Teaching English the Silent Way
Narrations for Day 1 session 1

1 Working on sounds (5m 17s)

We join the students right at the start of this six day intensive English course. The teacher, Don Cherry, started working with the class on pronunciation because he knew that this was one of the things the students would find hardest to learn by themselves, so it made sense to give them a solid grounding in this right from the start.

You'll see him using a chart with coloured rectangles. Each rectangle stands for one of the 41 sounds of American English. This means that, once the students have become familiar with the chart, which they do surprisingly quickly, Don can refer unambiguously to any of the sounds of English simply by pointing on the chart.

Japanese has just five vowels, so Don started with these. They're similar to five of the English vowels, and he used them to introduce the students to the sound-colour rectangle chart.

And then he introduced a new vowel that doesn't exist in Japanese and taught them how to shape their mouth to say that sound.

You'll have noticed that Don didn't say the sounds himself. And yet towards the end of the video the students had started to make a completely new sound that they may never have said in their lives before.

He did this, silently, by showing them, by a gesture, what to do with their mouth to change the sound /a:/ into /uh/.

He works this way because for most people, our ears are an unreliable guide to the sounds of a foreign language - we are too well trained to the sounds of our native tongue.

So, coaching students in what they need to do with their mouths and breath, particularly by gesture, is a more reliable way of teaching good pronunciation.

2 Introducing a consonant (5m 49s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced a consonant sound and the class worked on pronouncing that sound in syllables with the six English vowels that they had already worked on.

Notice how Don introduced the sound, silently, with an 'exploding' hand gesture and by miming the appropriate movement of his mouth.

This isn't a particularly difficult sound for the students - Japanese has a similar sound and the movements needed are quite visible - so the class guessed very quickly what they needed to do.

And then Don started them practising with the vowels they'd already encountered. Notice how Don continuously adjusted what he did in response to what the students achieved moment by moment. And notice how engaged the students were with this work.

The Silent Way uses a four stage model of learning, and this video shows, in the space of a few minutes, all of these stages at work.

[show gradually accumulating diagram]

Stage 1: we become aware that there is something to learn. These moments of realisation are often accompanied by us saying 'Aha!' or 'Oh!', as you've just seen in this film [show clip]

Stage 2: a period of experimentation and exploration which the teacher encourages and guides until the students begin to know what they should be doing. [show clip]

Stage 3: Once students know what they should be doing, they need to practice what they have learnt, so that it becomes easy and automatic. Here's Don giving the students practice and at the same time providing feedback as needed. [show clip]

Stage 4: once we've learnt something, we're in a different place, and we can use what we now know as a stepping off point to learn something else. That's, in fact, what the class were doing throughout this film: they could start to work on pronouncing syllables like /pɑ/ and /pʌ/ because of what they'd already learnt about these vowels earlier in the course.

You'll see examples of how Don uses this four stage spiral of learning throughout this series of films.

3 Low energy sounds - introducing the schwa /ə/ (2m 56s)

The English schwa is low energy, short and not clearly pronounced. In this film, which gives you a glimpse of thirty minutes of work in the class, the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the schwa.

In the chart, schwa is placed low down and on its own reflecting its low energy. Don doesn't treat the schwa as a vowel, instead he helps the students to say it by using body language and gestures showing its characteristic low energy.

The English schwa is completely alien to the sound system of Japanese and the way that Japanese syllables work. It's therefore difficult for Japanese speakers to learn.

Schwa-type sounds are ubiquitous in English and mastering them is essential for good pronunciation. It therefore makes sense to work on them very early in the course, and spend a considerable amount of time on them as Don did.

4 Permutations and combinations of sounds (2m 27s)

At this stage of the course, the teacher, Don Cherry, had deliberately restricted the range of sounds he was working on . This meant that the students could focus

precisely on the task without any significant memory burden or the distractions of meaning or vocabulary.

In this video Don introduced and got the students to practise saying syllables ending in a consonant, in this case the consonant /p/. Such syllables are not possible in Japanese, so he knew that there would be work to be done on this - the students would have to overcome their natural instinct to add a vowel at the end of such syllables.

More generally, permutations of sounds are useful. Transforming /pʌ/ and /pɑ/ into /ʌp/ and /ɑp/ and then into /pɑp/ etc means students get lots of practise getting their minds and mouths around syllables with this unfamiliar structure.

And, because their heads are up, following the pointer, which could go anywhere unexpectedly, the students enjoy the game and stay present to the task. And because Don was constantly giving feedback, they quickly realised that he was going to expect good pronunciation from them throughout the rest of the course.

5 Introducing two more consonants (2m 56s)

The class now knew how the sound-colour rectangle chart works and how to make a few English vowels, the consonant /p/ and the schwa. They'd also experienced some English syllables which have a structure completely alien to the Japanese language.

In this video the teacher, Don Cherry, built on all this, extending the range of what they could do and further improving what they'd already worked on.

Did you see how Don works - silently, with constant and immediate feedback, and continually adjusting to the students' needs of the moment - this means that the students develop their own inner criteria for how the sound system of English works. And that means that in the future they will be able to sound English and will find it much easier to understand spoken English when they hear it.

6 Working on another vowel sound (2m 47s)

This film shows the class working on the vowel /ʊ/. They'd met this vowel very briefly before in the course - when someone happened to say it whilst experimenting with other sounds - and the teacher, Don Cherry, had used that opportunity to point to its rectangle. But now Don started working in earnest on that vowel and its neighbouring ones.

You'll have noticed how Don kept the focus on what they should do with their mouth, lips and face, encouraging the students to try different lip and jaw positions and degrees of tension in the face, for each of the four vowels they worked on.

The differences between these vowels are very slight and the students needed to increase their sensitivity to differences that are unimportant in Japanese but essential in English.

The work on these four vowels was by no means finished by the end of this clip, but as you will have seen the students had started to get criteria for how to make them and had started to get used to hearing the differences between them - as soon as we use our mouths differently, we automatically listen to and notice the new sounds we make.

7 More work on vowels (2m 53s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, added another to the students repertoire of English vowel sounds and they practised all of the ones they'd worked on so far.

Notice how Don showed them, by mime and gesture, ways of using their mouths to make these sounds. The students were used to making just 5 vowel sounds for Japanese and now they've added the eighth in their repertoire of English vowels - another step on their journey to the full set of 16.

You'll have noticed how Don continued to avoid providing an aural model for the students to try to copy. Instead he used mime and gesture to guide their experimentation and then he gave them feedback to help them home in on the unfamiliar movements they needed to make to say these unfamiliar English sounds.

8 Still more vowels (3m 18s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, added two more new vowel sounds to the students' repertoire.

He focused them on the movements required to say these vowels by showing very clearly his jaw gradually opening. The students needed to get a sense for themselves of the amount of movement required for each of the four vowel sounds they were working on. How much we open our jaw is another crucial variable in creating different vowel sounds in English.

The students had started to build their criteria for how much to open their jaw for these four vowels. The degree of opening for each of them was certainly not mastered yet, but the students now knew that this would be a factor in English pronunciation.

They would improve as Don continued giving them feedback on their attempts throughout the rest of the course.

9 Practising 'mop' and 'map' (2m 1s)

This film shows the concluding few seconds of the first, hour-long, session of the first day of this 6-day intensive English course. The teacher, Don Cherry, gave the class some practice in saying a couple of similar words using sounds they had been working on so far.

Perfection does not come straight away, so practise of this sort helps students make the distinction between the two vowels they were working on.

To make these skills automatic, students need to say things many times, but the teacher needs to avoid the practice becoming a repetitive drill - that's just tiresome. And that's why Don kept varying the words unexpectedly.

To do this he created two gestures which he used to trigger one or the other of the words. He wasn't at this point teaching vocabulary, so the meaning of these gestures was unimportant, they were simply arbitrary triggers for one word or the other.