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TECHNOLOGY REVIEW

LanguageTwo.com

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INTRODUCTION

LanguageTwo.com, a website created by Thomas David Kehoe in January 2017, is intended to train second language learners in speech perception, segmentation, pronunciation, and diglossia, but the primary target is second language learners with auditory processing disorders, those who cannot "pick up a language by ear". The author argues that if the website can help learners with auditory processing disorders, then all second language learners will find the website helpful. Kehoe claims that the website primarily aims to improve the ability to hear a second language. The website is free and can be used on any device (e.g., computer, tablet, cell phone) with internet access and any type of software. According to the author, the website is still being developed, which needs to be taken into consideration when evaluating this website.

Currently the tool supports four languages (English, Spanish, Chinese, and Finnish), however the author does not provide reasons for selecting these four languages. The website is still under construction for Spanish, Chinese, and Finish with final improvements being made for the English part. For the purposes of this review, we focus on English (only American English is an option at this point).

To create an account, learners are encouraged to use their Google, Facebook, Twitter, or GitHub account; email is given as an option, but not recommended by the author.

DESCRIPTION

The main page of the website which provides learners with a menu consisting of different explanations, descriptions, and instruction for phonemes, consonants, vowels, and IPA (see Figure 1 below). The menu also shows IPA for the vowels (front, central, and back) and consonants (stops/plosives, affricates fricatives, sibilants approximants, and nasals). When learners click on one of the words, a written description appears as a pop up (e.g., English short I, *kit*, *lid*, *fill*, *bin*) including a description of the position of the sound in the mouth near-close, near-front, unrounded vowel are provided for learners. Learners can click on the headphones sign and hear the phoneme produced by a native American speaker.

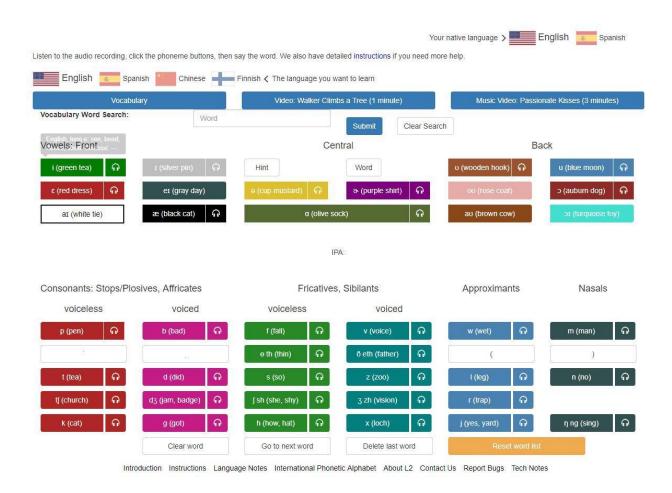


Figure 1. Main page of the website.

In addition to this main page, the website includes three sections: Vocabulary, Video, and Music Video (see the top of Figure 1). A brief description of the three main sections along with their screenshots are provided below.

Vocabulary

After clicking on "Vocabulary", users are provided with a variety of options. One such option is a search bar which allows users to search for any word being linked to the Oxford English Dictionary and pulls up the information on the LanguageTwo website (see Figure 2, section 1 below). The author chose to use this dictionary in order to include the word, IPA transcription of the pronunciation, audio recordings of exemplary speakers saying the word (they used synthesized speech) and definitions, translations, speech recognition (to test the learners' pronunciation of words) (T. Kehoe, personal communication, November 27, 2018).

Furthermore, learners can listen to the pronunciation of individual vowels and consonants, read a brief description and hear/see examples of each sound (See Figure 2, section 2). Then, learners can click on the provided sounds and try to click on the phoneme that they heard (Figure 2, section 3). Finally, there is also a hint button that lets learners find the correct vowel or consonant (Figure 2, section 4).

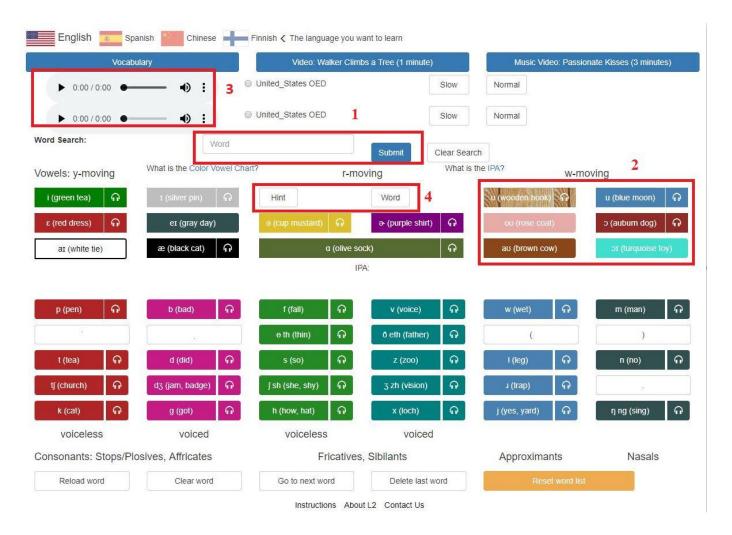


Figure 2. Vocabulary section

Video

In addition to the vocabulary component of the website, LanguageTwo.com also provides short one-minute videos which are divided into smaller parts containing short phrases. The smaller parts are automatically segmented and consist of two-three second videos. The learner can select one short part in the top right corner of the screen and watch them as separate videos. Below the video, the learners can listen to each word that is used in the video, pronounced in isolation, at normal or slower pace (see Figure 3). The website claims that learners can practice their pronunciation of the phoneme they heard and receive immediate feedback, but the immediate feedback feature could not be found on the website at the time of publication (May, 2019). The IPA chart always remains below the exercises so that students can refer to it and listen to individual sounds at any time. Also, detailed instructions are provided in the menu in the top right of the screen if more help is needed. This interface can be seen below in Figure 3.

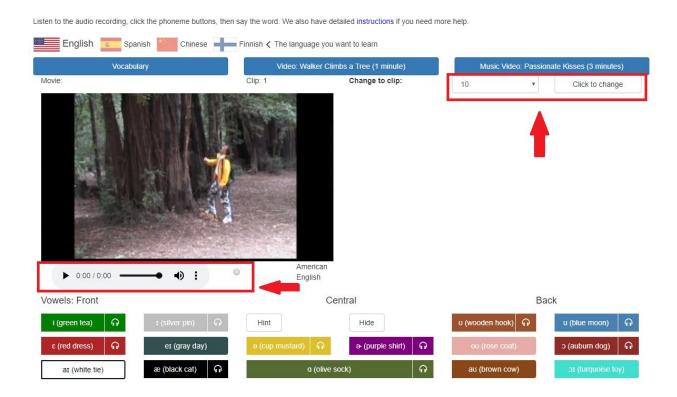


Figure 3. Video section

Music Video

Lastly, learners can listen to and watch a short music video which is broken into 20 shorter chunks which are two - three seconds long each (see Figure 4 below), following the same procedure as in the previous section described above. The website breaks the videos down into phrases, words, and then phonemes. After that, the website suggest that learners should be able to build them back into words, phrases, and stories.

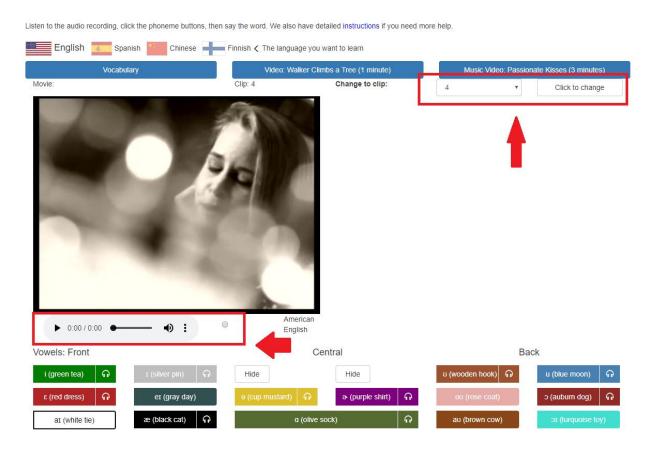


Figure 4. Music video section

After listening to each short phrase within the music video, learners are given the option to take a pronunciation test (see Figure 5). The purpose of this option is to allow learners to test their pronunciation production and receive feedback by Automated Speech Recognition (ASR) system, most likely, to test whether improvement of their perception skills, resulted in improvement of their production skills. It is difficult to find instructions and explanations for this feature on the website, as well as the feature itself. Considering that the website is still developing, this feature may be changed in the future.



Figure 5. Pronunciation test

EVALUATION

As seen through the various screenshots throughout this review, LanguageTwo.com is visually stimulating and draws attention to the IPA chart. The colorful appearance and inclusion of videos may provide an engaging learning environment for the users. In terms of usability, at first glance, the website seems user-friendly and it provides detailed instructions for users who need guidance using the website. The IPA chart is fairly easy to use; nonetheless, users may need to spend some time learning how to use the videos, since that part is a bit confusing. The division of the videos into smaller two-three second chunks and the way it can help the learners may seem difficult to grasp at the beginning, so it would be helpful if this is elaborated upon in the instructions. Occasionally, certain technical problems arose, such as not being able to hear the sound when clicking on a few phonemes. Hopefully these issues will be resolved as soon as the website is fully completed.

One of the important aspects of pronunciation learning is the promotion of learner autonomy (McCrocklin, 2016) and this website encourages autonomous learning as the learners can practice any time and place, at their convenience. The practical aspect of the website, being free and accessible on any device, can also provide support for autonomous, self-paced learning.

Despite this potential for learner autonomy, the website only emphasizes segmental acquisition and there is no information about suprasegmentals. Focusing on segmentals can be useful and effective for beginners who do not have a lot of experience with differences in pronunciation between their first language (L1) and English (Eskenazi, 1999).

However, unlike other software that focuses mostly on production, this website would mostly be useful for speech perception improvement because its main aim is to enhance learners' perception. Badin, Bailly, and Boë (1998) state that second language learners (L2) can be considered phonologically deaf as they may not be able to discriminate between sounds that do not belong to their phonological inventory. Hence, if learners cannot perceive the sounds, they cannot produce them consistently either; thus, if the primary aim of the website is improving perception, then it may serve as a stepping stone towards production improvement.

LanguageTwo.com claims that it can be used to train speech perception and pronunciation production. While Thomson (2011) argues that the amount and quality of L2 input influences L2 production, but we are doubtful that this website can also be useful for production improvement. Even though a feature for pronunciation practice is provided, that feature was not functional when the website was tested. Levis (2007) states that feedback is lacking in Computer-Assisted Pronunciation Training (CAPT) systems as they are usually unable to automatically and accurately diagnose pronunciation. As noted earlier, the website is still under development, and when this feature becomes functional, we hope it will provide accurate, automated feedback to learners. With this feature available, the website would be a suitable resource that might also become useful for production improvement.

For future improvements, we suggest the inclusion of High-Variability Phonetic Training (HVPT) which relies on input produced by multiple contexts and by multiple speakers (Qian, Chukharev-Hudilainen & Levis, 2018) as well as a larger diversity of videos on different topics. As stated by

the author, future versions will include data collection so that researchers can study how speech perception affects pronunciation with large data sets of thousands of learners and words.

CONCLUSION

All said, with a few suggested improvements, LanguageTwo.com has the potential to be a successful tool that can be used to aid English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms around the world. L2 perceptual training is important and necessary, not only because L2 perception is challenging for adult learners, but because it also facilitates oral production (Qian et al., 2018). This website can be used for beginners to introduce them to the sounds in English, but also with more advanced learners who struggle with pronunciation. Finally, the use of this website could facilitate autonomous learning in an engaging way for learners.

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