REVIEW OF *CONEXIONES: INTERACTIVE CD-ROM*

Name of Product:	Conexiones: Interactive CD-ROM
Author:	Fast, Michael (1999)
Distributor:	Prentice-Hall, Inc.
Contact Information:	One Lake Street Upper Saddle River, NJ 07458 Phone: 1-800-374-1200 (within US); 515-284-6751 (international) Fax: 515-284-2607 http://www.prenhall.com
Platform:	Macintosh System 7+; Windows 95/98
Minimum Hardware Requirements:	Windows: Pentium processor, 16 MB RAM, CD-ROM drive (2X minimum), SVGA monitor with 640X480 resolution, sound card, monitor that can support 16-bit color. Macintosh: PowerMac/G3, 16 MB f RAM, CD-ROM drive (2X minimum), SVGA monitor with 640X480 resolution, sound card. To record one's own speech, a microphone is needed.
Support Offered:	On-line support offered at http://www.prenhall.com/conexiones
Target Audience:	University-level, intermediate Spanish course (suitable for advanced high school level as well)
Price:	Free to institutions that adopt *Conexiones: Comunicación y cultura*

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OVERVIEW

Conexiones: Interactive CD-ROM is the software package to accompany *Conexiones: Comunicación y cultura* (Zayas-Bazán, Bacon, & García, 1999), a university level, intermediate Spanish textbook. It purports to expose students to "task-based activities using authentic material that further engages students with the high-interest topics of the text" (Zayas-Bazán et al., 1999, p. xvi). Task-based instruction requires learners to achieve a goal by searching for or exchanging information (Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989). Unfortunately, *Conexiones* falls short of achieving its task-based objective, and fails to take

advantage of today's electronic and multimedia features that could promote such a learning environment. Nonetheless, the wealth of cultural information is a strength of the package.

DESCRIPTION

Once the CD-ROM is loaded, the user is asked to type his or her name and to mark either male or female. The main menu appears next, with all of the activities connected by hyperlinks. The software is divided into lessons which correspond to the chapters of the textbook, each of which contains a reading/culture selection, a vocabulary list, grammar exercises, and a writing section. Each lesson on the CD-ROM, on the other hand, contains four sections: Mail *(Correo),* Kiosk *(Kiosco),* Let's Chat *(A conversar),* and Let's Play *(A jugar),* all accessible through hyperlinks.
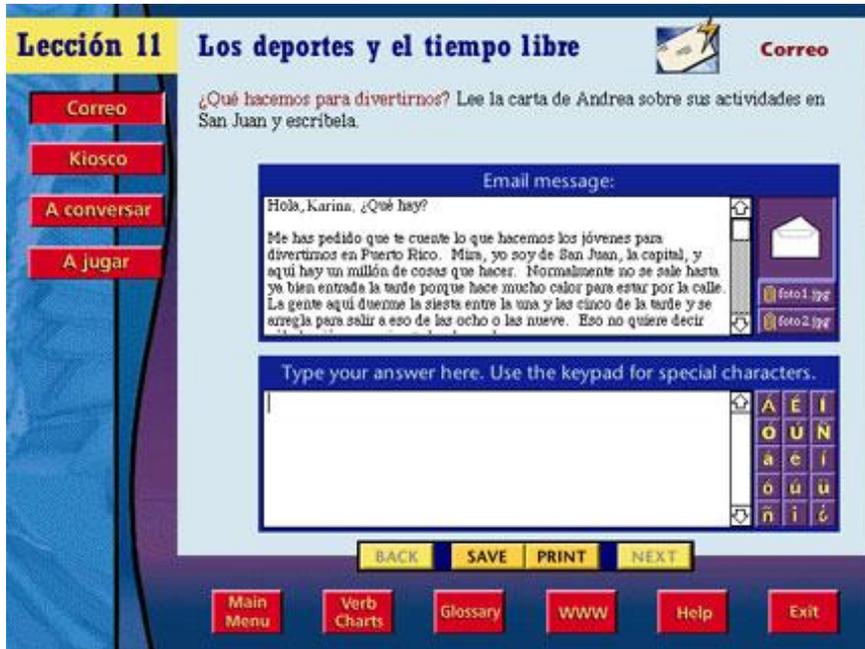

 Figure 1. Sample screen from the Mail section

The Mail section contains a lengthy (five to eight paragraphs) e-mail message in Spanish, personalized to the user, which expands on a cultural topic of the textbook. The messages use an informal register, as is appropriate to e-mail messages, and are from fictitious characters. For example, in Lesson 11 ("Free Time") a fictitious Andrea writes about how a typical weekend goes for her and her friends. She describes the places she and her friends frequent (e.g., the beach, shopping malls, night clubs, carnivals), as well as the time she spends with her family and alone. Each e-mail message ends with a question. For instance, the message in Lesson 11 asks, "And what do you do to have fun? What are young people's favorite activities where you live?" Students type their responses in a text box and can print or save them (to a floppy disk or a volume on the network). Two pieces of visual *realia* accompany each Mail section; a click on an icon will load the images. For example, in Lesson 11, one photograph depicts an aerial view of the Puerto Rican coastline, the other shows young people at a night club. There are no activities to accompany the photographs.
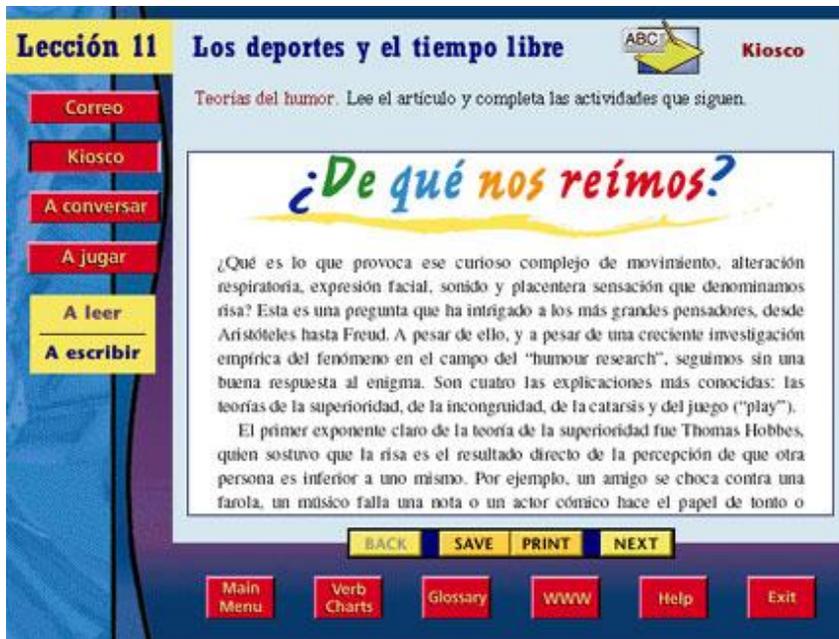
Figure 2. Sample screen from the Kiosk section

The Kiosk section entails an authentic reading passage related to the lesson topic, followed by five open-ended questions. As with the Mail section, students may save their answers. In chapter 11 ("Free Time"), the passage's topic is an article on laughter.

Figure 3. Sample screen from the Let's Chat section

In Let's chat, users view a QuickTime movie in which an interviewer poses a series of thematically related questions both to an interviewee (seen and heard in the digital movie) and to the student. Students record their answers with the microphone, and can then play them back to (mentally) compare their own answers to the interviewee's responses.

Figure 4. Sample screen from the Let's Play section

The Let's play section provides opportunities to practice vocabulary recognition with items from the textbook. Here, the student completes five fill-in-the-blank sentences by clicking one of four word choices on the screen. Students can make choices and receive feedback until they provide the appropriate response. After completing all five items correctly, the user sees a color photo relating to the cultural topic in question.

Conexiones contains a number of student resources. It includes a link to Prentice-Hall's Web site (where students can explore numerous supplementary activities for each lesson), a series of verb charts, a dictionary with words and phrases translated from Spanish to English, and a Help button, all of which can be accessed at any time during the lesson.

EVALUATION

Conexiones provides students with valuable cultural information relating to the lesson themes, which include "Technology and Progress," "Human Rights," "Diversity and Prejudices," "Employment and the Economy," and "Culinary Arts and Nutrition," among others. The slices of life in the Mail section's e-mail messages are engaging and realistic, while the authentic reading passages of various genres (e.g., short stories, autobiographies, and newspaper and magazine articles) in the Kiosk section expose students to the type of authentic language models believed to promote acquisition (Vigil, 1987). Still, the package does not take advantage of the unique learning experience that computers offer. A digital video presentation of the cultural information detailed in the Mail sections would have provided a multimedia cultural experience, thus bringing the target culture to life at multiple levels of representation, that is, through aural and visual avenues (Garza, 1996).

Conexiones also does not provide the task-based learning experience that it promises. It does not offer an exchange-of-information learning environment, which the term "task-based learning" implies (cf. Pica, Kanagy, & Falodun, 1993). Instead, this program amounts to a digital cultural reader and workbook. Of course, this is symptomatic of much courseware today. As Blake (1999) notes, "Most CD-ROM programs minimally do something in response to users' clicks, typing, or other keyboard/mouse actions. This minimal reaction often constitutes the sole basis for labeling the program as 'interactive'" (p. 11). Indeed, some of the features of task-based instruction, such as working in pairs and sharing of information, are

limited or not currently possible in computer-assisted language learning (CALL). However, *Conexiones* fails to capitalize on the features of task-based instruction which are possible in CALL, namely, providing non-linguistic goals for activities, attempting to draw students' attention to linguistic form while they are engaged in meaning-based communication, and including a variety of language functions. The author could well have provided opportunities for users to create a Web-based travel brochure, a health pamphlet on how laughter can release stress, or a forum for producing and recording a radio commercial (in QuickTime). In addition, while the topics of the Kiosk passages tie in nicely with the textbook's cultural themes, the reading activities are not task-based because there is no non-linguistic goal (cf. Shrum & Glisan, 1994). Indeed, the only task involved is an academic one, namely, answering comprehension questions.

The *Conexiones* package does not seem to be informed by recent reading research and pedagogy. More effective methodology would have employed widely accepted frameworks for approaching reading comprehension, such as the procedural model for integrative reading (Swaffar, Arens, & Byrnes, 1991). Because the Kiosk sections contain no pre-reading activities or guidance as to effective reading strategies that a learner can employ, students are more likely to rely heavily on bottom-up processes (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Furthermore, there is no feedback provided to the student concerning the accuracy of responses. Current technology allows the application designer to include context-sensitive routines (e.g., natural language processing; Nagata, 1996) that linguistically and semantically assess the appropriateness of a user's response. For instance, the user may believe that an answer in the Let's Chat section such as "My favorite sport is baseball" to the question "What is your favorite sport?" is wrong because it does not match the answer provided by the interviewee ("I like soccer"). The learner is not provided with any means to distinguish between ungrammatical responses and those that are grammatical but that differ from the example given.

Another unique feature of today's technology lies in its ability to provide a non-linear, exploratory learning experience of the target language (Berge & Collins, 1995; Salaberry, 1996). This possibility is largely unexploited in *Conexiones.* The student can access the lessons, as well as the activities within lessons, in any order. For example, a student can select to complete Lesson 2 before Lesson 1, or the Let's chat section before the Mail section. However, *within* any section, the learner must progress linearly, from item 1 through item 5.

Concerning the language, the editorial process seems to have eliminated the majority of typographical errors, although some still exist. For instance, in the Mail section of Lesson 3, an accent mark is missing in the first sentence of the e-mail message *"¿Como [sic] estás?"* (How are you?), while in the Kiosk section of the same lesson a typographical error can be found in *"Y ¿por qué cita el texto ae [sic] gobierno británico?"* (And, why does the text quote the British government?).

Regarding the reference tools, this reviewer finds that the lack of an English to Spanish dictionary, a tool that students might use in composing a response to an e-mail message in the Mail section, is a major oversight. Nevertheless, the dictionary contains an impressive number of words in Spanish with their English equivalents, including a range of high to low frequency terms. The verb charts are a nice addition to this software program. However, while the irregular verb chart is extensive, the stem-changing list is limited to *-ir* verbs, with even some common verbs such as *servir* (to serve) omitted.

SUMMARY

To its credit, *Conexiones* is not simply a drill-and-practice expansion of the textbook. The depth and breadth of the cultural information is noteworthy among ancillary packages. Nevertheless, the lack of the promised task-based activities, of interactivity, and of recognition of effective approaches to reading

categorizes this package more as a cultural supplement that resides on a CD-ROM than as a multimedia language learning experience.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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