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The Failure of Modern Teaching, A Case Study: Branksome Hall Asia

For roughly three and a half years, from 8th to 12th grade, I attended an international school called Branksome Hall Asia. My parents had decided to send me there because I did not fit in the traditional Korean educational system as much as they would have liked; they believed I would adapt well to a Western school system, and that Branksome would bring out the best in me. I was admitted within a year of its opening, which leads to my interesting position as an observer - people sent their children to Branksome in the hope that they would learn to speak English like a native speaker, so I was able to see firsthand how it measured up as a second language learning experience. The results were dismal, and I will describe the qualities of an effective teacher, the three teacher types, and learning retention rates in order to back up my argument.

From the beginning, Branksome branded itself as the quintessential “modern” school, and prided itself on its modern teaching techniques. However, the best teaching techniques in the world are completely ineffective should the teachers fail to practice them, and that is exactly what happened. Empathy, authenticity, and respect are the three core qualities of a effective teacher, with empathy being the greatest of all, but the teachers at Branksome lacked it as a whole. The reason for this is because they were told that their contracts were unlikely to last longer than a year no matter how well they taught, and the dearth of morale caused by high turnover rate caused teachers to do what they had always done in regards to teaching style rather than learn the school’s new techniques. Why bother to care about what the students think about you when you will be gone in a few months? Which leads into my second point: the teachers at Branksome lacked authenticity. They were not excited about teaching, and the students easily saw past the few who faked enthusiasm. This led them to dismiss whatever the teachers said. There was no respect on either side, and over the course of each school year the teacher-student relationship would slowly but steadily break down until there was no attempt made to even pretend otherwise.

Of the three teacher types, Branksome’s teachers taught like enablers. Enablers should allow their students to create their own ideas; the ideal enabler sits back and watches as their pupils learn on their own. Branksome’s teachers did the former, but not so much the latter. The idea was that if students were allowed to peruse new info on their own, and then were prompted to use English in varying group activities later on, they would learn more words naturally, without all of the inefficiency of the Explainer and Involver types. Unfortunately, the entire process was improperly managed from start to finish. When students were given the new material, the vast majority simply did not read it. Instead, they would group up and discuss it in Korean, and the work they produced would be much the same in content and description. This obviously did not result in any boosts in English skill. At this point, the school should have intervened and changed their strategy, but because of the scarce communication between the staff and the school directors, as well as the afterformentioned lack of teacher morale, no changes were made during the entire three and a half years I attended. This mismanagement of the Enabler teaching style resulted in class activities being a waste of time regarding English study, deeply damaging to both students and teachers.

Lastly, Branksome’s focus on high-efficiency learner retention techniques in classes, while good in theory, were less effective in practice. Most groupwork took the form of discussion groups, but because there was no moderation regarding who was speaking, those who were already excellent at English lead the discussion, though they already knew the material, while the pupils who actually needed to improve lagged behind. The rest of the work was covered in lectures, reading, and audio-visual format, the three least effective study techniques. Most of the actual study, for students who wanted to do well, was done *outside* of class, not in it, in the form of independent study groups - falling under teaching/mentoring others, which has a 90% retention rate. Nevertheless, the school did not support the students in this venture at all.

Earlier, I discussed the qualities of an effective teacher, the three teacher types, and learning retention rates to argue that Branksome was a poor environment in which to undertake second language learning. As someone taking the TESOL course, I can also say that it was an excellent case study as to what *not* to do as a second language teacher. Doubtlessly these qualities enliven a classroom and boost learning efficiency if done correctly, and this should not be taken as a criticism of the concepts taught in the course as a whole. Regardless, due to numerous issues with its internal structure and interpersonal relationships, Branksome completely failed to make the best of its new teaching techniques. I do not intend to make the same mistake if I can help it.