Tense Buster

Overview

Tense Buster is a grammar program, aimed at all students wishing to improve their English grammar. It provides structured, sequential activities in mastering the fundamentals of English grammar. The publisher's claim that it is 'effective, enjoyable, easy to use' is reasonable. The software could be used on an individual or networked basis and would be a useful tool for any secondary phase English language course. It is particularly suited to EFL students but could work just as well for students with literacy deficits such as dyslexia.

The activities are interesting, varied and just the right length to sustain interest. They include selecting the correct form of verbs from a choice, finding errors in whole passages, and active listening followed by a quiz. The subject matter of the articles is appropriate for the target age group and some have considerable appeal e.g. an accompanying picture of a sports car instantly grabbed the attention of teenage boys.

There are many excellent supportive features such as the marking and progress feedback and the vocabulary support. Instant knowledge of results, in the form of an audible 'oops' or a round of applause, was generally welcomed. The colour wheel, used to represent the percentage of correct responses at the marking stage, was an effective and popular form of feedback with the students. The multimedia function allows students to hear passages read to them. Contrary to teacher expectation, students did not mind that many voices were American. They particularly liked passages where dialogue was read by several characters. This very positive feature helped maintain a higher level of interest. Some negative remarks came from students who felt the speakers weren't acting the part well enough, but the general consensus was that these were read well.

There are certainly enough incentives to sustain interest in what might generally be viewed as rather dull stuff. I think it is fair to say that the prospect of a grammar exercise seldom inspires students to think it could be a pleasurable activity, but this software does raise the interest level for most users. Students in trials made favourable comments and were observed to stay on task throughout sessions of approximately half an hour. Feedback from users was generally positive.

Written by

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head of learning support

Image
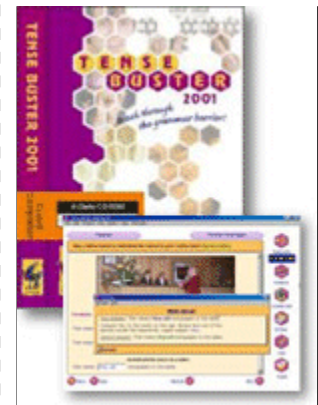
Publisher

Clarity Language Consultants Ltd

Subject

English

Cross Curricular

Key Stage

Key Stage 3 / P7 - S2

Key Stage 4 / S3 - S4

Post-16 / S4 - S5

Product Code

CLAR-TENSEBUSTER

Classroom use

Context

The software was used in a senior school Learning Support department. The pupils who tried it out were Y9-11 dyslexic students, working on an individual basis. One EFL pupil in Y9 worked in some depth on the Elementary level material. All levels of the program were used over 16 separate occasions. The school's EFL department subsequently trialled the program with pupils aged 12 to 16 and feedback from these colleagues was very positive. Students, mostly from the Far East were able to work unaided on the software and found it stimulating and enjoyable.

Labour saving aspects

The program is well-constructed and provides a logical sequence of progression through important areas of grammar. Students could happily work on this unaided or with minimal support.

Learning outcomes

Students increase their command of correct usage in language contexts. They learn how to express themselves in good English, with appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary. They become more confident in handling ICT and navigating around the functions of a program. They improve general comprehension skills and memory retention. Students are mentally challenged by most tasks and activities. A very comprehensive system of recording progress and coverage is a key feature of the software.

Student Response

Although the initial reaction to the prospect of a grammar program was almost invariably negative, the overwhelming verdict was that this was an enjoyable program to use. Students of all ages could find sufficient challenge as well as support by using the range of levels offered. The multimedia interface brought passages to life and provided welcome additional interest and motivation. Dyslexic students frequently expressed approval for the 'reading voice' and were observed to follow the text with the cursor arrow as it was being read. Some sections were disliked because the student could not get to grips with the concept being taught e.g. the passive tense in the Intermediate level, but on the whole students found the material and its subject matter of interest. They particularly liked the way that each activity was based on a different method of interaction, e.g. sometimes typing in a few words, or drag and drop. This helped keep them on task and motivated. The length of task was pitched just right to sustain interest and students expressed approval of this in the context of a sense of progression and moving on.

Everyone liked the marking function. It gave them a feeling of being in control. Popular too were the sound effects, the 'oops' for an error and the applause for a correct answer.

A number of UK nationals could not see the point of technical terms like modals. One student said it just overloaded his brain with useless stuff. There was a feeling that it was more important to be able to 'handle' language correctly, rather than know the proper terms for parts of speech or the various tenses.

Assessment and pupil tracking opportunities

Each exercise is assessed on completion and students get immediate feedback on results. The results wheel presents a pie chart, colour segmented, illustrating the proportion of correct/incorrect responses. The results are also presented numerically. There is an opportunity at this point to retry or view errors. A feedback facility helps students see where they have gone wrong. For each area of study e.g. pronouns, there are 3 practice tasks followed by a test. In use, these 3 practice activities seemed just about right for most students. The success rate in the follow-on test testified to the effectiveness of this.

It is very simple to track students' performance. Students can use the Progress button to see their progress graph, either for the current day or from the start of using the software. A coloured line on the graph plots the individual's progress against everyone else. Students liked the way these lines rise up the percentage axis as they watch. This is good psychology! Teachers can monitor students' progress easily.

Special needs

This software was trialled with a number of KS4 students with dyslexia. With some help from a teacher, the students were able to do the exercises and learn effectively from them. They maintained focus and interest, enjoying the high level of interaction available on this program. The instant knowledge of results was a very positive feature of Tense Buster. There was general approval of the suitability of the material and they found it stimulating and appropriate for their age group. There was a sense that this was quite adult in format.

Content and design

Literacy

There are a number of excellent features in Tense Buster to support literacy. Dyslexic readers found the multimedia facility a boon because it would take the burden of reading from them, freeing them to concentrate on the content. Many were seen to follow the speaker's words with the arrow of the cursor. Instant marking was similarly supportive, with pupils realising straight away that they had entered a wrong answer. One problem however, is that a dyslexic pupil could enter the correct words from the grammar perspective but a minor spelling slip in one word would result in the answer being marked wrong. In such cases, the teacher had to reassure the pupil that the answer was correct
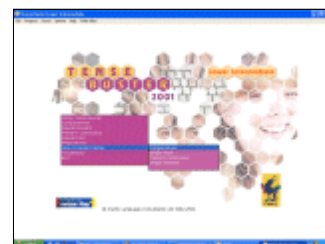
for the purpose. There is no inbuilt mechanism to distinguish this type of error.

Design and navigation

This software is very user-friendly. It is easy to move from one function to the next and the screen is well-laid out with the principal functions clearly defined. Students had no trouble navigating on their own and became familiar with the functions very quickly. Students could use a scratch pad to jot down notes and ideas and these could be printed off for reference. There were a number of times when students lacked confidence in how to respond at the start of an exercise. One example with voice might have been useful here.

The feedback function allows students who made mistakes to see their answer as well as the correct one and many positive comments were made about this support. Activities were short and varied, and the content was appropriate for each level of difficulty. Photos and pictures appeared on all articles, but sometimes these had very weak links with the content e.g. a photo of a castle illustrated one page of text where only two sentences were about a castle. There was good development of subject matter as a theme e.g. an information passage about UFOs was developed for a series of practice exercises and students liked this, preferring it to a change in subject matter for each exercise. This familiarity with the subject matter created a sense of confidence in tackling a progressively difficult task. Students picked up quickly that the use of different coloured text was significant e.g. red for errors, blue for examples, black for explanations.

The page presenting the rule posed some difficulties. It was often, certainly at the higher levels, depressingly wordy, some 50 lines in one example, and had the potential for being the dullest part of the program. This was the 'turn off' point for many students and required something to make it more digestible. Perversely, multimedia would read just the opening title and no more on these pages, but having the rule information read to them would have been much more supportive, helping to focus concentration. The section 'How do I use Tense Buster' was generally treated as superfluous; students who opened it decided very quickly it was just the sort of thing they wouldn't waste time reading. Similarly, the 'well done' box that appears when an answer is correct can contain 6 lines of explanatory information. Students say they would never read this unless their answer had been wrong and wondered why it could not appear just for incorrect responses. When it appeared with the 'oops! Sorry' box, the attitude was quite different. Now students were highly likely to read the advice provided it amounted to one or two lines; anything more was a turn-off. Again, the multimedia tool would not read these.

The Vocabulary function was extremely good; not only did it give a straight dictionary definition, but it often gave the word in a meaningful context sentence too. Every passage had this facility, where more difficult or ambiguous words were selected for this vocabulary support.

On multimedia, readers' voices could be rather dull and flat. The tempo of reading was often slow, but this could benefit the EFL student or indeed any dysfluent reader.

Overall, there is no doubt that users picked up very quickly how to operate the various components of the program and could use it efficiently within a very short period of time.

Ease of installation

Installation was excellent, very fast and no problems; just what what every user wants…a good start!

Suitable for ages

12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

Planning

The teacher can quickly get to grips with this program. After working through the menu for one level, it is straightforward to see that this formula is replicated through progressively difficult levels. The screen layout is consistent, only the subject matter changes through the course. All the support functions follow the same procedure for all levels, and students and teachers using the software felt fairly confident after a short period of use. Tense Buster could be used by individuals or pairs working at a PC, but a larger group could be actively deployed on a network. Some supervision would be desirable, but the very minimum would do. Students often just wanted confirmation that they were tackling a task correctly, and occasionally, felt unsure how to start. There is no pressure of time; none of the tasks are against the clock. This allows students the opportunity to discuss their anticipated response with a co-learner or teacher in a relaxed way.

Clarity has been developing effective educational software since 1992. We specialise in MFL and ESOL and currently have four series of language programs registered for COL. Our fifth COL program, Author Plus Online, enables teachers to create interactive activities for all subjects from Year 3 to Year 13 (see www.AuthorPlus.com). We provide lots of teacher support for all our programs!

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