



iatefl

VOICES

November/December 2024
Issue 301

ISSN 2412-6578

Learning to speak, speaking to learn

In this article, Roslyn Young presents the work she has done in the Silent Way tradition, an exploration of learning to speak and speaking to learn

In this article, inspired by my work in the Silent Way tradition, I present a different way of thinking about how people learn and teach languages, captured in the twin aspects of the title, 'learning to speak, speaking to learn'.

Knowledge vs know-how

Let's begin with a story, a true story which takes place at various times, in many cultures and in different disciplines.

One day, a youth became apprenticed to a master craftsman, a carpenter. He spent some days in the workshop doing menial tasks, observing all that took place. Soon he was given more important tasks. His master used a coaching process; showing him the gestures he had to learn, watching how he worked, and commenting, showing him good practice. *Hold your plane like this. It has to be completely flat and level; otherwise, you'll bite into the wood. Careful of the pressure ... Press a little harder with this hand ... That's better.*

Our apprentice's principal way of knowing was through hundreds of experiences gradually accumulating to become his experience: which gestures are required for each tool, how to adapt them to the various woods, etc.

He became skilled in his craft and proved this by creating his masterpiece; he had become a master craftsman. He began to take apprentices himself and the process started over again. It has been repeated down through the ages, in some countries, to this day.

One day, an idea came to the master craftsman. He would write a book about his craft. To do this, he had to describe many things which, when in the workshop, were evident. He had to describe the tools and the gestures each tool required, the woods he used for different jobs, and so on. The master craftsman converted his know-hows into knowledge. The book was duly published and placed in libraries, the role of which is to hold a culture's knowledge, and thus made accessible to all.

Many years later, I become interested in woodworking. I find several books on the subject, all descendants of the first



Before retiring, **Roslyn Young** taught English and sometimes French for many years at the Applied Linguistics Centre of the University of Franche-Comté in Besançon, using

the Silent Way and techniques derived from it. You can see her using the Class Conversation technique for Dogme-like guided, free conversation on YouTube.

book written in my culture by a master craftsman. Reading these books and, more recently, watching YouTube videos, give me the same thing: knowledge. Knowledge gives me an entry point into the challenge, but it doesn't give me what is essential in learning new skills: experience.

I need to get a feel for my tools, the angles to hold them at, the varying pressures they require me to exert. I need to become familiar with various woods, glues, oils ... In other words, I, too, need to accumulate hundreds of experiences that will coalesce into my experience and become my know-how. How does one learn know-how? There is only one way, and that is to do it, whatever 'it' might be. One accumulates experiences using trials and the feedback they yield to build experience. This is true of skating, of baking cakes or of playing the guitar.

How does one teach know-how?

This has always been known: we teach know-how by giving learners opportunities to do 'it' and by giving them feedback. Speaking is an activity; it's something we do. Learners need to keep their wits about them to develop a linguistic agility in the new language. They need to develop a physical agility, the motor skills to use their mouths differently. For the time it takes you to read this article, I would ask you to entertain the idea that, for teaching purposes, speaking a foreign language is best seen as know-how.

The takeaway

Knowledge does not spontaneously change into know-hows. The only way to learn a know-how is to do it until you know how.

Learning to speak requires self-involvement

In 2018, an overview of the scientific understanding of learning wrote:

'Quite literally, it is neurobiologically impossible to think deeply about or remember information about which one has had no emotion because the healthy brain does not waste energy processing information that does not matter to the individual.' (National Academies of Sciences, 2018, p. 29)

Textbooks try to be relevant and engaging, but nothing in a textbook, no role play, no exercise, will ever have the emotional charge of even the simplest sentence said by someone because this is what they want to say.

In both cases, words come out of a student's mouth, but only in the second case is language being used as we use L1, with genuine self-involvement. This is real speech. Without self-involvement, we might call what is being produced 'sp.ch' (speech with its heart missing). Sp.ch is only a pretence of speech.

When talking about schoolchildren, Holt (1983) wrote:

'It can't be said too often: we get better at using words, whether hearing, speaking, reading, or writing, under one condition and only one – when we use those words to say something we want to say, to people we want to say it to, for purposes that are our own' (p. 124).

This is just as true for L2 students.

The takeaway

Learners' emotions must be engaged. This will always be the case if they speak about what they choose to, but rarely the case if the teacher makes the choice.

Learning to speak requires learners to speak

Ferdinand de Saussure is considered to be the father of modern linguistics. He defined the boundaries of the discipline by proposing two entities: a formal system of elements such as syntax, semantics, morphology, etc. which he called *langue*, usually translated as *language*; and a second entity, used by humans in the messy business of talking, which he called *parole*, usually translated as *speech* (Saussure, 1983). The discipline of linguistics is concerned with Saussure's *langue* and formally excludes *speech*.

The problem is that we teachers have been trained in grammar, syntax, phonetics, all part of Saussure's *langue*. But our students have come to class wanting to learn *parole*, the know-how

to speak the language. They are given examples, rules and grammar points and then practise these with exercises where they use (emotionless) *sp.ch.* It is expected that this will turn into a capacity to produce *parole*, natural spontaneous speech. The fact that so many students are tongue-tied in real life when they have to speak shows us that working this way is unsatisfactory. This should not surprise us. In no other field are know-hows taught from the rules backwards, or from pretences rather than the real thing. We don't tell children to pretend to play football before giving them a ball and letting them play. Why demand that students pretend to speak?

As Wittgenstein (1953) pointed out, children learn games by playing them. The rules are made explicit, if ever, only when this is necessary. What happens is that every time a rule is broken, new players see the consequences, and this is enough for them to pick the game up.

The same approach in language teaching is to view L2 as know-how and to use *parole* – real speech – directly; no rules, no explanations, no teacher talk, just students using the language in sentences generated by themselves. The teacher acts as both referee and coach; referee when telling students that their sentence is outside the boundaries of the language, and coach when helping them to formulate correctly what they want to say. The teacher does this by giving feedback after every sentence, helping the student to get to a final correct form before the next one is said.

The takeaway

To learn to speak, learners need to speak and to receive feedback.

Feedback

Imagine that you are an ice skater learning to perform an axel. You jump ten times and then your coach tells you, 'Your third try was the best; your left hip was high and you jumped outside your circle. Well done.' This commentary is much too late to serve any purpose. To be useful, feedback must be given immediately after each trial.

In a language classroom, one of the main jobs of the 'teacher as coach' is to provide useful feedback. Each sentence should get feedback as soon as it is finished. This does not mean simply reformulating the student's version. Nor does it mean correcting what students can rectify for themselves. It does mean the more subtle process of developing their criteria so that they understand what misconception(s) created any problems. It also means introducing new language where this is needed for students to properly express the idea they have in mind. Lessons like these are the



The use of finger correction in action

Wednesday evening 'training session' with the coach, as opposed to the 'playing the game' session on a Sunday afternoon when people simply talk to each other.

Giving precise feedback economically requires tools. The tool we use most is finger correction; one word for each finger. This is intuitive and easy. Fingers can be waggled, grouped, folded and crossed. Fingers are used to guide learners as they reflect on what they say. It is so useful that many students start using their fingers to reflect on their productions.

The takeaway

Timely feedback is essential in the learning process.

The importance of foreignness

Languages give their speakers different ways of talking about the world: Japanese speakers don't talk about the world as French speakers do or as English speakers do. Japanese manages with no articles, no plurals, no gender, and rarely uses pronouns; how is that possible? French speakers use many pronouns; not only that, they cram them all into the beginning of their sentences. How do they manage? English speakers can 'put down', 'put up with', 'put one over', and so on. How strange! We call these fundamentally different modes of expression 'the spirit of the language', those things that make each language uniquely foreign.

Discovering the spirit of a language directly, from the beginning, generates astonishment and a desire to find out more. As one learner put it, 'I love

learning Japanese. It's SO foreign!'

The excitement appears where the foreignness is most apparent, with the use of the functional vocabulary. The lexical vocabulary comes easily when introduced later, once this core has been explored.

The takeaway

Learning is exciting and inviting when students meet the language at its most foreign. We exploit this.

Conclusion

Just as the master craftsman guides his apprentice by giving him experiences that build into experience and become know-hows, so teachers working in the Silent Way tradition guide their learners sentence by sentence until they reach a know-how-to-speak-the-language. In doing this, we teach students what they came to class to learn.

References

- Holt, J. (1983). *How children learn*. Pelican.
- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2018). *How People Learn II: Learners, Contexts, and Cultures*. The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/24783
- Saussure, F. (1983). *Course in General Linguistics*. Duckworth. (Original work published 1916)
- Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Blackwell.

A Class Conversation: working with what students say

Following on from Roslyn Young's article on the Silent Way teaching methodology, Laurence Howells presents an interview he conducted with her about her work

Introduction

This article is based on an interview with Roslyn Young in January 2024. [Roslyn Young](#) is an expert on teaching languages. She has 60 years' experience teaching English and French and she has written extensively on learning and teaching and their application in the foreign language classroom.

What is a Class Conversation?

A Class Conversation is just an ordinary conversation, except that the students are speaking in the language they are learning. So the students provide the content of the lesson – whatever they want to talk about from their lives, interests and concerns – and the teacher helps them to express it in good quality English.

A student launches a sentence – it could be a question or something they want to tell people about – and the teacher works with this student and the rest of the class to turn this attempt into correct, well-pronounced English.

It is this process, undertaken sentence-by-sentence that makes it a lesson. Without this, it would be just a conversation in poor English: students can do that by themselves outside of class. Class Conversations are not for beginners. Students need a solid base in pronunciation and the ability to use the functional vocabulary at intermediate level.

How does the teacher build the course around the students' needs?

Students of English invariably have problems with pronunciation and almost always with the English system of verb tenses. As a result, these become the focus of the course. And because the functional vocabulary comes into every sentence, students also work on this. Sometimes, they will need new vocabulary. Therefore, the teacher needs the skills and tools to work with students on these things.



Since retiring as Chief Executive of the Scottish Further and Higher Education Council in 2016, **Laurence Howells** has focused on teaching and learning languages, producing over 150 educational films for [silentway.online](#). He is currently learning Japanese, French and Spanish.

Getting students' sentences corrected

If students are to learn, every sentence must be worked on until it is correct. As far as possible, the teacher should guide the student, together with the rest of the class, to do much of the correction themselves. The teacher helps by first showing only where the problem lies, and then by offering hints if necessary. When the sentence requires linguistic knowledge the students don't have yet, the teacher provides what's needed.

The process of working on sentences is done as a whole class activity because everyone learns from observing the process unfold. And if the whole class is kept together, attentive and involved, everyone gets full benefit from the lesson.

How many students can you have in a successful Class Conversation?

It's preferable to have at least ten students because that makes for variety in the conversations, but Class Conversations can be run with any class of more than one student. If the teacher has more

experience, then classes of 20–30 students can easily be run. The largest group Roslyn Young ever taught was a group of 55 students on a week-long summer course for English in August 2010.

How do you get a Class Conversation started?

Students new to this way of working need help to get started. So the teacher seeds the first few Class Conversations with questions like: 'What did you do last weekend?' or 'Where are you from?' These are simple, open-ended questions that members of the class can ask each other and that everyone can answer. Each answer will be different and personal, and they can be answered at many levels of detail. As they gain confidence, students learn to follow up if an answer intrigues them. They also learn to come to class with something to tell everyone.

After the first few Class Conversations have been launched, all the teacher has to do is make an encouraging gesture and wait until people have had time to think of their first sentence.

Talking about the everyday

Intermediate students need the skills to express themselves about simple things – their everyday lives and activities – spontaneously and with ease. This is the priority at their stage in learning a language: more complex things will come later. The ease they gain from speaking about their lives and listening closely to their classmates doing the same gives them confidence in speaking English. To



Summer course, August 2010



Working on the English verb tense system, August 2010

see this idea in action watch this [video](#).

In a sufficiently long series of Class Conversations, the class will encounter all the common structures and most of the common vocabulary they need for everyday conversation. This is normal; the common things occur and recur because they are common!

Why use Class Conversations?

Nothing is more interesting than humans. And all our students have stories to tell, even if they're only about their hobbies or holidays on their aunt's farm or what happened on the way to the dentist yesterday. Stories that seem unimportant ... But telling *their* stories turns them from a group of students into a group of people; people who have lives, histories and dramas. This is what we want as teachers.

We don't want them saying things they have no emotional engagement in. If they have no personal investment in what they're saying, their brains simply won't deal with what's being worked on and the lesson will leave no lasting impression.

This means talking about themselves, always telling the truth, asking other people about themselves, and expecting to hear something truthful about them and their lives.

'The content most likely to engage learners and to trigger learning processes is that which is already there, supplied by 'the people in the room'. (Meddings & Thornbury, 2013)

How was the Class Conversation invented?

The circumstances around its invention were very particular. Roslyn Young taught a week-long English course in 1978 near Lyons in France. The class was made up of a closely-knit group of about 35 primary school teachers from France and Switzerland who were using Caleb Gattegno's approach in their teaching

(for more information see: [silentway.online/](#)). They had been working together for nearly ten years, one full weekend each month. This was a group of friends, including the teacher herself, and the level of trust was therefore exceptionally high. At one point around mid-week, the students just started taking the class over, talking and joking in English, and Roslyn simply followed them. She worked sentence by sentence with the students to correct what they'd said; the essence of the Class Conversation was created.

From the early 1980s, it was used systematically by a group of eight teachers at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée at the University of Franche-Comté in France. This team developed specific tools and techniques to make it more effective, and it is still in use there.

All classes have people at different levels. How can the teacher deal with this?

Pronunciation is the great leveller. It is advantageous to teach pronunciation as a motor skill (for more information see: [www.pronunciationscience.com/](#)); it is much more efficient than any 'listen and copy' process. The teacher can then demand a much higher standard of pronunciation from the faster or more advanced students. This means they keep improving. It also means that the weaker students hear better and better pronunciation from their classmates, and learn from observing how it was achieved.

You can get the faster students to make more complex sentences. For example, they can be asked to take the last few sentences and find ways to combine them into one longer one or to find different ways of expressing the same meaning as intended in the current sentence.

You can also send them off into a corner of the room to practise saying their sentences several times. When they come back they may want to say the sentence again so that the teacher can check it or deal with any doubts they have. Even the more advanced students find that complicated sentences can't be pronounced fluently and accurately without practice. While these students are doing work like this, the teacher can give more time to others in the class.

How do you deal with students who don't want to say anything? Or those who never stop talking?

Reticent students often just need encouragement and time to get used to the situation. But if after a lesson or so,

despite being given opportunities, they still haven't spoken, then they can be taken aside and you can say, 'Do you mind if, for the next lesson, I tell the rest of the class "We don't know much about X. So today, let's ask him (or her) and find out as much as we can"'. The student concerned invariably says 'Yes' and that is usually all that is needed to get them launched.

Very occasionally this doesn't work. But then it becomes the student's problem. We can only continue to give them opportunities and encourage them. People sometimes have to deal with difficult issues in their lives and we have to respect that.

Very loquacious students can be taken aside and made aware that they are using more than their fair share of 'airtime'. They can also be held in check by limiting their participation to only asking questions or seeking more details. This can have the added advantage of keeping the conversation going.

Students in a Class Conversation shouldn't take notes

Taking notes in a Class Conversation isn't permitted. All the students need to be completely present to what's going on in class all the time. There are all sorts of subtle things going on as the class works: little gestures, movements of eyebrows, smiles and frowns, tones of voice ... and the students need to be aware of these. This goes beyond the details of work on the language: if the class is meeting as people, then they need to be aware of each other as people. Taking notes breaks that awareness and divides their attention in a very damaging way.

In fact, notes are simply not needed. If the work on each sentence is properly practised, then the learning has already been at least partially lodged where it needs to be – in students' minds, and not on pieces of paper. And then, the process of sleep will naturally consolidate the work in each student's mind.

Reference

Meddings, L., & Thornbury, S. (2013). *Teaching unplugged: Dogme in English language teaching*. Delta.