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

1 Introducing a word chart (5m 11s)

In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced a word chart and helped the students to become familiar with it.

The word charts contain the functional vocabulary of English - the 400 or so very common words that English uses to express spatial, temporal, numerical and personal relationships. Familiarity with how they are used is key to learning how English 'works' to construct sentences and to express meaning.

Don started by getting the students familiar with just the first word chart - that was more than enough to start with.

Notice how in these few minutes, without Don saying much at all, the students became aware:

- that the colours on the word chart match those that they were now familiar with on the sound-colour rectangle chart
- that they could use the colours as a reliable guide to pronunciation, something that English spelling certainly is not
- that some of these common English words are said with reduced, low energy sounds, and
- that there are several pronunciations for some of these words

This was the first time that any form of reading or spelling had been introduced into the course.

The way that Don worked with the chart was designed to ensure that the students remained focused on good pronunciation—you'll have noticed that he introduced the words as a sequence of sounds first, and only then showed them where the word was on the word chart. He wanted them to start from the oral form of these words and **not** from their written forms.

2 Working on English rhythm—'end and end' (2m 21s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, used the word chart to work on the arbitrary sequence of words 'end and end'.

Pronouncing this phrase well required the students to get the rhythm right and to reduce the energy, and therefore the sounds, of the word 'and'.

Notice how Don used clapping to show the students the rhythm, and how, almost automatically, once the students got the right rhythm, the word 'and' became '.n', as a native speaker would say it. He can work so quickly and simply on this difficult aspect of English pronunciation because of the approach he has taken so far in the course.

This pronunciation of the word 'and' is ubiquitous in normal speech and part of what makes English sound 'English'. Learning how to reduce sounds like this and to hear these reduced sounds in other people's speech is a fundamental part of learning English, so it's a good idea to start work on this as early as possible in a course, as Don did.

It's worth emphasising that Don's purpose in working on this sequence of words was to work on English rhythm. He wasn't concerned with meaning at this stage—that would come later.

3 Working on full vowels and reduced sounds (1m 34s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, combined pointing on the sound-colour rectangle chart with gestures and clapping to show very clearly how the students needed to distribute energy in saying the word 'another'.

The metaphors of the position on the chart—down for low energy sounds, up for full ones —and his gestures—slumped for low energy sounds, upright for full vowels—meant that the students experienced this fundamental mechanism of English.

Experiencing this mechanism in their own bodies, and seeing and hearing other students doing so, continued their work on English stress and reduction. They would continue to work on this during the rest of the course.

4 Chunking a phrase—'an end and another end' (2m 33s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, used the word chart to show the class the phrase 'an end and another end' and then worked with the students to help them improve how they said it.
You'll have noticed how Don used his fingers to help the students say the phrase better, first working on chunks and then putting the whole phrase together.

Because he had already worked on sounds and rhythms, he was able to move the class to this next stage.

Learning accumulates: this is why, at every stage, Don ensures that students practise sufficiently—so that what they've learned is not wasted and future learning can be built on it.

This isn't necessarily a linear process—you'll have noticed that half way through this film the students needed a second chance to correct their pronunciation of the word 'an', even though it is one they had already worked on. Don simply gave immediate, non-judgemental feedback and a chance for them to try again, a powerful way to help students improve.

5 Two sounds with one spelling (2m 09s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, contrasted the vowels in the two words 'brown' and 'yellow'. Students are often confused by English spelling, for example, several sounds can share the same spelling, as in the case with these two words.

Watch how Don used the charts to make sure that the students were aware of which sound they should use in which word.

One of the advantages of teaching using the sound-colour chart is that confusions caused by spelling can easily be resolved. As you've seen in earlier videos, Don started by teaching sounds and only later introduced written words.

This meant that the students were already familiar with the sound-colour chart and he could use it and the word chart to clarify efficiently which sound they should say in each word.

6 A red rod (2m 31s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the phrase ‘a red rod’ and worked on its pronunciation.

He knew that this was quite a difficult phrase for Japanese speakers. However, because he was building on the work the students had already done on English pronunciation, the students were able, quite quickly, to say the phrase well.

The phrase ‘a red rod’ is a very common one in a Silent Way class when a teacher starts to use Cuisenaire rods to explore the function words of English. We’ll see this type of work in future films.

Spending time on pronunciation, rhythm and melody of these words and phrases means that when meanings are introduced in the next phase of the work, the students have already established good pronunciation habits.

7 Blue is a color and red is too (2m 31s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the sentence ‘blue is a color and red is a color too’. He worked on the rhythm of this sentence, which was the longest they had said so far in this course.

Notice how he used his fingers to get the class to shorten the phrase by removing two words.

You'll have noticed that once Don had finished pointing the words on the word chart, the students had to hold the sentence in their minds. This is quite a different experience from reading something written on the board—and the extra effort that students have to make to hold it in their minds means that what they have been working on will leave a deeper trace.

8 Seeing a situation in an English way: 'here' and 'there' (4m 33s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, was establishing the way English speakers use the words 'here' and 'there'. He avoided translation or explanation because he wanted the students to experience the direct association between the words and the actions.

He'd already pointed the phrase 'Put one there!' using a word chart and worked on its rhythm. Then he opened the box of Cuisenaire rods and invited the students to give the order. He was only willing to carry out their order when what the students said had matched their gestures.

You'll have noticed that it took a little while for the class to know what gesture to put with the words, but as more examples were worked on and mistakes made, one student suddenly said 'Ah!' For her, at that moment, what had been mystifying suddenly became clear, and she then tested her hypothesis and got immediate feedback: Don did what she asked. Every student then gave the order and experienced for themselves the effect the words had.

A period of tension, questioning and uncertainty, followed by realisation and then confirmation or denial of a hypothesis is a very valuable process in learning.

9 One of the ways English creates emphasis (4m 34s)

In English the same sequence of words must be emphasised differently depending on what has happened before, the present situation and what you want to happen now. In this clip, the teacher, Don Cherry, made the students aware of this mechanism and got them to practise using it.

Notice one way that he gave them feedback on their attempts: he would only do what they told him to do when their order had clear stress on the right syllable.

And notice how he guided their practice, without ever saying the sentences himself.

The students were forced to realise that as each situation changed, how they said the words also had to change. You'll have heard the audible expression of 'Aha!' moments throughout the clip.

This wasn't just about working on these particular sentences. It was about experiencing a fundamental mechanism of English, applicable to any sentence.

This is something that students have to work on in order to express themselves properly in English, and in order to interpret the meanings that English speakers give their words by the way they emphasise them.

10 ‘Take one of the ones that are there and put it back’ (5m 44s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, worked with the class on a longer order.

Before this clip he’d used the word chart to introduce the phrase ‘Take one of the ones that are there’. In this clip, you will see him respond to each student’s difficulties and use several techniques to help them improve.

You’ll have seen that Don was able both to respond to every student’s individual needs of the moment and keep the whole class present and learning. He could only do this because his teaching was spontaneous—he reacted to what the students individually and collectively did, working thoroughly on every sentence.

11 Experimentation and feedback (4m 31s)

Just before this clip, the class had been practising the sentence ‘Take one of the ones that are there and put it back’. Then one student decided she wanted to try something a little more elaborate.

She launched a sentence trying to express her more complex idea and got very close to saying it correctly. Notice how enthusiastically she experimented and how Don let her try and gave her feedback: he knew that every time she tried something and got feedback she was refining her criteria for English.

Notice also how engaged the other students were in the process: they were learning at the same time as she was. After she had tried, and got close, five times, he invited one of the other students to volunteer.

You'll have heard, all the way through this video, the student at the front saying 'Ah!'—a sign that Don's feedback had made her aware of something. And each time this realisation prompted her to new experimentation.

You'll also have noticed how, towards the end of the clip, when one of the students said a correct version of the instruction, she pointed with him as he said it. Watch this moment again.

The process of trial and error is the way we learn any kind of skill. Had Don intervened earlier and simply given an answer, then this process of experimentation and feedback would have been truncated. By allowing her time to try out options, Don gave the whole class the opportunity to learn more from what she was doing.

12 Using Perception

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, started by showing the class what he wanted to happen and then invited them to instruct him to do it.

Notice how Don got the class to explore and practise some of the different ways of expressing this instruction in correct and accurate English, simply by using his fingers.

Situations like the one Don set up in this film using Cuisenaire rods greatly simplify the task of teaching.

The situation wasn't hypothetical or imaginary, so everyone knew what they were talking about. Everyone could see how many rods there were, where on the table they were, and what action they were trying to get Don to carry out. So there was no need for explanation, translation or teacher talk. Don could rely on the students' perception to supply meaning.

The situation was simple on the face of it, but:

- It forced the students to make subtle linguistic distinctions, and
- it provided practice in various equivalent ways of describing it

The way Don worked illustrated several important aspects of the Silent Way:

Don was helping the students to build their own 'mental model' of this part of the language. So Don worked with the students on **every** sentence until it was as well-said as possible.

The way that he worked was important too: he let the students do as much as they possibly could themselves. And everyone remained present—interested and involved—so everyone was learning all the time.

The **process** of the students working on the language—the process of trying something out, getting feedback, revising, trying again and practising—this is the raw material our minds use to build, step-by-step, our own mental model for what is correct and accurate English, and also what isn't.