

## ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROGRAMS FOR LARGE SCALE TRAINING APPLICATIONS

### *English Discoveries and Planet English*

Economic growth is an engine for poverty reduction in developing countries and international trade is a contributing factor to growth. While training in foreign languages is unlikely to help poor rural peasants or urban slum dwellers change their own conditions of poverty, training in international trade languages is widely perceived as a path to modern sector employment. Across Asia, there is a high level of demand for foreign language training, most commonly in English as the main language of international trade and diplomacy. The hope is the English will open up opportunities for employment in companies and organizations with international dealings, or lead to employment in industries like tourism; all of which directly contribute to economic growth and indirectly to poverty reduction.

Across the whole of the Asia-Pacific region, overseas education is in demand, especially from countries using English as the medium of instruction. International education is a major industry in the USA, UK, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. Hong Kong and Singapore are well placed to enter this market as well. English language training to enable students to better access opportunities for employment and overseas study is a growth industry.

This review compares software for English language training systems. *English Discoveries* from Israel and *Planet English*, which originated in Australia, are two sophisticated language programs that use CD-ROM technology to provide interactive skills training in English. They are highly competitive products targeted at slightly different student groups, and having similar capabilities and support systems.

### **Users**

The current generation of CD-ROM technology for language laboratories makes the previous generation of cassette tape laboratories obsolete. *English Discoveries* and *Planet English* are loaded on computer servers for Local Area Networks that students can access from computer workstations for laboratory-based training. Both products target commercial and education system providers of English training. They offer an expensive but potentially cost-effective approach for universities, technical colleges, schools, commercial language training centers, and companies or organizations with a requirement for sophisticated in-house English training programs.

The programs are suitable for professional organizations with the capital to establish computer laboratories, income to cover licensing fees, technical support for the computer systems, and professional English teachers to deliver the training. With a high volume of students, the programs can provide the basis for profitable language training businesses.

Conversely, these are not CD-ROMs for standalone self-study.

### **Competing Programs**

There are three main programs competing on the international market:

- *English Discoveries* is from an Israeli company, Edusoft, which provides a range of English products for school, commercial and academic use to over 50 countries across the globe. Edusoft can be accessed at <[www.edusoft.co.il](http://www.edusoft.co.il)>. *English Discoveries* is at <[www.engdis.com](http://www.engdis.com)>, which contains promotional material and downloadable demonstration material. Edusoft provided *English Discoveries* Version 2.1, dated 1998 and 1999. This is an institutional LAN version of Edusoft's earlier product, *English+*. *English Discoveries* focuses on functional English for school or technical college students, but includes an extra CD-ROM of Business English for executives.

- *Planet English* is an Australian product originally developed by the University of New South Wales, but was recently taken over by an American company. The website <[www.planetlearning.net](http://www.planetlearning.net)> connects to <[www.planetenglish.com](http://www.planetenglish.com)>, which also contains promotional and demonstration material. *Planet English* is a general English program that provides functional everyday English, especially for adolescents and students who are planning to study in English or at university overseas. It is widely used in language centers in the Asia-Pacific region. Planet Learning provided demonstration discs for *Planet English* 2001. It is LAN based and can be loaded from CD-ROM or DVD, and can be used without discs via a virtual CD-ROM drive.
- ELLIS Academic is an American program suite supplied globally, but mainly targeted at the Americas as part of a range of business and academic products. The website is <[www.ellis.com](http://www.ellis.com)>. Ellis Academic provides functional English mainly aimed at American English schools with large numbers of second language users. Ellis did not respond to an approach for a demonstration version of its product.

### Computer System Requirements

*English Discoveries* and *Planet English* have similar Pentium II-level computer requirements that present no technical obstacles. Both programs require processor, hard disc, and RAM capabilities far below personal computer standards now prevailing internationally.

For the technical, the minimum recommended LAN requirements for the *English Discoveries* Teacher Server are Windows 9X, a Pentium 300 MHz processor, 128 MB of RAM, a 6.4 GB Hard Disc Drive, a CD-ROM 4X drive, SVGA monitor with 256 color display card, a Sound Card, a Novell or NT Server, a 10/100 network interface card, an Internet connection and browser, and an Uninterrupted Power Supply. Student workstations need similar specifications, but only a Pentium 133 MHz processor and 32 MB of RAM. A hard disc is not required, but headphones and microphones are. *Planet English* has slightly lesser requirements.

The products are appropriate for large-scale language training operations with capital to fit out language laboratories, but able to realize economies of scale. The hardware cost does not come from a need for expensive computers – standard IBM-compatibles will do the job. Rather, computer costs derive from the numbers of computers that can be connected to the server. *English Discoveries* does not advise this in its handbooks. *Planet English* can manage over 100 concurrent users per server.

Servers can be used concurrently for other functions, but this would be a false economy. In practice, the server is best dedicated only to language training, both to maximize speed of student access and to reduce the risk of students hacking into other programs.

Planet Learning recommends the use of *Planet English* trained technicians to install the program. A competent technician familiar with networking can install *English Discoveries* from the CD-ROMs. The level of difficulty is similar to installing any advanced Windows-based product. The instructions appear simple but they are heavily reliant on the installer understanding technical terms, for example when installing the dongle, which allows legal use of the program.

### Functionality

These are mature products that have undergone extensive development and have wide international use. This lends confidence to users who do not want the technical glitches commonly found with brand new products.

*English Discoveries* occupies 12 CD-ROMs. It is:

- Divided into five levels from beginner to advanced levels.
- Covers reading, writing, speaking and listening.

- Provides over 1200 hours of student learning, assuming no prior English.
- Has a vocabulary of about 3500 lexical items.
- Uses authentic English for real life situations.
- Can be switched from American to British or other accents.
- Offers students three ways of working: a 'Democratic' approach where students choose what to do and how; a 'Structured' approach with pre-programmed lessons following a fixed path; and a 'Problem-Solving' approach where students develop skills through an adventure game.
- Allows students access to an Internet site with extra activities.
- Includes a teacher management system that allows teachers to administer the program, test student progress, and maintain class records. Students receive feedback on graphs showing level of mastery of the skill groups.
- Has speech recognition technology that gives learners feedback in the form of a pronunciation meter comparing the user and a native speaker's model.

*Planet English* uses 10 CD-ROMs to provide some 1000 hours of tuition in 40 learning units with 160 modules. The material has similar functionality to *English Discoveries*. It:

- Encompasses post-beginner to upper intermediate levels.
- Covers reading, writing, speaking and listening.
- Has a vocabulary of some 2000 words.
- Can be switched from American to British English pronunciation and usage in the Vocabulary modules.
- Has a mix of learning methodologies, including videos and audios.
- Allows teachers to program student access to fit with other media, eg. follow the sequence of a separate school textbook.
- Is set in realistic social, study, travel and business scenarios.
- Contains 40 hours of video and audio recordings, including a mock soap opera called *Pacific Park*, which simulates real life use of English.
- Has eight Student Workbooks.
- Has a courseware management system that allows teachers to administer and track the progress of their students, and maintain class records.
- Gives teachers and students feedback in the form of graphs and tables showing their progress across all skills.

## Content

The two programs have slightly different target audiences, although both can be used with a wide range of students. *English Discoveries* implicitly targets younger school students with its graphics and study topics. In western cultural terms, its use of cartoons might not interest older users, although this may not be the case in cultures where cartoons are an adult medium. *Planet English* targets older students at secondary or university age who are planning to study in English or overseas. For example, the *Pacific Park* videos start with a young Singaporean student seeking to obtain a visa for university study in Australia and then follows her through typical situations involving travel, settling in at university, studying, and the like. This reflects the origins of the program at the University of New South Wales, where it was developed initially for students newly arrived from overseas.

Neither program provides English for Academic Purposes, nor do they claim to. Nor does either company present them IELTS or TOEFL test preparation programs. However, both are structured around similar skill sets to IELTS and, as with any well-designed study program, both stand to improve test results – English language teachers generally calculate that some 200 hours of study will improve IELTS results by about half a point.

The interactive audio aspects of both programs are an excellent way of improving listening and speaking skills. The main weaknesses of many second language users of English are difficulty hearing different English accents and lack of confidence to speak English. Both programs allow

students to hear native speakers of English using functional English for everyday situations. At their own pace, students record and playback their own voices privately and compare results with the originals.

*English Discoveries* uses an eclectic mix of international accents. *Planet English* generally uses American and British accents, but there are also some non-native speaker accents as 'international English' models.

Reading is also facilitated, but the writing skills aspects of both programs are the weakest area. They have material on basics such as sending postcards, writing letters and filling out forms, but do not attempt more advanced report or essay writing, for example.

The programs are best understood as highly sophisticated audio-visual textbooks that supplement but do not replace the work of teachers. They are not off-the-shelf products to plug in and use straight away. They are for professional educators who will have many different approaches to language teaching. Thus, the products have a considerable amount of programming flexibility built into them so that they can be adapted to individual courses. For example, *English Discoveries* provides a facility for teachers to design lesson plans for a year of study, either as a supplement to existing teaching programs or as the basis of a new one. Teachers can program *Planet English* so that students can only access particular parts relevant to students' daily work: by mapping *Planet English* to their preferred textbook, for example. Both programs' flexibility mean they have to be studied carefully, but they have great long-term functionality as teachers become more skilled in their use.

By presenting the packages as supplementation to existing materials, one assumption is that practicing teachers may resist the straight substitution of new technology for old. Managers planning to introduce these products will need to consider the receptivity of their teachers. Teachers used to traditional methods of classroom teaching may be reluctant to change their teaching styles, although teachers already experienced in the use of language laboratories should be more receptive. The programs can also operate with far more students per teacher, so that teachers may fear redundancy. In entrenched educational systems, staff in-service training will be required. Introduced in fresh situations where teachers can be engaged specifically to implement the programs, they can be the basis for efficient and profitable teaching systems. Even here, staff will need training and time to program the systems to fit their teaching.

### Structure of materials

*English Discoveries* has student material on nine CD-ROMs with three levels: Basic, Intermediate and Advanced. Each level has three graded student discs of material. Students can study lessons adapted by the computer to levels shown in student test results; lessons set up by the teacher; or about 25 pre-programmed lessons per disc. For example, Intermediate 2, Lesson 16 has three exercises on talkback radio. These allow students to hear a script, do vocabulary exercises and tests, and record and playback their own voices. The other CD-ROMs comprise setup and test material, plus Executive English.

The eight student CD-ROMs in *Planet English* have 25 modules, each with up to five lessons. Each module has a theme and includes a number of lessons with different exercises involving skills training in speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as the *Pacific Park* video, which is a consolidation module. For example, CD-ROM3, Unit 2 has a listening Module that has an Activity based on phone answering machines. CD-ROM9 is a pronunciation program and CD-ROM10 contains Assessments for each of the eight content CD-ROM's.

### User-friendliness

For teachers, these are complex products that need some time to learn but open up many new avenues for teaching. Programming both products is menu driven and quite straightforward once the potential is understood. Planet English offers more programming potential, but requires more time to learn to full effect.

For students, both programs are clear and easy to navigate. Any student familiar with menu-driven computer programs will find these very easy to use. *Learning Discoveries* makes heavy use of cartoons and slightly gimmicky graphics and topics that will appeal to younger school age users. *Planet English* uses more formal tabs and layout that will appeal more to older users.

Both products have the major advantage that they can combine with formal classroom lessons, but allow student learning to be self-paced.

### Interactivity

Both programs are highly interactive. Tabs and toggles take the user through the lessons and the exercises. Students would easily learn either system. Both programs give students good feedback on performance through bar graphs of multiple choice and cloze test results, for example, or from audio recordings.

The quality of the *Planet English* graphics is superior and its uses some 400 video dialogues. Both programs operate with high resolution on smaller than normal screen size. If the full computer screen is wanted, *English Discoveries* reverts to VGA standard, but in this mode some of the fonts are too small to read easily. It also uses static cartoons rather than video.

Both allow students to record and playback their own voices and compare them to the recorded voices. The programs have differing features for this. *English Discoveries* has a pronunciation meter; *Planet English* a separate CD-ROM on pronunciation with animated graphics modules – Planet Learning advises it removed speech recognition from its program because the results were educationally unreliable.

### Instructions

*Planet English* provides considerably more written guidance for teachers and students than *English Discoveries*. A key difference is that student workbooks in *Planet English* provide supplementary written exercises.

*English Discoveries* has a 210 page Teacher's Guide that includes 40 pages of installation instructions and 20 pages on the Teacher's Management System. A 150 page Pedagogical Guide uses 35 pages to outline the principles on which the program is based, the program contents, and steps for building lessons. There are also 115 pages with a detailed description of the contents. This material is clear and well written, but requires detailed study. *English Discoveries* also has three User Guides of 30-50 pages, which provide technical guidance to students on using the program at different levels, but which do not provide work exercises. However, it does permit Internet access to extension exercises, although this does have cost implications.

*Planet English* provides Teacher's Manuals with some 600 pages of material in two plastic ring binders. Book 1 outlines the content, provides a detailed description of content for the eight discs (occupying 150 pages), and details grammar, functions and vocabulary (135 pages). Book 2 provides scripts and notes for the *Pacific Park* video that is part of the program (occupying 160 pages in all), grammar notes, and a user's manual with 22 pages of color diagrams that can be put on overhead transparencies for training purposes. As well, a courseware management system manual (33 pages) provides technical guidance to teachers and students. There are also substantial resources available for each licensee via a secure support section on the *Planet English* website.

Additionally, *Planet English* has eight Student Workbooks, one per CD-ROM, which can be used as the basis of a program of class study. At some 60-80 pages each, these provide graded exercises for student work. This is a considerable difference from the computer guides provided by *English Discoveries*.

### **Program Distribution and Costs**

Access to information about *English Discoveries* is controlled through the Edusoft website. Buyers need to email the sales department to find information on buying/licensing, prices and agents.

*Planet English* is not sold retail for private use. It is licensed to training centers for a recurrent fee payable according to the number of students using the program. Planet Learning monitors user numbers by automatic Internet connection. If the connection is not maintained, the system shuts down. The license cost varies from market to market in response to market conditions and international exchange rates. As the company has recently been subject to a takeover, prices may change. Potential users need to contact their local agents through the Planet Learning website <[www.planetlearning.net](http://www.planetlearning.net)>. In August 2003, agents were listed for Australia and New Zealand, China, Malaysia, Hong Kong and the Republic of Korea. Other countries are serviced from Australia.

### **Sustainability**

These are complex programs to install, use and service. An important corollary is that organizations using the products need technical support for the operation and maintenance of the computer systems and professional English language trainers to operate the learning packages and teach the students.

The *Planet English* license fee includes technical support and backup, which are available on-line. Anti-piracy software also protects license-holders from piracy.

In some institutional settings, such as schools and universities with government funding, many of the costs will be absorbed into existing budgets.

In purely commercial applications, in-house financial and business management skills are necessary. The costs need business modeling to include the product price, cost of teachers (which can be high if international wages have to be paid to teachers with first language skills) and estimates of cash flow. Because these are high quality, best practice products, student fees can be set at the upper end of the English language market. With high fees and large student numbers, these can be commercially viable products, but that is unlikely to be the case where fees and student numbers are restricted.

### **Summary**

*English Discoveries* and *Planet English* are both high quality sophisticated products that require solid levels of technical, educational and management support. They should not be considered lightly, but they do stand to provide dramatic improvements in language training, particularly in speaking skills, over traditional classroom methods. They also stand to be profitable in commercial settings, but this will need analysis on a case-by-case basis.

Both programs have similar capabilities, although *Planet English* is technically better in its use of videos. It also has student workbooks, although *English Discoveries* to some extent compensates through Internet access to extension material for students.

A key factor in selecting the program is the targeted students. *English Discoveries* provides school or technical college level training in functional English for a wide range of potential uses. *Planet English* aims at older school or university students planning to study overseas. It provides functional English for the daily life of a student studying in an English-speaking environment.

The other key factor for potential buyers is cost. No conclusion can be drawn because license costs and fee levels that can be charged to students vary from county to country. It can be said however, that the programs do require professional business planning.

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