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The Silent Way materials and what's behind them

Donald Cherry
Hokuriku University

Many language teachers are familiar to some degree with the teaching materials created for, or popularized by, the Silent Way teaching approach. Perhaps most familiar are the rods. Originally called "Cuisenaire rods," now also marketed as "Algebricks," they are plastic rods of various lengths and colors, the longest being the orange ones at 1x1x10 centimeters, followed by 9-centimeter-long blue rods, then in descending order of length, browns, blacks, dark greens, yellows, purples, light greens, and finally reds at 1x1x2 centimeters. There are also 1-centimeter, white cubes.

In addition to the rods, there are several 42x57-centimeter, cardboard wall charts. One of these is the sound-color chart, on which are printed a number of rectangles of different colors, each color representing a phoneme of the language being studied. There are also the "fidel" charts, which constitute an expanded version of the sound-color chart. On these charts are printed all the possible spellings for each phoneme in the color of that phoneme. Finally, there are the word charts, on which are printed a functional vocabulary of the language. These words are printed in colors corresponding to the other charts, indicating the pronunciation of each word. Another tool in the Silent Way arsenal is the metal, collapsible pointer used to point at these charts.

While the materials of the Silent Way may be familiar to many language teachers, the tenets and techniques of approach itself do not seem to be as well known. Consequently, the use of Silent Way materials is often incorrectly assumed to be equivalent to the practice of the Silent Way approach. In the absence of a more thorough understanding of the Silent Way, and given the unique, rather unusual nature of the materials themselves, this is not surprising.

This paper is written to provide the reader with some insight into the techniques and principles of the Silent Way approach. We will begin with a look at two separate, unrelated language classes. The students in each class are the same—10 so-called "false beginners." The first language for all the students is Japanese.

Ann's class

The students are seated close to each other on chairs arranged in a horseshoe pattern. Ann walks into the classroom, introduces herself and puts an English sound-color chart on the blackboard. She smiles and says, "Today, we're going to begin by practicing the sounds of English. Please listen, then repeat after me." She points at one of the colored rectangles with a metal pointer and says, "ahhh." The students all say "ahhh." "Very good," Ann says. She points to the next color and says the sound for that one. The students repeat this sound. This continues for all the rectangles on the chart. Sometimes, if the sound is difficult, Ann has the students say it more than once.

Ann then puts English word chart #1 next to the sound-color chart. "Now," she says, "We're going to practice saying some words." She points to the word "rod" on the chart and says it. The students don't hesitate; they all repeat the word. Ann says it again, stressing the initial "r" sound. The students repeat the word. "Very good," Ann says. Ann and the students go on to read the rest of the words on the chart, reading some words only once and others, those with more difficult sounds, as many as three times.

"Now," Ann says, "let's practice sentences." She has the class sit around several desks put together. She spreads a box of rods across the desks. She sits at a desk up front, by the blackboard. She picks up a blue rod. "Please pick up a blue rod," she says. The students do. "A blue rod," Ann says. The students repeat this. She picks up two blue rods and a green one. "Two blue rods and a green one," she says. The students pick up the appropriate rods and repeat this utterance.

The lesson continues in this vein. Following Ann's lead, the students eventually produce more complicated sentences, such as "Put the blue rod here," and "Take a green rod and put it there."

Beth's class

The students are seated close to each other on chairs arranged in a horseshoe pattern. In front of them is a small desk. Beth walks into the classroom holding a paper bag. She smiles mischievously at the students. She takes two brown cups and one red one out of a paper bag and places them on the desk. She waits a beat, then takes five spoons out of the bag. She puts one of them in one of the brown cups, one in the red cup, and the other three in the other brown cup, pausing after each cup. She stops, looks at the students, and smiles again, like a magician about to perform some trick.

Beth points to each object on the desk, making a show of counting the three spoons in one of the brown cups. When she's done, she faces the students and waits a beat. Looking from face to face, Beth seems to be checking with the students to see if it is okay for her to continue.

Now, Beth places a large clipboard in front of the objects so the students cannot see them. She takes one of the spoons out of one of the brown cups. She takes the clipboard away. Facing the students, Beth waits for about twenty seconds. The students say nothing. "What did I do?" Beth asks them. After about another ten seconds, a student begins, "Take spoon from cup." Beth nods and motions for the class to join in. They all begin, "Take . . ." but Beth stops them. She makes the gesture common among language teachers to indicate past tense--she waves her hand back over her shoulder. Some students say "took." Beth nods and gestures for them to begin again. When they begin, Beth suddenly holds her hands up before her, nine fingers splayed and extended straight up. As the students say, "took," Beth the folds down the second finger from the students' left. The students note this and continue. When they say "spoon," Beth moves similarly the fourth finger from their left; when they say "from," Beth doesn't move any finger; and when they say "spoon," she folds down the finger all the way to the students' right.

There is silence now. Beth waits patiently, keeping her hands up. After about half a minute, she gestures for the students to go again. They say "took," and Beth again folds down the second finger from their left. She stops them, raises her eyebrows and wiggles the finger all the way to their left. The students say nothing. Beth points to herself. A student says "Me." Beth feigns shock, and the students laugh nervously. Somebody says, "You." Beth nods and they begin the sentence again. "You took spoon . . ." The students see that Beth has folded down the first, second, and fourth finger from their left. They stop. Beth wiggles the third finger and waits. After a while, somebody says "the." Beth shakes her head "no." Somebody says "a." Beth nods and gestures for the students to start at the beginning. "You took a spoon . . ."

Here Beth stops them. She holds the finger indicating spoon and makes a face. She gestures for the students to say this word again. They do, and Beth gestures for them to continue individually as she walks among the students listening closely to them one at a time. She finds an acceptable pronunciation and gestures for the students to listen to this. She begins to elicit individual pronunciations. If acceptable, she nods, sometimes gesturing for the student to say the word again. If the

pronunciation is not acceptable, she waits for another attempt or two. Often this is enough for the student to improve the pronunciation. One student says the word three times, correctly the first time, incorrectly the second, and correctly the third. Beth pairs this student with another and tells them to continue practicing.

Beth sometimes gives instructions in Japanese. She tells one student to get rid of the vowel sound between the "s" and "p." It works. She tells this to another student with the same problem but it doesn't work. Beth has the student say the word again, slowly. As the student says the word, Beth points at the finger representing the word and slowly moves down the length of the finger. Beth returns to the tip of the finger again and gestures for the student to begin the word again. The student begins, "soo . . .," but Beth stops him and directs his attention to the fact that she is still pointing at the very tip of the finger, the very beginning of the word. She asks him to start again, and indicates that he should watch her finger. After some confusion, the student utters "sssss," staying with the "s" sound and not adding the following vowel sound. Now Beth skips over the part of the finger that seems to contain the vowel sound between the "s" and "p," and begins halfway down. The student says "oon." Beth points a little bit above that halfway mark, and he says "poon." Now Beth points to the tip of the finger again, then skips down to a halfway mark. The student says something closer to "spoon." She works with him a little longer.

The lesson continues. The students complete the sentence they were working on—"You took a spoon out of a brown cup." Beth works on phrasing by grouping her fingers together and she works on rhythm by having the students clap their hands to a beat she models for them. The students move on, eventually working less on sounds and more on longer utterances, such as "You took one of the spoons out of the red cup and put it in one of the brown cups." The sentences are created by the students in response to Beth's, and later their, manipulation of the spoons and cups on the desk.

Some Silent Way ideas

As may already be apparent, one of these lessons is not a Silent Way lesson and the other is. Ann, though using many of the Silent Way materials, is not teaching here in the spirit of the Silent Way. Beth, on the other hand, uses no Silent Way materials yet is clearly teaching according to the underlying principles of the approach. This is not to say that Beth's lesson is a model Silent Way lesson, or that there are absolutely no aspects of the Silent Way in Ann's lesson. Nor is it to say that one lesson necessarily

does a better job of achieving its objectives than the other. My purpose in describing these two very different lessons is simply to give a point of reference for the following discussion of some Silent Way principles.

It should be noted that the principles presented and discussed here as Silent Way principles are certainly not unique to the Silent Way and can also be seen, perhaps in slightly different form, in any of the teaching approaches. It should also be remembered that the Silent Way, like any teaching approach, is open to different interpretations.

¤ **Language is not learned by repeating after a model.** Students need to practice the sound themselves. They need to learn to listen to their own voice and develop their own **inner criteria** for correctness. They need to trust and be responsible for their own production of the target language.

Sounds can be described quite well visually. We see this in Beth's lesson, when she gestures to different parts of her finger to elicit an acceptable pronunciation of "spoon." The colors on the Silent Way wall charts provide an excellent visual representation of sounds, an aspect of the charts that Ann largely ignores. The teacher may also, without modelling, describe verbally how to produce a given sound, as when Beth told the student to get rid of the sound between the "s" and "p" in "spoon."

Sounds may occasionally be modelled in the Silent Way but this would generally be when all else failed and the model would probably be given only once. The important thing is to get the student speaking, working toward some target sound, and give them sufficient feedback on their progress. We see this feedback in Beth's lesson in many forms. In its simplest form, she simply nods "yes" or shakes her head "no." She also gives feedback through more complicated gestures and through some directions she gives to one student in the student's native language. We see almost no feedback in Ann's lesson.

¤ In addition to freeing the teacher to listen more carefully to the students and provide helpful feedback, **the teacher's silence is a tool that fosters student autonomy.** Students can adapt fairly quickly to a given teaching style. In Ann's lesson, for example, when she reads the first word from the word chart, the students know from their previous work with the sound-color chart that they are supposed to repeat this word. In Beth's classroom, as the lesson progresses, the students gradually begin to fill

the periods of silence Beth provides for them with their own ventures into the target language. In the process, they are becoming more active, autonomous learners.

This teacher silence also forces the students to become more attentive. Their attention in Beth's lesson is further peaked by the teacher's mischievous smiles and slightly theatrical demeanor. The students need to be very attentive if the teacher is to **force awarenesses**, an essential component of a Silent Way lesson. Different kinds of awarenesses can be forced in different ways. Ann's rather dramatic presentation of the cups and spoons is one simple example. Another, less theatrical but perhaps as dramatic an example is Beth's use of her fingers to represent all the words needed for the sentence the student was trying to say.

Forcing awarenesses is essential, according to the Silent Way, because **only awareness is educable**. Beth goes to great lengths with at least one student to force the awarenesses necessary for him to pronounce "spoon." First she indicates by her facial expression that something is wrong with the student's pronunciation. He tries again and is unsuccessful. She tells him to take out the vowel sound between the "s" and the "p." He tries again and is unsuccessful. Beth then does what has been described in above, using the length of her finger to represent the length of the word and skipping over the unwanted vowel sound.

¤ A Silent Way teacher strives always for **the subordination of teaching to learning**. How can we know what to teach until we know what needs to be learned? And how can we know what needs to be learned unless we watch and listen to our students?

So we have, then, a double-feedback system. This system can be observed in Beth's lesson as the following: a student attempts a sentence--"Take spoon from cup." The teacher makes a gesture. The students begin again, this time with "took . . ." The teacher holds up nine fingers to represent the words necessary for the sentence she believes they are trying to say. She folds down the appropriate finger as the corresponding word is spoken. She wiggles a finger representing a word they haven't spoken yet. The students and teacher continue to go back and forth, working now on a sound and now on a linguistic structure, working on what becomes necessary as it becomes necessary.

¤ The vocabulary in both Ann's lesson and Beth's lesson is extremely limited. This is in keeping with the Silent Way idea of **much language and little vocabulary**, an idea

behind the creation of the word charts and their carefully selected collection of words. The idea is not to tax the student with too many words so they may focus their attention on the **functional vocabulary** of the language, where lies, according to the Silent Way, the **spirit of the language**. The language focus in Beth's lesson, for example, is one which is particularly challenging for native Japanese speakers for reasons that go to the very heart of the two languages--not the words themselves but the way the most common words go together.

It is to allow students to fully exploit this kind of limited vocabulary that rods are so often used in the Silent Way. The rods simply provide all-purpose nouns to be glued together in a million different ways by the functional vocabulary. This is essentially the same way the spoons and cups are used in Beth's lesson.

There are of course techniques within the Silent Way that can be used for the expansion of vocabulary, but the approach stresses the value of working with a small functional vocabulary, particularly for but not limited to beginning and intermediate students.

¤ The Silent Way describes **four stages of learning**. Briefly put, stage one is where the learner becomes aware that there is something to be learned. This would be when Beth first indicates that something is wrong with the pronunciation of "spoon." Stage two involves what is commonly referred to as "trial and error." Here the students begin to make stabs at pronouncing "spoon." Stage three is where the student knows what is necessary and simply needs practice. A good example of this is when the student in Beth's class says "spoon" three times, the first time correctly, the second incorrectly, and the third correctly. Beth learns from this, and from the expression on the student's face indicating he knows when he says the word correctly and when he says it incorrectly, that this student is in stage three. That is, he knows what is necessary to make the sound and he can tell when he has succeeded or failed, but he needs further practice. It is for this purpose that Beth has the student continue working with another student while she moves on to those still in stage two.

Stage four would be where the pronunciation of "spoon" were completely automatic and required almost no energy on the student's part. Beth is the only one in this classroom who has reached this stage regarding the pronunciation of "spoon." Many of the students may be at stage four in being able to call up the English words "cup" and "spoon" for the objects on the desk.

¤ During her class, Beth doesn't offer her students anything that might be commonly thought of as **praise**. She doesn't say things like "very good" or "nice try." She doesn't give them reassuring pats on the back. She offers no particularly encouraging gestures or facial expressions. Generally speaking, the Silent Way sees this kind of praise, as well as any kind of criticism, as unnecessary and interfering with the student's development of inner criteria, or self-reliance.

Conclusion

In the first half of this paper, I described parts of two separate, unrelated lessons. It is always difficult to adequately and accurately describe everything that happens during a class but hopefully the reader was able to get some sense of what occurred. I purposely included one teacher teaching a non-Silent Way class using Silent Way materials and another teacher teaching a Silent Way class without any Silent Way materials. I did this so that the principles of this particular teaching approach could be isolated and seen more clearly, free of the distractions of the materials themselves. In short, Silent Way is not the Silent Way materials; and the Silent Way materials are not the Silent Way. It is hoped that this paper has succeeded in revealing a little of the theory behind the Silent Way.

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