“Escape from pressures” (or Pressure to Motivation)

“Education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire,” - William Butler Yeats

As many other students in Korea, I began studying English in middle school. With the heat of strong parental support for education, my mom sent me a private language academy in an expectation to see higher score and grades.

I attended JLS Jeong Sang Language School, one of the leading English language institutes with rigorous curriculum in Korea, located in Daechi-dong, the center of Korean private education, in Gangnam, Seoul from Jan. 2002 to July 2002. Mr. Jang, who taught me, was a highly-experienced Korean traditional English teacher. He always put on emphasis on grammar in class and forced us to repeatedly memorize large vocabulary all the time. Once one of the students fails to meet his requirements, he punished him in front of others in the classroom. Mr. Jang seems to be advocating practices that are, quite frankly, abusive, such as calling the student "stupid" and "lazy" and even "garbage(?)" as a way of motivating them to achieve in class.

As beginner, I studied very hard and did my best. Over the short-term, my test scores at school had a big gain. My parents were very satisfied with higher scores. But, in the longer term, I felt that my English capabilities did not improve as expected - even worse I had felt sometimes “I do not want to go there and I just want to stay away from the English class,” although I enjoyed listening to American (English) pop music very much at those years.

Recalling that time, it seems these were two sides of the same coin: extensive grammar lecture and vocabulary-driven English class are very good at preparing me for standardized tests; his traditional way of teaching was too test-oriented, so some pressures around the classroom often deprived me of the joys of learning a foreign language, in which I have been deeply indulged.

A few years later, one of my American friends living in Korea frankly told me that she was very surprised at my excellent English reading skills. According to her, she had never imagined that I enjoy reading some English novels so interested; just because she thought some English expressions I used daily were sometimes quite awkward or sometimes just like popped up from textbooks, or inappropriate in some situations. When I heard that, I was shocked because I was believed to a good English speaker among my peers. I thought over and over whether my spoken English really lags behind the written English. What caused this unbalanced?

Later, I realized that the tedious way of learning, which is focused on grammar and vocabulary by adopting good techniques under pressure, and which I had experienced since I was a middle school student, did not allow me to develop the natural way of communication in a second language and the potential connected to further stages of learning new language over several years even I didn’t notice at those days. Luckily, on the back of help from many other teachers and professors around me, I have employed better approaches to the English learning for myself . And now I am fascinated in learning and teaching English as a second language: because I know how wonderful it is to communicate in other language and the potential that this amazing skill can have for changing everyone’s life.

I still admitted that some exam-oriented practices might be effective for some purposes. In fact, I also experienced that having a base of vocabulary to draw from made learning grammar and sentence structure easier. However, at that time Mr. Jang’s teaching style was steeped in discipline, rote learning and obsessive test preparation. Through this practice, I lost my initial interest in learning a foreign language. I was just a student who lacked curiosity and the ability to think and act independently in the classroom for a new language. No motivation and no question - even when I needed.

I do not want to talk about whole process of learning a language here. Of course, I agree that there is no royal road to learning. But at the same time, based on my own experience, I believe that one of the most essential elements for learning a second language involves permissive attitude by teacher in the classroom environments and highly active behavior of the learners over a period of time. In other words, to learn effectively a second language, I think learners have a clear motivation and goal why they needs it; cooperative, non-authoritarian setting of classroom by the teachers.

Thus, I believe my future student will experience in my class it is more important to ignite a fire with a motivation than filling a pail studying with technics when they want to get better chance in their life and go further their own way through English education.