[Software Review]

An AET's Perspective on "The Real English CD-ROM 1&2"

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Title	"The Real English CD-ROM 1&2" The Original Real English 1999
Author	Marzio School and Ipse Communication
Web Address	http://www.realenglish.tm.fr
Price	399 French Francs (app. $64US)
System Requirements	CPU: Pentium 120 Memory: 16 MB OS: WIN 3.X, 95, 98 CD-ROM: 4x CD-ROM Additional: Graphics Card, Sound Card, Microphone, and Headphones or Speakers

As an Assistant English Teacher (AET) on the Japan Exchange of Teachers (JET) program, I have taught at three Junior High Schools in Hiroshima Prefecture for four months. My limited experience with Japanese students has shown me that they have difficulty understanding native speakers of English. Even some of the Japanese Teachers of English (JTE) have difficulty understanding English spoken by native speakers. However, some students who do not seem to understand more than simple greetings in spoken English are quite proficient at reading English text. This phenomenon is not undocumented. Richards (1991), in his article "Real World Listening in the Japanese classroom," notes that even though Japanese high school graduates have studied English for six years, they have neither practiced nor have been taught how to listen to spoken English (p. 50).

This sweeping statement needs to be modified somewhat because the Japanese classroom is changing. Now, through the JET program, Japanese Junior High and Senior High School students have access to a native speaker (AET) who provides spoken language in the classroom. Even though the JET program was designed to give Japanese students exposure to native speakers of English, often the AET is used in non-efficient ways. The syllabus in the Japanese Junior High School where I am located is designed around a grammatical syllabus. Each page of the lesson's dialogue is designed and written around a particular grammatical point. The AET is often used to read the dialogue, giving a native speaker's rhythm and pronunciation to the dialogue. Even though the spoken dialogue may have a native feel to it, with this method, the students are not given real communicative situations in which to hear English spoken by the native speaker.

Sometimes as an AET, I have even been reprimanded by the JTE for speaking authentically in the classroom. For example, I am often asked to speak more slowly than normal and to only use words that have been introduced from the textbook.

When asked to review a computer software package that addressed the non-native speaker's difficulties understanding native speech, I was delighted. With great anticipation, I began to explore "The Real English" created by the Marzio School.

I began my review of "The Real English" by reading an article sent me via the co-editor of CALL-EJ Online supplementing the software. The article describes the problems that the "The Real English" is designed to solve. The problems are similar to the ones I am experiencing with Japanese learners. Marzio (1999) reports that The Marzio School English learners were experiencing two major difficulties with their listening ability. The first problem was that they could not understand native English speakers when they went abroad. The second problem was that the learners had trouble holding casual conversations with their native English speaking coworkers (p. 1-2).

With the designer's purpose in mind, I began to test the software. I first had to choose which language background to load. The three choices I had were French, German, and Spanish. I choose Spanish because this was the language I was the most familiar out of the three choices. This choice affected the translations and bilingual notes in each lesson. Upon loading the program, I viewed a collage of video footage highlighted by snappy guitar music.

From the main menu, I could select a lesson to enter. (Even though each lesson was presented linearly, any point in the lesson was accessible by returning to the main menu then re-entering the lesson at the desired point.) Each lesson was designed to expose the English language learner to a wide variety of English accents and a wide variety of responses to the same queries. In the twelve lessons of CD-ROM 1&2, there were examples of American, Australian, British, Canadian, Irish, New Zealand, Scottish and South African accents. There was also a wide variety of non-native English accents. Below are the chapter titles.

1. Hi! How are you?
2. Hi! What's your name?
3. The Alphabet
4. Where are you from?
5. Spelling
6. Revision plus (Spelling plus Where . . . from?)
7. Numbers
8. What time is it?
9. The Jones Family
10. What's your job?
11. What's the weather like?
12. Can you tell me the way to . . .?

Each chapter was presented in the following manner. First, there was a collage of the chapter's dialogues (The collage was always accompanied by the snappy guitar music). The dialogues were videos of interviews taped on the streets of major cities in English speaking countries. In the interviews, there were various responses in a variety of accents

to the same question. For example, in lesson one, the collage showed five different responses to the greeting "Hi! How are you?"

Each dialogue was then shown separately. During each dialogue, I saw the textual equivalent of the spoken response, played back each phrase as many times as desired, recorded my voice, and played back the phrase of the dialogue followed by my recorded voice. (The program instructed me to listen, record, and compare.)

Each series of dialogues was followed by translations of vocabulary from the dialogues, and then by bilingual notes which explained the grammatical elements illustrated within the dialogues. The translations and notes were in both English and Spanish since I selected Spanish when I loaded the program. Following each dialogue came three types of interactive exercises: multiple-choice, drag-and-drop, and fill-in-the-blank.

All three types of exercises were designed to test the listening skills of the user. Each question referred to a dialogue. Most of the time, I could watch the video then answer the question. Some of the time, I was only able to see a screenshot of a previously viewed dialogue. In the multiple-choice exercise, I had to identify the true statement from four possible true statements (Sometimes the task was reversed so that I needed to identify the false statement from four possible false statements.) In the drag-and-drop exercises, I had to arrange words into the correct order which corresponded to the video's content. In the fill-in-the-blank exercises, I needed to type, or in some cases speak, the correct answer to a question about the corresponding dialogue. In some cases, I was answering content questions about the dialogue. In other cases, I was repeating what was spoken. Occasionally, I needed to substitute pronouns to make a sentence refer to a particular person in the dialogue. For example, if the spoken sentence was " " then I needed to produce "."

While running the software, I encountered a few technical problems. I ran the software on a Pentium 120Mhz machine with 32 MB RAM and an 8xCD-ROM running English Windows 95. While the program could run fine on the English version of Windows, I could not get the software to run correctly on the two versions of Japanese that I tried: 95 or 98. "The Real English" would load well enough, but I could only view about three-fourths of the viewing area. Once I began a chapter, I could neither exit the chapter nor advance to the next section of the chapter.

While running the "The Real English" on the English version of Windows 95, I experienced two problems. One technical problem was that while running the software on my machine, there would be a slight delay loading some of the videos occasionally. One of my biggest frustrations, however, was with the voice-recording feature. When I was inputting my answers to the fill-in-the-blank exercises via the microphone, the volume of the succeeding video would drop. To restore the volume, I needed to enter the Windows volume control panel. Other than those two problems, the software ran well on the English version of Windows 95.

In my opinion, "The Real English" does a good job of exposing the user to a wide variety of English accents. The dialogues also expose the user to a wide variety of responses to common questions. By completing the CD-ROMs, the user will be more prepared to expect a variety of responses they will get from native speakers of English to these questions.

A CD-ROM with a wide variety of native speakers would give the students the variety they lack in their school life. As an AET I have been in interactions where the

students cannot understand me when I speak at normal speed. Even though the students can interact with a native speaker, often the students cannot understand the native speaker because of the full speed of native speech.

For the above reason, I believe that the exercises in "The Real English" could be of some benefit to Japanese learners. My Japanese students do have more difficulty understanding spoken English than understanding English text. Activities that allow them to transfer speech to text might prove to be beneficial to the Japanese learner. Stanley (1991) reports, "Testing uncontrolled speech with foreign students showed that they consistently failed to perceive individual phonemes and hence words, with which they were already quite familiar under more formal circumstances" (p.289). This description fits my experience with Japanese Junior High School students.

One problem with "The Real English" CD-ROM is that the exercises are only testing a limited number of micro-skills. The user is only required to recognize/ reproduce sounds and words from the dialogue (as in fill-in-the-blank and drag-and-drop exercises) or to recognize/reproduce phrasal content from the dialogue (as in multiple-choice exercises). As Richards (1983) points out, "A set of true/false questions following a passage on tape might indicate how much of the material the learner can remember, but this kind of activity in no way helps the learner develop the ability to grasp main ideas or extract relevant details" (p. 24). The exercises in "The Real English" are only testing what they can remember from the dialogues, so the exercises do not have full effectiveness.

Japanese students will need pre-listening and post-listening activities to give the dialogues full effectiveness for improving their comprehension. Murphy (1991) states, "Current theorists describe listening comprehension as an interactive, interpretive process in which listeners engage in a dynamic construction of meaning" (p. 56). The exercises, in my opinion, do not engage the user in a q©Åynamic construction of meaning.q«• EThe teacher in the Japanese classroom will need to create other activities to give the dialogues in "The Real English" full effectiveness for improving the listening comprehension of Japanese students.

While I in no way believe "The Real English" CD-ROM is a self-study course in listening on its own, I believe that it can be an excellent supplement to the Japanese classroom. I encourage all teachers of English in Japan to have a look.

References

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