REVIEW OF *TRIPLEPLAY PLUS! ENGLISH*

Program title:	TriplePlay Plus! English
Distributor:	Syracuse Language Systems, Inc. 5790 Widewaters Parkway Syracuse, NY 13214-2845
Phone:	(315) 449-4500
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Program information:	http://www.syrlang.com/
E-mail:	customerservice@syrlang.com
System requirements:	IBM 486 DX 2/66 or faster with 8 MB RAM, Windows 3.1 or 95, 256-color display, CD-ROM drive, 16 bit sound card, speakers or headphones, mouse, 9.5 MB free hard disk space (standard install).
Price:	US $49.95; for a site license: $250.00 for 5 users, $450 for 10 users.

Reviewed by Alison Mackey and Jung-Yoon Choi, Michigan State University

OVERVIEW

TriplePlay Plus! English is a CD-ROM-based multimedia package designed for beginning to intermediate ESL learners, ages 8 to adult. The program comes with a user's guide, plug-and-play microphone, and technical manual. *TriplePlay Plus!* is claimed to assist learners in developing three skills: listening, speaking, and reading. Vocabulary development, and a few other areas such as verb tenses and prepositions, are also targeted through a variety of games. This multimedia language learning program can be used by learners for self-study, by teachers in classroom settings (in computer labs), and also by second language acquisition (SLA) researchers. The software, which includes automatic speech recognition and 32 separate games, covers six main topics or themes. These include food, numbers, home and office, people, activities, and places and transportation. The current version under review here expands the activities and material from previous versions. The software is also available for Spanish, French, German, English, Hebrew, Japanese, and Italian.

DESCRIPTION

From the first screen, the Main Menu, learners can click on: (a) the SoundStart, which allows them to practice pronunciation of 50 words using the Automatic Speech Recognition (ASR) and Record/Playback; (b) the Letters & Sounds, which demonstrates through the use of examples how English letters correspond with the various sounds of the language; or (c) the Language Connect, which gives them access to language learning resources on the Internet.

A remarkable feature in the SoundStart is that the ASR provides immediate feedback on pronunciation after learners select a word from the list and say it into the microphone. Learners can also record their voices and compare their production to that of a native speaker's by using the Record/Playback. The ASR feedback is provided visually as well as aurally. For example, when the software finds the pronunciation acceptable, learners hear a distinct "bink" (pronunciation is OK) or if it is not, they are provided with

"bonk" (pronunciation is not correct). In the current version, visual feedback is shown through lights on the Speech Recognition Meter. The number of lights indicates how well learners pronounced the word; when they see all of the lights on the meter, their pronunciation is near native-like.

The ASR feature represents a considerable bonus for the current generation of CALL software. Indeed, it shows how far the field has come from the days when native speaker production of "recognize speech" was understood by the software to be "wreck a nice beach."

The Main Menu presents other options for a number of games. First, learners select one of the three modes: listening, reading, or speaking. If they choose the speaking mode, they also choose a voice type from "child, female, and male" options. The speaking mode also contains the ASR feature, again giving learners feedback whenever they speak words, phrases, or sentences into the microphone. However, unlike the SoundStart mode, the feedback in the speaking mode is provided only as an aural type (the sound of either "bink" or "bonk") without the option of visual lights. After choosing a mode, learners then select one of the six subjects: Food, Numbers, Home and Office, People, Activities, or Places and Transportation. Within each topic, several of the 32 available games become active. Games are also arranged by incremental developmental level.

In the first level, games such as Concentration, Bingo, and People Puzzle allow users to learn individual words and simple phrases. In Level 2, learners can practice the vocabulary learned in Level 1 through usage of complete phrases and sentences. Level 3 represents the most complex language usage. At this stage, learners can extend Level 1 and 2 skills through conversations in a colorful comic strip format. In some games, learners can also choose a skill degree, depending on the cognitive as well as linguistic challenges of the game. Regular game-users will be familiar with the criteria of many of the games, and with determining skill-levels.

ADVANTAGES OF TRIPLEPLAY PLUS! ENGLISH

- The software is easy to use. We tried it out in two different universities with 14 people, including ESL learners, ESL teachers who were taking introduction-to-CALL classes, and second language researchers. Most people were able to switch between modes and try out the ASR within 15 minutes. Beginners, while supported by their teachers, seemed particularly enchanted. The program is CD-ROM-based, and can be easily and quickly run in Windows. The interface is graphical and intuitive (green for go, red for stop, and a large help button). It also comes complete with a well-written user's guide which explains in detail how to use the software and play each game, and gives clear instructions which help learners easily move from game to game.
- One of the best features of the program is the user-friendly ASR technology which evaluates learners' speech, indicating whether their pronunciation is acceptable and reasonably accurate (but see also the first point in our "less positive reactions" below). The usual benefits of CALL apply here: A motivated learner can repeat a word, phrase, or sentence and get feedback without the necessity for a human interlocutor who usually would not have the patience or consistency of the software. Such instant feedback on speech may help some learners improve their pronunciation. Pronunciation studies to date, however, have been inconclusive about the effectiveness of teacher-delivered pronunciation instruction. See for example the article in the *TESOL Research Interest Section Newsletter*, February, 1998, Volume 5, Issue 1: http://pilot.msu.edu/user/polio/news2.htm#pro. Certainly, computer evaluation of pronunciation is also open to empirical investigation, and *TriplePlay Plus!* would be easy to use as a treatment tool.
- In keeping with current approaches to ESL material design, *TriplePlay Plus!* represents a good attempt at contextualizing the dialogues, even if the speech itself is highly scripted. The program presents learners with the option of hearing native speaker conversations in "real world" environments using natural speech rates, reductions, contractions and other features of authentic

spoken English. In the reading mode, learners' attention is also drawn to some of these features: They have the option to click and get further information about how contractions are made, for example. They also can control the speed of the dialogue. Depending on their listening comprehension ability and perceived needs, learners are able to play entire conversations or single sentences at a slower rate, and even hear sentences word by word. Obviously, they can repeat utterances as many times as they want. That *TriplePlay Plus!* is clearly targeted at a range of levels can also be seen by the fact that learners may select the level of the games. The software lets learners control the sequencing and pacing of their learning, offering contextualized native-speaker dialogues and complex games at one end of the spectrum, to simplified learner-friendly language at the other. This fine-grained targeting is obviously beneficial for second language learners, particularly in a classroom context where there may be a range of sub-levels within one class designated "lower-intermediate."

- The program is fun, probably motivating for learners (especially in the "play against the machine" game mode), and seems like a good learning tool. For example, the variety of games may keep language learning, particularly vocabulary acquisition, interesting. Many of the games are targeted at vocabulary, introducing learners to what may be new words and encouraging productive and receptive practice. Words and phrases are well matched with pictures, so that learners can easily comprehend the meanings and associations of the vocabulary. The bells and whistles are very professional (graphics and sound effects together with the ASR) and suggest that learners might remain stimulated by this software long after traditional lessons or previous generation CALL programs have become boring. Again, there is potential for SLA research using this software, perhaps to explore the outcomes of vocabulary learning in a CALL environment.

DISADVANTAGES OF TRIPLEPLAY PLUS! ENGLISH

- At the more advanced levels (e.g., Level 3 games in conversations), the ASR technology is less sensitive. Users' speech is not always accurately rated. For example, the ASR made the "bink" sound, meaning the pronunciation was acceptable, during testing when our non-native speakers cut off the final syllables of words, saying into the microphone "Playing ten," "I can't find my tennis rac," and "We'll also be going swim." The target forms were obviously "Playing tennis," "I can't find my tennis racquet," and "We'll also be going swimming," respectively. That the ASR system can be fooled into "binking" is a serious issue, and calls into question the usefulness of relying too heavily on the ASR.
- The program claims to help learners improve not only listening and speaking skills but also reading skills. However, this claim is not easy to substantiate since the text consists of mostly short conversations and the reading mode is similar to that of the listening mode.
- Some less significant issues:
    o We were surprised that learners cannot resume games from their last point if they stop for the end of class, for example. If learners stop a game in the middle of playing, they have to start it from the beginning, which can be a lengthy process. It would be useful if there was a feature by which learners could save their previous work.
    o Another frustrating point was that there is no "undo" feature when playing games in the reading/listening mode. Users need to click an option in order to move on. There is a feature, called "give up," but it is unfortunately only available in the speaking mode. It is an important feature because, for example, it is easy to click accidentally on a word when rearranging scrambled words. Even if the user realizes it is a mistake, they can't go back. Also, there was no "I don't know" feature; all the questions required yes/no answers.
    o It was also disappointing to hear that the company does not have plans for a Macintosh version. While we do not wish to begin subscribing to the platform wars, this did seem rather limiting.

      ○   As a final gripe, a site licence for five users is the same price ($250.00) as buying five individual copies. When we pointed this out to the company's education representative, they suggested we buy a licence for ten users to get the discount. With today's tight budgets in many language laboratories, the site licence discount and overall software cost does not represent a good deal.

CONCLUSION

In the opinion of these reviewers, *TriplePlay Plus! English* is a good software program for a variety of contexts. Individual learners, ESL teachers instructing at the beginning to higher intermediate levels, and others interested in CALL as a learning tool can all use this program and find something useful.

ABOUT THE REVIEWERS

Alison Mackey is Assistant Professor in the Department of Linguistics at Georgetown University. Her research interests include second language acquisition, research methodology, and CALL. She recently guest-edited a special issue of the *Modern Language Journal* (with Susan M. Gass) on the role of input and interaction in second language acquisition to appear in Fall 1998.

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Jung-Yoon Choi received her MA in TESOL from Michigan State University. Her research interests include computer-assisted language learning and curriculum design. She currently teaches English as a second language in Korea.