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[Software Review]

Power Japanese Version 2.0

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Developer and Distributor

Bayware Inc. 1660 S. Amphlett Blvd., Suite 128 San Mateo, CA 94402, USA
URL: http://www.bayware.com

Type

Japanese Language Learning CD-ROM Program

Format

Available for Windows only and distributed on CD-ROM; online dictionary on disk

Computer

Requires PC 386 or higher, Windows 3.1 or Windows 95, CPU, 4MB Ram (8MB recommended), 7MB HD space, VGA/SVGA graphics, MPC-compatible sound card

Language Level

Beginners to Intermediate

Documentation
User manual: 20 pages, pocket-size learner's dictionary: 184 pages, hiragana and katakana exercise book: 38 pages, romaji chart, hiragana, and katakana flashcards

Price

Retail price: US$159

Description

Power Japanese is a widely acclaimed multimedia language program. It was named one of the top ten CD ROM Titles of 1994 by PC Magazine and in 1993 and 1995 it won the Multimedia World Readers' Choice Award for Best Language Education Title. It also won the Silver Apple Award in the 1996 National Educational Media Competition.

Designed for native English speakers, Power Japanese is purported to focus on the principles that underlie the entire Japanese Language. The materials are presented in a vibrant learning environment using sound graphics, interactive exercises, and games. The program is divided into four separate sections as follows:

- Hiragana
- Dialogs and Basic Grammar
- The Homestretch
- Katakana

Hiragana offers the basic syllables of the Japanese language in conjunction with their sound, following the stroke order with moving images. The listening component teaches spellings and assists in recognising sounds. Various useful expressions are also provided in this section.

Dialogs and Basic Grammar offer all the basic components of the Japanese language such as syntax, particles, sentence patterns, and translations. Sentence patterns include interactive word phrases and vocabulary drills to help learners build up their ability to express ideas.

The Homestretch presents the same set of Japanese sounds as the Hiragana symbols. The difference is that Katakana symbols are generally reserved for the transcription of foreign or imported words. Auxiliary verbs are also presented in this section.
The program also features the following:

- Voice record compare: This option helps to record and compare pronunciations against native speakers.
- Japanese word processor: The PC keyboard allows us to enter phonetic kana characters, write and print letter quality documents in Japanese.
- Voice tracks: This is a separate learning aid that allows to group different phrases to meet one's specific or travel or business needs.
- 10,000 word online dictionary: This option offers meanings both from Japanese to English and vice versa.

Evaluation

The multimedia platform incorporating text, graphics, sound, and animation offers a promising interactive tool for learning a language in class, as well as providing an opportunity for students to practise at their own pace and time. But the media properties alone cannot produce an effective program unless they are grounded in sound pedagogical principles.

This paper evaluates ‘Power Japanese’ for its effectiveness as a multimedia language program. Its focus is on the extent to which this program reflects pedagogical issues with the new technology. Five criteria, embedded in these pedagogical issues, have been formulated for this purpose. The program is then assessed against these criteria on a continuum which conveys the positive and negative attributes of each category. The ratings for these categories are located in pointers along the continuums between those

opposing attributes. Such ratings have taken collectively constitute the value of the program. The five criteria with their opposing profiles are:

- Accuracy: accurate inaccurate;
- Comprehensible language: comprehensible incomprehensible;
- Multimedia properties: appropriate inappropriate;
- Tutorials: effective ineffective; and
- User friendliness: easy difficult.

This evaluation has been conducted by a Japanese teacher who is also a native speaker. He regularly uses the program in his class. At the time of this evaluation, he was completing an MA in CALL at the University of Queensland. This teacher-oriented review may be contrasted with Imura's earlier, more program-oriented review that was published in On-CALL in 1996 (Imura, 1996). The Imura review provided an elaborate description and evaluation of the program and included sections on linguistic accuracy, pedagogy, and multimedia properties.

Accuracy

Accuracy refers to the correctness of the content and includes linguistic items such as grammar, spelling, and word meanings provided in the program (Knowles 1992; Bitter and Wighton 1987). In an educational software consortium, 86% of the members ranked accuracy at the highest order of importance out of 22 significant criteria.

For this category the program was rated ‘highly’ but not ‘exceptional’. The evaluator found that the text, which contained discourse-level language and isolated words, was correct both in spelling and grammar. The punctuation, phonetics, pronunciation, and the translations were also accurately presented. He was specifically interested in the complex aspects of the language, namely, sentence constructions (interrogative, affirmative and negative sentences), their meanings, and grammatical items such as particles, adjectives, demonstrative pronouns. Significantly, the evaluator mentions that the absence of idiomatic Japanese in the program was considered a drawback. The language was not complete without them; it was not an authentic presentation of the language. However, a discrepancy was noted between the findings of the evaluator and Imura's review (Imura, 1996). Imura's review reflects errors in translations and grammatical structures appearing in The Homestretch. Such findings include four errors in translation and four in grammar, not specified by the evaluator. Notably, out of the entire program_which has over 2200 words, phrases, sentences in the audio, a significant number of grammar lessons, and 10,000 words in the on-line dictionary_the eight translation and grammar errors were regarded as negligible by this evaluator in the context of the entire program. The evaluator believed overall effectiveness was not seriously compromised by these few mistakes: this was especially so given that two of the mistakes were considered to be not so many errors as ambiguous meanings: for instance, ‘hiraku’ can mean either ‘to begin’ or ‘not to open/unhold’; the grammatical item ‘kumitate rarenai’ can signify either negative potential or negative passive. The few minor errors that users of this program risk learning, surely, cannot invalidate the learning effectiveness of the program as a whole when it has so much more to offer. While the evaluator took a global approach, getting a grasp on the overall

accuracy of the program rather than the details, Imura insisted that the small number of errors comprised the program as a whole. The evaluator was more of the opinion that these errors could be corrected during the study, whereas Imura probably considered the program as a stand-alone resource.

Comprehensible Language

The program must provide language that is of appropriate difficulty. Not all learners are at the same level and the same lesson cannot be given to everyone. Accordingly, faster students must be given more advanced lessons with a certain level of complexity in the input that they find challenging, and, of course, more accessible material needs to be provided for slower students. If understanding precedes the acquisition of the target language, then designing effective language software is essentially a matter of designing input understandable by a range of learners in a given situation. A French program (Ca Continue), is an excellent example, as it provides language input at multi-tasks and multi-levels thus motivating all learners in a given class (see Lyman-Hager, 1995).

The program was given a high assessment in this category because it sustains strong interest for all learners. The evaluator was extremely satisfied with this aspect of the program and again he differs from Imura in this respect. Imura criticises the program for incorporating sentences that "were found to be inconsistent in their degree of difficulty" (Imura, 1996). The text of this program ranged from easy to difficult topics and from isolated to discourse-level input. But this problem of 'the degree of difficulty' can very easily be solved if the input is matched with the learners' abilities. Among the easy topics, for instance, there were teaching of hiragana and katakana which included basic syllables, voiced syllables (daku-on), p-sound syllables (handaku-on) followed by more complex sounds such as compound-sound syllables, double consonants (soku-on) and long vowel syllables (cho-on). These sections were accompanied by stroke by stroke animated drawings together with the pronunciation of each character. Also, there were interactive drills to form sentences from time, months, days of the week, and essential words.

There were many sections in the program to address problems associated with learning vocabulary and grammar. For vocabulary building, there were three exercises called Word Booster. There was another section that presents advanced grammatical concepts. This offers lessons on verb inflecting exercise parameters, choosing a page type, typing text (instructions/questions/answers/feedback), and specifying and locating a pertinent media (or a pertinent portion thereof) to make it launchable. The process is only marginally more complex than word processing.

Multimedia Properties

'Multimedia properties' refers to the appropriate use of media features in program design. Multimedia technology offers a variety of interesting features such as text, graphs, sound, animation, stills, and colour. Appropriate use of this technology provides an effective platform to present pedagogically sound programs with appealing interfaces.

Power Japanese was rated 'appropriate' but not 'exceptional' in its use of technology. On the positive side, it has excellent sound, attractive screen design with vibrant colour and simulation, the proportionate balance of graphics and text enhancing the overall presentation of the interface. However, the evaluator commented that Power

Japanese did not seem to promote the teaching of discourse level language for productive skills in speech or writing. For instance, the program did not have any provision for practising speech, writing essays, or paragraphs enhancing these skills. Material for practising speech can very easily be designed in the audio by incorporating segments on interesting debatable topics from a range of issues such as history, literature, politics, or movies which would stimulate discussion among students (see Lyman-Hager,1995).

The environment that was created to accomplish speech, according to the evaluator, was poorly designed. The lesson, which was a dialogue with a simulation of two figures talking to each other, was very short with insufficient input to master any spoken language. Moreover, it did not have any concrete exercise which would enable learners to practice and produce speech in real situations. Although the program included sentences (short and long), syllables and phonetics, these would only facilitate memorisation of alphabets, pronunciation, words, phonemes and basic sentence structures as a prerequisite for the productive skills, not to sustain a discussion or to write lengthy, coherent documents of any complexity.

Nevertheless, a large number of words, phrases, and sentences spoken by native Japanese speakers were incorporated effectively. Following is an example of the lexical range: ‘kore’ (this); ‘douzo’ (please); ‘yomu’ (read); ‘desu’ (is/am/are); ‘tetsudau’ (give hand); ‘nihongo’ (Japanese language); ‘oshieru’ (teach); ‘nan’ (what); and ‘iu’ (say). These lessons were mediated through interactive drills followed by guided feedback in which learners were prompted by the computer to imitate every word, sound, or sentence they heard and record it in the voice record/compare activity. Despite the program's lack of sufficient explanation in the use of these words, as Imura argues, they would be excellent in building an initial knowledge-base for vocabulary which would precede further learning (Bransford, 1979). In addition to the audio component, the relevant match of text and graphics provided by the visuals in the word building section was also stimulating.

User-friendliness

This feature reflects how easy it is to use the program. A program's effectiveness can diminish if the user-friendly features such as the buttons and icons are not conveniently located, the navigation within the program is not smooth or information inappropriately related to the dictionary (Plowman, 1989), or grammar or other textual aspects are not readily available (Laurillard, 1993).

Power Japanese was rated by the evaluator as ‘average’ for user-friendliness. The movement through the program was both linear and non-linear with clear instructions for navigation. The program was menu-driven with a glossary, pause and restart buttons, pop-up menus and help options easily activated through the click of a mouse, pressing the space bar, or using the F2 key. Quitting and entering the program was also easy. Nevertheless, the menu did not always correspond with the on-screen pages. Also, the program was disorienting at times: there were 40 different types of buttons in the program which were hard to find because they were not located in the same position at all times, except for the ‘previous page’ and the ‘next page’ buttons. However, the numerous command keys, although criticised by Imura as confusing, increased the interactivity with the program facilitating learning (Plowman 1989).

Tutorials

Tutorials form the basis of teacher/student interaction in a class. An emulation of a good teaching strategy enhances the transfer of knowledge from the teacher (the computer) to the student interactively. The tutorial capability of Power Japanese was assessed as 'average'. It did not emulate any teaching strategy as such, except for the use of visuals, pop-up explanatory notes, and translations. Such features would only assist in internalising isolated words and Power Japanese would be an excellent tool for that, but not the language at a discourse level. To acquire complex language structures, as the evaluator reflects, the better and more sophisticated pedagogical design is required.

Material for practising speech can very easily be designed in the audio by incorporating segments of interesting, debatable topics from a range of issues such as history, literature, politics, or movies which would stimulate discussion among students (Lyman-Hager,1995). The environment that was created to accomplish speech, according to the evaluator, was poorly designed. The sudden exposure to such levels of complex discourse, dialogues, and grammar was most intimidating and the evaluator recommended an intermediary stage of tutoring. At this stage, a systematic structure and clear step-by-step guidance are necessary to facilitate the acquisition. Imura's review stresses that as 'content becomes more complex', the need for tutoring becomes necessary to 'facilitate understanding' (p. 39) which, at present, the program lacks. But an understanding of issues relates only to gathering information that is already provided by translations and explanatory notes. What the program lacks is a sound pedagogy that will transform understanding into acquisition so that information may lead to knowledge construction and then be subsequently applied (Laurillard, 1993).

Conclusion

The preceding discussion suggests that the program has more strengths than weaknesses. Except for the tutorial and user-friendliness aspects which scored an 'average' rating, all the other criteria have high ratings to various degrees. Also, given the range of the simple and the complex language input in the audiovisual component of the program, it is meaningful to use it at different entry levels as proposed incomprehensible language.

This evaluation, it should be emphasised, differs considerably from Imura's earlier study. Although they have similar backgrounds as language teachers, their treatment of the program is distinctive. Imura's orientation was more toward the autonomous learner. This led her to evaluate the program as an independent learning tool, pointing out inaccuracies both in linguistic matters and program design which, if left unaddressed, would lead to students learning incorrect usage. On the other hand, the evaluator's approach tended to assume the presence of a language teacher when the program was used. Consequently, he examines the underlying strengths more in terms of the classroom context as a whole and considers the elements that are required to achieve effective integration of the program in the class. Hence we may say the evaluator corrects or compensates for errors or deficiencies in the program as they appear. The evaluator reflects on pedagogical issues such as effective tutorials and feedback, which Imura does not. Additionally, while the evaluator has a more comprehensive view of the program explaining both the merits and the demerits, Imura provides a lower level, a more

program-oriented critique. These two divergent points of view notwithstanding, the ultimate effectiveness of the program will not be seriously compromised if it is competently managed by an instructor.

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