ReCALL **13** (2): 293–295. Printed in the United Kingdom

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Software reviews

EuroTalk Advanced French DVD-ROM – *Au coeur de la Loi*. Euro Talk have produced a DVD application for advanced learners of French who wish to improve their communicative ability. The DVD has as its main focus an episode of a popular French television detective drama *Au coeur de la Loi*. The tasks that are included in this package are all based upon events and scenes from the episode of this television programme. It is a self-contained package, that is to say the user requires no supplementary media or materials to use the DVD.

System Requirements: Windows 98/2000, Pentium 200Mhz, 64 MB RAM, DVD-ROM drive, 800*600 16 bit colour display, 50MB free disk space, soundcard and microphone (optional)

Distributor: EuroTalk Ltd. (http://www.eurotalk.co.uk)

Price: £34.99

The DVD will load automatically if the auto-run function is activated on the DVD ROM drive. The first screen allows the user to choose the language in which the help screens will appear. Along with this choice, there are also troubleshooting notes regarding the DVD and recording sound in the application. This proved to be a useful addition, as during testing problems were experienced when using the voice recording section of the package.

The use of icons as opposed to textual descriptions and menus helps to create an uncluttered screen, even on smaller monitors. The colours have been chosen with care and complement each other well to give a modern appearance to the whole package. The subtitles that accompany the video are displayed in a white font on a black background and other text is contrasted well with backgrounds and graphics present on the screen. The icons are sensible in their design, the use of the classic video cassette recorder metaphor for play/stop, fast forward and rewind in the video section for example. Custom icons are explained adequately either on the jacket of the DVD or within the screen specific help.

The main praise however has to be reserved for the quality of the video. The reason for choosing to release this package on DVD as opposed to CD-ROM is evident when watching the video. The audio too is sharp and clear and combines with the images to give the impression of watching an actual television programme.

Aside from the video and text section, the episode can be viewed either in its entirety (fifty minutes) or as individual scenes. The DVD comprises five other sections: a Dictionary, Concordance, Recording your Voice, Video-quiz and the Test section.

The dictionary has both audio and pictorial examples of its entries. Similarly, the word look-up adopts the same method of explanation, although as opposed to the isolated word of the dictionary, the chosen word is placed in context with one or more examples from the video. While these are adequate in their content, it would have been beneficial to have them available while watching the video.

The user can choose to be one of nine characters in the Record your Voice section. This section is aimed at the user being able to master different registers and adopt paralinguistic features associated with French.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0958344001001227 Published online by Cambridge University Press

The four different exercises in the Test section are vocabulary, missing words, what is the next line? and spelling. There is a practise section that allows the user to become familiar with what is expected and how to manipulate the actual test, which is either 'point and click' or 'drag and drop'. The user can attempt as few or as many of these practise questions as is desired. In the Test section the user must complete the exercises against the clock. The test section is scored out of 400 and the user has the opportunity to print out a certificate of achievement if they desire, the reward for a good score is a gold, silver, or bronze medal with a score of 375 or above winning a gold medal.

The Video-quiz is where the user is pitted against a virtual opponent (another interesting use of DVD capabilities). The questions are based on semantic factors of spoken French, the user must choose the correct meaning of a slang phrase, for example. Ponder too long and 'Matthieu', the opponent, could steal the point; this is a great motivational feature.

The overall look of *Au coeur de la Loi* is impressive, the DVD format certainly shows how video can look when used in a CALL application, yet, it does tend to distract from the lack of other features. While the exercises and the video quiz are visually pleasing and of a decent length, there appears to be very little user support and the quality of the feedback is not up to the standard of other features present. The only feedback present on the tests is either a green tick for a correct response and a sound (either a gong or a beep) to signify an incorrect choice. The user cannot review the mistakes that have been made and there is no explanation of errors. It is difficult to provide error feedback on a multiple choice exercise but with a package that has such potential a little more learner support would be desirable along with a more interactive dictionary available when watching the video.

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EASE (Essential Academic Skills in English) Volume One – *Listening to Lectures*. The ease ('essential academic skills in English') listening to lectures CD-ROM is the first in a series of CD-ROMs planned by the ease team based at the University of Warwick. It is intended for students whose first language is not English and, as the title suggests, aims to help them overcome the difficulties they may encounter when listening to lectures in English. It can be used either as free-standing self-study material, or to complement an existing English for Academic Purposes (EAP) course.

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Distributors: ease, CELTE, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL UK. Tel: +44 (0) 24 7652 8440 E-mail: easeteam@warwick.ac.uk (for general enquiries and for site licence and multi-user sales)

System Requirements: a 486 PC or better, running Windows 3.1, 95, 98, NT or 2000, a CD-ROM drive, 16 megabytes of memory, at least 8 megabytes of hard disk space, 16 bit colour or better, a sound card, a mouse

Price: £30 (single user copy), £120 (5-user licence), £220 (6-20 user licence), £400 (full-site licence)

The material is based on digital video recordings of lectures given in 25 different departments at the University of Warwick. This has been divided into six units focussing on different aspects of lectures such as Openings, Structure and Organisation, Language Functions, Attitude and

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Argumentation. Each of the units gives practice in a wide variety of tasks including listening for gist, listening for specific information, note-taking and vocabulary expansion. There is a mixture of short intensive listening (some of the clips last only a few seconds) and longer extended listening (although even the longest clips do not last more than a few minutes).

The CD-ROM loads without problem, and I did not experience any technical difficulties while using it. The quality of the video clips is extremely high, and I was impressed with the consistently high standard of both sound and graphics. (The author gave a presentation on the problems of recording lectures at the British Association for Lecturers in English for Academic Purposes (BALEAP) conference in Leeds in 1999). The ease website (http://www.ease.ac.uk) can be accessed at any time when using the CD-ROM and this provides technical assistance and further information. One of the innovative features of the CD-ROM is the cross-referencing dictionary, which in addition to providing a written definition also allows the user to watch a video clip in which the word is used.

The *listening to lectures* CD-ROM has obviously been well thought out. It is easy to use, and the questions are clear and unambiguous. Students using it for self-study purposes should not have any problem following the instructions. There is a wide variety of tasks, enabling the student to practise the different skills involved in listening to lectures, and subskills such as vocabulary extension are not neglected. The authors' own publicity material states that it has been shortlisted for the European Academic Software Awards 2000. It may be, however, that some of the questions ("Does the lecturer give his name?") were too easy for some in-sessional students and the material is perhaps more suited to weaker students, particularly those on year-long pre-sessional courses.

Listening to lectures provides non-native students with the opportunity to analyse the language needed to understand lectures, and by giving the student the chance to listen to and watch this language in a variety of contexts, different learner needs are catered for. It will be an invaluable resource for students from a wide variety of language backgrounds and study specialisms, as lectures have been selected from across the spectrum of courses taught at the University of Warwick.

When I was using it I occasionally found instances of overlapping questions and answers; in one case the user is told the structure of a lecture in feedback to one question, and then in the following question is asked to give the structure of the lecture! Moreover, cultural differences in lecturing styles are not fully exploited; despite some good examples in the video clips of self-deprecation by the lecturer, for example, the student's attention is not drawn specifically to it.

Finally, I noted that the student is not given a chance to focus on a full-length lecture and put all the subskills learnt into practice. Although there are note-taking exercises in each unit, these never last more than a few minutes and in-sessional students in particular would perhaps benefit from the chance to listen to some complete lectures, with an accompanying transcript and sample notes as support.

Despite these points, *Listening to lectures* in general is interesting, well thought-out and well presented and as such is a welcome addition to the current meagre battery of EAP listening materials. To sum up, I would say that the CD-ROM achieves what it sets out to do – "to prepare non-native speaker students for the realities of UK lecture theatres" and I would highly recommend it as an EAP self-study resource. I look forward to seeing the other CD-ROMS planned by the ease team in this series.

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