[Software Review]
Pronunciation Power

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Distributor:

English Computerized Learning Inc. (http://www.EnglishLearning.com)

Computer:

Any Macintosh running System 7.01 or higher. The program requires QuickTime 2.5 and Adobe Acrobat 2.1 which are provided. 6 MB of free RAM, double speed CD-ROM drive, microphone, speakers. Any PC running Windows 3.11 or better, 12 MB of free RAM, SVGA graphics card with a compatible monitor, double speed CD-ROM drive, SoundBlaster compatible sound card, microphone, speakers.

Format:

CD-ROM (Hybrid Mac Windows compatible)

Audience:

ESL learners

Target Language:

False beginner to advanced

Price:

$84 (U.S.) per copy, this product may be ordered from the above web site. A demo version is also available.

Description:

Pronunciation power is a multimedia CD-ROM designed to assist intermediate learners in improving their English pronunciation and listening skills. The program has the following features:

1. Sound menu. The sound of any of the 52 phonemes in English can be reproduced by clicking on the selected phonetic symbol:
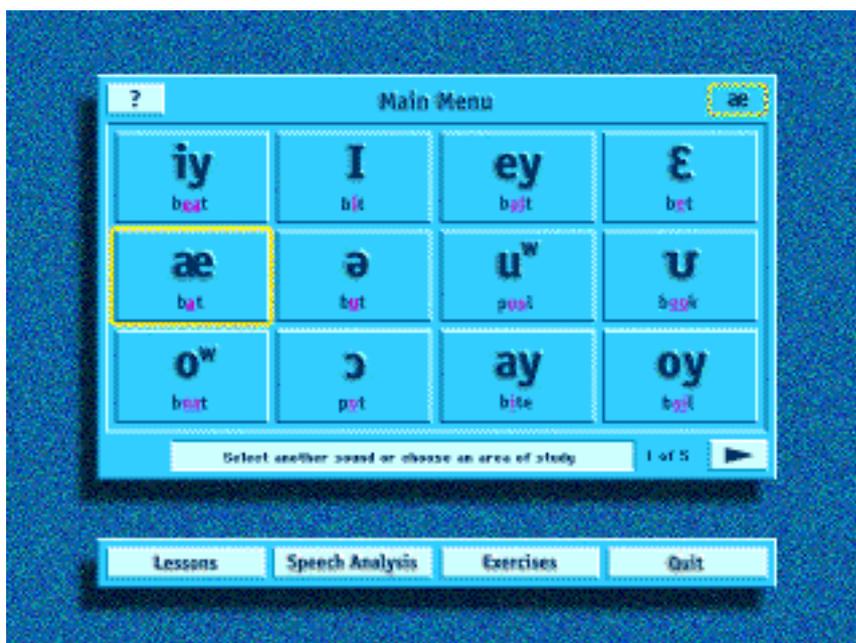
2.   Speech Analysis. Learners can record their attempts to match the wave form of a sound produced by a native speaker:
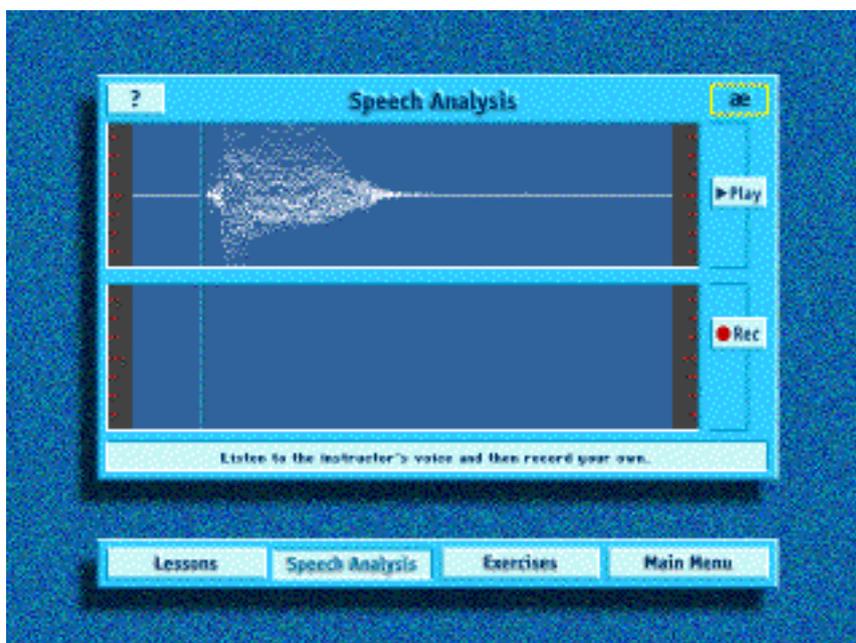
3.   Lessons. Learners may observe articulation through a QuickTime animation showing front and side views of the human articulatory system. An example of this approach is reproduced below:
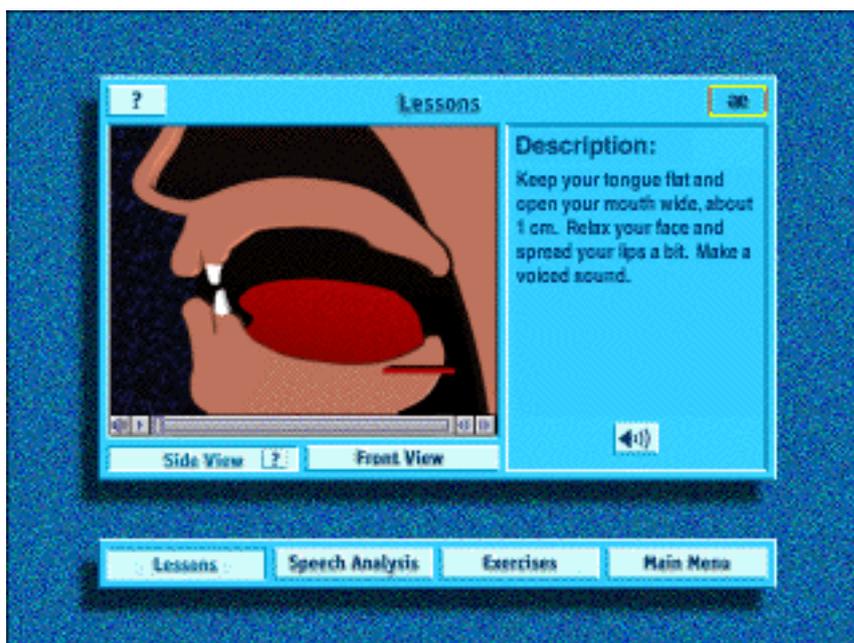
4. Exercises. Learners may choose from three kinds of exercise. Practicing the pronunciation of single words, sentences, and listening discrimination of minimal pairs. In the pronunciation exercises, learners record their voice and compare it with that of the instructor. In the listening discrimination exercises learners are invited to select the correct response as in the following screen:

Interface design:

The designers have sought to reduce the cognitive load on learners (Plass 1998: 36) and create an accessible interface (Peterson 1998: 120), through the following design features:

1. The use of intuitive visual and functional metaphors to facilitate navigation.
2. Colour is used to signal tasks.
3. High quality animation and authentic audio are embedded in the program.
4. Limited onscreen feedback and help are provided.
5. Simplification of the process of data input and error handling
6. The interface presents learners with a consistent visual structure.

Evaluation

Pronunciation Power has been designed with the needs of learners in mind. Positive features of this CD-ROM include the provision of sequenced instruction that allows learners to study at their own pace. Information is presented in manageable segments that do not overwhelm the learner. At the same time, the CD provides access to an extensive range of activities, including over 650 different sentence exercises and 1040 comparative words.

Moreover, an attempt has been made to provide access to a consistent user interface that reinforces learning. The use of waveforms to facilitate learning through voice recording is an innovative feature of this product. In the author's experience, students working in groups or individually enjoy the interactive nature of the learning activities. As students often lack an understanding of how sounds are produced in English the onscreen instructions such as those found in the lessons section of the program (see screen capture shown above), are useful for demonstration purposes. The cross-platform capability of this product will also appeal to many educators. The robust nature of the program combined with its relatively low cost is further attractive features of this CD-ROM.

However, there remain areas where this product could be improved. One area of concern is the lack of informative feedback in some exercises. As is the case with many language learning programs responses are marked correct or incorrect, with no instructive feedback to guide the learner. In the listening activities, the lack of exposure to a variety of accents (the program utilises only North American English) is an area where enhancements could be made. The absence of an exit icon on all screens is also a noticeable design weakness.

Conclusion

The teaching of pronunciation is a task that lends itself readily to the use of computer technology. Multimedia applications have the potential to enable learners to undertake the study of pronunciation in new and engaging ways. In adopting a design concept that focuses on using the computer as a magister or tutor (Higgins 1983), the makers of this product have implemented a pedagogical approach to the teaching of pronunciation that effectively addresses learner needs. The creators of Pronunciation Power have made an imaginative attempt to harness the potential of multimedia to assist learners in the often difficult task of mastering pronunciation.

References

Higgins, J. (1983). Can computers teach? *CALICO Journal*, 1(2), 4-6.

Peterson, M. (1998). Creating hypermedia learning environments: Guidelines for designers. *Computer Assisted Language Learning*, 11,(2), 115-124.

Plass, J.L. (1998). Design and evaluation of the user interface of foreign language multimedia software: A cognitive approach. Language Learning & Technology, 2(1), 35-45. http://polyglot.cal.msu.edu/lit/vol2num1/article2/index.html