Gangnam 123: Gigi Kim

Essay1: Second Language Acquisition

Before I signed up for Spanish lessons this summer at an academy in Jongro, the last time I studied Spanish was in the winter of 1999, at a school in New Jersey where Señora Rifkin taught 7th grade Spanish. Her syllabus was quite appealing to us rowdy teenage students, and it broadly addressed the three learner modes and our different multiple intelligences. Thanks to her thorough teaching methods which I now come to recognize perhaps as a mixture of the Direct Method, Audio-Lingual Method but primarily Communicative (CLT), it was no surprise that, when I picked up Spanish again at Jongro 16 years later, it was like riding a bike. Señora Rifkin’s way of teaching had been motivational and provided me with self-confidence in learning to this day.

Looking back, Señora Rifkin’s classes had touched upon all three learning modes of Visual, Auditory and Tactile-Kinesthetic (where it was possible). We were all True Beginners in Spanish and we had visual materials such as pictures and flash cards in learning the Spanish alphabet and everyday vocabulary. For the Auditory mode, I distinctly remember learning the colors in a song she taught us to the melody of “Frère Jacques”, among number of other rhymes and songs. As part of Tactile-Kinesthetic experience, we were paired to make presentations. My friend and I dressed up and pretended to be the local weathergirls, describing the weather forecast of the week. In such environments, we were able to apply our Verbal/Linguistic Intelligence and Musical Intelligence as well as Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence. None of us were very thrilled to be singing nursery rhymes or enacting role plays since we were presumably too “cool” for such activities, but we quickly found that they made learning enjoyable and we were not pressured or driven with anxiety to provide the correct answers all the time, which means Señora Rifkin had successfully lowered our Affective Filters.

When we had learned the basic alphabet and grammar functions, Señora Rifkin continued to provide new input and kept the lesson alive by using techniques from the Direct and Audio-Lingual Method, such as simple repetitive drilling games, reading aloud and filling in the blanks. There were traditional academic sessions when we learned grammar, but she encouraged us to speak in full sentences in Spanish during games and assigned us with various written tasks. Perhaps it was her intentions for the Communicative methodology (CLT), but I remember using family photos to make a short album to describe stories of my family, which we took turns presenting in class to share and communicate. There were also projects to draw blueprints of our dream house, to describe the furniture and how we wanted to decorate the interior designs. In short, the activities required to think for ourselves on how cohesive and coherent we were in our communication.

Above all, Señora Rifkin enabled us to be creative and to be able to use Spanish for everyday purposes based on our understanding of the language. Her empathetic patience in learning a new language made us comfortable, and her daily instructions in Spanish became comprehensible input to help us realize that Spanish was there for everyday communication and not simply as another subject to study. She encouraged us to create new sentences of our own based on what we learned, and provided genuine and positive feedback on our progress. It would have been easier to pass the time if she simply ran drills or conducted translation, but her enabling tactics challenged us to use our knowledge and ideas and to create something of our own.

I thank Señora Rifkin for her contribution and for giving me the confidence I have today. The Spanish classes at Jongro are tediously traditional classes, with explaining teachers who are instructed to use the Grammar Translation method, but I continue to make my own ideas and seek to obtain my comprehensible input in remembrance of my experience with Señora Rifkin in 7th grade. When learning languages became an elective course in 8th grade, I stayed in her class, studied hard and at the end of the school year was awarded for highest achievement in second languages. If we had not moved back to Korea that winter, I would have continued to study Spanish well into High School. I would have loved to write her a thank you note in Spanish.