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CHAPTER 4

THE SILENT WAY

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Learning Goals

In this chapter, we will discuss the theoretical principles behind the Silent Way, as well as the practical aspects of teaching according to this approach. After covering all of the material in this chapter, students should be able to:

1. *Explain what is meant by teachers' silence;*
2. *Describe, in general terms, the linguistic theory behind the Silent Way;*
3. *Articulate the main objectives of the Silent Way;*
4. *Discuss the practical considerations in teaching foreign languages according to the Silent Way;*
5. *Discuss the issues involved in adapting the Silent Way to meet the needs of students in an English as a foreign language (EFL) context.*
6. *Design an EFL lesson plan according to the Silent Way.*
7. *Decide whether the Silent Way is a viable method to use in the foreign language classroom.*

A Historical Perspective on the Silent Way

Teachers who feel more secure when they are talking may regard ~~may regard~~ silence in the classroom as something of a fearsome concept. Yet, in the 1970s, Caleb Gattegno was able to gain some ground against this prejudice when he formulated a unique language teaching system, which came to be known as the "Silent Way." His use of silence as a language teaching system first appeared in his book *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way*. It was offered as a response to traditional language teaching methods in which teachers do the majority of the talking and are very active in dominating classroom activities. In contrast, the silence in this approach is used to focus students' attention, elicit their responses and encourage them to correct their own errors. Rather than a clear-cut teaching methodology, the Silent Way constitutes a game-like approach to teaching a foreign language that has been based on careful observation of the workings of the mind. Thus, the Silent Way is more often considered as an "alternative language teaching 'system'" (Cook, 2008, p. 266).

As you have already learned in previous chapters, language instruction carried out according to traditional teaching methods was grounded in the presentation of linguistic structures, which students were required to passively absorb and internalize. By means of this expository mode of teaching (Bruner, 1966), learners were expected to gain an understanding of the target language by imitating the teacher and memorizing the new structures. However, according to Gattegno (1972, 1976), knowledge is not a transferable commodity, but rather a construct that must be actively developed through experience; therefore, the objective of education should be to raise students' *awareness* that there is knowledge to be gained, rather than to supply them with this knowledge.

In support of Gattegno's ideas, educational research has consistently shown that

when students are challenged to discover new knowledge actively, their awareness is stimulated, fostering learner autonomy and contributing to greater mastery of new material. Accordingly, the Silent Way proposes an alternate approach to teaching foreign languages that does not require students to simply imitate the teacher or rely on memorization. Instead, the teachers' silence in the classroom is conceived as a pedagogical device; by minimalizing the direct input provided by the teacher, students are encouraged to learn by authentic experience. Students in the Silent Way classroom are thereby expected to become problem solvers who are "independent, autonomous and responsible" (Gattegno, 1976, p. 45) for their own learning.

As an additional benefit, the silence of the teachers enables them to gain more knowledge about the students. Stevick (1980) emphasizes that by remaining silent, "the teacher learns the student at the same time that the student is learning the language" (pp. 48-49), thereby developing a more detailed understanding of the student's learning needs. Furthermore, Long (1987) points out that, under the skillful direction of the teacher, students provide each other with correct models and encourage each other's initiative. Thus, the Silent Way fosters interdependence and cooperation among students. Moreover, it encourages independence from the teacher and encourages students to rely on what they do know in order to learn what they do not know. The concepts of interdependence, autonomy and responsibility are the basic principles underlying the Silent Way.

Theory of Learning

Gattegno's Silent Way is based on the principle that teaching should be secondary to learning. In other words, the underlying learning theory holds that it is the learners' responsibility to control and direct their own learning, while teachers are there to present essential structures in order to raise students' awareness for learning. Referring to the cognitive code approach, Richards and Rogers (2001) explain that the Silent Way rests on the idea that "successful learning involves commitment of the self to language acquisition through the use of silent awareness and then active trial" (p. 83).

Gattegno suggests that learning takes place in four stages, as described by Young (n.d.): (1) the *awareness* stage, in which students are guided by the teacher to understand that there is something new to be explored; (2) the *exploration* stage, in which learners experience the new material through practicing it in order to build comprehension; (3) the *transitional* stage, in which learners automatize the new skills; and (4) the *transfer* stage, in which students acquire and transfer the new skills to the rest of their lives. The language-learning concept of Gattegno's Silent Way shares a great deal with other learning theories and educational philosophies, embracing the following three principles:

- 1. *Learning is facilitated through discovery and creation, not memorization or repetition.***

In fact, this principle is anchored in Bruner's (1966) assumptions on teaching. According to Bruner, whenever teaching is built on discovery and creation, teachers and students

begin to work in cooperation, and students are no longer just listeners, but actors playing the principal roles in the learning process. In the same vein, the Silent Way views learning as a creative, discovering, problem-solving activity in which the students are the principal actors, rather than passive listeners; memorization and repetition activities are avoided, as “the teacher’s strict avoidance of repetition forces alertness and concentration on the part of the students” (Gattegno, 1972, p. 80) claimed.

2. *Learning is facilitated by accompanying (mediating) physical objects and manipulatives.*

Through his early work as a mathematics teacher, Gattegno observed students learning mathematical concepts through the use of tangible objects (e.g., abacus) in the course of basic or arithmetic operations; such tools “provide physical foci for student learning and also create memorable images to facilitate student recall” (Richards & Rodgers, 2001, p. 81). Gattegno believed that the same principles could promote language acquisition by allowing students to relate linguistic signs to the “truth that they perceive with their senses” (Stevick, 1980, p. 47).

Accordingly, inspired by Georges Cuisenaire, a European educator who used colored wooden rods for the teaching of mathematics, Gattegno developed a number of specific objects – including sound/color cards, Fidel and word charts, spelling charts, a set of wall charts and colored wooden rods (known as Cuisenaire Rods) – for use in the language classroom. These items are employed in the teaching of pronunciation and vocabulary, as well as basic grammatical structures such as prepositions of place; comparatives and superlatives; determiners; tenses; and adverbs of time, manner, and so on. The visual tools used in the Silent Way serve as associative mediators for student learning and recall. All of the pedagogical materials created by Gattegno are designed to provoke students’ awareness and are intended for use along with techniques aimed at leading students through a succession of *awarenesses*. See the section on materials later on in the chapter for a more detailed discussion of these materials and their uses in the Silent Way classroom.

3. *Learning is facilitated by problem solving related to the material to be learned.*

The final learning hypothesis underlying Gattegno’s language teaching system involves taking a problem-solving approach to learning a foreign language. According to Gattegno (1976), problem solving encourages students to develop inner criteria that allow them to monitor and self-correct their own production. Through problem solving activities, students in the Silent Way classroom are actively engaged in the learning process, instead of being passive listeners. Involving them in problem-solving activities motivates learners to explore, develop their understanding and apply their new knowledge. The essence of the notion of problem solving is represented by these words, which are frequently attributed to Benjamin Franklin:

*Tell me, and I forget. Teach me, and I remember.
Involve me, and I understand.*

Theory of Language

In Gattegno's (1976) view, language is not just a series of vocabulary items to be memorized and/or structures to be practiced, but also a functioning mechanism that develops as the student experiences it and uses it to express the self; and furthermore, there is a distinction between self-expression and communication. While communication occurs only when both the producer and the receiver of the message show sensitivity and openness to the messages shared between them, self-expression can be developed by students with the help of a teacher, who guides them in learning to express their thoughts, feelings or opinions in the target language. In terms of self-expression, language serves as a substitute for experience; and furthermore, conversely, experience is what gives meaning to language (Gattegno, 1972). In line with this thinking, the Silent Way gives tokens and picture charts a centralized role in instruction as a means to simulate experience.

Instructional Practices in the Silent Way

Reflective Activity

Discuss what you believe are the pros and cons of the Silent Way with your classmates. Focus on the theories of learning and language embraced by this method.

In a Silent Way classroom, teachers design their lessons around specific situations that are straightforward enough for students to capture the essence of the topic by means of the target language. However, in spite of the simplified nature of the lesson context, students are still challenged to discover how to use the language within this framework. The instructional sequence of the Silent Way can be compared with the way that

children learn their first language. Like infants, students perceive and deduce the specific elements of the language in the situations presented by their teacher. Then they test, experiment, observe and practice trial and error to confirm their understanding and develop their language skills. Benstein (1996) described the four stages of learning according to the Silent Way as follows:

- **Stage 1: Initial encounter with the unknown.** Students get ready for learning through teacher's attempt to raise awareness about the language. Several trials are necessary.
- **Stage 2: Practice of skills.** Skills become developed enough to be applied in diverse situations. Learners can direct their own practice.
- **Stage 3: Mastery of skills.** Students challenge themselves by expanding on their skills.
- **Stage 4: Application of skills.** Skills have become completely automatic. Skills are subordinated in order to meet further challenges.

Learning Outcomes

The main objective of the Silent Way is to teach students *how* to learn a language. Rather than dictating or transmitting knowledge, the aim is to foster learning through discovery by challenging students and developing their awareness and autonomy. In terms of language proficiency, near-native fluency in the foreign language is generally targeted. Gattegno's (1972) proposed objectives for language learning at the elementary level include developing learners' ability to correctly and easily answer questions about themselves, their family, travel, and daily events; to speak with a good accent; to describe a picture; to answer general questions about the target culture; and to perform adequately in spelling, grammar, reading comprehension and writing.

Syllabus

There is no syllabus that has been specifically designed for the Silent Way. Instead, instruction evolves according to learning needs. A structural approach to teaching is assumed. The sentence is the basic unit of instruction, and students are presented with the structural patterns of the language. Lessons are planned around grammatical items and related vocabulary (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The teacher starts with what the students know and builds from one structure to the next. As the students' proficiency develops, previously introduced structures are continually being recycled.



Language Areas and Skills

Like many other language-learning methods, the Silent Way aims to develop all language skills, including listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, there is a sequence that proceeds according to students' expanding learning repertoire. To enable students to use the language with near-native fluency, which is

one of the basic learning goals of the Silent Way, pronunciation is emphasized from the first lesson. Through this focus on pronunciation, learners are expected to be able to acquire the *melody* of the language, and pronunciation-based activities are used to support vocabulary teaching. Gattegno (1972) described vocabulary as a core dimension of language learning; teaching functional vocabulary items that do not have direct equivalents in their native language may enable learners grasp the "spirit" of the language. In the early stages of the Silent Way, prepositions, numbers, pronouns, quantifiers and words describing temporal relations and comparisons are taught. Stevick (1980) explained vocabulary teaching according to the Silent Way as a process of teaching the lexical items that refer to oneself and to others in relation to the numerous functions of everyday life.

In terms of grammar, teaching, although the focus of learning is on linguistic structures, grammatical rules are never explicitly taught. Instead, the teacher

provides the propositional meaning, and students learn the appropriate structural patterns through an inductive process.

Learning Activities

The learning activities and tasks used in the Silent Way are intended to encourage students' oral production. Rather than explicit instruction and/or excessive modeling, activities are designed according to an inductive approach, creating an environment in which students rely on themselves while learning the target language. Simple linguistic tasks are used in which the teacher models a word, phrase or sentence and then elicits students' production. The ensuing tasks enable students to produce their own utterances by incorporating both old and new information.

Thanks to limited teacher intervention, peer- and self-learning are fostered during the learning activities. Although the teacher's modeling is restricted, s/he still controls the overall process by applying the special materials and observing the students' progress. The basic classroom activities that are most commonly used in this method constitute responses to commands, questions and visual cues.

Role of the Teacher



As the name of the method implies, silence is the main tool for teaching according to the Silent Way. Unlike in traditional classrooms, the Silent Way teacher remains silent, providing an environment for students' own learning efforts by means of this silence; as Stevick (1990) asserts, it is the teacher's function to teach, test and get out of the way. Accordingly, the teacher assumes the role of facilitator or guide, helping students along their journey of self-awareness and autonomy in language learning.

Considering the teacher's role in the Silent Way, discuss the following statement:

"Teaching should be subordinated to learning."

Role of the Student

The student is an active contributor to the learning process, taking responsibility for their own learning by utilizing what they know in order to overcome any learning burdens,

focus their attention and actively engage in exploration of the language. At first, students may be confused, and their affective filter can be up (see Chapter 6 on the Natural Approach for more on the effects of affective filters in learning); however, they become accustomed to exploring language through systematic analysis, trial and error, and practice. Rather than repeatedly modeling correct usage, the teacher allows students to develop their own inner criteria concerning right and wrong with respect to the language and to correct their own errors. In the same way, students are encouraged to generalize, come to their own conclusions and formulate rules as they become aware of the correct forms. Students are also responsible for their

peers' learning progress. They are expected to interact with each other and to suggest alternatives; therefore, they must learn to work cooperatively rather than competitively and feel comfortable both in correcting and in being corrected by their peers.

Error Correction

Rather than seeing errors as sins, they are accepted as a natural part of the learning process. As students are exploring the language, mistakes are considered inevitable to the process of developing criteria for what is wrong or right. Once these criteria are settled, students are able to stand on their own in terms of learning. However, prompt teacher feedback is necessary in order to establish learners' knowledge of correct and incorrect uses of the language in varying circumstances. In other words, foreign language students should gain the ability to distinguish between what a native speaker of the target language would say or not in any given circumstances. Errors become opportunities for teachers to understand which subjects are unclear and where further work is necessary. Rather than teacher correction, self-correction is encouraged (Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011). Teachers should not offer direct correction or criticism, as this may interfere with students' developing their own criteria. Instead, teachers should encourage students to listen to themselves and compare their own production with their inner criteria. The absence of direct error correction may enable students to make generalizations, reach conclusions and formulate their own rules, thereby transferring their knowledge to a new level of understanding. In addition to self-correction, peer correction is promoted; by fostering group dynamics in the classroom, the Silent Way class encourages cooperation in favor of competition. Teacher should respond directly to students' errors as a last resort, when students are unable to self-correct and peers are unable to help.

To promote self-correction, teachers could use gestures. For instance, in case of pronunciation errors, teachers could use their hands to lengthen the sounds or make intonations. As typical gesture for error correction is to use fingers representing the words in a sentence and to show and emphasize the problematic word.

Evaluation

The Silent Way method takes a process-oriented approach to evaluation, rather than focusing on the end product; this is a result of the belief that learning takes place in a progressive fashion, and every student has different learning rates. Thus, the best means for evaluating students is considered observation of individual progress, wherein the teacher looks for steady improvement and ability to transfer a skill to a new area of learning.

As such, formalized testing is generally not conducted. Instead, teachers monitor their students during the course of a lesson, observing from their performance, as well as their interactions with other students, whether they have successfully mastered the new skills or not.

Materials

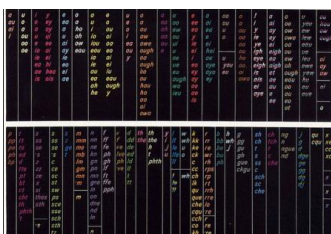
The Silent Way is perhaps best known for its unique teaching materials. These typically consist of a set of colored rods with various lengths and colors, coded pronunciation charts, vocabulary wall charts, a set of pictures and worksheets, and a pointer. These items are used to stimulate awareness about the target language.



- **Cuisenaire rods** are used to demonstrate grammatical structures such as prepositions of place; comparatives and superlatives; determiners; tenses; adverbs of time and manner, and so on. They are also used to indicate sentence and word stress, rising and falling intonation, and word groupings, as well as to create a visual model of constructs. Finally, the rods may be employed to represent physical

objects: clocks, floor plans, maps, people, animals, fruit, tools, and so on, as required for a particular lesson.

- **Colored Fidel charts** are used to teach spelling through systematic phonetic groupings. With the help of a pointer, students can learn how to sound out and form new words or practice words that have already been learned.



- **Sound-color charts** comprise a system of phonetics that matches each phoneme with a specific color or combination of colors. All of the sounds of the target language are paired with matching colors. It is used to teach these sounds as students associate a specific color with a specific phoneme, allowing them to pronounce words more easily during subsequent instruction. Through

experimentation with ~~with~~ the sound-color chart, students can rediscover their ability to learn new sounds. For instance, the sound-color chart can be used for vocal gymnastics; through awareness raising activities using the chart, students learn how to control their mouths. The colors on the sound-color chart are identical to those on the Fidel and word-charts; in combination, the Fidel chart and the sound color chart can help students to reconcile the spoken words with their sometimes-confusing written forms. This leads to more accurate and confident speaking, reading and writing.

- **Colored word charts** contain the vocabulary to be acquired. They are color-coded in accordance with the sound-color charts to aid in ease of pronunciation. For example, if students read the word *green* on the word chart, they will be automatically clued in, due to their knowledge of the sound-color chart.
- **The pointer** is used by the teacher, or sometimes by students, to show stress, phrasing and intonation. Stress can be indicated by touching a particular symbol when pointing out a word, while intonation and phrasing can be demonstrated by tapping on the chart to the rhythm of the utterance.
- **Wall pictures** are also important visual aids, as they provide physical

representation of vocabulary items. For example, when learning the word *cat*, students will be presented with a picture of a cat, and the color-coded word *cat* below. This provides valuable contextual information about the meaning and usage of the word.

Together, these materials make up the basic framework of the Silent Way approach, since they are regarded as assisting students in discovering the language and developing their own inner criteria. The teacher's responsibility is simply to lead students through the basics of the system of materials, and then provide them with new materials once the old ones have been mastered. Theoretically, this color-coded system can teach any language at any level of complexity, to students at any grade level, given proper time and correct implementation.



A Typical Silent Way Lesson

A typical Silent Way lesson is conducted according to a standard format, starting with a focus on pronunciation, restricted teacher modeling and student interaction. At the very beginning stage of the lesson, the teacher models new sounds by pointing to a symbol on the Fidel chart, continuing to point to individual symbols and combinations of symbols. Afterward, without interfering,

the teacher silently monitors students' performances. With gestures and mimes, the teacher ~~he~~ motivates students to continue production. After practicing the sounds, sentence patterns, structure and vocabulary are studied. The teacher models an utterance through a visual realization with colored rods, and then encourages students to try to produce the utterance. When the teacher is sure that the structure is clearly comprehended, s/he creates a scenario in which the students can practice the structure with the manipulation of the rods.

A sample lesson plan that follows this format is given below; this is a typical first lesson according to the Silent Way method. The students in this case are not familiar with this method, nor are they aware of the structures to be taught.

- The class consists of 15 beginner students.
- Throughout the lesson, the students' mother tongue is never used; mime and gesture are used to support minimal teacher input. The teacher places a box of colored rods on his desk.
- The teacher opens the box and draws out of it one rod, showing it to the class and saying, "a rod."
- The teacher puts the rod down and picks up another of a different color, saying the same word, "a rod," again and going through seven or eight rods without asking the students for anything.
- Then, the teacher lifts a rod and asks in mime for students to repeat the sounds.
- One of the students understands what the teacher wants and tries to say the

word. The teacher may smile or nod to show approval.

- Next, nearly all of the students in the class repeat the sounds for "a rod."
- The teacher then introduces the names for four or five colors; e.g., "a blue rod," "a black rod," "a red rod," "a yellow rod," "a green rod."
- The teacher motions for two students to come forward. The teacher says to one of them in English, "take a blue rod." Naturally, no response is expected, except perhaps the utterance of the words "a blue rod."
- The teacher says the words again, at the same time putting the student's hand over the set and prompting him to take a blue rod from the pile.
- Then the teacher says, "take a brown rod" or "take a yellow rod," and so on, expecting a correct action as a response.
- The teacher then turns to the second student and repeats the process.

The first lesson may end here.

Sample Lesson Plan

The Silent Way enables students to master basic grammar and vocabulary patterns at early stages through simulated situations, using the materials we have described. After achieving control over the grammar, pronunciation and melody of a language, learners can enlarge their repertoire of vocabulary through this method. Here is one example for teaching vocabulary:

Lesson Plan

Difficulty Level: Beginner

Age of Students: Any age

Lesson Topic: Everyday Objects

Duration of Class Period: 40 Minutes

Language Skills: Pronunciation, Vocabulary, Speaking

Materials: Color Rods, Fidel charts

Learning Objectives:

At the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

- Identify the names and meanings of objects related to real life;
- Pronounce the names of the objects correctly.

Presentation: (5 min.)

The teacher indicates each object in a wall picture of a bedroom scene with a pointer. After repeating the names for each object and writing the words on the board, the teacher encourages the students to repeat them. To assist students and ensure the correct pronunciation, teacher refers to the Fidel chart for special sounds and stress.

Practice: (10 min.)

Using gestures and body movement, the teacher asks students to form groups of

five. The teacher then encourages students to continue the activity within their groups, referring to small pictures of a bedroom. During the group work activity, the teacher remains silent and observes the students. If errors occur, the teacher does not intervene, instead giving time for peer- or self-correction.

Production: (20 min.)

The students and teacher surround a table. The teacher puts the Cuisenaire rods on the table and arranges them to represent different objects in a bedroom. Introducing each rod, the teacher begins to tell a story, using the newly learned words:

This is Mrs. X. This is her bedroom. Mrs. X opens the door and enters her bedroom. This is her bed. She lies down on her bed. This is her armchair...

The teacher then gestures for learners to continue the story. One student first repeats the teacher's story and then adds one sentence; another student again repeats the teacher's story and his/her friend's sentence, and then adds another sentence including different words they have practiced. This story retelling activity continues to involve the entire class. The teacher does not intervene, but observes and assists if necessary.

Wrap up: (5 min.)

As the final step in this lesson and as a stimulus for the following lesson, the teacher prepares a list of the words practiced in this session and hangs it on the wall. The teacher may ask students to make up new sentences using the words in this list in subsequent lessons in order to reactivate the vocabulary items and ensure retention. To challenge students, the teacher might also ask them to make up new sentences using words from different lists (e.g., one word from a 'house' vocabulary list and one word from a list of 'school' objects).

Reflective Activity

As a prospective teacher, consider and discuss the following issues with your classmate:

- Do you believe you could successfully implement a lesson using the Silent Way in your expected teaching context?
- For which language skills would you consider implementing a Silent Way lesson?
- What types of activities might you offer?

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