

Fourth Week:

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Teaching approaches: what is the silent way?

Introduction

Silent Way originated in the early 1970s and was the brainchild of the late Caleb Gattegno. The last line of Benjamin Franklin's famous quote about teaching and learning can be said to lie at the heart of Silent Way. The three basic tenets of the approach are that learning is facilitated if the learner discovers rather than remembers or repeats, that learning is aided by physical objects, and that problem-solving is central to learning. The use of the word "silent" is also significant, as Silent Way is based on the premise that the teacher should be as silent as possible in the classroom in order to encourage the learner to produce as much language as possible. As far as the presentation of language is concerned, Silent Way adopts a highly structural approach, with language taught through sentences in a sequence based on grammatical complexity, described by some as a "building-block" approach.

The structural patterns of the target language are presented by the teacher and the grammar "rules" of the language are learnt inductively by the learners. Cuisenaire rods (small coloured blocks of varying sizes originally intended for the teaching of mathematics) are often used to illustrate meaning (the physical objects mentioned above). New items are added sparingly by the teacher and learners take these as far as they can in their communication until the need for the next new item becomes apparent. The teacher then provides this new item by modelling it very clearly just once. The learners are then left to use the new item and to incorporate it into their existing stock of language, again taking it as far as they can until the next item is needed and so on.

This is perhaps best illustrated by an example. Let us say that the teacher has introduced the idea of pronouns as in "Give me a green rod". The class will then use this structure until it is clearly assimilated, using, in addition, all the other colours. One member of the class would now like to ask another to pass a rod to a third student but she does not know the word "her", only that it cannot be "me". At this point the teacher would intervene and supply the new item: "Give her the green rod" and the learners will continue until the next new item is needed (probably "him"). This minimalist role of the teacher has led some critics to describe Silent Way teachers as "aloof" and, indeed, this apparently excessive degree of self-restraint can be seen as such. The prominent writer on language teaching, Earl W. Stevick, has described the role of the teacher in Silent Way as "Teach, test, get out of the way". The apparent lack of real communication in the approach has also been criticized, with some arguing that it is difficult to take the approach beyond the very basics of the language, with only highly motivated learners being able to generate real communication from

the rigid structures illustrated by the rods. The fact that, for logistical reasons, it is limited to relatively small groups of learners is also seen as a weakness.

As with other methods and approaches, however, aspects of Silent Way can be observed in many lessons in the modern classroom. In the 1980s and early 90s, for example, it became fashionable in some quarters to argue that excessive "teacher talking time" was something to be discouraged. Cuisenaire rods are also popular with some teachers and can be used extremely creatively for various purposes from teaching pronunciation to story-telling. The idea of modelling a new structure or item of vocabulary just once may also have some justification as it encourages learners both to listen more carefully and then to experiment with their own production of the utterance. Lastly, the problem-solving feature of Silent Way may well prove to be its most enduring legacy as it has led indirectly both to the idea of Task-based Learning and to the widespread use of pronunciation.

Features

The Silent Way is characterized by its focus on discovery, creativity, problem solving and the use of accompanying materials. Richards and Rodgers (1986:99) summarized the method into three major features.

1. **Learning is facilitated if the learner discovers or creates.** The Silent way belongs to the tradition of teaching that favors hypothetical mode of teaching (as opposed to expository mode of teaching) in which the teacher and the learner work cooperatively to reach the educational desired goals. (cf Bruner 1966.) The learner is not a bench bound listener but an active contributor to the learning process.
2. **Learning is facilitated by accompanying (mediating) physical objects.** The Silent Way uses colorful charts and rods (cuisenaire rods) which are of varying length. They are used to introduce vocabulary (colors, numbers, adjectives, verbs) and syntax (tense, comparatives, plurals, word order ...)
3. **Learning is facilitated by problem solving involving the material to be learned.**

This can be summarized by Benjamin Franklin's words:

“Tell me and I forget
Teach me and I remember
Involve me and I learn”

A good silent way learner is a good problem solver. The teacher's role resides only in giving minimum repetitions and correction, remaining *silent* most of the times, leaving the learner struggling to solve problems about the language and get a grasp of its mechanism.

Disadvantages

- The Silent Way is often criticized of being a harsh method. The learner works in isolation and communication is lacking badly in a Silent Way classroom.

- With minimum help on the part of the teacher, the Silent Way method may put the learning itself at stake.
- The material (the rods and the charts) used in this method will certainly fail to introduce all aspects of language. Other materials will have to be introduced.

Advantages

- Learning through problem solving looks attractive especially because it fosters:
 - creativity,
 - discovery,
 - increase in intelligent potency and
 - long term memory.
- The indirect role of the teacher highlights the importance and the centrality of the learner who is responsible in figuring out and testing the hypotheses about how language works. In other words teaching is subordinated to learning

References

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problem-solving activities in language classrooms.