The LLL SIG Newsletter

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Online resources for turning EFL students into lifelong readers

-- Adam Murray

The Internet is a gold mine of resources for EFL students, providing an unlimited supply of reading materials on every possible subject. Although such a quantity of materials is wonderful, this abundance of reading matter can be overwhelming for some students as they try to find texts that are at an appropriate reading level for them. This brief paper will introduce some free online resources that can be used in the EFL classroom and for independent reading. These resources will be divided into four sections: authentic texts, adapted texts, texts for learners, and tools.
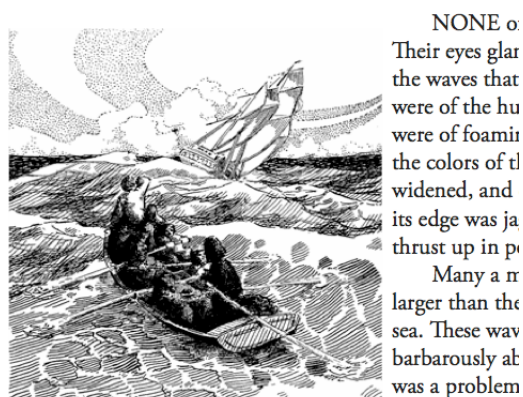
Authentic texts

Authentic texts are texts which were written for native English readers. As would be expected, these texts: a) come in a variety of genres, b) are written for a range of ages— children to adults—and c) are written for various purposes. One of the largest, if not the largest, source of public domain literary works is Project Gutenberg. Currently, Project Gutenberg offers over 40,000 e-books that are in the American public domain. In addition to the main website, there are smaller regional websites such as Gutenberg Australia and Gutenberg Canada that offer additional books that are not in the American public domain. These e-books provided by Project Gutenberg are offered in a number of formats, such as HTML, EPUB, Kindle, and Plain Text.

To accompany the texts that can be found on Project Gutenberg, audio recordings are also available on other websites. The largest repository of audio recordings of public domain texts can be found at LibriVox. LibriVox's self-proclaimed mission is the "acoustical liberation of books in the public domain". Volunteers from around the world make recordings of public

domain books in .mp3 (64kbps and 128 kbps) and .ogg vorbis formats. As of September 2012, there were 6,000 projects at various stages of completion. Although it is difficult to criticize the efforts of these dedicated volunteers, it should be mentioned that the quality of these recordings can vary greatly. Some of the recordings were made with low-end microphones and, as a result, there is background noise (e.g., computer fan noise, page turning, etc.). Also, the quality of the actual readings can vary. Some of the recordings were made by enthusiastic volunteers whose love for the books is evident. On the other hand, some of the readers tend to read in monotone voices. Despite these shortcomings, these audio recordings are still useful for reading-while-listening.

Another source of audio recordings is Lit2Go, a website created by the Center for Instructional Technology in the College of Education at the University of South Florida. Much smaller than the previously mentioned websites, Lit2Go offers hundreds of short stories and poems. What makes this site superior to Project Gutenberg is the beautifully illustrated PDF files of the texts. An example of one of these illustrations can be seen in Exhibit 1.

Exhibit 1: An illustration from Stephen Crane's *Open Boat* (Lit2Go)

In addition to providing illustrated texts, Lit2Go also avoids the previously described shortcomings of the LibriVox audio recordings. As a result of being supported by grant funding, Lit2Go is able to provide high-quality audio recordings in .mp3 format made by professional readers.

Adapted texts

Adapted texts are texts that have been modified in various ways for ESL/EFL learners. Typically the vocabulary and grammatical structures have been simplified to make the text

easier to read and understand. One well-established resource of adapted texts is the Voice of America (VOA) Learning English website. A regular feature of the website is a Special English audio show called "American Stories". The stories presented in this show are adaptions of famous American short stories such as *Rappaccini's Daughter* that have been written for "intermediate and upper-beginner" level students. In addition to being adapted for learners, the stories are read at a much slower speed (33% slower) than the regular VOA recordings. Like Lit2Go, PDF and high-quality .mp3 files are available for download.

For students and teachers who do not have an interest in literature, The Learning Resources website may be attractive. This website has a number of lessons that feature news stories from CNN and CBS which are organized into 12 categories. Examples of these categories are adventure, culture & society, environment, and science & technology. For each news story, the original text, an abridged text, and an outline are available along with audio and video files in Real Audio format. In addition to the news stories, there is a number of supplemental vocabulary and comprehension activities that are suitable for independent study. Unfortunately, the most current news story is from 2005, so it seems that this website is not being actively maintained any more.

Texts for EFL/ESL learners

Texts for EFL/ESL learners are original texts that were created for learners of English. The University of Victoria English Language Centre has a website called Study Zone that was created for adult English-language learners. The website has readings divided into four language levels: a) upper beginner (level 200), b) lower intermediate (level 330), c) intermediate (410), d) upper intermediate (level 490), and e) advanced (level 570). In addition to the readings, each of the levels has grammar and vocabulary exercises. Some of the topics such as urban legends are an interesting alternative to regular news stories.

Cengage has a companion website for the long-selling reference book *E-Learning Companion: A Student's Guide to Online Success*. The site has 24 reading passages approximately 500 words in length that are intended for timed reading practice. These passages cover a wide variety of topics such as global English, Summer X Games, and Pablo Picasso. The website calculates reading speed and has follow-up comprehension quizzes.

GCF LearnFree.org by the Goodwill Community Foundation offers activities to improve reading fluency and vocabulary. It is intended for beginners and focuses on 1,000 commonly used words. For reading comprehension practice, there are 140 texts that are very short in length (150 words or less) on everyday topics such as family, household, and transportation. As shown in Exhibit 2, each text has an accompanying audio so reading-while-listening practice is possible.

Exhibit 2: GCF LearnFree reading comprehension activity

In addition to reading comprehension activities, there are exercises for vocabulary development and basic reading skills such as letter and word recognition.

Tools

Although the previously listed resources are an excellent starting point for independent reading, students need to be able to locate appropriate reading materials for themselves in order to truly be lifelong readers.

One way that students can identify appropriate reading materials is to measure the readability of texts. Simply put, readability is the ease of understanding or comprehension of text by a specific reading audience. An excellent website for calculating readability scores is Readability Formulas. The website calculates readability scores for texts between 150 and 600 words using a number of popular readability formulas such as Flesch Reading Ease and the Gunning Fog Scale. A unique feature of this website is the "Text Readability Consensus Calculator" which calculates the average grade level, reading age, and difficulty of texts. In

Exhibit 3, the readability consensus score for a text from *National Geographic* is shown.

Exhibit 3: Readability Consensus Score for a *National Geographic* article

Readability Consensus
Based on 8 readability formulas, we have scored your text:
Grade Level: 10
Reading Level: fairly difficult to read.
Reader's Age: 14-15 yrs. old (Ninth to Tenth graders)

In addition to calculating readability scores, the website also generates wordlists from texts. Some of the lists are: a) unique words, b) repeated words, c) single syllable words, d) double syllable words, and e) three-plus syllable words. Using the readability consensus information along with the information in the wordlists, the reader can make the decision whether or not the text is at an appropriate level.

Another tool for analyzing texts is Cloze Horse. Although the website is intended for use by teachers, it can be useful for learners as well. Like the Readability Formulas website, it calculates readability. Cloze Horse relies on one readability formula - Flesch Reading Ease. In addition to calculating readability, Cloze Horse highlights words in the Academic Word List (AWL), low frequency words, and words in the second thousand of the General Service List (2000 GSL). In Exhibit 4, the vocabulary analysis for a text is shown.

Exhibit 4: A text with words highlighted by word level

New Zealand is a small country in the southern Pacific Ocean. There are two main islands, the North Island and the South Island, as well as many smaller islands. New Zealand is 268,000 square kilometres, about the same size as the United Kingdom.

Maori people arrived from the Pacific in the 10th century, and by the 12th century there were many Maori settlements along the coasts of New Zealand. The Maori name for New Zealand is Aotearoa, which means 'The land of the long white cloud'. Seven hundred years later, large numbers of Europeans started to settle in New Zealand. According to Government figures, the population of New Zealand in 2004 was over four million, and of these, about 75 percent lived in the North Island.

There are four main cities. Auckland, in the north, is the largest city with a population of over one million people. Auckland's population includes many different nationalities. For example, there are large groups of European, Maori, Pacific Island, Chinese and Indian people. Together with other smaller groups, they make Auckland an interesting and exciting place to live.

Note: Yellow words – AWL, blue words – 2000 GSL, green – low frequency.

This easy-to-understand output allows the reader to quickly determine the difficulty of the vocabulary used in the text.

Appendix A: URLs of Resources Described (In order described)

Authentic Texts

- Project Gutenberg – www.gutenberg.org

- LibriVox – librivox.org

- Lit2Go - etc.usf.edu/lit2go

Adapted Texts

- Voice of America Learning English - learningenglish.voanews.com

- Learning Resources – literacynet.org/cnnsf/archives.html

Texts for EFL/ESL Learners

- University of Victoria English Language Centre Study Zone - web2.uvcs.uvic.ca/ elc/studyzone/

- E-Learning Companion (Cengage) - college.cengage.com/collegesurvival/ watkins/learning_companion/1e/students/timed_reading.html

- GCF LearnFree - www.gcflearnfree.org/reading

Tools

- Readability Formulas – www.readabilityformulas.com

- Cloze Horse - simonsplace.mine.nu/~simonac/clozehorse2/index.html