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Gattegno's legacy

<http://www.pronunciationscience.com>

Roslyn Young and Piers Messum explore the thinking behind the Silent Way.



Roslyn Young has taught a wide variety of learners, mainly in France, Japan and Vietnam.

She has written extensively on the Silent Way and is active in teacher training.



Piers Messum lives in London. He divides his time between creating materials,

teaching English and research on child speech. He has taught in the UK, France and Japan.

The year 2013 is both the 50th anniversary of Caleb Gattegno's book, *Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: the Silent Way*, and the 25th anniversary of his death. Most teachers will associate the Silent Way with Cuisenaire rods, wall charts and the silence of the teacher, but Gattegno's contribution is of much wider relevance.

Gattegno developed a theory of learning that leads directly into practical teaching, for all subjects, not just languages. He made his name in Britain in the 1950s as a maths educator at the Institute of Education, and in France he is best known for his work on teaching literacy. The materials

and pedagogy associated with the Silent Way are thus just one application of his learning model. Indeed, the reasons why any successful language teacher succeeds can be understood and explained using his theory of learning.

How people learn

Gattegno's model covers all aspects of learning, from languages to riding a bicycle to cooking.

Outside classrooms, we are all natural, life-long learners. As small children we learn to stand, to walk and to talk; later on we learn to live in our society and perhaps a new one, to work, to be a grandparent, to cope with disability, and so on. Gattegno identified and described what is going on in all these learning situations: the role of awareness, of the will, of other powers of the mind; the role of analysis and synthesis, of action and perception, of intuition and acquaintance; the role of the mind's retention system and the limited role that memorisation usually plays in spontaneous (non-classroom) learning.

With this understanding at his disposal, he showed how to 'subordinate teaching to learning': how to teach so that one constantly mobilises people's aptitude for learning rather than inhibiting it. A teacher who is able to do this systematically creates a classroom in which spontaneous learning happens all the time.

The role of awareness

Gattegno proposed that all learning takes place through what he called 'awarenesses' (in the plural). Everyone knows the 'aha moment', the moment when we become aware of something which is new and important. What is created in the mind at that moment is 'an awareness'. Gattegno saw

that awarenesses could be as big as an 'aha moment' or very much smaller, and that they take place at all instants of our lives. If we choose to attend to them as such then we can be aware of very many of them, but in the normal course of events the fact that our lives are a succession of discrete awarenesses goes unnoticed. We are concerned with the result, and the process escapes us; we don't notice how our minds are functioning.

I'm visiting an old aunt and decide to make a cup of tea. She doesn't have a kettle, so I fill a saucepan, turn to the stove and become aware that I don't know which knob goes with which burner. I look at the diagrams on the front panel, become aware that one in four of the circles in each diagram is filled in, link the diagrams to the arrangement of the burners, turn the knob I've chosen, press the lighter button and become aware that it was the right knob.

During these few seconds, I attended to my awarenesses as well as to the task itself. I took the time to observe and distinguish both what information my experience furnished for me and what new awarenesses were necessary to light the gas; I could find six of these.

Gattegno realised that awarenesses are the stuff of human learning. Clearly, then, teachers must attend to awarenesses, both in themselves (to learn to observe the process of learning) and in their students (to be able to recognise learning as it happens and to see when it doesn't happen). Teachers then appreciate that they have to continuously adjust their teaching in response to their students' learning. This transforms the classroom.

Because he attended, above all, to people's learning, Gattegno used to say, 'I'm not a language teacher. I'm a people teacher, and the people are learning a language'.

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Awarenesses in language teaching—two examples

1 To learn the pronunciation of a new sound, a student has to be aware of what he is doing with his mouth, his tongue, etc. Gattegno saw that a 'listen and repeat' approach directs students' awareness away from their articulators and towards their ears and what they can hear of the model and of themselves. In order to keep their attention where he knew it needed to be, Gattegno remained silent, not giving a model of a sound for imitation. The students had to explore for themselves what they could produce with their articulators, aware of what they were doing and aware of what the result sounded like. The teacher's responsibility was to indicate how adequate each trial was, and to encourage and guide further exploration using hand and facial gestures, the colour chart, etc.

The idea of a teacher not providing a model while teaching pronunciation is counterintuitive when first met, but quickly becomes the only way to teach once one has tried it out.

2 Error correction as it was understood by Gattegno is entirely based on awarenesses. Common to all mistakes, large or small, is the need for the student to become aware of some aspect of the language which he needs to work on. A mistake is an opportunity for change that the teacher should not waste. If she just gives the student the answer, the creative tension of the moment is dissipated. Instead, the student needs to effect a change on himself, within himself and by himself, and he can only do this through his own awarenesses. The teacher can help by provoking the specific awarenesses she sees are needed.

Among the techniques that Gattegno developed to provoke thoughtful self-correction were various uses of fingers which inform the student of a problem without solving it for him. For example, as the student repeats the problematic part of his sentence the teacher ‘places’ the words on her fingers, one word per finger. Too many or too few fingers make him aware that his sentence has too few or too many words; wiggling a finger shows him exactly where his problem lies but does not provide the answer; wiggling several fingers makes him aware of a larger area for him to work on; changing the way that fingers are grouped brings to his awareness that his sentence is not properly coherent; and so on.

Finger correction is an elegant way of starting the self-correction process in students: it launches the process quickly, the teacher does not intervene excessively and the whole class can see the fingers so that everyone can work on the problem.

How memory works

In his model, Gattegno distinguished retention from memorisation. We retain effortlessly, using mental images created from our various senses. It is our retention system which allows us to know where our local supermarket stocks tea and tomatoes; to find our way around our town, and round the town where we went on holiday ten years ago. We all have images of places dating from our childhood, showing how long-lived the process can be.

Memorisation, in contrast, costs a great deal in terms of effort and is notoriously unreliable. Those who memorise must keep revising or they forget. So in the Silent Way, all teaching is directed towards students retaining the language rather than memorising it. Learning vocabulary is postponed until students have enough language for vocabulary to be easy to retain. Grammar is learnt through intensive use in lived situations; these are restricted in vocabulary but rich in their need for the structures and function words of the language.

Communication or expression?

In his thinking about language, Gattegno was careful to distinguish expression from communication and realised that expression is the more fundamental. We have some-

thing to say before the words to say it present themselves and have many things to say whether or not we utter them and whether or not we have listeners. For Gattegno, the strongest motivation to learn a language, including L1, is to express ourselves. He took this into account in his language classes.

For example, for tenses, Gattegno insisted on the importance of developing our students’ sensitivity to the way particular forms express ‘inner climates’ related to time and mood in the speaker, rather than developing an understanding of formal propositions about events on a time line or, worse still, learning rules.

The teacher must make sure that students are in contact with an ‘inner climate’ when they use a tense. This is why Silent Way students, whatever the level, are asked to speak from experience: for beginners, to describe things that they do and see; then, to talk about their lives; and then, as advanced students, to express the opinions they genuinely hold.

If we teach students to express inner climates, when they are moved to speak outside the classroom their inner climate will trigger the appropriate verb form, as happens with native speakers.

Not to be taken lightly

Gattegno spoke many languages and by the end of his life he had developed teaching materials for more than 40: the major European ones, but also Russian, Greek, Arabic, Hebrew, Japanese and Chinese, each with a different writing system, and Tagalog from the Philippines, Inupiaq from Alaska, Tahitian and Hawaiian, Maori and Lakotan. This breadth of experience alone gave him a unique understanding of language learning and teaching, and remember that Gattegno also had a worldwide reputation as a teacher of mathematics and as a teacher of literacy. His propositions deserve serious consideration.

Who is Gattegno for?

People have thought of the Silent Way as a self-contained system, possibly only suitable for beginners, and have therefore believed that it is not relevant to their teaching circumstances. For us, Gattegno’s contribution was not rods and charts but his insistence on the subordination of teaching to learning in all circumstances. He described and demonstrated principled teaching: teaching informed by an understanding of learning, of language, and of how language should be taught in order for it to be learnt to mastery. Gattegno, then, is for everybody.

roslyn.young@orange.fr
and p.messum@gmail.com

An expanded version of this article can be found at www.pronsci.com/downloads.

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