

Innovative Language: A Critical Review

Innovative Language Learning, LLC

www.innovativelanguage.com

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Rapidly developing technology has been changing the landscape of second language (L2) teaching and learning; there is now technology to support almost every aspect of L2 pedagogy (Nushi & Sadeghi, 2021). The reliance on technology for L2 teaching and learning has particularly increased since the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic in late 2019 (Ghanbari & Nowroozi, 2021). Although distance learning seems to be the most obvious remedy for the lack of access to classroom learning, an alternative for many learners has been a number of technology-mediated commercial products that provide the opportunity for self-directed L2 learning. Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, and HelloTalk are among the many popular language learning platforms available on the market. Innovative Language (IL), created by Innovative Language Learning, LLC (<https://www.innovativelanguage.com/>), is among the pioneers of the commercial products which have delivered Internet-based language learning self-study programs.

The IL product has been available in website format since its launch in 2005, and more recently through a series of mobile applications for android and iOS devices. Despite commercial success in providing lessons for over 40 languages, it has thus far not received attention from the English Language Teaching (ELT) community. The present article aims to address that shortcoming by providing a critical review of the product. Due to space limitations, the article narrows its focus down to the English section of the website format of the product, which is accessible at www.englishclass101.com.

For the IL designers, the ultimate purpose of language learning is communication, and the primary focus is on listening and speaking. Grammar and vocabulary are peripheral, only aiding this ultimate goal. Lessons often begin with a dialogue, which is used to discuss culture, vocabulary, and grammar. Learners hear phrases broken down into syllables and are asked to repeat them.

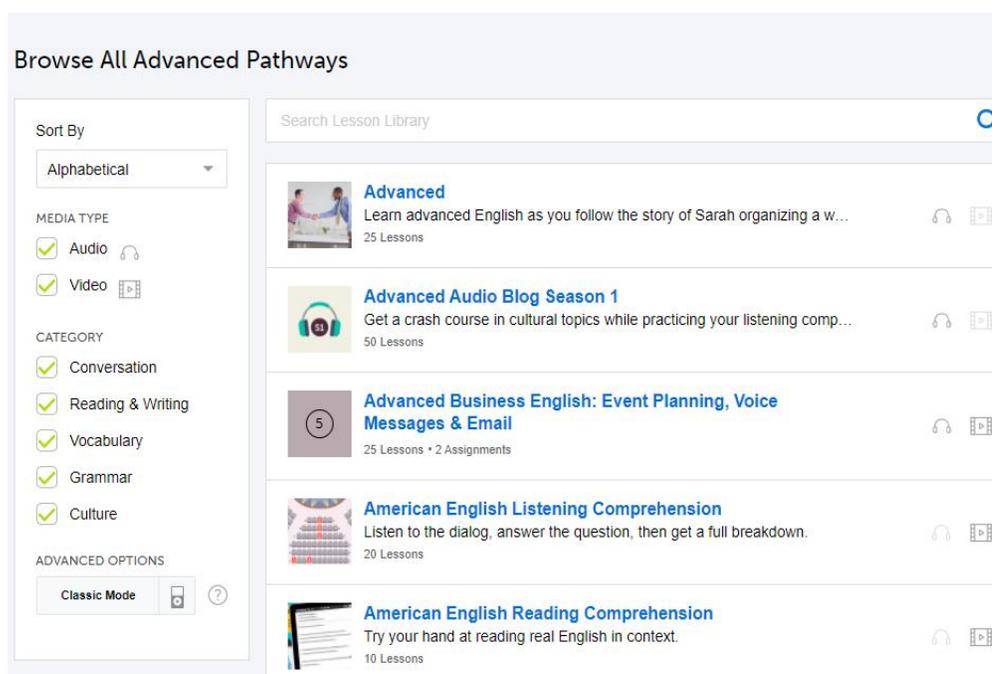
Using the IL website requires registration and users will have access to a one-week trial subscription upon registration, after which they will have to subscribe to one of the three available subscription plans. The two standard subscription plans cost \$4 and \$10 a month, and provide the features described above. An additional third plan, the *premium plus membership*, is available at \$23 a month, which offers additional computer-mediated interaction with real teachers. Upon the first log-in, learners are asked to report their level themselves based on intuition. Users can access courses and their lessons by browsing the

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lesson library in the dashboard (Figure 1). A drop-down list at the top of this page allows the user to browse courses by level. The five levels available to choose from range from *absolute beginner* to *advanced*. An example of the vocabulary lessons for the lowest level is a 50-lesson course titled *Survival Phrases Season 1*, which begins by introducing items such as *thank you*, and *a lot*. The topics covered in lessons are varied and include categories such as food, clothing, and business.

Figure 1

A Screenshot of the Lesson Library Page

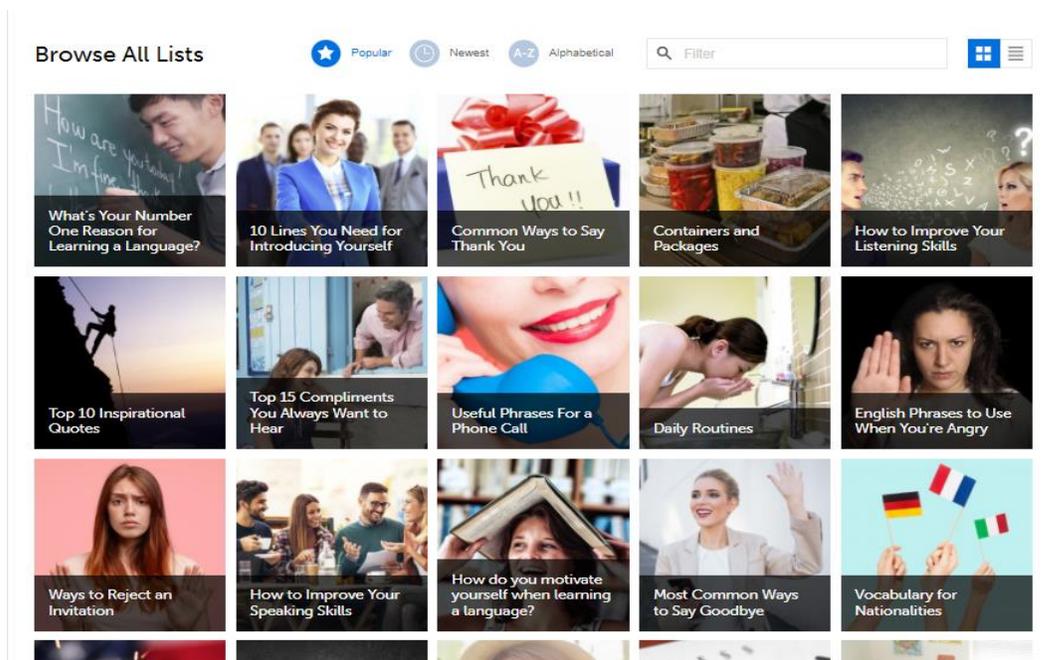


Retrieved 05/27/2022 from: <https://www.englishclass101.com/lesson-library/advanced/>

The users can choose the language skills (e.g., reading, writing, vocabulary) they wish to focus on by having the lesson library display only courses that are designed for their skills of interest. The lessons are mainly provided through video and audio files that are embedded on a separate video feed webpage, similar to YouTube. Under each video or audio, the related vocabulary is presented. IL has several useful tools such as flashcards and vocabulary lists for learning and practicing vocabulary items (see Figure 2 for vocabulary lists). Useful sentences (e.g., "I can't stand his constant input on everything I do.") from the video are presented in isolation and audio files for each are available. The website also allows the user to record their own voice and compare it with the presented audio files. This technique of pronunciation improvement has been applied in ELSA Speak too, though with a more sophisticated technology that provides detailed feedback to the learners (see Nushi & Sadeghi, 2021, for a review of the ELSA Speak app). A short quiz in multiple-choice format is also available under each video lesson.

Figure 2

A Screenshot of the Vocabulary Lesson Selection



Retrieved 05/27/2022 from: <https://www.englishclass101.com/english-vocabulary-lists/>

Innovative Language has a number of good features, one of which is easy access. It can be accessed using any device with Internet connectivity (e.g., Windows PC, Mac, smartphone, Kindle). A further merit of the product is the teachers in the video lessons. They are energetic and enthusiastic, and help to create enjoyable learning experiences. This is an improvement over apps such as Voscreen which merely expose learners to videos and other authentic materials without much instruction. The whole curriculum may also perfectly suit learners who do not aim for mastery of the target language and wish to simply learn basic communication skills.

The product, however, suffers from a series of issues that keep it from fulfilling its claims of being the fastest, easiest and most fun way to learn languages. First, the IL is built on weak—if any—theoretical grounding. Already well documented, for instance, is the pivotal role of interaction and communication in language acquisition (e.g., Larsen-Freeman, 2007; Loewen & Sato, 2018). Computer-learner interaction, though, is the extent of interaction learners experience in the IL. This lack is hardly justifiable since the Internet provides all the ingredients for cost-effective environments that easily allow communication through both written and oral modes.

Closely linked, and equally as important, is the role of output generation—as opposed to the reception of solitary input (Swain, 2005). Learners' production while using IL is kept to a minimum, with the materials requiring from learners no more than mere repetition of words and sentences. This may be of high value for practicing pronunciation (Blake, 2017) and for making improvements in select areas such as memory

storage and retrieval of L2 words (Loucky, 2006), but it is no longer a secret that drills and repetition alone are far from adequate for learning a language.

Another issue is assessment, which is virtually absent as even learners' performance on the occasional short quizzes of the lessons are never recorded for later tracking. This is surprising as computers have made cost-effective testing possible for years. In addition to the easily accessible tools for testing reading, listening, vocabulary, and grammar which have existed for a long time, several recent technologies have made possible even the automatic assessment of the writing skill, through technologies such as spell-checkers, grammar checkers, automatic writing evaluators, and intelligent language tutoring systems (Heift, 2017). Coupled with speech recognition technologies that are now on the fast track of progress, these may soon be able to assess student speaking proficiency levels for placement into language programs.

With more and more businesses going online in recent years, and the COVID-19 pandemic boosting what was already a quickly growing trend, products such as Innovative Language seem to already share a large slice of the second language teaching market. In their current form, though, they lag far behind the language instruction scene in terms of the quality of the instruction they provide. In the case of IL, the lack of a rigorous research-based foundation makes it hard to recommend the product to any serious language learner. Still, the input that the package provides should be attractive enough to entertain any learner long enough to grasp the very basics of a language, perhaps up to the point of acquiring basic survival language. It is, though, quite unlikely to help any learner progress much further. The Internet provides countless cost-effective facilities for providing higher quality language learning services. Examples of what could enhance the IL include the provision of opportunities for oral interaction with peer learners or language exchange partners through video calls and the publishing of the learners' oral and written assignments through online blogs to enhance motivation. As the market for online language learning has been growing, the perfect opportunity seems to be there for IL and similar products to take their services to the next level by incorporating research-based practices.

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