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**FREERICE.COM - FREE EDUCATION BASED ON APPEALING LEVEL-BASED  
ENGLISH TESTS**

Mariana COANCĂ  
Romanian - American University, Bucharest, Romania  
E-mail: coancamaria@yahoo.com

***Abstract:** Our paper deals with the presentation of Freerice.com and its custom database. We also show the impact of the level-based English tests - Freerice.com upon our students during classes. The level-based tests for grammar and vocabulary are very appealing to us and our students: firstly, because Freerice.com provides education for free and offers the teachers the possibility to create a “closed” group for a class, by registering each student so that they have a login username and a password. Secondly, the database contains questions at varying levels of difficulty and adjusts automatically to the student’s level. When the student selects an answer, this information is sent to a server via a regular HTML form. This answer is then processed by the server using the PHP programming language, which then is able to discern if the student’s answer was correct. Grammar and vocabulary tests were highly appreciated by our students because they consider the tests as a challenging, funny and efficient method to improve their English grammar and vocabulary while donating rice (if their answers are correct) and feed as many people as possible all around the world.*

***Keywords:** Freerice.com, English, teaching, learning, online resources*

## **I. THE CONCEPT OF FREE E-EDUCATION**

The specialists in teaching modern languages will select the most appropriate online resources – online learning platforms so that students could easily bear in mind the applied notions, enrich their knowledge in a foreign language, get a good job in the near future and make a fruitful career. For this reason, taking a few online lessons, for free, which are recommended by his/her teacher, proved to be the student’s best choice because the online lessons do not impose on students a fixed timing, they practice whenever they want. The learning of foreign languages encourages students to get to know better other foreign counterparts, making a steady comparison between cultures and trying to build bridges between cultures and outlooks.

Moreover, by learning foreign languages the students’ cognitive abilities improve considerably and their linguistic competences in the native language are enhanced (for instance, students are given the permission to work or study in a member state). Learning a foreign language with the tools offered by the information technology is fashionable nowadays, as part of an efficient framework, that improves the students’ linguistic competence (see also Terrell 1991, Pica 1988, Swan 1985, Oxford 1989).

Adapting the educational contents to the students’ needs represents a justifiable factor. Using the Internet as an informing source, the educational contents and the teaching tasks are selected according to the interests of the students and adapted to their individual needs. The teaching of English as an international language is a field in which ideas are developing at a tremendous pace, materials are being published in a flood and the online resources have increased lately. Learning a language and using the online resources is essentially an individual achievement, an exploitation of the capacities of the mind to make sense of the environment. But typically this private process takes place in the public

context of the classroom, the individual is one of a group, a member of the class, and the activities which are to set the process in training, are determined by the teacher (see also Hutchinson and Waters, 1990; Abbott and Wingard, 1990).

The assumption is that this internal process of learning will come about as a consequence of the external interaction which takes place between the two kinds of participants: the teacher on the one hand, and the learners on the other. Therefore, the learning process based on teaching tasks benefits easily from the online resources, saving time and money. The vocabulary practice is one of the most productive tasks during a foreign language acquisition; the online exercises for vocabulary practice become effective as long as the words (the adequate answers given by the students) are used in a context. Moreover, skilled students can choose the words they want to put in practice and make exercises by themselves, achieving this way a lexical portfolio (for instance, the vocabulary practice of economic terms, legal terms, etc). Additionally, the teacher can ask the students to search on the web (some links are recommended by the teacher) and find contexts that contain the exercised words and eventually translate the texts or summarize them to review the new vocabulary.

## **II. FREERICE.COM – A FASHIONABLE TOOL FOR A FOREIGN LANGUAGE ACQUISITION**

Online materials help to organize the teaching-learning process, by providing a path through the complex mass of the language to be learnt. Good materials should, therefore, provide a clear and coherent unit structure which will guide teacher and learner through various activities in such a way as to maximize the changes of learning. This structure should help the teacher in planning lessons and encourage in the learner a sense of progress and achievement. We witnessed our students' enthusiasm and achievements when dealing with the tasks required by Freerice.com.

Moreover, online resources provide a stimulus to learning. Good materials do not teach, they encourage learners to learn. Good online materials consist of:

- interesting texts;
- enjoyable activities which engage the learners' thinking capacities;
- opportunities for learners to use their existing knowledge and skills;
- content which both learner and teacher can cope with (see also Hutchinson and Waters, 1990).

According to Wikipedia, Freerice is “a website where users play various educational, multiple-choice games in order to fight world hunger. For every question the user answers correctly, 10 grains of rice are donated. The categories include English vocabulary (the game the site began with), multiplication tables, pre-algebra, chemical symbols (basic or intermediate), English grammar, basic foreign language vocabulary for English speakers (French, German, Italian, and Spanish), geography (flags of the world, world capitals and country identification), the identification of famous artwork, and literature”.

Freerice was founded in October 2007 by John Breen. In March 2009 Mr. Breen donated the site to the UN World Food Programme, hoping that Freerice will develop the following years, helping to feed and educate as many people as possible throughout the world. Thus, FreeRice became a non-profit website managed by the United Nations World Food Programme. Moreover, The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard University became the partner of Freerice. The Berkman Center is a network of faculty, students, fellows and members of an extended community, it assists Freerice to assure the possible educational content and has resources to help Freerice develop in other areas as well (see also <http://freerice.com/about>).

The motto of The Berkman Center for Internet and Society is: “We envision a growing opportunity to use Internet technologies to improve the ways that we teach, learn, and make information accessible to citizens around the world”. FreeRice mainly wants to achieve two goals: provide education to everyone for free and help end world hunger by offering rice to hungry people for free. It is used by many schools as an education tool. This means that students play Freerice on shared computers in their classrooms. When the lesson is over, they need to log out and allow for a

new set of students to use the computers. If the browser session is not cleared, the new set of students would start playing with the same number of grains earned by the previous set of students (id.).

Freerice has a custom database containing questions at varying levels of difficulty. There are levels appropriate for beginners and levels that will challenge even professors. The levels are suitable for students of all ages and being signed up as a player on Freerice they are able to track their totals permanently, join and create groups, share their results on Facebook and Twitter, find and follow friends, see their results in the ranking table, let others see and be inspired by their totals. It automatically adjusts to the student's level. It starts by giving the students questions of increasing difficulty and then, based on how they handle, assigns them an approximate starting level, but they have the possibility to settle their precise level as they go on playing. When they select an answer, the information is sent to one of the servers via a regular HTML form. This form is then processed by the server using the PHP programming language, which then is able to see if their answer was correct. If so, it adds to both their personal rice total and the overall rice total. It then sends back an HTML page with new words and their new total as part of the next form (see <http://freerice.com/about/faq>). We present below two examples of questions, one for grammar and one for vocabulary:

If they give a wrong answer, the application automatically sends students to an easier level and Freerice will repeat it a few turns later to give the students a second chance at it. If students give three correct answers in a row, they progress to a harder level. The program keeps track of how many people get each question right or wrong, and then adjusts each question's difficulty level accordingly. So the questions at the easiest levels are the ones that students most often get right. The questions at the hardest levels are the ones that students most often get wrong. Previously it was found out that as more and more people have played the game, these levels have become increasingly more accurate. When students log out, their cookie session is erased - this means that their internet browser no longer remembers how many grains they earned during that session (see <http://freerice.com/about/faq>). In order to create a group we had to take the following steps (see also <http://freerice.com/groups>):

- Make sure that we have registered ourselves
- Go to <http://freerice.com/groups/create>
- Fill in the required fields
- Upload an image by clicking on the upload button and navigating to where it is saved on our computer, double click the image
- Choose if it is "open" (anyone can join) or "closed" (only those with an invite link can join)
- Choose the subjects
- Hit the "Create" button

If the teacher wants to create a "closed" group, he/she will have to send his/her potential group members an invite link. Teachers can find this by going to their group profile, clicking "Edit" and clicking on the "GET INVITE LINK" above their members list. They also had the possibility to create a group for their class, by registering each student so that they could have a login username and password. Then, they gave them the link to their group, and let them "Join" (id).

### III. THE IMPACT OF FREERICE.COM ON STUDENTS' LEARNING

Using the Freerice.com for the students' learning process, we took into consideration the following aspects (Hutchinson and Waters, 1990: 128-129):

- *Language learning is an active process.*

It is not enough for learners just to have the necessary knowledge to make things meaningful, they must also *use* that knowledge. Therefore, we have to make a distinction between two types of activity:

a) psycho-motor activity, that is, the observable movement of speech organs or limbs in accordance with signals from the brain;

b) language processing activity, that is, the organization of information into a meaningful network of knowledge. This kind of activity is internal and not observable.

- *Language learning is not the learner's first experience with language*

Every second language learner is already communicatively competent in one language. They do not know the specific forms, words or possibly some of the concepts of the target language, but they know what communication is and how it is used (Swan, 1985). They may not be able to verbalize this knowledge, but it is there, for without it they would not be able to operate in their own mother tongue. Learners' knowledge of communication should be actively exploited in second language learning, for example, by getting students to predict, before reading.

- *Learning is an emotional experience.*

Our concern should be to develop the positive emotions as opposed to the negative ones by:

- using pair and group work to build on existing social relationships;
- giving students time to think and generally avoiding pressure;
- putting less emphasis on the product (the right answer) and more on the process of getting an answer;
- valuing attitude as much as ability;

- making interesting, funny tasks, as primary considerations in materials and methodology, rather than just added extras.

We presented above two examples of questions, one for grammar and one for vocabulary. However, if students are not on a shared computer, they can remain logged in and the grains collected during that session will be stored for 30 days, total number of collected grains being stored in their profile view permanently. Freerice has a policy of purchasing rice from the same country to which the rice is allocated. This means that it saves on the cost of transporting the rice, in this way it helps more people, being a website committed to the cause of ending hunger worldwide. All money raised by the site goes to the UN World Food Programme to help feed the hungry. There are also certain sponsors that make all payments to the WFP directly. Through sponsorship, it is supported both learning and hunger reduction. We thank these sponsors for their generous participation at Freerice. Taking into consideration that the cost of rice per metric ton has more than doubled since the website's inception, but its popularity has consistently grown these days. Therefore, rising rice prices means that Freerice has to collect significantly more money to pay for the grains generated by every correct click (see <http://freerice.com/about/faq>).

By choosing the vocabulary game, students find out that there are 60 levels of vocabulary with over 12,000 words in all and the word definitions for English vocabulary derive from a wide range of sources including dictionaries, thesauruses and books of synonyms. Each definition is checked exhaustively and edited for accuracy. Although learning is considered a conscious process, acquisition is seen as an unconscious process. Learning new vocabulary has significant advantages the vocabulary and grammar games can help our students to enhance their knowledge which entails the following: their comprehension level increases while reading, also they manage to formulate their ideas in an accurate manner (delivering powerful speeches), write efficient papers and emails, speak more exactly on various topics. As a final result of all these achievements, students get higher and higher grades and increase their scores while taking exams like TOEFL, GRE, CAE (id.).

Concerning our students' interest in Freerice.com and their involvement degree we identified two forms of motivation (see Hutchinson and Waters, 1990: 48):

a) Instrumental motivation is the reflection of an external need. The learners are not learning a language because they want to (although this does not imply that they not want to), but rather because they need to. The need may derive from varying sources: the need to sell things to speakers of the language; the need to pass an examination in the language; the need to read texts in the language for work or study. The need may vary, but the important factor is that the motivation is an external one.

b) Integrative motivation, on the other hand, derives from a desire on the part of the learners to be members of the speech community that uses a particular language. It is an internally generated *want* rather than an externally imposed *need* (id.)

Both authors state that Gardner and Lambert's conclusion was that both forms of motivation are probably present in all learners and we totally agree with them, because the exercises on Freerice.com are very appealing to our students and their instrumental and integrative motivation lead to better and better results. English for specific purposes, as much as any good teaching, needs to be intrinsically motivating. It should satisfy their needs as learners as well as their needs as potential target users of the language. In other words, they should get satisfaction from the actual experience of learning (Freerice.com), not just from the prospect of eventually using what they have learnt.

#### IV. CONCLUSIONS

Using the computer as means of teaching / learning foreign languages is a real improving factor, contributing to the optimization of the instructive – educational process, enhancing the quality of the teaching – learning process and increasing the motivation degree of the participants in this process. Although teaching is a demanding and pleasant activity, accountable entirely to its effect on learning, the teacher typically assumes a dominant and directive role in classroom interaction, and it is learning which is made accountable to the teaching intent. Thus, traditionally, learning has been considered as the mirror of teaching, the action of the teacher as requiring a corresponding reaction on

the part of the learner. Learners may be persuaded to cooperate by overt participation in the classroom interaction, either with the teacher or with other learners in groups.

Whatever pedagogic approach is taken, it is the interaction of the classroom, the assumption and assignment of different kinds of participant role, which mediates between teaching and learning. Furthermore, teachers can take the initiative in learning, through their own experience of teaching.

We strongly believe that advances in language teaching derive from the independent efforts of teachers in their own classroom. This independence is not brought about by imposing fixed ideas and promoting fashionable formulas. It can only occur where teachers, individually or collectively, explore principles and experiment with techniques, use of online resources. Eventually, we reached the following conclusion: Freerice.com gives feedback to our students, at no charge it provides flexibility in terms of timing, the motivation degree goes hand in hand with the satisfaction degree because they manage to donate rice to people in hunger, feeling that Freerice is a great investment in themselves.

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**ELECTRONIC SOURCES:** www.freerice.com, Wikipedia