

READING COMPREHENSION ONLINE

After dealing with sites facilitating writing instruction in the previous issue of *Teaching English with Technology*, this month I have decided to familiarise readers with a few websites that can be used in teaching reading skills. Reading, just as listening, is a skill whose mastery requires ample practice. The classroom instruction rarely provides that – students are of different language level, of different vocabulary level, their reading speed differs. Coursebooks do not give enough reading practice for obvious reasons of limited space. Thus, the Web may be the solution.

The main advantages of online reading activities are the following

- access at any time, in any place, for unlimited number of times, for unlimited time, without any charge
- great abundance of topics to choose from, so every student may find something interesting
- most sites are fully interactive, in that they check students' answers, give correct ones and provide feedback on incorrect ones
- due to these factors, students are able to develop their reading skills without the teacher, providing they have the access to the Internet.

What follows is a brief account of a few Internet websites devoted to reading comprehension. I would like to acknowledge here the fact that the sites given below were brought up on the international TESLCA-L discussion list by Birgit Ferran (October 9, 2001) and Christine Bauer-Ramazani (October 9, 2001).

<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/comp/Readcomp.htm>, is a part of Hong Kong Virtual Language Centre maintained by Chris Greaves (<http://vlc.polyu.edu.hk/default.htm>). The site contains reading comprehension activities based on authentic texts taken from South China Morning Post and created by Eric Collins. When accessing the page, a student has at his disposal 34 reading comprehension activities on various topics such as computers, religion, nuclear weapons, unemployment, protecting the environment or teenagers. All texts can be accessed either in a practice or test mode. When choosing any text in any mode, a user gets a screen divided into three windows. In the top one, he can see the text to read. The text has some words underlined, and clicking on them brings the dictionary definition. Under the text, some selected phrases are explained for the reader.

In the bottom left window, there are multiple choice exercises to be done while reading. In the practice mode, there are buttons referring to each possible answer, and by clicking on them one can see which answer is right and which is wrong. In the test mode, each exercise concludes with a "Submit test" button. By clicking on it, one gets a detailed score sheet for a

given test, with such pieces of information as the name of the test, the date, the score out of the total score, the correct answer for each question and the answer given by the user, finally the score for each question. The test is checked instantly, and the learner may get back to the text and work on it to see why some of the answers were wrong.

The website is fully interactive and can be used by students on their own thanks to the “Active Dictionary” feature of the pages. By double-clicking on any word from the text a reader can get its meaning in a dictionary, which opens in the bottom right corner of the page. The information given comprises the meaning of the word, its category, the example sentences, links to entries of other words of similar or opposite meaning.

Apart from typical multiple-choice reading exercises, one can find also two other types of reading activities, that is cloze tests, where a user reads a text and needs to fill in the gaps with correct words, and jumbled texts, activities using Java technology, where the user is asked to reorder the jumbled text using copy, cut and paste commands.

On the whole, the site is strongly recommended as extremely innovative, comprehensive and fully interactive reading comprehension resource. The especially noteworthy feature is the “Active Dictionary” one, allowing users to get the meaning of unknown words in a moment.

English Zone.com, <http://english-zone.com/>, also has a section devoted to practising reading skills online, namely a reading zone, <http://english-zone.com/reading/index.html>. The site is divided into levels (all students, intermediate+ and advanced), and for each one there are a few online reading comprehension tasks. The topics of the text are engaging for students (birthday, friendship, US presidents), and the tasks are usually multiple choice questions. As was the case with the previous site, also here a reader gets the text in one scrollable window while questions in the other. Here, the test is checked immediately, that is after choosing a wrong answer the user gets instant message about that. Thus, there is no possibility to practise reading in a test mode, as there is no scorekeeping and checking after having done the whole test. As for dictionary help, there is a link to Merriam Webster’s online dictionary, but it is on the index page, and there is no dictionary link on reading activities sites. However, a strong advantage that needs to be noted here is that some of the activities are intended for printing and using offline in class, because each one is just one long screen, and the owner of the website grants “limited permission ... to make copies of this page for use in classroom teaching only”.

University of Victoria English Language Centre Study Zone,

<http://web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/elc/studyzone/index.htm> features a section focusing on practising and testing reading skills online. Here again one can choose the level (200, 330, 410, 490, 570

and Extras), which is probably ambiguous to users from all over the world, but certainly corresponds to the types of classes held at the English Language Centre. Among the materials available for a given level there is usually the reading section, where one can find different stories with exercises (for level 200 it was “A special Christmas present” and “Two sisters and a cat”). In this website each story is used for different purposes, e.g. first for multiple-choice reading comprehension activities, then for recreating a story by choosing one of the three sentences proposed, working on vocabulary in a gap-fill activity, where students need to put the clozed words into the right place in the story or summarising the story in an open cloze task. The texts on higher levels (e.g., 410) are also accompanied by grammar exercises and write-a-summary exercises. Of course, the site is fully interactive in the sense that the answers to the reading tasks are instantly evaluated, and summaries written by students can also be submitted for correction. Though prepared for a given audience from University of Victoria courses, materials can be certainly used by other teachers and learners.

Fluency through fables (<http://www.comenius.com/fables/index.tpl>) is the reading comprehension section of the Comenius English Language Centre website (<http://www.comenius.com/index.tpl>). Here students can work on comprehension of 7 short texts (fables), which are accompanied by various exercises testing their comprehension. Among these one can find vocabulary matching exercises, vocabulary completion exercises, multiple choice comprehension exercises, written discussion exercises, true or false comprehension exercises. The user can get the questions evaluated by the website, and repeat the reading activity to see what was wrong or right. The advantage of the site lies in the fact that it uses short texts, which is a good option for lower-level classes or for teachers having less time at their disposal. However, the users would definitely benefit from a greater number of materials or some dictionary help.

Similar sites: Folktales from Around the World, <http://www.otan.dni.us/webfarm/emailproject/folk.htm> (texts only, without exercises), National Geographic Grimm Brothers Tales, <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/grimm/>.

The New York Times on the Web, <http://www.nytimes.com/>, has its huge section devoted to learning English, namely “learning network” - <http://www.nytimes.com/learning/>. The site menu on the left is divided into three sections: Student Connections, Teacher Connections and Parent Connections. Teachers can benefit from a daily lesson plan, based on relevant New York Times articles, as well as access lesson plans archived on the site and browse them by subject, by keyword or by grade range. Each lesson plan is carefully developed and laid out, listing such information as grades, subjects, overview of the lesson, time allowance,

objectives, and resources/materials. Teachers get a step-by-step instruction on what to do in the classroom, together with further questions for discussion, evaluation/assessment, useful vocabulary, extension activities (making use of the Web), notes on interdisciplinary connections and annotated links to other relevant sites on the Web. What is more, the plan concludes with a specification of state standards for each grade of education, so that teachers from other countries could try to adapt the given plans to their levels of education.

The site has a number of advantages: a huge collection of lesson plans, detailed and sound methodological approach, interesting and engaging materials to work on, but probably its greatest strength lies in currency: students work on the most up-to-date materials, and consequently they are going to be more motivated than working with a few-year-old coursebook texts.

Other sites of this type: CNN Learning Resources, <http://literacynet.org/cnnsf/archives.html>; MSNBC News for Children, <http://www.msnbc.com/local/pencilnews/default.asp>, BBC World Service Learning English page, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/index.shtml>.

To sum up, it can be said that the sites discussed above show the great potential of the Web for developing and delivering language learning materials. It is easy not only to put materials online, so that students can access them at any time and as often as they wish, but also to set up automatic evaluation and scorekeeping schemes. Thanks to that, students can get as much practice as they need to in reading comprehension, using most current, interactive, interesting materials.