

Recommended website

ABA English
<http://campus.abaenglish.com>

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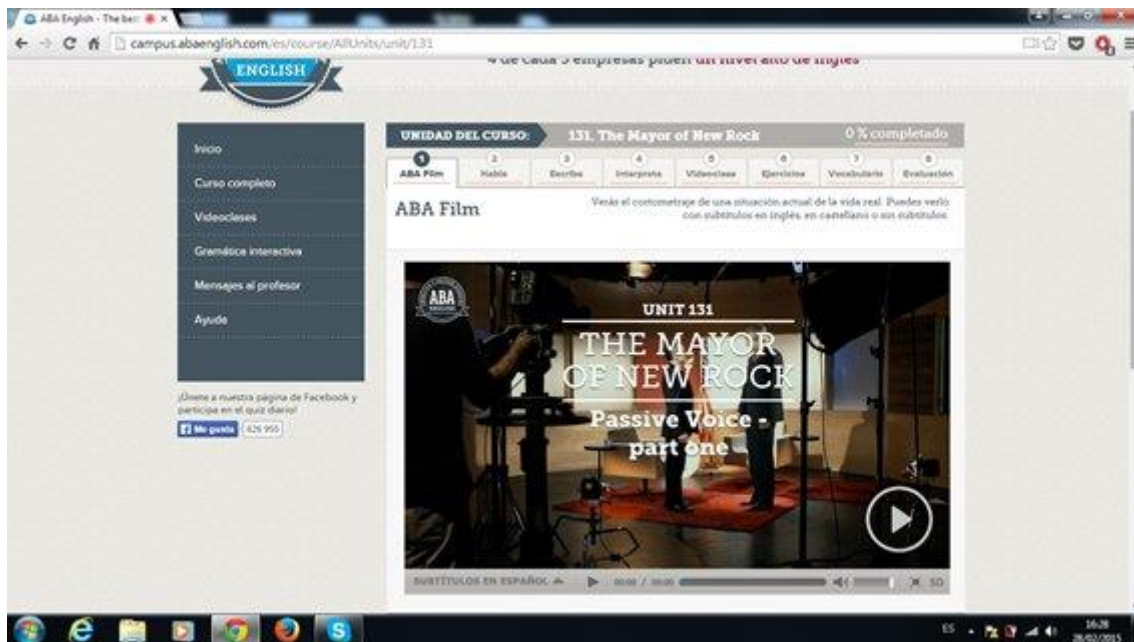


Figure 1. ABA English online course.

1. Website description and structure

This website is developed and maintained by ABA (American and British Academy: <http://www.abaenglish.com>), an institution that has been devoted to distance language learning for about 40 years and now delivers its interactive materials for learning English through the Web. The online English learning materials at <http://campus.abaenglish.com> comprise a full stand-alone general English course for adults consisting of a series of 144 modules or didactic units divided into 6 levels of linguistic competence, covering the whole range of the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages): Beginners (A1), Lower Intermediate (A2), Intermediate (B1), Upper Intermediate (B2), Advanced (B2-C1) and Business (C1). Each one of these levels includes 24 units. The support languages of the course, i.e. the languages in which instructions and help are expressed, are 6: English, French,

German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. The company is based in Barcelona (Spain) but the course is aimed at a worldwide audience.

The structure of each of the 144 units is the same, and is made up of 8 sections:

- *ABA Film*: a short video, ranging from 1 to 3 minutes, showing a situation from daily life and including the language structures and expressions that will be covered in the other sections of the unit. The videos may be watched with or without subtitles and also with the help of the course dictionary.
- *Speak*: it contains the vocabulary and expressions of the unit, translated into Spanish and in an interactive way, so that, by clicking on them, students can listen to them, record their voice and compare their oral performance with the original recording (LRC™).
- *Write*: in this section students can click on boxes to listen to a part of the video script, write down what they hear and then receive feedback on what they have written.
- *Act*: this part gives students the possibility of choosing one character from the video and role-playing his or her part. The purpose of this is to improve the student's oral fluency, although in a quite controlled environment.
- *Video-class*: another video passage in which a teacher explains some grammar and vocabulary issues covered in the unit.
- *Exercises*: here students complete fill-in-the-gap and/or translation exercises aimed at improving grammar and vocabulary. Feedback is provided, including the provision of the correct answer.
- *Vocabulary*: a list of vocabulary terms from the units is provided in alphabetical order, for the students to listen to, record and compare with the original, together with a Spanish translation.
- *Assessment*: an online test checks acquisition of the vocabulary and other linguistic features from the unit.

The course recommends the student to follow this learning path in this order, although if a learner chose to do so he or she could jump from one part to the other in a different sequence. Some other features of the website are also worth mentioning. First, regarding the video passages including the video-classes, it is possible to watch the videos in three different ways: without subtitles, with subtitles in English and with subtitles in any one of the 6 source languages, and a course dictionary is available through a hyperlink near the video window. Second, in the sections "Speak" and "Vocabulary", sentences or individual words are clickable to display a small pop-up menu with three buttons. These allow the learner to listen to the pronunciation, record his or her own voice or compare both pronunciations. This feature, called LRC™ (Listen-Record-Compare), is one of the most original of the website and is based on speech recognition technology. Third, in the parts called "Write", "Exercises" and "Assessment", the learner can write down open text with the computer keyboard, with or without the help of an oral prompt. Thus, as can be seen, the online resource provides plenty of contact with multimedia learning materials, especially situational videos, and places a particular emphasis on oral practice, both at the listening and pronunciation levels, as a departure point to improve English grammar and vocabulary. Variety within the course comes from a wealth of characters and daily situations, rather than from the structure or the formats of the units, and the student is provided with access to many different English accents and typical expressions. The content of the units, in terms of topics, grammar, vocabulary and linguistic structures is adequate for adults and young learners alike, and matches the CEFRL requirements. The structure of the website in general can also usefully provide gradual learning materials to students who want to advance from one level to the next.

When learners are working on one of the 8 main sections of a unit, they also have access to other areas of the learning resource through links that are placed on the left, at the bottom and at the top of the screen. Navigation between the sections is easy and

all sections are named in Spanish. The most important ones will be described next. The left-hand-side menu contains 6 sections, giving access, in turn, to the homepage, the whole course where we are, all the video-classes, the interactive grammar (including all the grammar topics covered in the course), a 'Contact' feature which allows the user to send messages to a teacher and, finally, a section to get technical support and help. At the bottom of the screen, students can connect to a number of social networks on the Web where the resource is present (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Google and a Blog), and, just a little bit below that, there is access to the whole ABA online campus, the user's account and other services of the institution. The level at which the user is working is indicated at the top of the screen together with his or her progression, expressed in terms of the percentage of the course that has already been completed at any given time. This information is also visible for the individual units. All in all, the structure of the website is very clear and comprehensive, and the learning objects, that is the videos and the corresponding tasks, are distributed in a linear form which is easy to navigate.

2. Pedagogical analysis

As far as language learning pedagogy is concerned, this online resource follows the Natural Method, a development of the Direct Method. According to this didactic methodology, the oral aspects of the language should come before the written forms, and therefore, learning materials have a strong focus on, first, listening, and then speaking. Pronunciation also plays a central role in the course's activities and in the way linguistic content is presented. Learning takes place through close contact with the linguistic input, making extensive use of visual and oral prompts and aids. From there, the student can derive the rules that are part of the language form. There is, therefore, in this resource a clear emphasis on content, which is noticeable in the type of syllabus that was chosen to organize the units: the so-called Situational Syllabus. The units and the videos as well as the grammar, linguistic structures and vocabulary of each unit are arranged according to situational criteria. More particularly the topics have to do with daily life situations. From this multimedia contact with the target language, via video and digital sound, in a learning environment that could perhaps be regarded as a virtual equivalent of immersion scenarios, learners are encouraged to approach language in an intuitive way, learning through discovery and making their own generalizations about grammar rules. Nevertheless, it does not mean at all that grammar is not taught in a formal manner. Actually, the resource has a significant structural component, and there is an interactive grammar section where grammatical items are directly and formally explained. In terms of the accuracy-fluency continuum, the resource seems to emphasize accuracy, which is approached through repetition drills, although the ultimate purpose of these drills and formal exercises is for the student to achieve a satisfactory degree of fluency, too. Another related methodological approach that is predominant in this learning website is the Audiolingual Approach to language learning, which is deductive in nature and uses, as was mentioned above, a wealth of multimedia learning objects, with a profusion of visual and oral aids.

The three most important linguistic components that are covered in the resource are pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. The first two are practiced mainly through drills, mimicry and memorization. On the other hand, students are invited to deduce grammar rules on their own after studying the videos and the situations. Yet there is also a very clear and direct instruction of grammar topics, mainly in the video-classes, which are mostly led by a teacher. This combination of an intuitive (indirect) and tutor-led (direct) treatment of grammar content makes the resource very interesting from a didactic point of view. As regards language or communicative skills, there is a focus on the oral component, on the one hand, and on receptive skills, on the other, although all

4 linguistic skills are properly covered. Writing and speaking (mainly through pronunciation tasks) are practiced in a very controlled way, which is typical of computer-assisted language learning processes.

Three fundamental features that must be considered when analysing Web- or Computer-assisted language learning resources are interactivity (the way the human user interacts with the computer), interaction (when humans interact through the technology) and feedback (how the resource reacts to students' output and performance). Regarding interactivity, the website is quite rich, since the interactive interface with the computer includes not only the mouse and the keyboard –as in most similar resources–, but also the headphones and the microphone. In contrast, the resource, at least in the didactic units, does not cater for interaction with other students as such, although, very close to the learning units the learners do have access both to a feature to send messages to their teachers, and to several social networks. Thus, there is some degree of human interaction. In terms of feedback, we can differentiate between feedback on oral performance and feedback on written performance. Regarding the former, it relies on the student completely, since it is the student who must compare his or her voice with a model. As regards, the latter, learners have the possibility of choosing between basically two types of feedback: either try to answer correctly in several attempts or access the correct answer directly through an available link. These types of feedback are not very informative or metalinguistic, but are quite appropriate for the language learning approach advocated by the resource. Another aspect which deserves study in online language resources is scaffolding; that is, how the learning material promotes gradual improvement of the students' knowledge and skills, by building on their previous competence. This website does so in a linear way, since practically the only possibility for students to proceed in their learning is by following a pre-established learning path. This is not necessarily negative if the language content is appropriately designed and graded, as is the case here.

The resource does not incorporate major active methodologies, such as learning by doing or task-based approaches, but, on the other hand, it is quite learner-centred, since it allows students to control some components of the learning process, basically through a rich interactivity with the material, as we have seen. The resource is not very communicative, either, although two of its features satisfactorily compensate for this limitation. First, it is possible, and easy, to access certain social networks to enhance the learning process, and, second, grammar and vocabulary instruction is highly contextualized, which is a typical characteristic of the communicative approach to language learning and teaching.

3. Technical analysis

The usability of this learning website is very high. This comes across very clearly in two aspects in particular. Firstly, the videos –the central part of the learning units– have clear user control features, which makes it easy for students to access content at an individualized pace, and the provision of hyperlinked words and expressions throughout the courses is a consistent way of ensuring easy interactivity. Secondly, navigation throughout the parts of the online resource is very clear, intuitive and, therefore, efficient, due to a series of interactive menus around the central part of the screen. The central part is always occupied by the 8 main sections of each unit and thus could be considered as the main learning “space”. Consequently, the high degree of user-friendliness of this web-based learning resource is a technically-driven feature which has a very positive influence on pedagogy since it allows the materials to be highly learner-centred.

The website is very stable and strong from a technical point of view, i.e. the interface of the resource with the user –the learner– is reliable and it works well with no technical mistakes in the recordings or their associated files. Quality of multimedia, the videos, graphics and sound is also very high, which makes the learning experience very enjoyable. Graphic design is pleasing and consistent throughout the courses, too. Additionally, the efficient performance of the LRC™ (Listen-Record-Compare) speech recognition technology makes the resource very strong technically speaking. And last, but not least, the feedback is provided very efficiently from a technical perspective. Thus, the website and the language learning materials and features it contains have a very good technical and instructional design, which is a matter of prime importance in Web-based language learning resources for self-study.

4. Summary of the analysis

The courses and units within ABA English are excellent materials for self-study at different levels. The resource's technical, graphic and instructional design is strong and serves the main objective of this website perfectly: to help the contextualized practice and efficient acquisition of oral skills and grammar and vocabulary knowledge of the English language by Spanish-speaking adult learners. The use of videos to illustrate real-life situations in order to improve oral competence and learn the structure of the English language is a remarkable feature of this website. Another strong point of the resource is that it is a stand-alone and coherently organized collection of courses and units that can lead the learner from low to very high levels of linguistic competence in a gradual way. It might be said that the website's approach to language learning is not very communicative. Nevertheless, the courses hosted in ABA English website take full advantage of what the computer (in this case, the Web) does most efficiently at present: namely, provide the language learner with considerable opportunities to practice the most mechanical aspects of the language in a dynamic and interactive way. This kind of practice can be crucial to improve language competence.

