Directness and indirectness when communicating in English

Ben Dobbs suggests that learners need to learn about indirectness in order to handle certain situations.

An Emirati participant on a leadership course, himself a highly competent and accurate speaker, recently commented to me on the intercultural and linguistic matter of directness, indirectness, diplomacy and the difficulty of adjusting language to meet the expectations of the other party in an interaction. His thoughts echoed those of a Japanese trainee wishing to develop his language skills for international business, who remarked on an apparent contradiction in his language knowledge: in his L1, culture dictated indirectness, yet when speaking in his L2, English, he had received managerial feedback that his choice of words was rather harsh and direct. This was not, of course, his intention but simply a symptom of a deficiency in his language knowledge or control with reference to how to produce and balance statements he makes. This brings up various points to reflect on regarding the nature of directness and indirectness and what learners and teachers need to know.

Levels of directness are dictated by culture, situation and personality

We can generalise about the level of directness or indirectness in a culture – this may form part of the stereotype of a national group. I stress stereotype as a summary of majority behaviour in a culture and a way to manage complexity by generalising about majority trends, not as a falsified or exaggerated caricature.

Of course, culture is not all there is to it. Some in a culture may be more or less direct than the national norm or standard as dictated by their personality. The environment, situation or context is also a defining factor: whatever your national culture or personality, there will be times when indirectness will be called for, often when diplomacy is required, or directness would be most useful, such as in a crisis situation.

For international communication, it is important to know and have an appreciation of these cultural and personal differences and the effect that situations have in contributing to the language we select in an interaction.

It is also worth noting that directness and indirectness are not absolute. We are not dealing with something clear-cut or black and white. We may describe a person or culture as being ‘direct’ or ‘indirect’ (or even ‘very direct’, ‘brutally direct’ and so on), but these are not extreme adjectives; level of directness is spectral and exists along a range of possibilities.

Additionally, anyone may perceive themselves as being more or less direct than those around them perceive the person to be.

Directness and indirectness are expressed linguistically, but being direct is linguistically easier

Direct language is generally simpler to produce and as a result requires less control of language. To produce an indirect utterance may involve:

- use of more modal verbs
- use of negative opposites of adjectives
- use of hedging and caution in language
- production of question forms
- careful consideration of choice of words
- the skill to avoid a direct ‘no’ if needed
- hypothetical speaking if required to an individual or group
- care taken over intonation
- arrangement of information in a certain way.

While not all of these may be deployed in a single statement, the language proficiency required is clear. Directness on the other hand is produced by:

- simple, straightforward statements, typically non-interrogative sentences
- less thought regarding the impact of words
- adjectives
less use of modals
less caution
direct refusal
‘telling it as it is’
tonation reflecting annoyance or emotional stress.

Directness and indirectness are affected by channel of communication

Directness and indirectness may be expressed in written or spoken language. They are also affected by the audience to which the message is delivered: directness would dictate a direct communication to the intended recipient or recipients, while indirectness may be expressed through delivery to a group even though the message may only be of relevance to a small percentage of those receiving it.

Directness does not equate to impoliteness or rudeness, nor does indirectness equate to politeness

In intercultural situations, we may often hear or read something and respond emotionally: the email is, for example, too vague, sarcastic or rude, or the person’s feedback was verbose or brutally honest. When confronted with a statement featuring a degree of directness or indirectness that is not in line with our cultural or personal preference, it is all too easy to judge another’s directness by our own cultural standards; instead, we – students and teachers included – need to react objectively, not emotionally, when encountered with a level of directness different to our own. Indirect language can, however, be utilised when diplomacy or sensitivity is called for. Indirectness is not necessarily the same as vagueness, waffling or inefficiency just as directness is often different to impoliteness. This does, however, come with a caveat: that culture should not be used as an explanation for any misunderstanding or inappropriacy.

There are implications for feedback

In terms of feedback, it is worth asking ourselves as teachers how direct we can be and how direct we may need to be. In terms of classroom culture, this may involve asking how direct the students wish their feedback to be and reminding them of their choice if needed. This relates equally to delivery of positive or negative feedback.

Classroom ideas

Any practice or production of direct and indirect language comes with the caveat that students must have the linguistic knowledge and foundation required; additionally, an awareness of intercultural concepts would be helpful for framing the tasks and producing the correct mindset.

Some classroom ideas may include:
- writing the same message (for example, in an email) twice: once with a direct style and the second time in a more indirect style
- presenting information or news in direct and indirect ways
- rewriting direct utterances in a more diplomatic way
- examination of intercultural critical incidents relating to directness
- reflection on responses to a series of situations in a social or work context.

Examples of directness and indirectness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct</th>
<th>Indirect</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>This is a bad situation.</td>
<td>This is not a great situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, we can’t do that.</td>
<td>I’m not sure that will be possible.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This is unacceptable.</td>
<td>This might not be acceptable.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The price is a problem.</td>
<td>The price could be a problem.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Addressed to the offending individual) You have been late three times this week.</td>
<td>(Addressed to a group but relevant to only one) We all know punctuality is important so …</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It’s a disaster!</td>
<td>We have a challenge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Conclusion

So, directness and indirectness are cultural, personal and linguistic. For building and maintaining relationships when communicating in English it is important to have an understanding and preferably a control over the level of directness produced and how this is or may be perceived. Language is the carrier and it is skill with language which will dictate the level of directness we produce in reality, and whether that level is what we want or not.