Software Review: Mango Conversations—Spanish (Spain)

ANNALISA TEIXEIRA
University of California, Davis

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type:</th>
<th>Interactive Language Learning Software, drill and practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language reviewed:</td>
<td>Spanish, Spain (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 (Latin American), Swahili, Swedish, Tagalog, Tamil, Telugu, Thai, Turkish, Ukrainian, Urdu, Vietnamese, Yiddish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>8 specialty courses such as Medical Spanish, Endangered Languages (Tuvan), &amp; Brazilian Soccer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>18 English Courses for non-English speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level:</td>
<td>Unit 1 (People) and Unit 2 (Travel). For beginning-intermediate learners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activities:</td>
<td>Pronunciation, dialog repetition; listening comprehension; vocabulary learning; oral production; culture; grammar knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Format:</td>
<td>Web-based or cloud-based software</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hardware Requirements:</td>
<td>Sound card, speakers, microphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software:</td>
<td>Javascript must be enabled in the browser, and Adobe Flash Player (version 13.0.0) must be installed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation:</td>
<td>Mango On-The-Go®, includes a MP3 audio version of Mango Passport®, and well as a printable PDF companion course guide.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price:</td>
<td>Varies depending on level desired</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Mango Conversations is a new web-based, self-paced product by Mango Languages that combines versions of Basic and Complete 2.0 courses into one updated program. Mango Conversations includes two units (People and Travel) made up of 5 chapters each, for a
total of 10 chapters. Each chapter includes an average of 5-10 lessons, for a total of 82 lessons and chapter reviews. Each chapter includes both conversational goals and grammar goals (see Fig. 1).

**Figure 1**
Mango Conversations displays goals for each chapter

This product is marketed towards adult learners who intend to use Spanish for travel and basic communication. Each thematic chapter begins with a core dialogue that is then deconstructed into lexical and phrasal pieces. The majority of the learning module centers on drilling through the use of flashcards, with additional grammar and cultural instruction slides interspersed throughout (see Fig. 2).
**Figure 2**
Cultural Notes move beyond grammar and vocabulary

Mango Languages frames the Conversation product on their website as a pragmatic and practical way to learn language for travel that goes "beyond words and phrases" and allows for users to be productive with Spanish where they can create new meaning on their own. Also including audio resources and a pronunciation record and playback feature, Mango Conversations claims that through using their product learners will "sound like a native speaker."

**EVALUATION**

**Technological Features**

This is a cloud-based program, which requires no install other than the Adobe Flash and JavaScript requirements. It is easy to access with an Internet connection, with minimal loading time. Easy to navigate, additional keyboard shortcuts are provided and illustrated in the Keyboard Guide. A Feedback button is clearly displayed that allows the user to "Share an Idea", "Contact Customer Service", or "Report a Course Error." At sign-in, the last login date is displayed as well as the last lesson access, to help the user begin at the point on which he or she left off. The operation appears reliable with no reported crashes or stalls.

As mentioned earlier, Mango Conversations includes a feature where the user may record his or her voice and compare the sound wave to that of a native speaker (see Fig. 3). To do so, one must allow Mango Conversation to access the camera and microphone settings by changing the privacy settings for Adobe Flash. Another feature allows the users to scroll over target terms and click on an audio button to hear the pronunciation.
In the vocabulary and phrasal flashcards, navigability could be improved. When completing the flashcard slides, it is natural to try to click on the green arrow to scroll through the target terms, but this essentially skips the slides without showing the L1 answer. Instead, one must click on the “Show the Answer” button on the slide itself. This might be remedied by relying on the keyboard control, where the space bar displays the answers in the flashcard tests and quizzes. Also, after interacting with a number of flashcards or vocabulary slides, one might want to toggle off the narrator feature, which delays the recitation of the target term with repetitive prompts such as “Let’s hear you say…” (in English). Suggestions for improvement include removing the “Show the Answer” button allowing the click of the green arrow to show the answer for any given flashcard slide. The narrator’s voice could be limited to an initial tutorial and later to solely the instructional slides.

After completing lessons and chapters, badges are awarded. These badges can be shared either on Facebook or Twitter. While these types of badges are common for game-based and goal-based learning, they might be more relevant if Mango Conversations provided an interactive online space for learner interaction where users would be able to display their badges to others in the form of a user profile.

In regards to the exploitation of computer potential, there is an effective use of sound, but no pictures, video components, and limited user adaptability options besides toggling the narrator on or off and adding response time to the vocabulary quiz section. There is a feature utilizing semantic color mapping, where learners are guided through the use of color to link different components of grammar and meaning. Through using a speech recording feature students can compare their recording to that of a native speaker, as well as visually compare the two waveforms. However, this feature does not provide personalized, direct feedback to the user on their pronunciation.

Activities (Procedure)

Students begin by hearing a scripted dialogue while simultaneously provided orthographic input that shifts from the L1 to the L2 as the dialogue lines are read. Afterwards, lexical and phrasal pieces of this dialogue are presented as input (L1-L2 translations with semantic color-coding) to the learner, with slides adding additional grammar concepts like conjugations and cultural concepts, like formal and informal addresses. After the input slides, learners are quizzed by the narrator through the use of flashcards that use spaced
repetition and combine and recombine lexical items to produce more and more complex phrases. The flashcards also rely on L1-L2 translation, rather than images or L2 glossing. All lessons in both units share this formulaic structure, with no deviation to the sequencing or activities types.

Mango Conversations offers learners rich options for L1-L2 comparisons, both semantically and structurally, appropriate for adult and independent learning. The semantic color-coding feature (see Fig. 4) reinforces these L1-L2 comparisons. For certain phrases, both a literal and intended meaning is provided, such as for ponerse (literal meaning: to put on oneself; intended meaning: to wear), which is related to the non-reflexive, poner (to put).

**Figure 4**
Mango Conversation’s semantic color mapping

In regards to pronunciation, students can hear the pronunciation for any presented lexical or phrasal item, reinforcing form-pronunciation mapping. The pronunciation models can be compared to their own pronunciation, as they can record their voice and compare the shape of the subsequent sound wave to that of the recorded audio. However, no training is provided to help the user when interacting with this feature, so it may not be fully exploited.

In conclusion, activities are solely instructional (tutorials, drills, etc.), with no collaborative or facilitative options available for the user. This program does focus on discourse, syntax, lexis, and morphology using illustrative examples, enhanced input, and direct explanations. Mango Conversations focuses more on speaking and listening skills, as the lessons are dialogue-based and focus on spoken language. No reading comprehension or writing components are included, with no feedback provided on spelling. Speaking activities include repetition and flashcard translations, and listening activities are always accompanied by text and include listening to and processing scripted dialogues, phrases, and lexical items.

If this program were to be used in conjunction with a standard language curriculum, it could function as a complementary component to a curriculum with a communicative approach that offered numerous activities for production and feedback, but less time for enhanced textual and aural input and analysis.
**Teacher Fit (Approach)**

The approach of Mango Conversations could be characterized as a blend of audio-lingual method and the grammar-translation method. This program includes the modeling, repetition, and static drilling of the audio-lingual method, and similarly does not include space for productive, creative output of the learner, despite how Mango has framed the product. The grammar-translation elements of the program include the heavy inclusion of the L1. Translations of dialogues, phrases, and lexical items are at the center of input and flashcard practice, even including semantically color-coding that links L1-L2 forms. Towards the end of the flashcard practice, the narrator asks for the translation of whole sentences. Like the grammar-translation method, grammar is taught directly, although deduction is encouraged. Many times the grammar is not presented in its entirety, but snapshots are provided interspersed among the input and flashcard slides. For instance, full verb conjugation paradigms might not be presented at once.

The Mango Conversations program does present some research-based benefits. Research has shown that adults tend to prefer L1-L2 translation methods for vocabulary learning due to its perceived efficiency (Loucky, 2006). Also, repetition, or exemplar frequency, has been shown to be an important construct in language learning (Ellis, 2002). The flashcard methods used in Mango Conversations include these methods, appropriate for cognitive, adult learning.

Also, enhanced input that helps to focus the learner’s attention on relevant forms, illustrated by the semantic color-coding technique used in Mango, has been shown to benefit adult language learning, recognizing that “morphosyntactic development involves prolonged periods of form-function mapping” (Long & Robinson, 1998, p. 17). Spaced-time repetition, utilized in the flashcard modules where target forms are practiced, abandoned, and then reappear later in this lesson, has also been attested as an effective way to develop vocabulary knowledge (Bloom & Shuell, 1981; Ellis, 1995).

However, the activities could be improved in certain ways to better align with SLA methods that raise the importance of comprehensible output (Swain, 1985), interaction (Long, 1983, 1996, 2006), and feedback (Mackey, 2006). Mango Conversations does not push users to produce output that is then processed for intelligibility, meaning that users miss out on the opportunity to have their productive language skills explicitly addressed. Interaction is beneficial to the learner, as it includes the negotiation of meaning and helps to connect understandings of the input to functions in the output. Feedback has been shown to also aid in language development, as it helps to highlight weaknesses or gaps in the interlanguage, forcing learners to focus their attention and ultimately produce more target-like forms. Mango Conversations provides neither positive nor negative feedback that directly responds to the unique productions of any one user.

Suggestions on how to add more interaction and feedback would include adding quizzes and comprehension checks that ask users to demonstrate what they’ve learned after having completing the lesson. Since the program is dialogue-based, this could include reordering sentences to form a logical conversation, turn-taking in a conversation with an avatar to choose the best responses to move the conversation forward, and vocabulary practice (matching, cloze, etc.), all with feedback provided if the user makes off-target selections.

Mango Conversations was found to be linguistically accurate, with no grammar, authenticity, or spelling issues noted. However, the sociocultural representations tend to rely on generalizations, and the lack of complexity and limited number of slides concerning sociocultural issues perhaps demonstrates that this is a peripheral goal of the program. Improvements might include diversifying these generalizations to include more complex viewpoints, and increasing the number slides concerning sociocultural issues. Since this program has a dialogic focus, presenting more concepts in the area of Spanish pragmatics and interpersonal relations might be of high benefit to the learner, especially if these lessons helped to demonstrate the variability of language practices in Spain. A number of
these lessons could be contextualized geographically to complement the “travel” aspect of this program.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

The intended user is an adult learner who intends to travel, arguably someone who is in their 20s or 30s given the ages of individuals that appear in the chapter images and the topic of Chapter 5, “Where did you go to College?” The general themes would be appropriate for most adolescents and adults, and the program is ideal for independent and self-driven learners. The themes covered across the two units are very relevant for travel-related goals and basic conversations and also appropriate for beginners.

Response handling could be drastically improved, as there is no feature that allows for error correction or feedback of learner-produced forms. The production that occurs in this module is solely vocal and includes users simply repeating the input, which utilizes simultaneously aural and orthographic prompts. Later in the lesson, the learner is quizzed by the narrator and asked to vocalize the L2 Spanish translation of the L1 English prompt, which may be a lexical or phrasal item or a complete sentence. There are no comprehension checks that ask learners to manipulate images, take a vocabulary quiz, or produce written forms for direct feedback and correction. Given that the lessons are highly guided and formulaic and encourage learner analysis, field independent learners would benefit most from Mango Conversations, with deductive reasoning strategies used widely. Many times a grammar form is presented a number of times before it is explicitly addressed, which gives students a chance to deduce how it functions or is used.

Students have the freedom to sequence the lessons how they choose, although besides these options, the guided lessons offer limited flexibility/modifiability options.

**SUMMARY**

Overall, Mango Conversations has its utility as a companion to more productive and conversational language practice. It is essentially a dialogue-driven flashcard program that lacks some of the more flashy media and design of comparable programs (i.e. glossing options, images, comprehension activities, etc.). The program does include audio and semantic color-coding to aid in language processing and does guide users through some grammar, utilizing what Mango Languages terms “Intuitive Language Construction” and “Stealth Grammar” methods that add a degree of sophistication to the target language text used in the flashcard module.

Although easy to implement, this program could offer more feedback and opportunities for production and interaction. It should not be used as a stand-alone program to reach basic overall proficiency, but might be appropriate for users with limited time and plans to travel and get by with basic language.

**SCALED RATING**

Implementation Possibilities: 4
Pedagogical Features (relative to evaluation parameters): 2
Sociolinguistic Accuracy (typos, grammatical errors, stereotypes): 3
Use of Computer Capabilities (multimedia bells & whistles): 2
Ease of Use (student/teacher): 3
Overall Evaluation: 2.5
PRODUCER DETAILS
Developer/distributor:
Mango Languages
Address: 30445 Northwester Hwy #300
Farmington Hills, MI 48334
Phone: 1 (855) 466-2646
Email: support@mangolanguages.com
WWW: mangolanguages.com

REFERENCES


REVIEWER INFORMATION
Annalisa Teixeira is a Ph.D. candidate and Associate Instructor in the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and a M.A. student in Linguistics (TESOL) at the University of California, Davis. She holds B.A.s in Spanish and Linguistics from CSU, Chico, and an M.A. in Spanish Linguistics from UC Davis. Her research interests include computer-assisted language learning and Spanish vocabulary development, Portuguese for Spanish speakers, and internationalization and English language teaching.

REVIEWER ADDRESS
abcorioso@ucdavis.edu