

## HOW GOOD ARE ESL/EFL WEBSITES?

by **Maria Teresa Ciaffaroni**

ITC- Liceo Linguistico “L. Lombardo Radice”

Rome, Italy

ciaffaroni @ gmail.com

### **Abstract**

The article features the review of three well known EFL/ESL websites, evaluated against some general criteria, based on SLA principles, and some specific ones, in order to find out whether they may provide any added value compared to currently published materials, as well as to highlight what they can actually offer learners. The article also sets out to discuss whether the Web has fulfilled any of the numerous promises it seemed to offer EFL/ESL learners when it first came around.

**Dave’s ESL Café**, <http://www.eslcafe.com/>

**LearnEnglish**, <http://www.learnenglish.org.uk/>

**English-Zone**, <http://english-zone.com/index.php>

### **Introduction**

The World Wide Web has been about, in its full potential, for more than ten years. Though continuously evolving, this technology can be considered as quite settled both in its general features and in its basic tools. Welcomed by many enthusiasts as a revolution, it seemed to hold wonders in store for EFL/ESL learning. It promised constant *exposure* to the target language, with loads of ready available resources; easy, fast, *autonomous learning*, and interesting, varied and challenging activities; endless *interaction* with native and non-native speakers through e-mail, forums, chats and virtual environments of any sorts. All this more or less for free.

Has the Web lived up to its promise? Or has it petered out, as many other modern utopias? In particular, are EFL/ESL websites likely to fulfil any of the promises stated above? Do the materials they provide offer any added value, compared to published ones? Have they evolved or remained more or less the same? What do these sites actually have to offer EFL/ESL learners? The article sets out to answer at least some of these questions, through a review of three widely

popular EFL/ESL websites – *Dave’s ESL Café*, *English-Zone*, *LearnEnglish* – evaluating them against some general criteria, based on SLA principles, and some specific ones.

## 1. Overview of the three sites

The three websites have been chosen because they seemed to supply suitable examples of what EFL sites have to offer to general learners. In fact, though not featuring structured language courses, they provide extra practice and support to learners who are studying English either on their own or in some sort of formal setting. In addition, the three sites are organised according to varying approaches, thus setting forth the opportunity to compare/contrast different features, in order to decide which ones best suit learners’ needs and requirements.

**Dave’s ESL Café** and **English-Zone** have been around for nearly ten years. ESL Californian teachers David Sterling and Kaye Mastin Mallory, respectively, created them and still keep them going, updating materials and offering support to learners. **LearnEnglish** has no indication on when it was set up, is probably more recent and is due to the joint effort of a team of “teachers and educationalists employed by the British Council and partner organisations” [1].

Dave’s ESL Café, which mainly relies on interaction, is made up of 3 sections. *Stuff for teachers*, *Stuff for students*, *Stuff for everyone* – the fourth section, *Jobs*, has recently been added. *Stuff for students* features a *Help Centre*, which is actually a forum where learners can post language related questions of any kind. Dave Sterling himself, or some other learner, will answer them. There are also subsections on *Idioms*, *Slang*, *Quizzes* on different topics, and a wide set of student *Forums*, ranging from *Computers and Sports to Science, Learning English* and even *The Strange and Mysterious*. *Stuff for everyone*, on the other hand, contains a *Chat Central*, to which learners can register if they wish to experience a chat in English in a protected environment, a section on *Podcasting* and a wide collection of *EFL links*.

**English-Zone**, which claims to be “the BEST English-Learner's site on the 'Net’”, focuses, though not exclusively, on language form. It features as many as 16 subsections on any possible ESL topic: *Grammar*, *Idioms*, *Verbs*, *Pronunciation*, *Conversation*, *Dictionaries* and even a *Fun Stuff* section, just to quote a few. The sites claims to be updated on a daily basis, thus providing fresh sets of exercise and activities, while keeping up a huge archive of older materials for revision and/or extra practice.

**LearnEnglish** is conceived as a repository of materials to help learners practice and improve their English, particularly the *Learning Central*, meant for general learners, which has 6 sub-sections dealing with different topics – *Magazines and Themes*, *Grammar and Test*, *Sport and Culture*, *Fun Stuff*, *Your Turn*, *Science and History* – plus a recently added section on *Listening*. Every week new content is added to each section. Previous weeks’ content is archived

and easily accessible for further practice. Activities range from gap filling to multiple choice, from matching to sentence re-arranging, covering all possible kinds, from highly structured to completely free ones. The site is highly organised and different sections and activities are clearly marked.

The three sites seem widely popular. David Sperling claims his **ESL Café** gets million of hits every month, though the statistics show that it has had about 20 million hits altogether [2]. **English-Zone** provides no information on overall visitors, but single pages highlight hundreds or thousands hits. Though there's no indication as to the number of visits to **LearnEnglish**, given the popularity and reliability of the British Council, it must get lots of hits. This popularity seems to point out that there's a demand for the materials and services provided by these sites.

Both **Dave's ESL Café** and **English-Zone** are privately funded, though they have gradually accepted selected advertising to face costs. **English-Zone** has recently shifted to paying membership for some content and services. **LearnEnglish** is completely free and does not contain advertising, "it does however promote English language courses, publications and educational services" [3].

## 2. Procedure

Comparative reviews of EFL/ESL websites have been attempted many times, even on an extensive scale [4], but as often as not, they simply provide a rubric of tools and materials. To my knowledge a principled evaluation on the learning potential of websites has never been attempted, probably because evaluating them is not easy. First and foremost, it is almost impossible to select specific target learners. Webmasters claims do not help, being, if possible, even vaguer than publisher's claims. Here's the gist for each of the three sites.

**Dave's ESL Café** intends to be "a colourful, fun, interactive, and friendly virtual community that connects both students and teachers together". "**English-Zone's** goal is to provide visitors with engaging, entertaining, yet educational activities, language lessons, and interactive language exercises". **LearnEnglish** is "a safe, fun, educational place on the Internet [...] It is like a restaurant with a long menu of learning activities, not designed for complete beginners or very advanced learners, but every learner in between should be able to find something they can understand and practise" [5].

Thus, target learners might be young adults, or teenagers, who wish to improve their English, but also want to have some fun. They have a computer, basic technical skills and some time to spare. They may be studying in a formal learning context - language course, school, university – they may need extra resources or clarification on specific points and be willing to

try some sort of interaction. They might either know what they need perfectly well or just browse around out of sheer curiosity. Learners of this sort might be very demanding or very easily contented. Vague as all this sounds, one can hardly get any closer to outlining a learner's profile.

Whatever the case, one cannot but agree with Tomlinson (2001) that good language materials should provide “learners with engaging and purposeful interaction with language in use”. This ought to be especially true for materials in EFL/ESL websites, since they are mainly meant for self-use. That's why it is so important to set up some principled criteria against which to evaluate them. These criteria should be based on SLA principles and ought to measure the added value offered by technology at the same time. The three sites will be evaluated after choosing the criteria and establishing a grading scale, in order to better compare the results.

### **3. Evaluation criteria**

Though not specifically referring to EFL/ESL websites, Tomlinson (1998a) [6], suggests a set of basic principles for self-access materials and activities, which can be useful in the selection of criteria for the evaluation of ESL/EFL websites. Here are the criteria formulated from these principles along with a brief rationale. For a complete list see [Appendix](#).

#### ***Impact***

With ESL/EFL websites meant for self-study, the materials and activities they contain should achieve impact in the first place. According to Tomlinson (1998b) “impact is achieved when materials have a noticeable effect on learners, that is, when learners' curiosity interest and attention is attracted”. Impact might be created by different factors, the main one being choice.

#### **Affective engagement**

As well as achieving impact, the materials and the activities in a website ought to involve the learners affectively. In fact, according to the affective engagement principle, foreign language is more easily acquired if learners feel relaxed, confident and successful and if they are able to respond to the target language holistically, with their whole beings (Tomlinson, 1998c).

#### **Maximisation of the brain's learning potential**

The materials and the activities in a website should stimulate the learners to use both their previous experience and their left and right brain. This principle from Suggestopedia (Lozanov 1978) states that language acquisition is enhanced when the input materials are stimulating and the learning activities are not too simple, so that the learners need to use their previous experience and both their left and right brain to complete them.

#### ***Comprehensible input***

Since ESL/EFL websites are virtual self-access centres, with little or no support from teachers, they should provide comprehensible input. Krashen (1985) first elaborated the idea of comprehensible input of a slightly higher level than the learner's. As well as being comprehensible, input needs to be as challenging and as varied as possible, in order to trigger the learners' interest. Thus, selection of input is a key factor for SLA, which needs to be properly reflected in self-access materials.

### *Self-discovery*

An ESL/EFL website needs to be particularly suitable for the learners to invest effort and attention in their learning activity. This principle, explored by many researchers (see, e.g., Ellis, 1990 or Bolitho and Tomlinson, 1995) maintains that learning materials and activities should help the learners to make informed decisions and self-discoveries.

### *Learning styles*

As ESL/EFL websites are meant for the general learners, they should consider that users might have different learning styles. Thus, the activities and the materials they provide should cater not only for the analytic but also for the reflective and experiential learners and take into account the kinaesthetic as well as the auditory and visual learning styles (Ellis, 1990; Oxford, 1990).

### *Layout specifications*

As well as responding to SLA principles an EFL/ESL website should maximise learner ease of use through a series of devices, such as

- Functional layout
- Clear instructions
- Easily retrievable activities
- Teacher support
- Opportunities for interaction

## **4. Report on evaluation**

Though the results of evaluation cannot but be subjective - both for the selection of criteria and the judgements - and though reviews by different reviewers would produce different results, they might point out some common trends and highlight a few meaningful features to reflect upon.

None of the websites got a high overall score. In a total of 80 points **LearnEnglish** got 48 (60%); **ESL Café** scored 46 (57%) and **English-Zone** - 36 (45%). **LearnEnglish** scored better in SLA based criteria, while **ESL Café** and **English-Zone** obtained higher marks in layout specifications. In fact, **LearnEnglish** is a fairly wide repository of language resources, **ESL**

**Café** offers good opportunities for interaction and feedback and **English-Zone** provides online support for registered users. These results apparently point out that the selected websites might not have a very high learning potential, notwithstanding their popularity and claims. A closer look at each of the criteria in detail will help to gain deeper insight.

### ***Impact***

The three websites, and particularly **LearnEnglish**, offer so wide a choice of topics and materials that they seem able to achieve impact. It's a pity no audio or video materials are available in any of them, even though they contain links to audio and video resources. The popularity of the three sites confirms that at least some specific features are likely to attract the learners' curiosity and attention: the problem is whether the activities provided are able to keep them up. Unfortunately none of the three sites features very motivating activities, providing multiple choice, gap filling, matching, cloze, that is, activities suitable for self-marking and focused feedback. As Tomlinson (1998a) rightly points out, "the development of self-access material has been a positive feature of the foreign language pedagogy in the last decade (or so)" but "in order to make sure that learners can work entirely on their own and still receive feedback, there's been a limiting tendency to restrict activities to those which can more easily be self-marked". The underlying pedagogical approach of the three sites seems to be PPP, with a focus on the first two Ps, that is, the same approach informing most published ESL/EFL materials for the global market.

### ***Affective engagement***

If affective engagement is achieved by lack of stress, all the sites would manage to involve even the most anxious learners. If it is achieved through catching materials and challenging activities, none of them is likely to get very far. They all provide a fun stuff sections with jokes, stories, games, funny pictures, but the main learning activities are neither affectively engaging nor cognitively challenging, being of the restricted types described in the previous

paragraph. Of the three websites, **LearnEnglish** makes at least some attempts at providing some open-ended activities. For instance, in *Stories And Poems*, after reading *The Banyan Tree* by Tagore, learners are requested to complete the following task: “Write a poem about a tree or another type of plant. Send us your texts”. The same task is proposed for any poem or story presented. In fact, quite a few learners from all over the world actually sent poems or comments on articles and stories. Some are really good, confirming that open ended, challenging activities do appeal to learners.

### ***Maximisation of the brain’s learning potential***

Unfortunately, neither the materials nor the activities included in the three website make much reference to the learners’ experience or life. They are up to developing explicit, declarative knowledge, with almost no attempt to develop procedural knowledge of the language, that is of how language is used to achieve specific purposes. See Tomlinson (1998a): “Many self-access materials designed to individualise learning treat learners as though they are stereotypical clones of each other”. ESL/EFL websites seem to follow no different pattern from currently published materials.

### ***Comprehensible input***

The three websites certainly offer rich and varied exposure to language in use, particularly **LearnEnglish**, which provides a wide range of text types and genres, including literature and songs. **English-Zone** has a comparatively narrower range of texts, being mainly focused on language form, but has a really good section on language curios and strange facts, which may appeal to many learners. None of the three site contains extensive reading, audio or video materials. **English-Zone** and **ESL Café** partly compensate this with direct interaction, while **LearnEnglish**, in the FAQ section, provides links to audio, video and speaking resources. The lack of audio and video further impairs the learning potential, since exposure to aural and oral language is a key factor in SLA. Thus, the greater pity since technology developments would allow ample use of both.

### *Self-discovery*

There's almost no room for self-discovery and language awareness in any of the sites. **English-Zone** contains detailed explanations on any possible tricky or trivial language question, with plenty of practice activities of the structured type. **LearnEnglish** features a specific grammar section, with brief explanatory notes followed by practice exercises. **ESL Café** provides no grammar section. It is up to the learners to ask for clarification, explanation, examples of use, or whatever they may need. Sometimes questions are directly answered, more often a link to a resource is provided. This is the real added value of **ESL Café**: learners have to work out a solution for their specific problem on their own browsing online resources.

### *Learning styles*

The materials and the activities in the three websites, particularly in **English-Zone**, mostly cater for analytical, reflective learners who prefer to learn with written language and like to focus on discrete bits of it. There's little or no opportunity for global kinaesthetic learners, that is, those learners who would possibly benefit most from self-access materials to do things their own way.

### *Layout specifications*

Though completely different, the layout can be considered functional for the chosen focus of each site. **ESL Café** and **English-Zone** have remained more or less the same since they were first created; **LearnEnglish** has recently undergone a restyling, moving most materials and activities to a new site. Specific sections and different types of materials and activities are quite clearly marked in all the sites. Some activities can be retrieved from more than one place causing a bit of confusion that does not seriously impair ease of use. Instructions are quite clear and up to the point, even though they do not sound particularly friendly in **LearnEnglish**, while they are somewhat confusing in **ESL Café**. In **English-Zone**, instead, it is not always clear what is meant for whom, or what is the purpose of some activities. Materials are quite easy to retrieve and load in all the sites, even though in **LearnEnglish**, loading activities can take too long at times. **ESL Café** provides feedback from teachers on specific topics for free; **English-Zone** does so only for paying users, while **LearnEnglish** has no such service. No doubt, this is an added value for **ESL Café** along with the availability of interaction tools, completely lacking in **LearnEnglish**.

## 5. Overall evaluation



**ESL Café** is the website with the highest **Layout specifications** score. Even though it has no restriction, it has quite a clear target: late teenagers or young adults still in formal education. It is particularly useful for learners with specific questions or problems, who are aware of their learning needs. It is perfect for interaction with peers from all over the world. It is not particularly good for extra practice, since it has little choice of materials and activities and, even though it provides a huge amount of links to language resources, they are not easily available, unless you are very experienced at searching and retrieving info.

**English-Zone** is the site with the lowest global score. Wishing to cater for any language learner it ends up having no clear target. In fact some materials and activities seem more suitable for young learners, others for adults, others for no learner in particular. Indications of level are somewhat confusing. It might be useful for reflective learners requiring guided practice on specific language points, but it has not as wide a choice as **LearnEnglish**, and an even more limited availability of activity types. The site offers tools for Interaction and feedback from teachers but only to paying users, while one of the best sections in the site is the fun stuff.

**LearnEnglish** is the site with the highest overall score. Though aiming to reach as wide an audience as possible, it sets up an implicit target, late teenagers-young adults, wishing to improve their proficiency. It has a huge availability of resources and might be useful for extra practice on specific language points or for reading. A very good section is the fun stuff with games, cartoons and trivia. It is the best repository of resources. Unfortunately it does not provide any tools for interaction, either with peers or teachers.

## Conclusions

Apparently the selected sites do not have a very high learning potential, notwithstanding their claims. In fact, at a closer look, they show no substantial difference from current published materials, either for self-access or classroom use, apart from the huge amount of resources they contain. None of them seems to exploit the technology potential of the Web to its full extent. Possibly they never will, since they have undergone no relevant change over time.

One reason might be cost-effectiveness. Putting up, maintaining and updating a website is quite costly, time consuming and difficult to make it pay, so each site had to find direct or indirect ways of making a revenue of a sort. **LearnEnglish** seems to be kept there to attract learners and redirect them to learn English somewhere else - paying language courses, exams.

**English-Zone** lures learners with sample materials and activities just to get them pay for the real thing. **ESL Café** provides help and support but gets selected advertising and book selling in exchange.

What will happen to ESL/EFL free websites? Will they be discarded? Will they be taken over by publishers? Will they die of their own accord? Or will they completely shift to paying membership? One thing is clear from the evaluation: the ideal online resource for self-access ESL/EFL learning would have to combine the rich repository of resources in **LearnEnglish**, the opportunities for interaction and support in **ESL Café** and **English-Zone**, the audio and video resources one could find, say, in BBC, plus some sophisticated collaboration tools for voice interaction. Add to this meaningful, challenging activities, which hopefully maximise the brain's learning potential and cater for any type of learner, and you get... a chimera, that is, a cyber combination that will never be.

Let's wait for new technology developments and see what they get in store. Let's also hope that a few pioneers with a vision - like David Sterling ten years ago - may be willing to invest time and energy to make experiments for the benefits of language learners, hopefully keeping in mind a few sound SLA principles while so doing.

## Notes

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1 See the section *What is Learnenglish?*

2 There's no way to decide how many are repeat hits and how many are the idle surfers and browsers.

3 See the section *About Learnenglish*

4 See, for instance Krajka (2002)

5 These statements are from the three websites *FAQ* or *About us* section respectively.

6 The principles include: be self-access, with choice of learning routes, type, time and pace; be open-ended, with a variety of acceptable answers; engage the learners affectively; involve the learners as whole human beings; require the learners' personal investment to foster self-

discoveries; stimulate left and right brain to maximise the brain's learning potential; provide varied and comprehensible input.

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Click for [Appendix](#)