

June 2011 – Volume 15, Number 1

EZ Slang

Title	EZ Slang (URL: http://www.ezslang.com)
Author	Randall Davis
Type of product	Website to develop listening skills and enrich low intermediate to advanced learners' slang vocabulary and familiarity with common idiomatic expressions for better communication
Minimum hardware requirement	A personal computer with Internet connection and speakers or headphones
Target language	English
Target users	ESL learners and teachers at the intermediate level or higher

Introduction

Innovations in technology take place every day. This causes almost everything else to evolve in response to those changes and affects how literacy is defined, expanding its definition so that “new literacies” are also considered to be a part of literacy today. Understanding the evolution of these new literacies helps teachers, learners, educators, researchers and web-designers to review language learning websites. Many scholars, such as Coiro (2003), Cummins, Brown and Sayers (2007), Lankshear and Knobel (2003), and Leu, Kinzer, Coiro, and Cammack (2004), have conceptualized a clear definition of new literacies and how it supports the evaluation of web-based learning environments. In their view, new literacies are a combination of skills, activities, and approaches aimed at helping learners to communicate effectively in the world. These skills differ by time and place. In other words, they are developed to keep pace with the technology existing in a certain period of time. These skills include social practice, reasoning and having an open mind merged with critical thinking, producing and exchanging meaningful inputs, useful employment of media and technology, respecting other cultures and contexts, building individual self-esteem, and facilitating and motivating learning, which is the ultimate goal. Taking these scholars' views into consideration, the components described above provide a new literacy framework for evaluating the EZ Slang website. This evaluation first presents

a general description of the website and then provides a critical evaluation of how the site supports the components noted below:

- (A) Social practice
- (B) Critical thinking
- (C) Engagement
- (D) Culture and context

General Description

The home page of the website EZ Slang (<http://www.ezslang.com>) includes the logo, site links, free activities and themes, and related advertisements provided by Google on the left side of the page. On this page (shown in Figures 1 and 2), viewers can access the different sections of the website such as About the Site, Design, Characters, Help, Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), and Contact by clicking on the links. This design is user-friendly, and sections are denoted by different colors and fonts throughout the page. Also, the words are in a good, readable size that is in normal, bold, or italic fonts used for emphasizing certain parts of the site.

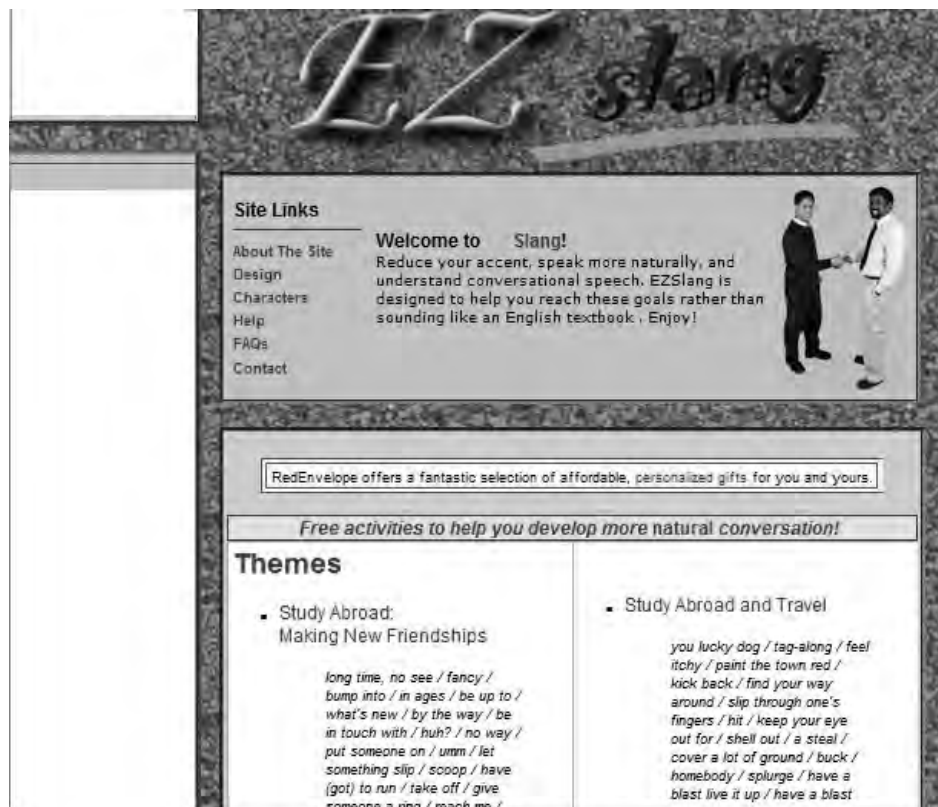


Figure 1. The top half of EZ Slang's homepage

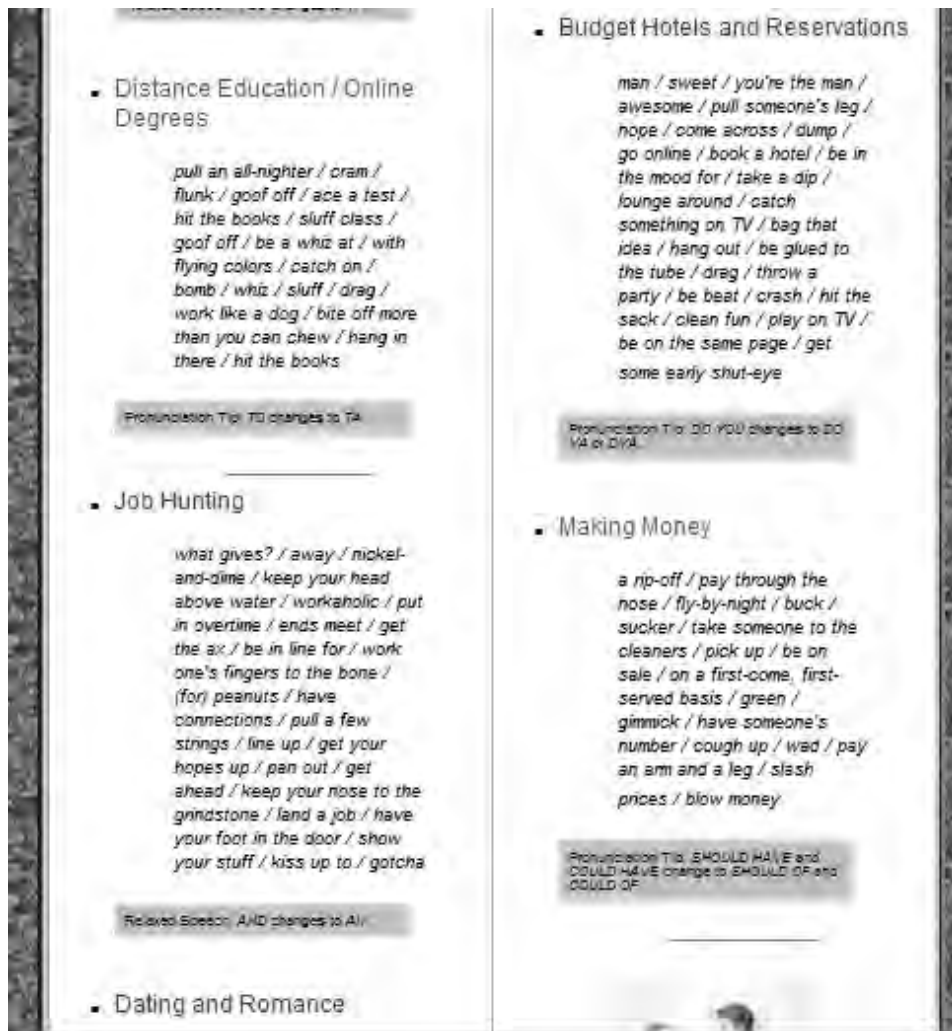


Figure 2. The bottom half of EZ Slang’s homepage

The designer of the website, Randall Davis, explains the purpose of his design in the page under the link About This Site (shown in Figure 3). Since he is an ESL teacher himself, he describes his own students’ frustration when dealing with native speakers in different settings outside the classroom. This frustration, as Davis explains, comes from the differences between what is said in real conversations and what is taught in classrooms.

About This Site

Speaking Effective English and Accent Reduction Training

Purpose

Having taught ESL for many years, I am often asked by students about how they can understand authentic, undigested language, and speak more naturally beyond the walls of the classroom. In other words, they usually can understand my "teacher-talk," but when they go to buy a cheeseburger at a fast food restaurant, they can't figure out what the cashier is saying (perhaps a rare dialect of the English language, something only found on the walls of prehistoric caves).

In fact, this might be extremely frustrating for you too if you have studied English for years in your country, only to discover that what people use in "real" conversation is sometimes far different from what you studied in preparation for college entrance exams or class tests. And even if you studied a variety of expressions in your classes, the language is often NOT what is spoken in the streets, meeting rooms, and classrooms in the target country. Non-native speakers often do not have the background knowledge of everyday language to understand it, relying on textbooks published by others to be their guides. Moreover, studying English for the TOEFL, TOEIC, or




Figure 3. About this site page

On the Site Design page (shown in Figure 4), the designer describes some of the pedagogical issues pertinent to language instruction, particularly concerning the difference between idioms and slang. In terms of the technical issues (see Figure 6), the designer points out some potential problems such as difficulty in using the audio operating system as well as possible technical setbacks with the Internet connection.

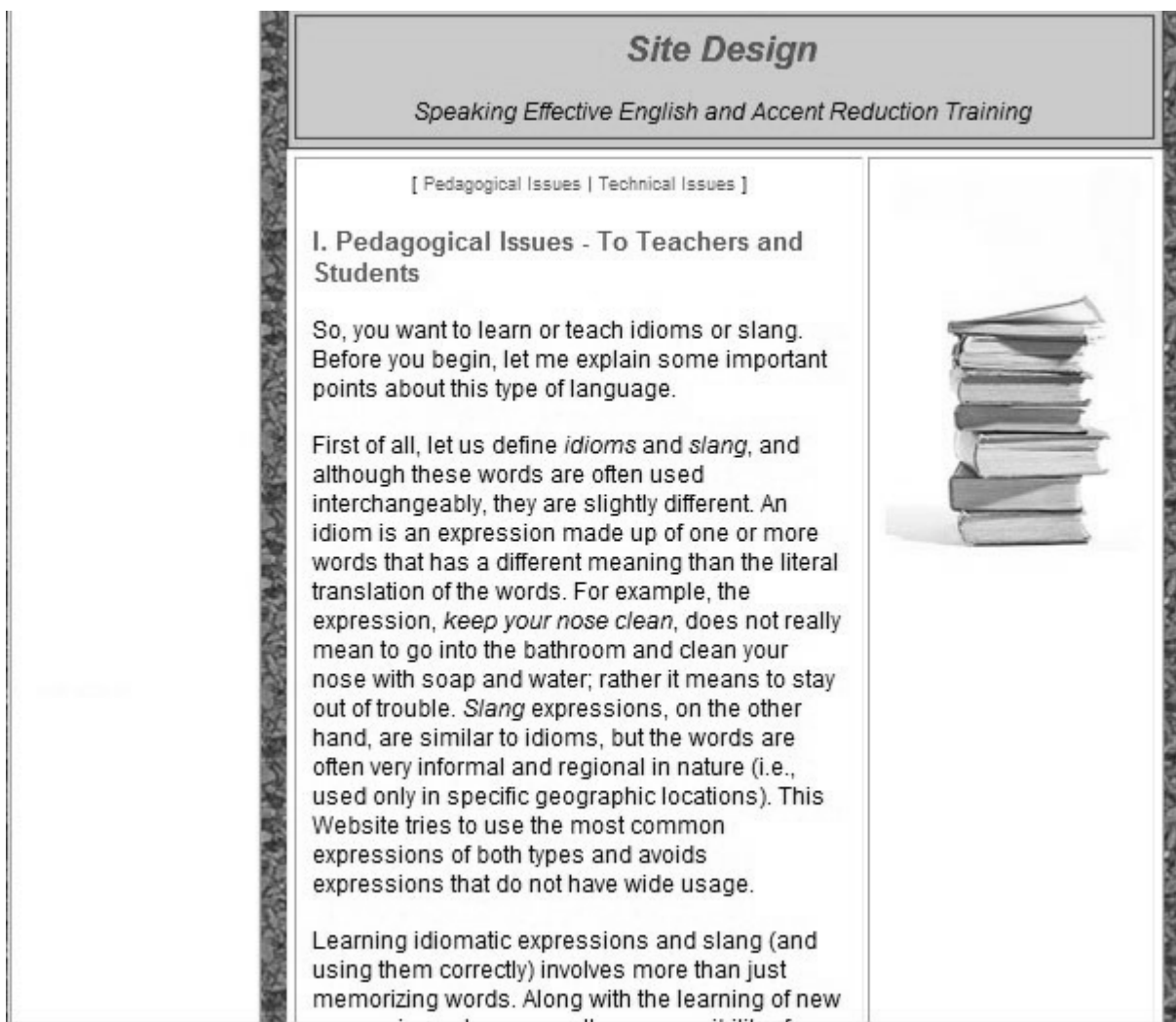


Figure 4. The top half of the Site design page

Also on this page (as in Figure 5), he clarifies how the units and activities are designed and divided into components within main parts. These components are: Warming Up, Relaxed Speech, Listening in Context, Catching the Gist, Filling in the Meaning, Retelling the Story, Expanding Your Learning.

Each unit is made of of five parts, progressing from structured activities to eventually more extemporaneous speech. Each activity requires learners to recycle the idioms over and over again for better comprehension and retention. In addition, the same main characters are a part of each recording, so you become very acquainted them and their personalities (Read more [HERE](#)). Here are some of the main components of each activity:

- 1. Warming Up:**

A question or statement to get you to share your ideas based on your background knowledge of the topic and language structures
- 2. Relaxed Speech**

A short tip on understand reduced speech. Native speakers often reduce or contract their their speech in quick or informal situations. Although using such speech isn't appropriate in all situations, learning to recognize it is critical in improving listening comprehension skills.
- 3. Listening in Context**

A conversation using the target slang and expressions in context with key vocabulary explained.
- 4. Catching the Gist**

Multiple-choice questions to check understanding of the expressions used in

Figure 5. The middle part of the Site design page

II. Technical

Because visitors to this site come from over 100 countries around the world, I designed the site with many different users in mind. First of all, although high-speed connections are becoming more and more available, many people are still using slower, dial-up connections at home. Thus, all of the pages and audio files on this site have been prepared to accommodate these situations, and to simulate these conditions, I use a dial-up connection to test the site.

Second, I have prepared the media files in Windows Media format (.wma), a leading standard in digital audio. The Windows Media Player is already part of the Windows operating system, and thus, does not need to be downloaded to use this site. However, you might want to upgrade your player to version 10.0+ to take advantage of the Play Speed Settings that allow you to slow down or speed up the playback of audio on this site. You can adjust these settings through the menus: VIEW >>> ENHANCEMENTS >>> SPEED CONTROL SETTINGS.

I am also in the process of adding a Flash Media format which is embedded in the Web page and can play equally well on almost all computers, Mac, PC, and other. Here is an example from the site:

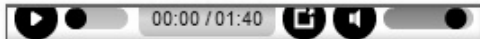


Figure 6. The bottom half of the Site design page

Moreover, the website contains designated pages for introducing the characters whose voices are heard in the conversations, frequently asked questions to help resolve possible problems, contact information such as an email address, and help.

Listening lessons are presented according to different common themes that can help users in an academic setting as well as outside the classroom. Some of the practical topics focus on preparing students to study abroad, with essential areas of concern such as making new friends, job hunting, distance education/online degrees, dating and romance, study abroad and travel, budget hotels and reservations, and making money.

Since it is mainly designed for independent study, the website allows users to start with the general written description of the topic and proceed to the following brainstorming task as a warm-up exercise (as shown in Figure 7). The second part opens with pronunciation tips and some background description about the characters and the situation of the conversation before it begins. An audio player and a transcript of the conversation are available within the section. Key vocabulary, including unfamiliar expressions, sample sentences, and the origin of some idioms mentioned, are also provided.

The screenshot shows a web page titled "Study Abroad: Making New Friendships" with a sub-header ">>>>> Part II". The page is divided into several sections:

- I. Warm Up:** A text block explaining that study abroad programs offer opportunities to make new friends and that understanding conversation structure (beginning, maintaining, ending) is key to positive communication. It asks the user to think about expressions for starting and ending conversations.
- II. Conversation:** This section includes a pronunciation tip: "Pronunciation Tip: YOU changes to YA". It provides background information: "Alex and Sarah run into each other at college after not having seen each other for six months since they finished a study abroad program." Below this is an audio player showing a 01:40 duration and a transcript starting with "Sarah: Hey, Alex, Alex! Long time, no see".
- Key Vocabulary:** A list of phrases with their meanings and sample sentences:
 - long time, no see: it's been a long time since I've seen you
 - fancy: expressing surprise
 - bump into: meet unexpectedly
 - in ages: a long time
 - be up to: be busy or occupied with
 - what's new: what's new in your life
 - by the way: (used to introduce a new topic), so
 - be in touch: make contact
 - Huh? (interjection): what?
 - no way (interjection): I can't believe it
 - put someone on: fool or joke
 - umm (interjection): used when pausing to think
 - let something slip: talk about something accidentally

Figure 7. A sample of a listening lesson and the tasks that follow (top part)

The third section (shown in Figure 8) contains the first task titled Catching the Meaning. This task helps users consolidate the meanings of the expressions mentioned in the audio conversation by solving a multiple choice task. The task is followed by a self-score detector that gives scores and correct answers for the task.

after I *wring his neck*. That *lousy* so-called friend.

III. Catching the Meaning

Read the following sentences and select the best expression for each:

1. Have you heard from Cindy lately? I haven't talked with her _____.

- A. long time, no see
- B. in ages
- C. in touch

2. I wish we could talk more, but I _____. My class starts in five minutes, and I don't want to be late.

- A. 've got to run
- B. 've be up to lately
- C. 've put you on

3. You won't believe who I _____ on the way to school. It was your old girlfriend, Marsha.

- A. took off
- B. gave a ring
- C. bumped into

Final Score Reset

Score =

Correct answers:

>>>> Continue, Part II

Figure 8. A sample of a listening lesson and the tasks that follow (bottom part)

By clicking on the “Continue Part II” icon at the bottom of the page (shown in Figure 9), the user can continue with the fourth task of Filling in the Meaning. This task requires the user to listen to another conversation that employs more of the previously presented expressions and then fill in the blanks in a paragraph. The correct answers are provided once the user clicks on the score-detecting icon. The lesson can be used alongside another task entitled Retelling the Story, which involves restating the situation mentioned in the previous task in the user’s own words. This task can be used in a classroom setting where students work in groups to discuss and share their thoughts. Instructions and extra activities for this task are also provided.

Study Abroad: Making New Friendships

<<<< Part I --- Part III >>>>

IV. Filling in the Meaning - Listen

Instructions: Listen to the short interview and fill in the blanks with the missing words.

Recently, I ⁽¹⁾ a friend that I hadn't seen ⁽²⁾ , and he said he hadn't been ⁽³⁾ because he lost my phone number and email address. I asked him what he had been ⁽⁴⁾ during the past several years, and he said he was married and had eight kids. I said, "No ⁽⁵⁾ !" I mean he was always the type to ⁽⁶⁾ you on, but when he showed me his family picture, I knew he was serious. We hope to get together soon.

Score =

Correct Answers:

V. Retelling the Story

Instructions: Retell the story above using the vocabulary you have learned. Then think of a time when you bumped

Figure 9. Some more tasks

The last exercise (shown in Figure 10) is Expanding Your Learning. This exercise can either be used independently or in a classroom setting. The page provides the user with additional activities and includes examples.

Study Abroad: Making New Friendships	
<<<< Part II	
<p>VI. Expanding Your Learning</p> <p>Instructions: <i>Select one or more of the activities below to expand your understanding and use of the slang studied in this unit.</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Discussion: Discuss possible reasons why friends lose contact with each other and what people can do to stay in touch more. ▪ Improvisation: Give your partner(s) a new word from this unit and ask the partner to think up a sentence or more with the slang used in context. Sharing something from personal experience will make the activity more real and interesting to the listeners. <p style="padding-left: 40px;">Example: <i>be in touch</i> >>>> <i>I haven't been in touch</i> with my parents for the past week because I've been so busy.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Writing: Send an email to a friend or family member with whom you 	

Figure 10. Sample tasks on expanding your learning page

Evaluation

New literacies have been defined to include a set of skills utilized to understand information in any way presented (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006). The definition of new literacies involves the following components:

- (A) Social practice
- (B) Critical thinking
- (C) Engagement
- (D) Culture and context

Social practice:

The website supports collaborative engagement in learning and involves viewing and communicating others' opinions and perceiving and employing knowledge with a critical awareness. As mentioned earlier, EZ Slang is mainly designed for self-access learning.

However, the designer included some tasks that require collaborative work in a classroom setting. Also, tasks such as the warm-up activity can be used by teachers as part of a group discussion to brainstorm vocabulary, expressions, and predictions of what the students are going to hear. The designer's suggestions effectively highlight the process of social practice.

Critical thinking:

EZ Slang involves several aspects of critical thinking described by Lankshear and Knobel (2003), such as conceptualizing, questioning, researching, acquiring information, evaluating, answering, synthesizing and communicating the result with others. EZ Slang gives users the opportunity to assess and differentiate between slang expressions and idioms. This assessment involves the use and the context of such expressions outside the classroom. Also, the site focuses on recycling these expressions in different tasks to help generate different contexts and uses of the expressions. This process gives the users the sense of when and how they can use these expressions in real conversations with native speakers. However, it would be more effective if the site included some suggestions to teachers on how to generate more critical thinking tasks while using the site.

Engagement:

Engagement occurs when learners are provided with appealing resources and tasks that make them want to work hard in the educational process. This is what EZ Slang accomplishes in several ways. First the site uses common topics that may interest second language learners. In addition, it uses expressions and idioms in different contexts along with explanations for each one. It also employs audio recordings with native speakers as a way for learners to understand the language as well as the speaker's intended meaning via tone and pronunciation. However, it might be more efficient if the designer used video conversations instead of audio only. Seeing the speakers' facial expressions and gestures while delivering their speech can help learners decode better and faster. It also supports their engagement with the content presented and may catch their attention more easily.

Culture and context:

Culture and context refer to the recognition of the identity of entities and how they are perceived by different cultures. These entities can be driven from "human elements ...[and] include people's ways of thinking, acting, feeling, moving, dressing, speaking, gesturing, believing, and valuing. Non-human elements ... include such things as tools, objects, institutions, networks, places, vehicles, machines, physical spaces, buildings" (Lankshear, 2007, p. 3). This may be one of the ways cultures have developed to be recognizably different from one another and understanding them becomes interestingly essential for global communication. The main content in EZ slang is certainly culturally oriented. Learners recognize that mastering the language itself is an only part of the intended goal, since the rest of the goal is learning more about the culture. The language is widely represented through idioms and slang expressions that second language learners need to

focus on. The site incorporates themes that address a wide variety of interests and needs for upper-intermediate and advanced English language learners.

Conclusion

Incorporating new literacies in the classroom setting can improve the transfer of information from the teacher to the learner and/or the website to the learner. Employing new literacies in classrooms often requires more effort from the teachers themselves; teachers must participate and engage with technology in order to understand how it can be helpful in schools. EZ Slang accomplishes the specific goals described above. The design, the layout, the content, and the function of the website successfully support its purpose of improving users' communication with native speakers of English.

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About the Reviewer

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