

THRASS Phoneme Machine to be Showcased at Microsoft Africa School Technology Innovation Centre

The THRASS Phoneme Machine is a groundbreaking computer programme that uses the International Phonetic Alphabet and moving human lips to demonstrate the pronunciation of hundreds of frequently used English words. It has already enjoyed considerable success since its launch in 2006, and is now to be showcased at the Microsoft Africa School Technology Innovation Centre, in Johannesburg, starting with a presentation and demonstration on 22 May.

The Phoneme Machine has already enjoyed considerable success in Africa, Europe and the USA, with thousands of copies already downloaded. An indication of the extent of this success is the fact that it is now to be showcased at the Africa School Technology Innovation Centre (ASTIC), Johannesburg, South Africa. ASTIC serves as a centre for best practice and innovation in the use of ICT in teaching and learning and receives major sponsorship from Microsoft. Although the site is in Johannesburg, the vision is for the functionality of ASTIC to be transferred to and embedded in centres and schools in countries across sub-Saharan Africa through programmes such as Microsoft's 'Schools of the Future'. The Phoneme Machine has already received software accreditation from market leader SMART Technologies Inc, for use on its interactive whiteboards, and THRASS UK and SMART Technologies Inc are joint sponsors of the THRASS SMART project, which uses the very latest in education technology, at Masimbambane College in Orange Farm Township, South Africa.

The Phoneme Machine was designed by Alan Davies, British educational psychologist and pioneer of the widely used THRASS (Teaching Handwriting Reading And Spelling Skills) phonics programme, of which it forms part. It develops a good understanding of the 44 sounds and the 120 main spelling choices of English, which is largely achieved by 'blending all the sounds through a word', a key recommendation of the British Government's recent report on Synthetic Phonics. It is an excellent resource for teachers, assistants and parents for learning about, and also teaching, the fundamental building blocks of English in an entertaining and fun way. Although it is suitable for learners of all ages and abilities, it has been found to be particularly helpful to parents of children starting to read, children finding reading difficult and those for whom English is not their first language.

The latest Version 4.13 of the Phoneme Machine has many new features including an interactive version of the English Calendar Chart, with children's voices saying the 7 days, the 31 dates, the 12 months, the numbers from 1 to 20, the 10 main colours and the names of the 26 lower-case letters (and their associated capitals). Later updates will include calendar charts for many European (e.g. French, German, Spanish and Dutch) and African (e.g. Afrikaans, SePedi, Setswana, Sesotho and Zulu) languages.

As the words of Dr Jean Place, Principal Tutor Foundation Phase Programmes, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, demonstrate, it has been particularly well received in South Africa, "We had over one hundred teachers at the THRASS accredited training, organised with the NAPTOSA teachers union, and everyone thought that the programme was an excellent resource for teaching English. There was considerable interest in the Afrikaans and other African language versions of the interactive English Calendar Chart."

The Phoneme Machine is available in PC and Mac formats and is suitable for computers and interactive whiteboards; it is Microsoft Vista compatible. The 40MB file can be downloaded free-of-charge from www.phonememachine.com and is activated with a serial number provided during registration. This may be used to install the programme on any number of computers at the same address.

Many professional African commentators have publicly stated that THRASS is heralding the start of a new era in the teaching of English in Africa. Dr Melodie de Jager, author of Mind Moves, and Dr Jean Place agree that THRASS is a revolutionary approach to teaching English that provides learners not just with handwriting, reading and spelling skills but also with valuable life skills training.

THRASS also scores full marks against the criteria published by the British Government to help schools select a high quality phonics programme. THRASS UK has been invited, by the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), to present THRASS at regional one-day phonics conferences in May and June.

ASTIC is located in the Johannesburg College Campus, Troyville (within the Gauteng Department of Education). The Phoneme Machine software is to be showcased at the centre from 22 May, starting with a presentation and demonstration, by educational psychologist Alan Davies (the designer) and Mike Meade (the programmer), from 1500 hrs to 1630 hrs. The demonstration, in one of the learning laboratories with a SMART Board, will be with children from Masibambane College, Orange Farm Township, which is a Centre of Excellence for the teaching of THRASS in South Africa.

To register for the event, please contact Angela Schaerer, Africa School Technology Innovation Centre Manager. v-angels@microsoft.com +27 83 308 5190

For more information about the THRASS Phoneme Machine Version 4.13 and to register for a free download of the software, visit www.phonememachine.com

For a summary of the main features of THRASS and the benefits of using THRASS (including comments from teachers and parents), visit www.thrass.co.uk/keyfacts.htm

Demonstration lessons showing Alan Davies using the Phoneme Machine can be viewed as videostreams or downloaded from THRASS Video Clips at www.thrass.co.uk/tvc.htm

For details of the THRASS SMART Project, visit www.thrass.co.uk/thrass_smart.htm

You can find out more about the Africa STIC by downloading the ASTIC Overview from www.thrass.co.uk/downloads/Africa_STIC_Overview_April_2007.doc

The countries that THRASS UK is licensed to serve are shown in blue on the world map at www.thrass.co.uk/worldmap.htm

For details of THRASS Professional Development Courses that are held regularly in the UK, Europe, West and Southern Africa, including the NAPTOSA two-day certificate course to be held in Cape Town on 11 and 12 May, visit www.thrass.co.uk/courses.htm

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