

## 6 The Silent Way

### Background

The Silent Way is the name of a method of language teaching devised by Caleb Gattegno. It is based on the premise that the teacher should be silent as much as possible in the classroom but the learner should be encouraged to produce as much language as possible. Elements of the Silent Way, particularly the use of color charts and the colored Cuisenaire rods, grew out of Gattegno's previous experience as an educational designer of reading and mathematics programs. The Silent Way shares a great deal with other learning theories and educational philosophies. Very broadly put, the learning hypotheses underlying Gattegno's work could be stated as follows:

1. Learning is facilitated if the learner discovers or creates rather than remembers and repeats what is to be learned.
2. Learning is facilitated by accompanying (mediating) physical objects.
3. Learning is facilitated by problem solving involving the material to be learned.

Let us consider each of these issues in turn.

1. The Silent Way belongs to a tradition that views learning as a problem-solving, creative, discovering activity, in which the learner is a principal actor rather than a bench-bound listener (Bruner 1966). Bruner discusses the benefits derived from "discovery learning" under four headings: (a) the increase in intellectual potency, (b) the shift from extrinsic to intrinsic rewards, (c) the learning of heuristics by discovering, and (d) the aid to conserving memory (Bruner 1966: 83). Gattegno claims similar benefits from learners taught via the Silent Way.
2. The rods and the color-coded pronunciation charts (called Fidel charts) provide physical foci for student learning and also create memorable images to facilitate student recall. In psychological terms, these visual devices serve as associative mediators for student learning and recall.
3. The Silent Way is also related to a set of premises that we have called "problem-solving approaches to learning." These premises are succinctly represented in the words of Benjamin Franklin:

Tell me and I forget,  
teach me and I remember,  
involve me and I learn.

### **Approach: Theory of language and learning**

Gattegno takes an openly skeptical view of the role of linguistic theory in language teaching methodology. He feels that linguistic studies “may be a specialization, [that] carry with them a narrow opening of one’s sensitivity and perhaps serve very little towards the broad end in mind” (Gattegno 1972: 84). Considerable discussion is devoted to the importance of grasping the “spirit” of the language, and not just its component forms. By the “spirit” of the language Gattegno is referring to the way each language is composed of phonological and suprasegmental elements that combine to give the language its unique sound system and melody. The learner must gain a “feel” for this aspect of the target language as soon as possible.

By looking at the material chosen and the sequence in which it is presented in a Silent Way classroom, it is clear that the Silent Way takes a structural approach to the organization of language to be taught. The sentence is the basic unit of teaching, and the teacher focuses on propositional meaning, rather than communicative value. Students are presented with the structural patterns of the target language and learn the grammar rules of the language through largely inductive processes.

Gattegno sees vocabulary as a central dimension of language learning and the choice of vocabulary as crucial. The most important vocabulary for the learner deals with the most functional and versatile words of the language, many of which may not have direct equivalents in the learner’s native language. This “functional vocabulary” provides a key, says Gattegno, to comprehending the “spirit” of the language.

In elaborating a learning theory to support the principles of Silent Way, like many other method proponents Gattegno makes extensive use of his understanding of first language learning. He recommends, for example, that the learner needs to “return to the state of mind that characterizes a baby’s learning – surrender” (Scott and Page 1982: 273).

Having referred to these processes, however, Gattegno states that the processes of learning a second language are “radically different” from those involved in learning a first language. The second language learner is unlike the first language learner and “cannot learn another language in the same way because of what he now knows” (Gattegno 1972: 11). The “natural” or “direct” approaches to acquiring a second language are thus misguided, says Gattegno, and a successful second language approach

will “replace a ‘natural’ approach by one that is very ‘artificial’ and, for some purposes, strictly controlled” (1972: 12).

The “artificial approach” that Gattegno proposes is based on the principle that successful learning involves commitment of the self to language acquisition through the use of silent awareness and then active trial. Gattegno’s repeated emphasis on the primacy of learning over teaching places a focus on the self of the learner, on the learner’s priorities and commitments. The self, we are told, consists of two systems – a learning system and a retaining system. The learning system is activated only by way of intelligent awareness. “The learner must constantly test his powers to abstract, analyze, synthesize and integrate” (Scott and Page 1982: 273). Silence is considered the best vehicle for learning, because in silence students concentrate on the task to be accomplished and the potential means to its accomplishment. Repetition (as opposed to silence) “consumes time and encourages the scattered mind to remain scattered” (Gattegno 1976: 80). Silence, as avoidance of repetition, is thus an aid to alertness, concentration, and mental organization.

Awareness is educable. As one learns “in awareness,” one’s powers of awareness and one’s capacity to learn become greater. The Silent Way thus claims to facilitate what psychologists call “learning to learn.” Again, the process chain that develops awareness proceeds from attention, production, self-correction, and absorption. Silent Way learners acquire “inner criteria,” which play a central role “in one’s education throughout all of one’s life” (Gattegno 1976: 29). These inner criteria allow learners to monitor and self-correct their own production. It is in the activity of self-correction through self-awareness that the Silent Way claims to differ most notably from other ways of language learning. It is this capacity for self-awareness that the Silent Way calls upon, a capacity said to be little appreciated or exercised by first language learners.

### **Design: Objectives, syllabus, learning activities, roles of learners, teachers, and materials**

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.

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

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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 an 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 Silent Way adopts a basically structural syllabus, with lessons planned around grammatical items and related vocabulary. Gattegno does not, however, provide details as to the precise selection and arrangement of grammatical and lexical items to be covered. But language items are introduced according to their grammatical complexity, their relationship to what has been taught previously, and the ease with which items can be presented visually.

The following is a section of a Peace Corps Silent Way Syllabus for the first 10 hours of instruction in Thai. It was used to teach American Peace Corps volunteers being trained to teach in Thailand. At least 15 minutes of every hour of instruction would be spent on pronunciation. A word that is italicized can be substituted for by another word having the same function.

### *Lesson*

1. Wood color *red*.
2. Using the numbers 1–10.
3. Wood color *red* two pieces.
4. Take (pick up) wood color *red* two pieces.
5. Take wood color *red* two pieces give *him*.
6. Wood *red* where?  
Wood *red* on table.
7. Wood color red on table, *is it?*  
Yes, on.  
Not on.
8. Wood color *red long*.  
Wood color green *longer*.  
Wood color orange *longest*.
9. Wood color green *taller*.  
Wood color *red*, is it?

### *Vocabulary*

wood, red, green, yellow, brown,  
pink, white, orange, black,  
color  
one, two, . . . ten  
take (pick up)  
give, object pronouns  
where, on, under, near, far, over,  
next to, here, there  
Question-forming rules.  
Yes, No.  
adjectives of comparison

10. Review. Students use structures taught in new situations, such as comparing the heights of students in the class.

(Joel Wiskin, personal communication)

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 modeling 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 to create their own utterances by putting together old and new information. Charts, rods, and other aids may be used to elicit learner responses. Teacher modeling 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.

Learners are expected to develop independence, autonomy, and responsibility. Independent learners are those who are aware that they must depend on their own resources and realize that they can use “the knowledge of their own language to open up some things in a new language” or that they can “take their knowledge of the first few words in the new language and figure out additional words by using that knowledge” (Stevick 1980: 42). The absence of correction and repeated modeling from the teacher requires the students to develop “inner criteria” and to correct themselves. The absence of explanations requires learners to make generalizations, come to their own conclusions, and formulate whatever rules they themselves feel they need.

Learners have only themselves as individuals and the group to rely on, and so must learn to work cooperatively rather than competitively. They need to feel comfortable both correcting one another and being corrected by one another.

Teacher silence is, perhaps, the unique and, for many traditionally trained language teachers, the most demanding aspect of the Silent Way. Teachers are exhorted to resist their long-standing commitment to model, remodel, assist, and direct desired student responses. Stevick defines the Silent Way teacher’s tasks as (*a*) to teach, (*b*) to test, and (*c*) to get out of the way (Stevick 1980: 56). Although this may not seem to constitute a radical alternative to standard teaching practice, the details of the steps the teacher is expected to follow are unique to the Silent Way. By “teaching” is meant the presentation of an item once, typically using nonverbal clues to get across meanings. Testing follows immediately and might better be termed elicitation and shaping of student production, which, again, is done in as silent a way as possible. Finally, the teacher silently

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monitors learners' interactions with each other and may even leave the room while learners struggle with their new linguistic tools.

The teacher uses gestures, charts, and manipulatives in order to elicit and shape student responses and so must be both facile and creative as a pantomimist and puppeteer. In sum, the Silent Way teacher, like the complete dramatist, writes the script, chooses the props, sets the mood, models the action, designates the players, and is critic for the performance.

Silent Way materials consist mainly of a set of colored rods, color-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 pronunciation charts, called "Fidels," have been devised for a number of languages and contain symbols in the target language for all of the vowel and consonant sounds of the language. The symbols are color-coded according to pronunciation; thus, if a language possesses two different symbols for the same sound, they will be colored alike.

Just as the Fidel charts are used to visually illustrate pronunciation, the colored 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 1 to 10 centimeters, and each length has a specific color. The rods may be used for naming colors, 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.

## **Procedure**

A Silent Way lesson typically follows a standard format. The first part of the lesson focuses on pronunciation. Depending on student level, the class might work on sounds, phrases, even sentences designated on the Fidel chart. At the beginning stage, the teacher will model the appropriate sound after pointing to a symbol on the chart. Later, the teacher will silently point to individual symbols and combinations of utterances, and monitor student utterances. The teacher may say a word and have students guess what sequence of symbols compromised the word.

The pointer is used to indicate stress, phrasing, and intonation. Stress can be shown by touching certain symbols more forcibly than others

when pointing out a word. Intonation and phrasing can be demonstrated by tapping on the chart to the rhythm of the utterance.

After practice with the sounds of the language, sentence patterns, structure, and vocabulary are practiced. The teacher models an utterance while creating a visual realization of it with the colored rods. After modeling the utterance, the teacher will have a student attempt to produce the utterance and will indicate its acceptability. If a response is incorrect, the teacher will attempt to reshape the utterance or have another student present the correct model. After a structure is introduced and understood, the teacher will create a situation in which the students can practice the structure through the manipulation of the rods. Variations on the structural theme will be elicited from the class using the rods and charts.

The sample lesson that follows illustrates a typical lesson format. The language being taught is Thai, for which this is the first lesson.

1. Teacher empties rods onto the table.
2. Teacher picks up two or three rods of different colors, and after each rod is picked up says: [mai].
3. Teacher holds up one rod of any color and indicates to a student that a response is required. Student says: [mai]. If response is incorrect, teacher elicits response from another student, who then models for the first student.
4. Teacher next picks up a red rod and says: [mai sii daeng].
5. Teacher picks up a green rod and says: [mai sii khiaw].
6. Teacher picks up either a red or green rod and elicits response from student. If response is incorrect, procedure in step 3 is followed (student modeling).
7. Teacher introduces two or three other colors in the same manner.
8. Teacher shows any of the rods whose forms were taught previously and elicits student response. Correction technique is through student modeling, or the teacher may help student isolate error and self-correct.
9. When mastery is achieved, teacher puts one red rod in plain view and says: [mai sii daeng nung an].
10. Teacher then puts two red rods in plain view and says: [mai sii daeng song an].
11. Teacher places two green rods in view and says: [mai sii khiaw song an].
12. Teacher holds up two rods of a different color and elicits student response.
13. Teacher introduces additional numbers, based on what the class can comfortably retain. Other colors might also be introduced.
14. Rods are put in a pile. Teacher indicates, through his or her own actions, that rods should be picked up, and the correct utterance

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- made. All the students in the group pick up rods and make utterances. Peer-group correction is encouraged.
15. Teacher then says: [kep mai sii daeng song an].
  16. Teacher indicates that a student should give the teacher the rods called for. Teacher asks other students in the class to give him or her the rods that he or she asks for. This is all done in the target language through unambiguous actions on the part of the teacher.
  17. Teacher now indicates that the students should give each other commands regarding the calling for of rods. Rods are put at the disposal of the class.
  18. Experimentation is encouraged. Teacher speaks only to correct an incorrect utterance, if no peer-group correction is forthcoming.  
(Joel Wiskin, personal communication)

## **Conclusion**

Despite the philosophical and sometimes almost metaphysical quality of much of Gattegno's writings, the actual practices of the Silent Way are much less revolutionary than might be expected. Working from what is a rather traditional structural and lexical syllabus, the method exemplifies many of the features that characterize more traditional methods, such as Situational Language Teaching and Audiolingualism, with a strong focus on accurate repetition of sentences modeled initially by the teacher and a movement through guided elicitation exercises to freer communication. The innovations in Gattegno's method derive primarily from the manner in which classroom activities are organized, the indirect role the teacher is required to assume in directing and monitoring learner performance, the responsibility placed on learners to figure out and test their hypotheses about how the language works, and the materials used to elicit and practice language.

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