Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentary for the films for Day 3 session 2

1 Pronouncing the word ‘who’

Everyone in the class had some Cuisenaire rods in their hands. They’d been practising saying things like ‘There are more of yours than mine’.

Notice how the teacher, Don Cherry, introduced the word ‘who’ by pointing to its sounds on the rectangle chart. The students experimented with saying this word—but were unable to escape from the Japanese pronunciation [ɸu] into the English pronunciation [hu:].

After the students had experimented, Don said the word himself, albeit only once. He made sure he had their full attention on what he was doing with his mouth when he said it.

Most people’s ears are an unreliable guide to a foreign language. So focusing on how students use their lips, tongue, mouth and breath and then giving feedback is a better route to a good accent than asking them to ‘listen and repeat’.

This is the only time in twelve hours of teaching that Don had given the students an aural model for a word. Because this was such an unusual thing for him to do in this course, and he had just refused to accept many of the students’ attempts, they were now primed to listen and watch very carefully so that they became aware of the difference between the Japanese [ɸu] and the English [hu:].

2. Matching the melody to the situation

Well-pronounced words on their own are not enough to sound English. The melody of a sentence carries much of the meaning that the speaker intends. In this film, the teacher, Don Cherry started by making it obvious that he had far more Cuisenaire rods

than anyone else, and then he coached the students to say the sentence ‘There are more of your rods than mine’ in a way that reflected this.

You’ll have noticed that Don didn’t say the sentence and ask the students to simply repeat it. X 3 He used whistling, nonsense syllables and tapping on the word chart so that the students started to realise where they needed to put the emphasis and how they needed to modulate their voices to get the emotion he was adding to the sentence.

3. That is correct but it isn’t true! (2m 20s)

The students were talking about how many Cuisenaire rods they each had. They’d used phrases like: ‘There are more of mine than yours’ and ‘I have more rods than you’. Then someone came up with ‘I have fewer rods than you’.

Another student picked up this new phrase and tried to use it. The teacher, Don Cherry, helped her get the sentence correct, but then he pointed out that what she had said wasn’t true!

With tangible objects, everyone is immediately certain of the truth of the situation. So the teacher can avoid explanations or ‘teacher talk’, which may or may not be understood, and instead rely on people’s own perception to connect words and truth.

4. Distributing energy in a sentence

The situation was that one person had a red rod and the other, two red rods. In this clip, one student describes the situation with the correct and accurate sentence ‘She has more rods than she does’. Then the teacher, Don Cherry, coached her to place the emphasis in the right places so that it sounded English.

Learning how English distributes energy in a sentence is an important part of learning the language.

5. Talking from your own personal perspective

The students had been working with Cuisenaire rods and two students ended up with one red rod each. The teacher, Don Cherry, invited the other members of the class to describe the situation and helped them to two different ways of saying the same thing.

Then he invited the two students themselves to start with the word ‘we’.

You’ll have noticed that Don took care to stop the rest of the class joining in with ‘We each have one rod’, since this sentence would not have been true for them.

Making sure students talk accurately from their personal perspective is important in forging that link between meaning and the language used.

6. Alternative ways of saying something (1m 37s)

The students had been comparing how many Cuisenaire rods they each had. In this film one student generates two alternative ways of saying the same thing.

And the teacher, Don Cherry, coaches the students to say these alternatives with authentic English emphasis.

The ability to generate alternative ways of talking about a situation is a characteristic of native speakers. Working with rods helps students become aware of these alternatives: the situation remains the same—they can see it—but they experience using different words to describe it.