

An interview with Michael McCarthy

In this article, three students and teachers of English pose their questions to Professor Michael McCarthy.



Michael McCarthy is Emeritus Professor of Applied Linguistics in the School of English Studies, University of Nottingham. He has published extensively on corpora, vocabulary and discourse, including *English Vocabulary in Use* (with Felicity O'Dell and Geraldine Mark), *Touchstone* (with Jeanne McCarten and Helen Sandiford), *Exploring Spoken English* and *Cambridge Grammar of English* (both with Ron Carter). He is also an active member of the English Profile research teams.

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Eva Ferrigato has just completed her training to become an English teacher in Austria.

EF Are you aware that the first year of the English language studies in Austria is more or less based on *English Vocabulary in Use*? What do you think about that?

MM I am delighted that people use and like this series. Naturally, when I wrote them with my co-author, Felicity O'Dell, I hoped they would be successful. They are now used all over the world.

EF Why did you decide to concentrate on the field of vocabulary?

MM It's simple, really. No task in language learning is as big as vocabulary. You can more or less learn all the grammar you need to know in a few years at high school or university, but there are just thousands and thousands of words you need. Even

to survive in basic, everyday speaking you need around 2,000 words, and to be an independent reader of English texts (e.g. novels, newspapers) you need to be able to understand around 10,000 words. You can't learn all of those in class, so our books are intended for self-study, for you to use when class is over, or when you've left school or college or university and still want to learn.

EF What does learning a foreign language mean to you?

MM In a nutshell, learning a foreign language means to me learning lots and lots of vocabulary, especially 'chunks' (fixed phrases of 2, 3, or 4 or more words).

EF Do you think that your books help foreign language learners to acquire a language? Why did you start writing these books?

MM We have got good feedback from around the world, and teachers and students tell us that they do learn a lot of vocabulary with our books. I started writing the books for two reasons: (1) As a teacher I was disappointed with the materials available (especially for vocabulary) and thought I could do better myself (a bit arrogant, you may think!), and (2) I used to teach a vocabulary class every week at my university and I made my own materials, so I had a lot of worksheets and exercises lying around, which formed the basis of my first class text book, *English Vocabulary in Use Upper-Intermediate* in 1994.

EF How was your own language learning experience? Did you want to do anything better than your teachers did?

MM I learned French and was no good at it. I learned Spanish and had wonderful teachers and became very good at it. My best Spanish teacher convinced me that the secret of success was to learn a lot of vocabulary. I learned Swedish when I lived in Sweden for five years, mostly outside of class and informally. It was not too difficult (except for pronunciation and intonation), as the grammar and vocabulary are somewhat like English.

I think I felt that my teachers (with one exception) were devoting too much time to grammar (especially French) and not enough time to vocabulary. So when I became a teacher myself, I was determined to help my students learn a lot of words!

Anne Kuhfeldt is studying English and Czech at university in Germany.

AK What fascinates you most about the English language?

MM I think its huge vocabulary, compared with its rather small grammar, fascinates me most, and secondly the wonderful variety of dialects. I am Welsh, of Irish descent, and the varieties of English I have been exposed to are quite different from the standard, educated British and American English represented in English language teaching materials. I am also fascinated by how the language changes constantly – it is a living organism.

AK What do you think English has that other languages don't have?

MM Well, because English has spread so widely across the planet, it now exists in a vast number of varieties, all of which have their own robust characteristics, their own literature, their own cultural identity (e.g. Indian, Irish, Australian, Hong Kong, Malaysian, Canadian, and so on). Few other languages can boast such global variety. And it is, of course, used by hundreds of millions of non-native users every day in international communication, in business, the arts, science and academic life – another characteristic that not many other languages can claim on such a global scale.

AK Do you like word-plays?

MM I love them. I think they are great pun – sorry, fun!

AK Which author has influenced you most?

MM In my professional reading, it would be my old colleague and mentor, the late Professor John Sinclair, who inspired me to look at real language as people really use it, and not to escape into theory. In my leisure reading, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Flann O'Brien have taught me more about life than any other writers.

Andrew Milne-Skinner is an English teacher, lecturer and teacher trainer in Austria.

AMS Can and do teacher educators practise what they preach?

MM Many of them don't, and simply preach to each other, and my more tolerant side says there is room for peer-preaching, as it often leads to the emergence of new ideas and perspectives for those who can and do practise what they preach. An analogy would be that not all medical experts actually treat patients in a surgery or hospital. However, I do believe that any teacher-education precept should be founded on practical experience, good science where it is available, and large dollops of common sense.

Having said that, perhaps you have a more specific target in mind, i.e. people like me, who seem to exist in an ivory tower or on a stratosphere that most teacher educators cannot rise to, and who do not seem to have much hands-on engagement with teaching and the classroom.

I can only speak for myself. Let's see now, what is it I preach? Well, principally, I suppose it comes down to a few basic tenets:

1. That our knowledge of the language should be based on the evidence of actual usage (whether of native speakers or expert users) and is best accessed through investigating corpora.
2. That spoken language has been neglected and will become more and more important in our global, mobile world.

3. That the biggest single task for any learner is acquiring and using a large vocabulary – a task far bigger and more important than grammar-learning.
4. That language awareness is an important part of learning a language.
5. That we should respect what teachers and students want and aspire to, and not dictate to them or patronise them.

Now, perfect I'm not, but as a materials writer and teacher educator, I've tried to put these into practice in the following materials:

1. Almost all my books since the mid-1990s have been based on corpus evidence.
2. The *Cambridge Grammar of English* (which I jointly authored with Ron Carter) respects spoken grammar equally with written grammar.
3. My greatest single effort has been to produce good, usable and useful vocabulary teaching materials. The success of the *Vocabulary in Use* series (jointly authored with Felicity O'Dell) testifies to this.
4. Language awareness is at the heart of the four-level adult course *Touchstone* (which I co-authored with Jeanne McCarten and Helen Sandiford). *Touchstone* is also corpus-based and stresses spoken language and vocabulary learning.
5. All my materials are extensively piloted and revised in light of feedback from teachers and students – we never give them things they say they don't want. I visit schools regularly around the world, observe classes and talk to teachers and learners.

Personally I would not be able to live with myself if I thought everything I did was at odds with what I preach, but I know where your question comes from.