

The Story of English Banana.com

by Matt Purland (Site Founder and Writer of English Banana.com Materials)



2002

Channel Z.org.uk (reg. 6th February 2002)

February: I started my first website! Channel Z Television is English Banana.com's sister site. It was my first attempt at creating a website from scratch. I was inspired to start doing it in February 2002, after my mum took a computer course but failed her exam because she forgot to close a link, and her complete article acted as a link to the next page (instead of a single word). I vowed to learn HTML (HyperText Markup Language – the code that I used to make all of the web pages) to avenge her fail.

Actually, it was more out of boredom and also because I couldn't afford a mega WYSIWYG website package like Front Page (though I looked at it longingly in the shop for a bit). I bought a book called HTML Complete and it really did live up to its name. It taught me how to make a page. The reason that my websites look a bit home-made compared to more shiny and polished sites is that they have been created using mainly handwritten HTML coding. Rather than this being a problem, I soon realised that there were potential benefits; the pages are very quick to load in browsers, and I also feel that my sites stand out a little bit and are unique because the code has been handwritten rather than generated by a software program that thousands of other web designers are using.

From the start, it was fascinating to be able to change the colours of page backgrounds and add links, and save them all in one folder. It was really exciting. I "ooohed" to the novelty of adding pictures, and "aaahed" to the fun of creating tables. In the end I finished up with a basic page shape that I liked. A colourful page, with a links bar at the top, a heading, a site logo .gif (image), a small .JPEG photo, and a white table in the centre with the text in. I stuck with that style of page, and then later copied the idea (and coding) for English Banana.com.

Channel Z started out on local radio. Back in 1998, I had a friend at university called Lucy who did a one hour show every week dubbed "The L Zone" on local radio station Radio Ceredigion. We got together some other drama students and actually performed the first six scripts live on air, the first episode going out on 14th January 1998. Did anybody hear it? Yes, statistically, they must have done. (Although that person no longer lives in Wales!) We had a lot of fun doing it, usually without even a cursory rehearsal; just reading from the scripts into the studio mic. After Channel Z I started writing a sit-com set in the time of the English Civil War, which also didn't get very far. That was called "Evening Playing" and was really

enjoyable to write. I suppose it was a sitcom inspired by Blackadder, but without any funny gags. Later that year I graduated from university and got a sensible job with the British Civil Service. (Although not long after that, in early 1999, I took a one-month intensive TEFL training course, with the hope and expectation of teaching English abroad.)

Channel Z is still floating about online, as a subsection of English Banana.com, on the same server. I hardly ever update it, and never get any feedback about it. It feels a bit like a neglected tea towel, half hidden out of sight in the laundry cupboard of my life. I would like to get my hands on it one day, gather all of the characters and plot strands together, and make a book or play out of them. Re-reading some of it recently, ten years down the line, I was hooting with laughter. But maybe that's just me... There is a proper story outline somewhere, with a conclusion to the whole plot, so if you would like to know what happens in the end to Rodney Clambake and Michael Macintyre, please do get in touch!

Making the Channel Z site – which was essentially recycling and embellishing old content that I had lying around – was a really useful learning curve for me. It's where I first learned the basics of how to make pages with content and link them together; how to make images and banner ads; how to create a unified whole out of a group of pages and images; how to code and, most importantly, how to promote a site online – both with the search engines and through exchanging links with other sites and directories.



English Banana.com (reg. 17th December 2002)

December 17th: I registered the englishbanana.com domain name.

Though I had had some good feedback for Channel Z and I enjoyed writing stuff for it, it was still mainly all about reading from a monitor. (Which is not that much fun at the best of times, is it really?) I had learned so much from doing Channel Z, but I wanted more of a challenge. I really wanted site visitors to be able to interact with the site – to have a deeper experience than simply reading text. I began working on English Banana.com in the autumn of 2002.

English Banana.com first went online on the free Lycos Tripod server as part of the same domain as Channel Z (members.lycos.co.uk/mattpurland/), a few weeks before Christmas 2002. (For the first six months of the site's history, the domain name englishbanana.com was pointed to this free hosting package.) The first ever index page (see above) had a nice picture of Crich Stand in Derbyshire, and a windswept field, until a helpful student at work pointed out that this was "boring" (he was quite right) and suggested that there should be pictures of people on the front page, rather than a field. (He was right again – although he did specify that all of the people on it should be "fit" women...) The sentiment on the home page of the original site – "Feel free to copy as much stuff as you want from this site..." – is still very much alive today.

While I wanted the site to be interactive – I wanted to create a more tangible relationship with my site visitors – the other aim at the outset was for it to offer something of real value to students and teachers of English and Drama. I wanted it to appeal mainly to adults, but realised that some of the material could be useful to teenagers and children too. I also wanted the site to be a bit more compact and user-friendly than the rambling mass of pages over at Channel Z. That's why I designed a template page that could be used again and again, with the same main links on it. I copied the design (and colour) from a page on Channel Z, and decided to kit out the whole site in the same salmon red colour, rather than use different colours for different sections, as I'd done on Channel Z.

Although the English Banana.com website now comprises well over 1,400 pages, the first set of materials on the site was fairly scant. It was a modest start. Just the collection of

descriptions of classroom games, a few interactive Javascript quizzes (made using free software that I'd downloaded called Web Questions 2), plus links for link exchanges (which had proved really useful in building up the Channel Z traffic), and a home page. There wasn't even a "Quizzes" option on the original titlebar. That came later, and the "Games" option pointed merely to the static descriptions of classroom games, rather than to any Javascript or Flash games. A few months later I found code online for some free Javascript games – at sites like Javascript Source – and added them to the games home page. This would prove to be really significant for the site... but more on that later!



2003 (visitors: 66,759; page views: 207,902)

This was one of the earliest home page layouts, when there wasn't that much content on the site. I owe a debt of gratitude to these unknown faces (whose pictures came from a stock pictures CD-ROM) for lending the site a certain gravitas and studiousness. (Especially the older chap who wasn't even looking at the camera, he was so cool.)

This page had the familiar titlebar that had been with the site since it started in 2002 and would continue on the home page until 2007. Also prominent were banners for Channel Z Television, and Sites for Teachers, a site which really helped English Banana.com to get off the ground by providing lots of great teacher traffic that has – wonderfully – continued to this day. Note the links for adding to favourites and making the site your home page – which also helped the site to become more established, as people saved the bookmark and began returning to English Banana.com again and again...

Free Printable Worksheets

The site really began to take off, though, when I invested in Adobe's Acrobat software in March, which enabled me to start adding printable worksheets as .PDF files that could be downloaded and used freely. I learned the important lesson that web traffic goes up – big time! – once you start giving away free stuff.

The worksheets started to build up slowly, from 50 to 100, then 150, then 200 and so on. I had excellent support from the Sites For Teachers website and I quickly realised that it was necessary to integrate links to them into the key pages of my site. I added a new set of sub-heading links to all my main pages, including basic stuff like the facility to “set as homepage”, “bookmark this site”, and other peripherals like a polls page, tell a friend, guestbook (all free add-ons from Bravenet.com) and an awards page. I had an early boost when my site was added to the now-defunct web directory Yahoo!igans (“The Web Guide for Kids”) in February 2003, and also when my site won Site of the Month at the influential and well-established English Club website one month later.

Whilst the English Club award really meant a lot – coming as it did from a highly credible source – it was quite fashionable at this time to apply for and get “awards” from all sort of websites, that were sometimes no more than a way for the awarding site to acquire a free link on your page, in return for lending an air of credibility to your site. One of the most common “awarding bodies” around was “The Golden Web Awards”, and Channel Z and English Banana both won a brace each in consecutive years.

Throughout 2003 I kept on plugging away at building up the resources on the site – worksheets, quizzes and games – and the monthly traffic continued to grow steadily. It wasn’t until September 2003 that the site started getting above 1,000 page views every day, with 38,164 pages viewed in total in that month. After that things just started getting plain silly, with 61,188 in October and 91,353 page views in November. By the end of the year I was staggered when I realised that the site had had over 200,000 page views in the whole year; in the same way that I now feel surprised and amazed when the site gets over 4 million page views in a single month! I was enjoying writing the resources – the topics for which sprang from the needs of my learners at work at the time, who were more than happy to test out my ideas and the worksheets that would then end up online.

Teachers and students are always hunting for fresh materials online. I know they are, because I’ve done and still do the same myself, so when you find a great site on the web with lots of free content, it’s a happy day indeed! I felt like this when I first clapped eyes on all the free downloadable material that was freely available on Macmillan Publishing’s One Stop English site. In general, it seems that many people view the internet as a free resource – a kind of virtual treasure trove of downloadable stuff that they can share with their friends whenever they like (e.g. music, films, games, pictures, and so on). The nature of the web allows them to do this.

Why should online materials be free? It seems that we expect stuff from the internet to be free. Maybe it’s because we know that the distribution costs are so much lower than for physical products. Or maybe it’s because free is just better than paying for something. When searching online for free worksheets for my ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes, I had been getting annoyed by the all-too-common experience of finding great teaching sites which offered high-quality educational materials, getting excited about using them (getting my hopes up), and then slowly realising that there was a catch of some kind. That you could only access a few pages, or that you had to sign up to receive something, or worse still – pay...! As a teacher using the web, I knew what I wanted, which was high-quality, free, useful materials to give to my students. It was my aim to provide this on English Banana.com. (I also got a kick out of being different from many other sites in not charging or making visitors sign up for the materials.)

Interactive Quizzes

During the first part of 2003 I began adding interactive quizzes to the site, at three different levels: Elementary, Intermediate, and Advanced. Early quizzes included “Days of the Week 1”, “Parts of the Body 1”, and “Meet Arnold Palmerstone – the most boring man on earth”. I tested them out on my adult learners at work and was delighted with their reaction. They were engaged with the pages and enjoyed adding their answers. This was exactly the kind of interactivity that I had wanted to create when I conceived English Banana.com. It encouraged me to write more, and the site content grew in three directions: quizzes, .pdf worksheets, and Javascript games.

Drama Scripts and Poems

Like Channel Z Television, the drama scripts and poems were material that I already had lying around. The poems had already been added to Channel Z in 2002 under the title “Playing in the Snow”, and I added the drama scripts to the site in order to increase the amount of free content for visitors. I don’t know whether anybody has performed any of the scripts because I have never received any feedback about them. I studied Drama at the

University of Wales in Aberystwyth, and wrote and produced “An Elephant’s Memory of Cakes Once Thrown” as a student production in 1996 whilst in my second year (see below). I wrote “Waterfall – A New Version of Chaucer’s Pardoner’s Tale” the following year, with an eye on producing it, but ran out of time at uni. The “poems” were mostly written between 1994-1996 and were originally songs that I had composed on my acoustic guitar. Yes, there are original tunes for each of them!

Paid Hosting

June: I upgraded the website to paid hosting – on a Lycos server. This felt like a big step because I was investing money in the site for the first time, but I was hugely encouraged by the growing number of site visitors and wanted to see how far English Banana.com could go. Also I wanted the site to look more professional, without all of the Lycos Tripod ads on every page, which came automatically with the free hosting package.

Letters to Publishers

May-November: I sent out unsolicited copies of a prototype English Banana.com workbook with a covering letter to a few ELT publishers, including Macmillan and OUP. Here’s an extract from my letter to Macmillan Publishing:

“Dear Sir/Madam, I am writing to enclose a copy of a book that I have written – ‘English Banana.com – the second book’. I wondered whether Macmillan Publishing would be interested in publishing it. The book has its own website – www.englishbanana.com – where the worksheets have been originally posted for free download by surfing teachers and students. The book brings together some of the best recent worksheets, along with answers. It is aimed at ESOL and EFL teachers, although it could be used by students themselves as a self-study tool. It is divided into skill sections, with each page being an individual worksheet, suitable for photocopying for class use. All the material is original work, and at present the book is in prototype form...”

Like any writer I wanted to get my work published – properly published. I had some correspondence with them, but nothing came of it. It became clear that photocopyable worksheets of the kind that I was producing weren’t part of the business plan for this kind of publisher, which makes its income largely from volume sales of books to language schools, rather than selling a single book to each school that can be photocopied.

Online Games

Adding online games to the site was something that I had not planned to do, but I was really excited about this section of the site once I got started, and was very happy to learn a little about editing Javascript files in the process (I stress, “a little” – the slim volume that I bought on Javascript has, due to lack of time, stayed on the shelf since I bought it). I added the games from various sources, including JavaScript Kit.com, and The JavaScript Source. Games from early in 2003 included: “Write a Tall Tale”, “The Instant Story Recipe”, “Pong”, and “Snake”. This was before the multitude of free Flash games that exploded onto the web. These original games were fun, quirky, and – importantly – interactive. Plus, they seemed to capture the imaginations of some of the students who were visiting my site.

English Banana.com became a member of GEM – The Gateway to Educational Materials (a directory of educational websites) in June 2003.

The First Book

By August 2003 I was in a position to be able to put together as a free download an 80-page .pdf book containing some of the best worksheets and activities so far. This is from the introduction:

“Hi there!... and welcome to the first ever English Banana book! This book brings together some of the very best worksheets for teachers and students of English from the English Banana.com website. Whether you are a teacher or a student we hope that you will find something here to inspire you and make English language learning fun and relevant. The worksheets can be photocopied freely and are primarily intended for use with Entry Level students, although they will also provide useful practise for learners at all levels...”

The Second Book

“The Second Book” followed soon afterwards, containing material for students at intermediate level. Material from both books was redistributed into the three books that followed over the next two years – the Big Grammar Book, Big Activity Book, and Big Resource Book – along with lots of new material. At 88 pages long and with full answers and notes for use “The Second Book” – like its predecessor (above) – represented something really worthwhile for teachers to download for free, and both books soon became very popular on the site. From the introduction:

“While the first book was aimed primarily at Entry Level students, this one is aimed at higher level students, either Intermediate Level or Level 1 (ESOL Core Curriculum), depending on how you choose to label them.”

At the time I was teaching adult learners from many different countries at a private training provider in Derby, UK – students who, for one reason or another, were living long-term in the UK, rather than foreign language students who were visiting on holiday. The name of the subject that I taught was ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) and it’s clear from the jargon in my introduction that I was trying not to limit the usefulness of the material to one kind of teaching situation. As time went by, as I received feedback from site visitors, I realised that the material had wider appeal and was being used in all sorts of situations, and countries. In prisons, schools, with adults, with children, with teenagers. I tried to make the material as neutral as I could – without lots of culturally-specific pictures – so that it was just for “learning English”, rather than for students of any particular age, nationality, or acronym (ESOL, ESL, EFL, TOEFL, and so on). I think that this helped to widen the appeal of the worksheets.

Big Grammar Book

November: The Big Grammar Book (ISBN: 0954698509) was published. It was effectively self-published. I applied for the ISBN number; I made arrangements with the printer, and for distribution via my website; I sold copies to friends, and packed and posted them to customers from the site; I set up a business account as a “sole trader”. Nobody told me I couldn’t do it: I just did it! The Big Grammar Book was really a compilation of all the grammar worksheets from “The First Book” and “The Second Book”, plus some new material. I was writing all different kinds of worksheets – Vocabulary, Spelling, etc. – but the grammar ones were proving most popular (so the site stats were telling me), so I felt that a compilation of the best grammar worksheets would be the best commercial prospect. The original price was £8.95, which gave me a small profit after the printing costs. I sold a few of the first copies to friends, and gamely my manager at work bought a copy for our department, which I really appreciated!

The Big Grammar Book has always been the most popular of all the English Banana.com books and materials, and I think that that is really due to the word “Grammar” in the title. Simple as that. So why not produce a “Big Grammar Book 2”? Well, I like variety in all things in life and I was happiest writing different kinds of worksheets under the headings that I used

from “The First Book” through to the Big Resource Book: Grammar, Spelling, Vocabulary, Reading, Speaking & Listening, and Research. The truth is that I get bored when working on the same kind of thing for too long.

More Awards!

November 11th: The site was awarded Techlearning Site of the Day. They wrote:

“This site has a wealth of language arts games along with solutions. Complete with grammar rules, quizzes, punctuation tips and links to utilizing the site in different languages, the site serves as a digest, with games for students from elementary through high school level.

“Free worksheets by subject might prove most useful for educators, leaving the games links for students to explore on their own time. A vast list of topics (in .pdf or .jpg format) are available for download including reading, writing, flash cards, vocabulary, listening and speaking, to name a few. For those wishing to use the text version only, that option is available.”

November: We were awarded The Busy Educator Award by Marjan Glavac, editor of The Busy Educator’s Guide to the World Wide Web. It was awarded exclusively to “sites which benefit Busy Educators.”

At about the same time we were nominated for the New Statesman – New Media Awards 2003. Well, self-nominated! For these awards site owners could nominate themselves – so I lost no time in doing just that – two years running. It made English Banana.com look really good – and provided a free picture link for the New Statesman’s site into the bargain!

2003 had been a really productive and positive year on English Banana.com. I had produced three books – the third being a “proper” publication. The number of pages and visitors easily outranked anything I had achieved with Channel Z Television, and this, combined with positive email feedback and site awards, spurred me on to write and add more worksheets, quizzes, and games. Everybody likes to be liked! The aim was all the time to increase the content on the site, and to make it quality content – something really useful for teachers and students, that would encourage them to tell their friends and increase the number of visitors to the site.



2004 (visitors: 408,545; page views: 1,428,966)

As the amount of content on the site grew – look, there are now 600+ free printable worksheets already! – so the home page menu had to develop. I added a search box, which seemed like a good idea, and stuck with the same people in the pictures, who had done such a sterling job (although the chap in the top right-hand corner had to make way for a featured link). There are still no ads on the home page and I still think that the yellow and salmon pink go quite well together. It must be early 2004, because there's still a Christmas message on the home page...

Google Ads

April: I set up an account with Google AdSense and their distinctive text ads appeared on the site for the first time. It was just an experiment, really, and at first I wasn't making more than around £75 per month from the ads, but it was enough to pay for the hosting and a few small outlays, and marked the beginning of the monetisation of the site.

Avanti Books

I first contacted Avanti Books in the first half of 2004, having found their number on the internet. They were helpful from the outset, saying that they would take a copy of the Big Grammar Book, have a look at it with a view to stocking it, and give me some feedback. They liked it and ordered several copies. Since then Avanti Books have been the main stockist for English Banana.com books and CD-ROMs. It was encouraging because it made the Big Grammar Book feel like a "proper" book. It certainly spurred me on to get moving and bring out a follow up – as well as the CD-ROM that would bring together in one collection all of the worksheets that I had produced to date.

Online Store

During 2004 I sold books and CD-ROMs via the English Banana.com online store, which stayed online for more than three years. I never sold a lot of stock, although some months I was processing orders for around 30-40 items, which made it feel busy. I shopped around for a payment provider and thought about online merchant solutions, e.g. from my bank, but chose PayPal because of their efficiency and – crucially – low fees. I don't know whether I would have sold more stock had I used a proper merchant solution that was able to process debit and credit cards, rather than PayPal (which at the time required you to be a PayPal member and log in to pay), but I do know that I would have had to pay a lot more – around £30 a month, and I wasn't prepared to take the risk in finding out, having no funding for the site, apart from a small ad revenue, profits from the online store, and my own monthly salary.

Yahoo! We've Made it into the Top Directory!

August: English Banana.com was added to the Yahoo! Directory of handpicked sites – the biggest and best-known web directory. This gave the site a significant boost, as well as lots of new traffic – and no doubt helped to increase its rank in Google too.

The First 500 Worksheets (CD-ROM)

August: The First 500 Worksheets (CD-ROM) (ISBN: 0954698517) was published. By the end of 2003 I had worn my fingers to stumps writing worksheets (OK – it's a bit of an exaggeration!), and I wanted to gather them all together in one place – on one disc. It was the same impulse that made me develop the ELT Resource Bank, which superseded the First 500 Worksheets CD, putting it out of print in March 2007; and the same impulse that is today making me put all English Banana.com materials together on the – massively updated and totally comprehensive – Version 3.0 of the ELT Resource Bank. It wasn't too hard to sell the CD-ROM and it was a pleasure to send out, being much lighter to post than the Big Grammar Book – around 60g compared to the BGB's 800g!

English Banana.co.uk (reg. 16th October 2004)

16th October: I bought this domain for around £400. I had been angling to get it all this year, because it had already been registered and was owned by a private individual, who wasn't really using it for anything. I figured it would be valuable in protecting my "trade mark", and have hung onto it ever since. Although it has merely forwarded visitors to the main site at englishbanana.com, I believe it's worth having, since it is a British site – and also so that nobody else can use it! Over the years individuals unconnected with English Banana.com have set up their own websites using various misspellings of "englishbanana.com", and covered them with links to shopping sites and obscure search engines. I guess that it has garnered them some wayward traffic – and income – as clumsy typists have tried, and failed, to reach www.englishbanana.com. I've taken this mostly as a tribute to the success of my site, although perhaps the owners of "misspelled" sites should try to think more originally...

Big Grammar Book (.pdf Version)

October: the Big Grammar Book (.pdf version) (ISBN: 0954698533) was published. I was thinking of new ways to get my books to people – and make money from them at the same time. Putting the actual .pdf file on the site for free download – the most direct way – was absolutely out of the question and off the radar at this point. I didn't have to make many of these CD versions of the books, because I didn't sell very many copies. The Big Activity Book and Big Resource Book were also sold on CD, but they were all made out of print in September 2006 – purely due to lack of interest from customers. Plus, by then the wind was blowing more in the direction of giving site visitors what they really wanted – all of the books online, and free to download.

Books For Sale on Amazon

October: English Banana.com books go on sale on Amazon. I held an Amazon Advantage seller's membership for around four years. It felt great seeing my books available for sale on Amazon, getting reviews and gaining sales ranks. I felt just like a real author, and it gave the site a boost, lending a certain credibility to the material. One of the reasons for the steep price hikes for the books – from the original £8.95 for a Big Grammar Book, to the current price of £29.95 – was the fact that I had to give Amazon a big discount for them to sell the books. They passed on some of the discount to the customers, and I got regular orders for one or two books at a time. I left this scheme in 2008 because it was no longer cost-effective for me to send single orders to Amazon.

Big Activity Book

November: The Big Activity Book (ISBN: 0954698525) was published. As the follow up to the Big Grammar Book, it was aimed at higher-level students (Intermediate instead of Elementary level) and was an amalgamation of material from the first two books (see above), along with the best new worksheets from 2004, that hadn't gone into the Big Grammar Book. I felt encouraged by my experiences with the Big Grammar Book and the new CD-ROM collection of worksheets, and I wanted to extend my range of items to sell online. This new book included all of the descriptions of ESL games that had existed on the site since the beginning, and also a special section using research that I'd been doing on the vowel sounds of the IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet).

It was split into subject areas (Grammar, Vocabulary, Spelling, Reading, Speaking & Listening, and Research Skills), which made it much more varied than the Big Grammar Book. It was also more playful, with quizzes in the Research section on topics such as "Design a Board Game" and "An A-Z of English Slang Terms". The worksheets always reflected the work that I was doing with my students in my classes when I wrote them, so you can be sure that my former students will remember stuff like "The Joy of Abstract Nouns" and "Reading Comprehension 6 - How Much Money Do They Have?" – along with lots of other material from the Big Activity Book (and the other books too).

Big Activity Book (.pdf Version)

November: The Big Activity Book (.pdf Version) (ISBN: 0954698541) was published. It was made out of print in September 2006.

Clip-Art Photos

This section of the site came about because I wanted to increase the volume of content on the site, and – being a budding amateur photographer – I had a growing number of photos of places that I'd visited just lying around doing nothing. I felt it was better to share them with people online, rather than have no one see them. I got the inspiration for adding this section when out for a walk one day with my camera in Kedleston Park, Derbyshire, near my then home of Belper. It was very nice to be able to make an online archive of some of my favourite pictures, and it's great to be able to add all of the pictures – plus some unseen ones – to Version 3.0 of the ELT Resource Bank. The free photos section was marketed on the site as "*Exclusive, high-quality, royalty-free! Perfect for home and school projects!*" and featured the first ever instance of an English Banana.com licence. The licence underneath each photo read:

"The photo on this page is © copyright English Banana.com 2004. All rights reserved. It is permitted to copy and use the photo for personal use or non-commercial use only. Please credit the photo to www.englishbanana.com. If you wish to obtain a licence to use this photo for commercial purposes, please do get in touch. To read our copyright policy, please click here... [link to FAQs page]"

The aim was to allow private individuals – e.g. students and teachers – and not-for-profit organisations to copy, print, and use the images, but not commercial businesses. I have had a couple of enquiries from businesses wanting to use the images, but they backed off when I wanted to charge them for using an image – one company wouldn't pay £50 for commercial use of one of the pictures. I don't know whether anybody has used the pictures in school and home projects, because I haven't had any feedback to that effect, but I assume that they must have done!

November 21st: The site was awarded the Mackey Web Design – Gold Award.

The judges commented: *"We have found that your site is well thought out, very pleasant to look at, and serves a definite purpose. It is compelling to its viewers, has informative content, originality, excellent design, and leaves in its visitors' mind the image of a quality site."*

English Banana.com was (self-) nominated for the New Statesman – New Media Awards 2004.

New Year's Eve Domain Name Buying Spree!

31st December: in a burst of mild paranoia – and because I wanted to have them – I bought and registered eleven "englishbanana" domains in one (fun-filled...) evening: www.englishbanana.biz, www.englishbanana.org.uk, www.englishbanana.net, www.englishbanana.info, www.englishbanana.tv, www.englishbanana.eu.com, www.englishbanana.me.uk, www.englishbanana.us, www.englishbanana.org, www.english-banana.co.uk, and www.english-banana.com. That was a busy couple of hours! I did it all before going out to a New Year's Eve party. I arrived late, but not too late to hear the chimes of Big Ben on TV! Having chased and bought the domain englishbanana.co.uk earlier in the year, I was becoming more aware of "English Banana" as a brand, and wanted to prevent other people from setting up rival sites that could potentially damage that brand. Of course, nobody did, and I let almost all of these domains expire after two years without renewing them. These days I'm happy to have the main domain: englishbanana.com, and two other important variants: englishbanana.co.uk, and english-banana.com.



2005 (visitors: 775,696; page views: 3,589,936)

Again, as the number of features on the site grew, the site needed a bigger – and better – menu on the home page. I feel that this was really the classic home page layout and design for the English Banana.com home page. It's neat, looks nice and does the job well. I maintained the theme of smiling faces – bringing back some of our old friends from 2003, and adding a new face, plus some people walking away into the sunset (why?) – and added the “What's New?” link, which linked to the English Banana.com blog (version #1) that kept readers up to date with site news and additions. I also wanted to show how long the site had been online. “4th YEAR ONLINE!” seemed like a big achievement back then. In reality, by January 2005 the site had been online for just over three years, but “4th YEAR ONLINE!” sounded somewhat better I felt! Still no ads on the home page...

Unpublished Comedy Sketches

December 2004 - February 2005: I had a writing competition with a friend where we both had to write a comedy sketch every week on an agreed theme. We did six before we ran out of interest, or time – or both! Although they are fairly unrelated to English Banana.com, they can perhaps give you an idea of what my writing was like when I wasn't busy writing worksheets.

Recognition from the British Council

April: English Banana.com was voted “Website of the Week” by the British Council.

This was a really nice tribute to get, firstly because the British Council are an august body with influence in many countries around the world, and secondly because they know their onions when it comes to teaching English. It meant a lot. They commented:

“This is a useful site with lots of free resources for teaching. There are games, quizzes, worksheets and even drama scripts all designed for English language learners.”

Since then English Banana.com has also been featured in various British Council newsletters, which have helped to bring lots of new visitors to the site.

April: The site was (self-) nominated for the New Statesman – New Media Awards 2005.

Press Adverts

April: I began paying for press adverts for the website and books, in the Times Educational Supplement newspaper and Big Issue magazine. I really wanted to invest in the site in 2005, and get it better known, because I believed it had a great offer for teachers and students. At that time I felt that print marketing was the way forward, but I remember thinking what a lot of money it was for such a small area of page. Plus, there was no way of telling how many people visited the site as a result of seeing the ads in print.

Gordon Barrett – Film Critic

2nd April: At the same time as writing worksheets and planning new books, I was itching to do some creative writing, along the lines of Channel Z. I wanted to be able to write in short installments, and felt that a fake blog would be the best way to go. Blogs were all the rage, and I set up a blog using the name of my hero, the rather unpleasant 50 year-old early-retiree and amateur film critic Gordon Barrett. I even took the – somewhat premature – step of registering two domain names for the project: www.gordonbarrett.co.uk and www.gordonbarrett.com. I posted on the blog (as Gordon) between March 19th and April 3rd. It seems I lost interest after two weeks. I just couldn't focus on the writing for long enough. It was good fun at the time, though.

The idea behind the blog was that the misanthropic Gordon would provide some rather amateurish and ill-informed reviews of contemporary films, books, and TV shows, as a self-appointed web critic. The contemporary nature of what he was reviewing would ensure interest from the search engines (which it did). At the same time, readers would gain insights into his (rather sad) life, and that of his wife Marion and his wan teenage art-student son Hugh. Of course, the character was meant to be satirical, although at least one person took the site too seriously when Gordon wrote in praise of the Conservative Party (I received an item of hate mail from a Labour supporter!). Here are some extracts from the blog:

“Review of ‘Hitch’, starring Will Smith [blogged on 19th March 2005]:

“This evening Hugh and I went to see ‘Hitch’ which is a film starring Will Smith. Hugh persuaded me to accompany him because I wasn’t going to go out tonight, I had a lot to do in my shed. But off we went and I must say I was pleasantly surprised ... One of the most surprising scenes was when Will Smith’s already large ears grew to the size of plates and his face became hideously deformed. We certainly hadn’t seen this coming ... The leading lady was very pleasant, but one couldn’t help comparing her unfavourably to Elizabeth Taylor. One feels that she (or Doris Day) would have made a better job of the comedy in the script than Eva Mendes. I had not been aware of her works prior to this film, but Hugh informed me in the car on the way home that she is some sort of supermodel. One highlight had to be the presence of Bond himself – Pierce Bronson ... The evening was marred when Hugh unexpectedly lost his wallet in the car park as we arrived and it was left for me to pay for both of us ...”

“Review of ‘Thank You For The ABBA’ – Long Norton Children’s Amateur Saturday Drama Club (LNCASDC) [blogged on 28th March 2005]:

“Marion and I spent the weekend staying with my brother Derek and his wife Madge. They live in the small Norfolk village of Long Norton, which is in the middle of nowhere, to put it bluntly. It took us five hours to get there on Friday, since we spent most of the journey behind a royal blue tractor. When he finally pulled over into a beet field we hit roadworks near Little Snittering, at which point I turned off Classic FM and put on one of my wife’s relaxation

technique tapes ... On Saturday night we accompanied Derek and Madge to the village hut to see a large-scale cabaret performance of 'Thank You For The ABBA' by Long Norton Children's Amateur Saturday Drama Club (hereafter known as 'LNCASDC'). There must have been over 80 children involved and they had come from many neighbouring hamlets to take part. I can't fault the scale of the producers' ambition.

"The show ran for well over 3 hours with two intervals, during which raffles were taken and refreshments were provided. I myself won a small bottle of Scotch, while Marion won a 'Bee Gees' album. She is not a fan, but will pass it on to Hugh, who may have some pleasure from it ... I was glad I went, although the tickets at £3 (£2 concessions) were on the slightly pricey side, and I had to undertake some discussion in order to get my concession ticket. I pointed out that I was a retiree and the charming forty-something lady on the door (pudgy, with glasses, but refreshingly womanly in appearance) said 'I can't believe it. You look too young.' At which of course I was charmed. My delight turned to perspicacity when I realised that she was using this argument to potentially force me to pay the full whack price of the ticket. She pointed out that all proceeds 'Are going to the Tsunami.' I take it she meant the appeal. I reluctantly paid all ... Overall a charming production, which was marred by poor singing from one youth (Nathaniel Robinson-Brown), who had several long numbers on his own and in duets. When he began singing (badly) numbers from the 'Super Trouper' album I started a slow hand-clap, but it didn't take ..."

Paid Downloads

July: Still looking for the best way to get my content to people – whilst ensuring that they paid for it – I put the Big Grammar Book, Big Activity Book, and The First 500 Worksheets CD-ROM online for paid download, with payments managed via PayPal. The idea was that after people had paid there would be a period of time when they would wait (until I manually picked up their email), before receiving a link to a page where they could download the file. Around this time I also experimented with some relatively expensive bespoke software, that I had made by a local company and paid for, which would allow shoppers to receive the download link automatically after completing their payment. I sold several downloads in this way, although the automatic system didn't last many months, due to an absence of customers.

An Elephant's Memory of Cakes Once Thrown

August: Again, I was looking around for content that I could add to the site and found an old play that I had written whilst at university in Aberystwyth. I had directed it in early 1997 as a student production in the upstairs room of a small pub in the town called "The Cooper's Arms". I re-typed the script and spruced it up a bit so that I could add it as another English Banana.com product for paid download. For the back cover blurb I described it as: *"an engaging and original coming-of-age drama which explores the themes of friendship, forgiveness, escaping ghosts of the past, and learning how to give away your most precious possession – your heart – to the one you love."* It sold exactly zero copies, but I included it on the original ELT Resource Bank, and it can also be found on Version 3.0. Under the English Banana.com Free Copying Licence anybody can put on a performance of this play, without charge, but I've yet to hear of anybody doing so. It featured some nice songs and a variety of performance styles, and was an enjoyable production – although as a wholly extra-curricular activity it rather distracted me from my second-year university coursework! The picture of the girl on the cover (from a stock photos CD-ROM) represents the main character, Dee.

Picture Dictionary

September: The Picture Dictionary grew out of a desire to make use of a stock photos CD-ROM that I had, and also the wish to make something interactive for my students to use at work. I developed the concept of an image without labels merging with an image with labels using the "ImgOver" HTML tag. I think that the concept works well, and the Picture Dictionary could be expanded, but I ran out of steam after the initial couple of batches of words due to:

a) the novelty wearing off, b) other, bigger projects waiting in the wings (e.g. the Big Resource Book about to be published), and c) lack of time in general. The .pdf Picture Dictionary quizzes were good fun to print out and use with small groups of students, and although the Picture Dictionary was (and still is) far from comprehensive, it represented a new free feature to advertise on the site, and more quality content for the site visitors.

Big Resource Book

October: The Big Resource Book (ISBN: 095469855X) was published. I had been working on this follow-up to the two previous books throughout the second half of 2005. It took the same format as the Big Activity Book – Intermediate level worksheets covering a range of skills. It contains some really fun activities – like “Calculator Code Words”, “The Amazing Maze Game”, and the “Spotlight on the United Kingdom” series of quizzes. It was full of material that I had been doing with my adult learners during this year. By now I was feeling confident enough in my experience as a teacher to be able to prescribe information-based worksheets such as “15 Common Grammar Mistakes in Written and Oral Work” and “Tips for Better Written and Oral English Work”.

I had been getting a lot of feedback from teachers who were working in many different teaching situations, telling me that they really enjoyed using the worksheets with their students. This was good to hear, and accordingly I tried to make the appeal of the worksheets as broad as possible. I understood the need for different acronyms in professional environments, but I was determined to write material for learning “English” rather than specifically for any different strand of teaching. I wrote in the introduction:

“Judging from the many emails we receive, you’re finding our materials helpful in lots of different learning environments, including schools, colleges, prisons, and home schooling groups. The worksheets are designed to be flexible, so feel free to adapt them to suit your needs, whether you’re teaching Basic Skills Literacy, ESOL, EFL, ESL, EAL, TESL, TEFL, TESOL, or even just simply English! It’s all about helping learners to improve their English skills – reading, writing, speaking and listening – and that’s what the aim of English Banana.com has always been.”

This was the first English Banana.com book to have a dedication: to my seven month old nephews Liam and Daniel, and babies belonging to my old school friend Sarah – little Tommy – and my friend from university, Rachael – little Sarah.

Big Resource Book (.pdf Version)

October: The Big Resource Book (.pdf Version) (ISBN: 0954698568) was published. It was made out of print in September 2006.

Now we are three! Or five, if you include the earlier two books. Three heavy manuals of worksheets in the online store (and with offline distributors) somehow seemed like enough. I didn’t consciously decide that the Big Resource Book would be the last big book of assorted worksheets, but having three “solid” products (plus the CD-ROM) gave me a kind of licence to think about something different for the next book... and different it was!

Free Books and CD-ROMs Programme

Oct ’05 - Mar ’06: With income coming in from ads and sales of books and CD-ROMs, plus a site that was growing in popularity and in people’s affections (judging from the many positive emails that I received), I wanted to give something back, so I set up a scheme whereby books and CD-ROMs were sent out to site visitors who requested them. The catch was that they had to show in writing that they were teaching “in difficult circumstances”. Of course, this was encouraging people to send in, in effect, begging letters, but I couldn’t think of a better way to separate those who were able to buy the books and CD-ROM, from those who weren’t able

to. Furthermore, I calculated, rather crudely, that by sending free books and CD-ROMs to people who couldn't afford to buy them anyway, my sales wouldn't be affected, so I had nothing to lose.

Over this approximately five month period I sent out eleven free books (heavy books!) and 28 free CD-ROMs, paying the costs and postage from my business account. I was bowled over by the – relatively – high number of requests that I got for free products. Some days I got as many as eight requests by email, which was a lot for a relatively unknown website. It made me think differently about English Banana.com materials, and reminded me that there was a world out there who either wouldn't – or just couldn't – log into a website like PayPal and pay \$60 plus postage for a book of worksheets. But how to separate out those who could pay from those who couldn't?

English Banana.com Store on eBay

November: Looking at lots of different ways to sell the books and CD-ROM, I opened an online store on eBay, and advertised it for some months using banner ads on English Banana.com. By now the books were relatively expensive – the high price being justified (I believed) by the fact that they contained photocopiable material – and eBay browsers were (and maybe still are) almost wholly bargain hunters. They wouldn't even consider the meagre price of £10 for a Big Grammar Book or Big Activity Book. I realised that eBay was a buyer's market, and decided to stick with my own online store, whilst also approaching specialist ELT retailers in the UK to see if they would stock my products. I did find a few more stockists, to add to Avanti Books and Amazon, for example Cambridge International Book Centre in the UK.

Penny Download Day

23rd November: This was a curious experiment. Without any prior warning for regular visitors, I put a notice on the home page telling people that they could download the Big Grammar Book (.pdf version) for one penny via PayPal – just for one day! I had intended the download to be free, but the mechanics of the PayPal payment system meant that I had to charge a minimum amount. I didn't simply put the file online for free because I wanted to track how many people took part in the experiment. About fourteen people took advantage of Penny Download Day, which was fourteen more than would have paid £10 or more to download the file on the same day... More food for thought. Demand for the books was there, but how to get paid?

Free Postcards

December: I was using a paid service from Bravenet.com which allowed visitors to my site to choose and customise a postcard and mail it to their friends automatically, thus providing free viral marketing for English Banana.com. This was a successful feature of the site for over a year, and resulted in lots of new visitors – although I wouldn't say thousands, but perhaps hundreds! At the end of 2005 the site was offering a choice of four Christmas-themed postcards that visitors could send. Over the years the amount of Christmas-related material has varied. I have always been aware that the site is used by people from all over the world, from many different cultures and religions – not just from Western, Christian traditions – and have tried not to go overboard on different holidays, in a bid to make the site as inclusive as possible.

“Rosalind” Project – Secret Free Downloads

22nd December: In the midst of running the “Free Books and CD-ROMs Programme”, and after “Penny Download Day”, I developed a scheme where hand-picked users could access a password-protected folder on English Banana.com, and download all three English Banana

books (.pdf versions of the Big Grammar Book, Big Activity Book, and Big Resource Book), plus 512 printable worksheets for free. The people selected were initially those who were contacting me about the free products, but I hoped that I would be able to expand this group into a kind of mailing list, keeping the existence of the download area relatively secret. I named the project "Rosalind" after the heroine in my favourite Shakespeare play "As You Like It".

I sent out emails to people with the username and password, and watched the stats for this page with keen interest. After several weeks though it became apparent that fewer people than I had hoped were accessing the files, and I was still getting requests daily for hard copies of books and the CD-ROM. Maybe it was too complicated for people to access the page – with the instructions in English. Maybe the people who wanted the hard copies didn't have access to a printer, or even reliable internet access. I don't know exactly, but like many things that I have tried on English Banana.com over the past six years this idea fell by the wayside. However, this project was another step on the road towards making all of the books and materials available free online, which I would start to do within twelve months of "Rosalind".

30th December: I registered another (rather ungainly – and utterly unnecessary) domain name: www.englishbanana.uk.com. What was it about the end of the year and the impulse to register unwieldy domain names?



2006 (visitors: 1,194,141; page views: 6,140,608)

Er, what happened here? Did I really put this online as the home page? This was back in the era when the games section of the site was starting to become popular. Can you tell that I wanted people to play the games? In hindsight this is an awful design, but there's a homely note with the "Thanks to Jennifer..." message. The rest of the menu (as of 2005) continues below the fold, i.e. the bit that you have to scroll down to see.

2006 – The Fallow Year

In 2005 I had spent a couple of thousand pounds on the site – both promoting it (e.g. the print ads) and on adding new features that would hopefully attract either new income (the pay per download software) or new visitors (the postcards system), not to mention hosting costs which kept going up in line with the ever increasing number of visitors. In 2005 the number of pages viewed (3,589,936) was way up on the previous year (1,428,966), so I must have been doing something right. Sales had been relatively good throughout 2005 and during the last three months of that year the income from the ads was just starting to increase to something more significant. However, over the preceding five years or so, I had – by the benefit of various overdrafts, loans, and credit cards, and for various reasons – managed to achieve a personal debt of around £12,000. As I faced the new year 2006 I decided to take stock of my and the site's financial positions. I wrote a short manifesto in which I determined not to invest money in the site during 2006, but to use all of the income generated to help pay off my debt. And that's more or less what I did. My resolution read as follows:

"2006 – The Fallow Year!

"Aim: after three busy years, to use the fourth "fallow year" to end non-income generating activities (e.g. print advertising) and pay back £4,000 in 10 months from English Banana.com income to various debts that have built up in the course of growing the business (incl. x2 overdrafts and credit cards)."

Selling Individual Worksheets for 15p Each!

Feb - April: It seems astonishing to see this now, but I was selling individual worksheets (with the answers) for 15p a time on a site called Payloadz.com. They sold, but not in any great quantity. Let's face it, I wasn't going to become rich selling ten worksheets per day at 15p each. Even with my limited maths skills I realised that. I was also offering the three books for paid download on the same site.

Podcasting, Audio Lessons and Video Lessons

The podcasts originated from my desire to add syndicated content to a feed that could be published all over the web. The buzzwords of the day were "RSS – Really Simple Syndication" and "Podcasting", that is creating small nuggets of content that could be advertised by way of a web feed in lots of different directories online. I began by syndicating content from pages of English Banana.com – a new page every day would be listed on the feed – but this developed into making short audio lessons, using a cheap microphone and free software from Audacity. Podcasting was all the rage, and – not shy of jumping on a passing bandwagon – I spotted a great opportunity to promote English Banana.com material in many of the new podcast directories that were springing up everywhere on the web – and the podcasts really did spread the englishbanana.com URL far and wide on the web. Plus I wanted to learn how to make an audio lesson. How cool! Somebody, somewhere else downloading and listening to my lesson! My interest in the audio podcasts waned after ten outings, largely because I was keen to try my hand at video podcasts.

I didn't have a video camera, just a video function on my digital camera, but that didn't stop me having a go! I figured that the originality of the content would make up for the poor quality of the resources. Another bonus with video podcasts was that they could be uploaded to YouTube – the site of the moment – and also embedded on my site, making it look up to date and "with it". I made ten English Banana.com video podcasts in all, mainly using the free Windows Movie Maker programme to put together animated sequences, rather than a video camera. As with other areas of the site's development, I didn't invest in it really, although this was "The Fallow Year". Had I bought a shiny video camera, would I have produced better videos – and more videos – and got more hits, and more this and that...? Yes, maybe. Like with the audio podcasts I ran out of steam after a while, but the great thing about the web is that the material you create can stay online and form an archive or library that anybody can dip into at any time.

EU Domain Names

7th April: I registered www.englishbanana.eu and www.english-banana.eu as a precautionary measure. One which was, in hindsight, absolutely unnecessary. But you never know!

I Can Learn English.com (reg. 11th May 2006)

Summer: In May 2006 I got engaged to Anna, a Polish lady whom I had met during the course of my work the previous autumn. Although she speaks English very well, I wanted to be able to talk to her family in Poland, and this site was the product of my trying to teach myself Polish. The site was online in its own right for about a year, but was amalgamated to become part of English Banana.com in 2007, as Channel Z had been before it. I borrowed the central design feature – how the vocabulary words change from Polish to English and vice versa, using the "ImgOver" HTML tag – from the Picture Dictionary HTML, and this method of learning words seemed rather innovative. It was great to be able to design a completely new website from scratch, using what I'd learned from making the previous two. The vocabulary sets were Polish words that I wanted to learn – basic things for beginners, like "Days of the Week", "Fruit", and "In the Bathroom".

The site was successful for me, since I managed to learn almost all of the words! I got some good feedback about it; for example an email from a primary school teacher who suddenly had to teach several Polish children alongside English pupils in her class, as a result of the large number of economic migrants coming to the UK from Poland after its accession to the EU in 2004. However after the initial burst of energy – making thirty different vocabulary sets – and despite an attempt to use the “technology” with another language, French, I got bored with the site and/or other things took over. I’ve always had only a limited amount of time to work on English Banana.com (having been employed full-time as a teacher throughout the site’s existence), as well as a limited attention span for making any one kind of resource.

Check It Again! (Book One)

1st June: Check It Again! (Book One) (ISBN: 0954698584) was published. It wasn’t published as a CD-ROM due to the lack of sales of the previous titles. I started working on this book in the second half of 2005, when the Big Resource Book was in its final stages. I wanted a break from books of worksheets, and had been collecting typos from newspapers, leaflets, and magazines, etc. throughout 2005. I wanted to encourage my students – and readers – by showing them that even trained professional native speakers of English are prone to making errors in language from time to time. I grouped the errors into six categories: “apostrophes”, “articles”, “doesn’t make sense”, “punctuation”, “singular / plural”, and “spelling”. I was careful not to use each extract “as is” (for copyright reasons), and wrote a new text whilst keeping the same mistake or typo from the original text. I included copious notes and answers for each error and an “A-Z of English Grammar Words” – stuff that my generation (schoolchildren in the ’80s) weren’t taught in English lessons at school.

I was inspired by Lynne Truss’s mega best-selling book on punctuation “Eats, Shoots & Leaves”, which had sparked an improbable nationwide interest in the apostrophe, and believed that my tome could be equally popular with both language students and native speakers of English (you can’t fault the scale of my ambition!); a book for reading on the loo, or on the bus; for dipping into and testing your knowledge of grammar and punctuation marks. Sadly, the book didn’t take off or sell well, but it enjoys a “long-tail” life on English Banana.com online and download sites such as Download.com and Scribd (more of which below). I optimistically named it “Book One” of a series, and I do have enough material for more Check It Again! books but, I fear, it’s destined to remain an oddity: a curate’s egg of a book – the least popular English Banana.com book by far. I still believe in it, though (as any proud parent would!), and feel it to be an original and helpful little book for practising some of the niceties and nooks and crannies of written English.

Moved Hosting to Yahoo!

20th June: This was a great boost for “The Fallow Year” concept because the Yahoo! webhosting price plan was far cheaper than the Lycos deal. The hosting with Yahoo! was also more user-friendly and much easier to navigate.

English Banana.com’s Channel on YouTube.

14th August: I started the English Banana.com channel on YouTube, so that I could upload the video podcasts that I had been making (see above).

Ad Revenue Freefall

Oct - Dec: From its zenith in the second quarter of this year, ads from Google AdSense began to show a serious and worrying decline. For the first time I thought about the possibility of registering with other ad companies, and applied to several different ones. Bearing in mind the aims of “The Fallow Year”, ad revenue had become a more significant issue, particularly as it had grown steadily from autumn 2005 to the middle of 2006. No longer just pin money to

cover the hosting charges (which had in any case been significantly reduced by my switching provider), I looked to the ad revenue to help me out with my credit card debt. I was forced to consider the uncomfortable possibility of losing this revenue. If that happened, would I still keep English Banana.com online, now featuring over 600 free printable worksheets? After all, I wanted to get something of value from the site too...



2007 (visitors: 2,211,358; page views: 11,701,442)

This is from February 2007 and it's the first time that we can see an ad on the English Banana.com home page. It was quite a nice layout, with text making it clear for visitors (and, crucially, for the search engines) what the site was all about, and it was clear what the site was offering by now: "750+ Free Printable Worksheets...", the games, the quizzes, and the free books... Free books?! Wait a minute! I'll come to that soon! Everything that is still available today on the site. But I feel that this version of the home page lacked a little sparkle, or passion, if you will. There are no pictures – apart from the ad – and the whole thing looks kind of, well, functional.

I added the RSS and XML buttons, for the feeds (audio and video podcasting) which I felt made the site look a tiny bit Web 2.0. I was still using the original titlebar that was on the site back in late 2002, but this page looks a bit boring and uninspired compared to the 2005 version, don't you think? The photos of people's faces made the latter seem more friendly and welcoming.

All Worksheets and Books now Online for Free Download (But Page by Page – not Complete Books as Single Downloads)

By the autumn of 2006 the site was offering around 750 free printable worksheets for free download – with no strings attached. This was more than I had ever seen offered online anywhere on the web – without subscription or membership, or a catch of some kind. I was still holding out on putting the books up for free download, because I saw them as an important income generator. The ads were doing far worse than I had anticipated, but I was still selling a steady number of books per month – at high prices: £39.95 for the Big Resource Book, and £29.95 for the other two workbooks. I didn't need to sell many to make a healthy profit.

I was still wrestling with two seemingly unrelated, but nevertheless interwoven, issues: 1) How to make money from the materials, and 2) how to give away the materials to those people who couldn't afford to pay for them. By the end of 2006 I was busy making a download page for each book, which would enable any visitor to download and print each page of each book. I figured that the extra hits I would get from the search engines by listing all of the page titles of each book, with links to .pdf and .doc files, would bring in more visitors, leading to more ad

income and perhaps better book sales. At the same time I had always been aware that whenever anybody printed one of my worksheets and photocopied or distributed it, they were creating a form of advertisement – and a new potential audience – for the website, because each one carried the English Banana.com logo and URL. Perhaps monetisation by page views with ads on them would be more profitable in the long run than hanging onto the books and making individuals pay high prices for them – the income from the ad companies paying a few cents each time for many page views, outweighing that generated by the relatively few customers who were paying big prices for the books.

As you can see from the home page image above, by February 2007 all three workbooks (plus Check It Again!, plus all 750 worksheets, along with other resources) were online for people to download – but one page at a time. I still held out on offering the books in one complete .pdf file (which is what feedback was telling me that people really wanted).

Ads from Burst Media

January: By January 2007 I had CPM ads from Burst Media on the site, as well as ads from Google AdSense. The Burst Media ads were initially there as an insurance policy in case the AdSense ads continued to get worse, but the CPM ads started to do well, and by the end of February I had replaced many of the Google ads with the new ads.

ELT Resource Bank (CD-ROM)

1st March: The ELT Resource Bank (CD-ROM) (ISBN: 0954698592) was published. Having made the pages and files for the online versions of each English Banana.com book, it seemed like a good time to put together a new compilation CD-ROM. After all, it was now three years since The First 500 Worksheets CD had been published. The original ELT Resource Bank was much smaller than Version 3.0, but still contained a lot of material for teachers and students. It wasn't the complete archive that this CD-ROM now is, lacking, among other things, the interactive quizzes, audio and video podcasts, and clip-art photos (and content from my other two sites: Channel Z Television, and I Can Learn English). I felt it was a better package and looked more professional than the former CD-ROM, although The First 500 Worksheets CD has sold more than five times as many copies.

ELT Resource Bank Programme

Feb - April: As a way of introducing this new product on the site, I ran a promotion where people could apply for a free copy. The blurb read:

"We have a limited number of copies of our new CD-ROM – 'ELT Resource Bank' (RRP £25.95) – to give away free to people who are teaching or learning English in difficult circumstances. We know that many regular users of English Banana.com live and work in situations where to pay £25.95 (plus postage and packing) in British Pounds Sterling is simply not possible.

"If you would like to receive a free copy of the 'ELT Resource Bank', simply send us your name, address and email address, and tell us why you need to receive a free CD-ROM from English Banana.com. There are no strings attached, and no charge to you – we will even pay postage and packing!

"We look forward to hearing from you!"

This is one of the many emails that I got back, which I found so inspiring – and humbling:

From EP in República Dominicana: *"I'm teaching english for free to a group of teenagers that are my kids friends, as they can not pay for it and I want to teach my kids I decided to create a 'English Club' for 10 of them. I prepare the lessons myself but is hard for me, because I*

have to do it at night and my lunch time, as I have a full time job I use the internet in my lunch time to find things that can help me with the lessons. I found this site preciselly looking for 'free printable pairworks and exercises'. Please let me know if I can count with you."

In total I sent out sixty-five free ELT Resource Bank CD-ROMs to people in many different countries all over the world. I received up to ten requests per day. It certainly kept my local post-mistress busy, looking up the small packet rates for many far-flung destinations! It also proved that there was a real appetite for free hard copy materials. I pondered: how can I send out hard copy materials to everybody who wants it? The answer was, of course, that at that point in time, working on my own, with a family and a full-time job, I couldn't.

EB Forum

April - August: I had always been fascinated by finding effective ways to get feedback from site visitors. A forum is very attractive for a site owner, because it generates a lot of page views and clicks, and the content is created by your visitors, rather than by you having to exert any pressure on your brain. Having tried (just for a few weeks) a couple of times before, this attempt was the closest I got to running a forum on English Banana.com. The original intention was to create a place where teachers could visit to swap teaching resources, links, and anecdotes, etc., but it failed to attract any visitors, so I started adding flash games from the main website to the forum. Oh yes, then it became more popular! I started making visitors sign up as a forum member to play some of the more popular games from the main site, and several hundred people – kids mainly, I guess – took time to register for the forum. This was better, but it still barely generated any discussion among the users. They just wanted to play the games, as they had done back on the main site.

So, how do you generate discussion on a forum from scratch, without a small, dedicated band of people who already know each other, posting to keep each other amused? I still haven't worked out this conundrum! As well as the games, I started posting material that I was writing for a project called "English Banana.com Schools". It was a collection of all the basic forms and paraphernalia that you need when you're planning and administering an English course (see below for more details). I was getting hits for the games and for this material on the forum, and people were signing up, but there still wasn't any discussion between English Banana.com site visitors themselves.

April: I added thirty-nine new games to English Banana.com. It had become my habit to add big batches of games at regular intervals – for example before the start of a new school term – to keep the games-loving kids happy, rather than adding one or two new games every week.

Negative Feedback

Hard as it may be to imagine, for a site that gives away so many free learning materials, I get negative or offensive feedback about English Banana.com every single week. It usually comes from kids who are visiting for the games, and falls into one of several well-defined categories:

Kids complaining about games that they find offensive:

Marina wrote about The Idiot Test: *"I really think that the idiot test is cool, except I don't think you guys should put 'YOU FOOL' if someone gets something wrong, because it may be affending to some people. just to let you know."*

Crystal wrote about Monkey Cliff Diving (in which you have to save monkeys who are jumping off cliffs from being dashed to pieces on the rocks below – yes, I know...!): *"I think this game was cruel and unnessasary. Forgive me, but I think it is your worst game yet. I love your site (and so does my SIX year old brother) so I was very disapointed."*

Live Web Chat on English Banana.com

June: At the same time as the (ultimately unsuccessful) forum was running, I tried an experiment with a (paid for) live chat application from Bravenet. This allowed my site visitors to chat to each other in different parts of the world, by both hooking up to the application. To my knowledge nobody ever actually held a chat online using this application on English Banana.com, and I quickly buried it. You win some, you lose some. I just couldn't make English Banana.com a venue for chat – either here, or in the forum. By August 2007 I had closed the forum and moved the EB Schools material, and other useful posts to the newly-created English Banana.com Google Groups page (see below).

English Banana.com Schools

June: This material started its life as content for the new English Banana.com forum (see above), but grew and expanded into a comprehensive collection of blank forms and assessments that could be used by teachers to plan and administer a course. Not course materials, but all the bits of paper that you have to fill in before, during, and after the course to keep records on each student, and to make sure that students are in the right level groups. I have used the forms – particularly the initial assessments – with many different students in both the UK and Poland. The idea was that the site could now offer teachers materials with which to: a) plan and run their courses, and b) teach their courses. At the same time as preparing and writing this set of materials, I had a freelance job offer to write fifty printable worksheets for Pearson Longman's ELT website. I got as far as writing a sample worksheet for them. The problem was that they couldn't offer any editorial support and I would have had to have done all of my own corrections and rewrites for the same (rather modest) fee as writing the worksheets. I declined the offer, preferring instead to finish writing the English Banana.com Schools materials.

July: I Can Learn English.com moved across to the English Banana.com server. I felt that the site wasn't really going anywhere in terms of increasing its numbers of visitors or hits, and I didn't have time to update it, or develop new resources for it. I thought that it would give better value as part of the English Banana.com domain, than as a separate "dead-duck" site. Plus I was able to put ads on some of the I Can Learn English pages, which I hadn't been able to do before.

Copying Licence

1st July: The original English Banana.com Copying Licence became effective and was published online for the first time. The idea behind the Copying Licence was to make clear in strict terms what people could do with English Banana.com materials. It grew out of the experience of putting all the books online (page by page versions) and making the EB Schools materials. The offer on the home page was now quite unique, the idea being that a teacher anywhere in the world could, with the help of English Banana.com materials, plan and run their course, and charge to cover their costs, without paying a penny. In fact it felt a long way from "Penny Download Day".

The reasoning behind the licence was charitable and humanitarian. By this point I was making a sizeable amount from the ad money and book/CD-ROM sales per month, but the materials were still locked tightly into a traditional copyright straitjacket. The following text is from the English Banana.com "Frequently Asked Questions" page from 2006:

"It is permitted to either print the worksheets while online or download each file separately and print from that while it is on your computer ... All material on English Banana.com is protected under UK and International law. All worksheets and books have copyright notices on them, which give due notice of this. No material may be resold in any form or any media ... No material may be added to any other server without the express permission of English Banana.com ... all the free worksheets are photocopyable. You don't need permission to copy them. That's why we have a notice on every worksheet, which hopefully makes our

photocopying policy crystal clear: 'This worksheet can be photocopied and used without charge.' My feeling is, what's the point of printing a free worksheet if you can't use it?

"However, what we do request is that no material from our site is packaged for sale, in any shape or form or in any media, either now or in the future ... Please note that our photocopying policy for English Banana.com books that have been purchased is slightly different from the above, and can be viewed on the front flyleaf of each book: 'Photocopying Notice: All worksheets in this book may be photocopied without charge for use by the purchasing individual or institution. Permission to copy does not extend to additional branches of an institution. All other copying would require prior written permission from the publisher.' ..."

Instead of hitting people with legalese, as I had been doing (ironically, all paraphrased from copyright notices in traditional course books!), I believed more and more that if people used and distributed the materials, more people would visit the website, which would mean greater ad revenues and book sales, so more money all round. Motivated by both a desire to make money for my family and a genuine humanitarian and utopian desire to help people as I had been helped over the years (I remembered in particular the many years of free education – including teacher training – that I had enjoyed) I wanted to get the materials out there: to set them free; for charities and private individuals to feel that they could print and copy English Banana.com books and CD-ROMs and distribute them, or sell them to raise funds.

At this time there were still three restrictions within the Copying Licence: "1. You may not repackage and resell English Banana.com materials in order to generate a business profit. 2. You may not upload English Banana.com materials to an internet server. 3. You may not capture English Banana.com materials in frames on a website." The first was intended to stop mainstream publishers from taking my work and making a lot of money out of it, whilst the second and third were intended to protect the integrity of my website. The first restriction proved the most confusing for people. I received many emails checking whether they could use the licence in their particular situation, e.g. at a training provider, the remit of which was educational, but which was still a commercial organisation. It took me nearly eighteen months to address this issue with the second version of the Copying Licence in December 2008 (see below), but for now this felt fantastically radical, and a big step forward in terms of making my materials more freely available and more useful. I didn't use a Creative Commons licence, e.g. "Some Rights Reserved", because I didn't feel that any of them fitted exactly what I wanted to permit with my licence.

I even splashed out on a press release to market the new Copying Licence: I paid a PR company about £150 to send out my press release to relevant publications. It seemed – to me – an amazing offer, but I didn't get any press from the release. Here's an extract:

"Publisher Permits Teachers to Copy and Sell Books and Materials Without Charge:

"New Offer From ELT Materials Publisher www.englishbanana.com. September 24, 2007 – Popular educational website and publisher English Banana.com (<http://www.englishbanana.com>) launches its unrivalled Copying Licence, which permits teachers worldwide to raise money for their courses by selling and distributing English Banana.com materials, including books and worksheets. Under the new licence, teachers may freely copy the English Banana.com materials to their own computers, servers or intranets for use throughout an organisation, and may freely sell (or give away) the materials on CD-ROM or in paper format – meaning that the materials can not only be used in the classroom but be reproduced and sold on disk or as worksheets, bound books or manuals, without any requirement to pay royalties or commission to English Banana.com. This offer applies to students, teachers and any employee working within an educational organisation (e.g. a school, college or university) or within a not-for-profit organisation ..."

All Books Now Online for Free Download as Single Files

19th July: In line with my thinking at the time about making the materials more available, I put all the English Banana.com books online as single downloads. For the first time, visitors could download a complete copy of any or all of the books for free. Initially this was through the englishbanana.com server, but after a few months I started adding the books to Download.com, which really helped because: a) they provided free hosting for the downloads, and b) they were a well-known and trusted place that people visited to reliably download software. At the same time, the fact that the books were available spread throughout the cnet.com network – the parent of Download.com – and from there via search engines throughout the web. By 1st September 2008 I was able to estimate that more than 100,000 English Banana.com books had been downloaded in just over a year – since 19th July 2007 (downloaded from englishbanana.com, Download.com, and Scribd.com – more of which below).

This number far outstripped my expectations and was absolutely extraordinary for me as the author, working without a “professional” publisher. According to “Globalization and Language Teaching” (2002) by David Block and Deborah Cameron, “... a successful [ELT] course book could sell over a hundred thousand copies a year ...” My books were achieving a similar distribution – with barely any marketing – although without profit! Of course, if I had sold all of the books that had been downloaded I would be a very rich man today. To have a bestseller in the UK top 10 hardback non-fiction chart in May 2008, an author would have needed to sell only 870 copies of his or her book, according to The Times. “Talk a Lot Spoken English Course Elementary Book 1” was downloaded 1,875 times in a single week in December 2008, making it #5 on the Download.com list of the “Most popular Language Software downloads”. All of the software titles ranked above my book were items that you had to pay for – mine was the only free title in the top 5. This figure doesn’t include all of the many (and uncountable) downloads from file sharing sites, where people have uploaded my books for wider distribution – despite them already being free and included in the Copying Licence! In the absence of a mainstream – or any – publisher, is it better to give away the materials for free, than allow nobody to use them whilst all the time “waiting to be discovered” by a proper publisher?

Google Groups

August: The failure of the forum notwithstanding, it was still necessary for the site to have a space online – preferably part of the main site – where I could post news and ephemera related to English Banana.com. Prior to the forum I had had a page called “What’s New?” on the site, that I regularly updated with news and things that I wanted to flag up on the site, e.g. new quizzes, or games. I started a Google Group, which gathered a few members. I was able to email them from time to time for updates. Members were also able to email each other. The group ultimately died because one member began sending offensive messages, that went to all of the other members, some of whom complained – quite rightly – to me. I was disappointed that I still wasn’t able to start an online group or forum where members could discuss English language issues and teaching together, but better things grew out of the Google Group, in the form of the English Banana.com Blog – for news and stray bits of content – and the “English Banana Club” group on Facebook – for contacting members with news and updates (see below).

Better English Lessons – Volume 1

October: I had been working on this major new collection of 201 new worksheets during the summer of 2007, and it was ready to publish online by October. It was basically a collection of all the miscellaneous rough versions of worksheets and scraps of ideas that I had knocking around in my “Ideas Folder”, as well as work that I had been doing with my learners in the first half of 2007, for example the worksheets on the IPA, and the Derbyshire Accent Project. My new thinking towards publishing and making available new material was reflected by the fact that I didn’t even consider making a new hard copy workbook compilation of the best

worksheets, as I so easily could have done. Instead I prepared all of the worksheets to go straight online as free downloads. This collection gave a big boost to the number of free worksheets on English Banana.com, and for the first time I was able to advertise 1,000+ free printable worksheets on the site. This was the first major update that I had added after moving to Poland in September 2007 with my family: my now wife, Anna, and our new baby daughter.

English Banana.com on Facebook

October: Facebook was all the rage, so, in my latest bid for English Banana.com to look like it had moved with the times, I duly signed up, made my online profile, and created the English Banana.com Club group. The group has grown very slowly, but today new people are joining every week, and it's a good way for them to get to know each other – as well as for me to be able to network with some English Banana.com regulars. I can send emails to all members of the group with updates, and post links to new materials. It's still hard to get a discussion going though, although groups with much larger memberships also have fairly spartan discussion groups. The truth is that the vast majority of web users use it to relax and get something, rather than participate and contribute.

We've Got a Widget!

October: In the initial rush of excitement of joining Facebook and starting the group, I discovered a way (via Spring Widgets) to make an app, or widget, for Facebook – “app” and “widget” being the great buzzwords of the time. The widget was a gadgety-looking square of .html code that people could embed on their sites, which contained copious links to English Banana.com pages. I should say that I'm not a technical wizard or computer nerd, but I know enough, and have continued to learn enough over the years to be able to do (most of) what I want to do online with my sites – and I'm still learning today. I don't think that my widget set the blogosphere alight, but it's still available online, and on Facebook, and showed people that English Banana.com was moving with the times, despite being an “old” site from way back in 2002! Truth be told, it felt good just for the site to have survived online since then.

November: I added sixty-six new games to English Banana.com, especially for the winter term at school.

Useful Tools

December: Towards the end of this month I had a flurry of activity adding pages containing useful online tools, such as a translator, a currency converter, world maps, a dictionary, a word of the day, and so on. I had a rather vague idea of English Banana.com becoming a kind of portal – an essential stopping-off place on the web. I think my ambition (for the week that it took to make these pages) once again outran reality because today these pages – though undeniably useful – are visited by approximately thirty four people per day... max! Well, you put stuff online (i.e. throw it against the wall), and you just never know what's going to stick.



2008 (visitors: 4,216,466; page views: 22,949,421)

This was a bit more radical because I completely changed the titlebar, squeezing and squishing it to make it thinner. This was mainly to allow more room on the page above the fold (the part that shows when the page first opens), but it also gave me an intriguing problem to work on on a wet Saturday afternoon!

I liked this version because it had room for lots of feature links, a wide banner ad, and the graphic that outlined the site's main offer (see above). This helped to sum up what the site was all about, and there was also room for visitors opening the page to see that they could download the books. I added the new Javascript menu bar (code that I had paid for), which made it easier for visitors to find all of the site's features, since they'd increased quite considerably since the early days in 2002.

However, it was still a bit blocky and text-based and I wanted something more fun for the visitors, and more flexible for me to be able to announce new things on the site (plus I just fancied a bit of a change), so this version didn't last for the whole of the year.

January: I added one hundred and one new games to English Banana.com for the spring term.

Home Page Experiment / Dog's Dinner / Disaster?

31st January: Er, what happened here? Before the revamped home page shown above, I had created the home page below using Word 2003, and it certainly looked different. Quite a departure from its predecessors. I thought that it looked OK (maybe I was just sick of the old designs), but a few weeks in I discovered that – being a Word 2003 web page – it wasn't supported by Firefox, a browser that was gaining in popularity. In fact, none of the home page links worked in Firefox! I had been trying to be smart, but it was back to the drawing board, and back to the old faithful HTML coding that I knew, loved, and – more importantly – understood.



English Banana Extra (Blog)

10th February: With the demise of the English Banana.com Google Group, and the Facebook group not yet off the ground, I needed somewhere else where I could post news and features. Lots of other sites had blogs, so it was a natural step for English Banana.com to have one. It launched with my first post on 10th February 2008, where I advertised the launch of the ELT Resource Bank free download (more of which below):

“Download 1,000+ Free Printable Worksheets for English Lessons – in a Single Zip File!”

I used free software from Word Press to make the blog and was very pleased with the results, although sometimes it wouldn't work when I wanted to add a new post, or it would do something unexpected for no apparent reason. It was much better than using the Google Group, although this time, mindful of what had happened with the spammer, I didn't allow any interaction or commenting on the blog from visitors. It was a bulletin board for news, but also a place to post original material, like the .pdf quiz from the end of February: “How Did You Feel When...? (English Idioms of Mood/Emotion)”.

I also used it to promote other things of interest to ELT students and teachers, such as the amazing free online “Open Yale” courses (“Become a Student at Yale University – FOR FREE!”). I was able to add multimedia, for example videos from YouTube, and build quizzes around other people's work, e.g. music videos, which I hadn't done before on the main English Banana.com site. The blog sent out feeds to feed aggregators, which in theory should have resulted in more visitors to the posts, but the number of people using the blog started off very small, and has remained small. These days the blog still exists, but it's less important as a place for announcements, largely due to: a) the budding group on Facebook, and b) the new mailing list that I started in the summer of 2008 (see below).

ELT Resource Bank Available for Free Download (That's Everything, OK?!)

February: By the end of 2007 I had put everything online for free download – or so I told myself. All of the books, all of the worksheets – even 201 brand new – NEW! – worksheets. I felt that with this and the Copying Licence I had done everything I could to make the materials freely available, but I knew deep down that I was still hanging onto something: the ELT Resource Bank CD-ROM, which I was selling for £25.95 a time. This was all of the materials on one handy CD-ROM. I tried to tell myself that nobody would want to download such a large .zip file (138 MB), but I knew that people were already downloading larger files than this – e.g. movies, or albums – and I set about preparing this final, previously unavailable, product for free download. Mindful that not all English Banana.com visitors have fast broadband, or even any broadband, I made it available in two versions: a complete download (one .zip folder),

and a “Download Folders Separately” version, which enabled visitors to download each of the twelve folders, and manually put them together into one single folder.

After this, I really felt that I couldn’t do any more. All of the English Banana.com products were online, free to anybody to download, without membership or fee, and governed by a Copying Licence that would allow people to not only use them in class and at home but also to pay their expenses in teaching classes. What else...?

English Banana Trust

March: Discussions began regarding launching a charity that would support and expand the work of English Banana.com. First we had to decide on the aims and scope of the charity, then begin finding trustees.

May: I added fifty new games to English Banana.com for the summer term.

Talk a Lot Elementary Book 1

1st May: Talk a Lot Elementary Book 1 (ISBN-13: 9780955701511) was published. Since October 2007 I had been teaching a weekly English class in Łukta, a small town 30km from where we lived in Poland. I was writing material for it each week based on different topics and had started to develop a new way of practising tenses, using speaking and listening skills, and memory, called sentence blocks. By the end of the ten week course I realised that I had enough raw material for a complete course book. I hadn’t set out to write a course book, but felt that it would sit very well with the site, because people would be able to use the materials, along with the provisions of the Copying Licence, to run their own courses. Compared to the earlier three books of fairly random worksheets, I was able to offer something immediately useful: a teacher could just pick up the book and start planning their course – with full instructions and answers. As usual, the instructions and answers sections took the longest to write!

By the publication date of Elementary Book 1 I had already finished a draft of Book 2, having developed the material with another group of students in the same school between February and May 2008. Book 2 was much easier to put together, because I already had the template to follow from Book 1. I have taught material from these books in both Poland and the UK, with teenagers and adults from a range of different countries, and have been delighted with the positive responses that I’ve had. It’s straightforward to develop a third book – the same template, just using different topics – and I would like to encourage teachers to develop their own versions of Talk a Lot. Choose a topic; choose some vocabulary words; write some discussion questions; plan some role plays; make everything culturally relevant to your teaching situation, and off you go...

This is from the introduction:

“Talk a Lot is a great new way to learn spoken English, and quite a departure from the standard ELT course book. Instead of spending hours reading and writing, students have the opportunity to engage in challenging and fun speaking and listening activities with their friends ...”

“The Talk a Lot course objectives are very simple:

- *Every student talking in English*
- *Every student listening to and understanding English*
- *Every student thinking in English, and*
- *Every student taking part in class”*

I have been pleased to discover by using the books with different kinds of students in different countries that there really is a lot of mileage for teaching spoken English – stress, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar, and so on – in the Talk a Lot materials.

Casale Media Ads on English Banana.com

May: I put Casale Media ads on the site for the first time. Why have two ad companies on the site generating income, when you can have three? That was my reasoning, and it has worked out well so far – fingers crossed!

Books and Worksheets Downloadable from Scribd.com

In June 2008 I discovered the new document-sharing site, Scribd.com. It was billed as “the YouTube for documents” and it has been a terrific place to share English Banana.com worksheets and books. In just five months (to November 2008) more than 100,000 of my worksheets and books had been accessed, with the most popular being the books – and Talk a Lot Elementary Book 1 the most accessed by a mile. This site has given English Banana.com a real boost in the search engines because of how often they index Scribd.com, and of course, the unique English Banana.com Copying Licence meant that there weren’t any complicated copyright issues surrounding putting my work onto Scribd, as there would be for other publishers and authors. There has been huge growth in page views and visitors to English Banana.com this year (2008), and I attribute this in no small part to the tremendous opportunity presented by Scribd.com.

English Banana.com Update (Mailing List)

June: Still keen to communicate – “to have a conversation with” – my site visitors, I began an experiment (trial period) with a mailing list provider called Constant Contact. Their software and interface weren’t exactly to my liking, but PEOPLE JOINED the list! This encouraged me to look around for something that I liked better, and I found iContact, which I have stuck with since then. Hundreds of people have joined the list so far, and it’s been a good way to communicate news and generate clicks to new resources, as well as to provide regular lessons by email to some of the people who are the most interested in the site. I’m happy to have this option, as well as the blog, and the group on Facebook. All effective means of targeting the keenest English Banana.com site visitors.

Study English Pl.com

July: I made this site to promote my private business in Poland. It was the first time I had written a site in a foreign language (Polish)! I collaborated with my wife over the content, and tried to make the most efficient use of the space above the fold. (More efficient use than I had ever made with English Banana.com pages.) You can visit this site online, if you want to, at <http://www.studyenglishpl.com>.



A Bit of a Re-design!

August: It was the most radical re-design yet (apart from that bizarre yellow effort at the beginning of the year), but I felt pleased with it. It had links to all of the best content on the site above the fold, along with two picture blocks, on the left, that I could change any time that I wanted to announce new features on the site.

Two important features were back, back, BACK above the fold – the search box and the “Add as home page...” link. They were important because the search box helped visitors to quickly find what they were looking for, and the “home page” bit encouraged them to keep on returning time and again. I should have featured these above the scroll all along, but... oh well, web building is a continuous learning process!

I felt that English Banana.com looked more fun and welcoming at first glance than ever before, and if you scrolled down you could still find all of the links to download the books... And if you kept on scrolling down you could find a distant relative of the menu that was first on the home page way back in 2005 (see above). How things had changed since then!

August: I added fifty new games to English Banana.com in time for the autumn term.

1st September: A big milestone: more than 100,000 free English Banana.com books had been downloaded since 19th July 2007.

Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2

1st September: Talk a Lot Elementary Book 2 (ISBN-13: 9780955701528) was published (see above). This book was dedicated to my wife and daughter (as was the first volume), as well as to Sylwia and Piotr, two friends and students from the original Łukta courses, who had really encouraged me by their positive responses to the embryonic Talk a Lot materials.

Cambridge Free English Club (CFEC)

27th September: By September 2008 I had moved back to the UK for a few months – partly to have a break from life in Poland – and was teaching English to teenagers and adults at a

private school in Cambridge on a three month contract. I decided to try to set up a free English course, and advertised on community site Gumtree.com to see if any students would be interested. I really didn't think that anybody would reply, but was pleasantly surprised when enough students responded for me to be able to start a course within two weeks. Here are extracts from some of the emails that I got in response to the ad:

"Good morning! I'm K. from Korea. Is it really free? Is it related religion? I really want this class. If you don't mind, could you send mail about my question for me? Thank you." – from K.

"Hi, I am 46 old lady from Poland and interested in learn English for free in Cambridge." – from L.T.

"Hi Matt! I'm a young French professional working in Cambridge. Are your courses still on going? If yes, can you give me the details concerning the time, date and location! Thanks a lot." – from V.

"Hi, my name is L., i would be interested on this english lessons for my mother, she is 52 years and already has done a pair of courses, could you please send some information about it? I will be really appreciated." – from L.

"Hi matt, I'm V. from China. I want to improve my English especially the oral English. I'm interested with your class. Could you tell me more details about your class? Hope to hear from you soon. Thanks," – from V.

I arranged the first lesson for Saturday 27th September, at a small coffee shop above a bookshop in Cambridge city centre. It was free for us to meet there – which minimised my costs – and I obtained permission from staff working there before the first meeting. I was expecting around eight students, and three students came, although others expressed apologies via email that they hadn't been able to make it. At the next lesson the following Saturday eight students attended, including people who had read about the course on Gumtree.com and came along on the off-chance. I was using Talk a Lot materials each week to teach vocabulary, word and sentence stress, and for students to practise discussion questions together. There was a nice atmosphere and the students enjoyed it, although I insisted that they bought a coffee, if they could, to support the coffee shop who had provided the free venue.

At the same time I was looking for a more professional venue. I found a church hall where the hire cost was £34 per week for two hours (plus public liability insurance costs), with a minimum booking of 10 weeks. I wanted to book it, but held back because of the costs involved and because I wasn't sure about the commitment level of the students – or how long I would be in the UK. Also, I didn't want the free course to be "related religion". I wanted it to be free, without any strings attached. A genuine good offer. Having gained eight students on the course – which was enough for the venue at the coffee shop – we took up two tables there! – I didn't renew the ad on Gumtree, because I felt that we had enough students. On the third Saturday lesson (11th October) only three students attended. After that, for work reasons, I had to change the day to a Wednesday, and at around the same time I went back to Poland for a weekend, so the next lesson was on Wednesday 29th October. The Wednesday switch meant changing venues too, and we moved to a different coffee shop (opposite King's College Chapel, on King's Parade), where we had even less space. Only two students came – one who had been to every lesson so far, and a new student.

The following Wednesday two students came – again, the same guy who had attended all of the lessons, and a different new student, his friend. I felt that the course had really run out of steam: with no suitable venue, only one regular attendee, and my contract coming to an end within a few weeks, it was time to "knock it on the head" – i.e. conclude the course.

For me it was a good experiment, which taught me that it's possible to put on an English course using very few resources, and goodwill (plus money for a coffee and a cake). Had I stayed in Cambridge more permanently I would have booked and paid for a suitable venue,

and advertised the course – or even courses! – more widely. Clearly there was an appetite for free English courses, in a city where so much learning takes place, but is either expensive, or comes with strings attached – for example, the English classes run by churches as outreach events to attract foreign students to join their congregations (see the rather wary email from K., above).

Why should the classes be free? I taught only ten hours of free lessons in Cambridge, but if I'd charged the going rate I could have made £200 from these hours – more if I'd charged a higher rate. I figured that I was already getting paid a decent salary to teach twenty-one hours per week (which was full-time) in a good private school. It didn't seem much to give away two "free" hours (2 x 45 minute lessons). After all, I had already been paid for my full-time job, so my needs had already been met. It wasn't a sacrifice for me to meet this class on a Saturday morning, or Wednesday evening. In fact, being new to Cambridge, it was a pleasure to meet some new people – and the students were all very nice people. But why shouldn't the students pay to learn English? For this experiment, I didn't apply means-testing or other criteria to work out whether the students on my free course could or could not afford to pay. Perhaps I should have. But I would guess that of the many thousands of foreigners living in Cambridge who don't speak English as a first language – working in hotels, kitchens, shops, and bars, among other places – there are plenty who just can't afford weekly English lessons priced at the going rate of £40 for 90 minutes. I met some of them.

1st November: The first official meeting of trustees from English Banana Trust takes place in Norfolk, UK.

Study Paws.com

My latest website first went online on Wednesday 19th November 2008. On its first day online it got 1,000 visits – all clicking through from English Banana.com. The name itself is a pun: "Study Paws" = "Study Pause", because the site is intended to be a place where students can hang out online during breaks from their lessons and enjoy high-quality educational games, quizzes, and activities. On the site's "About" page I wrote:

"This site can help students enjoy their study break in an educational and motivational way – by playing games, solving puzzles, and achieving learning goals, then clicking through the links on each page to find out more. With each activity or game we have included hand-picked links to trusted sites which students can visit to learn more about the topics or ideas raised. We believe that learning should be fun and interactive, and that it's possible for learning and fun not only to co-exist but to overlap and integrate, thanks to the magic of the internet!"

I don't know whether this new site will sink or swim, but it's really fun trying something new – putting it out there into cyber space, and seeing whether it finds an audience. You can visit this site online at <http://www.studypaws.com>.

25th November: Another big milestone (more quickly reached): over 100,000 English Banana.com documents had been accessed on Scribd.com since June 2008.

Version 2.0 of the Copying Licence – and a New Licence to Run Courses

7th December 2008: The second version of the English Banana.com Copying Licence came into effect. Having written two dedicated course books, I realised that I ought to add something to the original licence making it explicit that people could run their own courses using English Banana.com materials, without paying anything. This became the Free Licence to Run Courses. At the same time I wanted to update the Copying Licence, and to give away that which I was still holding onto – namely the right to use the materials for commercial gain. Thus came about the Free Copying Licence. Notice how I have used the word "Free" in the names of both licences this time, to make it even clearer what the offer meant. I took away all restrictions on who could use the materials, and what they could use them for, and even

explicitly stated that people could use the materials without giving any credit. I had been getting emails throughout 2008 from people unclear about whether they could use the materials in their school, or training provider. Of course, I emailed back and said that yes they could, but it puzzled me that people still felt that they had to ask for further permission.

People seemed to be generally unclear about the terms in the first licence where I stated that: *“You may not repackage and resell English Banana.com materials in order to generate a business profit.”* Naturally, most schools and training providers need to make a business profit, so perhaps herein lay the anxiety for potential users of the licence. I decided to do away with this restriction, as well as the other two on the first licence, and replace it with the more catch-all: *“In short, if you can use English Banana.com materials in any way, this licence gives you permission to use them.”* I hope that this is clearer! I had been inspired by how some of my correspondents were using the materials in their situations and wanted to enable greater use.

Above all, I still just want people to use my materials. Like back in 2002 when I started the site. Most authors want to be read, and I’m no exception! I left in place just one restriction: *“You may not claim copyright to original English Banana.com materials. International copyright for English Banana.com materials belongs to Matt Purland/English Banana.com 2002-2008.”* This was purely so that nobody – no company or private individual – could take the materials and put a walled garden around them, preventing others from using either the materials or the licence.

There isn’t a lot more I can do to make the materials freer and more open aside from making them public domain. Maybe that will be the next step. To those who want to use the materials for education and to help others: great. Good for you. To those who want to use the materials to make money for their charitable cause, or school project, or for their basic daily needs: please do. And to those who want to use the materials to make money for themselves – even a lot of money – go for it. Seriously. Do it – with my blessing.

4,000,000+ Pages in One Month

18th December: The site passed another important milestone when for the first time over four million pages were viewed in a single month. Astounding!

Philosophy and Influences

“Philosophy” is a strong word, but from the early days of the site – from its inception – I had wanted to put materials online that people could interact with, and that would be helpful to them in learning or teaching English. Along the way I have discovered ways to make money from my materials; ways to sell them, and to control them; ways to share them, and ways to set them free. Now I hope that English Banana.com is on the right track. I’m a Christian, and am (sometimes!) guided by this set of beliefs. Far from always getting it right, I have more often than not got it wrong.

This story has many wrong turnings and blind alleys in it. I hope that the way is now clear for people to use this set of materials. It’s not that great an offering. I sincerely hope it’s not the best thing that I will ever write. I would like one day to be able to – and have time to – sit back, relax, wait for inspiration, and bang out a brilliant novel, film, play, or award-winning TV sitcom... Not just English Banana.com materials...!

“Influences” are much easier to list. I like and have been influenced by the following:

Books: Leo Tolstoy, John Irving, Sue Townsend, Victor Hugo, George Eliot, and travel writing. (At the age of sixty-three Tolstoy gave away the copyright on all his works published after 1881, and all future works. Fortunately for his (huge) family, his great novels, “Anna Karenina” and “War and Peace”, had already been written before then.)

Films: Woody Allen, Kevin Costner (I would pay money to watch him read the phone book), The Coen Brothers, Richard Curtis, and Pixar films.

Theatre: musicals such as “Chess”, “Miss Saigon”, “Martin Guerre”, and “Little Shop of Horrors”.

Art: Pieter Brueghel the Elder (especially “Hunters in the Snow”), and Seurat.

Music: U2, The Killers, Pink, Darren Hayes, Arctic Monkeys, and John Shuttleworth. Plus, I like virtually all chart music. I’m not a big fan of heavy metal though, and I can’t get on with modern jazz.

Radio: Scott Mills, Sara Cox, Adam and Joe, Russell Brand, Jonathan Ross, Elaine Paige, and Bob Harris.

TV Programmes: mainly comedy, like Alan Partridge, “The Office”, “Blackadder”, “Curb Your Enthusiasm”, “Adam and Joe”, anything produced by Armando Iannucci, “Seinfeld”, “Cheers”, “Teachers”, and “The Simpsons”.

Future Plans

Nobody knows what will happen, but in terms of revenue – if I’m optimistic – the future may hold more income from ad companies (apart from the three ad companies noted above, I get a small revenue from two additional companies – Chitika and Mochiads), along with more income from sales of books and the CD-ROM. In terms of the materials, I’m sure that I will write more English Banana.com books and materials. It’s hard to know what the fruit of the new Free Copying Licence and Free Licence to Run Courses will be. It’s no longer in my hands what happens to my materials. Maybe people will use them, but I won’t hear about it. Maybe nothing ground-breaking will happen. Then again, maybe something big will happen. Who knows?

It’s probably time to finish this short history of English Banana.com – partly because now I’m just rambling, but partly because it is bang up to date. What will happen will, no doubt, be recorded in the next English Banana.com update.

Matt Purland, Ostróda, Poland – 3rd January 2009