

Comments on Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei, and Sarah Thurrell's "Direct Approaches in L2 Instruction: A Turning Point in Communicative Language Teaching?". A Reader Reacts

Author(s): Scott Thornbury

Source: *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Spring, 1998), pp. 109-116

Published by: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3587904>

Accessed: 01-11-2017 12:54 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL) is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *TESOL Quarterly*

THE FORUM

The *TESOL Quarterly* invites commentary on current trends or practices in the TESOL profession. It also welcomes responses or rebuttals to any articles or remarks published here in The Forum or elsewhere in the *Quarterly*.

Comments on Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei, and Sarah Thurrell's "Direct Approaches in L2 Instruction: A Turning Point in Communicative Language Teaching?"

A Reader Reacts . . .

SCOTT THORNBURY

International House

■ In their overview of current communicative language teaching (CLT) practice (Vol. 31, No. 1, Spring 1997), Marianne Celce-Murcia, Zoltán Dörnyei, and Sarah Thurrell argue that CLT is at a crossroads and that the profession is experiencing a paradigm shift toward a more direct approach. They assert that "explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills" (p. 147). However, in a footnote to their article, the authors make the point that "in foreign language learning contexts where the dominant form of language attainment is instructed SLA, teachers have never really abandoned the use of direct methods in teaching grammar" (p. 147).

This, I believe, understates the case. 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 (ELT).

The distinction, invoked by the authors, between direct and indirect approaches to the teaching of speaking skills (Richards, 1990) echoes an

earlier distinction made by Howatt (1984) between the *weak* and *strong* versions of the communicative approach, the latter being predicated on the belief that “form can best be learned when the learner’s attention is focused on meaning” (Beretta, 1989, p. 233). Celce-Murcia et al. suggest that there has been a move away from strong (indirect) CLT to a weaker (more direct) version “whereby new linguistic information is passed on and practiced explicitly” (p. 141).

My own observations of EFL classrooms and of initial and in-service training courses in a wide range of contexts (i.e., western Europe, Egypt, the U.S., Australia, and New Zealand) over 20 years suggest that, far from experiencing a return to a direct approach, CLT has never been anything but direct and that strong CLT—apart from its one moment of glory in Bangalore (Prabhu, 1987)—has been and remains a chimera. In fact, from a communicative perspective, CLT is not only weak but very weak. As Legutke and Thomas (1991) maintain, “In spite of trendy jargon in textbooks and teacher’s manuals, very little is actually communicated in the L2 classroom” (p. 8). Analysis of transcripts of classroom interaction tends to confirm this verdict (Johnson, 1995; Kumaravadivelu, 1993; Nunan, 1987; Thornbury, 1996b). Display questions and IRF (initiate–respond–follow-up) sequences dominate, and if learners interact at all, it is more often so as to exchange language tokens than to communicate meanings in which they have a personal investment—a level of communication that can best be described as small-*c* (Thornbury, 1996a).

In fact, apart from the absence of pattern practice drills, the addition of information-gap activities, and a greater tolerance of error, the current approach is virtually indistinguishable from its predecessors, such as weak audiolingualism and situational language teaching (Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Why is this the case? I suggest there are at least three reasons: (a) the constraints imposed by grammatical syllabi, (b) novice teachers’ need for low-risk teaching strategies, and (c) the expectations of learners.

GRAMMAR RULES

Apart from the brief flirtation with functional-notional syllabi in the 1970s (Wilkins, 1976), CLT is still shackled to a largely grammatical syllabus, with the result that the linguistic tail is wagging the communicative dog. The phenomenal success, for example, of courses such as *Headway Intermediate* (Soars & Soars, 1986), virtually every unit of which begins with a grammar presentation, or of Murphy’s *English Grammar in Use* (1985), of which 7 million copies have been sold to date (“Record Numbers,” 1997), indicates the extent to which the ELT industry has colluded in maintaining the view that language learning means learning

the grammar.¹ When the objectives of a programme are described primarily in linguistic terms (and relatively narrow ones at that), it is unsurprising that so many allegedly CLT classes should show so little evidence of authentic language use. As Willis (1990) has pointed out, there is a basic contradiction in a methodology that is organised around a syllabus of preselected, discrete grammatical items while purporting to be driven by the meanings the learners wish to express. Sooner or later, these two agendas are going to part company. It is inconsistent to say to learners, on the one hand, “Say whatever you mean,” and on the other, “Use the third conditional.” Whereas it may be theoretically possible, as Widdowson (1987) argues, “for a grammatical syllabus to be actualized by a methodology which develops a genuine capacity for communication” (as cited in Nunan, 1988, p. 96), in reality, where there are grammar rules, grammar rules.

LEARNING TO TEACH

But, arguably, the grammar bias in ELT materials simply reflects the needs of the market. The persistence of the grammar-driven paradigm may owe as much to the need on the part of most practising teachers, at least initially, for a method. By *method* I mean a set of non-context-specific, routinised classroom procedures that target preselected, narrowly defined, easily testable objectives. This need for simple solutions to complex problems may be partly attributable to teachers’ initial concerns when faced with the multidimensionality, simultaneity, and unpredictability of the classroom environment (Doyle, 1977). Researchers who have tracked these survival concerns (Fuller, 1969; Ryan, 1986) have noted that control—of the students, of the direction and flow of the lesson—is a primary developmental goal, such that for novice teachers “class control and instruction appear to be inextricably interrelated pedagogical tasks” (Kagan, 1992, p. 145). Beginner teachers’ preference for lockstep activities (Harmer, 1991), such as choral drilling, reading aloud, and dictation, is evidence of the need for workable routines that impose order on potential chaos. This need for measures that will reduce unpredictability is particularly acute for teachers whose L1 is not English (Britten, 1988).

Grammar offers such teachers a life raft. By its very nature, grammar imposes order on chaos. Not only does grammar provide content for the language lesson itself (in the form of “the structure of the day”; Skehan,

¹A quick glance at the course books that feature in the *English Language Gazette’s* list of the 10 top-selling ELT books (June 1997) shows that 8 have, as their primary organising principle, a grammatical syllabus, whereas only two (both examination courses) are primarily organised thematically.

1996, p. 17), but it also lends itself to the formulation of syllabus and test specifications. Any pedagogical alternative that relegates grammar to a merely mediating role—rather than an end in itself—is potentially disempowering. It is not surprising, therefore, that many teachers are less than enthusiastic about claims, such as Kumaravadivelu's (1991), that in a task-based pedagogy “the teacher and the learner have a remarkable degree of flexibility, for they are presented with a set of general learning objectives and problem-solving tasks, and not a list of specific linguistic items” (p. 99). The methodological implications of a *fluency-first pedagogy* (Brumfit, 1979), in which the focus on form is reactive rather than preemptive, require of the teacher the ability to respond spontaneously to the learner's unpredictable, “in-flight” linguistic needs. Far from reducing unpredictability, strong CLT seems actually to increase it. No wonder that Medgyes (1986) characterised the CLT teacher as “a multi-dimensional, high-tech, Wizard-of-Oz-like superperson” (p. 107).

Once in place, the grammar-driven classroom routines that offered initial security become more fluid and automatic as the teacher achieves mastery (Ryan, 1986), especially if endorsed by the culture of the teacher's institution, as realised in its choice of course books and tests, for example. Worse, grammar-focused instruction serves to maintain the unequal power relationship existing in many classrooms, since, as Wright (1991) warns, “One great danger of acquiring specialist knowledge about language is the possible desire to show learners that you have this knowledge” (pp. 68–69).

The direct teaching of grammar, then, offers the teacher order, security, and power. In contrast, CLT suggests chaos, risk, and subversion. It is not surprising that it has conspicuously failed to gain a foothold.

LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS

In their defence, many teachers will attribute their supposed conservatism to the conservatism of their learners, who, unfamiliar with the theoretical underpinnings of CLT, expect, even demand, what Celce-Murcia et al. term “direct, knowledge-oriented” (p. 148) approaches to the teaching of English. For better or worse, many educational traditions prioritise knowledge-oriented instruction over skill-oriented instruction. The compatibility of CLT with such traditions has been strongly challenged recently (Holliday, 1994; Phillipson, 1992). But irrespective of contextual and cultural factors, it is difficult if not impossible for teacher educators, course designers, school administrators, and course book writers and publishers to promote indirect CLT in the face of the argument “my students want grammar.” Indeed, Ur (1996), for example, believes that if they want it, they should get it (p. 78). (One wonders what

the state of education would be if this principle were to be applied indiscriminately.) The fact is, they do get it. And how.

PUTTING THE C BACK IN CLT

I have argued that CLT—both in its weak and in its strong version—has had little impact on current classroom practice and that to talk about a return to direct approaches to language instruction is like talking about a return to the use of private transport. But what, then, of CLT? Was Swan (1985) perhaps right when he predicted that CLT would one day be seen “as little more than an interesting ripple on the surface of twentieth-century language teaching” (p. 87)?

I hope not. There are many reasons to believe that the principles on which CLT was formulated are as valid today as they ever were. Where once there was a paucity of CLT learning theory (Richards & Rodgers, 1986), there has recently been a felicitous convergence of theory and practice, such that “the research strand of SLA now underpins neatly the range of classroom activities imaginatively devised by practitioners of CLT” (Skehan, 1993, p. 17; for an overview of recent CLT learning theory, see Lightbown & Spada, 1993; Lynch, 1996).

Celce-Murcia et al. wish to retain the *C* in CLT, and so they should. I would go further and argue that communication should not just be the goal of CLT, it should be the process of instruction itself. The most exciting development in the recent literature on CLT has been the claims advanced for the formative role of teacher-learner talk. The role of conversation as a scaffold for language development, as proposed by Hatch (1978), now finds support in the social interactionist theories of Lev Vygotsky (see, for example, Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Moll, 1990). Van Lier (1996) argues persuasively for a conversational pedagogy, citing the notion of *instructional conversation* proposed by Tharp and Gallimore (1988), who write,

“Instruction” and “conversation” appear contrary, the one implying authority and planning, the other equality and responsiveness. The task of teaching is to resolve the paradox. To most truly teach, one must converse; to truly converse is to teach. (p. 111)

This is big-*C* communication (Thornbury, 1996a), requiring of teachers not so much the learning of new pedagogic skills but the accessing of the interpersonal communication skills that characterise real talk. These are skills that, curiously, teachers with no prior training often resort to, especially in small-group settings (Stevick, 1980). “I sit and talk with my students and I correct their mistakes” is a premethod method. It is an approach that, at the preservice level, is relatively easily inculcated but

that, at the in-service level, is often deeply buried in layers of ritualised teaching behaviours, surfacing only, if ever, as the prelesson chat. The deskilling process requires a fundamental change in values and beliefs. As Kramsch (1993) argues, “A dialogic pedagogy is unlike traditional pedagogy. Not only can it not be pre-programmed, but it is likely to question the traditional social and political tenets of foreign language education. . . . Such a pedagogy should better be described, not as a blueprint for how to *teach* foreign languages, but as another way of *being* a language teacher” (p. 31).

In the light of the resistance to nonpreprogrammed learning that I have cited—at the level of publishers, teachers, and learners—such a fundamental change in approach—tantamount to a rehabilitated strong CLT—seems a tall order. Nevertheless, it would be defeatist, I believe, to consign CLT to the status of a passing methodological curiosity. Teacher educators occupy a pivotal role here, as they are well placed to mediate a methodological compromise between the intransigence of publishers, the insecurities of teachers, and the expectations of learners. We as TESOL professionals should therefore welcome Celce-Murcia et al.’s principled (albeit weakened) CLT in the spirit that it is offered, as a catalyst for discussion and professional self-appraisal. But we should also be wary of making claims about classroom practice that are unsupported by classroom observation and research.

REFERENCES

- Beretta, A. (1989). Attention to form or meaning? Error treatment in the Bangalore Project. *TESOL Quarterly*, 23, 283–303.
- Britten, D. (1988). Three stages in teacher training. *ELT Journal*, 42, 3–8.
- Brumfit, C. (1979). “Communicative” language teaching: an educational perspective. In C. J. Brumfit & K. Johnson (Eds.), *The communicative approach to language teaching* (pp. 183–191). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Doyle, W. (1977). Learning the classroom environment: An ecological analysis. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 28, 51–55.
- Fuller, F. F. (1969). Concerns of teachers: A developmental conceptualisation. *American Educational Research Journal*, 6, 207–226.
- Harmer, J. (1991). *The practice of English language teaching* (New ed.). Harlow, England: Longman.
- Hatch, E. (1978). Discourse analysis and second language acquisition. In E. Hatch (Ed.), *Second language acquisition: A book of readings* (pp. 401–435). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Holliday, A. (1994). *Appropriate methodology and social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Howatt, A. P. R. (1984). *A history of English language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Johnson, K. E. (1995). *Understanding communication in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Kagan, D. (1992). Professional growth among preservice and beginning teachers. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 129–69.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1991). Language-learning tasks: Teacher intention and learner interpretation. *ELT Journal*, 45, 98–107.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1993). Maximizing learning potential in the communicative classroom. *ELT Journal*, 47, 12–21.
- Lantolf, J. P., & Appel, G. (Eds.). (1994). *Vygotskian approaches to second language research*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Legutke, M., & Thomas, H. (1991). *Process and experience in the language classroom*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Lightbown, P., & Spada, N. (1993). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Long, M. H., & Crookes, G. (1992). Three approaches to task-based syllabus design. *TESOL Quarterly*, 26, 27–56.
- Lynch, T. (1996). *Communication in the language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Medgyes, P. (1986). Queries from a communicative teacher. *ELT Journal*, 40, 107–12.
- Moll, L. (Ed.). (1990). *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Murphy, R. (1985). *English grammar in use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nunan, D. (1987). Communicative language teaching: Making it work. *ELT Journal*, 41, 136–145.
- Nunan, D. (1988). *Syllabus design*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phillipson, R. (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Prabhu, N. S. (1987). *Second language pedagogy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Record numbers enliven Brighton. (1997, May). *English Language Gazette*, p. 2.
- Richards, J. C. (1990). *The language teaching matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (1986). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ryan, K. (1986). *The induction of new teachers*. Bloomington, IN: Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.
- Skehan, P. (1993). A framework for the implementation of task-based learning. *IATEFL Annual Conference Report* (pp. 17–25). Whitstable, England: International Association for the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language.
- Skehan, P. (1996). Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenge and change in language teaching* (pp. 17–30). Oxford: Heinemann.
- Soars, J., & Soars, L. (1986). *Headway intermediate*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Stevick, E. (1980). *Teaching languages: A way and ways*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Swan, M. (1985). A critical look at the communicative approach (2). *ELT Journal*, 39, 76–87.
- Tharp, R. G., & Gallimore, R. (1988). *Rousing minds to life: Teaching, learning, and schooling in social context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Thornbury, S. (1996a). Paying lip-service to CLT. *EA Journal*, 14, 51–63.
- Thornbury, S. (1996b). Teachers research teacher talk. *ELT Journal*, 50, 279–289.
- Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- van Lier, L. (1996). *Interaction in the language curriculum: Awareness, autonomy and authenticity*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Wilkins, D. A. (1976). *Notional syllabuses*. London: Oxford University Press.

Willis, D. (1990). *The lexical syllabus*. London: Collins ELT.

Wright, T. (1991). Language awareness in teacher education programmes for non-native speakers. In C. James & P. Garret (Eds.), *Language awareness in the classroom* (pp. 62–77). Harlow, England: Longman.

On Directness in Communicative Language Teaching

MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA

University of California, Los Angeles

ZOLTÁN DÖRNYEI AND SARAH THURRELL

Eötvös University

■ 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