

The Efficacy of the Direct Method for Young Learners: Integrating Phonetic Approaches and Visual Realia to Enhance Early Vocabulary and Speaking Skills

¹Haribabu Thammineni

Professor Lendi Institute of Engineering and Technology, Email:

haritheuniversal@gmail.com

Abstract

The Direct Method (DM) was the focus of this study, which examined its effectiveness in early language acquisition by young learners when the phonetic approach and visual realia were integrated to boost vocabulary mastery and speaking abilities. The critical period hypothesis, which suggests that early childhood is a neurologically “sweet” time for natural language learning, provides the basis for the research, which looks at the effects of an immersion, translation-free environment on beginner learners. The main method examined is that of the exclusive use of the target language, which establishes a direct mental connection between the concepts and the linguistic forms, without going through the “translation loop” that makes it difficult to become fluent. Results of various educational environments, such as bilingual schools in Andhra Pradesh and public elementary schools in India, suggest that the Direct Method is effective for enhancing oral competence. Systematic use of phonetic awareness, whereby they are taught the alphabet rhythms and vowel sounds, allows students to learn the correct pronunciation without reading. Moreover, the presence of visual realia, which are concrete materials, flash cards and multi-sensory materials, enables the learner to “catch” meaning in the context of the situation; hence, better retention of new words. Bearing in mind these achievements, the study also identifies the following conditions for the success of the method: the teacher's high level of professionalism, creativity and the small class size. The research results show that the Direct Method consumes a lot of instructional energy, but it has the advantage of stimulating students' motivation and confidence in language communication, which is more advantageous as a “good start” in the beginning of language learning. The following recommendations are made: Use a blended model to help span the gap between oral fluency and academic literacy when moving to higher educational levels.

Keywords: Multi-sensory materials, language acquisition, stimulating students, language communication.

1. Introduction

The Direct Method (also known as the Natural Method) is a change in language teaching practices that is designed to mimic the natural acquisition of a first language in the classroom. It was developed in the late nineteenth century as a reaction to what was seen as a lack of emphasis on functional communication in

the Grammar-Translation Method. The core idea of the Direct Method is that translation is forbidden; the meaning is direct as between the target language and the learners' concepts or experiences in their minds. This immersion is especially important for young learners because of what is called the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which posits that young children are neurologically ready to learn a language at a time when they are developmentally sensitive to language input. Combining the phonetic methods with visual realia can help make good use of this biological window to achieve significant improvement in early vocabulary and speaking ability. In countries like Indonesia and Pakistan where English is not a native language and is taught as an additional language, the effectiveness of the Direct Method to acquire the twenty-first century communicative competence is increasingly questioned as a means to achieve the goals of second language learning. This essay will analyze the theory and practice of the Direct Method for young children and how support and scaffolding with both sounds and visual props aids their learning of oral language. Although it has high expectations of the teachers' competence and resources, current research indicates that this method has a great effect on the student's motivation and speaking confidence as compared to the traditional and translation-oriented teaching methods. The Direct Method emphasizes the "here and now" of the classroom and engages with real-world objects, making the target language more of a social tool than a theoretical subject. Finally, the analysis compares the application of these immersive concepts in elementary school and examines whether they have a lasting effect on building basic skills in literacy and communicative fluency.

2. The effectiveness of the Direct Method in young learners' learning

The theoretical foundations for the Direct Method are based on the assumption that there should be a direct relationship between thought and expression of the second language without mediation by the student's first language. This model works on the premise that meaning is "caught," not explicitly "taught" based on rules and that the student is treated like a child learning his or her mother tongue. The phonetic approach is one of the most important aspects of this natural acquisition process, and is also the first language of the language before the language is written. The researchers in a study of 1st grade students at Andhra Pradesh School noticed that the early part of the lessons was spent very much on the rhythm and sounds of the language. Teachers designed an alphabet curriculum with a specific rhythm and emphasized the pronunciation of long vowel and short vowel sounds to provide students with an essential phonological awareness that would help them recognize and produce words correctly in preparation for learning to read and write. Young learners require this oral-to-written progression as it is in line with their developmental stage of pre-operational thought, where language and vocabulary learning is best suited.

The use of visual realia and multimedia tools is at the heart of the effectiveness of the Direct Method in bridging the gap between unknown English words and their meanings. Because translations are not allowed, the teacher must use physical objects, gestures, facial expressions and mime to communicate concepts. In fact, for young learners, using concrete objects (such as real fruit, animals, or furniture in the classroom) works much better than abstract definitions. Results from the “Sri chaitanya School” in Visakhapatnam showed that pupils with no previous English learning experience could attain a remarkable improvement when the words were taught with visual aids such as flash cards and realia. During a food lesson, in these sessions students had the opportunity to interact with the fruits by touching and tasting them and their learning process was thus placed from a passive to an active one and from the cognitive to the sensorial plane. This multi-sensory experience not only helps students to remember but it also encourages student attention and interest, both of which are essential in early childhood learning.

For Direct Method classrooms, pedagogical techniques are carefully planned to promote as much Student Talk Time (STT) as possible, and to promote spontaneous interaction. The focus of instruction is on question and answer, students are expected to answer in sentences. It helps students “think in the language” and gets them into the habit of using English in everyday situations, such as asking permission to use the restroom or to get water. In one classroom action research cycle, it was discovered that the longer the classroom sessions were and the more that game-based learning was used, the more students were willing to speak. The games are easy to set up (they typically only require a whiteboard and marker or some simple objects in the classroom) and can be competitive yet fun, encouraging students to utilize the target language to accomplish a goal or earn a point. In addition, the Direct Method allows for immediate correction because the student is easily guided to correct himself/herself when he/she makes a lexical or pronunciation mistake, by the teacher's questioning tone or providing an alternative pronunciation of the same word. Through this process, students' linguistic independence and autonomy are developed, and they are not taught wrong habits.

Results of the Direct Method consistently show that it is effective in improving oral proficiency scores among beginner learners. In one significant study, the total speaking score of the public elementary students in the first grade in Indonesia increased from 12 for the pre test to 140 for the post test within 22 sessions. These students had a poor command of the grammatical structure of the language, and a lack of using I, My, to be, etc., etc., but their vocabulary and pronunciation skills grew to be excellent. This reflects the importance of fluency and oral behaviour in language learning as early as possible in the Direct Method. The method makes the concept of “right and wrong” in grammar less prominent and more important is to be understood, which makes the production of language less anxious and

fearful of making mistakes. Therefore, students learning by Direct Method are able to communicate well in English, because they have been immersed in a language-rich environment with a single medium of communication, namely English.

The Direct Method, however, is not without its major problems, such as teacher competence and classroom facilities. The merit of the method is that no translation is allowed, therefore the teacher should have native fluency, creativity and also have to have “physical strength” to manage spontaneous interactions and make meaningful demonstrations without using the mother tongue. This approach may result in the method being described as “unproductive” or “stifling” for many teachers working in the public sector who are not trained to maintain an immersive environment. Further, the Direct Method is deemed to be most appropriate to a small class setting, where the oral drills can be given as one-on-one attention to children. The Direct Method may not be easy to maintain the proper intensity in a crowded public school classroom because students may be confused or bored if they don't understand the instructions. Moreover, the approach is also frequently criticized for the relative lack of attention to systematic reading and writing instruction; thus, in modern times, many teachers use a combination of Direct Method principles and systematic reading and writing instruction as students progress.

However, the emotional effect that the Direct Method has on young learners is still a strong reason to employ it. A pre-intervention interview frequently shows that, because of the unfamiliar phonology of English, young students have a perception of it as a “difficult” or “overwhelming” subject. Their perceptions, however, change after feeling the Direct Method's focus on songs, videos and interactive play, to a positive and motivated attitude. Early development of positive attitudes towards language learning is a crucial factor determining success in language learning. The Direct Method also creates a “language community” in the classroom, as seen in Indonesia, “Kampung Inggris,” where students feel proud and confident because they can understand and communicate with their teacher in English.

To summarize, the Direct Method is an excellent, engaging approach to vocabulary development and speaking that goes hand in hand with phonetic awareness and the use of visual realia, for young learners' language development. It focuses on the oral aspect of language, thus avoiding the “translation loop” and allows children to learn English in a way that closely resembles the natural language acquisition process. The empirical evidence from the elementary schools shows that the method can yield meaningful gains in fluency and student engagement even in non-bilingual public schools, although it is very teacher-dependent and relies on the individual skill and fluency of the teacher. The results indicate that investing in teacher training and visual equipment is key to the effective use of the Direct Method for policy makers and educators. While not a

panacea for advanced academic literacy by itself, this book is a “good start” for developing oral language, and it is an essential resource for today's language teachers. As these principles are developed and adjusted, educators will help young learners better meet the communicative needs of a globalized world.

3. The Rhythmic Approach to Language and Phonological Foundations

A phonetic method incorporated into the Direct Method has not only been added as a supplementary tool but has also been an indispensable method for pre-operational young learners. In Andhra Pradesh Bilingual School, the first graders' DM implementation focused on the sounds of English as the main entrance to English. Rather than present the alphabet as a series of letters to be memorized, teachers taught the alphabet in a particular rhythmic manner; the sounds of vowels and consonants were introduced melodically in the sequence of repetition. The approach permits that young children are specifically attuned to the musical and rhythmic qualities of language, and that they are able to master their pronunciation without being able to analyze complex syntax. Practicing phonemic awareness—particularly the difference between long and short vowels—gives children “auditory hooks” to help them identify words in spontaneous speech. The oral to written progression is an integral part of the Direct Method, as students should not become dependent on the “translation loop” that can happen if a written word is translated to the student's first language right after seeing it written.

4. Concrete learning through Visual Realia and Multi-Sensory engagement

The Direct Method is enforced by prohibiting translation, which means that the “direct link” between a word and its meaning must be made through extensive use of visual realia. Realia (real-world objects) are much more effective for young learners whose cognitive frameworks are still concrete and have a strong dependence upon actual experiences. Vocabulary for food and animals were introduced during teaching sessions in “Sri Chaitanya School” using flashcards, toys and real items that the students could see, touch and taste. Through this multi-sensory involvement, language learning becomes a model of first grade students' active participation, thereby, it brings language learning from a passive, sitting learning to an active learning. The brain then does not connect the physical sensation to the native language label anymore but makes a direct link between the sensation and the target language phonemes when a student touches a piece of fruit while he hears the English word apple. Experience indicates that this approach not only enhances recall of the words at present time, but also creates the enjoyable atmosphere that stimulates students to employ the words beyond classroom settings.

5. The development of the speech habit

An important aspect of the effectiveness of Direct Method with young learners is the use of Student Talk Time (STT) in a Q&A format. In the DM classroom,

unlike the traditional classroom with long explanations in the native language, the teacher models sentence patterns in the target language and students are expected to immediately imitate the teacher's pattern. This is frequently accomplished through the process of forming habits – students get used to dealing with the English language for basic classroom functions and social interaction. In classroom action research cycles, for example, teachers noted that they could consistently reject requests to respond in the native language and encourage students to respond in English with gestures and mime and that over time students would begin to request permission or express needs spontaneously in English. The Natural Method is designed to take students from learning about the language to living in the language. In addition, students are encouraged to talk to earn a point or complete a challenge in a non-threatening setting through the use of creative games (based on drawings on the whiteboard or competitive group activities). These activities take use of the competitive nature of young children, and make the process of learning vocabulary a fun, social process.

6. Oral Proficiency Growth: evidence from practice

The findings from the quantitative results of various studies in Indonesia give good evidence of the effect of Direct Method on the ability to communicate orally. A quasi-experimental study was conducted with 12 first-grade students with a total speaking score of 140 at the end of 22 sessions, compared to an initial score of 12. In pre-test, students' performance was quite low, they were not able to produce any simple phrases, even in grammar, fluency, and consistency. After the DM intervention, however, notable improvements were found in vocabulary and pronunciation, with students being able to mention object names and colour names, with high accuracy. Although it was difficult for students to get the grammar right (e.g. using the word “I” instead of “My”, their ability to express their ideas and stay consistent in answering the questions was improved. The results indicate that although the grammatical perfection may not result from the learning of DM, it is an extraordinarily effective method for developing self-confidence and the building blocks of language learning for success in the long run.

7. Pedagogical burden and the role of the teacher

Although effective, the Direct Method is considered to be physically and mentally exhausting for the teacher. As the teacher cannot use his native language to explain the hard words, he must be very imaginative and creative in explaining the meaning without using words. This involves the use of mimicry, drawing and a range of intonation patterns to indicate errors and encourage self-correction. When there has been a lexical or pronunciation error, the DM teacher does not give an explicit rule, but may show the student the error in a “questioning voice” and explain that they need to think of something different. This is an essential process in young learners' lives that helps them listen with greater discipline to

the patterns of language. The effectiveness of this method, however, depends on the foreign language proficiency of the teacher: if the teacher uses incorrect pronunciation or structure, the young learners (at a stage of high “neural responsiveness”) will probably repeat and use the same mistakes. Therefore, Direct Method teachers need to be bilingual and also trained in pedagogical techniques for immersion.

8. Learners' emotions and motivations

The use of real-world interaction and meaningful communication in the Direct Method has a positive effect on the affective filter of young learners. Many students in the pre-intervention interview report that English is “hard” or “confusing” because of the traditional, rule-based teaching. Language production anxiety is reduced by focusing on songs, videos and interactive play with the Direct Method. A large majority of students expressed a positive attitude about the English lessons and their self-confidence in speaking English in the post-tests interviews. Such an increase in intrinsic motivation is a crucial element in early childhood education, as it creates a positive approach to the subject that can help the learner to achieve the more challenging learning levels in the future. Students' pride in the thought that they are able to comprehend a teacher who speaks “only in English” is a psychological motivation to persist.

9. Conclusion

The Direct Method is a very successful approach to the acquisition of language by young learners, tapping into their innate ability to acquire language in the manner phonetic awareness and visual realia facilitate. The approach requires the teacher to be very fluent and to use creativity, but the advantages in terms of vocabulary, pronunciation and communicative confidence make the effort worth it. The Direct Method is a method which omits the native language and attempts to create a direct cognitive connection between thought and the target language, thereby giving students a “good start” in oral language development for the 21st-century needs in global communication.

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