

The Silent Way

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The Silent Way is usually considered to be one of the alternative or humanistic approaches to language teaching. It is the name given by Caleb Gattegno to the language teaching application of his general pedagogical approach. When Gattegno's approach is applied to other subjects such as reading or mathematics, it goes by other names.

Caleb Gattegno based his whole approach on several general observations which underlie the Silent Way.

Firstly, it is not because teachers teach that students learn. Therefore, if teachers want to know what they should be doing in the classroom, they need to study learning and the learners, and there is no better place to undertake such a study than on oneself as a learner.

When Gattegno studied himself as a learner, he realised that only awareness can be educated in humans. His approach is therefore based on producing awarenesses rather than providing knowledge.

When he studied other learners, he saw them to be strong, independent and gifted people who bring to their learning their intelligence, a will, a need to know and a lifetime of success in mastering challenges more formidable than any found in a classroom. He saw this to be true whatever their age and even if they were perceived to be educationally subnormal or psychologically 'damaged'. (For an account of Gattegno working with such learners, see Holt, 1964.) As a teacher, he saw that his way of being in the class and the activities he proposed could either promote this state of being or undermine it. Many of the techniques used in Silent Way classes grew out of this understanding, including the style of correction, and the silence of the teacher - though it should be said that a teacher can be silent without being mute. Simply, the teacher never models and doesn't give answers that students can find for themselves.

Secondly, language is often described as a tool for communication. While it may sometimes function this way, Gattegno observed that this is much less common than we might imagine, since it requires of speakers that they be sensitive to their audience and able to express their ideas adequately, and of listeners that they be willing to surrender to the message before responding. Working on this is largely outside the scope of a language classroom. On the other hand, language is almost always a vehicle for expression of thoughts and feelings, perceptions and opinions, and these can be worked on very effectively by students with their teacher.

Thirdly, developing criteria is important to Gattegno's approach. To know is to have developed criteria for what is right or wrong, what is acceptable or unacceptable, adequate or inadequate. Developing criteria involves exploring the boundaries between the two. This in turn means that making mistakes is an essential part of learning. When teachers understand this because they have observed themselves living it in their own lives, they will

properly view mistakes by students as 'gifts to the class', in Gattegno's words. This attitude towards mistakes frees the students to make bolder and more systematic explorations of how the new language functions. As this process gathers pace, the teacher's role becomes less that of an initiator, and more that of a source of instant and precise feedback to students trying out the language.

A fourth element which determines what teachers do in a Silent Way class is the fact that knowledge never spontaneously becomes know-how. This is obvious when one is learning to ski or to play the piano. It is skiing rather than learning the physics of turns or the chemistry of snow which makes one a skier. And this is just as true when one is learning a language. The only way to create a "know-how to speak the language" is to speak the language.

Historically, the approach went through several stages. It came into being in the 1950s when Gattegno, a mathematician, encountered the Cuisenaire rods, small pieces of wood which vary in length and colour and are used in mathematics teaching. He soon became aware that the rods could also be used to create unambiguous and instantly apprehendable situations which would permit a teacher to give students step-by-step input as required by their learning. New words were introduced when necessary by being said once, and the students could explore the language using their natural gifts. The teacher could remain almost silent, giving the students the time and space necessary to practise the language, the teacher's silence indicating to the students this attitude to learning and the learners, and placing the onus for learning squarely on their shoulders.

Towards the end of the decade, Gattegno had the further idea of writing the functional vocabulary of the target language on wall charts, colouring the different letters so that each sound was always represented by the same colour. Using a pointer, the teacher indicated the words on the charts, and the students could work out their pronunciation by looking at the colours. The approach was given the name Silent Way at this time, referring of course to the teacher's silence.

A major advantage of this way of working is that using a pointer reproduces the inherently ephemeral nature of language. To indicate a phrase, the person pointing - teacher or student - must move the pointer from word to word, and the students have to hold the complete string in their minds as it is built from each written element. This leads to a greatly heightened level of retention.

Another advantage of using word charts is that they free the students from the need to rely on memorization. They thus become more autonomous, and this in turn allows the teacher to devote more attention to being a sensitive source of feedback during the students' exploration of the language, indicating systematically when changes need to be made and finding the best way of inducing them. The teacher's feedback can be as simple as a slight movement of the hand indicating that the sentence needs to be modified somewhat, or more elaborate, if a word needs to be pointed on the charts or a situation capable of

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illustrating the problem and allowing a solution to be found has to be created. The teacher's job is constantly subordinated to what the students are doing.

Typical classes

A recurrent pattern in low level Silent Way classes is the initial creation of a clear and unambiguous situation using the rods. This allows the students to work on the challenge of finding ways - as many as possible - of expressing the situation in the target language. The teacher is rather active, proposing small changes so that the students can practise the language generated, always scrupulously respecting the reality of what they see. They rapidly become more and more curious about the language and begin to explore it actively, proposing their own changes to find out whether they can say this or that, reinvesting what they have discovered in new sentences. The teacher can then gradually hand over the responsibility for the content of the course to the students, always furnishing the feedback necessary for the learning process. The content of the course then becomes whatever the students want it to be, usually an exploration of their own lives, their thoughts, feelings and opinions.

In more advanced courses, the basic way of functioning remains the same, although the class might look quite different to an inexperienced observer. The rods are seldom necessary and the word charts are used much less frequently, since the students can usually find their own mistakes once they become aware that there is a mistake to look for.

To learn to be a Silent Way teacher, it is of course necessary to know the position of the words on the charts and which colours correspond to which sounds. Only then does the real work begin. Silent Way teachers need to become aware of the role of awareness in their own learning in order to see the students' awarenesses more clearly. They need a strong commitment to self exploration in order to develop an ever deeper awareness of themselves as people. They must develop a deep sense of the students' strengths and learn to have confidence in them as people. They can then put into practice another important principle at the heart of the Silent Way - that while the students work on the language, the teacher works on the students.

The Silent Way is used by a small but growing number of teachers round the world, often working in relatively extreme conditions - with illiterate refugees, for example, or in cases where speed of acquisition is important or accuracy is vital.

Further Reading

Gattegno, Caleb. (1976) *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages*, New York: Educational Solutions.

Gattegno, Caleb. (1987) *The Science of Education. Part 1: Theoretical Considerations* New York: Educational Solutions.

Holt, John. (1964) *How Children Fail*. Revised edition (1982), New York: Pelican Books.

Stevick, Earl W. (1990) *Humanism in Language Teaching*, Oxford University Press.