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On Directness in Communicative Language Teaching

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■ We have read with interest Scott Thornbury's reaction to our commentary on communicative language teaching (CLT) (Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring 1997). Colleagues in the EFL/ESL profession work in very diverse linguistic, cultural, and institutional contexts, and therefore we specifically invited comments on our essay, in which we highlighted a new trend in CLT that involves a gradual shift within communicative teaching methodology towards a more direct approach that we called the *principled communicative approach*. Thornbury's response is thus a welcome contribution to the discussion, and it is particularly interesting in that he adopts an EFL perspective; that is, he considers the type of language instruction that takes place primarily in a classroom setting in which learners do not experience any significant regular contact with L2 speakers. This type of language teaching is probably the most common form of L2 instruction in the world, yet we believe that it is often underrepresented in the professional literature and at international conferences.

Thornbury's main argument is based on his observation that grammar-based instruction tends to prevail in actual classroom practice in spite of all the theorizing on the values of CLT in professional books and journals. He takes a strong and rather thought-provoking position when he writes, "Not only have teachers never abandoned a grammar-driven approach, but there seems to be little evidence that the alternatives, such as a task-based pedagogy (Long & Crookes, 1992), have made any lasting impression on the current practice of English language teaching." He then gives his analysis of why this should be so. We are in full (and somewhat sad) agreement with some of Thornbury's statements; indeed, grammar-based syllabi and grammar-centered teaching practices appear to be firmly entrenched in many parts of the world—this is certainly the

case, for example, in Hungary, where a great deal of our teaching experience comes from. Where we disagree with Thornbury is the way he further develops his argument when he states that "far from experiencing a return to a direct approach, CLT has never been anything but direct," which leads to his conclusion that "to talk about a return to direct approaches to language instruction is like talking about a return to the use of private transport."

We do not think it is valid to say that CLT has "never been anything but direct." The prevailing grammar-dominated situation Thornbury describes (correctly, in our view) is not so much direct CLT but rather non-CLT. Indeed, we believe that a great deal of language teaching around the world follows, to a large extent, traditional grammar-translation principles (for reasons many of which are well summarized by Thornbury). Yet it does not follow from this that these approaches are examples of direct CLT; rather, they would fall under the category of direct L2 instruction (a difference Thornbury himself must have noticed as in the concluding statement, quoted above, he talks about a "return to direct approaches to *language instruction*" [italics added] rather than direct approaches to CLT).

In our commentary we were writing specifically about CLT, and shifting to greater directness within this approach is very different from adopting direct, grammar-based instruction and grammatical syllabi in the traditional sense. Let us quickly reiterate our main arguments.

Although we personally find the explicit focus on grammar in language instruction important (see Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988), in our commentary the emphasis was not so much on teaching grammar as on developing awareness of conversational grammar, that is, of the higher level rules and regularities within language that go beyond the sentence level and thus fall outside the scope of most of traditional grammar teaching. As we wrote,

> Language classes following this [direct] approach adapt various features of direct grammar instruction to the teaching of *conversational skills* [italics added]; that is, they attempt to provide focused instruction on the main rules of conversational or discourse-level grammar (e.g., pragmatic regularities and politeness strategies, communication strategies, and various elements of conversational structure such as openings, closings, and the turn-taking system). (pp. 141–142)

That is, we were talking about direct approaches contributing to the development of the learners' communicative competence, of which grammatical competence is only one, although a major, constituent. In fact, because grammatical knowledge has traditionally been a prominent feature of actual language instruction, a key distinguishing feature of

communicative classrooms is the emphasis on the other-than-grammar components of communicative competence, such as discourse, sociocultural, actional, and strategic competencies (see Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995). Thus, the meaning we assigned to the term *direct* was largely related to the directness of the teaching of non-sentence-bound L2 rules, and in this respect modern language teaching has been almost universally indirect: Even in formal classroom contexts where direct teaching is the standard practice (or in course books geared toward various age groups in various environments), explicit and direct discussions of, say, cohesion, communication strategies, or the principles of politeness are typically nonexistent. And these three points are only a few of the best-known topics in an extended content base of the *principled communicative approach*, with the list of other important and relevant conversational grammar points being a fairly long one. (The interested reader should refer to our pedagogically motivated taxonomy in Celce-Murcia et al., 1995, and to the list of actual teaching points accompanied by specific classroom activities in *Conversation and Dialogues in Action*, Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1992.)

The main point we would like to emphasize, then, is that the increasing directness of CLT that we have observed cannot be equated with a back-to-grammar tendency; rather, it involves recent attempts on the part of several applied linguists and methodologists to extend the systematic treatment of language issues traditionally restricted to sentence-bound rules (i.e., grammar) to the explicit development of other knowledge areas and skills necessary for efficient communication. Thus, the principled communicative approach would also focus on regularities that go beyond the sentence level by considering language as discourse in its micro- (i.e., textual) and macro- (i.e., sociocultural and pragmatic) context. As we argued in our commentary, an explicit description of such issues was not available at the genesis of CLT (in the mid-1970s) and, therefore, the rather indirect pedagogical approach that expected learners to master conversational grammar through participatory experience in communicative tasks—rather than through focused practice— was understandable and innovative at that time. Since then, however, conversational grammar has been the target of a great deal of research (e.g., see McCarthy & Carter, 1995), and this has created the possibility of developing specific language tasks that allow presentation and practice of the relevant points in a more direct manner.

In our view, what is needed now is for methodologists to develop a repertoire of such direct communicative tasks. After the development of the original principles of CLT in the mid-1970s, it took almost a decade to produce a good number and variety of teaching activities for putting those principles into practice. In terms of developing direct tasks for the

principled communicative approach, the language teaching profession, we believe, has taken only the first few steps.

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Comments on Dwight Atkinson's "A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL"

A Case for Critical Thinking in the English Language Classroom

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■ In his article (Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring 1997), Dwight Atkinson does a service by directing attention to two important questions: (a) What is this critical thinking that some educators want to bring into the English language classroom, and (b) is it really appropriate in English language teaching? Both these issues have been missed by those who have used the term like a slogan or buzzword and by some who want to charge ahead with some program of instruction that they label *critical thinking*. But if critical thinking is worth anything, it should not be promoted like a fad or chanted like a mantra without much attention to its meaning or practicality.

Ironically, however, to embark on a critical look at critical thinking is already an admission of its value. Atkinson can find no other tools besides the ones that critical thinking provides for his critique. He tries