English Department

Method of Teaching English

Third stage

Assist. Prof. Liqaa Habeb Al-Obaydi

Techniques & Principles in Language Teaching

Chapter Five/ The Silent Way

Introduction

Although people did learn languages through the Audio-Lingual Method, and indeed the method is still practiced today, one problem with it was students' inability to readily transfer the habits they had mastered in the classroom to communicative use outside it. Furthermore, the idea that learning a language meant forming a set of habits was seriously challenged in the early 1960s. Linguist Noam Chomsky argued that language acquisition could not possibly take place through habit formation since people create and understand utterances they have never heard before. Chomsky proposed instead that speakers have a knowledge of underlying abstract rules, which allow them to understand and create novel utterances. Thus, Chomsky reasoned, language must not be considered a product of habit formation, but rather of rule formation. Accordingly, language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring. The emphasis on human cognition led to the establishment of the Cognitive Code Approach. Rather than simply being responsive to stimuli in the environment, learners were

seen to be much more actively responsible for their own learning, engaged in formulating hypotheses in order to discover the rules of the target language. Errors were inevitable and were signs that learners were actively testing their hypotheses. For a while in the early 1970s, there was great interest in applying this new Cognitive Code Approach to language teaching. Materials were developed with deductive (learners are given the rule and asked to apply it) and inductive (learners discover the rule from the examples and then practice it) grammar exercises. Gattegno looked at language learning from the perspective of the learner by studying the way babies and young children learn. He concluded that learning is a process which we initiate by ourselves by mobilizing our inner resources (our perception, awareness, cognition, imagination, intuition, creativity, etc.) to meet the challenge at hand. In the course of our learning, we integrate into ourselves whatever 'new' that we create, and use it as a stepping stone for further learning. In order to explore the Silent Way, we will observe the first day of an English class in Brazil. There are 24 secondary school students in this class. The class meets for two hours a day, three days a week.

Based on the above teacher experience, the following are the main principles that this method based upon:

1 The teacher points to five blocks of color without saying anything. The blocks of color represent the sounds of five English vowels close to the five simple vowels of Portuguese.

The teacher should start with something the students already know and build from that to the unknown. Languages share a number of features, sounds being the most basic.

2 The teacher points again to the five blocks of color. When the students say nothing, the teacher points to the first block of color and says /α/. Several students say /e/, /i/, / /, /u/ as the teacher points to the other four blocks.

Language learners are intelligent and bring with them the experience of already learning a language. The teacher should give only what help is necessary.

3 The teacher does not model the new sounds, but rather uses gestures to show the students how to modify the Portuguese sounds. Language is not learned by repeating after a model. Students need to develop their own 'inner criteria' for correctness —to trust and to be responsible for their own production in the target language.

4 Students take turns tapping out the sounds.

Students' actions can tell the teacher whether or not they have learned.

5 One student says, 'À esquerda,' to help another.

Students should learn to rely on each other and themselves.

6 The teacher works with gestures, and sometimes instructions in the students' native language, to help the students to produce the target language sounds as accurately as possible.

The teacher works with the students while the students work on the language.

7 The students learn the sounds of new blocks of color by tapping out the names of their classmates.

The teacher makes use of what students already know. The more the teacher does for the students what they can do for themselves, the less they will do for themselves.

8 The teacher points to a rod and then to three blocks of color on the sound– color chart. The students respond, 'rod.'

Learning involves transferring what one knows to new contexts.

9 The teacher points to the words 'a' and 'rod' on the word chart.

Reading is worked on from the beginning but follows from what students have learned to say.

10 The teacher sits down at the table and is silent. After a minute, a girl points to a rod and says, 'a rod.'

Silence is a tool. It helps to foster autonomy, or the exercise of initiative. It also removes the teacher from the center of attention so he can listen to and work with students. The teacher speaks, but only when necessary. Otherwise, the teacher gets out of the way so that it is the students who receive the practice in using the language.

Dear students

The following ten questions cover all what is important in this method. Please read and memorize them all.

1 What are the goals of teachers who use the Silent Way?

Students should be able to use the language for self-expression—to express their thoughts, perceptions, and feelings. In order to do this, they need to develop independence from the teacher, to develop their own inner criteria for correctness. Students become independent by relying on themselves. The teacher, therefore, should give them only what they absolutely need to promote their learning.

2 What is the role of the teacher? What is the role of the students?

The teacher is a technician or engineer. 'Only the learner can do the learning,' but the teacher, relying on what his students already know, can give what help is necessary, focus the students' perceptions, 'force their awareness,' and 'provide exercises to insure their facility' with the language. The teacher should respect the autonomy of the learners in their attempts at relating and interacting with the new challenges.

The role of the students is to make use of what they know, to free themselves of any obstacles that would interfere with giving their utmost attention to the learning task, and to actively engage in exploring the language. No one can learn for us, Gattegno would say; to learn is our personal responsibility. As Gattegno says, 'The teacher works with the student; the student works on the language.'

3 What are some characteristics of the teaching/learning process?

Students begin their study of the language through its basic building blocks, its sounds. These are introduced through a language-specific sound–color chart. Relying on what sounds students already know from their knowledge of their native language, teachers lead their students to associate the sounds of the target language with particular colors. Later, these same colors are used to help students learn the spellings that correspond to the sounds (through the color-coded Fidel Charts) and how to read and pronounce words properly (through the color-coded

word charts). The teacher sets up situations that focus student attention on the structures of the language. The situations provide a vehicle for students to perceive meaning. The situations sometimes call for the use of rods and sometimes do not; they typically involve only one structure at a time. With minimal spoken cues, the students are guided to produce the structure. The teacher works with them, striving for pronunciation that would be intelligible to a native speaker of the target language.

The teacher uses the students' errors as evidence of where the language is unclear to students and, hence, where to work. The students receive a great deal of practice with a given target language structure without repetition for its own sake. They gain autonomy in the language by exploring it and making choices. The teacher asks the students to describe their reactions to the lesson or what they have learned. This provides valuable information for the teacher and encourages students to take responsibility for their own learning. Some further learning takes place while they sleep.

4 What is the nature of student–teacher interaction? What is the nature of student–student interaction?

For much of the student–teacher interaction, the teacher is silent. He is still very active, however—setting up situations to 'force awareness,' listening attentively to students'speech, and silently working with them on their production through the use of nonverbal gestures and the tools he has available. When the teacher does speak, it is to give clues, not to model the language. Student–student verbal interaction is desirable (students can learn from one another) and is therefore encouraged. The teacher's silence is one way to do this.

5 How are the feelings of the students dealt with?

The teacher constantly observes the students. When their feelings interfere, the teacher tries to find ways for the students to overcome them. Also, through feedback sessions at the end of lessons, students have an opportunity to express how they feel. The teacher takes what they say into consideration and works with the students to help them overcome negative feelings which might otherwise interfere with their learning. Finally, because students are encouraged throughout each lesson to cooperate with one another, it is hoped that a relaxed, enjoyable learning environment will be created.

6 How is the language viewed? How is culture viewed?

Languages of the world share a number of features. However, each language also has its own unique reality, or spirit, since it is the expression of a particular group of people. Their culture, as reflected in their own unique world view, is inseparable from their language.

7 What areas of language are emphasized? What language skills are emphasized?

Since the sounds are basic to any language, pronunciation is worked on from the beginning. It is important that students acquire the melody of the language. There is also a focus on the structures of the language, although explicit grammar rules may never be supplied. Vocabulary is somewhat restricted at first.

There is no fixed, linear, structural syllabus. Instead, the teacher starts with what the students know and builds from one structure to the next. As the learners' repertoire is expanded, previously introduced structures are continually being recycled. The syllabus develops according to learning needs. All four skills are worked on from the beginning of the course, although there is a sequence in that students learn to read and write what they have already produced orally. The skills reinforce what students are learning.

8 What is the role of the students' native language?

Meaning is made clear by focusing the students' perceptions, not by translation. The students' native language can, however, be used to give instructions when necessary, to help a student improve his or her pronunciation, for instance. The native language is also used (at least at beginning levels of proficiency) during the feedback sessions. More important, knowledge students already possess of their native language can be exploited by the teacher of the target language. For example, the teacher knows that many of the sounds in the students' native language will be similar, if not identical, to sounds in the target language; he assumes, then, that he can build upon this existing knowledge to introduce the new sounds in the target language.

9 How is evaluation accomplished?

Although the teacher may never give a formal test, he assesses student learning all the time. Since 'teaching is subordinated to learning,' the teacher must be responsive to immediate learning needs. The teacher's silence frees him to attend to his students and to be aware of these needs. The needs will be apparent to a teacher who is observant of his students' behavior. One criterion of whether or not students have learned is their ability to transfer what they have been studying to new contexts.

The teacher does not praise or criticize student behavior since this would interfere with students' developing their own inner criteria. He expects students to learn at different rates. The teacher looks for steady progress, not perfection.

10 How does the teacher respond to student errors?

Student errors are seen as a natural, indispensable part of the learning process. Errors are inevitable since the students are encouraged to explore the language. The teacher uses student errors as a basis for deciding where further work is necessary. The teacher works with the students in getting them to self-correct. Students are not thought to learn much if the teacher merely supplies the correct language. Students need to learn to listen to themselves and to compare their own production with their developing inner criteria. If the students are unable to self-correct and peers cannot help, then the teacher would supply the correct language, but only as a last resort.

The following techniques are the main techniques that used in this method. Please read them carefully.

• **Sound–Color Chart**

The chart contains blocks of color, each one representing a sound in the target language. The teacher, and later the students, points to blocks of color on the chart to form syllables, words, and even sentences. Although we did not see it in this lesson, sometimes the teacher will tap a particular block of color very hard when forming a word. In this way the teacher can introduce the stress pattern for the word. The chart allows students to produce sound combinations in the target language without doing so through repetition. The chart draws the students' attention and allows them to concentrate on the language, not on the teacher. When a particular sound contrast is new for students, and they are unable to perceive which sound of the two they are producing, the sound–color chart can be used to give them feedback on which sound they are making.

Finally, since the sound–color chart presents all of the sounds of the target language at once, students know what they have learned and what they yet need to learn. This relates to the issue of learner autonomy.

• **Teacher's Silence**

The teacher gives just as much help as is necessary and then is silent. Or the teacher sets up an unambiguous situation, puts a language structure into circulation (for example, 'Take a _____ rod'), and then is silent. Even in error correction, the teacher will only supply a verbal answer as a last resort.

• **Peer Correction**

Students are encouraged to help another student when he or she is experiencing difficulty. It is important that any help be offered in a cooperative manner, not a competitive one. The teacher monitors the aid so that it is helpful, not interfering.

• **Rods**

Rods can be used to provide visible actions or situations for any language structure, to introduce it, or to enable students to practice using it. The rods trigger meaning: Situations with the rods can be created in such a way that the meaning is made clear; then the language is connected to the meaning. At the beginning level, the rods can be used to teach colors and numbers. Later on they can be used for more complicated structures; for example, statements with prepositions ('The blue rod is between the green one and the yellow one') and conditionals ('If you give me a blue rod, then I'll give you two green ones'). They can be used abstractly as well; for instance, for students to make a clock when learning to tell time in the target language, to create a family tree, or to make a floor plan of their house, which they later describe to their classmates. Sometimes, teachers will put the rods

down on the desk in a line, using a different rod to represent each word in a sentence. By pointing to each rod in turn, while remaining silent, the teacher can elicit the sentence from the students. He can also make concrete for students aspects of the structure, for example, the need to invert the subject and auxiliary verb in order to

form questions. The rods are therefore very versatile. They can be used as rods or more abstractly to represent other realities. They allow students to be creative and imaginative, and they allow for action to accompany language.

• Self-correction Gestures

We already examined some self-correction techniques in the chapter on the Direct Method. Some of the particular gestures of the Silent Way could be added to this list. For example, in the class observed, the teacher put his palms together and then moved them outwards to signal to students the need to lengthen the particular vowel they were working on. In another instance, the teacher indicated that each of his fingers represented a word in a sentence and used this to locate the trouble spot for the student.

• Word Chart

The teacher, and later the students, points to words on the wall charts in a sequence so that students can read aloud the sentences they have spoken. The way the letters are colored (the colors from the sound–color chart are used) helps the students with their pronunciation. There are twelve English charts containing about 500 words. The charts contain the functional vocabulary of English. There are others available for other languages. Although we did not see them in this lesson, students also work with Silent Way wall pictures and books to further expand their vocabularies and facility with the language.

• **Fidel Charts**

The teacher, and later the students, points to the color-coded Fidel Charts in order that students associate the sounds of the language with their spelling. For example, listed together and colored the same as the color block for the sound /ei/ are 'ay,' 'ea,' 'ei,' 'eigh,' etc. showing that these are all ways of spelling the /ei/ sound in English (as in the words 'say,' 'steak,' 'veil,' 'weigh'). Because of the large number of ways sounds in English can be spelled, there are eight Fidel Charts in all. There are a number of charts available for other languages as well.

• **Structured Feedback**

Students are invited to make observations about the day's lesson and what they have learned. The teacher accepts the students' comments in a nondefensive manner, hearing things that will help give him direction for where he should work when the class meets again. The students learn to take responsibility for their own learning by becoming aware of and controlling how they use certain learning strategies in class. The length and frequency of feedback sessions vary depending on the teacher and the class.