

## An Interview with Scott Thornbury

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Scott Thornbury is an internationally well-known teacher, teacher trainer, and writer who works in the field of English language education and cherishes his role as a mediator between the academics and the practitioners of the English language. At present, he is working for Mosaik Education, training teachers of refugees in the Middle East in how to integrate communicative activities into their online classes. This interview was conducted virtually via Skype on 04 February 2025.

**Noopura M:** At the outset, I would like to thank you for agreeing to meet with me virtually. I know you're very busy, and I truly appreciate it. I'd love to make the most of our conversation and hear your insights on the Dogme Approach. If it's alright, I'll get started with my first question.

If this approach were to be applied in the Indian context, what advice would you give the researcher?


**Scott Thornbury:** First of all, it is not the first time it is being applied to the Indian context. Perhaps it was not a classroom research study, but rather an argumentative piece in which someone in an Indian teaching context examined Dogme through the lens of a local context. That might be useful! I can try and hunt that out and send that to you. A number of people who have done master's assignments have looked at Dogme attitudinally through questionnaires for teachers and students after having some exposure to Dogme. Not a lot, but even in some cases, a comparative exposure to Dogme versus the traditional approach, and getting their opinions about that. There is very little or no research done of a more quantitative variety. It is difficult to study this where we have evenly matched groups. Imagine where you've gotten one group undergoing a more traditional, grammatical approach and the other a less prescriptive, less materials based one that is more emergent, more Dogme-like. How would you compare? A standard measure would be some kind of formal test-whatever the institution uses as a testing instrument. Or you could devise an objective measure. For example, fluency and accuracy could be compared across two groups in both speaking and writing. You would need a range of

different skills and criteria to get anything that could be considered remotely plausible in terms of research design.

A lot of research has been done in Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in terms of research design. Dogme is not that far removed in terms of this at all. That is, it has so many similarities and, in a sense, emerged out of the task-based approach. A task-based approach mostly looks at the kind of tasks that are conducive to fluency, accuracy, and the development of grammatical complexity. So, research into speaking tasks with Dogme that is less prescriptive would be possible. For example, years ago, in a study on two kinds of communicative tasks (ie), spot the difference versus a freer practice wherein students were having a conversation with their examiner. The first one was a more traditional, constrained classroom task, and the other was a conversational kind-more like a Dogme task. When they transcribed these tasks, they found qualitative differences between the two and discovered that the conversational task generated more student-initiated language and a wider variety of functions. This validated the value of improved conversation and is the nearest study between a conversational versus a traditional approach.

A PhD research would be a more longitudinal study of a group of students for about nine months, followed by the collection of qualitative data, quantitative data, attitudinal studies, and observational data of accuracy and fluency. This is a massive and incredibly interesting thing to do, and it hasn't been done before with a specific focus on Dogme. It depends on what students you have access to, what teachers will be willing to be

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involved, and what your supervisor recommends - but it hasn't been done!

**NM:** From your perspective, how suitable is the Dogme Approach for implementation in India?

**ST:** It would be very important to do a study in the Indian context that looks at how relatively low-resourced classrooms and institutions can still maintain a high standard of education because that would be a lesson well worth sharing with other contexts, which are similar to the Global South, South America, and Africa. Here, teachers are often committed to teaching large classes with limited resources from a technological point of view, and yet are able to do it in a way that satisfies the standards that everybody expects from them. The reason for this is that when Dogme first started, it was a reaction against the overuse of materials, resources, and technology, and that was in the year 2000. There is a lot of literature that is critical of the over-dependency on educational technology as well. The height associated with new developments in technology, like AI, would be a good example. There's Neil Selwyn from Australia who has written abundantly about challenging educational technology that would be really interesting to look at, for it sort of complements the Dogme literature, which is not extensive, and in a sense validates the literature review of Dogme, especially in India, where so much culturally appropriate material is locally produced.

There is great precedence in your part of the world from great scholars who have done critical work challenging the influence of the center versus periphery debate. We've got Canagaraja, Kumaravadivelu, and the late lamented N. S. Prabhu, who are a very strong tradition of South Asian scholars who have been critical of the dominance of the Global North. Alastair Pennycook, the Australian linguist, and Adrian Holliday, who coined the terms 'appropriate methodology' and 'native speakerism' are also scholars that you can look at. The literature is very rich, and you need to be selective of how you can go about this, depending on what your particular interests and those of your colleagues are.

**NM:** How far is the Dogme Approach different from Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)?

**ST:** Well, Dogme was never proposed as a method. It was simply a critique using a metaphor and an analogy with a film making school which is now defunct. It only developed as a trapping of a

method as more and more people started exploring its features, and then in 2009, Teaching Unplugged was an attempt to capture some of the activities at least, which are typical of the approach. But then again, we resisted calling it a method because it emerged from my interest in TBLT, other people's interest in humanistic and critical approaches. There was a resistance to call it a method because that would imply that Dogme has a unique theory of language and learning, a set of activities etc, but it hasn't. It is incredibly eclectic. I would never draw a line between Dogme and TBLT per se, and it seems to me that they share a lot in common. Samuda and Bygate make one of the first academic references to Dogme in the literature and call Dogme 'a valid approach to designing classroom tasks' and the difference really being that in Dogme, the tasks are minimally resource-intensive as opposed to the task-based learning, which involves quite a lot of material brought into the classroom to complement the task. The fact that it is suggested here is proof that there is an overlap between the two.

**NM:** How would you describe the key features that Dogme and Stephen Krashen's theory of Second Language Acquisition share?

**ST:** Dogme is situated at the acquisition end of the learning- acquisition spectrum. Krashen would never call it a spectrum because there is either learning or there is acquisition. But implicit learning is going to be more effective than explicit learning and instruction. Hence, Dogme shares the opinion that explicit instruction following a grammar syllabus of preselected items is less effective than the Dogme Approach. This is where again we share something common with the Task-based approach, which is strongly anti-grammatical syllabus of tasks because their (Long and Krashen) argument suggests that you cannot alter the order in which learners acquire language items and therefore let the language emerge through exposure and use in an immersive context.

Hence, Dogme is all about language that emerges from the tasks in classrooms. The idea that there is no syllabus of preselected language items is what-

- distinguishes Dogme from traditional approaches.

- is consistent with Krashen's views of language acquisition, and

- c) aligns Dogme with TBLT or CLIL, or any kind of content-based approach. These are on the acquisition end of the spectrum.

Of course, that raises the question as to what the educational context is like in large classrooms in India and analyze its feasibility of any immersive approach. These are big arguments against TBLT that it requires more time to achieve obvious outcomes using a more implicit approach to language teaching than a more traditional approach, where we get results at least in exams quickly in terms of accuracy. Dogme seems to be working in large classrooms of motivated learners with minimal resources.

The affective argument about Krashen's principle has moved on and is now more nuanced. More than the affective filter, people talk about engagement, and that learners need to be engaged in the learning process. Sarah Mercer and other scholars have written extensively about engagement and affective factors like motivation, and arguably, Dogme ticks the right boxes because learners tend to be more engaged in language or instructional content that they themselves have generated. They are going to be more engaged in reading the texts produced by their peers rather than the course book, and more engaged by the stories that are real about themselves than the stories that are fictional from literature. Hence, the lessons must be centered towards real-life situations as far as possible, and that's the idea that has been around Dogme for quite some time. You could look at the critical pedagogy of the time by Paulo Freire in Brazil in the 1960s, that's generated between the learners and the teacher and the learners themselves.

**NM:** How has research on the Dogme Approach developed over time?

**ST:** You must note that Terrell and Krashen, to a large extent, ignored or underappreciated the importance of output and interaction. We have now moved on from that, I think, towards the universally recognised output hypothesis of Merrill Swain in the 1990s. She studied her experiences at the immersion schools in Canada, where students were getting a lot of comprehensible input but weren't producing much output and therefore not getting enough feedback. There was no incentive to be accurate.

The quality of language produced during a Dogme lesson, when compared to those methods in

conversation and information gap activities, is much richer. If the teachers know how to support and scaffold them, the results would be great!

Writers like Steve Walsh talk about interactive competence and suggest that teachers should have the ability to not just set up activities but to shape them, give feedback, scaffold, and model them. So if you're looking for criteria to evaluate the effectiveness of a Dogme lesson, you need to not just look at the amount and quality of comprehensible input, but also largely the amount of learner-generated output and teacher-learner interaction, including scaffolding, etc. Now that's an area in ELT that is quite under-researched.

**NM:** Thank you, Mr. Thornbury, for taking the time to share your insights on the Dogme Approach with me! I truly appreciate the clarity and depth with which you explained its principles and evolution. Our conversation has given me a deeper understanding of its practical relevance, and I feel inspired to explore its applications further.

**ST:** You are welcome, Noopura.

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