

***“THIS IS THE BIGGEST BLUE CAKE”: A TECHNOLOGY REVIEW OF
ROSETTA STONE® VERSION 3***

ERIN BIDLACE

Title	Rosetta Stone version 3
Publisher	Fairfield Language Technologies
Contact information	http://www.rosettastone.com/ http://www.rosettastone.co.uk/
Type of product	Computer-assisted language learning software
Format	Online subscription or CD-ROM
System requirements	<p>Operating System: Windows (32-bit editions only) 2000, XP or Vista, Mac OS X 10.4 or 10.5</p> <p>RAM: 512 MB or more</p> <p>Processor: 1 GHz or faster</p> <p>Hard-drive space: 600 MB free (per level)</p> <p>Sound card: 16-bit</p> <p>Display: 800 x 600 resolution (1024 x 768 recommended)</p> <p>Internet: Internet or phone connection required for product activation</p> <p>Microphone: Speech recognition feature requires a headset microphone (USB recommended)</p> <p>Disk Drive: 16X CD-ROM Drive (for installation)</p> <p>Additional Requirements for Online Products: High-speed internet connection</p> <p>Browsers: Internet Explorer 6sp1, Internet Explorer 7, Firefox 3.0, Safari 2 and Safari 3.</p> <p>Flash 9 plug-in installed on browser</p>
Price	£129 - £399 for personal license

Keywords: *computer-assisted language learning software, technology review, Rosetta Stone, second language teaching, self-instruction*

1. Introduction

A few minutes on the Rosetta Stone website is likely sufficient to intrigue any language enthusiast. With its colourful pictures, celebrity endorsements, and bold claims, even the most defeated language learners may well be persuaded to believe

they have at last found the answer to their language learning needs. However, what magic method lies behind such claims as “Language learning that works. It’s fast, easy, and fun!” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website) and “The fastest way to learn a language. Guaranteed.” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website)? While teachers and applied linguists struggle to make even the smallest advances in second language (L2) learning, looking for even modest ways to facilitate this long and arduous process, the developers at Rosetta Stone purport to have it all tied up with a red ribbon. The following review attempts to demystify the Rosetta Stone method and presents my evaluation of version 3.

2. Description

Rosetta Stone version 3 is advertised as an “everything you need” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website) package, alleging to be all you need to learn speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in over 30 available languages. As such, assignments are built around these four main skills, although learners have the opportunity to customize by selecting the skills they want to focus on most. Using the in-house developed Dynamic Immersion™ method, the target language is presented without translations or grammatical explanations, using only pictures and illustrations to convey meaning. The assignments move from single words to short phrases to more complicated sentences in a highly repetitive manner. Although learners are free to work through the program as they wish, the assignments are presented in a linear sequence, each assignment building on the previous one. At the end of assignment blocks there are summarizing tests to evaluate overall progress. Meanwhile, a feature called Adaptive Recall™ uses an intelligent design to remember which target

language prompts the learners have previously made mistakes on, and reintroduces these prompts at specific intervals for extra practice. Rosetta Stone version 3 boasts high-end graphics, cutting-edge speech recognition technology, and is available in up to three levels of difficulty ranging from basic (level one) to advanced (level 3).

A typical Rosetta Stone assignment takes the form of a multiple choice question, and begins by presenting a target language prompt, e.g. “*una manzana*” (Spanish for “an apple”). This prompt is either written (in a reading assignment) or spoken (in a listening assignment). On the screen are four pictures, e.g. an apple, a sandwich, an egg, and a loaf of bread. Once the prompt is presented, learners must click on the corresponding picture. A correct answer is marked with a “√” (and a pleasant harp sound), while an incorrect answer is marked with an “X” (and an unpleasant chime) with the opportunity to try again. Assignments build on one another by incorporating previously introduced prompts into phrases and sentences of increasing complexity, e.g. “*nueve manzanas*” (“nine apples”). In this way, learners have the implicit opportunity to practice lexical items (e.g. “*manzanas*” means “apples”), morphological forms (e.g. adding “s” to nouns creates the plural form), and syntactic structures (e.g. the count modifier comes before the noun) without any translations or explicit grammatical explanations. This lack of translations and explanations is the impetus behind the Dynamic Immersion™ method, which claims to eliminate the need for “boring memorization” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website) and “the endless tedium of...grammar drills” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website), and instead “teaches language naturally, the same way your learned your first language” (Rosetta Stone 2007: iii). As Stoltzfus, (1997: 2) explains:

The native language is learned by hearing simplified speech in a context which provides the cues that makes this speech comprehensible. This context also

provides immediate reinforcement to the child. The Rosetta Stone works in the same way. It uses thousands of carefully selected pictures to create contexts where the meaning is clear. The program elicits the student's response and gives instantaneous feedback, confirming the comprehension that has taken place.

With this instantaneous feedback, learners are afforded the luxury of a tireless tutor as they click from one colourful screen to the next, and endlessly mimic native speaker pronunciations using the speech recognition technology to gauge accuracy. Moreover, working alone on their computers, learners are free to do so whenever they wish, for as long as they wish, the oft-touted great advantage of using any materials designed for self-instruction (Dickinson 1987).

3. Evaluation

At first glance, Rosetta Stone version 3 is an appealing product, with an attractive interface, easy to navigate assignments, state-of-the-art technology, and a straightforward approach to language teaching and learning. However, a closer look exposes certain flaws in the design.

Rosetta Stone purports to teach L2s the way children learn their first language (L1). However, while this approach may seem elegant in theory, the obvious objection is that children do not learn their L1 sitting alone at a computer, nor are they constantly prompted to choose between four discrete multiple choice options when assigning meaning. Consequently, such an approach may not be so elegant in practice. Children learn their L1 in a social setting, where their attempts at communication are received by caretakers who engage in negotiating meaning, rather than simply evaluating these attempts as correct or incorrect. If a child learning German as an L1 failed to capitalize nouns in written production, the meaning of the text would still be

understood, and the child would not be held back from further communicative efforts, yet this is exactly what happened to one learner of Rosetta Stone German when she attempted to complete a writing assignment. Because she did not capitalize the nouns in her answer, the program responded with a big “X” and little else. There was no opportunity to negotiate meaning, no corrective feedback instructing her on the rule that nouns in German are capitalized, and no way to complete the assignment until she discovered her mistake on her own (Bidlake forthcoming).

As described above, Rosetta Stone does not provide translations or grammatical explanations and uses only pictures and illustrations to convey meaning. However, whereas children learning their L1 are oblivious enough to tolerate the extreme levels of ambiguity present in language learning, adults learning their L2s may experience intense frustration with the lack of translations and explanations (e.g. if adding “s” to nouns creates the plural form, why is “sheeps” incorrect?). As another frustrated learner of Rosetta Stone German expressed, “but I’m not a baby, I’m a grown-up!” (Bidlake forthcoming). Some adult learners simply want grammatical explanations and to deny them this is to create an antagonistic learning environment. Moreover, this pedagogical design brings with it other problems. Because meaning is conveyed through pictures and illustrations, target language prompts are restricted to what can be represented visually, and as such, concrete nouns and active verbs seem to enjoy an unbalanced privilege throughout the assignments (e.g. the verbs “to think” and “to feel” are not taught in level one, yet less frequently used verbs such as “to wash”, “to wear”, and “to brush” appear several times). Furthermore, adding to the already frustrating ambiguity caused by the lack of translations and explanations, many of the pictures themselves are ambiguous. Are the blond schoolchildren “los

niños” (“the boys”) or “*las niñas*” (“the girls”)? Does the adjective “*groß*” (“big”) correspond to the large dog, or the magnified picture of the leaf? These ambiguities create problems for the learners who report making errors, not because they do not understand the target language prompt, but because the pictures are unclear. The result of such errors is frustration and often failure to complete assignments with a passing score (Bidlake forthcoming).

Comparisons across Rosetta Stone reveal that all of the programs have been designed around a single language bank, from which programs for the more than 30 languages have been developed. As such, every program presents the exact same content, simply translated into the target language. The result of this design short-cut is, for example, a Japanese language program that does not teach words such as “*sushi*”, “*sake*”, “*geisha*”, “*futon*”, or “*shinkansen*”—all words of some importance to people learning Japanese in order to travel to Japan or get along with native speakers. Additionally, pictures and illustrations are not language-specific, making the programs relatively inexpensive to produce, but missing out on a significant opportunity to present target language culture in authentic settings (Kramsch 1993). This is a concern also raised by Kaiser (1997: para 7) in his review of Rosetta Stone Russian version 2:

[It] has no cultural context, at least not a Russian context. None of the pictures were taken in Russia, so the CD-ROM fails to convey a sense of Russianness. The cars aren’t Russian, the houses aren’t Russian, the parks aren’t Russian, the people aren’t Russian. Interestingly, the same pictures are used in the German version...but my guess is that they are not German either.

Just as children learning their L1 are not sitting alone at a computer, these same children are not learning their L1 utterly decontextualized from their L1 culture.

In terms of the content that *is* presented, some learners may be frustrated by the order in which it appears and the priority it is given by the developers. Although

the expressions for “hello” and “goodbye” have been inserted fairly conspicuously into the first lesson of level one (an improvement on version 2, which does not teach these at all in level one), “thank you” and “excuse me” are not introduced until the 12th and 13th lessons respectively, while “please” is not taught until level two. For learners preparing to use their newly acquired language to travel to target language destinations and interact with native speakers, such expressions will no doubt be more useful than “The eggs are red” and “This is the biggest blue cake”, taught in the third and 19th lessons respectively of level one. As one learner of Rosetta Stone Italian complained after completing the eighth lesson of level one:

I had to write (type) a female name, “*Giulia*” or something! I don’t understand why I need to know how to spell “*Giulia*” when I haven’t learned so many more basic things. For example, I haven’t learned how to say “thank you” or “excuse me” in Italian yet! (Bidlake forthcoming)

Finally, Rosetta Stone claims to be “everything you need” to learn the four main skills of language learning; however, there is no explicit instruction on how to use writing systems. For a learner only familiar with Latin-derived alphabets, trying to learn to read and write in non-Latin-derived writing systems such as the Arabic alphabet, Korean Hangul, Japanese Kana, or Chinese Han without instruction is a herculean task. Rosetta Stone learners working with such unfamiliar writing systems have the option of having everything transliterated into the Latin alphabet at the click of a button; however, this is not going to help them read menus, negotiate street signs, or write postcards in a target language environment.

To its credit, Rosetta Stone version 3 is an improvement on version 2. The language bank has been updated to incorporate some conspicuously absent lexical items (e.g. “hello”, “goodbye”, “to want”, “to need”, and “to love”). Many of the grainy, poor quality pictures and illustrations of version 2 have been replaced with

sharper, higher quality images. The addition of the Adaptive Recall™ feature has provided added learner support, while the addition of Audio Companion™ (ancillary target language CDs/MP3s that learners can use away from the computer for listening practice) has provided added flexibility. These are all welcomed improvements and serve to enhance language learning with Rosetta Stone.

4. Conclusion

In my view, cost-saving measures such as withholding translations and grammatical explanations, using a single language bank for every target language, and sacrificing cultural authenticity for the cost-effectiveness of recycling pictures and illustrations has cheapened the Rosetta Stone experience. Moreover, it would seem that Rosetta Stone has replaced “boring memorization” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website) and “the endless tedium of...grammar drills” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website), with boring multiple choice questions and the endless tedium of mouse-clicking. Returning to the intriguing claims made on the Rosetta Stone website (i.e. “Language learning that works. It’s fast, easy, and fun!” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website) and “The fastest way to learn a language. Guaranteed.” (Rosetta Stone 2009: website), I remain unconvinced. In fact, according to a study alluded to here (Bidlake forthcoming), the only truly fast phenomenon of Rosetta Stone is how quickly learners get frustrated and lose interest, and starting at £129 for a six-month online subscription, this is an expensive way to satisfy intrigue.

References

Bidlake, E., forthcoming. *Going solo: case-studies of learners grappling with self-instructed CALL*. Thesis, (PhD). Newcastle University.

Dickinson L., 1987. *Self-instruction in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kaiser, M., 1997. Review: The Rosetta Stone for Russian. *CALL @ Chorus*. Available from: http://www-writing.berkeley.edu/chorus/call/reviews/rosetta_russian/index.html/ [Accessed 27 April 2009].

Kramsch, C., 1993. *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rosetta Stone, 2007. *User's guide: online*. Harrisonburg, VA: Rosetta Stone.

Rosetta Stone, 2009. Website. Available from: <http://www.rosettastone.com/> [Accessed 25 April 2009].

Stoltzfus, A., 1997. The learning theory behind the Rosetta Stone Language Library from Fairfield Language Technologies. *The Annual Meeting of the National Association for Bilingual Education, February 1997, Albuquerque, NM*. 1-3.

About the author

Erin Bidlake is in year three of the Integrated PhD program in Education and Applied Linguistics in the School of Education, Communication, and Language Sciences at Newcastle University. Any questions or comments on this review are welcome and can be sent to: e.e.bidlake@newcastle.ac.uk.