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Review of Transparent Spanish, Premium Edition

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Transparent Spanish, Premium Edition

Reviewed by

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PRODUCT AT A GLANCE

Product Type

Multimedia course

Language

Spanish

Level

Beginner (College level)

Activities

Listening, reading, writing, speaking (for interpersonal communication), flashcards, cross-words, word scrambles, dictation, and audio recording

Media Format

CD-Rom or Electronic download

Operating Systems

Windows: Windows XP Service Pack 2, Windows Vista or higher

Macintosh: Mac OS X version 10.3.9 or higher with Safari

Hardware Requirements

Microphone (for voice recording activities)

iPod® or MP3 Player for Byki Pod files: iPod Video or nano required to display pictures and play sounds. Other MP3 players can play sounds, but may not support picture display.

Documentation

User's Manual on CD-Rom or with Electronic download

Price

\$89.95

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

Transparent Spanish, Premium Edition is designed as a stand-alone, comprehensive introductory Spanish course. The material it contains is equivalent to that covered in one college semester of beginning Spanish. Learners are encouraged to spend 30-45 minutes on *Transparent Spanish* activities each day and complete each lesson in approximately one week. The goal of the program is to develop conversation skills in an immersion environment through a variety of communicative activities and lessons. The main screen presents four

virtual books: *Beginner Lessons*, *Fundamentals*, *Conversations*, and *An Adventure with Andrés*. The topics included in *Beginner Lessons*, the main text, are: Introducing Yourself, Describing Yourself, Ordering and Preparing Food, Talking to People, Going Shopping, Work and School, Recreational Activities, Business Vocabulary, Health and Medicine, Sleeping Late, Going to the Beach, The Weather, José's House, Making Plans, and Going on Vacation.

Fundamentals includes 10 additional lessons, each presenting 10 common nouns and verbs. *Conversations* includes 4 lessons and *An Adventure with Andrés* includes 3 lessons; both books present video vignettes featuring an amiable character, Andrés González, as he travels around the Spanish-speaking world filming commercials for a travel agency.

EVALUATION

Technical Features

Transparent Spanish is easy to install on the hard drive. The installation results in one shortcut for the main program and another shortcut for Byki, which is the flashcard-based vocabulary component of the program. From the main page, learners can click on a Guided Tour for an introduction to the program. There is a Help button on every screen throughout the lessons; this help button launches a very detailed, printable and searchable user's manual.

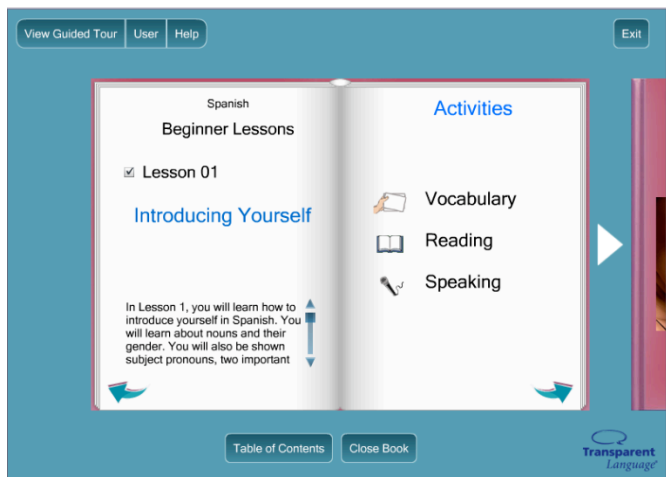
Launching the Byki flashcard-based vocabulary activities from the main program is easy but a bit clumsy. An 'import list' window opens and closes automatically. During this reviewer's test run (on a good PC running Windows XP), the Byki could not be exited without a manual close using the Task Manager. Once launched, however, the Byki is very attractive, easy to use, and has many engaging features. Those learners who enjoy flashcard-based studies will love the Byki. For typing accents and other special characters, learners are directed to a link that launches a guide to setting up their own foreign language keyboards. They might miss having an embedded toolbar with clickable Spanish symbols.

The activities of *Transparent Spanish*, as detailed below, are generally very user-friendly, highly interactive, and varied in structure and focus. Learners have many opportunities to hear recordings of native speech, and the sound quality is impeccable. The activities in which learners record their own voices are surprisingly easy to use and clear-sounding. Every activity offers corrective feedback.

Activities (Procedure)

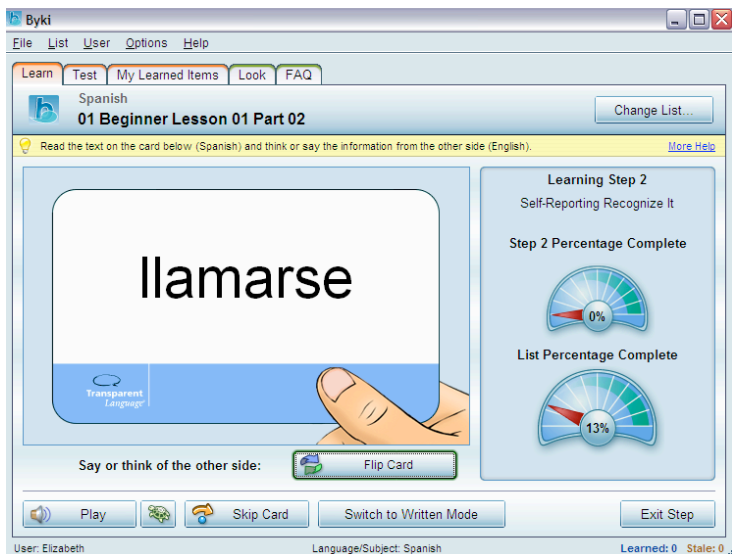
The 15 lessons of *Beginner Lessons* consist of a brief introduction, a vocabulary section, a reading section, a written activities section, and a speaking section (see Figure 1).

Figure 1
Main screen for lesson 1 of *Beginner Lessons*



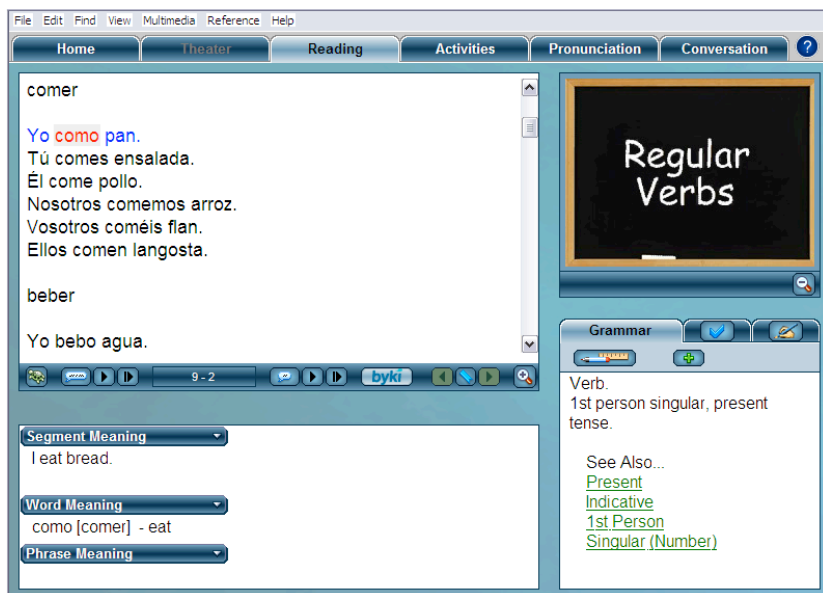
Clicking on the vocabulary link launches Byki flashcards. The three step learning process of the Byki program is 1) Preview It, 2) Recognize It, and 3) Produce It. In the Preview step, learners simply click through the flashcards, reading the words and listening to native speakers pronounce them. English translations are provided in writing. Learners can click the turtle icon to slow down the pronunciation. After previewing all the cards in the lesson, a congratulations screen appears. Step 2, Recognize it, presents the cards in Spanish, and learners think of or say out loud the English equivalent (see Figure 2). They then flip the card and decide if they were correct or incorrect. Once learners have answered each card correctly a few times, Byki switches to written mode. The cards are presented again, in Spanish, and learners type their responses, in English. When a learner types an incorrect response, Byki shows the two relevant cards in succession, to help learners re-learn the vocabulary they confused. A very useful feature is the “Accept answer” button, which allows learners to proceed even if they’ve made a simple typo. After typing all the words on the cards correctly, learners move on to Step 3, Produce It. This step is just like Recognize It, except that the cards are first presented in English, and learners must produce the Spanish equivalent. Each lesson includes approximately 10-20 new vocabulary words.

Figure 2
“Recognize It” step of Byki



The reading section allows learners to read the vocabulary in word lists, phrases, and full dialogues. Learners navigate through the written text and highlight the parts they want to listen to. A grammar window details the grammatical information carried by each word as it is highlighted (see Figure 3). For instance, for verbs, the grammar window displays their mood, tense, person and number. Learners can click on any of these inflectional features to read about their function and form in the GrammarPro manual.

Figure 3
Reading

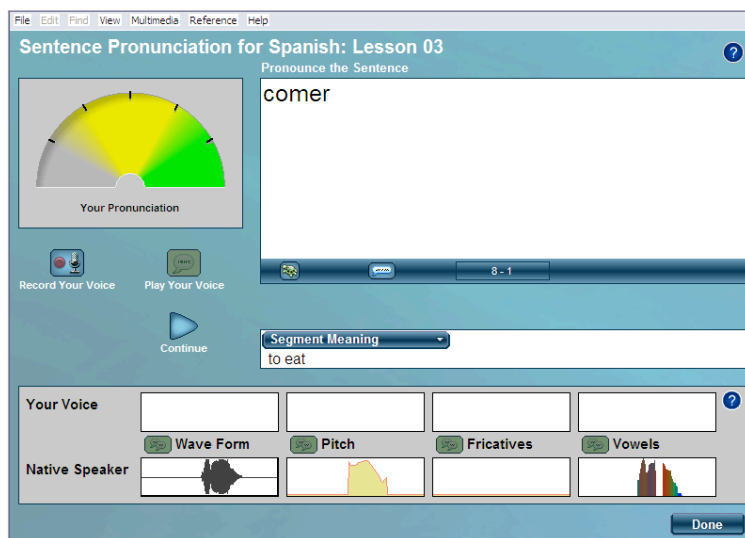


A variety of written activities are available in the activities section: Crosswords, Vocabulous®, Word Dictation, Unscramble, Verb Quest, Plug-n-Play, Graffiti, and Sentence Dictation. For each type of game, learners can delimit the linguistic material used in the creation of the game, e.g., all words from this lesson, just some, or just some part of speech. The activities are ordered by perceived relative difficulty, but they can be completed in any order. The clues to the crossword puzzles are set up as cloze phrases and sentences, drawn directly from the reading passage. Learners can avail themselves of several types of help if needed, such as the sentence translated into English, an audio recording of the Spanish sentence, or a free letter. Vocabulous® is designed to be much like the crossword, but with fewer help functions. The word and sentence dictation activities are designed to help learners hear words and sentences in a target-like way. Learners listen to audio segments and type in their dictation. Waveforms of the sound files are provided to support their listening and speaking skills. The unscramble activity requires learners to unscramble a sentence in the time allotted by clicking and dragging the words. Verb quest requires learners simply to highlight the verb in the phrase, which is perhaps too basic to be engaging. Plug-n-Play is a form of cloze test with phrases on the left and vocabulary words on the right to plug into the phrases. All activities provide item-by-item feedback, helping learners discover the correct answers with the minimum amount of help they need or desire. Scores are tabulated for most activities. Scores include points for accuracy, bonus points for completing activities quickly, and penalties for help that is used.

The speaking section includes many opportunities for focused listening and speaking. Learners scroll through a text, highlight a word or phrase they want to practice, listen to a

native speaker producing the phrase, record their own voices producing the phrase, and compare the recordings. Multiple native speaker voices are used. Waveforms depict the acoustic energy produced in both native speakers' and learners' recordings. Pitch, fricatives, and vowels are also depicted visually in three separate graphs. The Help button brings learners to an explanation of how to use these visual feedback cues. However, learners may feel overwhelmed or confused by the feedback unless they have prior experience with acoustic analysis (see Figure 4).

Figure 4
Pronunciation



There is also a conversation activity in which learners listen to a complete dialogue and then practice playing the part of one of the characters. Learners' performance can be supported with a prompt for their upcoming line in English, the full line in English, the full line in Spanish, or no support. Learners record their lines and can compare their productions with those of native speakers. Finally, learners can replay the entire dialogue, with their voice inserted when the character talks.

When a lesson is completed, learners click an arrow next to the lesson title, so that a check mark appears in the book's table of contents marking the lesson as complete. However, learners have the ability to check the lesson at any time; there is no requirement to actually finish the activities in the lessons. Similarly, learners can jump to any lesson and any activity at any time. Their progress and completion of lessons is only tracked lesson-by-lesson; the program does not keep track of which activities learners have completed within each lesson.

The *Fundamentals* book includes 10 lessons, each highlighting ten common nouns and verbs. All the linguistic forms contained in *Fundamentals* are useful to beginners, and the activities (the same as those in *Beginner Lessons*) are engaging. *Fundamentals* has a story line that revolves around a set of characters, but it lacks meaningful title chapters and is not explicitly linked to *Beginner Lessons* or to the other books, even though some of the linguistic forms are repeated in more than one book. *Conversations* features videos of the character Andrés González filming commercials for a travel agency. These films are shot on location (e.g., in Puerto Rico and Colombia) and provide many opportunities for learners to see native speakers of different varieties of Spanish interacting in culturally appropriate ways while they discuss a range of topics. The sound quality is good, though the video itself looks

slightly dated. Learners can practice the dialogues of the videos just as they did in *Beginner Lessons* and *Fundamentals*. Likewise, *An Adventure with Andrés* includes videos shot on location, this time in Spain, in three fun lessons that include many interesting references to cultural information.

TEACHER FIT (APPROACH)

Transparent Spanish claims to help learners master key vocabulary and develop speaking skills as they interact in an immersion environment, and the program delivers on all these fronts. The variety of lessons and interactive activities allow opportunities to hone skills in reading, writing, listening, speaking, and culture. This beginning course emphasizes vocabulary, both individual words and longer phrases, over grammar, helping learners to build a lexicon of formulaic sequences that can support fluency in speaking (see for example, Wood, 2006). However, grammar is not avoided altogether but rather backgrounded in otherwise communicative activities. The GrammarPro is always available, with explicit instruction and examples, so that learners can investigate relevant form-meaning relationships existent in the linguistic forms they are using as they carry out particular activities, akin to a *focus on form* approach rather than a *focus on formS* (Doughty & Williams, 1998). Every activity provides corrective feedback of some sort, which may help learners to notice the gaps between their interlanguage and the target language (Mackey, 2006). A variety of help functions provides linguistic support for learners, in the form of word clues, English translations, and voice recordings, so that learners can be successful at every activity even while working in the TL independently. The program covers a wide range of topics and thematic units, all presented in meaningful scenarios, with relatively natural dialogues, and requires learners to communicate in the target language. Great emphasis is placed on frequent practice and use; linguistic forms are recycled often, and learners are encouraged to review their flashcards and other activities as often as possible.

However, some elements of *Transparent Spanish* are not completely in keeping with best practices of SLA. Learners can complete any book, any lesson, and any activity at any time they choose. While this allows for great independence and freedom, it begs the question whether or not the program has been designed with learners' natural developmental sequences in mind (Meisel, Clahsen & Pienneman, 1981). Also, though the listening and speaking activities include communicatively meaningful scenarios, the mechanics of the activities themselves emphasize dictation and repetition, reminiscent of antiquated audiolingual methods (Lee & VanPatten, 2003). These listening and speaking activities may not be as effective for honing conversational skills as would be opportunities for extemporaneous speech or more meaning-focused listening comprehension activities.

Though not explicitly stated, *Transparent Spanish* is designed for college-aged or older, highly literate adults. It can be used as a stand-alone beginning conversation course or incorporated into a language class as outside practice of the linguistic forms presented in the class, in an engaging way through interactive activities. Learners' performance on activities is tracked with assessment scores, which could easily be incorporated into classroom-based assessments. The Byki element of the program can be purchased separately and could be incorporated into a traditional class as an extra vocabulary building exercise. The Byki allows many opportunities to listen to, speak, read and write key vocabulary, as well as recycles older material to test one's knowledge regularly.

LEARNER FIT (DESIGN)

Transparent Spanish could work well for learners who like to work independently, are motivated, and do not mind the absence of a human interlocutor. The wealth of activities and multimodal presentation will engage learners with a variety of learning styles and strate-

gies. The program even automatically creates a screen saver that will challenge learners and remind them to be thinking of the target language frequently. The dialogue activities, in which learners hear their recorded voice as part of a dialogue supported with character photos, may make it seem almost as if the learner is truly conversing with native speakers. Learners can easily keep their vocabulary refreshed with the Byki feature that tallies which items are "fresh" (having been viewed recently) or "stale."

However, the design of the program may also be frustrating to learners in several respects. The computer assisted language learning (CALL) immersion environment may leave learners feeling as frustrated at times as they are apt to feel in a real immersion environment, i.e., that they are being inundated with too much language at once, without being able to make sense of it. Grammar explanations are relegated to the GrammarPro, which is quite complete for a beginner's reference, including such advanced topics as the preterite perfect progressive tense. Grammar explanations are written succinctly, and translation support is provided. For the second language learner and grammar neophyte, however, the information in the GrammarPro may seem like too much too soon. Learners may also be occasionally frustrated by the sometimes haphazard presentation of vocabulary in the lessons and flashcards, in which some items in a thematic unit (e.g., days of the week) are presented without others (e.g., Wednesday only). The Byki flashcards present individual lexical items with Spanish-English translations and audio support, but lack visual (pictorial) and contextual support which may not be entirely engaging for learners or encourage deep processing (Ellis, 1995). Finally, learners may be confused about what sequence of activities is suggested. That is, the four books in the program are not directly linked or interwoven into one program of study. Learners may wonder whether they should complete all the *Beginner Lessons* before attempting the lessons in the video series, for instance.

SUMMARY

Transparent Spanish is an easy-to-use beginning-level Spanish program for adults that provides learners with a wealth of vocabulary and opportunities to practice conversational skills in an immersion environment. Learners can navigate at will through a variety of lessons and communicatively-oriented activities with many models of natural language. While the presentation looks and feels a bit outdated, the technology works very well, even for speaking activities. The program is not designed to provide opportunities for extended writing and of course cannot provide real, meaningful, human interaction or negotiation of meaning. However, motivated learners will find that this program provides them with many hours of engagement with the target language.

SCALED RATING (1 low-5 high)

Implementation Possibilities: 4
Pedagogical Features: 3
Use of Computer Capabilities: 4
Ease of Use: 5
Overall Evaluation: 4
Value for Money: 5

PRODUCER DETAILS

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REVIEWER'S BIODATA

Elizabeth M. Kissling is a PhD candidate at Georgetown University. She specializes in second language acquisition studies and is particularly interested in second language teaching methodology, second language phonology, psycholinguistic approaches, memory systems, study abroad, and computer-mediated learning.

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