

# Direct Method

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## Framing the Issue

The direct method (DM) was proposed as a reaction to the grammar translation method (GTM) in terms of its approach to grammar teaching, vocabulary learning, teachers' and students' attitudes, and an emphasis on linguistic skill. The Reform Movement (Fotos, 2005) provided the impetus needed to deliver a blow to GTM. Language teachers questioned whether first language (L1) acquisition is distinctively different from second language (L2) acquisition. They criticized the deductive approach to grammar teaching, the emphasis on translation and the inauthentic language materials used in GTM, where the primary skills to be improved are reading and writing. In the direct method the main emphasis is on listening and oral communication skills. The approach to grammar teaching is deductive in GTM and inductive in DM. In the former, the role of the teacher is to translate words and texts for students, and students need to be accurate in translating into another language. In the latter, the roles of student and teacher are reversed: the teacher becomes proactive in asking questions, engaging students in speaking activities and encouraging self-correction. Students have to convey meaning through the use of the target language. The emphasis is on how to use the language to communicate.

The direct method was developed by Maximilian Berlitz (1887) in the late 19th century, and its principles were based on the assumption that L2 learning is similar to L1 learning. It was named "direct" because meaning should be connected to the target language without translation into the native language. It was originally known as the "oral" or "natural" method (Krause, 1916), and was seen as an alternative to the grammar translation method. In the direct method, language instructors have to provide learners with opportunities to convey meaning through the use of the new language. L2 learners are expected to use the target language without translating and without using their native language to communicate. In the early 20th century, DM was introduced in France and Germany before becoming popular in the United States. Known as the "Berlitz method," it was taught in private schools and colleges. Berlitz opened a language school in Rhode Island

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and published a textbook using his methodology. According to Howatt (1984, p. 203) there were more than 200 Berlitz schools in the United States and Europe by 1914.

The direct method was object of criticism in the 1920s, as the emphasis in second/foreign language teaching became the development of reading skills. The direct method's emphasis on developing speaking skills was considered impractical for two main reasons: the scarcity of time available for foreign language teaching and the limited skills of language teachers. A number of constraints made it hard for schools to integrate and use the methodology: budget, classroom size, and time. The popularity of the direct method declined toward the beginning of the 1930s, leading to the development of new methodologies in language teaching such as the audiolingual method and the situational language teaching method.

## **Making the Case**

The direct method aims at providing language learners with a practical and useful knowledge of the target language so that they can use it for communication purposes. It requires high student motivation. All lessons are in the target language and there is a focus on everyday vocabulary. There is a systematic approach to developing comprehension and oral expression in the language classroom. Grammar is learnt inductively and the meanings of words and forms are taught by means of objects or natural context. The emphasis is on establishing an association between a word and its meaning. Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 10) have briefly summarized the features of this method: (1) an oral methodology is used, with attention to pronunciation; (2) students listen to the target language before reading or writing it; (3) vocabulary is presented in communicative contexts and is not taught in isolated lists of terms; (4) grammar is presented inductively and practiced in communicative contexts; (5) translation is avoided; and (6) the L1 is used as little as possible. A fuller list of the method's basic principles would include:

1. Instruction is conducted exclusively in the target language. Teachers should demonstrate, not explain or translate. Teachers and learners are more like partners. Learners are given opportunities to interact with other learners. The method is thus less teacher-centered. The target language is always used in the classroom. Learners are continuously exposed to the target language and teachers do not use the native language as a mean of instruction.
2. Basic vocabulary is introduced first. Students are encouraged to make associations between meaning and the target language. Vocabulary is taught through known words, concrete objects, pictures, and mime. The emphasis is on spoken language, and vocabulary is emphasized over grammar.
3. Instructors should approach the teaching of grammar inductively. This is on the assumption that L2 learners should learn grammar by interpreting

contextual and situational cues rather than receiving long explanations. Rules of grammar are not given, and students need to figure them out.

4. Although the development of the four language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) is desirable, the emphasis is on developing speaking skills to communicate. Communication is paramount, and the main purpose of language learning is to enable students to communicate in the target language.
5. Self-correction is encouraged. A number of techniques (see “Pedagogical Implications” below) are employed to get students to self-correct whenever possible.
6. The curriculum is based on real-life situations (at the bar, at the shop, at the police station) or topics (e.g., sports, hobbies, weather).

The main advantage of this method is that it makes the learning of languages interesting and lively. It facilitates learners’ participation and understanding of the target language and fosters their development of fluency of speech and expression. Learning is contextualized, and learners learn the language, not *about* the language. It follows the natural order of first language acquisition: listening, speaking, reading, writing.

One disadvantage is that the method does not pay enough attention to reading and writing skills. Because of the inductive approach to grammar teaching, learners run the risk of internalizing incorrect rules. An additional drawback is that, since the aim is to teach exclusively in the target language, teachers have to be fluent in that language, preferably native speakers. When the method was first introduced this was an unrealistic goal, as the competence of most language teachers in those days was normally far from native.

## Pedagogical Implications

Based on the principles outlined in the previous section, a variety of techniques (Larsen-Freeman, 2000) were developed to help learners practice the new language in the language classroom. The typical techniques used by teachers in the direct method are:

- *Read texts aloud.* Teachers use linguistic examples and non-linguistic means (pictures, gestures) to clarify and exemplify the meaning of the passage read.
- *Question and answer.* Learners have the opportunity to use the language by asking and answering questions and by practicing new words and the grammatical properties of the target language.
- *Fill in the blanks.* Items are presented in the target language and learners are asked to fill the gaps with the correct grammatical items learned during the lesson.
- *Conversation practice.* Learners are asked to take part in conversation with the teacher and with each other to develop oral skills: questions are asked and

answers are given using the target language and specific grammatical features are practiced.

- *Dictation*. The teacher reads a passage several times (at normal speed and then more slowly) and learners are asked to write down what they hear.
- *Self-correction*. Learners self-correct as they speak. The teacher can repeat a sentence containing an error by using a questioning tone of voice to signal the error, or the teacher can signal to the student that something is wrong by repeating what they have said, stopping just before the error.
- *Paragraph writing*. Students are asked to write a short passage in their own words.

Richards and Rodgers (2001, p. 8) offer the following principles as guidelines for teaching oral language skills.

- Never translate: demonstrate.
- Never explain: act.
- Never make a speech: ask questions.
- Never imitate mistakes: correct.
- Never speak with single words: use sentences.
- Never speak too much: make students speak a lot.
- Never use the book: use your lesson plan.
- Never jump around: follow your plan.
- Never go too fast: keep to the pace of the student.
- Never speak too slowly: speak normally.
- Never speak too quickly: speak naturally.
- Never speak too loudly: speak naturally.
- Never be impatient: take it easy.

The direct method encourages the use of the target language in second language instruction to teach students how to communicate. Teachers are encouraged to teach by using familiar situations from people's everyday lives.

**SEE ALSO:** Deductive Versus Inductive Teaching; Grammar-Translation Method

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### **Suggested Readings**

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