

Looking back, looking forward ...



Helena Gomm
lifts the lid on
editing *ETp*.

As the hundredth issue of *ETp* is something of a milestone, I hope readers will forgive me for taking the main feature for myself this time, in order to share with you some of my feelings on reaching this point in the magazine's history.

The process

Editing *ETp* has many rewards, which I will describe below, but first let's take a look at the process.

The content of each issue of the magazine consists of a combination of both material that I have commissioned and unsolicited articles, which arrive on an almost daily basis from all over the world. Every unsolicited article that is submitted to us is given a number and added to a chart. This enables me to keep track of what decision has been made on each one, the number of the issue in which the successful ones were published, which articles have already been accepted but are still waiting for publication, which have still to be assessed, etc. I have just added number 1,729 to this list – an article on improvisation and storytelling by David Heathfield.

Each article that arrives is read and considered carefully. That's an awful lot of reading! I calculated this morning that of the articles that have already been assessed, 64% have been published,

which I believe is quite a high percentage within the editorial world, and this is in line with my feeling that everyone who writes to us has something to say – and usually something that is worth saying. The way in which that 'something' is expressed may need a little work, but I see that as an important part of my job. No one is turned away because of the standard of their English or because their article doesn't match a prescribed formula or template.

The rewards

Editing this magazine has many pleasures, and one of these is getting messages from a vast community of teachers, working everywhere from a Mongolian yurt to a high-tech purpose-built classroom with an interactive whiteboard on every wall. This makes me feel part of an enormous family of like-minded professionals. Of course, the members of a family don't always agree on absolutely everything, but the ELT community has room for a wide variety of individual opinions on almost every topic, and editing *ETp* gives me an overriding sense that we are, if nothing else, all aiming at the same goal.

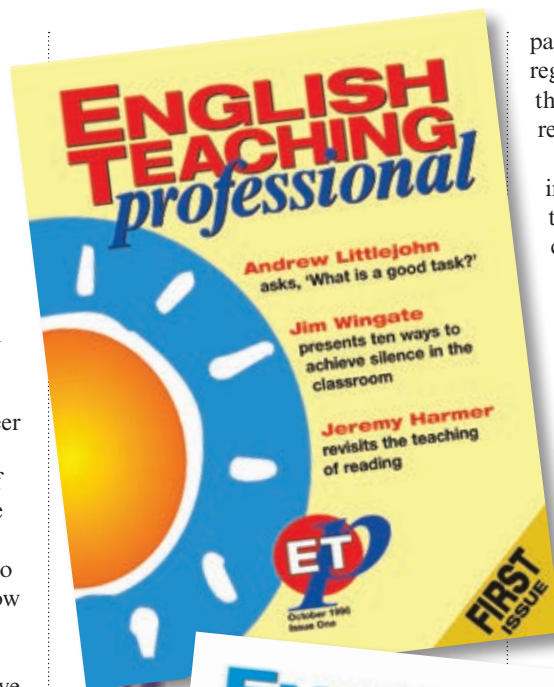
An incredible wealth of ideas passes across my desk, and I can't count the number of times I have thought to myself '*I wish I'd known that when I was teaching!*' or '*I wish I could try that out in*

the classroom'. Fortunately, a local language school is sometimes short of staff in the summer months and gives me the opportunity to experiment with some of the things I learn from the magazine. Our editorial consultant, Mike Burghall, who teaches in a prestigious music school in Madrid, also frequently tries out ideas which are submitted to *ETp*, and he reports back on how successful they were. I am painfully well aware that I would have been a much better teacher during my active teaching career if I had read a magazine like this.

One of the greatest satisfactions of editing *ETp* is discovering the pleasure that other people get from seeing their work in print. It gives me a real thrill to get emails from contributors saying how much they liked the way their article turned out, that their bosses were impressed by their article, that they have been given promotion or a bonus because of being published, etc. It is also very encouraging to receive emails from people who have enjoyed reading one of our articles and want to report that they tried out an idea in their own classroom and found that it worked. On the whole, I have to say that I prefer emails that begin: *Thank you, Madam, for imparting a sputnik to the world of English language teaching* to those that begin: *You heartless *X*@*, how could you have published that piece on ...* but we all have to take the rough with the smooth!

Editing *ETp* has introduced me to a wide range of 'interesting' people: a South American nun who sends me lines of poetry and follows these up with increasingly demanding emails enquiring why I haven't published them; several contributors who clearly put their articles through some form of translation software so that even quotations from well-known ELT pundits come out as gobbledygook; someone who thinks that the first ten and a half (the photocopier cut off the rest) items from his ministry's guidelines on teaching English constitute an article ...

ETp articles also inspired me to become a *student* again in order to try out some of the learning strategies and techniques that contributors write about. I decided that the subject had to be something entirely new, something that I had never done before. I already had quite a bit of experience of learning other languages, so I chose the piano. Seven years later, I am still playing.



The concerns

One of the difficulties of editing *ETp* is a direct result of its success. The number of contributions submitted to us is increasing, so the task of reading and choosing articles grows bigger every year. Priority always has to be given to getting the next issue ready for the printers, so sometimes there isn't much time left for answering emails and processing unsolicited articles. This means that some people have to wait rather a long time to hear whether we have accepted an article or not, and then again to see it actually in print. I am genuinely sorry about this because I hate to keep people waiting, but it is, sadly, inevitable. Thankfully, most people are incredibly

patient, but some are not so. I deeply regret having lost some good articles this way – entirely my own fault for not responding more quickly.

One reason that submissions are increasing is, of course, the result of the tremendous pressure to publish currently being exerted by universities and other educational authorities. For many people, publication can mean the difference between retaining a job or being made redundant, receiving a promotion or staying at the same level, getting a salary increase or not.

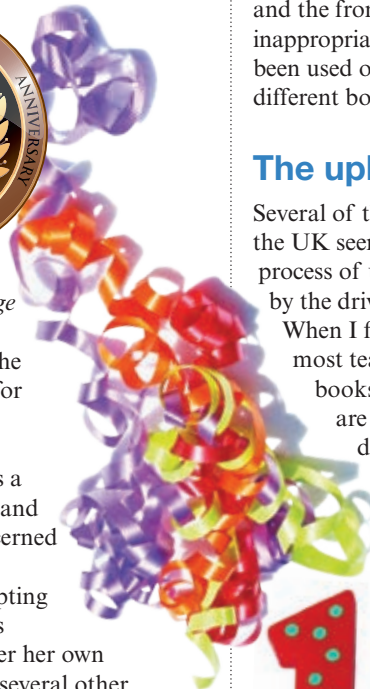
I once received an article from someone who said that her tutor had made it a condition of passing a teacher training course that every candidate should get an article published in a teaching magazine.

Whether this was actually true, or merely a ploy to apply pressure on *ETp* to accept the article, I never discovered. It seemed unlikely that it would be the case, as most training courses would be finished long before an article had completed the assessment process and been allocated a slot in a magazine, but the prospect that I might be about to receive an article from every trainee on this particular course and others in the future filled me with some trepidation, especially as the expectation seemed to be that I would give detailed feedback and guidance to each writer!

The pitfalls

Another unfortunate bi-product of the pressure to publish has been a marked increase in plagiarism. Readers may have noticed that in Issue 98 we had to print a retraction of an article published in Issue 72. The fact that this example of plagiarism was spotted nearly five years after its publication should be a warning to all potential plagiarists that your sins will eventually find you out! This particular article got through my net, but there are many others that, fortunately, do not. A few weeks ago, a would-be contributor tried to pass off Chapter 10 of *Teaching Reading Skills*

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in a Foreign Language by Christine Nuttall as an article which she herself had written for *ETp*. I immediately pointed out that intellectual theft was a very serious offence and that the person concerned was risking her own reputation by attempting to get someone else's work published under her own name. I also alerted several other editors in our field to what had happened (yes, we do talk to each other and compare notes). Later that day, she submitted the same 'article' to another magazine. As a result, nothing submitted by her in future will be accepted by *ETp* and she may well find it difficult to get published elsewhere. Plagiarism really isn't worth it!

Pressure to publish brings problems aside from plagiarism. In the last few years, a host of online companies have been offering publication of people's work – at a price. Many potential authors whose work has been rejected by mainstream publishers seem to have turned to these outfits as a solution. The main issue is one of quality.

A couple of years ago, I was sent a book for review in *ETp*. It was an account of the presentations that the author had attended at an ELT conference, and he was desperate for it to be reviewed because his university had made it clear that he would only be able to retain his job if he could prove that he had published a reputable book. The content of the book was interesting, but it was quite obvious that he had been cheated by the company involved. They

had taken his money with the promise that they would edit and publish the material, yet no editorial work had been done at all: the author was Polish and no attempt had been made to correct the mistakes in his English or to edit the text so that it made sense; the back cover alone had five spelling mistakes and the front cover picture was not only inappropriate, but was an image that had been used over and over again for many different books on other subjects.

The upheavals

Several of the major ELT publishers in the UK seem to be going through a process of upheaval, largely occasioned by the drive for digital publishing.

When I first started editing *ETp*, most teaching material was found in books. Now the larger publishers are pouring all their money into digital products, and there is much less book publication taking place. However, it has become increasingly apparent that more



emphasis is being placed on the delivery of the material than the content, and staff with ELT expertise are all too often being replaced by those who merely possess IT skills. There has to be something going wrong when someone with the glorious job title of 'Content owner' gives the reason that she is unable to answer a question as 'I'm afraid I don't know anything about content'! I am not saying there is anything wrong with exploring new avenues for delivering material to teachers, but there is a reason why reputable publishers employ good content editors with teaching experience and knowledge of the markets, and cutting them out of the process tends to lead to sub-standard materials. Editors do more than merely check the spelling and punctuation, and there are far too many worksheets that are simply uploaded to the internet with exercises that don't work, texts that are full of mistakes and instructions that make no

sense. It is my hope that teachers will be the force that will reverse this process by rejecting style over substance and insisting that content is king.

The future

When *ETp* was taken over by Pavilion Publishing in 2010, the company put a lot of effort and investment into creating a new and improved website for the magazine, with a searchable archive of all the articles published in the past, blogs, videos and a bookshop. This has been a great move forward for us and I am delighted that the Pavilion staff, particularly Fiona Richmond, Rob Mair, Andrew Chilvers and Rachel Langdon, have been so supportive. I was also especially pleased when the decision was made to re-establish our annual one-day conference, *ETp Live!* We have now had two of these, both held in Brighton in June, with superb speakers and lots of enthusiastic delegates.

Pavilion have also moved into ELT publishing and are currently soliciting new proposals from prospective authors. *ETpedia*, a compendium of ideas for teachers by John Hughes, a frequent contributor to the magazine, was published earlier this year and has been very well received. More titles are in the pipeline.

Of course, getting *ETp* to its 100th issue hasn't been '100 Issues of Solitude'. There are a lot of people who have made and continue to make *ETp* what it is. Two of them are profiled on page 7. It may seem invidious to single out only two people, but it is a plain fact that they have both been on board since the very first issue (I am a relative newcomer), and *ETp* simply wouldn't be possible without them. They are the designer, Christine Cox, whose talent is only equalled by her patience, and the editorial consultant, Mike Burghall, who is almost always right.

So, it only remains for me to give a big thank-you to all the people who have nursed *ETp* from its very first issue to the present day, and to hope that the magazine will continue to thrive and to reach its 200th issue. Perhaps by then I will have achieved a rather bizarre ambition: to get onto the London underground and see someone on the seat opposite reading a copy of *ETp*. 