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Sometimes learning can be sort of magic. An Interview with Mario Rinvolucrí

A veces aprender puede ser algo mágico. Una entrevista a Mario Rinvolucrí

Raquel Fernández Fernández*

Abstract

Mario Rinvolucrí is a well-known English as a foreign language teacher, trainer and writer. He has written more than 70 Teacher Resource Books over the past 30 years, and has worked for Pilgrims (Canterbury, Kent) since 1974. In 1999 he became the founding editor of *Humanising Language Teaching* (a webzine for EFL teachers at www.htmlmag.co.uk). In this interview he talks about several of his fields of interest, recommends some books and gives his opinion about the current (and future) state of English Language Teaching.

Keywords:

Mario Rinvolucrí, English as a Foreign Language, Teaching

Resumen

Mario Rinvolucrí es sobradamente conocido por su trabajo como profesor de inglés como lengua extranjera, formador y escritor. Ha escrito más de 70 libros de recursos para profesores en los últimos 30 años y trabaja para Pilgrims (Canterbury, Kent) desde 1974. En 1999 fundó la revista *on line* para profesores de inglés como lengua extranjera: *Humanising Language Teaching* (www.htmlmag.co.uk). En esta entrevista Mario Rinvolucrí habla sobre varios de los asuntos que más le interesan, recomienda algunos libros y da su opinión acerca del estado actual (y futuro) de la enseñanza del inglés.

Palabras clave:

Mario Rinvolucrí, Inglés como lengua extranjera, enseñanza

*E.U. Cardenal Cisneros. UAH
raquel.fernandez@cardenalcisneros.es

Entrevista

R.F. *To start with, who is Mario Rinvolucrí?*

Mario Rinvolucrí: I guess it depends on who you ask. At one end of the spectrum there are some people who have come on training courses with me and for whom I have been the right trainer at the right moment in their lives. These people would give a warm account of their contact with me. There are people whom I have had on training courses for whom I have not been the right trainer as a person and who have not been at the right stage to take on board the technical things I was offering them. My guess is that such people would give me good marks for effort and hard work with them, but not for content or results as far as their own teaching is concerned.

For many EFL teachers who know me only through the written word, I will be seen as the author of «Grammar Games», a book that has sold 150,000 copies over 25 years, and that is still being bought by people coming into the profession.

I see myself as one of the people who, with Alan Maley, Alan Duff, Andrew Wright, Bernard Dufeu, Peter Grundy, Paul Davis, Russell Stannard and many more have, over thirty years, brought together an impressive body of techniques for teaching English as a foreign language.

R.F. *Most teachers talk about a moment of revelation when they discovered their teaching vocation. When did you know that you wanted to start a teaching career?*

Mario Rinvolucrí: On leaving university I was determined NOT to become a teacher. I did not want to follow in my mother's footsteps and become a language teacher trainer. My first job was in journalism... I worked in Reuters, which gave me an excellent though very tough training in no-nonsense writing. I fell into English teaching at the age of 24 when I was doing magazine journalism in Athens and needed to make more money, with a child on the way. My two first EFL classes were very different experiences: I taught a group of university students in an Athenian suburb and worked with them on a Trollope novel. They had upper intermediate English and we were roughly the same age. The class went really well. My other class was made up of tired shop girls who were beginners at the language. I make a complete mess of teaching them and learnt the terror of a shrinking group..., as people voted with their feet. I still occasionally have «vanishing student group» nightmares. I am sorry to disappoint you... but such were my beginnings as a teacher!

R.F. *You were educated at home as a child up to the age of twelve. How did this experience influence you as a teacher?*

Mario Rinvoluceri: Somehow, and I really don't know how, my mother taught me the basics of French between the ages of 10 and 12. I simply do not remember the methods she used. All I know is that she gave me an excellent underlying feel for the language. So I realized that sometimes learning can be sort of magic.

By contrast my father was impatient at the way I was unable to be the adult he wanted me to be. When you are six or seven it is impossible to satisfy this kind of demand. The poor man got very frustrated with my incomprehensions and my failure to remember things he felt I ought to remember. His reaction was anger, shouting and book-flinging.

I thus experienced, between the ages of five and 12, the pedagogy of anger and, in a way, sadism, that Alice Miller has described so well in books like «For your own good», the «black pedagogy», so well expressed in proverbs like: *la letra con sangre entra, spare the rod and spoil the child, pane e panelli fanno i figli belli*. Grim though those years were, I have to thank my father, Giuseppe, for having inculcated a deep awareness in me of *how teaching should not, should never happen*.

R.F. *You worked for Reuters as a journalist and are now in charge of an online free magazine (Humanising Language Teaching). What was the main purpose of this publication and how did you get the idea of starting it?*

Mario Rinvoluceri: The current editor of HUMANISING LANGUAGE TEACHING is Hanna Kryszewska, who took over from me as editor four years ago. The magazine is firmly in her warm and competent hands. The main purpose of starting the magazine was to offer a forum to people who believe in student-centred teaching, who believe that teaching should be subordinated to learning and who are aware of the major role that affectivity plays in learning. We felt that, at that time, 1999, such people did not have a web-forum, though the IATEFL Teacher Development SIG Newsletter was an excellent print outlet for thinking about humanistic teaching. There was also a commercial motivation in creating HLT. Our main website that catalogued our teaching training courses only needed to change once a year and we realized this was horribly static in the landscape of the ever-moving Internet. We needed something more dynamic to funnel people onto our main, selling website. Today the referrals from HLT to our main website fully pay for the maintenance of HLT as a free resource open to all.

R.F. *What does a human classroom look like?*

Mario Rinvoluceri: Let me start auditorily rather than visually. There will be many voices speaking and the timbre will be gentle and involved, these will be the voices of students

in flow, really wanting to be where they are, to be doing what they are doing. The teacher is as likely to be observing in silence as to be speaking to one or two students or speaking to the whole class. The feeling in the room will be one of well-directed energy and of some excitement, and all this within an underlying sense of relaxation. Computer access and Smart Board access will be open to anybody in the room and computers and Smart Board will not be teacher power zones. In this idealized room the teacher is unlikely to have a chair different from all the others. (It is amazing, how, across Europe, teachers are judged by the powers-that-be to have different sorts of bottoms to their students!) Let me stress that the description you have just read is an idealized version of the «human classroom» and things may often be a lot less ideal, especially just before the lunch break or if there is a police helicopter hovering overhead!

R.F. *Could you suggest a reading list for teachers? Which books are essential to learn and reflect on the teaching (and learning) profession?*

Mario Rinvolucrí: I would, without hesitation, recommend two books by Carl Rogers' «On Becoming a Person» and «Freedom to Think for the 80's». Underpinning both books is Roger's concept of the *Unconditional positive regard* the teacher should have for the student. Sure, this is a counsel of perfection as it is very hard to treat a student with the same unconditional love that a parent may naturally feel for their 2 year-old.

Sylvia Ashton Warner, a New Zealand primary teacher wrote «Teacher» in which she describes how she realized that the UK produced readers she had been given were no use whatsoever with her Maori 5 year olds. She then tells us how she adopted a Freire style method and let the kids themselves choose the words they wanted to learn to read and write.

If you want to spend some hours in the company of an educator who felt that his main area of work was the learner's imagination then any book by Gianni Rodari will fit the bill. Maybe his best known title is «La Grammatica della Fantasia».

Within the realm of language teaching Earl Stevick's two books: «Memory Meaning and Method» and «A way and ways» are major humanistic classics.

R.F. *One of your (many) well known books is «Once Upon a Time». Good teachers should be good story tellers?*

Mario Rinvolucrí: I am not sure how well known «Once Upon a Time» is... I would have said it is a «niche» book with strong appeal for those language teachers who have

positive feelings towards the use of stories in teaching. A thing I am really happy about is that since that book came out in the 80's, several authors have brought out new books in the area, thus making my own book with John Morgan look less lonely in the marketplace.

Story-telling is one very effective way of teaching but then so is the Socratic question and answer method and so is Gattegno's brilliant way of getting students to sniff their way through trial and error into new learning. «**Should**» in the question above seems to me to be too strong. Story-telling is one of the effective ways of teaching because it is highly relational in a way that goes beyond the normal teacher student relationship. It is also a parental mode of communication but in the best and warmest sense of this term.

R.F. *Since Gardner started to talk about multiple intelligences this has been one major topic in EFL? Which intelligences would you consider to be the «ugly ducklings» within the classroom? How can we improve their status?*

Mario Rinvolucrì: I find this an excellent and tantalising question. It is tantalising because it has so many possible answers.

I have met language teaching colleagues who shy away from arithmetical exercises and simple logic activities as these remind them of their own difficulties in the past with number work. When subject teachers from six Birmingham (UK) lower secondary schools were being trained to run a summer school along MI lines, the people who struggled most with Gardner's thinking were the maths teachers: «*How on earth can we be expected to teach maths other than purely mathematically?*» Speaking of my own teaching, I have to really force myself to realize the importance of using musically primed exercises as music is an area I pay little general attention to.

In Luxembourg recently three languages teachers out of thirty who had signed up for an MI teacher training session, sat out when it came doing movement exercises of the sort that tend of appeal to kinaesthetically inclined students: «*couldn't do any of that stuff... it's just not me...*»

Yes, I was shocked that they dared to express themselves this forcefully against one of the eight intelligences, and therefore against those of their students who would benefit from movement in class. Maybe their social courage came from a feeling that mind and body are very separate and that intelligences are of the mind. This is part of European tradition going back to ancient Athens. I wonder what you think; is the somatic intelligence likely to be the «ugly duckling» for many teachers across Europe?

R.F. *A caring teacher who shows emotional involvement is often considered weak or less skilled in the teaching profession. Why is the affective aspect of teaching paid so little attention?*

Mario Rinvolucri: Jane Arnold, from the University of Seville, authored and edited a whole book: «Affect in Language Teaching» which I guess Cambridge would not have wanted to publish if emotion were paid sufficient attention by teachers. Emotion is present in every form of mental activity including my own answering of this interview. When I started answering I was a little bored and a trifle disengaged. I am now well into the swing of your questions and of my answers and am responding with some degree of flow and energy. Maybe you can sense this?

I cannot give a sensible answer to the question of why teachers pay so little attention to their own feelings and to those of their students. Why, for example, does testing literature (in the area of languages) pay scant attention to affect in the test situation, where the student's emotions can totally bias the result. My brother used to panic before an exam while in my case I would get a surge of adrenalin and I would do much better than with normal classwork. The disregard for affect shown by writers on testing is to me totally inexplicable unless I hazard the hypothesis that the whole thought world of testing is a sort of Alice through the Looking Glass space.

R.F. *It seems that some countries in Europe, including Spain, are moving steadily towards the integration of content and the foreign language in their classrooms. CLIL seems to have played a key part in this change. Do you think that an educational revolution has already started?*

Mario Rinvolucri: The CLIL movement in Europe has, to my mind, some odd features. Its main proponents, folk like David Marsh from Finland and Gisella Langé from Italy, seem possessed of kind of apostolic faith in the inevitable rightness of CLIL for the 21st century. Their discourse is one of absolutes and they push CLIL in black and white terms. This makes them, to my mind, a little intellectually suspect.

Many parts of the world beyond Europe have been CLILing for years and there are plenty reports of serious failures. A couple of such failures would be the teaching of Maths in English in both Hongkong and Malaysia. Such failures need to be carefully considered before the whole of Europe turns to CLIL.

When CLIL works it is clearly a marvelous way of killing two birds with one stone. I saw a lesson on the circulation of the blood, given in English in a special school in Valladolid. It was a brilliant lesson and for these clear reasons.

- a) the teacher knew his subject backwards;
- b) after three years in the US his English was a fully adequate vehicle for both the technical content and his relationship with the students;
- c) he read the students excellently and paced his lesson according to their rhythm;
- d) he respected the students' mother tongue and was carefully to make sure they learnt all new terms in both Spanish and English.

How often are the above conditions given? If we can say that such conditions are in place then the future of CLIL in Europe is bright.

I fear that the stumbling block for the implementation of the CLIL process lies broadly speaking in the English language insecurities of the various subject teachers. In the case of the Valladolid colleague mentioned above, his flow in English carried both the subject matter and his masterful rapport with those sixteen year olds. The worst thing about a teacher with inadequate English is that it blocks her ability to relate fully to her students. This is a lot more serious than simply having difficulty in finding the technical terms of the subject in her mental lexicon.

Let me share with you one last worry about the CLIL project in Europe: I am told that today 40% of university courses in the Netherlands are offered through the medium of English. I guess this means that nearly half of the people graduating there have a major area of discourse competence in English that they do not possess in Dutch, their mother tongue. Is this a desirable outcome? Do we want the thinking structures of English (yes, I follow Whorf) to dominate across the subjects across Europe? Do we love the Imperium Americanum this dearly?

R.F. *You've been training teachers for more than 30 years. Which have been the main changes in training needs over these years?*

Mario Rinvolucrì: As far as language teaching is concerned this question can be answered at a number of levels. Let's start with the more obvious, easier things.

It is clear that the move to start teaching English to younger and younger children has meant drawing a whole new primary teaching community into EFL. In some countries this has meant training language teachers to work at primary level, in other others primary teachers themselves have made valiant attempts to learn English. The kernel problem in this upheaval has been that the younger the children are the more they instinctively know whether their teacher is at home in the language or not. At an unconscious level the children find it hard to learn much from language wobblers.

The growth of internet use by children of all ages has meant that they have direct contact with English in use and are aware that the English of their coursebooks and sometimes of their teachers is a «different dialect» of the language. The children meet normal oral forms like «wanna» in songs and in class learn «want to». Is this a schizophrenia that training should address?

To my mind though, the central issue in teacher training 30 years ago and now was and is helping the teacher develop the best relationship she can with her students.

Central to training is helping the teacher to become aware of the way she naturally models on good teachers from her past and holds others as counter-models (as I do with my father). Central to training is helping the teacher to become a deep observer of her students and an empathetic listener. Central to training is encouraging the teacher to become aware of her own hidden needs when she teaches and aware of her projections onto other people. In a word, the best teachers are often those who share some of the skills of the therapist. I do not think this aspect of training has changed over the past 30 years and I do not foresee it changing much over the next 30.

R.F. *My students often ask me about how they can become good teachers of English. What would you tell them?*

Mario Rinvolucrí: Requests for advice are normal but not always useful. If you take the bait and offer your three-hapence worth of advice the response will often be: «*Yeah, that's very interesting.... but.....*»

Before hazarding any advice it is best to try to get some idea of the internal map of reality of the advice seeker.

One way of dealing with apparent requests for advice like the one above might be to ask the person a couple of questions:

«*What, in your view, is a good teacher?*»

«*Can you give me an example of a good teacher you have known?*»

«*Have you had any good teachers of English?*»

Decent answers to these questions will a) tell you much more about where this student is coming from and b) will, with a bit of luck, make the advice seeker realize that the best person to ask for advice is themselves.