Recommended website

JOHN'S ESL COMMUNITY - ENGLISH INTERACTIVE

http://www.johnsesl.com

Site at a glance

John's ESL Community - English Interactive is an interactive website with a double portal for students and teachers. It offers a wide range of learning and teaching resources, with over 350 activities for students, including quizzes, games and exercises of many kinds, as well as plenty of class resources for ESL teachers. It is claimed to be updated almost daily. There is the possibility of obtaining a free e-mail account. Content is sorted by communicative skills and linguistic topics. It was set up in 1995 by John Erskin. It makes wide use of JavaScript interactive resources. Its overall objective is to provide general linguistic practice at different levels of general English and in different formats. English is also the vehicular language for the whole site. Multimedia includes audio and graphics, but no video. Plug-ins, software and files in general are easy to access and download.

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Site description and analysis

Although the site does not include a site map as such, there is a lot of meta-site information giving a wealth of details about the developer and the resource itself. The website has been clearly divided into two parallel sections (for students and for teachers) from the very first welcoming screen. A brief outline of the site's sections follows:

Student sections:
- Linguistic skills (Vocabulary, Reading, Writing, Listening, Grammar, Idioms, Quotes)
- Quizzes (organized by type: Short answer, Cloze, Yes/No, Multiple Choice, Vocabulary, Scrambled Text, Flash Cards, Matching, Listening)
- Holidays (reading pages to learn about American Holidays)
- Games (sorted by type)
- Riddles (sorted by topic)
- E-cards (possibility of sending real postcards to people)
- E-mail (possibility of opening an exclusive e-mail account for free)
- Links (a place to view categorized links and submit links onto the page).

Teacher sections: similar to the above plus a plentiful collection of teaching ideas and plans, as well as on-line tools to develop activities (including a dedicated and free class website).

After the user accesses the student section, the screen displays four distinct areas. At the top, on the right-hand, side there is information about the site, a links section with the possibility for the student to add and organise new links, and a facility to provide a new e-mail account with the extension <@johnsesl.com>. The central part of the screen is occupied by an explanatory text about the chosen section at a given time, and links to exercise sections. Both sides of the screen layout include columns of hyperlinks to
language skills and exercise formats (on the left-hand side) and at actual exercises or collections of tasks (on the right). These hyperlinks at both sides of the page lead us to different collections of actual exercises on the central part of the screen. Consequently, the student can move around the website in a non-linear way, making choices concerning language skills and exercise types, depending on what he or she wishes to practise. For all language skills, there is a section devoted to useful learning strategies to develop them, some of which are very interactive (e.g. vocabulary list builders).

The teachers' section has a similar layout and structure, but with different parts. In the left-hand side column, the teacher can find a "class web site" login facility which allows for the self-construction of lesson plans. Available teacher resources include activity generators (Java-programmed) that show a high degree of interaction, printable worksheets and classroom activities, as well as links to teaching resources of various kinds (Bookstore, professional associations, world news, etc.). Both students and teachers can easily interact and send messages and feedback to the site developer, by filling in online forms.

Synchronous communication is not catered for within the resource, but the degree of interaction is quite high. Links are plentiful, coherently organised by topic or purpose, and regularly updated. Detailed charts about performance are sometimes available. Metalinguistic feedback, in the form of comments and explanations, is occasionally provided.

All language skills are treated, with the exception of speaking, which is not present. There is also the possibility of skills integration, namely Reading/Writing and Listening/Reading, for instance.

The treatment of linguistic skills and components is as follows:

- **Phonetics:** Perception versus production exercises. Discrimination of sounds (minimal pairs). Exercise types: multiple choice.
- **Grammar:** Direct (explicit) instruction as well as indirect (implicit) instruction. Grammatical consciousness-raising is promoted. Inductive (examples + rule inference) and deductive (rules + practice with examples) approach. Formal explanation of rules. Practice of structures by analogy rather than explanation. Provision of opportunities to use and observe the language in real contexts. Exercise types: multiple choice, gap-filling, drag-and-drop, matching, open-input tasks, tutorials and games.
- **Vocabulary:** Lexical fields included. Strategies for the deduction of meaning. Learning by lexical association and grouping. Graphic, multimedia or contextual cues and support. The treatment of vocabulary is contextualized sometimes. Mnemotechnic strategies. Encouragement of active and personal vocabulary compilation by students. Presentation of collocations and expressions (in addition to isolated words). Perceptive (to recognize) as well as productive (to use) approach to vocabulary. Oral or written treatment. Exercise types: multiple choice, open-input, games and tutorials.
- **Reading comprehension:** Bottom-up and top-down approach to comprehension. Possibility of gradual approach to the text. Graphic or multimedia support. Pre-reading exercises. Use of information transfer. Possibility of extensive practice. Predicting, inferring and guessing from context. Reading is seen as a highly interactive process. Exercise types: multiple choice, gap-filling, open-input, games, tutorials, exploratory tasks and text reconstruction.
- **Listening Comprehension:** Bottom-up versus top-down approach to comprehension. Practice of the phonetic (perceptual) versus interpretative (comprehension) component. Connections between the written and spoken word reinforced and promoted sometimes. Exercise types: multiple choice, gap-filling, games.
- **Writing:** Focus on product rather than the process. Practice derived from reading. Levels of sentence, and text. Controlled composition. Exercise types: open-input and games.
There is a tendency towards authenticity in tasks, although many of them are clearly pedagogical and linguistically oriented. The coverage of linguistic topics is quite wide, including discourse, syntax, lexis and morphology, as well as information transfer tasks.

Regarding the role played by the computer, following the distinction made in 1980 by Taylor, it acts as a tutor (providing linguistic practice, guidance and feedback), as a tool (to help the student and the teacher with their learning and teaching activities) and as a tutee (because it is possible to feed plenty of data into the online resource). The linguistic input (i.e. the materials available to the students) is made comprehensible by means of explanations of words or concepts, attached audio files, pictures and graphics. The pedagogical approach to contents is analytical, rather than synthetic, and the website allows for the construction of meaning and learning paths by the students themselves, which implies a constructivist learning approach, instead of a linear one.

 Plenty of help and reference aids for learning are provided, together with lots of examples, demonstrations and explanations. Grammar is contextualised, and linguistic practice can be controlled, contextualised and communicative.

 Motivation is encouraged through the use of games, the provision of a wide variety of exercises, exploratory activities, or development of web skills (e-mail, web page creation...).

 Language awareness is also promoted. In addition, this comes hand in hand with a strong focus on meaning, which shows a communicative approach to language learning. Interaction supported by the resource can take the form of asynchronous communication with other people (by e-mail) and contact with language learning materials.

 The website can be considered innovative in many respects: pedagogical use of lots of different games, possibility of adding links and contributing content, original tasks and activities (free class website, action mazes and other exercise generation tools, "Never ending story", "Talking crosswords", interactive tree activity to choose the use of articles, etc.), vocabulary builder facility, explanations about learning strategies, exclusive e-mail account.

 **Technical and pedagogical summary**

 From a pedagogical standpoint, *John’s ESL Community* is an example of a resource which follows sound communicative and constructivist approaches to language learning and teaching. It integrates the interaction possibilities provided by JavaScript programming within a coherent pedagogical framework, using relevant organizing criteria, such as language skills and varying activity types. It is an innovative, interactive and motivating learning tool which allows the student to construct their own learning paths quite easily in a non-linear way. On the debit side, the grouping of the exercises and the overall structure of the site is at times confusing, partly due to the fact that there does not seem to be a default route (or learning path) and a full site map is missing.

 Technologically speaking, *John’s ESL Community* is very efficient, well designed and optimised for ease of use. It is generally very user-friendly. Audio files, as well as supporting software and plug-ins are easily and quickly accessible, and work. So does the Java-programmed interface. It is a robust tool that successfully integrates content submitted by users (links, messages) and organises external links in a very coherent way. Nevertheless, sometimes there are different links for the same exercise, faulty links (eg. Adjectives quiz), different font sizes together, and spelling mistakes. Screen readability is occasionally poor. But, all in all, the site follows a consistent modern design, is easy to use and responds in an efficient way.

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