Bombed by Meaningless Words

TESOL 75 / Soo-Yeon Kim

Essay Assignment #1

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Imagine yourself in an intense university course being taught in a foreign language; tons of information is being thrown at you, but you hardly understand anything. This was the situation for me when learning my second, or first, language. I consider myself a rather unique case for I had learned my second language first. Although my first language is Korean, I had had no proper education of the language until my first day of school back in Korea, which was in the fifth grade. My family had gone to the US when I was 3 years old and stayed there for 7 and a half years due to my parents’ study. Although I had used Korean with my parents at home, I had never properly learned the language.

I recall my classrooms in the US being rather warm, friendly, and easy-going. There was plenty of interaction between the students and teachers, and peer interaction was also encouraged as long as it was relevant to the lesson plan. Classrooms were cozy with sections divided so that students could engage freely with different kinds of teaching aids. My second grade teacher was regarded strict, keeping a rather traditional way of teaching, but one day of school in Korea was all it took to make me miss even second grade.

A square room packed with desks to seat over 50 students, all row by row facing the chalkboard, leaving little space to move around was the first noticeable difference. As class begun I was shocked, or more paralyzed by the difference in teaching styles. We were directed to sit in front of our desks for 7 or more hours a day with the exception of our 40 minute lunch break and 10 minute breaks given between classes. We had about 10 subjects to study by text and each semester we’d have a mid-term exam and final exam.

Music, Art, and PE had been enjoyable classes in the US. In Music class you got to sing and have fun, in Art you’d enjoy yourself while using new materials to create something, and PE was a class you would actively move around and have fun. However, in Korea, every subject, including music, art, and PE was theory-based, and were to be learned by text. Therefore, there was tons of things to be taught and learned, probably resulting all classrooms to take the format of “chalk and talk.” Although our teacher was one of the younger, enthusiastic teachers, all classes took the traditional teacher-based form. This classroom type resulted in no student involvement, except for when she’d call on students to ask questions making sure they were listening. She might have been a good explainer, but for me it was just massive amounts of a new foreign language with no meaning. I can still remember the respect and warmth she held towards me, and looking back now, I can kind of understand that she, too, must have felt pressured to finish the textbooks before the exams. And yet, I can barely give her any credit for my education. Instead I’d have to thank my friends who invited me into their circle, teaching me new words and phrases, correcting me when I said things wrong. So, I guess the actual interaction with others is what really makes learning a new language possible.

Rather than blaming my teacher, I should rather say that the Korean education system had failed on me for if there had been certain prep classes that could have somewhat familiarized me to the Korean language, something like an ESL course for Korean, I might have been able to fit in better as a student.

Thus, based on my past experience, although my situation would differ from those who are simply trying to learn a second language, I would have to say that encouraging a person to interact with another in the language they are trying to learn is the best and only way to learn. Having said this, should I become a teacher, I would put my emphasis on student involvement. Rather than having me, the teacher, try to explain words or functions, I’d become an enabler and simply throw a topic at the students and have them talk freely. Furthermore, as Albert Einstein had stated, “Play is the highest form of research.” Hence, making a joyful, exciting classroom as if you were hanging out with friends, and really empathizing with students as a true friend would do would definitely be a plus.