

Rose Aylett interviews Adrian Wallwork (author of *A-Z Discussions* and *TEFL Discussions*)

Why can't we find more gritty, real-life, global issues in published ELT coursebooks? GISIG's own Training and Development Co-ordinator **Rose Aylett** spoke to the established materials-writer and author **Adrian Wallwork**, to try and get some answers...

[Rose] So, you've just self-published a new series called 'TEFL Discussions'. Why have you opted to self-publish these materials?

In the late 1990s, Cambridge University Press published my *Discussions AZ* and *The Book of Days*. The three books were heavily censored by CUP's legal department, so in 1997 I suggested that such materials could have their own separate book tentatively entitled, *Taboo*. We had a very heated exchange in which I tried to argue the case for PARSNIP-type topics, to which their final exasperated reply was: *My colleagues and I are in constant touch with hundreds, if not thousands of teachers and in my judgement, it is simply not on. I have also seen other publishers get their fingers very burnt with this sort of thing and it's very messy indeed.*

Five years ago, I contacted CUP again, this time simply to update the two *Discussions AZ* books. I was informed that marginal books were no longer viable. So self-publishing was the only option.

[Rose] The exclusion of certain 'controversial' topics from ELT materials (commonly referred to by the acronym PARSNIPs) is a much-discussed issue. As a materials writer, do you find you frequently have to 'self-censor' your work?

When I wrote the CUP books I was in my late 20s. I had an arrogant streak. I was convinced that controversial topics should be discussed in the classroom. I wanted to 'enlighten' my conservative Catholic students (I teach in Pisa, Italy). I felt I might even be able to convert them to another way of thinking. I didn't like the idea of any kind of censorship and I was enraged when CUP removed a Guardian text highlighting the dark side of Mother Teresa of Calcutta's charity.

Now I am 60, I am even more convinced that controversial topics need to be discussed - but not in the down-your-throat way I thought in my 20s and 30s. I am very much aware of the extremely polarized world in which we live right now. I think it is vital for us all to really listen to each other and hear other points of view without dismissing them outright, just as I felt it was my duty as a parent to help my children understand that there is always more than one way of seeing something.

So, my new books cover a vast range of topics from the dark side of US politics (including gun laws, the Alt right, religion), to scamming, racism, having affairs, abortion, prostitution, swearing, LGBTI, #MeToo issues, child abuse, etc. I have tried to present them in a non-provocative way and to be as objective as possible.

And because, I hope, I am a wiser 60-year-old rather than a know-it-all 30-year-old, I was aware that I needed a softer approach and that I could not always trust my own judgement. I needed others to see the materials. I entrusted this job to three people. First my wife, Anna Southern, who has acquired a natural talent for spotting anything offensive in my books. Then I enlisted the services of James Lawson and Matt Fletcher, as well as a series of contributors. James was new to EFL teaching having recently switched from working in the NHS. He was my target teacher - young, inexperienced in teaching, but full of enthusiasm. So, he went through the materials telling me what he personally would never use and also weeding out and toning down anything that presented with any bias. Matt, on the other hand, is an experienced teacher, doing a Delta, and very much into the PARSNIPS philosophy. So, he was on board to test out the materials and add a few of his own.

Some exercises were removed in the process. What is left is a series of exercises that I think do work, should not offend anyone, but may not be to everyone's taste!

[Rose] We're often told that publishers just don't want to publish this stuff because students don't want to cover it in class, but as both a teacher and trainer myself, I tend to find it is often *teachers* who prefer to stick to 'safe' topics, rather than students. Is this your experience?

I enlisted the help of four teachers from a local private English language school in Pisa to test out the materials. They have varying levels of teaching experience from a couple of months to 15 years. They were given a mix of controversial and non-controversial materials to test out on groups of students (aged between 21 and 35) that they had never met before. They were given no suggestions on how to use the materials - I was really interested in whether they would use the controversial ones at all! When the trial period was over, I got feedback from the teachers. One wrote: *Some of the topics were not for me but that is just personal style and the fact I felt I would need to know the class very well for those subjects.*

Her answer was typical. She had only used some of the more traditional TEFL type materials from Volume 1. She preferred using her own 'safe' topics that she knew from experience would work well. I can understand why she might want to do this particularly with a group she didn't know, but at the same time I think she may be depriving students of a discussion on things that are very important in the world we live in today.

It might help such teachers to remember that students are speaking through the filter of English. By 'filter' I mean that the act of speaking in your own language is much more powerful and meaningful than it is when speaking in a foreign language. If an Italian says 'fuck' in English, for them it is really just another word, the connotations that 'fuck' has for us are totally filtered out. Consequently, I think students can have quite heavy discussions in English that they might not feel so easy about in their own language. Any teacher who has done one-to-one lessons will know that private students often share incredibly personal information very, very quickly (even in the first lesson), which they would never do in a 'real world' situation.

[Rose] Who exactly did you write the books for? Did you have a target audience in mind as you wrote them?

I wrote the books for teachers like James (inexperienced but happy to try anything if it meant not having to use an EFL coursebook) and Matt (sick of the tired old topics and who wanted a structure for teaching those controversial subjects that he really enjoyed discussing). The books are certainly not for everyone and not for every culture. However, I teach international PhD students and irrespective of the part of the world they come from, they seem up for discussing pretty much anything.

[Rose] What made you decide to write these materials right *now*?

Because the CUP editor's comment about certain topics being 'messy' had been at the back of mind for 30 years. On reflection, CUP were certainly right in their decisions, but I wanted to see if there was an approach that would not end in mess. Also, the state of the world today demands that such materials be published.

[Rose] How do you determine what makes a topic 'controversial'?

I should point out that not all the exercises are controversial. *Discussions Volume 1* contains nothing controversial, but lots that is new. *Volume 2* has a few exercises that I have marked with a bomb symbol, and *Volume 3* is laden with them. I wanted to provide something for everyone. To

determine whether something was controversial or not was easy: would one of my conservative students have a strong moralistic opinion about a topic? Yes? OK, that's controversial.

[Rose] What advice do you have for other aspiring materials writers who would like to include 'PARNSIP' issues in their work?

I am very much aware that as a teacher it can be tempting to act a bit like a missionary, trying to 'convert' students to an alternative way of thinking. This is dangerous, arrogant and often not very helpful. So yes include PARNSIP issues, but try to present both sides of the story (even the side that you personally may strongly object to).

[Rose] Are there any ways that our readers could collaborate with you?

Yes, in two areas. Firstly, one of the joys of self-publishing with Amazon is that you can update your book very easily. So, if any readers have improvements or replacements for my exercises, then please send them to me. Also, next year we are going to publish *Business Discussions* and *Elementary Discussions*, so contributions to those books would be very welcome.

Secondly, this newsletter is breaking news, so-to-speak. I am hopeless at self-publicity and my efforts so far have been limited to the TEFL Discussions website. If readers do buy my books then it would be great if they could leave a review on Amazon. I would be a real hypocrite if I used fake reviews to promote the books.

[Rose] Any advice for teachers who are uneasy about using these kinds of materials?

Test them out first on a class who know you well. Tell them that you are going to push the boundaries a bit. Give them a chance to decide whether or not they actually want to have such a conversation - don't impose it. Read the *Teacher's Book* which gives you a whole load of strategies for overcoming your own reluctance as a teacher plus how to present/manage the exercises in class. The *Teacher's Book* was designed for those teachers, like the four teachers in Pisa, who might be reluctant to use controversial materials.

[Rose] How do you anticipate TEFL Discussions will be received?

I hope readers / teachers will appreciate the massive effort that has gone into a project that is highly unlikely to recover the financial investment involved. I wasn't writing for the money, but to have fun and help those teachers who want to use such topics to have the courage to do so. Some teachers will love the discussions. Others won't want to touch them with a barge pole!

[Rose] Why should TELF Discussions be on my bookshelf?

If nothing else, to show off the unusual covers!

Discussions Vol. 1-3, Discussions You've Never Had, and Discussions 1-1 are all available on Amazon both in paper and Kindle versions. For samples and a free teacher's book: tefldiscussions.com

Contact: adrian.wallwork@gmail.com



Rose Aylett is a freelance teacher, trainer and Celta tutor, based in Liverpool in the UK. She has been working in ELT for fifteen years, predominantly in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and is currently working towards an MA in Professional Development in Language Education. Her areas of interest include materials-light teaching, creativity in teacher education and the integration of global issues into the EFL classroom. An avid hiker, when not climbing mountains or wild camping on her days off, she is the Teacher Training and Development Coordinator of the IATEFL Global Issues SIG. In 2017 she set up 'Pop-up Teacher Training' and now delivers training at conferences and teacher development events worldwide. Find out more about her work via her website: www.pop-uptrainer.com. Email: rose.aylett@gmail.com

Adrian Wallwork lives and works in Pisa, Italy. He is the owner of English for Academics (e4ac.com), a scientific editing agency and promoter of EAP courses for PhD students around the world. He has written three Teacher Resource Books for CUP, four audio books for the BBC, four Business English coursebooks for OUP, and in the last ten years more than a dozen EAP textbooks for SpringerNature with over 1.5 million chapter downloads. His most recent book, *Communicating Across Borders* is the first book of its kind to teach native English speakers how to communicate in English to non-native speakers - annoyingly, but unsurprisingly, the book has sold very few copies! His current project is the release of a series of discussion books and resource books via his own self publishing venture - *TEFL Discussions*.

