Rosetta Stone: Does not provide compelling input, research reports at best suggestive, conflicting reports on users' attitudes.
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I comment here on Rosetta Stone, language teaching software. I conclude that Rosetta Stone presents a tepid version of comprehensible input, that the evidence so far provides only modest support for its effectiveness and that studies do not agree about users' reactions.

A Comprehension-Based Method?

Rosetta Stone uses the terminology of current theory in its advertising, e.g. "Don't learn a language, absorb it" (similar to the Acquisition-Learning distinction, Krashen, 1982, 2003) and advertises that "language learning should be natural" (reminiscent of The Natural Approach; Krashen and Terrell, 1983). In fact, some writers have the impression that Rosetta Stone is explicitly based on the Comprehension Approach (Saury, 1998).

Rosetta Stone does indeed present comprehensible input, but in the samples I have seen, the input is not very interesting, and a long way from compelling, hypothesized to be the most effective kind of input (Lao and Krashen, 2008). The approach is straightforward: the student hears a word or phrase and is asked to choose a picture that matches that word or phase. Rosetta Stone then tells the user if the answer is right.

As Nielson (2011) points out, "The authors (of Rosetta Stone) claim that 'by combining genuine immersion teaching methods with interactive multimedia technology, *Rosetta StoneTM* replicates the environment in which learners naturally acquire new language' (pp. 2-3). This claim is patently false. The *Rosetta StoneTM* interface simply presents learners with matching activities in which they guess or use a process of elimination to determine which words or phrases go with particular pictures. This pales in comparison with an actual "immersion environment" … (p. 6).

Evaluations of Rosetta Stone

There have been two evaluations of Rosetta Stone I know of. Neither are published, to my knowledge, but both can be found on the internet through the Rosetta Stone website. Neither was done by language education professionals and it is not clear, in either study, how the evaluations were funded. (Rosettastone.com lists a third study, but I could only retrieve a short summary). Both studies had adult subjects, most older and more educated than college students, the target language in both was Spanish, and the results are similar.

In Vesselinov (2009), subjects did 55 hours of the standard Rosetta Stone program. Vesselinov concluded that his subjects gained about the equivalent of a one semester college class, based on their performance on the WebCAPE (Computer- Adaptive Placement Examination).

The WebCAPE includes listening, reading and writing, but is for the most part a form-based traditional examination. All items are multiple choice. Here are some samples (http://cflc.bard.edu/test/). I won't comment here on the content of these questions and their odd implications.

Raul is probably drinking at his uncle's tavern.
Raúl _____ bebiendo en la taberna de su tío.
A. esté
B. está
C. estaría
D. estará

Replace the grammatical error in the sentence with the appropriate correction:
Carol doesn't works full-time anymore. She teaches school until twelve o'clock and then she goes home.
a. doesn't works
b. teaches
c. until twelve o'clock
d. goes home
e. I don't know

According to data presented in Vesselinov, students in college Spanish need a WebCAPE score of 270 to continue to the second semester. The mean posttest score for the subjects in Vesselinov's study was 237.7, a gain of 185.1 points from the average pretest score (Vesselinov's sample contained 22% false beginners). I calculated an average gain of 3.4 points per hour. At this rate, it would take a true beginner 80 hours to reach the second semester threshold, which can indeed be accomplished in one semester, assuming 45 hours in class and the rest as homework.

This study thus shows that Rosetta Stone produces about the same results as regular traditional instruction does, as measured by a traditional test. It is hard to conclude much from this result. Students in comprehensible-input based methods typically do as well as or better than traditional students on form-based tests, and do much better on communicative tests (Krashen, 1982, 2003). Only a communicative test would tell us if Rosetta Stone has the same effect as comprehension-based methods such as TPR, Natural Approach, or TPRS (for recent studies of the effectiveness of TPRS, see Watson, 2009, Varguez, 2009, Dziedzic, 2012).

.In Rockman et. al. (2009) (we are not told who the et. al. are) subjects did 64.5 hours of the standard Rosetta Stone course, similar to what Vesselinov's subjects did, and also spent time with "Rosetta Studio," live conversations with native speakers. (Rockman et. al.'s summary as well as the Rosetta Stone website state that subjects spent six hours with Rosetta Studio, but the data reported in Rockman et. al. indicate that they spent an average of 14 hours.).

Both Vesselinov and Rockman et. al. reported that their subjects improved an average of about one level on the ACTFL oral interview, moving from novice-low, the lowest level out of ten, to novice-mid, the second level. There is no research matching ACTFL levels to college semesters in foreign language that I know of, but we can conclude that many subjects had developed minimal ability to communicate in the second language after using Rosetta Stone.

Subjects in both studies were enthusiastic about Rosetta Stone: Vesselinov (2009) administered a questionnaire: 94% of the subjects agreed or strongly agreed that Rosetta Stone was easy to use, 88% agreed or strongly agreed that it was helpful and enjoyed using it, and 77% said they were satisfied with it. Rockman et. al. state that "perceptions of the Rosetta Stone solution were overwhelmingly positive" (p.7) but provide no data.

These cheerful reports are contradicted by Nielson (2011), who asked 150 people to do the Rosetta Stone program in Spanish, Chinese or Arabic for 10 hours per week for 20 weeks. The most important result was that "there was a precipitous drop-off once the study was underway" (p. 8). Only 32 of the original 150 subjects (21%) spent more than 10 hours with Rosetta Stone, and only one completed the entire course: In other words, nearly 80% dropped out before completing the first week of a 20 week course. Among the reasons given: the program "was not compelling enough for continued study" (p. 9) (Subjects also listed lack of time and technical problems as reasons for not continuing.)

Summary and Conclusion

The small amount of research available suggests that Rosetta Stone produces some gains in oral proficiency and is about as effective as traditional instruction on traditional tests. Both studies reported that subjects were enthusiastic about Rosetta Stone, but one did not provide data. One published study presented evidence suggesting that Rosetta Stone is not particularly interesting.

At best, the achievement results are only mildly encouraging, and the disagreement about attitudes toward Rosetta Stone is puzzling. The data certainly do not support Rosetta Stone's advertised claim that it is "The fastest way to learn a language."

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