TESOL 01: Second Language Acquisition Assignment

Seo Young (Erica) Park

Instructor: Tobin Stutler

The Power of Students’ Actions

When I recall my experiences of learning English, I had two distinctive experiences. The basic differences between the two were teaching styles and classroom types. At first, I overlooked the importance of them, but soon I was surprised to find that the instructor’s choices of teaching styles and classroom environments could create such a different learning environment to students. These two factors are not mutually exclusive; in fact, they are taking place at the same place at the same time. Thus, the instructor’s awareness of effective teaching technique is critical. **Considering my own experiences of learning second language, I believe that a teacher should provide a learning environment that encourages students to participate in the very process of their own learning experiences.** Since the classroom type and the teaching style are mingled together in establishing a learning environment, I will describe two different classes that I attended.

My first teacher, Linda was an explainer offering a traditional classroom setting. She gave a two-hour lecture on the board to forty students in her class. The materials were a grammar textbook, a reading textbook, and a vocabulary book. The class started with vocabulary test. After she graded our tests, she spanked us based on the number of the incorrect answers. After the test, she began her lecture. While her teaching was well-organized and actively delivered, the students’ learning level was low and passive. We took notes while she explained materials and we were asked to answer few comprehension questions in the book after a short lesson. Linda gave us few minutes to complete the questions and wrote the correct answers on the board. If there is no question about the answer, she continued her lecture. Ten minutes before her class ended, Linda checked our reading homework – translating English sentences to Korean. She walked around whether we actually did it and handed out the correct answer. She told us to ask any question after reading her handout. She always emphasized memorizing vocabularies and grammar rules. Her homework assignments were memorizing a hundred new vocabularies for the next class and translating English reading passages into Korean.

I was ten years old when I attended Linda’s class. To me, her lecture was too long and boring. In spite of all my effort to pay attention to her lecture, I often fell asleep. When her students fell asleep, she asked the student to stand up and listen to her lecture. It was embarrassing. Also, when she graded our vocabulary tests, I was so nervous that I wanted to run out of the class. The positive punishment under Behavior Theory was not a good way to motivate myself to learn English. The atmosphere of the class also affected to the other parts of the class. Doing the comprehension questions, I left blank for almost all questions. Even though I barely understood what she explained, I was afraid to ask questions. Linda was strict in managing the class and I was intimidated by her presence in the class. Moreover, there were too many people in the class and other students seemed to understand the materials since no one asked a single question. Later I realized that I was not the only one who did not follow the class. There was no rapport between Linda and the rest of the class so that the students missed opportunities to learn the lesson even though they did not fully understand the materials. The students including me spent hours to complete her tough assignments not to get the punishment. Despite our effort, we were not sure what we were learning and we sometimes wondered why we were attending her class.

After a year, Linda completed her grammar lesson and the whole class took a grammar test. The outcome was failure. All grammar rules were mixed together upon my head and I just gave up the test. Also, I realized that my vocabulary level was not improved. I memorized them to take the test, but after the test, I forgot most of them since I never used them. Moreover, I was not able to make a single sentence in English although I knew words and grammar. I was able to translate some simple English sentences into Korean, but my brain seemed to be stopped when I had to make my own English sentences. Linda covered the materials that she planned, but I did not learn what she lectured. Indeed, the retention rate for her lecture was very low. Also, the amount of information I knew was not equal to my English skill. English skill could be improved not by the amount of knowledge but by repetitive drills. As a consequence, Linda’s class only raised my affective filter – lowered my self-confidence, motivation and raised my anxiety towards English - in learning English; I did not want to learn and use English. In fact, I became to hate English.

After I struggled in Linda’s class for a year, my parents and I looked for a different learning environment. The new instructor was Suzie. She was an enabler and offered a modern classroom setting. She could not speak Korean and all students were also asked to speak English only. There were seven students in the class. In the first class, we introduced ourselves. Starting with our names, we shared our hobbies and talked about favorite food, color and subject. Even though all of us did not speak English fluently - we hardly made sentences in English and most of the grammar we used was incorrect, we somehow explained things with few words we knew and also understood what others tried to say. After the first class, we became good friends and learned from each other. We were not too shy to speak in English in front of the class and we were not embarrassed by our own mistakes. The atmosphere was quite different from the one of Linda’s class. The atmosphere of Suzie’s class was friendly and warm.

Unlike Linda’s class, every class was run differently. Suzie knew materials and a variety of methodologies. For many times, Suzie just listened to our opinions rather than giving a lecture. In the beginning of the class, she naturally led us to do some discussions and the class continued from our discussions. She gave us a couple of same expressions and we tried to use them in the discussion. Also, she had a keen awareness of our thoughts and emotions. Her empathy, respect, and authenticity toward the students were noticeable and it facilitated our learning in her class. She always gave us a range of options or general guidelines. We were the ones who decided what activities would be effective and enjoyable for the materials. In addition, she appreciated the different learning types based on Multiple Intelligence Theory. Suzie tried to incorporate a variety of activities to motivate different types of learners: sometimes we watched movies and pictures; sometimes we played word games such as ‘Hangman’ or ‘Scrabble’; sometimes we drew a picture or did paper folding activities; sometimes we made songs to sing together; and sometimes we individually researched a topic and did a presentation in the class. The one thing common among the activities was that we were the very ones who led the activities. Since we made the decisions, we were willing to participate in the activities.

Similar to Linda’s class, Suzie’s class also had a vocabulary section in the class. However, there was no punishment but a reward. We were asked to memorize ten words and make ten sentences in the class. If our usages and sentences were correct, we got some snacks. Even though we made some mistakes, Suzie corrected it and asked the whole class to repeat the correct sentence. The positive reward under Behavior Theory was effective to motivate young students. Her approaches to teaching English as a whole actually lowered our affective filter and allowed us to have confidence in English. It eventually accelerated our learning process. After six months, I had a chance to visit America. I attended a summer school sponsored by YMCA. Even if I was still not able to speak English fluently, I was confident enough to speak English in front of the class. It was not much different from what I already had done in Suzie’s class. In spite of my lack of English skills, I made many American friends in the program.

Looking back to my own experiences and analyzing Linda and Suzie’s teaching approaches and classroom settings, I was able to understand the importance of an instructor’s knowledge of teaching techniques. Of course, I believe that the genuine passion and sincerity of an instructor are the outmost important factors in teaching. However, with the focus on the techniques, effective teaching and learning can take place when a teacher provides various kinds of activities that students are willing to participate in. This approach also offers the students many opportunities to interact with the world around them and it will eventually raise the learner’s retention rate for the target language and improve their language skills.