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

1 Consolidating what has been worked on

In this film we see a student who has had at least six years of high school English struggling to talk about the simplest of situations. The teacher, Don Cherry, knows that to speak English fluently, something quite different from what she did at school is required: practice on the simple things.

We don't master the skill of speaking a language straightaway. Only once we have practised something sufficiently are we ready for the next step.

It's a key part of a teacher's job to judge, moment by moment, when to consolidate with more practice and when to push ahead. In the subsequent films you will see how Don gradually expanded the work whilst at the same time, consolidating everything they had worked on so far.

2 Immediate feedback

In this film, the students make a number of small mistakes—a word omitted, the plural /s/ missed off, a mispronunciation.

Notice how the teacher, Don Cherry, ensured the sentences were corrected immediately. He knows that slips of this kind are inevitable while students are learning and that his job is to give the feedback they need and get them to try again.

Don doesn't accept the students' sentences until they are correct and as well-pronounced as possible. His feedback is immediate, and efficient. And his way of working doesn't discourage the students.

3 ‘An orange one’

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, worked with the students on the phrase ‘an orange one’. The work had started the day before. Here’s what happened then.

You’ll have noticed that Don gave no explanation or rule for either the grammar or pronunciation of this phrase. He simply made sure the students experienced what is needed to say it correctly.

The next day, the issue cropped up again. Notice how Don was able to intervene less this time, because he was able to build on what the class had done the day before.

Mistakes can be put on a spectrum running from ‘not knowing what to say’ to ‘just a slip of the tongue’. In this case the mistake was slightly more than ‘just a slip of the tongue’; the student immediately recognised the correct sentence when her colleague said it, and was able to use it.

4 ‘Two orange ones’

The students had been practising using the /n/ sound to join together the words ‘an’ and ‘orange’ to say ‘an orange one’. In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, then added a second orange rod to the situation.

When one student tried to describe what she now saw, with the sentence ‘A blue rod and two orange ones’, she mistakenly retained the /n/ sound. Notice how Don coached her to say it correctly.

This film shows another way that pointing on the word charts can be used to improve students’ pronunciation. You’ll have noticed how rapid the process was, how he didn’t need to give any explanation, how he didn’t say the phrase himself. Just a rapid sliding motion of his pointer was sufficient.

5 Where does ‘and’ go in a sentence?

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, used gestures to make sure the students were aware of where to put the word ‘and’ in a list.

Notice how he used his hands to show the students how to chunk the sentence and then got them to practise so that they could say it more fluently.

This is typical of how a Silent Way teacher works: he identifies specific things the students need to improve on, he creates ways for the students to work on those problems, and then he coaches them and gives them feedback.

6 Working on intonation

The teacher, Don Cherry, had introduced the sentence ‘Which is longer, a blue rod or a green one?’. In this film, he coached the students in how to say it with English intonation.

Notice how Don didn’t say the sentence himself. He used whistling and gesture to illustrate how they should say it and then he gave feedback on their attempts. Working this way allowed him to isolate what he wanted the students to work on.

Intonation is essential if one wants to sound English. By showing the intonation pattern, isolated from the words and then getting them to practise, Don was making the students more aware of this aspect of English speech.

7 Everybody is working

The students had been working on comparisons using the words ‘longer’ and ‘shorter’. In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, had set up a simple situation with Cuisenaire rods and invited one of the students to describe what she saw.

Notice to what extent she had to mobilise herself to generate and say her sentence. And notice too that the other students were also doing this; they were practising silently while she was speaking.

This is another characteristic of the Silent Way—even if only one person is speaking everyone else remains involved. And they **all** learn from the feedback that **she** gets.

8 Pronunciation is a physical skill

Not only do students need to have the right mental image of the sounds they are trying to make, they also need to practise the muscular actions and coordinations required to say these sequences of sounds fluently.

In this film you'll see the students practising these physical skills in just the same way that an athlete or dancer or musician would.

Once the students had practised saying the sentence, the teacher, Don Cherry, then made sure that they had made a visceral connection between the reality of the Cuisenaire rods they chose and the sentence they were saying. Actually holding the rods forced the students to be accurate.

9 How little does a teacher need to do?

The students had been working on comparing which rods were longer and which were shorter.

Notice that the teacher, Don Cherry, did nothing except utter one word and show the student who was working that what she had said wasn't true.

Ask yourself what the other students learned from watching her work.
And ask yourself, too, why the students remain mobilised throughout this course.

10 Comparisons: feedback and practice

Notice in this film how the teacher, Don Cherry, got the students to practise comparisons, making sure that even the smallest mistakes were corrected. Notice too how he gave the students feedback.

You'll have noticed how little Don needed to do for the student to correct herself and then he got everyone to join in the practice that followed.

11 But if ...

In this film the teacher, Don Cherry, still working on comparisons, created a situation calling for the students to use the words 'but if'.

Throughout this series of films you'll have seen how Don gradually expanded the range of language the students used in class. This session was about comparisons but he wasn't following a preset series of exercises. He was responding, in the moment, to what the students did and at the same time keeping the class moving forward at the fastest pace they could reasonably manage.