13

〔研究論文〕

A Review and Assessment of Technology and Materials For English Language Teaching and Learning

Sylvain Bergeron

Abstract

As an increasing number of materials and language learning resources have become available online, English language learners of any level can easily access an unlimited number of websites and applications at the swipe of a finger. For teachers and students concerned with the quality of these online tools, being directed to websites that are trustworthy and truly educational can become a daunting task. This two-part article aims to support teachers in this challenge. In Section One, titled *Website Review and Assessment for Listening Instruction*, the results of a review and assessment conducted to determine the quality of readily available online resources and study materials intended for English language teaching and learning are presented. In Section Two, titled *Online English Language Course Assessment,* a review and assessment of an online language course suitable for either self-study or for use within the context of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom will be presented.

Keywords: Online, technology, self-study, resources, assessment

According to Eastment (2001, p. 420-422):

One of the appeals of the Internet is that it provides access not only to text and pictures, but also to sound and video material…[L]istening on the Web is on its way to becoming a mainstream activity…[I]f you have a good computer…[a]nd a fast connection, the world is your oyster.

Although expressed more than a decade ago, from an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) perspective the aforementioned quote by Eastment (2001) predictably and accurately spoke of the increasing use of the Internet and the World Wide Web as popular mediums of information from which, language education can

be brought to life. However, as we are constantly presented with a seemingly infinite amount of choices every time we "… [g]o to Google," (Eastment, 2001, p. 422), how can well-intentioned users select the most appropriate websites to access quality content and materials that are specific to language teaching and learning?

Overview

This two-part article is an attempt to adequately advise and direct educators and learners to quality online English language resources. The paper will at first introduce five distinctive websites where EFL practitioners can easily locate reliable online instruction tools and activities that have been purposely designed to challenge learners that are intent on improving one or more of the receptive or expressive skills needed for effective communication in English. In the second part of this article, a review and assessment of a comprehensive online English language course appropriate for either personal or group study will be discussed.

Section One:

Website Review and Assessment for Listening Instruction

Belonging to an interrelated group of four basic skills or *macro-skills* that include listening, speaking, reading, and writing, for this section of the paper I opt to focus specifically on the receptive macroskill of listening. I present a critical assessment of five selected websites that offer online language learning resources intent on helping learners improve their English language listening ability. In line with this assessment, a brief introduction, explanation and evaluation of these five websites, dedicated in whole or in part to English listening, will be provided in the following order:

・Voice of America

・Lyrics Gaps

・National Public Radio

・StoryCorps

・Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab

Following a listing of each of the five websites' respective names and Uniform Resource Locator (URL), or commonly termed as web address, a brief review and evaluation of each website will be provided according to the following criteria as described in the

Website Assessment Criteria table appearing below: Audience, Suitability, Authenticity, Quality, and Offline Use.

Website Assessment Criteria
1. **Audience** - who is the site intended for e.g. teachers, students or both?
2. **Suitability** - is the site suitable for different levels of ability e.g. beginners, intermediate, or advanced?
3. **Authenticity** - is the language used in the listening tasks authentic e.g. resembles naturally-spoken English?
4. **Quality** - does the site make use of quality audio-visual components to promote effective listening instruction e.g. professionally-made sound recordings or video footage?
5. **Offline Use** - is it possible to use the site's material offline e.g. computer, mobile or paper-based tasks?

(*Source: Table adapted from *ICT4LT, 2001: CALL Software and Website Evaluation Forms*).

1) **Website name:** *Voice of America* (VOA)

Website address (URL): http://learningenglish.voanews.com/

Assessment: VOA is a news broadcasting website that also includes an educational section. It is intended for EFL learners, and it is well-suited for false beginners and intermediate-level students of English. As this website's content is centered on news broadcasts, listening tasks emphasize a reporting style, as opposed to a conversational style of English. As VOA is recognized as a professional news medium, the quality of its audio-visual material is very high. It is also possible to use the website's material offline via podcast, mobile and social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

2) **Website name:** *Lyrics Gaps*

Website address (URL): http://www.lyricsgaps.com/

Assessment: This website provides an enjoyable way to improve listening skills through song-based activities. It is a resource website suitable for EFL learners of various levels. Here teachers are introduced to various exercises and creative ideas for supplementing song-based tasks and learners will enjoy their interactive design. The language used is entirely based on the themes and lyrics of popular songs uploaded to *YouTube*; as such, the quality is mostly good. As the site's interactive activities require that answers be typed in, learners will need to complete the tasks online. Paper-based tasks can also be printed out for offline instruction.

3) **Website name:** National Public Radio (NPR)

Website address (URL): http://www.npr.org/

Assessment: The *National Public Radio* (NPR) is a very well-reputed website dedicated to informing the public about cultural issues, public affairs and current international news. It is an excellent resource for EFL learners with high intermediate or advanced listening skills. Unlike conversational

English, the type of language used on this site is of a reporting and interview style. As NPR is a professional and well-established radio station of long date, listeners are provided with sound recordings of high quality. It is also possible to access the website's listening material offline via computer-based downloads such as podcasts, *i-Tunes* and mobile application software (App).

４）**Website name:** *StoryCorps*

Website address (URL): http://storycorps.org/about/

Assessment: The *StoryCorps* website is a remarkable listening tool that allows real people to share their human stories with the world. Intended for EFL learners at the intermediate level and above, this website is dedicated entirely to storytelling. The language and the emotions used to recount these stories are very authentic and at times quite moving. The speaking style fluctuates between a narrative style and a conversational style of English. The website's audio-visual components are professionally produced and the quality is very high. Listening material featured on *StoryCorps* can also be accessed offline via podcasts, DVDs, and social networks such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*.

５）**Website name:** *Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab*

Website address (URL): http://www.esl-lab.com/

Assessment: This website is dedicated to providing a variety of instructional resources for EFL learners. Here, language students of all levels can easily select listening tasks that are best suited to their needs and interests. The type of language used on this website is conversational and authentic. Although *Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab* is the creation of a private individual, it is chockfull of practical information and activities for learners. While recordings lack the production quality and the level of artistic professionalism of more established sites, conversations include audio effects that make the listening tasks realistic, challenging and enjoyable. The website's material is also accessible offline via downloadable paper-based tasks, social network and *YouTube*.

Section Two:

Online English Language Course Assessment

> As the technology improves and costs come down … [e]lectronic means offer enormous potential in terms of [in] and out-of-class speaking practice (Thornbury, 2005, p. 109).

The World Wide Web and the myriad of other instructional resources currently available to EFL students make language learning increasingly accessible, affordable and meaningful to anyone equipped with a

computer and "… [f]ast and reliable Internet access."

One such readily available online English language learning tool is the TalkEnglish.com website (see: http://www.talkenglish.com/), which offers language instruction aimed at improving learners' English speaking and listening skills.   The lessons are well-structured and are directed at beginners, intermediate and advanced-level learners. Instruction is free of charge and includes a considerable amount of material designed for self-study, or use within the context of an EFL classroom.

1．Assessment criteria:

The following section will provide a critical assessment of the *TalkEnglish.com* website, the purpose of which is to provide users with a complete online English language course designed around activities that promote the development and reinforcement of learners' speaking and listening skills.

The criteria used for this assessment will focus on its relevance, usefulness and practicality as they pertain to the development of learners' English speaking and listening skills (see 'Online Language Course Evaluation Criteria' below):

Online Language Course Assessment Criteria **Target Macro-skills: Reading, Listening and Speaking** **Website:** TalkEnglish.com **Address:** http://www.talkenglish.com/
1．**Relevance –** is the content of the online language course relevant in terms of how it supports/supplements the students' main (classroom) lessons' objectives e.g., topics, functions and practice .
2．**Usefulness -** does the content of the online language course serve a useful purpose in terms of how it assists learners to reinforce core elements of spoken English e.g., grammar, pronunciation and intonation?
3．**Practicality** - do the speaking activities have any value insofar as they help learners fulfill certain practical tasks through the use of conversational and situational task-based English e.g., shopping, meeting friends, asking for directions?

In order to make this assessment more practically relevant to the EFL classroom, instructors are invited to make use of the aforementioned criteria within their own assessment of this or other similar types of online English language learning/teaching platforms. Throughout this particular assessment, it would be advisable to keep in mind that the primary focus will be on how the technology, in the form of the TalkEnglish.com website, lends itself to the experience of language learning and the quality of that experience, as opposed to presenting a critique of the technical, operational, or functional features of that technology.

2．The benefits of integrating an online language course:

Dudeney and Hockley (2007) strongly recommend the use of technology within the context of an EFL classroom. In agreement, I argue that integrating an online language program such as TalkEnglish.com in the high school, college or university computer laboratory, can significantly enhance the students' learning experience while also increasing their motivation and level of interest.

Concurrently, Brinton (2001, p. 462) states that the use of technology or "technical media" such as computers in the ESL/EFL classroom can contribute richly and constructively to "the language teaching [and learning] process." This is a point that is also echoed by Wilson (2011), who encourages language educators to "make use of available technology in the English language classroom," as this type of methodology has the potential to become a highly motivational, enjoyable and effective way to learn a second language (L2).

Finally, the interactive, engaging and well-supported instructional tasks and materials tasks found on the TalkEnglish.com website have the potential to positively encourage independent learning, maximize in-class oral communication (OC) practice and ultimately, contribute to improving the students' overall English speaking and listening ability.

3．Assessment of the TalkEnglish.com online language course

1） **Relevance**: the online language course offers instructional material that can be used to support and/or supplement the topics, functions and practice segments of a core EFL classroom syllabus. However, as this website contains a rich variety of courses and lessons to choose from, teachers are advised to visit the website prior to the lesson to select activities that are most appropriate to support the lesson and to meet students' needs and interests. For example, if the topic of the lesson were centered on the topic of *Home Life*, teachers/students would need to direct themselves to the TalkEnglish.com top page and select the *English Conversation - Practice your English and gain confidence! tab*. Then by clicking on the *Beginner Conversation Course* tab and scrolling down to the *Home Life* tab appearing below, teachers/students would then have access to numerous categories of topic-related practice conversations to choose from. Video-supported instruction prior to the start of courses and lessons is available and post-activity exercises such as quizzes are also accessible to test students' listening comprehension skills.

All conversational and situational dialogues that are available for practice are particularly relevant in terms of how they can effectively support and/or supplement core classroom lesson material, improve students' speaking/listening skills while at the same time, "enhancing retention and learning," (Gagne & al., 1998).

２）**Usefulness:** Reading, listening and interactive speaking activities constitute a considerable amount of this website's teaching material and methodology. However, there are other sections dedicated to the fundamental aspects of conversational English. These sections are particularly helpful "to determine the next best step for the learner and provide [extra] practice in that skill area" (Warschauer & Healey, 1997). For example, for students needing to reinforce basic elements of the spoken language, this comprehensive website offers additional practice and learning support dedicated to English grammar, pronunciation, intonation, idioms and phrases. Students can make use of these extra practice activities to strengthen basic skills and become more capable and confident speakers of English.

３）**Practicality:** going beyond basic language structures, this website also offers reading and speaking practice that focuses specifically on practical and situational task-based dialogues. As "task-based learning provides students with motivation to use language as they perform tasks designed to facilitate language practice" (Nunan, 1993). For example, these situational dialogues offer many opportunities to practice real-life conversations relating to business situations, travel, school, and work. Again, situated in the *English Conversation* section of the website's *Business Conversation Course*, students are provided with a considerable amount of speaking and listening practice centered on task/content-based subject matter and supplemented by post-activity listening comprehension exercises.

Conclusion:

Returning to Brinton (2001, p. 461), we are reminded that the use of technical media (e.g., computers) within an EFL context helps to stimulate and engage learners "by bringing a slice of the real world into the classroom." By presenting how the L2 is used in real-life, or within a day-to-day context, learners gain a greater level of linguistic and contextual understanding compared to more traditional, rote and teacher-centered "talk and chalk" approaches and methodologies. Echoing a similar sentiment, Harmer (2007, p. 176) concludes this assessment by stating optimistically that:

> the [technological] resources [such as TalkEnglish.com] that are currently available are truly amazing… [f]or they offer an amazing variety of routes for learning and discovery.

Whether for self-study or for in-class application, it is important for teachers and students to be well-informed and aware of legitimate websites that offer quality teaching and learning tools to effectively meet their interests and specific language needs. As we look to current trends that point to a constantly increasing reliance on the use of readily available technology to access educational platforms such as the ones mentioned above, it is essential that users approach yet unfamiliar websites with a certain degree of discernment. With this in mind, the author hopes that the information shared in this article will help to

introduce and guide users toward websites that are free of charge and whose value can be determined by the quality of their content and the level of support that they provide to users – EFL teachers and students alike – that are looking for a reliable and authentic online English language learning experience.

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英語教育と英語学習におけるテクノロジー及び教材の評価について

シルヴァン　ベルジュロン

要　旨

　近年、ますます多くの教材や語学学習リソースがオンラインで利用できるようになり、どのレベルの英語学習者も簡単に、また無制限にウェブサイトやアプリケーションにアクセスできるようになった。そのため、これらのオンラインツールの品質に関心を持つ教師や学生にとって、信頼性があり真に教育的なウェブサイトを用いることは困難になってきた。そこで、本論では、オンラインによる学習リソースの適切な評価を試み、英語教師をサポートすることを目的としている。まず、セクション1では、聞き取り指導のためのウェブサイトレビューと評価と題して、すぐに利用できるオンラインリソースの質を決定するために行われたレビューと評価の結果を紹介する。セクション２では、オンライン語学コースの評価、自学習またはEFL（外国語としての英語）の文脈の中での使用に適したオンライン語学コースのレビューと評価を行う。

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