TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE -- THE SILENT WAY

by Ko Ko Gyi

ABSTRACT

Many approaches to the teaching of English as a second language have been proposed by theoreticians and practitioners. These approaches are quite varied and each has its characteristic strengths and weaknesses; because of this, each method may be suited to particular types of situations. The present paper considers one of these techniques, Caleb Gattegno's SILENT WAY. The Silent Way differs from most techniques insofar as it makes no claim to mimic natural language learning behavior. In this approach the teacher maintains silence while his students talk; this is clearly opposed to most educational practice in which the emphasis is on the teacher as lecturer. In addition to critically examining this technique the paper considers the situations in which it might most appropriately be applied.

CALEB GATTEGNO'S THE SILENT WAY

Gattegno's silence in his "Silent Way" is used for a purpose which is somewhat different from that of the extended listening periods employed by other innovators of methods such as Asher and colleagues. In Gattegno's approach, the silence of the teacher is an inducement for the students to take the initiative. They must experiment with the target language internally at first and then overtly. At the outset, the teacher provides a model utterance which refers in an obvious way to a small rod selected from a set of rods

which are used to provide a kind of pragmatic context. The teacher may hold up a green rod and say, "A rod" (in the target language). Then the teacher may add, holding up the same rod "A green rod." Then the teacher may pick up a red one and repeat the procedure. "A rod", pause, "A red rod." After some manageable chunk of the target language has been presented, the teacher remains silent while the pressure for some one of the students to fill the silence grows to a crescendo level. Inevitably someone speaks up, and if the utterance indicates some initial comprehension and appropriateness, the teacher reacts with nonverbal acknowledgement and encourages other students to follow suit. Or the teacher may encourage further attempts until a recognized facsimile of the initial utterance is attained. Next a new chunk of language is introduced, "submitted" is the right word) can deny that it generates an intense level of cognitive activity. First the students are placed under tremendous pressure to figure out what the teacher has said (comprehension) and subsequently to repeat the act of saying it with comprehension-e.g. saying "a green rod" when pointing to the green one. The Silent Way invites teachers and students to engage in an intense congnitive wrestling match where communicative use of the target language is both the arena and the reward.

Gattegno himself has admitted his approach as being "artificial" as opposed to the "natural" approaches put forward by other exponents of language teaching. "The learning of a new lenguage is considered to be that of a foreign language," [1] is his contention. He adds further that "a new language will require from the learner a new adaptation. Apprenticeships in the mother tongue and in a foreign language have little in common." [2] His approach is thus, for some purposes, strictly controlled, and to use all that there is to be tapped in every mind in every school. He has admitted that he could very early transfer the responsibility for the use of the language to his students, so that he could be able to teach using fewer and fewer words. He values that feature "silent" in his approach among a host of others, since it conveys at once that there are means of letting the learners learn while the teacher stops interfering or sidetracking. "Teachers who are using the silent way recognize silence to be one of the powerful tools in their teaching" [3] was his summation of his theory. The first lesson of the Silent Way usually ends with the students being able to repeat the colors of the rods (and the rod itself). Sometimes it may carry on to the next chunk of language like "take a blue rod" which two pupils are obliged to take from the pile the teacher has brought. Naturally no response is to be expected, except perhaps the utterance of the words for "a blue rod". So the teacher says the words again while putting the pupil's hand over the set and making the pupils fingers take a blue rod from the pile. Then the teacher says "take a brown rod" or "take a yellow rod" etc., and can expect a correct action as a response. The teacher then turns to

the other student and does what was done before but fewer times. Then dramatically the teacher changes place with one of the students and indicates that the student should now utter the words first. Someone in the class usually gets the idea. If not the teacher goes back to the previous situation and does what was done before once or twice again. The exchange of places this time yields the required results : the equivalent of "take a blue (or red..) rod" is uttered by one or the other of the students. When the teacher complies with this, it is conveying an agreement that the rules of the game are being observed. The next lesson usually shows that the time separating the two sessions has served the students well. The quick revision of the sounds for the names of the colored rods proves that the class pronounces them on the whole much better than the previous time. Calling two other students, the teacher says : "take .....," and the action is performed at once, usually correctly. But this time the teacher adds: "give it to me" and indicates with a hand that the teacher wants it. As it is done with different rods and alternately with each of the two students, the set of noises for "give it to me" is put into circulation. Then after saying "take a .....," the teacher says : "give it to him" (or her) and indicates that this time it is to be given to the other student (the teacher may have to use the hands to convey the meaning).

The class has heard phrases and sentences being used from the start by a number of students, or even all of them, more or less adequately, but at least approximately, recognizably. The language covered is : "a rod, a yellow/ red / blue .... rod, /take a ..... rod, give it to him / her / me" What is significant is that the set of rods has helped :

1. To avoid the vernacular.
2. To create simple linguistic situations that are under the complete control of the teacher.
3. To pass on to the learners the responsibility for the utterance of the descriptions of the objects shown or the action performed.
4. To let the teacher concentrate on what the students say and how they are saying it, drawing their attention to the differences in pronunciation and the flow of words.
5. To generate a serious game-like situation in which the rules are implicitly agreed upon by giving meaning to the gestures of the teacher and the teacher's mime.
6. To permit almost from the start a switch from the lone voice of the teacher using the foreign language to a number of voices using it. This introduces components of pitch, timbre, intensity that will constantly reduce the impact of one voice and hence reduce imitation and encourage personal production of one's own brand of the sounds.

The teacher stands through much of the lessons but keeps the students concentrating all the time, and says less and less while the students say more and more. The teacher neither approves nor disapproves but throws them back upon their own tools of judgment, indicating that they must

listen better, use their mouths differently, stress here or there, shorten one sound and prolong another. Very soon, the more or less arbitrary conventions introduced become accepted between the teacher and the class. In four or five lessons the vocabuary will have increased very little. The plurals of "rod", of the adjectives and of the pronouns are introduced plus the conjunction "and", some possessive adjectives and perhaps one or two demonstrative ones. The numerals "one" "two" and "three" are added; generally there may be about thirty words in circulation.

From the gradual increase of the vocabulary this way, a new tool and a new technique is introduced-a wall chart. On it all the words learned so far is printed at random, plus a few more according to the demands of the language studied, one exception being that the first words are "a rod" (or "rod") The teacher links words, with the convention that if it was pointed at one word followed by a pause, that word is uttered alone; if pointed at two or more words in succession, all these words must be uttered and in that order. This convention is established in no time. When the class can sufficiently well utter these words in succession, the speed of pointing can be varied so that the convention of the speed of flow of words is brought in again. This exercise is called "visual dictation" Visual dictation is a two-fold technique in which the teacher points at words and the students say what was shown, or the students find words on the charts after the teacher has uttered a whole sentence. This second exercise can easily be changed into oral dictation, in which a full sentence is said and the learners write it down.

From these simple beginnings of a few rods and charts, Gattegno has given to second language teaching ideas and techniques of lasting knowledge and interest. It would be in order to evaluate his method in the light of recently proved or popular critiques in the genre. It would not also be out of place to delve in the field of second language teaching theories so that a better understanding of the terminology and trends are obtained.

First it would be prudent to investigate the field of theory and practice to find the relations between them. One of the foremost theoreticians in the field, namely Krashen, stated that "theory" and theoretical research are not the only input into deciding on methodology and materials but that there are at least three different ways of arriving at answers in methodology and materials and that all should be taken into account when considering. From among the three theories that is put forward, the theory of Second Language Acquisition is of importance to us and among the theories of second language acquisition, his hypothesis named the "input hypothesis" is directly relevant.

THE INPUT HYPOTHESIS

This hypothesis contains a concept which attempts to answer the crucial

theoretical question of how we acquire language. It makes a claim : a necessary (but not sufficient) condition to move from "stage i" (one) (where i represents current competence) to i+1 (the next level) is that the acquirer understands input that contains i+1, where "understand" means that the acquirer is focused on the meaning and not on the form of the message. We acquire, in other words, only when we understand language that contains structures that are "a little beyond" where we are now.

We understand language that contains structures that we have not yet acquired because we use more than our linguistic competence to help us understand. We also use context, our knowledge of the world, our extralinguistic information to help us understand language directed at us. That is the Hypothesis of "input" according to Krashen.

Krashen has provided an "evaluation schema for methods and materials" and by this criteria, we can evaluate each approach to classroom teaching, to what extent it satisfies the requirements for optimal input and to what extent it puts learning into proper place. In this respect only two aspects of Krashen's schema need to be explained, since the "input" hypothesis has been familiarized. These two are :

1. **Filter Level** which was postulated in his theory "The Affective Filter Hypothesis" This hypothesis implies that our pedagogical goals should not only include supplying comprehensible input, but also creating a low filter. Classrooms that encourage low filters are those that promote low anxiety among students, that keep students "off the defensive"

2. **Monitor Hypothesis** which postulates that acquisition and learning are used in very specific ways. Normally acquisition "initiates" our utterances in a second language and is responsible for our fluency. Learning has only one function, and that is as a Monitor or editor. Learning comes into play only to make changes in the form of utterance, after it has been "produced" by the acquired system. This can happen before we speak or write. "Krashen's Evaluation schema for methods and materials"

Requirements for optimal input

1. Comprehensible Input
2. Interesting/relevant
3. Not grammatically sequenced
4. Quantity
5. Filter level ("off the defensive")
6. Provides tools for conversational management

Learning

Restricted to :

1. Certain rules ; those that are
   a. Learnable
   b. portable
   c. not yet acquired
2. Certain people (Monitor users)
3. Certain situations
   a. time
   b. focus on form

EVALUATION OF "THE SILENT WAY"

(A) Requirements for optimal input

1. **Comprehensible.** It can be claimed that this method provides comprehensible input. Only basic vocabulary is introduced and the next step follows only after the initial step is acquired, although the chart system introduces "written" words never adopted. This may relate to the i+1 of the input hypothesis.

2. **Interesting/relevant.** Stevick's personal experience in Honolulu should be adequate to establish this : "This hour was the best I had ever conducted, both with regard to the amount learned (by spectators as well as by the six participants) and with regard to the comments afterward." 4

3. **Not grammatically sequenced.** This method is obviously not grammatically sequenced. Teaching is done from "rods" and charts and not related to any approved grammar sequence.

4. **Quantity.** While the silent way is succesful in familiarizing the students with colors, numbers, and various language vocabulary, the input level per class hour might be quite small. Indeed, the entire hour might be spent with just a few sentences or patterns, as compared to the wide variety real communication gives.

5. **Affective filter level.** This method of teaching violates several aspects of the Input Hypothesis : production is expected immediately, and is expected to be error free. Over-use of drill and repetition, procedures such as not allowing students access to the written word in early stages may also add to anxiety.

6. **Tools for conversational management.** Students are given the tool for interaction in the classroom -- they are soon able to initiate discussion, although within the bounds of the chart. Some of this conversational, or better, "classroom competence" will be useful on the outside, some will not. There is no explicit goal providing tools for conversation with more competent speakers.

(B) Learning

Theoretically, conscious learning is not an explicit goal of the Silent Way. The goal, rather, is to have the student learn a variety of patterns to be used directly in performance. In practice, however, this method might result in inductive learning, the student attempting to work out a conscious rule on the basis of the pattern practice.

Comments and Recommendations

The Silent Way of Dr. Caleb Gattegno has been commended by some noted theoreticians and practitioners in the field of Second Language Teaching. Prominent among them are Robert W. Blair, Earl W. Stevick, and John W. Oller, Jr. Stevick has practiced this method personally and has found only praise for it. Evaluating according to Krashen's schema, however, we find flaws, specially in areas of input and

filter levels. Lacking in quantity of input might seriously hinder acquisition of vocabulary and the stress and anxiety of the students who are put under enormous strain every second of the three hours of class, might heighten the filter level enormously.

My own personal opinion is that this method is suitable for real beginners. As acquisition is slow, fluency would be slow. It would, however, make a non-speaker produce speech within a few lessons, which might well be the target Gattegno aimed at. Production is demanded almost immediately, thus achievement is observable and the teacher might find enormous satisfaction. The student, however, is put under great stress from the incessant vigilance and ceaseless control of the teacher. The students would be worn out after three hours of tension to produce at all costs. The student would also find it difficult to rise beyond a certain level as the vocabulary on the chart is limited. A plateau might be reached quickly and further advance could only be made with great difficulty.

I would recommend that more vocabulary be channelled towards the class by means of audio and visual aids during breaks (which should be introduced, if not already done, to break the monotony) to enable the class to acquire some words sub-consciously. Krashen's theory could also be tested if more input could cause more acquisition. Questions and answers on various topics should also be introduced, so that the students can practice their vocabulary by themselves while the teacher could guide the class both verbally and non-verbally as desired. Reading and writing grammatically is an accomplishment which this method could scarcely satisfy, unless the teacher would break silence more often than now. Thus it would seem that the golden mean of striking a balance between the teacher and student participants, to enhance the suitability of this method, should be found and adhered to, once the plateau of acquision is reached.

A limit of six students in a class would mean that classes are expensive compared to other class sizes accomodating 25 to 30 students. Furthermore, it is felt that only people with a moderate level of education could cope with such a level of immediate production. It would, it seems, therefore, not be beneficial to the poor beginners.

NOTES

1. Caleb Gattegno, **"The Silent Way."** From ***Methods That Work***, A Smorgasbord of Ideas for Language Teachers, (Rowley, Mass., Newbury House Publishers, Inc. 1983) p. 72.

2. Ibid. pp. 72-73.

3. Ibid., p. 73.

4. Earl W. Stevick, **"The Silent Way, in Honolulu"** From ***A Way And Ways*** (Rowley, Mass., Newbury House Publishers, Inc. 1981) p. 82.

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