

You're most known in EFL for championing the role of psychology in the language classroom and have recently won the Ben Warren Prize for a book you co-authored on the subject, *Exploring Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching* (OUP, 2015). How did you first become interested in the psychology of learning in general and language learning, and what is the most important thing it has taught you?

These are huge questions, Melanie, and involve the last 45 years of my professional career.

In 1988 I took up a position at Exeter University running the MEd and doctoral programmes in Tesol. As a qualified primary teacher and teacher trainer, I had become increasingly concerned that, while the Tesol field had a vibrant literature on methodology, it did not draw sufficiently on insights from psychology. I became particularly curious about what educational psychology might have to offer language teachers. Surely, if we knew something about how learners learn, we would be in a better position to figure out how to help them to learn a language.

So one day I went to talk to an educational psychologist working in the department about these concerns, which actually proved to be a momentous day in my life as Bob Burden was really interested in this question. The upshot was that we decided to develop and teach a psychology course for the MEd Tesol students and tease

The thinking revolution

Melanie Butler asks author Marion Williams about the psychology of learning and how it can be applied to teaching a foreign language

out the implications for language teaching. As we worked, we began to take a social constructivist approach to psychology, one that sees learners taking control of their learning, which was quite a departure from many of the prevailing approaches in university psychology courses. Over the next ten years or so we developed our ideas and models about various aspects of psychology from a social constructivist stance until they culminated in the book *Psychology for Language Teachers* in 1997 with CUP.

I was encouraged by the positive response to this to delve further into psychology, and became particularly interested in the teaching of thinking, among other things. In 1998 Bob Burden and I published our book *Thinking through the Curriculum* with Routledge, which argued that thinking should be taught through all subjects in the curriculum, including foreign languages.

Recently I had the great experience of working with Sarah Mercer and Stephen Ryan to write *Psychology for Language Learning* for Palgrave Macmillan, and with Sarah on *Multiple Perspectives on the Self* with Multilingual Matters. One day



Courtesy Richard Cullen

THINKING AHEAD Marion Williams believes that 'children need to develop a range of problem-solving and decision-making skills'

when I was staying with Sarah in her lovely house in the Austrian hills I told her that I had a dream of writing a sequel to *Psychology for Language Teachers* before I finally retired. As always, Sarah responded enthusiastically. Encouraged by this, I asked Stephen if he might consider joining us, and received the quickest ever response from him saying yes. We had the perfect team in place and couldn't wait to get started.

Together we wrote *Explor-*

ing Psychology in Language Learning and Teaching for OUP, which was published in 2015. We wanted to bring psychology to teachers in a clear, straightforward way to help them in their busy lives and to generate some excitement about the topic. And needless to say, we were overjoyed to receive the Ben Warren Prize for this book.

How has psychology informed the work you have done on Helbling's new series of readers designed to develop

thinking in young learners, the Thinking Train, in which you worked with the author team Herbert Puchta and Günter Gerngross? What is the methodological principle behind this approach?

I have been looking at the teaching of thinking for twenty years or so and I believe passionately that children need to develop a range of problem-solving and decision-making skills in order to face an unknown future and navigate their way through life. When Herbert invited me to write a book with him the obvious topic was thinking, and this led to the book *Teaching Young Learners to Think* with Helbling.

I was then very taken by Helbling's Thinking Train stories written by Herbert and Günter as they were interesting stories with a playful element, with plenty of food for thought, that would engage young readers. Story is a powerful vehicle for developing thinking and lends itself to activities that encourage children to think between the lines and beyond the lines, important skills that they will need in the future, and also develop different thinking skills. When Helbling invited me to write the activities I was delighted as I

could now apply my convictions to something that would be of practical use to teachers.

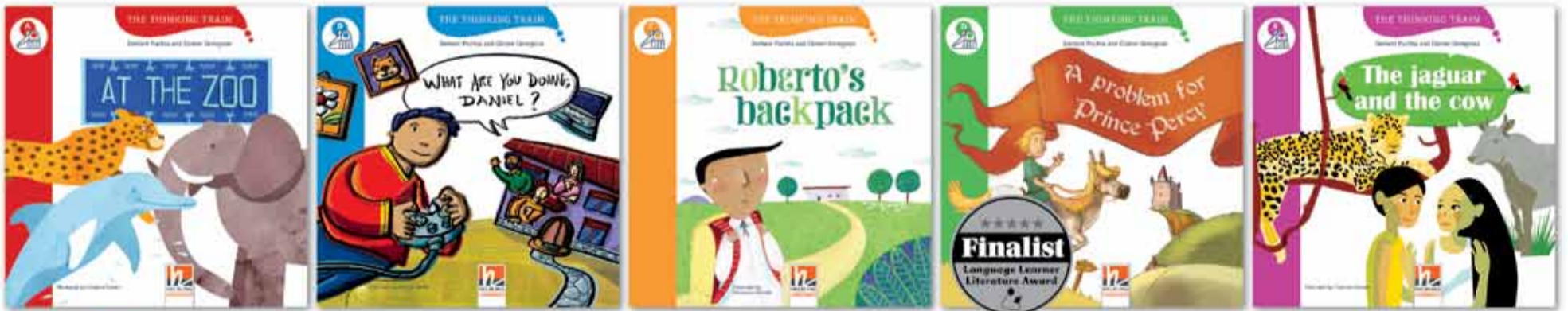
Basically the approach integrates the teaching of language and thinking. This means the children are engaged in using language for a real purpose, to solve problems, to compare and contrast things, to make decisions and so on, which is entirely in keeping with communicative approaches to teaching. They are also encouraged to think together, thereby creating a community of enquiry in the classroom. And, importantly, the children are cognitively engaged in the activities. Children are capable of high levels of thinking. There is a danger in foreign language classrooms of simplifying language so much that any cognitive challenge is removed leading to disengagement and boredom. And the activities are fun.

You are best known as an academic and a trainer – not as a textbook writer. How did you become involved in what we might call the thinking revolution on introducing critical thinking in language learning in early years?

I'm a primary teacher and I enjoy working with children. In the 1970s and '80s I wrote two series of coursebooks for children – one was a task-based listening course for OUP and the other a course based on story for Longman. So you might say I've gone full circle. And as a teacher I love applying my theoretical understandings to the classroom. And am I going to finally hang my boots up? I don't think so. ■

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by Herbert Puchta and Günter Gerngross



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Wednesday 13th April 2016

TIME 10:40-11:25

HALL 11a

Chat with Marion at our stand after her session!



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