Software Review

Little Pim: A review of the French Teacher’s Kit

Michele Regalla, Ph.D.

PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product Type:</th>
<th>DVD video series with books, CDs, and flashcards to accompany the videos</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Language(s):</td>
<td>French (focus of this review), Spanish, English, Mandarin, Russian, Italian, German, Japanese, Arabic, Hebrew, Portuguese</td>
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<tr>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Beginning, preschool (birth through age 6)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Activities</td>
<td>A combination of entertainment and immersion focused on listening comprehension and repetition of key vocabulary and phrases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Media Format:</td>
<td>DVD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hardware Requirements:</td>
<td>DVD player and television or computer (PC or Mac) with capability to play DVD and speakers, digital download also available</td>
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<tr>
<td>DVD</td>
<td>A total of 6 DVDs are available to complete the entire series.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sound</td>
<td>Speakers, if computer is used to play DVD</td>
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<tr>
<td>Video</td>
<td>Colorful, high quality resolution</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supplementary Software</td>
<td>Supplementary apps are available for Ipad, Iphone, Ipod touch, Android, or LeapPad</td>
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<tr>
<td>Printed Documentation</td>
<td>Companion guide and scripts, lesson plans and worksheets, and teaching tips all available online <a href="http://www.littlepim.com">www.littlepim.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Price</td>
<td>French 3-pack, volume 1 (set of three videos) $34.99 for digital download</td>
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<tr>
<td>Single user</td>
<td>Teacher’s Kit is available for $219.99 and includes 6 videos, lesson plans, worksheets, teacher’s guide, pronunciation guide, companion scripts, flashcards, Pim poster, plush panda, and a progress tracking app.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple copies</td>
<td>Orders can be placed online using <a href="http://www.littlepim.com">www.littlepim.com</a> or by phone. Also, retailers (such as Toys R Us) sell Little Pim products.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Site license</td>
<td>Information can be accessed on the website using “store locator.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distribution Rights</td>
<td>The program is based upon the Entertainment Immersion Method®, a registered trademark.</td>
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General Description

Little Pim is a video series created to teach foreign language to young children from birth through age 6. According to the website, Little Pim is based upon the Entertainment Immersion Method® designed by language teacher and filmmaker Julia Pimsleur Levine and neuroscientist, Dr April Bensisch. The information provided on the website states that Julia was inspired by her bilingual childhood to create a foreign language program specifically for young children and built the program upon the Pimsleur Method®, a foreign language learning method designed by her father. According to the Little Pim website, the Entertainment Immersion Method® is research-based, although no citations are provided on the website in support of these claims.

The series was designed as a method for parents with or without foreign language background to teach a new language to their children at home. Little Pim also offers a package of their materials as a Teacher's Kit for classroom teachers of this age group (including preschool and kindergarten teachers). Little Pim is offered in 11 different languages, which will be called the target language in this review. The Little Pim series offers a video-based foreign language learning experience designed to teach target language vocabulary to young children. There are a total of six DVDs in the series and the website claims that children can learn up to 360 words and phrases in the target language. Other supplementary materials are available to accompany the videos such as books, flashcards and apps. The DVD version of the French Teacher's Kit was used by this reviewer and will be the focus of this review as told from the perspective of a teacher. A digital download of the DVD has recently been released, but has not yet been used by this reviewer.

The Teacher's Kit contains six DVDs, flashcards, a Pim poster, a plush panda, and online access to lesson plans, worksheets, a pronunciation guide and companion scripts. The DVDs feature a cartoon panda named Pim who is the main character of the series. Each DVD is centered on a theme and consists of seven episodes, lasting approximately five minutes per episode. For example, the DVD entitled ‘Eating and Drinking’ focuses on food vocabulary. The episodes begin with Pim introducing the topic in a cartoon setting. See the screen shot (Figure 1) for an example from ‘Eating and Drinking’.

Next, Little Pim presents vocabulary through video of real-life children and adults in various settings where the vocabulary is present (see Figure 2). Pim is the only character from the episodes who speaks and Pim uses only the target language. The real life children and adults do not speak during the episodes but according to the website, the vocabulary is presented with audio of native speakers pronouncing the target language words. The target language words are shown on the screen with time given for student repetition.
Figure 1: Pim, the cartoon panda, introduces vocabulary in ‘Eating and Drinking’

Figure 2: Image of a child is used to present vocabulary in ‘Eating and Drinking’ in Little Pim

At the end of the episode, Pim reviews the vocabulary with a combination of cartoon and real life visuals (see Figure 3 for an example).
A variety of support is available to help teachers plan language lessons and pronounce target language words with their students. Teachers who are not speakers of the target language are encouraged to listen and learn with the children. The Companion Guide explains the general layout of the series and provides non-speakers of the target language with basic pronunciation guidelines. The scripts list exact wording of the audio portion in both the target language and in English. The script, pronunciation guide, and the modeling of vocabulary pronunciation by the speakers on the videos are designed to serve as pronunciation support for teachers who are non-speakers of the target language. The Companion guide, script, coloring pages, and a list of teaching tips are available directly from the website. Lesson plans and worksheets are also available through the website, but are password protected. In addition to the online materials, books, CDs and apps that accompany the DVD series are available for additional purchase. Personalized support is also available via a live chat forum on the website or from an agent using the toll free phone number.

Little Pim is advertised on the website as the ‘most comprehensive language learning program designed for young children’. Little Pim is also supported by parent testimonials on the website as a top language learning program for children and has been the recipient of over 25 awards. Recent awards include ‘The Toy Man Seal of Approval’ (2014), ‘Creative Child Magazine 2013 Media and Game of the Year Awards’, and ‘2013 National Parenting Seal of Approval Award’.
Evaluation

Technological features
The Little Pim DVD series is quite easy to use. It only requires a television with a DVD player or a computer with the capability to play DVDs and working speakers for audio. A projection screen may also be used to show episodes to a larger class. The episodes are divided into their own segments so that a teacher only needs to click the ‘next’ button to advance from one episode to the next. As long as the classroom equipment is functioning properly, the resolution on the video is sharp and the DVD runs smoothly without interruptions.

Activities
The Little Pim series is a foreign language instructional tool which is focused on vocabulary acquisition. Because this series is designed for young children, there is no focus on reading, writing, or grammar. According to the website, the goals of the Little Pim series are to teach vocabulary and pronunciation in a fun and engaging format. There is no corrective feedback through the Little Pim program. Children need only watch the episode, listen, and repeat the vocabulary in the target language. In fact, teachers are encouraged not to correct errors. The teacher’s job is only to serve as a language model by repeating the vocabulary, with the help of the pronunciation guide if the teacher is not a speaker of the target language. Research supports repetition without overt correction as a method of error treatment (Brown, 2007), but little research exists on the efficacy of pronunciation modeling by those who do not speak the target language.

Teacher fit
For teachers, the approach taken by any tool for teaching foreign or second language is extremely important. The focus of this section is the approach used by Little Pim, the claims made by the Little Pim website about language learning, and how those claims are supported by research. Also, this section will address the practicality of Little Pim’s approach for the pre-kindergarten classroom. The claims made on the Little Pim website regarding the benefits of learning a second language and teaching a second language in context can be connected to theories and research in the field of first and second language acquisition. Although research supporting such claims exists, one problem with the Little Pim website is that citations are not provided for any of the claims that are advertised as research-based. Because citations are not provided by the Little Pim website, all research used to support or question claims made by Little Pim in this publication have been added by the reviewer.

The Little Pim website promotes its product by highlighting benefits of bilingualism. The website states children who learn a second language prior to age 6 display superior reading and writing skills in comparison to their monolingual
peers. This claim can be supported by research in bilingual education which shows that bilinguals outperform monolingual peers in first language literacy skills (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) and in cognitive skills such as problem-solving (Bialystok, 2001). Additionally, the Little Pim website supports the idea of early language learning by stating that advantages exist for students who start to study a foreign or second language at a young age. According to Bialystok & Hakuta (1994), children learning a second language at an early age outperform adolescents and adults in terms of overall proficiency when the language is studied for the same period of time.

For those who support the idea of learning a foreign language in context without the use of first language translation, Little Pim is an excellent fit. According to the website, learning language in context is the most natural environment for children to learn a new language because it resembles the way first language is learned. The Little Pim series uses only the target language to introduce vocabulary to children. Visuals and other scenarios are shown to provide a context for learning in the target language without the use of translation. Also, the Little Pim website makes the claim that only native speakers are used to model the pronunciation of all vocabulary presented and the videos are inclusive of a wide diversity of French speakers.

According to Krashen (1982), children acquire their first language through an unconscious process without attention to grammatical form, unlike traditional second language learning where students learn rules of grammar. Research shows that young children are more meaning-focused and learn indirectly (Halliwell, 1992; Moon, 2000). The Little Pim series attempts to simulate this indirect process of first language learning by presenting language in context, without translation or focus on grammatical form. Although the series presents one-way communication via a video, children must focus on the actions, pictures, and all nonverbal communication presented in order to follow the episode. The Little Pim website does not make the claim that children will achieve proficiency by using their product, but the focus of the video series is vocabulary acquisition. According to the website's claims, a child can learn up to 360 words and phrases in the target language after completing all six Little Pim videos. However, the Little Pim website does not provide research-based evidence to show that children who have used their product are able to either recognize or produce 360 target language vocabulary words after having watched all six videos. Furthermore, scholars have debated what it means to really know a word. The knowledge of a word is a complex concept that can range from simple recognition to the ability to use the word in a variety of contexts (Beck, McKeown, & Kucan, 2002).

According to the website, Little Pim's use of the target language without translation provides an immersion experience for children, The Entertainment
Immersion Method®, but it does not address the fact that the immersion experience lasts for only a short period of five minutes if the teacher is not a speaker of the target language. Little Pim’s website provides a general recommendation that children view each video two to three times per week, moving through the series in approximately six months. However, the Little Pim website gives no recommendations for the amount of time (if any) that should be spent on language building activities outside of watching the videos in order to acquire 360 vocabulary words and phrases.

One of the main drawbacks to the practicality of the Little Pim Teacher’s kit is the lack of fit with a typical preschool curriculum. The vocabulary and situations presented in the Teacher’s Kit match the household setting much more closely than the school setting. The Teacher’s Kit consists of the three DVDs ‘Eating and Drinking’, ‘Wake up Smiling’ and ‘Playtime’. In these three DVDs, most of the focus of the vocabulary is household-related. For example, the ‘Eating and Drinking’ episodes show parents and children eating and preparing their meals at home, and the ‘Playtime’ series shows children playing dress-up with clothes from their mothers’ closets (see Figure 4). Much of the vocabulary used in the Little Pim series may be ideal for parents at home who have plenty of opportunity to reinforce the vocabulary while at home with their child, but less than ideal for a pre-kindergarten classroom.

Figure 4: Mother with child playing dress-up to present vocabulary in ‘Playtime’ in Little Pim

Some connections to school can be made by the teacher. In ‘Eating and Drinking’, students can identify foods and drinks found in their lunches,
and the ‘Playtime’ video shows toys and playground equipment that are used during recess. However in the pre-kindergarten classroom, daily instruction is focused on topics such as letters of the alphabet, numbers, and the calendar. Classroom teachers who participated in the use of Little Pim with this reviewer often requested supplemental activities outside of the Little Pim series that would connect better to their curriculum and allow for more use of the target language throughout the school day.

The importance of making connections from language learning to other aspects of the curriculum by building upon students’ prior knowledge has been researched and incorporated into a model of language instruction for English learners, the SIOP Model (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004). Teachers using Little Pim who are looking to connect target language vocabulary instruction with curriculum must seek resources outside of the Little Pim DVD collection and other products sold by the company to achieve their goals. With the exception of the ‘I can count’ DVD, a teacher using the Little Pim Teacher’s Kit may experience difficulty making the vocabulary presented in Little Pim relevant to the pre-K classroom.

**Learner fit**

Little Pim claims to make learning a foreign language fun, easy and accessible to all children with their Entertainment Immersion Method®. Research supports the fact that language is learned best in a motivating, low-anxiety environment (Krashen, 1982; Gass & Selinker, 2008). In practice, this reviewer used the ‘Eating and Drinking’ and ‘Playtime’ videos with pre-kindergarten students. Upon arrival for each French class, this reviewer found the children anxiously awaiting the next episode and proudly identifying the vocabulary they remembered from previous episodes. Little Pim is certainly a very engaging foreign language program for its intended audience. The panda cartoon is very appealing to children and they look forward to watching Pim’s antics in each episode. Pim’s cartoon introductions always feature a comical or other attention-getting scenario. For example, in one episode of ‘Eating and Drinking’, Pim eats a large stack of pancakes and becomes covered in syrup. The children enjoy viewing these scenarios repeatedly when reviewing the vocabulary. Also, the five minute episodes are appropriately paced for the attention span of this age level.

The video format reaches both auditory and visual learning styles. Children have many opportunities to view visuals of the vocabulary, listen, and repeat as the videos show various scenes using the vocabulary. Repetition of vocabulary is frequent, but not at all boring. The short episodes and the varied scenarios keep the attention of children. For example, when Pim introduces ‘apple’, he does not simply show a picture of an apple. In this scene, a visual of an apple is shown followed by several children eating apples, followed by a
baby trying to make a pile of apples, and finally, a large assortment of apples in a grocery store. Other examples include the presentation of the word 'sandwich' with children and parents making a sandwich together while one child steals a tomato from another child’s sandwich. The scenes shown in Little Pim are not only varied to keep the attention of young children, but the scenes are familiar to children and seem to be shown from their perspective.

Although the video format and pacing are appropriate for young children, some episodes contain large amounts of vocabulary and include long phrases or full sentences that may not be easily remembered by children of this age group without frequent repetition. This reviewer and the other pre-kindergarten teachers chose specific vocabulary words from the videos that were emphasized in class activities following the videos. Also, assessments were designed to measure the learning that occurred at the end of each video. Although it goes beyond the scope of this review to analyze assessments collected of the pre-kindergarten students’ learning, the children assessed by this reviewer (who are not categorized as special needs) identified an average of 20.8 of the 25 of the vocabulary words tested from the ‘Eating and Drinking’ video. The majority of the words children identified incorrectly were presented in the videos, but not as frequently emphasized by the teacher in follow-up activities.

In some cases, the vocabulary presented in the episodes is not reviewed at the end of the episode, nor does it appear in later episodes. Furthermore, some episodes in a particular DVD do not relate well to other episodes in the same DVD. For example, the ‘Playtime’ video begins with colors, shapes, and clothing vocabulary, but later episodes show playground equipment and pets. A classroom teacher using this video may struggle choosing a vocabulary focus while trying to connect the vocabulary in Little Pim to a theme in the curriculum. In this reviewer’s experience, it was much more difficult to design an assessment at the end of the ‘Playtime’ video than it was for the ‘Eating and Drinking’ video. When the reviewer and other pre-kindergarten teachers noticed that the children did not volunteer as many vocabulary words during class sessions focused on the ‘Playtime’ video as compared to the ‘Eating and Drinking’ video, a decision was made to assess other French vocabulary words that were taught outside of the Little Pim videos. The lack of continuity between episode themes and lack of repetition of target language vocabulary from one episode to the next created challenges for the teachers to design a fair and valid assessment for the ‘Playtime’ video.

**Summary**

Overall, Little Pim has done an excellent job of creating a foreign language learning tool specifically designed to appeal to young children that is easy for
adults to use. Its strengths include the engaging video episodes, the pacing of each episode, and appeal of the panda cartoon character to children. Also, the approach used by Little Pim presents language in context without the use of native language translation. There are few foreign language learning programs that exist for young children available and Little Pim has filled a need in the market with a child-centered video program.

However, the biggest weakness of the Little Pim Teacher’s Kit is its lack of connection to school-based curriculum. The Little Pim series was originally created for parents to teach language to their children at home, but the needs of teachers in a classroom differ from parents at home. The current version of the Teacher’s Kit consists of six of the household-based videos designed for parents at home packaged together and sold as a Teacher’s Kit. Some refinements in the Teacher’s Kit could be made in order to meet the needs of classroom teachers at the pre-kindergarten level by designing a series more appropriate for the school setting and by increasing the continuity of the vocabulary and themes addressed in each episode. Another major weakness of Little Pim is the lack of support for the claims made on the website. If Little Pim claims that its methods are research-based and that it is possible for students to learn up to 360 vocabulary words after completing the entire series, the website should provide evidence to support their claims.

Pedagogical Features: 2
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 5
Use of Computer Capabilities: 5
Ease of Use: 5
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: 4

References


Bialystok, E. & Hakuta, K., (1994). In other words: The psychology and science of second language acquisition. New York: Basic Books


**Producer Details**

Little Pim
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