Random House Electronic Language Tutor: ¿Qué Tal?

Vital Statistics

Authors: Dorwick, Marks, Knorre, VanPatten, and Higgs; Software by John Underwood and Richard Bassein
Copyright: 1988
Publisher: Random House, Inc.
Edition: Second
Title: *Random House Electronic Language Tutor: ¿Qué Tal?*
Compatibility: IBM PC, PC-XT, PC-AT
Intended Users: College Students

General Description

This version of the *Random House Electronic Language Tutor* (RHELT) is based on *¿Qué Tal?: An Introductory Course*. It consists of eleven 5.25" disks corresponding to lessons 1 through 26 in the textbook and provides supplemental practice on the grammatical points contained in the book. Six pages of general information accompany the disks.

Positive Features

As stated in the informational pages accompanying RHELT, this supplemental program provides grammar practice outside the classroom, thereby allowing instructors to concentrate on communicative activities during class time. In light of the 1985 ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines and of the move toward a communicative approach to language teaching, instructors welcome educational resources which promote better classroom interaction.

This program's best feature is its feedback to the learner. The computer highlights the incorrect word and offers a clue to the type of error, e.g., accent, gender, tense, or word order. The user may then correct the error or ask for the correct answer. Other options include moving on to the next question, going to the next exercise, and returning to the main menu.

Another positive feature is the program's congruence with the vocabulary and structures found in *¿Qué Tal?* Among the pitfalls of foreign language computer programs are their irrelevance to what is being learned and their pervasive use of vocabulary and/or structures far beyond the students' knowledge. Although the authors of the *¿Qué Tal?* package and the developers of this software are not the same individuals, it is evident that Underwood and Bassein consciously fitted their computer program to the textbook. This consistency diminishes the learners' confusion and frustration.

Limitations

The quality of the *¿Qué Tal?* package led me to expect equal or better quality from the corresponding computer package. Unfortunately, the software neither meets these expectations nor does it capitalize on the computer's unique capabilities.

The first problem encountered is the informational pages which accompany the disks. These sheets, which look like an office photocopy of hand-drawn sketches and typewritten notes, are for instructors and students. The instructions shift from instructor to student, even within the same page. Separate guides for instructors and students are preferable. The students' copy should be a quick-reference guide to using the program. The instructors' guide should supplement the students' copy with suggestions on using the program, a description of exercises per chapter, and an interpretation of exercise scores.

The next major obstacle that the user confronts is the Help screen. This screen provides instructions on typing and entering answers. The directions for typing in "¿ and "¡ are incomplete an misleading. The use of nonstandard keys for

inserting, deleting, and entering creates confusion and unnecessary memory load. Students press "+" to add a space, "#" to delete, and "]" to enter a response. Computer literate students expect to use the INS, DEL, and Enter keys for these functions.

While doing the exercises, students may press the DEL key to see the correct answer. Unfortunately, when the correct answer appears, the student's response disappears. Thus, the learner cannot compare the correct answer with the entered response. Moreover, pressing the DEL key usually results in being asked if one wants the next question, the next exercise, or the menu. These questions appear consecutively and each must receive a response before continuing with the program. Neither a colleague nor I could discern a pattern for calling up the correct answer with the DEL key. Indeed, we asked for the same answer 12 times and each time the computer asked if we wanted the next question. To say the least, failure to receive the correct answer is frustrating.

RHELT detects errors from left to right one word at a time. However, errors in Spanish do not always follow this pattern. For example, when I accidentally entered a sentence using "a la universidad" (from the model sentence), the computer expected the keyed response "al hospital." The error message indicated that I needed to change "la" (feminine gender) to the masculine. The actual error was the use of the wrong noun, not the gender. Only when I changed to the masculine, thus creating a gender error, did the computer indicate I had used the wrong noun.

Another annoying feature is how the cursor returns to the student's response after an error message. When the Enter key is pressed, the cursor always appears at the beginning of the response, rather than at the error. This process becomes time-consuming and tedious when there are several errors within one sentence.

It is difficult enough for learners to correct their own mistakes without correcting ones created by the program. RHELT's preset margins are too narrow and, consequently, words are automatically divided, without a hyphen, at the strangest places, e.g. R ichard. When the user enters a sentence with a RHELT- divided word, an error message appears, such as, "Check model." Furthermore, the computer does not accept correctly hyphenated words. Unless the user enters the split word as a complete word on the next line, the error message continues to appear.

Branching is one of the most pedagogically valuable aspects of the computer. It provides the necessary flexibility for individualized instruction. RHELT, however, fails to take advantage of this feature. When the current exercise is too difficult, the computer does not direct the student to an easier exercise. When an exercise is too easy, the program does not move the student to a more challenging activity. Students who repeatedly make the same error would benefit from a review or Help screen; RHELT fails to provide this help. The program also does not allow students to skip a question and return to it later. In short, this program offers students very little individualized help.

Another shortcoming of this software is the absence of a pool of possible answers and a pool of alternative questions. Students giving correct answers beyond the programmed answers receive an error message. Students wanting additional practice must return again to the same questions.

RHELT is a series of textbook exercises on a computer disk. Examining the multiple exercises for 18 chapters, I found that, with minor variations, all exercises were in the textbook. If indeed the software is supplemental, then the exercises should be supplemental, that is, provide additional practice and instructional help.

The interpretation of individual scores is unclear. On the last page of the informational sheets, one reads that the student's score reflects the number of correct words entered of those that are expected. Neither the computer program nor the informational sheets provides a clue as to what words are "expected" within each exercise. A score of 3 out of 5 does not explain which two words were missed nor which five words were "expected." Such information would be helpful to both students and instructors.

Finally, RHELT commits the grievous offense of being boring. Computer programs that are

repetitious behavior-training drills are as interesting as licking postage stamps. Once the novelty fades, tedium quickly sets in. Computer programs can be more than just dull drills; they can definitely be more exciting.

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