

Englicious: Teaching English Grammar in Schools

Englicious [Online], University College London. Available from the World Wide Web: <<http://www.englicious.org/>> Free subscription. Supplementary resources available at <<http://www.youtube.com/user/engliciousgrammar>>

Reviewed by Rachel Fletcher, University of Cambridge

Englicious is a new online library of resources for English language teachers that has been designed by the Survey of English Usage at UCL. It offers not only lesson plans and activities for use in the classroom, but a collection of Continuing Professional Development resources for teachers, all aimed at supporting the teaching of the new National Curriculum in England. There is a particular focus on spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPaG), and especially on preparing pupils for the Year 3 and Year 6 SPaG tests, but users will also find materials covering many other aspects of English Language at both a primary and a secondary level.

In addition to its specialised focus on grammar teaching, *Englicious* promises teachers several other innovative features. Central to many of the exercises offered by the site is the corpus of spoken and written English gathered by the Survey for English Usage. The corpus provides authentic quotations to illustrate points of grammar; it also allows users of the site to complete interactive exercises using examples that change each time the questions are attempted, challenging students to apply their knowledge to unseen problems rather than simply memorising the small number of questions offered by a standard textbook.

The commitment to teaching grammar through real examples of English in use is just one aspect of the site's foundation in descriptive linguistics. Throughout the various resources there is an emphasis on encouraging pupils (and teachers) to think about the language they use and encounter, recognising linguistic variation without condemning it. Nevertheless, this linguistic variety is constantly linked back to the grammar of Standard English prescribed in the National Curriculum. An extensive glossary aids in bridging

this gap by attempting to provide teachers with a consistent framework of terminology. Ambiguities in usage are pointed out and a great number of additional concepts are added to the core glossary that is provided as a non-statutory part of the National Curriculum.

This wealth of information, although surely one of the main attractions of *Englicious*, may also prove to be one of its most off-putting characteristics. Clear distinctions are made between National Curriculum material and the additional information provided by the site, and all concepts are introduced in a way that presumes no prior grammatical knowledge, suitable for teachers not already familiar with grammar teaching. However, *Englicious* is not given to over-simplification of the complex and often contentious subject that is English grammar, and expects its users to keep up. Its acknowledgement of some of these points of theoretical contention may better equip users to make use of other, unstandardised resources, but teachers coming to the site because they are struggling with the unfamiliar concepts in the new curriculum may be alarmed to see yet more new ideas being introduced.

Similarly, some users may initially find it challenging to navigate the resources themselves, especially if they are not following the National Curriculum in England. Although it is possible to browse the site by topic, there is an emphasis on categorisation according to National Curriculum level, and teachers not working within this system may have to spend a little more time searching for the resources that are relevant to them. The tailoring of *Englicious* to the requirements of the curriculum also imparts a slight bias towards British



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and contributed to its production; this review was written at the request of the Englicious team, but represents the individual opinions of its author. Rachel is currently studying for an English Language Teaching qualification. Her further linguistic interests include the history of English, lexicography and her work in intonation annotation. Email: fletcher.rachel.ann@gmail.com

English usage at times, both in the standard usage the curriculum aims to teach to children and in the background knowledge assumed of teachers and students, a point that users outside the target audience may wish to bear in mind.

Englicious presents some innovations in terms of content, but it is also worth mentioning the practical features of the site. All of its pages are designed to be projected onto a screen or interactive whiteboard, and it is quick and easy to switch between this slide format and a more conventional layout. Using an interactive whiteboard is also a good way to take advantage of the site's interactive features; many of the lesson plans include click-and-drag exercises and other such games designed to engage and involve children directly. In addition to the main site, *Englicious* also has its own YouTube channel, with videos providing a visual introduction to grammar topics and to the use of *Englicious* in the classroom.

A newly-established mailing list for users of *Englicious* promises more practical tips on using the resources, as well as site news and other relevant information. Doubtless teachers will find their own ways of incorporating *Englicious* materials into their lessons depending on their needs and the extent to which

these fall within the site's main focus. The glossary may prove useful to those wishing to supplement *Englicious* lesson plans with other resources while keeping terminology consistent. Once users have familiarised themselves with the navigation, it should be possible to pick and choose as required from a collection of exercises ranging from quick starter activities to longer projects, or simply quickly to look up information on a particular area of grammar.

However *Englicious* is used, in many ways the heart of the site is in its overall approach to grammar teaching. Throughout the lesson plans and other resources it advocates for a descriptivist approach that should challenge students and teachers alike to think critically about language. Rather than emphasising the memorisation of prescriptive rules, *Englicious* invites users to explore and understand language. In the short term this may appear to be an additional challenge, but it should ultimately provide students with a more solid foundation of linguistic understanding on which to build future skills. Indeed, after completing some of the higher-level materials available on the site, particularly the longer projects, students will have been introduced to several of the basic principles and research methods of modern linguistics.