Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentaries for the films for Day 3 session 1

1 A word is missing—using your fingers (2m 10s)

In this film, a student was trying to get the teacher, Don Cherry, to ‘take a yellow rod’.

Notice how Don held up four fingers and she realised that she was one word short. Because he worked this way, both he and the student were able to discover that her mistake was just a slip—she was able to find within herself what was required.

Don could have given her the answer, but in that case neither she nor Don would have found out what she could do for herself. This is crucial information for a teacher.

The more students can correct themselves the more independent they will become as speakers of the language: able to judge confidently for themselves when they are speaking correctly.

2 Introducing the word ‘box’ (3m 02s)

In this film one student wanted the teacher, Don Cherry, to put a rod back in the box, but didn’t quite know how to say it.

Notice how Don showed the class the word ‘box’ using the sound-colour rectangle chart and coached the students in its pronunciation.

Notice too how he can obtain good pronunciation so efficiently now, with just a gesture or a movement of his face. As you watch the film, pay attention to how the last student to speak is so present to the pronunciation of both ‘back’ and ‘box’.

When the student initially said ‘put it back’, Don did exactly as she had asked, making the students aware of the precise meaning of the phrase and making them aware that something else was needed for the meaning the student wanted to convey.

Using Cuisenaire rods enables a teacher to make students aware of the precise meanings of words and sentences. These fine distinctions are necessary if one wants to speak a language well.

3 Practising ‘take’ and ‘put back’ (4m 57s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, invited one of the students to take his place at the table.

This enabled Don to step back into his role as ‘quality control’ on the words spoken, their pronunciation, the accuracy of the students’ instructions and of the actions that flowed from them.

The student’s name in Japanese was Saori, so the first thing that Don did was help the students to say her name in an English way ie Saori.

You’ll have noticed how Don gave feedback silently, for example: by a gesture, by pointing on a word chart, or by stopping the student carrying out the action.

4 Practising ‘the’ and ‘a’ (4m 25s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, got the students to play a game with one person giving instructions and someone else carrying them out.

The purpose of the game was for the student to practise when ’the’ or ‘a’ was appropriate. This is not a distinction that the Japanese language makes, so Don knew that the students would have to practise this aspect of English.

Notice how he insisted that the orders given were both correct English and accurate to the situation before he would allow the action to proceed. And notice how he let the students correct themselves in response to his feedback.

Don didn’t want the students to be following a ‘rule’ or inventing their own ‘rule’. He wanted them to react spontaneously and intuitively to the situation they saw in front of them, as a native English speaker would. This is why he made this a friendly race against the clock and why he got the students to play the game many times.

Making the students play this simple game meant that they had to practise this aspect of English so that it became more and more automatic.

5 Provoking awarenesses (4m 24s)

In this film the students are playing a variation on the game you've seen in previous films. In this case, they have to ask one of their colleagues to take two rods at a time.

Notice how Don acted so that the student who was working, realised what she needed to change in her sentence—he changed the situation so that it matched her incorrect version, and afterwards changed it back. In fact he went through this process twice in the course of the film.

You can hear throughout this film students saying 'Ah!' or 'Aha!' as they become aware of what they need to say. Since these are the moments when students learn, provoking them is one of a teacher's most important jobs. In this film Don provoked the necessary awarenesses by changing the situation to match the student's sentence and then changing it back.

Students can only work on one thing at a time, so whilst the student's pronunciation of the /r/ sound slipped, this was not the moment to distract her from the problem at hand by turning her attention to that. Consolidating the work on pronouncing /r/ would be best done when the student has reached a correct sentence and stablised it.

6 'Chunking' an English sentence: 'Take one of the purple rods that are there!' (3m 53s)

In a Silent Way class, the teacher works, in the moment, on whatever aspect of the language is needed, whether it is pronunciation, grammar or meaning. You'll see the teacher, Don Cherry, working in this way in this film.

Notice how Don used his fingers to 'hold' the words and to remind the students to make the /z/ sound at the end of 'rods'; and how he used his fingers, in groups, to show how the sentence should be 'chunked'.

You'll have noticed how Don used the pointing gesture to reinforce the meaning of 'there' in the sentence, and how he made sure that the students got the timing of the gesture right.

7 The difference between 'one' and 'ones' (1m 59s)

The students had been working with Cuisenaire rods and words like 'take' and 'put'. The teacher, Don Cherry, noticed that when the students were working on more complicated sentences, some of them made mistakes with the words 'one' and 'ones'.

So he gave them some practice on this with a very simple situation.

Don knew that his students needed plenty of precise experience using the small, hard to translate function words like 'one' and 'ones'. And no explanations were necessary because the situation and his actions were clear and unambiguous.

8 Practising the language so that it starts to flow (1m 55s)

The class had been working on giving instructions like 'Take one of the purple rods'. The teacher, Don Cherry, knew that although they had worked on this before, they still needed more practice and feedback, until this part of English flowed more automatically for them.

Because everything was visible to everyone and the situation was tangible and unambiguous, Don needed no explanation or 'teacher talk' to give feedback and reinforce the connection between the words and the meaning in this situation. As students experience these connections they get more and more familiar with how the language uses these small, hard to translate, words.

9 An efficient way of correcting (1m 27s)

The students had already worked on the differences between ‘the’ and ‘a’, but these subtleties can’t be learned at one sitting, especially since the Japanese language doesn’t make this distinction.

In this film, you will see how the teacher, Don Cherry, made the difference clear by changing the situation. The student was then able to correct herself.

This was a far more effective and efficient way of correcting than any explanation Don could have given—the whole process took 30 seconds and was very simple. And since everyone in the class could see and hear what was happening they all got the chance to learn.

10 ‘The group’ or ‘a member of the group’ (1m 53s)

In this film, you’ll see the teacher, Don Cherry, working with the students on phrases like ‘one’, ‘another’, ‘the other’. The students had met these phrases before but Don knew they needed more practice using them in different situations if they were to become really confident speakers of English.

Cuisenaire rods are useful for working on how a language expresses all types of relationships.

This way of working minimises vocabulary making the focus 100% on the language skills being worked on. And these skills, once mastered, will stand the students in good stead whenever they use English.

11 ‘Or …’ (3m 16s)

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, gave the students more practice describing situations made with Cuisenaire rods. He combined getting the class to generate alternatives to describe the situations they could see with work on pronunciation.

He knew that the students needed lots of practice to make these skills automatic. It is not enough to teach these kinds of things: what is taught is not the same as what is learnt .

Towards the end of the clip one student mispronounced the word ‘of’. This was almost certainly because earlier in the lesson, she had worked on saying the phrase ‘one of’ and had practised using the ‘n’ sound to join these two words together.

Don used his fingers to make her aware of the mistake and then left her to correct it herself.

12 ‘Give me …’ (3m 11s)

The teacher, Don Cherry, started by getting everyone to put their hand out in a gesture which meant ‘give me’. He knew that the students would know this piece of vocabulary, and sure enough one student started the ball rolling with her request.

Then all the students got a chance to try, with Don giving feedback on what they said, whether pronunciation, grammar or appropriateness to the situation.

In the Silent Way, students get feedback sentence by sentence. Their sentences need to be grammatically correct **and** accurate to the reality of the situation **and** properly pronounced for the teacher to accept them.

13 Intonation and sentence stress (2m 24s)

In this film you’ll see how the teacher, Don Cherry, coached the students to get the right intonation pattern and sentence stress for an exchange of questions:

‘How many rods do you have?’
‘How many do **you** have?’

Intonation and sentence stress are essential parts of English, so it is important that students practise these.

You'll have noticed that Don gave no explanation of the differences, nor did he say the questions himself. He simply gave the students clues through gesture and tapping. And then he gave them feedback on their attempts.