

PRODUCT reviews

- Soliloquy Reading Assistant
- InFocus IN32 Projector

Soliloquy Reading Assistant V.4

By J.V. Bolkan

Computer voice recognition software may not even be close to Star Trek levels of sophistication, but Soliloquy Reading Assistant makes amazing use of current speech technology. An oral reading system for grades 2–5, Soliloquy is designed to work best with a good computer headset.

Students read text passages aloud from the Soliloquy library shown onscreen. The program monitors reading speed and automatically provides proper pronunciation for words that the student mispronounces or stumbles on. Definitions for words are provided in context, a nice feature for students at this level. With the supplied Logitech USB 250 stereo headset, the program was amazingly capable. Reading in my normal tone and speed, the program smoothly prompted me with the next sentence to read, when I accidentally transposed two words, it noted that, but continued. Affecting a stutter and feigning trouble with some of the vocabulary did cause the program to flag a considerable number of words, but as far as I could tell, only those I'd had "difficulty" with.

Students can practice with a section or even have the software read along with the text before pressing the record session button. When recording, students are given the opportunity to hear themselves reading a passage and can hear where they stumble or other-

Soliloquy's Reading Assistant V.4 is a sophisticated oral reading and comprehension skill building application with strong assessment and reporting capabilities.

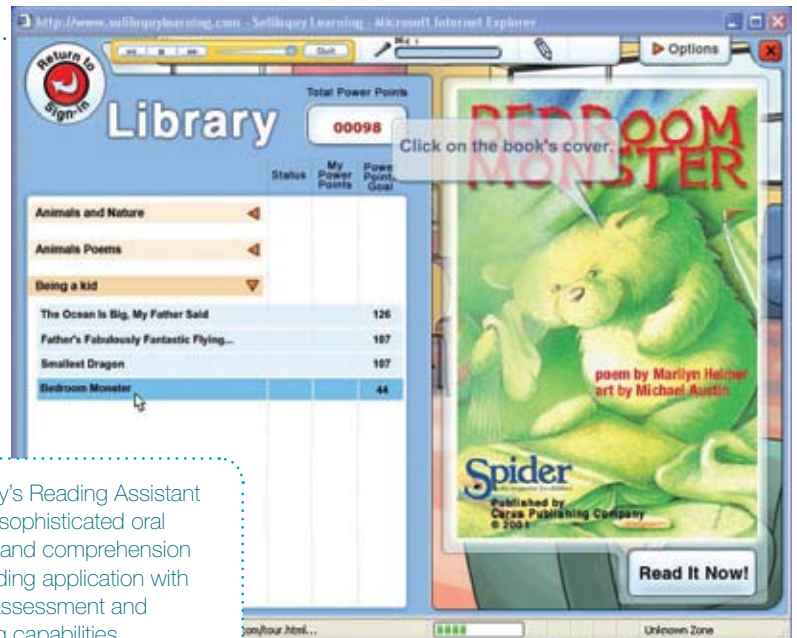
wise have problems. Students sign in to the system, which then remembers them from session to session. The software stores student-recorded reading passages, so teachers can also listen to student reading for assessment. This can be extremely helpful, especially for assessing students who may have trouble reading aloud in front of an audience. The headset tends to isolate the wearer, which should promote confidence for those shy students.

The selection of reading matter supplied is varied and good for the grade levels it targets. Included are fiction, non-fiction, poetry, limericks, and folktales. Additional content is available on CD from the company.

Once a story has been read, students are awarded points. Even a challenging session will provide some points for the student, fluent sessions will garner more points. A session can be repeated as many times as the

student wishes. Additional points are available for the students by taking quizzes after the reading. I found the questions refreshingly challenging, demanding understanding of the topic rather than rote memorization of the material. The point system for reading and comprehension could be motivating for students.

Teachers can track student progress individually or as a class. As mentioned earlier, teachers can choose to listen to any student's recorded session, or simply generate a report. Reports detail how the class, student, or other teacher-defined group is using the software, how well they are reading, and if they are understanding the material enough to score well on the quizzes. The reporting feature is quite robust. With a school network and the network version of the software, administrators can have access to compare classrooms, or even compare an entire



school to other schools within a district using the software. The software does require a dedicated application server if used in network mode.

The stand-alone version of the software (including the excellent Logitech microphone headset and one anthology) costs \$229, an excellent value for the level of sophistication. Although the network (if used) must be a Windows 2000 or 2003 Server, the workstations can be either Win-

dows or Macintosh systems. Requirements for workstations are relatively modest, a Pentium II or Mac G3 (400 MHz minimum for either). Most of the other requirements should also be easily met by any machine with those or better specifications.

The software isn't appropriate for every student. Students with speech impediments, strong dialects, or attributes that affect reading onscreen will have limited success with the software.

For the majority of elementary readers, Soliloquy Reading Assistant is an excellent tool for expanding oral reading abilities and comprehension. For teachers, the independent-instruction and strong assessment features could make this an easy choice for classroom management.

Soliloquy Reading Assistant V.4
Soliloquy Learning
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InFocus IN32 Projector

By J.V. Bolkan

InFocus seems to make a specific projector for every possible situation. Within that deep lineup, the IN32 stands out as a versatile, mid-priced choice for classroom applications. The IN32 is a DLP-based projector with a 2,000 lumens lamp that delivers a very bright, vivid image that stands up to the ambient light that's inevitable in most classrooms. In fact, the image is bright enough that the IN32 could serve for smaller auditoriums. InFocus does make an almost identical projector, the IN34, which uses the same case and has the same specifications except it produces 2,500 lumens.

Along with brightness, the other factor that distinguishes a mid-level projector from the low-cost competitors is native resolution. The IN32 is a true XGA (1024 × 768) projector, meaning that both computer-generated input and high-definition video are produced extremely sharply.

Unfortunately, the IN32 doesn't have a HDMI connection for high-definition video input. It does have digital input with an included M1-DA to DVI adapter and it accepts S-Video, composite video, and standard VESA (computer) connections. As with most projectors, onboard audio

InFocus's IN32 projector provides razor-sharp XGA displays and a strong 2,000 lumen lamp for a reasonable price.



is pathetic. The anemic 1 watt mono sound system really only is suitable for the various audio cues used by InFocus in the projector's setup menus. Fortunately, you won't need to hook a monster external sound system up—the IN32 fan is very quiet.

Although capable of being ceiling mounted, the IN32 is best as a portable device, ready to travel from room to room. It's a compact, light, yet solid feeling projector. It does come with a canvas carry case, but the poorly padded case probably isn't going to keep the projector safe for longer, or rougher trips.

InFocus is well respected for its support and warranty policies. The projector has a 2-year warranty, but only 6 months on the lamp. I did find a number of vendors online offering either a \$100 rebate or free replace-

ment lamp (take the lamp, they can cost as much as \$500). With pricing online from a variety of vendors just below the \$1,000 level, the IN32 is a solid value for a true XGA-resolution projector with 2,000 Lumens. It doesn't have a lot of whiz-bang features, isn't the smallest, brightest, or most beautiful, but sometimes you just need a solid, capable no-nonsense solution.

InFocus IN32 Projector
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J.V. Bolkan is associate publisher/senior editor for L&L. He has been reviewing and writing about multimedia and technology for more than 20 years.