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TESOL Class # 70

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**Essay # 1 – “I am an Adult Learner, Mate!”**

“We learn by example and by direct experience because

there are real limits to the adequacy of verbal instruction.”

– Malcolm Gladwell, *Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking* (2005)

Although I have been exposed to several second language environments, the one that I most vividly remember is the writing workshop that I attended this year. The workshop, titled “Yonsei Intensive Writing Program,” was organized by the English Language Centre of Macquarie University, located in Sydney, Australia. Ten graduate students majoring in English Literature and Linguistics at Yonsei University received a funding from the department to participate in the program. This two week long program mainly focused on improving the writing skills of the participants and dealt with the topic, “Education and Critical Thinking” There were two teachers, Sharynne and Alejandra, who took turns in teaching the course. Although the instructors tried their best to teach in a modern classroom setting by encouraging active participation of the students, they committed a crucial error in conducting the course because they neglected the fact that the participants were adult learners. If the instructors had kept in mind the five characteristics of adult learners that Malcolm Knowles had identified, the workshop would have been more effective and successful as a language learning experience.

To begin with, the instructors did not conduct a needs analysis at the beginning of the course. In other words, both Sharynne and Alejandra overlooked the fact that adults are autonomous, self-directed, and goal-oriented. As adult learners, the graduate students who participated in the workshop had specific purposes and needs that required some satisfaction. For example, as a literature major, I wanted to learn the techniques necessary to write a formal and original thesis on literature. I also thought that the program would focus on guiding the students on how to write graduate level papers, but it did not. Also, none of the instructors were literature majors so they did not know the subject matter well enough to help me. Since they did not know anything about literature or the MLA format, they could not be an effective teacher for the literature majors. Although the instructors were enthusiastic and genuine, they could not empathize with my problems which hindered them from giving me clear feedback.

Another mistake that the instructors made was the lack of explanation. Although both instructors tried to integrate the characteristics of both explainer and involver types of teachers, they forgot to explain how each assignment was relevant to what we were learning. For instance, Sharynne took time defining some important terminologies such as “critical thinking” and “education” which revealed that she was the explainer type, but she did not explicitly tell us the reason behind doing a dictation on the second day of class. The dictation seemed like a waste of time since it was not relevant at all.

The most crucial mistake was that the students did not feel like they were being respected because of the way in which the teachers talked to them. Since the instructors did not conduct a language proficiency test at the beginning of the course, they had no idea that the students were either in the upper/high intermediate or the advanced level. Although the students had either operational command of the language or near native fluency level of English, the teachers treated us as young children. For instance, Sharynne continuously asked the question, “Do you understand me? Are you following along?” which made me feel like I was back in kindergarten learning my ABC’s again. I felt like I was being looked down upon by the teachers. This sense of disrespect made not only me but also all of the students upset and some participants even started to disrespect the teachers by playing computer games in class.

Through this valuable experience, I learned that a need analysis, along with a language proficiency test, must be conducted at the beginning of the course. I also learned the importance of knowing the five characteristics of adult learners that Knowles had pointed out. If Sharynne and Alejandra had been more flexible and had adjusted the course to meet the needs of the participants, I think that the workshop would have turned out to be a great language learning experience. I believe that this experience will help me become a better teacher because I learned that it is important to acknowledge the fact that adult learners are not only relevancy- and goal-oriented but also autonomous and self-motivated. When I become a teacher, I will respect every single one of the adult learners and try to create a more effective and friendly environment for them.

Word Count: 741