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Modern Software — a brief review of computer programs for English language learning

The main aim of the following article is to introduce and briefly present computer programs which can support or assist learning English as a foreign language at school or which can be used independently at home.

Nowadays, in the era of fast and rapidly changing world, a computer seems to be an inseparable part of our life. It has become an absolute necessity that has revolutionized almost each walk of life, starting from medicine through business transactions and finishing with the topic of the authors' interest, that is education. Apart from performing administrative functions, they above all, play a significant role in learning a foreign language.

Multimedia systems join a variety of ways necessary for presenting language items: text, graphics, sound, animation. Combined together create new and interesting developments in language education. Computer assisted learning makes the process of language learning more attractive, especially for those who may be bored with formal environment that is with the classroom (Juszczyk, 1999). By participating in computer language learning, learners' natural ability to think intentionally and creatively is stimulated. It allows the learners to relax, choose the topic of interest, the level and the pace of learning. It also seems to appear quite comfortable and stress-free referring to progress tests completion. Tests can be done several times even if the final score is unacceptable. Checking the level of the language acquired is not required here, so the language failure and disappointment can gently be avoided (Komorowska, 1999).

A modernised way of acquiring new items of a foreign language is aimed at four essential and necessary skills such as speaking, listening, writing and reading. Additionally, grammar and phonetic exercises can be practiced. All of them are accompanied with the key so the learners have the possibility to check their progress promptly.

Now let us start with a brief presentation of computer programs for English language learning that are available on Polish market.

EUTAINMENT is a program addressed to the youngest learners. The name derives from two words "EDUCATION and ENTERTAINMENT". The last word has a significant meaning in case of children since it covers two activities together: playing and learning. Children can easily learn to write and to speak in a target language, acquire new words, listen to the dialogs, and to get accustomed to the correct pronunciation of English sounds.

MULTIMEDIA LANGUAGE SYSTEM addressed to 4 to 9 years old language learners. It is composed of a set of 27 educational games which are supposed to help children to acquire basic English vocabulary such as colors, numbers, size, names of animals, body parts. Also basic language activities that are followed by English equivalents of vegetables, fruit, meal and drink can be used here. This program is equipped with a special set of quizzes helping children to consolidate new sets of words. Additionally, all the instructions are given in English, therefore, it would be necessary for a child to be given a Polish instruction, at least at the beginning of using the program. What makes the program even more valuable is the fact that the purpose of the program is to teach the language the same way as the mother tongue is acquired, that is through listening, repeating and then performing. Children above 10 can make use of 'MULTIMEDIA LANGUAGE SYSTEM' for practical learning. The learner can choose the topic of interest (eating and drinking, numbers, house and office, places and means of transportation, people, types of activities, house activities) and decide on the level of difficulty (there are three levels to go through). The idea of the program is to improve communication and pronunciation owing to really rich vocabulary (about 1000 words and phrases) from everyday life, consolidating exercises and short dialogues (in a cafe, restaurant, market, shop, library etc). The knowledge can be checked through puzzles, bingo and jigsaw puzzles.

MICKEYEURO — the next computer language program appropriate for beginners. (especially those who are delighted with Disney characters taking part in many funny situations). The learners get involved in spelling and pronunciation of over 1000 words, phrases and sentences read by an English lecturer. The expressions are accompanied by pictures and Polish equivalents. The program is supplemented by a book *English with Walt Disney*, thus the learning can be continued without the help of the computer.

WORD BIRD'S WORD LAND by Jane Perrett is a fully animated highly interactive world building program for 5 and up year old children. It is easy to use and it requires little teacher's or adult's support. A number of humorous games, song, and activities in 20 carefully chosen themes will quickly enable children to assimilate over 400 words while keeping them amused for hours. It includes an option to register the name of the user name, store and show the score – ideal for monitoring progress and introducing competitive stimulation.

ZAK'S WORLD GAMES: 'Million of years ago, a space ship from Zak's planet, Zalphon, crashed on Earth. In the space ship was the Wheel of Knowledge, which had 24 pieces. All the pieces were scattered through time and space when the space crashed. Zak needs to find all the pieces of Wheel of Knowledge so he can save the planet'. It is an extract from a computer program for the beginners. This language program helps children learn English in a motivating, original and enjoyable way. Using English from the moment they start to play, they match sounds with words and pictures to build up the Wheel of Knowledge. The game has three time zones Dinosaurs, Witches, Wizards and Future city, each with 8

activities. Children have to complete each level to move to the next one. Words are taught through sound and animation, in a totally interactive way.

GRAMMAR TREE (established by Witsoft) assists learning English grammar, which sometimes poses many problems to students. It presents exercises concerning all grammar topics and it includes appropriate feedback such as dictionaries and reference grammar books. The most characteristic feature of the GRAMMAR TREE is the possibility of graphical presentation of students' progress in learning.

ProEURO (Young Digital Poland) is one of the first professional program addressed to young learners. This program combines graphics with the digital recording and reproduction of sound, and hence the computer room can be altered into a language laboratory. It serves learning English for practical purposes. Thus, speaking, conversing and playing dialogues are greatly stressed as well as new vocabulary and collocations.

EUROplus+ is the program based on the modern language course *Flying Colors* (Heinemann Publishers). The material is presented for 3 groups of learners: beginners, intermediate and advanced. Its unquestionable merits are variable set of about 20 types of exercises and test, a very extensive set of sound recordings (words, sentences, dialogues, grammar explanations and song), possibility of self recording and video films. It is also suitable for schools and language courses since it can register many users and is equipped with a test checking system.

POP-ENGLISH is an interesting way of learning English as a foreign language offered to Polish students. 4500 very original tasks are sub-categorized into 3 groups: vocabulary, grammar and phonetics. The learner can choose between two forms of working:

Learning: the program teaches, corrects errors made while doing drills, gives feedback, enables users to take advantage of the enclosed handbook and dictionaries,

Evaluation: the program tests the knowledge gained by the learner.

GENIUS — the most up-to-date technique of learning is applied in this program. The authors use the mnemonic hyper-space to present the language. It is the development of the idea of brain maps established by Tony Buzan. The maps are the graphic representation of the semantic structures of the memorised information. They, through thoroughly joined action of the two hemispheres of the brain, increase the ability to memorise words, phrases and grammar rules. Many people take advantage of this technique subconsciously, for example while taking notes, which facilitate the process of memorising in an effective way. Furthermore, when learning some material (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) the students are able to make their own remarks next to the text or above. It also provides a set of tests for homework evaluation.

PROFESSOR HENRY may also be used independently. On one hand, it lets the users decide on the level of exercises, topics and areas of study. On the other hand, it cleverly prepares and plans the system of revising the material and checking progress. Professor Henry concentrates on grammar, vocabulary, reading and listening. The learners freely choose the route and the rate of the language.

NEW INTERCHANGE a program created by Jack C. Richards, Jonathan Hull and Susan Proctor is a course for international communication and one of the most successful English

courses for adults and adolescents at the beginning and intermediate levels. It focuses both on the accuracy and fluency, and offers a multi-skill syllabus integrating themes, structures, functions, vocabulary and pronunciation. The underlying philosophy of the course is that foreign language is best learned when used for meaningful communication. It is written in American English, but reflects the fact that English is the major language of international communication and is not limited to one country, its region or culture. Each unit offers fresh new topics and fresh world information for adults and adolescents. Beautiful illustrations and photos are presented in new design. It contains two conversations in every unit presenting grammar, function and expressions followed by listening or discussion tasks. The course offers a lot of comprehensive grammar presentation and practice. Student-oriented fluency activities reinforce each new grammar point. Pronunciation practice is integrated into grammar and fluency activities. Vocabulary building exercises are accompanied by fluency activities and offer a variety of approaches to vocabulary development. Additional listening practice with clear tasks and charts to help develop students' attention is offered. Expanded process writing guidance develops composition skills. Reading skill is of high interest and it evolves discussions. Special tasks called 'Interchange Activities' for pairs and groups enhance role playing and information sharing. Each full level of New Interchange provides between 70 to 120 hours of language instruction.

FCE GRAMMAR ROM created by Ingrid Freebairn and Hilary rees-Parnal for upper intermediate students. Built on the success of The Grammar ROM, this new higher level CDROM follows a similar approach to the presentation and grammar practice, whilst preparing students thoroughly for the Cambridge FCE exam. The additional exam practice section includes exam training and interactive tasks for the 5 different papers: reading, writing, listening speaking and use of English. Students can check their answers and cross-refer to different grammar sections to revise problem areas. Grammar section and the above mentioned parts of the exam are brought together in one format, making it compact and easy to use. Students can study at their own pace in a fully interactive environment and with instant on – screen help. The Grammar ROM is fun to use and students will have difficulty to get tired of it.

Euro PLUS — Interactive Course of Business English covering specialist issues is a complex and universal instrument designed for study English for specific purposes. It joins elements of text, colorful graphics, sound animation and video constituting integrated multimedia system. Language material for Business English is based on 2 textbooks: Business First written by Colin Benn and Poul Dummeth, Business Targets by Simon Grennal, printed by Heinemann Publishers (Oxford, Ltd). Joining these two textbooks in one application guarantees broad scope from all field of professional life and creates the course suitable for beginners and upper intermediate learners. Euro Plus has its own structure, which in a clear way allows learning the material gradually. The whole course consists of 2 parts (for beginners and upper-students) and each part contains 20 units. Within each unit there are 20 – 30 exercises which can be described as testing or descriptive. The previous ones the knowledge of material presented earlier and they require active participation of the learner in order to solve the test. Descriptive ones are designed for introducing new material of the lesson. they serve for acquiring new information. They contain basic facts of the current unit, as well as description of grammar, lists of important expressions and sentences with examples of their applications, new vocabulary, illustrations with sounded descriptions and sounded

dialogues. Although, the learners are not obliged to provide the answers to these kinds of exercises, they can independently test the degree of remembered units by completing filling gaps passages. This set of activities requires user's active participation in order to monitor the acquisition of the material. Here the further division is made. Additionally, Euro Plus contains 2 sets of tests:

1. one question

The characteristic feature of one question is the presence of only one question to be answered. This type of exercises are mostly focused on practicing writing skill and extending vocabulary of business specialty. It is performed by filling empty spaces in the table, inserting the missing roles in dialogues, identifying sentences or words in the text, completing missing pictures' descriptions, putting mixed paragraphs in the text in the correct order. Although all these activities aim at improvement in writing skill and vocabulary increase, it should be mentioned that the knowledge of grammar is essential here in order to solve the problem properly.

2. many questions

The second type of tests gives the user the possibility to develop writing as well as listening skill. In opposition to the first group, not one but a set of questions is to be answered. The most common orders that appear here are "write an answer to the set of questions, choose the most suitable answer to a given questions, write down couple phrases or sentences dictated, or place groups of words in the correct order". Often, the instruction suggests listening or watching video before solving the test. It means that certain exercises have additional sounded or video recording which helps to provide correct answers.

A separate group — so called 'recording exercises' make the users perform their own recording and it includes two types of activities. The first one refers to recording the missing part of dialogues or sets of phrases dictated. The recordings are stored on the disk and can be recollected later. The second one is 'monitoring' the progress either by the learner himself or someone else. Undoubtedly, one of the advantage while using this program is the possibility of applying additional bonus programs. EURO PLUS offers its users 5 so called instrumental programs. They are completely or partly independent from the principal course. The learners can use them irrespectively in each moment of their work with the program on every stage of learning. These, connected with the basic course, can in great part facilitate the acquisition of knowledge and promote its efficiency. The browser allows the users to search the whole material according to the described topics. The learners have the opportunity to define types of exercise and sets of key words, which precisely describe which part of material was used. Repetition and revision is possible. Business Audio Dictionary, which is a part of Euro Plus, contains all vocabulary introduced in the course. Each word has its own recording and short explanation as well as a longer text providing additional meanings and examples which illustrate the application of the word. New expressions can be added.

Other additional programs are created to practice pronunciation and writing skill. Thanks to a tape recorder, the user is able to establish the list of sounded phrases which stem from all programs of English systems. This is the basic for further improvement of pronunciation. The users have the opportunities to recall the list, record their own sounds and then compare them to original ones. Writing and spelling are practiced by using *Spel-*

ling Teacher. It allows them to test the knowledge of the English alphabet, it measures the time of reaction during the exercise, analyses the correctness of the answers and finds the most common mistakes or errors.

There is also Irregular Form program to which students can always refer to, no matter if they work with Euro Plus or do some other things. It contains a combination of irregular verbs, adjectives, nouns.

BUSINESS ENGLISH is the program addressed to students of professional English. It contains exercises which present, revise and check the knowledge of basic economic vocabulary (banking, turnover in shares, bonds, international trade, advertising, printing etc). This kind of computer language learning program is mainly addressed to intermediate or advanced students whose knowledge of English grammar is broad enough so they can concentrate on vocabulary development. Business English requires from the users general understanding of the business issues. The program does not teach how to make business but it shows how to communicate in the professional world.

Looking at what has been presented above, one can easily notice that learning English cannot necessarily be restricted to the classroom environment, books, copybooks, tests and the language teacher. Learning can be supported by the media or performed independently, according to one's speed, time and need. However, to achieve a satisfying level of proficiency in the language one has to realise that the responsibility for their involvement in language acquisition lies on them. As far as the access to the mentioned above language learning programs goes, it surely does not make any problems nowadays. Those who do not possess a computer can register to multimedia language libraries which are equipped with such software and which are willing to provide the users with professional help.

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