The Silent Way

Introduction

Although people did learn languages through the Audio-Lingual Method, and indeed the method is still practiced today, one problem with it was students' inability to readily transfer the habits they had mastered in the classroom to communicative use outside it. Furthermore, the idea that learning a language meant forming a set of habits was seriously challenged in the early 1960s. Linguist Noam Chomsky argued that language acquisition could not possibly take place through habit formation since people create and understand utterances they have never heard before. Chomsky proposed instead that speakers have a knowledge of underlying abstract rules, which allow them to understand and create novel utterances. Thus, Chomsky reasoned, language must not be considered a product of habit formation, but rather of rule formation. Accordingly, language acquisition must be a procedure whereby people use their own thinking processes, or cognition, to discover the rules of the language they are acquiring.

The emphasis on human cognition led to the establishment of the **Cognitive Code Approach.** Rather than simply being responsive to stimuli in the environment, learners were seen to be much more actively responsible for their own learning, engaged in formulating hypotheses in order to discover the rules of the target language. Errors were inevitable and were signs that learners were actively testing their hypotheses. For a while in the early 1970s, there was great interest in applying this new Cognitive Code Approach to language teaching. Materials were developed with deductive (learners are given the rule and asked to apply it) and inductive (learners discover the rule from the examples and then practice it) grammar exercises.

However, no language teaching method ever really developed directly from the approach; instead, a number of 'innovative methods' emerged. In the next few chapters we will take a look at these.

Although Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way, which we will consider in this chapter, did not stem directly from the Cognitive Code Approach, it shares certain principles with it. For example, one of the basic principles of the Silent Way is that 'Teaching should be subordinated to learning.' In other words, Gattegno believed that to teach means to serve the learning process rather than to dominate it. This principle is in keeping with the active search for rules ascribed to the learner in the Cognitive Code Approach.

Gattegno looked at language learning from the perspective of the learner by studying the way babies and young children learn. He concluded that learning is a process which we initiate by ourselves by mobilizing our inner resources (our perception, awareness, cognition, imagination, intuition, creativity, etc.) to meet the challenge at hand. In the course of our learning, we integrate into ourselves whatever 'new' that we create, and use it as a stepping stone for further learning.

In order to explore the Silent Way, we will observe the first day of an English class in Brazil. There are 24 secondary school students in this class. The class meets for two hours a day, three days a week.