THE DIRECT METHOD: ITS POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS IN IOWA SCHOOLS¹

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NOTHING so befogs and limits the usefulness of discussion as a failure to establish at the outset a common basis of terms. That is, unless the parties to the discussion mean the same thing by the terms they employ, the result is often needless disagreement. No one who deals with educational problems in general or foreign language questions hopes to receive unqualified approval from his audience. However, to avoid the unnecessary differences just mentioned, let us, for argument's sake, agree on what we mean by "Direct Method." This is all the more necessary because the term connotes so many different things to different people. To some it means "panacea;" to others, "anathema." Let us say that the Direct Method is that means of teaching languages with the fourfold objective of speaking, understanding, reading and writing, by the immediate or direct use of the foreign tongue.

To bring the matter still more clearly before us let us pass in review some of the salient features of this method. Such features are: phonetics; exclusion of the native tongue from the class room; emphasis on various forms of oral practice; much practical application of grammatical principles; original, rather than set composition; little or no translation into English; free use of objects and actions as illustrative material; imparting knowledge about foreign countries and peoples. Before considering the application of these features to our own work let us look a little into the aims of such a program. This is useful because the two questions of aims and methods cannot be separated. Discussion of the latter is futile without due consideration of the former. And with these two must be considered a third factor which may be called "conditions." As we have already seen, the Direct Method aims at imparting an all round ability. An advocate of it has said that the chief end of foreign language study is to be able to express our most intimate and important feelings and ideas in that tongue: hence the emphasis on acquiring a speaking ability. This

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statement shows that theory and practice do not always agree, and is open to attack when we recall the fact that we most willingly and effectively curse, make love and pray, which feelings are surely of the most intimate sort, in our native tongue. Be this as it may, the aims of the Direct Method are wide and valuable. Directly, or as by-products, it accomplishes, under ideal conditions, all that any other method will, and some things that others will not. In what follows there will be little criticism of this method as such. The attempt made will be to study in how far is the method available for our Iowa schools, not with theoretically ideal conditions, but with conditions as they actually are.

Failure to take into consideration the factor called "conditions" is common among extreme advocates of the Direct Method and constitutes a serious weakness in their position. This method is of foreign origin, introduced into this country by foreigners and spread by them and by American converts. What were and are the conditions that surround foreign language study abroad? Near neighbors who speak foreign tongues make foreign language study and attention to speaking ability of vast importances. In spite of hymns of hate, atrocities, reprisals, economic boycott. and the like, the chief nations engaged in the Great War did nothing so foolish as to neglect the study of the language of their enemies. The value of this sort of study in general and cultural training is also recognized. This attitude explains the long course, four to nine or ten years, and the early age at which the study is begun, nine or ten years. Lastly, of course, comes the teacher. In France, for example, English is taught, not by English or Americans whose chief qualification is the fact that they speak English, nor by Frenchmen who have studied English a year or two, plus perhaps a summer session. The French teacher of English is a Frenchman who has had long and excellent preparatory training in his subject and in his profession, and residence in England to enable him to speak English well. He is fully qualified to teach by the best and most intricate methods. Keeping in mind these conditions let us now contrast with them our own, to find if a method which is adapted to one is adapted to the other.

Not surrounded by foreign nations, a speaking knowledge of foreign languages is not needed by many Americans, but it is

pitiful folly to talk about America as a world power, and declare in the same breath that one language is good enough for us. To be sure, this feeling was engendered by the hostile attitude toward all things German growing out of the war. We all know that in some sections of our country German had too big a place in the schools and that some teachers of German were disloyal. German is now paying the penalty and the innocent are suffering with the guilty. Nor is it right to allow immigrants to remain for years in this country without ever learning English. On the other hand, it is stupid to go to the other extreme and cast out German utterly. It was well that the A. E. F. contained many men who knew German.

Discredited by educational theorists and committees on revision of programs, condemned by "practical" men who expect in two years results that call for five years, disliked by students because foreign language study even by the most amusing methods requires some time and mental effort, we all know that the average high school course in French is limited to two years. As no foreign language may be begun below high school, the age of the pupils is advanced several years, especially when elected by juniors and seniors. Now what about the teacher! We all know what happened when German was dropped. Teachers of German were expected to become at once teachers of French or Spanish. Others were less fortunate. Though they had never taught a foreign language, if they had been "exposed" to French that settled it. The lucky ones had a chance to get into a summer session first. Such teachers could hardly have a speaking knowledge of French. They are not to be criticized. They and their classes are to be pitied. We have with us also the foreign born teacher who never expected to teach but on reaching this country found teaching his native tongue the easiest thing he could drift into. Such teachers often rely on sort of natural method, laying great stress on so called conversation. Their work is not direct method and needs no further notice.

Grant for the moment that the picture drawn of our conditions is fairly correct. Can a method growing out of such different conditions be suited to ours? The categorical answer "No" can be defended. As well attempt to put the contents of a quart measure into a pint pot. The question may fairly be asked here,

—if so much is lacking in the teacher, why should not our higher institutions be expected to remedy this? They are giving their best efforts to this problem, but a supply of teachers for French and Spanish cannot be created at once. Prospective teachers must be reasonably sure that the demand will continue. They must start their work earlier than the junior year. When we begin to get from the high schools students interested in foreign language who have had at least two years French or Spanish, the quality of teaching will improve. The improvement of teachers' courses, the establishment of courses in phonetics and provision for laboratory facilities for training in pronunciation, and especially the development of French Houses to replace the now costly trip abroad will all contribute to improved teaching.

There are, however, certain features of the direct method that good teachers adopt and should adopt in increasing numbers. Let us examine some of them.

The greatest contribution that the direct method has made to our work is in connection with the teaching of pronunciation. It is now entirely possible to impart to a fair proportion of a class a reasonably accurate pronunciation. This proportion will vary with the size of the class, the ability and efforts of the pupils and the time the teacher is willing to give to this part of the work. There is no longer any excuse for trying to teach pronunciation by purely imitative means that leave the pupil with no sure guide when the teacher is not present. Of course, the question may properly be asked: if a speaking knowledge is not so essential, why stress the matter of pronunciation. The answer is that whatever be the aim, a language is more readily learned if the sound as well as the looks of it make an impression. This is especially true in the case of French words, where appearance gives so little clue as to the sound.

The question raised about pronunciation leads us easily to ask what may be our aims in our high school classes? As these are so closely connected with methods it is fitting to attempt an answer before going further.

We must cut our garments to our cloth. With conditions such as they are, it is idle to expect to do what could be done if conditions were altered. As the cry is now for the practical, let us begin with something of that nature as an aim. An ability acquired in

school that can be retained after leaving school is more practical than one that cannot. Few who study French in high school will ever be called upon to speak it. Therefore emphasis on the spoken tongue is not so practical as most people suppose it to be. Even if this could be acquired in two years by sacrificing all else, as soon as the pupil leaves school he will lose it for lack of opportunity to keep it up. On the other hand, ability to read can be retained as long as one wishes to do so. This aim is also practical because it can be acquired in two years. That pupils do not is their fault, not that of the subject. But it is only fair to treat French as a living language and to train pupils to speak a little, at least to give them a foundation on which future speaking ability may be acquired. And while this is going on they can also be taught to understand simple spoken French. As a foundation to this there must be a grounding in the essentials of grammar, and along with it should go the imparting of information relative to foreign countries and people. As a result of this instruction pupils will achieve the second great objective, reading being the first, namely the mental training imparted by linguistic studies. For a pupil to discover that mere general intelligence and listening to the teacher will not enable him to get through his work in French, but that he must make some real efforts of his own, is a valuable lesson.

What else now, has the direct method to offer us to help to realize these aims? Oral practice of all sorts to make the pupils depend on the ear and tongue as well as the eye, unless overdone, will aid and not hinder the acquisition of a reading ability. The practical, useful application of grammar, not the mere learning of rules that the pupils recite but do not understand, is also a feature of the direct method that we do well to adopt. Teaching by use of objects and actions, especially at the start, is another helpful device that aids and interests the class. To the direct method we are also indebted for improved verb drills. These are all rather simple matters that most teachers can readily apply to their teaching.

From the title of this paper it is evident that there are some features of the direct method that may not be so useful for our purposes. In closing we may consider these. The exclusion of English from the class room is not desirable for our conditions. Many of our teachers have not had the opportunity to acquire the

command of French to do this readily; to develop and carry on lessons without the use of English requires more time than we can give in a two year course. Much valuable time may be wasted by trying to explain by action, definition or circumlocution when using the English word or words would at once convey the idea. The use of grammatical terms in a foreign language is of doubtful utility at best, and sheer loss of time in short courses. Enough of the simplest class room business can be carried on in French to aid the students' ear without dispensing entirely with English. To acquire even a little of a foreign tongue is difficult enough at best: why deprive ourselves of one of the most handy tools, our native tongue? Time does not allow for answering the objections that may be raised to this statement, but they may be answered.

About the next item, translation, a bitter controversy prevails. The favorite phrase of the direct method extremists is: "translation reduced to a minimum." Some would discard it entirely. "Minimum" is a vague term. It is certain that in the past, and even now in some cases too much stress is put on translation. It is the easiest exercise for the teacher and the most dull for bright pupils. But it has its place. The one practical test to which a pupil's knowledge of French is likely to be put is to translate something. Free reproduction will not take the place of it. It is a valuable exercise in English. In spite of the view of some teachers that we are not trying to teach English, it is safe to assert that it is the duty of the teacher of any subject to do his part in improving the pupils' English. It has been and remains a sure, rapid and simple test to discover if the pupil really knows what he is reading. The various substitutes for translation are often beyond the skill of the teacher of limited preparation and experience.

From the foregoing follows what we all know: that with growing experience we all gradually work out our own methods, being governed, perhaps, unconsciously, by the limitations imposed by the varying conditions of our work. Any teacher will do better with method adapted to her abilities than one in theory better, but to which she is unsuited by training or temperament. With conditions as they are, few if any of us should venture on an out and out direct method program: none of us can afford to decline to use some of its features.

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