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

1 Working on emphasis (3m 21s)

The students had been giving the teacher, Don Cherry, instructions that they wanted him to carry out. Don would obey these if, but only if, the English was correct and appropriate to the situation. This meant the students got immediate, silent, non-judgemental feedback, and they could then try again until they got him to do what they wanted.

In English the meaning and appropriateness of a sentence often depends not only on the words and grammar, but also on the emphasis given to the words. So Don had to make sure the context was clear while the students had to keep in mind what had just happened to know where to put the emphasis in the next sentence.

You'll have noticed that the second student who spoke in this clip wasn't certain of how the emphasis should be placed in these instructions and needed more attempts, in order to get more feedback. Don gave her plenty of opportunity to experiment and start to work it out for herself. And he knew that she would continue to learn as she watched the other students grappling with the same problem.

Relying on students' own mental capacities—the powers of their minds—and giving them time to experiment is a more effective way of teaching than giving rules and explanations.

2 Speeding up (1m 28s)

The class had been working on describing how many Cuisenaire rods were in each pile. In this clip, out of the blue, one student wanted to see if it was possible to shorten the sentence by taking out words.

In a Silent Way class, the teacher invites experimentation and treats any resulting mistakes as 'gifts to the class' in Gattegno's words, because we learn from them, if we

get feedback. In this film you saw how Don responded to this student's experiment: he welcomed it, gave feedback and invited her to try again, and then she said it correctly.

3 Changing old habits (3m 56s)

The class had been working on sentences like 'There are more there, than there and there'. At the start of this clip, you will see two students confidently saying variations on this sentence.

The third student, however, made a mistake and it became clear that she was confused about the meaning of the word 'there' in the phrase 'there are'. This confusion is common amongst students of English.

Notice how Don made sure she understood the meaning of 'there', indicating position, by associating it with the pointing gesture and contrasting it with 'here'. And then how he helped the student inhibit the incorrect pointing gesture when she was saying 'there are'.

You'll have noticed how hard it was for the student to stop making the incorrect pointing gesture for 'there' in the phrase 'there are' at the beginning of the sentence, even with Don's help. This is why in the Silent Way we give so much attention to the accurate use of the language and in particular the functional vocabulary.
Once habits are formed they are very difficult to rectify, so it is far more efficient to avoid them in the first place, than to try to correct them later.

4 Dispelling ambiguity: 'two' and 'too' (3m 8s)

Just before this clip, the students had been generating phrases like 'There are more there than there', or 'There are more there and there, than there' and 'There are more than two there'.

Then one student decided to try another possibility. Notice how the teacher, Don Cherry, let the students experiment, and gave them feedback until they arrived at a correct and appropriate version of the sentence.

Only at that point did Don show the correct sentence they'd arrived at by pointing it on the word chart.

You'll have noticed that Don checked whether there was confusion between the words 'two' and 'too' by pointing the sentence on the word chart. One student said 'Ah!' revealing that she had indeed confused them. Don's pointing led her to realise that she had something else to learn about the situation and the words being used to describe it.

The word charts enable a teacher to make students aware of these kinds of ambiguity very easily. Only once they are revealed can the teacher help the students to dispel them.

5 Generating alternatives (2m 45s)

A simple situation with Cuisenaire rods can be used to generate a lot of language. The students had been practising using phrases like 'there are' and 'more than'. In this film the students practised generating alternative ways of describing what they saw.

Notice that towards the end, one student's pronunciation slipped slightly below what she was capable of and this time the teacher, Don Cherry, only had to draw her attention to this because he could build on everything the class had already done in pronunciation.

The students were practising these particular aspects of English, so that they would become automatic. This is what practice is for.

6 Changing the words as the situation changes (2m 35s)

Just before this film the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the sentence 'There are fewer than two there'. But one student seemed to get locked into these words when they were no longer appropriate for the situation. Don knew he needed to get her to

change the sentence so he held up four fingers. After a few attempts she understood how to accurately express the changing situation that she saw in front of her.

You'll have seen how he gave feedback and varied the situation, so that the student encountered sufficient examples for her to work out how to say what she wanted to. And he made sure she got sufficient practice to start becoming confident with this part of English.

Making a direct connection between perception and words is a far more accurate and powerful way of learning than using any form of translation.