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The Standard Deviants—Learn English as a Second Language—Pronouns, Adjectives, and the Present Tense

Produced by Cerebellum Corporation (2004)

Platform: DVD

Target Language: English

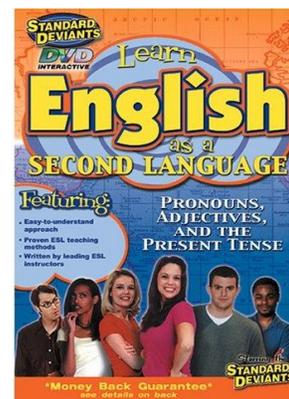
Target Audience: English Language Learners

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With the large variety of supplemental materials that exists for aiding English Second Language (ESL) students in the acquisition of pronouns, adjectives, and the present tense, a teacher must often carefully choose classroom tools while keeping in mind the learning styles of the diverse student population. To support the acquisition process of ESL students, the educational DVD *Learn English as a Second Language: Pronouns, Adjectives, and the Present Tense* starring the Standard Deviants provides viewers with a brief but clear overview of the topics aforementioned in the title through repetition, role plays, opportunities to build on previous knowledge, and use of vocabulary in contexts. Whereas proper practice is a necessity in the learning of any language, this product provides students with opportunities to develop their English language skills through a variety of visual and auditory aids to supplement the ESL student's knowledge of these topics. With its simple yet effective overviews of the content and concise practice and input strategies, this DVD can be a supplemental aid that is appropriate for the low beginner ESL student.

This educational DVD addresses three topics through the presentation of three different “chapters”: pronouns, adjectives, and the present tense. Each of the chapters addressed through the DVD are all presented in a similar manner: introduction of vocabulary, how to use it, practice, a story, and finally a quiz. In the first chapter discussing pronouns, ESL students are introduced with the verb “to be” as well as pronouns and their functions. The DVD uses this to introduce the cast of the DVD and helps students become familiar with the characters in the DVD through the use of conjugated forms of the verb “to be”. As students move along through the sections of the pronouns chapter, a song is played during the practice stage to provide students the same input in a rhythmic fashion where words flash upon the screen as a character sings them and strums a guitar to a simple melody. Having some practice, exposure, and time to decode the meaning of the vocabulary presented, the chapter then moves to a brief role play regarding two characters who are meeting for the first time. Use of the verbs and pronouns previously encountered are abundant as the dialogue moves along, first by the characters on screen, then with students role playing. Concluding the chapter, the story is followed up by a quiz to quickly assess the viewer's comprehension of the chapter's contents. Following the

pronouns chapter, the second chapter, adjectives, recycles knowledge and ideas from the first chapter through using pronouns and the verb “to be” while adding common adjectives and their appropriate use. This is accomplished through the same manner as the first chapter by use of simple images, videos, a continuation of the story section from the pronouns chapter, and a quiz to convey and assess the proper use of adjectives. Finally, the video concludes with the third chapter, the present tense, through videos and photographs depicting a variety of verbs being portrayed in the present tense. Characters dance on screen to music, sleep on chairs, and eat a variety of cuisine as the corresponding verbs appear on the screen and are articulated by an off-screen voice. Practice is then provided through short videos showing the language being used in context, proper placement of words through shifting around words in sentences, closer examination of the difference between “does” and “doesn’t”, a song using the different verbs, and interaction between characters writing letters to one another while thinking aloud what their letters to one another are saying, thereby supporting the main ideas of the chapter before entering the more productive parts of the section with the present tense. This is achieved through having viewers once again take active roles during the story section, in which two people becoming roommates are viewing an apartment together while using vocabulary and verbs previously covered in all three chapters to convey their thoughts to the viewers. The final chapter, like the chapters before it, end with a quiz assessing the viewers’ understanding of the content discussed.

In addition to providing input through recycling information covered in the chapters, building on prior knowledge, and use of related videos and images, the DVD makes appropriate use of several types of input to aid in the encoding of topics covered. As the vocabulary section of each chapter is taking place, the word is presented on screen and a voice cued by a visual aid or a video clip related to the adjective, pronoun, noun, or verb is presented. The “how to use it” and “practice” sections of the chapters focus on using related contextual videos which, in turn, provide viewers with the necessary input to view its use in social experiences via explicit explanations of the chapter’s content. Also, the short role play acted out at the end of each chapter after students have been provided with multiple opportunities to learn the vocabulary and its use is done first by the actors alone before asking viewers to take the role of one character or another. The final type of input, the assessment, provides input by allowing students to build their metalinguistic awareness regarding the topic of the chapter. In other words, the chapter quiz asks students to gauge themselves on how much they have learned through observing the chapter.

The manner in which the elements of the DVD are discussed throughout the chapters are very supportive of beginner ESL students. The provision of varied and stimulating input is helpful to aiding beginner ESL students grasp concepts that may be new to them. The use of text with videos, audio, and dialogue supplies students with the chance to learn the vocabulary through the receptive skills of listening and reading while viewing visual aids. These additions provide students with multiple means of decoding the lexicon given, supplement their learning process and, furthermore, allow students to see the lexicon being used within its appropriate context which is not only aided through the video alone but, more importantly, through the subtitles for students so that they may read along as they watch. Although the majority of the aforementioned elements rely heavily on students receptive skills (reading and listening), the application of the story and role-play, as well as the quiz at the end of each chapter, asks students to speak up and become actively involved in the acquisition of the input provided. By presenting the material in this way, students are given time in which they may remain silent and not produce output until they feel ready to do so. Thus, until students enter the practice and role play section, they have time to learn and understand the materials provided without having to fear being put

on the spot where they may become afraid of making a mistake. Instead, students can wait until the vocabulary has been provided through a variety of input before the class collectively as a group takes the part of one character in the role play while the actors on the DVD take the part of the other. The final portion of each chapter, the quiz, is beneficial for teachers and students alike, allowing teachers to make a short and quick assessment of what the students have learned from each chapter through student production of the content and the concepts covered therein.

There are two shortcomings that need to be addressed to avoid confusing students who may be watching the DVD. Although the DVD does provide necessary elements (the verb “to be”) before moving on to how they are used in junction with other English language elements, there were points that appeared as though an ESL student may misinterpret the information provided given their limited lexicon and control of the English language. For example, in the first chapter regarding the verb “to be” and pronouns, the images provided may have made it slightly disorienting for students to make the distinction in the difference between “you” and “s/he”. During the use of “s/he” and “you”, the character on the video is looking out at the audience (the students). Although a small picture is present of another character, and since the speaker is looking toward the audience rather than at the image of the person being referred to as “s/he”, students may unnecessarily become confused. Expressed differently, regardless of whether the word “you” or “s/he” was used, the character on the screen directed his/her view and comments at the student, which, in turn, may cause students to think that “s/he” and “you” can be used interchangeably rather than depending on context. Secondly, the use of contractions is not explained in the video. The verb “to be” and its conjugations are taught in their full forms, but are then provided in the contracted form without prior explanation. For example, the chapter on pronouns constantly provides repetition of “I am”, but the role play/story element of the chapter only uses “I’m”. For beginner level students, contractions may need to be explicitly explained and taught before encountering this element.

Despite the stated shortcomings of the DVD *Learn English as a Second Language: Pronouns, Adjectives, and the Present Tense*, this media tool can be used quite profitably in the beginner ESL classroom. Its provision of repetition for materials through a variety of comprehensible input can be a simple yet effective tool for supplementing classroom instruction. Further, coupling the content of the DVD with lesson plans can provide additional examples, helpful vocabulary, and practice through complementing a healthy learning environment with reasonable objectives. Caution is necessary however when introducing new multimedia tools into classroom instruction, but this DVD keeps in mind the conditions necessary for successful acquisition of knowledge and turn them into a centered classroom aid. This is accomplished through the provision of the same material in a variety of contexts, the use of both receptive and productive skills to keep students actively engaged in the learning process, and the continuous building of previous material to establish bridges between what the students know and are learning, both of which are necessary elements in an effective ESL classroom.

Barton Colmerauer is pursuing his master's in TESOL at SUNY Fredonia, Fredonia, NY. He has a B.A. in English-Adolescent Education and plans on teaching English abroad upon completion of his master's degree.

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