

**M**elanie Butler: You started your career as a secondary school teacher. What was best about being a classroom language teacher, and what most difficult?

Herbert Puchta: We're looking at a fair time ago, when communicative language teaching was in its infancy. I found myself teaching the way I had been taught, and soon discovered that focusing on form and disregarding meaning was not in line with the vision I had of myself as a teacher who makes a difference. The best thing was discovering that language for communication can be taught and learnt, and that meaningful interaction in the foreign language class is not only possible but extremely rewarding.

**You have written courses for learners from kindergarten kids to adults. Your latest course, *Super Minds* with Gunter Gerngross and Peter Lewis-Jones, is for primary children. How important do you think it is to fit methodology to cognitive development, and how do you put this into practice in the new course?**

I'm a strong believer in educational theory. Teaching a foreign language to children is not just about teaching words and structures, it's a highly educational process that if done properly leads to the development of cognitive tools, as Kieran Egan shows. So we need to be deeply concerned with the relevance of the content; we need meaningful stories, not texts that merely demonstrate

# Teaching with children in mind

Herbert Puchta tells Melanie Butler about the theory behind his new course *Super Minds*

certain language areas. We need to be concerned with teaching life skills just as much as language skills, and we need to be aware of the values we base our teaching on. And that's what we do in *Super Minds*. The methodology in that course supports those aims, and includes multi-sensory processes, role-play, project work and tasks that promote creativity.

**One new thing in this book is that, along with the skills of speaking, listening, reading and writing, you have added a fifth skill – thinking. In fact, you have also written a methodology book on the topic. What role do you think that developing analytic thinking skills for language learning has at this age?**

Educators worldwide are realising that children's natural curiosity is a resource we can tap into in order to develop strategic thinking skills, so that children can apply them in the real world for solving problems.

But should thinking be taught as an add-on to the curriculum, or be taught as part of various subjects? In *Teaching Young Learners to Think*, Marion Williams and I advocate the teaching of thinking through L2 learning. We looked at a range of thinking programmes, from Feuerstein's

instrumental enrichment to Blagg's Somerset model, to see how thinking skills development could be meaningful when combined with language teaching. We came up with thirteen categories of thinking, ranging from basic to higher-order skills. Each of these combines the development of thinking skills with meaningful and sharply focused language work.

**In *Super Minds* you include some Clil sections called 'Think and Learn'. Where do you stand on the debates about who teaches Clil, what they teach, and when? How do you see the role of Clil at primary level?**

I am amazed at some of the claims that promote Clil as a panacea. We have included Clil sections in the course because, first, the course is aimed at classes with five or more English lessons per week, giving the teacher time to balance imaginative content with the children's growing interest in the real world. Second, we have developed those sections with a focus not just on information transfer but also on getting students to think deeply about what they are learning, by gathering and organising information, forming hypotheses, evaluating their work and so on. Many L2



Courtesy of go-art Georg Ott

**CREATIVE PROCESS** Herbert Puchta says that teachers should tap into kids' natural curiosity to develop their strategic thinking skills

activities lack intellectual challenge, but we show how children can be engaged in learning which gets them to process real world content through intellectually challenging activities, without making the activities too difficult linguistically.

**You are perhaps most famous for introducing elements from Neurolinguistic**

**Programming, multiple intelligences and cognitive psychology into ELT teaching. How does this work with primary children? Are there any examples in your new course?**

I've always been interested in learning about how the brain works and how we can use research findings to enrich the foreign language class. We live

in exciting times in terms of what brain research makes available to us, and I believe that a significant body of those findings can now be applied to the classroom. The Iatefl conference in Glasgow is presenting the first ever neurobiologist, James Zull, as a plenary speaker. Some of his findings confirm what we've been doing in the young learners' classroom – my own work in multi-sensory teaching comes to mind, a strong strand in *Super Minds* – and recent research reveals why students' emotional involvement has such a significant influence on the outcomes of their learning process. And again, our course includes a wide range of activities based on some of the latest insights into how the brain works.

**Not every child in every classroom will fall in love with English – but what can we as teachers do to make sure they like it?**

A lot depends on the teachers' ability 'to create a world that students want to belong to', to quote Robert Dilts's dictum on leadership. If teachers create such a classroom culture, students are more likely to develop positive feelings about the language they are learning and a sense of ownership of it. ■

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