

The Martin Hewings interview

Martin Hewings, author of *Advanced Grammar in Use*, gave an interview to the *TEFL Farm*, an Internet magazine for English teachers, and with permission of the *TEFL Farm*, edited extracts from the interview are reproduced here.

Martin Hewings spent five years writing *Advanced Grammar in Use* for Cambridge University Press and produced a book which has become a standard reference work in every staff room.

TF: You were stepping into some pretty hefty shoes when continuing the *In Use* series, because Murphy is a household name in the ELT world. How did you feel about that?

MH: Fairly daunted, really. It's odd, having used Murphy for so many years ... It's the one I refer to if I want to check on something and also if I've got a student who has a particular problem, it's the book I tend to point them to.

TF: Were you tied to the established *In Use* format when writing the book? If so, how did you manage to input your own originality?

MH: It's a particular kind of originality that comes from trying to synthesise what other people have said in a way which is as clear as possible. A lot of it is turning grammar material written for native speakers into something that is going to be readable and usable by non-native speakers.

TF: Give me an example of your originality coming through.

MH: Well, there was a time when Suzanne (my daughter) was having great difficulty sleeping and we had to creep upstairs past her bedroom so that she didn't wake up and I think that's in the book somewhere, although I can't remember which unit! Very often I've drawn from my own experience and interests and the things that were going on around me.

TF: Did you approach CUP or did they approach you to write this book?

MH: I'd already written a book about pronunciation for them, so they knew me, and approached me.

TF: What would you say advanced students most need to improve?

MH: I think there's scope for going over some of the perennial problems, like participles, certain tense distinctions, the area of countable and uncountable nouns ...

TF: How did you approach the book?

MH: I tried to get a balance of review or revision material of problems like that, as well as an attempt to expand knowledge about certain areas that students will have met before. An example is 'some', meaning 'approximately' as in 'some 80 percent of the population does this', which may not have been taught at intermediate level. Who knows what advanced level students have been taught!

TF: In some areas they'll be very competent and in others they may be down at pre-intermediate level.

MH: Yes, so the book deals with familiar areas of grammar, but with different uses, different patterns, different contrasts. And then looking at things that most people would think of as advanced grammar.

TF: And these approaches have been integrated throughout the book ...

MH: There are some units that are entirely new material – the units on inversion, for example – which may not have been looked at intermediate level. A lot of my students, particularly at university, are just not aware that inversion takes place. For example, the use of 'not only'. In academic writing, students may say something like 'Not only it depends on interest rates...' rather than 'Not only does it depend on interest rates...'

TF: You've also tried some new exercise types.

MH: What I've tried to do is include a reasonable amount of variety. I've included matching, gap-fill, transformation to some extent, and prompt, in order to produce a particular sentence. I've also used error identification and correction which is quite useful at a more advanced level

TF: You think that error correction is more appropriate at an advanced level ...

MH: I think students are sophisticated enough not to confuse things.

TF: The argument against it is that it's not good for students to read "wrong" English ...

MH: Yes, but I think they can cope.

TF: It's quite a hefty tome. How did you decide on the subject for each unit?

MH: One way is looking at grammars that have gone before and finding out what they focus on. *Practical English Usage* is "the reference" so that was a starting point. But also looking at Michael Vince's, which has a good balance of grammar and looking at what areas they covered. I also work with people I consider to be

advanced level students and I draw very much on the kind of problems they have.

TF: Did you include any pet themes - things you are fond of or think are particularly difficult?

MH: Well, the units on inversion, because this really stands out as a problem for most of the students I work with. Certain conditional patterns as well, the old "Had it not been for ...", which occurs fairly frequently in academic writing and is something that students have a lot of problems with.

TF: Is there anything you find particularly difficult to teach?

MH: Articles! They are just so hugely difficult.

TF: Why?

MH: There are so many aspects of them. Students expect a simple answer to questions like 'When do you use *the* and when do you use *a*?' and it just can't be given simply. So you give a part explanation and then another part explanation and there's an overlap between them and it's no wonder people have problems with them.

TF: Can you now put in a nutshell what an advanced learner is?

MH: No, I don't think I could. One of the lessons that the piloting review process taught me was that people have different views of what an advanced level student is. And the definition will vary from country to country.

The TEFL Farm is a bi-monthly Internet magazine for English teachers featuring interviews, articles, news, reviews, letters, curios and an extensive reference section.

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