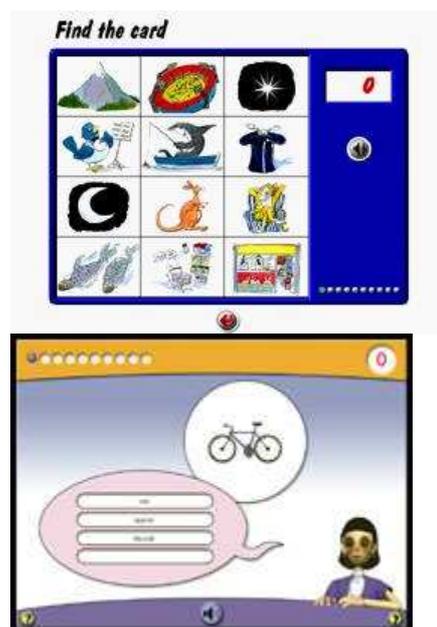


Chatter Chatter Primary English

Sherston Software 2004

Available from Sherston Software
www.sherston.com Price £86.95 (single user) £246.85 (10 users) or £406.75 (unlimited users)



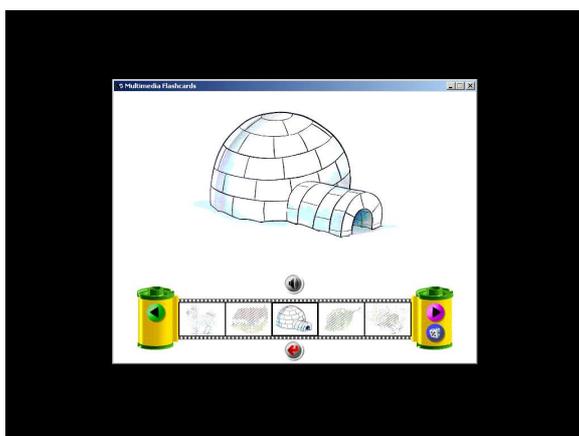
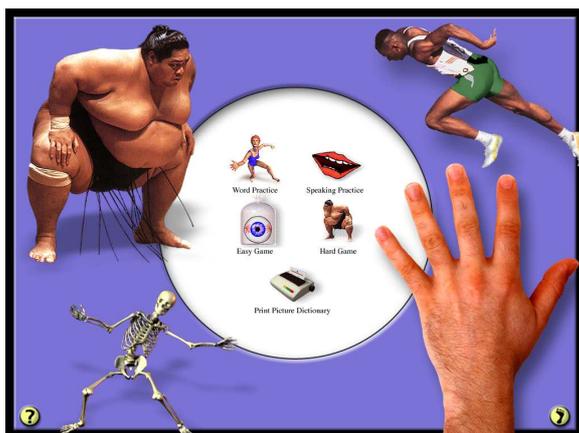
I was prompted to investigate this 'complete course for basic English' after I heard an EAL teacher describe it as the only useful ICT based/multimedia resource for EAL learners they had ever come across. Reading that 'Chatter Chatter really is something different. It consists of two multimedia CDs produced by the language experts Eurotalk, and a complete course in introductory English written by Sherston including lesson plans, worksheets, flashcards and masses of games all presented in a high quality self contained A4 book.' I ordered a trial copy and looked forward to its arrival.

Chatter Chatter English describes itself in its manual as 'an ideal resource for schools wishing to help children learn English as an additional Language (EAL). A large number of school children do not speak English as their first language. These children may be literate in other languages but need support in learning English as a second or even third

language. Children quickly need to develop speaking and listening skills to communicate. These skills will then help in the development of reading and writing skills. All four literacy skills compliment (sic) each other and Chatter Chatter English aims to teach all four skills but focuses primarily on learning English vocabulary through speaking and listening'.

So far so good but what does the £86 package contain? The multimedia course consists of two CDs, 'Talk Now' and 'Vocab Builder' and a 106 page teaching manual. The manual gives information on how to use and install the CDs followed by a 13 unit course breakdown. The 13 units are: First Words, Numbers, Time, Colour, Food, Animals, Positions, Body, Professions, Places, Shopping (clothing), Shopping (household) and Countries.

Unit 10 is concerned with Places and is typical of the approach and resources adopted in *Chatter Chatter English*. The unit objective is 'Places and how to ask where something is'. The suggested unit/lesson plan is written in the familiar tripartite format – introduction, activities and plenary. The introduction is using the vocabulary CD Rom to listen and repeat vocabulary items (soccer ground, coffee shop, hospital, hotel, park, pet shop, school, bank, sports shop, train station, supermarket, swimming pool, toy shop, zoo) followed by the teacher introducing the phrases 'Where is the?' and with the children pointing to the appropriate words enlarged and displayed on the whiteboard and replying 'There it is'. The activity section includes further use of the CD Rom based vocabulary practice individually or in pairs and worksheet activities which are provided in the pack. One labelling pictures with correct place names and the second 'reading' picture clues to work out where someone has been – picture of man with arm in a sling/hospital, child with goldfish in bowl/pet-shop. Two games are also suggested, 'Twenty Questions' and a *Pictionary* type game where the pupil draws the picture of a place for the others to guess. The plenary involves further repetition and a scrambled letter activity. Homework is to draw an imaginary town.



So why is *Chatter Chatter English* so disappointing and dispiriting? I think perhaps it is because it is such a wasted opportunity. The original EuroTalk Talk Now and Vocabulary Builder CDs had many secret fans in the EAL world. We all agreed that the content and presentation was culturally insensitive. The illustrations and on screen narrators seemed to spring from a kind of Janet and John world where everyone was white, went shopping, kept fit and smiled a lot. And the focus on vocabulary was relentless. But on the other hand, the CD could be operated in 80 written languages including many of our pupils' first languages; the record and repeat facility was helpful for many learners who felt happy responding to a software programme and assessing their own progress; and many of the students responded really well to the timed activities and got enthused by beating the clock and the computer. As a self directed add on activity for pupils to try out in homework club or even take home, it had some merit. Many pupils (and teachers) recognised the CD activities as 'learning English' and compared them favourably to a learning English through content approach which underpinned most mainstream classroom based work in

schools. And after all, Eurolanguage, an EFL languages publisher never marketed their product specifically at UK schools and the CDs were relatively cheap, £25 for Talk Now and £15 for Vocabulary Builder.

Chatter Chatter English is quite different in this respect as it is produced by Sherston, a mainstream UK educational publisher and is squarely aimed at the UK school market. Sherston has acquired remarketing rights to the original Eurolanguage CDs and has doubled the price to over £80 for a single user. The 'added value' in the new package is the 105 page spiral bound manual. This is a collection of very pedestrian lesson plans as described above, worksheets (typically word picture matching and scrambled words) all in black and white with poor quality illustrations and art work and 20 pages of two sided word flash cards which the teacher has to make by gluing together the two words and sandwiching them with cardboard in between or laminating!

The quality and content of this manual is worse than many printed resources which are now being produced by local EAL teams and services. It is a world away in pedagogical rigour from say the DfES ESOL core curriculum materials. And the Eurotalk CDs which are its main components are being bettered by EAL service website interactive activities and CDs (see Portsmouth's EAL interactive activities or Manchester's School Talk CD Rom).

Chatter Chatter English is bitterly disappointing. Within a language and content curriculum, I would argue there is a place for multimedia resources which introduce and stimulate learners to develop survival vocabulary and language skills for the early days of school. This was an opportunity for Sherston to put right the deficits of the Eurolanguage products by eradicating cultural inappropriacy and linking the content and context more closely to the primary mainstream classroom and curriculum. It was also an opportunity for the company which produces Oxford Reading Tree Talking Stories to produce a high quality, flexible multimedia EAL resource with spoken and written first language access and support. Instead they have produced *Chatter Chatter English*. What a waste and what a shame.