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Review of: RealTime Spanish CD Rom

Shaw N. Gynan
Western Washington University, shaw.gynan@wwu.edu

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which detracts from the exemplary use of authentic Spanish in the video clips. The oral introductions to the videos also would be more useful if they stated the interview question in written or spoken Spanish.

¿Cómo se dice...? includes four types of post-viewing activities, two for each clip. One very useful feature of ¿Cómo se dice...? is that the video box is visible in every activity, so that users may easily replay the clip when completing the follow-up activity. True-or-false and multiple-choice exercises test comprehension of the interview. In click-and-drag activities, students hear a word, a line of dialogue, or a description, and then drag a drawing to the correct spot on the screen. In speaking activities, a voice "interviews" the users, posing questions similar to those which the native speakers respond to in the clip. Learners speak their answers into the computer's microphone and then hear both the questions and their answers in a dialogue format. This activity would result in a more meaningful exchange if the interview questions also appeared in the ¿Cómo se dice...? textbook, so that students could use the recording as practice for a live conversation in class. Finally, writing activities give students the opportunity to respond to the same questions asked in the interview. A help box gives grammatical reminders in English. The text is saved to a disk file that the learner can later open with a word processor.

A box beneath each video screen contains a brief cultural note in English about the history or geography of the region as-

sociated with the speaker. However, this information is not pertinent to the interview question and will likely be of no interest to users. For example, when a young Mexican mechanic talks about his job, the culture box describes Aztec deities. Users would benefit more from cultural information that refers to the topic of the interview. The ¿Cómo se dice...? textbook is much more successful than the CD at presenting historical and cultural information at an appropriate level of Spanish and in a meaningful context.

The ¿Cómo se dice...? CD-ROM gives the student valuable contact with authentic speech in manageable segments and is an excellent supplement to the textbook. Instructors will find a wealth of support material here to reinforce the theme of any chapter in the text. However, the textbook makes no reference to the CD and gives students no indication at what point in the chapter they should complete the video activities. This feature could lead to student frustration with the CD because some of the interviews are short and include simple recognition activities, while the writing exercises require a more thorough understanding of the themes and grammatical topics in the chapter. Instructors using the ¿Cómo se dice...? textbook package will want to consider how best to incorporate the CD-ROM into the curriculum in order to take advantage of the many possibilities that this fine tool offers.

Jerome Miner
Knox College

RealTime Spanish
Digital Publishing
Distributed by MacMillan Interactive Publishing
London, Basingstoke, England
Copyright 1996; ISBN: 0-333-684 044
CD-Rom for IBM (Windows), Instruction Pamphlet
System Requirements: PC with 486SX/33MHz processor or higher, 4 MB RAM, SVGA monitor (256 colors, 800 x 600 resolution), double speed CD-ROM drive or faster, Windows compatible sound card,

microphone (optional), mouse, Windows 3.1 or 95; also tested successfully on Power Macintosh with G3 @ 300 MHz, 64 MB RAM, built-in video 832 x 624, double speed CD-ROM drive, Windows compatible sound card, microphone, mouse, Connectix Virtual PC 2.1.2, MicroSoft Windows 95.

RealTime Spanish is billed as an interactive, immersive journey through Spain, the objective of which is to help students to learn culture and language and to become confident speakers of Spanish. The single CD-ROM is accompanied by a ten-page pamphlet of instructions. Digital Publishing is a German company that specializes in computer-assisted language learning, and *RealTime* is based on an *Interaktive Sprachreise* series written by Sigrid Brugger and Arturo Matheu. However, the series has been "localized" for Spanish learners by Maritza López.

Although the system requirements are listed exclusively for the PC environment, the program performed fairly well on a Power Macintosh equipped as noted above. However, on the Macintosh, video quality was lower, the sound was a bit distorted, one menu item which was supposed to be a hyperlink to another node in the program appeared not to function, and the overall response was somewhat sluggish, compared to the rapid response on a Gateway Pentium Pro PC with 64 MB RAM and Microsoft Windows 95 4.00.905 B. The difference can be explained by the need for a platform emulation in the Mac environment.

RealTime Spanish features an easy-to-use interface. Simply inserting the disk causes the program to load automatically, displaying a full-screen map of Spain on which the learner sees 13 cities, their names, and a photographic icon for each. In the upper left-hand corner is a small window with a frozen image of the instructor-narrator, named Patricia. Merely clicking on her image invokes a video clip in which she greets the student and gives instructions about how to begin the trip through Spain. Clicking and dragging on the image

reveals a menu of options for navigating through the program or exiting. One can "travel" to a site in Spain either by selecting from the narrator menu or by clicking on one of the city icons. For each city, a photograph appears as a background for three to five icons. Patricia talks about the region in English. In the section on spelling, students can record samples of their speech and compare them with Patricia's.

By clicking on one of the icons for a given city of region, another photograph appears. Patricia instructs the student to open the menu, where the user can select an item starting a dialog based on the photograph in the picture. A series of still photographs accompanies a dialog that shows the characters in different poses accompanied by cartoon-like balloons with a transcription of the dialog text. A handy feature is that by holding down the Alt key, the student can display a running translation of the conversation in the balloons. Upon completion of the dialog, the student can work through a set of exercises and then exit.

An icon for a language laboratory is located on the map at North Africa, near Tunisia. There, one can learn about orthography and accent marks. Confusingly, the explanations are listed as "exercises" in the menu that appears below Patricia. The use of the term "lesson" or a label corresponding to the particular topic would have been clearer. The explanations are in need of revision and improvement. In Exercise 5, under "Ortografía," for example, Patricia explains in English that the Spanish "d" can sound like the voiceless "th." According to the Spanish explanation on the screen, /d/ has two allophones, pronounced like a soft /d/ and, at the end of a word, like "z" (English /th/), or it disappears. A lot of standard phonetics terminology is used in the explanation and non-linguistic terminology and symbols are, unfortunately, mixed together. The word "soft" means nothing in phonetics, and for the average user of this program, this material is not helpful. The student cannot clarify the meaning of "soft" by looking up the definition in the dictionary, and, of course, the statement that /d/

has two allophones is inaccurate.

The language lab was one of the more disappointing features of this program. The "tour" of the cities is arranged according to a traditional grammatical syllabus, but no explanations of grammar are available. They could have been included in the laboratory; there is ample room on the CD to do this, since the entire program occupies no more than 550 MB. Links between the cities and grammatical points would be very helpful and an appropriate application of technology to the task of language learning.

The exercises are sufficiently varied, of the fill-in-the-blank, unscrambling, matching, multiple-choice, and short-answer types. However, one receives rudimentary and occasionally inappropriate corrective feedback, and, separately, the correct answer. When the dieresis is left off the letter "u" in "vergüenza," the program responds: "Has cometido un error de acentuación," but when the accent is omitted from the word "lápiz," the message is: "Lo que has escrito no tiene ninguna relación con lo que deberías haber escrito." This rather severe admonition appears in response to other similarly insignificant errors. In Oviedo, the program asks users, "¿Qué quiere tomar Maribel?" Apparently the only acceptable answer is "una sidra." If one answers "Quiere tomar sidra," the program responds, "Aquí falta algo." Even before 1996, well-developed programming techniques for providing specific and useful feedback for CALL applications existed; the authors could have used them here.

Typing accents in this program is very difficult. In the accompanying pamphlet, learners are told that they can produce the accent by combining the appropriate vowel with the key for a character that is not on any keyboards that I have seen. The pamphlet recommends that the user enter the characters by holding down the Alt key and entering the numbers specific to the letter on the numerical keypad. Unfortunately, these numbers are not available in the pamphlet. (By the way, the combinations needed to produce diacritics for Spanish are: 'ü'-Alt 129, 'é'-Alt 130, 'á'-160, 'í'-161, 'ó'-162, 'ú'-163, 'ñ' -164, 'Ñ'-165, ¿-Alt168, and ¡-Alt 173.)

RealTime Spanish is a rather obsolete program by today's computing standards, but even a new version would probably not be very different. It could, perhaps, be on a DVD and use whole video clips to replace the comic-book format; however, more advanced technology will not remedy flaws that are conceptual in nature. The fact that *RealTime Spanish* is based mainly on audiolingual methodology, along with grammar and translation, is not the problem, but rather that the dialogs are painstakingly slow and stilted. The content is more often than not unrelated to the potentially fascinating locations. Indeed, one of the biggest weaknesses of *RealTime Spanish* is the paucity of cultural information. Users are led to believe that they will learn about Spain as they learn the language, but this expectation generally is not met. For example, when the learner goes to Mallorca, Patricia presents a couple of sentences about the region and directs the user to the dialogs, which are about the airport, souvenirs, and shopping. All these themes conceivably could be geared to Mallorca, but they are not. This lack of coordination is typical of all the sites. In Oviedo, one of the dialogs is about a divorce in the family. In a dialog that takes place near Gaudí's famous cathedral in Barcelona, the building serves as a backdrop, but the boys talk about the entrance fee and how to avoid paying it by jumping the fence. One learns almost nothing about the building itself.

RealTime Spanish is an example of good technology that lacks a properly communicative orientation. If the authors had provided more informative descriptions of the different locations in Spanish, if the dialogs had been more interesting and relevant to the sites, if a complete grammatical tutoring section had been supplied in the language laboratory and linked to the grammatically arranged dialogs, and if the automated correction had been more carefully programmed, then *RealTime Spanish* could serve as a useful, self-contained tool for independent language learning. However,

despite the weaknesses, the simplicity of the program is very attractive, learners may enjoy working through the exercises, and the basic concept of a journey through Spain is appealing.

Shaw N. Gynan
Western Washington University

Pro One Multimedia: Spanish-English, English-Spanish Multimedia Talking Dictionary
CD-ROM for IBM PC or compatible
Pro One Software
P.O. Box 16317, Las Cruces NM 88004
Support Hotline: 1-505-532-6000, www.sofsource.com
System Requirements: IBM PC or compatible with CD-ROM drive, Windows 3.1 or higher, 486 DX2 or greater processor, 8 MB of RAM, 12 MB recommended, 16-bit sound card

Desktop dictionaries, like the traditional or the hand-held electronic versions, vary considerably with respect to the number of words they contain and the amount of information provided. Furthermore, there is often a direct correlation between the price of the reference product, which can cost several hundred dollars or less than ten, and its ultimate usefulness. The *Pro One Multimedia Talking Dictionary* is at the low end of this spectrum. This simple product, designed for students, business people, and travelers, according to the product description, provides translations and pronunciations for high frequency vocabulary in English and Spanish.

Computerized dictionaries have the advantage of being both faster and more convenient than traditional dictionaries, and, as the name of this dictionary suggests, can combine other multimedia capabilities, such as audio files and a record/playback function. The *Talking Dictionary* is easily installed, fast, and will run behind other programs, allowing the user to quickly access vocabulary for reading or writing projects. The program opens immediately to the language selection page, where the user clicks on one of two icons to choose

either the Spanish-to-English or the English-to-Spanish dictionary. A click on the translation button opens the dictionary page, which displays the word list on the left and the dictionary entry for the selected word on the right. The user can either type in a word or use the scroll bar to select a word. The dictionary entry shows the original word, a short description or synonym in the original language, and its part of speech, followed by the same information for the target word. Words with multiple meanings or uses are repeated in the word list. The description line, seldom included in traditional dictionaries, helps the user avoid the pitfalls of not taking into account the part of speech of the target word. Unfortunately, an element of delay is introduced if the user wishes to change the language of origin; there is no button on the dictionary page to accommodate this function. The user must return to the language page and click on the two language icons again before returning to the dictionary page.

The audio functions of the *Talking Dictionary* are reliable and represent probably the most attractive aspect of this product. Users can click on the pronunciation button to hear the target word and can use the record and playback buttons to compare their pronunciation with that of the native speaker. The Peninsular pronunciation may not be familiar to all Americans. However, it would be impossible to address all the regional and national pronunciations of Spanish in a product of this scope. The pronunciation of the English words is American, making the dictionary a possible resource for Spanish-speaking students of American English as well as for learners of Spanish.

The verb page could be a useful tool if not for the limited number of verb tenses given in Spanish. The user selects from a list of fifty regular, irregular, and stem-changing verbs, but with the option of only five verb tenses: present, present perfect, imperfect, future, and conditional. It is clear that this was a programming shortcut, since five verb tenses are provided on the English verb page as well. The omission of the pret-