BiLingo Kidz

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type:
Interactive language learning software

Language(s)
Spanish (Latin American dialects only—focus on Columbia, Chile, El Salvador, and Mexico)

Level:
Elementary Spanish; for children, ages 7-14

Activities:
Dialogues/listening comprehension, vocabulary learning, games

Media Format:
CD-ROM (needs to be installed on local machine) or download from internet

Operating Systems:
Windows (XP or later recommended); Macintosh OS X 10.1

Hardware Requirements:
Windows:
500 MHz Pentium 3 or AMD Athlon processor; 256 MB RAM (500 MB recommended, 1 GB RAM minimum on laptop); 116 MB of hard disk space; onboard sound card with speakers or headphones; DirectX 9 compatible video card, minimum of 16 MB video RAM, 16-bit color, 1024 x 768 display; CD-ROM drive (if program installed from CD-ROM)

Macintosh:
300 MHz G3; 256 MB RAM (500 MB recommended, 1 GB RAM minimum on laptop); 116 MB of hard disk space; speakers or headphones; 1024 x 768 video display

Supplementary Software:
Broadband internet connection; web browser; email address (all needed if downloading program from the internet; otherwise, none)

Documentation:
No printed documentation or online documentation available; included with program on CD-ROM are: EULA, specs, RealPlayer movie tutorial on features and use

Price:
Multiple users: The program can be installed on individual computers in classroom setting or a lab; up to 5 students can log into the program on a computer and their progress will be saved. Annual classroom use per class, $125 when used as curriculum and projected to the class. School computer lab cost: 1-12 computers-$30 per computer, 13-24 computers-$27 per computer, 25 or more computers-$25 per computer
Distribution rights: Supplemental script of narrations and exercises-$45. Except as permitted for home use, the software may not be shared, installed, or used concurrently on different computers. Users may not sell, license, rent, transfer, or grant any rights in the software in any form to any person or entity without the prior written consent of BiLingo Kidz or authorize all or any portion of the software to be copied onto another person’s computer.

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The BiLingo Kidz program uses a series of short child-centered vignettes (4 vignettes per country, of approximately four sentences each) to teach basic vocabulary and sentence construction as well as cultural aspects of four Latin American countries. The stories are supplemented with audio recordings made by native Spanish speakers and by watercolor paintings depicting the content of the story. Vocabulary lists are accompanied by visual and aural reinforcement as well as American Sign Language (ASL) signs. A series of exercises after each story checks the learner’s comprehension of the stories, and culminating games are available after each of the four country units. The BiLingo Kidz website (http://www.bilingokidz.com) claims that “children will learn to hear, read and speak Spanish” through this program, although no speaking activities are directly included in the program. (The program producers note that they have adopted a natural approach in these materials, thereby making the assumption that language and speech are acquired naturally after a sufficient amount of comprehensible input. Therefore, the lack of speech recognition is intentional in BiLingo Kidz in order to prevent learners from feeling forced to produce the language before they are ready.)

Virtually no documentation accompanies the program, online or otherwise. The CD-ROM includes a tutorial (RealPlayer) explaining some navigation, but there is no other help available. A script of the stories and exercises is available for purchase at an additional cost of $45. The producers were more than willing to answer questions via email and also indicated that a teacher resource manual is in development.

EVALUATION

Technological Features

The program was tested on a PC laptop (Intel Celeron M processor 1.40 GHz, 504 MB of RAM), running Windows XP. The recommended RAM for a laptop is 1 GB, and the reviewer found this recommendation to be accurate. Even though the program itself ran fine on the laptop, it did slow down other programs while it was installed. There are no problems with compatibility anywhere else because there are no other platform- or browser-specific elements in the program.

There are no installation instructions, but the program is quite easy to install. Upon insertion, the CD-ROM auto plays, opening a window that shows the contents of the CD, the EULA, a RealPlayer tutorial, the required specifications, and the installation program. Installation from the disc takes fewer than 2 minutes.

The program operates almost flawlessly, with only occasional small delays switching between sections. No crashes or stalls occurred, only one or two small glitches (e.g., lack of feedback after answering an exercise question) which did not reoccur in spite of repeating the same keystrokes.

Leaving aside minor navigational issues in the exercises, the program is easy to use and is aesthetically pleasing. The operation of the program itself is fairly straightforward and is further enabled by the consistent layout of each subsection of the program.
In terms of the technology employed, the program has no frivolous bells or whistles, except perhaps the somewhat superficial animations of the watercolors, which often do not add any comprehension or content to the story. The animations occasionally seem jerky and unsophisticated and, at times, detract from the artistry of the paintings. Other than that, however, the program makes use of audio recordings and flash animation to provide audio input simultaneously with the written text and the paintings. The simplicity of the program is commendable precisely because it does not use extraneous technology that does not serve a purpose; however, it is questionable if children in the target age group (7-14 years of age) will find the program appealing. The multimedia society that surrounds children is full of high-quality videos, interactive animation, and integrated multiple technologies. To this generation of digital natives (Prensky, 2001), such simplicity may seem unsophisticated. Nonetheless, the producers report that a limited survey conducted by Gonzaga University marketing students in the spring of 2008 showed 50% of the children surveyed indicated that they would use the program at home. Therefore, depending on the child’s motivation and interests, the multimedia deficiencies may not be seen as such.

**Activities (Procedure)**

The program offers the user a variety of instructional activities designed to foster language comprehension. The focus is on reading and listening skills, as well as the development of cultural awareness.

The index screen allows easy navigation through the program. Learners’ progression through the program is prescribed; sections are grayed out and are unavailable until users complete the prerequisite areas. However, the program saves users’ progress so that they can quit and return to their last story/exercises when they log in again. Thus from the index screen only the areas that are available show up in color, requiring that users do everything in order and making it easy for them to see where to go next.

The main content of each of the four units is presented through four vignettes (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Storyboard*

![Storyboard Image]
For the vignette presentation, the screen is divided into five main areas (see Figure 2).

Figure 2
Sample Storyboard (from Fourth Mexico Story)

The bottom area consists of navigation buttons (forward or backward in the story, Translation, Vocabulary, Exercises, etc.). However, since users can only go on to Vocabulary when they have finished the story and can only go to Questions after they have viewed the Vocabulary, these navigation buttons make navigation burdensome at times. The Translation button, though, is helpful because it allows users to see the English translation of any sentence or word when the mouse is held down on the button, but only when it is held down. This encourages users to work primarily in Spanish and to resort to English only when necessary.

Above the navigation line is a text box that contains the lines of the story as the story unfolds. When clicked on, the corresponding audio for that sentence plays. Above the storyline text box, the window on the left-hand side is devoted to watercolor paintings depicting the action of the story. The paintings are minimally animated as they convey the actions of the story (or sometimes unrelated actions, such as a girl waving) and change with each sentence.

The right-hand upper portion of the screen is subdivided into two areas. The top area is a scrolling slideshow of photographs, and one can only presume they are of the country in which the action takes place, although they do not necessarily have anything to do with the story or its content. In fact, the reviewer found that she either wholly ignored them or was distracted by them. The lower area is a small box that contains grammar points and/or culture notes that are relevant to the content of the story or the language used in the story. The box is unfortunately quite small and rather easy to miss (or ignore). The grammar points are geared towards young learners (i.e., simplistic—not metalinguistic—comments), but, because they are so easy to ignore, they may not serve their purpose very well. The culture notes are relevant to the country in question and are accurate; however, they are occasionally simplified to the point of risking stereotyping. This is admittedly a challenge with any cultural presentation. Parents and/or teachers should be advised to deal with these notes appropriately.
Vocabulary

After each story is a list of vocabulary items from that story. These lists are presented in Spanish (and English, when the “Translate” button is held down) with corresponding audio and images from the story, as well as in American Sign Language (ASL).

While including ASL is an interesting idea, and it helps people associate actions with words, if one does not know ASL, it can seem a little overwhelming. Also, since ASL is American Sign Language, the signs used here are obviously English based and not necessarily the signs used for those vocabulary items in Latin America.

An inconvenience with these vocabulary lists is that the reviewer was unable to translate a single vocabulary word into English because holding down the Translate button gives the whole list in English. If she did not already know those words, it would be challenging to figure out which word was associated with which while toggling back and forth between languages (the items are not numbered in the list). However, since the Translation button is also included on the story page, most learners would probably not need to look up the translations for the vocabulary items, or at least not often.

Questions

After viewing the vocabulary list, the program unlocks the comprehension questions. There are four different kinds of exercises for each vignette, and each has accompanying audio (with the same native speaker that narrated the story). The exercises progress from simple yes/no questions (“Sí-o-No”) (see Figure 4), to paired-choice questions (“Choose-It”), to fixing incorrect sentences (“Fix-It”), and finally to multiple choice (“Answer-It”).

Some parts of the navigation through these screens are difficult to figure out. For example, in the Choose-It exercises users must click on the word in the sentence itself rather than in the square window used for answers in the previous exercise. All the exercises are timed, so if understanding navigation takes too long, 5 or 10 seconds elapse and users are
automatically moved on to the next question. Further, some exercises have visuals taken from the story watercolors, and some do not. These minor inconsistencies are distracting, but do not interfere with the exercises themselves.

*Sí-o-No questions.* In the first exercise, questions are presented (written and aurally), and learners have to click on *Sí* or *No* according to the information presented in the story (see Figure 4).

For the most part, the questions are very straightforward, although there are at times confusing items. For example, in the Mexico story, the character Diego is interested in the environment. One of the yes/no questions is *¿A Diego no le interesa el medio ambiente?* “Is Diego not interested in the environment?”, and users have to choose *Sí* or *No*. The correct answer is *No* because the statement is false according to the story, but this reviewer answered *Sí* because she thought that answering *No* would be confirming “No, he is not interested ... .”

Figure 4
Sample *Sí-o-No* Question Screen

*Fix-It questions.* The Fix-It exercise presents a series of factually incorrect sentences based on the vignette. In the bottom pane of the window are four possible sentences, and users must select the correct one according to the story (see Figure 5).

Unfortunately, the distracter items are insufficient. Often the only sentence that is even relevant to the question is the correct one; the others are sentences taken from other parts of the story or are totally ridiculous (e.g., Mickey Mouse takes the bus to school). Additionally, the distracter items that are taken from other parts of the story, while not answering the question, are valid assertions that can lead to confusing situations. For example, if the statement to fix were “Esther walks to school,” the options for correct sentences would be something like: “No, she takes the bus to school.” | “No, she leaves at noon.” | “No, she eats lunch at home.” | “No, she studies English and math.” Even without reading the story or remembering any details, it is clear that only one statement could possibly be the correct version of the initial statement because all the others are unrelated. This drawback diminishes the focus on comprehension.
Choose-It questions. The Choose-It question asks either/or questions in which users must select the correct option based on the story (see Figure 6).

This exercise was initially difficult to navigate. An answer box is not used (either on the side or below, where the answers to other exercises are found), so the text itself must be clicked. However, it is possible to click on any word in the sentence, even one that has nothing to do with the question (e.g., la or some other unrelated word), resulting in an incorrect answer. It is important to be both careful and precise while clicking the mouse button.

Answer-It questions. The Answer-It exercise has a subtitle of “What do you think?” However, the exercise is really not an opinion exercise but rather a simple multiple-choice
question. Questions are presented with four possible answers in the pane below the question, and learners must click on the correct answer (see Figure 7).

Figure 7
Sample Answer-It Question Screen

![Sample Answer-It Question Screen](image)

The same concern with distracter items mentioned above is also an issue here; the items are often valid sentences from the story but unrelated to the particular question. For beginners this section is more challenging although it is not so difficult as to frustrate them or to impede their progress. The activity encourages listening and is, again, a form of input to promote language comprehension.

Throughout all four exercise types, feedback is lacking; all that is provided is a “Correct” or “Sorry, try again later” message. (These generic responses could easily be given in Spanish to reinforce that vocabulary.) Thus the feedback is not at all intelligent and gives no indication of what was wrong or why. When a question is answered incorrectly, there is no opportunity to answer correctly because the program automatically proceeds to the next question. After completing the whole set, learners can go through the same questions again to try to do better, although having to go through all the questions that were answered correctly can be a bit tedious.

**Supplemental vocabulary lists**

When all the questions have been completed (correctly or incorrectly, the scores do not matter in terms of moving on in the program), additional vocabulary lists are available. These lists are thematically unrelated to the vignettes but provide necessary lexical items (e.g., foods, people, things, colors, clothing, places and stores) (see Figure 8).
These lists have audio recordings and visual aids available that are activated when a word is clicked. However, the visual aids are only line drawings, occasionally so simplistic as to make it difficult to tell what the picture is. The lack of aesthetically pleasing watercolors is noted here. Additionally, one wonders why these do not have ASL signs as well. (The producers indicated that this was due to budget limitations, as well as a desire to keep the computer requirements from being prohibitive.)

End of unit games
When all the stories, questions, and vocabulary lists have been completed or viewed in each unit, the program unlocks a final game for that unit. For the most part, these games offer limited linguistic functions because the goal for the games, according to the producers, is that they be used as rewards for learners and are viewed as being a fun, relaxed portion of the program.

The games consist of matching drawings or written words. While they provide written input and aural reinforcement (i.e., when a match is made, a recording of that lexical item is presented), they do not test material from the vignette.

The Memoria game is a memory matching game of pictures from the vocabulary list from the unit, but not necessarily related to the story content (see Figure 9).
The Vámonos game is similar, although here the goal is to match the written words while they are moving across the screen. It is essentially a mouse-skill game, although it provides written vocabulary input and aural input when a match is made (see Figure 10).

The Ándale game is a Tetris-like game in which one must move drawings to match
pairs of identical pictures; when contiguously paired the two drawings disappear. An audio recording of the lexical item plays as they disappear (see Figure 11).

Figure 11
Andale Game (Mexico)

The Cinco game is a hybrid of a tic-tac-toe game and a Connect-Four type of play. The goal is to put five colored markers in a diagonal row. In order to place a marker, learners must select the number that matches the audio recording. This is the only game of the four that allows competition, either with the computer or with a friend, thus offering the only collaborative opportunity in the program. Also, the Cinco game has the most linguistic-oriented focus because it requires the matching of aural input with its written form (see Figure 12).

Figure 12
Cinco Game (Chile)
Culminating activities

Two culminating activities unlock after finishing all exercises for all four countries: “Tell Your Own Story” and “Now You’re Trippin’.”

The Tell Your Own Story is a form that can be printed out, allowing students to fill in information about themselves. The form provides the relevant grammatical information so that even novice learners can produce a short, four-sentence story about themselves, similar to the ones they have studied about the four Latin American children (see Figure 13).

Figure 13
Tell Your Own Story

An excellent culminating activity, the Tell Your Own Story exercise is precisely the kind of personalized activity that is lacking throughout the program. Students would be admittedly very limited in their productive skills, but some kind of guided production at each stage would be beneficial.

The Now You’re Trippin’ game format is different from all the other program components; it is supposed to look like the viewer of a digital camera (see Figure 14).
Learners are presented with a series of digital photos, which are the photos used in the slideshows during the story displays in the earlier part of the program. Some of these photos are very memorable, but for the most part many have nothing to do with any particular country (e.g., a fruit stand, dogs in a street, etc.) and could be seen in a variety of countries, Latin American and otherwise. The benefit of this activity is that the photos are visually appealing and show many aspects of Latin American culture; they are the true realia in the program. Succeeding in this game, however, would require intense memorization of the photo slideshows.

**Teacher Fit (Approach)**

The creator’s note to the parents on one of the initial screens states, “The key to language acquisition is repetition!” This approach explains the redundancy in the materials, for example, asking the same questions over and over again. While most language educators would agree that constant and repeated input are invaluable to the acquisition process (Krashen, 1985), it is no longer clear that pure repetition and redundancy are essential in today’s more preferred communicative approaches to language teaching (Canale & Swain, 1980). It is difficult to tell, though, whether the repetition inherent in this program is the result of an adherence to an audiolingual method of language learning based on tenets of behaviorism (Skinner, 1957) or the result of the limitations of computer-based language programs (i.e., inability to provide personalized input and output opportunities). In either case, the end result is the same: a program in which learners interact solely but minimally with a computer that is used to provide multisensory input regarding basic language and cultural knowledge. There is nothing that encourages or requires learners to create or produce the language, to personalize their own linguistic production, or to interact with anyone other than the computer (Chapelle, 1998; Swain, 1993). As a stand-alone program, therefore, the program does not comply with communicative and sociocultural approaches to language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2003; Lantolf, 2001).
Additionally, while the ASL component is fascinating, there is no theoretical or empirical justification for superimposing American signs on Spanish language, and the developers provide no indication of the benefits of such. Parents may often use sign language with their preverbal children, but in those cases it is to make up for a developing linguistic system. In the case of BiLingo Kidz, it seems to complicate the already difficult development of an additional linguistic system (essentially, two additional systems). Nonetheless, for the kinesthetic or action-oriented learners, these physical signs may help their acquisition of targeted vocabulary items. Further, any exposure to sign language or other systems of communication can only be seen, ultimately, as beneficial in a child’s overall development.

**Learner Fit (Design)**

This program is designed for young children with little or no Spanish background. Accordingly, it presents basic lexical and morphosyntactic structures that children would need in order to talk about themselves in Spanish. Grammar is presented minimally, primarily in the grammar side notes during story presentation. As such, the approach is mostly inductive, hoping that children will be engaged with the stories and pick up the relevant grammar as they go (Omaggio-Hadley, 2001).

Given the reliance on written text in both English and Spanish, lack of instructions, and minimal error feedback, the program seems most appropriate for use in a class. Such a setting would allow a teacher to guide progress, provide feedback, and encourage linguistic creation and social interaction throughout the units. The teacher could supplement with personal anecdotes, additional cultural facts, or linguistic explanations. All of these things would be sorely lacking if the program were used alone. However, as a classroom supplement or for additional learning or practice at home, the program provides a nice launching point for the acquisition of Spanish and the discussion of Latin American cultures.

**SUMMARY**

The BiLingo Kidz program is a relatively inexpensive resource that allows teachers and parents to foster second language learning at an early age. The short stories about children similar to the target audience and the beautiful watercolor paintings serve as a springboard for language study in an elementary school setting, and the intensive repetition of the exercises encourages learning through memorization. The game-like format of the activities will appeal to young children. Crucially, this program is one of a very few that cater to young learners and fosters second language acquisition in children, although other programs focus primarily on vocabulary learning only, for example Español para chicos y grandes (http://www.allbilingual.com/epcyg-parents.htm), Hooked on Spanish (http://hooked-on-phonics.com/hooked-on-phonics-category.cfm?SID=1&cat=8y%20Subject&Category_ID=172), and 123 Teach Me (http://www.123teachme.com/learn_spanish/spanish_for_children). The BiLingo Kidz program offers a view of the vocabulary and structure of Spanish as well as a detailed look at some Spanish-speaking cultures, and it is this aspect of the program that gives it its greatest value.
SCALED RATING
(1 low-5 high)

Implementation Possibilities: 4
Pedagogical Features: 3
Sociolinguistic Accuracy: 4
Use of Computer Capabilities: 3
Ease of Use: 3
Overall Evaluation: 3
Value for Money: 4

REFERENCES


PRODUCER’S CONTACT INFORMATION
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REVIEWER’S BIODATA
Dr. Gillian Lord is Assistant Professor of Spanish and Linguistics at the University of Florida. Her primary specialization is second language acquisition, especially the acquisition of second language phonology, as well as study abroad. She also works in teacher training and the effective implementation of technology in language classrooms.
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