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TEACHING SPANISH THE SILENT WAY
(A Summary of Student Teaching)

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MAT X

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INTRODUCTION

This is a report on the Silent Way Approach to second language teaching and is based on personal studies of the method and its application. Hoping to increase my understanding of and competence in the use of the Silent Way Approach, I conducted classes in Spanish at the Village Green Condominium Complex in Los Angeles, California, during the summer of 1979. I had already gained some experience with the Silent Way in reference to the teaching of English as a second language and the teaching of French at the Institute Cultural de Orizaba in Veracruz, Mexico, during the previous winter.

My interest in the Silent Way had been aroused during a seminar conducted by Mr. Caleb Gattegno at the School for International Training. In his presentation, Mr. Gattegno demanded that the participants set aside their preconceptions about a familiar topic and asked them to develop a new awareness of their thought processes in order to go beyond preconceptions to utilize dormant portions of the mind to increase creativity.

This experience showed me that to become a more effective teacher, I would have to examine closely my own mental processes and develop greater insight into how the

mind acquires knowledge. Convinced that the Silent Way was a creative approach, I attended seminars in New York and Vermont that enhanced my understanding and appreciation of the Silent Way. I found the following sessions especially useful:

1. A Silent Way teaching-learning project in which I taught Portuguese to my classmates at SIT.
2. A seminar in ESL teaching techniques during which I learned how to use the special materials of the Silent Way approach.
3. A weekend Spanish language class for adults in which I observed certain examples of the sequencing of activities in the Silent Way.
4. Viewing selected videotapes of the first 145 hours of a beginning ESL class conducted by Mr. Gattegno.

The Silent Way Approach as described by Gattegno is an attempt to make use of the language skills already possessed by the student: "Freeing our students means giving them in the new language the know-how they already possess in their mother tongue" (Gattegno, 1976:2). Those skills are considerable, for Gattegno notes: "The hardest language to learn, of all foreign languages, is the mother tongue" (1972:2). Gattegno considers how the young learn their own language in the first place, and he finds that they clearly do so by means other than

those usually utilized in teaching a foreign language. Such teaching is generally artificial as a result and does not make use of the various language-learning mechanisms possessed by the organism from birth.

As a result, the language taught in most classrooms is artificial to a degree as well because learning in such a situation requires concentration and the learning of rules and concepts rather than language. Gattegno says that learning a language is accomplished through surrender, a very different approach to the usual classroom situation.

GOALS

Once I had obtained a better understanding of the Silent Way and the confidence necessary to apply it in a teaching situation, I made it the basis of my second teaching experience in Los Angeles. I wanted to examine for myself the question posed by Mr. Gattegno at SIT: Can greater creativity in language learning result from surpassing the limits of the known--that is, can more creative energy be released if students can be induced to use portions of their minds that are not bound by preconceptions and tied to previous experience?

Beginning with this broad question, I began to formulate the basic approach that I would use in the Spanish class at the Village Green, and I decided to use what I considered the classic Silent Way sequence of

teaching language skills. This approach encourages the student to use his own judgment and criteria in formulating answers to the teacher's questions. The teacher acts as facilitator in the learning process rather than as a focal point of the class. In this role, I intended to remain silent as far as possible in order to encourage the students to take the responsibility for their own learning.

I had not had any extensive experience with the exclusive use of the Silent Way with mature students, although I had used it with classes of young adults and children. Nor had I used the approach with learners who had no special training or interest in languages (unlike the group of teachers to whom I taught Portuguese at SIT who showed great interest in languages). My first goal, therefore, was to apply this method to the teaching of foreign language to middle-aged men and women who were neither full-time students nor language specialists. In this fashion, I hoped to determine the efficacy of the approach. The members of the class would have widely different educational backgrounds, learning styles, and motivations, and I was particularly interested in whether this diverse group would accept a learner-centered approach as readily as a traditional approach.

A second goal was to gauge the effectiveness of the Silent Way in teaching pronunciation, stress, and

intonation, and this Village Green class was ideal because it was to emphasize spoken Spanish. Third, I wanted to see if the basic structures of Spanish could be taught more effectively through the use of the Fidels and rods than by traditional methods. Finally, I wanted to see if it was true that the Silent Way enhances language retention: Would my students be able to retain the sounds and structures of Spanish without relying on the traditional methods of repetition and memorization? Would their experience with the Silent Way bear out Gattegno's assertion that "we hold better in our minds what we meet with awareness" (1976:8). Would the using of this approach indeed produce or help to produce a heightened awareness of language and of the learning process on the parts of the students and the teacher as well?

THE TEACHING SITUATION

This was my second student-teaching experience, and it was under the auspices of the Educational Committee of the Village Green Condominium Board, with the class held in the clubhouse. The duration of the course was eight weeks, with classes held twice weekly in two-hour sessions. There were two classes with ten members each. Class 1 met in the afternoon and was composed of six women and four men, mostly retired people in their fifties and

sixties. Two of the students were teachers themselves; one was married to a Puerto Rican, one student was Italian, and the rest were American. All were upper middle-class people who had attended some college. Class 2 met in the evenings and was composed of students with a wider range in ages, from late twenties to mid fifties. All were middle-class people who had attended some college, and three were ESL teachers.

These classes were conducted in relaxing and attractive surroundings and they were informal. Many of the students were acquainted before the class began, and this fact, along with the informal seating arrangement around a table, helped to create an atmosphere conducive to learning.

MATERIALS

I used many of the usual educational Solutions materials: Silent Way Spanish Fidels, Silent Way Spanish word charts, and Cuisinaire rods. As texts for reference, I used Gattegno's Mil Frases and Common Sense in Foreign Language Teaching. Supplementary materials included: pictures from Educational Solutions as well as from other sources; slides of Latin America, used primarily at a party and Mexican dinner that took place at the end of the course; and a tape recorder which we used for songs and pronunciation practice.

parents, but in Los Angeles all were willing participants who had personal reasons for wanting to learn Spanish. The adults in the Village Green course could more readily judge whether they were using their time wisely.

In Mexico, the course was much more restrictive, and I had to follow an established syllabus and administer the required written exams. In Los Angeles, I could devise my own tests without external control, and this allowed me to deal with the immediate needs of the students without regard for the constraints imposed by other educators' expectations. Also, in Los Angeles I could establish my own goals and adjust my methods daily as needed to meet those goals.

AWARENESS OF STUDENT ROLES

Having had two experiences with the Silent Way, I feel that I am now able to assess my own reactions as well as those of my students to this unconventional approach. I found that the initial reaction of the students did not differ appreciably from that to conventional approaches, for neither the Mexican nor the Village Green group was accustomed to working hard. Gattegno's approach is, however, ideally suited to dealing with problems of student motivation. Traditional approaches place the burden on the teacher to convince the students that it is in their own interest

students' learning experience. Gattegno states that "retention, being a functioning of the self, will take place as a matter of course, and students, who all are linguists, will end up owning a language as they own other skills" (1976:14).

What follows is an explanation of the teaching experience and sequencing involved in the ten-week Spanish course in Los Angeles. The situation described is not an attempt to detail a complete Spanish course, but is rather an attempt to show what was done in this one class in the time allotted. This class helped me understand the methods involved in teaching, using the Silent Way as well as the reactions that would be likely from students. This, in turn, has enabled me to refine my use of this a better approach for other such classes, in order to avoid problems and to make the entire experience more meaningful for the students.

SEQUENCING

1. The teacher begins with the Fidel vowels, at first pointing and having the class work on a few sounds at a time. As Gattegno has written: "Vowels are the most important element to work on in the beginning, and we have found that, if they are done well, students are helped immensely in all that follows" (Gattegno, 1976:18).

Spanish vowels are particularly interesting because they keep their value anywhere in the world and are considered pure as a result; this is quite different from many other languages. In Spanish, many words, such as oí oía (the respective preterite and imperfect forms of the verb oír, to hear) are composed entirely of vowels. With this in mind, we can see the importance of vowels as a base for good pronunciation. At this point, the teacher is careful to make sure that the vowels are pronounced as individual sounds, not as diphthongs. Then the teacher practices vowel combinations of all sorts; some of these combinations are real words, as the above examples, and some have no meaning at all in Spanish. What is important to remember here, however, is that sound precedes meaning, and all pronunciation practice will provide the student with a strong basis in the language.

2. After the introduction of three vowel sounds, diphthongs are attempted by various combinations of these vowels. The strength of the tap of the pointer on the chart can indicate the accent on the sound, so as to differentiate, for instance, between "ai," "ái" or "aí." It is important also to make certain that the vowels in this exercise are pronounced as purely as possible to differentiate them as Spanish from English. Again, the teacher at this point must thus make sure the vowels

are pronounced each as one sound and not as elided diphthongs.

3. Consonants are introduced at this stage and are then combined with the vowels. For Spanish, "s" and "z" are shown to be the same sound, as are "j" and "g" in certain environments. The color-coding and ordering on the Fidel make this easy to explain, and the chart for Spanish is particularly simplified and easy to follow because of the purity of the vowels and the cleanness of the sound relationships. By contrast, the chart for English is much more complex because of the number of different spellings that may have the same sound, as well as the number of sounds that may be represented by one letter. In combining the consonants with vowels, again it is not so important to use real words, and in any case it is the sound that comes first and not the meaning of the word or phrase.

4. Hand and finger gestures are introduced to show breaks between words and intonation, and the joints of the fingers are used to show the syllables of words. The ability to use this system improves with practice, of course, but it is worth every effort. The students in this instance found this quite helpful. Phrasing is indicated through the use of several fingers of one or more hands, with one finger representing one word. They

are separated if a short pause exists, and they are held together if they run on together. For example: "Mi amigo no está en su casa" yields a 2-2-3 grouping of words, while "Y en aquel lugar no hay nada" is 4-3 (Gattegno, 1976:21).

5. Sentences are introduced as the next step, but again sound and not meaning is involved as this juncture. This is a means of giving practice without wasting time indicating meaning. It will later be easier to recognize meaning when it is given because of the thoroughness of these exercises.

6. A student is asked to spell out the sentence by writing it now on the board. This is actually another opportunity to involve the entire class in the process, for the other members of the class will help with this exercise by repeating the sentence as the individual writes, encouraging him to continue, offering suggestions, and so forth. In this class, this is what happened, and the teacher did not need to get involved more than occasionally during this stage.

7. Further work is done on sounds and rhythm, and I used the following sentence at this stage: "Pero si me miras mira me con gafas." This offers an effective means of demonstrating intonation within the sentence through the use of gestures with the fingers, as noted above.

8. Again, this sentence is written on the board by students, and the process is worked through once again. The use of gestures should make this second attempt a bit more effective for the students, and it should demonstrate how effective the teacher has been in conveying the proper information in this fashion.

9. The intervocalic "r" sound is the next to be considered separately, and the instructor helps visually, indicating stress and other pertinent information in the examples used.

10. The sentences on the board are considered once again and are examined closely, syllable by syllable, for pronunciation and intonation. This reiteration of the basic material should help correct any problems the students may have been having, and by this point the teacher should be gaining a feeling for what instructions and indications on his part are the most effective in getting through to the students and changing their bad habits. He should also be aware by now of how they are thinking and whether they are beginning to avoid bad habits they are used to.

11. The remainder of the consonants that have not been discussed as yet are now included with the vowels and practiced as have been those that have been utilized previously. When a difficult consonant is found--such as the

"ll"--that consonant is given special attention and is practiced more until it is no longer a problem.

12. The following sentences are introduced and treated as the others have been: "yo me llamo . . . me llamo . . . y el se llama "

13. The work on these sentences and on "llamas" is carried through as before, and then the students write the sentences on the board and discuss them. The teacher points to vowels in the words for a review. This serves as useful reinforcement. The words can be tapped out on the Fidel for review as well, and this approach is never completely abandoned. This saves time for the teacher because of the involvement of the students, and that involvement also enhances their learning experience. In the class I conducted, the students were very interested and were deeply involved, and sometimes students would correct their own mistakes as soon as I would point at the word or sound as written on the board, indicating that they were paying close attention and were thinking.

14. The "k" sound is the next to be explored and given specific and individual treatment, and this is coupled with consideration of the various written representations and environments of this sound; "co," "cu," "ca," and "qui" and "que."

15. Other consonantal sounds are explored in this fashion--"v," "b," "w." There is no distinction among these three, and this is demonstrated by the chart and pronunciation. A sentence is used to demonstrate this quite clearly and to bring the fact home to the students: "No vaya a la casa de tito vayase al teatro." Again, this sentence is to be written on the blackboard by the students, and basically the same procedures are to be followed with reference to this as to the others. Sound remains the first concern, though the students may be becoming more familiar with these sounds and some of the words by this time. The teacher continues to use the natural momentum of the class to good advantage.

16. Two more consonants are examined closely--"j" and "g"--and a sentence is provided for further enlightenment: "Juan y José juegan a la barajas en el jardín del general." This sentence is written on the board as were the others, and the process repeats as before so the students can come to a better understanding of the sounds indicated. In addition, the students now read through an entire story. They should be ready to perform this task by now, for they have examined most of the sounds and are familiar with the way they are written. Meaning still is not the key issue, but sound and sound recognition.

17. The trilled "r̃" sound is studied, and the teacher can use a heavy tap to indicate accent or stress. Among the words that can be used for this purpose are "Ramón," "Raúl," "romper," "raton," "ruta," "parra," and "perro." A sentence is also offered for the same treatment and examination as before: "Ramón y Raúl amarraron al perro junto a la reja del regimiento, pero el perro se solto y corrió por la torre." The sentence can be written on the board as before, and the students will then correct any mistakes that have been made. This sentence also provides the opportunity to emphasize the difference between the sounds of "r" and "r̃." The gestures and tappings of the teacher help to make this distinction and others of intonation and stress visible to the student on the basis of the sentence written on the board.

18. The next consonant to be considered is "x" (as "x" or "s"), and the sentence used is as follows: "El extraño trabajador tiene un traje muy raro." Obviously, this sentence contains many of the other sounds that have been considered, and indeed each succeeding sentence offers the new sound in context with many other sounds. This affords an immediate opportunity for review as well as for learning through the new material

19. The next lesson considers a contrast of the initial "d" sound with the intervocalic "d" (voiced), with

words for each (unvoiced--doy, das; voiced--nada, cada, virtud, usted).

20. The next step serves as a review. The teacher erases the story sentences from the board, but the students are asked to remember them and then to say them aloud. The students are next asked to write the missing sentences on the board once again, from memory. The same basic approach can be followed as was used when these sentences were discussed the first time, but the involvement of the students in remembering these sentences should be complete.

21. At this point the teacher starts a number chart to enable the students to work on the sounds involved. Most languages have a system of numeration that enables the speaker to produce all the names of the numerals, and this is therefore an area for teachers to consider because of the saving in time and effort involved in creating words and examining sounds through practice. The concept of numeration is clearly familiar to the students, and they can therefore apply this to Spanish and involve themselves in learning the sounds, this time coupled with distinct meaning.

22. In this next step, meaning is introduced through the use of symbols for the numbers. The teacher puts these symbols on the board--1, 2, 3, etc.--and the students say the words that match the symbols. If the students do not

know a word, the teacher may point it out. The numbers one through nine are practiced at this time in this fashion. Different numbers, higher numbers, and number combinations can next be addressed in the same fashion--the teacher will go to 80 and practice 80, 81, 82, and so forth. Then, the forties, fifties, and 400 and up can be treated in the same way. (Certain numbers are irregular in both form and spelling in Spanish and should not be considered at this time; they will be introduced on the chart at a later time.) The thousands can then be used, and thus longer numbers are introduced, practiced, and reviewed. This number practice can go on for some time, into higher and higher numbers. Numbers can be added until the students are dealing with the millions, billions, and trillions with some facility.

Once the students have achieved a familiarity with these numbers, then the irregular forms, the teens, etc., can be introduced as the earlier forms are being practiced and reconsidered. Combinations of numbers, regular and irregular, can then be practiced until the student has a good working relationship with the entire system of numeration.

The various mathematical functions of addition, subtraction, division, and multiplication are introduced, with the teacher tapping out this information as the class

progresses through these tasks. Fractions are next considered, and this gives the student a complete view of the elementary arithmetical expressions.

Students can not take on all sorts of mathematical problems that either the teacher or students dictate. To practice writing, the teacher or student can dictate a long problem for another student to put on the board. To make sure meaning is clear, another student can write in symbols that which has been put into words.

After only five or six hours of class work, students are dealing with complicated concepts, creating long sentences with numbers and are understanding words and symbols. This is indeed a great accomplishment after so short a period of time.

23. Colors are the next concept given meaning, and the teacher taps out "regleta" (rod) and some colors, or uses a word chart for the same purpose. The teacher then shows the rods and the different colors, demonstrates all of the colors, and then has the students practice with this new information: "una regleta verde," "roja," etc.

This can then be combined with the numbers just considered above: "3 regletas anaranjadas y una rosa." Variations can be used, with different colors and numbers, to increase proficiency and understanding.

24. The teacher next produces the plurals of the colors.

25. The teacher can tap out "tome una regleta amarilla" ("take a yellow rod") and the students can tell this to each other. It is not necessary to explain the grammar to the students in using these sentences. It is rather that the students will grasp the grammar through usage and understand the correct structure without the need for explanation. Not only does this save the teacher time and effort, but it also means that the students will have a better grasp of the structure involved because they have learned it in this fashion rather than through rules and explanations.

26. The next syntax to be demonstrated and absorbed is as follows: "Tome una roja y de me la," "Tome dos rojas y de me las"--Give it to me, Give them to him/her. Variations on this can also be practiced.

27. "Tome dos regletas rojas y de se las"--this sentence draws together many of the separate words and ideas already covered. This sentence can be treated as the others have been, studied and written by the students and the corrected as necessary until everyone understands the process involved.

28. Direct speech is the next topic to be practiced: "De me las," "de se las," "de nos las," "de se las," "den se las."

29. The plural of "you" is indicated and utilized as usual.

30. "Tome una regleta roja y una negra; de me la roja y de le la negra." There are innumerable variations possible with this sentence, and they should be explored and practiced as much as possible to see that the concept is ingrained in the students and that they grasp the essentials of the process.

31. The teacher now holds up four rods of different colors--two green, one blue, and one yellow--and motions to the student to say the appropriate sentence, and practice in this is continued: e.g., "De me la regleta azul," "de le una verde."

32. "Den les 2 anaranjadas"--and this sentence as well can be treated as have others, with variations considered and practiced. By this point, it is possible for the student to make very long and coherent sentences with increasing confidence, and this should be encouraged because it does create confidence and increase proficiency.

The lessons continued from this point and added concepts and linguistic forms, also using other materials to engage the students in conversation and to serve as visual aids to what was under consideration. Indeed, at this point it is possible to carry on conversations: the teacher can tap out questions, and the students can then

answer. These conversations could be written on the board as well, but they can also serve as conversations to increase confidence and quick thinking. The teacher taps out "Buenos Dias" and asks other questions, with the students giving the proper response. Objects can be displayed, and the teacher taps out "Cual le doy?" ("Which shall I give you?") with the expectation of a student response. All this with a minimum of speaking on the part of the teacher.

At all times, work continues on pronunciation and intonation patterns as other questions are used to elicit responses from the students. At some point, the teacher can provoke a reaction from the students by giving misinformation, such as taking the wrong color rod or the wrong number. This actually tests the certainty of the students in their vocabulary, and if they have come to be comfortable with what they have learned, they will readily challenge the teacher and demonstrate that they truly understand what they are saying.

Other added concepts include other interrogatives, directions, prepositions, imperatives, distance, comparatives, possessives, verb tenses, calendar words, and so forth. These concepts are introduced as has been demonstrated above--through rods, other objects and word charts. From these are built sentences which can be continually expanded and varied. As noted, pronunciation and

intonations continue to be emphasized through all this. I found that by leaving the Fidels and word charts prominently displayed on the wall the students could usually find words that they needed without having to ask the teacher. They were involved in getting what they needed and would also correct themselves almost immediately when either the teacher or another student indicated that an error had been made. I had never seen so much accomplished in such a short period of time and such involvement by students in their own learning.

The Silent Way clearly follows the most important precepts set down for the teaching situation. As Stevick notes: "Teaching should be subordinated to learning" (1976:137). This is precisely what happens when using the Silent Way Approach. As Stevick says of Gattegno and his approach: "He is consistent with his principle of maintaining the integrity of what is to be taught and at the same time enhancing the integrity of the learners" (1974:313).

CONCLUSION

The Silent Way was shown in this research to produce results and to enhance the experience both for the teacher and the student. The use of gestures and signals also proved to be most effective in teaching pronunciation, stress, and intonation. In fact, I was amazed that the

pronunciation and intonation of even the slowest students were remarkable after a few short hours of work with these materials. People who had studied beginning Spanish over and over suddenly were able to pronounce with near native ability. The constant presence of the charts and Fidels as visual aids seemed to be very effective. Students would look for what they wanted and correct themselves which showed a great deal of involvement on their part in the learning process. The fact that charts were color-coded for pronunciation and could be read by students without the teacher modeling words or phrases indeed induced students to work. I believe the class learned more in a short period of time using the Silent Way approach than they could have with any other traditional approach or method.

Of course, this is true of these students, clearly a select group in terms of age and education, and the method might be less effective with a group differently constituted. Further studies might offer insight into this question. However, there is a strong indication that this method has considerable merit and makes the task of teaching a foreign language interesting and effective in important ways.

