The Direct Method

Introduction
As with the Grammar-Translation Method, the Direct Method is not new. Its principles have been applied by language teachers for many years. Most recently, it was revived as a method when the goal of instruction became learning how to use another language to communicate. Since the Grammar-Translation Method was not very effective in preparing students to use the target language communicatively, the Direct Method became popular.

The Direct Method has one very basic rule: No translation is allowed. In fact, the Direct Method receives its name from the fact that meaning is to be conveyed directly in the target language through the use of demonstration and visual aids, with no recourse to the students’ native language.

We will now try to come to an understanding of the Direct Method by observing an English teacher using it in a scuola media (lower-level secondary school) class in Italy. The class has 30 students who attend English class for one hour, three times a week. The class we observe is at the end of its first year of English language instruction in a scuola media.
Experience

The teacher is calling the class to order as we find seats toward the back of the room. He has placed a big map of the USA in the front of the classroom. He asks the students to open their books to a certain page number. The lesson is entitled ‘Looking at a Map.’ As the students are called on one by one, they read a sentence from the reading passage at the beginning of the lesson. The teacher points to the part of the map the sentence describes after each has read a sentence. The passage begins:

We are looking at a map of the United States of America. Canada is the country to the north of the United States, and Mexico is the country to the south of the United States. Between Canada and the United States are the Great Lakes. Between Mexico and the United States is the Rio Grande River. On the East Coast is the Atlantic Ocean, and on the West Coast is the Pacific Ocean. In the east is a mountain range called the Appalachian Mountains. In the west are the Rocky Mountains.

After the students finish reading the passage, they are asked if they have any questions. A student asks what a mountain range is. The teacher turns to the whiteboard and draws a series of inverted cones to illustrate a mountain range. The student nods and says, ‘I understand.’ Another student asks what ‘between’ means. The teacher replies, ‘You are sitting between Maria Pia and Giovanni. Paolo is sitting between Gabriella and Cettina. Now do you understand the meaning of “between”?’ The student answers, ‘Yes, I understand.’

Figure 3.1 The teacher drawing on the board to illustrate the meaning of ‘mountain
range’

After all of the questions have been answered, the teacher asks some of his own.
‘Class, are we looking at a map of Italy?’

The class replies in chorus, ‘No!’

The teacher reminds the class to answer in a full sentence.
‘No, we aren’t looking at a map of Italy,’ they respond.

The teacher asks, ‘Are we looking at a map of the United States?’
‘Yes. We are looking at a map of the United States.’

‘Is Canada the country to the south of the United States?’
‘No. Canada isn’t the country south of the United States.’

‘Are the Great Lakes in the North of the United States?’
‘Yes. The Great Lakes are in the North.’

‘Is the Rio Grande a river or a lake?’
‘The Rio Grande is a river.’

‘It’s a river. Where is it?’

‘It’s between Mexico and the United States.’

‘What color is the Rio Grande on the map?’

‘It’s blue.’

‘Point to a mountain range in the west. What mountains are they?’

‘They are the Rocky Mountains.’

The question and answer session continues for a few more minutes. Finally, the teacher invites the students to ask questions. Hands go up, and the teacher calls on students to pose questions one at a time, to which the class replies. After several questions have been posed, one girl asks, ‘Where are the Appalachian Mountains?’

Before the class has a chance to respond, the teacher works with the student on the pronunciation of ‘Appalachian.’ Then he includes the rest of the class in this practice as well, expecting that they will have the same problem with this long word. After insuring that the students’ pronunciation is correct, the teacher allows the class to answer the question.

Later another student asks, ‘What is the ocean in the West Coast?’ The teacher again interrupts before the class has a chance to reply, saying, ‘What is the ocean in the West Coast? … or on the West Coast?’ The student hesitates, then says, ‘On the
West Coast.’

‘Correct,’ says the teacher. ‘Now, repeat your question.’

‘What is the ocean on the West Coast?’

The class replies in chorus, ‘The ocean on the West Coast is the Pacific.’

After the students have asked about 10 questions, the teacher begins asking questions and making statements again. This time, however, the questions and statements are about the students in the classroom, and contain one of the prepositions ‘on,’ ‘at,’ ‘to,’ ‘in,’ or ‘between,’ such as, ‘Antonella, is your book on your desk?’ ‘Antonio, who is sitting between Luisa and Teresa?’ ‘Emanuela, point to the clock.’ The students then make up their own questions and statements and direct them to other students.

The teacher next instructs the students to turn to an exercise in the lesson which asks them to fill in the blanks. They read a sentence out loud and supply the missing word as they are reading, for example:

The Atlantic Ocean is ____ the East Coast.

The Rio Grande is ____ Mexico and the United States.

Edoardo is looking ____ the map.

Finally, the teacher asks the students to take out their notebooks, and he gives them a dictation. The passage he dictates is one paragraph long and is about the geography of the United States.

During the remaining two classes of the week, the class will:

1 Review the features of United States geography.

2 Following the teacher’s directions, label blank maps with these geographical features. After this, the students will give directions to the teacher, who will complete a map on the board.

3 Practice the pronunciation of ‘river,’ paying particular attention to the /r/ in the first syllable (and contrasting it with and to the pronunciation of /t/).

4 Write a paragraph about the major geographical features of the United States.

5 Discuss the proverb ‘Time is money.’ Students will talk about this in order to understand the fact that Americans value punctuality. They will compare this attitude with their own view of time.