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Learning Second Language

My first exposure to English language was when I was around 2nd grade. I did not know at the time, but my parents were planning to immigrate our family to the United States of America. Thinking back now this was because my parents wanted to give my older brother and I better opportunity in life. South Korea’s economy was still recovering from IMF crisis from 1997 at that time. During my second semester of 2nd grade still in South Korea, my father hired a personal English teacher from a program called “Nunnoppi” which means “Eye to Eye” in

English. Anyways this program was to get us ready for our new life in America. That program was not very effective in teaching me English, and after coming to America I was finally able to speak English by going through the ESL program.

The problem with my first Korean tutor was that all we ever did in our lesson was to learn about alphabet and how to say certain words by looking at pictures. My tutor’s lesson was mostly about her just explaining English vocabularies in Korean. By only explaining the lesson, she was not able to make me understand how to connect all the words together to form a sentence. Additionally she never taught us how to read the alphabet out loud either. In the end I was able to say out some of the vocabularies, but I was unable to read or even form a simple sentence.

Because the English lessons I had in Korea was kind of useless by the time I came to US, I had to relearn everything from the beginning in the ESL class. Few things I liked about ESL classes was that they would try to get me involved in the lessons. One of the lesson I remember doing is when the ESL teacher would read a short book and made me follow along everything she said, word by word. After reading I had to write everything in that short book, and then read it back to her. She would also visually show me some books and picture on where my tongue, lips, and teeth positions should be at when pronuncing harder phonics like Th, L, R, Z and F, and corrected me when i would mispronunce it. Their lesson seems to be very time consuming and require lot of manpower, but I believe in the end it was very effective.

I think the most important English skill they thaught me was the phonics of English alphabet. By teaching me ability to read the English alphabet, I was finally able to practice english by myself. Not many English native speakers will think of much about the phonics when learning the alphabets, since many of them use it in their own laguage. Whereas for lot of Asian people like me, learning how to read a alphabet should be the first priority. At first it was very hard for me to learn English since none of the words or sentences in English were remotely similar to Korean. As time went on, I became better in all four English skills, but there was huge frustration whenever I came by much more difficult vocabularies. Later, school that I attended was nice enough to hire a Korean teacher who could also speak English to help me out whenever I would get stuck in class. Bad thing about having that Korean teacher was that I became too depandant on her and my learning kind of stagnated. Regardless, by the time I got to 6th grade I was surprised to find out that it was easier to for me to read the meaning of a new word in English rather than Korean. This kind of made me realize that having class done in 100% English does allow you to progress little faster.

From my experience of learning a second language, I believe the best way to learn is by have storong motivation for. At that time learning english for me was a huge priority, I needed it so I would not get left behind in school, or stay behind a grade. Another reason was because I needed it to talk to my friends and classmates. As there was no other Korean kids in the school, and I did not wanted to get left out. My parents also had very high expectation of me, and I did not wanted to disappoint them. All these events allowed me to study hard and learn English, but I cannot say the same for Spanish and Japanese. Even though I have studied them extensively in my free time, in the end I was not able to learn these two language. Unlike with English I actually never felt the neccesity for it, so I did not have the motivation for it. This reason is why I guess a lot of student in Korea struggles with learning English. Best advice I could give them is that, they should try their best finding their motivation. If they still cannot learn it, then I just think that, their motivation is not strong enough. As old English idiom goes, “you can lead a horse to a water, but you cannot make it drink it, if he does not want to.”