My Personal Experience

Learning a Second Language

TESOL 110th WK

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I have 3 people who had a great effect on my learning a second language in my life: my father, my first elder sister and the middle school teacher taught English, I do not exactly remember his name, though, because it has been ages since graduation.

My father used to teach me how to write and read Chinese characters, have me write them on a pile of read newspapers with a marker pen and even teach me simple Chinese and Japanese, both of whom are based on Chinese characters, believing learning them would help me understand my schoolwork much better because most of the meanings of words in Korean are also come from Chinese characters. That was the first time I learned a second language as far as I remember. Because my father was taught in a traditional Korean teaching environment, the forced input, he had me memorize all the things and scolded me severely when I got them wrong. Terrified of him, I studied very hard to make him satisfied. Thanks to him, I could learn many of them, I am not sure the word “thanks to” is proper in the light of what we have been learning in TESOL, though, and I started to become interested in foreign languages.

In the meantime, my interests in foreign languages reached out to English because in late 1980’s and early 1990’s when pop music was all the rage in Korea, my 7-year-older sister was infatuated with American and British pop stars so she started collecting cassettes of them, which helped me to be exposed to English, and placed them on the shelf of her desk. Out of curiosity, I spontaneously listened to them and they were quite enough to attract my attention to English because of pronunciation and intonation which I thought were different from those of Japanese, Chinese and Korean. She bought me some cassettes I wanted to listen to, heard me sing along some songs and gave me a big applause when I mimicked Mariah Carey’s songs although I did not know the exact meaning of the lyrics of them. She was such an understanding and open-minded audience making me feel relaxed whatever I did.

When I started to get curious about the lyrics of the songs, I fortunately had the teacher who was very kind and easy-going as my first English teacher. Being different from other English teachers at that time, he had his own teaching methods; while other teachers taught students grammar for exams, writing it down on the board and reading a text book, he let us know how to pronounce words and useful function of them, and showed us video clips as well as told us cultural differences between Korea and America, making class fun with lots of activities. I used to ask him the meaning of the lyrics and the wrong grammar on songs. His kind explanation made me get interested in English more and I used to carry my small English dictionary for looking up some words and tried to memorize all of them. Unfortunately, however, not all students developed voluntary interests in English; they thought of his English class as time just to play so the English test result of our class was a disaster. Much to his regret he could not teach us any more and had to be transferred to another school, considered an incompetent and lousy teacher. I do not think he was a bad teacher but it was premature for us to have such an involver and enabler teacher at that time.

Korea has changed a lot as time goes by and the perspective on what is the effective education has also been changing now. I am not sure yet what type of teacher is good for students because I learned a lot from my father, the explainer as well as my first English teacher, the involver/enabler. And that will be my never-ending homework to find out what is the effective way of teaching as the teacher who teaches adult learners already familiar with teacher-centered traditional classrooms since I have been taking a TESOL course.

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