WEBSITE REVIEWS

RANDALL'S ESL CYBER LISTENING LAB

www.esl-lab.com

by Jarek Krajka

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It is well known that the Internet is abundant in EFL sites practising reading skills, vocabulary, grammar or writing. It is not so in case of listening, and Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab is a notable example of a site with plenty of varied listening material, on various levels, for general listening and listening for academic purposes, including long conversations with RealVideo as well as short listening exercises.

When you visit the site for the first time, you are struck by a multitude of material collected there. All of the main sections (general listening, academic purposes listening, long conversations and short listening exercises) is divided into easy, medium and difficult, (or medium, difficult and very difficult in the case of academic purposes listening), and each such section has a number of quizzes. New ones are added constantly, and it is sure that your students will find something new each time they visit the site

The topics of quizzes encompass all areas of life, such as for instance telephone recording, flying a plane, riding a taxi, touring a city, renting a car, home repairs or checking in the hotel, and provide real-life interaction, which helps students (especially in the EFL environment) to become accustomed with English-speaking culture and lifestyle.

Randall Davis makes it possible for everyone to use the site by giving the chance to download audio and video players necessary to listen. As for teachers, the site has a "tips for teachers" section, giving ideas on setting, equipment, software or using the site. The site is specific about the activities for pre-, while- and post-listening. What is more, they refer not only to the ideal setting, but there are also some modifications for the situation with worse connection or less computers (the low-budget method) or the tape-recorder classroom only.

In order to help learners to use the site on their own, ESL Lab has a "self-study guide" section, where learners are given specific instruction on how to use the site to make the most of it. Also, users new to interactive multimedia can benefit from the "multimedia tutorials" section which outline the development of Randall's ESL Cyber Listening Lab, with special

emphasis on how educators can create their own Internet-based listening exercises for language teaching and learning, on using hardware and software, recording audio and video. The only problem is that if elementary or pre-intermediate students read the tutorials and instructions to find out how to use the site, they may find them difficult to understand. Thus, it seems that the teacher should do one lesson showing students how to make the most of the site.

When choosing a particular quiz, one gets the page with the following features:

*   the title of the quiz

*   level of language

*   topic

*   type (conversation)

*   grammar point practised (e.g., gerund)

*   speakers (e.g., two men)

*   length

Then the site follows with pre-listening, listening and post-listening activities. While doing the exercises, the site keeps the learner's score, giving it in the box at the end of the quiz, together with the correct answers. After the whole task, a student can do the quiz once again, this time looking at the quiz script (by clicking on „Quiz Script"). Thanks to that, a student is given more assistance, can focus his/her attention on new or difficult words, make a more difficult activity easier and continue the work on the material. In post-listening exercises, there are some problems and questions to discuss with a partner, in this way introducing the element of speaking to the lesson.

Of course, using the site effectively largely depends on the type of connection one has, so that downloading a file with the recording does not take too long. Also, it is crucial that the computers of the lab have sound cards and headphones rather than speakers, so that students do not disturb each other when working on different quizzes. If there are two students per one computer, it is necessary to equip headphones with adapters, so that it is possible to connect two pairs of headphones to one computer. Finally, it is essential that all the computers have audio or video players necessary to play the files, and no disturbing "unable to decompress a file" messages appear.

As for using the site, it seems that it is at its best for out-of-class, self-study, individual work, when students need more listening practice on interesting and varied material. Of course, it is also possible to use the site in class, with the whole class listening to the same

quiz (connected with the topic of the lesson), or students working on separate quizzes, according to their preferences. However, it seems that such a lesson is difficult to manage by the teacher, and its advantages over traditional tape-recorder listening are hard to estimate. Thus, teachers are advised to get to know the site well, do a lesson with their students showing them how to use it, and encourage them to develop their listening skills with the help of this enormous source of quizzes and exercises.

EDUSEEK

http://eduseek.ids.pl

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Eduseek is the leading Polish educational portal, the starting point for browsing the Net when you are a teacher, a student or a parent. The site's enormous amount of materials in each of the three categories and the thoroughly checked content makes it a fully reliable source of information.

The site is divided into the following sections:

student: Internet quizzes, schools online, students' rights, a perfect crib, have a problem, school website competition, your music, music playlist, interactive novel, etc.

teacher: education address book, teachers' professional promotion, forms of teacher training, exams, methodological and psychological tips of advice, legal advice, online courses, teaching aids, etc.

parent: Internet for students, online quizzes, schools online, school calendar, a perfect crib, exam standards, how to help your child, students' rights, Poland in percentages, school ranks.

Apart from these, the site also offers:

- *edukurier* (current educational news): Antarctica's ice melts too quickly, electronic signature bill

- *przeboje eduseeka*: Eduseek's best sites or online lessons

- services: forum, chat, kids, cards, calendar, ftp, catalogue

The portal features a number of interactive online lessons in various subjects (history, physics), which are well integrated with the curriculum, but which make use of the wide accessability and interactivity of the Itnenet to deliver the instruction.

When clicking on the teacher, we get a listing of subjects to choose from and a listing of general resources (Internet address book, news about the reform of education, teacher training courses, legal tips, online courses, and many more). Finally, we have the list of new resources, such as the presentation of active methods of teaching, lesson plans or ways of testing. Also, the site makes the life of the teacher and the headmaster easier by providing a form for calculating period grades in the class, and helping in complying with the school administration demands by publishing templates of forms to fill.

So far, I have been talking about the portal as a source of materials for the teacher in general, not specifically the English teacher. It needs to be admitted that each teacher will find there plenty of useful materials, and the website allows teachers to exchange views by providing discussion forums on different subjects.

When going specifically to EFL resources by clicking on *język angielski* (English), we can see there such sections as: help on Present Simple tense or the use of articles, measurements, trivia, links, catalogued links, holidays, lesson plans (Christmas traditions, Christmas cards, Recipes, etc.), tests ready to be printed out, teaching tips, activities, online tests or crosswords. All the materials published on the website have been checked by a competent teacher/specialist in methodology, therefore teachers can safely guide their students to the website being convinced of the good quality of materials presented.

Another nice feature of the English section is "English Day by Day," an online calendar helping in learning English by focusing on different words, grammatical patterns and everyday English constructions as the days go by.

The authors of the portal strongly encourage teachers to become the part of the endeavour by sending their own materials to be included in the English section of the website. Of course, the materials sent undergo a thorough check, to make sure that they are methodologically correct. By encouraging teachers to create the English section, its authors want to involve teachers in creating a large resource of materials they want to share.

On the whole, the site is worth recommending to teachers, mainly because of enormous amount of material useful to teachers in the time of the reform of education. It is really helpful as a reference site as for different aspects of the teacher's work, as for law, school administration demands, lesson plans, tests or activities. As for the specifically EFL

resources, there is a lot of interesting material, but obviously teachers should be encouraged to consider sharing their private lesson plans or activities, to let the portal grow into a bigger and more teacher-friendly medium.

STUDENTS' METRO PAGES AT THE BRITISH COUNCIL ROME

http://www.britishcouncil.it/english/english/rome/students/

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Students' Metro Pages is the e-zine for the students of English at the British Council Rome, the place in cyberspace for students and their Internet partners, created by and for students. The purpose of the site is, according to its creators, to establish an online community among students of English at the BC Rome, to bring their classes into the world and to bring the world into the classes.

On the one hand, the site is the perfect example of a class website, making it possible to reward students' efforts by publishing their works, in this way extending the instruction also beyond the classroom. It is well-known that when having the prospect of publishing works in the Internet, with the name of the author next to it, students devote more attention to their writing, becoming more conscious writers in this way. On the other hand, the site serves the purpose of giving students the experience of meeting other people, getting to know their customs and habits, learning to interact in the multicultural community. This is done by allowing students of English from other countries to write and have their works published, as was the case with my class. All contributors are credited, and the name and country of origin appears next to the text or artwork.

The Metro Pages are updated every week, adding new essays, changing outlook, adding new elements, but the main sections of the site are the following:

- Hello: explaining the mission, objectives, some new features
- People: information about teachers and classes with photos
- Places: students from different countries describe their places of residence
- Our Rome: students write why they like Rome, compare Rome and other cities, etc.
- Lifestyles: essays on entertaining guests, favourite rooms, risky sports, objects, how to behave in Italy or America

- Travel: students share their travel experiences, both pleasant and unpleasant
- News: students write interesting news from their countries in their words
- Events: announcements of BC Rome events
- The Arts: book, film, play, music, opera and video game reviews written by students
- Language: students are advised to email with the language problems they have, while the site gives solutions
- Story: where students publish their stories

It has to be said that Metro pages contain really varied material with respect to the level, as we can find there texts by Young Learners' class and FCE class alike. Also, the site is varied as for material type, as we can find there texts, pictures, drawings, all claimed to be done by students themselves. The whole site must be praised for its beautiful graphics, namely pictures, drawings, page backgrounds, etc.

As for using the site in the classroom, there are many possibilities here. As the site is rich in culture-specific material (the way we eat, how we entertain guests, our ideal home), it is a splendid source of information about customs and lifestyles of the Italians (but not only), written by students learning English. Thanks to that, our students are more likely to read and understand the material, as it is written by someone of their age and in the language they would use themselves.

One idea for a lesson is to make students go to the website, assign some topics for them to read, then ask them to compare the lifestyle presented to the one in their country, either in groups or whole class, finally make students write a similar description about their country and send to the authors of the website to be published there. I did it with my class, and my students felt extremely proud when seeing their works on Students' Metro Pages.

On the other hand, Students' Metro Pages serves as a perfect example of how to use a class website to enhance learning. The sections, the layout of the site, the graphics, all these should serve as guidelines to those teachers thinking about creating a class homepage. Also, the author of the site, Michael Ivy, is an example how a site like that should be publicised, so that more and more people know it, and that it is something more than a mere noticeboard in electronic form.

Bringing the world to the classroom, but more importantly bringing the classroom to the world, these two fundamentals of webpublishing for language learning, are the best recommendation for the Students' Metro Pages.