DID YOU KNOW THAT?

FACTOIDS FOR ESL TEACHERS
Factoid 1
Topic: Vocal Skills

Did you know that we think, speak and read at different speeds?

We can think at speeds of around 500 words per minute. However, most people converse at speeds of about 150 – 200 words per minute. During a presentation, a person speaks at a rate of 120-150 words per minute. Speed readers claim to read at speeds up to 800 words per minute, but most of us read at rates below 200 words per minute.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

This is useful to know when giving a presentation.

When a person presents, they speak more slowly (to ensure everyone can understand), but this gives the audience a lot of time to go on ‘mental walkabout’ since the audience can think through the topic faster than the presenter can speak about it. Help keep the audience mentally engaged with extra information in handouts and images in your PowerPoint slides.

Factoid 2
Topic: Writing

Did you know that Microsoft Word allows you to check the readability of a text?

Click on Tools and then Options. Click on the tab that says Spelling and Grammar. Check the box that says Show Readability Statistics.
Now you can display the readability statistics after using the Spelling and Grammar Check. To test it out, click Tools and then Spelling and Grammar. After the grammar check, something like this will be displayed:
How can this information help me as a teacher?

This is useful to know when preparing reading texts for a class. The readability statistics are an easy way to compare reading texts and find out which ones are easier or more difficult for the students to understand. For example, you could aim to give a class passages that fall between 8 and 10. In the final exam, you could make sure that the passage conforms to the level they have been practicing in class.

Factoid 3

Did you know that students have more problems with short words than with long words?

Think about it. Everyday words like ‘get’, ‘put’ and ‘take’ can have many different meanings. Longer words such as ‘globalization’ usually only have one meaning and
that meaning is clear.

As native speakers, we learn to read shorter words (including ‘sight words’) first and then move on to longer words. As teachers, we think that students struggle with longer words, but most mistakes that students make are with shorter words.

A word like ‘make’ is a real headache for an English learner. It is used in English at times where ‘do’ is used in other languages. In addition, it forms confusing phrasal verbs such as ‘make up’, ‘make off’ or ‘make out’. To make it worse, these phrasal verbs often have multiple meanings.

Other short words that cause problems are articles (a/an/the) and prepositions.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

When students are at a reasonably advanced level, they can be expected to still make errors with seemingly ‘easy’ words. This is normal and you can reassure the learner that it does not mean they are weak in English if they continue to make mistakes with ‘get’, ‘the’ and ‘of’.

**Factoid 4**

Topic: Vocabulary

**Did you know that English has the most words of any language?**

In fact, it is debated whether English has the largest vocabulary of all languages, but when we factor in phrasal verbs, it seems to be true.

There are many cases where other languages have only one word where English has two or three. For example, ‘borrow’ and ‘lend’ are the same word in some languages. ‘understand’, ‘figure out’ and ‘know’ can be the same in some languages.

Not only does English have an immense number of words, but many, if not most, have multiple meanings. Even a simple word like ‘dog’ can be a type of animal or it
can mean to follow persistently (doggedly). What about ‘could’? Isn’t the meaning different in each of these two examples?

I could run faster before the accident.
Could I ask you something?

How can this information help me as a teacher?

Students often ask how many words are in English or how long it would take to learn all the words in English. Plus it is estimated that a new word is created every 98 minutes. It doesn’t work like that. Nobody knows all the words in English. However, most people have a working vocabulary of around 35000 words. It is also important for students to understand that alongside discrete words, they need to learn phrases and phrasal verbs as well as alternative meanings for words they already know.

Factoid 5
Topic: Vocal skills

Did you know that we vary our speed when we speak, even within a sentence?

Take a look at the following sentence:

“It’s a waste of time, you know what I mean?”

The second part of the sentence is spoken more quickly than the first part even though it is the same length. Why? Because it doesn’t have a meaning! In English, some words or phrases have a particular meaning, some give grammatical structure to the sentence and some are there to perform a function. ‘You know what I mean?’ carries out a function – to check if the listener agrees or understands. This could alternatively be summed up in one word, ‘right?’ Hence, it is spoken quickly. Important information is spoken more slowly, which is surely good news for English learners.
How can this information help me as a teacher?

A lot of students struggle with their listening. Common issues are that they find the speech too fast to follow or they find it difficult to distinguish discrete words from phrases. If they understand that the important information is usually spoken more slowly and emphasized, it will help them to home in on the part of the sentence they need to understand. You can help them do this by giving exercises where they need to identify which words and phrases are stressed and which not.

Factoid 6
Topic: Pronunciation

Did you know that there are two ‘x’ sounds in English?

The first sound is that of a K plus an S. Here are some examples:

exit  extreme  hex  axe

The second sound is that of a G plus a Z. Here are some examples:

example  exam  exaggerate  exhaust

Of course, ‘x’ can also be pronounced as a Z as in xylophone or xerox!

How can this information help me as a teacher?

Make sure you teach your students both pronunciations.
Factoid 7
Topic: Pronunciation

Did you know that there are two ‘th’ sounds in English?

The first sound is the ‘voiced’ th sound. To make this sound, you place the tip of your tongue between your teeth and vibrate your vocal cords. The voiced th sound is used in these words:

this  that  there  bathe

The first sound is the ‘voiceless’ th sound. To make this sound, you place the tip of your tongue between your teeth and force air out (blow) without vibrating your vocal cords. The voiceless th sound is used in these words:

three  throw  mathematics  bath

The phonetic symbol for the voiced th sound is ð. The phonetic symbol for the voiceless th sound is θ.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

Make sure you teach your students both pronunciations. If their mother tongue does not have the ‘th’ sound, it is likely to be difficult for them to learn and use these sounds. It may even seem uncomfortable for them to use their mouth to form the sounds.
Factoid 8
Topic: Writing

Did you know that a good recommended sentence length is 15 – 20 words?

If your sentences are too short, they will come across as overly simple. However, if your sentences are longer, they will come across as confusing. A good guide is to stick to an average of 15 – 20 words. You can check this, of course, by using the readability tool in Microsoft Word (see factoid 2).

How can this information help me as a teacher?

People get confused with sentences over 20 words. When you throw broken English into the mix, it makes it even worse. Teach the 15-20 words rule to your advanced-level students and make sure they watch out for run-on sentences too.
Factoid 9
Topic: Language Acquisition

Did you know that the speed a person learns English depends on their mother tongue?

It’s obvious if you think about it, but the speed that a person learns English is affected by how similar or different his mother tongue is from English. Languages that are very similar to English are found in countries that are geographically closer to England, such as Holland and Germany. The further away geographically that a country is, the more different the language.

If we compare Dutch or German to English, there are many similarities. For example, you can probably understand ‘Mein name ist John’ even if you speak no German whatsoever.

In contrast, if we look at Chinese, everything seems to be different. The writing system is totally different. The system of pronunciation is different. The grammar is totally different. Many English names are changed in Chinese because they cannot even be written or pronounced in standard Chinese (and vice versa). Not surprisingly, it takes the Chinese student a lot longer to learn English, having to adapt to a new alphabet, new grammar system and a new system of pronunciation amongst other things.

Differences in mother tongue can double or triple the time it takes a student to reach a particular proficiency level.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

European languages all share similarities. If you have been teaching Germans and you take up a job teaching Vietnamese students, you are going to have to adjust your expectancies. If you have a class of mixed nationalities, take it as normal that some will progress a lot faster than others.
Factoid 10

Topic: Language Acquisition

Did you know that English skills can be classified as productive and receptive?

We are used to working with frameworks where we talk about written English and spoken English. We group Listening skills with Speaking skills. We group Reading skills with Writing skills. However, it can also be useful to group skills together as receptive and productive.

Receptive skills refer to listening and reading. These are the skills where we take in information. Productive skills refer to speaking and writing. These are the skills where we produce language. In general, receptive skills are stronger than productive skills. In other words, it is easier to understand language than to produce it. If you have experienced learning a foreign language, you might recognize that familiar feeling where you just can’t think of how to say something although you feel you have enough language to do so.

Native speakers, too, have a large pool of words that they can understand, but a smaller pool of words that they use regularly. For example, many native speakers never say ‘perhaps’ – out of habit, they say ‘maybe’ – but they all know what it means.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

A balanced language test needs to test both receptive and productive skills. If you attempt to test a student’s level through a reading and listening test (which is easier to mark), you are likely to misjudge their actual language ability. Also, you may come across students who seem very weak in spoken English but have a hidden ability to read very well.
Factoid 11
Topic: Language Shift

Did you know that English rules are based on convention?

In some countries, there are bodies that govern the use of language and these bodies dictate what is correct and what is not. English is not like that. English works by convention. That means whatever the majority of people say and do with the language is the correct way to say and do it. Okay, we use the dictionary as a guide, but the dictionary follows convention, too.

Just imagine if everybody stopped saying breakfast and started saying morningmeal instead. Then morningmeal would be the correct word and it would be added to the dictionary. This is precisely the reason why English changes so quickly. Grammar and punctuation ‘rules’ change too, albeit more slowly. Look at the word ‘data’. This is a plural word and the singular form is ‘datum’. Or at least it was. Now everyone uses data as an uncountable noun. You’ll see this reflected in some dictionaries but not others.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

A lot of English learners were schooled on out-of-date textbooks. They get quite anxious over things like when to use ‘who’ and when to use ‘whom’. They need to know that English changes and it changes according to popular convention.

Factoid 12
Topic: Language Shift

Did you know that black used to mean white?

English is such an odd language, but did you know that the word 'black' once meant 'white'? In Middle English, blac, blak or blake technically meant 'lacking in color'. Of course, if something lacks color, it could be said to be black or it could be said to be white. During the Middle Ages, both these definitions existed side by
Finally, in England, the modern meaning of black, as in dark, won out. In France, however, the opposite held true and the word blanc (white) in French is actually derived from the same root as black in English. Compare this with the word blank in English. Are blanks usually black or white?

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

This is a fun example of language shift that you can give to advanced level students. It is also a good introduction to the concept of etymology, again for advanced students.

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**Factoid 13**  
*Topic: Language Shift*

**Did you know that awful and awesome used to mean the same thing?**

Have you ever wondered about these words? How is it that if something is awful - full of 'awe' - then it is terrible, but if something is 'awesome' - having some 'awe' - then it is great? In fact, awful is closer to the original definition. Both words share the root word 'awe', which meant 'fear and terror'. Over time, influenced by biblical texts, 'awe' came to mean 'reverential fear' as in 'the fear of God' and then later took the meaning that we associate with it today - a sense of wonder or shock. It still retains something of its old meaning; American bombing campaigns in Iraq were said to cause 'shock and awe'. So hundreds of years ago, awful and awesome meant the same thing. As the use of the root word awe changed, awesome came to mean excellent, while awful retained the original meaning.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

This is a good example of how English just sometimes does not make sense. There are many things in English that do not make sense and they are related to language shift as well as English being derived from a mix of various languages. It is also a good illustration of how suffixes (-ful, -some) and roots (awe) come together.
Factoid 14
Topic: Teaching Skills

Did you know that teachers do not always represent good language models?

People speak more slowly when giving a presentation (see factoid 1) and ESL teachers have a natural tendency to grade their language down. This is a good thing when dealing with beginners, but as students reach intermediate and upper intermediate level, they need a more realistic model.

My students have often told me that they understand me better than other native speakers. Then one day a couple of my students listened in as I spoke to another native speaker and had a short chat. They amazed me by saying, ‘We didnt understand any of that’. I realized that when I was speaking to the class, it was not the real me talking.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

We know to slow down for beginners but do we remember to raise our language when we deal with more advanced students. It is also an example of how important it is to bring listening activities into your class. You alone are not a good enough language model for them to hone their listening skills.

Factoid 15
Topic: Language Shift

Did you know that the most commonly spoken form of English is broken English?

Or, to put it another way, the most commonly spoken form of English is English as a second/foreign language.
Lets look at the statistics. The number of native speakers of English should roughly equate to the combined populations of America, Britain, Canada, Australia and Ireland. (Although many people in America speak Spanish and many Canadians speak French.) This gives us less than 35million people. Yet when we look at the number of people worldwide who speak English as a second language or a foreign language, the number is over a billion. Since many, if not most, of these speakers are not fluent, that means the most commonly spoken form of English is broken English.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

English is a form of communication, first and foremost. The days when it was tied to one culture or country are long gone. It would be a wise move to teach students a more international brand of English. After all, there are more people who speak like them than there are native speakers.

**Factoid 16**

**Topic: Vocabulary**

**Did you know that specific action verbs make it difficult for learners to read fiction?**

English has a lot of verbs to describe specific physical actions. Here are some examples:

- shrug
- wink
- blink
- shuffle
- snatch
- caress
- whisper
- tap

Although these are not everyday words, there are many of them in English; too many to list here. The place where they are most commonly found are in fiction. Consider the following passage:

*He could not help breathing water in, and that made him cough and choke.*

*He flapped his left arm madly and just managed to keep himself afloat.* He
heaved at the bulky body of the earl, made heavier by its water-soaked clothing. He approached the shore with agonizing slowness. At last he was close enough to put his feet on the river bed. **Gulping air, he began to wade,** still dragging Roland.

- from World Without End by Ken Follett

It is clear that a student who is not well-versed in specific action verbs would struggle to understand the passage; the verb is the most important part of any English sentence. In fact, a student with little knowledge of specific action verbs would struggle to understand any work of fiction.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

Teachers often recommend reading as a way for students to practice their English. However, specific action verbs are not commonly found in English lessons. Cover specific action verbs in your lessons and your students will become more confident readers.

**Factoid 17**

Topic: Language Shift

**Did you know that French has probably had the largest impact on English of any foreign language?**

Starting in 1066, French became the official language spoken in England and remained that way for the next 30 years. During this time, English was thought to be the language of the common folk, while lords and nobles spoke French. French was used in courts and offices too.

To this day, words used for peasant objects, such as shovel or hay are derived from the older Anglo-Saxon and words used by the upper class, such as portrait or court are derived from
French.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

When dealing with speakers of European languages such as French, Spanish or Italian, you will notice that small, everyday words are different in their mother tongue. But longer words, derived from French or Latin, are almost the same. Here are some examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>chicken</th>
<th>house</th>
<th>reproduction</th>
<th>organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>French</td>
<td>poulet</td>
<td>maison</td>
<td>reproduction</td>
<td>organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italian</td>
<td>pollo</td>
<td>casa</td>
<td>riproduzione</td>
<td>organizzazione</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Factoid 18**

**Topic: Language Shift**

**Did you know that English is a relatively new language?**

As anyone who has studied Shakespeare knows, the English of today differs from that of a few hundred years ago. The difference is such that English from a few hundred years ago is difficult, but possible, to understand.

But how old is English? That’s a difficult question to answer. Its origins date back about a thousand years. In other words, it is quite young for a language. However, have a look at this text:
It is hardly recognizable at all. In fact, this is a page from Beowulf, considered to be the first literature produced in English. This text is written in Old English and it dates from no earlier than the 8th century.

English is basically a mix of different languages coming together. It has influences from German, French, Latin, Greek and so on. This is the basic reason that the language is so strange (for example, some past tenses end in ed and some don’t). The mix of different languages created a unique and odd set of grammar rules.
How can this information help me as a teacher?

Students often ask why English has strange rules or many words with the same meaning. The answer is because of its history. English is a mix of many different languages and it is still changing and growing today.

Factoid 19
Topic: Reading

Did you know that the brain recognizes jumbled text as long as the first and last letters are in place?

This is a well-known viral message that circulated on the Internet a short while ago. Can you read it?

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at Cmabrigde uinervtisy, it deosn't mttarer waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht the frist and lsat ltteres are at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a tatol mses and you can stll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe.

The basic premise of the message is true. Isn’t that freaky?

How can this information help me as a teacher?

When I first came across this, I immediately thought of my Arabic students. Time and again I had seen them make spelling mistakes with basic words when they knew better. Their spelling mistakes mirrored the text above. For example, they may spell *comb* as *cmob*. I realized that this had to do with two things: 1) Arabic writing goes from right to left, unlike English. 2) The students were scanning incorrectly with their eyes as they checked their work. They couldn’t help themselves due to force of habit from using their own language.

I also occasionally make this kind of mistake when I type too quickly and don’t pay
attention to what I write. This kind of mistake is tricky to catch when you proofread your own work because your brain tricks you!

The solution, of course, is to proofread as slowly as possible. If you have beginner-level Arabic students, this is a must for them.

Factoid 20
Topic: Reading

Did you know we read and speak in multiword units?

For example, look at the sentence below:

a) The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.

It sounds smooth if we break it into chunks as shown above. What about if we chunk it as shown below?

b) The rain in Spain stays mainly in the plain.

Now it no longer sounds smooth or rhythmic. Why? In a) we split it into lexical chunks - each chunk has a discrete meaning. In b) we split it indiscriminately - the chunks have no meaning.

This system of chunking goes for both speaking and reading.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

A native speaker of the language does this without thinking. For a non-native speaker, however, chunking may have to be learned.

Some languages do not have chunking, such as Chinese. Speakers of these languages need to work on this issue in order to sound natural. To get your students to practice chunking, simply give them a reading passage and ask them to place markers where they think the chunks are, and then read the passage out loud.
After a while, they will find it easy.

**Factoid 21**  
*Topic: Pronunciation*

**Did you know that English is a stress-timed language?**

What this means is that the rhythm that we hear in English speech depends not on the number of words in a sentence, but the number of stressed syllables in those words.

Each word in English with more than one syllable has a stressed syllable. We can denote this using the following simple system of dots:

- mature
- product

- Malaysia
- terrible

The stressed syllables are held longer and spoken slightly louder. Try it out.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

Most students do not understand the concept of word stress until it is pointed out to them. In some languages, like French, words often have the same spelling, but the word stress in a different place (production, organization). In some languages, such as Indonesian, the word stress changes position, but in English it is always in the same place. These issues can make speakers very difficult to understand if they are not addressed.

*Check out  
www.roadtogrammar.com/wordstress  for extended online practice of this topic.*
Factoid 22
Topic: Vocabulary

Did you know that learners often have difficulty with the word say?

As mentioned earlier, short words give learners more problems than longer words. There are two very common issues with the word say:

The past tense of say, said, should be pronounced such that it rhymes with head. You could write it as sed. The third person singular, says, should sound as if it is sez. Many learners dont realize this at all.

We use the word say for writing that is publicly displayed:

- Her t-shirt says Happy Camper.
- The sign says, No Jaywalking.
- What does that warning label say?

Learners get confused when they want to express these things but do not know how.

How can this information help me as a teacher?

Work this info into your lessons. Perhaps you could have a lesson devoted to ways of expressing yourself. We have dozens of words that describe ways of delivering speech: whisper, groan, reply, mumble, murmur, stammer, announce and so on.

Factoid 23
Topic: Vocabulary

Did you know the difference between pronunciation, enunciation, articulation and intonation?

Pronunciation refers to which sounds one says and what stress patterns one uses. If a student is unable to make a particular sound or gets word stress wrong, it is a
pronunciation issue.

Enunciation is the act of speaking clearly without mumbling or slurring speech. Often, to speak clearly, a student simply needs more concentration on the task at hand or needs to speak louder. Some languages, such as Vietnamese, lack consonant word endings and the students may need to concentrate to produce these sounds.

Intonation refers to the rise and fall of a speaker's voice when they are talking. If a learner has good pronunciation (of discrete words), but poor intonation, they will be understood but will not sound natural. Learners from China often have this issue.

Articulation is the physical production of particular speech sounds. We basically make vowel sounds by vibrating the vocal cords and we make consonant sounds by disrupting air flow through our mouths using our teeth or tongues. Technically, problems with articulation can be overcome by training a student how to make a sound using a mouth diagram.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

People often lump all these issues under the umbrella of pronunciation but there is a little more to it than that. To get your students speaking naturally, put emphasis on all four of these areas in your lessons.

**Factoid 24**

Topic: Language Acquisition

**Did you know that there are ‘Aural’ and ‘Oral’ learners?**

Auditory learners acquire new information through sound; they hear grammatical endings and they associate new words with sounds they already know. Auditory learners can be divided into two groups: aural learners and oral learners. Aural learners learn by listening to others. They tend not to take notes in class
because they remember what they hear. They love listening comprehension tasks. Oral learners learn by listening to themselves. They love to talk. Talking and hearing themselves talk is essential to their ability to comprehend information and store it in memory.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

As a teacher, you will wish to make sure that your classes have a good balance of all learning skills – listening, reading, speaking and writing. We think of speaking and writing as practice, but for some learners, it is where they do the most learning. For oral learners, reading out loud is also an excellent activity.

**Factoid 25**

**Topic:** Vocabulary

**Did you know the best way for learners to improve their vocabulary?**

Learners acquire new vocabulary through listening and reading. Some acquire more vocabulary through reading and some through listening. A typical mistake is for the learner to write down a solitary word and write the translation next to it. A better way is this:

A learner should keep a notebook for new vocabulary. When they hear or read a new word, they should write down the entire sentence containing the word. Next, underline the word or phrase they wish to remember.

That’s it. There is no need to write down either the translation or the definition in English. When the learner goes through the notes again, they will be forced to remember the meaning by understanding the context of the sentence. It is a more natural way of acquiring vocabulary.

**How can this information help me as a teacher?**

This is a great study skill to teach as early as possible. It takes a bit more effort from the learner, but it is worth it.