

Streamline and in English interview

Interview with Peter Viney

You've just published a major new series, IN English. Let me go back and ask you about Streamline. It has been successful all over the world, and is still often the course of choice when teachers are confronted with genuine starter students. How do you feel about it now?



I'm still very proud of Streamline, and its content is still clear in my mind as the revised New American Streamline was only published a few years ago, and I had to revisit the whole course to write it. We get feedback from our website and enquiries about Streamline (often asking for a revised British edition to match the revised American edition) and comments have increased markedly recently. We've heard from several teachers who had stopped using it some time ago, then have recently gone back to it. They mention a significant increase in the number of genuine Starter students, many being immigrants, then there is the spread of ELT into new countries.

Judging by my photocopying statements from the Authors' Lending and Copyright Society it's one of the most photocopied courses too, which from our point of view is a bad thing! It's also still being heavily pirated in various black and white editions in countries with no copyright protection, for which we never see a penny of royalties. I've seen a few of these pirates. One, inexplicably, added authentic poems at the end of several units.

However for us Streamline was a long time ago. Remember that we started writing and teaching it three years before it was published. We have had a lot of experience, travel, feedback from users and teacher-trainees in many countries, influence from other books, influence from new ideas since then. We're different people. We've had kids, and experienced the education system right through as parents as well as educators since then. This changes everything about your approach, I think.

That said, if I had a group of students and Streamline, I'd be content to teach through it and would expect success. The reason is that Streamline put the minimum necessary on the page and allowed the teacher to adapt, extemporise and create very different lesson types around that minimal core. I certainly wouldn't teach it in the same way as when I wrote it, but would be glad of those core contexts upon which to hang a lesson. Our new course IN English shares that vital feature.

Many teachers recall Streamline fondly – ‘Willy The Kid’ has been cited more than once as the best-ever contextualization of the past simple of regular verbs. Do you get the urge to repeat things?

Simply, you can't. I've heard that comment on 'Willy The Kid' a few times myself ('I Love You, Fiona' and 'On the Moon' are others), and it's something of a millstone around my neck whenever I write a new lesson in the same area – as I've done many times with Grapevine and the various videos. It does remind me that strong, memorable contexts are an important teaching tool.

When you get a good way of contextualizing any point, it shouldn't date that fast – it's fresh to each new group of students. Take songs. No one says, 'Ah, but Hotel California was written ages ago.' They still play it on the radio. People still like it. People still buy it. I don't feel any immediate desire to replace my 1970s Van Morrison LPs with the latest dance albums. A good context should go on like a good song. But I was glad to see the clothes and prices updated when we did New American Streamline. Just as I was pleased to get digitally remastered copies of my Van Morrison favourites.

How important is humour?

A small joke, however weak, at the end of a dialogue or listening passage is the best test of listening comprehension. Students laugh, probably at the sheer relief of understanding it rather than because it's hilariously funny.

We use humour a great deal in all our materials. We don't use humour as much as some people think we do though. When I was researching and speaking to users before rewriting for New American Streamline, the feedback comment that we often got was, 'Even more humour, please.' After much discussion, we decided to ignore that comment. If every unit is 'funny' (or attempts to be funny) the humour becomes relentless and stops being funny. You have to include more mundane and more transferable topics, as well as more serious ones. So we use humour carefully, and not all the time. Then when we do use humour, there is more impact.

A Mexican teacher commented that his ideal book would be the Streamline Everyday Conversations, one per page with a short exercise. Did you ever consider doing something like that?

When we were doing Streamline, the Everyday Conversations were our intuitive attempt to deal with 'lexical chunks', though in those days we called them formulas and fixed expressions. Formulaic language has always been an important feature of all our materials. We became fascinated with minimal communication – the simplest most natural way to express something, and you can see something of the approach in most lessons in IN English. Your Mexican commentator might find his wish fulfilled in the Everyday English section in the 3-in-1 Practice Pack. In the IN English Student Book, there is less on a page than in most other books, and there is that minimal, clear focus.

Was Streamline a major influence on the new course?

We wanted the clarity and focus and humour, but in methodology there are major differences. IN English is at a lower level, it has vastly more variety of approach, and listening skills are a major part of the IN English syllabus. Similarities are an oral / aural bias and a belief that the right contextualization is a major student motivator.

Actually Grapevine influenced the variety of approaches much more. It also used a lot of songs. This time around we have shifted from our own original songs to authentic songs. Handshake, though at a higher level, was very much in our minds as we tried to focus on communication, and even at this early level to pay attention to communication skills. We also used approaches to dialogue and text that we developed writing video support materials. I'd cite Handshake, and the videos, as a stronger influence.

The one thing that does happen is that we use dialogue more than most courses (though far less than Streamline did). I'll be totally arrogant here and say that it's because the experience of working on video so heavily has made Karen and I better dialogue writers than most! Dialogue still has major advantages in presenting memorable, flowing interchanges to students. Courses which avoid dialogue almost entirely, as some do, have difficulty in getting students to create longer interchanges which flow.

I didn't co-write Streamline with Karen, and her influence can be seen in many of the fundamental differences with our more recent materials. Karen taught the pre-publication edition of Streamline for three years and had a lot of input at that stage and also on the higher levels, particularly on Directions. Karen was one of the fiercest critics in the pilot group and was influential as a result. I would say she's more open-minded than me on new ideas in general. I actually can't conceive of writing a major course with an all-male, or an all-female team of writers nowadays. You need both viewpoints, which is why so many male-female (or female-male if you prefer) writing teams have been successful in educational materials.

Are there any negative effects of Streamline on your career?

Yes, there are, and I think most successful ELT authors have a similar problem. Whenever a course has been a major success, there has been a reaction from some critics and trainers against it. If I think of the major successes of the last 30 years, First Things First, Kernel Lessons, Strategies, Meanings Into Words, Cambridge English Course, Headway, Project English, Interchange, Cutting Edge ... then I can think of the many times I've heard them knocked and criticized, and Streamline is in that group. As a result, for some people you can then do no right.

The incident that brings this home happened to me at a conference. Handshake had just been published and a ... let's say 'leading ELT figure' ... was praising it generously and extravagantly for its innovative syllabus. Then he finished, 'So then I saw your names were on the cover and I couldn't believe it.' I asked why not, and he mumbled something about being surprised that commercially successful authors kept abreast of current developments. There is an odd thing at conferences too. I can't count the number of conference parties where the textbook authors end up in one group, and the academics end up on the other side of the room in another group. It's not fair as several in the textbook

authors group will be distinguished academics in their own right, but once the books are successful ... well, they're squarely in the authors group. I'm rambling around the point, but while authors might be privately critical of their 'opposition' textbooks, they are also the only people who understand how much care and effort their rivals have put into their work. So we never have a go at each other in public. Privately I've had some great discussions with other authors.

People used to see me exclusively as 'the Streamline author.' I've been pleasantly surprised when I speak to teachers about my books to find that increasingly people mention the videos or Handshake. One pleasant shock I got (in Mexico) was when a teacher said, 'I studied English with your books and now I'm teaching them.' I assumed she was talking about Streamline, but in fact she was talking about Grapevine. It's good to be identified with a wider range of materials.

Some people have criticized the number of mechanical activities in Streamline ... any comments?

Yes. The drills were confined to the Teacher's Book (as they are in the new one). Everything that is taken out of the SB and placed in the TB is optional – it's the teacher's choice. You can easily teach Streamline without ever touching the drills. People asked me if I would follow the TB notes faithfully in Streamline. The answer is 'not mid week, but yes on a cold Monday morning or on a Friday afternoon with the sun streaming through the windows.' On those occasions, I'd lack inspiration and be grateful for the question sequences. I couldn't generate a question and answer sequence as good as the one we wrote because we often spent a couple of hours honing and refining a short sequence in the TB notes. You can't improvise that clearly on your feet. This is true of all of our TBs, actually, not just Streamline. The TB is an important component, and that's why, unlike many writers, we don't farm out the TBs to other writers. We see them as an integral part of the process.

One problem with mechanical activities is that teachers are no longer trained in doing them most effectively. A few years ago in Japan I listened to a leading American ESL guru who explained why drills and question sequences were useless, then proceeded to demonstrate them. He didn't have the first clue how to do them effectively and in a non-boring and challenging way. They didn't work for him because he was lacking the requisite skills. No names! All our TB introductions from Streamline through Grapevine and Main Street to IN English explain how to use the activities in great detail. I just wish people would read the TB introductions. Especially some of the gurus.

In the new book, we covered ourselves by having a free Audio CD in the student 3 in 1 Practice Pack. That means students can get the practice outside the classroom. The amount of learner-paced material we provide in the Practice pack is vitally important.

So, you have a class of Starter students starting tomorrow. Which of your courses would you use?

No question. IN English.

If I had the facilities, I'd use English Channel One video alongside it and Only in America video too, regardless of whether I was in Britain, the USA or somewhere else. Most students want to learn 'English' rather than just one variety. My second choice would be to use just video if it was a short course – we have three related low-level videos, Grapevine One, English Channel One and Only in America, let alone A Weekend Away and The Wrong Trousers. Then Grapevine (UK) or Main Street (US) would be my third choice, with Streamline fourth. Grapevine is richer in its variety of activities and is generally a fuller course. Even in Britain, I'd definitely choose New American Streamline over the earlier American Streamline, or over Streamline English, as I think we improved the course significantly when we revised it. The fact that I'm British would compensate for the American accents on the tapes. But I'd be happy to use any of them. ❖