The package consists of a teachers’ guide and five independent self-paced units. Each unit focuses on one formal context. This was identified by the producers of this package through a needs analysis which they carried out. Each unit uses vocabulary relating to the context to improve skills in speaking, listening, reading, writing and critical thinking. The five units are:

- Language and the Law
- Buying a Dinghy
- Shopping in a Supermarket
- Good Food for Diabetics
- Dealing with Social Security

Each unit consists of a short video (approximately 5 minutes), a Computer Assisted Learning (CAL) package and a work booklet. The teachers’ guide states that the three components of each unit are integrated “into the scope and sequence of each topic in an attempt to provide a real-life context for the concentrated language encounter” (DEET, p 5). The video sets the context and tells a story. The CAL package contains interactive activities, while the activity booklets contain the most important literacy components.

Target Group - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in isolated communities in northern Australia who have a minimum social proficiency in listening to, and speaking English and who have no prior computer experience.

Hardware - To operate the CAL package you will need an Apple Macintosh computer with 8 Megabytes of RAM and system 7.0 or later, with a 13 inch or larger monitor, a CD ROM drive and a printer and headphones as optional.

Focus of Review

This review will focus on the CAL packages and only comment on the other materials as they relate to the software. The teachers’ guide indicates that the project was well conceived and shows that the designers were aware of the potential of interactive multimedia for the target group. The teachers’ guide tells us that “the challenge ... was to create a concentrated language encounter using interactive multimedia” (DEET, p5). (See Gray (1986) for more details on what is a concentrated language encounter.) While CAL can bridge the gap between “current and traditional learning styles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Areas” (DEET, p5) the whole area of learning styles is still poorly defined. CAL does however allow students to participate, observe and interact in a culturally sensitive way.

Does this package meet the needs of Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders in Remote Areas?

No, unfortunately the expectations built up reading the teachers’ guide were not fulfilled. The target group could not independently, or with a little help, use this package. To load the software you need to load the CD-ROM and then open the folder and then double click on the package name. This was an unnecessary hurdle for the target group and could have been easily avoided.

The three sub-units, although sequential, were not directly or explicitly linked and thus were not integrated. The interaction was mostly passive and the feedback was poor and unpersonalised. Often you were left waiting and had to click the Continue button to proceed. The use of sound, video and graphics was not consistent, at times good, but usually poor, mainly due the lack of user control. The user could not select the sentence or video they wished to re-hear, but could only re-play the last one. Even this was not always consistent. This lack of user control continued into the area of navigation. Especially frustrating when reviewing the package, was that the user did not know where they were and could not jump into and out of the package. They could only move forward or back one screen (new display) at a time or quit and start again.

Review of the CAL Packages

Eastmant (1996) in his review of CD-ROM materials for English language teaching found that at present there are no agreed standards for evaluating this material. He found that over the last eighteen months the number of language learning CD-ROMs available has expanded considerably and in the UK alone, over
twenty titles are now available. So I was pleased to see this package come out, however I am disappointed with its quality.

Engagement overall was poor and where it could have been adequate, lack of user control caused it to be weak. User engagement would have been enhanced if the user could have been able to replay on demand all the spoken parts on the screen and not just the last one. This also occurred when video clips were available, only the last one could be replayed.

Interactivity was poor and for this type of package a major flaw. The producers stated that the CAL packages contain interactive activities. However on using each of the five CAL packages this reviewer found the interactivity to be very low and of poor quality. Feedback was poor to say the least and often the user was given the correct answer after one only incorrect try with no feedback as to why that attempt was incorrect. Even feedback on the correct response was poor and often failed to mention the user’s name, even though this was requested at the beginning of the package. For this type of package such poor feedback was a major short coming. The target group for which the package was designed, needs lots of support and this was either poorly given or absent.

Tailorability was very limited and amounted to turning off the sound in a few cases. Sound volume could not be controlled within the packages and thus to do this the user would have had to access the volume control within the Control Panels folder. A procedure beyond the ability of the target audience.

The mode and style of interaction was limited and boring, even for the target audience. All the program required was for the user to click the mouse and occasionally to drag something. There was no monitoring the user interaction at all and thus no assessment of where the user reached in the program. Also neglected was what the user had difficult with and how much was achieved. A great deal of valuable information could have been easily recorded especially given the capacity of Authorware. Unfortunately it seems that the producers were unaware of Authorware’s ability in this area.

The ancillary learning support tools were the video and the work booklets. However, the user was required only to watch and read. The CAL package was designed to fit between these two, but no mention of them is made, except for the fact that video clips and materials in the booklets were used in CAL packages. This lack of interaction between units, was continued within the units. Thus I can not see how the producers can claim the units are integrated and that the CAL packages are interactive. During the evaluation of these packages lack of integration and lack active participation and involvement on the part of the user was a major concern of the reviewer.

Interface Design

As can be seen the interface was simple and overall consistent throughout the packages. However there were some very annoying interface design flaws. The Continue button was not located in the bottom right corner as is usual and the key board command for Continue was not always operational. The Word button was off for a number of packages. Which seems strange for a package purporting to assist students poor in English. Where it was active and a video had just been shown, the video showed above the words you were meant to click on to obtain their meanings (see figure 1 below), and even when a word was clicked on, the meaning was covered by the video. This is unbelievable in a product costing $240. The screen was also very difficult to close. After clicking on many possible buttons it would close, but I was unable to determine which button achieved this.

In Figure 2 below you would imagine you would be able to replay any of the three videos by clicking on them. No, only the last one and ‘Go Back’ button takes you to the screen before!

Summing up

From reading the teachers’ guide it appears that the producers had done a lot of developmental work, both on what multimedia could achieve (see Backer, T. (Ed) (1995) for a good review) and the needs of the target group. However on reviewing this product I was shocked that such a poor master copy was allowed to go to production. I can not believe that the producers intended this to happen. The lack of user control, low active interaction and monitoring of user progress can not be excused in this type of product. If you are still considering purchasing this product please review a copy before you make your final decision.

References


