

THE FISHBOWL

By Mario Rinvoluceri, Pilgrims, Canterbury

*Per il grande
Trentino*

When my son was 16-17 he would watch the Wimbledon tennis championships intently, ring a friend up and go and play as much tennis as he could. He told me his game always improved substantially at the Wimbledon time of year. Somehow he seemed to watch the champions' moves with his arms and back and legs as well as with his eyes. There was a strong, relaxed, learning process going on in front of the screen.

At first sight it might appear that Martin was doing much the same thing as a language learner watching a TV or video language programme. He was modelling himself on the champions' kinetic behaviour while the language learner models herself on the actors' native speaking language behaviour. The big difference, though, is the intensity and reality of the model. The Wimbledon players are involved in an all person situation with money, fame and self-image at stake. The actors on a language teaching screen are doing a humdrum job and obeying the dictates of pre-set script. If you take language broadcasts like Follow Me or Digi-Digi (Catalan) nothing remotely human or involving is happening on the screen, at least not in Wimbledon terms.

Caleb Gattegno*, the inventor of Silent Way, empathised with the "Wimbledon principle" and, in the late seventies, produced a seventy hour Silent Way video course in which a group of beginners learns English on the small screen. On these remarkable cassettes you see

- the whole learning group
- the head of an individual student trying to get something right
- the teaching materials
- the teacher's hand or pointer
- a mixture of the above elements using split screen or oval insets for the heads of individual students.

Gattegno proposed that the learning group should watch a half hour session of learning on the video and then complete the lesson by actively practising what the screen group had learnt. They would have a flesh-and-blood teacher in the room to help them.

The extraordinary thing that happens when you watch a learning process on the screen is that you yourself often get sucked in. You find that you identify with one or other of the screen learners and you follow their process with attention and involvement. When that person loses concentration, so do you - when they come alive, so do you.

Another extraordinary fact is that quite often the people in the watching group understand things faster than the learning group on the screen. The spectators are in a state of relaxation and they are shielded from the teacher's attention, love, annoyance, pressure, demands. They are not being required to produce anything so they bubble with productive thoughts.

In making his seventy hour English course Dr Gattegno has offered a brilliant model for all educational television programmes. The principle could be summarised thus:

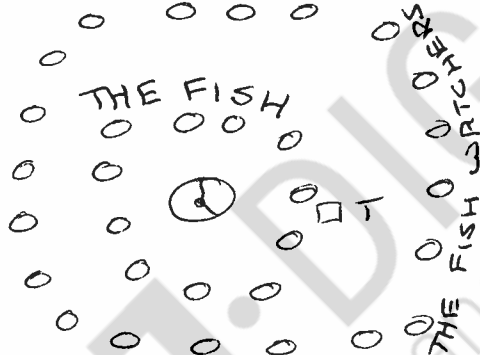
Don't show accomplished models on the screen (in the case of language programmes, native speakers with suave acting skills).

*Dr Gattegno died in the Summer of 1988.

Show real learners grappling with the new subject, concepts, skills. Show the Wimbledon thrill, uncertainty, struggle. (Such programmes are both accessible and compelling viewing.)

The same fish-bowl principle that Gattegno used in his video teaching can be used in your class. All you need is an inner group working on something and an outer group observing, thinking learning, benefiting. The outer folk know the heat is off them:

Suppose you want to revise comprehension of time-telling in English with a beginners' class. Have half the class sit in a circle on the floor with you. Place a large cardboard clock in the centre of the circle. The rest of the class sit on chairs forming an outer circle.



Tell the outer people to be quiet, their turn will come. Say a time and ask someone in the inner circle to show it on the clock. If she does it wrong don't correct it yourself, let someone else in the inner circle help. After some practice like this have the inner fish exchange places with the outer watchers and continue the revision process.

Intermediate Discussion

Have everybody in one big seated circle. If the discussion topic is, say, family life ask all the first-borns to form an inner circle on the floor and ask the others to draw in closer. Give the inner circle four minutes to tell each-other what it feels like to be the first one in the family. The outer circle listen.

Ask the first-borns to return to the outer circle and have a new inner circle formed of middle-born people. Give them four minutes to describe what their situation was/is like.

Repeat the process with the last born students. (Only-children are normally fairly rare and can be included with first-borns).

Now ask the students to form groups of four or five with at least one person from each birth order group to continue the discussion.

The use of fish-bowling allows people to listen and think before they have to speak. It also divides the class group into psychologically powerful sub-sets which the fish-bowling format makes spatially clear.

Beginners' Conversation Class

Half the group sit in the inner circle on the floor round an audio-recorder. The rest of the class sit on chairs in the outer circle.

When a person in the inner circle wants to say something to another member of the inner group, he says it to the person and simultaneously records it on the recorder. If he can't say it in English he calls the teacher over and says it in mother tongue. The teacher says the English translation into his ear. He then says the sentence in English to its addressee and into the audio-recorder.

In this way the inner group produce a 5-10 minute conversation in the target language.

They change places with the outer group and the latter now try to exactly reproduce the conversation they have just witnessed. This is also recorded.

The group then transcribes both conversations onto the board from the two recordings.

The above procedure is an adaptation of Charles Curran's Community language learning and is a useful way of getting students to really listen to each other. I learnt this development of CLL from Vincent Broderick, Osaka.

Shadow Dictation*

Have people sit in two concentric semi-circles:



The people in the outer semi-circle are the writers. The people in the inner semi-circle are the listeners. During the dictation the task of the writers is to take the words down - the task of the listeners is simply to listen.

When you dictate maintain eye-contact with the inner circle people. Dictate to them. Encourage students to consult/help their partners in the other circle as much as they can. Pause in the dictation long enough to make this possible.

At the end of the dictation the listeners should check their partner's text. (Pair your students carefully at the start of this exercise. It often works better to have the louder students writing and the quieter students listening and helping.)

*For more dictation exercises see bio-data.

"Work is wonderful - I love watching it."

This sentence is a joke within a fierce, work-ethic focussed culture but it accurately captures a major intuition about learning: one needs to see it happening in others, to hear it, to sniff it, to freely hover over it before actively committing oneself to practising. This is the central intuition in Stephen Krashen's work and no amount of linguists niggling about him being sloppy as an academic is going to make the intuition evaporate. You see the self-same process at work when a mother is helping a five-year to read and the 3½ year old picks up the same skill with half the trouble. No one is focussing - forcing him to do it. It just happens because he independently wants to emulate the five year old. Maybe we can modify the above sentence a bit:

Learning is wonderful - watching it is doing it.

Bio-data

After work in Chile and Greece, Mario Rinvoluceri joined Pilgrims in 1976 and currently works there as a teacher, trainer and writer. He is consultant to the forthcoming Pilgrims-Longman list (1990) and his two most recent books are Dictation, with Paul Davis, Cambridge University Press 1988 and The Q Book with John Morgan, Longman, 1988.