Lecture 12

**TEACHING APPROACHES: WHAT IS THE SILENT WAY?**

1. Features of the Silent Way
2. Types of learning and teaching activities. The role of instructional materials.
3. Advantages and disadvantages of the Silent way method.

**Introduction**

Silent Way originated in the early 1970s and was the brainchild of the late Caleb Gattegno. The last line of Benjamin Franklin’s famous quote about teaching and learning can be said to lie at the heart of Silent Way. The three basic tenets of the approach are that learning is facilitated if the learner discovers rather than remembers or repeats, that learning is aided by physical objects, and that problem-solving is central to learning. The use of the word "silent" is also significant, as Silent Way is based on the premise that the teacher should be as silent as possible in the classroom in order to encourage the learner to produce as much language as possible. As far as the presentation of language is concerned, Silent Way adopts a highly structural approach, with language taught through sentences in a sequence based on grammatical complexity, described by some as a “building-block” approach.

***Objectives***

The general objective of the Silent Way is to give beginning level students oral and aural facility in basic elements of the target language. **The general goal set for language learning is near-native fluency in the target language, and correct pronunciation and mastery of the prosodic elements of the target language are emphasized**. An immediate objective is to provide the learner with a basic practical knowledge of the grammar of the language. This forms the basis for independent learning on the learner's part. Gattegno discusses the following kinds of objectives as appropriate for a language course at an elementary level (Gattegno 1972: 81-83):

- Students should be able to *correctly and easily answer questions about themselves, their education, their* family, travel, and daily events;

- speak with a good accent; give either a written or oral description of a picture, "including the existing relationships that concern space, time and numbers";

- answer general questions about the culture and the literature of the native *speakers of the target language; perform adequately in the following areas: spelling, grammar (production rather than explanation), reading comprehension, and writing.*

The structural patterns of the target language are presented by the teacher and the grammar “rules” of the language are learnt inductively by the learners. Cuisenaire rods (small coloured blocks of varying sizes originally intended for the teaching of mathematics) are often used to illustrate meaning (the physical objects mentioned above). New items are added sparingly by the teacher and learners take these as far as they can in their communication until the need for the next new item becomes apparent. The teacher then provides this new item by modelling it very clearly just once. The learners are then left to use the new item and to incorporate it into their existing stock of language, again taking it as far as they can until the next item is needed and so on.

This is perhaps best illustrated by an example. Let us say that the teacher has introduced the idea of pronouns as in "Give me a green rod". The class will then use this structure until it is clearly assimilated, using, in addition, all the other colours. One member of the class would now like to ask another to pass a rod to a third student but she does not know the word "her", only that it cannot be "me". At this point the teacher would intervene and supply the new item: "Give her the green rod" and the learners will continue until the next new item is needed (probably "him"). This minimalist role of the teacher has led some critics to describe Silent Way teachers as "aloof" and, indeed, this apparently excessive degree of self-restraint can be seen as such. The prominent writer on language teaching, Earl W. Stevick, has described the role of the teacher in Silent Way as "Teach, test, get out of the way". The apparent lack of real communication in the approach has also been criticized, with some arguing that it is difficult to take the approach beyond the very basics of the language, with only highly motivated learners being able to generate real communication from the rigid structures illustrated by the rods. The fact that, for logistical reasons, it is limited to relatively small groups of learners is also seen as a weakness.

As with other methods and approaches, however, aspects of Silent Way can be observed in many lessons in the modern classroom. In the 1980s and early 90s, for example, it became fashionable in some quarters to argue that excessive "teacher talking time" was something to be discouraged. Cuisenaire rods are also popular with some teachers and can be used extremely creatively for various purposes from teaching pronunciation to story-telling. The idea of modelling a new structure or item of vocabulary just once may also have some justification as it encourages learners both to listen more carefully and then to experiment with their own production of the utterance. Lastly, the problem-solving feature of Silent Way may well prove to be its most enduring legacy as it has led indirectly both to the idea of Task-based Learning and to the widespread use of pronunciation.

**Features of Silent Way**. The Silent Way is characterized by its focus on discovery, creativity, problem solving and the use of accompanying materials. Richards and Rodgers (1986:99) summarized the method into three major features.

1. **Learning is facilitated if the learner discovers or creates**. The Silent way belongs to the tradition of teaching that favors hypothetical mode of teaching (as opposed to expository mode of teaching) in which the teacher and the learner work cooperatively to reach the educational desired goals. (cf Bruner 1966.) The learner is not a bench bound listener but an active contributor to the learning process.

2. **Learning is facilitated by accompanying (mediating) physical objects**. The Silent Way uses colorful charts and rods (cuisenaire rods) which are of varying length. They are used to introduce vocabulary ( colors, numbers, adjectives, verbs) and syntax (tense, comparatives, plurals, word order …).

3. **Learning is facilitated by problem solving involving the material to be learned**. This can be summarized by Benjamin Franklin’s words:

“Tell me and I forget

Teach me and I remember

Involve me and I learn”

A good silent way learner is a good problem solver. The teacher’s role resides only in giving minimum repetitions and correction, remaining silent most of the times, leaving the learner struggling to solve problems about the language and get a grasp of its mechanism.

**Types *of learning and teaching activities***

Learning tasks and activities in the Silent Way have the function of encouraging and shaping student oral response without direct oral instruction from or unnecessary modelling by the teacher. Basic to the method are simple linguistic tasks in which the teacher models a word, phrase, or sentence and then elicits learner responses. Learners then go on create their own utterances by putting together old and new information. Charts, rods, and other aids may be used to elicit learner responses. Teacher modelling is minimal, although much of the activity may be teacher directed. Responses to commands, questions, and visual cues thus constitute the basis for classroom activities.

**The role of instructional materials**

The Silent Way is perhaps as well known for the unique nature of its teaching materials as for the silence of its teachers. The materials consist mainly of a set of coloured rods, coded-coded pronunciation and vocabulary wall charts, a pointer, and reading/writing exercises, all of which are used to illustrate the relationships between sound and meaning in the target language. The materials are designed for manipulation by the students as well as by the teacher, independently and cooperatively, in promoting language learning by direct association. The number of languages and contain symbols in the target language for all of the vowel and consonant sounds of the language. The symbols are colour coded according to pronunciation*;* thus, if a language possesses two different symbols for the same sound, they will be coloured alike. Classes often begin by using Fidel charts in the native language, colour coded in an analogous manner, so that students learn to pair a sound with its associated colour. There may be from one to eight of such charts, depending upon the language. The teacher uses the pointer to indicate a sound symbol for the students to produce. Where native-language Fidels are used, the teacher will point to a symbol on one chart and then to its analogue on the Fidel in the other language. In the absence of native-language charts, or when introducing a sound not present in the native language, the teacher will give one clear, audible model after indicating the proper Fidel symbol in the target language. The charts are hung on the wall and serve to aid in remembering pronunciation and in building new words by sounding out sequences of symbols as they are pointed to by the teacher or student.

Just as the Fidel charts are used to visually illustrate pronunciation, the coloured cuisenaire rods are used to directly link words and structures with their meanings in the target language, thereby avoiding translation into the native language. The rods vary in length from one to ten centimetres, and each length has a specific colour. The rods may be used for naming colours, for size comparisons, to represent people build floor plans, constitute a road map, and so on. Use of the rods is intended to promote inventiveness, creativity, and interest in forming communicative utterances on the part of the students, as they move from simple to more complex structures. Gattegno and his proponents believe that the range of structures that can be illustrated and learned through skilful use of the rods is as limitless as the human imagination. When the teacher or student has difficulty expressing a desired word or concept, the rods can be supplemented by referring to the Fidel charts, or to the third major visual aid used in the Silent Way, the vocabulary charts.

  The vocabulary or word charts are likewise colour coded, although the colours of the symbols will not correspond to the phonetics of the Fidels, but rather to conceptual groupings of words. There are typically twelve such charts containing 500 to 800 words in the native language and script. These words are selected according to their ease of application in teaching, their relative place in the "functional" or "luxury" vocab­ulary, their flexibility in terms of generalization and use with other words, and their importance in illustrating basic grammatical structures. The content *of* word charts will vary from language to language, but the general content of the vocabulary charts (Gattegno 1972) is paraphrased below:

Chart 1:  the word *rod,* colours of the rods, plural markers, simple im­perative verbs, personal pronouns, some adjectives and question words

Charts 2, 3:remaining pronouns, words for "here" and "there," *of, for,* and *name*

Chart 4: numbers

Charts 5, 6:   words illustrating size, space, and temporal relationships, as well as some concepts difficult to illustrate with rods, such as order, causality, condition, similarity and difference

Chart 7: words that qualify, such as adverbs

Charts 8, 9:  verbs, with cultural references where possible

Chart 10:  family relationships

  Charts 11, 12: words expressing time, calendar elements, seasons, days, *week, month, year,* etc.

Other materials that *may* be used include books and worksheets for practicing reading and writing skills, picture books, tapes; videotapes, films, and other visual aids. Reading and writing are sometimes taught from the beginning; and students are given assignments to do outside the classroom at their own pace. These materials are of secondary im­portance, and are used to supplement the classroom use of rods and charts. Choice and implementation depends upon need as assessed by teachers and/or students.

**Disadvantages**

– The Silent Way is often criticized of being a harsh method. The learner works in isolation and communication is lacking badly in a Silent Way classroom.

– With minimum help on the part of the teacher, the Silent Way method may put the learning itself at stake.

– The material (the rods and the charts) used in this method will certainly fail to introduce all aspects of language. Other materials will have to be introduced.

**Advantages** –

– Learning through problem solving looks attractive especially because it fosters:

* creativity,
* discovery,
* increase in intelligent potency and
* long term memory.

– The indirect role of the teacher highlights the importance and the centrality of the learner who is responsible in figuring out and testing the hypotheses about how language works. In other words teaching is subordinated to learning

**References**

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