

An interview with Herbert Puchta

The following article appeared in *The Teacher* magazine, Poland.

Are you in favour of any specific approach to teaching?

I believe the primary aim of language teaching has to be to develop the students' ability to communicate in the foreign language, as for example laid out in the Common European Framework. I think that the 'communicative approach' to language teaching achieves this best. However, we also need to consider important humanistic aspects of the teaching and learning process itself – we need to cater for differences in learning styles and multiple intelligences, for example, and we need to keep in mind the specific interests and needs that different age groups bring to the language class, especially when we choose the content of a teaching programme.

Was it difficult to find the right content for *English in Mind*, a course book addressed to an international audience?

English in Mind has a very strong European dimension and it is in line with the Common European Framework. As far as the choice of content is concerned, we took into consideration latest research findings concerning the development of teenage students. Teenagers often seem so cool – and yet, deep within they are very insecure. They feel threatened by the world, and they are overwhelmed with emotions. Therefore they will be interested in anything that is far away from their own world. They are fascinated with extremes and realistic details. The more different from their own experience the content is, the better.

Another and very crucial aspect of content that adolescents are interested in has to do with idols. Teenagers need heroes and heroines who they can identify with, who embody the qualities necessary to succeed in a threatening world, such as courage, nobility, genius, energy, creativity, love, tolerance etc. From a psychological point of view *Eminem* and *Britney Spears* are adored not only because of their music (and in some cases in spite of their music), but because they serve as projection screens. Adolescents project onto them all those qualities mentioned.

Again, this is important for the choice of text. But it does not mean that adolescents always and only want to read about those pop stars in their English lessons. Such an approach might soon become pretty boring, and might be interpreted as a weak attempt by the teacher to make himself or herself popular. Teenagers do want to explore texts, however, that have the **qualities** mentioned above. They do want to read about and deal with people and the life

experiences of people who they can associate with the qualities mentioned earlier.

Did you use the findings of corpus linguistics when working on the course?

English in Mind is corpus-informed, not corpus-based. This means that we did take into consideration some of the key findings from corpus linguistics, for example in writing the dialogues for the photo stories – they are not only meant to be interesting and amusing, they are also used to present conversational phrases that have high frequency value.

What do you find most important in teaching teenagers and adolescents?

Michael Grinder once said that if you can teach teenagers, you can teach anyone. And it is true that teenagers **can** be extremely difficult to teach. But the quotation also implies that it is possible to teach teenagers successfully – and many teachers know that. Many teachers have experienced how rewarding it can be to teach this difficult age group. We cannot always be successful, however, given the difficult phase our students are going through. So what do I regard as most important in teaching teenagers? I think we need to aim at establishing a classroom culture of rapport and mutual trust. When the student get the feeling they are accepted not only as learners but also as individuals, and when the classroom culture is one that allows for the strengthening of the students' self-esteem and confidence, then we have created the best basis for teaching teenagers successfully.

You have a strong interest in Neuro Linguistic Programming. What is the general idea behind it?

NLP – to put it in a nutshell – is about finding out what people do who excel in certain fields. To give an example from a language learning context, if someone is brilliant in remembering new words in a foreign language, an NLP approach would be to find out what this person does in terms of the behavioural patterns and cognitive strategies they use, what kind of supportive beliefs this person has etc. NLP has developed a set of techniques to model the skills of successful people and to teach them to others.

In *English in Mind* there is a section called *For your Portfolio*. There is a debate now in Poland about introducing this concept into Polish schools. Has it proven successful in other European countries?

Yes, it has. Basically the idea was developed by the Council of Europe, also in cooperation with experts here in Poland, and is already used rather successfully in some countries. The basic idea is that students collect evidence of their learning progress, learn to reflect upon their learning process and develop cross-cultural awareness as they learn foreign languages. A portfolio also helps teachers when a student changes from one school to another to assess that student's level.

Some people say that getting students to keep a portfolio is a lot of work for the teacher. I think that course book authors and publishing houses can give teachers a lot of support with the portfolio – as we are doing in *English in Mind* through the course content and by providing a free photocopiable Portfolio Builder for each level.

What's the best advice you would give language teachers?

I think what is most important for us as language teachers is to keep learning while we are teaching. We constantly need to reflect on our teaching, reflect on what goes well, for example. Find out more about why it goes well. Also look into things when we get a bit stuck, where things do not go so well and what we can do to improve on them. And what is probably most important of all – and will be very appreciated by our students – let's keep a good sense of humour!