

REVIEW OF *REAL ENGLISH*

Title	<i>Real English, Interactive Video CD, Level 1</i>
Author	The Marzio School and Ipse Communication
Distributor	Americas: Real English L.L.C. Europe and Asia: The Marzio School s.a.r.l.
Contact information	Real English L.L.C. 153 Skylands Road, Ringwood, NJ 07456 USA Tel: 1-800-320-2224 Fax: 1-973-962-9101 www.real-english.com The Marzio School s.a.r.l. 5 et 7, rue des Baumes Istres 13800 France Tel: 33-4-42-55-01-25 Fax: 33-4-42-55-10-83 www.realenglish.tm.fr/
System requirements	With voice recognition: Pentium 120 or higher processor; 16 MB RAM; Windows 3.x, 95, or 98; Display adapter configured in High Color; 2x or faster CD-ROM drive; 12 MB available hard disk space; sound card, microphone, headset or speakers Without voice recognition: 486 DX4 100 or higher processor; 8 MB RAM; Windows 3.x, 95, or 98; display adapter configured in High Color; 4x or faster CD-ROM drive; sound card, microphone, headset or speakers

Price	1 - 5 sets* - \$79 <i>per set</i> plus shipping and handling 6 - 10 sets - \$69 <i>per set</i> plus shipping and handling 11 - 19 sets - \$59 <i>per set</i> plus shipping and handling 20 sets or more - call or email for quote *One set consists of two CDs.
Support	realenglish@attglobal.net
Target Language	English as a foreign/second language
Target audience	Adult beginning learners; knowledge of German, French, or Spanish required

Reviewed by Tomoaki Tatsumi, Toho Gakuen High School, Tokyo, Japan

OVERVIEW

Real English Interactive Video CD contains multimedia English lessons designed for either self-study or teacher-directed use. Eventually, the *Real English* series is to include four different levels, each consisting of a set of two CDs, although only one level is currently available. *Real English Level 1* (reviewed here) is designed for beginners and false beginners and thus covers basic structures and topics, such as greetings, names/spelling of names, the alphabet, numbers, time, weather, and asking for directions. Because one of the goals of the program is to familiarize learners with authentic speech heard outside of the classroom, each lesson is organized around video clips of on-the-street interviews conducted in countries where English is a dominant language. Consistent with this emphasis on authenticity, interviewees speak with a variety of native and non-native English accents and make no obvious effort to tailor their speech to non-native listeners. Accompanying each interview video clip are as many as eight types of listening, speaking, typing, and reading exercises. These exercises are supported by interactive video clips, sound, and voice recognition.

DESCRIPTION

When installing *Real English*, the learner is asked to choose among Spanish, French, and German for instructions, bilingual grammar explanation, and the bilingual glossary. One remarkable feature of this program is that the explanation of grammar points is customized for each language, and includes comparisons between the selected language and English. However, this feature also has serious drawbacks. One major disadvantage is that people who do not understand any of these three languages are automatically excluded from the pool of potential users, as even simple functions, such as exiting the program, must be carried out in one of the three languages specified.




Lea atentamente estas notas.

Instrucciones en inglés

You and I; he and she
Verb "To be" in the present tense: affirmative
Presente del verbo "ser/estar" : forma afirmativa

Subject Sujeto	Verb Verbo	Contracted form Forma contracta	Spanish Español
I	am	I'm	Yo soy/estoy
you	are	you're	tú eres/estás vosot. sois/estáis ud. es/está uds. son/están
he	is	he's	él es/está
she	is	she's	ella es/está

Note that "you" is used for both the singular and formal, the polite and the familiar.
Nótese que "you" se usa para "tú/vosotros" y "ud./uds."
2ª persona singular y plural, forma familiar y de cortesía.

Figure 1. Bilingual grammar explanation

From the main menu, learners first select a lesson, and then the specific point in that lesson where they want to start. *Real English* keeps track of learners' progress, and each time they use the program, it gives them the option of starting where they left off the last time. Each lesson comes with explicit objectives (typically using a social question, e.g., What's your name? What's your job?) and listening-comprehension of responses to that question. Lessons also contain some lexical and/or grammatical objectives. The following is the generic format for each lesson:

Stage 1. Presentation

The learner first views the video clips, consisting of various people's responses to the same question (e.g., Hi, how are you? What's your name? What's your job?). A variety of accents are featured, including those of non-native speakers as well as native speakers. The type of accent (UK, US, Irish, etc.) is indicated by an icon in the upper right-hand corner of the screen. With the appropriate equipment, both image and sound quality are excellent. On one

of the laptops on which the reviewer tested this program (Toshiba, Satellite 315CDT, equipped with Japanese version of Windows 98), however, part of the screen was cut off on one side.



Figure 2. "What's your name?"

Stage 2. Repetition Exercises

The learner is instructed first to view video clips or to listen to speech segments, then to repeat the speech sample, and finally, to record his/her own speech to compare with the model speech. These exercises resemble the repetition exercises commonly used in audiolingual methods. The record-and-compare activity provides the learner with a rare and potentially helpful opportunity to juxtapose his/her own speech and model speech, although some sort of visual representation, such as graphic representations (often used in acoustic phonetics) of the two speech samples, might help the learner notice where the two differ, especially if the learner is a visually oriented learner. However, the question remains as to whether such imitation practice is helpful, given that the models represent such a wide range

of English accents. Even if one accepts the developer's claim that, given the present status of English as an international language, learners should learn to *comprehend* a variety of accents, whether exercises should require them to *produce* such a range is unclear.



Figure 3. Record and Compare

Stage 3. Additional Exercises

Finally, the learner is presented with a series of drills targeting listening comprehension and writing. Contrary to the developer's claim, this reviewer did not find any activities that specifically focus on reading or writing at higher levels of cognitive complexity than spelling and typing. Some exercises supported by voice recognition offer pronunciation practice, as the learner has to speak into the microphone to answer questions. This stage provides the learner with an opportunity to practice the same target items and structures through a range of activities; typical exercise formats include multiple choice, word-ordering, cloze tests, and substitution drills.

Like the repetition exercises in stage 2, none of the additional activities in stage 3 allow the learner to express her own meanings and therefore cannot accurately be called "communicative." Immediate oral feedback is provided for these exercises, and is expressed in a variety of ways (e.g., "No way," "That's very good this time"). While such feedback is potentially useful, this reviewer found some of the feedback comments less than polite (e.g., "No way," "What are you saying? Maybe it's time for a break...") and was glad to discover that this function could be turned off via the options settings.

EVALUATION

As with all other CALL software, *Real English* has both pedagogical and technical strengths and weaknesses of which users should be aware in order to make optimal use of this unique program.

Pedagogically, the activities of *Real English* are compatible with some existing theories of SLA. For example, *Real English* is consistent with psycholinguistic approaches to SLA that focus on input, encoding/retention in memory, and automatization through practice (e.g., McLaughlin, 1987), to the extent that the program focuses on repetition of the same target items through different activities. The avoidance of artificially simplified input may appear to be in harmony with the interactionist account of SLA (e.g., Gass, Mackey, & Pica, 1998; Long, 1996) which suggests that exposure to non-reduced input may promote L2 development by providing learners with opportunities to negotiate for meaning. However, the lack of opportunities for learners to engage in *meaningful* target language use is not consistent with these and other SLA theories, and is strongly refuted by the interactionist account in particular. This lack of meaningful use of the target language by learners constitutes one major pedagogical weakness of *Real English*.

This lack of communicative activities is ironic given that "authenticity" is one of the claimed strengths of *Real English*. It is true that the language materials used in *Real English* are authentic in the sense that they are based on unscripted spontaneous language spoken at normal speed by non-actors. The inclusion of different accents and "real" people also contributes to the authenticity of the program by reflecting the current state of English as an international *lingua franca*. Indeed, this kind of input is extremely rare in existing ESL materials, granting *Real English* a unique strength. However, beyond the text level, at the contextual and situational levels, the input contained in the video segments is less than authentic. There is no story line or other contextual information that can inform the learner about when to expect to hear or use the language presented. Moreover, what learners are required to *do* with the input, an important dimension of authenticity, limits the authenticity of the program. As reported above, learners typically repeat dialogues, reconstruct sentences, and carry out substitution exercises.

One unique characteristic of *Real English* which deserves special mention is the inclusion of a diverse range of accents. With this feature, *Real English* is arguably one of the few, if not the only, CALL programs that have substantiated the recent movement toward "English as an international language" (Smith, 1983). One issue which concerns this reviewer, however, is whether this incorporation of different accents is sound pedagogy as much as a reflection of the demographics of English use world wide. Many learners of English (e.g., ESL learners who aim to enter a U.S. college) are not "world-wide" users of English and may not benefit from this feature of *Real English* as much as those who are (e.g., learners of English for international business). Therefore, although the target learners of this program are loosely defined as "beginning learners," it seems that the target learners should be specified more narrowly for this feature of *Real English* to be maximally beneficial, as was also the case regarding learners' first language, as mentioned above.

From a technical perspective, there is no doubt that *Real English* has achieved excellence. The program does not come with a users manual because there is no need for one: the basic operations of the program are self-explanatory and clear, and an extensive help function is available.



Figure 4. Help menu in Spanish

The learner interface is well-designed and attractive, and the main menu and navigation buttons accompanying the video clips give the learner maximum control over what, when, and how much to practice. The ability to resume the lesson where the learner left off last time is also a helpful function which is simple but nonetheless often lacking in other programs. The voice recognition feature, which appears in some of the multiple choice exercises and fill-in-the-blank type exercises, may help learners become aware of and improve their pronunciation. Three adult ESL students at a U.S. university who tried out *Real English* particularly enjoyed recording their own speech and comparing it with the model. Although limited to the three languages, the bilingual explanation and glossaries are also helpful.

One technical aspect of *Real English* which is both promising and somewhat disappointing is the way the program conveys immediate feedback and correct answers. Immediate feedback has been claimed to be one of the advantages of CALL in comparison with analogue videos or paper and pencil drills (Slaton, 1991). Indeed, this feature was well-received by the three ESL student informants who assisted with this review. It was therefore a little disappointing to find a few, albeit minor, weaknesses in this aspect of the program. For one, fill-in-the-blank exercises are not case sensitive, so "english" or "japanese" are accepted as correct spellings. This is disappointing, especially because this type of exercise offers the only opportunity for learners to practice anything related to writing other than spelling. Another drawback is the inflexibility of the evaluation of answers. For example, one of the fill-in-the-blank items asks the learner to fill in the following blank: "Where are you from? She _ from X." The only answer accepted by the program was "is," while the alternative "comes" received the negative response, "No way."

SUMMARY

In conclusion, *Real English* can offer excellent ancillary material for classroom or self-study learners at the beginning level. It provides input which is authentic in the sense that it is produced by "real" people who speak with a variety of accents. This kind of authenticity is often lacking in traditionally used materials. The excellent audiovisual interface and the diversity of the activities are intriguing and arguably motivational. Like other CALL programs, however, *Real English* has limitations. What it does not provide are authenticity in the sense of what learners are required to do, communicative activities, opportunities for interaction and the related hypothesis-testing about the target language grammar, and writing beyond micro levels of typing and spelling. Nor are any speaking or reading activities included, despite the producers' claim regarding "all four skills." Nonetheless, given that a single software program rarely addresses all of a learner's needs, *Real English* is highly recommended for use in conjunction with other materials or activities that compensate for its limitations.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Tomoaki Tatsumi is a full-time English teacher at Toho Gakuen High School, Tokyo, Japan. His current research interests include cognitive approaches to SLA, L2 learning through interaction, and foreign language education in general.

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