

## in English interview with Peter Viney and Karen Viney

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Peter and Karen Viney are internationally known for best-selling ELT courses such as Streamline, Grapevine, and Handshake. They have written for business English, and for videos such as English Channel, and the ELT adaptation of the Wallace and Gromit animations. Their writing is characterized by their understanding of learners' needs, humour, and a talent for writing material that both teachers and students enjoy using.

Here Peter and Karen Viney talk about their new course, In English – now available at Starter and Elementary level.

**You've just published two levels of your new course, In English. What was the motivation behind writing this course?**

**Peter** After several years working with video, we wanted to return to main course materials. We believe that we have something concrete and different to offer. Many recent courses start in the middle at intermediate level and work backwards to elementary and starter. We feel passionately that the right way is to start at the beginning and work up. We wrote this series in sequence and we feel that is the best way to do it. A vital concept was the Extension section which enables the teacher to speed up, slow down or expand sideways.

**Karen** From the teacher's point of view we wanted the material to be transparent, straightforward and flexible, which is why each lesson is divided into clear chunks. We also wanted it to be minimal, the central core of a lesson. For the student we wanted it to be stimulating, relevant and most important of all, to engage interest. The teacher is the ultimate resource. We didn't want teachers and students to lose interest while trawling through dense lesson content.

### What are the most important syllabus areas to focus on with low level learners?

**Peter** You have to teach a basic grammar syllabus in a clear logical way, but you always have to balance it with usefulness and genuine transfer to real situations. Grammar isn't everything. But there are also teacher preconceptions. There are things teachers expect to see in a course and that's important too.

### What's your view on the use of mother tongue with low level learners?

**Peter** You can teach at this level wholly in English and there are great benefits from doing so. We have done ourselves. But in a monolingual class the mother tongue will be used and that's natural, and teachers can make a positive virtue of it. There is no right way or secret method for teaching languages, but many ways.

### How does one develop a communicative approach when teaching students at this level?

**Karen** We focus on minimal language – the simplest way of expressing what you want – from the beginning. You also have to keep communicative goals in mind throughout the course. Dialogue has been underplayed recently, and it still is an important teaching tool.

### One of your great strengths is contextualising language clearly – where do you get your ideas from?

**Karen** We spend a lot of time looking for engaging contexts. If you get the context right, teachers can exploit the material in many ways, even if they dislike our suggested exploitation. If the context is neither interesting nor memorable, then it doesn't matter how good the exploitation might be in the book.

### Do you have any special tips or suggestions for teachers at this level?

**Peter** It's the most satisfying level to work with, the one where you can see the most dramatic progress. You'll learn more about teaching English at the lower levels than any other. You'll learn to control your own language level, and whatever you teach later you'll be aware of how the learners assembled their own knowledge. Two tips- genuinely listen to what the learners are trying to communicate. And enjoy it!

### We'd probably all agree that learners need to study at home to progress. How can you encourage learners to study effectively outside the classroom?

**Karen** Self-access materials are central to IN English. You need as many different ways as possible for learning and practising the same things. We hope we have provided this with the range of add-on materials. When we visit bookshops they tell us that students always request basic, simple audio exercises. We provide them on the free audio CD.

**On a more personal note, how do you find working together as a husband-and-wife team?**

**Karen** We're a good team, because we have different teaching styles. Rather than thinking of it as a husband-wife team, think of it as a male-female team. I can tell 'all male' or 'all female' writing teams immediately. You need both perspectives.

**What do you do when you're not working?**

**Peter** I spend a lot of time writing about music, listening to music.

**Karen** We met performing weekly theatre shows for students, and were writing scripts together from the beginning. My main interest is the theatre. One of our recreations is writing non-ELT scripts!

**You've travelled to many places around the world with your work. What place do you like best?**

**Peter** Impossible to choose.

**Karen** I love Alaska.

