

## 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

