Chapter 2

ELT: The First Phase

(Grammar-Translation Method and Direct Method)

The methods used by the teacher in the classroom hold a very important place in the teaching-learning process. Several approaches have been tried out in the teaching of English in our country. In order to fully comprehend and appreciate the present trends in the teaching-learning of English in India, it is imperative that past trends be surveyed. The changes in the methods of teaching are the consequence of dramatic advances in linguistic science, research in the techniques of teaching, progress made in mass-media and the great interest elders show in making their children learn foreign languages. Foreign language teaching is a very complex phenomenon involving different methodologies and different materials at different levels. A method which is evolved through research may be impeccable at the theoretical level but it may bristle with weaknesses when put into practice in the classroom. While trying to remedy the weaknesses in one method academicians might suggest another method. Thus, in reaction to one method, another method evolves.
Of the several methods of teaching English advocated in India in the past, the Grammar-Translation Method was, and still remains, to a great extent, one of the most popular. In spite of a number of later improvements in the method of teaching a foreign language, in practice, teachers still harbour a partiality for this method. The inherent weakness of this method is that it was originally inherited from the teaching of Latin, a language not ordinarily taught for active use in any language community. Because of this weakness, the learning-teaching of Latin through the Grammar-Translation Method ignored spoken communication and the attendant social variation of language, and concentrated on the written language of classical literature.

Yet the advocates of the Grammar-Translation Method argue that translation can best interpret English words and phrases and sentences. They assume that a child comprehends a foreign language best when it is taught through the mother tongue and that the structure of English, which is quite difficult, can be best understood by the child when contrasted with that of the mother tongue. So, they maintain that the Grammar-Translation Method can be used effectively by the students also for their written exercises in English.
W. R. Mackey, in his *Language Teaching Analysis*, discusses the different ways in which this method can be tried out in the classroom. The aim is to enable students to translate passages of increasing difficulty initially from the second language into the first and subsequently from the first language into the second. At first the translation is limited to individual words. Then these are integrated to form sentences. Later the grammar of the mother tongue and that of English are studied comparatively on the assumption that the latter can be learnt better through comparison than by itself (32).

The Grammar-Translation Method is based on the following principles:

a) translation interprets the foreign phraseology best;

b) in the process of interpretation, the phraseology is assimilated; and,

c) the structure of the foreign language is best learnt when compared and contrasted with that of the mother tongue.

Apart from the use of the mother tongue this method facilitates language learning by grading the learning material according to a grammatical plan.
The Grammar-Translation Method was popular for a number of years for some non-epistemological reasons also. The teachers found the method easy to follow since they themselves were taught English through it. This method was comparatively easy to follow in large classes since it laid emphasis on written rather than on oral work. Since it is natural for the student to go back to his mother tongue to find an equivalent expression for an unfamiliar foreign word translation would occur anyway, no matter what technique the teacher adopts. So the student naturally feels at ease when the teacher himself uses translation in the classroom. The teacher, when confronting a large classroom, finds it easy to communicate with the students through liberal use of their mother tongue. As Mackey says in Language Teaching Analysis,

Translation Method can best be used to teach to classes of any size by teachers with imperfect knowledge of the language and special teaching techniques. It is easy and cheap to teach and administer and the number of class periods may be as few or as many as administratively feasible. (31) No wonder, the Grammar-Translation Method was popular for long.
However, when the students failed to attain the expected standard and proficiency in the language, experts began to reconsider the efficacy of the method and concluded that translation as a method was unacceptable in English language teaching. Gatenby, who opposed any form of mother tongue usage in the English class in his "Translation in the Classroom," asserted that

all failure in language learning is a result of the unnatural process of acquiring speech. Every normal child learns to speak the language of his environment and to understand what is said in it. (65)

The emphasis that the Translation Method lays on the written form rather than on the spoken form goes against nature because any human being learns to speak before going on to learn writing. Moreover, since the minimum unit of reading in this method is either a letter or a word, the child, in spite of attaining some mastery over vocabulary, finds connected speech difficult. So, he breaks up sentences into units of words and does not absorb the meaning of the sentence as a whole.

Another major drawback in this method is that it does not provide for sufficient practice. Language
is a set of habits, learnt through constant practice and usage and the Translation Method neglects this very vital part. There is no direct contact between experience and expression. Though the child may learn the meaning of the word, it fails to learn the correct usage of the word in sentences.

Since the mother tongue plays a major role in the learning of English, the pupil is inclined to think in his mother tongue first and then translate the thoughts into English. As a result, he never develops the habit of thinking in English and subsequently never assimilates correct English usage.

Further, it should be conceded that it is not always possible to find complete and correct translation for all nuances of thought. The thoughts, emotions, feelings, culture and habits of the English people are vastly different from those of Indians and hence a literal and apt translation is not always possible. English has certain untranslatable items in vocabulary, expression, idiom, phrase, structure and grammar. Certain English words and expressions do not have any equivalent in Tamil.

For example, the English terms 'scales' and 'key' in music, 'drawing room' and 'pudding' have no literal
equivalents in Tamil. The literal translation into Tamil of the English idiomatic expression "it rained cats and dogs" would produce a ridiculously absurd jumble of words. The structural difference between English and the mother tongue also makes exact translation impossible. For instance, the teacher cannot explain the use of the article in English to the Tamil student. Moreover, the students tend to apply the grammar and word-order of the mother tongue to English. Sentences like 'I am going to go there' from 'Naan ange pogappogiren' are a result of mechanical translation.

In the classroom, the teacher plays a dominant role while the students sit passively listening to him. As a consequence the hazard of their learning the meaning of the word not in context but out of context is great and hence they may fail to attain mastery over correct usage.

In spite of all this, translation in the classroom cannot be completely done away with. It is valuable as an exercise. During the early stages, translation from English to the mother tongue is preferred and at later stages, when the student has acquired some familiarity with the use of the English language, he
The art of translation not only increases the ability of the student to use the foreign language but also helps him to appreciate the richness of its literature. W. M. Ryburn in *The Teaching of English* asserts that translation is an art which will be increasingly in demand and that, in laying a foundation on which this art of translation can be developed, we are doing something which is of great value (18).

There has been a good deal of controversy over using translation as a tool to test the proficiency of a student in English. Whereas Ryburn advocates translation exercises as the most valuable for the purpose, Gatenby, in *Translation*, opposing the use of translation as a test, says:

There is much to be said against using or asking for translation as a test of comprehension. After a year's work, a pupil can usually give evidence by simple paraphrase or by mentioning opposites or possibly by demonstration, that he understands what he is reading, and resorting to the native speech under these
circumstances merely interrupt,"; the assimilative process... . what should be avoided at all costs, if the pupils are to make progress in hearing and speaking, is translation as an exercise, oral or written. As a skill, the proper time for practising it is when an equal command of both languages has been obtained. (66)

Traditional linguistic analysis recognises different types of sentences—declarative, interrogative, exclamatory and imperative—and divides vocabulary into different parts of speech (noun, verb, preposition etc.). In Latin, the fact whether a noun is the subject or the object of a verb is indicated by different endings attached to the word stem. These different endings point to different cases (nominative, accusative, genitive etc.). In English we indicate these relations with the help of prepositions or by the word-order. So, the classification used in the Latin language is of little value in the case of English.

Moreover, too much emphasis on the mastery of the grammar led to learning about the language rather than to learning the use of the language. While the basic patterns of the language were learned in a formal way, together with lists of words, the
Translation Method was supposed to help the students to use the language successfully. But when translation was used as the principal method for teaching the spoken language, it failed because it concentrated on the written and the literary forms and paid little attention to speech.

Before an analysis of Direct Method is taken up it becomes imperative to analyse the reasons for the failure of the Grammar-Translation method. The teachers, even today, not only make a free use of this method in their class but also strongly advocate this method. Teachers of yore staunchly defend this method as not only the easiest to adopt in the classroom but also the most effective one. With a sound basis in grammar it was—it is still—felt that mastery over the language was certain. When the Grammar-Translation Method was first adopted and used in the classroom, the government policy aimed at making the Indian student think like an Englishman and this method provided an ideal short-cut towards this goal. Though the spoken aspect was grossly neglected in this method, the prevalent atmosphere in India and the lingering "English climate" made the Indians fairly proficient in spoken English. After Independence, however, when a professed contempt
for English came to be considered proof of Indian patriotism, there was a perceptible drop in the standard of English language teaching and learning.

The National Government could not take such a fanciful or sentimental attitude and look askance at English. In order to maintain its position in the international arena, India very much needed English. It was felt that oral proficiency in that language should take precedence over competence in writing. It was also felt that emphasis should be less on the teacher, the course or the text, and more on the student himself. In natural foreign language learning—for example, the learning of a foreign language by a child in a foreign country within a length of time—acquisition cannot be simply additive; complex lists of language are learnt in a chunk at a time. Our very knowledge of the fine structure of language constitutes a threat to our ability to maintain perspectives in teaching languages. Locke, far back in the eighteenth century, said, as quoted by Gatenby in "Conditions,"

Languages were not made by rules or art, but by accident and the common use of the people. And he that will speak them well has no other rule but that, nor anything to trust to but to his memory and the habit of
speaking after the fashion learned from those that are allowed to speak by rote.

(44)

As a result of this shift in the government's educational policy, the Grammar-Translation Method gave way to the Direct Method of teaching English. The Direct Method emphasises the aural-oral skills and rejects the use of the students' mother tongue. While learning the mother tongue the child comes in contact with the language directly and the necessity and the compulsion to understand and to be understood make him acquire the language with the least effort. On this principle, the Direct Method advocates the teaching of English through conversation, discussion and reading. P. Gurrey, in *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*, says that the Direct Method follows "one of the main principles of the psychology of language that can be directly translated into classroom procedure" (31).

The Direct Method aims at making the learning of a foreign language akin to the learning of the mother tongue. In this natural way of learning a foreign language, a direct link is established between the word and its meaning without the interruption of the mother tongue.
The Direct Method aims initially at mastery of the active language skills and subsequently at developing the skill to think in English as well as to speak English, that is to cultivate thinking and expressing directly in English. The pupil is expected to react and respond naturally and spontaneously in English.

The Direct Method was the result of the academic view that the foreign word and its meaning should be linked together directly and not through the mother tongue. This method was based on the principle of contextualisation which demanded that the thought expressed in words should be associated with the real experience that would give occasion to the thought. The Direct Method was evolved on the principle that the experience used for associating the word with the idea should not be artificial. The participation of the pupils in the experience should help in strengthening their learning. Learning through direct experience should proceed in parts and lead to the inclusion of the entire experience. The context of a living event should help in the proper assimilation of the language.

H. E. Palmer, in The Scientific Study of Teaching Languages, describes the following as the salient
features of the Direct Method: (1) translation in every shape or form is banished from the classroom including the use of the mother tongue and of the bilingual dictionary; (ii) grammar, when it is taught is taught inductively; (iii) oral teaching precedes any form of reading and writing; (iv) the use of disconnected sentences is replaced by, the use of connected texts; (v) pronunciation is taught systematically on more or less phonetic lines, (vi) the meaning of words and forms are taught by means of objects or by natural contexts; and, (vii) the vocabulary and objective of the language are inculcated to a large extent by questions asked by the teacher and answered by the pupils (53).

Because of its emphasis on aural-oral training of the pupil rather than on written work, and since it recognises the fact that in real-life situation a word becomes meaningful only in company and not in isolation, the Direct Method takes the sentence and not the word as the minimum unit of the language.

Another important feature of the Direct Method is its treatment of grammar. Grammar is not taught for its own sake. It is only a means to an end. Only-functional grammar is used in the classroom and that
too is taught inductively. As Mackey has observed in *Language Teaching Analysis*, grammar is taught by situations and is illustrated through visual presentation (28).

Vocabulary is learnt through speech. As far as possible everyday vocabulary is used. Emphasis is laid on articulation of correct pronunciation and on speech pattern. Though acquisition of words is rather slow, this method ensures sure and steady progress.

In order to make this method more effective, it should be executed in three sequential stages. In the first stage, that is, for the first *one* or two years, the teacher's aim should be to familiarise the pupil with English. Emphasis should be on auditory and vocal skills. The pupil should be able to identify the English sounds. The second stage should carry on further the training and practice given in the first stage, and also train the pupil to comprehend the textbooks. Reading and writing should be introduced gradually at this stage. The third stage introduces English literature into the syllabus. With his prior training the pupil should be able to enjoy English literature.

The Direct Method has certain advantages and merits. Basically this is a natural method using the natur-al
approach to teaching a foreign language. The direct bond between experience and expression makes learning sound and quick. As oral drill is emphasised, the pupils' fluency of speech and correctness of expression improve. The preliminary training in speech helps to make the reading of English easy and pleasant to the pupil. Since there is ample scope for pupils' active participation in the class, the students are kept alert, active and interested. This method is linguistically sound in its use of the sentence as the unit. With all these merits this method has now been given up in favour of another one, namely, the Structural Method.

The effectiveness of the Direct Method was proved by an experiment conducted at Gandhigram Rural Institute, India, in 1989. Fifteen students of the M.A. course in Communicative English were given intensive training for one week in Spanish by Robert Onstein, Professor of Linguistics in California University. In the one week he spent with the students, approximately covering 12 contact hours, he taught them a number of Spanish words and quite a few sentences in Spanish. English was not used in the classroom either by the students or by the teacher. There were 6 sessions of lecture, each
session lasting two hours. A number of visual aids were used. The lesson of the first session is given below as an example.

A. Practice: Natural approach to teaching Spanish to Indian students.

1. Teacher: Li-bro - li-bro - li-bro
   [Teacher holds a book in his hand and says 'li-bro' several times. Students respond only after hearing the sound]
   [Teacher gives the book to one student. Student responds]
   Student: Li-bro.
   T: ¿Come se llama?
   "Student gives his name."
   S: Arunachalam.
   T: ¿Quien tiene el libre?
   S: Arunachalam.
   JjTeacher gives a big book to one student and a small one to another
   T: ¿Quien tiene el libre grande?
   Tj ¿Quien tiene el libre pequeno?
   [Student answers using name of the appropriate person]

2. Va-se
   [Same exercise is repeated with the new word and
a different student.

3. Frasco

[Further dialogue can be developed in the same manner with the teacher giving the question and the answer first and the students giving the answer after him.]

e.g. T: Para que es el frage?
    T: Aqua

4. Cuer-da

T: Para que usames la cuerda?
T: Para star.

5. es-pon-ja

T: Para que usmos la esponja?
T: Para Limpier cosas.

6. Ja-que-ta

T: Para que usmos le jaqueta?
T: Para calentarnes.

7. Ca-mi-sa

T: Para que usamos is camisa?
T: Para vestirnes.

8. Som-bre-re

T: Para que usames el sombrere?
T: Para cubrir la cabeza.

9. Za-pa-tos

T: Para que usames zapatos?
T: Para limpiar los pies.
10. Ce-plllo
   TJ Para que usamos el ceplllo?
   Ts Para lirnpiar ice dletes.

11o Ca-len-da-rio
   T; Para que usamos el calendario?
   - TJ Para saber la fecha

12. Man-go
   T: Para que es el mango?
   T: Para comer.

13- Ma-le-ta
   T: Para que usamos la maleta?
   Ti Para viajar.

14. Toa-llla
   T: Para usamos la toalla?
   T: Para secarnls.

15* Plu~ma
   TJ Para que usamos la pluma?
   T: Para escribir.

16. Fo-co
   T: Para que usamos el foco?
   T: Para la luz.

Initially the teacher held a book in his hand and repeated the word "li-bro" several times. There was a direct link between the word and the referent. Subsequently the teacher made appropriate gestures and the pupils had little difficulty in following the trend of the conversation. Some questions were repeated again and
again till the student completely understood them and were able to answer them. Then slight variations were introduced. The mode of question was the same but the answer required a change in the vocabulary. New words were subtly introduced. The teacher either showed the object or a symbolic representation of the object and introduced the word for it in the question. Through dramatisation and by means of gestures, the appropriate answers in Spanish were first given by the teacher and then learnt by the pupils. The students then were divided into two groups—one group asking the questions and the other providing the answers. At the end of the first session, about 40 words and 20 sentences in Spanish were learnt by the pupils.

It must, however, be borne in mind that in this experiment, there were only 15 students in the class, that they possessed fairly well-developed skills in a foreign language, namely English, and that a number of visual aids were used. In the context of Indian schools all these three factors would be either unavailable or greatly altered and so the Direct Method will not be as effective as it proved to be in the experiment described above. In fact, the history of English language teaching in India records facts that
prove that this method has not been completely successful.

The Direct Method has some inherent disadvantages. The first disadvantage is related to the principle of direct association. Only a part of the vocabulary can be taught in this way. As Onstein's Spanish classes proved, concrete concepts can be taught effectively and interestingly. Onstein used his shoulder-bag like a Pandora's Box and every time he opened it, the students, despite their age, were eager to see what would come out of the bag and then they eagerly learnt the name of the article. But such material association is not possible in the case of abstract ideas. When abstract ideas are taught exclusively through English, synonyms and definitions for the abstract have to be given and so the learning will be from one unknown to another unknown. Naturally the time required to teach and learn these words would be considerable and it might not be possible to teach the expected number of lessons within the specified period allotted in the curriculum plan.

Another important disadvantage of this method is its neglect of grammar. Though grammar is supposed to be taught inductively, no graded materials are prepared by the teachers. The teachers are also not
provided with adequate training in teaching grammar indirectly. These might have been the reasons for the shift from the Direct Method to the Structural Approach.

Since this method laid more emphasis on oral skill than on reading and writing, it was imperative that the class remained small. The most ideal class according to educationists should consist of not more than twenty students. This would facilitate personal attention to individual pupil. But, in the Indian context, it was not possible to have such a small class. In actual practice, the class consisted of about forty students and therefore tended to be noisy and neither the teacher nor the pupils had control over the teaching-learning activities. There was another practical difficulty faced by the schools and the teachers. Since this method necessitated the use of visual aids it proved expensive. Even if these visual aids could be provided, the teacher had to be extraordinarily resourceful in order to use these aids effectively.

Because of some of these disadvantages of the Direct Method, V/est criticised it in Learning to Read a Foreign Language and Essays on Language Teaching.
and suggested an alternative view called the New Method for teaching English in Indian classrooms. West's criticism 3prang mainly from his belief that an Indian child required to develop reading skill rather than speaking skill, since English, as a foreign language, was not as important to a bilingual Indian as his mother tongue was. The other reasons given by West were that rapid improvement was possible in reading even without the constant guidance of a teacher and the 'surrender value' of reading was greater than that of speaking. He explains the phrase 'surrender value' thus:

> By the surrender value of a subject we can mean the proportionate amount of benefit, which will be derived by the pupil from an incomplete course of instruction in the subject. (39)

West believed that it was easier to teach reading than speaking and that reading was not affected by the strength of the class. With all this in mind, he suggested that the New Method could be followed in Indian schools with (i) priority given to reading, (ii) separate provision for readers with controlled vocabulary, and (iii) a judicious use of the mother tongue. Even to this day the series of 'Readers'
An improved version of the Direct Method, incorporating West’s suggestion was tried out by the MELT (Madras English Language Teaching) campaign in the early sixties, with the beginners in the third standard in schools.

This method provided opportunity for intensive immersion in the second language and tried to emphasise effective language use rather than intellectual analysis. Statements and questions were illustrated with actions and students repeated both the language model and the action. However, all the statements were related to the classroom and the teachers did not generally think of students using the language outside the classroom.

So, most of the statements turned out to be artificially constructed sentences and therefore, the grading and the sequencing of the materials were not based on realistic speech.

Because of these inherent drawbacks in the Direct Method and the avoidable errors in its execution, new regions were explored. The ideas of the psychologist B. F. Skinner began to be used to explain what happens when we teach and learn languages. Linguists
like L. Bloomfield and C. C. Fries started to apply
the idea of structural linguistics to language
teaching, and the result of these efforts has been
loosely called the Structural Approach to language
teaching.
MOTES

1 Of the 1700 teachers of English interviewed by this researcher, seventy-five favoured the Grammar-Translation Method, but in actual practice, 210 used it predominantly. See Appendix 1.

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See note at 1 above.

* Of the eighty retired teachers of English interviewed by this researcher, everyone advocated the use of the Grammar-Translation Method in the teaching of English. However, most of these retired teachers were not quite familiar with the other methods/approaches.

This explains why, though out of the 500 teachers of English interviewed by this researcher 140 favoured the Direct Method, only seventy of them practiced it predominantly. See Appendix 1.