

REVIEWS

[Editor's Note: We will consider for publication reviews on literature, hardware, or software only as it applies specifically to language learning lab facilities. We will not publish reviews that more properly will be found in other professional journals. For example, a review of a specific French textbook might not be appropriate, but a review of circulation management software would. We would like to find an editor for this column. If you are interested, please contact me.]

Practice and Improve Your Spanish

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José Amodia Gómez, John Pride, Saxon Menne, and David Stoll, *Practice and Improve Your Spanish*, NTC Publishing Group, 1988.

General Description

Practice and Improve Your Spanish is a self-tutorial for individuals with some knowledge of Spanish who wish to improve their conversational skills. The program centers on four cassette tapes that feature native speakers using authentic speech. The tapes reveal the story of a businessman and his colleagues and include practice materials.

The program's emphasis is on listening for general comprehension rather than on understanding of each word. The underlying philosophy is that learning efficiency increases when the learner is relaxed and not concentrating too hard on the material. Indeed, the authors state that retention will be better if it is the result of "absorbing the target language" rather than responding to rules and translations.

Transcripts of the recording appear in the "Listening Guide". These serve as written reinforcement of the spoken word.

The "Handbook" includes an introductory essay on the Spanish language. It contains summaries of all scenes and tape exercises, notes on new expressions and grammatical points, and vocabulary lists for each story. For additional reference, the "Handbook" offers a Grammar Appendix, a Glossary of Grammatical Terms, and an Index to all vocabulary in the program.

Positive Features

Flexibility is this program's best feature. Although the authors encourage learners to "discover" the language through repeated listening, they are quick to indicate that the best method is that which best suits the learner. People can learn at their own pace according to their particular learning style and needs.

The content of *Practice and Improve Your Spanish* adds realism and immediacy to the learning material. It steers away from classroom and teenage themes and focuses, instead, on the office environment, the camaraderie among colleagues, and the rivalry between business competitors. Indeed, the content mirrors the problems, interests, and complex interactions of the adult world.

All voices on the recordings are those of adult native speakers. The conversations reproduce the rhythm, intonation, hesitations, and interjections of authentic speech. If the learner is to understand and be understood by native speakers, then exposure to authentic speech is a must.

An interesting and helpful feature on the tapes is the sound effects. These go beyond the traditional door slamming and footsteps

approaching. They include such things as glasses clinking at a bar, office machines running, car engines starting, and hollow voices over a telephone. The sound effects set the scene and clarify word meaning. They also provide an acoustic sound-mental image-spoken word association which aids vocabulary recall. For example, in the segment on office equipment the sound of each machine (e.g., adding machine, computer keyboard, teletype) precedes its name.

Another positive feature of *Practice and Improve Your Spanish* is the variety of situational contexts. Both formal and informal registers are used in a variety of settings.

There are conversations between boss and secretary, between colleagues, between strangers, and between old friends. The settings are also diverse, for example, an office, the airport, a restaurant, and a bar. Situations include renting an office, clearing up a misunderstanding, and interviewing a prospective employee. Thus, the learner becomes familiar with proper forms of address, the use of formal and informal expressions, and the *Ud.*, *tú*, and *vosotros* forms.

Except for lists in the "Handbook", vocabulary always appears in context. Context helps the learner derive the meaning and usage of words, and also provides a framework for recall.

Limitations

The biggest drawback to *Practice and Improve Your Spanish* is the heavy use of Castilian Spanish. The learner hears the Castilian /θ/, whereas /s/ is used by most other Spanish speakers. The regional difference is also evident in such idiomatic expressions as *vale* (i.e., OK, fine) and *estar en paro* (i.e., to be unemployed) which are not generally used in Latin America. Although Castilian Spanish is "the accepted standard in Spain", as the authors indicate, it is not what most Spanish speakers use. The use of Castilian speakers places the learner at a slight disadvantage

when encountering speakers from other parts of the Spanish-speaking world.

This program, with its business-oriented content, should be marketed as Commercial Spanish or Business Spanish rather than as a general Spanish program. The vocabulary, idioms, and registers are more applicable to working abroad or to conducting business in Spain than to touring the country or visiting friends.

Though the authors claim this program is for those who want to improve their conversational skills, audio tapes alone cannot provide authentic conversational practice. Listening to a tape is by no means equivalent to speaking with a person. Missing are the cultural nonverbal cues, the spontaneous interchange of ideas, and the interpersonal dynamics. Furthermore, the *Practice and Improve Your Spanish* tapes provide limited opportunities for oral practice. Thus, listening comprehension rather than authentic communication is reinforced.

Another limitation is the absence of language manipulation and application by the learner. Aside from listening, repeating, and reading, the learner has no opportunity to use the language in new contexts. The authors do no attempt to engage the learner in interactive exercises requiring personal responses, recombination of words and phrases, and grammatical changes. Language manipulation and experimentation is an integral part of language acquisition and language proficiency.

Conclusion

As far as self-tutorials go, *Practice and Improve Your Spanish* is helpful for people who have business contacts in Spain and, who do not have the time, opportunity, or inclination to enroll in a Spanish conversation class. It is also useful for those dealing with Latin Americans, though pronunciation and vocabulary will differ slightly. Although it provides limited speaking practice, the program does offer good listening comprehension practice. Lim-

ited oral practice is an inherent problem of the programs; it is alleviated only when authors make a conscious effort to incorporate conversation exercises. Another inherent problem is the physical absence of a teacher who can answer questions and clarify points. Trying to learn a language in isolation is like trying to swim without water. At the heart of all languages is communication and communication requires more than one person. Audio cassette self-tutorials are very limited in what they can offer even to the most talented learner.

[Editor's Note: Nevertheless, we often have persons who come to us needing "quick" help in preparing to travel to a foreign country. It often proves quite useful to have on hand self-tutorial materials, quite apart from tapes from our regular classroom courses, that can assist in reviewing or even learning basic phrases in the language.]

In Memoriam

The members of IALL were saddened to hear of the death of our colleague, James W. Dodge, of Middlebury College. Jim served many years on the executive board of NALLD, and more recently served as Secretary-Treasurer of the Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.

Jim's dedication to the organization and to the language teaching profession will be remembered with gratitude by his many friends and colleagues.

We extend our deepest sympathies to his family and friends.