

English Language Learning on the (Hyper)Way:

A Guided Tour of EFL Websites

by **Cristina Pennarola**

Universita di Napoli Federico II

Napoli, Italy

cpennaro @ unina.it

Abstract

The present paper aims to provide some insights into the learning pathway shaped by English language learning websites and to suggest possible implementations for language teachers. The analysis, conducted on a selection of free access EFL websites, will ascertain to what extent the English language practice provided by the websites mirrors or deviates from online classes procedures as well as from self-access materials such as books and CD-ROMs.

Introduction: An Overview of Online Learning

Compared with the traditional classroom-based educational process, online learning seems to offer a highly personalised experience where the participants have full control of their study with regard to both content and method. In addition to the obvious advantages of a flexible learning environment where learners can choose time and place for self-study, tutorials and peer discussion and even negotiate their assignments (Morgan & O' Reilly, 1999, p. 34), the dialogic nature of much of their coursework, based on computer mediated exchanges (Paulsen, 1995), seems to guarantee stimulating, real-life learning characterised by hands-on practice, collaborativeness and procedural knowledge rather than by remote academic skills and knowledges (Salmon, 2004). The revolutionary pedagogic approach imposed by online learning advocates cognitive pathways in place of content-based curricula, and the construction rather than the transmission of knowledges and competencies (Ladomery, 2002; Mason, 1998; Rossini Favretti, 2005; Salmon, 2004). While in a traditional face-to-face educational environment, the teacher sets the tasks and also

provides the answers (Fairclough, 1992), in the online class s/he acts as “moderator”, “facilitator”, “guide”, skilfully directing learners without assuming the role of lead.

Various possibilities open up for online learners once they have enrolled on a course and joined the online classroom, such as free flow discussion, peer learning groups, collaborative projects, renovating and adapting well known procedures of traditional classes to the new virtual environment. If some of these formats (like peer learning groups) have always been available in face to face teaching (Nunan, 1992), the added value comes not so much from the medium but from the pedagogy related to the medium, i.e. the decentred and self-effacing mode of communication used in online classes, whereby the tutor and the participants all contribute equally to the construction of knowledge without experiencing the hierarchical constraints visible in the face to face setting (Ladomery, 2002; Paulsen, 1995). Coursework is a collective construction rather than an individual accomplishment and the people involved cooperate rather than compete for the attainment of common goals (Jones & Issroff, 2005; Salmon, 2004, pp.19-20; Sung, Chang, Chiou, & Hou, 2005). Even when the online course is focused on a foreign language, where background knowledge can and does indeed discriminate between participants, progress is achieved through group exchanges advancing and testing hypotheses on language use in a spirit of collaborative enquiry (Salmon, 2004, pp. 75-79)

The Website as an Open Resource

The paradigm of online learning sketchily outlined above seems to drastically change when learners move from a formal course-based mode including supervision, assessment and completion of credits, to an informal mode where they freely access the materials and resources on the Web with no record of their work being kept (Broadbent, 2002, pp. 12-14). In this latter mode, learners are truly on their own, choosing activities and controlling their learning pathway, checking their intuitions against the corrections available in self-access mode and making their progress through closed activities and language notes. However, if the percentage of dropouts in online courses may be rather high given some demotivating factors such as the absence of “visible” control and the lack of physical contact (O'Connor, *et al.*, 2003; Tait, 2000), the number of people dissatisfied with the language self-service provided by websites may be even higher.[\[1\]](#)

The present study sets out to investigate the pedagogical features and student-friendliness of EFL websites in comparison to online courses and self-access materials with a view to assessing their potential as self-learning tools and also suggesting ways of implementing and facilitating their use as out-of-class add-on instruction. The language websites examined are all open access, either manifestly commercial like the ones sponsoring

coursebooks and materials such as Oxford and Longman, or institutional like those promoting the diffusion of English language and culture such as the British Council. They have been selected on the basis of their “credentials” (Walker, Hewer & Davies, 2006, pp. 10-13), attraction power and userfriendliness, and keeping a balance between British and American English websites (see also Krajka, 2002 for an evaluation matrix of EFL/ESL portal sites; ICT4LT Project, 2005; Son, 2003) [2].

What mostly differentiates an online course from the language practice offered by a website is evidently the teaching component: while the online course sets a progression and is the result of teacher-student interaction, the website is simply a learning instrument which does not incorporate the tailored assistance provided by a tutor neither does it include a syllabus or spell out the set of objectives to be achieved. The menu metaphor used as an instruction in the British Council website well represents the kind of open and unsystematic learning fostered by websites: “LearnEnglish is not a 'course'. It doesn't have Unit 1 followed by Unit 2, etc. Instead, LearnEnglish is a like a restaurant with a long menu of learning activities. Today you might want to practise some grammar. Tomorrow you might want to play one of our games or read a story. Soup, meat or fish - you'll find them all here.” <http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-about-us-how-to-use-learnenglish.htm>

The interactive devices working as backchannel signals and ensuring a fruitful exchange of information mostly relate to the correction of closed exercises, an automatic operation which can hardly offer some personalised feedback to learners (Ciaffaroni, 2006). On the other hand, features such as forums and help desks do provide guidance and answer the specific queries put forward by the students, at the same time ensuring some degree of dialogic exchange both between students and tutors and among learners. Even if the questions generally revolve about specific language points which are then explained in few sentences, the very exchange represents for the learners a chance at real communication and a way of experiencing the range of stylistic modulations which can be conveyed in messages (e.g. informal expressions; slang; emoticons). Especially in forums, where learners have the opportunity to discuss the most disparate issues from gay rights to Harry Potter's mysteries, the writing practice is extremely varied and motivating, although not all the webservers may be aware of differences in register and of the language lapses common in EFL chat rooms.

The kind of supportive assessment provided by tutors online or face to face seems to be the feature most impervious to implementation in self-access mode and in fact seems to be missing in the websites examined. Whether, for instance, the learner shows a good control of language resources but poor interaction strategies or lacks the basics of English phonology, no

kind of (hyper)technological tool will ever reveal as the very complexity of assessment, based on intuition rather than on the application of some generally acknowledged principles, requires a flexible mind and cannot be replaced by an automatic procedure (Bartram & Walton, 1991, p.105). In this respect, a language website is very much like a student's workbook although, unlike this, it is not pitched at a specific level but quite confusingly can include them all, thus causing "cognitive overload" (King & Honeybone, 1996, p. 5).

Furthermore, the innovative technology of the Web does not easily accommodate actual conversations; these can indeed take place but require the implementation of costly software and equipment. For this reason, on the Internet, chatting has turned into a peculiar written to be spoken mode of communication – aka "interactive written discourse" (Shortis, 2001, pp. 92-97) – and spoken interaction has been reduced to a minimum. Even in language learning, where speaking is considered a core language skill, the learners' spoken abilities are hardly systematically tested or even exercised online apart from a few initiatives developing audiographic rather than text conferencing (Salmon, 2004, p. 71; see also Hill & Storey 2003 on the development of oral presentation skills online).

Despite these drawbacks largely related to the multiplicity of the learning routes in the absence of a guide, EFL websites can indeed offer great advantages to solo learners in terms of language activities and authentic materials, in addition to being an invaluable resource for teachers, who know how to best supplement their lessons.

The structure of EFL websites

The EFL websites examined encourage learners to explore at their leisure a series of activities and materials complete with instructions and comments. The register used is still very much influenced by classroom discourse with sharp commands and brief comments punctuating the language exercises and activities. Each website has a distinctive design, which differently

combines the “multiple literacies” fostered by new technologies (Stevens, 2005) and responds to the needs for visual appeal, comprehensibility, utility, efficacy, and navigability marking effective communication on the Internet (Shneiderman, 1997). The size varies from huge comprehensive websites such as the BBC English learning programme, to small, delimited sections like Longman’s ELT site. Authorship is also a differentiating feature between the websites created and updated by “regulars” indicated in the copyright notice (e.g. [Dave’s ESL Café](#), www.manythings.org), those counting on the contributions of outside teachers and volunteers whose identities are made known (e.g. a4esl.org) and the ones which do not specify the contributors’ names as they are somehow incorporated into the organizations (e.g. the [BBC](#); [Oxford ELT](#)).

However, they all provide a kind of thematic categorization which largely follows the traditional classification in language teaching: pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, skills, with further subdivisions taking into account the materials and activities proposed and depending on the size and inclusiveness of the website. Metalinguistic features such as usage notes, stylistic guidelines and forums may be also provided ensuring the surfers’ exposure to English language is reinforced by explanations and examples.

A system of internal and external links visible on the webpage points to explicit connections between language aspects (e.g. idioms, collocations and proverbs; verbs and tenses; nouns and determiners) offering learners immediate access to a variety of materials and activities, and possibly sensitizing them to the interrelatedness typical of any language system, whose intelligibility is the result of many concomitant factors pertaining to phonology, lexis, grammar and rhetoric, all encompassing natural discourse (McCarthy, 1991, p. 32). Thus, the connectivity characteristic of the Internet seems to perfectly suit the language practice

accommodated by the websites as their networked structure allowing many overlapping or criss-crossing routes not only stimulates a kind of global learning (something which many face to face courses or self-study materials do themselves) but also makes the necessary range of language skills and resources fully visible to learners.

Hypertextual coherence can be both local (intra and internodal) and global (hyperstructural) depending on the level of relatedness within a single node or webpage, between various nodes and within the whole system of links and nodes respectively (Engebretsen, 2000, p. 14).

English language learning websites show a varying degree of coherence apparently related to their size and comprehensiveness: the ones opting for full language coverage (i.e. combining explanations and activities on all language aspects and skills) seem to be characterised by a more articulate cross-referential system. Thus learners are also encouraged to “network” their learning (process and outcome) in line with the constructivist pedagogy, which regards learners as builders in collaborative undertakings. For example, some notoriously irksome language point such as “funky phrasals” links up to a grammar explanation, a listening exercise, and a vocabulary quiz on the BBC website; and the tenses quiz on AboutESL.com leads up to other grammar tests on determiners, sentence structure, and time expressions.

Other websites, in particular the less extensive ones, seem instead to prefer individual presentations of language items arranged by category and consequently let the surfers create their own connections, as in Dave’s ESL café where each section (e.g. phrasal verbs; idioms; slang) is self-contained and does not include links to other sections. However, hyperstructural coherence is still high even in case of few internodal connections as all the topics dealt with – from phonemes to proverbs – relate to the very same macrotopic, that is the English language,

and therefore show an intrinsic consistency, probably this time more reliant on the users than on the authors of the website.

The homepage, teasingly illustrating the website contents, can be regarded as a tourist's map, indispensable for the travellers to arrange their language journey and organise what can turn out to be either pleasurable roaming or a straightforward excursion, depending on the learner's objectives and the actual route undertaken. The details of the map are usually made known along the way as each "node" or crossroad displays the associated nodes only in case the websurfers manifest their interest by clicking onto it, inasmuch as the complete list of all the materials and resources available on the website would simply risk disorienting the prospective learners.

The sheer extension of the language can in fact be an overwhelming realization for most learners, who best build on their existing knowledge and competencies in a gradual, steady manner rather than fast and furiously as the Internet would allow. As a consequence, mechanisms of information filtering, such as scrolling menus or "serialised" lessons, are set up to narrow down the learners' focus and encourage them to choose a specific pathway within the language website. However, the other routes which have not been chosen can still be accessed, by using either internal links or the menus usually placed on top of and aside the webpage. Thus hyperlinking preserves the abundance of material and multiplicity of pathways typically associated with the Internet and, at the same time, ensures that the information is packaged into manageable units.

Prospective learners of English nosing about a language website would then be unlikely to lose their bearings as the many opportunities nicely prepackaged are mutually exclusive and can be fruitfully activated one at a time, although it is the very array of resources on display

which can be daunting. While the very sequential structure of a book constrains learners into neat, identifiable reading pathways (even when the order of the units is subverted), the multisequentiality of a website, apparently discarding hierarchical orders with its many overlapping routes and opening windows, can prove a real challenge and encourage diverse reading strategies (Davies, 1997; Engebretsen, 2000; Foltz, 1996, p. 125; Moro, 1997; Shortis 2001, p. 11).

An outline of the language progression (expected if not actually achieved) can be provided as a direction to learners only with tools such as online courses, CD-ROMs or even books as long as they establish a learning pathway to be actualized and negotiated by the recipients but already there, so to speak. A language website, by contrast, can simply offer information and activities according to a thematic categorization but cannot impose an order to its users who are left free to explore and test the possibilities to their own liking. The difference between online courses, CD-ROMs and books, on the one hand, and free access websites, on the other, lies not so much in the way learning pathways are developed - systematically or randomly, by logical progression or by casual association, by the teacher or by the learner - but in the features of the communicative situation. While the former, in fact, make out the language profile of their addressees (e.g. beginner, intermediate, advanced with general or specific needs) and construct a hypothetical route even in the absence of the tutor, the latter not only often fail to specify the learners' level (in accordance with the vast reach of Internet users) but also include multiple and mutually exclusive pathways.

Furthermore, unlike books and online courses, websites do not keep track of the learners' pathways, which would forever disappear from memory unless the learners decide to save the tasks carried out in computer files and start to create their own portfolios or personalised

grammar. The lack of retrieval devices is in fact the disadvantage of many language learning websites in that the transience of the webpage coupled with the very net structure of information make it difficult for the learners to accurately visualize their own route and identify their provisional points of arrival.

Practical implementations for language teachers

The question then remains how we can best put to use the vast and varied English language material available on the Internet taking into account both the advantages and the limitations imposed by the website format. In fact, although the websites appear to be designed for individual, autonomous use, the lack of student-tailored pathways and personal tutoring would apparently discourage most intermediate-level learners, who are the main targets and beneficiaries of the online activities, as they still need to improve language and skills but show enough proficiency to orientate themselves through the layers and intricacies of a self-help language website. To advise the students to simply go there, have a look and grab whatever they need or like for improving their language does not offer a satisfactory solution, although many academic services and language centers provide an annotated list of free language resources available on the Internet and include it in their own websites as hyperlinks [3]. The temptation to entrust some of the language tuition to reviewed open access websites is strong and may even at times appear overwhelming in some academic contexts where the demand for English lessons is not matched by adequate human and logistic resources and where the students themselves ask for more classes and more flexible or personalised course timetables. However, in my own experience of language teacher, the students' responses to the all-inclusive self-directed instruction provided by EFL websites appears cautious and even ambivalent to some extent (Ladomery, 2002; Kavaliauskiene, 2003). Apparently, it is the very

absence of a designed route together with the lack of “cognitively challenging activities” (Ciaffaroni, 2006) which may discourage students from systematically accessing and incorporating the website activities into their language routines beside, say, pronunciation drills and tenses revision.

And yet, it seems a pity that such a wealth of attractively packaged and pedagogically sound language materials goes somehow wasted – or rather is not exploited to its full potential – all the more so as the systematic use of free access resources could significantly improve the students’ self-management skills beside their English language awareness and result in their personal empowerment. Moreover, integrating EFL website activities into self-access resources such as the graded tasksheets or focused multimodal materials available in language centers would also prove useful to those students who are not able to attend their English classes, something hardly uncommon in Italian universities. How can we language teachers then use these materials, or rather, how can we get our students to use these materials and thus complement their book-based learning?

One way of addressing this question would probably entail some form of guidance such as graded tasksheets including general maps of the websites selected and spelling out the activities to be carried out and their language focus. This material, complete with a set of instructions orientating the students through the vast amount of learning materials available on the Web, would serve as an introduction to the website and as a teacher-designed pathway outlining the short-term and long-term objectives of the students’ website surfing. Some experimentation along these lines has already been carried out with positive results by Kung and Chuo (2002), who have tested their students’ involvement and satisfaction with selected EFL websites which had been previously presented to them and used as support of their

homework assignments. The students had to complete a tasksheet in two weeks' time and use five selected websites to carry out vocabulary exercises as well as activities focused on reading, writing and listening skills. Although only few of them (5 out of 46) kept on using the websites after the completion of their EFL programme, they all expressed satisfaction with the use of the language websites in their learning pathways and in particular with the strategies developed by their teachers to facilitate their website-based coursework (instructions for online navigation, selection of websites, introduction to the websites' content, homework assignments). The findings of this study seem to suggest that students' use of EFL websites in language learning needs to be facilitated and monitored (Kung & Chuo, 2002, p. 12), even though the material which they include may be primarily designed for self study.

However, once the students get the knack of the website, know what to look for and where to find it, and especially realise the value of their Internet surfing, they can easily make it part of their daily (or weekly) language learning routines. This in turn would entail the teacher's prior "domestication" of the selected website(s) through the design of relevant student-focused activities: for example, the "News English" section hosted by the BBC Learning English and regularly updated at least twice a week would provide intermediate students of English with reading and listening activities on the latest news <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/newsenglish/index.shtml> Similarly, the vocabulary section in selected websites could easily be exploited to familiarise the students with computer terminology, specialised jargon, phrasal verbs, idioms, formal and informal registers depending on target needs and interests [4].

Yet a different case is represented by EFL coursebook supporting sites as they are usually structured according to the book series and the level of difficulty, and the range of follow-up activities further exploring the units of the book are neatly packaged for student reference (See [Appendix](#)). Particularly in this case, the focus is on the teacher as dispenser of content materials and learning facilitator (so much so that the label currently used for these website sections is *Teacher Support*), although the students would hardly find it difficult to find their way provided they did find the time and will to visit the website (Kung & Chuo, 2002, p. 8).

Concluding remarks

As a source of learning materials, a language website can indeed be invaluable as for scope, topicality and personalisation (Teeler & Gray, 2000, p. 36) in addition to providing a highly stimulating interactive multimedia environment; however, as a learning tool it presupposes on the part of the learner the same resourcefulness and language awareness required by self access materials (Evangelisti & Argondizzo, 2002; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Sanniti di Baja, 2004). It is up to the teacher then to provide guidance and support for the students approaching EFL websites by designing personalised pathways and/or suggesting homework activities which may be conducive to language routines. Learners should be encouraged to keep track of their English focused websurfing: 1. by keeping a log where they note down times and days of their language practice and specify the focus; 2. by storing the exercises and language notes most relevant to their needs in computer folders.

Even in technowise times, learning and mastering a foreign language remains a complex activity bringing into play various factors such as exposure, use, motivation, instruction (Willis, 1996, p. 11) and it cannot be achieved simply by accessing a network of multimedia

material, although one can reasonably expect that all that surfing, scrolling, clicking and typing will make it more engaging, dynamic and fun than traditional classroom settings.

Notes

[1] According to a survey conducted by the author on a sample of around one hundred students at Naples University Federico II on the use of English language learning websites, the lack of a personal tutor would discourage most students from regular attendance, even if the activities are considered highly stimulating. A similar survey conducted at the University Roma Tre in March 2002 seems to confirm the students' mixed feelings about online learning (Ladomery, 2002). Although the study by Kung and Chuo (2002) sounds a more positive note, it still highlights the students' awkwardness in using Internet educational resources: “[students] are not likely to visit these sites on their own unless they are told what to do with the information on the sites” (Kung & Chuo, 2002, p. 8).

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[2] The following is the complete list of the English language websites used for the present study:

- * **About English as a Second Language, <http://esl.about.com/>**
- * Activities for ESL students, <http://a4esl.org/>
- * Dave's ESL Café, <http://www.eslcafe.com/>
- * **English Club, <http://www.englishclub.com/learn-english.htm>**

- * Interesting Things for ESL Students, <http://www.manythings.org/>
- * Longman.com ELT Adults Resource Library <http://www.longman.com/adult/>
- * Oxford University Press English Language Teaching
<http://www.oup.com/elt/students/?cc=gb>
- * **BBC Learning English** <http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>
- * The British Council's Learn English <http://www.learnenglish.org.uk/>

Although it has been considered representative of English language learning websites, it does not mean to be an exhaustive list as other equally interesting websites have been inevitably left out.

[3] See, for example, the exhaustive list of TESOL/EFL related websites at <http://www.personal.leeds.ac.uk/~edumw/eltwww2.htm>

[4] See the following Web addresses for a range of lexical resources and exercises:

<http://esl.about.com/od/engilshvocabulary/ht/htvocab.htm>

<http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/computing.htm>

<http://www.englishclub.com/vocabulary/phrasal-verbs-quiz.htm>

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/learnenglish-central-word-games-archive.htm>

<http://www.manythings.org/e/vocabulary.html>

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Appendix - An annotated list of some major EFL publisher supporting sites

Cambridge English Language Learning <http://www.cambridge.org/us/esl/>

Cambridge University Press ESL website offers teacher-oriented material including suggestions, activities, exercises, and games complementing its leading titles: *Touchstone*, *Interchange*, *In the Know*, *Let's talk*, *Connect* and *Writers at Work*. Most of the activities are openly downloadable while others may require the teacher's registration.

Longman.com ELT Adults Resource Library <http://www.longman.com/adult/>

Longman promises free resources for learners of English on key vocabulary, grammar and skills (e.g. indicating dates; giving opinions; job vocabulary etc.), though the absence of the answer key makes them more similar to teacher support materials. In addition, it includes 70 companion websites to its key titles, including *Cutting Edge*, *Total English* and *Language to Go*.

Macmillan's One Stop English <http://www.onestopenglish.com/>

This teacher's resource site run by Macmillan offers to all its users registered free of charge a wealth of resources and materials ranging from lesson plans to articles and teaching tips, including language-focused activities and cultural insights.

Oxford University Press English Language Teaching

<http://www.oup.com/elt/students/?cc=gb>

Oxford University Press provides a very wide range of language notes and activities as a supplement to its coursebooks for primary, adult and professional learners. However, it is also accessible to learners without any previous acquaintance of the books as the activities offered are self-contained and provide useful language focus. The first classification of materials points to the book or series (e.g. *Headway*; *English File*; *Natural English*), the language aspects under scrutiny (grammar; vocabulary; listening skills etc.) are specified only once the learners have actually "entered" the book. There is a wide range of materials as well as text and audio activities complete with answer key.

Thomson ELT http://elt.thomson.com/namerica/en_us/index.html

This website offers samples of its catalogue books (e.g. worksheets, online activities, TESOL resources) together with demonstrations of technological tools such as Online Speaking Labs, aimed at improving pronunciation and conversational skills, and Exam View, suitable for creating and customizing language tests. Much of its material is password protected and requires registration.