Seok(Dan)Kim

Teaching English as a Language Not a Subject

 In my experience, the most important skill regarding the English language has been speaking. Even though it is one of the most basic language skill for a native speaker, it is the most difficult to master for someone that is studying English as a second language. Most ESL students struggle with expressing their thoughts verbally even when they may be comfortable with the other skills. Learning to speak in another language demands the most practice compared to reading, writing, and listening. When the students are in the classroom, I believe it is vital to increase their comfort level with speaking in English because of this reason. My very first American teacher instilled this value onto me, and she has been the biggest reason that I can speak English fluently today. Not only am I grateful for her influence on my English education, but also I believe it will have a positive impact on the way I will teach English in the future. In my opinion, modern method of teaching that emphasizes communication is the best method to teach a language.

Speaking should be the first priority when teaching another language. I had the pleasure of learning English in both my home country and in America. My experience has taught me that concentrating on the ability to communicate through speaking is not only important for a student’s future but also boosts his or her learning process. Back home I was encouraged to focus on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. However, in the states my teacher’s first priority was to teach me how to speak the language. It was fifth grade when I first attended school in America and I still remember the look of surprise on Mrs. Omara’s face when she found out that I could spell the word ‘friend’. I could not speak a word of English but I could spell a word that wouldn’t make sense to any non-native student. Back home, I was focused on the rules of the language, but when I got to America I actually did not have the ability to communicate with others. Rules of the language are of course important, and Mrs. Omara did teach grammar and spelling, but obtaining the ability to listen and speak in English was a far more valuable, as it was more useful. A language should be taught to students to be used in the future. Moreover, I processed the language more thoroughly when I spoke English than when I read or wrote. To speak English, it requires a quicker processing speed of the language. By practicing verbal communication, you would be training yourself to reduce the habit of thinking in your native language and translating in order to get your message across. I was under a special condition where I learned English at an American elementary school. I would speak English in and out of the classroom since I was living in an English speaking country. Most ESL students do not have the opportunity to learn English in this environment. However, the point I would like to get across is that eventually I was able to think in English, and this was accomplished through focusing on speaking and not through reading and doing exercises in a textbook. Therefore, I believe it is important for students to be focused on speaking English and try to speak the language as much as possible. If I become a teacher, I would try to encourage the students to speak as much English as possible in and out of the classroom.

Furthermore, I have experienced that classmates can be a better teacher than your actual teacher. On my very first day of school in the states, Mrs. Omara assigned me a buddy. His name was Tyler and for weeks I could not speak a sentence in English. However, Tyler was to do everything with me while we were at school. He showed me where to put our backpacks, how to get to the cafeteria, etc. What I remember is that Tyler and my other friends at my school actually taught me English every day. I remember Mrs. Omara giving Tyler a stack of vocabulary cards and he and my other friends would teach me English words during free time. More importantly, just by conversing with them I was learning English at a much faster pace than I would have from reading a textbook. When talking with your classmates, you are at a different comfort level and it is easier to ask question and answer each other. You are building on each other’s knowledge and you are less concerned with making a mistake, which creates a great learning environment. Therefore, as a teacher I would like to encourage students to work with each other whenever there is an opportunity to do so.

 My experience with Mrs. Omara also taught me that flexibility of the teacher is very important for a student’s education. In my case, my level of English was far lower than the rest of my classmates when I first arrived to the school. If Mrs. Omara had just stuck with the regular curriculum and try to force that upon me, it would have been a horrible experience for both her and myself. As I have mentioned, Mrs. Omara assigned a buddy for me as well as low-level vocabulary cards that were fit for my level. During grammar classes I were to listen to her classes and observe my classmates and their assignments. I did not receive any assignments that would have been over my head. When my English improved I eventually joined the grammar classes and took on the assignments. The flexibility of Mrs. Omara allowed her to create a better learning environment for me. Back home I sometimes see students that are put into classes by their age and stuck with teachers with minimum to no flexibility. I believe that having the patience and flexibility to tend to each student’s level is essential.

In conclusion, my experience of learning English in the states has aspired me to become a teacher who teaches English as a language and not a school subject. Sometimes I see students in my country perceive English as an academic requirement rather than the most useful language to communicate with the rest of the world. As a future educator of this language, I believe the emphasis should be on communication by using modern methods of teaching. During class, students should be encouraged to use their communication skills. Not only is this method helpful for the students’ future but it also enhances their learning process. Also, just as my classmates played an important role in my English education, I would love to see my future students to learn from each other. It is beneficial for students to practice communicating with others, as it trains them to think in language they are learning rather than translating. I will never forget my first American English teacher and her influence on my education. I was able to have a greater appreciation for the English language under her guidance and her technique of teaching has inspired me to become a modern teacher.