THE FORUM

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Direct Approaches in L2 Instruction: A Turning Point in Communicative Language Teaching?

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■ In 1990 Richards argued that there were two major approaches to teaching speaking skills, an *indirect approach*, "in which conversational competence is seen as the product of engaging learners in conversational interaction" (p. 76), and a *direct approach*, which "involves planning a conversational programme around the specific microskills, strategies, and processes that are involved in fluent conversation" (p. 77). The indirect approach, which was the typical teaching practice for communicative language teaching (CLT) in the late 1970s and the 1980s, involves setting up and managing lifelike communicative situations in the language classroom (e.g., role plays, problem-solving tasks, or information-gap activities) and leading learners to acquire communicative skills incidentally by seeking situational meaning (Schmidt, 1991). That is, learners are not specifically taught the strategies, maxims, and organizational principles that govern communicative language use but are expected to work these out for themselves through extensive communicative task engagement.

The direct approach, on the other hand, recalls the traditional methods of teaching grammar, whereby new linguistic information is passed on and practiced explicitly. Language classes following this approach adapt various features of direct grammar instruction to the teaching of conversational skills; 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).

During the past 10 years an increasing number of publications have reported on various direct approaches to teaching communicative skills. (For a recent summary of several lines of research, see Williams, 1995.) We believe that a significant shift is taking place in language teaching methodology, comparable to the fundamental changes of the 1970s that resulted in the introduction and spread of CLT. The purpose of this article is, on the one hand, to take a closer look at the scope and importance of this shift and, on the other hand, to raise a number of questions and initiate discussion about the future of CLT.

PROBLEMS WITH CLT

L2 teaching methods and approaches tend to undergo a natural process of cyclical development: A method or approach is first proposed (often as a counterreaction to an earlier method or approach), then accepted, applied, and eventually criticized. The criticism may involve either the reform and revision or the complete rejection of the method or approach and perhaps its replacement with another. CLT is no exception to this cyclical process: After its appearance in the 1970s and spread in the 1980s, the early 1990s witnessed a growing dissatisfaction with several aspects of CLT, with some language professionals calling for certain reforms and suggesting changes (e.g., Celce-Murcia, 1991; Dörnyei & Thurrell, 1991, 1992; Kumaravadivelu, 1992, 1993; Larsen-Freeman, 1990; Legutke & Thomas, 1991; Savignon, 1990; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992; Schmidt, 1991; Widdowson, 1990). Much of the original criticism, and the consequent research that was aimed at offering improvements, was related to two main issues: (a) the linguistic content base of CLT and (b) the pedagogical treatment of linguistic forms in CLT.

THE LINGUISTIC CONTENT BASE OF CLT

The primary focus in CLT, as Savignon (1990) indicates, has been "the elaboration and implementation of programs and methodologies that promote the development of L2 functional competence through learner participation in communicative events" (p. 210). Hence the principles of CLT were fully compatible with a functional perspective on linguistics (Halliday, 1973), as translated into classroom practice by means of the notional-functional syllabuses of Wilkins (1976) and van Ek (1977) (see also Finocchiaro & Brumfit, 1983; van Ek & Trim, 1991). The proposed system of *language functions* (e.g., agreeing, inviting, explaining) and

language notions (e.g., ways of expressing location, time, degree) was undoubtedly the most elaborate content base of CLT theory, and the presentation of these functions in course books was further enhanced by a second important aspect of CLT, its sociocultural sensitivity and the explicit need to achieve a degree of appropriateness in language use (Berns, 1990). Thus, language functions were introduced in a range of contexts, with some coverage of degrees of formality and politeness as well as of cross-cultural issues.

As early as 1978, Widdowson argued that a purely functional approach to language and language use did not do justice to the "whole complex business of communication" and called for the "consideration of the nature of discourse and of the abilities that are engaged in creating it" (p. ix). He noted, however, that the "present state of knowledge about language and language learning is such that it would be irresponsible to be anything but tentative" (pp. ix–x). Indeed, in the early and mid-1970s, when the principles of CLT were being developed, theoretical and applied linguistics had not produced a clear enough description of communicative competence for methodologists to apply in tackling the complexity of communicative language use. There was no coherent and explicitly formulated pragmatic and sociolinguistic model available to draw on (see Savignon, 1983); nor had discourse analysis reached sufficient development and recognition.

The lack of firm linguistic guidelines led to a diversity of communicative approaches that shared only a very general common objective, namely, to prepare learners for real-life communication rather than emphasizing structural accuracy. In Dubin and Olshtain's (1986) words, "as with the tale about the five blind men who touched separate parts of an elephant and so each described something else, the word 'communicative' has been applied so broadly that it has come to have different meanings for different people" (p. 69).

One area in particular that has featured problems caused by the lack of clear-cut content specifications in CLT is the testing of learning outcomes. Any language teaching approach must be accompanied by language tests that adequately measure the learning outcomes promoted by the particular program; otherwise the washback effect of tests drawn from other approaches or methods will undermine the program's effectiveness. As Savignon (1990) observes, "Many a curricular innovation has been undone by failure to make corresponding changes in evaluation" (p. 211). Current communicative testing methods, she argues, fail to provide sufficient precision, which is a source of frustration for teachers:

> Some teachers understandably are frustrated . . . by the seeming ambiguity in discussions of communicative competence. Negotiation of meaning is well

and good, but this view of language behavior lacks precision, does not provide a universal scale for assessment of individual learners. (p. 211)

We believe, however, that sensibly integrating recent research results from fields such as oral discourse analysis, conversation analysis, communicative competence research, interlanguage analysis, language input analysis, sociolinguistics, pragmatics, cognitive psychology, and anthropology may make it possible to outline the "whole elephant" and describe the content elements of CLT in a far more systematic way than has hitherto been the case. In a recent paper we attempted to provide such a description by outlining a pedagogically motivated framework for communicative competence that includes detailed content specifications (Celce-Murcia, Dörnyei, & Thurrell, 1995). Our aim was to organize the knowledge available about language use in a way that is consumable for classroom practice. We argued that although this knowledge is still fragmentary,

> a great deal more of it is relevant and potentially applicable than is currently exploited in language pedagogy. Language teaching methodologists, materials writers and language testers badly need a comprehensive and accessible description of the components of communicative competence in order to have more concrete pieces of language to work with at the fine-tuning stage. (p. 29)

Our model, which we viewed as a refinement and extension of Canale and Swain's (1980; Canale, 1983) earlier construct, divides communicative competence into five major components (discourse competence, which we considered the core, along with linguistic, actional, sociocultural, and strategic competence) and describes the language areas falling under each component. Thus, our construct was intended to serve as a fairly comprehensive checklist of language points as well as a content base in syllabus design that practitioners can refer to.

THE PEDAGOGICAL TREATMENT OF LINGUISTIC FORMS IN CLT

In an overview of the history of language teaching methodology, Celce-Murcia (1991) pointed out that during the past 50 years language teaching has followed a fluctuating pattern in terms of the emphasis placed on bottom-up linguistic skills versus top-down communication skills. CLT grew out of a dissatisfaction with earlier methods that were based on the conscious presentation of grammatical forms and structures or lexical items and did not adequately prepare learners for the effective and appropriate use of language in natural communication. However, in their zeal to give notional and social-functional aspects of

language proper consideration, many CLT proponents neglected linguistic competence and accepted the premise that linguistic form emerges on its own as a result of learners' engaging in communicative activities.[1] As Schmidt (1991) summarizes in his critique of CLT, "a general principle of CLT is that language learners gain linguistic form by seeking situational meaning, that is, the linguistic form is learned incidentally rather than as a result of focusing directly on linguistic form" (p. 1.2.2). However, this argument from CLT is not in accordance with the principles of cognitive psychology, according to Schmidt, who suggests instead that for learning to take place efficiently the learner must pay attention to the learning objective and must then practice the objective so that it changes from part of a controlled process to part of an automatic process.

Widdowson (1990) also argues that incidental, "natural" language acquisition is a "long and rather inefficient business" and that "the whole point of language pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of natural discovery and can make arrangements for learning to happen more easily and more efficiently than it does in 'natural surroundings'" (p. 162). In the L2 literature of the past decade, different researchers applying a range of conceptual frameworks and different technical terminologies have expressed the belief that making learners aware of structural regularities and formal properties of the target language will greatly increase the rate of language attainment. For example, various types of "consciousness raising" (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985), "input enhancement" (Sharwood Smith, 1993), "language awareness" (for a review, see van Lier, 1996), "focus on form" (see Doughty & Williams, in press; Long & Robinson, in press; Williams, 1995) have been proposed; in addition, Lightbown, Spada, and White (1993) and Ellis (1990, 1994) discuss in detail the role of explicit instruction in second language acquisition (SLA). In her summary of the communicative teaching of grammar, Fotos (1994) describes the changing climate in the language teaching profession:

> Grammar consciousness-raising tasks can therefore be recommended to the field of language teaching as useful pedagogy at a time when many teachers are seeking acceptable ways to bring formal instruction on grammar back into their communicative classrooms, and other teachers are searching for communicative activities which harmonize with the goals of more traditional educational curricula emphasizing the formal study of language properties. (p. 343)

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[1] Even though CLT theorists and practitioners have often argued that all direct approaches to grammar instruction are counterproductive (e.g., Krashen, 1982), some of the earliest proponents of CLT never forgot the importance of grammatical competence as part of communication (e.g., Wilkins, 1976, p. 66).

In a similar vein, there has been an increasing interest recently in investigating the conscious development of various dimensions of communicative competence, for example, discourse competence (e.g., Celce-Murcia & Olshtain, in press; Cook, 1989), strategic competence (e.g., Cohen, Weaver & Li, 1995; Dörnyei, 1995), and pragmatic competence (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, in press; Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Kasper, in press; see also Kasper, 1996).

One special issue in the development of communicative language skills is the question of formulaic language use. Along with a number of other researchers (e.g., Coulmas, 1981; Ellis, 1996; Nattinger & DeCarrico, 1992; Pawley & Syder, 1983), Widdowson (1989) argues that

> communicative competence is not a matter of knowing rules for the composition of sentences and being able to employ such rules to assemble expressions from scratch as and when occasion requires. It is much more a matter of knowing a stock of partially pre-assembled patterns, formulaic frameworks, and a kit of rules, so to speak, and being able to apply the rules to make whatever adjustments are necessary according to contextual standards. (p. 135)

According to this view, native speakers of a language are in command of thousands of preassembled language chunks and use them as building blocks in their speech. The retrieval of these chunks is cognitively undemanding, allowing the speaker to attend to other aspects of communication and to plan larger pieces of discourse. For L2 learners, however, the lack of a repertoire of such language chunks means that they tend to put sentences together from scratch, word by word, which takes up most of their cognitive capacity and does not allow them to achieve nativelike fluency. Nattinger and DeCarrico (1992) discuss in detail how lexical phrases can serve as an effective basis for a new, increasingly lexis-oriented teaching approach, and, indeed, there have been indications in L2 methodology that such a development is more than a mere theoretical possibility (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 1988; Lewis, 1993).

A TURNING POINT IN CLT?

Based on the brief overview presented above, a more direct, systematic approach to teaching communicative language abilities appears to be emerging gradually along the lines of Richards' (1990) direct approach. Such an approach requires, first, a detailed description of what communicative competence entails so that the subcomponents can be used as some kind of content base in syllabus design. Then the classroom activities can be developed for each of the selected language areas. This does not necessarily imply a return to traditional, structural syllabi.

Pedagogic tasks combined with a systematic focus on form, as outlined by Long and Crookes (1992), could well function as the primary organizational units in a direct communicative syllabus. Indeed, in their summary of the role of instruction in SLA, Spada and Lightbown (1993) also argue that research has produced increasing evidence "that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of communicative interaction can contribute positively to second language development in both the short and long term" (p. 205).

We must note, however, that the notion of "focus on form" has typically been understood as focus primarily on the grammatical regularities or "linguistic code features" (Long & Robinson, in press) of the L2, whereas the direct approach we have in mind would also include a focus on higher level organizational principles or rules and normative patterns or conventions governing language use beyond the sentence level (e.g., discourse rules, pragmatic awareness, strategic competence) as well as lexical formulaic phrases. A recent example of expanding the notion of focus on form is Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds' (1995) study, which broadened the concept of input enhancement to include "not only form in the strictest sense of formal (i.e., grammatical) accuracy but also to include form-meaning associations" (p. 123), that is, lexical aspects.

Interestingly, some early CLT theorists also recognized the possibility of a more direct approach to CLT. In a summary of the key concepts of CLT, Johnson (1981), for example, concluded that "we may find a structurally-organized course whose methodology practices important aspects of the communicative skill and is thus more worthy of the title 'communicative'" (p. 11). Similarly, Morrow (1981) stated,

> The crucial feature of a communicative method will be that it operates with stretches of language above the sentence level, and operates with real language in real situations. Interestingly, this principle may lead to procedures which are themselves either synthetic or analytic. A synthetic procedure would involve students in learning forms individually and then practicing how to combine them; an analytic procedure would introduce complete interactions of texts and focus for learning purposes on the way these are constructed. . . . A communicative method is likely to make use of both. (p. 61)

In sum, we believe that CLT has arrived at a turning point: Explicit, direct elements are gaining significance in teaching communicative abilities and skills.[2] The emerging new approach can be described as a

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[2] 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. However, we believe that the tendency we are describing applies even to such settings

principled communicative approach;[3] by bridging the gap between current research on aspects of communicative competence and actual communicative classroom practice, this approach has the potential to synthesize direct, knowledge-oriented and indirect, skill-oriented teaching approaches. Therefore, rather than being a complete departure from the original, indirect practice of CLT, it extends and further develops CLT methodology. According to Dörnyei and Thurrell (1994), the shift toward direct teaching may involve three main tendencies: (a) adding specific language input (formulaic language, in particular) to communicative tasks, (b) raising learners' awareness of the organizational principles of language use within and beyond the sentence level, and (c) sequencing communicative tasks more systematically in accordance with a theory of discourse-level grammar. These issues are very much at the core of recent discussions on task-based language teaching (see Crookes & Gass, 1993a, 1993b), and, indeed, the principled communicative approach is expected to incorporate a task-based methodology.

IS TALKING ABOUT CLT STILL RELEVANT?

Those who have been following the literature on teaching methods for the past few years (for reviews from various perspectives, see, e.g., Brown, 1994; Kumaravadivelu, 1992, 1994; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; Long, 1991) know that methods as such are losing (or have lost) their relevance to language instruction. Instead of following the current "best" method, teachers have learnt to be "cautiously eclectic in making enlightened choices of teaching practices" (Brown, 1994, p. 73). Long (1991) argues that even in courses that are intended to follow a particular method, the method disappears in the reality of the language classroom; that is, different methods overlap considerably when it comes to actual classroom practice, and long periods within classes following different methods are, in fact, indistinguishable from each other (see also Larsen-Freeman, 1991).

The question, then, is whether it makes any sense to talk about CLT at all. Kumaravadivelu (1994) argues convincingly that the development of language teaching theory has arrived at a postmethod condition, which requires a reconsideration of some of the metaphors used to describe methodological issues; in an attempt to achieve this, he introduces the concept of *macrostrategies* for L2 teaching as broad guidelines, on which teachers can generate their situation-based microstrategies. The macro-

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because it concerns direct approaches to the teaching of language issues that are beyond sentence-level grammar, and these have been typically taught in an indirect way even in foreign language learning environments.

[3] We are grateful to B. Kumaravadivelu for suggesting this term.

strategies Kumaravadivelu (1992, 1993, 1994) has put forward (e.g., maximize learning opportunities, facilitate negotiated interaction, foster language awareness) are neutral to methods and provide a coherent enough framework for teachers to make it unnecessary to use higher-order terms such as CLT.

Having argued thus, we note also the other side of the coin: The language teaching profession needs certain broad guidelines to follow, and many teachers and teacher trainers now feel comfortable with the goals and terms of CLT, as Thompson (1996) affirms in a recent article:

> Whatever the situation may be as regards actual teaching practices, communicative language teaching (CLT) is well established as the dominant theoretical model in ELT. There have been recurrent attempts to take stock of CLT and to identify its characteristic features . . . and in areas such as teacher training the principles of CLT are largely treated as clearly understood and accepted. (p. 9)

This need for guiding principles is, in fact, not inconsistent with the postmethod perspective: Kumaravadivelu (1994) specifies "principled pragmatism" as a major feature of the postmethod condition, and Brown (1994) talks about the need for an "informed approach." Therefore, the concept of CLT construed as a general approach rather than a specific teaching method might be useful in providing language practitioners with some important guidelines even at the time of the postmethod condition. CLT highlights the primary goal of language instruction, namely, to go beyond the teaching of the discrete elements, rules, and patterns of the target language and to develop the learner's ability to take part in spontaneous and meaningful communication in different contexts, with different people, on different topics, for different purposes; that is, to develop the learner's communicative competence. Achieving this is a real challenge, and the use of the terms *communicative language teaching* and *principled communicative approach* may serve as effective reminders of this goal to all of us.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to initiate discussion about the present practice and future directions of CLT. We have offered our current thinking on these issues and discussed the emergence of a more principled communicative approach, knowing that some colleagues working in different learning and teaching contexts will have had different experiences and will disagree with our opinions and judgments. We invite responses that will challenge or extend our collective professional thinking on the topic.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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