

## ***Jack Scholes (Brazil) interviews Herbert Puchta for NEW ROUTES***

*The internationally renowned young learners expert, Dr. Herbert Puchta, recently toured Brazil under the auspices of Cambridge University Press and kindly offered this exclusive interview for New Routes readers.*

**NR: How long have you been involved in the teaching of English to children?**

**HP:** Well, I started to teach English to lower secondary school children in Austria in the early 70's, so it's 30 years or so.

**NR: That's right, you're Austrian, of course. So, when did you start to learn English?** **HP:** Oh! That's quite some time ago! I learned English as a child at school.

**NR: So what do you think have been the major changes since then?** **HP:** It's changed a lot, fortunately! At that time it was basically grammar and vocabulary. The standard exercises were just devoid of any meaning, basically. These days the focus of teaching in a good young learners classroom is on meaning. It's stories, activities based on information gaps, so children learn from the very beginning to communicate in the language they're learning.

**NR: What are some of the key principles which promote effective and enjoyable learning in young children?** **HP:** Well, for young learners one principle is definitely fun. Young learners learn the language indirectly. They are interested in stories and if the story is good, they want to understand it and in this way they're training their receptive skills. If you're doing a song with them, and they love songs, they will be singing and chanting along enthusiastically and obviously training their pronunciation. The teacher does a guessing game with them, has given them a certain structure which they use over and over again and they want to find out the solution to the game. That's why both the content of what they're learning and the process of how the teacher is teaching them are so important.

**NR: How can teachers motivate children in the classroom?**

**HP:** I think the challenge with children is not so much how you initially motivate them, because children have a high Level of motivation in everything that is new. The real challenge is how to sustain that motivation and make more out of it. Motivation, seen from a psychological point of view, has to do with beliefs, with the children gradually developing an understanding of why they're doing things and what's in it for them, and developing an awareness of what they're able

to do in the foreign language.

**NR: Do children learn English more effectively if the language learning takes place as part of their overall development, that is intellectual, social, and emotional? HP:** Yes, they do and I strongly believe that it is possible to help develop the child's cognitive skills at the same time they are learning a foreign language. This is very much based on Howard Gardner's concept of Multiple Intelligences. Gardner and his team claim that intelligence is not one unitary kind of skill. It's a wide range of different cognitive capabilities, eight or nine different intelligences. What he convincingly states is that it's not that we are born with a certain IQ which decides our success or failure in life. We can actually develop our intelligences and as teachers of young learners we have a responsibility to help them to develop their cognitive skills.

**NR: What does that mean then in practical terms in the classroom?**

**HP:** Well, a teacher might say, "I've always used songs in my classroom to foster musical intelligence, pictures for visual intelligence etc." What I mean is something a bit different here. First of all, you might think you have children in the class who are not very intelligent and in fact they might be very intelligent in other intelligence areas. So by using exercises that motivate different intelligences, not only the linguistic intelligence, but also the visual, interpersonal, intrapersonal, kinaesthetic, musical etc., the chances are those learners will feel more addressed, more motivated and will learn better because they see a way into the foreign language. The other thing is that I believe there are certain activities we can use in each of the different intelligence areas that can actually be used to help learners to develop skills that maybe are not that well developed yet. So, for example, the visual skill. One sub-skill is the ability to be able to focus on pictures. If we give learners discovery pictures that you can use for all kinds of language purposes, and at the same time focus their attention and concentration, this is important for two reasons. First of all there are studies that show that children's concentration span seems to be becoming shorter - this has a lot to do with the fact that our children live in a world of visual overload and fast-moving pictures have a certain effect on their concentration span. So, if you give them an activity like a picture with a number of animals hidden and half hidden and ask, "How many lions, snakes etc. are there?", from the language teaching point of view it's plural nouns plus revision of animal vocabulary and numbers. From the point of view of developing their visual intelligence, it's all about helping them to focus their attention, which is a cognitive skill that forms the foundation for a number of other more sophisticated cognitive skills.

**NR: In what ways should the classroom for children be different? How can the teacher make it a "magic" place for kids and stimulate creativity? HP:**

The child lives in a world where the line between make-believe and reality is a very blurred line, which is great, because we can get them to completely identify with what they're doing. So when you use a puppet, a glove puppet, they know it's a puppet and yet at the same time for them it's alive! We can do all sorts of role-play activities where learners really identify with the foreign language and almost develop a kind of foreign language identity. Something we have done with the new course Playway to English, from Cambridge University Press, for example, is musical plays, acted out by children in England on stage, so students can just watch it on video, or they can, of course, do a project themselves and act it out, which is the idea, and which is extremely motivating. They can produce a real project with costumes, props, and teachers using this say it's fascinating how enthusiastic children become and how well they learn the language.

**NR: You travel all over the world training teachers. What kinds of cultural differences and the influence of these on teachers, have you observed? HP:**

Well, if you go to the Southern Hemisphere you don't need to worry about teachers not being ready to try things out. Teachers in Brazil, for example, are very spontaneous and open. They want to try things out, and if they believe something is good, they're willing to change what they're doing. This is not the case everywhere in the world. There are some countries where teachers tend to be more reserved and would not act as readily and spontaneously in a workshop as teachers here in Brazil.

**NR: Are there any cultural disadvantages in the Southern Hemisphere?**

**HP:** I don't think so. I love coming here and working with Brazilian teachers!

**NR: What advice would you give to teachers who are new to teaching children? HP:**

Well, go into second position with your children. Feel what it's like for a child learning a foreign language and then look for good materials that give you the guidelines you will need in order to make the best out of this situation for the children and for yourself.

**NR: What advice would you give to teachers who have been teaching children for a long time? HP:**

You're probably doing lots of things with excellence in your class. Share these things with as many other teachers as possible and where you think there is room to improve, look at some of the latest developments, for example in the areas of Multiple Intelligences, and look at materials that actually

transform these very important findings in the area of cognitive psychology to the foreign language classroom.

**NR: What advice would you suggest teachers give to the children?**

**HP:** Children do not ask the teacher for advice, that's what I find difficult. I think rather than give them advice, teachers should show the learners that they are enjoying the class themselves. This is the best advice they can give them because it will give the learners a model, open up their minds and form a basis of interaction in the class that draws on mutual motivation and offers the learner and the teacher fun!

**NR: Finally, could you gaze into your crystal ball and tell me what major changes you foresee for the future.**

**HP:** I think brain research is going to come up with further interesting insights into the workings of the human brain and somehow this will further influence what will be going on in the classroom. The last decade has already come up with a number of very interesting influences from areas like brain research. Possibly more and more foreign language classes will have computer systems available and will be using very good software and CD-ROMs. Obviously not each and every classroom has good computer facilities but this certainly will be one important point for the future.

**NR: I can also see into your crystal ball, Herbert, and I can see a brilliant future for you! HP:** (Laughing) Thank you very much.

**NR: I thank you very much!**

*The author Dr Herbert Puchta is a teacher, teacher trainer and materials writer. He is currently working at the Pedagogical Academy in Graz, Austria. He has co-authored numerous textbooks and resource books. His latest publications, together with Günter Gerngross, are the successful series Playway to English and the forthcoming Join In, both for young learners and published by Cambridge University Press.*