

## It all began with April Fools' Day

An interview with Adrian Wallwork

Adrian Wallwork is the author of *The Book of Days* and *Discussions A – Z Intermediate, Discussions A – Z Advanced* in the *Cambridge Copy Collection*.

'For language learners who spend their school lives engrossed in their own culture ... this will serve as an extremely useful introductory insight into the lives and customs of people from distinctly different lands.'

From a review of *The Book of Days* in *Modern English Teacher*

**Q:** In the introduction to *The Book of Days* you describe the rationale behind it: 'The philosophy of this book is to get students curious about particular traditions and religious events. It is designed to draw on learners' own experiences, knowledge, opinions and feelings, and thus provoke lively discussion on how, where and why these days are celebrated.'

Where did the original idea for this book come from? And are these themes for discussion based on material you have used in your own classes?

**AW:** I had been doing lessons on April Fools' Day for years and had really no idea where the festival originated from. When I discovered with a group of students, which included people from Russia, Turkey and India, that people celebrated April Fools' Day (or an equivalent) in various parts of the world, I became curious as to where this Day came from. And so the project began ...

**Q:** You have selected a wide variety of significant days, from Diwali to Martin Luther King Jr's birthday for discussion. How do you ensure that students are given enough background information to have a reasonably informed discussion about events with which they are totally unfamiliar?

**AW:** The more obscure days (at least for a non-Western audience) are given more extensive treatment about what they actually are. So, for instance, on the students' page for Diwali they are given a fairly detailed account of what the festival is. They then go on to discuss what they know about Hinduism – it may be very little, but they have probably heard about karma, the sacred cow and Mahatma Ghandi. The idea is to inform them as well as teach them English. It also gives students an opportunity to compare their religion and traditions with those of another culture. It may even lead them to discover how much they actually have in common with other cultures.

**Q:** How multi-cultural is your coverage of events and traditions?

**AW:** Very! I interviewed over a hundred people from around the world to find out about their traditions, most of these people are actually listed in the acknowledgements to the book. And since writing the book, many other people have contacted me, telling me more things about their cultures. I now have many email friends around the globe! What I did was to try and see each festival from various perspectives. Easter, for example, is celebrated in many

very different ways and I was fortunate to find an American Filipino who told me about the amazing crucifixions that take place on Easter day each year in the Philippine Isles (and in Mexico too, I discovered later) – this interview is recorded on the cassette along with many other authentic interviews.

**Q:** How do you handle difficult/multi-cultural vocabulary?

**AW:** There is a lot of specific vocabulary covered in the book. Key words are presented in a box on the teacher's page. It is really up to the teacher to then decide how to deal with these words – whether to explain them in English, translate them into the students' own language, or get students to look them up in a dictionary. There simply wasn't space in the book for a glossary. In exercises that contain particularly difficult language items, the teacher is warned to only do the exercise with more advanced levels.

**Q:** Do the activities centring around one particular date have to be used on the day in question, or can they work successfully on any day?

**AW:** It depends on the Day. Clearly you wouldn't want to do something on Christmas Day in the middle of the summer. But some of them, e.g. Buddha's Day, Children's Day, Teacher's Day, Birthdays, Wedding Day, and Days of the Week, can be used at pretty much any time of the year. Others, such as Independence Day, could be used, for example, on the day that your students' country became independent.

**Q:** You state in the Teacher's Introduction that you have deliberately tried to get away from traditional students' page design. Why did you decide to do this?

**AW:** I wanted students pages without rubrics. This was for two reasons. One, so that the teacher could decide exactly how he/she wants to exploit the exercises. But mainly because I wanted to give the book a magazine feel – students would have the impression that they were reading about something that they might have read about in their own language too.

**Q:** Have you or other teachers who have used these materials encountered any problems of cultural or religious sensitivity with any of the discussion topics? If so, what do you suggest as the best way for dealing with this?

**AW:** Both in *The Book of Days* and the *Discussions A – Z* books, potentially explosive subjects are marked with a bomb icon! As in all EFL lessons, teachers must be really sensitive to their students. In the current climate, for instance, a discussion on racism, refugee and immigration problems (*Discussions A – Z Advanced*: Home, Xenophobia; *Discussions A – Z Intermediate*: Colour) would have to be handled very carefully. I think the best solution is always to have a back up lesson prepared just in case a hot topic gets out of hand.

**Q:** How important is the listening material to the effective running of the activities in class?

**AW:** In *The Book of Days*, I think it is very important as the listenings contain a lot of information about the Day in question. In the *Discussions A – Z* books it is not quite so essential.

**Q:** Are there any links between the discussion themes in *The Book of Days* and *Discussions A – Z Intermediate* and *Advanced*?

**AW:** There's a lot of crossover. For example, School (*Discussions A – Z Intermediate*) could obviously lead into Teacher's Day (*The Book of Days*). But units within the books also lead into each other, and there is a suggested path at the back of the *Discussions A – Z* books.

**Q:** If you have a class which is reluctant to become involved in discussion, do the *Discussions A – Z* books have any advice on how to encourage them?

**AW:** Follow the advice in the Introduction to the Teacher, which deals specifically with how to conduct a good discussion. This is also dealt with in the units themselves (eg Talk in *Discussions A – Z Advanced*).

**Q:** Looking at the index in *The Book of Days* and subject lists in the back of the *Discussions A – Z* books, the majority of exercises in all three books would work well with an adult audience. Are there any that you think would be appropriate for teenagers as well?

**AW:** Certainly the ones related to school and young people (eg Teacher's Day, Children's Day, and School in *Discussions A – Z Intermediate*), and the quizzes and games in the *Discussions A – Z* books (eg the ones in English, Quizzes and You). The ones related to love (eg Valentine's Day, and Love: *Discussions A – Z Intermediate*) also lend themselves well. But in *The Book of Days*, teenagers would also probably find some of the historical ones of interest (Martin Luther King, Independence Day) plus the ones on traditions (Halloween, Bonfire Night and some of the exercises in Christmas and Birthdays).

**Q:** How can discussions be used to develop all four language skills – not just speaking?

**AW:** The books are designed for speaking and listening, though there is some reading too. I was actually trying to get away from traditional lessons, to give students a break from routine and get them to discuss the kinds of things they might discuss outside the classroom in their own language. The books do not therefore follow an established didactic formula.

*If you are looking for a way to offer your students a challenge both in their language learning and in their way of viewing the world, try out these books with your classes.*

