

Website Reviews Students in CTESL at UNB Fredericton

BBC Schools- Bite Size Revision by Tamara Lund:

The BBC website is a popular bookmark on my computer since early into my teaching internship last year. The site has many potential uses, but the focus of this review will be “BBC Schools – Bite Size Revision¹”. As suggested, “Bite Size Revision” refers to review of small topics in the subject areas. The lower level material is divided into Key Stages. The Key Stage One (KS1) and Key Stage Two (KS2) have the most potential to aid in beginner to intermediate ESL instruction. As the learner moves from KS1 to KS2, the games and their concepts act as ‘stepping stones’ for learners as they advance in abilities.

KS1 Literacy ² covers some basic grammar concepts. Included with each topic is a game and worksheet. The game is divided into three levels to master ‘medium’, ‘hard’ and ‘really hard’. The games have simple instructions that are both written on screen and read-aloud, on a side note, not all words on the game screen are read-aloud. The site is based on teaching English to L1 learners, so there may be some comprehension problems for very low-level ESL students.

KS2 English ³ is divided into three sections: Reading, Writing, and finally, Spelling & Grammar. The Spelling & Grammar section⁴ has a slightly different structure; there is an activity, revision bite, and quiz for each topic. The activity is a game, but it requires not only more knowledge of English but also more comfort with a computer and has more steps to be successful. The revision bite gives a clear, written definition and examples of the concept. The quiz gives instant feedback on their answer; it explains why or why not they are correct.

This website is fun, colorful, and to the appropriate learner, it is not ‘work’ but a ‘fun game’. The site is free, there is no charge to use all of the games and print all of the worksheets. It is also accessible at home for students to do review and practice after class. It allows students to go through the levels at their own pace, there is no time limit on the games, and if they are using the site independently, no one will know if they got an answer wrong. It reduces anxiety for the learners. As well, since the games increase in difficulty in both computer skill and material covered it can be used over multiple years and ability levels. It is also ‘kid-friendly’. Finding grammar material geared towards younger learners can be challenging. Many grammar website I found during my internship were made for an older audience.

It is important to remember the site does not teach the concepts, but rather acts as review. The appropriate learner would have already received classroom instruction in the concept. It also requires knowledge of how to use a computer. Additionally, it requires access to both computers and the internet for your students. At maximum, I would recommend three students per computer to do the games, although ideally it would be one-on-one. It can be used with a Smart Board

¹ <http://www.bbc.uk/schools/revision>

² <http://www.bbc.uk/schools/ks1bitesize/literacy>

³ <http://www.bbc.uk/schools/ks2bitesize/english/>

⁴ http://www.bbc.uk/schools/ks2bitesize/english/spelling_grammar.shtml

quite effectively. On a final note, it is important when considering the appropriate learner, to consider age. The games will be deemed childish by middle school aged students and beyond.

Overall, I recommend this site to anyone that is teaching ESL to elementary aged students. I believe that when used properly the benefits of this site prevail over the disadvantages.

Review of ESL Gold by Amanda Carr-

ESL Gold is a very helpful website for ESL students and teachers. It is a branch of Speak-English-Today¹ which enables students to practice speaking English online with native English speakers, personal tutors and more. The ESL Gold home site itself is translated into sixteen languages, helping language learners orient themselves to the tools offered. From this homepage, viewers can select information on speaking, listening, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, business English, pronunciation, and idioms.

For example, by clicking on speaking², a viewer can select what types of *speaking* they will focus on (i.e. conversation phrases) and the level they are speaking at (beginner, intermediate, etc.). Within the *conversation phrases* link there are dozens of situations a learner or teacher can select. By clicking on *buying and selling*³, the viewer will see phrases, listen to audio, watch video and practice their speech in quizzes or through the speaking partners program⁴. Many links include audio and information on the textbook used to provide the lesson. A review of the textbook, including its main features, is provided as well as an opportunity to purchase the book from Amazon⁵. ESL Gold is also consistent in its design, allowing for easy browsing.

ESL Gold caters to both students and teachers and has specific student and teacher sections. The speaking partners program is one of the site's highlighted applications for students. However, there may be a cost involved, depending on what form of communication is chosen. Students can select conversation plans; prices range to \$25 per month depending on the plan selected. The Skype⁶ program is recommended, making conversing very inexpensive. If students are dialling computer-to-computer, there is no charge involved. This allows students to study the content provided on ESL Gold and test their skills immediately.

In addition, students can scan lists of recommended software or books to prepare for the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) or the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) but to download the helpful programs students must also pay a fee. However, there are many free activities on ESL Gold. Finally, various recommended ESL programs and schools are pinpointed to advanced students seeking further instruction.

Teachers are able to access hundreds of handout activities and online resources as well as teaching tips for each area of study on ESL Gold. The website also provides teachers with lesson plan ideas and outside links for teaching specific concepts. Along with these resources the site also posts job lists and information on ESL teaching schools around the globe. Teachers struggling to arrange their teaching objectives could look ESL Gold for focus. ESL teachers could also instruct learners how to navigate the site and sign up for the online speaking component.

Overall, ESL Gold is a solid resource for the ESL learner and teacher. Although less personal than a cafe webzine created by one or two ESL teachers, ESL Gold can be used for supplementary teaching materials and at home student use. The website is professionally designed and all links are active. Although some fees are attached to certain software and books, these items are optional to the learning experience. The site itself provides audio and visual learning as well as free testing. In addition, the website encourages feedback on its materials and tries to incorporate suggestions made by its users. This feedback can be provided through email or responding to ESL Gold's current survey. I recommend ESL Gold because of its available content, accessibility and practical use through the speaking partners program.

Alierra. (2005). <http://www.eslgold.com>. NA.

1

<http://www.speak-english-today.com/>

2

<http://www.eslgold.com/speaking.html>

3

http://www.eslgold.com/speaking/buying_and_selling.html

4

<http://www.speak-english-today.com/partners.html>

5

<http://www.amazon.ca/>

6

<http://www.skype.com/>

ESL Software Review: Rosetta Stone by Geoff Nicki

Rosetta Stone is a software package for language learning which you can install on your computer. One can choose from a list of thirty-one different languages, each target language having up to three levels of difficulty. Each level is subdivided into units; each unit is subsequently divided into lessons. Each lesson comprises particular grammar points and vocabulary and relates these to corresponding images to which the student can respond. Each lesson also connects to prior knowledge by using vocabulary from previous lessons as well as adding new words and sentence structures. All of the lessons each have five sections: 1) listening and reading, 2) listening, 3) reading, 4) speaking, and 5) writing. Rosetta Stone is intended for learners of any additional language such as individuals, schools, organizations, or companies.

Considering the technology of today, a teacher could have many uses for Rosetta Stone in the ESL classroom. For example, armed with laptop and a Smartboard or LCD projector, an ESL teacher could literally conduct his/her entire classes using this software. The lessons in Rosetta Stone can be customized to fit a teacher's curriculum so that they can be incorporated into daily lesson plans by providing the necessary language skills practice and development ¹. Additional

software is available intended for specific use in the classroom which can record and monitor student progress and identify which areas are in need of extra work ². An ESL teacher could also use the software as mini-lessons for individuals within the class (at a computer console) or to assist individuals in need of extra vocabulary and sentence structure training in between classes. As an individual ESL learner, the student can preview each lesson, practice it in each of the listening, speaking, reading, and writing modes, then take a test to determine competency and understanding. The learner can further go back at any time to address any difficulties. There is also voice recognition capability to assess and help correct pronunciation in the speaking mode. By working through each of the units, the student can become acquainted with all of the material in an anxiety-free low-risk environment at his/her own pace.

Rosetta Stone's claim to success is that:

"it uses rich visual imagery to help students learn and think in a new language. The association of language and images is an integral part of our Dynamic Immersion ® method, ensuring a direct connection between words and their meanings. Rosetta Stone systemically builds nouns and verbs into complete sentences and dialogue." ³

The company also claims that their software works because it is intuitive, interactive, and visually engaging ³. Lastly, they say that students can be free of ever having to translate, memorize, or work through a list of words ³. With all the positives claimed in the above, one might wonder why he/she would ever try learning a language any other way. However, one should also consider the limited fashion in which input from Rosetta Stone is transmitted. For instance, when considering the learning styles of Howard Gardner's widely accepted Multiple Intelligence Theory, it appears that Rosetta Stone only truly appeals to those with strengths in **Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence; the other six learning modes are simply not addressed. So it would seem Rosetta Stone is perhaps beneficial to some but a waste of time and money to others. As a Chinese (Mandarin) language learner, I have tried Rosetta Stone's Mandarin lessons finding them easy to use, interesting, and fun. Conversely, having been fully immersed in a Mandarin speaking society for four years, I realize my interaction with this program, limited to the computer screen, will only provide a cursory knowledge and background of the language. The program lacks the infinite dynamics and ever-elusive nuances experienced when interacting with native speakers.**

In short, the cultural context in which a language should be presented is not realized in Rosetta Stone. The company claims that its patented "Dynamic Immersion ®" is the key to learner success stating, "Rosetta Stone works because [it's] exactly the way we learned our first language." ⁴ However, when taking an educated look at the finer points of "Dynamic Immersion ®," **it appears to be nothing more than a market researched catchphrase. When considering the testimonials, if they are indeed real, many state that Rosetta Stone has led them to**

fluency in months, that the program “didn’t seem like work,” or that it’s “addictive.”
5 I personally believe that there probably are some cases where people found Rosetta

Stone extremely useful for their purposes. Nonetheless, as both an ESL teacher and language learner myself, I conclude that Rosetta Stone may only provide one with a superficial background of a language and that it only be used for practice or review.

Fairfield Language Technologies. www.rosettastone.com

1. <http://www.rosettastone.com/schools/>
2. <http://www.rosettastone.com/schools/overview/RManager>
3. <http://www.rosettastone.com/schools/overview/how-we-teach>
4. <http://www.rosettastone.com/schools/solutions/esl>
5. <http://www.rosettastone.com/personal/what-people-say#default>

Mark’s ESL World by Holly Goodwin-

Mark’s ESL World (www.marksesl.com) provides a multitude of relevant and useful resources for teachers and students who are looking for an online community for assistance. The homepage features 15 “areas” that link to a number of sites aimed at specific needs. The areas include Job Postings, Resumes, the Teacher’s Area, the Student’s Area, and so on. In addition to the Teacher’s Area, the home page features a list of “Top ESL & Teacher Sites,”ⁱ which are ranked in order from number 1 to 340. The homepage allows those who teach English second language and those *interested* in teaching opportunities to share information and develop important resource networks.

The teacher’s link provides crucial employment information and relevant ESL articles. Of particular interest to me is the Lesson Plan Roomⁱⁱ, which provides websites on numerous lesson plan options for individuals who are unsure of how to go about creating a useful, exciting lesson in English, or who are looking for a little inspiration. The student resource area gives everything from worksheet ideas to “Visa Issuance and Green Card Lottery”ⁱⁱⁱ, and has specific links for both children and adults. In addition sections like the “Pronunciation Room,” the “Vocabulary Room,” the “Grammar Room,” the “Writing Room,” and the “Conversations Room,”^{iv} are posted by other individuals. At the base of each page, Mark includes his own relevant materials (articles, sites, pages, activities, etc). Resultantly, there is a community atmosphere to this site: people from around the world contribute their own useful aids in order to help others. The ESL Bookstore^v icon also provides a direct link to amazon.com^{vi}, where students and teachers can find books related to second language learning at discounted online prices. The Post Jobs^{vii} and Resumes^{viii} links provide instructions on how to post advertisements schools

seeking teachers, and space for teachers to post their CV. The website includes a free ad posting option, or the alternative payment plan through PayPal^{ix}. Other links at Mark's ESL World include the Forum, the ESL Job Boards, and the ESL Programs. Finally, the Lounge focuses on "General Areas of Interest."^x Topics range from Britney Spears (who is ranked number 1!), to recipes, wine, online casinos, magic tricks, and furniture, etc. I feel this option provides culturally relevant materials for ESL learners, as well as an opportunity for students and teachers alike to exchange information that is of interest to them.

There are a few criticisms I have for Mark's ESL World. I found that the website focuses primarily on the teaching of English in Asian countries, mainly China and Korea. There is very little attention to opportunities available in South America, Europe, or Africa. While these destinations may be less popular, I feel a website such as this should provide information to those who are looking for teaching experiences outside of Asia. I also feel this website lacks audio and visual aesthetics. Aside from the Photo Gallery^{xi}, the website features only one video option under the Student Area link. For this reason, I feel it is reliant on the user's (particularly the student's) ability to read English without any other assistance (ie. visual or audio cues), and does not take into account different learning styles. Nevertheless, despite these minor critiques, I believe Mark's ESL World is an excellent resource and a great tool for anyone, teacher or student, to source and become part of the English Second Language community.

ⁱ www.marksesl.com

ⁱⁱ http://marksesl.com/lesson_plan_area.htm

ⁱⁱⁱ http://marksesl.com/visa_issuance.htm

^{iv} http://www.marksesl.com/students_area.htm

^v http://www.marksesl.com/students_area.htm

^{vi} <http://www.amazon.com/s?ie=UTF8&keywords=esl&search-type=ss&index=books>

^{vii} http://www.marksesl.com/post_jobs.htm

^{viii} http://marksesl.com/ESL_Job_Boards/ESL_Resumes.cgi

^{ix} https://www.paypal.com/ca/cgi-bin/webscr?cmd=_home&country_lang.x=true

^x <http://www.marksesl.com/lounge.htm>

^{xi} <http://www.marksesl.com/photo.htm>

Breaking News English by Velta Douglas:

Breaking News English Lessons is a website that provides lesson plans for ESL based on current events. The lesson plans are based on a short article, which is followed by a variety of activities dealing with vocabulary, writing, listening and reading. The stories cover a range of issues and topics, from the recent birth of octuplets in the US to 'politeness' education instituted by the Chinese government to prepare the country's population for the Beijing Olympics.^{xi} There are over a 1000 lesson plans available for free on the website, and a new one is posted every three days.^{xi} Listening files are available on the site^{xi} or there is a podcast that teachers and learners can subscribe to.^{xi} The activities are provided in an easy-printing format, and can be downloaded or copied for use in the classroom. There's also a variety of links to other websites by the same creator, including a discussion website with twelve thousand conversation questions,^{xi} and a site that creates lesson plans based around famous people.^{xi} The former is especially useful because it deals with famous people from all over the world, providing cultural relativity for ESL students. Sean Banville, a British ESL teacher who started Breaking News while taking his MA at Birmingham University in the UK, created this trio of websites. He wanted to make classroom materials that would engage students on a daily basis with their learning. He has taught in Japan and written a textbook on activities and ideas for ESL teachers.^{xi}

This site is extremely useful for teachers. The classroom-readiness of the lesson plans is a huge bonus if you are in a pinch, or even as a filler activity for students who complete their regular work ahead of the rest of the class. The lessons generally follow a common format, starting with warm up activities, pre-reading activities, during reading activities, and post-reading activities. Each lesson has extra practice and/or activities that can be assigned for homework or group work in class. The lessons often end with a writing component. The activities include discussion questions and the lessons in general leave lots of room for learners to express their opinions about the topic being covered. For example, the warm ups always include a chat section that gets learners discussing the topic before even reading the article. The after-reading activities always have a list of discussion questions relating to the article, but not based solely on it. Answers are provided at the end of all lesson plans. Separate handouts can be printed for older lesson plans that include student copies and master teacher copies of lesson plans. Additionally, the range of subjects covered by the articles gives students and teachers the ability to focus on topics that are of interest to that particular class.

Even if you choose not to use all the activities related to the articles, the stories are still short, well written and concise. They can be used separately as a reading activity for students, as discussion starters, or as an introduction to another activity. The addition of the audio for each article gives teachers the choice to focus on listening comprehension as well. Students can also use the website individually to access the articles and activities. It could be assigned as homework. The article

could be read and discussed in class while the activities are completed at home, or vice versa. Teachers can tailor the lessons to their individual students' needs.

The only drawback to the website is that it is aimed at high-level learners. The articles often use language that would be difficult for beginners, and the activities assume that students can handle a certain level of English. There are some lessons and articles with lower level of text that are located in the 'general news lessons'^{xi} section. There are also easier and harder versions of lesson plans available between April 2005 and August 2006.^{xi} However, the vocabulary used in the articles would probably need to be simplified or teachers would have to develop extra introductory vocabulary activities before delving into the article. As well, the audio versions of the articles are read with an English accent (Sean Banville, presumably), which could be confusing for those students who are used to other native English accents. Breaking News could not, for the most part, be used with young children. While several articles, like 'Computer Mouse Turns 40' and 'Burger King Releases Meat Perfume,'^{xi} could be used for children as young as ten, most articles are aimed at teenagers and adults. Nevertheless, for intermediate or advanced level learners, this website is a gem of useful information. It is an invaluable resource for teaching adults and business English.

Banville, S. (2004-2009) <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com>

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/0811-0902.html>

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/about.html>

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/listening.html>

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/podcast.html>

^{xi} <http://www.esldiscussions.com/>

^{xi} <http://www.famouspeoplelessons.com/>

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/banville.html>

^{xi} http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/esl_lesson_plans.html

^{xi} Ibid.

^{xi} <http://www.breakingnewsenglish.com/index.html>

Review of ESL kidstuff by Laura Taylor

ESL kidstuff is a site mainly oriented towards "teachers" and "parents"^{xi}.

This site is useful for ESL teachers especially because it contains important information for them. For example, there you can find tips for teachers like "classroom supplies" and "classroom management"^{xi}. These types of tips could be useful information for the teacher, who is just starting teaching ESL and does not have much of the resources or experience in the classroom.

The site has a great source of flashcards and worksheets. A certain fee is involved in getting the access to all the flashcards and worksheets. The site also offers games, song sheets, activities related to various seasons like Christmas or Halloween. The access to this type of material is mainly free and membership is not

required. Games and activities are listed alphabetically. Therefore, it also helps save time when searching for a specific game or activity. Games and activities are also listed into categories like “classroom games and activities”, “song games”^{xi}, and etc. The ability to access these resources allow teachers to provide students with a variety of fun experiences in learning the language no matter the age of the learner. Engaging games and activities such as these allow students to use additional tools to learn the language in a way that is often more enjoyable than only learning from a textbook. Finally, the site has a job category where you can look through listed jobs worldwide and list the job you are looking for. Jobs are offered for ESL, EFL and other language teachers.

ESL kidstuff also has links to other ESL sites. Links are categorized and a short description is given.

The site offers interesting and various articles. Articles explore topics such as “language environment” and “tips for teachers”^{xi}. These articles come from various sources and could be used as a learning tool for advanced ESL or EFL students. For example, these articles could form the foundation of discussions on English instruction topics and written responses to them from the students. One of the sources is ELTnews.com (The Web Site for English Teachers in Japan).

Personally, I think the site is great tool for teachers and educators who teach primary students in ESL. The activities and materials can be fully applied in the ESL adult classroom as well. It is also a simple site and not overcrowded with information and materials. Therefore, the site is great for people who may not be very experienced with computers or people who are looking for useful information and materials quickly.

With that said, the resources offered at this site are not very broad compared to other similar sites and consists just material useful for someone who is teaching English. It is not learner-oriented site. Another downside of the site is that it requires the user to purchase a membership in order to receive full access to the materials offered. The list of articles could also be updated more often.