A Review of Online Reading Sites for ESL Students

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Background
As coordinators of a one-year intensive English course, we are looking for supplementary reading materials which are available online for our students who are English as Second Language (ESL) learners. These supplementary reading materials form part of a larger reading curriculum and instruction in the course. The purpose of these materials is to encourage students to read beyond the classroom, which is in line with one of the aims of the course, to help students to become effective and independent readers.

We have specifically chosen online reading sites based on their currency (i.e., up-to-date news), potential for learner authenticity and text authenticity (Spector-Cohen, Kirschner & Wexler, 2001), suitability for independent learning, and ease of accessibility. In particular, the eleven sites that we have identified share some similar features. These sites are Breaking News English, BBC Learning English, BBC China, New York Times Learning Network, onestopenglish, literacynet.org, VOAnews.com, efnet Reading, English Listening Lesson Library Online (ellllo), 51VOA.com and Adult Learning Activities. The first similarity is that they are news-based sites specially created for English language learning. Second, the articles are accompanied by exercises and tasks that help to enhance vocabulary learning and reading comprehension. Third, the texts have been appropriately adapted for different levels of language proficiency and competency. Fourth, there is video or audio or both accompanying the passages, a feature which is common to most established news sites.

By encouraging students to access online reading materials and to read on their own outside of the classroom, we hope that they will cultivate good reading habits and increase their interest in and knowledge of current affairs. Through this supplementary reading initiative, we also aim for the “promotion of extensive reading” and “development of intrinsic motivation for reading” as recommended by Grabe (2004:46) as two of nine goals for effective reading.
There are two parts in our selection and review process of the online reading sites. The first part of our assessment concerns content and appropriateness, which we have outlined earlier. The second part of our selection and evaluation process is described in this review in the following section. In particular, it focuses on three areas: user-friendliness, support and interactivity, and effects of media such as audio, video, graphics and text on the reading experience.

**Review criteria**

We have developed some criteria to guide us in assessing the online reading sites. These criteria are categorized into three broad areas – user-friendliness, support and interactivity, and effects of media. The descriptors for each category are outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Criteria for review of online reading sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>User-friendliness</th>
<th>Support and interactivity</th>
<th>Effects of media (i.e., audio, video, graphics, text)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>clarity of objective(s) of lessons/exercises and instructions</td>
<td>availability of online dictionary, glossary, thesaurus</td>
<td>quality and clarity of audio clips, video clips and graphics</td>
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<tr>
<td>ease of navigation (i.e., how hyperlinks connect to new browsers, ease of navigation, layout)</td>
<td>presentation of answers (i.e., interactive or static)</td>
<td>blending of audio, video, graphics and texts</td>
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<tr>
<td>information about levels of readability and proficiency</td>
<td>connection to social networks which enhance learning (e.g., twitter, facebook, blog, forum, chat)</td>
<td>technical requirements (i.e., plug-ins, compatibility with Personal Computer and Apple)</td>
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<tr>
<td>option to download and/or print worksheets and audio files</td>
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**User-friendliness**

The first category, user-friendliness, refers to the extent of usability of online reading materials. As early as the late 1990s, scholars (Fronkjaer, Hertzum & Hornbaek, 2000; Lee, 1991 as cited in Lee, 2003) have noted the impact of web users’ browsing behaviours on sustainability. Specific studies that focused on text hyperlinks (Mobrand & Spyridakis, 2007)
and navigational links (Wei, Evans, Eliot, Barrick, Maust & Spyridakis, 2005) have also found that such features affect users’ comprehension, perception of the website and the number of embedded pages users explore. In short, apart from content, the more user-friendly the website is, the longer users stay on the website. In the case of the reading sites that we have selected, our main concern is whether the sites have a clear focus with an uncluttered and pleasant layout as well as easily identifiable navigational signs. Such sites will appeal to the web readers and help maintain their attention and sustain their interest and motivation in reading.

In addition, for sites with activities and exercises, it is important for the respective sites to have an indication of objectives as well as clear and concise instructions. Among the reading sites with exercises and activities, two do not indicate objectives and instructions. The rest have at least simple instructions for the users to follow. Another aspect that enhances user-friendliness is information on readability levels of the news articles. Though not common, sites such as onestopenglish and elllo have articles that are graded from elementary to advanced. Other sites like Adult Learning Activities and literacynet.org provide articles in two versions – original and abridged.

In terms of ease of navigation, the sites should present a clear focus, especially if there are advertisements. Furthermore, the users should be well guided through navigation menus and icons. A number of sites that we looked at have advertisements interspersed with key content. In some of these sites, the advertisements and their effects are so overwhelming that they overshadow and dilute the focus of the reading content. A good example of a reading site with a layout design that allows for the key content to be the centre of attention and where there is a clear demarcation of types of content on each webpage is elllo, as illustrated in Figure 1.
Another website that has effectively created a clear presence for key news items is VOAnews.com (see Figure 2).

Another consideration for user-friendliness is whether the text, video and audio files are downloadable. This downloadable option will provide further ease to the users where learning or reading and listening may take place not only online but also offline on paper or the mobile phone. More than half of the eleven sites (namely Breaking News English, BBC
Learning English, BBC China, VOAnews.com.elllo and 51VOA.com) offer users downloadable versions of print and audio files.

Support and interactivity

The second category of evaluation is support and interactivity. Support structure, such as dictionary, glossary, concordance and thesaurus, made available to users is one of the considerations in this category of criteria. Such structure provides immediate help, which enhances comprehension of news articles. Except for New York Times Learning Network, the other sites offer support in the form of an online dictionary or a glossary of words with definitions.

Another concern in this category is how answers to exercises are presented. All the sites that have accompanying activities and exercises provide suggested answers. However, answers are presented mainly in a static and non-interactive manner. Most do not give explanations on why certain responses are not acceptable.

The third concern for support and interactivity is connection to social network sites. Links to social network sites such as facebook, twitter and blog, though perhaps not crucial during the reading stage, provide an avenue for the sharing of ideas and thoughts. Participation in the online social networks may help in enhanced appreciation and understanding of issues related to the news articles. It also encourages engagement in activities beyond reading that may further interest and motivate the learners to read even more extensively. Among the eleven sites, only two sites (i.e. literacynet.org and Adult Learning Activities) do not make available links to social networks.

Effects of media

The final category of evaluation criteria is effects of media. Our evaluation in this category includes not only the quality of audio and video clips, but also our consideration of how well different forms of media integrate for effective learning, the reading speed of the audio clips and technical compatibility. Most of the news sites have accompanying audio clips and some include video clips. The New York Times Learning Network, for example, is a site that makes available short video clips of the original news coverage, and the site is developed on a blog platform that allows the users to respond to any news item. Furthermore, the site has
links to other common social network sites. Two other sites with clear audio clips and good quality video clips are VOAnews.com and elllo. In particular, the audio clips of elllo include dialogues read by speakers with different accents.

Integration and blending among text, graphics and audio and video clips is another aspect that contributes to the effectiveness of reading sites. VOAnews.com gives a good illustration of successful integration of all four aspects (see Figure 3). Everything is provided on the same page and presented in a non-intrusive manner. In addition, it is not text-heavy. Most importantly, the focus is clear and there is ease of navigation.

Our final consideration is technical compatibility. We tried to access all the sites on PC and Apple platforms and found that while all sites are accessible via both platforms, there was slight difficulty in opening literacynet.org and Adult Learning Activities using Apple. This may be due to the browser one uses, whether Internet Explorer, Firefox, Safari or another. In terms of plug-ins, all require the normal plug-ins for audio and video. There are also instances where the audio and video clips play exclusively on RealPlayer or Windows Player whereas some sites may require the installation of Flash. Nonetheless, these are minor inconveniences that once resolved do not pose any great difficulty.

In summary, this section has provided a general overview and review of the sites.
Recommendation

Our recommendation is based on a specific group of students in a one-year pre-university bridging course. These students are from the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and they have completed their senior middle school (SM2). We have taught and/or coordinated a similar course for more than five years. Based on our experience, observation and feedback from tutors who have taught the course, we have developed a profile of the SM2 students which we took into account when we reviewed and made our recommendation for the appropriate reading sites as supplementary reading materials for the students.

In terms of reading competency and ability, we have learned that the SM2 students, in general, are able to read and grasp the gist or main message of articles in English, but they have difficulty appreciating the details. This is usually because they do not understand certain expressions and vocabulary items as well as more complex sentence structures. As a result, one of their preferences or strategies when they read is to refer to the dictionary to check the meanings of words. Another preference that we have observed is their appreciation for post-reading exercises (with suggested answers) such as comprehension questions and vocabulary quizzes. Additionally, they like the opportunity to re-read the articles or review the materials. Finally, the students could benefit from reading sites that have audio recordings of the articles as this feature will not only help them with pronunciation and stresses but it will also improve their listening skills.

When we considered online (instead of print) reading sites, we also had in mind accessibility, namely, if our students will have convenient access to a computer or laptop and Internet connection both at the university and the hostel. Our observation informs us that all the SM2 students will have purchased a laptop by the second week of classes. They watch movies, listen to songs, surf the Internet and participate in online social networks, mostly in Chinese, on their laptops. This means they will have no difficulty accessing the reading sites and in using the audio and video features, which will be good for their learning of English. In terms of connectivity, the students are well connected at the university as well as at their hostel.

With the SM2 students’ profile in mind, the sites we recommend must fulfill all four aspects of the user-friendliness criterion. Clear objectives and instructions, ease of navigation and information on the proficiency levels of the articles will make it easy for the students to
understand and use the sites in a purposeful manner. This will also encourage them to be independent learners. The downloadable feature of the sites is also important to ensure students can review the materials and listen to the audio frequently, and at their own convenience. For the support and answer criterion, sites with an online dictionary and activities with answers are preferred. Finally, for effects of media, because sites with recordings of articles are an advantage to our students, we assessed the quality and clarity of the audio as well as the blending of the audio and text.

Among the eleven sites that we reviewed, the top five sites recommended based on our students’ needs are as follows:

1. VOAnews.com
2. English Listening Lesson Library Online (elllo)
3. literacynet.org
4. Adult Learning Activities
5. onestopenglish (The Guardian Weekly)

Unfortunately, onestopenglish requires the students to subscribe, so the cost may be a deterrent.

In addition, we found Breaking News English and BBC Learning English appropriate for more advanced readers.

Concluding thoughts
It has been a challenging task choosing relevant online reading sites (among many sites available on the Internet) for our students. The main concern for any language teacher is essentially the match between the students’ profile and how these sites can be effectively used by them.

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References

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