Teaching English the Silent Way
Transcript of commentary for the films for Day 1 session 2

1 A game with sounds (2m 49s)

In this game, the students said any sounds they wanted to and one student helped the teacher, Don Cherry, guess which sound the other students had said.

So:

- the student saying the sounds got feedback about what was actually heard and could compare it with what they had intended, and
- everyone, both the student at the front and her colleagues, got feedback about whether what they heard was the same as what the teacher heard.

This game helped all the students refine their criteria for the different sounds of English: both for the ones they said themselves and the ones they heard their colleagues say. It is therefore working on skills for both speaking and listening.

And as you'll have noticed, Don made the feedback even more precise for sounds students said which weren't yet quite right by, for example, pointing to the corner or the edge of the relevant rectangle.

2 Using /m/ to work on vowels (2m 23s)

The class had already met the sound /m/ before. In this video the teacher, Don Cherry, combined this sound with the vowels they had already encountered to make syllables like mam, mum, mem, for example.

Notice how Don took the opportunity to give feedback when the sounds they said weren't quite right. Perfection doesn't come straight away and it is only through a process of the students trying something out and getting feedback that they can improve.

The work in this film, which built on and extended what the class did earlier on permutations and combinations of sounds, is an important part of helping them to

get their minds, mouths and tongues used to putting together English sounds into English syllables.

3 Introducing four more consonants (2m 30s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced some more consonants.

He started by mouthing clearly, but silently, the actions required to say /na/. The students were able to replicate his actions and therefore they made the correct sound.

He then extended this work to introduce the English consonants /ta/, /da/, /na/ and /la/.

Notice how the way Don worked kept the students focused inside, on what they were doing with their mouths and tongues and muscles.

Training students to keep their focus on the physical actions that they are making is invaluable for enabling them to improve their pronunciation. It will come in particularly useful as they work on sounds that are more difficult for them to learn.

4 Keeping practice interesting (1m 56s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, kept the students practising what they had been working on, including some new consonants he had just introduced.

Notice how by using a pointer he kept the exercise interesting—they had to follow precisely its unexpected movements. Notice also how, when the students' pronunciation wasn't quite perfect he paused, mouthed the movements required and got them to try again.

All of this meant that the students stayed present to the task, realised that good pronunciation was a priority and got immediate feedback when they needed to improve.

Motor skills like pronunciation, need practice when we are learning, and that's why, continually throughout this course, when Don introduced new material, he made sure the students got plenty of practice with both the old and the new.

5 Focusing on movements (3m 0s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the nonsense word /ban ban/ and let the students make several attempts to say it in an American way, giving feedback on their attempts.

He then mimed the word and got the students to mime it too. This way of practicing meant that the students really did focus on the movements they were making and not on the sounds. It is the movements we make that determine how we sound and therefore if we want to sound like a native speaker, then the place to start is with our muscles and movements.

You'll have noticed that towards the end of the clip, Don said the word, but only after the students had made plenty of attempts to say it themselves, and were clearly in touch with their mouths and their muscle movements.

6 Introducing a dipthong (1m 51s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the consonant /j/ and then showed the class how to make the diphthong /ai/.

The students now have criteria for this vowel sound it starts with /a/ and glides in the direction of /y/. That's why it has its own bi-coloured rectangle on the sound-colour chart.

7 Responding to the unexpected (3m 48s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, started work on the /r/ sound—a difficult sound for Japanese speakers. He started with showing them what his face looks like when he says this sound, and then a little later, described the movement of the tongue (which obviously the students can't see), using his hands to illustrate it.

The students started experimenting with this sound and Don gave feedback, but then someone's experimentation produced the sound /w/ and Don decided to take advantage of this.

The accidental introduction of the sound /w/ gave Don a chance to provoke some new learning. Because Don was not following a text book or preset lesson plan he could respond to whatever the class did moment by moment. And the interruption of the work on /r/ wasn't problematic - they'd made a start on this difficult sound, and would return to it subsequently.

In fact, the introduction of /w/ at this point was useful because, as you'll see in a later film, very shortly afterwards, Don used it to introduce the remaining English diphthongs.

8 More diphthongs (1m 48s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, worked on the remaining English diphthongs, exploiting the fact that earlier, someone had introduced the sound /w/.

The sound-colour chart is a very useful tool for this kind of work, because the colours and the arrangement of the rectangles means that students can see at a glance all of the sounds of English and their key relationships. For example, in this case, the students can work out for themselves which two sounds combine to make these diphthongs without the need to memorise anything.

9 Working on a difficult sound—/r/ (3m 08s)

The sound /r/ is notoriously difficult for Japanese speakers, and the teacher, Don Cherry, gives it some attention in this video.

Notice how he kept bringing the students' attention back to the actions they needed to perform with their muscles to make the sound and not what they may or may not have been hearing.

Notice also how he was able to use the sound-colour chart to give precise feedback efficiently when what a student said sounded different from what was intended.

You'll also have noticed that nothing has yet been written down in this course, and there are no textbooks or worksheets.

Writing is a form of memory aid and Don deliberately minimises memorisation in his classes. Instead, he ensures that students experience and get familiar with the language, and this means that they are far more likely to retain what they've worked on.

Particularly at this stage, any kind of written material would have been a distraction from the students re-sensitising themselves to what they can do with their mouths and breath. And that was the priority of the moment.

10 Putting it all together (5m 44s)

In this film you'll see how the teacher, Don Cherry, built on all the work so far, until the students were pronouncing the phrase 'World War II' well. There was no particular reason that Don picked this phrase, other than the variety of pronunciation challenges that it poses for Japanese people, and, indeed, he certainly hadn't pre-planned to introduce it.

Notice how the sound-colour chart enabled him to gradually build from sounds to words and then to the whole phrase, without him having to say it or write it on the board. And notice how he coached the students with a variety of gestures of the pointer or of his hands, by mouthing sounds and by giving feedback until they were saying it well.

You'll have noticed how, by now, the students were familiar with most of the sound-colour chart. They hadn't memorised it—that wasn't the point—but they had gradually got used to what they had to do with themselves in response to a touch on one of the rectangles.

Whilst the phrase they ended up saying is a meaningful one, Don hadn't introduced it for that reason: his focus was still on developing the students' pronunciation and, at this stage, meaning would have been a distraction.