

The Reading Matrix
Vol. 3. No.3, November 2003

Rosetta Stone (Arabic Explorer)

Reviewed by Ibrahim Suliman Ahmed

Title:	Rosetta Stone (Arabic Explorer)
Distributor:	Fairfield Language Technologies 165 South Main Street, Harrisonburg, VA 22801
Contact information:	Telephone: 540-432-6166 and : 800-788-0822 info@trstone.com
Program Website:	http:// www.trstone.com
System Requirements:	PC Windows or Mac-OS 7.0 2MB (4MB to allow for student practice speaking and recording) SVGA compatibility (256 colors at 640X480), Sound Blaster and microphone (for student recording). Stand-alone or Network.
Target Audience:	For beginner level learners

A General overview

This special edition the Rosetta Stone CD ROM for beginners (see figure 1) is taken from the award-winning Rosetta Stone programs. It presents 22 chapters of interactive multimedia immersion instruction, which elicit user responses and provide instantaneous feedback.

The numbering of the 22 chapters is somewhat confusing; being 01-1, 01-2, 01-3 and so on until 01-10 and then moves to 02-1, 02-2 etc. As each of these chapters has 10 sets of 4 pictures (each set being one lesson) and there are 12 different task modes to choose from for each lesson, the given numerical coding for each lesson is very complicated.

On starting the CD ROM, the student is confronted with a screen. This gives a list of the 22 chapters (this initial screen will be referred to as the “chapter” screen). By double clicking on any given chapter a second screen appears and we shall call this the “task option” screen. The chosen chapter number is indicated in the top right corner, e.g. 1-01. Immediately visible are five boxes each containing the same four photographs. Each box presents a different interactive task. However, at the bottom of the screen, to the left, are three buttons. This initial screen corresponds to tasks 1-5 (the five boxes). The second

button has 6-10 (and pushing the button brings up the choice of 5 new boxes, although within one level the photographs are all the same) and the third button 11-12 (brings up a choice of 2 boxes). Therefore each set of four photographs has the possibility of 12 different interactive, audio-visual tasks, which are referred to as twelve Run Modes. The task is usually to match the given cue (spoken, written or both) to the corresponding picture, except for activities 11 and 12 which have no pictures, i.e. no visual component. The student is required to click on the correct picture, written form or loudspeaker (for listening) to match the given target be it aural, written or a visual. An error elicits an X and its associated “wrong” sound. Clicking on the correct picture elicits a tick and its associated “correct” sound. The “trial and error” nature of these activities, rather than simply “spoon feeding” the correct answer, means the student is an active participant, more involved in “problem solving” and this enhances and speeds up the learning process. It can, however, also be a little frustrating (see Figure 1)

The 12 possible interactive tasks/Run Modes

1. Matching aural and written cue to picture: four photos to choose from are given and the target word is written*¹ at the top and spoken. (The combination of written and spoken word makes this particular activity doubly effective as a learning tool).
2. Matching aural cue to picture: presents the same pictures but with only spoken cues; there is no written form of the target vocabulary. The student must listen to the word spoken and click on the corresponding picture.
3. Matching written cue to picture: presents the same pictures with only a written cue. The target words are not pronounced.

Figure 1



4. Matching aural cues to picture/written form: presents each photo with its written form superimposed on each picture and the prompt is verbal.
5. Matching a written cue to picture/spoken form: presents the four photos and the target

¹ This CD assumes that the students are already familiar with the Arabic alphabet. For a student with no previous exposure to the Arabic script, the written form would be confusing in the extreme.

word written in the top left corner. Each picture is highlighted in a clockwise sequence and pronounced. By clicking on the icon of a loudspeaker attached to each picture the student can hear the word pronounced again. The student must choose the correct picture corresponding to the word presented at the top.

6. Matching picture cue to written and spoken form: Only one picture is given at the top. The set of four possible target words are given in written form and highlighted consecutively in a clockwise direction as each word is pronounced. The students must choose the correct word for the picture.

7. Matching picture cue to spoken form: The previous exercise is repeated without the written cues. Empty boxes are highlighted consecutively in clockwise direction with each of the four possible target words.

8. Matching picture to written word: As in the preceding task one picture is given at the top and there are four boxes with the written form of the target set inside. These are not pronounced.

9. Matching picture and spoken form to written form: One picture is given at the top and its spoken form given. By clicking on the loudspeaker attached to the photo the student can hear the spoken form again. The task is to choose the correct written form from four boxes.

10. Matching picture/written form to the spoken word: One picture and its associated written form superimposed are given and four loudspeakers are highlighted consecutively in a clockwise direction. Clicking the speakers allows the word to be repeated. The student must click on the appropriate loudspeaker.

11. Matching spoken form to written form: There is no picture. The student hears a word pronounced and must select the corresponding written form from four boxes.

12. Matching written form to spoken form: Once again there is no picture. One written word is at the top and the student must select from four loudspeakers which pronounce the target words consecutively, going clockwise.

3. The “task option” screen

At the bottom of the “task option” screen, to the right of the 3 buttons which indicate the 12 types of matching tasks/ run modes, there are 5 other buttons: A button with the icon of a teacher which gives further practice options. A button with a typewriter is for a dictation option (not available on this version). A button with an icon of an open book gives the option for three different forms (A, B or C) of an audio-visual dictionary. “A” presents a set of four photos and by clicking on any picture its corresponding written and spoken form is given. “B” presents the spoken form without the written and “C” presents the written and spoken form without the picture. This is a useful aid for the students who have the option to work with and concentrate on any particular form of the language they are having difficulty with.

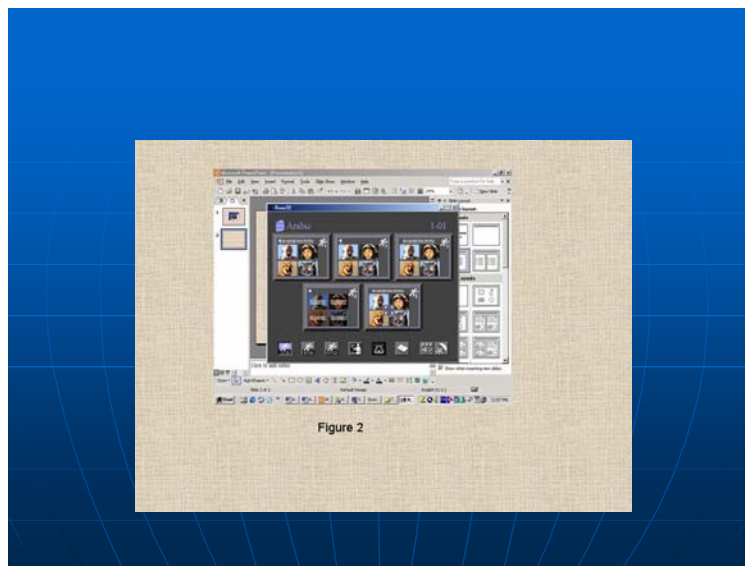
The second to last button (bottom right) has an icon of a speaker, buttons and a volume control and allows various options to be selected. The student can select ticks or happy faces as the feedback for a correct answer and there are a variety of associated sounds to choose from. There are options to set time limits on tasks, hide written forms of spoken cues etc. The last button has the icon of a parachute and brings up the “chapter” screen allowing a new choice of chapter.

4. The lessons

Once the student selects one of the twelve possible task formats (depending on whether they wish to concentrate more on the spoken or written form) a new screen appears with the set of four pictures. We will refer to this screen as the “lesson” screen. To the right of the screen are copies of the navigational and option buttons found on the “task option” screen. An icon of a runner indicates which chapter, task and lesson is being presented (as previously mentioned the numbering system is complicated and it is doubtful whether the students can or do get a clear idea of which lesson they are on). The open book icon allows quick access to the audio-visual dictionary. The general “options” button is available so that the student can alter the parameters of the task at hand at any moment without needing to go back to the “task options” screen. The parachute icon allows “escape” at any time back to the “task option” screen. Also given is a running score of correct and incorrect answers (one correct or incorrect answer adds 4 points to the appropriate tally).

As each set of four pictures is completed a new set of four appears. The first set is lesson 1, the second set lesson 2. There are 10 lessons within each chapter. Any change of lesson is indicated on the icon of the runner so that student is always aware of moving on. There is a forward and back button allowing the student to move between consecutive lessons (see Figure 2)

Figure 2



The evaluation will focus on the Arabic Language skills particularly listening, speaking, and reading and the effectiveness of using the [Arabic] language program (Brett, 1994:1) Listening Input. Audio. The quality of the audio material is clear, understandable and

uses native Arabic speakers. However, the entire program is based on a set of 12 audio-visual matching tasks which are only one aspect of the overall listening skills a language learner needs. This severely limits the type of listening experience available. One word sentences and then more complicated sentences are given in an artificial way. There are no natural dialogues representing what a student would hear in a normal conversation. Intonation is not in a conversational context but flat as is common when isolated sentences are merely read. The graphics are static too. Although native Arabic speakers have been used, the format chosen has meant no effort has been made to approach an approximation to the real world. This CD aims to present a limited and controlled form of language practice.

Pronunciation Input. Words are presented in citation form only with no attempt at normal, real life conversation.

Reading Input. Once again the format of the 12 tasks has fixed the reading input to one artificial form of reading (non-contextualized sentences) with no attempt to include any authentic reading material. This CD is really a modern, audio visual, controlled practice medium and doesn't include any of the elements one would expect from a standard textbook, i.e. extension exercises which allow the opportunity to practice the target language in different and authentic activities.

Speaking Input. This CD uses a passive, receptive format, which allows no speaking input. There is no opportunity for students to practice, repeat or record the words and sentences they hear.

Visual Input. 880 real life color pictures are used to clearly convey the meaning of each new spoken phrase. The use of color photographs is attractive and stimulates interest. All pictures are very clear except some pictures could use more highlighting as is the case in chapter 19 where a part of the body such as وجه (wjhun) "face" and عين ('aynun) "eye" would be clearer if highlighted. There were other instances where the use of arrows to pin-point the exact part of the picture would have been useful.

Vocabulary. The level of vocabulary is appropriate for this level of beginners. However, it is obvious from the first four pictures presented that the choice of vocabulary has been made for a general model of language learning and then applied to the variety of languages the company wish to target. Anyone with any sensitivity at all would not use the picture of a dog in the first set of pictures aimed at an audience that must be mainly Muslim. The designer has chosen to use current forms of vocabulary appropriate for our daily lives such as يشرب (yashrab) drink, and يأكل (ya'kul) eats. The choice of the twelve optional task formats/run modes means that each set of the target vocabulary can be practiced in every possible manner within the limited context of controlled, non-communicative practice of given target structure.

Is the presentation of grammar logically sequenced? The program uses correct grammar, spelling, and sentence structure, and it is very clear regarding the subject, agent, verb, predicate, the mixed form and the plural. The program follows a logical progression of

topics and proceeds in an easy step-by-step approach, with each subsequent level becoming more difficult. The program systematically integrates new vocabulary with new grammar as it builds on the previous chapter. For example, the program provides the demonstrative pronoun for singular masculine هذا (h«dh«) this, then after many lesson presents the demonstrative pronoun هذان (h«dh«ni) these two. However, there are some instances where, presumably because a general model was used and then adapted to various languages, it is obvious that careful attention has NOT been paid to the logical sequencing of vocabulary and grammatical input required specifically for the Arabic language. A complete list of these errors can be found in Appendix 2. It should be mentioned that there is even evidence that the program designer was perhaps unaware of vital differences between Arabic and say English sentence structure and this is a major flaw. For example, in chapter 5 the designer provides the singular subject with the present verb such as الولد يقفز (al-walad yaqfiz) “the boy is jumping” and the plural of the boy with the present tense الأولاد يقفزون (al-awl«d yaqfizwn) “the boys are running”. The designer uses the subject before the verb as would be done in English, but if he had used the verb before the subject it would be closer to Arabic usage. تجري البنات (tajryi al-bn«t) “The boys are running”. It is a major flaw in this program that the major differences (masculine and feminine nouns and the effect this has on numbering) between Arabic and English are not sufficiently highlighted. In English one cannot start a sentence with a verb as in “Goes Ahmed to the school”, it does not make sense, but in Arabic this is possible. We can start with the verb or with the subject because Arabic is (V+S+O) and English is (S+V+O).

Does the program focus user’s attention on specific structures? Once again it is obvious that the use of a general pattern, not directly generated with the Arabic language in mind, has resulted in NOT paying adequate attention to very important structure points in the Arabic language. That Arabic uses different forms for the masculine and feminine is not common in many languages and this needs very special highlighting when students first come across this. In Chapter 3 lesson 1 the designer uses singular masculine with only one singular feminine. It would be useful if he divided the lesson into two categories; one for singular masculine such as رجل *rajul*, man- ولد *walad*, boy (see Figure 3) – تلميذ *tilmyz*, student- كتاب *kit«b*, book- and the another for singular feminine, as he did with, for example, as حديقة *«adyga*, garden. This approach would make learning easier for the student as they would recognize the singular masculine and singular feminine forms in an easy way and a few minutes. In Chapter 2 lesson 3 a similar error occurs with the introduction of the plural masculine and feminine forms. We notice that the designer uses the plural masculine noun before the verb, which is difficult for the learner, because the learner has to know the نون النسوة (non- anniswa) noun for masculine plural but if the designer used the verb before the plural it would be easier and more user-friendly. This is a clear example that the designer has been affected by the English language for the structure of the sentences. Another example can be seen when the designer uses the mixed form الرجل والمرأة ناصقري (al-rajul wal-marati yrqu«ni) “The man and the woman are dancing”. The designer jumbles up the masculine, feminine and mixed form in one lesson. It would be much clearer if the designer used the mixed form separately. There is no difference in English, but there is a difference in Arabic for the verb with a masculine or feminine form or both. This is not mentioned or highlighted. Another

example of specific grammar points not being separated and treated in the best way for clear distinctions to be made is evidenced in the use of numbers .

Vocabulary learning activities. The use of the 12 variations of tasks provides a complete set permutations for matching exercises. As a means of controlled practice this CD is excellent. However it ought to be stressed that this kind of controlled matching activity is only one small part of the language skills a student would need in the real world. The 12 task variations make it possible to select either a simple form of any given lesson or a more difficult one. However, as will have been obvious from our discussion of the vocabulary content, exercises are based solely on the association of pictures, sounds and text, which is an extremely limited form of language use and practice.

Input for writing activities. There are none. This CD would be best used as a controlled practice activity which students can do at their own pace as happens when students spend time in a language lab session. It would be a fairly mammoth effort to supplement this program with extension exercises as the content does not lead very naturally to real life situations.

The evaluation will focus on the Arabic Language skills particularly listening, speaking, and reading and the effectiveness of using the [Arabic] language program (Brett, 1994:1)

Accuracy. There are not many errors in the program (see Figure 4). A rather blatant error which points out that there has been less than stringent care over accuracy comes in the lesson (chapter 10) introducing the interrogative “Who?” The designer of this program was obviously not aware that there are two possible forms depending on whether you are asking about a human or a non human and mixes up the two. See appendix 1. Also in chapter 10 there are two other errors: the use of الناس (‘an-n«s) people while there are شخصان (shakh·«ni) two people , when the designer ought to user شخصان or رجلان (rajul«n) for two people. The designer also uses the word شاحنة (sh«hina) trailer for a small car when it should be سيارة صغيرة (sayy«ra ·aghyra) small car.

Appropriateness. If we take a look at the picture of the woman in Chapter 8 who is eating, we recognize she is not an Arabian woman and her clothes are not those of an Arabian. In chapter 9 there is a picture of a man riding a bicycle who is not wearing a shirt. In Arabic cultures a man has to wear his clothes in public. In chapter 12 lesson five there is a sentence المرأة تجري (al-maratu tajri) “The woman is running” accompanied by a picture in which the clothes worn are very different from those an Arabian woman. There is a failure to convey the appropriate Arab cultural context to the student.

Scope. The information is of sufficient scope to adequately cover the basic topics for any general audience. However, if the target audience is not general, as is the case at a medical school, then supplementary vocabulary would need to be presented by the teacher. A more complete list of parts of the body would be needed, for example.

Technical Aspects.

Navigation. Icons: the icons are very clear. The student may choose, on any screen, to playback or repeat any lesson. However, it should be noted that the numbering of the chapters, lessons and tasks within a lesson is very confusing and unless concentrated attention is paid one can get lost in a confusion of numbers. The absence of a “help” button is a huge oversight and makes navigation a matter of trial and error. As the designer has been very clever in allowing all possible permutations of tasks, the program is complicated and insufficient care has been given to it being user-friendly.

Control: The student may control which lesson to work with and there are options for stopping, pausing or exiting at any given time. The student may also use the option button to change the parameters of the lesson he is doing. For example, if he is having a problem with the written form, he can choose the tasks that highlight this form specifically for more practice without actually changing the lesson he is working on. This is one of the strong advantages of this program as a student controlled practice activity.

Sound: The students may control the volume with the options button. They also have a choice of sounds associated with a correct or incorrect answer.

Search Paths: The students may return to any lesson he wants by just clicking on the parachute icon to return to the main menu. He has the option to choose any chapter, lesson or task option he likes. However, there is one major fault in the menu labeling. The main “chapter” screen lists only the chapter numbers without any idea of content and is really a waste of a screen. The same information could be given with a set of small buttons on the “task” screen. The “chapter” screen ought to contain a list of the vocabulary used for each lesson and the target grammar introduced or practiced. Any standard textbook gives such a list of contents. The absence in this program makes searching for a specific language point impossible.

References and Additional information. There is an audio-visual dictionary with three available options: written, spoken and visual combined, or the spoken form without the written or the written and spoken form without the picture. There is no help button. Neither is there any indication of an online help resource. The most glaring omission of adequate reference material is the absence of any form of grammar explanation, should the student wish to see basic, rule-based examples.

Bookmark and highlighting features: The researcher went through all the content of the program, but was unable to bookmark a specific lesson or any information. This program also fails to highlight any important information.

Save feature: The researcher tried many times to save important information, but failed.

Documentation.

Technical information: There are instructions for installation and operation, and the program is easy to install and this does not take too long. There are no instructions on

what the various icons and buttons mean. A search and help feature, therefore, is strongly recommended in addition to an online help site and also a dictionary and grammar reference section to help the student.

Teacher guides:

There is a summary of the content in the introduction to the program. There are no suggestions for classroom use or lesson plans. No related activities are suggested.

References

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<p>Ibrahim Suliman Ahmed He holds an MA in teaching Language to Non Arabic Speakers from Khartoum International Institute for learning Arabic. He has presented papers at various international conferences in Europe and Asia. He has published in <i>The Reading Matrix: An International Online Journal</i> and the <i>International Medical Bulletin</i>.</p>
