

# Silent Way

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## Forming the Issue

The silent way of language teaching was created by Caleb Gattegno in 1963. It was an effort by Gattegno to mesh together the mastering of pronunciation and the internalization of meaning and the structure of the language. Gattegno (1976, p. 19) believed that any language a person is trying to learn has a “spirit” which “seems to act as a container for the melody and the structure of the language and most users are unconscious of it.” In order to preserve this “spirit” of the language, learners ought to keep the main distinctive features of that language intact.

Gattegno considers that what one perceives is through practicing sound associations and not through translation or memorization. For him, language is perceived to be made up of groups of sounds that are associated together with definite meanings and organized into sentences following specific grammatical rules which are language specific. These rules govern the use of the language.

Vocabulary is seen as an integral part of language learning and for that reason, Gattegno (1976) places a great deal of importance on the choice of words used in the process of learning. He distinguishes between “functional vocabulary,” “semi-luxury vocabulary,” and “luxury vocabulary.” The “functional vocabulary” is the most important type of vocabulary that truly conveys the “spirit” of the language. The “semi-luxury vocabulary” is the words that are used during ordinary daily life usage like shopping, travel, family issues, and others. The “luxury vocabulary” is the highly sophisticated vocabulary which deals with topics like philosophy, medicine, politics, and others. The vocabulary or the language items learned are presented according to their grammatical complexity and according to their relationship to what was learned before. It starts with the simple forms and the level of difficulty increases over time. Numbers and prepositions, due to their importance in everyday use, are taught early on in the course.

Gattegno believes that learning a language requires three criteria; *rightness*, which is the proper use of language melody; *correctness*, which requires matching the order of words with native like habits; and *adequacy*, which links the dimension

of perception and the action taken in a certain situation. Gattegno approached language learning by looking at the way babies and young children acquire language (Larsen-Freeman, 2000). He believes that in the first language, there is no point of reference to fall back on to learn the language. Babies start from scratch to learn the language. In learning a second language, the learner knows the functions of the language and how to produce sounds and associate meanings and structures. In learning a second language, learners utilize their inner resources like their perceptions, recognition, creativity, imagination, and intuition to overcome hurdles they face in their internalization of knowledge. These inner criteria allow language learners to observe, monitor, and use self-corrections to help acquire the target language.

Gattegno's approach to language teaching relies on the fact that "teaching is subordinated to learning." For him, learning by the language learner takes precedence over the teaching the teacher does in class. The learner internalizes the information being learned without any meddling or interfering from the teacher. In the silent way of learning, the students are the center of learning and are responsible for their own learning. The students themselves are the initiators of learning. They are independently capable of acquiring language without any sidetracking from the teacher. The teacher sounds or mouths a form once and then the students are required to work together to reproduce the form that was mouthed. Student-to-student verbal interaction is desired and encouraged because students can learn from each other. Stevick (1980) writes that the Silent Way method of teaching encourages learners to use their internal resources to decide on how to best achieve the required outcome asked for by the teacher. The students are free to produce utterances for themselves not by memorizing chunks of dialogues or grammar rules.

## **Making the Case**

As the name implies, the silent way of teaching uses teacher silence as the base for teaching. The teacher gives the students the opportunity to learn the language by producing utterances that they heard the teacher say or mouth once. The students say the form as close to the way the teacher used it. They can also use their classmates to help support each other's proper production of the language.

The silent way relies on the oral and aural approach to learning the basic forms of the target language. It also allows the learner to acquire the basic functional sounds, vocabulary, and grammar of that language. The learner should be able to speak with a very good target-language accent, commenting about topics like family, daily issues, travel, food, and so forth. They can also express themselves well and with proper forms when asked to talk about themselves.

The silent way looks at learning as a problem-solving way of learning a language. It uses creative ways to learn and produce new concepts to learning. The learning of the language is made through constant discovery of how to utter words or understand their meanings. The learner is considered an active and not a passive learner where he himself finds ways to internalize and master the various

concepts introduced. Because the learners are allowed to discover their potentials, they become highly and intrinsically motivated. Their reward is the fact that they were able to successfully acquire the targeted learning items.

The silent way uses different tools to help student produce the target language and internalize the knowledge successfully. Some of the tools used include a set of colored wooden Cuisenaire rods, a set of wall charts with functional vocabulary written on them, sound charts or Fidel charts, and other audiovisuals for advanced learning.

The wooden or plastic rods are made up of ten different lengths and colors. The rods are used to provide physical items that show instances of language structures to introduce them to the students so that they can practice those structures. They also provide mental representations to forms in order to help students easily remember and evoke when necessary (Stevick, 1982). The colored rods are used at the beginning to teach colors like *red, green, black, white*, and so forth. They are also used to teach adjective forms like *long, longer, short, shorter*, and so forth. After that they are used to teach prepositions such as *between, on, under*, and so forth. The rods are used to make associations to language sounds.

The colored Fidel charts are used in an analogous way by pairing the sound with its associated color. The teacher models the sound pointing to the proper color on the chart. The students then produce their own utterances and practice with each other to master the pronunciation.

The colored word charts are conceptually grouped together. There are about 12 charts containing 500 to 800 words. These words are selected according to whether they are functional or luxury words (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2014). The teacher also provides students with worksheets that challenge students to go further in their learning, each at their own level of proficiency, evaluating their work based on what they learned earlier.

The rods and charts provide physical memorable association images that help learners facilitate their learning. They are used so that they can be manipulated by the students and the teachers to provide associations and relationships for the various learned items.

In addition to the colored rods and charts, teachers have other materials at their disposal. These may include pictures, drawings, audio and video materials, worksheets, films, and other helpful visual aids. These materials are used as supportive materials that would supplement what is learned in class using the colored rods and charts. Anthologies and texts are also used to teach larger reading sentences comprised of about 500 words. These are used only when the learners have reached a stage where they have already discovered language, its value, and are familiar with the language's idiosyncrasies (Gattegno, 1976).

## Pedagogical Implications

The silent way of teaching employs the learners' own experiences from their native language. Learners become independent not relying on their teachers. The silent way depends on the student centered approach to teaching and learning. The

teacher is a model who gives the students the ability to be autonomous and self-reliant. They are responsible for their learning because they are the ones who work on the language.

There are many pedagogical implications for the silent way of learning. These implications have to do with what and how learning takes place. They also have to do with the different roles the teacher, the learner and the tools of learning are utilized. The success of the students starts with simple discoveries about the sounds of the language. Then, it develops to involve the more intricate aspects of the language and the mastery of the target language.

First, the learners are in charge of their learning. They use their previous experiences and build on them. They become more familiar and at ease with what they are learning. In the beginning,

random or almost random feeling of the area of activity in question until one finds one or more cornerstones to build on. Then starts a systematic analysis, first by trial and error, later by directed experiment with practice of the acquired sub areas until mastery follows. (Gattegno, 1976, p. 79)

The learner has responsibility for their own learning and they are given the independence and autonomy to do that. The students self-correct themselves, using problem-solving techniques (Stevick, 1980; Richards & Rodgers, 1986).

Second, the teacher's role in the silent way is to be the conductor of the symphony of learning. He provides the tools (rods, charts, worksheets, films, etc.) and gestures to support the learners. They encourage, but not push the learners to produce sounds and build their knowledge (Gattegno, 1976). The teacher provides the props for learning. The teacher becomes the observer of learning who offers extra exercises to students to try or suggest ways that would help the learners master the language. The teacher is the coach, and not the meddler who hinders the students' progress with constant corrections.

Third, there are no formal assessments done. The teacher evaluates the learners at every point of their learning by observing the needs of the students and attending to those needs. The students use self-evaluation to correct themselves. The teacher looks at the general improvement the learners show in learning the language in general. Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000), notes that no negative or positive comments are given to the students. Instead, the students are allowed to progress at their own rate and at their own speed. Immediate perfection is not what is sought after and because of that, the students are more at ease and feel more comfortable with their evaluation of learning.

Fourth, there are many great advantages to the silent way of learning. The silent way is seen as a very important tool for learner autonomy and independence. The learners are at the center of the learning process. The learner is an active learner and not a passive one who gets the information from the teacher without their input or reaction to that material. It also allows for a high rate of student participation in class activities because they are the ones responsible for their learning. In addition to that, it allows for more student-to-student interaction and cooperation.

The learners are given ample opportunities to use problem-solving techniques to self-correct and evaluate their performance in their attempt to acquire the target language.

Finally, in order to grasp how the silent way may be used in the classroom, a typical first day lesson format of teaching would help in that effort. The following will be a demonstration of how the silent way lesson is conducted. The first day's attempt to learning a language starts with the basic words. In the following example, an attempt to teach Arabic to complete beginners in the language is made.

The teacher takes out wooden color rods and places them on the table. Then, he picks up a rod and says in Arabic (*a'asa*). He holds another rod and says in Arabic (*a'asa*). The teacher holds one of the rods and indicates to one student to say in Arabic (*a'asa*). If the student fails to give the right response, he elicits a response from another student. The teacher holds other rods without saying anything and gestures to different students to say the word. This is done until all students have mastered the word (*a'asa*) in Arabic.

After that, the teacher picks up a yellow rod and says (*a'asa safra*). He picks up a blue rod and says (*a'asa zarqa*). Next, the teacher picks up the yellow or blue rod and asks a student to say what he is holding. If the response is incorrect, a response is elicited from another student. The teacher keeps introducing the word (*a'asa*) and the other rod colors as above. The teacher keeps eliciting responses from the students with students' self-corrections or peer correction until all rod color words are learned.

After mastery of colors is achieved, the teacher introduces other forms. These could be numbers like (one, two, three, etc.) or adjectives like (long, short, medium, longer, shorter, etc.). He does this in the same way above. He picks up a yellow rod and says (*a'asa safra wahida*). He elicits responses in the same manner and depends on students' self-correction. Then, he picks up two yellow rods and say (*a'asatan safrawatan*). After that, he holds two blue rods and says (*a'asatan zarqawatan*). The next step would be for the teacher to hold two different color rods and elicit student responses. The teacher then introduces other additional numbers according to how much students can respond to and digest.

The teacher can include verbs like (give, take, put, etc.). For example, he can say in Arabic (give me the blue rod—*a'atini al a'asa al zarqa*). The teacher expects the student to give him the blue rod. The teacher repeats this with other students until mastery and with other colors. Once that is mastered, the teacher can go to other verbs based on whether they are functional, luxury, or semi-luxury words.

The students are asked to creatively try different forms with the words learned. They are also asked to experiment with expressions with each other so that they are more comfortable and less threatened than interacting with the teacher alone.

**SEE ALSO:** Problem Solving; Scaffolding Technique

## References

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