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CONTENTS

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EDITORIAL	3
INTERVIEW	
Interview with John Corbett. <i>María del Carmen Méndez García and María Luisa Pérez Cañado</i>	5
IN THE ENGLISH CLASSROOM	
La narrativa en lengua inglesa: perspectivas didácticas para el desarrollo de la competencia axiológica. <i>Juan Ramón Guijarro Ojeda</i>	11
Actitudes y valores en alumnos y profesores ante la asignatura de inglés. <i>José Luis Ortega Martín y José María Roa Venegas</i>	20
IN THE SECONDARY CLASSROOM	
A new challenge for EFL teachers: the intercultural scenario in Spanish secondary schools. <i>Alberto Lanzat García</i>	30
AT UNIVERSITY	
Apprehend without apprehension. <i>Serafina Lina Filice and Domenico Sturino</i>	36
AN ESSENTIAL GLOSSARY FOR THE TEACHER	
Culture and intercultural competence. <i>Michael Byram</i>	46
REVIEWS	49
CULTURE AND LITERATURE	61
NET IDEAS	
Grammar	85
LETTER FROM THE ASSOCIATION	89

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NET IDEAS: GRAMMAR

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INTRODUCTION

NET IDEAS is a new section that will be aimed at offering both ESL teachers and learners different websites which have been selected on the basis of the resources they offer. If you use a search engine in order to look for them, the number of results will be very high. However, just some of the hits may be useful to you. Moreover, you will have to go through all of them and choose the most suitable ones for your particular purposes.

For the sake of clarity and coherence, it has been decided that each issue will be devoted to a specific linguistic skill or area. This issue will focus on **English grammar**. The best websites dealing with this area will be not only provided but also commented on, taking into account different aspects, such as their target audience, the presence or absence of different levels, glossaries of linguistic terms, examples, extra exercises, the kind of activities exploited, etc. Due to limitations of space, we will just concentrate on some websites that have been selected among a varied range of links.

1- Activities for ESL/EFL Students (English Study): <http://a4esl.org/>

This website is the result of a project of *The Internet TESL Journal* (<http://www.iteslj.org>) and it benefits from thousands of contributions by many English teachers all over the world. It includes quizzes, tests, exercises, and puzzles that aim at helping ESL learners. Nevertheless, it should also be mentioned that teachers can also take advantage of these resources and use them for reviews, placement tests, homework, etc. Even though vocabulary is also dealt with, attention will be paid to grammar. The grammatical quizzes are divided

into six levels (from easy to difficult), and an extra section of "Grammar quizzes about places" is included. Each level contains quizzes which are alphabetically arranged depending on the specific area in which they provide practice (for example, articles, *do* or *make*, prepositions, punctuation, verbs, etc.). One of the main advantages of these quizzes is that the learner gets immediate feedback; in some cases they have to think of the right answer first and then see the correct answer by clicking the "answer" button; in some others, they have to type the answer first and, by pressing "enter", they are told whether they were right or wrong. Some quizzes even provide learners with their scores.

2- Phrasal Verbs Drinks Dispenser: <http://www.stuff.co.uk/phrasal.htm>

As its very title reads, this website is concerned with phrasal verbs. We have selected it mainly because of its originality, since it is not easy to deal with what most ESL learners consider as one of the hardest and most boring areas of the English language. What you find is an interactive drinks dispenser; you should first choose one of the eight topics available, such as "emotions", "illness" or "money"; then, you are asked to match each verb with its appropriate particle and the resulting meaning. If the combination is right, you get a can with the word "wow" printed on it; on the other hand, if you are wrong, the can you get is broken.

3- Bob Wilson's AUTO-ENGLISH 2006: <http://www.autoenglish.org/>

As Wilson explains in his site, it includes "free online and printout exercises for learners and teachers of English". Even though we will concentrate on the

grammar area, there are tons of free resources such as flashcards, games, forums, links, teachers' tips, online courses, exercises and activities, etc. As far as grammar is concerned, we should emphasise the relevance of what he terms "The Grammar Aquarium", which includes different sections called "basics", "general", "modal verbs", "prepositions", "questions", "tenses", "tests", and "tricky words" (all these names are self-explanatory). Each language area includes a number of items; thus, in the case of tenses, for instance, reference is made to conditional sentences, means of expressing future time, mixed tenses, and the subjunctive. An explanation is provided first (the link is called "notes"), and then the learner finds the exercises on that specific item ("online"); finally, it is possible to print all the exercises ("printout": whereas students may do so for study purposes, teachers may use them as lesson plans, extra activities, homework, review, or even exams). Two of the key aspects to highlight are the variety of this site and the fact that it is regularly updated.

4- Learning English (BBC):

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/>

This network is a very complete and useful one, full of resources such as a Business English section, listening activities, lesson plans, news, tips, links, etc. However, we will pay attention to three features: "funky phrasals" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/radio/specials/148_phrasalverbs/index.shtml), "the quiznet archive" (http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/quizzes/quiznet/archive_2003.shtml), and "the Ask about English archive" (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/grammar/learnit/index.shtml>).

As far as the first one is concerned, it deals with phrasal verbs in a completely different way from the "Phrasal Verbs Drinks Dispenser". There is a brief introduction at the very beginning in which the following idea is stated: "*Phrasal verbs are very common and are a really good way to make yourself sound more natural when speaking informal English*". Once again, they are divided into ten different topics, such as "childhood", "health",

"holidays", and "travel". Each area includes input first: a conversation, which should be listened to, is provided, together with the tapescript and the examples (all of them can be downloaded for free). Then learners are invited to check their knowledge by trying a given quiz.

As for "the quiznet archive", there are plenty of quizzes that can be either tried online or downloaded and printed. Some of them are concerned with vocabulary and pronunciation, but most deal with grammatical items, such as conditional sentences, modal verbs, futures, and superlatives. The main characteristic to highlight is that in both the online and the downloadable versions learners are provided with feedback, so that instead of just being told whether they are right or wrong, they are also told the reasons why it is (not) possible to say something.

Last but not least, "the Ask about English" section, as its very title points out, is an interactive site in which English learners all over the world ask common grammar questions which are replied by experts (for example, the differences between *under*, *below*, and *beneath*, *come* and *go*, *tell*, *say* and *speak*, etc.). Both questions and answers can be not only read but also listened to and downloaded. Then quizzes are provided for learners to practice those particular grammatical items. It should be emphasised that an archive is provided in which the latest interactive questions and answers can be consulted. Moreover, they are classified into nine different categories, namely "confusing words and expressions", "determiners, nouns and pronouns", "verbs and tenses", "conjunctions and clauses", "learning and exam skills", "prefixes, suffixes, spelling and pronunciation", "adjectives and adverbs", "modals and conditionals", and "prepositions and phrases". This makes searches for a specific grammatical item much faster and easier.

5- The Guide to Grammar and Writing:

<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/>

This is a wonderful website which offers both teachers and learners a vast number of resources which are divided into the following categories: "Index", "Word & Sentence Level", "Paragraph Level", "Essay & Research Paper Level", "Ask Grammar, Quizzes, Search Devices", and

“Peripherals & PowerPoints”. As far as grammar is concerned, detailed explanations of a wide range of grammatical items (such as the passive voice, subject-verb agreement, and tense sequences) are provided first, together with a lot of examples; learners can afterwards check their knowledge by trying the quizzes available.

Consulting the writing counterpart of this website, which is called “Principles of Composition” (<http://grammar.ccc.commnet.edu/grammar/composition/composition.htm>) is strongly recommended.

6- English as 2nd Language: <http://esl.about.com/>

Including a varied menu with free English courses, lesson plans, tests and quizzes, as well as grammar, vocabulary, listening, writing, reading, speaking, and pronunciation activities, this is another invaluable site. All the materials are adapted to three levels, namely “beginning”, “intermediate”, and “advanced”. The “English Grammar Help” offers a glossary together with articles, resources, worksheets, exercises, lesson plans, quizzes, and tests. As was previously stated, all of them are divided into three levels, this becoming, from our viewpoint, the main feature of this website, since it caters for all students.

7- English works! <http://depts.gallaudet.edu/englishworks/>

The Gallaudet University (Washington, D.C.) created this website in 1997. It is divided into different sections, such as “literature”, “writing”, “reading”, “grammar”, “vocabulary”, “exercises”, “tutoring”, and “references”. The grammar area includes four subtopics: “parts of speech”, “using grammar in sentences”, “grammar practice exercises”, and “links”. Thus, as can be seen, the learning process follows a smooth, natural path, going from simpler concepts, such as nouns, articles, conjunctions, and adverbs (word level) to more complex items, such as sentence patterns, passive voice, subject and verb agreement, etc. (phrase and sentence level). Theoretical explanations and examples are provided first and learners can practice these concepts by doing the exercises afterwards. We

would like to highlight the clear way in which the pieces of information are presented by means of charts, colours, time lines, etc.

8- Tim Johns’ EAP Page (“kibbitzers”): <http://www.eisu.bham.ac.uk/johnstf/timeap3.htm>

Even though this page is primarily concerned with English for Academic Purposes and it has not been updated since 2000, it still proves to be very useful for both English teachers and learners. It includes up to 77 of the so-called *kibbitzers* (according to the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online, <http://www.ldoceonline.com/>, the verb *kibbitz*, meaning “to make unhelpful remarks while someone is doing something”, and the noun *kibbitzer* are spelt with a single *b*). Johns explains the origin of the name of these activities as follows: “The term *kibbitzer* (and thus the verb to *kibbitz*) comes from the chess cafes of central Europe at the start of the century. A *kibbitzer* did not play chess, but watched other people playing, and possibly made comments on their play”. Thus, he decided to call the activities he devised “*kibbitzers*” because they allow you to “observe the sorts of problems that arise in revision of students’ written work, and, if you wish, send your comments on how we could improve our play in ‘the revision game’”. In spite of the fact that these activities deal with written English, many of the language points discussed (lexical, syntactic, and discursal) are difficult for most ESL learners. Such is the case of the differences and similarities among *cause*, *lead to* and *bring about*, *in accordance with* and *according to*, *until now* and *to date*, *too* and *so*, etc.

These *kibbitzers* are based on what is known as data-driven learning, which Johns defines as “the direct use of data from linguistic corpora for language teaching and language learning”. They are not an end in themselves, but a tool for both teaching and learning. This website has been included for ESL teachers to become aware of an application that, when used properly, can be very powerful and useful.

9- The Road to Grammar: <http://www.roadtogrammar.com/>

This site provides students with up to 365 quizzes on different grammatical points that are arranged in alphabetical order. It is possible to

ask the computer to show only “easy” quizzes. By clicking that button, we are left with 182 quizzes, i.e., half of the total. On the one hand, the strong point of this page is that the design is user-friendly and that the learner gets his/her scores immediately. The weak point, on the other hand, is the lack of explanations on any of the topics available. Therefore, it would be advisable to tell your students to visit this site once they have been provided with the suitable explanations and examples.

10- **English at Home:** <http://www.english-at-home.com/>

This network includes the following sections: “grammar”, “tenses & verbs”, “speaking”, “vocabulary”, “idioms”, “real life English”, and “test yourself”. It would be the perfect complement for the previous one because, whereas there are a lot of explanations and examples of the different grammatical points, tests or quizzes are only provided in some cases.

11- **Saber Inglés:**

<http://www.saberingles.com.ar/>

Designed for Spanish speakers learning English, this website is a very complete one, since it includes a wide range of resources, such as a free online course, exercises, vocabulary, readings, song lyrics and activities, games, etc. The course is divided into three levels, each of them consisting of ten lessons which comprise five different sections: “introduction”, “reading and listening”, “new words and expressions”, “grammar”, and “exercises”. As far as the exercises are concerned, they are devised for three levels: beginners, intermediate, and advanced. They can be used not only for grammar practice, but also for dealing with other linguistic areas, such as vocabulary, dictation, and exam tests. One of the main advantages this site offers is the fact that not only explanations but also the answers to exercises can be printed out.