Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentary for the films for Day 1 session 3

1 ‘We’re learning!’ (3m 23s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, came up with the phrase ‘We’re learning’. This wasn’t a preplanned activity, it simply arose on the spur of the moment as a result of aspects of pronunciation that Don saw that the class needed to practise.

Notice how the students:

- followed attentively the rapid movements of Don’s pointer
- were focused on what they were doing with their mouths—jaw, lips and tongue etc
- responded to his gestures, adapting what they were doing and therefore how they sounded; and
- remained ‘present’: engaged, fully active and interested throughout.

You’ll also have noticed how the students’ pronunciation was starting to improve. They weren’t gaining intellectual knowledge about the language (which could be taught by description or explanation), they were experiencing the language - experiencing what it feels like to use their muscles like English speakers do and thus make authentically English sounds, syllables, rhythms and melodies.

And these experiences of sounding English snowball as the students continue working throughout the rest of the course.

2 ‘One heart and one heart are two hearts’ (1m 50s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, had introduced the sequence of sounds for the short phrase ‘One heart and one heart are two hearts’ by pointing on the sound-colour chart. The class had worked a little on this phrase but now Don wanted to improve their rhythm.

This simple technique helped the students feel where the louder and longer syllables should be and forced them to speed up the syllables in between - a characteristic of the rhythm of English and one which is alien to most languages and certainly alien to Japanese.

3 ‘Their hearts hurt’ (3m 18s)

Just before this clip the teacher, Don Cherry, had introduced the sentence ‘their hearts hurt’ using the sound-colour chart, and worked with the class on the pronunciation of this phrase. In this clip Don coaches one of the students who was having difficulties with it.

Notice how the student had to work hard to ‘hold’ the sentence precisely in her mind - nothing had been written down, so she couldn’t look back, and this meant she had to call on her own inner resources to recall and say the sentence precisely.

The technique of handing over a pointer to students is a very useful one. The student involved gets feedback both from the sounds the other students make in response to their pointing, and also from the teacher. The students are forced to have a really clear idea of their conception of the sequence of sounds in the phrase. And pointing to a series of rectangles representing sounds helps them to retain what they are working on.

It also helps the teacher diagnose students’ problems - it isn’t always clear at first whether a student has a misconception about what they are trying to say, or whether it’s a pronunciation problem. Asking them to point the sequence of sounds can quickly reveal where the problem lies.

4 ‘Her heart hurts’ (3m 14s)

The class had worked on the phrase ‘their hearts hurt’ earlier. Now the teacher, Don Cherry, pointed the sequence of sounds for the phrase ‘her heart hurts’.

Don wasn't working on the grammatical points in these phrases, at this stage. His priority was to make sure the students could say the tricky pronunciation details in these phrases properly. Grammar work is far more efficient if it is built on a solid basis of accurate pronunciation, especially since once we can say foreign words well, we also start to be able to hear them accurately.

You'll have noticed how good the students had become at following the rapid movements of Don's pointer, and also, how confident the student who used the pointer had become. This wasn't as a result of any effort by anyone to memorise the chart, it's just an example of how humans quickly become familiar with things like this that we engage with.

We call this human capacity 'retention' and it is the capacity that means we know our way around a familiar supermarket or our local town perfectly, without effort and without memorisation. Since this capacity operates so reliably and so effortlessly, it makes sense to design our teaching to take advantage of it. You'll see examples of this throughout this series of films.

5 'Their hearts hurt' and 'Her heart hurts' (2m 29s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, continued working on the two sentences 'Her heart hurts' and 'Their hearts hurt'. Whilst the students were improving, they needed more work controlling the sounds of these sentences.

By now he had two students at the front 'acting' the situation, so that the class would associate the words with the meaning they saw in front of them. But his focus remained on pronunciation.

Notice how he coached a student in saying the phrase and ensured the class placed their attention on the movements they needed to make with their mouths.

It is a principle that teachers should spend most time on the things that students find most difficult to work on by themselves. And for most people, pronunciation is by far

the most difficult of these. So that's why Don kept the focus on pronunciation rather than meaning, communication, grammar or vocabulary.

6 Completing initial work on the sound-colour chart (2m 59s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the sound /ʃ/ by making the well understood gesture. The students experimented and Don gave them feedback and coaching; for example, asking them to move their tongues back from /s/, which they found easy, to reach /ʃ/.

At the end of the clip, you'll notice that Don said 'That's it!'. This was the end of the third session and they had laid down a solid foundation for the rest of the course.

Through the three hours of work on the course so far, the students had experienced the fact that to sound English, they had to move their mouths in different ways from what Japanese requires.

They'd experienced making a much wider range of vowel sounds than Japanese calls for. They had also worked on the low energy schwa sound that is so common in English. They'd had some experience of the way English constructs syllables and the way English rhythm works. And they'd started to associate the sounds of English, perceived as movements, with the different rectangles on the chart.

They hadn't mastered any of this yet - they would need more practice and feedback to learn from these experiences and turn them into skills that they could apply automatically.

However, this was a really solid foundation on which they could build. Most importantly, because this work had been thoroughly done, Don would be able to work efficiently whenever a pronunciation issue occurred during the subsequent sessions.