REVIEW OF *OPEN ENGLISH*

Program reviewed	Open English
Levels	Six
Price	1,000 USD for an initial 12-month subscription, 80 USD per month thereafter; for company or site subscriptions, contact Open English
Computer system requirements	Windows Users: 1. Windows Vista, 7, or 8 2. Internet Explorer 9, Chrome or Firefox 4+ are recommended for the best experience 3. Adobe Flash 10.3+ Mac Users: 1. OSX 10.4+, Linux 2. Chrome, Firefox 4+, Opera 9.6, or Safari 6+ are recommended for the best experience 3. Adobe Flash 10.3+ Microphone and headphone High-speed Internet connection
Publisher	Open English http://www.openenglish.com Open English LLC 2901 Florida Avenue - Suite 840 Coconut Grove, FL, 33133
Support offered	(1) FAQ (2) Contact information (3) Tour video (4) Teaching support 24 hours, 7 days/week
Target language	English

Review by Paula Winke, Michigan State University

INTRODUCTION

One of the best things about learning a language online is that you can learn no matter where you are. And this is especially important for busy, fully-employed people who might travel a lot and who are beyond that time in their lives when on-campus classes, study abroad, or face-to-face meetings with tutors or language partners are possible and viable options. Open English, a Venezuelan/US-based company founded in 2007 (see http://www.openenglish.com/corporate/about/) appears to know that there is real demand for quality, online English instruction. They sell subscriptions (1,000 USD for an initial 12 months, 80 USD per month thereafter) to their online English-language learning system that caters to a burgeoning market of individuals who want to improve their English skills in 10 to 60 minutes a day, whether those minutes are at 5AM in Quito or 11PM in Barcelona.

Open English was designed specifically for native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. According to James Daley (the Vice President of Open English Product, and to whom I spoke via Skype on December 4, 2013), there are over 110,000 people learning English through its system, with 98% of the learners in Latin America. Open English is looking to expand its market and is making necessary adjustments to do so. For example, 2014 will see a rollout of tablet- and phone-based, mobile access, with Android and
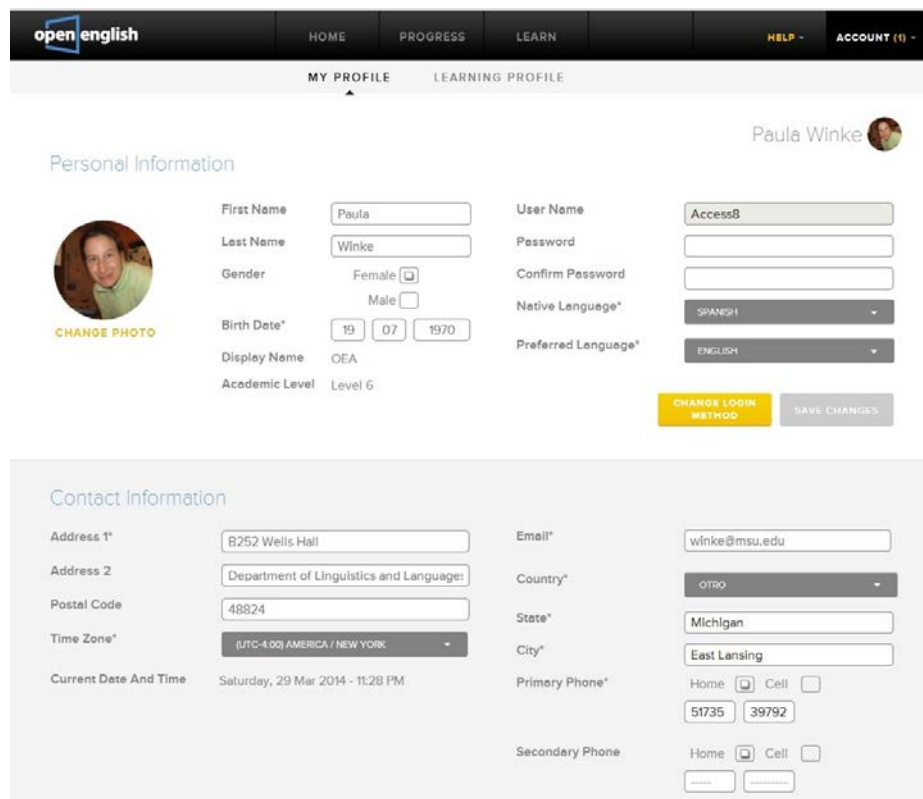
Macintosh versions included. Higher levels of English language instruction are being created for the system. There are three options for the learning platform's base-language (for navigation purposes): English, Spanish, or Portuguese. A user establishes this on his or her personal profile page, but Open English may be adding to those three options soon.

As of April 2014, Open English has six levels of English-language instruction. Subscribers have access to all of these, but only if their English is strong enough to move through all six. By default, all users start at Level 1, but can jump to a higher level by taking an online placement test. Otherwise, to move up a level, a learner must first complete 10 units of lessons, each comprised of about 6 lessons, which in turn, have about 9 activities each. The idea is that a learner will complete one lesson per week, going through as many activities a day as desired. After learners complete the work of one unit, they must pass the unit assessment to proceed to the next level. If users pass, they are prompted to produce a writing sample (based on an individual prompt that elicits language learned during the unit). Learners can submit this to a live teacher, who reads the essay and provides human-generated feedback.

Because I teach online classes at Michigan State University, I was excited to review Open English. They use an online classroom delivery platform (Blackboard Collaborate) that is similar to what I use to teach live classes online (I use Adobe Connect for eLearning). Open English has 80 software and web developers (who are computer science and programming experts), 600 English-language teachers who teach the Open English content in live, on-demand, online classes, and approximately 600 English teachers who provide writing feedback and answer questions via text. Thus, I knew Open English would be an eye-opener. I wanted to see just what a large, successful and growing company does for the masses in terms of online English-language instruction.

Here are some of the nuts and bolts: Learners sign up for an initial 12-month subscription for 1,000 USD, and after that, learners can transfer to an 80-USD monthly subscription. Mr. Daley reported that about 95% of the learner base currently pays for individual subscriptions (that is, the subscriptions are in the learners' individual names and the fees are paid by the individuals), while about 5% of the learners are subscribed under a company name, suggesting that some companies may be essentially contracting Open English to improve the English-language skills of their workforce. According to Mr. Daley, revisions to the entire online program in 2013 included a new curriculum that is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2001) or CEFR. The program currently has six levels of English-language instruction, which correspond, according to Mr. Daley, to the lower levels of the CEFR.

When learners first log on, they are directed to a profile page, where they have the option to upload a personal picture, indicate their native language (Spanish or Portuguese are the only options during the writing of this review), select the base interface language (English, Spanish, or Portuguese), and provide some other demographics (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The top of the Open English profile page.

After entering the demographics, learners are prompted to choose their main areas of interests so that the program can present lessons accordingly. At the bottom of the page, four "learner tools" are provided. These appear at the bottom of every page in Open English. In the short video below (Figure 2), I show the interest area selections and also the tools: a dictionary, a writing tool, a grammar guide, and a translator.
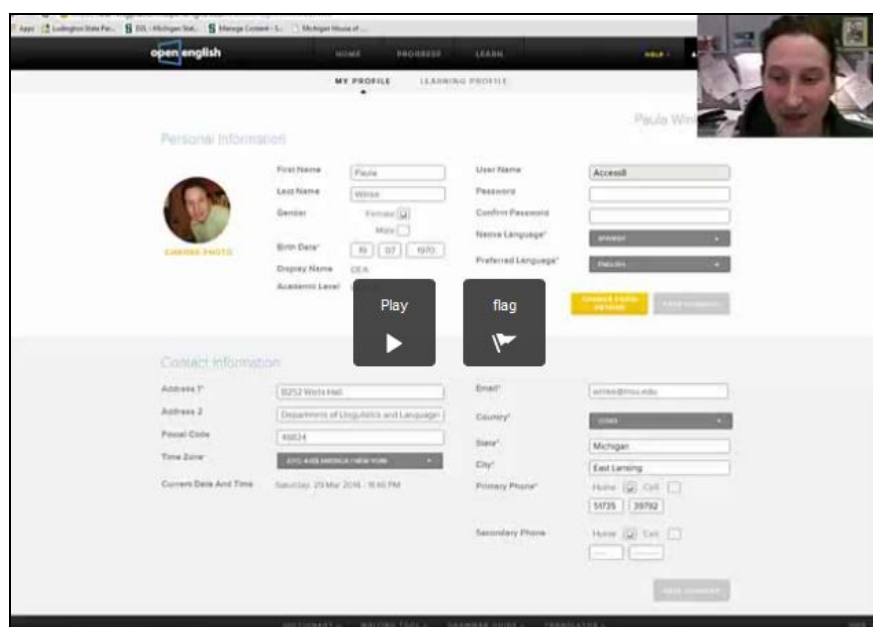

Figure 2. Video demonstration of the Open English profile page. Click on the image to see the demo at: https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Figure2_OpenEnglishProfilePage_Winke/1_lsj04b82

The Main Components of Open English

There are three main pages (accessed by tabs) in Open English: Home, Progress, and Learn. The main page students will use is the Home page: It is the portal to the weekly lessons. The Progress page presents summary information for the student. The Learn page also has learning content, like the Home page, but offers optional learning opportunities. I describe these three in more detail below.

Home Page

The Home page is the main lesson-navigation page for the learner. It shows the learner's Weekly Study Plan, which is presented through boxed interactive graphics, with each graphic representing one activity in the lesson. (See Figure 3.) The simplicity and sleek organization of the week's activities on the Home page is impressive. This page is clear, shows exactly what the learner should do during the week's lessons, and allows the learner to choose the order in which to complete the activities. Every Weekly Study Plan is laid out and presented in the same fashion, regardless of the topic, unit, or level, giving learners great satisfaction in knowing what to expect.
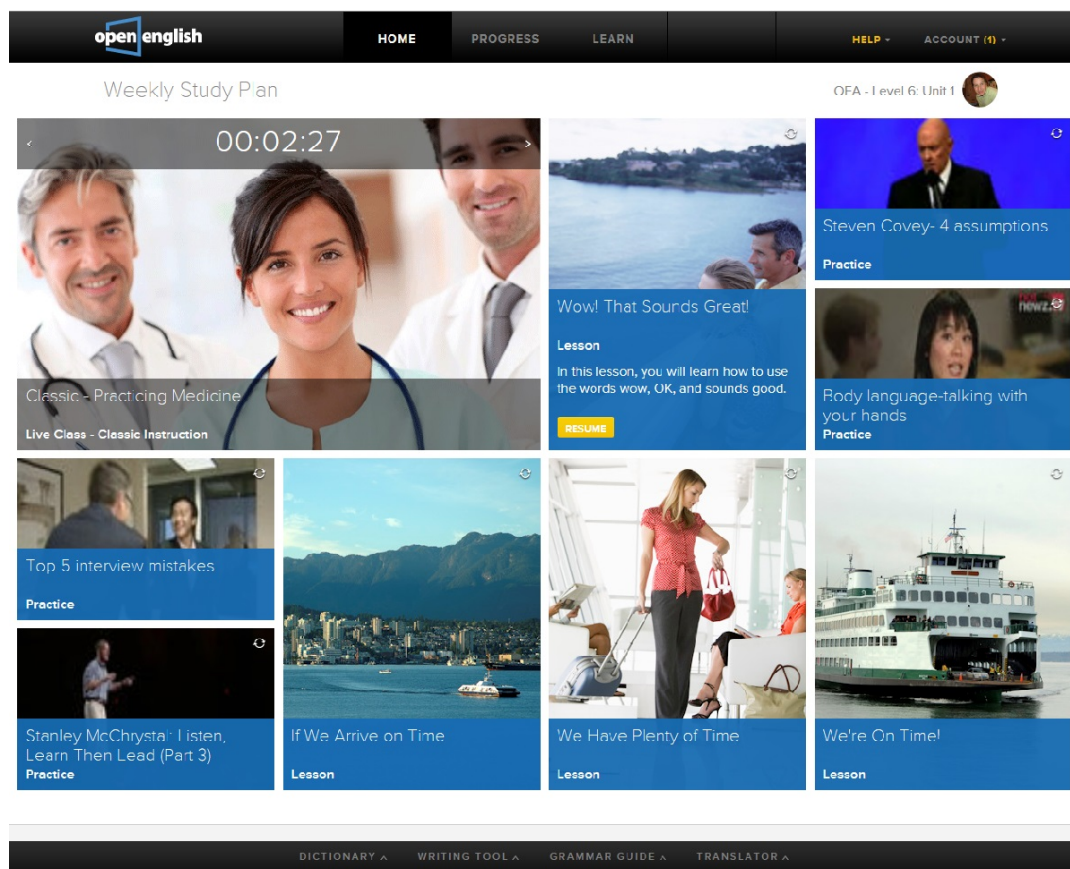
Figure 3. Weekly Study Plan for a Level 6 English-language learner.

The first, upper-right-hand activity is always a window to entering a live class. Live classes start on the hour, every hour, 24/7, except for on Christmas and New Year's Day. The counter at the top of this window is the countdown to when the next class starts. If you click to participate in the live class, you are directed to a Blackboard Collaborate site, where the teacher and up to three classmates join in. The lesson plan can be linked to ahead of time. It is always a PowerPoint saved as a PDF, and the teacher uses it to direct the lesson. There are two other activity types in the Weekly Study Plan: One is entitled "Lesson," the other "Practice." In Figure 3, a Level 6 Weekly Study Plan, there are four Lessons and four Practice activities.

Lessons

Each Lesson contains an audio dialog (almost always between a man and a woman) read aloud by voice actors; the audio files are created for Open English and are not authentic. This may or may not be a limitation, depending upon one's view on whether lower-level language-learning materials should be from authentic sources. Various vocabulary building drills and comprehension questions go along with each dialog. These drills and questions are interspersed among segments of the dialog and come in various forms: multiple-choice, true/false, drag-and-drop, cloze, short (single word) answer, and word-scramble activities (in which the learner assembles a sentence from scrambled up words and phrases). When a learner completes every drill within a Lesson, they are directed back to the Home page, and the completed Lesson is shaded in blue to mark its completion. During Lessons, learners can request an automatic "Hint" (i.e., ask for and receive the answers to a drill), take notes, chat via text with other learners who are in the same drill, and text questions to a live teacher. The Lessons are what one would expect in a massive, online learning environment. They present material that is highly structured. The dialogs are inauthentic, but linguistically at the designated level of the language learners. The discrete-point testing works well in an online environment, and the drill system appeared to me to be almost 100% bug free (everything worked well on my office computer). But how much learning actually takes place due to the exercises is an empirical question. One reproach I have is that all dialogs currently are audio recordings with an image (picture) of the imagined speakers. Work in speech processing has shown that language learners process and learn speech better when it is accompanied by visuals (Sueyoshi & Hardison, 2005; Wagner, 2010). For example, gestures and lip movements help listeners to parse words and sentences and to interpret meaning. Seeing how people stand, look at each other, and interact helps learners better comprehend the speech act. In the future, if it is feasible technologically and economically, it would be better, I think, to have actual videos of the voice actors so that learners can see their lip movements (which may help with parsing and pronunciation) and so that gestures and other visuals can become part of the natural tools used for interpreting speech.

Practice

In each Practice activity, a short, captioned video is shown. Learners watch the full video and then use voice-recording software to record their reading aloud of the caption segments in connection to the video segments. Learners can compare their own pronunciation with the voices in the video, and have the option to record and compare as many times as they like. In this sense, "Practice" can be viewed as a video-based listening exercise, but comprehension is not checked; rather, pronunciation, rhythm, and reading out loud are practiced and self-assessed. After recording, the program spits out a score (as shown in Figure 4; "Nice +13;" click on the figure image to see a demo). As far as I can tell, the score is based on basic voice-recognition software: the better the recognition, the higher the score.

Figure 4. The voice-recording software in each "Practice" activity in the Weekly Lesson Plan. Click on

the image to see a demo at:
https://mediaspace.msu.edu/media/Figure4_PracticeVoiceRecordingDemo/1_ln4cvbvz

The videos themselves are highly entertaining, of a good quality, and authentic. For example, at both Levels 1 and 6, I watched commercials, movie trailers, science reports, news segments, business tips, travel suggestions, and even music videos. I don't think learners could ever get bored with the videos, which sample many varieties of English, but they may find the post-watching, "SPEAK" activity to be repetitive, especially if they are doing this four to five times per week. The task to read out loud over and over again reminded me of Crazy English, an English-language teaching method from China in which learners practice (and learn) through the repetitive reading out loud (and very loud at that) of text. The idea here is somewhat the same: that through practice, speech patterns will become automatized, routinized, and learned. But compared to Crazy English, in Open English the reading is done more quietly, online, in connection to video, and with recording equipment so the learner can listen and self-analyze his or her speech. In both Crazy English and Open English, this is "output practice" in the most stripped-down sense of the term; it is an audio-lingual approach. What is missing here is interaction (Gass & Mackey, 2007), although that can be found in other places in this online learning program.

Progress

The Progress page maps for the learner where he or she is in the curriculum and also provides space for the learner to take additional notes. It has links to a log of all feedback provided to the learner from any of the online teachers. Within Lessons, if the learner takes notes, those notes are also logged here.

Learn

The Learn tab has three subtabs: (a) Live Classes, (b) Units and Lessons (which redirects to the Weekly Study Plan Lessons), and (c) Practice. Under Live Classes, a list of all live online lessons that are being offered in the next 24 hours and over the next seven days are presented. From this page, learners can enter live classes, as they can from their Weekly Study Plan. Every day, two online classes are offered, one called the "Classic" lesson, and one called the "Casual" lesson. According to Elaine Wheatley, Vice President of Live Instruction at Open English (personal email communication, April 11, 2014), the Classic lessons focus more on vocabulary and grammar building, while the Casual lessons focus on conversation practice. I took one of the Classic lessons on the topic of tea and coffee, and it appeared to me to target a lower level of English (perhaps, by my estimation, this class was at the A1 or A2 level). The Casual classes appeared to me to target an upper level of English (perhaps at the B1 or B2 level). But Ms. Wheatley explained in her e-mail that "each format is offered in various levels to accommodate students based on the level in which they have placed." Open English is planning to add a third level or type of classes, and placeholder (or thumbnail) spaces already demarcate where those will reside on the page.

What is nice about this page is that learners can go here to participate in classes that may be particularly challenging for them. Because the topics and class PowerPoints are provided, learners can decide for themselves if they want to or are ready to take an online class, and if they want, they can be a lurker in a class—that is, attend but not participate. Ms. Wheatley explained in her April 11 e-mail that when students enter a class, they enter with students at the same level of English proficiency and are matched to a teacher who speaks their shared L1 (if the L1 is Spanish or Portuguese). I believe students in a given class are *approximately* at the same level of proficiency, but I also think the proficiency range is good: one can be positively challenged when in a class with slightly higher-level speakers, or one could sit back and focus on a certain skill, such as pronunciation, if the others in the class are slightly below one's proficiency level. The other feature of note under Learn is the Practice tab. Here, new news stories are presented daily. Mr. Daley explained to me that Open English materials designers, who often double as instructors, find current news stories or texts (personal communication, December 4, 2013). They then modify them, reducing the difficulty level of the language, to match the abilities of the varying levels of

the language learners. With the tech staff, they gloss vocabulary in the text and append to each text a number of comprehension questions (multiple-choice or true/false). Students see the level of text and questions that match their proficiency level. To give an idea of the type of news stories that are presented, on March 20, 2014, the Level 6 headlines were these: "New World Cup Anthem," "People through Paint for Holi," and "Lifestyle: Tribal Fusion Dance." While a variety of current events are presented, disturbing or stressful topics in the news are not. The materials designers appear to only select news that is light and entertaining, for better or worse. (See Figure 5)

Figure 5. A news segment from the Practice section under the Learn tab.

Open English's Live, Online Classes

As explained above, learners can join any live, online class, and these classes start on the hour, every hour. I joined a Level 1 class on learning how to talk about tea and coffee. I was pleasantly surprised at how good the teacher was. She was a native speaker of English, but was also extremely fluent in Spanish. She greeted me and the other three students, asked us about ourselves, and told us a bit about herself. She then started the lesson, going through the content outlined on the PowerPoint slides (available for learners to download ahead of time). She wrote notes on the PowerPoint slides in reference to our comments, questions, and errors. She also had pop-up pictures and pronunciation tips to help us with what must be commonly-produced errors by speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. (See Figure 6, in which I blocked out the identifiers of the teacher and the other students.) The teacher elicited speech from the learners, often asking us to read out loud parts of the directions and sentences on the slides and corrected our pronunciation. She had us practice dialogs with her and amongst ourselves, and were allowed to diverge from scripts and speak freely. She asked us questions about what we liked to serve guests and whether we preferred tea or coffee and why. We could ask any questions directly or type them into the chat box. To my surprise, the teacher turned to Spanish to explain difficult concepts or to ask questions of students who appeared to be true novices in English. Whether this practice is widely shared amongst teachers in Open English is a question I had, but in correspondence with Ms. Elaine Wheatley, the Vice President of Live Instruction for Open English (personal email communication, April 11, 2014), I found out the following:

> [In the live classes,] students are paired with a teacher who has proven language skills in the students' native language… so that they [the teachers] can help explain complex directions in the native language if needed. Our teachers focus on English-only in the classroom, however, if they see that a student needs further direction, they are able to explain in the students' native language. We currently have teachers designated for Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking students.

It has been debated in the SLA literature as to whether a classroom in which there is a shared first language (L1) should strictly and blindly remain in the target language at all times (Campa & Nassaji, 2009). The argument is that using the shared L1 can help reduce the learners' cognitive load when teachers are explaining complex grammar in class (Scott & De La Fuente, 2008). The teacher of the online class I was in certainly used Spanish to help clarify grammar and to convey the pronunciation tips she was providing. She said, for example, the following in Spanish to describe how one pronounces an English "r" (as in "drink"). At the same time she put on the web a graphic (seen in Figure 6) of a hand curved back, which represented the curved-back tongue:

> I want you to look at this, aquí está. Yeah. This is your tongue. Su lengua. Okay? Eso es su lengua. Okay, [name]? Su lengua está- es plana, plana, plana la lengua cuando dice *eh* o *ah*. Okay? *Eh* o *aah*. *Eh*. Lengua plana. Okay ahorita los dos. Todos digan *eh*, *aah*. Para decir la *r*, curvamos la puntita de la lengua para adentro. No tocamos los dientes. *Eer*. *Aar*. [Name] please repeat *eh*, *aah*; *eer*, *aar*.

To translate loosely, the teacher was instructing the students to "Curve your tongue back when you say *r*!" Conveying that comprehensibly in English to low-level English speakers would prove to be incredibly difficult if not impossible, especially in an online environment; we did not have a live video feed of this teacher. The challenge will be with Open English's expansion. If more speakers of Chinese, for example, begin to take their classes, the explanations in Spanish will have to fall by the wayside.
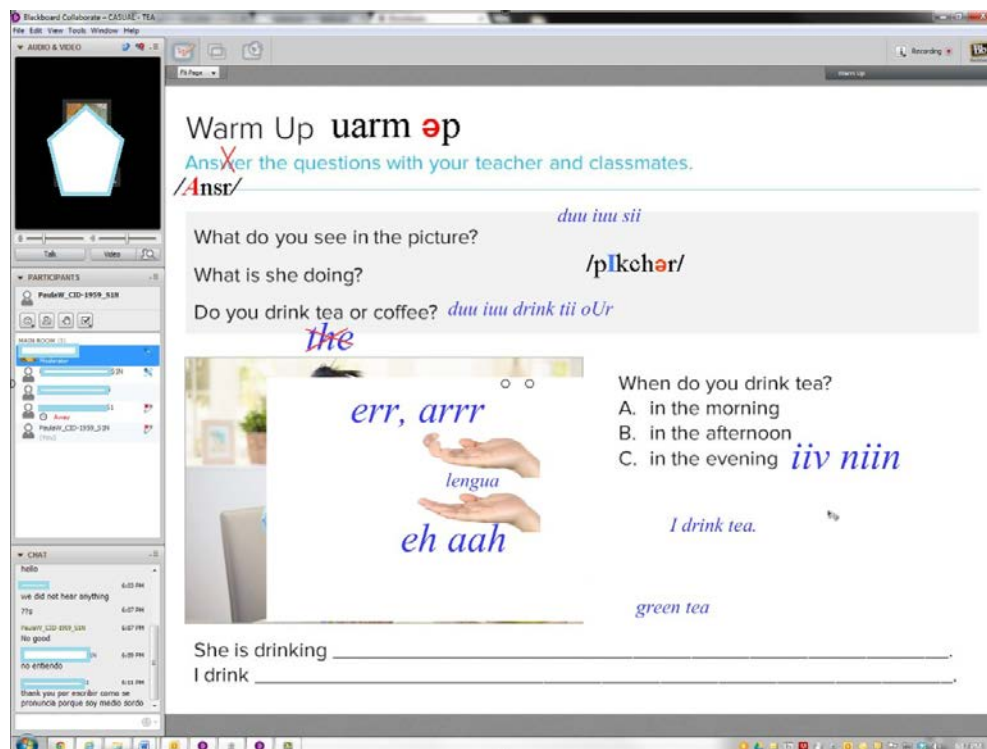
Figure 6. A screen-shot of a live, online, Open English class at Level 1.

CONCLUSION

Open English is a good, affordable way for Spanish and Portuguese speakers to learn or maintain their English-language skills. The platform for learning is robust, stable, and founded on good principles in online foreign language teaching and learning. The teachers are excellent, and the content of the lessons are well crafted and expertly delivered. My two main quibbles are these: first, scripted audio files are overused. To make the conversations a bit more authentic, it would better to have videos of speakers. Likewise, it would be good to have video feeds of the teachers in the online classes. Listening is, after all, almost never in a visual void, unless one is listening to the radio or talking on the telephone. The scaffolding support offered by visuals could be better represented in Open English. Second, after a unit lesson, learners can optionally submit a writing sample, and they do get feedback on that writing sample from a live teacher. But receiving feedback and *not* using it (to revise) may be no better than not getting any feedback at all (Hartshorn, Evans, Merrill, Sudweeks, Strong-Krause, & Anderson, 2010; Sachs & Polio, 2007). Perhaps in subsequent versions of Open English, the learners will be able to revise and resubmit their writing for another round of feedback. Such an option may necessitate an increased subscriber fee because human labor is likely one of the major costs of running the program. But, it might be worth it in the long run.

In sum, I highly recommend Open English for speakers of Spanish and Portuguese who want to learn English online. It is a cost-effective and well-designed program. Open English may also be a good option for businesses that want to offer English-language classes (i.e., workplace English classes) to their employees, especially when the workers are native speakers of Spanish. In Open English, such learners will benefit from support through the program's Spanish-language interface and through the teachers' Spanish-language scaffolding in class. But for speakers of other native languages (i.e., Chinese, German, Russian), I would proceed with caution, as the current teachers and the interface are still slanted toward instructing native speakers of Spanish and Portuguese. But with time, I think we will see Open English open up even more.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Paula Winke is an Associate Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Languages at Michigan State University, where she is also the director of the online Masters of Arts in Foreign Language Teaching Program. She teaches language teaching methods and language assessment in both face-to-face and online formats. She is the 2012 recipient of the TESOL International Award for Distinguished Research. Her research centers on foreign and second language assessment, but she also investigates task-based language teaching methods and foreign and second language materials design.

E-mail: winke@msu.edu

REFERENCES

Campa, J. C. d. l., & Nassaji, H. (2009). The amount, purpose, and reasons for using L1 in L2 classrooms. *Foreign Language Annals, 42*(4), 742–759. doi: 10.1111/j.1944-9720.2009.01052.x

Council of Europe. (2001). *Common European framework of reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment.* Strasbourg: Language Policy Unit, Council of Europe. Retrieved from http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/Source/Framework_EN.pdf

Gass, S. M., & Mackey, A. (2007). Input, interaction, and output in second language acquisition. In B. VanPatten & J. Williams (Eds.), *Theories in second language acquisition* (pp. 175–199). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Hartshorn, K. J., Evans, N. W., Merrill, P. F., Sudweeks, R. R., Strong-Krause, D., & Anderson, N. J. (2010). Effects of dynamic corrective feedback on ESL writing accuracy. *TESOL Quarterly, 44*(1), 84–109. doi: 10.5054/tq.2010.213781

Sachs, R., & Polio, C. (2007). Learners' uses of two types of written feedback on a L2 writing revision task. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 29*(1), 67–100. doi: 10.10170S0272263107070039

Scott, V. M., & De La Fuente, M. J. (2008). What's the problem? L2 learners' use of the L1 during consciousness-raising, form-focused tasks. *The Modern Language Journal, 92*(1), 100–113. doi: 10.1111/j.1540-4781.2008.00689.x

Sueyoshi, A., & Hardison, D. M. (2005). The role of gestures and facial cues in second language listening comprehension. *Language Learning, 55*(4), 661–699. doi: 10.1111/j.0023-8333.2005.00320.x

Wagner, E. (2010). The effect of the use of video texts on ESL listening test-taker performance. *Language Testing, 27*(2), 493–513. doi: 10.1177/0265532209355668