

Silent Way, Assessment and the Science of Education

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Current approaches to teaching languages reveal a situation in which a vast array of methods are offered, all with the implicit or explicit sanction of a science of education. We have a plethora of opinions to deal with, from the audio-lingual approaches, audio-visual, translation, direct method, the natural approach, various so-called humanistic approaches, and so on.

In defense of each particular methodology, assessments based on “scientific research” are offered. Often it is assumed that there is a more or less objective, neutral relationship between methodology and assessment. Methodology is seen as arising from an active involvement with language teaching and learning, and assessment can claim objectivity by its appropriation of the tools and vision of basic experimental research.

However, both methodology and assessment are linked, in often unspoken fashion, with prior “models” that reveal a somewhat less disinterested agenda. First, there are presumptions as to the models of people being taught, models that staunchly resist even years of contradiction or modification in the face of the learning situation. Behaviorism “begat” a range of audio-lingual approaches in which second-language learning often suffered doubly due to the limitations of Skinner’s explanation of first-language learning.

Furthermore, when methodology is based on a prior model taken from some discipline not directly connected with education, there is a tendency to “insulate” the model from the dynamics that are involved in its status as a manifestation of a changing paradigm in a particular discipline, one which, no matter how successful and total, is never really complete and certainly is not supposed to be isolated from the constant verifications against reality that must eventually lead to its replacement by some more satisfactory hypothesis. Simply put, we assume that everything is “all right over there” in that model’s source, and we can fall

back on that assumption in moments when our own discipline reveals its uncertainties. Thus we lose the chance to include the dynamics of the borrowed discipline in our modifications of our own; the “other” discipline is only implicitly present, never totally participating.

An analagous if opposite problem arises concerning the objectivity of assessment when we are called on to see just how well a particular method of teaching/learning “works.” Any assessment is better than none at all, yet it is probably only because we can sense the distance between research in support of a teaching method and the actual teaching itself, that teachers do not protest far more vehemently about the generally positive results that controlled experimentation in methodological research produces, no matter which methodology is under investigation. Rarely is there perfect transference of results obtained under experimental conditions to the classroom setting (Brown, 1979). Systems of assessment too often ignore the shift from a “basic” to an “applied” research environment that occurs when we enter the learning situation and its processes. Again, we are driven to depend on a present yet unparticipating “other” that justifies our actions as teachers and learners only at the cost of making them seem somehow inadequate.

In this context, the Silent Way can be said to have a very different relationship to methodology and assessment. It is based on a close, explicit relationship to a model of man. It is an integrated approach, not a method derived from an exterior, preexisting model. And it is part of a whole family of teaching approaches that are part of an effort to create a science of education.

The Silent Way was created by Dr. Caleb Gattegno (1911-1988), arising around 1954 out of a combination of work he had been doing on teaching math with Cuisenaire rod manipulation, and an idea of matching colors to phonemes as part of a UNESCO literacy project in Ethiopia. Silent Way language instruction evolved into a set of materials based on color-sound/script wall charts that may be said to stand in for the teacher in some way, and manipulation of colored rods that themselves may be said to stand in for the world. But all the approaches created by Dr. Gattegno are applications of the same general principle-*the subordination of teaching to learning*. Caleb Gattegno saw education as a “knowledge industry” in which teachers supervise the doling out of a commodity called “knowledge”

that students were to retain through *memory*, with an ever-growing set of props laid on to support poor memory (Gattegno, 1970, p. 5). Against this, Gattegno proposes a concept of learning as experiential awareness: only awareness is educable. If my awareness is not affected, I have learned nothing. Learning moves me affectively, changes me. Nothing else is worth the name of education.

Gattegno uses the analogy of the child's learning as the prime example of his approach to learning. Consider language: out of an uninterrupted flow of sound the child learns to differentiate, to correlate speaking and hearing. And this is not imitation: we listen to our own speaking and speak from our own listening. We interact with a world of language to create a world of meaning in the same fashion.

"Whenever we meet an educated person, we meet someone who has done something to himself so that the world around him is full of meaning for him and whose perceptions trigger the correct response to cope with all the messages that reach the self. When we meet a child who has learned to speak, we meet such an educated person, one who has done with speech what can be done in scores of other fields. So we can say: one *knows* how to speak; speech is a power one owns from now on." (Gattegno, 1973, p. 131) For Gattegno, learning in any field involves a movement within and across the four steps of contact, analysis, mastery and application.

The art of teaching must allow learning to take place. In *What We Owe Children* (1970, p. 53ff), Dr. Gattegno sets four tasks to the teacher:

1. "To become a person who knows himself and others as persons." This requires the exercise of *will*, the attribute of the self which enables us to become persons. Will enables us to counter behaviors we wish to change and generate new ones. It expresses itself in intention, attention, listening and looking. It is necessary to exercise this will and to recognize the students in the classroom equally as persons with will and these qualities. This will generate an attitude of mutual respect that will find a system of rewards and punishments totally irrelevant.

2. "To acknowledge the existence of *a sense of truth* which guides us all and is the basis of our knowing." Our sense of truth, our inner criteria that tell us whether what we perceive is real, the authenticity of our own direct experiences, functioned well at the beginning of life. Eventually we were expected to defer to others' authority. Teachers must use their own sense of truth and address the

sense of truth in their students. To know something, knowledge must be owned, and this is the essence of understanding.

3. "Find out how knowing becomes knowledge." The teacher must recognize different ways of knowing, unlike traditional education, that stressed only what can be verbalized and transmitted verbally, retained by repetition and other forms of memorization. This is not how we achieved the first knowing in ourselves.

4. "The duty to consider the *economy of learning*." Time is the stuff of life. To live is to change time into experience which, when accumulated, becomes growth. The economics of education should follow the economics of life: "students' time must buy equivalent experience." This means time spent in meaningful activity and time spent with that quality of psychological intensity which removes from consciousness the face of the clock.

Every student is a learning system motivated by learning itself. The teacher's task is to generate the situations which expand awareness through direct experience and the opportunities for meaningful practice to ensure facility. Neither congratulation nor criticism is needed: all is a matter of fact.

Every student is also a retaining system. Retention, as a function of the self, will take place as a matter of course when learning is experiential and has an impact on awareness. Teachers will make their students producers instead of consumers of knowledge, and the classroom a process of self-education.

The classroom is a community of relationship where teacher and students together move away from the personal insecurity and selfishness of ego to an expansion of awareness. Gattegno concludes his essay *On Love* with the words: "What we need now is an education for love which integrates all the components of the complex beings we are and extends to as many as possible the benefits of being aware of love as a power our self gave itself to humanize the world" (Gattegno, 1977, p. 57). The subordination of teaching to learning is an education for love, described by Gattegno (1971, p. 115) as a revolutionary action requiring the radical transformation of the teacher. Put very generally, the teacher works on the student, and the student works on the language.

Formal assessment has two principal levels: assessment of the work done by the student on the part of the teacher, and assessment by scientific research.

The Silent Way teacher has very little need for assessment. When she meets the students for the first time, she takes them as they are, and together, they go

where the students want to go. It is possible to consider this approach because the Silent Way is based on awareness and not on memory.

This is particularly valuable in the language class because we must work on the new language with the powers of the mind, and so allow it to be integrated as a functioning system. It is not necessary to assess functionings if they can be seen to function.

Scientific investigation of Silent Way learning runs head on into the problem of bringing the investigation to bear on what is actually happening in the classroom. It is too often assumed that this does not really matter, that it is enough to rely on scientific "method." But this may have very little to do with what is actually taking place, especially when the investigations only measure the memorization of words, exterior phenomena and the "final result."

In the Silent Way classroom, so little emphasis is placed on memorization that it is of no interest to conduct studies of this kind. At the end of a certain time, the students can use the language with a healthy confidence, but with only a few hundred words. The Silent Way aims at fluency with a little, rather than vast quantities of vocabulary. How does one investigate this in terms of memorization?

Exterior phenomena have been popular among scientific investigators because they appear to allow an objectivity close to that of basic scientific research. However, this may be a case of something compounding the problem instead of solving it. Basic research is a means for arriving at general hypotheses about human behavior defined in terms of abstract laws and principles based on observations made under controlled artificial and nonnatural settings, while applied research is a tool to tease out additional knowledge about human behavior in a particular social setting. Applied research is no less systematic than basic research. It is, however, predicated on a different set of observational data, including personal judgement, ordinary experience, and intuition (Jakobovits, 1974, p. 93).

The careful observer shares with the Silent Way teacher the role of an awareness-watcher. They see students becoming aware of the sounds of a language, of its structures, using them in accordance with what the language demands. They see the awarenesses as they take place and as the teacher works on them in the here and now. It becomes difficult to imagine merely relying on external phenomena for observational data, since it has nothing to do with what is happening on a

more subtle level.

As far as the “final result” is concerned, we too often allow ourselves to forget that it is still impossible to test with the kind of dissasociation from its subject matter that is typical of basic research. Until this is possible, it is perhaps better to take a more dynamic, interactive approach that sees the learning situation as a community with a mission that it can be said to have accomplished or not. Equally, given the way Silent Way operates, it is much less objectionable than it might seem to actually rely on the learners when “measuring” how they convey themselves with their new language in the real world.

According to Gattegno, evaluation of learner progress in a target language is not a question of subjecting students to criterion-referenced examinations, but is a matter of constant evaluation of learners interacting in the language. The point of evaluation is to discover how students are able to perform in the target language. Consequently, there is little value in determining what a learner does or does not know about the language (Gattegno, 1976, p. 136). Also, according to Gattegno, the appearance of a sense of humor, daring, imagination and other personal traits in learners’ performance is indicative of the strength of their “link to the new language.” Di Pietro (1979, p. 3) maintains that the expression of individual personality traits through linguistic means is, in fact, a function of language which is no less important than the conveyance of information from speaker to speaker.

Silent Way allows the learner to experience “genuine learning” which takes place in the natural setting through discovery rather than through explicit presentation of principles and rules. In this respect, the conditions under which learning takes place parallel more closely those of the native extra-classroom environment. This is of particular importance in re-evaluating assessment, because it provides grounds for acceptable observation of student performance and self-evaluation of such performance.

Silent Way provides an instructional framework in which learners are allowed to acquire the target language implicitly as a consequence of their interpersonal interactions rather than as a result of explicit discussion and analysis of linguistic structure. As Gattegno points out, “the *rightness* of a statement is to be felt, not deduced... the *correctness* of a statement lies in the matching of the sequence of words with the required habits of the native making such statements... the

adequacy of a statement results from a matching of what is evoked by the words with the supporting dimensions (perceptive and active) of the corresponding situation (1972, pp. 28-9).

Silent Way assesment should perhaps concentrate on the changes made necessary by factors such as the short time it takes to obtain self-contained independence in a langage, in the outside world. It would be worthwhile to replace the term communicative competence with that of communicative confidence. It is just as important to be willing to communicate with a native speaker as it is to be able to communicate as one. The imposition of great amounts of teacher silence in the Silent Way goes a long way toward developing confidence and self-reliance in a foreign language, as well as developing the self-judgemental strength to learn ever more independently from experiences in the new language.

Gattegno described the general process of learning as follows: "cautious, marginal entry so as to explore where the stepping-stones for the activity can be found; then wholehearted investigation of the field, accepting errors as guides and putting things right immediately because the proper feedback mechanisms have been deliberately placed to monitor each activity; then further testing of the mastery of all parts of the activity before one declares oneself satisfied with what one has done. Mastery is always the aim... when the skill is integrated with all that was there before and the new person enters a wider challenge to test himself (1973, p. 106). If this process can be made to take place, then we will have come a long way toward eliminating the alienation of learning from assessment of learning, and of learners from learning.

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