

Network English 2.03, a CALL program: An evaluation

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Introduction

This article evaluates Network English (2.03), a dedicated piece of EFL software that was developed by the British Council teaching centre in Athens. The review draws upon criteria originally cited by Richards and Rodgers (1986) and later adapted by Hubbard (1992) as the basis of evaluating courseware during its development. After a brief overview of Network English, the evaluation is set out by considering the criteria in terms of three broad areas:

- Software (operational) procedures: what types of activity are included, how they are presented, and how user-friendly the software is.
- Software approach (or 'teacher fit'): what linguistic assumptions are used, and the teaching methods suitable for exploiting the software.
- Software design (or 'learner fit'): the appropriacy and focus of the material, and how it is arranged.

Together, they recognise the interdependency that exists between the fundamental elements of any CALL environment; the software, the teacher, and the learner. It is important, therefore, that an evaluation of CALL material properly accounts for the factors that affect any or all of these three elements. To conclude, the article highlights areas that may be developed to improve the effectiveness of the application, in particular, aspects of the software's user-friendliness.

General Description

Network English is multimedia learning material developed and distributed by The British Council for its worldwide network of teaching centres.

The material is designed for both EFL self-access and classroom use. It is comprised of five levels, from elementary to advanced. Each level is on a separate CD-ROM and organised into four sections: words, grammar, skills, and stories.

The software was created using Toolbook, and is consequently limited to PC platforms (Windows 3.1 or higher). It also requires a minimum of 16 MB of RAM, a 16 bit sound card, and a four-speed CD-ROM drive.

Although the core of the programmes needs to be installed on the hard disk, the audio and video files can run from either the CD-ROM, a local hard drive, or from a server's hard drive.

The Evaluation

Procedures

The software delivers the material to students through good quality text, audio, illustrations, and video. The graphics are clear and stimulating, and the audio, which is based on authentic-like dialogues, is in a variety of accents (both British and non-British).

The user interface is simple, uncluttered, and easy to follow. Such simplicity is partly aided by consigning many of the functions to a pop-up menu that can be activated at any time by a right-click. These functions include the checking of answers, clues for completing tasks, and dialogue scripts for the listening tasks.

Students can navigate easily by clicking on word tabs that are always present at the top of the page, one for each of the sections: words, grammar, skills, and stories. Then, within each section, students choose where to go by clicking on one of the words listed on the section's menu.

To aid students, whenever the cursor is passed over a menu item, a short description appears telling them where the link will take them.

To navigate within the sub-sections, from page to page (in any order), or back to the main menu, the student clicks on a central box at the bottom of the page, or on tabs in each bottom corner of the page. Although intuitive to most, the addition of some simple text on these tabs (for example <NEXT PAGE>, <PREVIOUS PAGE>, and <MAIN MENU>) would make this aspect of the package more user-friendly.

There is a comprehensive, clear, and well-organised help section (show me) that uses animated visuals to illustrate the aural explanations that are all given in English. It

is available at all times by clicking on a fifth tab located next to the four main section tabs that are permanently displayed at the top of the programme's interface. Missing, however, are written explanations, which mean that lower-level learners are compelled to rely solely on the visuals, with the aural element of the explanations being far too difficult to comprehend. Some sections, of which the visual element is limited, are therefore almost impossible for lower-level students to follow. The alternatives are for students to read a summary that has been included in the sleeves of the CD boxes, or to receive training by a teacher. Regarding the former, the material has been given little prominence and can be easily overlooked by students who may be using the software as self-access.

Now, considering the activities of Network English, for each of the five levels (elementary to advanced), the following structure can be identified:

MAIN MENU (four sections):

Words: 4 lessons (4 sets of tasks)

Grammar: 4 lessons (4 sets of tasks)

Skills: 3 situations:3 modules each (1 set of tasks for each module)

Stories: 3 stories (3 sets of tasks that follow each storyline)

The first two sections (grammar and words) are each made up of four modular lessons that are based on grammar, topic, or function. Examples include Present Perfect, Health & Illness and Giving Advice (Network English 2.03: Intermediate Level)

The skills section is divided up into three sub-sections, each based on a situation, such as at a police station. They, in turn, consist of three modules, each containing a set of contextualised reading or listening tasks based on the use of, for example, a payphone, or a newspaper.

The stories section also presents different situations, but unlike the skills section, it presents them as part of a short story, for example, The bag snatch follows a woman's experience during and after a mugging. There are three storylines, each represented by a set of seven to eight tasks that are designed to be worked through sequentially.

If considering all the packages as a whole, many of the initial activities within each section are recognition and discovery type tasks that involve matching or grouping. There is also a variety of reconstruction type exercises.

As already mentioned, the answers and relevant dialogue scripts are available by right-clicking the mouse. Help with the answers is also offered, but only for the most

difficult activities such as total-deletion (reconstructing text by typing in the blanked out words), and some of the multiple-choice and gap-fill typing exercises. The help options are graded well, with a typical choice being 'see a clue', 'see the first letter', 'see the word', and 'see the text', whereby students click on any of the aforementioned to gain greater clarification of the point in question. However, because they are all made available at the same time, and can be used in any order, the effectiveness of this grading may be lost through misuse.

Once an answer has been given, it can be checked individually, or with all the other answers together from the same exercise. Results are indicated by a green or a red and are both accompanied by a distinctive, but repetitive 'beep'.

The software's general feedback and help with answers, however, lacks many features that may be regarded as fundamental for today's CALL software (for example see the conclusion). Consequently, students may be encouraged to give up more quickly and to rely too heavily on looking up the answers.

Finally, a useful feature that has been included is a glossary. This matches a selected word to its definition, and to an example sentence to contextualise it. Students are also able to listen to the pronunciation of the word. A significant limitation, however, is that many words from the tasks are not included. Also, selecting a word involves the relatively complicated maneuver of placing the cursor over the word, and then simultaneously left-clicking the mouse and depressing the <CONTROL> key.

Approach

The software is primarily learner controlled. It allows the learner to repeat tasks at any time and to start at any activity or section. Additionally, classroom sessions can be tailored to a particular topic or language feature, and easily integrated into a course syllabus.

Many aspects of the package's approach support the authors' claim that the material fits a mainly communicative method, which tends to emphasise listening comprehension of spoken language, and has interactional tasks.

The main feature supporting this is that the adopted linguistic approach of present, practice, and test, delivers grammar and vocabulary in a contextualised manner. The listening, reading, and writing activities that are centred on a situation or story, and also contextualised, and also, are integrated in a way that is meaning-based.

The interactional activities are mainly in the skills and story sections, which present tasks that involve the transfer of information, and, as such, are reasonably authentic. As an example, on the upper-intermediate CD (Stories: Weekend in Paris) students listen to a customer's complaints and fill in a complaint form.

Further adding to the communicative value of the material is the fact that both bottom-up (gap fills) and top-down (gist) listening tasks are provided. This is an important quality for listening material because of the generally accepted view among writers (for example Burgess (1997), Nunan (1997)) that both processing skills are necessary for full comprehension.

In contrast to the above, one aspect of the material which does not suit communicative methods of teaching is that very few of the tasks require pair or group work, and none use information or 'opinion' gaps (Rixon, 1978). If used well, these can create competition, discussion, and collaboration, which result in interpersonal interaction; central to communicative based learning.

Design

Most of the exercises support comprehension and recall learning styles. They follow a receptive-through-to-productive-sequence, which may typically contain the following series of activity types: Grouping or matching, multiple-choice, drag and drop gap fill, and finally typing gap fill. For more challenging text reconstruction tasks, students may finish by doing re-ordering and then total deletion tasks.

Because each section is based on a similar pattern of activities, they may appear repetitive in their delivery style. However, students, rather than getting bored, may indeed favour the repetitive style because it offers familiarity and is easier to use. In addition, the sequencing of tasks ensures that the language items that are being focused on, are continually reviewed, reused, and consequently reinforced.

If each of the four sections (words, grammar, skills, and stories) are considered together, we can also see a move from receptive to (as seen in the last two sections -skills and stories) productive type tasks. Although these two sections contain many of the activity types listed above, they are based on more extensive reading and listening comprehension, with additional writing tasks, or activities that can be adapted into group discussions.

For both these sections, the tasks follow a series approach, which may engage the students more than single activities. Communication may be more realistic and involve

more of the student's cognitive skills and processing. As students progress through the activities, the input required from them noticeably changes: from listening then matching tasks, to more challenging reconstruction tasks. As the tasks become more demanding, the students' tendency to collaborate can be expected to increase.

Finally, in considering the materials appropriacy, students can relate to it easily because the material is generally based on everyday situations, presented with authentic style dialogues. In addition, the focus on developing the learners' listening skills (over 50% of the tasks involve listening comprehension) makes it a useful and challenging package for Japanese students. This is particularly so because they tend to possess relatively weak listening skills. Reasons for this are often associated with the teaching styles that have prevailed in Japanese secondary and tertiary education, and which are claimed to provide little or no opportunity for students to practice listening. 'What listening there is tends to be testing' (Thompson, 1987:223).

Conclusion

Technically the package is impressive and makes good use of Toolbook's multimedia capabilities. However, while considering the more practical aspects of Network English we have seen that there are some weaknesses in the package.

In summary, these can be listed (and in a few cases expanded upon) as follows:

- There is no way for students to keep records, personalised or otherwise, of their work and progress. Useful functions related to this type of feedback could include, keeping track of scores, the number of attempts made and time spent on exercises, saving work at any stage, and to continue from the same position at a later session. Currently, the total scores that are given are lost when a student logs off.
- Interest and motivation could be improved by widening the variety of activities to include some games or quizzes.
- The help section is not tailored to the language ability of the student. They are in English, and the same for all the discs, elementary to advanced.
- Although the glossary and the functions available from the right-click of the mouse are useful, they are difficult to discover. It would be more user-friendly to have access to them through icons located on the work screen.
- To make the material more 'communicative' for class use, there would need to be some creative or collaborative type activities that require group work. For example,

speculative or problem-solving activities could be integrated into the stories section.

- There is no way to obtain a hard copy of any of the material, either for the teachers or the students.
- As mentioned in the Procedures section, and as an extension of I.(above), more sophisticated feedback and help with answers could be provided. At present, there is no tolerance given to spelling mistakes (even errors of hyphen usage), and no feedback on incorrect input. Methods such as ‘flagging’ or highlighting the incorrect parts of a student's answer could, therefore, be included.

In addition, while checking answers, a variety of encouraging replies for right and wrong answers would make the package less repetitive. A simple but good demonstration of this can be seen with the software package Wordbird.

There is also no provision of alternative correct answers. As an illustration (Intermediate level: grammar section: present perfect), a typed gap-fill task on the subject of a traffic accident rejects “...closed several lanes,” and only accepts “...blocked several lanes.”

With these points in mind, it seems that for the package to be more effective for self-access material the package needs to be made more user-friendly. This may mean adding a more sophisticated system of feedback and monitoring for the learner. Moreover, there is a need for additional support to be provided by a user manual, either in hardcopy or as on-line help.

Despite these weaknesses, Network English is a well-presented and easy to use package. In particular, it is a useful tool for listening practice and for presenting and/or reinforcing vocabulary and grammar in a contextualised way.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, from observations of my classes using Network English, the material is very successful at challenging and engaging the students who enjoy using it, even after accounting for the so-called ‘novelty’ factor.

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Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Software Titles:

Network English 2.03

Publisher: The British Council

Development: Mark Osborne & Graham Shipman

Toolbook 4.0

Publisher: Asymetrix Corporation

Wordbird

Publisher: Prentice-Hall International

Development: Jeanne Berrett, Andy Dench, Hugh Riley & Grant Harrison