

## TEACHING TEENAGERS

London: Longman, 1993,

by Herbert Puchta and  
Michael Schratz.

First of all, this book review needs to be set clearly in context: one of the authors whose work I am reviewing is a friend and former colleague. However, I will endeavour to ensure that —human nature aside— what follows will be as objective as possible. If you, as reader, don't find it so, then I apologise; but at least you were warned.

The book I am going to review is one of the latest titles in the rapidly-growing Pilgrims/Longman series of resource books for teachers. This series follows in the footsteps of a number of others — most notably the Oxford series edited by Alan Maley— which it emulates in a number of ways. Publications within these series tend to sell more on the basis of their "usability" and appropriateness rather than on the reputations of the individual authors. The name of the series consultant —in this case Mario Rinvolucris— is generally used as an umbrella to give others, often classroom teachers, an opportunity to get into print and to share practical ideas which have worked for them, with other colleagues who are in the same situation. In this vein, the Pilgrims series offers teachers short, concise volumes containing accessible "recipes" of classroom activities.

This book, *Teaching Teenagers*, is written by Herbert Puchta and Michael Schratz, both of whom work in Austria, and who have based it on an earlier work written

and published in German. The title in itself is highly likely to interest many readers, but equally its sub-title may serve to put some off: "Model activity sequences for humanistic language learning" is quite a mouthful and it could easily be criticised on two counts. Firstly, there's that word: "humanistic". Nowadays, it no longer carries the connotations of "sitting on the floor in a circle" that twenty years ago it brought with it into the world of EFL. Today, it's respectable (politically correct, even?) to be "humanistic" and wear a suit and tie! Perhaps, we should really ask ourselves whether it still has any meaning at all. I tend to feel that it has now been overtaken by terms like "student-centred learning" —which after all means the same— and which don't carry with them any connotations, either positive or negative, at all.

As to the second potentially off-putting aspect, what about the idea of "activity sequences". What exactly do the authors mean? In this volume nine units of teaching are presented, each of which covers a series of secondary school classes. These can last as little as 2 to 3 hours —broken into real "three fifty-minute lessons a week" chunks —or, up to four days of intensive learning for the unit on CALL (Computer-assisted Language Learning). The titles of the units range from "Young People and Pets" and "Nightmares", neither of which is particularly unusual, to "Class contract", and "The theatre of the absurd", which, by contrast, do take us a long way away from the more staid and predictable world of *Headway Intermediate* and the like. Each unit is presented with a subheading indicating the authors' objectives, and these are highly innovative as they progress from "Teaching communicatively in a

traditional class" to "Creating an understanding of absurdity —in everyday life and on stage".

These "activity sequences" are really sets of classes, organised in chronological order —just like a standard course book (?). So where's the difference? Primarily, it lies in the focus and presentation. The classes Puchta and Schratz offer have all been trialled, most of them on thirteen- to fourteen-year-olds, and consequently the book is centred on presenting the results of this trialling. This has enabled the authors to include a lot of verbatim reports taken from the teachers and learners who used the lessons, combined with many authentic examples of the materials produced. Consequently the book has a kind of narrative meta-thread running through it. There is no "Teacher's Book" for the user to refer to; rather, it's like reading a collection of short stories all based on the same, or similar themes: the reader is asked to assimilate the moral(s) they are intended to communicate.

Now, let's have a closer look at one particular unit to see what it's all about. Unit 5, headed "Class contract. A class and their teacher decide on their own ground rules" (p 65-74) begins with a brief sketch of the level, time requirements, trial class description, aims —both in terms of language areas and skills, and of the meta-aims of the teacher— and materials. There then follows a page of "Background and rationale" introduced by a quotation highlighting the activities' aims, in this case being to enable students to discuss their feelings about classes through the target language.

The activity sequence is then broken down into the five

classroom lessons over which it is planned to develop, with a brief description of the activity to take place in each of these:

## Lesson 2

### 5 Counter-arguments

In pairs or groups, students select one speech bubble and use it as the beginning of a role play dialogue. Students write down their dialogues.

### 6 Conflict dialogue

The students present their role plays to the whole class.

After this, each of the numbered components of the unit is described in more detail, intercalating samples of the materials used—for example, a set of speech bubbles making up a complete dialogue. These are sometimes followed by a "Comment":

With a class that has never done this kind of work before, it helps if you and the class compose one speech bubble dialogue together before...

Finally, this unit is rounded off by a photograph of "The English Class Charter" produced by the trial class, and the "Concluding discussion" on the activity sequence reflecting the students responses and applying these to a wider use of the underlying principles.

But, "Where," I hear you ask, "is the language work?" Clearly, in when you use pair-work there are

moments when students need teacher input of vocabulary and expressions in order to carry out the task. This may be required on a one-to-one basis or by the whole class. However this approach does mean the emphasis is wholly on the activity and its content, and not on "language to be learned". The authors are at pains to make it clear that they are not proposing an abdication of responsibility in this area, but rather a restatement of relative values.

*Teaching Teenagers* has one very important component which, I think, distinguishes it from other books of its kind—and certainly sets it apart from most coursebooks—in that the authors present an ideological manifesto of wide-ranging significance. This "Statement of Beliefs" they apply in the world of the classroom, may well seem inappropriate to some readers. If you pick this book up on the stand at a conference and just glance through it, words and phrases like "vocation" and "socially well-integrated learner" will catch your eye, and may persuade you to skip the introduction and move on to the activities themselves. But you'd be wrong to ignore it. Here, lies the heart of this book, and I will now quote one short extract from it to give you a flavour of their intentions:

It is true that teenagers are often less motivated than both younger children and adults. Also, they frequently present

outright discipline problems. This is partly due to teachers having missed opportunities to build bridges between what they want too or have too teach at their students' worlds of thought and experience. It is, however, almost never late to construct these bridges. (p. 4)

In *Teaching Teenagers* there is a continual focus on the learner, and on helping the individual to remain an individual and to develop with and through the learning of a foreign language. Activities foster the use of collaborative skills in learning, and demand thorough preparation by the teacher to ensure their success. Teachers who use these activities can't just "dip in and out", but rather they should read, think, adapt, and carefully prepare both themselves and their learners for the work they choose to undertake.

So, as I said at the beginning, I have a certain bias towards this book. However, I feel sure that teachers everywhere will benefit from it particularly in as much it is original and innovative. *Teaching Teenagers* is a "recipe book" which transcends that rather simplistic frame and offers clear, concise insights into some of the questions which affect all teachers of teenagers.

Bryan Robinson