Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentaries for the films for Day 2 session 4

1 Working on pronunciation details (2m 51s)

The class had been practising naming a few objects: a rod, a marker, an eraser.

Notice that the work the students had done on the /r/ sound—notoriously difficult for Japanese speakers—is paying off. Students can't reliably say an alien sound like this every time after just a few hours, but the teacher, Don Cherry, could now correct a mistake with just a movement of his mouth. Notice too how Don works on /z/. These are typical examples of Silent Way micro-pronunciation lessons.

By now the students were gaining more awareness of, and control over, English pronunciation, so they were able to improve their pronunciation of these phrases with less help from Don. His way of teaching is designed to foster this kind of internal growth, so that the students can, in time, become confident, independent, autonomous users of English.

2 Describing objects on a table (3m 5s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, had introduced a few objects—some rods, a marker, an eraser, a key—and the class had worked on the pronunciation of these words.

In this film two students practised describing what they saw in front of them. Notice how Don varied the order so that their practise didn't become repetition. And notice how the rest of the class were involved and working too at the same time.

Notice how Don wove into the work with the second student, a micro-pronunciation lesson on the difficult <r> sound in the word 'rod'. Although she managed to improve her pronunciation of this sound, she had more work to do in the days to come.

Despite the years of English these students have had at school, they found it astonishingly difficult to create a simple sentence naming the few familiar objects they saw in front of them. These words had already been introduced into the lesson and practised, so vocabulary was not the problem—what was lacking was simply the skill to produce a fluid English sentence about such a simple situation. That's why Don made the students practise this skill.

Don uses objects in front of the class so that everyone can be sure that what the students are saying corresponds exactly to what they are thinking, since this is the only way to make sure that their use of the language is accurate.

3 Pointing on the rectangle chart as a window into students' minds (3m 44s)

The class had been working on talking about a group of objects on the table and the teacher, Don Cherry, decided to vary their practice by adding a new object: his wallet.

But did everyone know how this word should be pronounced?

So Don handed the pointer to a student and invited her to try to point its sequence of sounds on the sound colour-rectangle chart.

This kind of work makes visible students' conception of the way a word should be pronounced. If students have the wrong sequence of sounds in their minds, their pronunciation will be poor. And we don't want students practising saying things badly. We all know the saying: *Practice makes permanent*.

So it's a good idea to get students to point words on the sound-colour rectangle chart and give them feedback.

4 Counting syllables (4m 5s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, made the students aware of the importance of knowing how many syllables there are in a word and where the stress should be placed.

Notice that Don didn't offer any explanation or teacher talk. He started with words they already knew and showed them a couple of examples and then got them to experiment with the word 'another'.

Being aware of the number of beats in an English word and where the stress should be placed is a fundamental aspect of English pronunciation. By providing the students with some ways of working on this—clapping and using Cuisenaire rods—Don was giving them tools that they could use during the rest of the course.

5 Introducing 'virtual words': the word 'on' (4m 30s)

The class had been talking about a group of objects: a marker, an eraser, a rod, a key and a wallet.

The teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the word ‘on’ by pointing to its sequence of sounds on the sound-colour rectangle chart and made the phrase: ‘on a brown table’.

The word ‘on’ wasn’t one of the words on the word chart he was using, and he wasn’t sure the students had recognised it. So he asked a couple of students to ‘write’ it on the wall. This revealed that they were confusing ‘on’ with ‘an’.

When we introduce a word which isn’t on one of the charts, we can assign a temporary place on the wall to that word. That way we can easily refer to it whenever we need it to make a phrase.

6 Rising to the challenge of a long sentence (1m 52s)

The class had been working on describing the colours of Cuisenaire rods. They had started with describing groups of just a few rods, but by this point in the course, the teacher, Don Cherry had built this work up into a challenge for one of his students.

Notice how the other students clapped when she finished her long sentence: a sign that they realised what a challenge this seemingly simple task had been.

The value of work like this is that students get to experience making on the fly a long sentence which corresponds to reality. Finding out that they can do this is a surprisingly motivating experience.

And once students have developed the skills involved whilst working with rods, they can easily apply them to other situations simply by substituting other nouns and adjectives.