

CANADIAN SCENES CD-ROM

reviewed by Fang Ying

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Publisher: Xian Bo Multimedia Company, He Nan Province, China, 2000

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Tel: 086-0371-5991246 **Fax:** 086-0371-5976192

Language: English

Level: intermediate to advanced EFL or ESL learners

Media format: CD-ROM

Operating System: Windows 95,98, NT, 2000

Hardware Requirements: Windows CD-ROM IBM PC or fully compatible, 133 MHz processor or above, 32MB RAM, 30 MB free space on hard drive, SVGA monitor (640x480 screen resolution capable of displaying thousands of colours). Windows-compatible 24xCD-ROM drive, Microsoft mouse or compatible, optional SoundBlaster sound card or compatible, headphones or speakers, a microphone.

Supplementary software: Windows Media Player

Price: Single User (20 RMB)

Description:

Canadian Scenes, a culture-embedded CALL software, is intended to provide people who are going to Canada with the first-hand information on Canadian culture. It can also be used as a language learning software for intermediate EFL learners to improve their English as well as acquire cultural background knowledge.

Once the software is installed, a simple and clear introduction is given on its interface, content and functions of each button. The crystal-clear direction paves the way for your better use of the software. The Menu button appearing on each page allows users to have a clear idea of where s/he is and where s/he is going. And other buttons on each page enables users to access “quit,” “help,” “continue,” and “exit” anytime they want, as well as to change the sound and colours of the program. The “help” button enables learners to access the translation if they have any difficulty in understanding any sentence or topic. Though the dictionary functional button is not shown on each page, a quick right-mouse click will soon provide you with a detailed explanation of any unfamiliar word you meet. On each screen, sound and graphics are both available to ensure users a better knowledge of Canada.

The content of the software is closely related to the Canadian culture and covers many aspects of life in Canada ranging from climate in different areas to sports. Altogether four relevant categories such as backgrounds, culture and education, Canadians and everyday problems are covered in this software. And each category is sub-divided into many detailed sections for learners to get acquainted with Canadian culture or to get prepared for going there. For instance, everyday problem section deals with such topics as living, shopping, telephone, travel and sports, which are considered to be travellers’ everyday concerns. All the information is organised in an associative and nonlinear structure to enable learners to find whatever interests them.

The designers of the software seem to understand the learners’ consultative needs and they have made all the information presented in a “dialogue-like” form. All the questions put forward by A are the key questions usually asked by people who are going to Canada or students who are keen on Canadian culture. And all the answers are very

specific and logical. A related picture is shown under the dialogue to add to the attractiveness of the topic and to enhance learners' understanding of it.

Furthermore, many vivid real-life examples are given to illustrate different features of Canadian culture. For instance, one of the sections subsidiary to the education category is written for those who are interested in studying abroad. "A" asks lots of questions like "How to write a letter of application," "What tests one should take" and "How much money one should get in handy before the departure." "B" provides very specific answers, which satisfy the needs of would-be overseas students.

Evaluation:

The CD-ROM is easy to install and simple to operate. Once you put it into the CD-driver under the Windows operating system, the CD-ROM will be immediately set up onto the hardware as long as you follow the simple English instructions in the dialogue boxes. Similarly, you can quit or exit anytime you want simply by clicking on the "Esc" on the keyboard.

The most eye-catching feature of the software is its culture embeddedness, which benefits many Chinese learners no matter what their needs are. It provides learners with informative and instructive information about Canada, especially for those who are going to travel or study there. The question-and-answer process in each category is helpful for them to get more familiar with all aspects of Canada and to adjust to the new culture.

Moreover, as the material is written by Canadians and spoken by native speakers, the language in each part is authentic and idiomatic. Thus, apart from being a reference tool for travellers, the software can be employed as an efficient reading and listening supplementary material in some formal courses. Some Second Language Acquisition principles can be found behind the content. For example, intrinsic motivation rather than extrinsic motivation is capitalized when learners are using the software. Instead of

expecting some external prizes or rewards, learners can get a feeling of competence and self-determination for exploration of foreign cultures. The culture-language relationship is most likely to meet learners' intrinsic demands as the questions presented are mostly what they intend to ask.

Besides, the multimedia settings like sound and graphics help to lower learners' anxiety which they usually have in a formal language learning environment and to sustain their attention to important and interesting content.

However, just as everything has two sides, this software is no exception. The biggest weak point, in my opinion, is that as a teaching aid, it fails to enable learners to practise language skills comprehensively because only listening and reading are involved in using this software. Learners do not have enough chances to test what they have learned and to practice writing and speaking. In addition, it is not interactive enough and fails to give sufficient feedback.

Recommendation

Though the software offers us promises as well as demerits, which is of most importance to us is how to apply it effectively in the classroom. In other words, the way we use the software can to some degree make up for some of its imperfections. Thus, how to make better use of it becomes another concern. First of all, sufficient pedagogical guidance should be given on how to take advantage of the software. Only when students have a clear idea of how to use it can they take more initiatives to integrate it into their language learning.

In my opinion, some software learning tasks concerning language input could be done before class. For instance, teachers may leave some related questions like "What are the famous sports games in Canada" and "What do Canadians usually eat" for students to explore on their own, making sure that the questions raised are based on the learners' language levels. Then, in class, teachers will have more time to ask students to report

what they have learned or to organise some role playing or group discussion activities to develop their speaking ability. Shortly after the class, if students are required to write reflections and summaries on some topics, their writing skills will surely get improved. In this way, the software can equally serve as a supplementary tool for language learning as well as a culture reference tool, just as was advertised on the CD box.