Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentary for the films for Day 1 session 4

1 Show us your name (3m 12s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, showed the class the sequence of sounds for the phrase ‘Show us your name’ and coached the students to pronounce it well.

Then he invited one student to use the sound-colour chart to point the sequence of sounds for her own name.

In this case, the student’s name, Kyoko, in Japanese, is said as Kiyoko in English, so the students needed to practise saying what was an unfamiliar sequence of sounds to a Japanese speaker, if they were to sound English.

Becoming aware of just how differently they must pronounce such familiar words is very powerful. The meaning is absolutely clear—it’s someone’s name—and there are no distractions of grammar or vocabulary, so this exercise makes this realisation almost unavoidable. And it’s fun to do!

2 ‘Hi Ryōji!’ (3m 34s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, helped one of the students point the sounds of his name as it would be said in an English way.

His name said in Japanese would be something like Ryōji but in English it would be said as Riyoji. Both versions have the same number of beats, three; and some similar sounds. But the distribution of the sounds is different, and the initial /r/ sound at the beginning is quite different.

Notice how Don worked—giving feedback, coaching the students and making sure they practised enough.

Learning how to say people's names in a foreign language helps students grasp important differences between the sound systems of their own and the new language. By noticing differences, they refine their criteria for pronunciation and listening in the new language.

The memory burden of this exercise is minimal, there is no grammar or meaning to worry about and therefore the students' focus can be solely on the task, which is pronouncing the name in an English way.

3 'Hi Nonoko!' (2m 10s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, helped a student to say her name in an English way.

Notice how the sound of her name in Japanese was transformed by Don's suggestion of using a schwa for the first syllable.

And notice how, towards the end of the clip, Don worked on the intonation of the short phrase 'Hi, Nonoko!'

Different languages use different intonation patterns for their sentences. If we want to sound English and correctly understand an English speakers' intentions, then we need to be familiar with how English uses intonation. Indeed the intonation patterns that the language uses are one of the most fundamental things that makes English sound English.

That's why Don gives attention to this aspect of the language as an integral part of his teaching.

4 'Hi Minako' (3m 00s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, helped the students to say another person's name—Minako—in an English way.

Notice how Don suggested substituting the diphthong /oʊ/ for the final /o/ sound the student had originally pointed to. Notice also how Don corrected himself, substituting the short /i/ for the long /i:/, as a better representation of how English speakers would say the first syllable of this name.

Towards the end of the clip, you'll have noticed one of the students having difficulty escaping from the intonation pattern for this name that she was used to. Pitch accent is a fundamental part of the Japanese language and built deeply into the automatic speech habits of Japanese speakers. It is not surprising therefore that she found it difficult to change this intonation pattern.

However, she did manage it! And whilst she clearly hadn't yet mastered this aspect of English, she has made a breakthrough in escaping, albeit briefly, from this aspect of her native tongue.

5 'Hi Machiko!' (4m 27s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, gave another student the chance to show the class her name.

In this case, the student found it difficult to find the rectangles she was looking for. This is often the case: when seen close up rather than from your seat in the class, the charts looks surprisingly different.

However, she quickly realised when she made a mistake, because the class said what she pointed, and what they said didn't sound like what she intended. Since the students were giving feedback in this way, Don was freed from the traditional teacher role as the fount of all knowledge, and this helps students take responsibility for their learning.

Notice that Don gave plenty of time for the student to try for herself, before he gave some help.

Notice also how he drew the students' attention to the differences between the Japanese version Machiko with the English one Machiko.

Don was trying to give the minimum help he could, and by waiting, he stood a chance of finding out what she could by herself. This is crucial information that he couldn't find out in any other way. He was also giving her the chance to puzzle it out for herself and therefore to learn something.

There's a judgement for the teacher to make: how long should he leave a student in a state of puzzlement, or tension, before intervening. Generally, we can leave students alone much longer than our urge to 'be helpful' would prompt us to.

6 Working on /f/ (2m 24s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry worked with the class on the sound /f/. This sound doesn't exist in Japanese, but it wasn't difficult for Don to show the students what they needed to do with their mouths to make it: the gesture of bringing the bottom lip up to the top teeth is easily seen and copied.

Notice how, towards the end of the clip, Don contrasted the sounds /fu:/ with /hu:/.

In contrasting /fu:/ and /hu:/, Don was making sure the students recognised the distinction English makes. The nearest Japanese sound to these two sounds is ふ, [ɸu], and is made by a constriction of the two lips.

This frame shows that this student was, at first, making the Japanese sound ふ, [ɸu] —look at her lips—until Don intervened and she started making the correct gesture, like this.

This is an example of how the Silent Way teaches pronunciation. By changing how the student used her mouth, she changed the sound she made to one which was closer to the English sound she was aiming for.

She would need further work to get the sound exactly right, and then she would need plenty of practice to make these new skills automatic.

7 A game with 'full' and 'fool' (3m 39s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, invited the class to play a game.

He'd already established two gestures: one stood for the word 'full' and one for 'fool'. The game was simple, each person said one of the two words and everyone else responded with the appropriate gesture for the one they thought they'd heard.

This is another way for students to get feedback both on what they say and what they hear, without anyone feeling criticised. Indeed, as you'll have noticed, the students clearly enjoyed the game.

The students quickly became aware of two things: first, that what they thought they were saying was not always what others heard; and second, that what they thought they heard wasn't always the same as what others heard.

All of this stimulated them to work harder on pronunciation and helped them refine their criteria for the differences between the vowels in these two English words.

8 'Woman and women' (4m 03s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, got the class to practise saying the two words 'woman' and 'women'. All the students probably knew these words, but weren't clear about how they are said.

Notice how Don used the sound-colour chart to make the pronunciations clear. And once the students knew what they should say, he gave them plenty of practice.

This example shows the advantage of using the sound-colour chart to introduce vocabulary and work on it.

English spelling is well known to be irregular and inconsistent and these two words demonstrate this. The problems the students had saying these words almost certainly stemmed from their peculiar spellings.

Rather than working from written forms, it's much better to introduce words as sequences of sounds. The sound-colour chart makes it easy to do so.

Spelling, reading and writing should come later, once good pronunciation has been established.