

## **An interview with Dr. Eli Hinkel**

The Editorial Board

The Editorial Board of the Web Journal recently had the pleasure of submitting interview questions to Dr. Eli Hinkel, the invited guest speaker at the 2009 APPLE Lecture sponsored by the Programs in TESOL and Applied Linguistics at Teachers College, Columbia University.

Dr. Hinkel has taught ESL and applied linguistics, as well as trained teachers, for over twenty five years. She has published numerous books and articles on learning second culture, and second language grammar, writing, and pragmatics in such journals as *TESOL Quarterly*, *Applied Linguistics*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, and *Applied Language Learning*. She is also the Editor of the Routledge ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series of books and textbooks for teachers and graduate students. Dr. Hinkel is currently the Program Director of the Culture and Language Bridge Program at Seattle University.

### **1. What led you to the fields of TESOL and Applied Linguistics?**

This sounds like a question that students tend to ask any teaching professor. In most cases, faculty give what they consider to be “appropriate” answers. In my case, I sort of fell into TESOL and AL when I was working as a Teaching Assistant at the English Language Institute at the University of Michigan during my MA-PhD studies. During that time, as a doctoral student I was involved with many other researchers in a serious research project in intercultural pragmatics, and that work really got me anchored in AL.

Questions 2 through 5 relate to the following article, which was suggested reading for the colloquium on the day of the Apple Lecture: Hinkel, E. (2003). Simplicity without elegance: Features of sentences in L2 and L1 academic texts. *TESOL Quarterly*, 37, 275-301. (<http://www.elihinkel.org/downloads/Simplicity.pdf>)

### **2. What was the rationale in choosing participants from Korean, Japanese, Chinese, and Arabic first languages (L1s)? Since these languages are so distant from English, do you think the results are only generalizable to these populations? How do you think the data would change if the participants spoke romance languages instead?**

Speakers of Romance, Germanic, or Slavic languages (like me) have a much easier time learning English than speakers of languages that are genetically different. The rate of second language (L2) learning is also higher when one’s first and second languages are related at least in some way. Outside of Spanish speakers, in the U.S. speakers of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Arabic represent large minorities (especially among university students), whose first language(s) are not genetically related to English.

In the case of that study, I was interested in trying to identify the factors that affect the quality of L2 writing in academic contexts, such as the types of register (e. g., formal/informal) or language learned (e. g., spoken/ written) over time, in light of learners’ relatively lengthy exposure to the L2 and given the genetic distance between students’ L1s and the L2. The types of language that students have much exposure to and can learn in the course of their daily lives seem to be key for the learners whose L1s are not genetically related to the L2. That is, all L2 learners have access to copious quantities of conversational language and its attendant (and restricted) morphosyntactic and lexical features. Speakers of Romance, Germanic, or Slavic languages can

benefit from positive transfer from their L1s to the L2, including a positive transfer of literate skills. On the other hand, speakers of languages genetically unrelated to an L2 need to learn another language from scratch. So, the results of my study showed that even when these learners were also exposed to academic language uses at least to some extent, they learned much of the L2 in their daily social and conversational interaction. In effect, this finding indicated that a great deal of intensive and extensive instruction in academic language is urgently needed. Advanced and academic language features cannot be learned in the course of social interactions simply because they do not occur in those contexts. For example, the vocabulary range in daily conversations is around 5,000 words, an 8-year-old native speaker has a vocabulary range of 20,000 words, and a native high school graduate has the range of approximately 100,000 words.

**3. Why did you end up deciding to code by hand rather than typing the essay and using a computer to count textual features? What could have been gained or lost by using a computer?**

L2 writing differs dramatically from L1 writing in countless ways (e. g., inflectional morphology, syntax, lexical and collocational uses, lexical derivations, or word forms, sentence and phrase parsing and boundaries, spelling, you name it). In the process of keying the text, many inaccuracies are introduced, and the process of making sure that the keyed text is true to the original is as laborious and time-consuming—if not more so—than actually keying it. So, the reason for hand coding the text was to ensure the accuracy of the text analyzed.

At the time when my two assistants and I were just beginning our work on this project, we did, in fact, type in a dozen student essays. The proofing of the typed essays against the originals proved to be so time- and work-consuming that my assistants argued that by the time we'd have finished typing and proofing together, we'd have already been done with the hand coding. I agreed with them, and there we were, doing the entire thing by hand.

In addition to time and labor effectiveness, another reason we hand coded the features is that the original student text contained many spelling and morphological errors which would have had to be corrected in order for the computer to correctly parse the text, and we didn't want to change the original data. On the other hand, manually analyzing text does not allow identification of syntactic and lexical co-occurrences of particular features in particular writing contexts. However, given that L2 writers' texts can be so unpredictable and unsystematic, as various analyses of L2 computer corpora have demonstrated, identifying syntactic and lexical cooccurrences may not be a fruitful research venue in any case.

For an analysis of L2 written corpora, the best thing to do is to have L2 writers type in the text themselves (if possible). Typing and proofing L2 prose is an extremely laborious and time consuming process.

Actually, I published a paper on the difficulty of the analyses of L2 computer corpora and the extensive number of mis-identifications and problems that result. So much so in many cases as to make some analyses invalid.

**4. You say in the conclusion that “activities focused on uses of lexical alternatives may not be hard to develop and implement” (p. 298). How should intervention take place in the ESL classroom (as opposed to a writing center tutoring session)? How do you guard against over-generalization of this tactic when presenting it as a strategy? While a syntactically and**

**lexically simple text is a problem, equally problematic is a wordy, flowery text born of overuse of a thesaurus.**

There are hundreds and hundreds of activities for expanding learners' lexical repertoires. Paul Nation has done a lot of work in this area. Flowery! Wordy! This is probably not a thesaurus's fault: vocabulary needs to be persistently and consistently taught. I am sure that a good vocabulary base (not even a gigantic one, but a good, solid vocabulary base) would allow learners to keep expanding their vocabulary range over time.

Vocabulary is one of those things where the rich get richer (see the famous study by Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997,2 as well as Stanovich, Cunningham, & Freeman, 19843). That is, learners with large vocabularies tend to read more because reading comes easier to them, and in this way, they learn more vocabulary because they read more. And it's not just vocabulary—learners with large vocabularies have a significantly greater exposure to print knowledge, advanced and abstract concepts, and a broader exposure to information. This is a very human thing when people who are good at something tend to engage more and more frequently in a particular activity, and therefore become better at it, as they have more practice and exposure.

There is no question, though, that dictionary and thesaurus uses and strategies have to be taught. They also have to be taught to native speakers of English, and the teaching of dictionary and thesaurus strategies to L1 users usually takes place in junior high and in high school.

**5. How would follow-ups to this study be performed investigating non-native speakers (NNSs) and native speakers (NSs) at the graduate level? What other morphosyntactic and lexical features would you deem important for further analyses? What do you believe would be learned from a series of these types of studies?**

There have been thousands of studies done on L2 writing, and of these, hundreds are on graduate student writing. The work of Swales and Hyland may be worth a look for all types of important language features needed for producing graduate level texts. As I mentioned during my first talk at TC, an enormous body of work on the analyses of morphosyntactic and lexical features in L1 and L2 prose has been carried out to date. Truly enormous. In addition, studies of L2 errors and error gravity in L2 academic writing both at undergraduate and graduate levels have also been highly prevalent in the past three or four decades.

Unfortunately, it hasn't yet been determined what L2 writers need to be able to learn and what they should be able to do when producing academic text. Nor is it known how to apply L2 text analyses to writing instruction, or how L2 writing can be taught at advanced levels. What the L2 world needs and can greatly benefit from is research on curricula and effectiveness of writing instruction (or even effective L2 writing teaching techniques). When it comes to teaching L2 writing (vs., say, researching the micro features of L2 writing), very little has been learned, in fact. At this time, in the discipline of L2 writing, we all find ourselves with one of those historical quandaries of the what's to be done and how to do it.

Questions 6 through 9 relate to the following article, which was suggested reading for the Apple Lecture: Hinkel, E. (2006). Current perspectives on teaching the four skills. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40, 109-131. (<http://www.elihinkel.org/downloads/CurrentPerspectives.pdf>)

**6. How has teacher training and education changed since you started, and how will the current direction of the field impact us as instructors, administrators, and researchers?**

Now this is a question worth a thousand dissertations and ten thousand personal narratives. For varied professional perspectives on the changes of the discipline over the past 40-50 years, see a special issue specifically on this topic in *Language Teaching* (2007)<sup>4</sup>. In my case, compared to teacher-educators and researchers who have been in the TESOL and AL business from the start and since the 1960s, I am a junior, relatively speaking. I received my professional training in the 1980s, when, for example, communicative language teaching (CLT) was all the rage, just like it is today. At that time, MAs were already a gold standard for ESL/EFL teaching careers, and PhDs were also required for any old respectable AL career. So, in this regard, compared to the early days of the discipline in the 1960s, the changes have been relatively minor.

**7. As you highlighted in your article, the TESOL field has evolved dramatically in the past several decades, and continues to do so. Within the framework of the four language skills, how do you see the field evolving in the near future?**

I think that TESOL researchers and methodologists have been under the illusion that the teaching methods that they advocate are actually adhered to in the classroom. The beyond-methods movement originated in the mid-1990s, very shortly after the communicative method took the world by force in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Actually, the beyond-methods movement emerged as a response to the indiscriminate exportation of CLT to those regions of the world where L2 communicative skills and communicative instruction were socially and culturally inappropriate. For instance, in those locations where learners do not have the need or opportunities to communicate in English and where the outcomes of written examinations determine the course of one's academic or professional career, CLT is not only irrelevant, but it's also damaging. In many locations where L2 communicative skills are largely extraneous, CLT, for example, actually has never taken hold.

The decline of methods is not, in fact, a new phenomenon, and in my view, it's likely to continue. That is, teachers in the classrooms will continue to determine what's in the best interests of learners in their specific locations, regardless of what methodologists say. I know from experience that when it comes to the teaching of real students, teachers have always largely ignored what methodologists prescribed. Those who adhere to prescribed methods in the face of classroom realities don't last long. So, I expect that the trend of teachers being fully responsible for what is taught in their classrooms and how it is taught will undoubtedly continue. There is no reason that it should not.

**8. One of the ongoing issues in SLA research is how to measure what is going on in a learner's mind. In the article, the importance of having learners practice both bottom-up and top-down cognitive processing is discussed. Is it possible for teachers or researchers to really know whether or not the students are engaging in bottom-up or top-down processing?**

Of course, it's not possible for anyone to know what's going on in someone else's mind, or what learners are engaging in while working on their L2 skills. It is, however, possible for teachers to determine what type of instruction learners receive, or whether bottom-up or top-down skills are being addressed in teaching. In the 1990s and to this day, bottom-up skills have received short shrift in the teaching of English language learners (ELLs) in the public schools and at the college level. For example, at present, there are 1.4 million ELLs in California, and several hundred thousand of these are enrolled in the state's colleges and universities.

A large proportion of high school graduates who are enrolled in colleges and universities in California cannot graduate in 6 years. The present drop-out/failure rate of ELLs in California higher education is somewhere between 70 and 80% simply because these students have dramatic shortfalls in bottom-up academic language proficiencies, such as advanced academic vocabulary and formal grammar. The ICAS (2002) report that surveyed 108 California four-year institutions determined that essential attention to the bottom-up properties of academic language are pervasively missing-in-action in school instruction practically at any level—junior high, high school, or college. Given that there are 1.4 million ELLs in CA schools, as far as I am concerned, this represents a tragic, life-long loss of educational, professional, economic, and political opportunities for over a million people. To me, the learners' advanced language proficiencies are about social equality and access, and as long as the teaching of ELLs remains unbalanced in regard to bottom-up and top-down skills, there can be little hope for equal opportunity for immigrants and children of immigrants in this country.

**9. With respect to the teaching of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic skills, Thomas (1983, as cited in Kasper & Rose, 20015) notes how it would be a thorny issue to deal with in the classroom. This being the case, would students benefit from a balance of implicit and explicit instruction, or would explicit teaching be most effective? Are they even still considered separate components of pragmatics to be taught, or has one been subsumed under the other?**

To be perfectly frank, as a NNS of English, I have very little faith in the benefits of implicit instruction. To make a simple analogy, when traveling anywhere on foot or by car, I always get lost. Repeatedly. I have a very under-developed sense of direction. So, sure, after trying to find my way several times and getting lost several times, I do eventually get where I am supposed to be, but I usually budget time for getting there that twice or three times exceeds that needed for a normal person. Getting lost repeatedly is an exhausting, frustrating, and time-consuming activity that I would really try to avoid if I could. For example, going to a new doctor's office for a short appointment can wipe out half of my day, and so why endure this misery if one doesn't have to?

As a non-native speaker of English, I see implicit instruction as very similar to riding in a car with someone who knows exactly where I need to go to get to my destination quickly and easily, but who won't tell me. So, I have to drive without a sense of direction, get lost time and time again, and become exhausted, frustrated, and a little bit desperate, while this person is sitting by my side, watching me go through all these contortions, and refusing to help me for reasons that are actually not very clear.

So, to be frank, as a teacher, I see no benefit in knowing the answers to learners' quandaries and not helping them figure out what they need to do and learn. I know that I am not unique in my non-native sentiments: see, for example, an article<sup>6</sup> published by two graduate students about writing and interacting with faculty at the graduate level.

In the case of L2 socio-pragmatic norms, many teachers are uncomfortable when teaching them because the need for instruction in social behaviors and norms of speaking implies that learners' are socially and culturally incompetent in the L2, and no one likes to make another person feel incompetent. But the teacher's job is not necessarily to do what's easy or fun, and sometimes, the teaching of L2 socio-pragmatic behaviors can be a little uncomfortable. This is, however, the nature of all teaching jobs (e.g., giving low grades for students' work is also uncomfortable

sometimes, but it's something that is intrinsic to teaching, or at least used to be, given the current world-famous grade inflation).

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