

JANUARY 1925 DIRECT METHOD

... For example, the importance of the order of the words in a Latin sentence is brought home to learners from the very first, and becomes quite natural to them, by means of question and answer. Upon order style depends, and if you are taught to realize the meaning of a Latin sentence as it comes, you will then later realise the meaning of a Latin paragraph as the phrases come, without having to hunt over on the next page for the verb, because in classical languages every phrase tells its tale as it goes and its meaning is absolutely clear. The only thing that has to wait, is the relation of those phrases to the others which follow.

To return to the direct method, a simple reading book is begun early, and then the words are explained so far as possible by Latin words already known, where they cannot be explained by the thing, the act or a picture. It is found in practice that a large vocabulary of words can be built up without using English, and that by and by it becomes possible to explain new things with the old words. Very soon all the explaining is done in Latin, and we are always careful even at the beginning if we use English words to apologise for them by adding 'anglice' or 'ut aiunt', to keep up the illusion of a Latin world. In the first year in this manner, taking one lesson a day, the whole accidence is gone through, together with the simple sentence. In the second, the compound sentence. In the third year an untouched Latin author is begun—although in the reading book there have been a number of simple poems untouched, such as those of Martial or Catullus which are within the faculty of a beginner. In this third year is begun free composition and the recital of stories. In the fourth year the more formal translation from English into Latin is adopted, and that fourth year nearly ends the Latin course for those who do not take it as a speciality; they do perhaps two or three Latin lessons a week in their succeeding years, but they do not learn very much new. However, a boy who has passed through that course will have done portions of some of the chief writers, Cicero, perhaps Caesar, Virgil, Tacitus, Horace, some poems of Martial and Catullus.

In the sixth form the staple work is reading aloud. Everything is based on that, and the greatest pains are taken to have it done well, with due observance of quantity and expression. If that be done from the beginning, it is very easy to tell when the reader understands and when he does not. A wrong division of words will show you that he does not, as well as doubtful intonation. I should rather have said when he thinks he understands, because he sometimes does think so wrongly. The master should know by experience, and he must make it his business to know, where in any given author or sentence a boy is likely to make a mistake, and he must guard against that by asking a question. Then having questioned as regards the meaning of a wrongly read passage, if the passage be then rightly read, pass on. There is no need to delay over it.

Details, of course, are missed in this way. It is quite possible that details may be missed even under the current system of teaching. I have known it happen! But I only mention that to show, that we are quite aware of the weak points, and we guard against them.

Then, of course, there are the occasional examinations, which consist largely of translation into English and similar tests. In beginning a new author it is wise to have a good deal translated into English, until you are confident that his style is familiar, and that a reasonable degree of accuracy will be got.

All new work is done in school, and that is a matter which has important results. For one thing, any good point, neat point, is enjoyed very much more. When you have a boy working by himself in his study with a dictionary, perhaps tired, he sees a point; it may interest him ; but when he sees it for the first time in class in the morning when he is fresh, with his master there instead of a dictionary, and with comrades who also see it, the enjoyment is intensified very much. It is the difference

between reading a good joke in Punch in bed and laughing at the ceiling, or reading it with your friends and having a good guffaw together.

Another result is, that nobody is afraid of cribs. No crib can tell a boy what questions I am going to ask him as we read the text. If he chooses to use a translation to revise, it really does him no harm, so long as the translation is good.

Then we ensure the new work being done, and not being done by a company but being done by each; because although you may not perhaps have thought of it, it is a fact that by the direct method every boy from the very beginning is trained to attention, and that it is possible to tell when the boy is attending and when he is not. They always do attend if they are properly handled.

The home-work then in this case is not new work, which may be well done or may be cribbed, but it is revision of one sort or another, or exercises upon the work done. After this general description let me take three important branches of work to show you how they are dealt with.

The first is grammar. You have already heard how that is dealt with, taught after use. I mention it particularly, because you will frequently hear it said, that under the direct method grammar is not taught. It must be taught and must be learnt in the end under every method. The only question is, when, in what degree, and in what place.

The second is composition. Composition in the proper sense means expressing yourself in the language concerned: not only the narrow sense of translation into Latin and Greek from English; that is always going on from the very beginning in the classroom, and what is heard by the ear is then repeated by the tongue, written down by the hand, and seen with the eye, so that there are four senses to reinforce the impression. I think it is common-sense to assume, that the impression will be stronger than if only two had been used. I may say even the fifth sense can be quite well brought in on occasion if you like, and you can express the meaning of the word for "sweet" by producing and handing round some sweets.

Occasional exercises of translation from English into Latin of catchy sentences, to illustrate constructions, are quite good, so long as they are occasional. No harm is done, and good is done, by this, if they are brought in when the boys know why, and realise that the translating of these sentences helps them. That is quite a different thing from making it the staple of the work.

In the third year the master tells a story, as I have already said, and the boys repeat it, first of all reproducing it almost exactly by imitation, and then embroidering it. If he gives them a sketch, they enlarge upon it. The same may be done with the aid of pictures. Lastly, easy pieces of English, so "cooked" that they will go simply into Latin without much change, are used in the fourth year.

When the boys get into the sixth form, a great gulf has to be bridged. Of course, to jump from that sort of work to the translation of pieces of unaltered English literature, is a very big jump, too big to take at once. The way that we have found useful to bridge this gulf is, at the beginning to set, as a daily exercise, a summary to be written in Latin of the text read that day in the school room. Supposing 250 lines have been read, a summary of that is to be written in Latin prose extending for perhaps a sheet of twenty or thirty lines. The boys are directed to use the words and constructions of the author as far as possible, and to train themselves by degrees to do it from memory. By that means new words are added to the vocabulary, in addition to the learning of new idiom. Afterwards English pieces are given, a few at first and more later, to translate in the usual way.

But I think the most striking effect in this department of the direct method, is seen in the writing of verses. Verses are done by ear without preliminary exercises. When the first piece of verse is read, the boys are taught the principles of scansion and quantity; but after that nothing more is necessary excepting careful reading aloud, and by the careful reading aloud it is possible to do quite good verses at the first try. I have kept a large number of these exercises, and I find that the very first exercise shows very few, almost no faults, except such as the wrong position of the accent, or a word of wrong length at the end of a line, faults that have only to be pointed out to be avoided. The first exercise also shows who has a bad ear and who has a good ear. There are very few who are unable to write verses, I should think not one in fifty, although there are not many of them first-rate of course. By this means of imitation we find it quite easy to write all sorts of verses. In reading Horace we always imitate if not all the lyrics, at least most kinds.

Lastly there is translation into English. Here you must remember there are two sorts of translation, one which is a test, and the other which is an art. The test is used by masters for their own sakes, to discover whether their pupils have understood what they have been reading. When that has been satisfactorily shown, there is no further need to use it at all.

As an art it requires some special consideration. To know how to render a Latin text into English of good style and if possible of a style something resembling the original, wants consideration, but a very few lessons are enough to give the cue to those who are taught to do Latin well by itself and English well by itself. I should also like to add that if boys understand a thing, they never find any difficulty in expressing the meaning. Sometimes the rendering may be a little uncouth, but it is always clear, if they understand it. Muddled expressions and bad style are due to not understanding, and to that pernicious habit of construing—continually shifting the attention from Latin to English—which enables one to talk the most arrant nonsense without realizing it. The most remarkable fact about the direct method is that there never is any nonsense; you will hardly deny, I think, that it is a common thing in ordinary schools.

Unseen translation does not play a special part in the direct method, because all the work is practically dealing with unseens. I have never found it necessary to do more than a few exercises, in the last term before boys go in for their scholarship, to teach them to do so much in the hour, and also to see whether perhaps there may be some gap in their knowledge that wants to be filled up. In the earlier stages, the translation of unseens is sometimes, but very rarely, used. It is not a useful thing at all, unless the unseen is very much easier than the text that they are in the habit of reading. To do an unseen, and to make a mess of it, is one of the most discouraging things the boy can do.

The method then with the sixth form is very much like that which you would see in any good French lesson, a lesson on Moliere, we will say, conducted by a Frenchman in French. Discussion is just as possible in Latin. If the boys are well encouraged to do their part, it is more like a conversation of intelligent friends over a dinner-table than a set task.

In summing up the facts, I would first of all call attention to the saving of time; since every lesson is entirely a lesson in Latin, it is obvious that the practice in that language will be very considerably more than if you have the greater part of it expressed in English. If the master chooses, he can bring in anything he wants to practise and stick to it for a week. If at the end of that time it is not pretty well known, I should be very much surprised.

But the most important thing of all is the effect on the temper of the learners. It is not true to say, of course, that whenever boys are happy they are being well taught, but I think it is true to say that if they are not happy, they are not being well taught. I think that a test of good teaching is the temper of the taught. That is why I never can believe that our mathematical friends have got the right way of

teaching mathematics (though I do not know what it is) because you hardly ever find a boy who does not hate it. From the very beginning it is a fact, that boys taught under the direct method are happy, and like to do it. First impressions are most important things in teaching, as Quintilian knew, and first impressions are the chief impressions which the boy will carry away with him into life. Instead of thinking of his school work, as he often does, as a series of horrible gloomy tasks, his memories will be of pleasant hours which he thoroughly enjoyed. If you remember that Latin is, for some boys, the highest intellectual exercise he has ever had or ever will have, you will see that these pleasant memories would be transferred to intellectual work. Hence the indirect results are very important.

In conclusion may I just mention the four statements which always meet us when we are discussing the direct method.

The first is that it is morally good for a boy to have to do what he dislikes. I do not know whether it is morally bad for him to have to do what he likes, but that seems to be implied too. Anyhow if the masters who make this statement apply the same rules to themselves, they must either be very gloomy folk or else very immoral.

Secondly comes our old friend mental gymnastic. It is very important that there should be mental gymnastic, but you will get mental gymnastic whenever your mind is exercised, and the difference between meaningless exercises of the mind and the direct method, is the difference between the treadmill, which is excellent for bodily gymnastic, and a morris dance, or a game of football. The game of football is harder work than the treadmill, but it is enjoyed. So the direct method is really harder work than the old method; the mind is more exercised than by learning a meaningless table, but is not so much wearied.

The third is — and this was put very forcibly at the Headmasters' Conference—that the current system of teaching classics is fool-proof. These are not my words, but the words of a defender. He said, "Any fool can teach it". Well, I am quite sure that no fool can teach on the direct method, but it does not need anything more than intelligence and willingness to take trouble. It is willingness to take trouble which has been our difficulty all along. Those who are invited, will not take the trouble to investigate the facts, which they can quite well do. No doubt the reason in their minds is, that if they did investigate them and found them to be true, they would then be bound to take some very troublesome steps in order to improve the existing system. This is not my own assumption only but fortunately I have it admitted in print by Dr. Lyttleton in the School Guardian, where there was a little interchange of politeness some seven or eight years ago.

The last thing that is always said, which I have already answered, is that a few men have a gift for this kind of thing, but the majority of men have not. Of course, that is quite untrue. The truth is, as I have said, that anyone with intelligence, who will take trouble, is quite able to do the thing in a first-rate way...