REVIEW OF *Easy Writer*

Title:	*Easy Writer*
Author:	Jane Boris
Distributor:	Software for Students 106 Hartman Road Newton Centre, MA 02459 Tel: (617) 630-1814 E-mail: easy_writer@hotmail.com
Program Information:	http://www.softwareforstudents.com*NOTE*
Platform:	Windows 3.1/95/98/NT only
Minimum Hardware Requirements:	486 processor; VGA/SVGA graphics adaptor card capable of displaying 256 colors
Target Language	High beginning to advanced English proficiency; high school age through adult
Price:	1-4 Installations = US$85 each 5 pack = $395 10 pack = $750 lab license = $1350 school license = $2000.
Other:	Networkable
Additional Materials:	6-page printed list of stories and 16-page "Directory of Errors" provided with the purchase of a 5-pack

Reviewed by Pamela Couch, Boston University

Easy Writer is designed to help writers identify and correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors. The program is based on essays and stories written by students in college-level ESL classes. Users first choose the type of error they wish to focus on (e.g., articles) as well as the level of difficulty of the editing task, and then begin the process of identifying and correcting errors they find in the stories provided.

The emphasis of this program is on editing for sentence- and word-level errors rather than the more complex task of revising the text, which may include changing the organization or elaborating on the content of an earlier draft. By focusing attention on fixing mistakes, the program may inadvertently reinforce the belief often expressed by basic writers that the goal of the revising process is "correctness" (Matsuhashi & Gordon, 1985). Nevertheless, *Easy Writer* is a useful tool for helping students develop editing skills, which may ultimately improve the readability and accuracy of their writing.

DESCRIPTION

Easy Writer contains fours levels which correspond not only to the complexity of topics covered, but also to task difficulty. In Level I, the student simply identifies errors. In Level II, the student must also fix errors by clicking on them and typing corrections in a pop-up box. Level III provides a model to assist

with the error identification and correction. The highest level, *Expert,* asks the user to identify and correct grammar points from all three prior levels.

After selecting a task level, the student chooses a lesson to work on. Each lesson focuses on a specific grammar, punctuation, or spelling problem. Level I contains seven grammatical constructions and writing issues often taught at the high-beginner level: verbs, nouns and pronouns, possessives, articles, prepositions, spelling, and punctuation. Level II covers five of the same topics as Level I but provides more challenging exercises and adds complexity by including lessons on sentence structure and question formation. Level III focuses on gerunds and infinitives, indirect speech, passive voice, and conditional sentences. Finally, the Expert level includes all of the writing issues found in Levels I - III.

In addition to choosing the lesson, the user selects a specific story or essay to work on. These texts, written by ESL college students, have titles such as, "The Right to Privacy," "Serving in the Israeli Military," and "Friday Nights by the Black Sea." Many of the stories appear in more than one lesson although the user sees only the errors relevant to that lesson; all other errors are hidden. To help the user pick a story at the appropriate level of difficulty, all of the over 85 stories are color-coded and classified as beginning, intermediate, or advanced. From this screen, the user also has the opportunity to click on the *Grammar Reference* to review the rules for that particular grammatical construction.
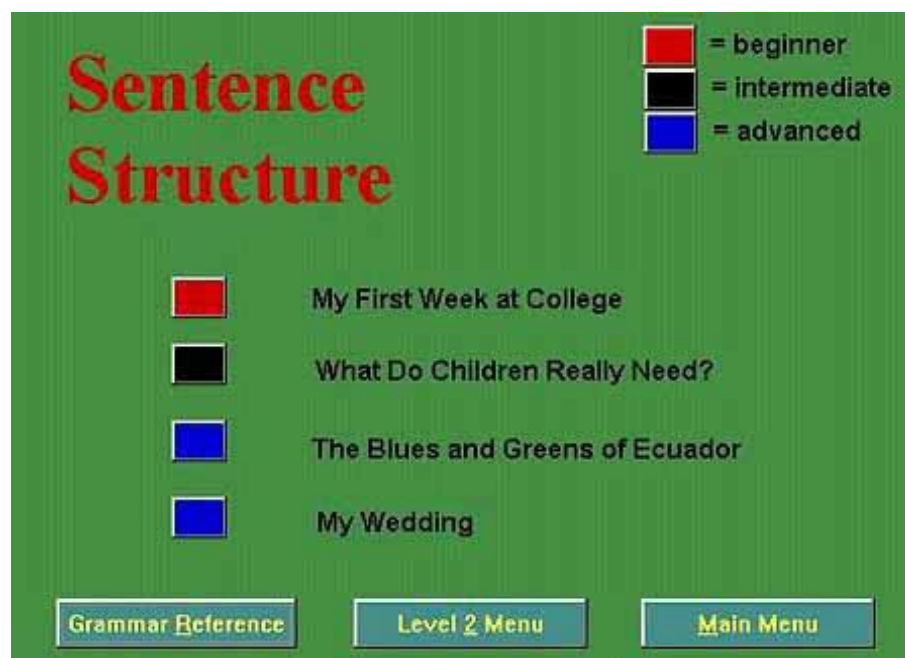

Figure 1. Level II, Sentence Structure Lesson

The feedback provided by the program varies according to level. In Level I, after the user detects an error, the program automatically provides a correction in blue. By clicking on the corrected word or phrase, the user can get a mini-grammar lesson related to the error.

In Levels II, III, and Expert, the error becomes red when clicked on, and a pop-up box appears. The user then types in a response and chooses "Check My Answer" or "Show Correct Answer." If the user submits an incorrect response, the program sometimes provides "smart feedback" that analyzes the error and guides the individual toward an appropriate response. For example, when this reviewer typed an incorrect verb tense in the pop-up box, the program replied, "That's a good try, but there's a problem with this

response. Read what follows in the essay. You'll see that this [story] began some time in the past. How can you indicate that?" However, this kind of contextual feedback is not provided for every response. In many cases, the feedback for an incorrect answer is, "Sorry, try again."

In all of the levels, users have the option of "keeping score" by finding out how many of the errors in a specific text they still need to locate and correct. They may also ask the program to supply the correct answers. A third option is go through the lesson again, thereby reinforcing the learning process.

Figure 2. Level II, Text and Pop-up Box

In Level III, users are asked to identify and correct syntactic errors, receiving the same guided feedback as in Level II. This time, however, they are provided with a model showing them the basic construction of the grammatical structure they are focusing on.
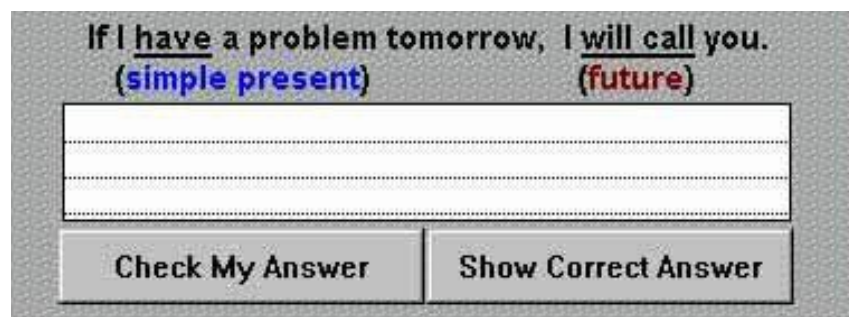

Figure 3. Level III, Pop-Up Box

Each of the levels includes a "mixed bag" activity in which users face the challenge of correcting errors from all of the lessons presented in that level. In this activity, the users are told how many errors of each kind are present in the text. For example, boxes to the left of the text might read, "5 errors in verbs" and "2 errors in articles."
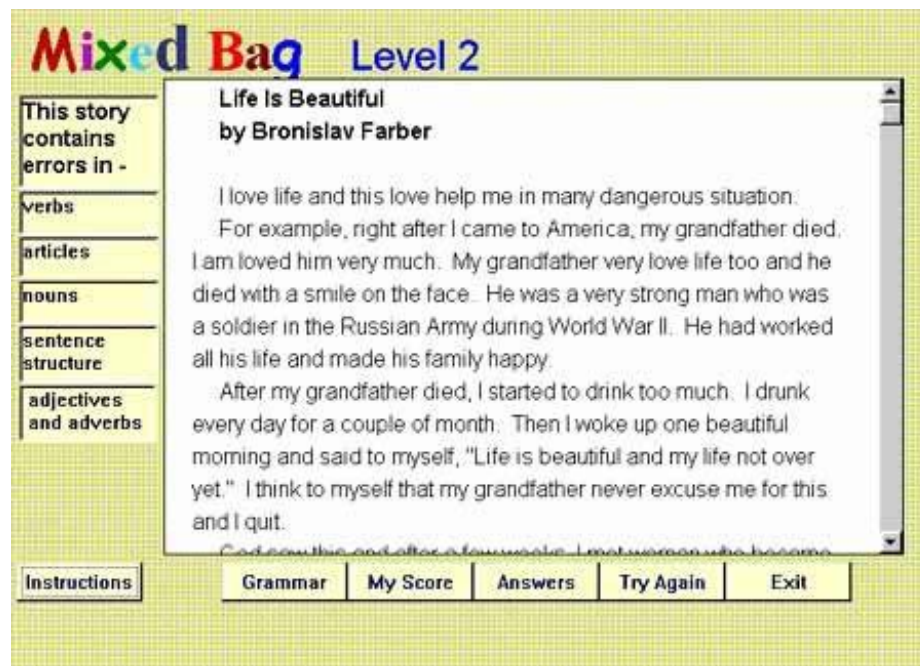

 Figure 4. Level II, "Mixed Bag" Lesson

At the end of each lesson, *Easy Writer* includes opportunities for writing practice by providing a choice of topics and a "writing space" in the form of a textbox on the screen. The program does not provide feedback for these writing samples, nor can users print or e-mail their work directly from this screen. Thus, in order to share their work with classmates or to submit it to an instructor for feedback, they must first save their text to a floppy disk and then open it with a word-processing program.

EVALUATION

Easy Writer is one of the few ESL instructional tools based solely on student-produced writing; this source of authentic language is often overlooked in ESL materials (Bird & Reid, 1995). The use of genuine student writing has a two-fold benefit: it provides real examples of errors in context, and it may motivate students by allowing them to work on texts created by other second language learners.

Another strength of the program is the use of guided feedback for levels II, III, and Expert, and the amount of grammar support provided throughout. The explanations are contextualized, as are all of the exercises, which is an effective method to help the writer view grammar as a way to convey meaning rather than as an isolated skill (Benander & Roach, 1995). Nevertheless, the program is inconsistent in its ability to analyze incorrect responses and steer the user in the right direction, and it does not always accept alternative answers. For example, in the lesson on "Sentence Structure," several correct alternatives were rejected without explanation.

Despite the generally positive features of the program, there are a few potential problems regarding its use. The most serious drawback is that students may conclude that correction of grammatical errors is the primary objective of the revision process. Although the name suggests that it is a *writing* program, *Easy Writer* makes no mention of other aspects of the process, such as generating and organizing ideas, and evaluating the text for content and coherence, as described in various cognitive models of the composing

process (Flower & Hayes 1981a, 1981b; Smith, 1994; Witte, 1985). This focus on accuracy seems especially out of place in the "Write the Story" activity. Although the topics are appropriate and interesting, the program seems to suggest that the only goal of the writing activity is grammatical accuracy. For example, in the Level I Nouns and Pronouns unit, the directions say, "Write your story, and after you are finished, check it very carefully for good use of nouns and pronouns." These instructions encourage students to view their text as a "surface problem area to be corrected" (Matsuhashi & Gordon, 1985, p. 242). In addition, the activity may force writers into editing prematurely rather than thinking of meaning-based revisions. As Sommers (1982/1996) explains in her analysis of teacher responses to L1 writing, asking a student to correct grammar and usage problems during an early phase of writing may cause that individual to focus on grammatical precision instead of clarifying purpose and logic. Moreover, L1 and L2 composition research suggests that inexperienced writers have a tendency to focus on text-based edits rather than meaning-based revisions (Faigley & Witte, 1981; Zamel, 1985/1996). Therefore, although ESL writers may increase their ability to edit their texts for errors, they will not gain a broader understanding of the revision process by going through this program.

SUMMARY

Easy Writer provides clear, guided practice in identifying and correcting the grammar, punctuation, and spelling errors often found in ESL/EFL writing. By working on student-produced essays, users practice their editing skills within an authentic context. However, because the program deals only with editing for sentence- and word-level accuracy, it may inadvertently lead students to believe that this is the goal of writing. Despite this potential pitfall, when used in conjunction with other instructional materials and writing activities, *Easy Writer* may be a useful tool for increasing students' editing ability.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Pamela Couch (Ed.D., Boston University) teaches at the Center for English Language and Orientation Programs of Boston University. She has led seminars on teaching writing in a CALL environment and written articles on developing CALL projects for ESL students.

E-mail: pcouch@bu.edu

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