

Simple English Wikipedia: Free Resources for Beginner to Intermediate Levels

Finding free, level-appropriate texts that can be shared with students—and that have no copyright issues—is a challenge. English language teachers often have to build their own collection of paper-based or online texts by purchasing them and making copies or creating texts entirely on their own, which takes time that many teachers do not have. Buying reading materials may not be cheap in any context, but it is sometimes impossible to find and purchase them in international English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. As teachers who have worked in a variety of places, we have struggled with these challenges and are always on the lookout for free accessible texts. That search is what led us to using Simple English Wikipedia (SEW) in the classroom.

SEW is a language option on Wikipedia, a free online encyclopedia, created for children and adults learning English. It works like any other language option on Wikipedia, and as of now, there are over 150,000 entries. These entries are shorter and have simpler language structures than regular Wikipedia articles. Writers of these SEW pages are advised to use only the first 1,000 most frequent English words, if possible, and give real-world examples to support complex ideas. They also cannot use idiomatic language in the passages or specific terminology without defining it. Difficult words and concepts have links to other SEW pages that provide more information or have pop-up definitions that appear when the reader hovers the cursor over them; these features promote reading the definitions in English rather than relying on translations.

Teachers also benefit from using SEW. With so many entries to choose from, you can find a topic related to almost any theme you are discussing in your classroom. SEW is also a Creative Commons resource, which means you can adapt it, share it online, project it in your classroom, or print and distribute it, as long as you reference the source. This level of accessibility makes SEW particularly useful for teachers who have limited time to hunt for resources.

At the same time, as teachers, we understand the skepticism around using Wikipedia as a resource. This website is discouraged in most classrooms; one reason is that it may tempt students to find information quickly without actually doing research. Students are told from early stages in their academic careers that Wikipedia is not a legitimate source to use or cite in any form of academic writing

or research. Thus, teachers who want to use SEW as a resource should explicitly discuss with students that it is *not* an acceptable source for research in English-language or content courses. However, it offers valuable content as a tool for creating or supplementing tasks and for scaffolding the language-learning process.

In this article, we explore three practical ways you can use SEW in your classroom for students at the beginner to intermediate levels. We will explain each task and then offer ideas for variations. These tasks focus mainly on reading, grammar, and writing. All tasks are explained with the assumption that students have computer access and the classroom is equipped with Internet connectivity and a video projector. However, computers are not necessary. Teachers can simply print any of the material they design using SEW instead of asking students to access the website directly. Students then use pen and paper to complete each task. The main downside to not accessing the site directly is that students will lose access to the built-in online dictionary.

Throughout the article, we refer to other online resources that might help teachers in the process of designing or implementing a particular task (see “Online Resources for Teachers” in the References section at the end of this article).

To access SEW, visit the main page at https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page (see Figure 1). You can type a topic into the search bar and click on “Search” to see if there is a related entry. Alternatively, you may scroll to the bottom of the main page to access “Knowledge groups” and browse topics SEW has to offer (see Figure 2).

Following are three ways to use SEW in your classroom.

1. READING PRACTICE AND VOCABULARY BUILDING

I. S. P. Nation (2009) states that the purpose of reading practice for students is not only to help them understand the text they are



Figure 1. The main page of Simple English Wikipedia (2019c)



Figure 2. Knowledge groups in Simple English Wikipedia (2019c)

reading at the moment, but also to train them to understand texts they will encounter in the future. Nation suggests that teachers may need to create their own reading exercises to fit the particular needs of their students. Instead of spending time writing their own texts, teachers can use SEW entries and adapt them. They can then create their own activities based on the type of reading practice the students need. Following is a reading-comprehension activity for lower-level students that helps build vocabulary and reading skills.

Planning

2. Find an appropriate article from SEW. The article can be connected to a theme being discussed in class, or it can be a new topic that will be scaffolded.
3. Use the free English Profile Text Inspector (<http://www.englishprofile.org/wordlists/text-inspector>) to gauge the level of this text. Most words in the text will be at the beginner level, with some higher-level words.
4. Use the text inspector to create a vocabulary list and decide if you want to pre-teach difficult words or if you prefer to edit the text and print out the edited version at the desired level. If you decide to keep the article as is, students reading online may also use the SEW built-in dictionary to hover over certain words and reveal their meanings.
5. Create a set of comprehension questions for students to complete after reading the text. These comprehension questions can be tailored to your students' levels and needs. For example, beginner students should answer questions based on main ideas of the text, and questions for higher-level students may ask about details or inferences. You can also create questions based on vocabulary in the text. Just as Nation (2009) discusses, you should create comprehension questions for the particular learning needs of your students.

Procedure

1. Put students into groups of three and, if possible, have one computer per group. Give students a link to the SEW page along with the set of comprehension questions and ask them to read the questions before they read the article.
2. Give students an appropriate amount of time—based on the difficulty of the questions, length of the text, and level of the students—to answer the comprehension questions.
3. After the time has passed, students share their answers with the class by writing one or two answers either on the board or on an online platform.

More ideas

Higher-level students can choose a theme that they are interested in, read SEW entries about that theme, and even introduce aspects of extensive reading into this process. For example, each student individually reads a topic that fits under the same theme and, with the whole class or in a small group, shares what he or she has learned as a way to build knowledge about the theme. For example, each student could read something connected to the theme of Japan, such as food in Japan, holidays in Japan, or education in Japan.

2. CONTEXTUALIZED GRAMMAR PRACTICE

The importance of being exposed to and learning grammar in a meaningful context is a key aspect of communicative language teaching methodology and second-language acquisition (Brown 2007; Spada 2011). The concept of *noticing* (Ellis 2006, 97) the target language is an important aspect of learning grammar in context and can be encouraged by enhancing texts visually; this is accomplished by highlighting text, bolding letters or words, underlining or italicizing words and phrases, or adding a listening component to the text (Reinders and Ellis 2009). Getting students to notice different forms of grammar within

a text is a valuable step toward teaching the grammar more explicitly at a later point.

The wide range of content available on SEW provides contexts where teachers can draw student attention to grammatical structures. Because SEW offers basic grammar and vocabulary structures, it is appropriate for either presenting or reviewing these structures. Present simple, present continuous, past simple, present perfect, and future tenses, as well as pronouns (personal, possessive, object), are all easily found within SEW pages.

When using SEW texts for grammar activities in our university EFL context, both teachers and students appreciated the range of content and the fact that students could practice reading while learning and reviewing grammar.

Planning and procedure

1. Choose an article that contains examples of the structure you are teaching. The structure should appear often enough that students can notice it and begin to see how it functions in different sentences or word patterns. Certain topics will have more of one grammatical structure than another. Present simple can often be found in articles that define concepts, objects, or ideas; past simple often appears in entries that discuss historical events or biographies of people who have died; and present perfect appears in entries that discuss something that started in the past but continues to exist, such as a city, a festival, or a ritual. Future forms appear less frequently but can be added by the teacher. In Figure 3, because the SEW entry on Rosa Parks is about a historical figure, it has many instances of the simple past, especially in the sections of the article that discuss her childhood and arrest.
2. After choosing the SEW article and grammar point(s), teachers can simply copy and paste the text into a document. They can edit the text and then highlight, bold, and/or underline the grammatical

structures they want students to notice. When you are focusing on two or more grammatical structures in the same text, choose two different ways of calling attention to those grammatical structures so that students can notice their differences. In the example from the Rosa Parks article in Figure 3, we chose to bold regular verbs in the simple past and bold and underline irregular verbs in the simple past; this helps students notice first the past simple and then the difference between regular and irregular verbs.

1. On December 1, 1955, Parks **got** onto a city bus to go home after work. She **paid** her 10¢ and **sat** down in the
2. first row of seats behind the painted line on the floor which **marked** the black section. After several stops,
3. more white passengers **got** on the bus. The bus driver **ordered** Parks and three other black people to give up
4. their seats so the white people **could** sit down. The other three **moved** to the back of the bus, but Parks **slid**
5. over to the window. She **said** she was following the law by sitting in the right section.

Figure 3. Sample SEW article about Rosa Parks with past-tense verbs in bold and/or bold and underlined (text from Simple English Wikipedia 2019b)

3. When the article is ready for the students, it is time to guide them through a noticing activity. There are many techniques for doing this, but we find that a good approach is to have students read, then elicit what they identified. If you are guiding students through a noticing activity using the Rosa Parks excerpt, you might want them to read silently, then discuss in pairs or small groups what types of bolded words they identified. Then you might elicit their ideas and write them on the board. Depending on the students' level of English, you might immediately get the

answer “past simple,” or your students might simply tell you that they identified “actions.” You could then ask them to identify something similar between all past-simple regular verbs and try to elicit that they all end in “-ed.” You could follow similar steps when working with the past-simple irregular verbs.

Variations

Teachers with access to a learning management system (such as Blackboard Learn or Moodle) or a free blog like Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>) or WordPress (<https://wordpress.com/>) can add a recording of themselves reading the text out loud in order to provide an aural form of input for the students.

To add an element of pronunciation practice, students could use the free online tool Vocaroo (<https://vocaroo.com/>), which allows them to record their voices online and provides a web link for them to post their recording on a blog or discussion board. In the Figure 3 example, pronouncing the “-ed” ending sounds of the past-simple verbs would give students valuable pronunciation practice with this challenging structure.

More ideas

- For more-advanced language learners, teachers can provide a text without any highlighting or annotations and ask them to identify and mark all the instances of a certain grammatical structure. In this scenario, students must have enough knowledge of that grammar structure to identify it. They could do this using pen and paper or on their computers.
- Teachers can also use the text as a context for practicing editing and error correction. They would simply have to alter the SEW text so it contains grammatical errors and ask students to correct them.
- Teachers may take out the past-tense verbs and put spaces and the base form of the verb in their place so students can practice conjugating verbs.

3. WRITING PRACTICE

Reading to writing integrates and develops both skills simultaneously; it is one of the most frequent processes students have to engage in at all levels, in general English, in academic English, and in classroom-based and international assessments (Hedgcock and Ferris 2009; Hasan and Akhand 2010). Therefore, practicing this skill can serve students in many contexts. SEW texts are easily applied to the reading-to-writing process, which uses multiple skills and higher-order thinking. Two tasks that can be created using SEW are (a) summarizing and (b) controlled writing practice.

Summarizing

Regardless of the level or the context, students are often required to summarize information in writing. Whether they are summarizing a short piece of audio or a longer academic text, this can be a challenging skill to master. Therefore, teachers must help students develop this skill in their second or foreign language. The length of entries in SEW is typically between 200 and 1,000 words, as writers are asked to keep entries short. As a result, the texts are perfect for students to use as they develop and practice summarizing skills at the beginner level. As an added benefit, teachers can help scaffold basic academic research skills and educate students on how to correctly cite articles and show them how to avoid plagiarism when summarizing.

Planning

Find one SEW article for students to summarize. Some articles may be too short for this activity, so make sure any article you choose is an appropriate length. Aim to find an article of at least two paragraphs (often organized into sections by headers) with details and examples so students have enough information to read and summarize.

Procedure

1. Put students into groups of three and give them a printout of the SEW entry. Biographies or a description of a special

event in history work particularly well for this activity.

2. Have students read the text and ask them to focus on the main ideas. Students can take notes, including important names, dates, and phrases.
3. Tell students to give the printout back to you.
4. With students still in their groups, ask them to use their notes to write two or three sentences summarizing the SEW entry. The length of the summary might vary depending on the length of the original SEW entry; if the entry is longer, students might write more sentences to summarize it. Students may either write on the board or type their sentences, which will later be projected.
5. The class reads each summary, checks for plagiarism (copied phrases or phrases that are too close to the original), and decides whether each group included the main ideas.

This is a precursor to a task where students will summarize an SEW article on their own, so this practice scaffolds the summarizing process and helps students understand how to avoid accidental plagiarism.

Controlled writing practice

Controlled writing occurs when students do writing tasks that focus on grammar, sentence structure, word choice and order, and punctuation instead of focusing on the components of content, organization, and cohesion. One example of controlled writing practice is creating simple and extended definitions of concepts, objects, events, and so on. A simple definition can be written in one sentence; an extended definition contains a simple definition followed by examples, uses, components, types, and the history of what is being defined. Since SEW articles often contain detailed information, students can practice identifying simple and extended definitions, as in the example in Figure 4.

Simple definition: *Coffee is a plant and the name of the drink that is made from this plant. The drink is made from the seeds of the coffee plant, called coffee beans.* **Components:** *Coffee contains a chemical called caffeine, a mild drug that keeps people awake.* **Types:** *Coffee plants originally grew in Africa, and now also grow in South America, Central America and Southeast Asia. They are an important crop for the economies of many countries.* **History:** *The first branded coffee sold commercially to the public was Nes Café in 1879.* **Applications:** *Coffee is usually served hot, and is a popular drink in many countries.*

Figure 4. Example of a text used to identify simple and extended definitions (adapted from Simple English Wikipedia 2019a)

Planning

Find terms for students to read about on SEW. Try to choose terms that students probably will not already be able to define. This ensures that students go through the process of reading, note-taking, and summarizing before writing their definition. Some terms we used were “squirrel,” “printing press,” “coffee,” “bluegrass,” “harmonica,” “sauerkraut,” and “the Trail of Tears.” These terms are all SEW entries with enough content for students to read and summarize.

Factors to consider before starting this activity

- This activity is recommended for advanced or high-intermediate students because of what students are expected to know about summarizing, note-taking, and referencing.
- Teachers should make sure students fully understand the concept of plagiarism, the necessity of students writing in their own words, and the importance of not copying the text word for word. These issues can be discussed before the activity; likewise, the activity could be part of a longer unit that focuses on writing, using sources, and referencing. Sowell (2018) has a helpful discussion about plagiarism, with

suggestions for activities to help students understand and practice the concepts; teachers could consult her article when covering the issue with students.

- Students should have experience with note-taking. This is a skill that you, as the teacher, should cover before this activity or that students have learned previously.
- Students should have been taught how to write an extended definition and recently practiced the technique.

Procedure

1. Quickly elicit how to write an extended definition. Use the example about coffee in Figure 4 and have students identify the parts of an extended definition within the text as a warm-up.
2. Distribute one term (such as those mentioned in the Planning section above) to each student and explain to them that they need to read, take notes, and then write an extended definition (one paragraph) about the term they receive.
3. Students will then go onto SEW, look up the term they received, and individually

read about it and take notes. This should take about ten minutes.

4. The teacher should monitor here in order to check that students are not copying the text word for word.
5. Students use the notes they took to write their extended definitions on the whiteboard/blackboard. Other students and the teacher read the definitions.
6. Students identify (by marking and annotating) the parts of the paragraph that correspond to the parts of an extended definition (see Figure 5).
7. Students read one other student's definition, check it for errors, and suggest corrections (if needed).

More ideas

This activity allows students to use multiple skills in the process of developing their definitions. It could also be used as a summarizing activity, as it requires students to read, reduce information, and synthesize it. If students do the activity in pairs or small groups, encourage them to speak and listen to each other throughout the reading and

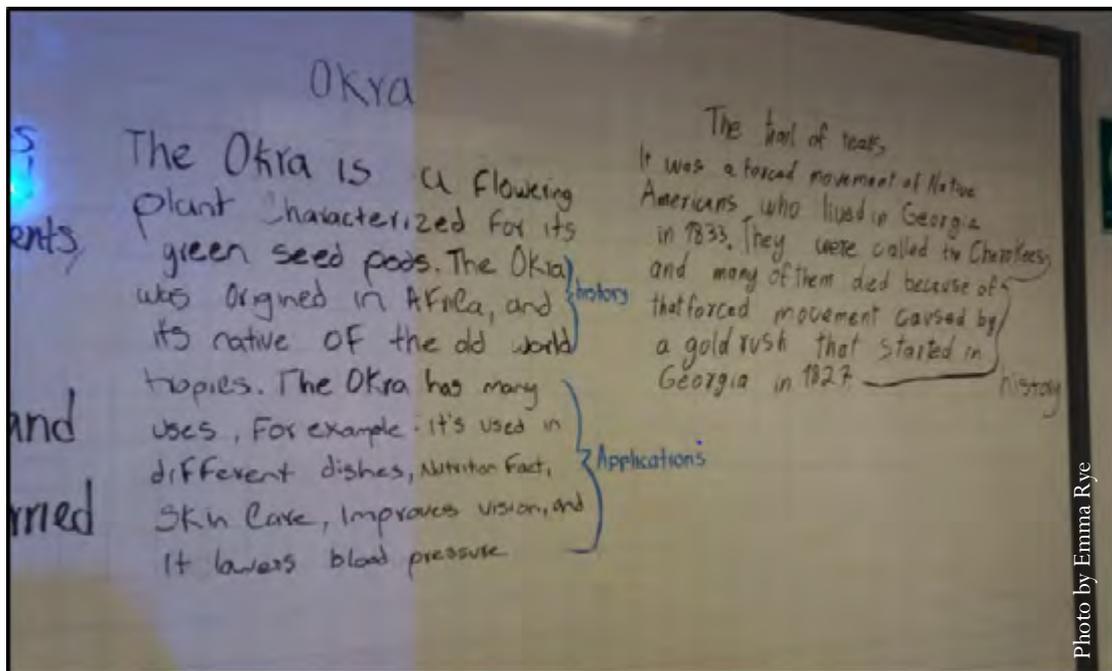


Figure 5. Example of students' annotated definitions

writing process, making it even more interactive. Step 7 brings in the aspect of peer feedback and/or corrections, which is valuable in the writing process. This step could be followed by verbal feedback, where students need to explain their suggestions to the writer.

CONCLUSION

SEW is a free resource that can reduce the workload for English language teachers who search for and create their own materials. As teachers, we found that using SEW for texts reduced lesson-planning time and ensured that texts were at the appropriate level. It provides a wide variety of interesting topics, and the short texts written with high-frequency vocabulary lend themselves well to several activities we have used successfully in our English classrooms. Our students enjoyed the topics, images, and hyperlinks to further information. We hope you will explore SEW and also find it useful in your classroom.

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