Mimosa Technology has been hard at it, and produced another stage (stage two) of its "Inside Stories" series. This product aims to continue developing reading and writing skills in Primary school children. The CD-ROM language activities and games are based on well-known stories.

This product would be suitable for use by children working independently. It could be incorporated into a classroom language program, or set up by parents for use in the home setting. Stage two of "Inside Stories" provides documentation indicating that it would be most appropriate for children at the "First Steps", 'Early' phase of reading and writing, correlating with an age group of about seven to eight years depending on their stage of development. The documentation also provides indicators from the Reading and Writing Developmental Continua, and shows which activity within each CD-ROM title has matching indicators, blackline masters/print outs, and follow up activities. However, some correlation to the recently introduced National English Outcomes would be a perfect addition for busy teachers that are coming to grips with yet another curricula change!

"Cinderella", "Red Riding Hood", "Jack and the Beanstalk", and "The Fisherman and his Wife" are the tales used. The format of the files is the same as those of Stage One with each fairy tale presented in its own ring-bound, plastic file. Within each file is a CD-ROM, map of the CD-ROM's navigational structure, skills overview sheet, teachers guide, evaluation sheets, and blackline masters. The CD-ROM is easy to load, containing software for both Macintosh and Windows-based (95, 98, 3.1, and 3.11) computers. Hard-copy instructions are also provided at the back of the file.

The use of interesting familiar fairy tale characters, animations and video excerpts help sustain children's attention. The fairy tale genre is clever as it helps to keep the children's level of interest relatively high. It also assists in keeping cognitive load at an acceptable level as the activities' tales are compatible with most childrens' knowledge spaces. The level of interaction is active throughout, providing a framework for students to become actively involved. This form of learning is supported by Pollock (1996) who advocates that "...learning & retention increase as the learner is more involved."

The previous product (Stage One) of "Inside Stories" was dominated by American accents, and it is pleasing to note that this version is a vast improvement as a more culturally neutral accent has been employed (an exception being an American accent of the narrator in "Red Riding Hood" play). Further minimisation of cultural bias is the use of characters from different cultures in a couple of stories. One bold attempt at using more contemporary characters has been made: one story incorporates Red Riding Hood riding a skateboard and having an altercation with the wolf by throwing an apple pie in his face!

Navigation is reasonably intuitive and consistent. For example "Pause" & "Exit/Quit" buttons are constant throughout the activities; "Forward", "Back", "Help", "Pause" "Sound" and "Print" are also appropriately incorporated. Children are able to make choices about the order that they would like to do activities in, and in a few instances the level.

Further allowance for different levels and the ability for more advanced users to use short cuts is needed. A few attempts have been made, for example, in the 'Find the way' activity in "Jack & the Beanstalk", where the user needs to click on arrows to navigate. However, they could also be given the option to use keyboard arrows. A further example is with "Cinderella"; in 'Palace Perils' children are able to choose their 'target score' enabling them to tailor the level of difficulty wanted. Similarly, "Red Riding Hood’s" ‘Wolfy’s Word Works’ has a ‘Build a sentence’ activity where children can choose a ‘target score’ thus allowing for individual differences.
Metaphors have been used occasionally, for example the sound icon is a speaker and in the "Red Riding Hood" 'Wolfy's Word Works' activity a computer monitor displays the game being used. More extensive use of metaphors may be considered in future products, especially versions for older children that have probably been exposed more to the "Office" metaphors.

A personalised map or navigational aid would be beneficial, thereby allowing users to see which activities are available and have been completed.

The ability to customise aspects of the product such as sounds, volume level and colours, would assist in meeting individual needs. In addition, more supporting prompts for hearing impaired children would be a desirable enhancement. An attempt at moving from traditional gender role stereotyping is evidenced with Red Riding Hood riding a skateboard. A more concerted effort would be welcomed.

Activities are appropriately paced and challenging. Incorporation of hints for incorrect answers would be beneficial instead of the feedback "Oops, try again" or "You've missed a point this time". This would encourage more risk taking and a student could attempt to have another go, thereby enriching their learning experience. A "Played before" option for each fairy tale allows children to avoid having to listen to the fairy tale again, proceeding directly to the main menu and retaining their interest. The opportunity to work in a shared game situation with another person in a few activities is an excellent feature. However, some type of prior notification needs to be indicated in the menu so that a second player could be organised before the game is opened.

The use of various language activities based around the original fairy tale is positive, although the use of correct terminology would be beneficial. This was done in the "Cinderella" 'Listen In' activity where children listen to a passage and select characters concerned from a list. They are then presented with the passage in written format & asked to insert quotation marks. The terminology 'quotation marks' or 'speech marks' was used. Yet in the "Cinderella" 'Sounds Like' game the term homonyms was not used for words like 'blew'/'blue', instead 'sounds like' was incorporated. In 'Make a match' activity in "Jack & the Beanstalk", the term 'opposites', was incorporated. Further extension of the vocabulary by using the term 'antonyms' would have been beneficial. Accentuation of important information has been achieved with colour, sound, video, animation, graphics and text suitably employed. This has resulted in an appealing, consistent, and logical interface. The price is $320 for the whole set which includes one copy of each of the four titles and a teachers' file for each title. Individual titles can be purchased for $97. Another option is a 'Class Package' for $685 that includes 5 copies of each of the four disks (20 disks) and a teacher's file for each title. More information regarding these and other options such as thirty-day approvals, technical information, cost of additional site licenses or the Stage 1 sets are available from Mimosa Technology.

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Generally, a well thought out and engaging set of products that incorporates many language activities in a well-balanced multimedia mix. Some improvements have been made since the last release, let's look forward to the next release!

REFERENCES

First Steps Reading Developmental Continuum (1994), Longman Australia Pty Ltd. Melbourne, Australia.