

Foreign exchange

They say nothing broadens the mind like travel, but knowing the local language can add greatly to the experience. *PC Advisor* laid down the gauntlet to its staff, challenging them to use CD-ROMs to either brush up their rusty linguistic skills or tackle a new language altogether

Learning or improving your knowledge of a foreign language comes easily to some, while other people struggle for years to achieve basic competence. This is partly due to natural aptitude but also depends on how you are taught. Grammar drills and role-play dialogue works for some people; others can't get beyond their embarrassment of trying out a foreign tongue in front of giggling peers. The language labs at school can be intimidating and adult evening classes can be off-putting, too. If your classroom memories are discouraging you from taking up the challenge, a language CD-ROM could be the answer. It lets you learn at your own pace and multimedia makes the experience more fun. In many cases, voice-recognition software helps you perfect your pronunciation, so you can feel confident putting your new-found skills into practice.

At *PC Advisor* we tried out a number of language CDs with varying degrees of success. Read on to find out which package to choose before you head abroad.



French Europress GCSE French

Europress' GCSE French apes classroom-based lessons with its school-style textbooks and blackboards. It has a precise, almost scientific feel and closely follows the GCSE syllabus which, though not exciting, gives you a good understanding of the language's mechanics. You can alter the difficulty setting, depending on your ability and level of confidence. There's also an extensive vocabulary built in as a reference aid and the useful exam section means you can test your listening, reading, speaking and writing skills. Europress GCSE French is accompanied by a voiceover, which is a good memory aid. Unfortunately, this doesn't make up its plain interface.

• Europress 01625 855 000; www.europress.co.uk; £19.99.



← Europress GCSE French will bring all those classroom memories flooding back



→ Uncover the mystery at Château Chic and brush up on your French skills in the process

GSP Everyday French

This Everyday title is not geared towards exams, so you'll find little theory but lots of practical and usable French. It's targeted at travellers and tourists, so there's plenty of material on ordering food and finding out what time the trains run and a lot less about conjugating verbs.

Each of the nine sections begins with a story, followed by lists of useful words and phrases and several tests to help you get to grips with the subject area. The tests place an emphasis on speaking and pronunciation, although they probe your reading and listening skills, too.

GSP Everyday French presumes no prior knowledge of the language, so a beginner will not be fazed by this CD. It's also well laid out and makes good use of images. If you are planning a holiday in France then this program will help you get to grips with, or brush up on, your French. Its visual presentation will help you remember what you have learnt and the tests will give you a good idea of how you are getting on.

• GSP 01480 496 575; www.gsp.cc; £9.99.

The Times Education Series GCSE French

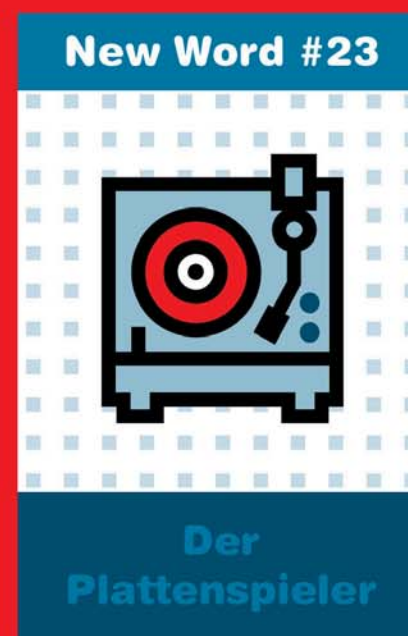
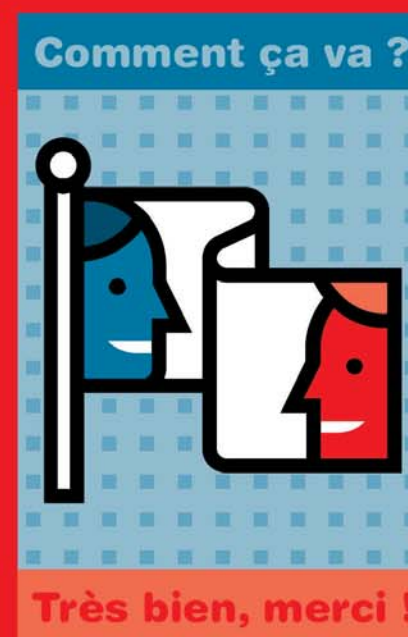
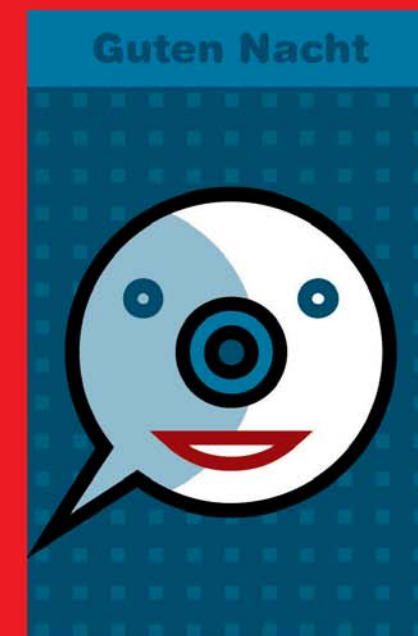
Aimed at GCSE students, The Times Education Series assumes a certain degree of competence in French and serves as a good refresher course for both current students and those whose exam days are now distant memories. The package is centred around a mystery that needs to be solved; you must complete certain tasks to catch a dastardly thief who has stolen priceless paintings from Château Chic.

If needed there are English translations for most of the instructions (handy for rustier students). In general, though, the simple games – where you must fill in gaps or test comprehension with word-matching tasks – are self-explanatory. The disc's cartoon-style interface keeps you interested, though some students may find the simple style off-putting.

• Guildhall Leisure 01302 314 000; www.guildhallleisure.com; £14.99.

Ben Camm-Jones

ILLUSTRATION: LEE HASLER





German DK GCSE German

DK is a major publisher of educational CD-ROMs, ranging from titles that encourage younger kids to explore science and nature to its curriculum-based study aids such as this program, GCSE German. DK has crammed plenty of content into its largely static format, with over 2,000 test questions. There is a large selection of topics to investigate but navigation is not obvious – you must highlight as many categories as you wish then use the slider bar to specify how many questions you answer at a time.

The main menu lets you tailor your revision programme or, by default, provides a master syllabus. Lessons are divided into reading, writing, speaking and listening and there's a voice-recording option so you can build up self-confidence. Disciplined students who are determined to get that grade at all costs will derive great benefit from using DK GCSE German. The less diligent will probably prefer to be entertained while they learn.

• DK 01480 496 575; www.gsp.cc; £19.99.

GSP/Auralog Talking German

Packaged much like GSP's Everyday German, Talking German is an ambitious product that attempts to interact with the student. Four 'lesson' dialogues are played out, with the PC asking the questions and the user responding with one of three preset replies. Not only must you understand the question, you need to select a suitable response and deliver it both quickly and convincingly enough to satisfy the difficulty level that you've selected. If you're struggling with a phrase or a word you can select the sentence from the drop-down box and concentrate on all or part of it by letting it play through or highlighting a section.

The dialogue that forms the backbone of this program is used to reinforce exercises, testing users' knowledge of word order. However, the main purpose of Talking German is to improve spoken language skills. Its powerful speech and voice-recognition engine is effective and, given a relaxed study environment, users can make strides in perfecting their verbal performance at their own pace.

• GSP 01480 496 575; www.gsp.cc; £9.99.

Starting from scratch

If you fancy anything other than one of the major European languages reviewed here, your choice is quite limited. If you want to learn Urdu, Sanskrit, Afrikaans or Gaelic you will almost certainly have to sign up for an evening class or a Linguaphone course. EuroTalk titles are the sole CD-ROM-based exceptions. We got two of our more adventurous linguists to try out some sample offerings.

EuroTalk Talk Now: Arabic (Modern Standard) and Arabic World Talk

Based around the same format as the Greek Talk Now edition, Arabic (Modern Standard) is a fun way for beginners to get a taste of Arabic. Essential vocabulary and phrases are introduced in entertaining games and quizzes, with new words often helpfully accompanied by pictures and captions. However, I found some of the longer words were spoken far too quickly. Topics are split into sections for word and speaking practice and reinforced by games and a Print picture dictionary feature. There are no other supporting materials and you need a microphone to practice pronunciation and compare it with that of the native speakers. Rather unproductively, some of the games rely on your memory rather than your language abilities, particularly in the country section where, if you know your flags, you can score top points. Another problem is the lack of basic grammar, which would have helped with simple sentence construction.

These limitations were highlighted when I attempted to move on from the basic language program to World Talk, an intermediate-level package designed as a natural progression from the basic package. It was impossible and, after much frustration, I gave in. Its combination of exercises demands a much more advanced level of knowledge than that gleaned from the beginners program. Despite being an accomplished linguist, I found the dictation and comprehension exercises here far too complicated. If you have a reasonable command of Arabic, you may benefit from this intermediate-level package, but it's by no means a logical step up from Talk Now.

• EuroTalk 020 7371 7711; www.eurotalk.co.uk; £24.99.

Kathryn Jackson

EuroTalk Talk Now: Learn Greek

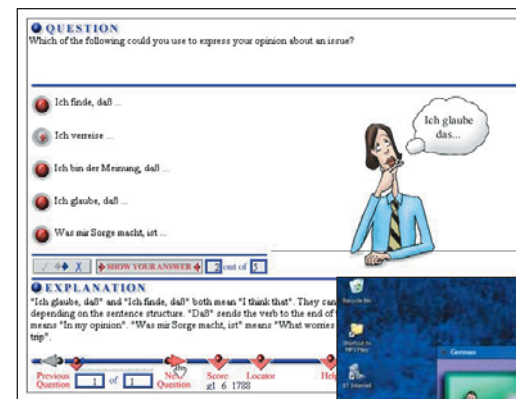
The Talk Now series is designed for people who want to acquire basic language skills quickly. Each title follows the same quiz-based format focusing on topics related to everyday life. These introduce vocabulary for food, colours, phrases, numbers and shopping which you have to recognise from photos and their descriptions. You can also mimic native speakers by repeating what they say into a microphone (not supplied). Games reinforce what you've learned and when you get the answer right, you receive a very emphatic and encouraging 'yes', which is amusing but also has a 'pat on the back' effect and makes you feel you have achieved something.

• EuroTalk 020 7371 7711; www.eurotalk.co.uk; £24.99.

Faith Wardle



→ EuroTalk's Learn Greek is ideal for beginners needing a quick grounding in the language



← DK GCSE German opts for a largely static format, with over 2,000 questions to test your language skills

↓ GSP Everyday German takes you on a tour around Munich, with plenty of role-play conversations to test your skills



↑ Auralog Talking German features a powerful speech and voice-recognition engine

→ The Times GCSE German uses a cartoon-style interface, which some students may find juvenile



GSP Everyday German

Like several of the publishers, GSP tries to distinguish between students wishing to brush up existing knowledge and casual learners who need to stock up on key phrases to help them get by when abroad.

Everyday German provides exactly this, with a static photo-based conversational tour around Munich in which travel arrangements are made, directions given, foodstuffs bought and meetings set up. Click on an icon relating to a topic to activate a conversation you can study and record yourself speaking line by line.

Playback is instant, though you'll need a microphone if you want to use this feature. This is highly recommended as few programs offer as much user control over speaking exercises. The dialogue is delivered in a clear and crisp manner that

seems relatively easy to emulate. Once you've understood and delivered the role-play conversation you can then move on to related exercises, testing comprehension and sentence building abilities. Confident students can test their object-recognition skills and extend their vocabularies against the clock, while strugglers will find a supporting cast of useful phrases, dialogue scripts, explanations of points and grammar, as well as a dictionary.

• GSP 01480 496 575; www.gsp.cc; £9.99.

The Times GCSE German

This title depends on a reasonable level of all-round linguistic competence and is designed to complement more structured, classroom-based learning. Like its French and Spanish equivalents, the student unearths clues to a criminal's identity

by reaching a certain level of competence in each of several activities.

These exercises range from identifying the right plural ending or pronoun in order to pot a billiard ball, to racking up a fruit machine by correctly identifying the gender of words. The answers are multiple choice, which makes it easier, but you aren't supplied with the right answer to any you get wrong so you can't learn from your mistakes without consulting a dictionary.

The support material is thinner on the ground than GSP's Everyday series', the cartoon interface is juvenile for a GCSE age group and, while the story idea is sound, it's a shame there are neither cultural clues in the setting nor any sense of the real world in which the language skills may be practised.

• Guildhall Leisure 01302 314 000; www.guildhallleisure.com; £14.99.

Rosemary Haworth



Italian Auralog Tell Me More: Italian Beginners

Having used a previous Tell Me More package for basic German, I was pleased to find Auralog has added a far more comprehensive scheduling system as well as a voice-recognition facility. However, this only recognises up to three seconds of speech even though it hands you phrases that, for a beginner especially, take longer than three seconds to say. This is frustrating and leads you to blab out badly pronounced sentences that the system lets you get away with.

Or you can spend more than an hour practising just one word, only to find that the PC will refuse to recognise your pronunciation no matter how well you score on others. Despite this, after three weeks of practise I am pleased with my progress in Italian and my pronunciation is, in my opinion, very good for a beginner.

I chose to concentrate on speaking and listening, but this means you get no formal grammar training and almost no structured translation. Therefore I have been swimming in a vast tide of Italiano with almost no idea what I'm doing for the most part. But it's not too bewildering – while new lessons remain something of an ordeal, work you've done is continually mixed in and there are

satisfying moments when you realise you understand more than you thought.

I've persevered with Tell Me More but hesitate to recommend it to anyone not fully committed to learning a language as you need to put in a good few hours of (frustrating) work. You will also want to discard the microphone and invest in a half-decent one. The software doesn't like running on notebooks, responding better to the stability of a desktop unit, so you can't take it away on holiday or business.

• Auralog Tell Me More 020 7929 6266; www.auralog.com; £39.99.

Rupert Collins-White

EuroTalk Advanced Italian DVD

If you're looking for a complete course of advanced-level Italian language tutorials, you will be disappointed by this EuroTalk program. It is at best a very restricted teaching resource and you would be hard put to take great steps forward in your knowledge of the language without any outside instruction. This is a pity, as the DVD is based around a well chosen full-length film that can be viewed with or without Italian subtitles and provides a rich and varied corpus of linguistic examples. From the tricky conjunctive case to some choice slang words and curses, it's all here in this gripping though at times rather cheesy crime thriller, *My father is innocent*.

Sadly, the accompanying exercises and resources, though fun and challenging, aren't always effective. Teaching is weighted towards listening aptitude and comprehension, using games and role-play exercises based on film excerpts. Spelling

and pronunciation tests (standard in any interactive, computer-based learning system) are provided, but the materials aimed at improving vocabulary knowledge are woefully incomplete and information on grammar is non-existent.

The word-finding section takes you to a still from the film where the word is used, but you have to guess the word's meaning from that context without any further explanation – easy with 'pistol' but harder with, say, 'disprove'. Divining the meanings requires you to be a far better detective than the bumbling fool from the *Polizia in Mio Padre è Innocente*.

• EuroTalk 020 7371 7711; www.eurotalk.co.uk; £34.99.

Simon Easterman



Spanish Europress GCSE Spanish

This GCSE-level CD is not only a good exam revision tool, but an excellent refresher course for anyone with basic Spanish skills. Grammar is clearly explained with all possible endings for word groupings listed, though not necessarily in a learning structure designed to ensure basic rules and patterns sink in. The vocabulary book contains plenty of supplementary phrases, but the spelling section is the weakest point: words are displayed for about three seconds before you have to spell them out, but you are given no translation. The exam section covers speaking, listening, reading and writing, while the microphone recognises your voice with little trouble.

← Our reviewer of Tell Me More: Italian Beginners only recommends this program to dedicated language students



→ EuroTalk Advanced Italian is based around an Italian crime thriller, using games and role-play exercises from the film

However, you either have to type answers into a Word document or write them down, which means you get no score or feedback. You also have to continually click back to the questions to answer another question rather than being taken directly to it, which is both frustrating and time-consuming.

• Europress 01480 357 183; www.europress.co.uk; £19.99.

Wendy Brewer

EuroTalk Advanced Spanish DVD

In this DVD-ROM activities revolve around an episode of the Spanish sitcom *Querido Maestro*, which lasts around an hour and is partially subtitled. After watching, you can become the character of your choice by recording your voice over theirs and play a quiz based on the episode. The quiz pits you against a grinning geek who's an expert on the series. Your quiz-game opponent reacts in different ways according to your actions. For instance, if you sit idle for a while he rolls his eyeballs and looks at his watch. If you do well, he expresses his disgust.

Apart from the fact that it crashed our test PC twice, this DVD is superb fun and has enough going on to occupy your attention for hours. Though the criticisms levelled at the Italian equivalent of this DVD ring true for the content of this Spanish version, I found it highly suitable for the linguistic level it is pitched at and enjoyed the activities that concentrate on improving your comprehension of complex material rather than simply testing grammar and vocabulary.

• EuroTalk 020 7371 7711; www.eurotalk.co.uk; £24.99.

Paul Rincon

EuroTalk Interactive Spanish

This program highlights how difficult it is to learn a language from a CD except as a tool to accompany classroom tuition. It is fine for learning vocabulary, with nine sections about food and drink, numbers and colours, each with full dictionary translations. A word practice section displays Spanish words and corresponding pictures. Within each section are two games that test how well you've understood all the words featured.

However, this is a basic package and once you've spent an hour or two learning

key phrases and vocabulary you'll have finished with it. In the numbers section, for example, even the 'hard' game only requires you to count up to 20 – no great challenge even for a novice. The speaking section is a vital component, but it takes a lot of patience to get the system to understand your voice. On the whole, this software is a good way of acquiring basic Spanish knowledge and is as suitable for adults as it is for children, thanks to the annotation throughout.

• EuroTalk 020 7371 7711; www.eurotalk.co.uk; £24.99.

Wendy Brewer

GSP/Auralog Talking Spanish

This GSP program is designed to help you brush up on spoken Spanish and improve pronunciation, but the first challenge is to get started. You'll need to dig out the 30-page online manual before attempting to use the voice-recognition features or, like me, you'll be frustrated by the muffled feedback.

Lesson titles include How to describe, How to count, Objects & adjectives and Introductions, with 15 questions in each. You are asked a question in Spanish and have to click on the correct answer. The speaker then pronounces the words and you must repeat it back using the voice-recognition software. Talking Spanish analyses your voice and evaluates your pronunciation, graphically represented as your 'voiceprint'. You are then given a score for accuracy and can play back your recording – the playback is clearer this time, but it's still not obvious from the screen what you should do.

A lesson report monitors your progress and you can practice your pronunciation by clicking on a list of words and phrases; translations appear when you right-click on them. In addition, there are five exercises, including word association, fill in the blanks and hangman, but I found these restrictive. The lessons are also limited in scope and the software isn't that straightforward.

• GSP 01480 496 575; www.gsp.cc; £9.99.

Faith Wardle

If you're soon to be heading abroad, get a Flying Start in any of 19 languages with this month's cover disc software



← EuroTalk Interactive Spanish is a very basic package— ideal for beginners, but not great value for advanced linguists

↓ Europress GCSE Spanish is a good revision tool and excellent if you want to brush up on your language skills



↑ Auralog Talking Spanish features a hangman game but our reviewer found the package quite limited



↑ Our reviewer of The Times Education Series GCSE Spanish loved the whodunnit format

← In EuroTalk Advanced Spanish you must watch an episode of *Querido Maestro* then pit your wits against a quizmaster

The Times Education Series GCSE Spanish

A loose whodunnit narrative is used to frame a variety of educational Flash games in this Spanish grammar and vocabulary program from The Times Education Series.

You must explore five rooms in a house and, for the most part, click on household objects and items of furniture in order to access a new challenge. For instance, click on the pool table and pot balls by replacing the blank in a sentence with the correct article or preposition. The more answers you get right, the more clues you are given to the villain's identity.

Games and multimedia can be very effective as learning tools when they are used correctly and this language CD is a relatively successful example. The design might be twee and the animation is incredibly basic, but the scenarios and games are cleverly conceived. The Times Education Series GCSE Spanish shows how framing educational tasks within a game can increase enthusiasm for learning.

• Guildhall Leisure 01302 314 000; www.guildhallleisure.com; £14.99.

Paul Rincon