

## LOOKING BACK—AND FORWARD

BY MICHAEL WEST

The Institute for Research in English teaching is to be congratulated on its tenth birthday. Those who are working on the problem of teaching English to foreigners have good cause to be grateful to it and to its Director, Mr. Palmer,—not merely for its original contributions to the subject, but also for the valuable work which has been performed by the *Bulletin* in disseminating new ideas and in keeping scattered workers in touch.

These last ten years have been eventful in Modern Language Teaching, and we are just now reaching a critical stage. They have been years of vigorous discussion and experiment which will eventually bear fruit; but this vigour has not been without its disadvantages; for it has raised extravagant expectations, and the layman is beginning to demand “get-rich-quick” results—even to grumble if they are not supplied. There is in consequence a dangerous temptation at the present moment to offer ‘fairy gold’ as a *placebo*. This is a short-sighted policy. I believe that the harvest of the labour is in the ground, that perhaps the next five years will show the realization of much of what has been aimed at, that we shall soon be able to make definite claims less extravagant perhaps than some which are being made now—but more justifiable.

The work of the past ten years may be summarized in one phrase—“making the Direct Method practicable.” Ten years ago people were still expecting a millennium as a result of the Direct Method: the principle was so obviously right, and skilled exponents working with small experimental classes had been able to produce such striking results. But the millennium did not come, and the reason for its non-appearance was that the

Direct Method, as then expounded, demanded a degree of skill and imagination on the part of the teacher which is not often to be found. In order that any method may seriously affect the general standard of teaching, it must be something which the *average* teacher can do. The Direct Method, in its original form, was emphatically not this; it was something practicable only for the brilliant.

Moreover there were serious flaws in it.

The Direct Methodites were fierce in their denunciations of the vocabulary used by the Grammarians; they pointed to obscure words introduced only because they illustrated eccentricities of grammar; but they did not “cast the beam out of their own eye”—long lists of relatively useless objective words introduced merely because their referents happened to be in the class-room or on the picture sheet. If a word is dragged in because of grammar, there is a considerable probability that it is a Form word; and Form words are useful to all pupils; but the strings of words introduced into the Direct Method lessons tended to be largely Content words—and those, of very doubtful utility. Worse than this, all sorts of unjustifiable assumptions were made in selecting the Direct Method vocabulary—that the pupil would go to (France), that he would live in a (French) family, that *he* (!) would go and buy food in the market or that *she* would go and buy clothes (including men’s clothes). Less than fifty per cent of the English children who are learning French ever cross the Channel. Perhaps the few who do may be claimed as justifying the predictions: but these methods of prediction were applied also to the teaching of English to Indian children, and Indian boys were set to study lessons on the Tower of London and the English breakfast table!

Nor was the vocabulary controlled.—A great catch-phrase in the Direct Method syllabus used to be “No textbook is to be used in the first term,”—or even “year.” What was the precise merit in *not* using a textbook, no one has ever been able to discover. If there is no textbook, what vocabulary is the teacher teaching? How does he keep track of it? How does he know

whether a word has been used before? How does he decide whether a word is worth teaching? How is the vocabulary standardized between school and school?

And finally—Reading. According to the old Direct Method, reading was to come as a by-product of learning to speak. If the children did not succeed in learning to speak, it just didn't come! In most Eastern countries a large proportion of the children leave school before the end of the course, and, under this system they get nothing from their labours; they do not learn to speak; they do not even learn to read. As for those who remain to the end of the course, they learn to read—but with a grotesquely small vocabulary, a vocabulary no bigger than their speaking vocabulary. Even in the mother-tongue the reading-vocabulary is very much larger than the speaking-vocabulary; in a foreign language it should be vastly larger. The fact is that this theory of reading as a by-product was unconsciously based upon the experiences of English children learning French (or French children learning English); for they get the form and grammar of the language and the common non-cognate words in their speech course, and after that naturally the reading follows because most of the rarer French words are cognate with English. Obviously this theory is quite inapplicable to Japanese or Bengali students, or to those of any non-cognate language.

In these past ten years we have learnt to teach reading as such—as reading, and largely *by* reading. We have learnt to emphasise reading in the early stages of the course so that the short-stayers may at least get something for their pains. We have learnt the need for controlling speech vocabulary and are attempting to select the words scientifically, or at least intelligently. We have learnt that the average teacher *must* have a textbook for his speech work, and we have tried to construct textbooks which he can be trusted to use with reasonable efficiency. But there is one thing which we have not done; we have not yet made a textbook in speech which the class can use independently (or as independently as possible) of the teacher.

I have an infallible recipe for proving that *any* method of oral teaching is better than that at present in use in *any* set of schools:—"Take a class of ten children and teach them by the experimental method, and compare the results with those obtained in any ordinary school class.—You will find that the results of the experimental class are three or four times better."—Why?—Because there are ten children instead of thirty or forty. A child learns to speak by speaking, not by listening to other people speaking (more or less incorrectly in the case of the fellow pupils). Leaving aside the time occupied by the teacher in asking questions, a child in a class of thirty gets two minutes' speaking practice per hour; a child in a class of ten gets six minutes, or three times as much.—Anyhow neither amount is in the least degree adequate for learning a language. Send the child to Paris and he will get three or four hours a day of speaking practice—instead of minutes! He will achieve in weeks what in school takes years. We can teach children in school to *read* a foreign language because they all read simultaneously and in a forty minute period they are reading at least half the time. We cannot teach them to speak, because they speak one by one. There are ways of decreasing the pathetic inefficiency of the "one-by-one" oral lesson,—mass repetitions, learning things by heart,—and of course written work.

But the root problem remains; we have got to find a method whereby children may *learn* to speak as they *learn* to read, may learn by working all together, simultaneously, instead of being taught one by one.

How teachers do love teaching!—prancing and gesticulating before the class, and scribbling on the blackboard, making little boys stand up and sit down: it's all such fun!—and so wasteful of time. We have got to transform the Direct Method punchinello into a helpful and taciturn Supervisor of Studies; we have got to transfer activity from the teacher to the class. The teacher must be, not clown, but Ringmaster.

How is that going to be done? The secret lies with self-tuition courses. The material which is suitable for the individual

student will be all the more effective where there is a teacher to ensure correctness and to give help. Alas, the self-tuition courses which I have investigated thus far have not proved very helpful,—fantastic in price but mediocre in method and technique. Yet it is in that direction that salvation lies, nor can I believe such salvation to be very far off.

We shall blunder through to it—somehow, soon.