

Review

How We Learn and How We Should be Taught: An Introduction to the Work of Caleb Gattegno (Volume 1)

R. Young and P. Messum

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Young and Messum's title is a welcome addition to the literature, the first of two volumes aiming to re-present the work of Caleb Gattegno (1911–1988) to a new generation of teachers. During the 1970s and 1980s, many language teachers encountered the Silent Way or heard about it at some remove. They may associate it with coloured rods and word charts, but the Silent Way is neither of those things and is better seen as the language learning application of Gattegno's much larger vision for education, the Subordination of Teaching to Learning. Gattegno was a scientist, mathematician, psychologist, investigator of human learning, and polyglot (English, which he spoke and wrote both fluently and elegantly was his fifth or sixth language.) Some readers of this review will recall a number of Gattegno's publications, in particular *The Common Sense of Teaching Foreign Languages* ([1976] 2010), *The Universe of Babies* ([1973] 2010), and *What we Owe Children* ([1971] 2010). More widely read, perhaps, were Earl Stevick's accounts of the Silent Way, especially in *Memory Meaning Method* (1976) and *Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways* (1980). The authors of the title under review would probably describe themselves as committed students of Gattegno's work. Roslyn Young met Gattegno in 1971 when she saw him teaching Chinese the Silent Way, and Piers Messum met him in Japan in the 1980s while learning Japanese through the Silent Way.

For many teachers in the United Kingdom and elsewhere, the 1970s was a colourful time of professional excitement. The places my colleagues and I worked at thrived on the

discussion and testing of rival educational theories and practices. In addition to experience of the successful 'eclectic' training originated by International House, teachers were likely to have a passing knowledge of a variety of approaches such as the direct method, total immersion, grammar translation; so-called 'humanistic' approaches like Suggestopedia, Community Language Learning, and the Silent Way; and later on The Inner Game of Tennis, Total Physical Response, Inner Track Learning, and so on. From the feeder fields of general education were echoes of Steiner and Montessori, and John Holt on the inner world of children's learning in *How Children Fail* (1965). And it wasn't just in schools. At that time, Tony Buzan's television series *Use Your Head* was on the British Broadcasting Corporation. We watched the weekly episodes at school and by the weekend had experimented with his approaches to mind mapping, memory training, or fast reading and integrated them into our work. On top of all this was an extraordinary array of personal development practices coming from the United States challenging us to view learning and living as a holistic activity, in particular Carl Rogers's person-centred approach (Rogers and Frieberg 1994). Currently, the so-called communicative approach appears to have replaced everything, though to my knowledge it has not been shown to be better than the others.

The title reminds us of those heady days while offering to take us forward for a second bite. In the Preface, the authors point out that Gattegno worked on a broad canvas. He began his career as a mathematics educator, founding the Association of Teachers of Mathematics in the United Kingdom in the 1950s and promoting the use of Cuisenaire rods. He went on to embrace literacy and language learning, and wrote with great insight about the development of babies, children, and adults and other aspects of life such as health, happiness, and death.

The book offers an overview of the concepts that Gattegno developed to account for how babies, children, and adults learn. The material in this volume addresses the first part of the title, *How We Learn ...* and the second volume, due for publication in 2015, will take up the second part, *How We Should be Taught*. The book is divided in three: Part 1 is entitled 'Who am I and who are my students?' This summarizes in four chapters Gattegno's description of how humans learn and develop. Part 2 asks 'How do we learn?' (also four chapters), and both answers this question and provides illustrations of the core ideas in practical examples. Part 3, 'Where do we come from?' (one chapter), puts Gattegno's ideas into a wider evolutionary context. I will discuss Parts 1 and 2 because they address what is most relevant to teachers.

Chapter 1 introduces two of the core ideas of Gattegno's view of learning, which he terms 'presence' and 'awareness'. When I stop my everyday life and look inside, I find that I have an inner life, made up of thoughts, feelings, memories, moods, questions and judgments, uncertainties, plans, commitments, and so on. I have access to this inner life by being present to it, just as I can be present to the world outside. And just as we talk about a field of vision, so we can talk about a field of presence that delimits my involvement with the world, inside or out, at any precise moment. For example, when I am looking at a landscape, then my presence is in my vision, and as I move my presence, I can adjust my vision to see the whole view or to focus on a distant detail. At a musical concert, I am similarly present in my hearing, and so on. As soon as my presence settles, I become aware of something and then I can say that I am aware, and the result is an awareness. To live one's life is to have an endless succession of awarenesses.

The authors draw attention to Gattegno's need to use 'awareness' as a countable noun. An awareness is an instance of the 'penny dropping'. Scientific discoveries are awarenesses. Seeing that the word 'and' in English follows 'a hundred', or 'two hundred', and not 'twenty' or 'thirty' is an awareness. Language acquisition is, according to Gattegno, the culmination of a sequence of many awarenesses. This brings the authors to a key point that scientists and learners understandably attend to the content of their awarenesses rather than to the process of becoming aware. Teachers, however, need to attend to both, and the different and vital thing teachers can bring to the classroom is attention to the student's process of becoming aware. Thus, Gattegno proposes the study of awareness and the

process of becoming aware as the foundation for both a science of education and the development of teachers. It is possible to identify the awarenesses needed in any domain of learning and to redefine teaching as the activity that leads students to have these awarenesses for themselves. Many examples of awarenesses as units of learning are given for different activities in Chapter 6.

The concept of presence illuminates the distinction between practice and repetition. Both involve some kind of 'going over it again', but repetition is done without being present to the task, without being 'with it'. Practice, on the other hand, requires the learner to be present to each trial and to adjust each new trial in the light of feedback from the previous one, thus there is no feeling of repetition, but there is practice without repetition.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the authors describe Gattegno's model of how humans function, a model that provides teachers with ways of seeing the learning of their students as it happens and being guided by it. I will mention two elements of this model, which Gattegno terms the 'self' and the 'psyche'.

Living one's life places two very different demands on us. The first is to be able to meet the new, to change, and to evolve. This is the role of what Gattegno terms the self, the part of me that is free to engage with any unknown. The self becomes aware, comes up with its own response, and learns. When we are doing all this openly and creatively, Gattegno would say, 'The self is at the helm'.

The self needs to be free to meet the next unknown in the lesson or in the day, so there is a requirement for something else to supervise what has just been learnt. And this is done by the psyche, which looks after everything the self leaves behind as it moves on to other unknowns. Past learnings are integrated into the psyche.

Various attributes of the self are described: awareness (already referred to), sensitivity, vulnerability, patience, the sense of truth, and others. One place where the self can be easily encountered experientially is in the classroom, since the self is the learner in each of us. According to this view, therefore, teachers need to learn to recognize when a student's self is at the helm, and when not, and this constitutes a core sensitivity to be developed in teacher training programmes.

Part 2 outlines Gattegno's four-stage model of learning: (1) becoming aware that there is something to learn and engaging with it (for example as a learner driver, I keep stalling the car and so discover

that there is something to learn about the integrated use of clutch and accelerator), (2) tossing the problem around and integrating the resulting feedback, which comes from inside or outside (I experiment using feedback from engine, myself, and instructor), (3) practising to automatize the new learning so the psyche releases the self to move on (I find I can talk at the same time as change gear, leaving my self available for the next learning), (4) transfer of the learning to support any further learning (like changing gear on a slippery road).

This model is then illustrated in a wide variety of real learning experiences in diverse activities like windsurfing, fishing, using a Chinese ink brush, throwing a pot, learning to type, going into a café, stopping smoking, and so on. In each of these examples, the authors indicate each learning move that they construe as an awareness so that the reader gets used to spotting this unit of learning. The aim is that we teachers become more able to see this in our own lives and learning so that we can apply it to our students' learning.

This is a demanding book and yet paradoxically easy to read. Demanding in that it challenges and offers to extend our thinking. Easy in that the clear and succinct style carries the reader along. As one who was daunted by Gattegno's writing style yet who wanted to understand and use his insights, this title has systematized and clarified concepts I had not fully understood. His concepts of awareness, presence, self, and psyche have been of tremendous help in my own work and have been at the heart of my notions of close-up teaching, seeing learning, and the Inner Workbench (Underhill 2013).

Any downsides? Well it is essentially a *tour de force* summary and explanation of about 30 of Gattegno's concepts, and that may not be for you. But the upside is that they fit together into a coherent and overarching model of learning that, as I see it, is ready for application in the classroom. If I have a complaint, it is the lack of index, a minor issue, however, since the nature of the book and its organization makes navigation straightforward.

Throughout his writing, Gattegno took ordinary words (for example 'self' and 'psyche') and gave them specific meanings, and by attending to this, the reader is rewarded with a much finer grained picture of human learning to build on or critique. I recommend this book because in my view Gattegno offers the most satisfying hypotheses about how learning happens and how we can help it to happen. I think it goes straight to a level of

perception and detail that our received knowledge does not. Who is it for? Those who are dissatisfied with our current descriptions of learning and how that informs teaching; anyone who has been curious about the thinking behind the Silent Way; and those who want to come again, or for the first time, to the work of Caleb Gattegno. And referring back to the beginning of this review, I think I am not alone in lamenting the loss of diversity in our educational theories, discussion, practices, and publications. Many said that Gattegno was ahead of his time. Perhaps this publication and Volume 2 that follows are signs that the time is coming around again when we might unpack, question, and throw fresh light on some of our assumptions.

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The reviewer

Adrian Underhill is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author. He met Gattegno in 1976 and remained in contact. Current interests include improvisation in teaching, leadership, global citizenship, and Demand High teaching. He is author of *Sound Foundations: Learning and Teaching Pronunciation* and of *Sounds: The Pronunciation App* (ELTONS award 2012). He is a past President of IATEFL.

Email: adrian@aunderhill.co.uk

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