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Review of: Spanish Grammar and Spanish Reading Comprehension CD Roms

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MEDIA / COMPUTERS

Prepared by Richard A. Raschio

Members of AATSP who would like to review media should send their curricula vitae to Dr. Raschio. (See address on *Hispania* Departments and Features page.)

I. Reviews of CD-ROMs

Spanish Grammar CD

Spanish Reading Comprehension CD

Queue, Inc., Fairfield, CT

Copyright 1999; ISBN: 0-333-684 044

CD-ROMs for Windows or Macintosh; Instruction Flyer

System Requirements for Windows:

386/33 MHz processor or higher; 8 MB RAM; 256 color display; 2X CD-ROM, printer (optional), mouse. **System Requirements for Macintosh:** 030 CPU 25 MHz or better, 256 color display, 4 MB RAM, 2X CD-ROM drive, System 7.x or higher, printer (optional)

Spanish Grammar and *Spanish Reading Comprehension* were tested on a Macintosh G4 400 MHz, 1024 x 768 display, 128 MB RAM, Apple CD/DVD. Both programs are designed for use by high school, college, and adult education students. Installation on the Mac is a very simple matter of inserting the disk and double-clicking on the icon that appears, which invokes the program. The screen goes black, meaning that the main Apple navigation bar is no longer available, and a window appears in the upper left hand corner of the screen displaying a menu with two options, *Spanish Grammar* and *Comprehensive Spanish*. At the bottom of the window there are a couple of buttons, one to quit and the other labeled documentation. In the accompanying instruction flyer, there is a cryptic statement about this latter button to the effect that the documentation files may be accessed by clicking on documentation. This reviewer missed the point entirely and merely began by choosing one of the two main options, discovering quite by accident that documentation has the master table of contents as well as instructions for using the program. A clearer identification of what the word "documentation" means in this context

would be helpful.

If the user double clicks one of the main menu items, a new window appears with a blank requiring the user's name. At this point the Apple navigation bar also reappears, thus making it possible to toggle between this and other programs that may be active on the computer. The program could be improved by leaving the main operating system navigation bar visible at all levels.

The *Spanish Grammar* menu option leads to a submenu with eleven units, *Spanish Grammar* I-XI. Since these unit titles form the main menu, it would be far more informative if each unit were to have a distinctive title that indicated something about the content. Each unit consists of approximately ten lessons. The lesson titles are generally descriptive, but in some cases one sees only "miscellany" or "miscellaneous." In one of these residual category lessons we learn about present tense, question formation, negatives, tag questions, and the second and third conjugations. There is no good reason why these topics should not be organized in a clearer way. Some "miscellany" may be difficult to avoid, but the program should display more prominently something as basic as the formation of "-er" and "-ir" verbs.

Each lesson has around three explanations, and, for each explanation there are five practice sentences. Therefore, there are roughly 300 short paragraphs of explanations with examples, and 1500 questions with which to practice. These paragraphs also are available by clicking Help on the Apple navigation bar to reveal a pull-down menu. The help topics usually are exact reproductions of all of the explanations provided in a given lesson. For the most part, the topics are clearly labeled, although an occasional title like "More objects" should be edited to communicate more clearly the topic intended to provide help. This program would be the equivalent, in a grammar

workbook, of at least 200 pages. The program is certainly comprehensive in that sense, although the level of grammatical explanation is formulaic, more a series of instructions for translating from English to Spanish.

The exercises are of two types, fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice. The fill-in-the-blank items are exclusively one-word responses. The correction is based on a rudimentary matching program. The student is informed of a correct answer or an explanation is provided of how to produce the right answer, regardless of the type of error committed. There is no opportunity provided to correct the answer. At the end of the exercise, the student's name provided at the beginning of the session appears along with the score and the time it took to complete the module.

The other main menu item leads to a submenu with two items. Each has ten lessons, for each of which there are approximately 15 sentences. *Comprehensive Spanish* therefore has 300 practice sentences. There are no explanations provided in this part of the program, the intention being "review." The Help option is available on the navigation bar; however, unlike the help topics in *Spanish Grammar*, these are not fully developed. For example, the first part of the *Comprehensive Spanish* review has ten lessons, for which there is only one help item, object pronouns, despite the fact that many other topics are covered. In the second *Comprehensive Spanish* review, four help topics are provided. This part of the program simply appears to be incomplete.

Spanish Reading Comprehension, which is on another CD, is a series of eight units, each of which has approximately ten readings. In each reading there are approximately three paragraphs, each of which contain around five questions. Therefore, there are 250 paragraphs and something like 1200 questions. This program contains no Help feature. The Spanish is idiomatic and the grammar is impeccable. The content is quite typical of second-year college texts. The reader reads the thrilling adventures of some Americans in a non-descript

Latin country by the name of Surlandia. The readings feature the usual information on culture, which consists of a smattering of history, economics, and cross-cultural analysis. The questions are exclusively of the multiple-choice type, and they are consistently focused on information retrieval. The program does not challenge the student at higher cognitive levels (appraisal, comparison, evaluation, and so forth).

Spanish Grammar and *Spanish Reading Comprehension* are well-organized, simple programs, which will appeal to students whose learning style predisposes them to predictable, traditional exercises. Students who need a more visually stimulating and creative approach will have to look elsewhere. Despite the technology used, these programs are, frankly, old-fashioned and take little advantage of what computer-assisted instruction can offer. On each CD there are over 600 megabytes of free space, so the authors easily had enough room to add some visuals and sound. Even without such trappings and using purely objective exercises, more creativity is possible. In the area of reading, for example, hyperlinks could be inserted to interesting sites or Spanish-language search engines. The readings themselves could be varied as to form and function. A searchable lexicon with synonyms and definitions or translations could be included. The grammar and reading CDs could be cross-referenced so that language structure could be illustrated in meaningful and communicative context. These kinds of changes could make this language program competitive in the current market.

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TravelTur: An Introductory Spanish Multimedia CD-ROM

Houghton Mifflin Company; ISBN: 0-395-70826-5; Copyright 1994.

System Requirements for Macintosh:

Minimum of Macintosh LCII series, system 7.0.1, 8 MB RAM, 5 MB available hard disk space, 13" 256 color monitor, double-speed CD-ROM drive, print recommended.