CALICO Software Review

CALICO Journal, Volume 16 Number 4, pp. 624-635

Español En Marcha
Self-Study Spanish Course

Monita A.M. Mascitti-Meuter, Marisa Cordella
Monash University

Product At A Glance
Product type: Self-Study Spanish Course
Language Level: Lower intermediate
Activity: Word and image association; conjugate verbs, hear native pronunciation/dialogues, fill in the blanks, readings with short comprehension exercises, word games.

Media format: 1 CD-ROM

Computer platform: Windows 95

General Description

Background information
Español en Marcha is based on the Camille method (Computer Assisted Multimedia Interactive Language Learning Environment). The program, which focuses exclusively on Continental Spanish, is designed for lower intermediate students with a special emphasis on the use and contrast of past tenses. It and includes:

1. 40 hours of interactive work (100 exercises including audio videos and illustrations).
2. Instructions, bilingual sound enhanced dictionary, a book on conversational skills, grammar book with hyperlinks to grammar exercises are available in three languages: English, French and German.
3. A help on demand file which helps guides the student in the running of the program.
4. An electronic cultural notebook which includes a variety of topics.
5. More than 60 topics related to hypertext which includes photographs and has a link to the dictionary.
6. 20 short videos which simulate natural/real situations (including comprehension exercises, as well as the possibility to record the student’s voice).
7. The inclusion of glossaries and notebook.
8. The possibility to evaluate and self-evaluation of the student’s progress.
9. The program covers a review of the past tenses.
10. The program’s design is intended to be accessible to those students with minimal computer skills, and to be used with or without the aid of a tutor depending on the language proficiency the student wants to achieve.

Information about the program is available on-line from the Web Site.

1.2 Summary of features:
The program is divided into 5 main categories: Cultura, Vocabulario, Gramática, Videos and Conversación.

Cultura
This is a large category (22 topics) and touches on issues ranging from Spain’s Economy to its local superstitions and gastronomy. The topics vary in length, from one paragraph to a couple of pages.

Vocabulario
With 5 categories, the vocabulary section is based on association between words and images and exercises which make the student match the word with the object/drawing. Compared to the other categories it is shorter in length and covers such topics as transport, travel, parts of the body and adjectives.

Gramática
Out of all the categories, that of Gramática is possibly the one which has been most developed: 17 topics in all. An effort is made to explore the difference between the use of the present perfect and preterit, as well as the preterit and imperfect. There is also a short segment on the present tense (acabar de; ir a; progressive) and the future.

Videos
The videos are divided into 4 subcategories (Buen viaje, Hay que cuidarse, Necesidades, El trabajo) and include brief comprehension exercises. A total of 19 topics vary from confirming flights, dialogues between doctors and their patients, interviews, food, as well as the university atmosphere in Spain. The episodes allow the student to experience real situations that they may encounter when travelling through or living in Spain. One video has also effectively been used elsewhere in another category-gramática (exercise 14: “me duele mucho”). Participants in each video present authentic (Spanish-from Spain) pronunciation and use of discreet language within the margins of social variables (e.g. formal vs informal speech) which in terms of pragmatics is appropriate for each event the program presents.

Conversación
This category (with 4 subcategories, specifically: ¿Te ayuda?, iQui te ha pasado?, ¿Has estado alguna vez en?, Casas) is organised similarly to the category of Vocabulario. Here again the principle is language acquisition through associating words with images. Links are available within this category to Cultura (for example: medios de transporte, geografía española).

 Extras
The program also includes an audio recording studio or a voice recorder, depending on the


21/08/2014
exercise, a dictionary (Spanish-English; Spanish-German and Spanish-French) and notepad, contextual help and online help. As well, it provides an evaluation of the student’s progress and the ability to call up the transcript of dialogues and exercises. This program is available for students of English, German and French background learning Spanish.

Evaluation

2.1 Technological features

Speed / reliability

Operating speed is very satisfactory. The time lapse from one exercise to the next is quite short. Naturally the videos take a while to load, but even that is of little consequence. No operating problems were encountered.

Compatibility

The program was tested on a Pentium processor and can be used on any IBM-PC or compatible system. The minimum requirement for the computer is an Intel 80486 DX processor or compatible, 8 Megabytes RAM, Microsoft Windows 3.1, a 16 bit sound card, CD-ROM drive, loudspeakers and Microphone/Headset and a VGA 256 colours video card.

Screen Management

The program makes available a number of different categories on the screen at one time. Tools such as the dictionary, evaluation, help line, exit, text supplier of dialogues, grammar reference are always available, though not always visible. The variety of icons, and their overlapping functions do not make the system very user friendly at the early stages. As can be seen below, there are two help lines (with the red and white question mark icons-contextual and online help respectively) as well as four icons that allow exit of some sort (the door in the left top corner, the two blue circles on the top of the screen—the circle on the right sometimes allows the voice to repeat a question in specific exercises—and the foot in the bottom right corner).

Navigation and user interface

Although no major difficulties were found in this area, there are some minor concerns:

1. Navigation through the cultural section can be slightly cumbersome. Although links have been made with photographs and other readings on cultural aspects, it is not clearly indicated that red words link to photos and blue ones to other cultural pages. (see example below)

2. In addition, when one is in the process of linking to other pages and wants to go back to the original cultural page, the program directs the student to the original listing of categories.

3. Thirdly (and this is related to an observation already made under screen management) although the help line is always available to explain the function of different icons and programs, it is confusing to have icons of similar function such as the door, the foot at the right bottom corner and the two blue circles available simultaneously.

Also unclear is the icon (a turned arrow) positioned in the lower right corner of the screen next to the mirror in the example below (as opposed to the top line or the side, where all the other icons are located) which allows the student to hear the conversation once again.
4. Under the category of the grammar reference tool, the future tense seems to have been incorrectly linked. When trying to retrace steps, the icons that allow one to do this, throw the student into other sections within the grammar category, rather than the previous step.

Exploitation of computer potential
The product explores every possible facet available for language learning purposes. The inclusion of audio visual material, drag & drop, fill in the blanks exercises, short multiple choice questions, recording possibilities, dictionary, photos and still drawings all add to the attractiveness of the package.

Possible improvements:

Cultural:
1. The cultural segments briefly touch on a number of different issues. The next step would be to extend these readings with more information.
2. As mentioned elsewhere, such topics as the history of Spain, and references to Hispanic America would make the program more complete.
3. The cultural segment could also have perhaps integrated multiple choice comprehension exercises. The purpose of the readings could expand from being purely informative to more pedagogical language exploitation.

Vocabulary:
The program could be usefully enriched by allowing more flexibility in the acceptance of vocabulary which, although not current in Spain, is quite widely used in Hispanic America (eg. cache for carrera/auto).

Grammatical:
Both the segment which deals with the grammar exercises, as well as the grammar reference tool could be further expanded. Although the program specifically addresses the complex nature of the past tenses, other tenses for the purpose of review could be included as well in order to make the program more complete. In addition, and this is more specific to the grammar reference tool:
1. The segment on adjectives could include a more in depth discussion of the change in meaning before or after a noun (appropriate for the lower intermediate level that the program targets).
2. Greater cultural sensitivity is desirable to avoid misunderstandings should users of the program chance to use what they have learned in a Hispanic American context (e.g. coger)

Video and Conversation:
The program could have used the video source in a more integrated fashion within the Grammar category, with more exercises related to it, for instance. As mentioned before, only one attempt of this kind was made. In addition, the following observations need to be taken into consideration:

1. The videos present very few mixed dialogues (i.e. Male-female combinations: only 4). Eight dialogues are between two men, and only four involve two female participants. This reflects an imbalance in gender speech, especially considering that the three documentary style reports use male voices, and the positions that the women hold within the dialogues always reflect an inferior social status to the male counterpart. Those holding a working position are mainly male participants. In one case, where a female character is a director of a language institute, this is not made explicitly clear (on her door, one reads director, rather than directorial).
2. The video clips total over 26 minutes in length, during which time the language variety is well used. A number of different registers are presented in the 19 video clips. The total time is divided into three categories: 15" is dedicated to dialogues, 9" is dedicated to the reports, and 2" is dedicated to an aerobics class. The latter could perhaps been shortened, since it is presented with poor acoustics, repetitive language and is too lengthy in comparison to other, more informative dialogues.
3. The videos show the potential for further application. While the topics are excellent and the speech authentic, no consistent effort has been made to link the dialogues with grammar/vocabulary exercises and/or more in-depth comprehension exercises. Especially the short documentaries on health, Spanish food and Spanish universities could have lent themselves to a more developed set of grammar / comprehension / vocabulary exercises.
4. Another element that could be explored is a possible inclusion of a greater variety in accents. Whilst the standard Spanish accent comes across very well, a student of Spanish would benefit from a greater variety of peninsular speech.
5. Finally, a possible improvement of the video could be allowing the student to listen to the dialogues at a slower speed. Although the clips do allow the student to select sections of the dialogue to be repeated, and even tape his/her voice to verify (subjectively) that the pronunciation is correct, the speed of the voices should be open to modification.

Extras: recording:
The recording capacity of the program is a one way exercise. The student records his/her voice, and can play it back. The program would be improved by allowing the possibility to repeat a
sentence pronounced by a native speaker, and then hear the comparison between the two voices.

2.2 Activities (Procedure)
The activities of the program are partially instructional (e.g. fill in the blank exercises, and recording of the students' voice), collaborative (e.g. word to image association games), and facilitative (e.g. the inclusion of a dictionary and grammar reference tool).

2.3 Teacher fit (Approach)
Linguistic Theory
The linguistic theory underlying this program is based on a communicative approach (e.g. dialogues and reports in the target language) complemented by structuralist exercises (the grammar reference tool emphasizes the need for such basic grammar learning strategies as drilling). Although the course purports to be a self-study Spanish course, it may not be suitable for all students at a lower intermediate level. A communicative approach alone is unlikely to suffice in this context to provide a successful outcome, unless the student is very proficient and aware of idiosyncrasies in the Hispanic language and culture.

Language acquisition
There is no clear structure to aid the building up of language acquisition, since the main purpose of the program is to review and consolidate as well as expand the students' proficiency level. More often than not, the expectation is that language acquisition will happen by association of what is said with a drawing. The discrepancy that arises here is that what is said is quite simple in structure (that is, at the beginners level) and yet the speed of delivery is at such a naturally high level, that the student may actually have difficulty in expanding his/her knowledge of the language. This is especially evident in the videos, as well as the grammar exercises (first exercise: ¿Qué has hecho hoy?)—the student barely has the time to read the right answer of the previous question, when the next question is immediately prompted.

Classroom methodology
This program is ideally suited as a complement to a lower intermediate Spanish class in the process of reviewing the past tenses. Unless the proficiency level of the student is high, the presence of a teacher is still necessary to help the students approach the exercises, and to explain possible flexibility needed for students interested in Spanish in the Hispanic American context.

Linguistic accuracy
The program is well written. The following typos and errors, however, were detected in the Grammar reference segment:
1. Under the category of regular present tense verb conjugation, a list of irregular verbs such as jugar, ver, coger, refer and morir is included, which may leave the student with the false impression that these are regular.
2. Under the category of the pretérito perfecto (which could be confused by some students for the pluscuamperfecto) the following conjugation occurs for ustedes: 'hemos', rather than 'han'.
3. Under the category of pretérito imperfecto, the ending of -aba is erroneously given with an accent.
4. When completing exercises and drills, the program also accepts words without their accents, which is pedagogically problematic.

Socio-cultural representation
Although the cultural segment of the program covers a lot of ground, it does not go into much depth in many topics. What is presented is a 'glossed over' view. Topics that were not included, and would seem essential are: the history of Spain and some reference to Latin America. The potential that this section shows is tremendous. What is often greatly lacking in other multimedia programs of this nature is well written, visually attractive (with photos) segments on issues of culture and civilization.

2.4 Learner fit
Linguistic Level
The program is rated as a product for lower intermediate students, yet some exercises may also be useful for beginners and others for intermediate students. The linguistic level, as mentioned above is somewhat problematic. Whilst presenting a fairly basic grammar base, material is delivered at quite a rapid spoken rate. This discrepancy between speech and content may hamper language acquisition. Likewise, most exercises are structured as a drop and drag activity. The absence of comprehension checks or more demanding exercises to test student abilities could lead students and instructors alike to assume that linguistic proficiency is higher than is actually the case.

Learning Styles/Strategies
These include such concepts as: learning by association (between words and drawings), filling in the blanks after having heard the segment (memory); drag and drop and simple yes/no multiple choice questions. The grammar exercises also include verb conjugations.

Design Flexibility/Modifiability
The program can be inflexible with respect to the answers that it accepts. The vocabulary segment as well as the grammar segment do not always allow for the many varieties of expression that exist. (e.g. accepting 'carro' for car, and any present perfect conjugation for the pretetit and vice versa).

Summary
This program has considerable potential, and although it has a few features that are problematic, it is of a very high standard. It is possibly one of the first of its kind to show such a strong grammar base, complemented by an attempt to cover vocabulary and conversation as well as aspects of culture and civilization. The inclusion of the video in the grammar segment shows a very interesting integration of audio-visual material. It would be beneficial for the program to be linked to the WWW in the future.

Scaled rating: (1=low 5=high)
Implementation possibilities: 4
Pedagogical features: 4
Socio-linguistic accuracy: 3
Use of computer capabilities: 4
Ease of use: 3.5
Over-all evaluation: 4
Value for money: 4.5

Technical Details
Developer/distributor:
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia
Address:
Directora: Dra. Ana Gimeno Sanz
Departamento de Idiomas
Universidad Politécnica de Valencia
Camino de Vera, 14
46022 - Valencia (Spain)
Phone: +34 6 387 75 30
Fax: +34 6 387 75 39
Email: agimeno@ldm.upv.es
WWW: [http://www.upv.es/camille/index.html](http://www.upv.es/camille/index.html), which has such subdirectories as:

Hardware requirements
Minimal: IBM-PC or compatible, Intel 80486 DX processor or compatible, 8M RAM, Windows 3.1, Microsoft Video for Windows 1.1, 16 bit soundcard, CD-ROM drive 4x, loudspeakers and microphone/headset, VGA 256 colours video card.
Preferred: IBM -PC or compatible, Intel Pentium processor or compatible, 16 M RAM, Microsoft Windows 95, Microsoft video for Windows 1.1, 16 bit sound card, CD-ROM drive 8X, Loudspeakers and Microphone/Headset, SVGA 65.536 colours video card.

Price: Individual copy $34.95 US

Reviewer Information
Monsia A.M. Mascetti-Neuber (Assistant Lecturer) and Mariisa Cordella (Lecturer) teach in the Department of Hispanic Studies, at Monash University, Australia. Monsia teaches Spanish language and literature, and specializes in Hispanic women’s writing, Hispanic American contemporary literature, and multimedia language program applications. Mariisa teaches applied linguistics subjects, Spanish Language, and specializes in cross cultural pragmatics, discourse/conversational analysis, translation and business Spanish.

Reviewer Contact:
Telephone: +61 (3) 9531-2408 or 9905-5449
Fax: +61 (3) 9905-2137 or 9531-2408

Email: monsia.cordella@arts.monash.edu.au
S-mail: Department of Hispanic Studies, School of European Languages and Cultures. Monash University, Clayton Vic. 3168, Australia.

The Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium
Texas State University
214 Centennial Hall
San Marcos, TX 78666
info@calico.org tel: 512-245-1417 fax 512-245-9089
©1996-2006 CALICO, Computer Assisted Language Instruction Consortium
Created by Acuity Innovation