Second Language Acquisition

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There is a saying “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.” It takes two parties for any give-and-take interaction to take place. You are not giving but wasting unless the other person takes what you are giving. I believe this applies to teaching/learning too. Teaching somebody doesn’t necessarily lead to his/her learning. What is the key that enables learning? I would like to share with you my experience of learning second language and my view on effective teaching.

My SL learning environment at school has always been traditional, meaning strictly controlled and directed by teachers. There was little room for student’s opinions or wishes could interface. Teachers executed lessons according to existing syllabus regardless of students’ needs. Teachers were a figure of authority we were not to question or challenge. Teachers were explainers/ lecturers while we remained passive listeners having to do only what we were told to do. Two way communications hardly occurred between teachers and us, and spontaneous interactions among students were discouraged. Sitting at one spot and staying attentive for 45 minutes was impossible. Teachers barely asked how we felt or what problems we had outside school. They didn’t seem interested to know what our joys/concerns were or what our likes/dislikes were. Teaching focus was on vocabulary (lexis) and structure (grammar) rather than pronunciation (phonology), situational use of English (function) or dialogue/discussion (discourse). We were given repetitive drills on what appeared irrelevant to us and we got easily distracted and bored. Emphasis was more on accuracy than on fluency. Teachers stopped and corrected us immediately when we were incorrect. We became inhibited to speak in fear of making mistakes. Text books were the only material teachers used in the classroom and we hardly had any other activities than listening, reading and writing. Little involvement resulted in poor rate of learner retention

What is wrong with traditional teaching method? The critical mistake is that a class of students is viewed/dealt with as a group, not each students as individuals. It overlooks individual differences in the level of readiness. Learning takes place only when you are ready to take in what is being taught. Being ready seems the first step to learning. By this, I mean mental, emotional and physical readiness as well as intellectual readiness. When you are not ready (e.g. you are troubled with problems, you are depressed and sad or you are sick), you cannot take things in. When you feel you are ready, you then become confident (“I can do it”) and active (“I will do it”). You are not afraid of making mistakes and you learn more by trial-and-error. Motivation is another important vehicle that facilitates learning whether it is internal/intrinsic or external/ extrinsic. Latter motivation is stronger a factor to adult learners and it increases the passion to learn more and faster. Likewise, proper feedback and reward reinforces learning. Positive reinforcement in turn increases the level of confidence and motivation. SL learning is a continuous process of building blocks. It means new learning builds upon past and present learning (in line with Krashan’s “Input Hypothesis). The stronger the base is, the more and better you can build the next tier on it, and second next, the third, so on. This goes back to the point of learner’s readiness. Progressive learning carries on in virtuous cycle when all the factors are carefully thought out and put in at the right moment in time.

Teachers’ role is to help learners learn by creating favorable environment where learning can take place easily. It is possible only when they are sensitive to and aware of individual learners’ differences. Understanding and empathy is a prerequisite for them to stay tuned in learners’ needs. As a counsellor, they need to encourage, foster and motivate learners. They will then be able to incorporate appropriate teaching methods and techniques accordingly.

I would like to close by mentioning a teacher I remember fondly. He was my English teacher at my junior high school. He walked in the classroom with gentle smile on his face. He asked after any absent student. He checked what had happened next day when the student returned. We knew he cared. On the other hand, he was disciplined and could be harsh on wrongdoings. He was a person of authenticity and consistency. I don’t remember any of what he taught but I can tell he helped me accelerate my learning English.