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The Silent Way

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Introduction

Although people did learn languages through the Audio-Lingual Method, and indeed the method is still practiced today, one problem with it was students' inability to readily transfer the habits they had mastered in the classroom to communicative use outside it. Furthermore, the idea that learning a language meant forming a set of habits was seriously challenged in the early 1960s. Linguist Noam Chomsky argued that language acquisition could not possibly take place through habit formation since people create and understand utterances they have never heard before. Chomsky proposed instead that speakers have a knowledge of underlying abstract rules, which allow them to understand and create novel utterances. Thus, Chomsky reasoned, language must not be considered a product of habit formation, but rather of rule formation. Accordingly, language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring. The emphasis on human cognition led to the establishment of the Cognitive Code Approach. Rather than simply being responsive to stimuli in the environment, learners were seen to be much more actively responsible for their own learning, engaged in formulating hypotheses in order to discover the rules of the target language. Errors were inevitable and were signs that learners were actively testing their hypotheses. For a while in the early 1970s, there was great interest in applying this new Cognitive Code Approach to language teaching. Materials were developed with deductive (learners are given the rule and asked to apply it) and inductive (learners discover the rule from the examples and then practice it) grammar exercises. However, no language teaching method ever really developed directly from the approach; instead, a number of 'innovative methods' emerged. In the next few chapters we will take a look at these.

Principles

1 The teacher points to five blocks of color without saying anything. The blocks of color represent the sounds of five English vowels close to the five simple vowels of Portuguese. The teacher should start with something the students already know and build from that to the unknown. Languages share a number of features, sounds being the most basic. 2 The teacher points again to the five blocks of color. When the students say nothing, the teacher points to the first block of color and says /a/. Several students say /e/, /i/, / /, /u/ as the teacher points to the other four blocks. Language learners are intelligent and bring with them the experience of already learning a language. The teacher should give only what help is necessary. 3 The teacher does not model the new sounds, but rather uses gestures to show the students how to modify the Portuguese sounds. Language is not learned by repeating after a model. Students need to develop their own ‘inner criteria’ for correctness—to trust and to be responsible for their own production in the target language. 4 Students take turns tapping out the sounds. Students’ actions can tell the teacher whether or not they have learned. 5 One student says, ‘À esquerda,’ to help another. Students should learn to rely on each other and themselves. 6 The teacher works with gestures, and sometimes instructions in the students’ native language, to help the students to produce the target language sounds as accurately as possible. The teacher works with the students while the students work on the language. 7 The students learn the sounds of new blocks of color by tapping out the names of their classmates. The teacher makes use of what students already know. The more the teacher does for the students what they can do for themselves, the less they will do for themselves. 8 The teacher points to a rod and then to three blocks of color on the sound– color chart. The students respond, ‘rod.’ Learning involves transferring what one knows to new contexts. 9 The teacher points to the words ‘a’ and ‘rod’ on the word chart. Reading is worked on from the beginning but follows from what students have learned to say. 10 The teacher sits

down at the table and is silent. After a minute, a girl points to a rod and says, ‘a rod.’ Silence is a tool. It helps to foster autonomy, or the exercise of initiative. It also removes the teacher from the center of attention so he can listen to and work with students. The teacher speaks, but only when necessary. Otherwise, the teacher gets out of the way so that it is the students who receive the practice in using the language

Reviewing the Principles

As you can see, the Silent Way has a great many principles. Perhaps we can come to a fuller understanding of them if we consider the answers to our 10 questions. 1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Silent Way? Students should be able to use the language for self-expression—to express their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. In order to do this, they need to develop independence from the teacher, to develop their own inner criteria for correctness. Students become independent by relying on themselves. The teacher, therefore, should give them only what they absolutely need to promote their learning. 2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students? The teacher is a technician or engineer. ‘Only the learner can do the learning,’ but the teacher, relying on what his students already know, can give what help is necessary, focus the students’ perceptions, ‘force their awareness,’ and ‘provide exercises to insure their facility’ with the language. The teacher should respect the autonomy of the learners in their attempts at relating and interacting with the new challenges. The role of the students is to make use of what they know, to free themselves of any obstacles that would interfere with giving their utmost attention to the learning task, and to actively engage in exploring the language. No one can learn for us, Gattegno would say; to learn is our personal responsibility. As Gattegno says, ‘The teacher works with the student; the student works on the language.’ 3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process? Students begin their study of the language through its basic building blocks, its sounds. These are introduced

through a language-specific sound–color chart. Relying on what sounds students already know from their knowledge of their native language, teachers lead their students to associate the sounds of the target language with particular colors. Later, these same colors are used to help students learn the spellings that correspond to the sounds (through the color-coded Fidel Charts) and how to read and pronounce words properly (through the color-coded word charts). The teacher sets up situations that focus student attention on the structures of the language. The situations provide a vehicle for students to perceive meaning. The situations sometimes call for the use of rods and sometimes do not; they typically involve only one structure at a time. With minimal spoken cues, the students are guided to produce the structure. The teacher works with them, striving for pronunciation that would be intelligible to a native speaker of the target language. The teacher uses the students' errors as evidence of where the language is unclear to students and, hence, where to work. The students receive a great deal of practice with a given target language structure without repetition for its own sake. They gain autonomy in the language by exploring it and making choices. The teacher asks the students to describe their reactions to the lesson or what they have learned. This provides valuable information for the teacher and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. Some further learning takes place while they sleep. 4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction? For much of the student–teacher interaction, the teacher is silent. He is still very active, however—setting up situations to ‘force awareness,’ listening attentively to students’ speech, and silently working with them on their production through the use of nonverbal gestures and the tools he has available. When the teacher does speak, it is to give clues, not to model the language. Student–student verbal interaction is desirable (students can learn from one another) and is therefore encouraged. The teacher’s silence is one way to do this.

Reviewing the Techniques

Many of the ideas in this chapter may be new to you. Some of these ideas may be immediately attractive to you, whereas others may not. Give yourself time to think about all of them before you decide their value to you. In the review that follows, the materials surveyed in this chapter (the charts and rods) have been included. While you may not have access to the actual materials discussed here, the materials may give you other ideas of what you can use.

- **Sound–Color Chart** The chart contains blocks of color, each one representing a sound in the target language. The teacher, and later the students, points to blocks of color on the chart to form syllables, words, and even sentences.

Although we did not see it in this lesson, sometimes the teacher will tap a particular block of color very hard when forming a word. In this way the teacher can introduce the stress pattern for the word. The chart allows students to produce sound combinations in the target language without doing so through repetition. The chart draws the students' attention and allows them to concentrate on the language, not on the teacher. When a particular sound contrast is new for students, and they are unable to perceive which sound of the two they are producing, the sound–color chart can be used to give them feedback on which sound they are making. Finally, since the sound–color chart presents all of the sounds of the target language at once, students know what they have learned and what they yet need to learn. This relates to the issue of learner autonomy.

- **Teacher's Silence** The teacher gives just as much help as is necessary and then is silent. Or the teacher sets up an unambiguous situation, puts a language structure into circulation (for example, 'Take a ____ rod'), and then is silent. Even in error correction, the teacher will only supply a verbal answer as a last resort.
- **Peer Correction** Students are encouraged to help another student when he or she is experiencing difficulty. It is important that any help be offered in a cooperative manner, not a competitive one. The teacher monitors the aid so that it is helpful, not interfering.