



NEWSLETTER

KANSAI ASSOCIATION OF LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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THE SILENT WAY

By Nancy Nakanishi

This past summer KALT sponsored a Silent Way workshop, held in Kyoto from August 13-19. Shelley Kuo, Director of the Gattegno Language School in New York City, taught approximately 50 hours of Mandarin Chinese. The group of 33 students almost completely consisted of English teachers of several nationalities.

Class met every day from 9:00 until somewhere between 5:00 and 6:30. Once or twice a day a feedback session would be held in English, where the students would talk about events which occurred in the classroom and their feelings during the learning sessions.

The description of the Silent Way is rather vague--it is defined as "the subordination of teaching to learning." (1) The techniques used to achieve this goal, at least at the beginning level, are 1) one or more charts of colors which represent sounds in the language (called a fidel); 2) several charts of words in the target language which are color-coded to agree with the sound chart; 3) a set of sticks of various colors and lengths, which Gattegno terms "rods;" and 4) a pointer. The use of these aids will be explained in more detail shortly.

The "Silent Way" refers to the high degree of teacher silence; in fact, the teacher was silent most of the time in our Chinese class. Because of the color coding on the charts, the teacher did not even have to say anything to introduce a new word. As we grew more confident with the basic structures, the teacher began to speak a little more in Chinese.

The teacher also frequently gave short instructions in English, but never explained a grammatical point or translated a Chinese word.

In our Chinese class we had one fidel and 12 charts of color-coded characters. The first two or three hours of the class on the first day were devoted to learning the sounds represented by the colors on the fidel; after that, we could (in theory, at least) determine the sounds of any character by referring to the character chart and the fidel. Although there were problems caused by shadings of some colors, difficulty in seeing colors from a distance, and fading of the charts, the great advantage was that romanization was avoided completely and we could refer to the chart at any time to check a word we had forgotten.

The rods were used in innumerable ways. In the early stages they were often used by the teacher--she would pantomime an action and indicate that we were to command her to do that action. We quickly moved into extremely long sentences, for example, "With your right hand, take two orange rods, three blue rods, and a white rod, and put them in the black box quickly, and with your left hand, take a light green rod and two dark green rods and put them in the white box slowly." At higher levels the rods were used as, for example, spaghetti, to indicate "I will eat, I am eating, I ate." At

a still higher level the rods were used to represent people, buildings, trains, dogs, hair curlers, lipstick, etc. The teacher would act out a story with the rods and the students would all tell the story in unison. The advantage of this technique is obvious--the teacher is still very much in control of the situation and the structures to be elicited, and yet the teacher is not speaking; in that way, the students in a sense feel they are "creating" the story.

Speaking of unison, it is worthwhile to note that the whole class of 33 people spent the majority of time speaking in unison. Although the "unison" was often ragged and not really together at all, it gave everyone the chance to practice forming the sentences and keep his/her mouth in motion almost all day. After we had spoken a pattern in unison for some time, Ms. Kuo would call on an individual to speak. This gave us a chance to make sure we had been saying the correct thing, to review in our minds what had been happening up to that point, or to relax from the intensity of the presentation. In spite of the fact that the group was rather large, everyone was involved; the people in the back rows leaned forward or even stood on their chairs in order not to miss what was happening.

Another point brought out was that in order to meet the needs of the students there was no textbook and no lesson plan. This in effect means that the teacher must be prepared for anything and must also try to anticipate what the students need at the moment. On the other hand, by being silent, the teacher is given more time to try to see the processes that each student is going through. If a student is having a problem, the teacher must try to assess just what is causing the problem.

Grammar is taught inductively. By presenting a variety of situations, we were supposed to guess the meaning of the word or grammatical structure ourselves. It always seemed to be that one or two students (not always the same ones) would grasp the point immediately. More would catch on as different situations were given. Some never did catch on at the first presentation. But there was a sort of cyclical presentation of structures; therefore, students who did not catch on to a particular point knew they would have more chances at another time. On the other hand, no student was allowed to fall irreparably behind. At a certain point, if a student was still having problems, Ms. Kuo would spend as much as a half hour working with the student individually. The others, once again, would use this time to listen to the interaction between that one student and the teacher, review their own progress, or take a break.

For an excellent detailed review of the workshop, more objective than this short summary, see Gwen Thurston Joy's article in the Fall issue of Cross Currents. (2)

If there was any general group feeling, I would say the majority felt "Positive with Reservations." I have chosen to write the above summary from a positive viewpoint, because I feel that even if one does not adopt the Silent Way completely, there are aspects of it which can enrich anyone's own teaching: therefore, if you are not familiar with the Silent Way, it might be worth your while to investigate it further. The following section of direct quotations may help to illuminate the nature of the reservations of the participants, to state more clearly some of the positive things that were felt, and to clarify some aspects of the Silent Way itself.

- (1) Gattegno, Caleb, Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way, Educational Solutions, Inc., 80 Fifth Avenue, New York, 1972.
- (2) Cross Currents, a journal published by the Language Institute of Japan, 4-14-1, Shiroyama, Odawara 250.

QUOTES FROM THE SILENT WAY WORKSHOP: THE PARTICIPANTS SPEAK

There are two sources for the quotes in this section:

1) the survey sheets which the participants in the workshop filled out about their experience in learning Chinese; and
 2) the 85-page transcript of tapes of the feedback sessions held throughout the workshop. I have tried to be fair in my choice of both positive and negative comments from the survey sheets; and from the transcript I have made selections which hopefully illuminate further some of the principles of the Silent Way.

This first section are quotes from the survey sheets.

POSITIVE COMMENTS

On Color-Coded Sounds

"The use of color coded pronunciation is highly effective and indispensable to actually learning the sounds rather than repeating what I 'think' I hear. With the charts before me I could continually check my pronunciation without having to check with or depend on the teacher or students."

"Color coding was extremely difficult to match to the sound chart, but the greatest advantage of Chinese characters was that we avoided romanization completely."

On Student Involvement

"The involvement of the greater part of such a large class in many of the sessions was very impressive."

The emphasis on the students' making the effort to figure out pronunciation, sentence construction, etc., is responsible for the high level of energy and lack of boredom and fatigue that I experienced."

"I think that the greatest thing about the Silent Way is that it doesn't allow the student any time (nor the need to) translate words and sentences into his/her native language. Rather than trying to 'understand' a sentence through translation, I've found myself understanding a situation through perception and trying to immediately say it out loud in Chinese."

On Making Mistakes

"As was mentioned by others, I don't feel afraid to make mistakes."

"The encouragement to 'try' and 'to make mistakes' I find very helpful and productive."

"I feel unsure of how much control I have over basic patterns, however, I feel no hesitation in speaking--that is to say--I'm not afraid of making mistakes."

"...^{maybe} this will help learners 'liberate' themselves more easily than many other methods because it encourages students to make mistakes."

On learning vs. teaching

"I feel the method is more conducive to learning than any other method I have used or observed. This may be because this method forces the learner to discover their own learning process and presents the language as a living language as opposed to an inactive language."

"Learning to guess, as it is encouraged, is a good basic skill to have."

The thing I'd like to learn to train myself from this method is to be patient to students until a real learning takes places."

". ..the most valuable aspect for me was learning a lot about the learning process in general."

"What I have learned and can use I can probably know with more certainty than what I've "learned" in the same time in a traditional course."

NEGATIVE COMMENTS

"I found the color sound coding useful for those sounds which I knew already. But I found it difficult to figure out the sounds which are not in English or which I don't know how to isolate. I was never sure if I was pronouncing them rightly."

"Concerning the teaching of pronunciation: I think one masters pronunciation by comparing one's own pronunciation with the correct one. When a student is not used to hearing a correct pronunciation, a problem arises in which he/she cannot comprehend the words correctly." (a rough translation from Japanese)

"There are times when I feel that if I could hear or see the meaning that my progress would be faster."

"Some random comments: grammatical pronunciation of a sort have been given explicitly from time to time; the method seems as authoritarian in some different ways as any I have seen; the theoretical basis for the method says both things that many *others* say and things that either have not been tested or cannot be tested (e.g. sleep and what it does for you)."

"The degree of peer teaching/correction seems to be arbitrary at times..."

"The Silent Way method is a wonderful method in introducing new content words, or a structure but as a learner it was frustrating when trying to produce the sounds."

"...once I 'understood' what was going on and felt successful in working out a problem I felt the need for teacher directed practice."

". ..the presentation seemed to lack balance. Minor points were sometimes given as much time as major ones. Important matters (past tense, future) were initially presented in a cursory, off-hand fashion."

The second group of quotes comes from the transcripts of the feedback sessions held throughout the Chinese course. My thanks to Thalia Alberts of Time-Life and Gwen Joy of LIOJ for their help in choosing significant passages. (Letters below refer to comments by various participants.)

August 14, 1976, after 10 hours of instruction

- Ms. Kuo: Was there any Chinese that came to you in any form or during your sleep? The reason I ask is that we do, in Silent Way classrooms, we do pay attention to the night's sleep. It's something that, we don't just die when we go to sleep. Even though you are exhausted in bed you don't die. The mind keeps working on you. The impact during the daytime gets sorted out, in your sleep. That's why, I think yesterday, before we left, somebody mentioned that you weren't very, he or she, I forgot, wasn't very sure about the chunks that he covered, and I said that one thing I'm sure is that tomorrow morning you'll be a lot better. And I think in the exercise this morning in the very beginning was to ask you to say a long sentence. If you now try to recall that moment and see the fluency of your being able to say that big huge sentence every time compared to what you could have said yesterday. Can we have...
- A: My husband said that I spoke Chinese during the night. I though I had a deep sleep, you know, I, I thought I didn't dream or... and he said I was speaking Chinese. I didn't think I was speaking.
- B: I was so tired after yesterday's session that I couldn't think about Chinese at all. I didn't think about one word, I didn't think about grammar or anything, I only thought about my reactions to the day, and I didn't dream about it, and I didn't think about it when I got up this morning. But yesterday at the end of the session I had missed a lot, and I was out this way, nothing was together. And within the first five minutes of the session today everything that I hadn't gotten yesterday had fit in. So something had happened even though I didn't think about it.
- Ms. Kuo: . . .I'm asking for what you have gone through yesterday and today.
- C: Well, mine would be just like S 's, I was confused but there were many times, especially today, when I would realize that two or three words all at once just fit together. It would just be something like an insight, it wasn't that I reasoned it out or anything, all of a sudden for some reason in one situation it seemed to make sense, where in all the other situations it didn't. And you kept going back.

Ms. Kuo: I did, talking about a group chorus, since there was again, many versions of, supposedly, of one statement, many versions, I was comfortable as to the situation on the grounds that, I knew that at the time it was necessary for every one of you just to say something to yourself, right or wrong, but just say something, and I was trying to make a decision then, how long, for how many more minutes I should let it go on, until I pick out somebody to give everybody else a chance to hear more clearly and to give a chance to fit in that little pieces here and there...

* * *

D: Well one thing you were saying that, the fast people are bored, but I feel that I'm slow, but even if you had spent more time with that sentence, I think that maybe I would have become bored, because you have already said that it would come back, it will come back, so I don't get it the first time, so what, it will come back, so I don't get it the first time, so what, I'm gonna wait until the second time, and for me it's good to break things up and, and move around, so I thought, you know, moving from one thing to another was good.

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Ms. Kuo: Yeah, as you will notice, when the days go by, I will be speaking more and more, I can be part of you as far as Chinese goes. Now I can only limit myself to speak very, at a very restricted ground where you are comfortable at, and I can speak a lot, but it certainly doesn't help. It will be so much as the part of the air, that it may not register as much as, M mentioned that, some few things. To me it's necessary just, say, for the first day and a half it was necessary for me to remain silent and to give all of you a chance to work on your own vocal apparatus. Once this is done, then, I can be part of you, we can joke and do all kinds of things.

August 14, 1976, 14 hours

Ms.Kuo: ...there isn't such a thing as standardized things in the Silent Way, you pretty much do, as a Silent Way teacher, do what you feel like necessary...

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Ms. Kuo: . .really nobody is born a good teacher, it's just something, no matter what approach you use, you have to kind of put your fingers on for the first time and then make some mistakes. As I did this weekend, I mean these three days I made some mistakes and next time around I'll be much better, and next time around I'll be even better and better and better. I think everybody can do it provided there's a room, to, there's a room of readiness for accepting mistakes. It was very hard in the beginning for me to recognize my own mistakes, it's, it was a very losing face type

of feeling, but once I got over that, the worst is that you just blew it away as I had done a couple times and start all over again, only considering the time has been wasted on my mistakes at two or three minutes the most, a lot of times it's only half a minute, it wasn't really that tragic. I think that the acceptance of mistakes is quite a, quite an important thing to gain in order to become a Silent Way teacher.

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E: And T really made a good point that it's a game, it's a puzzle, it's a challenge, and this is what I've noticed in class, I saw some Silent Way classes in New York. And I've tried my own modification of this system in our classroom. And first thing, if you try it with some students, they do get a little upset, because the typical Japanese desire is free conversation, even though of course they can't speak. But once you show them that there are these very basic problems that you have to work with, and then give them the means to work with them, and then let them work together, I find that within the, by the end of the first class, they're very much involved, and find it very challenging, and that it's extremely interesting. The point was made that, of the fact that because you're using this method you can sit back and watch the students and get at their problems, whereas most traditional teachers are so involved with projecting themselves, in teaching, that they don't know what's happening with the students, whereas if you sit back and watch what's happening with the students, you can deal, I think, with the problems that occur in the classroom much more effectively.

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F: I'd like to comment on the allegedly limited vocabulary. I think there was a vocabulary overload. We had too much vocabulary today. I mean I have strong doubts in what I'll be able to retain...

Ms. Kuo: Yeah, but see, to her not so. So to T it may not be the case either. It's like I am, Dr. Gattegno likes, I'll just quote him, he said he's putting out a feast. If you have a small stomach, don't eat that much. If your stomach is much bigger, eat till your stomach's tired. It's sort of give and take, I laid out this much, if you can take that much, do it. Especially today we did those things that came to a lot of us. But a lot of them because some of the people, especially those people who know kanji, to them it's not really such a big deal, to have them all. It seems they already have those things, and it only took me, say, one or two seconds to introduce every one, and that can be to the satisfaction of those who are ready for it. But those who aren't please be also at ease with what you can eat.

August 18, 1976, 38 hours

Ms. Kuo: . .the notes that were taken down usually, that is the note takers usually have to refer to their notes when they are asked to say something. And those who don't take notes usually would have to search someplace else rather than their notebook. And of course that someplace else is rather within oneself. And to me it's a more comfortable thing to take oneself wherever you go than a notebook, if you forget your notebook, then that part of Chinese isn't known...

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Ms. Kuo: . .to some people I feel more intimate than to some others. Those who have given me more in terms of just communication in the very broad sense, vibration in a very in sense, that there's something, in between I and you, you and me, every line here, every thread here is different, and I felt, I feel very differently toward, to each of you...

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Ms. Kuo: . .a lot of people, not a lot, some people felt that by working with you through the charts, firmly, on my part, that's caused certain embarrassing or miserable feelings from you, which was one thing, first of all, cause we couldn't tell, since we weren't you, it couldn't be verified...

F: Oh yeah, well I can verify that, I was angry...but that's, I think that was simply a matter where I was frustrated, and I know, being frustrated, you're supposed to say, o.k., it's gonna come. But I could see it was a brick wall. And until you wrote something on the board, now I know, I can, I can, I can tell pretty much when, when I, I should keep going, and when I should keep trying, and I can tell pretty much when there's just no way. And when I felt totally frustrated and no possible hope for making the sound, I guess my frustration did turn to anger of a kind.

Ms. Kuo: What happened after you got angry?

F: Well, after I got angry, you wrote that up on the board. And then, I was, I was able to do it, I was able to work it out. No, I have, I have no complaint with the system...

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Ms. Kuo: . .I had the purpose of the exercise with him is that, I felt there was a need for me to give him or, for him to give me this much time to establish, there's something called, listening to oneself. For his job then is not to listen to you, to me, or to anybody, but it's to listen to himself. Because there again, you showed that you weren't listening to yourself. And because I believe, it's a belief that if one can learn to listen to oneself, there's a very good chance that you can transmit the same thing to listening to others. But one has to start from here...

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G: . . . I felt very much that either when you've been working with me when I've had trouble, or with other people, there hasn't been the pain, and it hasn't been the threat that it has in other language courses. And I've been in classes where I've hidden behind the biggest person in the class, because I was terrified of something like that happening, and then when the attention was focused on me, of course everything just went (raspberry sound). And I really couldn't function. I don't feel that here, I feel comfortable making mistakes.

August 19, 1976, 50 hours

H: . . . and one thing I think, when you don't in my case I didn't have training as a language teacher, and as that kind of person when you come to Japan, especially everyone seems -to assume that as a native speaker you have the golden words, you know, it's very easy to follow that assumption, that, you know, you have, you can model, and especially when it comes to adults are very eager to listen to every little thing that comes out of your mouth. But I taught junior high, and they weren't so eager to listen to everything that came out of my mouth, and I kept saying what's wrong with them, you know, they don't realize how wonderful and valuable my words are. Why don't they, what's wrong with these kids, you know. They told me. I mean I could've learned from them what I could've learned from the Silent Way, but I wasn't ready to learn it. All right, I couldn't realize it, so that's one thing, I realize that the modeling is not that important, because no matter how many times I modeled it for them, they didn't or some of the, some of them of course grasped it, but some of them didn't grasp them, and they got very quickly bored with my wonderful modeling. And the other thing is I sort of assumed that students can only absorb so much at a time, so today we're going to go through this series, and that, that's all they're going to get so we have to go over it millions of times so they can get it, but on the other hand you threw a lot of different patterns at us, and it seemed to be a lot, how could we absorb it all, you know, but we did manage to absorb it over the days, so I think that was another assumption that I realized was incorrect, that in a certain time, in an hour, you can only absorb so much... And the other thing, I think, I don't know if this is really typical of the Silent Way or more your teaching method itself, but as you said today, you're meeting the students where they are, and this is another thing I've had a lot of problem in, especially with teaching kids, because if you don't meet them where they are, they let you know. But then you don't know how to meet them where they are, so you wish they wouldn't tell you that you're not meeting them where they are, so, I've had a big problem with that, and, I didn't want to meet them where they are, because I had my little plan, and it worked, in this class, why didn't it work in this class, I like you, but I don't like you, because you're not meeting me where I am, so...

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I: I, I would say that I still have some question marks about whether it is in fact really bad to give, let's say, explicit rules in the way explicit rules are usually given. When, for instance, let's say the case of D_ where it seems possible, it seems possible that he would have gotten the same benefit out of that as, that's a specific instance. Where I think an explicit rule would have helped, might have helped him more than, and done the same, he would have learned as much as a learner by being given the explicit rule as some other way, well in fact, we'll never know because the situation did not develop that way. But I wonder, that's a big question mark, is, is a, is an explicit rule for an adult learner who is a, who is a deductor under many cases, rather than an inductor, though adults can induct the grammar, is it more efficient at, from time to time, or when the thing is, when the situation arises, do bang, there it is, deduct it. That, that's a question, I'm not saying that this should always be done, and you, but if you don't do it this way, if you don't hold really strongly to the principle, have you so negated the method that you'd be just as well, as T said earlier, not to do it at all...

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J: The first time I expected I would get some special technique of some things, you know some special materials, or some special thing, but the, I was wrong, and I was just deeply impressed that saying, she's preparing lesson-type things, but before she met the students, nothing. After she met students she can get how to do with them. I, still can't understand what it means, but it might be a very important thing, and I'm in charge of children's department, and I always observe how the teachers are doing with various books, or with students, but I never observe the students themselves, and through, throughout the feedback sessions, I heard that many different persons spoke out different impressions, it was a great help for me. And I also observed myself as a learner... I can't express everything now, I can't say what I got now, but gradually maybe I can remember what I have experienced here in these sessions... Whenever we asked some questions, you said, please speak about what we have experienced only, not experienced things, it's not worthwhile.

Ms. Kuo: It's not that the things that we haven't experienced is not worthwhile, but it's more since we don't know that (inaudible) that we cannot benefit as much, and since we have a limited amount of time, it seems the wiser choice. Another thing, it just occurred to me when you're speaking, I've found great joy in knowing that I don't have much homework to do in terms of I have to prepare lessons. What I would do, which might be something you can use, is I will just kind of close my eyes and point at someplace, and that's where we are going to start. And that's pretty much all I needed for the day. I just had to get the beginning and the rest would follow...

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THE SILENT WAY FROM THE SIDELINES

The Comments of an Observer

Having already studied some Chinese in college, I decided not to take an active part in the 50-hour course. Rather, I observed approximately twenty hours over six of the seven days. I came into the course having already read Gattegno's book, Teaching Foreign Languages in Schools: The Silent Way, having seen a few second-hand demonstrations of some aspects of the method and having used the rods somewhat in my own classes to teach elementary English structure.

I came with three basic questions which I wanted answered: 1) How far can the sticks be used, i.e., how many types of patterns can be covered using only the sticks? 2) How well does the color-code system work? -- Can students really achieve native-like pronunciation?, and, 3) How well does the method prepare the student to learn on his own if placed in a Chinese language environment after completing the course? Below are the answers as I found them.

1) The sticks seem to be an extremely useful technique for teaching basic structure. In the 50 hours she used them to teach noun phrase constructions, the quantification system, relative clauses, commands and requests, existential relationship, the equivalent of YES/NO and WH-questions, some past and future verb tense patterns and the use of some adverbs, to name those which come to mind quickly. While I can foresee that a time would come when the sticks would no longer be adequate, they could still probably be used for another 50 hours at least.

Versatility is the basic virtue of the sticks. In a method where the students must do most of the talking, the sticks provide an ideal method in the usually sterile classroom environment to elicit sentences without the instructor having to speak himself.

2) My evaluation of the color code system and the teaching of pronunciation is not as favorable. How much of the problem is inherent or the teacher's personal preference to limit her correction is debatable. Perhaps too little time was spent teaching the sounds of the basic colors-- it could be that many students never got "locked in" to the code. Although my own pronunciation is not so good as to allow me to pass absolute judgment on the achievements of the students, my training as a linguist and a phonetician permits me to say that I often heard pronunciations which were different from the instructor's infrequent models, and there often seemed to be considerable variation among members of the class.

At one point the instructor did say that she was intentionally placing more emphasis at first on structure, stating that overdue concentration on pronunciation at that time would not be profitable since the students had so much structure to master. It could possibly be the case that greater emphasis would have been placed on pronunciation later, had the course continued for more than 50 hours. In this even, a question still remains as to whether poor pronunciation habits can be readily unlearned at such a relatively late stage. Suffice it to say that, regarding pronunciation, I found little evidence to support the claim of the Silent Way that the little that the students do learn is learned as well as a native speaker.

3) The Silent Way is supposed to teach the student how to learn by himself. I feel that this claim has been generally upheld for the learning of structure. Little or no verbal explanation was given; the students were forced to develop, and then to either confirm or discard their own hypotheses.

No comparisons with the mother tongue were used which might influence (for better or for worse) the student's own internalization of the language. It appeared to me that the major patterns taught had been comprehended and were being used automatically and correctly by the majority of the students.

Again, I have my doubts about pronunciation. I do not feel that the students were really taught how to observe the aural stimulus, compare and then improve their own pronunciation. Most teacher correction was done visually rather than aurally--by pointing to the color code, by the teacher mouthing the correct articulation or by giving a verbal articulatory description such as "cough" or "smile." Since the instructor rarely spoke, the students rarely had a model which they could imitate with confidence. The method claims that this is a virtue in that it trains the student to listen carefully and to catch new words the very first time they are uttered. If this turns out to be the case, perhaps the method has merit. Personally, I would prefer a "listen to my correct pronunciation and your wrong pronunciation, compare and then say it right" type of approach. After all, in a real situation one can try to improve perceived pronunciation errors by asking the speaker to repeat the problem word again.

My comments have been rather sketchy and have probably been biased by my previous teaching experience. As an observer, my comments are subject to observational error; I was always at the back of the room and it was difficult to hear individuals unless they were singled out by the instructor. Nevertheless, I hope that these comments taken in conjunction with the others in this newsletter will help to give a balanced picture of our Silent Way experience.

Thomas N. Robb

KALT Newsletter

Kansai Association of Language Teachers

Contributions to the newsletter are welcome and should be sent to Nancy Nakanishi, Editor, KALT Newsletter, Nagoya College of Foreign Languages, 1-7 Miyanishi-cho, Chikusa-ku 263 Nagoya. Book reviews, interesting teaching techniques, news about something that is happening of interest to language teachers, are all welcome.

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