

## Questions to an author Linda Chiesa



As every teacher knows, reading is essential if students are to make progress in the language they are studying. Simplified readers are great because students are able to read something which is interesting but also pitched at their level, so they do not feel discouraged by having to look up too many unknown words.

Until mid-2007, I gave guidance as to a suitable level but let students choose the book they wanted to read, and this has a number of advantages; not least the fact that they have the freedom to choose what interests them personally.

However, during the summer of 2007, I decided that I would try a different approach with the students at the vocational school where I teach in Switzerland. Everyone would read the same book, and this would have the advantage that some time could be spent during the class discussing various aspects of the same book, and we could listen to the CD of the book when they had just finished a test or they (and/or !!) were not up to anything too demanding!

For homework, simple worksheets to be done at home would ensure that they were keeping track of what was happening in the story. I did not want to impose my ideas on which book to choose, so I prepared a mix and match exercise for them at the beginning of September, in which they had to match the title of the story with the blurb. This was also useful in getting them to improve their reading skills, by looking at key words and ideas to help them find the solution.

Once this had been done, they then individually chose the three books they would most like to read in order of preference, and in democratic fashion, the book which interested most students was chosen. Almost all of my classes chose a different book, which means that I now have a wide knowledge of most of the readers in the Cambridge series from levels 1 to 5!

As one class was nearing the end of their chosen book, which happened to be *Help* by the Cambridge series editor, Philip Prowse, I thought it might be interesting for them to put any questions or observations they had directly to the author. I had met Philip at a conference in Basle a few years previously, so I emailed him to ask if he would mind my sending him some questions about the book.

An instant enthusiastic reply followed, so the next lesson I asked the class to get into groups and think of any questions or comments they might have. At the beginning, they sat there rather perplexed, so I suggested one or two ideas and this was enough to get the ball rolling.

Soon they were discussing animatedly (but given their very elementary level, quite often in Italian!) what they would like to ask. It was interesting that more than half the questions were not to do with the book itself, but to do with the author and the when, where and how of writing, and with other classes, the same sort of questions appeared.

The next set of questions was to Jeremy Harmer on his book *The Double Bass Mystery*. As I used to work with Jeremy many years ago and we had kept in touch, I had no hesitation in writing to him directly, but then what was I to do with the other authors, whom I had never met? This turned out to be no problem, as I asked Philip to forward the questions to the author concerned, and in every single case I had lovely emails back, usually within a very short space of time and with answers geared to the level of the students' English.

There was a slight sense of disbelief on the part of my students that a) I actually knew people who wrote books and b) they (and others unknown to me) had actually taken the trouble to reply. However, once their initial sense of incredulity had evaporated, they read the replies with great enthusiasm.

As mentioned before, many questions concerned the business of writing: 'Have you written other books?' 'Why do you write books?' 'Did you enjoy writing this book?' 'Have you written any books that are not simplified?' 'How long did it take you to write this book?' And given that I work with students who are doing an apprenticeship in commerce – and they live in Switzerland: 'How many copies of this book have you sold?'

There were other personal questions, such as 'How old are you?' 'Are you married?' 'Where do you live?' but of course, some referred directly to the content of the book in question.

For *The Double Bass Mystery*, one group wrote: 'Why did you choose to set the story in Barcelona?' 'Did you get the story from a real event?'

For *Staying Together*, students asked 'Why did you write a story about people from such different cultures?'

For *Different Worlds*, 'Have you ever known a deaf person? Where did you get the idea for the book?'

For *Hotel Casanova*, 'Why did you decide to kill Carla?'

For *Blood Diamonds*, 'What is the message of the book? Is the film the same as the book?'

I encouraged the students to say what they liked or didn't like about the book, but they were a little reluctant to do this. On reflection, they might be encouraged to write more on this aspect if given more time at home.

However, for *Staying Together*, one group wrote: 'It was a good idea the way you finished the story so that everyone can give their final interpretation the way they want.'

Another group said: 'Thank you for your interesting book. We read it during the English lessons at school and at home. At the end of every chapter we discussed in groups the meaning of the story because it takes place in different parts of the world where cultures, language and lifestyle are not similar. In our life we can't compare with a particularly exciting life experience. Thank you for the great moments you gave us. We hope you will write other magnificent books.'

A new school year began last September, and the classes are nearing the end of the first of the two books we will read together. Naturally, they have all chosen different books from the previous year's classes – well, I did say I had a wide knowledge of the Cambridge Readers series! The students are enthusiastic about writing to the authors so it is great news that they will be able to do this directly on the website.

As a final observation, there was one question several classes asked last year: 'Professoressa, why don't **you** write a simplified reader?' Now, there's a thought...

### **About the author of this article**

*I started teaching English in Valladolid, Spain while still a teenager because I wanted to improve my Spanish before going to Manchester University. The students I taught at the time paid for that year; undoubtedly in more ways than one! Now resident in southern Switzerland, I have also lived and taught in Bournemouth, Tenerife, Bern and Rome, where I obtained the Cambridge DELTA. Initially a teacher of adult students, I now work for a vocational commercial school where the students are mostly in their late teens.*

*Outside teaching, I spend time campaigning for Amnesty International, occasionally wondering what my life would have been like if I had taken the path of theatre in education in England, and enjoying the beauty of where I live.*

*Linda Chiesa*