Software Review: Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers

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**PRODUCT AT A GLANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type:</th>
<th>Interactive Language Learning Software</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language reviewed:</td>
<td>German (for English speakers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other products offered by Mango Languages:</td>
<td>Other foreign languages for English Speakers: Arabic (3 dialects), Armenian, Azerbaijani, Bengali, Chinese (2 dialects), Croatian, Czech, Danish, Dari, Dutch, Farsi, Finnish, French (2 dialects), German, Greek (3 dialects), Haitian Creole, Hawaiian, Hebrew (2 dialects), Hindi, Hungarian, Icelandic, Indonesian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Kazakh, Korean, Malay, Malayalam, Norwegian, Pashto, Pirate, Polish, Portuguese, Punjabi, Romanian, Russian, Scottish Gaelic, Serbian, Slovak, Spanish (2 dialects), Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Yiddish</td>
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<tr>
<td>8 specialty courses such as Medical Spanish, Endangered Languages (Tuvan), &amp; Brazilian Soccer</td>
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<tr>
<td>18 English Courses for non-English speakers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level:</td>
<td>Beginning and intermediate/ adolescent and adult</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td>Pronunciation, dialog repetition; listening comprehension; vocabulary learning; oral production; culture; grammar knowledge</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Format:</td>
<td>Online program (no installation required, desktop and mobile versions available)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
| Operating Systems: | PC running Windows XP SP3, Windows Vista SP2, Windows 7, or higher  
Mac running OS X 10.6 or higher  
Minimum 1 GHz processor with 1GB RAM |
| Broadband Internet connection | |
| Hardware Requirements: | Sound card, speakers  
1024 x 768 display resolution  
microphone to utilize the Voice Comparison tool  
iPad or MP3 player to use our Mango On-the-Go audio lessons |
| Supplementary Software: | JavaScript, Adobe Flash Player |
| Documentation: | A course outline in PDF form is available upon software registration. MP3 recordings are also available once the software is purchased. |
| Price: | Contact representative |
GENERAL DESCRIPTION

*Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers* is language and culture learning software designed to teach the conversational skills needed for interaction with German speakers. It is marketed for use by individuals, schools, organizations, government offices, and libraries. According to the publisher website (http://www.mangolanguages.com), the program was created for those who wish to learn how to converse politely in German while also gaining knowledge of the culture. Colloquial phrases are also taught throughout the chapters. The four units encompass 40 chapters and 549 lessons of varying length introducing a large array of topics. The lessons cover increasingly more complex conversational contexts starting with simple situations such as greetings and goodbyes to renting an apartment and dealing with emergency situations. Before beginning any of the lessons, learners are encouraged to take a placement test (about 30 minutes) or course assessment (about 60 minutes) which can help them decide where to start the language course. The units include a pre-test and post-test (about 30 minutes each) with which learners can assess what they already know and what they have learned in the unit, respectively. Learners can also take a short 10 minute quiz after each chapter within each unit.

This program uses dialogs spoken by native speakers and designed specifically for the program to teach learners phrases and sentences needed for interaction in Germany. The learner is presented with a German dialog which is then broken down and taught word by word, before the student is encouraged to build the construction back together phrase by phrase. Other useful words and phrases corresponding to the topic are often included in the units. The learner always sees and hears the English and German translations of every word or phrase that is being taught, and the corresponding words are color coded for easier identification. The lessons encourage the learner to repeat each word, phrase, and sentence after the narrator. There is also an built in voice comparison technology which allows the learner to record a word, phrase, or sentence, and compare it to the native-speaker narrator to improve pronunciation and intonation.

All the conversations in the lessons focus on real-life situations; the software indicates that the purpose of this is that learners “save time and stay motivated” by learning only phrases useful for everyday communication in Germany. The lessons include memory-building activities in which the learner is reminded of previously taught words and phrases. According to the website, these exercises help the learner grasp the grammar and “intuitively understand the language and adapt it to similar conversations.” Each lesson also offers grammatical explanations as well as cultural information to adequately prepare the learner for travel to Germany. All words that are taught can be moused over to see a pronunciation explanation, or clicked to listen to the pronunciation again. There are two options for the audio: in the dialogs, the learner can listen to the entire line at normal conversational rate by clicking on the speaker icon left of the line; each individual word can also be clicked and will then be played at a slower rate recorded in isolation by a native speaker.

EVALUATION

*Technological Features*

The web-based program *Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers* was tested on a PC (Intel Core Processor i7 2.60GHz, 4.00GB RAM) and it ran smoothly in Chrome and Firefox. It did not require any installation. Upon starting the program in Chrome, the program checks whether Java and Adobe FlashPlayer are installed. The loading time of the program was less than a minute on both browser versions. Loading times of all in-program features were extremely short which allowed for a very speedy operation of all features. There was no wait time and the operation was highly reliable. During the review time, the application did not crash or stall but ran smoothly throughout. Learners can also download the Mango Desktop Application as well. There is no documentation available on the website.
but the FAQ site states that a printable PDF companion course guide will be emailed upon registration.

The program is very intuitive to navigate. The layout of *Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers* is clear and appealing (see Figure 1). It is easy to find the available units and courses that one can complete, to turn the narrator on and off, to change the volume, and to access the keyboard guide which provides useful keyboard controls for the software.

**Figure 1**
Main screen of *Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers*

![Main screen of Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers](image)

The program is aesthetically pleasing. The vivid colors and pictures, as well as the presentation of the units are attractive and well-formatted. Unfortunately the pictures used in the different units are not culture-specific. Unfortunately the pictures used in the different units are not culture-specific. Note in Figure 2, for example, the unit on dating utilized an image of a couple in San Francisco. Several other unit pictures also clearly do not represent German culture. Comparing different languages in *Mango Conversations* revealed that many images are the same for the units in all language courses. While the lack of culture-specific images may not impact the language learning of the software user, it does impact the cultural learning. Since the website claims that the software will help users build cultural confidence by teaching language and culture together and that “cultural understanding lets you connect with a new way of life,” it would be beneficial to extend the cultural learning beyond the cultural text notes to include authentic images. Like realia from the target-culture, culture-specific images can enhance the learners’ cultural comprehension (Smith, 1997).
There is no online help available once inside the Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers program. However, one can return to the main dashboard where support is available on several issues, including font display problems, problems with Adobe FlashPlayer, as well as information on how to reach the help desk. The help desk is available Monday through Friday from 8-5pm Eastern time. The user interface is transparent.

The sound and image quality within Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers is excellent. The audio is very clear and the images are crisp. The software includes a voice comparison technology with which learners can practice the correct pronunciation of all the words taught in the program. To use this technology, access to the computer’s microphone must be granted. Learners can then listen to the pronunciation of a word or phrase, record themselves saying the word or phrase, and compare the recording to the narrator’s pronunciation. The learner can play either the narrator’s voice, or his/her own, or both together to compare the two. The waveforms of the recordings are shown as well so that the visual representations of the audio are also available for comparison by the user. The technology of the voice recording function worked very well when tested, though variations in hardware used by different learners may affect the quality.

Upon exiting the program, the program saves the progress so that learners can continue where they left off. Once a lesson is completed, the grey bubble next to that unit turns green in the overview (see Figure 3). Nonetheless the learner can always go back to earlier lessons and review any or all parts of it.
Lessons that have been completed (green) and are not yet complete (grey)

Activities (Procedure)
The program is designed to use dialogs to teach users German words and phrases, grammar, cultural understanding, and the intuitive language construction necessary for a stay in Germany. The software’s narrator teaches all components of the dialog word by word, along with a variety of words and phrases pertaining to the context of the dialog. The narrator speaks to the software user in English. The activities in the program are based on translation exercises. The learner is always presented with the English translation and the German equivalent. When practicing a word or phrase, the student can choose to see the literal translation or the non-literal translation; in both cases, words are color coded to the German translation. While Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers claims that learners will “accomplish specific communication tasks,” the only tasks are translation activities. The focus of the program appears to be to teach vocabulary and phrases with a linguistic focus on pronunciation. In addition to repeating words and then phrases after the narrator’s example, the program includes mini-lessons on grammar to explain particular features of the German language including the case system, tenses, and pragmatics.

The program systematically reviews words and phrases that were already taught through memory building activities to help the learner review material introduced earlier. These memory building activities help users realize which words or phrases they may not have memorized correctly yet. These activities are largely based on a self-check system; the program asks a question and the learner can say the answer out loud or think the answer and then on the next slide the correct answer is shown. The software does not assess the learner’s response but only provides the correct answer. There is no feedback about the correctness or accuracy of the expected answer. When the narrator asks, for
example, “How would you say you in an informal situation?”, a timer starts running (the
time set is variable) and when the timer runs out the narrator provides both the written and
spoken answer without feedback about a mentally or verbally given response by the
software user. The written answer can be moused over to see the English pronunciation for
the German word or clicked on to hear the pronunciation. For each taught word, phrase,
and sentence, the learner can use the voice comparison technology to practice and self-assess the correct pronunciation.

The activities teach learners to memorize and repeat all components of the units’
dialogs as well as additional words and sentences, but students are rarely encouraged to
use language creatively to form their own sentences based on the taught words. However,
the learner is encouraged to produce words and phrases from previously taught units and
grammar through what the software calls Critical Thinking Slides. These slides are supposed
to challenge learners to create their own sentences; however, in these activities a learner is
only asked to translate given words, phrases, or sentences. The narrator will, for example,
say: “Try to figure out how to say beautiful day.” The correct answer is then provided.

Even though the program encourages learners to practice saying words and phrases
out loud, the program focuses largely on repetition and there is neither interaction nor
communicative purpose, so that the program is not supported by current communicative
language learning approaches (Ellis, 2003). Even though second language acquisition has
been said to take place through communication in the target language (Gass, 1997), this
program does not allow the user to communicate or interact with an interlocutor. The
narrator in the program uses English for all communication, including all directions and
explanations. Users engage with the narrator only by repeating after the narrator or
answering the narrator’s question to translate words and phrases. The repeat-after-me
model of the program does not comply with current beliefs about the role of communication,
tasks, and interaction in second language acquisition (Chapelle, 1998), because the narrator
does not act as a participant in an interaction. A language learner needs the opportunity to
interact for L2 development (Mackey, Abbuhl, & Gass, 2012) and to prepare for real-life
communication.

While it can be suggested that learners produce output by being encouraged to
translate phrases or repeat after the narrator, these activities neither allow true
communication nor include feedback. Of course, technology is always limited in what it can
do in regard to interactivity, communication, and feedback. Using the software in language
classrooms would allow a teacher to supplement the activities with interactive tasks and
feedback. The pronunciation help provided by the software, combined with the grammar
explanations, cultural notes, and vocabulary units, are a valuable foundation for language
learners. The software could be used as a basis for students to acquire a large range of
vocabulary and grammar knowledge which could be complemented in the classroom with
further communicative language learning activities.

The pre- and post-tests include listening comprehension exercises, where questions
are asked and answered in English. The tests also contain English-German translation tasks,
and sentence assembly tasks in which learners are asked to translate an English sentence
into German by drag-and-dropping the given German words into the correct order. These
tests provide a constructive opportunity for students to assess their current knowledge of
these specific features of the language.

**Teacher Fit (Approach)**

The Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers program aims to achieve its stated
goal of teaching “practical conversation skills and valuable cultural insights” through
repetition of words and phrases, interspersed with grammatical explanations and memory
building activities, pronunciation help, short cultural notes throughout the units, and what
the program calls Intuitive Language Construction. Through the latter, learners are
expected to intuitively learn to recombine chunks of language taught in previous units by
correctly translating new phrases or sentences. The semantic color mapping—seeing the
words and phrases color coded with their matching translations as they are being taught—
can aid students in acquiring new language forms, as research has shown that highlighting
certain structures can support language acquisition (Doughty, 1991). In fact, using different
colors to emphasize specific linguistic features has been suggested as one way in which
CALL applications can adhere to current interactionist theories of language learning
(Chapelle, 1998). However, although color coding features in the target language may be
supportive in recognizing specific aspects of the language, the constant juxtaposition of the
English and German version of a phrase puts the emphasis on translation rather than free
communication.

In communicative language teaching, which is currently the predominant approach,
translation exercises are avoided and seen as unnecessary because vocabulary knowledge is
believed to develop through communicative tasks (Lee & Patten, 2003). Although it has
been suggested that some use of translation may be beneficial for vocabulary learning
(Augustyn, 2013), the sole use of translation tasks without any communicative activities
presents a one-dimensional approach that may not enable users to develop successful L2
conversation skills. Students are not given the opportunity to exchange information with an
interlocutor, which is a key component of communication and one way for students to
develop metalinguistic awareness, notice gaps in their language abilities, and develop their
target language communication skills (Blake, 2000).

Additionally, research has shown that feedback is necessary for second language
learning to take place (Gass & Selinker, 2008); however, users receive no feedback on any
mentally or verbally given answer throughout the units in the Mango Conversations—
German for English Speakers program. Users are left to their own devices and abilities when
it comes to comparing their own answer to the correct one then provided by the program.
Users are not given the opportunity to correct their output and may not notice their errors,
which are important steps in second language acquisition (Swain, 1995). Feedback for
language learners can have many explicit and implicit forms, including recasts, prompts,
and metalinguistic explanations (Henshaw, 2011). In multimedia environments, it has been
suggested that feedback should be “(1) positive and constructive, (2) explanatory, and (3)
immediate” (Türel, 2012, p. 37). This kind of feedback can enable learners to recognize
their own errors and modify their output. In this software, since no explanations to correct
or incorrect answers are included, students are not given the opportunity to learn more
about their mentally- or verbally-given response. Providing the correct answer alone does
not give learners the opportunity to increase their language awareness (Türel, 2012).

The program advertises the voice comparison technology as one of its special
features, as it can help users acquire better pronunciation skills. The importance of learning
good pronunciation skills is undisputed, as they are needed for successful communication in
the target language (Celce-Murcia, Brinton, & Goodwin, 1996; Kiliçkaya, 2011). With that in
mind, the program’s attempt to help users develop good pronunciation skills through the
built-in voice recognition technology is admirable. However, similar to the set-up of the
entire program, the voice comparison feature does not include any sort of feedback for the
user. Users can record their own language but they rely on their own ability to compare
their output to that of the native speaker, either visually through the waveforms, or
auditory. While other speech recognition tools have been shown to be capable of providing
learner-specific feedback on pronunciation (Ware & Kessler, 2013), the lack of feedback
given in this program makes the voice recognition technology less effective. It would be
beneficial for learners to receive feedback on their pronunciation, such as a score or
suggestion for improvement, without having to rely solely on the learners’ own ability to
compare their production to that of the native speaker. Nonetheless, the ability to play back
the narrator’s voice concurrently with the user’s own voice may enable some users to hear
differences in their pronunciation and/or intonation and may encourage them to attempt to
modify their pronunciation.

The dialogues which form the basis of each unit in the Mango Conversations—German
for English Speakers program are read by native-speakers but are designed for language
learners, and thus, at times, lack authenticity. The use of authentic materials for language
learning is supported by the turn to communicative language teaching (Rogers & Medley, 1988), because using authentic materials is essential for preparing language users for real communication outside of the classroom (Nunan, 2004; Rogers & Medley, 1988). Nonetheless, adapting input for learners can be beneficial especially at the beginning levels (Nunan, 2004), for which this software is intended. Therefore, the use of adapted texts can be said to be appropriate for this learning audience. With the characteristics outlined above, the program is reminiscent of many aspects of audio-lingual approaches to language teaching which became popular in the mid-20th century (Richards & Rodgers, 2001) and were based on behavioristic assumptions of learning (Skinner, 1957). Shortcomings of the program include the use of non-authentic spoken texts, lack of constructive feedback on produced output, and absence of opportunities lending themselves to negotiation of meaning, communication, or interaction—factors that have been shown to be essential for second language acquisition (Gass & Selinker, 2008).

The software would be strengthened by the addition of interactive and communicative activities in which learners can negotiate meaning through the production of comprehensible output based on comprehensible input, opportunities for noticing and correcting errors, and supporting task-based, goal-oriented learner-computer interactions (Chapelle, 1998). This can be achieved through activities in which learners complete a task, such as one introduced by Chapelle (2005). Here, learners act as investigators trying to solve a crime and have to create their own questions to which the computer responds. This kind of user-computer interaction can allow learners to complete a variety of linguistic and pragmatic tasks as well as to use language creatively and engage in second language learning processes (Ariza & Hancock, 2003). Another way the software could supplement communicative and interactive components would be through the incorporation of learner-learner interactions. Through optional chats, for example, learners could practice what they learned so far in real communications with other learners.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

This program is best suited for independent users who are trying to learn useful vocabulary and phrases, along with a foundation in grammar and cultural knowledge, for intended travel or study abroad in Germany. Because the different chapters cover a variety of topics, it can be useful for beginner and intermediate learners. Users without any formal instruction in the language may have difficulties with this program because there is no error correction and feedback is limited to providing the correct answer. Intermediate learners who have taken some German instruction and are trying to learn more vocabulary or brush up on grammatical structures for a planned trip could benefit from this program. The topics covered in the program are suitable for young adult and adult language learners. The program is most suited for the independent learner who enjoys working with translation. In its current state, it is not intended for group work. However, future versions of the software could benefit from the addition of communicative group or partner activities, such as chatrooms or forums where learners could meet and use the language for communicative purposes. Given the title of the Mango Conversations software, the addition of opportunities for students to have conversations with other learners would enhance the language learning possibilities.

Adapting Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers for classroom use would allow an instructor to supplement the software with interactive and communicative activities through partner and group work as well as feedback on students’ output. Students could be assigned to study selected units at home, and thus come to class prepared with vocabulary knowledge and insights into grammar themes. Class time could then be devoted to using the acquired knowledge in communicative activities in which the instructor could check students’ linguistic output and provide relevant feedback.
SUMMARY

The Mango Conversations—German for English Speakers program is a comprehensive vocabulary building program for individuals planning on traveling or studying in a German-speaking country who wish to expand their vocabulary knowledge and grammar knowledge in different areas of everyday life. The repetition of the taught words and phrases can help users become comfortable with a wide range of lexical items. Additionally, the program’s cultural notes provide important information that can help prepare them for possible travel and stays in Germany. The grammar explanations can give the user a basic knowledge of the structure of the German language. The ease of navigation, the speed of the operations, and the attractive interface are the main strengths of this program. The claim that program users learn only the useful stuff holds true — the variety of topics covered by the software allows learners to choose the content matter which is most relevant to them.

The lack of real communication or interaction combined with the absence of constructive feedback that would allow a learner to modify output and engage in second language learning processes are shortcomings of the software. These shortcomings could be overcome if the program were included in classroom instruction where the instructor could supplement feedback and provide opportunities for negotiation of meaning in communicative classroom tasks. Moreover, the cultural understanding which the software aims to impart could be enhanced through culture-specific images throughout the units. If the software is used as a stand-alone product, learner-learner interactions through the addition of chatroom or discussion forum features could enhance the language learning opportunities for users.

SCALED RATING (1 LOW-5 HIGH)

Implementation Possibilities: 2
Pedagogical Features (relative to evaluation parameters): 3
Sociolinguistic Accuracy (typos, grammatical errors, stereotypes): 4
Use of Computer Capabilities (multimedia bells & whistles): 3
Ease of Use (student/teacher): 5
Overall Evaluation: 3

PRODUCER DETAILS

Developer/distributor:
Mango Languages
30445 Northwestern
Suite 300
Farmington Hills, MI 48334
Phone 1 (855) 466-2646
http://www.mangolanguages.com/

NOTE

1 “Voice comparison technology” is the term used by the software.
REFERENCES


**REVIEWER BIODATA**
Theresa Schenker is Language Program Director of German at Yale University. She received her PhD in German Studies from Michigan State University. Her research interests include the development of intercultural competence and language skills through computer-mediated communication. She is particularly interested in the effects of NS-NNS interactions in telecollaboration.

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