WEBSITE REVIEW

Jarek Krajka

jkrajka@batory.plo.lublin.pl

www.dumblaws.com

www.dumblaws.com is an authentic site with laws from different countries, but the laws collected are for some reason "dumb" – they are either extremely out-of-date, or ridiculously distant from the reality. The authors of the site strongly emphasise the fact that all the laws are really acting in respective countries, none is made up or no longer in use, which is sometimes hard to believe, judging by the stupidity of some of them.

The home page of the site has the option of browsing through specific countries ("Different Countries") or the states of the USA ("States"). When choosing a state or a country, students get a list of laws from a particular country. These are quite short, written in a fairly simple language, so that intermediate or even pre-intermediate students should be able to comprehend them. Of course, dictionary help is necessary in most cases, since laws may contain either words which are not in everyday use or ones which are no longer used, as the majority of the laws are the ones that were introduced in the past and still exist. Anyway, this does not make it impossible to use the site even with lower-level students.

It should be said that the contents of the site is so ridiculous that students will surely have a good laugh when reading. It is important for the site to be appealing and interesting to students, as otherwise they will not be motivated to work on it. www.dumblaws.com is so funny that students forget that it is the lesson of English, that they are working on some material, but are eager to explore the laws of other countries. This is the most powerful justification of using the site for the lesson – if the material is so motivating and interesting, students will be extremely enthusiastic to work on it, and they will not notice that they practise grammar or learn new vocabulary.

The site offers all main advantages of online instruction over coursebook instruction:

- authenticity: students are convinced of the fact that the laws are authentic, though sometimes it is hardly believable
- novelty: the idea of stupid, but existent laws from different countries is new to them, and because of that novelty they are likely to be more interested and motivated to work on it

- recency: since the site is updated frequently and new laws are added, students have the idea of recency of the material, especially when compared with an outdated coursebook
- variety: there are different countries and states on the site, and students should be assigned different states, which makes it possible to organise information-gap activites, having in mind that sharing and exchanging the information foster communicative abilities
- choice: students have the opportunity to choose the states or countries they would like to work on, and they are not imposed a single text as in the case of a coursebook, and this decision-making enhances their learner autonomy
- interactivity: the site encourages people to send the stupid laws from their own countries, providing that they are true and still existent in the legal system (Poland is not in the site, so Polish students could contribute in this way to the making of the site, and seeing their works actually published on the Net would give students reward and encourage them to learning). Of course, the responsibility of the teacher is to supervise the activity of submitting stupid laws, in order to make sure that what students want to submit is really a law.

Obviously, it is not enough to have an interesting site, even the one such as www.dumblaws.com, to make a good English lesson. First of all, it needs to be said that for the lesson to be profitable, the lesson needs to be compatible with the overall syllabus, practising already known vocabulary and reinforcing grammatical structures. Because of that, it seems that the site mentioned could be used after teaching modal verbs, in order to practise the forms and draw students' attention to the differences in meaning between them. The language of the site uses plenty of modal forms: must, have to, be supposed to, be allowed to, be to, both in positive and negative forms, so it is a great source for the presentation of modal verbs and the explanation of the forms. Also, students could be made aware of the differences in the strength of obligation of different modals, and as a practice activity they could be asked to browse through the site and grade the laws of their choice from the strictest to the least strict. Drawing on that knowledge, students could be asked to work in pairs and devise a list of ten dumb laws for a given environment (a school, a bus, an office, a supermarket, etc.), paying special attention to the shades of meaning carried by specific modal forms.

When talking about the usefulness of this site as the input for vocabulary work, it is difficult to determine some specific areas or topics, simply because the laws given come from all walks of life and as such it is impossible to provide some comprehensive vocabulary practice on a given topic. Also, as the laws are usually old-fashioned, the language used consists of outdated or obsolete words, and as such some laws may be hard to understand

even with the dictionary. Of course, the site includes such a multitude of different laws, that this is not a problem which could break the lesson.

To sum up, www.dumblaws.com is a website with enormous potential for language activities and Internet lessons, because it allows the teacher to exploit such aspects of online instruction as authenticity, novelty, recency, variety, choice and interactivity, constitutes a good source of materials for teaching modal verbs in an interesting and varied way, is appealing to students because of its contents. Therefore, as my experience shows, a lesson of English based on this site should be successful and beneficial in terms of teaching goals.

OHIO UNIVERSITY CALL LAB
www.ohiou.edu/esl

OHIO University CALL Lab is a part of the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University, and it contains resource directories, study materials, things to read and topics to talk and write about (ENGLISH). Also, from the main page we can enter INFO-TOOLS (reference, library and Internet information tools), TEACHER section with lesson plans, professional development and other help for language teacher, OPIE (Ohio Program of Intensive English) sites, SEARCH the entire website for a specific topic or page, go to HELP site in order to find support on how to use this page or how to evaluate and cite information on the Web, and STUDENT LIFE, being the guide to life in the United States, and Athens, Ohio. The site is maintained by John McVicker, mcvicker@ohiou.edu.

This review will focus solely on the ENGLISH section, characterising types of resources available and possible applications of these in the classroom. When clicking on ENGLISH hyperlink, we move to the map of the site (www.ohiou.edu/esl/english), with the resources for English language and culture organised by skill area (grammar, reading, writing, listening, speaking, vocabulary), by OPIE class (American English, Academic English, Combined Skills, Undergraduate Writing, Graduate Writing, Oral Communication, etc.), as well as containing other resources such as audio materials, video materials, topics for study, world news, web directories, textbook supplements, student projects and other resources.

I will not go into detail with all sections of the website, as this is not the purpose of my review. Instead, I would like to concentrate on a few features of the website, to show what kinds of materials can be found there. As for resources organised by skill, I clicked on "reading," and what appears is the site with subsites and links to reading resources for English

language learners, divided into "activities," "reading skills," "electronic texts" and "et cetera" sections.

In the "activities" section, students and teachers can find various types of resources, such as comprehension quizzes; reading and vocabulary activities; example texts and questions from TOEFL Reading Comprehension part; interactive reading activities focusing on comprehension, summarising, gap-filling, organised by level from basic to advanced; reading exercises based on folk tales; reading activities based on current news stories with audio, story outline and summary. The interesting feature is the link to the "Online Reading Club," a group of readers from around the world, reading classics in English every 2 weeks and seding e-mail reviews to each other. The material in reading activities is authentic (CNN San Francisco, New York Times feature stories), literary and fictitious, which caters for a wide range of tastes and provides a variety indispensable to sustain students' interest in reading.

In the "reading skills" section, students can find sites and links to essay reading, exam reading, comprehension strategies, textbook reading, which has the purpose of preparing students for exams and providing additional off-class support.

"Electronic Texts" section comprises resources on the site and links to other sites on the Web, where e-texts could be found. The section is divided into "drama", "news," "poems," "stories," "songs," "interactive fiction" and "other," and each of them provides a number of annotated links to sites with electronic texts of various kinds. Thanks to that enormous collection of links to electronic texts on the Web, teachers and students can easily find a work of their choice, without the need to perform a time-consuming search with the help of the search engine such as Yahoo.

Finally, "Et cetera" section of reading resources comprises links to some projects by students, writings of non-native English speakers, speed reading methods or methods for reading speed improvement.

The site offers plenty of materials and links to external sites to practise reading, and it is an extremely valuable starting point for teachers looking for any kind of reading activities or strategies for their students. It is widely known that one can find everything in the Internet, but the only problem is how to find it. Ohio University CALL Lab, with its astonishing collection of resources and links, removes this obstacle, making finding online materials much easier.

Apart from dividing material according to skill, the site also offers searching its content by Ohio Program of Intensive English class. Of course, this is fully useful to Ohio

University students, but other teachers, interested in e.g. teaching combined skills may go there as well, getting materials divided into the following sections: Activities, Useful Resources, The Writing Process, The Essay Form, Reading Skills, Quotes/Paraphrases/Summaries, Library Skills and Resources, Research and Writing, and Finally Modern Impressions: Writing in Our Times. The materials collected in this section comprise, among others, interactive exercises based on stories in the news, interactive summary writing activities using technical texts, grammar, reading and writing resource pages, guidelines on evaluating student wriitng, tutorials on the process of planning and writing university-level essays, avoiding plagiarism, Web research practice, evaluating information, citing sources. Though the material is surely of interest to Ohio University students, it seems that every teacher could use the collection of materials and links when looking for some specific topic, in order to enrich his or her course with additional materials.

Out of the other resources, I would like to say a few words about "Topics for study." This is a site with topics, ideas, and questions that students might want to read about, listen to people talk and discuss or write about. The topics on the site are divided into multi-topic resources (e.g., Ethics on the Web), society and politics (Abortion, Climate Change, Censorship, Euthanasia, Gender Issues, Gun Control, Tobacco Use, and many more), history and culture (Adventures in Mythology, The Ancient World, The Holocaust, JFK Assassination, World Cultures, etc.), and science and technology (The Solar System, Weather Science, Volcanoes, and many others). When choosing an example topic, Censorship, you move to a site where you can find definitions, resources on censorship, case studies, voices for and against it, Internet discussion and searches for censorship, and questions. The Topics for study page is extremely useful as a great collection of links on specific topic, together with the introduction, definition, arguments both for and against. When clicking on voices for censorship, we move to a list of websites of organisations being for censorship, and our students can get the arguments for it from the first hand. This approach makes the whole process authentic and appealing to students, as they can get some deeper and more mature arguments from real life. On the whole, I can see the topics page extremely valuable as the collection of materials stimulating discussion, useful tool for writing argumentative essays. What is more, it can be used also by teachers of other subjects, or students can use this collection of materials and links when preparing projects assigned by teachers of history or geography.

In conclusion, it could be said that the Ohio University CALL Lab (www.ohiou.edu/esl) is a site with enormous amount of different materials, useful both to

students and teachers, which could be used both in class and for self-study. The site is not devoted only to Ohio University courses, but is easy to use also by other people from all over the world. Thanks to the site, searching the Web for specific information does not have to take that much time.