Learning by fortunate experiences to start my own journey of an educator

“What a teacher is, is more important than what he teaches.” – Karl Menninger

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Word Count: 743

I was fortunate enough to experience teachers from both eastern and western cultures when learning English as a second language. I spent about two and a half years in College Station, Texas, US from the 7th to 9th grade and this is when I met teachers from western culture. Besides this period, I attended ordinary Korean public schools with teachers and classrooms of eastern culture. I have met both an ‘enabler’ and an ‘explainer’ as my ESL teachers and also experienced both ‘traditional’ and ‘modern’ types of classrooms. I would like to elaborate these comparative experiences with my personal stories about Ms. Day and Ms. Kim.

During my stay in Texas, I attended College Station middle school for a year and a half and spent a year at A&M Consolidated high school. Ms. Day was the first ESL teacher I met in the 7th grade. She is actually the best teacher I have ever met and is remembered as an ‘enabler’. I can’t remember a day when there was just one-way explaining from her or when I didn’t feel comfortable in her classroom. She had all three components like Carl Rogers said; Respect, empathy, and authenticity. I had classmates from all over the world with all different levels of English. She showed respect for all the cultural backgrounds and tried her best think in our shoes. We each had trustful relationship with Ms. Day and she made us feel safe to ask or share anything about learning English. She would make cupcakes for the whole class on every student’s birthday which brought all class together in warm-hearted atmosphere. This helped when she let us work with each other on assignments. She was a very good motivator who listened to our struggles and gave feedback on which part we were good at so we wouldn’t get discouraged to keep learning English. Thankfully, she took my fear about new environment and taking risks in speaking out in classes out of me when I arrived to the new land, Texas.

Ms. Day’s classroom was student-centered in many ways. The way desks were organized, where we sat, which activity to do and what lecture to be covered were all decided by or at least with the students. We only had about eight students in the class which was relatively small size of a group. Ms. Day always asked us what we needed her help with and started the class by what was requested. She facilitated the discussion for us to express our opinions and feelings doing activities and assignments using different types of materials.

Compared to Ms. Day, I have met more ‘traditional’ type of teacher, Ms. Kim when I came back to Korea in the 10th grade at Suji high school. Ms. Kim was my homeroom teacher and also my English teacher. I remember her as a typical ‘explainer’ and the classroom was traditionally organized in teacher-centered way but with more ‘modern’ technology. In her class, teacher-talking-time was extremely high because the base structure of the class was just the one-way lecture, passive note-taking and occasional worksheet activity. The students raised their voice only when the teacher asked a question or told students to read a sentence time to time. I remember most of the time looking at Ms. Kim’s back writing on the board explaining about the grammar. I don’t remember any group activities or speaking related work. Most of the learning was focused on reading and writing. Even listening was through audio tapes or videos. The class was as large as 30 to 40 students in a class which made it difficult for students to have any close personal relationship with the teacher. It’s assumable the teacher didn’t know how each student was doing or feeling. In Ms. Kim’s class, I felt strange, isolated, and sometimes frustrated because I, too, didn’t raise my voice at all in class not to break the taboo.

Reflecting back on my teachers including Ms. Day and Ms. Kim and the effects they had on me one way or another, I now feel more responsible about becoming one. I would love for my students to have memorable learning experience and in order to do that I believe I need to be their ‘enabler’ rather than ‘explainer’. I believe knowledge is just an ingredient of teaching and as the quote on top of this paper says, I will keep learning ‘what a teacher is’ and work on my teaching knowhow.