

[Software Review]

Espanol en Marcha (Metodo Camille)

Cristina Poyatos Matas (C.Matas@mailbox.gu.edu.au)
Griffith University, Australia

Developers

CAMILLE Research and Development team led by Dr. Ana Gimeno-Sanz. Universidad Politecnica de Valencia, Spain.

Distributors

- INTEXT Textbooks Company, Melbourne, Australia.
- Difusi_n, S.L. Publishing House.
- Universidad Politecnica de Valencia Press, distributed via the Internet only in Australia, Brazil, Canada, and the U.S.A. The URL is: <http://interactivespanish.com>

Hardware/Software

Minimum requirements:

- IBM PC or compatible
- Intel 80486 DX processor or compatible
- 8 Megabytes of RAM
- Microsoft Windows 3.1
- Microsoft video for Windows 1.1
- 16 bit sound card
- CD-ROM drive 4x
- Loudspeakers and Microphone/Headset
- VGA 256 colors video card

Recommended requirements:

- IBM PC or compatible
- Intel Pentium processor or compatible
- 16 Megabytes of RAM
- Microsoft Windows 95
- Microsoft video for Windows 1.1
- 16 bit sound card
- CD-ROM drive 8x

- Loudspeakers and Microphone/Headset
- VGA 65,536 colors video card

Format

One CD-ROM for PC

Documentation

The user's manual contains program information for learners and teachers, instructions on installation, instructions for use, and a table of contents. All this information is made available in four languages: English, French, German and Spanish.

Price

For single user: A\$125.95 (from INTEXT) Multiple users license available on request.

Introduction

It is important to expose students to comprehensible authentic language input for the acquisition and development of language (Krashen & Terrell, 1982), as well as it is important to help students to use the different linguistic structures to achieve grammatical accuracy (Larsen-Freeman, 1995). It is not easy to find good quality multimedia resources in Spanish as foreign language learning, which has a communicative approach and acknowledge the importance of grammar learning. *Espanol en Marcha* presents a way of responding to this challenge provides an integrated approach to the use of different technologies available to create a supportive learning environment for intermediate learners of Spanish as a foreign language.

Software Description

Espanol en Marcha is an interactive CD-ROM course for lower-intermediate learners of Spanish as a foreign language. It has been designed for students willing to focus on the acquisition of communicative skills and to improve their command of the past tenses at an intermediate level. Language and linguistic structures are presented in context and the program contains more than one hundred activities.

Once the software has been installed this takes the user to the opening screen, with an audio file playing in the background, in which the learner is requested to input his/her name and select one of the three support languages: English, French or German (See Figure 1).

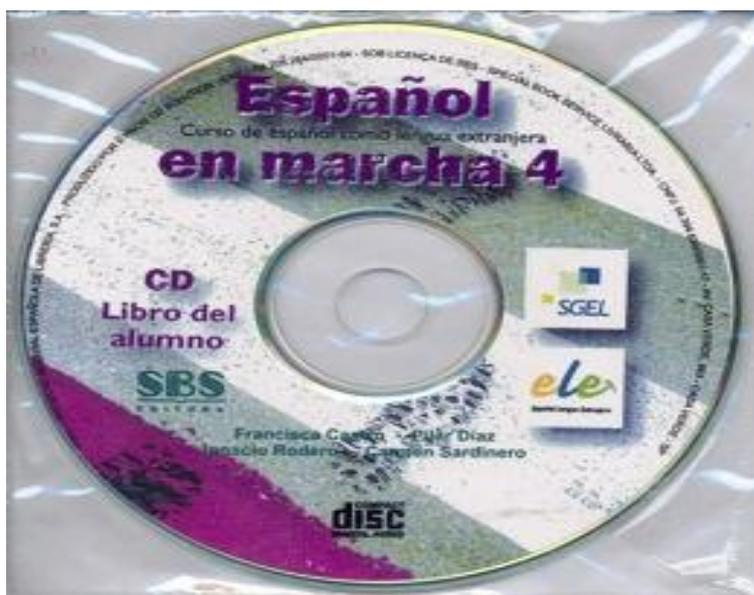


Figure 1: This image was replaced by the editor because the original image provided by the author was corrupted.

The language selected by the student will be used to provide contextual help on-line, information on the different types of exercise information is made available in four languages: English, French, German, and Spanish.

The design of the main menu screen presents the student with five choices: culture, vocabulary, grammar, video, and conversational skills (See Figure 2). In addition, eight navigation icons are displayed, on the right side of the screen. These are to allow access to: contextual help, the written form of the audio files that the program is playing, a notepad, a learner's performance report on any exercise, an electronic bilingual dictionary, an audio recording studio or a recorder, information on the different types of exercises, and the exit. As part of the contextual help, the user can access a section with information on how to create Spanish characters from a non-Spanish keyboard.



Figure 2: Main Menu

The culture section includes more than 60 topics (e.g.: education, food, health, Spanish language, etc.), which are related in content to the activities and video. This section provides a very good source of current cultural information on Spain, the customs and traditions of its people, and their institutions (See Figure 3).

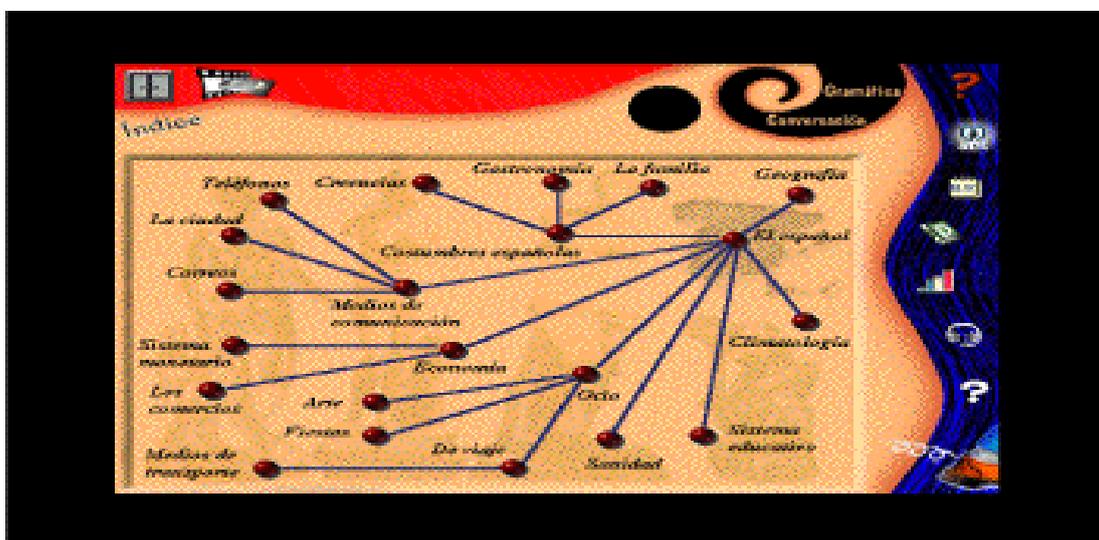


Figure 3: Index of the cultural section

The vocabulary section includes sound-enhanced interactive exercises to learn and practice vocabulary in several areas useful for intermediate and beginning students (See Figure 4). In addition, the user has the possibility of displaying the written form of the words or sentences pronounced in the exercise.

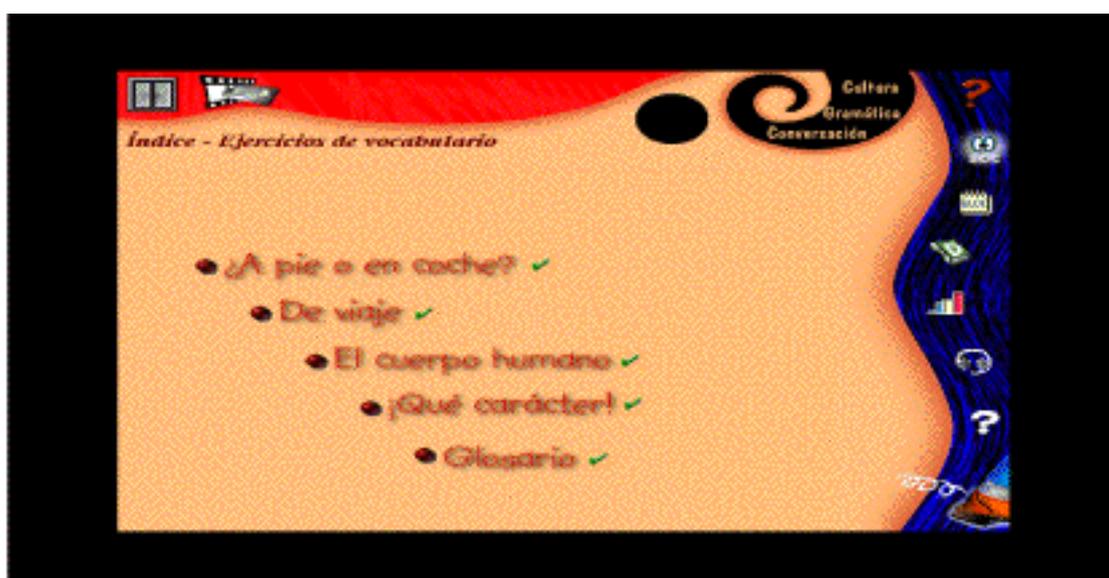


Figure 4: Index of the vocabulary section

The grammar section contains 17 topics, in which students can work and complete different grammar exercises (See Figure 5).

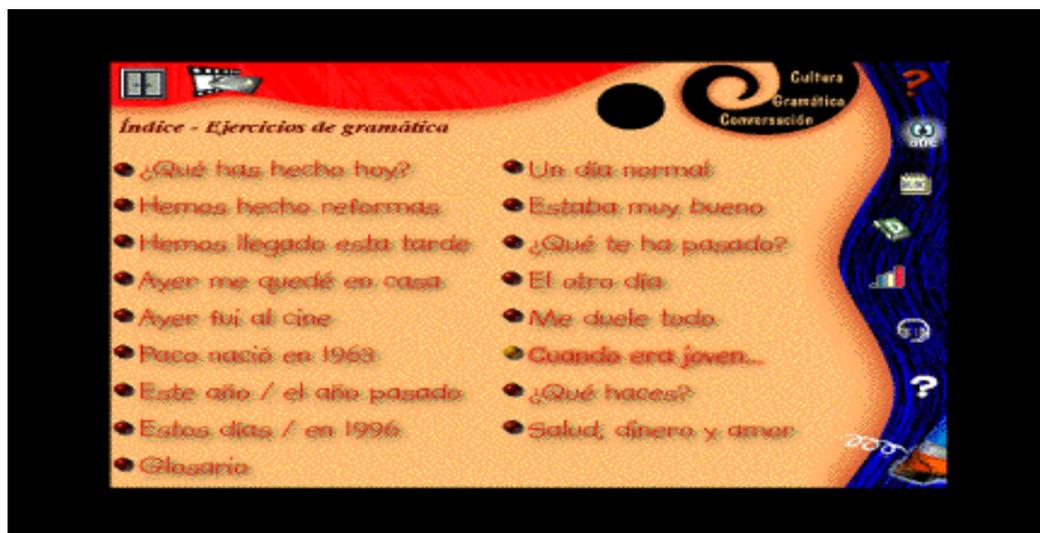


Figure 5: Index of the grammar section

The video section includes 20 video sequences (See Figure 6), each followed by three different types of activities: listening, speaking, and reading comprehension. They are sequences of real-life situations (e.g.: a job interview, eating in a restaurant, etc), that the learner can listen to and view at their own pace. The option of viewing the video script is made available to students if they wish to read it. In addition, it incorporates a recording studio or recorder (See Figure 6), in which the student can record his/her sentences within the dialogue simulating participation in a real conversation.

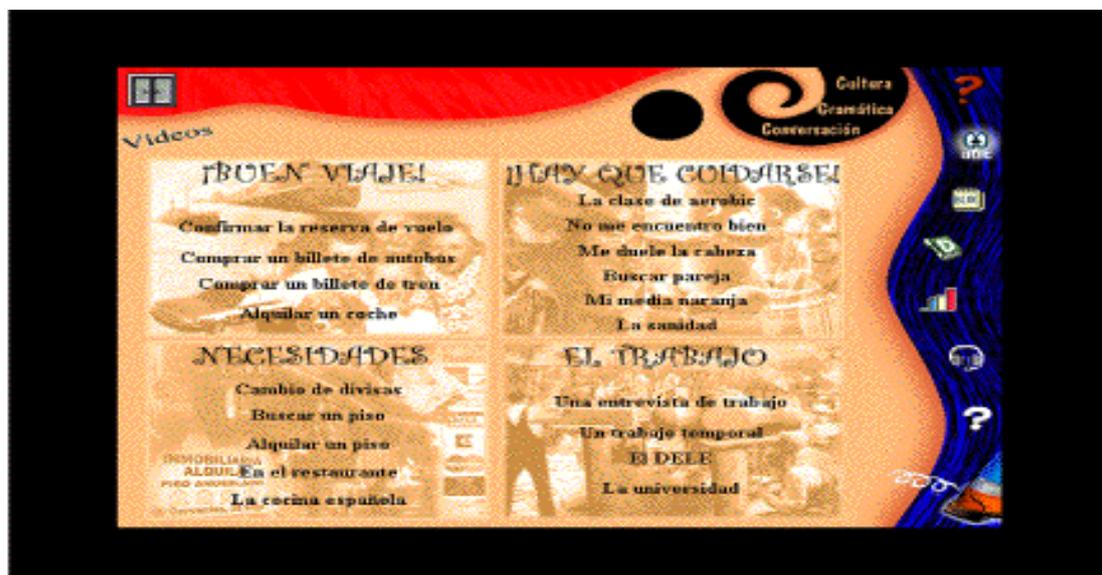


Figure 6: Index of video sequences

Spanish culture; and a grammar book. They can be accessed on the right-hand menu at any point in the program.

In addition, learners are also provided with a notepad, available in the right-hand menu, in which they can write any comments or problems that they may wish to write at any time.

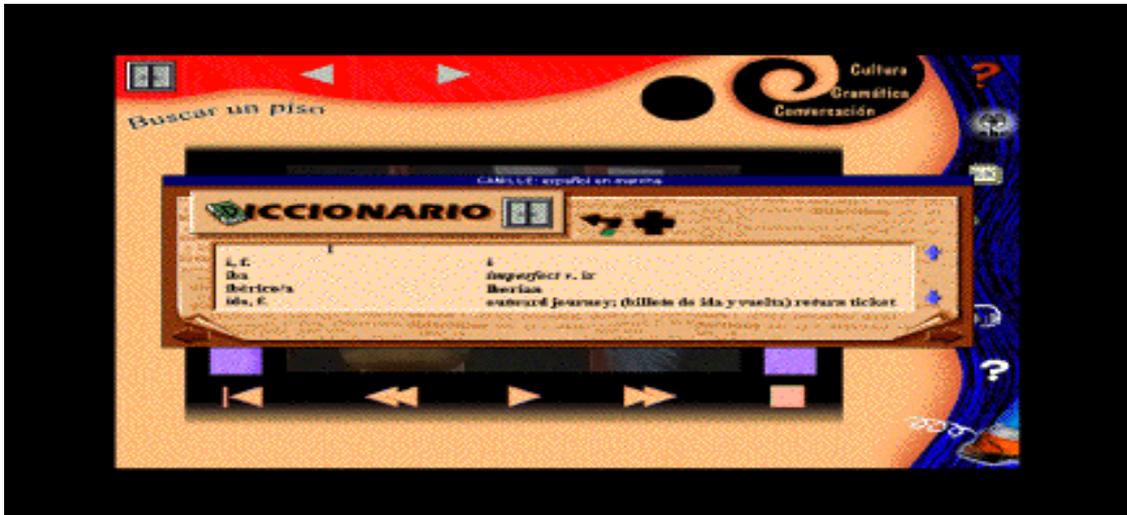


Figure 8: Sample of the bilingual sound enhanced dictionary

Software Evaluation

Installation

The software is easy to install and provides on-line support, as well as clear instructions on installation in the user's manual to assist the technical needs of different computer users. The manual also contains a troubleshooting section for anyone experiencing difficulties.

Interface design and navigation

The interface design of the different screens has been thought out carefully and the integration amongst colors, backgrounds, graphic design, pictures, video sequences, and text has been made very effectively to achieve a user-friendly, attractive, and interactive interface. The graphics selected for the different icons assist the user to guess and remember their content. However, the use of a very similar graphic with a question mark icon in red (for the contextual help), and in white (for the information on the different types of exercises) could be confusing for some users.

The navigational structure and tools made available in the program assist the learner to navigate and explore among the different sections and the content available, as well as to close windows and exit the program at any time. This flexibility can allow students to use the program according to their own needs and learning style outside the classroom.

Educational content and use

The software was integrated as part of a class on Spanish for Professional Purposes to provide students with an example of a job interview. At the end of the class, the teacher introduced to the students the main features of the program, and the fifteen Spanish students in this high intermediate level course were allowed to explore other areas of the program at their own pace.

Students explored the different sound-enhanced vocabulary exercises, which provide “yes/no” feedback and other types of visual feedback, to make learning vocabulary more interesting for the students (See Figure 9). However, some students reported that they would have liked to have the instructions of the different exercises available on the screen rather than having to go through the on-line help section to find out what to do in each exercise.



Figure 9: Sample of a vocabulary exercise

The grammar section was found useful by the students as it covers well the practice of past tenses, in particular, the preterito perfecto, imperfecto and preterito indefinido of indicative, an area in which many learners of Spanish as a foreign language seem to experience problems. The authors have included a good variety of grammar exercises and they are related to the video sequences, therefore encouraging learning grammar in context. However, once again students found the lack of instructions on the screen containing the exercises confusing (See Figure 10). If the program is going to be used in class, it would be a good strategy to expose students to the different types of exercises included in the program as well, before they proceed to complete any activities.

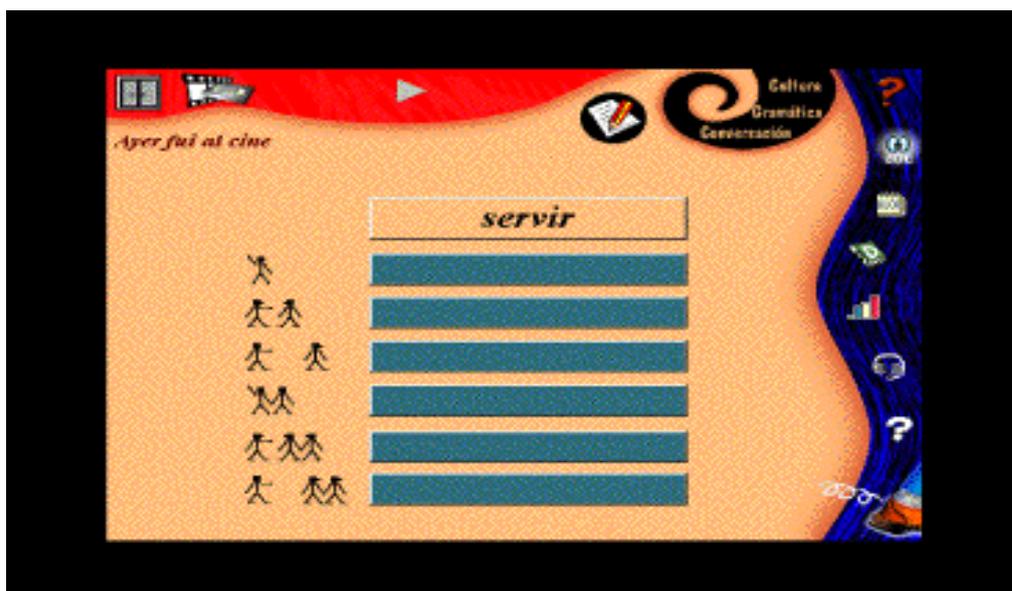


Figure 10: Sample of a grammar exercise

Students appreciated the availability of an on-line grammar book, containing explanations and samples of use on the grammatical items included in the program, that they could consult to assist their completion of different grammar exercises.

The technical quality of the video productions in the video section is very high and the pronunciation used is from Spain. The learners accessed the control panel to manage the viewing of the different video sequences included in this software (See Figure 11). Also, they could select an icon from the right menu bar, which allowed them to display the video script under the table that captures the video sequence.



Figure 11: Sample of a video sequence

A very useful way in which feedback was provided on video activities, was through highlighting the part of the video script that contained the correct answer to the question being asked. Students found this feature extremely helpful both to reconsider their answers and to learn different linguistic features. However, whenever a student took more time to read a section or to think about a particular answer than expected by the developers, a high pitch electronic voice told him/her: “!A ver si acabamos!” (Let's see if we finish!), which became quite annoying for some learners, in particular, if they were trying to concentrate on the completion of an exercise. It would have been nice for the students to have the option to deactivate this particular audio feedback feature at the beginning of the program, in particular for those who prefer to work without any audio interruptions. In addition, some of the follow-up activities on reading comprehension, in which students had to reply to “yes/no” questions, provided them with sound-enhanced feedback by saying “Si” (Yes) or “No”. This sound-enhanced feedback was found confusing at times, as it seems to be reading the “yes” or “no” option selected, and was also found disrupting for some of the participants, as it uses a high pitch electronic voice. It would have been more constructive to have more supportive feedback such as “!Muy bien!”(Well done!) or “!Prueba otra vez!” (Try again!) with a more natural voice, perhaps this could be considered by the authors in the next version.

The constant availability of the recording studio or recorder (See Figure 7) was well received by the students. This is an excellent feature of this program that can empower students over their learning, and make more interesting their practice of listening and pronunciation outside the classroom.

The participating students in this trial enjoyed the on-line reference sources that enriched their learning environment and provided support in the completion of the different activities in an integrated manner. Furthermore, the students found very useful the choice of viewing and printing a report on their performance while using the program. This report provided them with detailed information on the activities that they completed, including date, time spent on them, and the performance rate, among other feedback (See Figure 12). This was found very empowering as it allowed the learners to assess their performance. It can also be helpful for the teacher to explore the activities that students undertake in and outside the classroom, as it saves the records in a folder in the directory of the program.

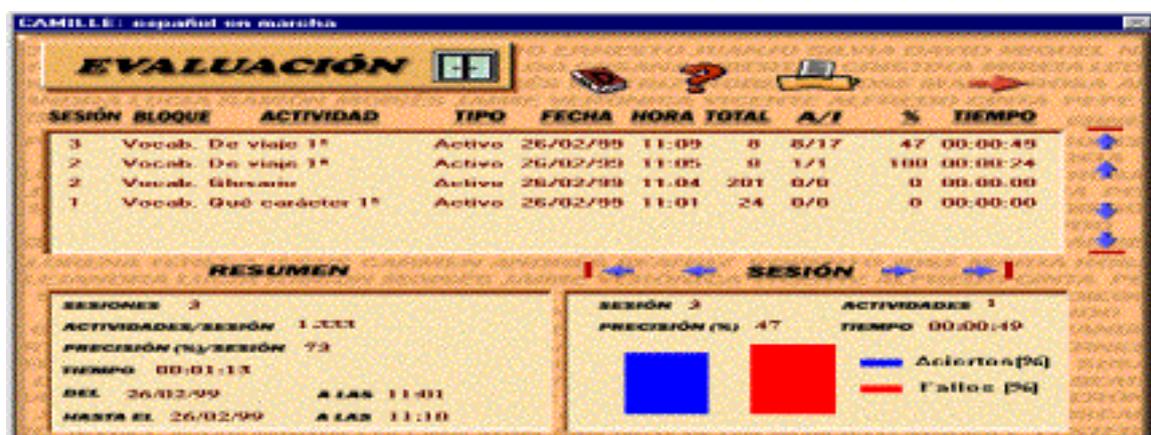


Figure 12: Sample of a student performance report

It is important to mention that the amount of student-controlled help (Robinson, 1991) made available in this program demonstrates that learners' needs have been taken into consideration in the different stages of its development. This amount of student control can help to create in the users' positive attitudes towards learning Spanish with this software (Jacobson, Maori, Mishra, & Kolar, 1995). Furthermore, the use of a student-centered approach and creative learning tasks produce a challenging environment for students to engage in learning.

Conclusion

Espanol en Marcha is a very good value for money. It is ideal for intermediate students, who are willing to work with Spanish from real-life situations to learn more about Spain, improve their Spanish vocabulary, grammar, and the four macro-skills, in particular listening and pronunciation. In addition, certain sections of the software have the potential to be used with other linguistic levels.

It can be used outside the class, in a flexible learning mode, for students willing to explore, learn, and/or consolidate their linguistic knowledge and skills, and/or their cultural knowledge of Spain. Also, it can be used in the class, to document different cultural or linguistic points with the support of authentic video sequences in which the language is being used.

The interface design displays an effective integration of multimedia and hypertext. The quality of the content makes this package one of the best packages available in the current market to assist learning Spanish as a foreign language. It is a must for anyone willing to use technology to enhance the learning environment of his or her students!

In a Nutshell

Good Points of the program:

- Easy to install with help online and in the user's manual;
- Uses a student-centered approach;
- Provides a supportive learning environment for the student;
- Clear and easy to access on-line help;
- Excellent interface and graphics design to make the program attractive and user-friendly;
- Good coverage of linguistic content for intermediate students;
- Provides keyboard information to support international users;
- Use hypermedia links to allow easy access to different parts of the program;
- Good navigation icons always accessible;
- Use of authentic pronunciation of Spanish;
- A good resource of quality video sequences which present real-life situations;
- Provides students with features that give control over video viewing and audio recording;
- An excellent variety of vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and grammar exercises;

- Provides a bilingual sound-enhanced dictionary on-line;
- Provides online support in one of the three languages chosen by the user (English, French or German);
- Makes available a notepad for students to write comments and questions;
- Presents clear and updated cultural information on Spain, its people, way of life, customs, traditions, and institutions;
- Uses interactive exercises with different types of feedback to encourage student performance;
- Good source of cultural updated information on Spain;
- Makes available to the students and teachers an evaluation report of user performance that can be printed.

The program could improve in:

- The “yes/no” audio feedback used in some activities is very limited and it can be at times annoying.
- The use of a more natural voice to provide audio feedback on the completion of activities;
- Giving students more constructive and encouraging audio feedback messages during and on their completion of exercises;
- Providing the user with the choice of having the instructions of each exercise displayed on the screen if they wish;
- Making printing facilities available to more sections of the program, such as the keyboard information.

References

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