Teaching English the Silent Way transcript of commentary for the films for Day 3 session 4

1. Escaping from your native language (3m 48s)

Just before this film the students had been getting the teacher, Don Cherry, to put different rods on top of each other. The students had been saying their instructions well, until this student tried to get him to put a yellow rod on a light green one.

Her mistakes are characteristic of how her native language, Japanese, works. Notice how hard it was for her to start the sentence with the word 'Put'. Instead she wanted to start with 'Yellow rod'. And notice how she omitted the word 'a' several times.

Our native tongue is so deeply ingrained in us that it is hard to escape its grip. It is possible that this student never worked on this construction while she was at school, so she can only guess how this might be said in English. Her translating from Japanese would probably give her a sentence like the one she started out saying.

Don always tries to work in a way that bypasses students' native language. Through feedback and practice he tries to forge a direct link between the meaning and the English words they need to say. This takes time but it's the key to developing facility in any new language.

2. Why do we need '*it*'?

Immediately following the previous film, another student tried to get the teacher, Don Cherry, to put the yellow rod on the light green one. Notice how she missed out the word 'it', perhaps because the Japanese language rarely uses pronouns. And notice, too, the pin-pointed feedback that Don gave her.

The simple act of pointing to the yellow rod allowed her to realise the function of the word 'it' in the sentence.

Once she arrived at the correct sentence Don gave her the chance to say it again, which she did more confidently.

3. Pronouncing ‘off of’

The phrase, ‘off of’, common in American English, is not an easy one for most students to say in an English way. The vowel in the word ‘of’ is a very short, indistinct, low energy sound in this context. In fact it is the smallest sound that can still be heard as a distinct syllable.

Don had worked with the students on saying these reduced vowels on the first day of the course, and you can hear how much this work was paying off in this film, which shows them managing to say ‘off of the table’ quite well.

Reduced vowels are the most common sounds in the English language—and many students don’t know how to produce them and therefore never sound English.

Now we can see that the half hour Don spent on this on the first day was time well spent.

4 A light green rod is much shorter than a brown one, but …

In this film, you will see the students continuing to practice comparing the length of different rods.

Notice how the teacher, Don Cherry, was careful to act out the changing situation, in time with the students saying their sentence. By making sure the words and the actions stayed in sync, Don was reinforcing the direct connection between words and meaning.

After a few minutes’ work on this, Don then started to make the situation more complex.

Students enjoy challenges like this.

Don would probably have then worked to polish the last student's sentence. But the class had almost reached the end of the session and it was time for a break.

But some of the students were too excited by what they had been working on and skipped the break to do some more impromptu work, as you will see in the next film.

5 Students take over the lesson

In this film, you'll see the start of what was supposed to be the break at about half past four at the end of the third day of the course. But two students were excited about what they had been working on and wanted to continue, and the others stayed to watch and cheer.

It's evident that these students enjoyed talking in English about the reality they saw in front of them—even though it involved only Cuisenaire rods.