REVIEW OF *ROCKET LANGUAGES:*
INSPIRING LANGUAGE LEARNERS FOR LIFE

Title	Rocket languages: Inspiring language learners for life
Program reviewed	Rocket Chinese
Levels	Level 1: Rocket Chinese Premium Level 2: Rocket Chinese Premium Plus
Computer system requirements	Windows Users: (1) Microsoft Windows XP, Windows Vista, or Windows 7 (2) Internet Explorer 8+, Chome or Firefox 4+ are recommended for the best experience (3) Adobe Flash 10.3+ Mac Users: (1) OSX 10.4+ (2) Chome, Firefox 4+ or Safari 3+ are recommended for the best experience (3) Adobe Flash 10.3+
Publisher	Libros Media Ltd. http://www.rocketlanguages.com (1) 8721 Santa Monica Blvd #1229, Los Angeles, CA 90069-4057, USA (2) 2-1008 Ferry Road, Woolston, Christchurch 8023, New Zealand
Support offered	(1) FAQ (2) Contact information (3) Tour video (4) Online community board
Target language	Chinese as a foreign/second language

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INTRODUCTION

Rocket Chinese is a straightforward, and self-contained language learning website. Rocket Chinese has been developed specifically for English speakers who would like to learn Mandarin Chinese as a foreign or second language. Interactive content, intelligent dashboard displays, personalized customer support, and audio-based learning are all basic features of Rocket Chinese. With spot-on cultural information and insightful audio lessons, this program is ideal for beginning to low-intermediate adult learners. As an Internet-based language learning environment, Rocket Chinese combines up-to-date features of interactive tools, such as a voice comparison system and interactive audio files with the benefits of social utilities, such as Facebook, Twitter, and on-line forums. Users have lifetime access and get free upgrades when the program updates.

NAVIGATION BAR

Once users have used their account, the opening portal at each subsequent log-in will provide them with pie charts to orient them in their previous progress. Above these pie charts is the navigation bar which consists of five principal components: Interactive Audio Lessons, Language and Culture Lessons, Writing, Survival Kit, and Games. Each component has a drop-down list which shows different aspects of the program's language learning resources and materials. Rocket Chinese presents an enhanced user

experience that combines listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills.

PERSONALIZED DASHBOARD

Below the navigation bar is a personalized dashboard which guides users on the recommended learning path by Rocket Chinese and allows users to see all the activities at a glance. This easy-to-manage interface contains several sections: Tour Video, My Overall Progress, Recent Activity, My Proficiency, Interactive Audio Lessons, Language and Culture Lessons, Writing, Survival Kit, and Games.

Several of these sections are straightforward. An orientation "tour video" as well as additional strategy videos are offered. A self-rating system called "My Level" is introduced in the "My Overall Progress" area. This progress tracking system enables users to determine how well they know a lesson and whether they should restudy it or move on. Users can test their comprehension of words and phrases associated with each lesson and get an overall rating for future reference. Users may also simply click the "My Level" icon at the top right of every lesson to manually rate the lesson overall. Under "Recent Activity," users can find a hyperlinked list of lessons they recently viewed and rated. The proficiency tests draw from the quizzes in each lesson. When a user has successfully completed each test, a certificate will be emailed for encouragement.

There are, however, two comments about these sections. First, users need to notice that their progress does not automatically update when they finish a lesson, and they must rate a lesson before the pie charts reflect that change in progress. Also, the quizzes are shown in written form, which may confuse beginners who have no idea about Pinyin (Pinyin is a kind of phonetic alphabet that uses the Latin letters to standardize pronunciation of Chinese characters). It would be valuable if audio files could be provided at the same time so the learners have better idea about the quiz questions.

The leading part of the program is the section "Interactive Audio Lessons," which provides abundant material, including lesson content, conversation transcripts, audio files, practice record, notes, tour videos, lesson feedback, level rating system, and quizzes. The primary aim is to cultivate learners' listening and speaking ability. Learners at level #1 can access thirty-one lessons, and level #2 learners can enjoy a more advanced selection of thirty-two courses in this section. The interactive audio course is designed to get learners participating in a series of conversations between Mandarin Chinese speakers. It covers practical topics that one may encounter in a Chinese-speaking environment, from self-introductions to various points of discussion. The conversation page displays transcripts in Pinyin, Chinese script, and the English translation. Previous research has shown that the use of similar transcripts can facilitate second language comprehension (Chen, 2011). While the interactive audio course's primary aim is to cultivate learners' listening and speaking ability, these trilingual transcripts may also enhance learners' reading acquisition. Additionally, the English translation helps learners keep up with the lesson and get comfortable with written Chinese. The Pinyin transcripts provide users with useful pronunciation practice.

The "Practice" page offers users a voice comparison feature, "Rocket Record." This voice-mapping tool is designed to allow learners to record their voice and compare their pronunciation with that of a Chinese tutor. Users can record and repeat until their accent, tone, and rhythm match that of the native host. Strategies such as evaluating and monitoring can be important for language learners who do not have much exposure to the target language (Li, 2010), but users do not receive any feedback on their pronunciation from the program, which may raise questions about the adequacy of self-monitoring without recourse to any authority (Engwall & Bälter, 2007).

The "Language and Culture Lessons" section attempts to address the need to integrate culture by describing cultural issues, facts, and social interactions; it offers resources, such as lesson content, transcripts, practice records, notes, tour videos, lesson feedback, a level rating system, and quizzes. The courses teach users the grammatical concepts behind the conversation as well as give them insights into different situations they are likely to encounter. Realistically portrayed impressions of Chinese society

(*Chinese* in this context meaning *Chinese society as a linguistic group*) help learners get the most out of their experience. Many of the topics in the language and culture section correspond to the ones in the interactive audio course. By linking these two sections, users have a chance to take a closer look at many of the words and phrases they learned earlier. Each lesson in this section provides audio sounds for individual sentences, but it would be even more helpful for learners if completed audio files for course content were offered, just like those in the "Interactive Audio Lessons" and "Survival Kit."

In the "Writing" section, there are easy-to-follow videos that teach learners how to write stroke by stroke. However, several problems surface here. There are two different kinds of Chinese (see above note) characters: simplified and traditional ones. Simplified Chinese is introduced throughout the program, but traditional Chinese characters are left out, which limits learners' ability to understand different cultural dimensions of the target language. Moreover, the course content in this section does not relate to the "Interactive Audio Lessons" and "Language and Culture Lessons" and does not take a practical, usage-oriented approach. Words and phrases that appear in other sections or that are used in daily conversation should be put in the writing section.

Rocket Chinese also includes a series of learning games which makes learning fun. These games are self-paced and can be repeated, which gives users an incentive to keep improving their scores and language skills. There are four kinds of learning games in this section: MegaVocab, MegaAudio, MegaCards Beginners, and MegaCards Advanced. MegaVocab and MegaAudio are word games that build users' Chinese vocabulary and test their audio recognition of Chinese words. These two games aim to increase users' reading, listening, and comprehension skills. Both of them are presented in Pinyin and also come in a version with Chinese characters. Another feature of MegaVocab is the MegaVocab Creator, which allows users to add their own extra words and pictures. MegaCards Beginners and MegaCards Advanced are memory games that enable learners to test their knowledge of Chinese words and build familiarity with common Chinese phrases. Two of the concerns are the absence of audio to assist learners to recognize and speak those phrases, and the lack of alignment in the content of the four games with previous lessons.

Users can get instant feedback from quizzes, tests, and games so they can see how much their Chinese has improved. Lesson content, mini games and audio tracks are downloadable. The on-average 28-minute audio files are compatible with computers and iPod/MP3, so learners can listen and practice easily through these portable and flexible files. The downloadable audio files are appealing, but additional files would also be useful, potentially with video as well as audio.

ROCKET TOOLBOX

On the left frame of the homepage is an area where users have access to additional features: My Community, My Motivation, My Notes, My Vocab, and Latest News.

"My Community" is a virtual space for learners to interact with the Rocket Chinese teachers, native speakers, and fellow Chinese learners. Users can have the system email them automatically when someone replies to a community topic they have commented on. The personal support is with learners every step of the way, which adds a human touch to virtual learning. It would be useful if, possibly for an extra fee, users could schedule a live tutor so that users could practice Chinese in real time. In "My Motivation" users find guidance on how to advance their language learning with a range of techniques, tips, tools, and motivational ideas with twenty-three lessons. The "My Notes" page displays the notes that have been saved, and users can click on the lesson name to go straight back to the lesson.

"My Vocab" is a learning tool that makes it easy for users to build their own vocabulary list, practice and remember important vocabulary, and rehearse pronunciation. Any word from the course materials can be added with its meanings and notes. Users are able to listen to the word or phrase to improve recognition and to practice their pronunciation as well. All the words in the "My Vocab" list are highlighted whenever

they appear in the course, and the meanings and notes will pop-up by clicking the words. Users need to add the English translation by themselves when they build their vocabulary list. It would therefore be beneficial to the learners to have a Chinese-English dictionary which can automatically translate the words for users.

The "Latest News" announces new features of Rocket Chinese, such as introducing Rocket's Facebook or Twitter account, changing the layout, and adding more materials. The dearth of posts shows that the news function is not frequently used. It would be desirable to have a moderator who could help to keep the site active by posting very important or fun news to all users in order to make fuller use of this announcement function.

HELP AND SUPPORT

On the Rocket Languages Help page, users can search for a topic by typing a question or key words into the Search box. They can check out the Top 5 frequently asked questions or browse for questions listed under the category headings as well. Through the help page or feedback icon at the top of each lesson, users who need technical support or want to provide feedback on the course can find contact information, such as phone numbers, mail, and e-mail addresses. Users can also send a copy to their own e-mail when they ask questions and receive answers on-line.

CONCLUSION

Rocket Chinese presents an Internet-based language learning environment which is extremely friendly, from the helpful words and phrases used in language instruction to the simple user interface. Rocket Chinese offers a favorable language learning environment in a self-contained website that integrates interactive features and inspires users with appropriate resources and materials to foster their learning. The strengths of this program lie in the continuity of native presenter, the voice-recognition technology, the variety of linguistic and cultural tips, the lifetime access, and the downloadable audio files. Rocket Chinese allows users to learn Chinese at their desired pace, place, and time. Beginning or low-intermediate adult learners of Chinese will find this program insightful and achievable. Overall, Rocket Chinese makes learning Chinese a rewarding and interesting experience.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Dr. Wan-Jeng Chang is currently an assistant professor in the Department of Applied English at Overseas Chinese University, Taiwan. She has a particular interest in examining how computer technology facilitates EFL teaching and learning. E-mail: cwj@ocu.edu.tw

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