SOFTWARE REVIEW: Rocket Spanish Premium

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SOFTWARE EVALUATION

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type</th>
<th>Multimedia Interactive Course</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language(s)</td>
<td>Spanish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Beginning (Adult)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>Listening, reading, speaking, writing, games, audio recording</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Format</td>
<td>WWW, CD-ROM plus Web access, MP3 (audio)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Operating System(s):</td>
<td>Windows 98, NT4, 2000, XP, and Vista</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mac-Classic Mode or OS X; Android, iOS (iPad, iPhone, iPod Touch)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardware Requirements:</td>
<td>PC 166 MHz or faster CPU</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Mac 120 MHz PowerPC</td>
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<tr>
<td>RAM</td>
<td>32 MB</td>
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<tr>
<td>CD-ROM</td>
<td>8X</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Sound card, microphone, speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software</td>
<td>Adobe Acrobat Reader 10.3 (view PDF documents)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Windows Media Player or iTunes (listen to interactive audio lessons); Google Chrome, Firefox 4+, Safari 3+ or Internet Explorer 8+ (online)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Documentation Online</td>
<td><a href="http://www.rocketlanguages.com">www.rocketlanguages.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price:</td>
<td>$99.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single user</td>
<td>Once a program is purchased, additional family members pay $49.95 per family member, per language, per level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Discount</td>
<td>Call for quote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple copies</td>
<td>*Lifetime membership/access comes with all purchases</td>
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GENERAL DESCRIPTION

_Rocket Spanish Premium_ is designed as an introductory Spanish conversation course for adults to help develop basic conversational skills (vocabulary and present tense verb forms). The user can choose from 32 interactive audio lessons of approximately 25 minutes in length, 33 language and culture lessons, games, and the _Survival Kit_. All of these resources can be downloaded. The interactive audio lessons (dialogues) are categorized into units about meeting and greeting people, traveling, discussing hobbies, describing oneself and the weather, shopping, socializing, and family.

EVALUATION

**Technical Features**

For the purposes of this review, _Rocket Spanish Premium_ was accessed online; however, the course may also be purchased as a set of 22 CDs. Once the user has logged in, s/he is presented with a personalized _dashboard_. This main screen (see Figure 1) introduces the learner to the _Rocket Record Voice Comparison System_, which allows the learner to record his/her voice and compare it to that of the native speaker (via an audio overlay). _Rocket Record_ is easy to use and there is a demo readily available.

Figure 1
Main Screen (_dashboard_)

_Rocket Record_ is available for use in the audio lessons, language lessons, _Survival Kit, Hear It, Say It_, and _Know It_. _Hear It, Say It_ and _Know It_ are self-evaluation tools. The program presents course sequence suggestions based upon the students’ responses within each of these tools. They are accessed within each audio lesson.

Another feature that the site emphasizes is the ability to download the audio lessons on an MP3 player, laptop, or smartphone. There is a hotline that learners can call concerning technical difficulties.

**Activities (Procedure)**

From the main screen (_dashboard_), the user accesses the interactive audio lessons, language and culture lessons, games, and the _Survival Kit_ via tabs along the top of the page. The language and culture tab presents lessons on foundational grammatical topics and information about Spanish-speaking countries (in English). The games tab offers three
activities from which the user may choose. Selecting the *Survival Kit* tab presents the learner with several options: the *Beginners book*, which provides written practice exercises; the *Conversation Course*, which offers additional conversations/expressions; and the *Vocabulary Supplement*, which lists additional terms and expressions not covered in the audio lessons.

The 32 interactive audio lessons (see Figure 2) constitute the foundation of the program. These are composed of dialogues between Amy and Mauricio, the program tutors; they are introduced as native speakers of Spanish in the online tutorial. The conversations present basic discourse in which a traveler might engage while visiting a Spanish-speaking country (introductions, ordering a drink, etc.). Written transcripts are provided for each conversation. After listening to the lesson, the learner has the option of role-playing one of the speakers by responding to a line from the dialogue. The learner can also utilize *Rocket Record* (see Figure 3) to repeat and record the conversation line-by-line. By placing the waveform of one’s speech over that of the tutor, the user is encouraged to compare his/her pronunciation to that of the native speaker. Finally, at the end of each lesson, an area is provided for the learner to add notes about the content.

Figure 2
Interactive Audio Lesson
Each of the 33 Language and Culture lessons are composed of a grammar lesson and a short cultural topic (see Figure 4). In order to view the culture lesson, the user must click on the culture tab within the lesson.

Clicking on the My Level tab brings up Hear It and Say It (see Figure 5), where the learner is presented with randomly selected audio conversation clips from the lessons. S/he then repeats the phrases and gives the translated meaning. A second tool is Know It, where the user is presented with a sentence or phrase in English, which s/he translates into Spanish. Again, these are self-evaluation tools.
The Games tab on the user dashboard allows the learner to choose from four games: *Megacards* (see Figure 6) and *Megacards Advanced*, which involve the user translating (within a given time limit) a Spanish sentence accompanied by a drawing; *Phrase Master*, another timed activity, requires the user to listen to a phrase and then place its words, which appear on a screen, into the correct order; and *Word Master* (see Figure 7), in which the learner hears a word and must place the letters appearing on the screen in order to render the correct spelling.
The *Survival Kit* includes a *Beginners Book* that contains explicit foundational grammar instruction and written exercises. There is also a *Conversation Course* within this tab that provides basic written conversations and presents multiple responses to a given situation. The learner can also click on each line of the conversations to hear correct pronunciation. There is limited grammar instruction here, but the user can refer back to the *Beginners Book* for that. Ancillary vocabulary is available via the *Vocabulary Supplement*, containing Spanish readings and vocabulary lists. After completing a selected reading, the user answers (in writing) questions concerning its content.

From the left sidebar on the main screen, the user also has access to some additional aides. Within *Assessments*, the user can complete quizzes (*Rocket Spanish Rehearsal*) with randomly selected content from the course and timed tests (*My Proficiency*). *My Forum* provides a site for users to ask questions to other members (Spanish teachers, native speakers, other Spanish learners). *My Toolbox* provides *Advanced Learner Techniques* (suggestions for language study and learning in general). *My Vocabulary* is where a user can access his/her personal vocabulary lists (ones s/he has created by double clicking on words throughout the course). *Phrase Finder* is a tool that allows the learner to type an English word/phrase to get the Spanish equivalent (and vice versa) of vocabulary used within the program. *My Badges* are awarded as the user completes portions of the program; s/he can also view the *Leaderboard* to see how her/his progress compares to other *Rocket Languages* members.

**Teacher Fit (Approach)**

On its homepage, the company states that users can "Speak and understand a new language like a native, while cutting [their] learning time in half!" using *Rocket Spanish Premium*. It asserts that its use of *chunking*, which allows users to analyze the components/constituents of a sentence without actually determining their function, provides a very basic understanding of the phrase. According to the publishers, this chunking feature, along with using (speaking) the language upon beginning the course, allows for fast acquisition of the language. Allowing the learner to replay and then repeat the audio dialogues makes the content more comprehensible (Chapelle, 1998). The written transcript provides the user an additional opportunity for noticing. This multimodal input arguably makes it more likely that the user will successfully acquire L2 vocabulary and expressions (Mayer, 1997).

*Rocket Spanish* emphasizes the audio component of the course for accessing authentic input. While the tutors may be native/native-like speakers (Mauricio and Amy), it should be noted that the user only has access to their voices throughout the program. Being exposed to a rich variation of native input would allow learners to be more adept in real-life
situations. Moreover, if authentic input is understood to be those materials designed for native speakers by native speakers (Hall, 1999), the program’s audio conversations fall very short. Again, what the program does provide is comprehensible input, which is what Krashen (1985) contends is required for the beginning L2 learner. On a positive note, the Conversation Course does provide the user with an assortment of varying responses for any of the given dialogues, thus allowing for word associations and aiding in the lexical retrieval process.

From a cognitive interactionist theoretical standpoint (Gass & Mackey, 2006), Rocket Spanish does not provide the feedback necessary for acquisition during the lesson exercises/production. While the program allows for written and spoken production, there is no opportunity for error-specific feedback (explanation of what is wrong with a response, or how to correct it). However, in the lesson quizzes, the learner is provided with the correct responses for written multiple-choice questions. Although the Beginners Book and language lessons provide grammar instruction, which is necessary for the adult second language learner, there is no requirement for the learner to utilize these resources to complete the course. The student could move through the activities in a haphazard manner, yet still complete them giving the false impression that s/he has mastered the course content. It is quite possible that a user, especially an impatient one, will simply complete the interactive audio lessons, thereby disregarding explicit instruction, a major component of many cognitive theories of adult language learning and acquisition.

All in all, Rocket Spanish is very much like early language learning curricula in that it provides auditory and visual (text) content. The main difference between this program and a workbook with accompanying CDs, for example, is that it provides voice recording and some rudimentary games. There is no requirement for the learner to complete each lesson in order to progress and no opportunity for actual discourse in the target language. What this program does provide is an opportunity to access vocabulary and audio outside of the classroom.

Learner Fit (Design)

Rocket Spanish would best serve a highly-motivated beginning adult learner, who works well independently. Since there is no video within the program, only audio, an auditory learner would reap the most benefit from this course. The program provides many resources needed for self-study in addition to the interactive audio lessons (Beginners Book, vocabulary lists, etc.). The course would be a good ancillary component to a college course or high school class. It could be very useful for a traveler who desires to have some conversational Spanish proficiency prior to visiting a Spanish speaking country.

While the course provides ample explicit grammar instruction, vocabulary, and real-life conversations, the amount of information, specifically vocabulary, could be overwhelming to the novice L2 student. Also, there is substantial overlap of where one can find individual items; this makes it confusing for the user to know where to go to access them. Therefore, it requires a significant amount of time for the learner to become familiar with the course prior to actually engaging in its activities.

Most importantly, while Rocket Record does allow the user to hear and adjust her/his speech, s/he is, in effect, evaluating his/her own oral production. Even with the visualization techniques afforded by the program, there is no instruction on what the displayed pattern represents or how to use it (other than to place the user’s recording over the tutor’s for comparison). As per Dlaska and Krekeler (2008), learners are usually unable to hear and diagnose their own errors in pronunciation and, therefore, they would receive minimal pronunciation benefit from Rocket Record.
Whereas the auditory learner might enjoy the audio lessons, a visual learner might languish in advancing through the course, due to the lack of video and graphics. Without accompanying visuals, it may be difficult for the program to maintain all but the most motivated student's attention.

The design of the pages could also present frustration for the user. The extensive amount of information displayed on each of the long scrolling pages prohibits the learner from being able to view the entire page content at one time. By reducing the screen size, the reviewer still could not fit the entire page onto the screen, and the content was rendered indecipherable.

Another drawback occurs in trying to complete the program’s writing and translating activities, since there is no option for the production of either alternate correct answers or receiving corrective feedback. The learner who has an interest in learning to write in Spanish should bear in mind that Rocket Spanish is designed for oral communication, although written practice is available through supplemental activities.

A final point of confusion for the user could be the use of tenses other than the present in course activities. Within the games and conversations of the Survival Kit the future, preterit, imperfect, and conditional forms are used. The learner would have no way of understanding these tenses as they are not used anywhere within the course.

SUMMARY

Rocket Spanish Premium is an introductory conversational Spanish course for adults, which provides learners with considerable vocabulary and audio conversations that one would commonly encounter in Spanish-speaking cultures. Explicit grammar instruction is available via the supplementary Survival Kit. The speaking and recording activities allow ample pronunciation practice, but without the variation that one might actually hear among native speakers. Although the course is not designed for written production, the supplemental activities and exercises offer significant opportunities for its practice. The repetition of phrases in the audio conversations, in conjunction with the supporting transcripts, should facilitate the acquisition of common lexical items, which serves as a good foundation for continued study of Spanish. A highly-motivated auditory learner would benefit most from this program (since s/he would be most likely to make use of the explicit grammar explanations in the Survival Kit). Finally, the granted lifetime access, including the most recent program updates is also quite appealing. There is also the possibility that the software developers will modify the program to include visuals and opportunities for learner feedback, thus appealing to a wider range of learning styles.

SCALED RATING

(1 low-5 high)
Implementation: 5
Pedagogical Features: 2
Use of Computer Capabilities: 3
Ease of use: 3
Overall Evaluation: 3.25
Value for Money: 5
PRODUCER DETAILS
Rocket Languages
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REFERENCES


REVIEWERS’ BIODATA
Carol Tripp is a graduate student at the University of South Carolina pursuing a MA in Linguistics with a concentration in second language acquisition. She has taught French, Spanish, and Latin in public and private K-12 educational settings since 1982.

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