DIRECT METHOD AND L2 LEARNING
THE REFORM MOVEMENT

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Individual disagreements with the practice of teaching modern languages by text-based methods like Grammar Translation were being voiced for some time. The publication of Henry Sweet's path-breaking work *Handbook of Phonetics* in 1877 helped to bring a number of like-minded researchers together. When the German phonetician, Wilhelm Viëtor published his landmark pamphlet *Language Teaching Must Start Afresh* (1882), the ground appeared to be ready for a revolutionary change in language teaching methodology. The changes assumed the proportions of a movement after Paul Passy formed the Phonetic Teachers' Association in France in 1886 and went on to publish a journal in phonetic script, *The Phonetics Teacher*. The collective effort of these reformists was directed mainly towards the description and analysis of speech sounds. This is how phonetics, the new science of speech sounds came to the aid of language learners. In 1886 Sweet (England), Viëtor (Germany), Passy (France) and Jespersen (Denmark) joined forces to form an organization that would be indispensable in carrying out such a task and it was named the International Phonetic Association. It devised a wide range of written symbols for speech sounds, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

GOALS OF THE REFORM MOVEMENT

Phonetic accuracy was the chief but certainly not the only goal of the Reform Movement. Phonetics was in its scheme of things, a part of a comprehensive plan for reorientation of language pedagogy. As the following list of objectives will show, the movement did propose a few fundamental changes:

(a) Emphasis on spoken language; training in phonetics essential for teachers.
(b) All teaching to be done in the target language; translation to be avoided.
(c) Inductive approach to rules of grammar: language samples first, rules later.
(d) Learners should hear the language first before seeing it in written form.
(e) Words should be presented in sentences and sentences should be practiced in meaningful contexts and not be taught as isolated, disconnected elements.

These principles provided the theoretical foundations for a principled approach to language teaching, one based on a scientific approach to the study of language and of language learning. They reflect the beginnings of the discipline of applied linguists. The writings of such scholars as Sweet, Viêtor and Passy provided suggestions on how these linguistic principles could be best put into practice. None of these proposals assumed the status of a method, however, in the sense of a widely recognized and uniformly implemented design for teaching a language. But parallel to the ideas put forward by members of the Reform Movement was an interest in developing principles for language teaching out of naturalistic principles of language learning such as are seen in first language acquisition. This led to what have been termed natural methods and ultimately led to the development of what came to be known as the Direct Method.

**THE DIRECT METHOD**

The Direct Method introduced in the last years of the 19th Century may be described as a fall out of the Reform Movement. It took the first decisive step towards rejecting the canonical literary text as the learner's staple diet, it now looked instead directly at the speech of man as its model of study. The constant two-way translations could now be dispensed with; on the other had attention was turned to naturalistic principles of language learning, the way a child acquires his first language.

Two linguists of the period made important contributions to the ideology of the Direct Method. The first one was Sauveur who argued that in learning a foreign language translation would be quite unnecessary if meaning was conveyed through demonstration and action. He advocated the use of a wide range of teaching aids (pictures, objects etc.) in the class room. Thus the teacher virtually took the place of the text book in the Direct Method controlling and directing all learning. Since Sauveur's methodology dealt with real objects and naturally produced language in context, it came to be known as the Natural Method.

The German scholar F. Franke wrote on the psychological principles of direct association between forms and meanings in the target language (1884) and provided a theoretical justification for a monolingual approach to teaching. According to Franke a language could be best taught by using it actively in the classroom. Rather than using analytical procedures that focus on explanation of grammar rules in classroom teaching, teachers must encourage direct and spontaneous use of the foreign language in the classroom. Learners would then be able to induce the rules of grammar. In the method speaking began with systematic attention to pronunciation. Known words could be used to teach new vocabulary using mime, demonstration and pictures. According to Howatt:
‘The vocabulary in the Direct Method is to be simple and familiar; the first few lessons of the Berlitz English course, for example, were based on objects in the classroom, clothing etc. followed by verb ‘to be' and common adjectives like big, small, thin, thick etc.’ (Howatt, p. 206).

According the Rivers in the Direct Method ‘creative vocabulary was explained with labeled pictures and demonstration while abstract vocabulary was taught through the associating of ideas’.

The other notable contribution came from Gouin who made the pioneering move of basing his methodology on the observed phenomena of child language acquisition. The order in which a child acquires the four languages skills-listening, speaking, reading and writing was found to be the key also to adult language acquisition. It paved the way for a reorientation of second language pedagogy.

Gouin agreed with Sauveur on the importance of presenting new lexical items in context. He insisted on the learner being given an opportunity to induce the meaning of an unfamiliar word. In fact, Gouin had devised an elaborate plan for presenting lexical items orally to learners parallel to stimulated situations.

**PRINCIPLES OF THE DIRECT METHOD**

1. **Oral Teaching** - The Direct Method accepts the Principle that language is primarily by speech and good reading and writing follows from correct Speaking. So it stresses the oral aspect of the language.

2. **Inhibition of the mother tongue** - The Direct Method restricts the use of the mother tongue to a minimum because according to the method the intervention of the mother tongue prevents the pupil from thinking in English. But Direct Method does not insist that mother-tongue should be eliminated from the whole of the learning process. When the teacher is satisfied that he is unable to explain the meaning of a new language form by the method of direct illustration or by verbal explanation in English he should not hesitate to use the mother-tongue.

3. **The Speech Unit** - The Direct Method recognizes the sentence and not the word as the unit of speech. Children express themselves in sentences or group of words and not in isolated words. So when they learn a second language they should be given practice in the use of complete sentences.

4. **Inductive teaching of grammar** - This method gives up the traditional way of teaching grammar deductively and adopts the inductive method of teaching grammar which insists that practice should precede theory, examples should precede rules and definitions and there should be a close connection between the grammar and the reader. To quote H. Champion ‘In the Direct Method grammar is not regarded as an end in itself but as a means to an end, as a guide to enable the pupil to correct errors of language’. (Gupta, p. 31).

5. **Value of phonetics admitted** - The speaking of a language involves pronunciation. Since
this method aims at learning English through speech it lays much stress on the teaching of phonetics.

6. **Creation of the direct bond** - In this method the direct bond between experience and expression is formed in two ways -
   (i) by the direct association of the English words with the appropriate objects or ideas.
   (ii) by the minimum use of the mother-tongue and thereby giving the maximum scope for thinking in English.

**INTERACTIVE PROCEDURE IN DIRECT METHOD**

One of the most influential aspects of the Direct Method was not simply its emphasis on speech but the emphasis on interaction. Interaction is recognized to be at the heart of natural language acquisition. The Direct Method devised question and answer sessions for learners at various levels. In promoting the interactive procedure as a tool for language learning, the Direct Method anticipated the communicative Method which was to appear on the scene many years later.

The Direct method is comparatively simple to grasp although it involved a bit of hard and intense practice. It was widely accepted in commercial institutions like the Berlitz school in USA. The direct method had nevertheless to contend with several points of criticism:

1. It certainly offered an innovative approach in language teaching but did not have a thorough methodological base. It focused on bare classroom issues.
2. Direct Method principles were often counterproductive because teacher went to absurd lengths merely to avoid using the native tongue when a simple explanation or even a translation would have been enough.

The Harvard psychologist Roger Brown documented similar problems with strict Direct Method techniques. He described his frustration in observing a teacher performing verbal gymnastics in an attempt to convey the meaning of Japanese words when translation would have been a much more efficient technique to use.

3. The Direct Method requires a highly skilled native speaker teacher. It is largely dependent on the teacher’s skill and not all the teachers are proficient enough in the foreign language to adhere to the principles of the method. It was possible for the well-organized Berlitz chain of schools to select and train its own teachers but once such control is loosened the Direct Method may appear as plain and inarticulate.

**RELEVANCE OF THE DIRECT METHOD IN MODERN TIMES**

Direct Method is very relevant in modern times due to the following reasons:

1. It provides ample opportunity for fluency in speech and good pronunciation.
2. It helps the pupil to think in the target language and develops his power of self-expression in the target language.
3. The method is psychologically sound for it puts into practice the main principles of modern education, e.g. ‘the particular must precede the general, the concrete the abstract, practice must precede theory’. (Gupta, p. 32)
4. In the words of H. Champion, it has shifted ‘the centre of gravity of language teaching from the aim of teaching pupils to understand and know its grammar, to the aim of giving pupils first and foremost the Command of language as a means of expression, to serve as a basis for the study of its literature and structure’. (Gupta, p. 32)

So, we have seen that Direct Method is relevant even in the 21st century and through the study of the method it is eventually realized that there is more to language learning than grammatical rules and phonetics, that is, emphasis is here given on the speaking and pronunciation and that a more comprehensive view has to be taken of the language learner's varied inputs.

Language pedagogy received in course of time insights from such diverse fields as linguistics, social psychology and anthropology. Experts from these areas especially between the two World Wars became increasingly involved in the teaching of English as a foreign language and it is perhaps not entirely surprising that psychologists and anthropologists rather than trained phoneticians have devised new methods of language teaching over the last seventy years.

WORKS CITED


