Pronunciación y Fonética, Version 2.0

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Multimedia pronunciation tutorial

Language:
Spanish

Level:
Advanced

Activities:
Multiple choice, fill-in exercises, comparison of recorded student utterances with those of a native speaker, matching

Media Format:
CD-ROM

Operating Systems:
Windows; Macintosh

Hardware Requirements:
PC:
Pentium II+; 32 MB RAM; 1 MB of hard disk space (for storage of audio files)—program runs from CD-ROM; 1X CD-ROM drive; sound card; microphone; 640 x 480, 256 color monitor

Macintosh:
Power PC; 32 MB RAM; 1 MB of hard disk space (for storage of audio files)—program runs from CD-ROM; 1X CD-ROM drive; sound card; microphone; 640 x 480, 256 color monitor

Supplementary Software:
Shockwave Player required (downloads automatically from the Internet)

Documentation:
None; website provides minimal information on product; telephone and email technical support offered
Price:  
Single User, $25; multiple copies and site license pricing available on request  

GENERAL DESCRIPTION  
The Pronunciación y Fonética program is an interactive Spanish pronunciation tutorial that explains Spanish phonology in detail and offers activities based on the pronunciation focus of each section. Learners also have opportunities to listen to native speakers pronounce isolated words and sentences and to record and listen to their own pronunciation, as well as to hear different dialects of spoken Spanish. As described in the information distributed by the producers of this program, “Units progress toward an overview of dialectology in which phonetic concepts are used to describe the major modalities of Spanish. Materials include basic text in Spanish, exercises for ear training and oral practice, and additional ‘hidden’ information for advanced learners.” ‘Hidden’ refers to footnote extra details on some screens. 

From the menu screen, users can access 10 different tutorials, each of which focuses on one aspect of pronunciation (see Figure 1):  

Figure 1  
Menu Screen  

1. La sílaba: practicing syllable divisions and elision;  
2. El acento: practice of intonation and rhythm;
3. El fonema: the difference between phonemes and allophones and a discussion of which sounds are contrastive in Spanish and which are not;

4. Las vocales—Descripción: phonetic description of the vowels and diphthongs;

5. Las vocales—Pronunciación: pronunciation practice for the vowels;

6. Las consonantes—Descripción: phonetic description of the consonants and blends;

7. Las consonantes—Pronunciación: pronunciation practice of the consonants including a comparison of Spanish and English allophones of similar phonemes;

8. La ortografía: how to connect the spelling of a word with the pronunciation;

9. Los dialectos: how Spanish pronunciation differs in different parts of the world including examples of speech from Spain, Dominican Republic, Mexico, and Argentina;

10. Repaso: a section of review activities which practice information learned in the other nine tutorials (Exercises are similar to those found in each lesson. This is the only section that does not present new material.).

Since this program is designed for advanced learners, or for Spanish teachers, all of the text in the tutorial, including the introduction and directions for the activities, is written in Spanish. The tutorials use the dialect of Spanish used in Mexico and Central America for all of the activities, but include a section on recognizing and explaining different dialects phonetically.

Very little documentation is provided with this program, but the double-sided CD-ROM insert provides an email address and a telephone number for technical support. The insert also lists a link to the website of the producers and their list of available products. However, even after finding the link for this particular product on the site, the latter does not provide any useful information about the software beyond a concise description and would not be useful in troubleshooting or learning how to use the product.

On the other hand, the program seems to be made for the user audience which the advertising describes, and the producers do not attempt to misrepresent what the program can do or the theoretical approach on which the software is based. The description of the program provided on the website and in the brochure is very brief and accurate. However, to improve usability of the product, we recommend that online documentation and instructions be made available.

**EVALUATION**

*Technological Features*

This software runs directly from the CD-ROM, and we were not able to install the program from the CD-ROM on the hard drive. Also, users must set a place for the program to store files of their recorded voice every time they open the program. Users are initially prompted to save the files on the CD-ROM.
drive. Since this is impossible, they must browse to a location on the hard disk
where files can be saved, which could be confusing to novice users.

The application ran fairly quickly on an IBM Thinkpad 600E using a Crystal
SoundFusion audio driver, a Pentium II processor, and 96 MB of RAM. It was
a little slow loading sound files from the CD-ROM when listening to the native
speaker and the short classical Spanish guitar audio clip that played at the be-
ginning of every module. This probably stems from the fact that the computer
has to read everything from the CD-ROM each time the program runs. The
program did not crash, but it repeatedly asked for Shockwave player to be down-
loaded and installed from the Internet, even after that had been done. Platform
compatibility seemed fine, although the program curiously displayed in full
screen on the Macintosh Performa while appearing as approximately 30% of
the screen on the PC. The window on the PC could not be resized, but the
display size should not cause major difficulty for most users. Navigational trans-
parency was adequate and the design scheme was clear and uncluttered, al-
though a bit text heavy. The colorful main menu screen and accompanying gui-
tar audio clip at the end of each module was a welcome relief to the predomi-
nant screens full of black and white text.

User interface and operational consistency were somewhat problematic. Linked
text that could be listened to was indicated in bold black print; however, other
bold text did not play. Colored links to audio would have avoided some confu-
sion.

When recording utterances, we had no feedback to indicate when recording
started and stopped. It took a while to understand that recording started when
we clicked on the record button and finished upon releasing the click because
there was little or no graphic indication of this process. This could probably be
clarified for users by providing better documentation to explain how the pro-
gram works.

Additional ‘hidden’ information was available by clicking on asterisks in the
main text (see Figure 2). However, on one screen—Consonant Production, screen
#23—the hidden information automatically appeared and had to be closed be-
fore reading the main text. Several linked text items (Consonant Production,
screen #24, numbers 3, 4, and 5) failed to open and play.
The diagrams describing the articulation of phonemes were too small and simple to adequately show students visually the concepts described by the text in rather dense linguistic terminology (see Figure 3). A more effective use of the multimedia potential of this Macromedia generated program would have provided animations showing the movements of various articulating organs of the mouth, as in *Encuentros en español* (see Alvarez-Torres, 2002).
The program could have also benefited from the ability to navigate between screens relating to particular phonemes by buttons (again as in *Encuentros en español*) rather than having to flip through all the screens of a particular tutorial to find items needing additional review. Although there were numerous quizzes with immediate scoring on the screen, no record keeping feature or scoring of overall mastery was available to the user. Adaptability to user profile was present in the option to explore different regional accents of Spanish, but this was minimal.

**Activities (Procedure)**

The instructional activities in each tutorial include a detailed description of how Spanish pronunciation is different from English and what students would need to change in the way they speak in order to improve their accent in Spanish. Each lesson has phonetic information and linguistic vocabulary which students are expected to memorize. Parts of the text which can be listened to when clicked are highlighted in bold. The tutorials can be scrolled through by clicking on forward and back arrows with a mouse. The main menu and an exit option are also available from each screen.

A variety of fill-in-the-blank, matching, true/false, and multiple-choice activities give users opportunities to practice the specific aspects of Spanish phonology they have learned in each lesson. Some of the exercises include dividing a word correctly into syllables, matching the spelling of a word to its pronunciation written in the international phonetic alphabet, and choosing the correct syllable to stress. The lack of graphics and animation make these tutorials and drills somewhat dull, but a lot of good information about Spanish phonology is there for those who are willing to wade through the pages of text and linguistic terminology.

The program handles the issue of student feedback in several different ways. Some of the activities have a check mark next to them which students can press to find out the correct answer. Others give automatic voice feedback telling users whether a correct or incorrect answer has been chosen. The program is designed for individual, self-directed practice. Teachers could potentially grade the exercises which deal with learning and manipulation of new concepts and accompanying terminology. The course could be very useful to Spanish teachers who need to learn how to explain how Spanish pronunciation works and could be a valuable drill supplement to an advanced course on Spanish phonetics.

Another important feature which provides feedback for students is that users may also click on a bold text to listen to a native speaker saying a sentence or word which illustrates the particular sound or other aspect of pronunciation being taught. Students may then record their own renditions of the practice sentences by clicking and holding down on a record button. They can play back their recording by clicking on another button. In this way, learners are encouraged to monitor their own pronunciation in comparison with the recording of
the native speaker by applying the phonological concepts from the preceding section.

**Teacher Fit (Approach)**

Unlike many pronunciation programs which emphasize segmental information and not prosodic elements such as stress, rhythm, and intonation, one of the advantages of this program is that it provides as much information about suprasegmental elements of speech as it does about the pronunciation of individual phonemes. This is a positive feature, given the second language acquisition research that shows suprasegmental elements of speech are vital for acquiring an intelligible accent in a foreign language (Piske, MacKay, & Flege, 2001). However, while it does give an introduction to these features of discourse, the practice words and sentences are not placed within a larger context. There are a couple of short poems which students can listen to in their entirety, but most of the recorded utterances are for drill purposes only and provide no meaningful context to which students can relate what they are saying. This language-centered software would fit well within an inductive, behaviorist approach, but teachers who prefer to teach pronunciation in context would find the drills problematic. On the other hand, teachers who want to help their students form good pronunciation habits through practice drills and through listening and repeating utterances by native speakers would find this program a helpful supplement to an advanced course in which there might not be enough time to do extensive pronunciation training in class. Students who already speak Spanish, but who want to learn about Spanish phonetics and phonology as background knowledge for teaching others or in order to understand how the language works, would also find the tutorials very useful and informative.

All of the native speaker recordings, with the notable exception of the dialect section, are done by a single female voice, a limitation which could and should be overcome to provide gender and sociocultural variability. The dialect section does include both male and female speakers with different accents, however, accents which represent different social registers are not within the scope of this software.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

This software seems to meet the needs of the targeted users, teachers or advanced learners of Spanish as a foreign language. Although the linguistic contrastive analysis of English and Spanish lent itself particularly well to English speaking users, since all text in the program was presented in Spanish, it would be useful to non-English speakers as well. However, since the information in the program is entirely presented in Spanish, users would have to have a good reading knowledge of Spanish in order to understand the text.

In addition to its targeted audience, it is worth considering whether or not such an approach to helping people record and compare their utterances with native speaker models might be useful to beginning learners of Spanish. Some
research in acquiring accents seems to indicate that learners demonstrate the most improvement in their accent due to exposure during the first year of language acquisition. (Piske, et al., 2001) If this is the case, it would be good to see a simplified presentation of the core linguistic concepts packaged for beginning students, perhaps at the undergraduate or high school level. A beginner’s version should use less technical vocabulary and more multimedia-clarified examples in a more engaging or contextualized package to hold student interest and should include an option to view instructions and phonetic descriptions in English.

The language-centered, inductive approach to discussing accent in Spanish would be particularly useful to those users with this orientation to language learning. As stated in the introduction to the software, no previous linguistic knowledge is necessary for users to understand and benefit from the material. New linguistic concepts and vocabulary are clearly presented with adequate examples, both written and spoken, to allow reasonably sophisticated language learners to benefit. The principal value of these descriptions lies in giving users the perspective and awareness of phonological and suprasegmental features and articulatory mechanics of Spanish to effectively compare their utterances to correct phrasing and pronunciation of the native speaker models. This addresses both of the pronunciation issues discussed by second language researchers who state that success in the production of L2 sounds is limited by both inadequate knowledge of the phonetic target and inadequate knowledge of the means of attaining it. (Leather & James, 1991)

Goal oriented learners would have been better served by a score reporting system drawing on the numerous quiz activities in the program. The absence of native speaker, automatic speech recognition, or graphic feedback on users’ utterances in the program is a weakness common to many pronunciation components of CALL software. However, there are those who would question the utility of graphic feedback (e.g., spectrographic amplitude/frequency displays), and it is true that the state of the art for ASR also leaves something to be desired in many cases. Moreover, the metalinguistic explanation of Spanish phonology and prosody, along with the material on articulation made available to users, should help mediate these shortcomings. This would be especially true for those learners with a well developed auditory learning style and the ability to apply moderately complex linguistic concepts to the language they encounter and produce.

The task of adapting the knowledge and perspectives that a teacher of Spanish might gain from this program to working with accent in a classroom or lab would be well served by a similar, but simplified, type of program designed to present to groups of beginning or intermediate students. A logical adaptation of the ‘build awareness/listen/record/compare’ paradigm exemplified in this software would be effective with small groups where students assist each other in monitoring their utterances in comparison to the native speaker models after a whole group presentation of the linguistic awareness building material.
The section on dialectical variations in Spanish is useful, all the more so since it is conspicuously absent from other Spanish pronunciation programs (see Figure 4). The software presents a linguistic analysis of different Spanish dialects along with a limited number of examples of native speaker utterances in each of these dialects.

Figure 4
Dialectical Variations in Spanish

Vamos a examinar la variación dialectal por medio del habla de cuatro personas. Estas cuatro personas no pueden, por supuesto, ejemplificar la inmensa diversidad del mundo hispanohablante. Pero sí nos permiten examinar cuatro dialectos muy diferentes entre sí: el argentino, el dominicano, el español y el mexicano. Nuestros informantes son de España, de Argentina, de México y de República Dominicana.

SUMMARY

The Pronunciación y Fonética, version 2.0 program is a multimedia tutorial designed to help teachers and advanced students of Spanish improve their pronunciation by giving them a solid introduction to Spanish phonology. By giving an in-depth overview of differences between English and Spanish phonology and prosody, the program provides learners with a good understanding of basic phonological differences and sources of accent problems for English-speaking learners. This thorough explanation of Spanish phonology should give users the awareness to more productively compare their utterances in Spanish to those of native speakers. This is in contrast to the majority of pronunciation tutoring features of other programs which ask learners to compare their production to that of a native speaker without giving them much of an idea of what common errors in pronunciation to check for and how to correctly articulate new sounds.
**Software Reviews**

**SCALED RATING**

(1 is low; 5 is high)

Implementation Possibilities: 3
Pedagogical Features: 3
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 5
Use of Computer Capabilities: 2
Ease of Use: 3
Overall Evaluation: 3
Value for Money: 3.5

**REFERENCES**


**CONTACT INFORMATION**

**Developer**
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**REVIEWERS' BIODATA**

Chris Corsbie, B.A., M.A., University of Texas at Austin, is a doctoral student in Foreign Language Education at the University of Texas at Austin. He has taught Spanish and EFL at many levels ranging from pre-K to university in Nepal, South America, and Texas. His research interests are CMC applications in CALL, including asynchronous and synchronous distance learning via Internet 2, poetry creative writing in L2 acquisition, and North Indian classical music. He is a member of CALL and Pi Theta Kappa, international honor society in education.
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