Insites

By Jackie Hemingway & Sarah Butler

This section highlights some useful learning and teaching websites that can help with planning, teaching and professional development. This time we look at resources for developing oral English.

English Central

http://www.englishcentral.com

It can be difficult to find motivating speaking practice for students outside of class. This site provides an extensive collection of videos for learners to use following the format of "watch, learn, speak, quiz". Users watch a short video with subtitles and can immediately check unknown vocabulary by clicking any of the words. By using a microphone headset, they can then record themselves repeating the dialogue as they read it on screen. They are given immediate feedback on their pronunciation using a colour coding system which highlights possible pronunciation mistakes of particular words and any sections which were unclear and not heard by the system. Finally, a quiz allows users to test their knowledge of vocabulary used in the video.

The diversity of videos available means that all users are likely to find content of interest.

Videos range from interviews with celebrities and movie trailers, to academic and business topics. As well as searching by topics, users can specify the level (beginner, intermediate and advanced) and use other filters such as "trending" or "most recent" to limit search results. Content is provided in collaboration with other organizations such as Voice of America, National Geographic Learning, and Garnet Education. Over 9000 video lessons are offered with 50 new lessons added every week.

Besides the authentic and wide-ranging video content, the design of the site encourages learners to return regularly. As users need to log in to use the site, every vocabulary item they come across in the videos is tracked; by clicking on "my words" on the menu bar, students can see their complete list of words and corresponding definitions, and then take a quiz to test their knowledge of those words. During the quiz, the word is heard and seen in context; a very short captioned video containing the vocabulary item is played. The student then chooses the correct definition from four options or is asked to spell the word after reading a definition. The personalized vocabulary record tracks progress on each word according to the frequency of successful quiz attempts. For further motivation, users are ranked on a scoreboard in comparison with others according to the points scored by completing video dialogues and quizzes. These

rankings can also be filtered in order to compare with other learners of the same native language.

For lower-level users, navigation of the website is now offered in several languages, including Chinese.

One major drawback of the site is its restrictions on non-paying users. Full access to the site starts at US$15 per month and packages are available for institution membership. Nevertheless, it is free for anyone to register and access two video lessons per month.

This is an extensive, yet easy-to-navigate site, providing motivating content for learners of all abilities and interests.

Okanagan University College: Pronunciation

http://international.ouc.bc.ca/pronunciation/

This website focuses completely on pronunciation and provides a variety of input catering to a range of learning styles. The site is organized according to hard-to-pronounce individual sounds, e.g. /θ/, /ð/, or pairs of sounds which can be confused by learners such as v/w or l/r. The lesson for each sound or pair of sounds is recorded as an MP3 and available with a PDF worksheet which students can download and complete while listening to the lesson. Each lesson provides comprehensive practice of the sound(s) featured, with each recording lasting approximately eight minutes. The lesson includes a description of how the mouth moves to make the sounds, followed by a range of practice activities including listening to and repeating words containing the sound, distinguishing between minimal pairs such as three/free (as both isolated words and in sentences), dictation, and tongue twisters. Also included are pair activities which could be used in class: pair dictation, information gap exercises and practice dialogues. The answer keys to all the lessons are provided in a link at the bottom of the main page.

Further audio-visual resources are provided to help students in forming the sounds: QuickTime movies both illustrate the movement of the mouth as each sound is made and feature teachers giving their own advice on ways to practice the sound in question. Adobe Shockwave Player and a microphone are
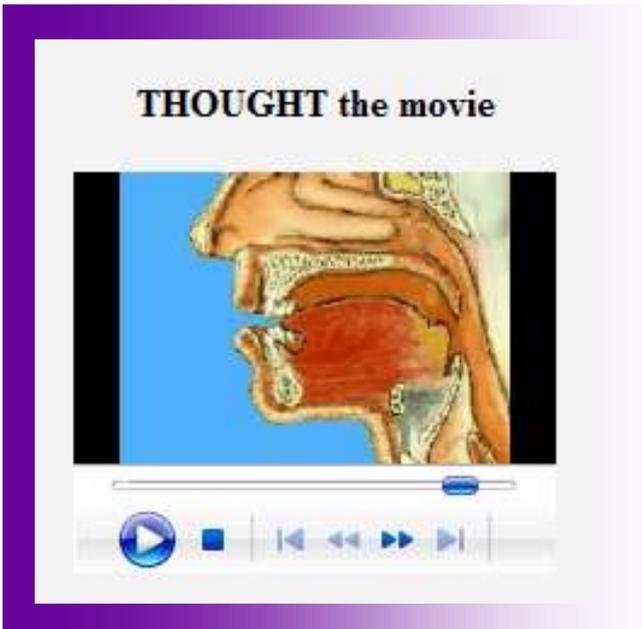
required for additional activities which allow learners to listen to a dialogue and record themselves taking on the role of one of the speakers.

Although the basic layout and aesthetics could be made more attractive, and better organized to more clearly show the features available, the site can be recommended as a useful resource for improving pronunciation, suitable for both in-class practice and self-study. Nevertheless, it would be advisable to demonstrate it to learners who may initially find the site difficult to navigate independently.

Knovio

http://www.knovio.com/

This is a website which is particularly valuable for students who have to prepare and deliver presentations. The ability to create a visual record of a presentation is useful for learners as they can reflect on a variety of skills such as pronunciation, intonation, body language, pace and vocabulary. It also allows the teacher an opportunity to give feedback online and present material in a different medium. In addition, it can be used to share information between learners as the completed presentations can be uploaded to social networking sites, or emailed to individuals.

The site could be used for self-study, or for preparing EAP students in their content courses. Learners could research a topic and then create a presentation which can be accessed by other students online. Learners of Business English could critically analyse and refine specific presentation skills, particularly with regard to delivery. As the presentations and accompanying slides can be uploaded online, or emailed directly to participants, feedback can be given after the presentation and reviewed later to see where improvements have been made.

The slides should be checked for errors before they are uploaded to Knovio as changes cannot be made after this. It is also possible to re-record the video, although the previous presentation is erased. The user has a choice of recording either audio only or making a video using the computer's microphone or webcam.

Although users have to sign up to Knovio, the process is quick and easy. Users can also create private groups where they can share their presentations with others.

The site is well laid-out and has easy-to-follow instructions. The main page has a FAQ section and a feedback option. At present it is a free site, although there are plans to have a premium option, which would charge for use.

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