Transparent Language System Complete Edition (German)

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Vocabulary drills and pronunciation practice

Language:
German

Level:
Beginning and intermediate

Activities:
Vocabulary drills, pronunciation practice, and guided reading activities

Media Format:
DVD-ROM

Operating Systems:
Windows XP SP2 and up

Supplementary Software:
QuickTime Player, Adobe Flash Player, iTunes

Documentation:
After installation, software offers online help and a manual in .RTF format

Price:
Not indicated, current price on amazon.com is $179.95

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Transparent Language System Complete Edition (German) claims that, with its interactive flashcard system, it will enable the user to “acquire over 2,000 words and phrases and never forget them.” At the center of the entire package is indeed a flashcard system presenting target language items and English translations. The flashcard system comes with a set of activities that learners can freely choose from. It offers a memorize mode, various quiz modes, such as multiple-choice style questions, translations, fill-in-the-blank exercises, scrambled sentences, and a memory game.
Once learners have memorized the vocabulary (see Figure 1), they will “explore comprehensive lessons, real immersion videos and stories in the new language.” The program offers audio and video recordings, reading activities and pronunciation exercises (see Figure 2) using simplified wave forms and gives an accuracy rating on a color scale in order to aid learners in determining how close their pronunciation is to that of the native speaker’s model.

Figure 1
Vocabulary Drill

The program consists of four books: “Beginner German”,”German Fundamentals,” “German Conversations,” and “Reunion in Tübingen,” each of which comprises 6 to 15 lessons (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Beginner German
The first book includes grammar and vocabulary in each lesson; the others only provide some information on the topics of the lessons which cover areas such as “meeting at the train station,” “at the bank,” “talking about the weather,” “talking about the future,” and other areas that provide a setting for basic communicative tasks. We could not find any information on how learners are intended to proceed after completing the first book.

In addition to the DVD-ROM, the package also comes with 5 audio CDs that contain the audio files of the vocabulary covered in the book. Each file presents an English word or short phrase followed by the German translation which is repeated twice. There are enough pauses between the individual utterances to give learners time to give the correct translation and practice its pronunciation. The audio files are also available as mp3 files on the DVD, and there is a video which explains how to import these to iTunes and transfer them to an Apple iPod.

As a bonus, the DVD includes a dictionary which is able to translate between any two of the following languages: English, French, German, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, and a second program to practice German vocabulary using virtual environments in which users can click on objects to have their German names displayed and pronounced by a native speaker.

This program also comes with a number of drill type activities. Both of these applications and the vocabulary drill software can be used independently from the Transparent Language package. It is unfortunate that the programs are not really integrated into Transparent German. A suggestion might be to link to suitable virtual environments so learners would be able to benefit from pictorial representations of the vocabulary they need to learn.

I also found it strange that the dictionary can function in different modes. In its default setting, it only provides translations for 4,000 words. In order to make the full 60,000 words accessible, users have to change this default. It does not make much sense to curtail the capabilities of the program if there are no good pedagogical reasons. Since the dictionary is bilingual and the entries in the three modes do not differ with regard to complexity, I would think that it is better to offer the entire dictionary by default than to only provide a fraction of it. The software comes with a fairly comprehensive online help system and a manual in the form of an rtf file. These documents are only available after the installation.

**EVALUATION**

**Technological Features**

As pointed out above, the package does not contain any printed instructions on how to install the software, which would have been helpful given that it contains 6 different disks. Once the right disk is inserted, users are presented with a fairly intuitive menu which offers to install the various packages and provides the option of watching a flash video which gives an overview of the package’s functionality and another video which explains how to transfer the audio files to an iPod. The installation took a fair bit of time (approximately 15 minutes). The reason for this is probably that all the audio and video files are copied to the user’s hard drive. Leaving the installation settings at their default, the package takes up about 1.5 GB of hard disk space. In addition, the DVD needs to remain in the drive to use one of the included programs.

The package provided for evaluation only runs on Windows, which is a bit of a surprise because it largely consists of audio and video files which are platform independent. According to the publisher, there are also packages available for Macintosh which do not contain some of the extra programs.
During the evaluation, the program never crashed, but I found that video playback appeared to hang frequently, which had the effect that advancing through all the sections of a video took far longer than if it had been watched in real time.

Another bug I came across is that while it is possible to click on certain words or passages in a reading passage to play back a recording made by a native speaker, regrettably, the program plays back the word or passage following the one that is selected.

The design of the user interface is fairly intuitive. The number of buttons, submenus, and so on is kept to a minimum and contextual help is readily available. The only aspect of the program that users will find counterintuitive is that on entering a wrong answer during the vocabulary drills, it is necessary to click next in order to provide the right answer. If you click on correct instead, you will be given the option to store the “wrong” answer as an alternative “correct” answer.

**Activities**

As mentioned above, the whole program is designed around byki (which stands, or used to stand for, before you know it), a computer implementation of a flashcard system. By itself, it offers anything one can expect of such a system. It comes with a number of preinstalled cards that match the lessons in the “books.” In addition, it offers the option of adding more cards manually. It provides various drills in which users can choose to provide the answer in German or in English. It can also be configured to ask multiple-choice style questions or require answers to be typed in. Some game type activities are also included, such as scrambled sentences, fill-in-the-gap exercises, memory games, and some others. Users can keep track of their progress. Graphics are not flashy, but the animations certainly look like flashcards. Sound effects and the like are also kept to a minimum.

Byki appears to form the center of the program. The manual suggests two different approaches to go through a unit. Taking the first route, learners use the flashcard system to memorize and drill the unit’s core vocabulary. They then proceed to do the reading and speaking components that will be explained in more detail shortly. Using the flash card system, it has to be noted that some of the drills often involve showing users a German noun without an article and its translation with an article, or the other way around. This is counterintuitive and makes it difficult to provide the right answers in testing mode because users have to remember not only a word and its translation, but also whether the article has to be provided in the answer. This is an idiosyncrasy of the program and does not reflect particulars of German articles in any way.

Apparently in order to cater to different learner types, the manual suggests that an alternative route is to start with the reading section or the immersion video. The reading sections are divided into a list of new vocabulary, phrases, and sentences highlighting vocabulary or new grammar forms with a small text (see Figure 3).
Figure 3
Reading Practice and Grammar Help

Users can highlight words or phrases and have them played back, with the limitations mentioned above. They can access context sensitive help on the word category, its root, and so forth. In addition, words/sections are linked to entries in a grammar reference which provides dictionary style definitions of grammatical terms. To claim that this will help students to acquire grammatical structures on their own, without consulting a textbook covering new grammatical phenomena in more detail, is misleading. Vocabulary can be marked for inclusion in vocabulary drills, and users can set bookmarks and make notes. It is possible to turn written translations of a word or phrase on and off, again, enabling learners to adapt the program to their particular learning style.

The pronunciation section covers the listening and speaking skills. Users are able to test their comprehension of the new material by listening to individual words or sentences and transcribing them. The feedback provided here is binary. It could have been possible to point the learner to the location of the mistake rather than marking an answer simply right or wrong.

Practicing pronunciation relies on the use of simplified waveforms that are intended to show users how close their pronunciation is to the model of the native speaker’s utterances (see Figure 4).
The waveforms are fairly detailed, and users will, after a phase of adapting to working with the program, probably benefit from these diagrams. Their recordings are also automatically assessed using a color scale that gradually changes from grey to yellow to green, where green represents the highest ratings. The functionality was tested by the reviewer, a native speaker of German, and an advanced German learner who is a native speaker of English. It is interesting to note that the English native speaker scored higher than the reviewer on most words or sentences that we tested, both of us scoring in the low to high yellows. Ironically, when the reviewer started to produce words and sentences that were completely different from the target utterances, he finally started to reach scores in the low and even middle greens. We are aware of the advantages and disadvantages of computer-aided pronunciation (see Pennington, 1999) and believe that using waveforms in pronunciation drills can have positive effects. If a software company, on the other hand, releases a piece of software that claims to be able to automatically assess the quality of a learner’s utterance, it should at least be able to assign a low rating if the speaker submits a sentence where only one word is required and the sentence does not even contain the required word or the word that is pronounced similarly.

The video section provides recorded conversations that can be played back sentence by sentence (see Figure 5). Learners can also assume the role of one of the interlocutors and be prompted by an English paraphrase to produce German sentences matching this paraphrase. Of course, this makes it necessary for the learner to memorize the entire conversation in advance because the program only accepts one sentence as correct. Here again, the software is using waveforms and the automatic feedback function discussed above.
Teacher Fit

The *Transparent German* program aims high, claiming that it provides training for all four language skills, vocabulary, grammar, conversation skills and also implicitly offers cultural authenticity and general adherence to a communicative language teaching paradigm (e.g., the immersion videos). In my opinion it performs satisfactorily with regard to the vocabulary drills and the pronunciation practice. The problem is of course that the approach the program takes here is behavioristic. Trying to market the product as a communicative tool could be misleading. While vocabulary and pattern drills seem effective (see Singleton, 1999), being able to reproduce words and sentences from memory does not enable anyone to uphold a meaningful conversation. It is equally far fetched to talk about writing skills if the program only allows users to assess whether single words or small sentences match the expected input exactly. As for grammar skills, it is nice to provide a glossary of grammar terms, but without detailed explanations and form-focused exercises, the learning of grammatical rules without the help of an instructor is apparently expected to occur implicitly and incidentally, which is more than unlikely judging by the studies discussed in Ellis (2008). Therefore, it is difficult to imagine how *Transparent German* could be used as an alternative to traditional instruction. It may be better used as a tool that instructors can access for vocabulary drills for students to do during class or after class.

Learner Fit

While the program is intended to be a comprehensive tutorial for German, I have pointed out some major shortcomings in this respect. It can be used by independent learners to teach themselves some basic German for their next holiday. Although a lot of vocabulary and ad-
Advanced grammar is used in the program, it is more than unlikely that learners will be able to use most of these forms adequately without consulting additional material or receiving other instruction. I have no doubt that incorporating the program into German lessons will have benefits for learners, especially in terms of vocabulary acquisition and pronunciation practice, but the program will not be able to serve as an adequate tutorial by itself, at least not if it is intended to be used in a communicative language teaching context. Given these limitations, I believe that the interface is fairly intuitive and that learners of all levels will be able to learn how to use the program effectively in a short period of time.

**SUMMARY**

Some components of this program can prove useful for independent learners or for a traditional language course that incorporates CALL components. It is fairly easy to work with, the flashcard system works well, although it does by no means represent a technological novelty. The same holds true for the pronunciation practice component. The package comes with a few nice extras, but none of these offer any functionality that is not available for free elsewhere. It is noteworthy that there is a free version of the vocabulary drill software, byki, available for download on the publisher’s website and that there are also a number of vocabulary files available for it that instructors have made available to others. Overall, I feel *Transparent German* fell short off the expectations which were based on the functionality that is promised and the price that is asked for it.

**SCALED RATING**

(1 low-5 high)

Pedagogical Features: 3  
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 4  
Use of Computer Capabilities: 4  
Ease of Use (student/teacher): 5  
Overall Evaluation: 3.5  
Value for Money: 3

**PRODUCER’S CONTACT INFORMATION**

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**REFERENCES**


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Peter Wood teaches German and Linguistics at the University of Saskatchewan, Canada. His main research focus is the development of intelligent CALL software that can be used in traditional language learning contexts as well as by independent language learners.

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