

# Meet the smiling boffin of ELT

Melanie Butler asks ClarityEnglish's Adrian Raper about his path into language learning

**A**drian, I always think of you as the smiling boffin. You are an artificial intelligence expert with a PhD and a tendency to tweet in programming language. You seem to be almost the polar opposite of a typical language teacher. Yet for over twenty years you've been involved in designing software for language learning. How did you first become involved?

I certainly didn't take the classic path to ELT publishing. My PhD was in vibrational engineering, and I started by applying computer solutions to vibrations in helicopters. But I didn't like working in a big organization, and in 1992 I decided to get out. My friend Andrew Stokes was teaching at the British Council and felt the same way. So together we started something small — our own publishing company, ClarityEnglish. Perhaps surprisingly, I found that the very exact techniques you require for modelling helicopters were quite similar to the skills you need to design sensitive and robust software for language learning.

**In 2014 the judges at the Hong Kong ICT Awards described Clarity programs as 'robust and elegant', and awarded you the prize for SME companies. What did you make of that?**

Yes — it is critical for us to keep our software delivery engine purring. We have aimed high, and our stats for 2015 are on target for 99.95 per cent

uptime, which is about the same as YouTube and better than most Yahoo services. Our servers are handling over four million sessions per year, so even a small mistake can result in hundreds of support emails. In my view, the key to successful software development is to make the developers handle the technical support. That way, they really understand the importance of reliable and elegant design.

**Your latest product, launched in November, is Practical Writing. It seems a little counterintuitive to use IT to teach writing skills. How did you come up with the idea?**

We started off by researching what students actually write, and came up with a list that starts with essays and short reports but also includes texts (obviously!), emails, TripAdvisor-type reviews and online profiles for job applications. All of these — except for the occasional essay — they write on the computer or on their phone. So it seems only logical for them to use the same devices to help them develop their writing skills.

**What was the hardest challenge you had to deal with when designing Practical Writing, and what is the feature you are most proud of?**

We wanted to integrate the full range of media: videos,



Courtesy ClarityEnglish

**POWER IN YOUR PALM** Adrian says it's logical for students to use their phones to develop writing skills

interactive activities, model writing on paper and a phone app. The first challenge was to match devices with learning behaviours. So, for example, we found that people like to learn on their phones, but only in short bursts and through fairly straightforward activities. As a result, we decided that the most suitable activity for the phone was pre-teaching vocab through presentation and a series of

games. This works well because you can pull out your phone and start learning discrete items of language straight away, even if you only have five minutes.

The second challenge was to integrate all these media in a form that is both attractive and intuitive. Our fabulous design team managed to do that very successfully, and we have had a lot of positive feedback on the look and feel of the program. It's

actually a pleasure to navigate around it.

What I like most about Practical Writing is that it doesn't just teach the traditional stuff. It also helps students with the writing they have to do day to day. If you are an international student in an English-speaking country, you really do need to know the meaning of IDK (I don't know), ATM (at the moment) and OMW (on my way). And if you are going to integrate

successfully into the wider community, you need to produce this language as well. Practical Writing helps you do this.

**Clarity has always produced material that complements the classroom teacher. Do you foresee a day when the computer can replace the language teacher?**

No. For all sorts of reasons, the most effective way of learning a language is with a teacher, and we design our programs primarily to support what the teacher is doing in the classroom. But we do need to recognise that not everyone has access to a teacher or has the money to spend on language lessons. One sign of this is that over the last few years Clarity has done more and more work with public libraries — we now have our programs in almost a thousand public libraries around the world. Research shows clearly that students are more motivated and learn more effectively from the computer than from a textbook, so making these resources available free of charge really does open up learning opportunities that wouldn't otherwise exist. So although the computer can never replace the teacher, it can become an alternative. My job is to make sure that it is as effective and reliable an alternative as possible. ■

## Do your students need help with their writing?

Essays: for and against

Job applications: your online profile

Emails: asking for information

A short report: graphs

Reviews: hotels and restaurants

Plagiarism

Taking notes

Essays: descriptive

Textspeak

Official letters

It's all in Practical Writing.

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