I. OVERVIEW

English teachers always look for supplementary materials that fill the missing parts of artificial textbooks such as speech exposure, visual input, authenticity, or other motivating elements. They often use audiocassette tapes, (textbook-based) CD-ROM, or other technology. Non-native English teachers often have a difficult time providing appropriate oral input that fits learners’ and curricular needs. The current textbook CD-ROM provides nothing more than a textbook. Other authentic materials such as videos, pop songs, Internet resources, are interesting enough, but it is hard to find the right one out of too difficult, too long, or uneducational realia. Thus, what teachers need might not be a finished product (e.g., CD-ROM titles), but rather an easy-to-use authoring utility with which teachers can produce or edit activities/materials on their own.

*Magic English Deluxe* belongs to this category, close to general-purpose software (such as email, authoring tools, materials on the web), so the product itself does not contain L2 lessons. It’s a teacher who designs them by utilizing this tool, so this software is waived from feasibility consideration (Bradin, 1999), the first round of software evaluation. Accordingly, *Magic English Deluxe* cannot be analyzed from ESL software evaluation principles before “teachers’ planned CALL activity”(Chapelle, 2001, p. 54) is produced.

*Magic English Deluxe* is described as software for English listening practice, more
technically, personal speech synthesizer. This software basically converts text to speech (called TTS) and saves it in a digital format. More simply put, if teachers type or paste the texts in this program, a native speaker’s voice-recorded listening file is created. More detailed functions are introduced as follows.

II. FEATURES

*Magic English Deluxe* doesn’t contain many functions, but they are robust. First, it supports three different types of voices, one male (Paul) and one female (Kate) adult English speakers and one female Korean adult speaker (Sujin). They are not genuine voices, but sound quite natural in their accent. They can read numbers, common nouns, quite complex sentences smoothly in the standard English/Korean phonemic rules.

Second, these synthesizers (voices) can recognize texts from many types of window programs such as email, word processors (e.g., *MS Word*), or web browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer). They read plain texts copied into the clipboard and web texts shown directly through the Internet browser of this software. For example, you can listen to CNN headline news just by highlighting the article.

Third, it also features "Dialogue Mode." Since it supports two different voices, you can create conversation dialogues by deciding upon who says what. Therefore, teachers can create a more communicative listening material, a situational role-play dialogue as well as one-person statements.

Fourth, there are other additional supports, such as "Mini Mode," a small menu bar that makes this software easy to operate anytime while working in other programs, and "Speech Synthesis Dictionary" that is updatable and savable, and "Voice Control Panel" that sets the speed, pause time, repetition number, etc.

Any read texts can be saved as a WAV or WMA file, the most widely convertible file formats for audio CD or MP3 Player.

III. APPLICATION IDEAS

*Magic English Deluxe* can be used for both language learning and teaching, but more likely for instructional purposes. As previously mentioned, English teachers can create highly feasible listening materials in no time. Here I will introduce many utilization ideas suggested by English teachers\(^1\) who have experimented with this software.

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\(^1\) 11 English teachers also reviewed this software for one week sometimes by using it for their
1. As Classroom Assistance

First of all, it can possibly function as a virtual teaching assistant. For example, if teachers or students encounter unfamiliar words (ex., rhinoceros) in class, Paul or Kate will read them out. In addition, teachers who are not confident with their pronunciation or public speech can practice classroom English in advance with previously synthesized voice. Or teachers can type teacher talk in the clipboard, such as the direction of the activities, beforehand and spend more time to help individual students while the synthesizer talks instead during the lesson. Paul or Kate can be utilized as an ice-breaker, or attention-gatherer or any type of motivating or refreshing elements.

2. For Material Development

First, it provides good speech exposure for pre- or post-task listening. Willis (1997) indicates the importance of listening to recording before and after students perform a main task. Teachers can prepare transcripts that suit the task goal and save the speech by using the software for sample dialogues, such as interviews, casual or situated regular lesson.
conversation, story telling, news reports.

Second, it can also generate teacher planned activities, like jigsaw, dictogloss, close test, send a voice e-card, voice web-conferencing or word/idiom guessing games. If teachers carefully design the activity, all these activities are interactive, collaborative and learner-centered.

Third, it can be also used as a listening test maker. Students can practice any types of listening test such as TOEIC or TOEFL with teacher-prepared practice materials in class. Teachers can also easily integrate a listening test into the school mid-term or final exam.

Any teacher-created audio files can be easily inserted into other multimedia applications, such as web pages or Flash movies, so that one can complete educational multimedia materials.

3. For Self-directed Learning

Although Magic English Deluxe appears more attractive to teachers for many reasons, it can be an excellent learning medium too. First, learners can work with language in a more dynamic way. While they are reading over the Internet, they can always check the word pronunciation. Sometimes reading and listening together helps understanding and concentration. Learners can highlight the texts while reading by dragging with a mouse.

Next, learners can create a more individualized learning environment. They can listen to news, essays, novels, or famous speeches selected on their own interest from the websites, even while they are doing something else, just like a radio, at their own pace. The audio content can stop, repeat, pause, and be read more slowly than the normal speed.

Furthermore, this software promotes collaborative learning. Students can write a poem, a skit, a short story together in a group and then let Paul and Kate read as a task report (Willis 1997). This will be another fun element for writing activity that engages students more actively, but it should not be used too often for learners to lose their own speaking opportunities.

IV. THINGS TO BE IMPROVED: EMPIRICAL EVALUATION

English teachers point out the following suggestions to upgrade this software. First of all, the technology, TTS should be improved. The speech synthesizer still doesn’t
sound like real human speech, especially, in terms of tone and intonation. Their etic concerns, such as word stress, basic intonation pattern are quite accurate, but emic considerations, such as semantic emphasis, sentence rhythm, and sentence stress are not considered. In addition, Paul and Kate sound like robots with no emotion or liveliness. Thus, synthesized speech is still hard to be compared with authentic speech. Some teachers also see the need of a children’s voice.

Second, this software provides merely a single function, TTS. A few assisting tools, such as dictionary and dialogue mode, but no other multimedia supports that enrich the effectiveness of CALL materials such as image, or sound. A teacher should put more effort to learn another authoring software for multimedia-assisted language activities. Other language learning tools, such as grammar/spelling checkers, could be provided together to strengthen the utilizability.

Finally, some existing functions, for example the functions in a voice control panel and a clipboard should be enhanced. In addition, its gray color and plain design could be improved too.

In conclusion, Magic English Deluxe is highly useful utility program with which teachers in any type of English class easily use for many purposes. It is expected that more teachers will report effective application ideas and meaningful findings after they experiment this in class.

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REFERENCES


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