

Never stuck for words

Programs for predicting words on PCs have been around for over 20 years. Victoria Crivelli sees how well the latest version of Penfriend stands the test of time

The Penfriend predictive series of programs has led the field in this area of technology for many years from the early version for Acorn Computers to the latest release – Penfriend XL Version 3.0.

With the new version this useful tool has improved and advanced in both technological terms and its ability to meet user needs.

For those unfamiliar with predictive programs, Penfriend will be a revelation when using the program in tandem with applications such as familiar word processors. Penfriend can help enter text at speed, minimise keystrokes, overcome many spelling difficulties and enable word processing applications, such as Microsoft Word, to provide speech support for text entered by a user.

If you type in the letter ‘m’ the system will suggest up to 12 commonly used words starting with m in an onscreen predictor window, (with full speech support if required). With one mouse click, you can select a word from the window and enter it into a document next to the cursor.

Suggestions can be refined with a second keystroke to present words starting with ma, for example.

For those more familiar with predictive programs, the accuracy and success with which Penfriend suggests words after one or two keystrokes will come as a pleasant surprise, together with the additional features and options including an onscreen clipboard for speaking text selected from a document, an application or the internet.

Penfriend boasts an onscreen keyboard option for visual comfort (it is much easier if you don’t have to keep looking at a keyboard), and a screen reader for accessing menus, text in other applications or web pages. The system can learn new words and also make its predictions based on words you have used before. Automatic predictive options will suggest words that are grammatically correct.

Of course, earlier versions of Penfriend have included many of these features, but Penfriend XL 3.0 has the added bonus of lexicons in eight languages, other than English, including French, Spanish,

German, Italian and Latin. This new dimension enables users to have support when writing text for MFL in education, business or recreational environments.

The program helps users locate free speech engines to support many of these languages directly from the internet so that speech support is appropriate. Despite using synthesised voices, this added dimension is of enormous help to those learning a language, and who are unsure of correct pronunciation or need to tune in to the correct

accent.

Students have commented on how reassuring and helpful it is when they and supporting adults, such as teaching assistants or parents, are non-specialists or not fluent in the language themselves.

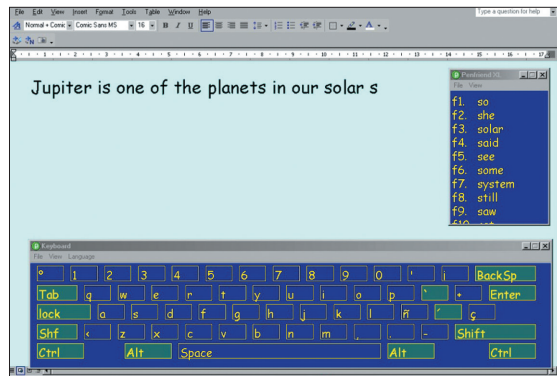
Users can select from a wide range of preferences including colour background, the

style, colour and size of fonts, preferred voice, speech support options and onscreen keyboard and save them together with the lexicons they use most often.

There are many lexicons, ranging in size from 500 to 30,000 words. And you can create new ones by adding words that are subject or user specific to the lexicons already provided. Penfriend can learn new words from existing texts or they can be added manually and saved. This is particularly useful for users writing scientific documents where key technical words can be predicted along with more commonly used vocabulary.

You can switch the screen reader on or off from the clipboard toolbar, which is a welcome improvement over previous versions. Those needing help to enter text accurately and at speed, with the option of speech support in English and other languages, will find Penfriend XL most helpful. □

Victoria Crivelli is special educational needs advisor for Worcestershire County Council.



Penfriend XL with onscreen keyboard and predictor window