

Frank Frankel Talks to TESOL France

Winter 1984 Volume 4 Number 2

Steve Flinders

The appointment of a new British Council English language officer in France is always a significant event for English language teaching here and we are grateful to Dr. M.A. ("Frank") Frankel for agreeing to talk to TESOL France *News* in November 1983, fairly shortly after his move to the Council's offices overlooking the Esplanade des Invalides in Paris.

TESOL France: Dr Frankel, welcome to France. Could we start with some information about your background?... What area of research did you work in for your doctorate?

Frankel: I think, as a matter of principle, I was generally concerned with the extent in our profession to which hypotheses are put forward as statements of fact without proper empirical evidence to support them. I feel very strongly that theoretical *a priori* models must be put to the test and that, too often, they aren't. The particular claim that I was interested in testing was concerned with listening comprehension and specifically with the ability of overseas postgraduate students to follow lectures in English in British universities. The claim was that the key to understanding lectures lay in the students' ability to interpret discourse markers in these lectures. My experimental research set out to demonstrate — and in fact proved — that they don't make any difference at all.

T-F: How?

Frankel: Well first I prepared a set of tests designed to show how well the individuals who took part in the experiment knew and were able to interpret discourse-markers. Then I recorded four university lecturers, each giving two ten-minute talks, one on a topic from their academic field, the second on another topic of their choice from outside their academic field. I asked them to treat the second one as though they were giving an academic lecture; the result was that the second talk in each case was like a lecture in delivery, but not in content.

T-F: Did you find that the same discourse marker “profile” was uniform over a wide range of academic subjects?

Frankel: Not really. But one of the interesting things that we discovered—this was the subject of an M.Ed. thesis of a colleague who was working with me—was that, over 48 hours of lectures given by 21 lecturers, covering 17 disciplines from English literature to electronic engineering, 90% of discourse markers were accounted for by four words: and, for, but and so. One could already predict therefore that discourse markers wouldn’t be a problem for the non-native listener, despite the claims made by discourse analysts at that time who had in fact based their claims on written discourse, rather than on spoken monologue.

In the experiment everyone who participated took a standard listening test first. On the basis of the results from the test the sample was divided into two matched groups. Each group listened to the same recorded lectures with one crucial difference; while one group heard the lectures as originally recorded, the other heard them with the discourse-markers electronically excised. Both groups answered the same questions which related to points in the texts where discourse markers had been used and were seen to be important. A comparison of the results from the different tests in the battery showed quite conclusively that the ability of overseas postgraduates to understand lectures is not affected by how well or badly they interpret discourse markers in lectures.

T-F: If discourse markers are not then a problem in understanding, what are the real problems in listening?

Frankel: Obviously, there is a complex of factors, but I would hesitate to claim any one factor as crucial. There’s an interplay. At one level, the listener must recognize which are the important lexical items and understand what they are; and understand the grammatical relationships between these items. But in my view, problems also exist at a level beyond this—problems relating to phonology and more specifically to the prosody of the language—that is, the rhythm as reflected in stress and intonation, pace, loudness, pitch, and so on. These features are very important for example, when a speaker wants the listener(s) to understand that what he is saying is an important or unimportant part of the message: so a slow, higher-pitched delivery signals an important message; a fast, low-pitched delivery signals a lower degree of importance.

All of this relates to one of my more general concerns in language teaching. I don’t think learners get enough listening practice. And when they do get it, it’s too

often inappropriate because it's listening-to-produce rather than listening-to-listen-and-interpret. And even then, it's not "authentic", to use that ghastly word: it's been doctored to make it "easier" for the listener. The result of this is that the listener develops false expectations about what the language is going to be like when he or she does hear it false expectations based on listening to standard English spoken by actors with RP accents making idealised utterances.

T-F: But surely the teacher has to exercise some controls when working with very low level learners.

Frankel: Certainly, but it should be possible to present the learner with opportunities to listen to the same language combined in different ways in different contexts. At an early learning level, you can use realistic language for listening practice as long as the input has a high degree of familiarity for the learners. I would like to see the sort of approach adopted by a book like "Task Listening", built into more comprehensive course materials.

T-F: Do you think it could be possible to construct "listener profiles" to identify how one individual's listening problems differ from another's?

Frankel: Yes, although I don't think anyone has yet developed the kind of sophisticated battery that one would need. It should be possible to base such a battery on the concept of how the listener processes spoken input with a view to identifying the key processes involved. I think it is important in this respect to shift the focus from socio- to psycholinguistic features as, for example, the complex question of redundancy. This is not an absolute feature for a native speaker and we should recognize its variability for nonnative speakers.

T-F: Should we therefore be teaching our students the concept of redundancy?

Frankel: Yes — in other words, not only making learners aware of how they learn but also making them aware of how language operates. ... There is a dangerous tendency nowadays to forget that we have to give our students the bricks and mortar of the language to work with. At the same time, Krashen has given academic respectability and support to the common sense idea, known to language teachers for centuries, that you cannot successfully learn a language without having opportunities to reinforce conscious learning. In lycee terms, this means helping students to forget that they are in a language classroom — convincing them that they're using English because it's appropriate for a particular activity. It is possible

for secondary students to accept “learning” in the formal Krashen sense — the presentation, assimilation and formal practice of linguistic items — for particular purposes if they know that there is going to be a target at the end that they can identify with. Another nice thing about this approach is that you can avoid what I believe is a non-debate about choosing between structural or notional/functional syllabuses.

T-F: Let’s go back to your mentors.

Frankel: I very much admire the work of Karl Popper and his view of the learning process as being one of experimenting, making mistakes, inviting criticism (exposing yourself to other people’s ideas) and learning on a trial-and-error basis. Popper tells us that we must experiment and we must be prepared to be wrong, and this, for me, is highly relevant to what we do in the classroom. Both teachers and learners have to learn to take risks, to do away with the “laager” mentality, that is, withdrawing behind the walls of the things that you know and so make you feel secure.

Another person I greatly admire is John Bright, whom I worked with in Uganda and in Manchester. He taught me the need for enthusiasm in one’s work — how can we expect our students to be enthusiastic if we are not? I became aware through him that the teaching/learning relationship has a powerful element of magic in it and, for me, this is very important. Manchester also taught me that all teacher training should start in the classroom and should be geared to what happens in the classroom. Working with a particular team in Uganda was also very important to me — we were very keen on the idea of “exposure”, what Krashen now terms “acquisition”.