

The Direct Method

Introduction

As with the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method is not new. Its principles have been applied by language teachers for many years. Most recently, it was revived as a method when the goal of instruction became learning how to use another language to communicate. Since the Grammar-Translation Method was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively, the Direct Method became popular.

The Direct Method has one very basic rule: No translation is allowed. In fact, the Direct Method receives its name from the fact that meaning is to be conveyed directly in the target language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students' native language.

We will now try to come to an understanding of the Direct Method by observing an English teacher using it in a *scuola media* (lower-level secondary school) class in Italy. The class has 30 students who attend English class for one hour, three times a week. The class we observe is at the end of its first year of English language instruction in a *scuola media*.

Experience

The teacher is calling the class to order as we find seats toward the back of the room. He has placed a big map of the USA in the front of the classroom. He asks the students to open their books to a certain page number. The lesson is entitled 'Looking at a Map.' As the students are called on one by one, they read a sentence from the reading passage at the beginning of the lesson. The teacher points to the part of the map the sentence describes after each has read a sentence. The passage begins:

We are looking at a map of the United States of America. Canada is the country to the north of the United States, and Mexico is the country to

the south of the United States. Between Canada and the United States are the Great Lakes. Between Mexico and the United States is the Rio Grande River. On the East Coast is the Atlantic Ocean, and on the West Coast is the Pacific Ocean. In the east is a mountain range called the Appalachian Mountains. In the west are the Rocky Mountains.

After the students finish reading the passage, they are asked if they have any questions. A student asks what a mountain range is. The teacher turns to the whiteboard and draws a series of inverted cones to illustrate a mountain range.

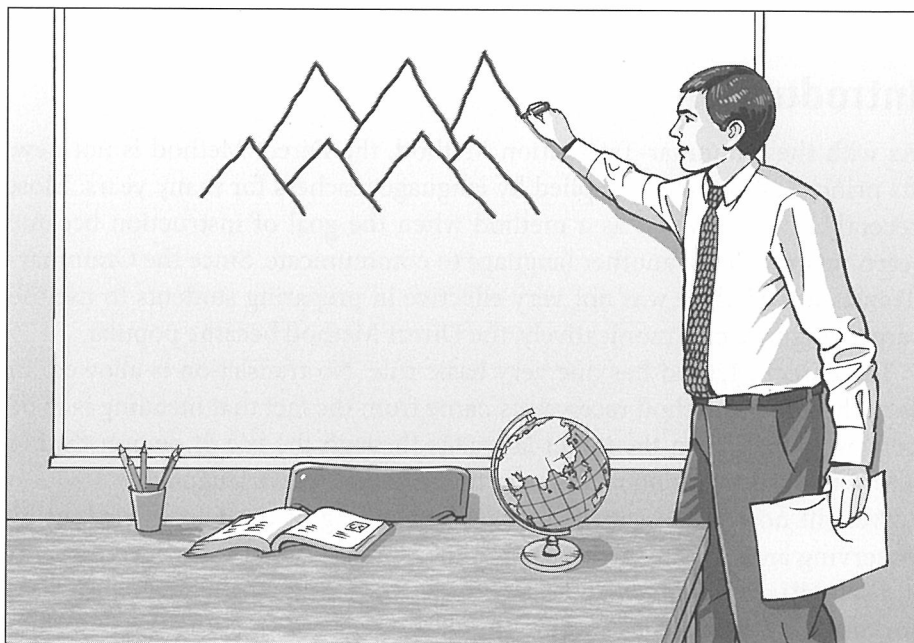


Figure 3.1 The teacher drawing on the board to illustrate the meaning of ‘mountain range’

The student nods and says, ‘I understand.’ Another student asks what ‘between’ means. The teacher replies, ‘You are sitting between Maria Pia and Giovanni. Paolo is sitting between Gabriella and Cettina. Now do you understand the meaning of “between”?’ The student answers, ‘Yes, I understand.’

After all of the questions have been answered, the teacher asks some of his own. ‘Class, are we looking at a map of Italy?’

The class replies in chorus, ‘No!’

The teacher reminds the class to answer in a full sentence.

‘No, we aren’t looking at a map of Italy,’ they respond.

The teacher asks, ‘Are we looking at a map of the United States?’

‘Yes. We are looking at a map of the United States.’

‘Is Canada the country to the south of the United States?’

‘No. Canada isn’t the country south of the United States.’

‘Are the Great Lakes in the North of the United States?’

‘Yes. The Great Lakes are in the North.’

‘Is the Rio Grande a river or a lake?’

‘The Rio Grande is a river.’

‘It’s a river. Where is it?’

‘It’s between Mexico and the United States.’

‘What color is the Rio Grande on the map?’

‘It’s blue.’

‘Point to a mountain range in the west. What mountains are they?’

‘They are the Rocky Mountains.’

The question and answer session continues for a few more minutes. Finally, the teacher invites the students to ask questions. Hands go up, and the teacher calls on students to pose questions one at a time, to which the class replies. After several questions have been posed, one girl asks, ‘Where are the Appalachian Mountains?’ Before the class has a chance to respond, the teacher works with the student on the pronunciation of ‘Appalachian.’ Then he includes the rest of the class in this practice as well, expecting that they will have the same problem with this long word. After insuring that the students’ pronunciation is correct, the teacher allows the class to answer the question.

Later another student asks, ‘What is the ocean in the West Coast?’ The teacher again interrupts before the class has a chance to reply, saying, ‘What is the ocean *in* the West Coast? ... or *on* the West Coast?’ The student hesitates, then says, ‘On the West Coast.’

‘Correct,’ says the teacher. ‘Now, repeat your question.’

‘What is the ocean on the West Coast?’

The class replies in chorus, ‘The ocean on the West Coast is the Pacific.’

After the students have asked about 10 questions, the teacher begins asking questions and making statements again. This time, however, the questions and statements are about the students in the classroom, and contain one of the prepositions ‘on,’ ‘at,’ ‘to,’ ‘in,’ or ‘between,’ such as, ‘Antonella, is your book on your desk?’ ‘Antonio, who is sitting between Luisa and Teresa?’ ‘Emanuela, point to the clock.’ The students then make up their own questions and statements and direct them to other students.

The teacher next instructs the students to turn to an exercise in the lesson which asks them to fill in the blanks. They read a sentence out loud and supply the missing word as they are reading, for example:

The Atlantic Ocean is _____ the East Coast.

The Rio Grande is _____ Mexico and the United States.

Edoardo is looking _____ the map.

Finally, the teacher asks the students to take out their notebooks, and he gives them a dictation. The passage he dictates is one paragraph long and is about the geography of the United States.

During the remaining two classes of the week, the class will:

- 1 Review the features of United States geography.
- 2 Following the teacher's directions, label blank maps with these geographical features. After this, the students will give directions to the teacher, who will complete a map on the board.
- 3 Practice the pronunciation of 'river,' paying particular attention to the /ɪ/ in the first syllable (and contrasting it with /i:/) and to the pronunciation of /r/.
- 4 Write a paragraph about the major geographical features of the United States.
- 5 Discuss the proverb 'Time is money.' Students will talk about this in order to understand the fact that Americans value punctuality. They will compare this attitude with their own view of time.

Thinking about the Experience

Let us make some observations about our experience. These will be in the column on the left. The principles of the Direct Method that can be inferred from our observations will be listed in the column on the right.

Observations	Principles
<p>1 The students read aloud a passage about the geography of the United States of America.</p>	<p>Reading in the target language should be taught from the beginning of language instruction; however, the reading skill will be developed through practice with speaking. Language is primarily speech. Culture consists of more than the fine arts (e.g. in this lesson we observed the students studying geography and cultural attitudes).</p>
<p>2 The teacher points to a part of the map after each sentence is read.</p>	<p>Objects (e.g. realia or pictures) present in the immediate classroom environment should be used to help students understand the meaning.</p>

3 The teacher uses the target language to ask the students if they have a question. The students use the target language to ask their questions.	The native language should not be used in the classroom.
4 The teacher answers the students' questions by drawing on the whiteboard or giving examples.	The teacher should demonstrate, not explain or translate. It is desirable that students make a direct association between the target language form and meaning.
5 The teacher asks questions about the map in the target language, to which the students reply in a complete sentence in the target language.	Students should learn to think in the target language as soon as possible. Vocabulary is acquired more naturally if students use it in full sentences, rather than memorizing word lists.
6 Students ask questions about the map.	The purpose of language learning is communication (therefore students need to learn how to ask questions as well as answer them).
7 The teacher works with the students on the pronunciation of 'Appalachian.'	Pronunciation should be worked on right from the beginning of language instruction.
8 The teacher corrects a grammar error by asking the students to make a choice.	Self-correction facilitates language learning.
9 The teacher asks questions about the students; students ask each other questions.	Lessons should contain some conversational activity—some opportunity for students to use language in real contexts. Students should be encouraged to speak as much as possible.
10 The students fill in blanks with prepositions practiced in the lesson.	Grammar should be taught inductively . There may never be an explicit grammar rule given.
11 The teacher dictates a paragraph about United States geography.	Writing is an important skill, to be developed from the beginning of language instruction.

12 All of the lessons of the week involve United States geography.	The syllabus is based on situations or topics, not usually on linguistic structures.
13 A proverb is used to discuss how Americans view punctuality.	Learning another language also involves learning how speakers of that language live.

Reviewing the Principles

Now let us consider the principles of the Direct Method as they are arranged in answer to the 10 questions posed earlier:

1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Direct Method?

Teachers who use the Direct Method intend that students learn how to communicate in the target language. In order to do this successfully, students should learn to think in the target language.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

Although the teacher directs the class activities, the student role is less passive than in the Grammar-Translation Method. The teacher and the students are more like partners in the teaching–learning process.

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

Teachers who use the Direct Method believe students need to associate meaning with the target language directly. In order to do this, when the teacher introduces a new target language word or phrase, he demonstrates its meaning through the use of realia, pictures, or pantomime; he never translates it into the students' native language. Students speak in the target language a great deal and communicate as if they were in real situations. In fact, the syllabus used in the Direct Method is based upon situations (for example, one unit would consist of language that people would use at a bank, another of the language that they use when going shopping) or topics (such as geography, money, or the weather). Grammar is taught inductively; that is, the students are presented with examples and they figure out the rule or generalization from the examples. An explicit grammar rule may never be given. Students practice vocabulary by using new words in complete sentences.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?

The initiation of the interaction goes both ways, from teacher to students and from student to teacher, although the latter is often teacher-directed. Students converse with one another as well.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

There are no principles of the method which relate to this area.

6 How is language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Language is primarily spoken, not written. Therefore, students study common, everyday speech in the target language. They also study culture consisting of the history of the people who speak the target language, the geography of the country or countries where the language is spoken, and information about the daily lives of the speakers of the language.

7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

Vocabulary is emphasized over grammar. Although work on all four skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) occurs from the start, oral communication is seen as basic. Thus the reading and writing exercises are based upon what the students practice orally first. Pronunciation also receives attention right from the beginning of a course.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

The students' native language should not be used in the classroom.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

We did not actually see any formal evaluation in the class we observed; however, in the Direct Method, students are asked to use the language, not to demonstrate their knowledge about the language. They are asked to do so, using both oral and written skills. For example, the students might be interviewed orally by the teacher or might be asked to write a paragraph about something they have studied.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

The teacher, employing various techniques, tries to get students to self-correct whenever possible.

Reviewing the Techniques

Are there answers to the 10 questions with which you agreed? Then the following techniques may also be useful. Of course, even if you did not agree with all the answers, there may be some techniques of the Direct Method you can adapt to your own approach to teaching. The following expanded review of techniques provides you with some details, which will help you do this.

- **Reading Aloud**

Students take turns reading sections of a passage, play, or dialogue out loud. At the end of each student's turn, the teacher uses gestures, pictures, realia, examples, or other means to make the meaning of the section clear.

- **Question and Answer Exercise**

This exercise is conducted only in the target language. Students are asked questions and answer in full sentences so that they practice new words and grammatical structures. They have the opportunity to ask questions as well as answer them.

- **Getting Students to Self-correct**

The teacher of this class has the students self-correct by asking them to make a choice between what they said and an alternative answer he supplied. There are, however, other ways of getting students to self-correct. For example, a teacher might simply repeat what a student has just said, using a questioning voice to signal to the student that something was wrong with it. Another possibility is for the teacher to repeat what the student said, stopping just before the error. The student then knows that the next word was wrong.

- **Conversation Practice**

The teacher asks students a number of questions in the target language, which they have to understand to be able to answer correctly. In the class we observed, the teacher asked individual students questions about themselves. The questions contained a particular grammar structure. Later, the students were able to ask each other their own questions using the same grammatical structure.

- **Fill-in-the-blanks Exercise**

This technique has already been discussed in the Grammar-Translation Method, but differs in its application in the Direct Method. All the items are in the target language; furthermore, no explicit grammar rule would be applied. The students would have induced the grammar rule they need to fill in the blanks from examples and practice with earlier parts of the lesson.

- **Dictation**

The teacher reads the passage three times. The first time the teacher reads it at a normal speed, while the students just listen. The second time he reads the passage phrase by phrase, pausing long enough to allow students to write down what they have heard. The last time the teacher again reads at a normal speed, and students check their work.

- **Map Drawing**

The class included one example of a technique used to give students listening comprehension practice. The students were given a map with the geographical features unnamed. Then the teacher gave the students directions such as the following, 'Find the mountain range in the West. Write the words "Rocky Mountains" across the mountain range.' He gave instructions for all the geographical features of the United States so that students would have a completely labeled map if they followed his instructions correctly. The students then instructed the teacher to do the same thing with a map he had drawn on the board. Each student could have a turn giving the teacher instructions for finding and labeling one geographical feature.

- **Paragraph Writing**

The teacher in this class asked the students to write a paragraph in their own words on the major geographical features of the United States. They could have done this from memory, or they could have used the reading passage in the lesson as a model.

Conclusion

Now that you have considered the principles and the techniques of the Direct Method, see what you can find of use for your own teaching situation.

Do you agree that the goal of target language instruction should be to teach students how to communicate in the target language? Does it make sense to you that the students' native language should not be used to give meaning to the target language? Do you agree that the culture that is taught should be about people's daily lives in addition to the fine arts? Should students be encouraged to self-correct? Are there any other principles of the Direct Method which you believe in? Which ones?

Is dictation a worthwhile activity? Have you used question-and-answer exercises and conversation practice as described here before? If not, should you? Is paragraph writing a useful thing to ask students to do? Should grammar be presented inductively? Are there any other techniques of the Direct Method which you would consider adopting? Which ones?

Activities

A Check your understanding of the Direct Method.

- 1 In the previous chapter on the Grammar-Translation Method, we learned that grammar was treated deductively. In the Direct Method, grammar is treated inductively. Can you explain the difference between deductive and inductive treatments of grammar?
- 2 What are some of the characteristics of the Direct Method that make it so distinct from the Grammar-Translation Method?
- 3 It has been said that it may be advantageous to a teacher using the Direct Method not to know his students' native language. Do you agree? Why?

B Apply what you have understood about the Direct Method.

- 1 Choose a particular situation (such as at the bank, at the railroad station, or at the doctor's office) or a particular topic (such as articles of clothing, holidays, or the weather) and write a short passage or a dialogue on the theme you have chosen. Now think about how you will convey its meaning to students without using their native language.
- 2 Select a grammar point from the passage. Plan how you will get students to practice the grammar point. What examples can you provide them with so that they can induce the rule themselves?
- 3 Practice writing and giving a dictation as it is described in this chapter.

References/Additional Resources

Berlitz, M. 1887. *Méthode Berlitz*. New York: Berlitz and Company.

de Saucé, E. 1929. *The Cleveland Plan for the Teaching of Modern Languages with Special Reference to French* (Revised edn.). Philadelphia: Winston, 1959.

Diller, K. 1978. *The Language Teaching Controversy*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.

Gatenby, E. 1958. *A Direct Method English Course* (3rd edn.). London: Longman.

Gouin, F. 1880. *The Art of Teaching and Studying Languages* (H. Swan and V. Betts trs.). London: Philip.

Krause, C. 1916. *The Direct Method in Modern Languages*. New York: Charles Scribner.