

Applying the Silent Way in Teaching Japanese Language to University Students in Taiwan

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Abstract

The present study investigated the feasibility of applying the Silent Way in teaching Japanese to Taiwanese university students. A total of 168 (96 female and 72 male) students in a university in central Taiwan were the subjects of this study. They were studying Japanese as a general course, and were grouped in five classes ranging from freshmen to juniors. Some basic principles and techniques of the Silent Way were adopted in teaching them some vocabulary and 50 Japanese Hiragana sounds during six successive sessions in three weeks. Each administration took about 20 minutes embedded in the normal class time. A 25-item Hiragana sounds oral test was used as the pre-test and post-test in order to examine the effects of applying this method. Using a paired sample T-test ($\alpha \leq .05$) significant difference between students' knowledge of the Japanese sounds before and after the experiment was observed. However, comparing female and male students' gained scores via applying a Mann Whitney U-test, no significant difference was observed. Thus, this study shows that the Silent Way can be used in teaching Japanese sounds and vocabulary, and that the effects for both females and males seem to be the same.

Keywords: Hiragana sounds, Japanese language, materials, silent way, techniques

1. Introduction

The need, tendency, or interest in learning the Japanese language has been thriving continuously around the world. Taiwan is not an exception. Actually, according to some estimates (Shirban Sasi & Haga, 2018), Japanese is the second sought after language in Taiwan after English. Various language teaching methods or approaches are currently in use to teach Japanese to high school and university students either as a general course, or as a major field of study. The present study examined the application of the Silent Way in teaching Hiragana sounds, as well as several frequent Japanese words to some Taiwanese university students. Succinctly introducing the Silent Way and its principles and techniques, this paper intends to suggest some preliminary practical lesson plans driven from the core of this useful method to be applied in teaching Japanese.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Introduction to the Silent Way

Silent Way is a language teaching method developed by Caleb Gattegno (1911-1988). This method or approach (actually Gattegno himself was reluctant to use either one) is based on the philosophy that the teacher in the classroom should be silent as much as possible, while the learner is encouraged to be involved in production as much as possible. This method regards learning as a problem-solving process. Being an educator and mathematician to begin with, the materials and activities he later proposed to be used in language classes, such as word color charts, pronunciation charts, Fidel charts, colored Cuisenaire rods, etc. are deeply rooted in those educational disciplines. According to Gattegno (1976), knowledge is not a transferable commodity, but rather a construct that must be actively developed through experience; therefore, the objective of education should be to raise students' awareness that there is knowledge to be gained, rather than to supply them with this knowledge.

We might rightly assume that many scholars in the language education field have considered and applauded the Silent Way. For instance, according to Sarosdy et al. (2006), Silent Way did not emerge from the cognitive code approach; however, it shares certain principles with it. The goal of this method is to enable language learners to use the language to express their thoughts and feelings. Thus, students need to develop independence from the teacher, and shape their own inner criteria for accuracy. Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) explain that Gattegno viewed language learning by studying the way babies and young children learn. He believed that learning is a process which we initiate by ourselves by activating our inner resources such as our perception, awareness, cognition, imagination, intuition, and creativity to meet the challenge before us. In this process, the learners integrate and internalize whatever 'new' that they create, and use it as a stepping stone for further learning. Likewise, Nunan (2015) suggests using the term 'designer' methods in order to fathom the spirit of a range of methods, such as Suggestopedia and the Silent Way, which developed in the 1970s and 1980s. These methods, Nunan asserts, "provided a clear set of procedures for what teachers should do in the classroom and, like audiolingualism, were based on beliefs about the nature of language and the language learning process." (p. 10).

According to Stevick (1980), the essence of silent Way is the affirmation of the individual learner in his/her self-contained independence. That is, instead of forcing the language on the learner, this method tries to encourage students to use their own internal resources to make decisions on how best to gain the desired outcome as offered by the teacher. Likewise, according to Richards and Rodgers (1999), Silent Way is built around a theory of the conditions necessary for successful learning to shape. Several of the techniques in this method are designed to train learners to consciously use their intelligence to enhance learning potential. According to Stevick (1974), Gattegno's commitment is to solving some of the problems of learning in general. That is, teaching foreign languages is only one certain notion of broader principles which he has also used in teaching mathematics, and teaching the reading and writing of the mother tongue. Stevick (1980) further envisages vocabulary teaching according to this method as a process of teaching the lexical items that refer to oneself and to others in relation to the several functions of everyday life. Stevick's remarks are in tandem with Diamond and Gutlohn (2006)'s assumption in that if we can get students interested in playing with words and language, then we are at least halfway to the target of raising the students who will make learning words a lifetime interest. Then from a historical point of view, Messum (2012) postulates that the basic paradigm which has been successfully used by teachers using the Silent Way has been considerably enhanced over several years, and can be applied in combination with other approaches and methods to grammar and other language areas, and with intermediate and advanced students.

According to Byram and Hu (2017), a major advantage of Silent Way is that using a pointer reproduces the inherently ephemeral nature of language. That is, in order to indicate a phrase, the teacher should move the pointer from word to word, and the students have to keep the complete string in their minds while it is being shaped from each written element. This leads to a retention which is of a significantly heightened level. Then, according to Messum (2018), color is useful when the color-coding leads into spelling and word charts. Gattegno's choice of colors was arbitrary, and he used the set he selected for several languages. Others have experimented with choosing colors which presumably have a synesthetic significance, or whose names can be keywords in a given language. For example the color and the word 'green' for /i:/ in English. Nonetheless, in the current study, the authors arbitrarily used various colors to create the major Japanese Hiragana sound-color chart (Appendix B).

Subsequently, Cael (2010), claims that the materials he developed and used in his study within the framework of teaching pronunciation applying the techniques and principles of the Silent Way helped students to recognize and practice the essential pronunciation elements of the language, such as intonation, stress, phrasing, rhythm, which are referred to in this method as 'melody'. He also asserts that students were consequently able to accurately produce individual sounds on a word level, and also develop an inner criteria for what is linguistically intelligible.

Finally, it should be stated here that to the best knowledge of the authors of the current study, there are no related studies concerning teaching/learning Japanese in the related literature. Nonetheless, there have been numerous studies about teaching English. For instance, Hasria, Fathu, and Andjarwati (2018) investigated the effects of the Silent Way in enhancing students' English speaking ability. They worked with 30 tenth grade students. Using descriptive statistics, they found out significant improvement in the students' speaking ability. Likewise, Budiharto (2018)'s study investigated the effects of the Silent Way on learning English pronunciation and grammar by the middle school students. The study revealed significant positive outcomes for both language areas.

2.2 Basic Techniques and Materials in the Silent Way

Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) do not differentiate between the techniques applied in this method and the materials used in the following list (pp. 65-67):

- Sound-Color Charts
- Teacher's Silence
- Peer Correction
- Rods (Cuisenaire rods)
- Self-correction Gestures
- Word Charts
- Fidel Charts
- Structured Feedback

3. Materials and Method

3.1 Participants

The authors had access to several university as well as high school students in Taiwan. Consequently, a total of 168 university students (96 females and 72 males) in central Taiwan were randomly assigned as the subjects of this study. These students studied in different departments, and were learning Japanese as a general course twice a week. The participants included 38 freshmen (one class), 71 sophomores (two classes), and 59 juniors (two classes). All participants were present in the pre-test and post-test.

3.2 Instrument

The researchers developed and used a 25-item Hiragana sounds oral test (Appendix A) as the pre-test and post-test in order to examine the effects of applying the Silent Way. The test was administered one session prior and one session immediately after the experiment. The order of the test items were randomized in the two versions in order to minimize the memorizing effect.

3.3 Research Questions and Hypotheses

Two research questions and hypotheses were the focus of this study

- (1) - Is there any significant difference between the test scores of the Taiwanese university students before and after applying Silent Way to teach them Japanese Hiragana sounds?

H0(1) - There is no significant difference between the test scores of the Taiwanese university students before and after applying Silent Way to teach them Japanese Hiragana sounds.

- (2) - Is there any significant difference between the gained scores of the Taiwanese female and male university students after applying Silent Way to teach them Japanese Hiragana sounds?

H0(2) - There is no significant difference between the gained scores of the Taiwanese female and male university students after applying Silent Way to teach them Japanese Hiragana sounds.

3.4 The Teaching Procedure

Due to lack of access to a native Japanese teacher who would be able or willing to apply Silent Way in her/his classes, one of the authors of the current study (a native Japanese university instructor, also sufficiently fluent in English and Mandarin Chinese) administered the treatment. The goal was to try teaching students 50 Japanese Hiragana sounds during six consecutive sessions in three weeks span. Each lesson took about 20 minutes scheduled in the middle of the normal class time. The material covered during the experiment was carefully designed so that the content was not to be taught in the other conventional teaching methods during the experiment period. Because of the short duration of the experiment, only one Color Chart and related teaching materials which were shaped in color slides (Appendix B) were used. The choice of colors, sample vocabulary, and the sequence of the teaching materials were thought of and perfected prior and during the trial by the researchers. A sample lesson plan using the above-mentioned materials is given below. As can be noticed, the teacher speaks as little as possible, and that he frequently refers to the first main Color Chart which encompasses Japanese Hiragana sounds with corresponding colors.

Slide-1: Before starting the main lesson, students are given the following instructions with reference to the Color Chart. (The instructions are given mainly in the students' mother tongue, or in English.)

- Each color on the chart represents an English alphabetical sound (Phonics).

- Five colors on the top represent “vowels” (*a, i, u, e, o*) and four colors on the left represent “consonants” (*k, s, t, n*).
- Combinations of “vowel” colors and “consonant” colors make Japanese sounds.

Slide-2: Words with “vowel”

- Ask the students how to pronounce these two words.
- Students respond either correct or wrong sounds, but do not give them an answer yet.

Slide-1: The Color Chart

- Instead of giving students a correct answer, show them the Color Chart again, and let them to check the answers by themselves.
- Now you can confirm right/wrong but you (teacher) are not supposed to pronounce the words yourself.

Slide-3: A sample picture with Chinese character

- By showing Slide-3, let the students know what the words mean.

Slide-4: Word with a combination of “consonant” and “vowel”.

- Again, ask students to pronounce this word.
- Let students discuss or/and help each other to find the correct sounds.

Slide-1: The Color Chart

- Once more, let the students check the answer (correct sounds) by themselves.
- Let the students know if they pronounced correctly or not, but again you should not pronounce the correct sound yourself.

Slide-5: With sample picture with Chinese character

- By showing sample picture with Chinese words, let students know the meaning of the words.

Slides-6~11: Repeat the same above-mentioned procedures.

Slide-12: List of six words learned before.

- Let students review each word with combination of colors, Hiragana and Chinese characters.

Slide-13: List of six words without Chinese characters, but with colors and Hiragana.

- Let students pronounce each word again with paying extra attention to Hiragana words rather than colors.
- Check if students pronounce the words correctly or not.

Slide-14: List of six words without colors and Hiragana, but only with Chinese characters.

- Ask students if they can pronounce these Chinese words without colors and Hiragana.
- Let students in the class discuss and help each other to find correct pronunciations.

Slide-1: The Color Chart

- Showing the students the complete Color Chart once again, and letting them check the correct pronunciations.

4. Results

4.1 The First Research Question

The authors used a paired samples T-test to check for any significant difference in students’ test results before and after the treatment. Table 1 illustrates the results.

Table 1. Paired Samples Test Results for the First Research Question

		Paired Differences			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Pretest - Posttest	-2.54167	1.73327	.13373	-2.80568	-2.27766	-19.007	167	.000

Table 1 shows that there is a mean difference of -2.54 between the results of the pretest and posttest. We can also see that the Sig. value of .000 is smaller than the demarcation criterion of .05 suggesting that there is a significant difference between the two test takings. In other words, the first null hypothesis in the present study can be rejected. Thus, it is proven that using the Silent Way would make a statistically significant change in the students' knowledge of the Japanese Hiragana sounds.

4.2 The Second Research Question

In order to statistically compare the gained scores of the female and male students after the treatment in the current study, the authors initially intended to use an independent samples T-test. However, after running the test in SPSS, it was noticed that although the two groups in question had close mean and median values, the assumptions of normality and homogeneity had not been met. The normality assumption could have been overlooked because as asserted by Gravetter and Wallnau (2002), and Stevens (1996), if the sample size is relatively large ($n > 30$), then the normality assumption might be neglected without compromising the validity of T-test. The sample size in the current study is 72 for males and 96 for females; thus, clearly exceeding the cut-off number. Nonetheless, since the homogeneity of the results still remained problematic, the researchers decided to use a non-parametric alternative test instead. Consequently, a Mann-Whitney U test was employed. According to Pallant (2005), instead of comparing means of the two groups, this test compares the medians. It converts the scores on the continuous variable to ranks. It then evaluates whether the ranks for the two groups differ significantly. Because the scores are converted to ranks, the actual distribution of the scores does not matter. Table 2 shows the ranks and sum of ranks in the two groups.

Table 2. Ranks

	Students	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Gained Scores	Girls	96	86.06	8261.50
	Boys	72	82.42	5934.50
	Total	168		

Then, Table 3 reports the results after running a Mann-Whitney U test.

Table 3. Test Statistics

	Gained Scores
Mann-Whitney U	3306.500
Wilcoxon W	5934.500
Z	-.488
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.626

As can be seen in Table 3, the Sig. value of .626 is larger relative to the demarcation criterion of .05 suggesting that there is not a significant difference between the two groups. In other words, the second null hypothesis in the present study cannot be rejected. Then, it means that both male and female students are identical (or at least very similar) when it comes to learning Japanese Hiragana sounds with the Silent Way. In other words, there is no statistically significant difference between boys and girls in this respect.

5. Discussion

The present study reveals that even through a short period of implementation, we can see some positive effects after applying the Silent Way. Nonetheless, the authors acknowledge that due to the short duration of the experiment, they were not able to control for several other possible variables which could have one way or the other altered the results.

After all, even using a paired samples T-test is controversial because many believe that this test might not indicate the true source of the observed significant change/difference. Moreover, the authors had no firm sort of Silent Way “platform” to stick to because, presumably, no one else—at least to their best knowledge—had used Silent Way before to teach Japanese sounds. Thus, the researchers tried their best to follow the principles of this method when using the relevant techniques and materials.

Then, the findings of the current research confirms Cael (2010)’s, assertion in that the materials used in this method can enhance students’ recognition- as well as production- of the necessary pronunciation elements of the language such as intonation, and stress. Moreover, the present experience endorses the viewpoints of Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011) in that in this method the techniques and teaching materials are indispensably interwoven.

Nevertheless, during the course of this experiment, the authors came up with some criticisms towards this teaching method which can be good topics for further investigations. For instance, as one of the basic techniques is to use different colors to associate sounds, words, etc., what should we do if some students have vision problems or disturbances such as color blindness? Also, when tapping on the color blocks to create strings of sounds, how should we gage our speed to tend to each individual student? Another concern might be how does this method address students’ different “intelligences”? Finally, what precautions and measures should be taken so that the students (of the Internet Age) not mistake the meticulously designed and thought-for techniques and materials of this method with mere language games?

6. Conclusion

The present study showed that the Silent Way can be used successfully, at least to some extent, in teaching Japanese basic sounds to the Taiwanese university students. Thus, the authors suggest that applying the techniques and materials of this method be considered by the practitioners and education decision-makers to suit the new needs, alone or alongside the existing conventional methods. We genuinely believe that the benefits are twofold; that is, both teachers and students can learn in the process. This study also revealed that there is almost no difference between the female and male university students in learning Japanese via the Silent Way. Therefore, it can rightly be assumed that this method is applicable with no gender discriminatory difference or bias, which is already an advantage per se. Finally, the authors assume that the following topics might be interesting to formulate future related studies:

- investigating the usage of the Silent Way in teaching/learning other languages;
- studying other groups of learners of different age, Japanese proficiency level; etc.;
- examining combining other conventional language teaching methods/approaches with the Silent Way;
- testing the effects of the Silent Way in teaching other language areas such as vocabulary or grammar.

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Appendix A: The Japanese Hiragana Sounds pre and post Tests

口頭試験：下記の平仮名单語を正確に発音しなさい。

(4点×25=100点)

Oral test: Please pronounce following “Hiragana” words correctly.

(4points x 25=100 points)

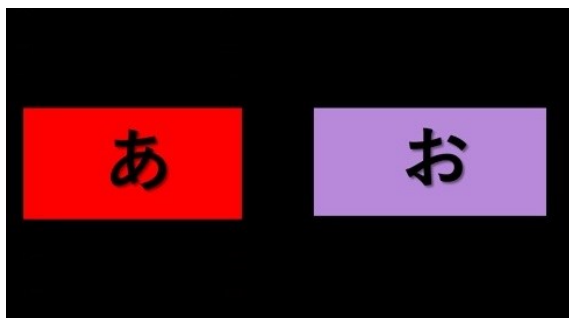
- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| 1) うし () | 14) へそ () |
| 2) もち () | 15) ぬの () |
| 3) えき () | 16) なに () |
| 4) あお () | 17) ふゆ () |
| 5) すし () | 18) やま () |
| 6) とり () | 19) よい () |
| 7) きく () | 20) かわ () |
| 8) ねこ () | 21) すいか () |
| 9) さけ () | 22) とけい () |
| 10) うま () | 23) きのこ () |
| 11) たこ () | 24) くるま () |
| 12) いぬ () | 25) みかん () |
| 13) はち () | |

Appendix B: The main Japanese Pronunciation Color Chart and the related teaching slides

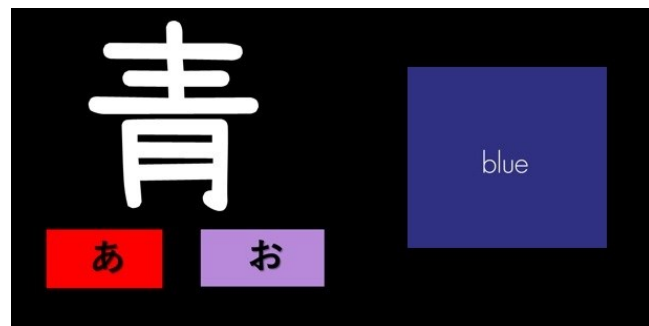
Slide-1 (the main Color Chart)

	あ a	い i	う u	え e	お o
k	か	き	く	け	こ
s	さ	し	す	せ	そ
t	た	ち	つ	て	と
n	な	に	ぬ	ね	の

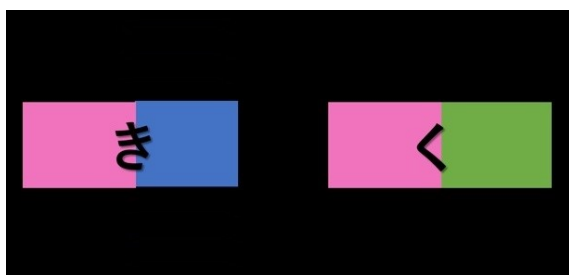
Slide-2



Slide-3



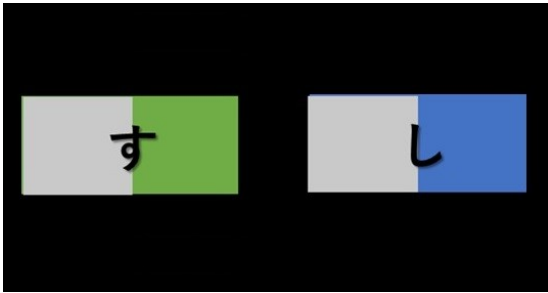
Slide-4



Slide-5



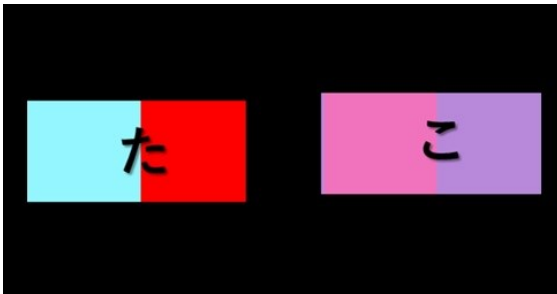
Slide-6



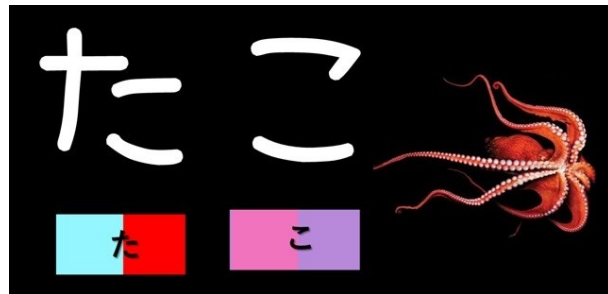
Slide-7



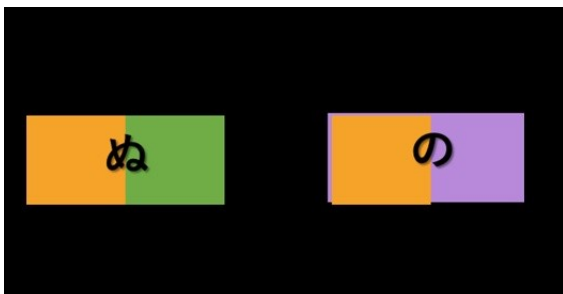
Slide-8



Slide-9



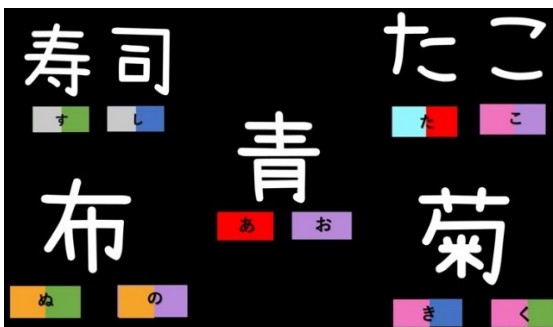
Slide-10



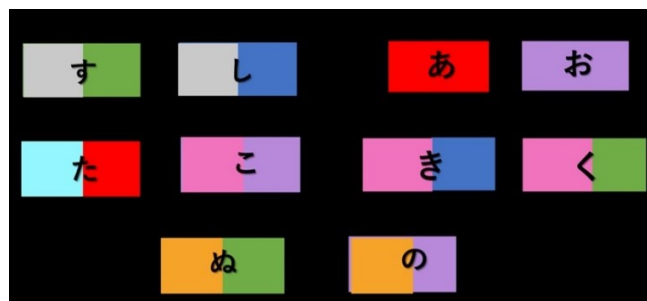
Slide-11



Slide-12



Slide-13



Slide-14

