

## Ideas for Evaluating a Website

First read a background article written for **Loud and Clear**, a teacher's magazine.

### Using authentic websites

Once upon a time there were many learners in the world who could not get hold of 'real' English texts, spoken or written. Now, in our wonderful IT age, any learner with Internet access is flooded with authentic English. Websites, websites, everywhere! But what on earth can we (as teachers) do with them?

In time, no doubt, a new ELT methodology will emerge, guiding us through this topic. I'm sure the PhD theses are already being written. But until we have a definitive new set of pedagogical tools for dealing with websites, let's see what we can do with some of our old ones.

One useful starting-point is a list of reading comprehension (RC) skills. Websites are texts, after all. For the purposes of this article, I've just re-read the useful list of RC skills given in Annex II of the Certificate of Education Examination. It is interesting to see how many are relevant to website comprehension.

First, we should train students to ask some basic questions about any website. In the old world of printed texts, we rarely read a text without having any idea where it has come from. But when we are on the Internet, that is exactly what often happens. We may find a list of 'Interesting Links', and so we click on one, and enter a brand new website.

Immediately, our traditional RC skills can come into action, and we should train our students to ask questions such as:

- Who is the author? (A government department? A company? A respectable organization? A nutcase?)
- What is the author's purpose? (To make money? To entertain? To educate? To persuade you to accept new ideas? To self-publicize?)
- Who are the intended readers? (Anyone? Children? Language learners? Day traders? Shania Twain fans?)

Going down one level in our RC skills, we can train our students to ask questions about the structure of the website.

- What are the main points of this site (or page)?
- Which pages/sections contain examples or elaborations?
- Which pages are important and which are decoration?
- How can we find our way around this website?
- Which parts of a page are relevant to the website, and which are advertising, trying to lure us away?

We can look at topics such as style, formality and authority.

- Is the writer trying to be funny or sarcastic, or is s/he being serious?
- Is this dry-as-dust formal or full of teen-talk informality?
- Is the writer a world expert on this subject, or just an ordinary person giving their opinion?

And finally, of course, we can look at many questions about the language itself in more detail. We can look at topics such as style and formality and authority.

- What do the words mean?
- What is interesting about the tenses and grammatical patterns being used?
- Which words are specifically relevant to the semantic field of this topic?
- Which words would it be suitable for me to use, or should I treat as taboo words?

Websites contain infinite variety. It is part of our job, as teachers, to train students to comprehend, evaluate and exploit websites. We can use a traditional list of RC skills as a starting-point to help us develop a framework for this training.



Peter Etherton

Having looked at the question of evaluating websites from a teacher's perspective, let's now examine it from the point of view of a student researching an assignment.

### Suggestions for evaluating a website

#### 1. Where does this website originate?

- Look at the URL. Does it include .gov, .edu, .org or .com? .gov sites are put out by government bodies, .edu sites typically by not-for-profit organisations and .com sites by companies.
- Look at the domain name. Do you recognise it? Harvard.edu and McDonalds.com may be more familiar than AskMen.com. The credibility of the institution should reflect on that of the website.
- Look at the credited author(s), if any. Have you heard of them? Do they display any affiliation? Or a job title? Do they post a contact email? On a university website the words of a well-published professor will typically carry more weight than those of a research graduate.



#### 2. What is its purpose?

Once you have determined which organisation publishes the website, it will be easier to decide on its purpose.

- Is the site giving opinion or fact? Look at the language used. The section from The Age uses these phrases: *It seems more likely that...*, *it is almost certain that...* This is the language of opinion.
- If the site is presenting factual information, how balanced is it? Exxon Mobil might present the facts of an incident in a very different way from Greenpeace. You have to assess the likely bias of the source.
- Is the site trying to sell you something? If so, evaluate the information in gives in this light. Is it highlighting certain information and suppressing unhelpful data?

Use Google to search **Link:www.McDonalds.com** to find out which sites link to the site you are investigating.

#### 3. How reliable is it?

What if you have never heard of the organisation? How can you tell whether the site is reliable or not?

- Look at the style of the writing. Does it contain mistakes? Look at the sentence in AskMen.com which speaks of "supernatural-like ability". Mistakes such as this suggest a site is not academically respectable.
- Look at the way the site is put together. How professional is the design? How good is the navigation? Note: this is not an infallible test. Many sites that are not respectable are professionally put together; plenty of academics have woefully designed sites! But it is an indication.
- Check the links. Are they relevant and up-to-date?
- If you believe a site to be reliable, can you nevertheless find a way of verifying the accuracy of the information? And does your existing knowledge confirm that information on the site is accurate?
- How current is the information? When was the site "last updated"? (And do you believe this?)
- How did you get to the site? Was it from an academically respectable source?

#### 4. Is it useful?

Obvious, but the \$64,000 question! It's easy to find websites with information on the topic you are researching, but...

- Is the information specific enough for your purpose?
- Are the arguments supported by sufficient data?
- Is the information sufficiently up-to-date?

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