

# THE SILENT WAY:

## Another Method

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The field of language acquisition has been and probably always will be deluged with proponents of "the Method." Everyone seems to have stumbled on THE WAY to teach English as a second language. It often happens that when a method is challenged, the challenger has a method which he feels is superior to the old one. This is a source of confusion to the individual who attempts to keep up with the latest techniques and methods in the field. As soon as one method is accepted, another springs to view with its own dogmatic followers. Clifford H. Prator says

*"...no one yet has proposed a new method, fully formulated, coherent, and sufficiently in harmony with generative-transformational linguistics and cognitive psychology to win wide acceptance." (3:4)*

The purpose of this paper is to describe one of the new methods known as the "Silent Way" and also to relate some feelings of instructors who have used this method in the classroom.

Caleb Gattegno, father of the Silent Way, defines the word "silent" to mean

*"...a transfer of the responsibility of the use of the language from the teacher to the student." (2:13)*

This is in essence what the Silent Way is all about. The burden of learning is on the student. The teacher is a model. The teacher uses fewer and fewer words, while the student uses more and more. It is also letting the student learn while the teacher stops interfering or sidetracking.

In his method, Gattegno makes a few assumptions. First, to be successful, you must start with people who already possess some sort of verbal consciousness, that is, they are already aware of language as having structure. The second assumption is that the participants must have an unconscious readiness to use words to describe a situation. The final assumption is that the participants know how to associate definite words with different circumstances. (2:14)

The Silent Way uses as few nouns as possible; in fact, for all initial efforts, only one noun is used. This means a very minimal vocabulary, stressing instead melody, natural expression, variations on one theme, and after the introduction of writing, the dictation of sentences spoken only once with natural intonation.

This method also includes the use of visual charts which are color-coded to convey phonetic equivalents of words. So, the early oral work is quickly followed by written work using the charts as visual codes.

Learners are not asked to learn a list of words by heart, as in some other methods. The memorization is replaced by a security in recognition and familiarity of the utterances as given by the teacher.

One of the biggest pluses in this method is that students are allowed to try, to make mistakes, to correct themselves and each other in order to develop their own rule for what is correct and what isn't. The teacher is still the model and the whole burden of correction is not his responsibility. Instead, the teacher is required to plan the lessons so that the student will develop a personal set of criteria for correctness.

Materials that have been developed as part of the Silent Way include:

1. A set of colored rods of various shapes and sizes.
2. A set of wall charts which show functional vocabulary and additional words.
3. A pointer to use with the charts.
4. The color-coded visual charts.
5. Recorded tapes, drawings, pictures, and a set of worksheets.
6. Transparencies.
7. Three textbooks.
8. Films.

Gattegno feels that the materials are acceptable to all students seven years of age or older and that the only adaptations need to

be made with the reading text. He also proposes that time requirements of one hour per day for one school year are sufficient for mastery of the language.

Following is a description of a typical first lesson in a foreign language. The class would be of any age group with about ten students.

1. The teacher (T.) enters, carrying only a box of colored rods.

2. T. opens the box, takes out one rod and shows it to the class while saying the word for colored rod in the language to be learned.

3. T. puts it down in silence and picks up another rod of another color and says the word for that colored rod, going through seven or eight different colored rods without asking for any response.

4. Without a sound, T. picks up a rod and mimes for the response. T. waits for the response, then gives the response.

5. T. repeats step 4 again and invariably the whole class responds.

6. T. introduces the names for four or five of the colors, repeating steps 4 and 5.

7. T. motions two students to step to the front of the room near him. T. turns to one and says in the language to be learned, "Take a blue rod."

8. T. says the utterance again while placing the student's hand on the correct rod and then making him take the rod.

9. T. repeats the utterance for the above step several times with both students.

10. T. changes places with one student and indicates the student should now utter the words first. (Someone in the class should guess. If not, T. goes back to step 7 and repeats.)

With the successful completion of step 10, the teacher has conveyed an agreement with the students that the rules of the game are being observed.

Gattegno proposes that the use of the rods help do the following:

1. Avoid the vernacular.

2. Create simple linguistic situations that are under the complete control of the teacher.

3. Passes on to the learners the responsibility for the utterance of the descriptions shown or the actions performed.

4. Lets the teacher concentrate on what the students say and how they are saying it, drawing their attention to the differences in pronunciation and flow of words.

5. Generates a serious gamelike situation in which the rules are agreed upon by giving meaning to the gestures of the teacher and his mime.

6. Permits almost from the start a switch from the lone voice of the teacher using the language to a number of voices using it.

7. Provides the support of perception and action to the intellectual guess of what the noises may mean.

8. Provides durations of spontaneous speech. (2:47)

Ten teachers who have used the Silent Way extensively in teaching Spanish, German, Cantonese, Italian, Russian, and English report that students who were taught with this method were less self-conscious, showed more pride in their progress made through trial and error, broke bad habits acquired in previous language learning attempts, and had more motivation to continue in the language. These teachers also report that the strongest interaction was among class members rather than between the class and the teacher. (2:98)

My first introduction to the Silent Way was very casual and quite recent. In April, 1977, I participated in the annual TESOL convention in Florida. While there I met many ESL instructors from various parts of the world. The name Gattegno and the Silent Way were mentioned several times. The vague descriptions I received of both were that the former was an aged Egyptian and the latter mostly focused on the use of cuisiniere rods, which only led to more confusion as I thought those rods were used solely in math.

Research into both Gattegno and his Silent Way has helped me to understand that the Silent Way is another good ESL method, but we must agree with Prator that it is not the answer to all language learning problems. It is interesting, it is novel, and it sounds like fun. I think I would be willing to try it, but I am reluctant to agree that it is the only method.