

Going beyond Learning English

It was in the 1st grade of middle school in early 1980's when I had my first English class in Korea. Grammar was everything about English at that time. And by the time when I became a 3rd grader in middle school, all I could remember about English was the first two or three chapters of an English grammar book and never progressed any further.

I was a 3rd grader in middle school when I met this teacher. He gave me a different understanding about English study and eventually put me back on track. What he emphasized on the first day of his class was that the sentences in the university textbooks or newspapers were no different than those in the textbooks of middle school 1st grade textbooks. Lengths of sentences might be longer, words might be more difficult, expressions might be more sophisticated, but the structures (grammar) that made up the sentences were the same. Whether it was true or not was of no importance because it was already tempting enough to encourage and motivate a fourteen-year-old student about to lose his interest in learning English.

With a middle school 3rd grade student, he started his class lecturing on fundamental grammar rules with several sentences not from a grammar book but from a middle school 1st grade textbook. Each time he finished with a twenty to thirty-minute grammar lecture, he would make me write the same sentences thirty times or even fifty times each while I read them out loud. As I progressed, I studied with more difficult grammar books that even high school students might have found difficult, in the very same way, i.e. writing sentences many times while reading them out loud, but with far fewer grammar lectures.

Though his class was also grammar-oriented at first like other English classes, the biggest difference was the teacher never told me to memorize anything. Writing a sentence thirty times surely would make me memorize it including its vocabularies. However, I came to understand at some point that the time I spent writing a sentence tens of times reading it out loud was not a time to memorize it or learn its grammar rules but to familiarize myself with its usage as a language.

When I went to the United States, I found myself surrounded with the environment full of English. All I could see, read or hear was in English, including street signage, books, advertisements and even garbage on the street. My English got much better then and if I look back, probably I indeed began to acquire the language by being immersed in English.

The way I learned English in Korea certainly worked for me, and thus I used to think that way would be the best for others too. Maybe yes if it was 25 years ago. But the teaching environment in Korea has tremendously changed as the learning environment. Not only the teachers, teaching techniques and materials have changed but so have the attitude to English learning of students and their parents and their needs changed.

One thing that has not changed even until now is the importance of students' confidence in English. I still remember how I was encouraged and motivated in his first class. My future students will definitely get that in my first class, too. It will be one of my foremost jobs as a great teacher to find a way to do it. And then, through developing various teaching styles and techniques, and practicing them in balance to meet the needs of future students, I will be able to make a great teacher in the end. And the bottom line is that it has to go beyond 'learning English' to 'acquiring English' in any given environment.