

# Ben Goldstein moves with the times

by Alejandra Rosas

Ben Goldstein visited Argentina in September. He was in charge of a plenary session with over 800 teachers at FAAPI, Santa Fe. Ben also visited our city giving talks and workshops at the Universidad Nacional de Mar del Plata and at Museo del mar. Even though he was really pushed for time, he managed to squeeze in an interview for ICANEWS. While having breakfast at a coffee shop by the seaside, with a warm and friendly attitude, Ben put forward his concepts on English teaching and he proudly talked about his creation:

Framework, **Richmond Publishing** multi-level stimulating course for young adults and adults with **groundbreaking** features.

Thank you Ben!

*Which were the factors that influenced on your decision to become a textbook writer?*

Well, that's an interesting question...After teaching in Spain for about ten years, I think I was quite frustrated with the material I've been working with. I've found a way to weigh the difference between the classroom language and real language. I found a lot of defects, specially on the listening material I was working with that didn't really represent me what my students were going to find in the real world. And the topics were not contemporary, they neither were meaningful for students, they didn't seem to motivate them, and I had to create so much of my own material to make the class more interesting or more dynamic, or more motivating, that I decided to set out a proposal for a course book, because I had a lot of material I've created myself and I thought other people might share it. I would say it all started from the deficiencies in the material I've been reading and I decided to do my own thing.

*What can be done to help adults forget about grammar rules and get involved in acquisition activities, or somehow integrate grammar and communication?*

Well, I think that the lexical approach can help us a lot in this, I mean systematizing the lexical approach. I think in **Framework** we try to do that. The key is to help students to see that grammar and lexis could be complementary, that there isn't just the grammar as one area closed off and lexis in another area. I think we could do a lot of work on the grammar-lexis interface, I would say. In Framework we have this section called "the real thing," which works on mainly spoken language but it's a panel which includes rules as well, otherwise you can't look for rules working with other elements of language, but the grammar structure. Rules are linked with grammar and the students think that in order to acquire grammar they need to learn rules. I think that the memory-based, the lexical approach is good, but we need a rule-based approach as well, so I think this combination, working on the lexis-grammar interface, is possibly the challenge.

*Adults seem to be book dependent. What can teachers do to make adults feel at ease with video classes or with the use of authentic material without feeling they are wasting their time?*

Adults like to have a book, they like to have a **prop**, some kind of support, ... they need a text book . If I didn't have a text book I would have to create the whole course myself, so I mean, specially for the **nitty-gritty** of the course, for the grammar structures we know we will have to go through, whether we like it or not, using a textbook is rightful. I think that if it is well done, it's good to follow a book, there wouldn't be anything wrong in being dependent on it. I think the book has to give you the flexibility so that you can pick and choose, and not feel that you are at the book's service. I think a good book is one that can be **feasibly** flexible to the needs of teachers.

*What's special about Framework?*

I think Framework, in a way, really **fulfills** this purpose, it has the whole of it, because it gives teachers the possibility of focusing on what they want to focus on; spoken language, high-frequency language, everyday language, and there's the grammar focus as well, which is pretty supportive, and pronunciation, but of course not all teachers are going to focus on all of these things. The book has a lot of support material, the workbook and the reference guide,... that gives the teacher so much material that allows teachers to be flexible. Each unit is divided into four double-page spreads, and each spread is self-contained, that makes it very easy to use, and it means that you can pick and choose,...choose the **prime**, you don't have to do one complete spread to do the next one. It means that, from my practical point of view, you can just concentrate on one spread and not worry about the parts which you may not have time for.

*What do you think about recycling material and repetition? Is the book designed to provide enough repetition and consolidation of structures?*

It depends mainly on the level of the students, but in general, when they come across different structures they need some kind of extra **scaffolding**, they need extra support. I think revision activities have to be something different from just gap filling. Framework has this section called "you choose," that gives the students the choice to reflect on the points they have found more interesting,... more useful, so students can decide what they want or need to revise. And that's one of the focuses of Framework, to encourage learners' independence and learning to learn, which is pretty much what the communicative framework is saying about language learning. So students are encouraged to reflect on the strategies they adopt while learning, on which strategies work for them and which don't work so well, and depending on the learning style, there could be many differences from one learner to the other, and the communicative framework has mentioned this as an important criterion.

*How can focusing on intercultural communication and embracing ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) affect those creating teaching materials?*

I think the whole identity of English as a lingua franca has been ignored. It's incredible that publishers and text book writers have not embraced this question, and this has to do, ironically, with the fact that this is a global industry. In other words, many writers are resistant to including non-native speakers in their text books because they think they would not represent good models. I've spoken to many other authors and I've been told that they "don't want" non-native speakers, that if you are publishing a book for many different parts of the world, their voice would be unintelligible for most learners, so they rather include native speakers with very clear pronunciation. That is one of the key areas,... we have to reflect on changing the identity of English as a lingua franca. In fact, in our cds we can have speakers from India, from Hong Kong or Kenya, ... we have this in Framework, we have a very multicultural approach, we have a number of non- native speakers, and it is quite **daring**. You come across the resistance of language purists and of very conservative minded individuals that feel that the English language belongs to the native speaker and, therefore, we should have native speakers models. I don't think at all that we "should not" include non-native speakers,...we must have EFL and ELS, in the sense that if you are teaching EFL you will be teaching students an English which would be used in native speaking settings. If you are teaching ELS, you'll be recognising the fact that our students we'll be using an English in non-native speaking settings or in a kind of mixture. In other words, students will be interacting in global or local contexts. For instance, here in Argentina or elsewhere, with mainly the non-native English speaking presence,... if that is the case, then why do we always insist on the native speaker model. There are now three times number of non-native **proficient** speakers than native teachers in the world. If we don't begin to reflect that in our course material, it will become increasingly archaic and anachronistic. This is one step towards facing the problem of the conservative ELT publishing industry. I think Framework is one of the first books that considers this aspect.

*When adults travel they fear to fail to understand what native speakers say. What can be done to help adults bridge the gap between their local English output and the native like input?*

I think we **spoonfeed** our students too much in the classroom, my point of view is that the key is the listening, it's too simplified,... of course we can't make students listen to people speaking at native normal rhythm speech, that would be absurd, and it would be very frustrating. But we have to grade language, otherwise when students travel, they feel frustrated. They usually say, "I could understand the classroom cd perfectly well, and I didn't understand a word while traveling." And that's because we come across the **undeniable** fact that native speakers or non-native speakers in English speaking settings don't accommodate for the learners. And that's why they have this kind of experiences, as for example, the way they feel the very moment they arrive at the airport or get into a taxi, or in any street situation. I think we have to revise the listening material, because at the moment, it tends to spoonfeed the students. I think we would get a lot more if we present a dialogue in class which is pitched up, more demanding, that's the way we advance. But that requires a change in both students' and teachers' minds. Students always focus on what they don't understand and they'd feel frustrated if they were given a more demanding level. To avoid this, teachers should tell their students that they know that the listening material is difficult to understand, and that all they want their students to do is just answer some simple questions. In this way, students would get the benefit of hearing, of being exposed to more natural speech. That would be the real way of progressing and of getting rid of the fast learning anxiety, and here again, the communicative framework comes in : students' should focus on what they "can do ," and not on what they can't do."

Ben has taught English as a foreign language for 15 years in Spain at the Centro de Lenguas Modernas of Granada University and currently at the language center of the University of Barcelona as well as being on English online tutor at the Universitat Oberta de Catalunya. He has also taught for many years at the British Council in Hong Kong.

He has a first class BA degree in English and an MA in English and American Studies, as well as a TEFL Diploma (DELTA). He is the coordinator and principal author of Richmond's new adult English course 'Framework'. He is a teacher-trainer and has many given talks and methodological workshops in conferences throughout Europe and South America and published numerous articles. With respect to ELT, his main interests lie in encouraging intercultural awareness in the classroom, genre analysis and the use of film.