Janet Hong

May 15th 2013/ TESOL 88th

TESOL 01: Second Language Acquisition Assignment

On the hot day of August 19th, 1995, my family and I immigrated to Jakarta, Indonesia from Seoul, South Korea: I was only ten years old. After spending a year at a Korean international school in Jakarta, my parents put us in a Christian international school in a different city, making a dorm life inevitable. It was one of the biggest and the greatest challenges of my life to live away from my parents and learn a second (English) at the same time. If I look back and think about my second language acquisition experience, I am more than grateful for the privilege that I had and the way it turned out to be. I truly believe that my experience has been a great success because the environment that I was placed in was itself very conducive to learning English.

The school that I attended was small and had no specific classes to instruct a second language learner like me, so I sat in “regular” classes with both native and non-native speakers who were all fluent. Because I could not even say a word in English, I spent most of the class time trying to follow and imitate what other students were doing or guessing what the teacher was saying. I often became very frustrated and cried in class but whenever my breakdowns happened, my teacher appeased and encouraged me. As Carl Rogers talks about the important traits of an effective teacher, my teacher was authentic, respectful, and empathetic towards my situation and the language barrier that I was facing. Other than these three most important traits, she was also caring, enthusiastic towards her teaching, and was a good listener. Stephen Krashen suggests in his Affective Filter Hypothesis that high self-esteem and motivation levels and low anxiety level of a student results in learning. I truly believe that my teacher’s establishing a good rapport with me and helping me to feel safe to make mistakes by creating a very friendly, open classroom atmosphere have supported me to learn.

My teacher was a great stepping-stone to my learning English because she took her students’ learning styles, interests, and different backgrounds into consideration very seriously. Different from traditional classrooms where individual work mostly from textbooks, a focus on receptive skills, and lecture-based teaching with low student participation are encouraged, she applied modern classroom characteristics where active participation from the students, variety of activities and group work, and a focus on communicative skills are encouraged. For example, a variety of group activities such as decorating posters and games like ‘show-and-tell’ greatly helped a visual-learner like me to grasped and understand the contents and the situation better. Also, she created an opportunity for me to discover and learn more about the uniqueness that each classmate had, as Howard Gardner’s Multiple Intelligence Theory suggests. By incorporating eight different intelligences that individuals have and develop over a lifetime into the activities in class, we all enjoyed learning and built good relationships more easily with one another.

Among the three teacher types, Explainer, Involver, and Enabler, my teacher definitely was an Involver/Enabler who encouraged both bidirectional teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. I personally believe in and have experienced the importance of teacher-student and student-student interactions in class. I cannot remember the specifics of the lessons that she taught me long ago, but she definitely motivated me to stay attentive even if I could not understand anything, and actually learn in class without my knowing that I was learning through inductive or stealth teaching. Rather than explaining everything and telling us exactly what to do, she encouraged us to do things on our own and with each other.

In his suggested five characteristics of adult learners, Malcolm Knowles argues that adults are autonomous and are self-directed, have life experiences and knowledge, goal-oriented, relevancy-oriented, and need to be shown respect. Because I was a child when I first encountered my second language acquisition period, all five characteristics of adult learners that Knowles’ suggests do not apply to me. However, I think I can relate to his fourth and fifth characteristics with my experience because I needed to learn English to live, communicate, and study in school and be respected to be an active participant in class.

 Even if it has been more than fifteen years since I have last seen her, I still vividly remember her kind smile and warm heart. I hope to become a mentor and a good facilitator like her soon.