

FIND OUT MORE ABOUT THE AUTHORS ...



Mike Harris, David Mower and Anna Sikorzynska, bestselling authors of *Opportunities* and of the new Pearson course *Challenges*, took some time out of their very busy writing and travelling schedule to

answer a few questions about *Challenges* and themselves.

About the books ...

***Challenges* is your latest course, after the great success of *Opportunities*. How has *Challenges* benefited from the writing of *Opportunities*?**

Firstly, after writing *Opportunities* we had a team of authors and editors who were used to working together and who understood each other. That's very important for any project. Our publishing manager, Elana Katz, has been particularly important for us on both projects. Secondly, when we started *Challenges* we knew where students were going later on in their school career. Having written a course for upper secondary, it was much easier to plan objectives for mid or junior secondary – to provide learners with the kind of communication and learning strategies, as well as language, that will help them later on in their learning.

What makes *Challenges* different from *Opportunities*?

Challenges is for a different age group – younger teenagers who are particularly difficult to motivate. The topics in *Challenges* reflect this and we deal with a lot more personal issues about growing up, establishing identity and relating to one's peer group. For example, in *Challenges* there are stories in each level where a group of teenagers has to work together and overcome a different challenge. The topics in *Opportunities* on the other hand are more related to developing awareness and knowledge about the outside world. *Challenges* also offers more step-by-step support to learners. You can see this in the Word Builders, Sentence Builders and Text Builders which build up language knowledge bit by bit. You can also see it in the learner development activities in *Challenges* such as the Study Help sections, the Language Checks and the Learner Diary (in the CD Rom). We think learner development is crucial for this age group.

It is often difficult to motivate teenagers to learn. How does *Challenges* deal with the issue of motivation?

As we said before, the topics in *Challenges* are related to the things that affect teenagers. Some of these can be from popular culture (e.g. films, computer games, TV, fashion), while others are more serious. For example, we look at bullying, anti-social behaviour, health problems and generational misunderstanding. We also have a lot of educational topics. It is a myth that students, just because they are teenagers, lose all interest in anything serious. There will always be some students in a class interested in science and technology, others into art and music, others into history and geography. Another thing that is very important for this age group is to have lots of room for students to talk about themselves and to express their opinions. They need to do this individually and as a group – peer group identity is crucial. Finally, we need to challenge students, to stretch them but at the same time to give them support and build their confidence. Both receptive and productive tasks are deliberately challenging but carefully staged and supported.

Courses are usually seen as purely for the students but you seem to have made a special effort to think about teachers with the separate Teacher's Handbook and Total Teacher's Pack. Why do you think it is important to do this?

Because teaching teenagers is a challenge, teachers need all the support they can get. The **Teacher's Handbook** is a practical, user-friendly book which you can take into the classroom. As well as answers, it has background information, routes through the material and extra suggestions. The **Total Teacher's Pack** is a sourcebook for extra activities and ideas as well as fantastic teacher development materials by Melanie Williams and Gillian Symonds (on citizenship education). There will also be a lot of extra support on this website, with extra reading, internet activities and more writing and speaking activities. We have also thought about teachers in the Students' Book. One of the key criteria for us while writing **Challenges** has always been to have clear, well-signposted, user-friendly lessons with transparent objectives. That may sound easy but it's hard to achieve in practice! We think that this makes a lot of difference to the usability of the course.

What part of Challenges makes you proudest as authors?

We think that **Challenges** is a coursebook with a clear identity and with a 'heart' as well as a 'mind'. Many coursebooks nowadays often look the same and do all the same things. We have tried to go that little bit further, not only by having innovative features such as the Word, Text and Sentence Builders, but by adding an important element of personal development. In the input texts, the stories and the tasks, there is a focus on positive values, on overcoming difficulties and on personal and group achievement.

During the writing of Challenges you investigated a lot of topics. Which topic did you most enjoy?

(Anna) Actually, most of them. It's incredible how much you learn about all sorts of things while writing a coursebook. I really enjoyed studying animal communication and learning of the different means animals used to pass messages. I also found prehistoric people fascinating – we have a text about homo floresiensis but I've also read about many other findings. You almost wish you were a palaeontologist.

(David) I enjoyed working on the 'Performers' module in *Challenges 2*. Liam Mower is my nephew's son, so I was able to do a real interview with him. I also enjoyed finding out about the giant mammals in the 'Discoveries' module of *Challenges 3*. I was never taught about them when I was at school, and when I first saw the BBC's *Walking With Beasts* series I was amazed.

(Mike) I really liked doing the Across Culture spots like the ones on dance and traditional costumes in *Challenges 2*, the one on nomads in *Challenges 3* and the one on Easter Island in *Challenges 4*.

What motivates me most about teaching English is ...

(Anna) The fact that English changes all the time, new words appear, and even the grammar is not stable. This means you have to learn yourself all the time, which is very motivating. Also, most modern culture is in English so students just want to learn English to get access to all new songs, films, books, etc. They are internally motivated and the teacher just has to be there.

A word / expression I use a lot is ...

(Anna) I'm not a native speaker so it's hard to say, but I can say which words in English I like. I like 'delicious' because its sound ideally reflects its meaning, I like 'nice' because it's so flexible, you can use it to describe anything.



What are you terrible at?

(Mike) I'm terrible at DIY. It takes me hours to assemble a bookshelf from IKEA. When I finish, I usually find out that it is crooked. My hands also end up full of cuts and blisters so the scene looks like something out of *Pulp Fiction*.

(Anna) Drawing.

What are you good at?

(Mike) I'm quite good at chairing meetings. I'm involved in a couple of local environmental groups and I always tend to end up as the 'facilitator'. Conversation management and turn-taking is rather different in Spanish from English and everybody tends to talk at the same time very loudly. So it's a real challenge, but fun.

(Anna) - logical thinking ... It compensates for my poor memory
 - cooking ... I've been thinking of opening my own restaurant
 - swimming ... I used to swim in a students' club

What food do you like best?

(Mike) I love fish (Spanish fish is unbeatable), soups (especially those from Poland like *zurek*) and game. I was brought up in the country in South Shropshire on the Welsh Marshes and I love jugged hare, roast pheasant and well-marinated venison.

(Anna) I like most food, especially trying new dishes

What book has made a big impression on you?

(David) *Catch 22* by Joseph Heller

(Mike) A book which made a big impression on me recently is called ***Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed*** by Jared Diamond. It's a book about historical ecology and looks at examples of how societies destroyed themselves by being too greedy. Very relevant nowadays.

(Anna) *To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee

What is one of your favourite songs?

(David) Almost anything by Bob Dylan.

(Mike) One of my favourite songs is ***Downtown Train*** by Tom Waits.

What is your most prized possession?

(David) My Martin acoustic guitar.

(Mike) My most prized possession is my collection of books. At the moment, the builders are in the house so my books are stuck in cardboard boxes under layers of dust and I miss them.

What did you want to be when you were younger?

(David) A doctor, would you believe?

(Mike) When I was younger I wanted to be a writer – but not the kind I am now. I wanted to write great novels while starving in a garret.

(Anna) A Psychologist. I even studied psychology for five years and obtained an MA

Who are your favourite authors?

(Mike) My favourite contemporary novelists are Paul Auster, Margaret Atwood, Peter Carey, Javier Marías and Ian McEwan. I am also getting to the age when I can start re-reading classics like Dickens, Fielding and Sterne. *Tristram Shandy* and *The Pickwick Papers* are all-time favourites. I like reading travel and history books too especially about the middle ages. At the moment I'm reading *Microcosm* by Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse. It is about the history of Wroclaw/Breslau in Poland and is very well-written and documented.

If I have a spare hour, I like to ...

(David) Play the piano or guitar.

(Anna) Read or go swimming

A film I really enjoyed was ...

(David) *Gandhi*, *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*, *Don't Look Now*, *Mississippi Burning* ... it's impossible to choose just one.

(Anna) *The Sting*, with Robert Redford and Paul Newman