

about flesl.net

- 1) The idea behind flesl.net is to create a slowly expanding set of interconnected English-as-a-second-language materials.

This is what's here at the moment (April 2005):

- forty intermediate level readings with an average length of around 900 words
 - 'grammar and meaning notes' for one of the readings
 - a set of vocabulary lists for one of the readings
 - a set of multiple choice questions for one of the readings
 - six grammar exercises with keys
 - a two-page 'explanation' of conjuncts (sentence connectors)
 - an incomplete "Glossary of Grammatical Terms"
 - a 150-page grammar text, *Complex Sentences*
- (2) The materials that are now on flesl.net, and the materials I hope to put there soon, are for intermediate students. In the future I hope there will be some beginning-level materials and also some for advanced students.
 - (3) I am publishing these materials on the web because that is a way of making them freely available. The materials were not written with online use in mind. They *could* be used online, of course, but I feel they will be most useful if they are printed on paper for classroom use or private study.
 - (4) The material on flesl.net was written in the belief that there are two main elements to language learning: first, acquisition of information about grammar and vocabulary and, second, practice in all four of the skill areas, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Of course, these two elements are not independent of one another: The grammatical and semantic information will be of little value unless it is 'digested' so well that it comes to be habitually and unconsciously put into practice — and language practice will be of limited value unless it is regarded as way of *improving* 'digestion' of linguistic information.
 - (5) The material is also written in the belief that, in language *practice*, the four skill areas should be integrated as much as possible. In other words, whenever possible, exercises and activities should involve two or more skill areas. For example, a grammar exercise that involves writing sentences or oral work of some kind will be more effective than a fill-in-the-blanks exercise that involves only silent reading.

For me at least, the main reason for using an integrative method is that it is more real in the sense that it brings language *learning* closer to real language use. That seems like a good idea: We are 'programmed' to learn our first language by actually using it — and by learning and using all the skills at the same time — so it makes sense to try to take advantage of that programming by learning a second language in as real a way as possible.

(6) Beyond encouraging the integration of skills, there are, I think, at least three other methods of making language learning more real — and I've tried as much as possible to employ them in writing the materials on flesl.net.

- making it **communicative**: Whenever possible activities and exercises should involve more than one person and the success of the exercise or activity should depend on information being passed from one person to another

- making it **engaging**: The 'content' of the exercises and activities — what the readings and the compositions and the discussions are 'about' — should be of real interest to as many students as possible. Concern about offending sensitive students or introducing controversy to the classroom, although understandable, should not result in the use of materials that are bland or vague or obscure.

- making it **productive**: Language is the original and fundamental social product of human beings, and likewise, learning a first language as a child is an essential part of the 'production' of an individual. In light of this, it seems that activities and exercises that encourage cooperation and create new social groups — even very small and temporary ones — are a good idea. And the same can be said, I think, for exercises and activities that introduce new ideas, new facts and new connections to individual minds.

(7) I hope that the materials on flesl.net — those that will appear in the future if not the ones that are there now — will be useful to a wide range of teachers. I hope for example, that the readings will be useful to teachers who have difficulty finding engaging and challenging reading material in ESL texts and who have difficulty in finding texts elsewhere that are not either too difficult or too long. I also hope the grammar text, **Complex Sentences**, and the independent 'grammatical explanations' will be useful to teachers who have limited training in theoretical grammar.

In addition, I hope that the material will be useful to teachers whose students — because of social poverty or for some other reason — have little or no access to commercial ESL material.

And I hope that the material on flesl.net will be also useful to a wide range of **students**. It seems for example, that it could be useful to students who are studying in ESL programs but who are dissatisfied for some reason with the material they're getting in the classroom. Moreover, I think it could be useful to students — and to **groups** of students — working independently of any institutional ESL program.

(8) I have put flesl.net together keeping in mind some relevant social trends: toward a global economy; toward the commercialization of all human life; toward widely available and inexpensive electronic communication; and toward a free flow of people from one part of the world to another.

These developments have strengthened and accelerated another trend: toward the worldwide dominance of the English language. The fact that English is, apparently, in the process of establishing itself as 'the world's language' is of considerable importance to teachers and students of the language. It is important, if for no other reason, because as English has been broadening itself so dramatically, the teaching of English has been becoming more narrow in its focus.

- (9) The first kind of narrowing is the narrowing of the content of English-language programs. In general, the study of a foreign language is motivated — in large part at least — by intellectual curiosity *about* the language and by a desire to use knowledge of the language as a route to a deep understanding of the culture it expresses.

But occasionally one language becomes a ‘lingua franca’ — a necessary tool for communication between speakers of a large number of other languages. When this happens more and more people want to study it — but a smaller and smaller percentage of those who want to are interested in the language itself or in acquiring an intimate knowledge of the culture it expresses. The common motivation for studying the language becomes the belief that it is a route to wealth and power.

There have been other lingua francas — but never one that has been carried to its dominant position on such a powerful wave of globalization and commercialization. One aspect of the commercialization of life is the commercialization of English-language training. A large ESL ‘industry’ has come into existence — and even public institutions where ESL is taught are more and more often operated as if they were businesses. Because it is the most profitable approach, the training offered by these businesses and institutions is aimed at helping students get into English-speaking universities where they can get the qualifications they need to get well-paid jobs.

As a result, the content of English-language programs tends to be more and more narrowly focussed on what is called ‘academic’ English and on such things as TOEFL preparation. The students who graduate from these programs are often unable to read novels or newspapers or magazines in English, and less and less able to discuss food or films or religion or sports or politics or sex in English. They see no need for it; and therefore the institutions that provide them with the service they want see no need for it either.

I believe, however, that there *is* still a need for broader, more humanistic English-language teaching, and I believe that this need will become more urgent as English comes to be a language that is spoken and read by the great mass of people who participate in the global culture and comes in that way to be *the* language of that culture.

It is estimated that by 2015 more than half the population of the world will speak English. Despite the commercializing trend, in the future, those people will require a full version of English that ‘covers’ all aspects of human life and which can therefore be used *productively* to create new ideas, new human groupings and new institutions. Since a very high percentage of those speakers of English will be non-native, this ‘full’ version English will have to be taught as a second language.

I have had this future need in mind as I’ve worked on flesl.net.

- (10) There is another, connected consequence of the commercialization of English: It will tend to lead to a situation in which the only people who learn English as a second language are those who can afford to pay the price.

As English spreads around the world, more and more poor people will tend to fall under its ‘influence.’ These will be poor people who work for companies that are

managed in English; poor people who are captivated by English-medium entertainment; and, of course, poor people who dream of learning English because they believe they could use it as a way of escaping poverty.

There will also be poor people who, because they have fallen under the influence of English in one way or another, come to believe that if they had good English skills they could find information that would help them, in simple, inexpensive ways, to improve their lives — and also that they would be able to contact people in distant parts of the world who were in a situation similar to their own.

If the trend toward the commercialization of English meets with no resistance, then the desire for English felt by the poor of the world will be thwarted. They will have no opportunity to use English to improve their individual lives and they will have no opportunity to use English as a tool of social production. They will still have their native languages of course — the one human 'product' that necessarily belongs to all human beings and that all humans play a role in creating. But as English establishes its dominance, a native language will scarcely be enough.

There is no reason, as far as I can see, why this second sort of narrowing of English-as-a-second-language education could not be effectively resisted. It seems to me that all that is necessary, apart from human imagination and determination, is that the right sort of materials be put into poor people's hands. Given the fact that most people in the world that are now within walking distance of an internet connection and a xerox machine that should be possible.