Mistakes: Learners’ Prerogative

If someone asks me if I like English, I’d rather say that I LOVE English. If he or she asks me if I like to learn English, I’d boldly say yes. If they ask again, with a bit puzzled look, dubiously narrowing their eyes with a meaningful and sly smile, “Did you enjoy your English classes?” this time, I cannot but concede my defeat because I am mentally normal, after all. Unfortunately, anyone who has some experiences in English classes at ordinary Korean public schools would understand what I am saying. I’d like to condense the characteristics of English classes I experienced into three words: terrifying, dead and bitter.

It was one beautiful spring day of my first year in middle school. My classmates and I were to have our fourth English class and there were still some childlike noises even right after our English teacher came into the classroom. No more had she looked around the classroom standing in front of the teacher’s desk without one word than she started yelling, smashing the desk two or three times with the black, hard-boarded roll book. At once, we stopped buzzing. A chill stole over the classroom with an indescribable terror. She picked her weapon, aka a broom, out of the classroom management cabinet, and started to THROW questions in the exercise book. Then, the massacre proceeded with a simple procedure like this: “T: Answer?”, “S: …”, “T: You don’t know it?” WHACK! Can you imagine how much I got terrified waiting for my turn? I managed to survive, though I had to hold my legs with my both hands to prevent them from shaking.

My 6-year middle and high school English classes were solely focused on tests: mid-term exams, final-term exams, national mock K-SATs, and ultimately the K-SAT. Accordingly, grammatical knowledge and vocabulary power for an accurate reading and translation with a slight portion of listening training were the main emphases of my English classes. Let me confess, at this juncture, that I liked this type of teaching method, i.e. Grammar-Translation Method, to some degree, and even exploited its convenience and passivity from two aspects. Firstly, English – when it comes to receptive skills such as reading and listening – was always the easiest subject for me during my school days. Of course I hated grammar and vocabulary memorization, and I’ve never given them any extra time and efforts. Rather, I even learned the whole series of the English alphabet right before I started the middle school. Nevertheless, the rules of English grammar and spelling sounded quite natural to me when my teachers explained them. The second aspect is related to my personality. I would say that I was the very combination of two opposite features: shyness and passion. I used to overly worry if I make mistakes or waste a precious time of my teacher and classmates with silly questions and answers. In the other part of me, however, I always had this “burning desire” to be pushed harder to be care-free, active, funny and just myself. Anyway, the traditional English class didn’t as forcibly require my active participation as I secretly wanted, and I could finish my school days as a “successful” English learner thanks to its indifference to speaking and writing. The Bible says, however, “Faith, if it hath not works, is dead.”, and I say, “Language, if it hath not speaking, is dead.”

Hardly had I started my college life when the bubble of my inflated and phony English proficiency suddenly disappeared. My language ego was brutally battered, too. It was in an English conversation class for freshmen at my college when I met and talked to an English native speaker “alive” for the first time. Let me tell you the conclusion first. I felt so miserable, ashamed, belittled and helpless just 5 minutes after the class started because I neither could clearly understand what the professor said nor say what I want to say. He looked quite familiar with my kind of Korean students who had comparably low English speaking ability and acted like a shy, little girl. At the end of the semester, the rich got richer, the poor got poorer. The funny thing was that “my kind of gals” would proudly judge and criticize all the mistakes and non-North American accents of other students with I-know-what-you-mean nodding and smiles after the class. It was the first bitterness of life I tasted as an adult!

Many years have passed since then, and I just took the first step to be a global class English teacher. Therefore, it is very meaningful, at this point, to recall my old English classes, teachers, the feelings I felt, and the influences all of these had on me. What did I learn from my English teachers? Were they helpful? What kind of teacher do I want to be? What will be the best way to teach English? How can I help my students? Can I be a welcome, memorable and respectable teacher? What is the key to a successful English teaching and learning? I guess I just found the most basic clue to it; it’s not just about teaching, but rather teaching and learning must go together! What is, then, the essence of going together? Undoubtedly, it is communication and mutual understanding.

We say that we are all different from each other so often that it almost became a maxim. While overemphasizing it, we seem to have forgotten the other half of the twin; that is, we all have the same desire to be understood. As an English teacher, therefore, I want to help my students become more confident, effective and empathetic communicators who are ready to hear attentively and speak clearly without fear and difficulty. I don’t think it is likely to happen in a threatening and an insecure environment with an impatient, apathetic and idle teacher. Here is the picture of my English classroom I have in my mind. The classroom should be the sanctuary for my students where they can make as many mistakes as they want and need while learning English. I observe and perceive their individual differences in both English proficiency and personalities - some might be able to quite easily communicate in English and some might be not; some might enjoy expressing themselves and some might have difficulty doing so. As a teacher, I have to reinforce their strengths and, at the same time, encourage them to overcome their weak points, empathizing with their difficulties. I should also offer them as many opportunities to practice their English as possible with both direct and indirect help. The more comfortable and secure they feel, the more confidence and interest they will have in their English learning, and consequently the more successful and autonomous English user they will be.

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English should be a tool to communicate with and understand each other, not an object to be studied, tested and even idolized unless you are devoted linguists. Let them do their job and let us, especially our students, dauntlessly and unabashedly navigate the broad sea of the new language and culture. Who knows they might fall in love with English after all?