
Accent Lab and American Speechsounds

Review by Brent Green

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ACCENT LAB. Accent Technologies, 12240 Venice Blvd., Suite 22, Los Angeles, CA: 1996. \$39.95

AMERICAN SPEECHSOUNDS. Speech Communication, Inc. Newport Beach, CA: 1997. Personal version \$69.95 with academic discount; Professional version \$199 with academic discount.

The recent resurgence of interest in pronunciation teaching has spawned the development of numerous ESL/EFL computer-based pronunciation hardware and software. *American Speechsounds* and *Accent Lab* are two recent software programs that have hit the market.

Both programs are designed to run on any multimedia PC. *Accent Lab* comes packaged on three floppy disks and runs in a Microsoft Windows 3.1 or Windows 95 environment. *American Speechsounds* requires a CD-Rom drive and runs in Windows 95. *American Speechsounds* comes with a separate hard copy users' guide which includes detailed information about vowel and consonant articulations and supplemental word lists. *Accent Lab's* on-line users' guide helps answer technical questions about running the software. The articulation hints are found within the program lessons. *American Speechsounds's* professional version and *Accent Lab* are equipped with authoring capabilities so teachers can add their own lesson materials if desired.

Both *American Speechsounds* and *Accent Lab* primarily teach the pronunciation of North American English segmentals through digitized listening and speaking activities. The instructional activities of *American Speechsounds* are divided into four units. Three units provide both listening and speaking practice at the sound, word, and sentence level, while the fourth quizzes students' ability to perceive minimal pair differences at the sound and word levels. Since there is no time limit on any of the activities, students can listen, record, and play back as many times as they would like.

In addition to providing native models, recording, and playback features, *Accent Lab* offers a detailed analysis and visual comparison of student and native speaker utterances through pitch diagrams, spectrograms and vowel and consonant charts. The basic *Accent Lab* lesson involves listening to a sentence taken from Rebecca Dauers'

Accurate English: A Complete Course in Pronunciation (1993), recording it, and then proceeding through a three-step visual analysis.

While both have pleasing visual appeal and sound qualities, there is very little instructional variety and the behavioristic-based practice (listen, record, play back) of *American Speechsounds* isn't a very appealing approach to pronunciation teaching. The underlying pedagogical foundation for *American Speechsounds*, and to some extent, *Accent Lab*, is the belief that if students listen to a native speaker model enough times they will be able to produce the correct form. While this may be an effective approach for some learners, others may not have the ability to hear the differences. *Accent Lab's* visual comparisons add an extra instructional dimension, but students may be confused by the spectrograms. Also, after several attempts, even native speakers have a hard time appropriating the native models on the pitch diagrams and vowel and consonant charts.

Perhaps the most noticeable shortcoming of both programs is the lack of suprasegmental practice activities and instruction guides. *American Speechsounds* ignores these aspects and *Accent Lab* only offers very basic intonation practice. Another weakness of *American Speechsounds* is the lack of on-line articulation guides. The learner must refer back to the hard copy users' guide to get help with consonant and vowel pronunciations.

While there may be some value in using *American Speechsounds* and *Accent Lab* as support tools for classroom pronunciation instruction, the sound, word, and sentence-level instruction that is provided still offers very little help in meeting discourse-level pronunciation demands. Therefore, I would not recommend the use of either program as the one and only approach to pronunciation teaching.

References

- Dauer, R. M. (1993). *Accurate English: A Complete Course in Pronunciation*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Microsoft Corporation. (1996). *Windows 95*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation
- Microsoft Corporation. (1993). *Windows 3.1*. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation.

About the Reviewer

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