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My Second Language Learning Experiences

Some have successfully learned a second language whereas others have given up as they remain somewhere lost in the learning process. In my case, I believe I have successfully learned two second languages and the key success factors were “the teachers” and “the learning environment”. I would like to reflect these factors into my English teaching to be a highly effective teacher whom students would like to remember as their most favorite teacher.

My first second language is English. I was born in Seoul Korea and at age 3, I was told that I spoke Korean fluently and could even sing along TV cartoon theme songs. At age 4, my family moved to the U.S.A. I attended Maple Shade Kindergarten and Elementary School in Bucks County, Philadelphia from age 6 to 12. I remember having fond memories of a loveable grandma like Kindergarten teacher whose storytelling time was magical. I also remember having ESL sessions with a beautiful teacher in the second grade who would hold visuals such as picture cards and would softly ask me to put the cards in order or ask me to explain what was happening in the picture in English. By the fourth grade, my skills improved and I no longer needed any ESL lessons.

Korean was the other second language that I learned. As my English improved, I started speaking more and more in English and had forgotten most of my Korean. After graduating elementary school, my family moved back to Seoul, Korea when I was 12. I attended Kangnam Girls’ Middle School in Seoul, Korea. Unfortunately, I did not know how to read nor write in Korean. I had to learn Korean again as if it was my second language. Luckily, my homeroom teacher Mrs. Kwang-Ja Lee took the time to help me practice my Korean. She was an enabler, for homework I would write a paragraph everyday in my diary and at lunch time, she would read and correct what I wrote. I thank her till this day, had it not been for her, I don’t think I could have successfully re-learned Korean.

Another key factor was the learning environment, where there were meaningful interactions with classmates who were native speakers. I gradually picked up English and Korean language by making friends and learning a new word or sentence here and there. I did not study Grammar. Back then most middle and high schools had Traditional Classrooms where teachers would all be explainers who would write so much on the chalk board and the students would be so busy taking notes. I was not capable of monitoring my Korean because I was too busy trying to keep up in class and the only time I could talk in Korean was during the 10 minute breaks between classes. The good thing was that I was always near native Korean speakers who were in a higher level than mine. This “i+1 input” was a big factor in advancing my Korean in a short amount of time.

Lately, I have tried to learn Chinese. However it was unsuccessful. The reason was now as an adult, I was more goal-oriented where I felt more comfortable knowing ahead what I would be learning, whereas when I was young I did not question where the lesson would lead to and I was just happy to be in the classroom learning and laughing with my classmates full of curiosity. Also, I did not have any time to practice my Chinese Mandarin with any native Chinese speakers other than in the classroom.

Based upon my experiences, for successful second language learning, it is key to have a good teacher that will make special time for each student out of the classroom. Also it is important to have an enjoyable environment where students have sufficient time to openly practice and monitor their language skills as well as exposure to “i+1 inputs” to advance their language skills on a daily basis.

To be a great teacher, I definitely will try to be a good friend to my students. I will make time for individual diary writing sessions which help my students practice and monitor their English skills. Also I will try to provide an open English learning atmosphere where students can have a magical time having fun with their classmates that would naturally lead to a successful second language learning experience.