

*Incorporation of the English Addicts program into traditional English classes.*

**Incorporation of the *English Addicts* program into traditional English classes**

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This paper is a practical study of how English Addicts was used in two English classes at a *grande école* of engineering in France, during the autumn semester of 2009, from September to December. The two classes were of the B1 and B1+ levels in terms of the European Framework levels, each with 11 students. The B1 class met four hours a week for 12 weeks, and the B1+ class met for three hours a week.

## **1 . The students**

The students were all in their first year at Télécom Bretagne, an engineering school in Brittany, in western France. They were all roughly 20 years of age. Most of them had spent the past two or three years in *classes préparatoires*, in which their English classes focused heavily on memorization of vocabulary and translation, with much less emphasis on reading, writing, listening and speaking. Many of them had never had a native speaker of English as a teacher before, and were not accustomed to the speech of native English speakers. Twenty students were native or near-native speakers of French (including three native speakers of Arabic with near-native proficiency in French), and two students were native Chinese speakers. All students had already had several years of English classes. The groups were both fairly homogeneous in terms of level, within the group, although certain students were stronger in speaking, for example, while others showed a higher ability in writing.

## **2 . How we used English Addicts**

Each class was scheduled for three class periods in a multimedia room over the course of the semester to use English Addicts online. Generally the days that English Addicts was used were days when we had a 50-minute class session, rather than 100 minutes. If English Addicts was used during a 100-minute lesson, only the first half of the lesson was dedicated to EA. The instructor chose lessons of three different levels for each class, to get an idea of how appropriate the various levels were for the classes. The following lessons were used in class:

### **B1 class:**

<b>Date associated with lesson</b>	<b>Lesson name</b>	<b>Level</b>
Nov. 23, 2009	A Serious Study looks at Laughter	easy
Sept. 23, 2009	How Swine Flu Might Develop	average
Nov. 20, 2009	Cataclysmic Event Threatens World	difficult

### **B1+ class:**

<b>Date associated with lesson</b>	<b>Lesson name</b>	<b>Level</b>
Sept. 23, 2009	How Swine Flu Might Develop	average
Nov. 20, 2009	Cataclysmic Event Threatens World	difficult
Nov. 16, 2009	Young Parisians Occupy Mansion	tricky

Students arrived in class and began working at their own pace through the lesson. If they finished ahead of time, they could work on other lessons. This was good, because it allowed students to choose lessons on topics that interested them. For the swine flu lesson, the instructor had prepared a crossword puzzle with some of the vocabulary words and a few other (presumably unfamiliar) words from the lesson, to give students more practice with the words. Several students did the crossword puzzle in class and others took it home to work on.

Vocabulary words and two or three phrasal verbs from the lessons were reviewed at the beginning of class for the following classes, until the instructor felt that students had learned them well enough to use them in conversation. This review was done through a variety of games.

Students were told that they could use English Addicts to help them prepare for the listening part of the final exam scheduled to take place in January. One student continued to work on English Addicts a bit after classes were finished in December, and two continued over the break and into January, presumably in preparation for the exam. The other students simply did the lessons required of them in class. Anecdotally, a couple of the students in the b1 class mentioned that the English Addicts program had been good training for the listening comprehension section of their final exam, which was borrowed from Voice of America.

### **3 . Appropriateness of various levels of lessons to students' levels**

The "easy" lesson was too easy for the B1 class, and most of them finished it in record time and then worked on other, more challenging lessons. Lessons of both average and difficult levels seemed appropriate for both groups, as there was unfamiliar vocabulary and they did not obtain correct answers for all of the questions, indicating that these lessons were not too easy for them. The "tricky" lesson did not hold any particular challenges for the B1+ group. However, that is probably because the "trickiness" in this lesson lay in the fact that some of the speakers were native French speakers with somewhat heavy accents, which obviously did not cause a problem for the majority native French speakers in the class. Since that was at the end of the semester and we had to prepare for the final examinations, no further "tricky" lessons were attempted.

### **4 . Incorporating English Addicts into the course structure**

In our English courses, we aim to help students develop their speaking, listening, reading and writing skills in the target language, with a heavy focus on improving speaking skills and confidence in speaking. The most obvious way in which English Addicts contributes to these goals is in the area of listening comprehension, with students responding to questions about the news stories that they listen to. While the recordings used come from the radio station Voice of America, native speakers of various dialects of English are heard in the news stories, as well as non-native speakers of English with a variety of native languages. This gives students exposure to a wide array of accents and variants of English, which helps overcome the fact that they only have one English teacher, with one accent and dialect. The exposure to a variety of speakers of various languages is very important, particularly because more and more students are learning English in order to use it as an international language, in contexts with speakers of a variety of different native languages, rather than with the goal of studying or working in an English-speaking country.

The lessons themselves also help students improve their writing skills somewhat, through the dictation parts of the lessons. Reading skills are also worked on indirectly, as students read and answer questions, and then read along with the written text as they listen to the news story. Teachers can improve the efficacy of the lessons by incorporating related readings or other media. For example, in the B1+ group, the swine flu lesson was incorporated into a unit on health, which also included vocabulary building games and work on a video about the importance of sneezing and coughing into the sleeve, rather than the hand.

## 5 . Benefits of English Addicts

### Vocabulary

Vocabulary building is a key way in which English Addicts can contribute to learners' all-around proficiency in English. However, instructors must be careful not to simply rely on the lessons themselves to teach this vocabulary. While students get a good understanding of the new vocabulary words by completing the lessons, it is crucial that the new words be reviewed in class through games or other activities. It is typically said that it takes seven to nine exposures to a new word for students to be able to use them in conversation. For this reason, once students were exposed to a new word using English Addicts, the instructor started with games and exercises intended to increase their *passive* knowledge of the word, meaning that they could recognize it if they heard or saw it again. After a couple of such activities, the focus turned to helping students gain *active* knowledge of the words, meaning that they could use them in conversation.

One example of a game intended to help improve passive knowledge of words is the flyswatter game. In this game, a number of recently seen words (about 15 to 20) are put up on the board. Two to four students go up to the board with a flyswatter in hand, and they hit the appropriate word with the flyswatter when a sentence is read with a blank that would be appropriately filled by the word in question. For example, if the teacher says:

“ It is important for teachers to \_\_\_\_\_ new words into the English lessons”

and the word *incorporate* is on the board, the students would all try to be the first to hit *incorporate* with their flyswatters.

For improving active knowledge of vocabulary, other games are more appropriate. For example, the password game involves having a list of several words up on an overhead projector, for example. A One person sits with his/her back to the list of words, and that person's partner sits opposite. The partner says one word at a time to encourage his/her partner to say the word in question. For example, if the word on the board were *Superman*, the partner might say “Kryptonite”. Each pair gets three minutes to try to get as many words as possible.

There are many other games to work on vocabulary retention. Since English Addicts is such a good way to introduce students to new vocabulary, it would be a shame not to use this asset to build on students' existing vocabulary. For adult learners, who have often had several years of English already at school, this is an important way of helping them see the progress they are making in English. This progress is less obvious than in lower levels, and it is important for learners' motivation to see that they are making progress in the language.

### Oral expression

The material introduced in the lessons can also be used to stimulate discussion in class, thereby helping students improve their speaking skills. One challenge we faced in the classroom was the fact that when we were in the multimedia room, it was difficult to rearrange the furniture to put students into pairs or groups for conversation. To some extent, we drew on the material in the next class, when we were back in our more flexible classrooms. For example, the B1+ group discussed whether or not the occupation of the mansion in Paris would be an effective way of demonstrating the need for affordable housing (*Young Parisians Occupy Mansion* - Nov. 20, 2009 lesson).

### Written expression

The material in lessons could also be used in creating writing assignments for students, to help them work on their writing skills. For example, students might write an opinion essay about something they heard in the English Addicts lesson. Another option would be to look at a couple of other articles available on the internet on a topic explored in the EA lesson, and write an overview of that topic. In another vein, students

could be asked to write a couple of paragraphs using the vocabulary words from a particular EA lesson. This would have the advantage of reducing the amount of time that is needed for vocabulary retention work in class.

### **Use of English Addicts outside of class**

With these B1 and B1+ groups, the use of English Addicts was restricted to in-class use. However, another way to incorporate English Addicts into regular English classes would be to have students do EA lessons outside of class time and then draw on the lessons for discussion topics in class. The advantage to this is that valuable classroom time could be used for focusing on speaking, as the classroom is the main place that most students have the opportunity to speak in English with others. One disadvantage would be the tendency on the part of some students *not* to complete homework assignments, and it could be a source of frustration for the instructor to base a lesson around students having completed an EA lesson beforehand, only to find out that 2/3 of the class had not done so. It would also be crucial to make sure that all students have access to an internet connection outside of class. This is not an issue at Télécom Bretagne, which is heavily technologically oriented.

### **Being able to check students' progress**

Teachers are able to check the progress that their students are making in English Addicts, even as they are working. This is a good way to make sure that students stay focused on their work, as the temptations of the internet might distract them from the task at hand. It is also possible to observe how quickly students work and to see how well they are answering the questions, in order to go back over the most troublesome questions as a class.

### **Technical aspects**

English Addicts worked well every time that it was accessed by the instructor and the students. There were no unexpected glitches. It is easy to move from one screen to the next and to figure out how to use the tools available.

## **6 . *Suggestions for improvement***

One area of improvement could be to draw learners' attention to the various grammatical structures within the news stories. This is done a bit with phrasal verbs within the vocabulary section, but it could be done in a more systematic way, with one or two questions related to grammar at the end of the listening comprehension section. For example, students could be asked the difference between a sentence given in the news story and the meaning of the same sentence with a different tense. This could help students better understand the difference between simple past and present perfect, for example. Or there could be a question asking students to choose between various possible prepositions with a phrasal verb, and then hear the answer as it is used in the news story. Similarly, students' attention could be drawn to which verbs take gerunds and which take infinitives. The fact that grammar is not emphasized too heavily in English Addicts is a plus, but a bit more focus on grammar could help students who are using EA as part of their preparation for exams, as well as for improving their overall knowledge of English. Of course, Edulang also offers Gramster, which focuses on grammatical elements. Perhaps Gramster would be a good complement to the oral comprehension work in English Addicts.

## **7 . Conclusion**

English Addicts was found to be a very useful tool for incorporating into traditional English classrooms. It provides an excellent source of new vocabulary for students, and gives them a context to work on their listening skills, as well as reading and writing skills, though to a lesser extent. Teachers can build lessons around the use of English Addicts, and students find it to be a nice change from the routine of being in the regular classroom. It can be a very useful part of a traditional English class for adult (and probably adolescent) learners.

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