



Christian Torjussen, a professor at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée in Besançon, France, teaching English using the so-called Silent Way, which involves colored blocks, charts and hand gestures. (Richard Harbus for the IHT)

Unconventional methods find a niche among teachers of English

By Thomas Crampton

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PARIS: Leaving office after eight years as chancellor of Germany, Gerhard Schröder made his first stop at an 18th-century manor house in the Welsh countryside - to learn English.

Like many senior-level executives facing a career change, Schröder wanted to polish his skills at speaking the de facto language of global business.

For his first week out of office, Schröder's daily routine at the Park House Training language center in Hyssington, on the Powys-Shropshire border, consisted of hours of intensive tutoring in small classes, followed by evenings of swilling lager at the local pub.

"We don't have any strange system of making people sit in a bath of water while doing lessons," said Ann Jackson, who runs the center. "We use good old-fashioned methods."

With courses at Park House starting at £1,240, or \$2,450, per week for tuition and board, it is easy to see how English language training contributes more than £1.3 billion per year to the British economy alone, a figure determined by Geraint Johnes of Lancaster University in a study in 2004.

A study by the British Council predicts that two billion people will be learning English by 2010, with a large portion of them in Brazil, Russia, India and China. This rising demand has spawned an equally wide choice of learning methods, with the same goal: helping people who are desperate to catch up on their English.

For years, teaching English as a second language remained a tradition-bound system. Phrases common to Indian English that have largely fallen out of use elsewhere - like the use of "kindly" in place of "please" - have sometimes been attributed to continued reference to older English grammar textbooks, including a well-known one by Wren & Martin that was first published in 1898.

Rote memorization also remains a mainstay of traditional teaching methods. In France, for example, the opening phrase from one system from the 1930s - "My tailor is rich" - became a running joke in everything from Astérix comic books to films of the 1960s.

The problem, say some learning experts, is that these methods often fail to teach communication.

"Foreign students arrive in the United States with great test scores, but totally unable to communicate," said Gena Netten, a manager for Educational Testing Service in Princeton, New Jersey. The Testing Service evaluates the English skills of nearly six million nonnative speakers each year through its Test of English as a Foreign Language, or TOEFL - a common requirement for entry to American universities - and Test of English for International Communication, requested by many U.S. and foreign employers.

"Memorizing basic grammar and a list of words does not mean you speak English," Netten said.

In response, the company introduced a new version of the TOEFL test last year. Instead of a paper-based multiple-choice test in which students select from a choice of grammatical structures, the new test takes place via the Internet and simulates the tasks of a university class by requiring students to summarize a text, speak about a variety of topics and answer questions after listening to a brief passage.

"The new test is more like real life, and you cannot cram for real life," Netten said. "People need to find ways to learn English that relaxes and opens them up."

Since few adults who have finished formal education relish the prospect of returning to school, unconventional language methods have found a following.

Teachers in some methods remain mute; in others, they shout or sing. One method tries to help students experience language learning as a baby does. Tools range from gentle Baroque music to colored toy blocks and an orchestra conductor's baton.

While some odd methods of English learning may sound like - or actually be - gimmicks, Netten said they can help students overcome explicit or unconscious reluctance to learn.

"If shouting English helps people to learn, then it is a good idea," Netten said, referring to Crazy English, a method developed in China to help students overcome shyness. "Teaching often needs to break down internal learning barriers."

Another method, Total Physical Response, has teachers help students relive a baby's experience in learning language. Students initially remain mute, and the teacher, speaking exclusively in the language being taught, orders them to take physical actions. Students could, for example, be asked to stand up, turn, walk and interact with objects in the room.

"Babies remain silent and get physical cues for 18 months before they speak, so we repeat that experience," said James Asher, a professor of psychology at San Jose State University in California, who developed the method. "All new ideas and concepts must come in through the body."

Suggestopedia, a name contracted from "suggestion" and "pedagogy," is an accelerated learning technique that uses Baroque music and singing teachers. Teachers can sing while acting out the lessons before repeating them in a whisper as recordings of Baroque music play in the background, according to Ludger Schiffler, a professor of language learning at the Free University of Berlin, who

has been refining the method since 1980. Schiffler also advocates simultaneous physical movement to activate the brain.

The students, who are not taught grammar, follow the performance by reading a text written in the foreign language alongside a translation into their native language. The students themselves then act out the dialogue. They can be encouraged to sing, but it is not compulsory.

For Schiffler, the most powerful variation on his method - which he calls Interhemispheric Language Learning - has all the students in the classroom act out and sing the text at the same time as the teacher.

"When the students say 'jump,' they should jump," Schiffler said. "Speaking and acting are very much connected."

In contrast, teachers of The Silent Way prepare no lesson plan, discourage memorization, never use a book and - as the name implies - rarely speak.

"I have had really bad laryngitis and the pupils never even knew it," said Roslyn Young, a longtime practitioner of the method who now heads an organization promoting its use. "Sometimes the only thing I say during an entire class is, 'Shall we start?'"

Created in the 1950s by Caleb Gattegno, an Egyptian mathematician who advocated the use of colors in teaching, The Silent Way is used by more than half of the 11 English-language teachers at the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée in Besançon, France, a branch of the Université de Franche-Comté.

"The downside is that the teacher's silence can make some learners uncomfortable and frustrated," said Nancy Peuteuil, head of the center's foreign language department. "But it is a great way to encourage people to speak out in a language."

The teacher's tools include brightly colored children's building blocks of different lengths, colored wall charts and a telescoping pointer. The first class has the teacher pointing to the white rectangle on the phonetic chart and saying the "ah" sound in the word "not."

From that point on, Young said, she uses mouth signs to help students understand what phonetic sound she wants them to produce from the chart, highlighting her elongated mouth shape for the "ee" of "seen" as she points to the bright red rectangle.

As the class begins to associate specific sounds with colors, the teacher points to a second chart with words written in colors that correspond to their phonetic sounds. The words on the chart are not chosen to expand vocabulary, but for their immediate usefulness as structural connectors. The first word chart includes "put," "back," "this" and "me."

"Too many English teaching methods waste time forcing students to memorize useless vocabulary," Young said. "Memorization is painful and usually ends with forgetting."