Software Review: Rocket Chinese Premium

WEI CHENG
GENGSONG GAO
University of South Carolina

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type</th>
<th>Tutorial, drill and practice, game, self-assessment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Mandarin Chinese (Putonghua)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Beginning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity</td>
<td>Pronunciation, dialog repetition, grammar and vocabulary learning, self-assessment, cultural points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Format</td>
<td>CD-ROM, WWW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Operating Systems</td>
<td>Windows XP or up; Macintosh OSX; IOS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Sound card, microphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software</td>
<td>Internet Explorer 5.5 or later, Firefox 1.5x or later, or Safari, Google Chrome; Flash Player 8.0 or later; Adobe Reader</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation</td>
<td>No documentation available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>Online Access $99.95; CD-ROM $299.95; Free Trial for Four Lessons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Rocket Chinese Premium is an interactive self-instruction program, intended primarily for beginning learners of Mandarin Chinese with a special focus on everyday conversations and expressions. It teaches high-usage words, phrases, and sentences in Chinese speakers’ daily lives through 31 interactive audio lessons. These lessons include audio lectures in English, drill exercises, and a self-test. Considering culture as an integral part of language learning and Chinese characters as a great obstacle for English-speaking learners, it also offers 31 corresponding culture and writing lessons to enhance their communicative competence. A survival kit, which is mainly composed of useful words and expressions and three vocabulary games, is provided to enrich learners’ vocabulary. Facilitative modules, such as My Assessment, My Forum, and My Toolbox, are available to enhance a personalized self-learning process and provide different personalized solutions to the problems encountered by different learners.

The program has two versions: an online version and a CD version. The CD version, which contains all audio lessons and games, is a portable version of the online version. When learners purchase the CD packs, they are also given access to the online course. On the other hand, if learners purchase the online version only, they do not have access to the CDs but all online audio files can be downloaded. Before purchasing, users can sign up for a free trial version, which covers four lessons. This evaluation is based on the full online version.
On its website, *Rocket Chinese Premium* claims to make learning Chinese easy and quick through its interactive lessons, games, and various facilitative tools. A previous review (Chang, 2012) of this program is largely descriptive in nature. This type of review is helpful because it gives learners a detailed overview of the operation of the courseware. Our review offers some description but provides a more critical evaluation of the product in that it is an approached-based evaluation (Hubbard, 2011) that can help learners to make an informed decision as to whether or not they should use the product.

**EVALUATION**

*Technological Features*

The online version of *Rocket Chinese Premium* can be accessed on the web. In terms of server access, we experienced no difficulty during our trial (Windows PC, AMD Athlon II ×2 240e processor, 4GB memory, 500 GB hard drive, 6GB bandwidth). The connection was fast, and there was no delay in playing audio and video files. Downloading the audio files was also very quick and free of crashes. The program runs on PC, Mac, iPad, or smart phones. There is also an application for Android. All audio clips on the web can be downloaded.

With their username and password, learners can log onto the main page of *Rocket Chinese Premium* (see Figure 1). Learners can choose among the main modules of the course on the navigation bar on the top of the page. By moving the mouse to each module, learners are able to see the lessons or components within the module, and by clicking the lesson they can go to an individual lesson page. Learners have full control over the program. They can terminate the lesson they are studying and go to any other lesson. Learners can see their progress in the picture below the top menu in terms of the percentage of finished lessons. The details of progress are presented in the body of the page, which also displays learners’ average self-rating of their mastery of the materials. On the left side of the main page are some personalized learning tools such as *My Assessment*, *My Forum*, *My Toolbox*, and so on. Learners can get help by clicking the *Help & Support* button on the top left corner of the main page as well as through the personalized emails sent to them by course creators that dynamically pull information about their own progress in the course.

**Figure 1**

*Main webpage*
Activities (Procedure)
The main component of Rocket Chinese Premium is the so-called interactive audio lesson. There are 29 main lessons and two review lessons, each centered around a short conversation of about 5 or 6 turns on a given topic. Each lesson begins with a 30-minute audio presentation by two tutors, one male native English speaker who also speaks Chinese but with a slight accent and one female Chinese native speaker. First, the English tutor introduces the topic of the lesson in English. Then, both the tutor and Chinese speaker read the conversation of the lesson at a normal speed. Afterwards, they break the conversation down into words, phrases, or sentences with translations and explanations. When teaching the individual sentences, the Chinese tutor will first say the sentence at a normal speed and then repeat it twice at a slower pace. Learners are given time to practice. They can also stop the audio and play it back if needed.

Every audio presentation is accompanied by three supplementary activities. The first activity is focused on listening. Learners can listen to the main conversation covered in the presentation and view the transcripts in Chinese characters, Pinyin (the standard Romanization of characters), and English.

The second activity aims at pronunciation practice and is carried out with Rocket Record, whereby learners record their own pronunciation. Rocket Record creates pronunciation graphs for learners to compare their pronunciation against that of native speakers by analyzing the peaks and troughs in the graphs to then adjust their pronunciation accordingly (see Figure 2). Learners can record their pronunciation until they are satisfied. However, such acoustic comparison may be challenging for beginners without any knowledge of phonetics.

Figure 2
Rocket Record

![Rocket Record screenshot]

The third activity is My Level in which learners test their mastery of the material. It is comprised of two parts. The first part called Hear It Say It and Know It, is a self-evaluation in which learners listen to or read a Chinese word or phrase and then rate their mastery of this item. An average level will be given based on their self-evaluation of 17 items. The second part is a quiz that consists of five multiple-choice questions on the vocabulary and grammar introduced in the lesson. Learners will receive immediate feedback as to whether their answer is correct or not. They can take the quiz an unlimited number of times.

Besides the audio lesson, Rocket Chinese Premium has 29 lessons that focus on language and culture with topics similar to those in the audio lessons. Each lesson consists of two major parts, language points and cultural notes, and both are presented in a textual format. The language points mainly cover the structures appearing in the corresponding audio lesson as well as extra vocabulary. The structures are presented in a deductive way with
basic grammatical rules followed by examples. All sentences and vocabulary items are displayed with Rocket Record, offering the opportunity to practice listening and pronunciation. The cultural notes provide some practical guides related to the lesson’s topic. As in the interactive audio lesson, there is also an evaluation part called My Level.

Although the main focus of Rocket Chinese Premium is listening and speaking, it also introduces some simple Chinese characters in 29 writing lessons. It should be noted that these lessons are about the Chinese writing system; that is, how to write individual Chinese characters, rather than how to write essays in Chinese. The writing of each character is introduced in a short video in which a demonstrator shows the stroke order of the character (see Figure 3). Textual explanation is also offered to help understand how the writing of the character is related with its meaning or how the characters sharing the same radical are related to one another.

Figure 3
An introduction to how to write ¼ ri “sun, day”

Apart from these instructional activities, Rocket Chinese Premium has several collaborative activities. There are two online games and one game application. The online games are called MegaCards, one at the elementary level and one at the advanced level. Each MegaCard comes with a picture, a word, and a sentence. Learners have to translate the sentence shown on the screen within a certain period of time, which can be adjusted, from 1 to 30 seconds. Once the countdown is completed the answer will be displayed. There are 150 cards at each level.

The game application can be downloaded and installed on both PC and Mac. It consists of two parts, MegaVocab and MegaAudio. For each topic of MegaVocab, learners answer 20 or 25 multiple-choice questions. For each question, learners are given a picture and then select the correct one from four Chinese words (written in characters). In addition, learners can add new words to MegaVocab simply by typing the word in Chinese and English and selecting a picture on their computer to illustrate the word. In MegaAudio, learners listen to a Chinese word and then select the correct one from six pictures. The common problem with these games is that there are many new words that students did not learn in the lessons. The challenge posed by these new words may diminish learners’ motivation to use these games.

The 2013 edition adds two web-based games designed to assist with word recognition, spelling, and phrase building: Word-Master and Phrase-Master. Word-Master lets students
practice listening comprehension by hearing each word in Chinese and then sets a challenge to the student to unscramble the letters to create the correct word in a timed scenario. Students are reminded of the meaning of each word each time they get one right. Phrase-Master is similar to Word-Master but builds whole phrases, rather than just words. However, no operation instructions are offered. Learners have to take some time to figure out on their own the rules about how to play the games.

*Rocket Chinese* has a discussion board *My Forum* where learners can post their questions that will be answered by the course developers or fellow learners. Questions put forth in the forum range from grammar, vocabulary, to cultural issues, and hands-on tips.

Facilitative activities are available too. For example, there are eight comprehensive tests for the interactive audio lessons and seven tests for the language and culture lessons, all available in *My Assessment* section. These tests incorporate all the important points learned in the lessons for each topic and the format is almost the same as the quizzes in the audio lessons. Moreover, there are 23 learning strategies available for review in *My Toolbox*. Also available is *My Vocab*, which functions as a vocabulary database. Learners can add any Chinese word that appears on the computer screen into *My Vocab*, so that they review these words at their convenience. Additionally, there is a dictionary function so learners can look up the spelling and meaning of key words in English or Chinese.

**Teacher fit (Approach)**

As mentioned in the introduction, *Rocket Chinese Premium* is a comprehensive language learning courseware, which aims to teach basic-level Chinese. The teaching materials used in the program focus on short conversations about everyday topics learners may encounter in real Chinese-speaking environments. This conversational approach to language teaching is typical of many language learning programs targeted at beginning learners. Each unit is centered on an everyday topic, giving learners an opportunity to learn how to use Chinese in everyday life. However, the language used in the dialog is more formal than colloquial, making it less authentic.

Every unit has a language lesson devoted to deductive explanation of the grammatical points covered in the conversation. A large amount of vocabulary is also introduced, which is in line with the current recognition of the importance of vocabulary in second language acquisition (Zimmerman, 1997). Most of the words, however, are simply presented in a list with their English translation. Such treatment of grammar and vocabulary makes the program similar to the traditional Grammar-Translation method (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The program also values correct pronunciation as reflected in the frequent use of *Rocket Record*. Research has found that most communication breakdowns are due to phonetic errors (Bueno, 2010). Therefore, the emphasis on pronunciation is helpful with the development of learners’ communicative ability.

The publishers suggest that this audio course is interactive. A close look at the audio lessons shows, however, that the nature of the interaction is not the type of interaction advocated by the Communicative Approach, but rather that found in more audio-lingual approaches (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). As described in the *Activity* section, repetition is key: Conversations are divided into so-called “chunks”, and learners are required to repeat the chunks and then the whole sentence. This instructional method does not simulate real interaction in that learners do not receive any feedback during learning. However, to be fair to the program, some other activities do show the traces of meaningful interaction. For example, the games engage learners in learner-computer interaction for review of vocabulary and grammar.
One of the prominent features of online language learning courses is the promotion of autonomous learning, which can help develop learner autonomy (Youngs, Ducate, & Arnold, 2011). However, autonomous learning is not equal to unsupported learning, and it is important to offer self-access learners the necessary advisory service (Gardner & Miller, 1999). Rocket Chinese Premium meets this criterion well. As introduced above, the program has a component called My Forum, an online forum where learners can get help from the course developers and other learners concerning various aspects of Chinese and Chinese culture. Additionally, there are other kinds of social media interactivity such as Live Chat, and the Rocket News Notification System for letting learners know what's new and what's coming up. Such cooperation and interaction is also consistent with Vygotsky’s (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, which holds that learning occurs with scaffolding within students’ zone of proximal development.

Learner fit (Design)

Rocket Chinese Premium is designed for beginning L2 Chinese learners with little or no previous exposure to Chinese. The linguistic challenge of the program is appropriate in most cases. The language taught is basic with no complex grammar introduced. However, the large amount of vocabulary may be overwhelming for beginning learners. Since the instructional language is English, it is only suitable for those whose L1 is English rather than other languages unless they also speak and read English.

The program may meet learners’ basic communicative needs. As we have seen above, the program teaches everyday Chinese, and topics covering most aspects of life in China. Therefore, it is uniquely suitable for those learners whose main purpose of learning Chinese is to travel and do business in China. Moreover, since all the audio files can be downloaded and saved on an MP3 player, it is convenient for learners on the go. The cultural lesson found in each unit is another source of appeal for learners. According to Price (2006), cultural understanding is the major reason why incoming college students take a foreign language. Therefore, the introduction of Chinese culture in the program may satisfy learners’ cultural curiosity.

Learners have distinctive learning styles. When the one’s learning style is different from the teaching style, conflicts may arise, exerting negative influence on learning (Oxford & Lavine, 1992). Rocket Chinese Premium lacks such diversity. The channel of each “audio lesson”—as the label suggests—is auditory. Every dialog has only an audio recording without any pictures or videos. In the language and culture lessons, the instructional mode is mostly textual with few pictures or videos. Learners may not have a real feel of what the culture is like. Therefore, auditory and textual learners may find the program appropriate; however, visual learners may not be as equally attracted. The lack of images may also make the program less engaging to younger learners or digital natives (Prensky, 2001).

Since it only takes about 30 hours to finish the course, Rocket Chinese Premium is suitable for independent learners who are not able to devote too much time to learning Chinese. Although its contents may not fit the curriculum of Chinese taught in school, it can function as supplementary material for students to expand their knowledge.

SUMMARY

Rocket Chinese Premium is an online program targeted at beginning English-speaking learners of Chinese. Mainly presented in an auditory and textual mode, it gives learners the basics of the Chinese language in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar through dialog drills and pattern explanation. In addition, it provides learners with useful expressions they may encounter in everyday interaction with Chinese speakers and cultural knowledge they need to know for a better understanding of the language. These features
make it suitable for use as self-access learning material by those who want to master the basics of Chinese in a short period of time.

**SCALED RATING**
(1 low-5 high)
Implementation Possibilities: 4.5
Pedagogical Features: 3
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 3.5
Use of Computer Capabilities: 3
Ease of Use: 4.5
Overall Evaluation: 3.5
Value for Money: 4

**PRODUCT DETAILS**
Developer and distributor: Libros Media Ltd
Address: 8721 Santa Monica Blvd #1229, Los Angeles, CA 90069-4057, USA
Phone: 1-800-798-8318
Email: support@rocketlanguages.com
WWW: http://www.rocketlanguages.com/chinese/premium/

**REFERENCES**


REVIEWER’S BIODATA
Wei Cheng is a PhD candidate of Linguistics at the University of South Carolina. His research interest is second language acquisition.

Gengsong Gao is a PhD candidate of Comparative Literature and Chinese instructor at the University of South Carolina. His research interests are Chinese literature and teaching Chinese as foreign language.

REVIEWER’S ADDRESS
E-mail: cheng22@email.sc.edu