THE DIRECT METHOD IN TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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Historical Background

Around 1880 and in the following years there was a great change in the method of teaching foreign languages. In 1882 Vietor published in Germany a pamphlet in which he directed a full attack on the current Grammar—Translation Method. For him grammar was not the starting point. Vietor, as well as other famous linguists of that period, insisted that the pupil should discover the facts for himself by experience in the language. He maintained that language must not be analysed too much into words but taught in complete sentence utterances. Language was to be learnt through speech first; the spoken language should take precedence over written language in order of presentation to the pupil. Even accidence was to be learnt from the sounds of speech rather than from written endings; therefore, phonetics and phonetic transcription were also introduced. These linguists stated that the four aims of language teaching in their proper order are: Hearing, Speaking, Reading, Writing.

Similarly Gouin, a French linguist, thought that a foreign language should be learnt more or less as a child learns his mother tongue, and to this end he developed 'series' of actions and accompanying statements, through which the basic utterances of the language were to be acquired. He thought that exposing the student directly to the foreign language impresses it perfectly upon his mind. However, many linguists thought that this was true only up to a point, since the Psychology of learning a foreign language differs from that of learning the first. The child is forced to learn the first language because he has no other effective way to express his wants. In learning a second language this compulsion is largely missing, since the student knows that he can communicate through his native language when necessary. Furthermore, with the first language the child's mind can be thought of as a "tabula rasa" where the pattern becomes impressed, whereas with a second language the habit patterns of the first language are already there, and the second language is perceived through the habit channels of the native tongue.

Although the Direct Method became very popular in Europe, in the years following 1880 a great deal of controversy took place about the merits and demerits of the new method. A society of French teachers in England was formed, and at its first conference
passed a resolution that French should be taught as a living language and that it should be taught by Frenchmen. On the other hand, other famous linguists gave strong support to the new method of language teaching. Though there were some differences of view among these Direct Methodists, in the main they were remarkably united in their outlook of language teaching. They were also strongly opposed to the Grammar—Translation Method, and generally opposed to all translation into the target language, as well as to memorization of conjugations, declensions and rules. They believed in learning the language in and through the language itself, and hence did not favour the intrusion of the mother tongue in the classroom. The reason why they were opposed to translation as a teaching instrument, was that it involved a mental exercise that was far removed from the normal experience of spontaneous speech. They thought that language was to be learnt by using language rather than by constructing sentences, putting together the necessary words according to the grammatical rules. Thus, the use of the mother tongue was replaced by activity, demonstration and drills, the use of 'realia' (1) an so on. Since many of them were phoneticians, they favoured an extensive use of phonetics in language teaching. Grammar was to be learnt inductively by the frequent use of language, and rules were completely banned. But their most vital idea was that meanings of words were to be learnt as far as possible by the direct association of the new word with the object, action, or concept that it designated, without the intervention of the mother tongue.

Harold E. Palmer, as we know, criticised this point, stating that the most "direct" way of conveying the meaning of a new word might often be simply to give a translation into the learner's native language. However, other linguists found out that many teachers think that giving the equivalent of a word in the mother tongue, or explaining what it means, is to teach it. "But, a child who plays with children who speak a different language begins to make the sounds which they make, as he learns to hide himself or run when chased, without waiting to learn why, or what the words mean. He learns the meaning of the words in a very short time by using them in the right place at the right moment. Besides, the pupil's curiosity is dissipated and the tension is relaxed before his interest, when the meaning of a new word is given: we weaken the impression which the word makes on the mind. We spoil the game if we give the solution to a puzzle before it has been really worked at, before our pupils have had a chance to try their wits and the quickness of their ears on it. A language learnt merely as a set of words, phrases and structures, might be more evanescent than a language learnt realistically as behaviour, and perhaps a behavioural method of language teaching might make language learning not only more interesting in the early stages but more permanent, and possibly quicker because of the diminished loss through forgetting" (2).

Despite these excellent principles evolved, there were some factors that imposed on them limitations. These factors were that those great linguists missed completely the principle of selection, grading, and controlled presentation of linguistic items, first vocabulary an then structures. In the second place, they did not have the technological aids to language teaching as we do today. But still, there have always been teachers who have successfully followed the best principles of language teaching ever since the remarkable developments of the 1880s.

The most difficult task came when the new Method had to be adequately adapted to the schools. Textbooks, detailed programmes and other materials were needed, and the teachers also needed to be trained. All this involved a tremendous task which could not be accomplished in a few years only. And since the new active methods in the hands of incompetent teachers lead to poor discipline, the new ideas earned considerable ill-repute. Furthermore, a number of teachers actively resisted the Direct Method and gave stronger support to the Grammar—Translation Method. Palmer, again, maintained that some of the means which Direct Methodists used to convey meaning were more confusing, in fact far less "direct", than the simple translation into the mother tongue. He said that to learn all
meaning by context, as the child learns his native language, would take too long.
Anyhow, the pupil usually guesses the English translation and repeats it to himself, so
that translation takes place. However, he supported most of the ideas of the Direct
Method, but he sought to give them more reality and a more scientific form. He finally
made the new method a success in practice, and it was later adapted by a large number of
teachers, especially in the period between the two World Wars. When used by competent
teachers, this method succeeded with whole classes where grammar—translation had at
best helped the exceptional student.

The Direct Method in Practice

We can now summarize and say that the Direct Method is a theory based on the
principle that language should be taught in direct connection with objects and living
ideas. It is based on the doctrine that translation should be excluded in the greater
possible measure, being considered in all its forms and functions as a vicious and harmful
proceeding. It stresses practice instead of theory, in other words, the students must learn
to speak by speaking, to understand by listening, to read by reading and so on. They are
brought into the language, at first in a simple form, and then in a progressively more
difficult form. So we see that in using this method, the teacher might begin teaching the
first words by saying the names of the things in the classroom and by letting the pupils
repeat them; by pointing to pictures, or by performing actions. But even at the beginning
he could easily bring these words into close association with some classroom action and
routine. For instance, we can see how the teacher puts this into practice "when calling the
roll:

Teacher: Peggy Brown?
Peggy: Here, Miss Quinones (or "Present, Miss...")
The teacher did not hear her answer, and so she asks:
Teacher: Is Peggy Brown here?
Peggy: Yes, I'm here.
Teacher: Where are you, Peggy? Put up your hand. Oh, there you are. Is Tom
here?
Class: No, Miss. Quinones
Teacher: Isn't he? Oh. Was he here yesterday, David?
David: Yes, he was.
Teacher: Where is he today?
Mary: He is at home, Miss.

And so on (3). Now we can realise that the Direct Method should not be thought of
only as the close association of words with the things named by them, though that
certainly is the theory in its simplest terms. There is much more in it than that: the
principle may be explained as the associating of word with thing, of thing with context,
and of context with expression in the foreign language. What is needed is the full
'contextual situation' of a living event, some small incident of real life. For instance, the
word 'watch' is to be taught: the pupils look at one, and if possible touch it (touch brings
such certainty to children). Then the teacher uses the word in a 'real' experience, saying:
"Look, I am winding my watch"; as he does so, the children all listen intently to the tiny
clicks. So the idea of winding a watch is immediately associated with the words
expressing the act. Of course the children know all about winding a watch; but their
attention and interest in making sure that they will hear the clicks transform the small
event into a fuller experience for them; and so the word "watch" becomes part of a larger
unit of thought and understanding, reinforced by sensorperception, interest and enjoyment.

We note here, too, that the word has been associated with a complete context, an
active one, not merely with a thing, referred to without interest or purpose. In addition
the word "winding" is not first met with as a purely verbal form with a meaning that has
to be memorized; but it has been encountered in a context of real life; they have seen the living person perform the action; they have heard the result of the action and the words that express action.

Using the same topic, we now must imagine a more significant story: the teacher pretending he is late and in a hurry to leave, keeps on looking at his watch. Then with an exclamation of annoyance, he holds it to his ear, then shakes it gently, and looks at it again: "Oh, dear". It has stopped again. Did I wind it last night? I always wind it at night; but did I last night?" Thus he suggests to the imagination of his pupils some little everyday "situation" by his actions and words. Thus, their curiosity helps their minds to concentrate on what is happening, and therefore on the language; and the new patterns of words and meanings are firmly impressed on their memories. The previous examples have shown us how very simple an experience in learning may be. Some teachers permit chatter and even fooling that can be controlled at a glance, and based on a real and friendly understanding with the pupils.

The task of divising little situations may seem at first not at all easy; but once one begins to make them up, little scenes will soon suggest themselves. Further classroom work can be prepared with games, songs and so on.

The Direct Method can be thought of as one of the most widely known and the one that has caused the most controversy. This movement resulted in various individual methods with various names, such as New Method, Natural Method, and even Oral Method, but they can all be referred to as Direct Methods, or the Direct Method. Its main characteristics are:

1. The use of everyday vocabulary and structure.
2. Grammar taught by situation.
3. Use of many new items in the same lesson to make the language sound natural and to encourage normal conversation.
4. Oral teaching of grammar and vocabulary.
5. Concrete meanings through object lessons; abstract ones through the association of ideas.
6. Grammar illustrated through visual presentation.
7. Extensive listening and imitation until forms become automatic.
8. Most of the work done in class; more class hours needed.
9. The first few weeks devoted to pronunciation.
10. All reading matter first presented orally.
NOTAS

(1) Techniques that make pupil feel environment of the country where the target language is spokken.

(2) A.L.Q. An Essay on "Language Through Speech As An Important Aim in Teaching English to Foreign Students". (Work done for the Method's Course).

(3) A.L.Q. "Syllabus" (Work done for the Method's Course).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


