

TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN SCHOOLS: THE SILENT WAY

Second Edition 1972. Caleb Gattegno. Educational Solutions Inc.,

SOME BASIC FACTS ABOUT THE SILENT WAY

This is another book by an outsider.¹ Like Curran (1972 reviewed in Stevick 1973), Caleb Gattegno does language teaching as a by-product and special case of a professional commitment which is broader than language teaching as such. Again like Curran, Gattegno makes almost no mention of those who are conspicuous in the field; in turn, his own published works are cited only rarely in our books and journals. The first edition of this book received no serious reviews in the United States, and so far as I am aware, the second edition has thus far been entirely ignored.

It is not hard to understand how this happened. I myself found the first chapter of the first edition so annoying that I refused to read further. I find the second edition exciting and utterly charming from cover to cover, but this fact is probably due less to the differences between the editions than it is to five intervening years of hit-and-run or hit-and-miss encounters with the Silent Way in practice. This review, therefore, while centering on the book, will necessarily reflect my total experience with what strikes many of us as a bizarre way of learning and teaching.

My first view of the Silent Way was in a brief demonstration, which I found good but not memorable. I did not begin to take it seriously until a year later, when I watched an actual Spanish class in its seventh hour of instruction. That session was one of the most impressive I have ever seen, for the amount of language that the students controlled, but also for the variety and intensity of the personal energies that were released. A year after that, I attended a two-day seminar on the Silent Way. From that time on, although I was by no means "sold" on the method, I began to pass bits of it on to teachers with whom I worked in various parts of the world. The responses of these teachers and their students, even to these second-hand fragments, were so good that I gradually came to re-examine my own thinking. Meantime, I saw a number of demonstrations - some of them outstanding - by other people. I have seen the method used brilliantly in a class of one person, and in a class of 70. Most recently, working in partnership with Turkish instructors who had had no previous experience with the Silent Way, I took a beginning class through their first 150 hours, using little except rods and purposive silence. This then is a summary of the background out of which I write this review.

Gattegno's commitment is to solving some of the problems of learning in general; teaching foreign languages is for him only one special case of broader principles which he has also applied in teaching mathematics, and the reading and writing of the mother tongue. Accordingly, his first chapter sets forth some of those ideas. The five that seem to me most important, both for understanding this book and for the illumination of any style of teaching, are the following:

1. *Teaching should be subordinated to learning* (1).
2. *Learning is not primarily imitation or drill* (3). This, a key tenet of post-audiolingual methodologists, was present in the 1963 edition of the book, at a time when audiolingual orthodoxy was at its height. In this respect, Gattegno's thinking runs parallel to that of Curran (1968:344ff), who sees learning in relation to the total and changing value-structure of the learner. Drill is valuable, he says, only insofar as it is substantially tied in with the personality of the learner. As we shall see below, the Silent Way gives primary attention to the social forces at work in the class.

¹ This review has been written in the midst of ongoing work with the Silent Way. I would like to thank Souad Demiray, Saynur Gören and Güzin Metya, language instructors who have co-operated in this work; and Evelyn Bauer, Emily Drake, Patrick and Susan Hayes and Kevin Homan, who have checked the credibility of my statements from their own experiences as learners. Carol and Nobuo Akiyama, Virginia Hodge, Elaine Rhymers and Panagiotis Sapountzis have also read the manuscript and made helpful suggestions. Full responsibility for errors of fact and interpretation remains of course with me.

3. *In learning, rather, the mind "equips itself by its own working, trial and error, deliberate experimentation, by suspending judgement and revising conclusions".* (4) Here, a year before *Games People Play*, is an almost verbatim description of the "Adult" ego-state (Berne 1964:24 et passim, Harris 1967:50ff.) together with an affirmation of the importance of this ego-state in the learning process.
4. *As it works, the mind draws on everything it has already acquired, particularly including its experiences of learning its native language* (12). For Gattegno, therefore, the differences between first- and second-language learning loom larger than the similarities, so that he is content to devise an "artificial" method (12), rather than trying for a "natural" one.
5. If the teacher's activity is to be subordinate to that of the learner, and if the learner's activity is to be of the kind described under point 3 (above), then *the teacher must stop interfering with and side-tracking that activity* (13). Here is the principal reason for the silence which gives this way of teaching its name. At the same time, this frankly artificial approach is in some respects very strictly controlled (12). The teacher provides knowledge of the language, and a firm overall structure for activity. In so doing, he meets a part of the student's deep need for security (Maslow 1970:39), and fulfils the role of Nurturing, or Natural Parent (Berne 1972:13,118). At the same time however, he avoids the constant modelling, prescribing and directing kinds of activity which are typical of the Controlling Parent (*ibid.*), and which many teachers seem to believe are inseparable from effective, responsible teaching. But this allegation on my part calls for a description of how the Silent Way is used.

Anyone who has ever heard of the Silent Way at all knows that it makes use of a set of "rods"², which are small wooden blocks of ten different lengths but identical cross-section, each length having its own distinctive colour. In addition, a fully developed set of materials contains a set of Word charts; a set of Phonic (Fidel) charts - in which phonemic distinctions appear as contrasting colours; drawings, worksheets and several books (15).

With regard to the linguistic units themselves, the basic strategy of the Silent Way agrees with many other methods of the past 30 years, by concentrating first on the acquisition, within a small vocabulary, of control over pronunciation and the structural elements (Fries 1947:3). Chapter 3, which many readers will see as the central chapter, is titled "Much Language and Little Vocabulary".

THE FIRST LESSONS

In a typical first lesson, the vocabulary begins with "a rod" and goes on to such expressions as "a blue rod", "a red rod", etc., ending with the imperative form "take ...". The teacher pronounces each new input very clearly. Ideally a new input should be given only once, but in any event the students get only what they absolutely require. From the very first minute the students do 90% or more of the talking, while the teacher remains almost completely silent. At all times speech is accompanied by appropriate action (generally consisting of manipulation of the rods), and action is accompanied by appropriate speech. The method thus has one of the characteristics which the "Total Physical Response" experiments showed to be so desirable for establishing durable comprehension (Kunihara and Asher 1965, Asher 1974). But this first lesson has two additional strong points which are seldom found elsewhere.

The first of these points is related to what we are discovering in research on short-term memory. According to one widely accepted view (e.g. Mayor 1969:1165, Nelson 1971:565, Norman 1970:2). For a recent alternative interpretation see (Craik 1973), a new auditory material is

² Cuisenaire Rods - widely used in schools at primary and secondary level for the study of mathematics.

retained for about 20 seconds in a state in which it is available for inspection and even rehearsing, something like a loop of tape, or like a small worktable on which bits of new and old material may be assembled, sorted and rearranged. This is the reason why human beings are able to do a “double take” in response to something they heard a few seconds earlier. Silence, on the other hand, gives the mind maximum opportunity to extract information from a short bit of aural input. In most of our methods, the barrage of utterances from teacher and fellow students is like a handful of stones thrown onto the surface of a quiet pond: we are unable to follow the ripples from any one of them because of interference produced by the others.

It is for this reason that, in my own attempts to use the Silent Way, I have learned to forbid any immediate repetition of new material spoken by the teacher. The enforced silence that surrounds the new words both allows and compels maximum attention and superior processing. The first individual or group production of this material comes about three seconds later (well within the span of short term memory), in response to a fresh presentation of the visual stimulus. If one student does not get it right, he is given more time and some non-verbal help. If he still does not get it, others are silently invited to try, and the best version is indicated by the teacher - again silently. Then (in a small class) the rest of the students may produce the utterance, each in response to a fresh stimulus.

This use of silence means that the student derives much more benefit per audible model from the teacher. It might still be argued that even if, in comparison to other, noisier ways of teaching the student absorbs 10 times as much *per model* from the teacher, the noisier ways still produce a greater effect in the long run if they provide 50, or 25, or even just 11 times as many models.

$$\begin{aligned} \text{If } L(\text{earning}) &= N(\text{umber of Models}) \times B(\text{enefit per Model}) \\ B_8 &= 10 B_c \\ N_8 &= N_c / X \end{aligned}$$

Then L_c is greater than L_8 if X is greater than 10. I find, however, that this argument leads to a conclusion that does not square with my observations. The reason, apparently, is found in a fundamental difference between the two ways of looking at the mind of the student. In one view, on which lines are engraved by patiently scraping a cutting tool over the same line until the desired depth is reached. In that view, the silence of the Silent Way has the effect of softening the clay so that fewer reiterations are necessary. Gattegno's view, as we have already seen, is quite different. He sees the mind as an active agent, capable of constructing and refining its own “inner criteria”. In the former view, “whenever a student makes a mistake he is practising a mistake” (the cutting tool is being drawn over the wrong part of the tablet), and “practice of any form makes that form more likely to be used in the future”. Therefore we must insist on “accuracy before fluency”. These of course are dogmas of a comparatively unenlightened version of behaviorally-oriented audiolingualism, so much maligned of late. By contrast, Gattegno tells us that “*to require perfection at once is the great imperfection of most teaching*”. Teacher and student alike must be “*shaken loose a bit from their timid perfectionism*” (Levertov 1970:167) if anything creative is to take place.

The concept of “inner criteria” (14:28) finds a close parallel in Titone's discussion of “linguistic feeling” (1970:60). Titone also seems in general accord with Gattegno on the route that leads to this kind of mastery: through incorporation of basic patterns, followed by inference of the basic rules through observation and deduction, rather than through mere grammatical theory. Gattegno's view of the mind places him very clearly in what today we may call the cognitivist camp. (It is interesting to remember that he occupied this position in 1963 and, in fact, much earlier). Indeed both in his theory and in his practice, he places much greater faith in the mental powers of even the ordinary student than does any other cognitively-oriented system with which I am familiar. As one colleague put it after 28 hours of a beginning course, “This was a little hard at first but then it became easier as I learned to use my mind in ways I had forgotten were available to me”. Or, in Gattegno's words (25), language learning may become “a recovery of the innocence of our self, a return to our full powers and our full potentials”.

This leads to the second of the two strong points that I mentioned above: the resources which the Silent Way makes available for helping wholesome things to happen inside, and between, the people in a classroom. Compared to this, teaching with rods and a minimum number of repetitions is merely an interesting tour de force, and the efficient use of the power of short term memory is superficial. The student who was re-learning to use her mind in ways that she had forgotten was growing in self-awareness: a student who can say "I have learned" rather than "I have been skilfully taught" is developing self respect. Words written by a poet teaching poetry describe also the aim and effect of the Silent Way : "My hope was not to teach anybody ... but to attempt to bring each one to a clearer sense of what his own voice and range might be, and to give him some standards by which to evaluate his own work." (Levertov 1970:147).

The interpersonal implications begin to show themselves already in the first few lessons, in at least two ways. I have a 20 minute demonstration of the method - or at least of my best understanding of it - which I have used with numerous audiences. During that period, I open my mouth only seven times. After each of these inputs, I shape the learners' production by a process of selective reinforcement, with results that are at least as good as what one gets through massive "mimicry" memorization. At the end of the demonstration the learners are producing, without prompting, any of nine simple three-word phrases. I then stop and ask an open-ended question: "What happened?"

One of the most frequent answers and often one of the first is "We learned how much we could depend on ourselves and on each other," or "We felt that we were working together as a group in relation to you." This reaction is not confined to the first few minutes. I recently interviewed a class that had completed about 180 hours of instruction, most of it by our best approximation of the Silent Way. One of the things that these students said first and most firmly was that the method offers *exceptional opportunities for them to help and be helped by each other*, and that they place *great value* on that aspect of it. Even the fact that the imperative "take" appears in the first lesson is helpful for intra-group relationships. Using this form, the students are able to interact directly with one another, with visible and verifiable *but nonverbal* responses. The language that one student chooses to use does not force his fellow students to produce further language if they are not ready to. Another feature that regularly receives comment, both in the early stages and later on, is that the students' attention simply does not wander even after six or more hours a day. Still another is the absence of destructive competition: when the students are depending on one another, the unique contributions of each are clearly recognized and valued by all, for even the slower students will from time to time remember something or figure something out that has escaped the others.

These then, have been some of the respects in which the Silent Way has rich possibilities from a psychodynamic point of view. But as with any other method, students come up sometimes with a right answer and sometimes with a wrong one. What then? In the case of a correct response, the answer to this question is simple but unorthodox: the student must learn to do without the overt approval of the teacher. Instead, he must concentrate on developing and then satisfying his own "*inner criteria*" This means that the teacher is supposed to react never verbally and very little non-verbally to a correct response. There is none of the "very good!" or the enthusiastically nodding head that many authorities tell us we should produce on these occasions. Indeed, some practitioners whom I have observed come across as stern and almost gruff. Others seem to manage a "warm, sympathetic and understanding" style without giving explicit approval to right answers. (I suspect that the desirable compromise is to show pleasure as a person rather than approval as a judge.) From the Transactional point of view, teachers may thus reduce the Parental component of their behavior (Berne 1972:104). In so doing, they presumably evoke less of the Adapted Child in the student (Berne 1972:104) and therefore clear the way for the flourishing of an Adult-Adult relationship.

What is usually called a “mistake” seems to have unusual significance for the silent teacher. The student who made the mistake has “stuck his neck out” acting vicariously for the whole group. The content of the mistake itself is an invaluable clue to where the students are in the development of their “inner criteria” and so provides guidance for the teacher's next step. There are many ways in which the teacher may respond. Choice among these ways, in Gattegno's view as I understand it, should conform to two principles:

- (1) Remain silent if at all possible.
- (2) Give only as much help as is absolutely necessary.

In the early stages, the use of hand signals; colors, etc. may form an elaborate and detailed system for locating places where the *inner criteria* need further work, or even for indicating what the desired response is. These devices still have the advantages of requiring/permitting the student to provide the answer on at least the auditory level, and of keeping all students' auditory short-term memories uncluttered. But if the teacher continues this sort of help beyond the time when it has become superfluous, he is interfering again, and students will grow restless as they feel their “learner space” invaded (Curran 1972:91).

Although silence on the part of the students is not a goal of the Silent Way, a certain amount of it may occur under these circumstances. La Forge (1971:57) found the silences of Community Language Learning (a system quite different from the Silent Way) to be periods of intense and valuable mental activity. Levertov (1970:175) recognized that toleration for silence when it does occur may be at the same time both a result and an expression of confidence in oneself and in the other members of the group. Of quite specific relevance to the uses of silence is a recent report of research on one facet of verbal memory.

In experiments reported by Buschke (1974), subjects were required to learn lists of 20 nouns. They were then asked to recall as many words as they could, in any order. They were allowed to try each list as many times as necessary. Before each trial, they were re-exposed only to those words which they had not yet recalled on their own during a previous trial. Unlike many of the other list-learning experiments that have been reported, the subjects were encouraged to take their time, and to continue trying past the point where recall becomes difficult.

Four of the observations that came out of the experiment were the following:

- (1) Most of the items that failed to be recalled on some one trial “were retrieved later without any further presentation, indicating that such failures represent retrieval failure rather than loss from storage” (579).
- (2) “Once an item was spontaneously recalled after previous recall failure, it usually was consistently recalled thereafter” (580).
- (3) The fact that it is possible to retrieve additional items by extended recall is something that must be learned (581).
- (4) “Subjects in the experiment reacted positively to the challenge of achieving their own maximum retrieval without further presentation” (581).

“TEACH, THEN TEST...”

One of the rules of thumb that we hear from time to time is “teach, then test”. I suppose that a fair paraphrase of this formula would be something like “present a piece of new material clearly, so that the student can develop the appropriate “competence” to match it; then go on to some kind of activity that will enable the student to demonstrate that the new competence has become available as a basis for “performance”.” This rule may have some value as a reminder not to omit either the

“teaching” or the “testing” function and not to confuse them, but it is also subject to a pernicious distortion. That distortion arises when the rule is taken to mean “teach, then test, then teach some more, then test some more, and so on until the end of the course”. It is pernicious because it encourages the teacher to monopolise the initiative in the classroom. A more whole some rule would be “teach, then test, then get out of the way”. Once the student, through his performance, has demonstrated that he has the desired new competence, he needs to be able to practice it under conditions that allow him to exercise as wide a range of choices as is consistent with maintaining orderly progress.

One of the advantages of the Silent Way, it seems to me, is that it lends itself exceptionally well to keeping these three kinds of activity separate from one another: when the teacher is both making the noises and moving the rods, he is “teaching”; when he is moving the rods and expecting the students to make the noises, he is testing; when he leaves both the rods and the noises to the students, he is “out of the way”. Furthermore, in the Silent Way, the teacher spends much less of the time in the “teaching” mode than in other methods that I have seen

There still remain, of course, questions of how and how long to teach, how and how long to test, and how long to stay out of the way. A final advantage of the Silent Way is that, not being required to keep the classroom filled at all times with audible language, the teacher has more opportunity to observe the students' performance and modify his own actions accordingly - what Gattegno calls being “*with*” the students.

SOME GENERAL QUESTIONS

I will not in this review describe the rest of the Silent Way in as much detail as in the first lessons, partly because of limitations on my personal experience with it. I also believe, however, that the first lessons contain those features of the method which are at the same time crucial, and most characteristic of it. But there remain two frequently asked questions which demand attention here.

1. Isn't the value of the Silent Way largely confined to the early stages, for teaching numbers, colors, spatial relations and a few things like that? Having taken one class successfully to 150 hours primarily by my best approximation of this method, I can only reply in the negative. This must certainly be the answer if we think of the Silent Way as a way of looking at teaching and learning, rather than as a set of operations with rods. But even from the latter point of view, the answer is still no. In fact, numbers and colors are in my opinion among the least interesting uses of the rods, because for these purposes the rods are most easily replaceable by other devices.

This brings us to the second question

2. How essential are the rods, really? For years , I was sceptical on this point , preferring to use toy villages, or Tinkertoys, or real objects, and actively refusing to have anything to do with rods. I now prefer rods to Tinkertoys because they are more visible, less distracting, they come in more colors and do not roll off the table.

My reasons for preferring rods to toy houses and cars are more important.

- (1) The representational objects tell the beholder what kind of house, school, truck etc. to see: they pre-empt the functioning of imagination, which is one part of the total personality that we are trying to activate.
- (2) It is hard for representational objects to become what they are not. Rods, by contrast, have unbounded flexibility. The same rods may become, now a map of the Middle East, now a picture of a traffic accident, now a graphic analog of the surface structure of the Turkish noun, now a visible record of information that a student is giving about the neighbourhood in which he lives. At the more advanced levels, students seem to

appreciate the shared concrete record of what they are talking about. As Maria del Gagliardo says in one of the appendices to the book, the rods are both *austere* and *mesmerizing* (132).

CONCLUSION

This book has an inescapable personal flavour about it. I think it would not be improper to make two observations in this regard.

One quality that comes across on many pages is the author's humility and sense of humor. He recognizes that his experiments have been limited in scope (2), and that his conclusions "may not be universally valid" (43). He has a quiet chuckle at his own expense in citing ways in which he exemplifies his observation that "strange uses of the language are common among learners who choose to be at peace with themselves rather than bow to the traditions of the foreign language" (24). But along with this humility - perhaps growing out of it - we find an unbending loyalty to whatever light the author has been able to find (xi). It has been granted to him to see parts of the truth that no-one else had seen before him (vii). He refuses to dilute or alter the distillate of his experience in order to make it more palatable to others. He believes that, at best, all that he can hope to educate in us his colleagues is our awareness (x). Both in his method and in this book about the method, he is consistent with his principle of maintaining the integrity of what is to be taught and at the same time enhancing the integrity of the learners (52). It is as though he is saying to us "*Once you have understood this for yourself, you will have no further need of me. And if I tried to give you a clue at the cost of your own experience, I would be the worst of teachers*". (Herrigel 1971:76). Again in conformity with this principle, he withdraws the promise, made in the first edition, to provide a Teachers Manual.

This review has been a frankly favourable one. I do not, however, intend it as a blanket endorsement either of the book or of the method which it describes. Some few parts of the book are open to serious question from the point of view of standard linguistic science. More important, it is frequently tantalizing in the questions it raises or in the partial answers it gives. As for the Silent Way itself, I have not seen enough of it in action to regard it as the one methodological pearl of great price; it is, however, possibly the most undervalued pearl on the market today.

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