Barron’s Book Study Notes: Software Evaluation

Publisher: Corel
Content Area: Analytical Reading
Grade level(s): Not specified.
Hardware Required:
  Windows 3.1, MS-DOS 5.0; IBM-compatible PC 486 33; 8 MB RAM; Double-speed CD-ROM drive; Complete install space 10.5 MB.
Cost Information and Pricing Options Available: N/A.
Software Functions: Reading Aid.
Objectives:
  Help the user to analytically read literary texts in a more convenient way; offer prompts for textual analysis.

Appropriateness of Content for Audience 4.5/5
  The software is primarily a great collection of famous literary works by great authors including Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, Charles Dickens, Mark Twain, and a lot more. A small self-test with multiple choice and open-ended questions follow each text. Apart from those, users can retrieve biographical information of the authors and portfolios of images and maps related to the literary work.
  The software does not specify its aimed audience, but senior high and college students can be perceived as the suitable users for this software. Most of the texts in this software are novels and long essays, and the software does not focus on interaction as its focus. The major objective is to offer the users a convenient platform to highlight texts, to bookmark, and to annotate on the hypertext. Users also have direct access to the American Heritage Concise Dictionary whenever they encounter new vocabulary.
  Some criticisms to those literary texts from other writers are offered. The learners could learn to read and analyze a text critically from these examples, and will also have secondary sources when it comes to their writing. It is regretful, however, that no annotations are offered on the original text (i.e., users can only annotate themselves) and therefore the software does not offer too much guidance on analytical reading.
  In the self-test part, the multiple choice questions are often about details in the novel plot, and are less constructive than the open-ended questions. The suggested answers for the open-ended questions could be helpful for the learners’ brainstorming.

Presentation; Appeal 4/5
  Because of the design objective, this software does not have colorful or lively animate presentation. The scholastic and plain style is appropriate for the audience and the purpose.

Interaction/Other Functions 3/5
  As is pointed out above, the software does not have too many interactive functions. The pedagogical function could have been improved if the learners will not only get the meaning but also the pronunciation of a word when they encounter a vocabulary. It would also be helpful to link the actual text to certain questions so that the users can be prompted to annotate.
  It is easy to access to Microsoft Word and to the printer from the reading interface, so that copying and pasting, as well as printing out documents, are made easier. Such functions offer some convenience when the learners want to retrieve their notes to write their research papers.

User friendliness 4/5
  It is not difficult to use this software. However, the software mostly collects extremely long texts. Because prompts and questions are only offered at the end of each text, reading the whole text from the screen before the they can have any learning activity can be exhausting to the users.
**Recommended Use**

The test questions and the criticism offered at the end of the texts are not too sophisticated and are suitable for beginner of literature and analytical writing. However, it seems doubtful that senior high students or college students of the freshmen composition class would be interested in reading and annotating the whole text on the screen. I suggest that the test questions could offer some help for language instructors, while the electronic book itself may be useful for senior researchers of literature. If a reader is in the habit of making a huge amount of annotation and markings before he will write a textual analysis paper, the electronic book will offer a convenient platform for his reading.

(Evaluated by Yi Xu, 2005.)