

# Useful web tools for developing language skills on a Cambridge English: Preliminary course

By Lindsay Warwick

For many students taking the Cambridge English: Preliminary exam, commonly known as PET, this will be their first external English examination. They may be keen to achieve a good B1 level of English and work hard in class, but motivation often drops outside of class and students don't make the kind of progress they'd like to. Fortunately, the Internet provides some engaging, meaningful language practice that can often be more attractive than traditional forms of homework.

**This article will suggest some useful, free websites that teachers can encourage their students to use to enhance their language skills.** The sites could help equally well in class to complement a coursebook such as Gold Preliminary, or for homework. Please note that we can not guarantee that the third party sites mentioned in this article will remain live, and we (Pearson) does not take any responsibility for their content.

## Listening skills

The web is a fantastic place to find authentic listening material but of course much of it can be challenging for B1 level learners. Here are some sites that provide practice at this level and include listening tasks for learners to complete so they are listening for a specific purpose.

### [www.ello.org](http://www.ello.org) (English Listening Lesson Library Online)

This site has over 1200 audio texts to listen to, plus some video. The speakers are often native speakers with accents that include American, British and Australian English which PET candidates will hear in the exam. The audio texts are graded according to level so *intermediate* is the most appropriate for the PET exam. They come with both a vocabulary and comprehension quiz so students can listen with a purpose and try to understand vocabulary in context. However, the quizzes are not specifically designed for exam preparation and may be less challenging than those in the exam. With so much material to choose from, learners are sure to find things to listen to that will interest them..

### [www.eslvideo.com](http://www.eslvideo.com)

Like Eлло.org, this site has videos and comprehension quizzes although not specifically for exam practice. The videos are taken from YouTube or uploaded by teachers and the quizzes are written by teachers.

### [www.lyricstraining.com](http://www.lyricstraining.com) or [www.lyricsgaps.com](http://www.lyricsgaps.com)

These two sites have music videos with the song lyrics which have been gapped. Students can choose *medium* songs to suit an intermediate level and then decide how many words they would like to be gapped by choosing a quiz mode. As the song plays, the students fill in the gaps until they have completed the lyrics. This has proved very popular with younger learners and young adults, who really enjoy using this at home. There may not be any songs in the PET exam, but this site is great for practising listening for and writing specific words correctly, something they have to do in Part 3 of the PET listening paper (note-taking). The songs are widely known pop and rock songs so beware that some of the lyrics may not be suitable for all age groups.

### [www.listenandwrite.com](http://www.listenandwrite.com)

This is a dictation site for native as well as non-native speakers of English therefore some of the texts are challenging and it is recommended that PET students practise with the lower numbered texts (1-7). Learners choose from three different modes and then listen and type what they hear. They can decide whether to type just the first letter of each word, type each word in full or type the gapped words only.

## Integrating online listening activities into a course

If you have a computer room available, it is good to get students using these sites in class with guidance before setting tasks for homework. While a teacher may choose a particular text because it supplements a lesson or topic, it may work better if learners choose their own material. They are more likely to be motivated by texts that are of interest to them.

In order to encourage students to continue using the sites, ask them to commit to listening to a certain number each week depending on the time that they have available. Make sure that their targets are realistic as this is a good study skill. At regular intervals, ask students to work in groups and feed back what they listened to and what they learnt from the texts. This could be information or new vocabulary. If students are struggling to keep up with their target, ask them to review it so that it is more realistic. By bringing this work into the classroom, you are hopefully showing them how important it is and encouraging them to continue while at the same time giving them the freedom they need to maintain motivation.

## Speaking skills

The development of the internet over the last decade has brought a variety of voice recording tools that allow students to develop their speaking skills. Students will need a microphone to use these sites.

### [www.fotobabble.com](http://www.fotobabble.com)

This site allows you to add a photo and then talk about it for one minute, just like PET candidates have to do in the exam. Encourage students to add a photo of their choice, for example of a holiday or special day, and then describe it for one minute. They can then share the link to this recording with you and other students. Ask students to listen to each other's and give feedback on whose photo surprised them or made them laugh.

### [www.voicethread.com](http://www.voicethread.com)

Like fotobabble, this site allows you to add a photo and record yourself talking about it. The difference is that many people can add their voices to one photo so you, the teacher, can add a picture and all of your students can record themselves describing it and then listen to each other. This will allow them to share ideas and learn from each other from one web page rather than many separate ones with fotobabble.

### [www.voxopop.com](http://www.voxopop.com)

This site enables you to set up a private talkgroup and invite your students to join. You can then set homework which involves your students recording themselves speaking in English. For example, you could set a weekly discussion topic that students must comment on, such as those in Part 4 of the speaking exam. Students can even start their own discussions between each other on topics of their choice to keep them engaged. You could ask students to record a description of a person, place or object and other students must listen and guess what it is, to help them practise descriptions for Part 2 of the exam. You could ask students to record themselves talking about new words that they have learnt and what they mean, or to give a definition of a word and other students must guess what it is to widen their vocabulary. Or they could speak for one minute on a topic without hesitation to improve their fluency.

### [www.englishcentral.com](http://www.englishcentral.com)

This is a fun site for practising intonation by listening and repeating speakers in a variety of YouTube videos that include film clips, adverts, interviews and speeches. Although access to some of the videos requires a subscription, there is still access to many which are free. Learners listen and follow the script, listen and fill in the gaps in the script and then record themselves copying the intonation they hear, either with or without the script. The site even compares your recording to the original and gives you a grade.

## Integrating online speaking activities into a course

Like with the listening tasks, it is good to set tasks for homework and elicit feedback on them in class. Again, giving students the freedom to choose topics and discussions will keep them more involved and therefore hopefully motivated. When using these sites, I want my students to enjoy speaking in English so error correction is not a particular focus. Instead, I monitor the recordings to inform my

teaching and deal with common errors in class. I also use the sites to encourage self-assessment. Partly this is because I may not have time to listen to and give feedback on every single recording, but it is also because I think it is important for learners to hear themselves speak and understand what their strengths and weaknesses are. This is an important part of learning and voice recording is a fantastic tool for this. My exam preparation students often really enjoy recording an exam task in pairs and listening back as it really does help them to understand what they need to improve on for the exam. A simple microphone tool on a laptop, tablet or smartphone can be used for this.

## Writing skills

### [www.storybird.com](http://www.storybird.com)

This is a wonderful way to get students practising storytelling for Part 3 of the writing exam. They choose an art theme and then four or five drawings to create a storybook. They then add text to tell the story. These stories can be uploaded or shared privately with others. The latter requires registration. While some of the art is more appropriate for younger learners, many of the designs that artists submit are wonderful for teens and adults to use too.

### [www.spellingcity.com](http://www.spellingcity.com)

This website allows learners to enter words that they find difficult to spell and create spelling games based on them. It is fun and can really help students to get to grips with those tricky words. Just five minutes here or there can help.

### [www.eflshorts.com](http://www.eflshorts.com)

This site has some nice short stories that students can read to develop their reading skills but also to see short stories in practice. While they are longer than those required in the PET exam, they still effectively demonstrate features of storytelling such as the use of direct speech.

## Emailing

While not a new tool, emailing can be very effective in preparing students for their writing exam as it seems more authentic. Take a Part 2 exam task, pair students and ask them to complete the task. However, rather than write to 'an English friend' as mentioned in the task, they should write to their partner. When they receive the email from their partner, they should then reply. . Ask students to copy you into the email so that you can give feedback on what they have written.

## The practicalities

With some of these websites, students will need to register at no cost which will require an email address. With adults this should be no problem but with school students it may be necessary to gain permission from parents as per the school's policy.

While many people have access to a computer or smartphone at home, not everyone does. It may be necessary to provide access to a computer before or after classes for some students, or to create study pairs/groups where you are sure that at least one member owns a suitable device.

The Internet has opened up learning for students and provides many opportunities for them to develop skills outside the classroom. It does not provide an easy fix to the problem of motivation but it does provide some engaging material that can be exploited. One or two of these tools will hopefully interest your students and get them practising their English without really noticing that they are studying.

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### About the author:



**Lindsay Warwick** has been in ELT for over 16 years. Based in Cambridge, she is a teacher, teacher trainer, materials writer and examiner for Cambridge English exams. She has a particular interest in the use of new technologies in language learning. Lindsay is co-author of the new *Gold Preliminary* course by Pearson.