

I wrote this in 1991, and we used it sometimes when training staff at my charter school.

The Role of Sleep in Language Learning: What I Learned as a Silent Way Teacher

Bruce Ballard

How many of us think about what we do with ourselves when we sleep? At most, we may associate sleep with dreaming, and we occasionally remember part of a particular dream from the night before. Until I became involved with the Silent Way of teaching languages, that's all I considered when I thought about sleep. Dreams, and their Freudian interpretations, did not interest me as a language teacher.

Even when I was presented with first hand evidence that learners grapple with a new language in their sleep, I disregarded any significance to it. When I went to South Korea with the Peace Corps in 1975, my roommate during the initial training program sat up in bed one night and started hitting our rotating fan with his pillow, shouting out the Korean words for "post office," "school," "tearoom," and "bathhouse." These were words we had been learning in our Korean language classes each morning. He was completely asleep while shouting them; then he abruptly fell back on the futon and resumed his normal sleep activity of lying very still and grinding his teeth. This meant nothing to me except as an interesting story to tell other Peace Corps volunteers at breakfast the next day.

I didn't associate sleep with language learning until I began taking Silent Way workshops, first in South Korea with the Peace Corps, then in New York City at

Educational Solutions, the company started by Dr. Caleb Gattegno, originator of the Silent Way. Initially, I understood only that Silent Way teachers believe learning occurs when one is asleep. Experienced teachers reported that a student would be incapable of something one day (such as making a new sound, or saying a sentence with fluency), but by the next morning the problem had disappeared. "Sleep on it" thus became a worthwhile suggestion at the end of class when students' heads were chock full of new information.

As a result of my contact with Dr. Gattegno and his colleagues, I became increasingly aware of how I use myself as I sleep. I also found my ESL and Korean as a Second Language students mentioning that they were mentally active during their sleeping state.

The first time I discovered myself learning in my sleep was when I took a German course with Dr. Gattegno in 1980. About ten people enrolled in the class, and most of them had already studied German in high school or overseas. I, however, was completely new to the language, and soon felt overwhelmed grappling with the many consonants that German can pack in a single word. Taken individually, the sounds were easy to say, but when Dr. Gattegno had us string consonants in unusual ways, I kept dropping some, making the clusters more like English phonology. The more mistakes I made, the more flustered I became, and the more I seemed to irritate the instructor. "You call yourself a language teacher," he shouted, "yet you can't hold onto the simplest of German phrases?"

After hours of unsuccessfully trying to make my mouth more German, I went home and, to get the experience out of my mind, I worked on my income tax forms. That night when I went to bed, I lay for a long time in a state of half sleep. While my primary thought line pondered my taxes, in the back of my thoughts German words and sounds murmured incessantly. When I tried to analyze them they would

disappear, but as soon as I thought about other things, they came back. The next morning I returned to class, and it seemed to both Dr. Gattegno and me that I had no more problems pronouncing German.

In 1982 I returned to Korea to teach English at a university in Seoul. It was there I began to hear from my students about their own sleep experiences. For example, one day a group of freshmen and I were sitting on the lawn by the school's front gate. Some students who were talking among themselves began to laugh uproariously. One of them turned to me and said, "Mr. Ballard, Jae Hong just told us he dreams in English." I was immediately intrigued and asked Jae Hong to explain. Embarrassed, he said that he often found himself putting together English sentences in his sleep. It felt similar to being in class, where many of our games forced him to construct sentences that completely respected English word order.

I now consider it an indication that students are acquiring a second language when they inform me of these sleep experiences. In April, 1991, I taught a weekend-long beginner's course in Korean language at Teachers College, Columbia University. About thirty-five students enrolled, either master's candidates in the TESOL program, or practicing ESL teachers. I casually informed the class on the first night that by the end of the course they might be dreaming in Korean.

The students grappled with so much Korean that weekend! By Sunday afternoon they had learned the sounds of Korean, learned to read and write with the Korean alphabet, dealt with the language's two counting systems, made simple phrases about colored rods, and sang the Korean folk song "Arirang." On Sunday morning I asked them to express, in English, what had been happening to them internally since the course began. After the first few comments, a student named Vincent shot his hand up. He confessed he had been dreaming Korean sounds and words on Saturday night. Other students nodded their heads and admitted that they had done this, too.

A week later, one student wrote in her feedback paper, "It is strange that the new language keeps coming back to me in spite of my conscious resistance. What surprised me most is that for three days after the course I always woke up with some Korean words on the tip of my tongue, and that sweet Korean song ringing in my ears."

In April, 1986, Dr. Gattegno published a newsletter titled "Sleep Revisited" (available from Educational Solutions). In it he reviews scientific research on sleep and offers his own insights. He criticizes much of Western research because it analyzes sleep solely from the outside, i.e., by observing others as they sleep. The research tradition also considers sleep as merely a fatigued reaction to each day's events. For many years Dr. Gattegno followed this path himself until he realized he could make more headway by viewing sleep as a continuous experience that begins at birth and is punctuated by periods of wakefulness. He also conducted experiments on himself while he slept.

According to Dr. Gattegno, by willfully entering sleep, the mind is able to sort out the impacts it receives from the outside world while awake. Furthermore, the mind at rest is so efficient at making sense of our day-to-day experience that we are more intelligent asleep than awake.

The implications of this for teaching are at least two-fold. First, as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, I can be at peace with a student's lack of success on any particular day, since I can expect that the next morning he or she will demonstrate improvement. Second, I have found that I can carefully "overload" the students during class, because they will be able to sort out a lot in their sleep.

I find that I must present new language items in such a way that (1) the purpose for the material is absolutely clear, and (2) the material is set up so that the students

naturally want to learn it. For example, if I show a class of low-intermediate ESL students a picture of a man and woman having a picnic under a tree, I might, with my pointer, elicit such words as "picnic," "grass," "tree," and "under." But when I ask the students to string these words into a sentence, they often balk or make attempts that don't come close to English at all. I shake my head and say, "No, that's not quite right," until they say that they want exact wording. Then, using the correct segments that they have provided, I tap out on word charts: "They are having a picnic on the grass under the tree." The students often seem shocked that this is English, and they pounce on the sentence, taking the pointer from me to tap out the words again and again. I allow them to continue for a few minutes, then move them on to a new statement.

Thus my role in this lesson is to create within the students a feeling that a certain sentence has to be worked on, then to step aside so they can attack and practice it on their own. After an hour of this, the students often claim they are exhausted and will not remember anything. Yet the following day they are surprised by how much they have retained.

I don't purport that this is all there is to being a Silent Way teacher, or that students in other classes don't also have experiences that lead them to intensive learning in their sleep. However, I don't recall non-Silent Way teachers talking about the relationship between sleep and learning.

In addition, I believe there may be even more to sleeping than what I've discussed here. Namely, I think you can have conscious control over the content of your dreams. I once told Dr. Gattegno that after a lesson on Russian numeration I had been dreaming about Russian numbers. He replied, "Yes, but you noticed you couldn't go any higher than 99, since I didn't give you the word for hundred." It seemed that Dr. Gattegno thought I was consciously counting from one to nine-nine

and then back down again, stymied because I could go no further. In fact all that had happened was that random numbers floated by in my brain.

As a result of his comment, I became more observant of myself in future sleep experiences. I began to see that yes, I could sometimes direct my dreams, even choosing not to dream about something because I could better deal with it when I woke. How far I can go with this new-found power is something I am still working on. In my sleep, of course.

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