Lee, Hanhoon

198th WD

My experience of L2 Aquisition – a Success or Failure?

Linguist Stephen Krashen defines second language acquisition as learning a second language after a first language is already established. English is my second language that I spared no efforts to master for many years. I am still struggling to improve my English ability in order to reach my desired level of proficiency. Therefore, I would say that my experience of English acquisition was a half success in consideration of my past learning experience.

I started learning English when I was a middle school student. At that time, I was unaware of how much English language would be communicatively influential in my daily life. Like most other students, I just passively studied English as a part of school curriculum to achieve high scores on tests and successfully pass the high school entrance examination. From what I remember, my English teachers were what Jim Scrievener defines as the traditional explainer type teachers. They unilaterally gave lectures to students without establishing rapport and a classroom dynamic and forcefully input English knowledge of grammar, structure, reading and translating skills without considering individual learners’ differences. To my disappointment, even in high school, the English teachers’ traditional teaching styles were not any different from those of the middle school teachers. Consequently, English language was a mere subject for tests that I needed to pass in order to move on to a next stage in school. Therefore, it was not easy to explain in terms of Krashen’s second language acquisition theory – Acquisition/Study Hypothesis.

When I became a freshman of Yonsei University in 1980, I at last realized the importance of comprehensive systems and skills of English for goals of effective communication. The English literature subject I took as a liberal arts course rendered me an unforgettable experience. On the first day of class, the professor asked me to express the first impression of my university life, but I could not say anything in English, because I had never experienced speaking English in public. The embarrassing moment strongly motivated me to study English hard through a more direct method.

Exposure to an English-speaking environment was the most important factor that contributed to strengthening my English skills. My first real experience of natural acquisition of English was the time when I was serving in the 2nd Infantry Division of U.S. Army in South Korea. I remember that one of Native American soldiers called G.I. helped me improve the speaking and listening skills of my English. The direct and intimate communication experience with American soldiers was a remarkable opportunity for me to get a sense of real English used by native speakers. After two and a half years of my military service in the U.S Army, I came back to my senior year in university and started studying English in a more effective way than before. Since then, I have tried to take advantage of new language learning modes, i.e. visual and auditory instruments recommended by the Linguistics Department of Michigan University. Also, I tried to find out and make use of my strengths among the eight distinctive Multiple Intelligences theorized by Howard Gardner – Logical, Visual, Kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, Verbal, Naturalist.

Furthermore, when I was working for a trading company, I had a more realistic experience to acquire English than just studying it by myself. I engaged in numerous business meetings with overseas business partners, which naturally exposed me to situations where I had to speak English. According to the theory of ‘communicative language teaching’ method, English-only environments such as frequently speaking English with native speakers on the streets, listening and watching English television shows help people to speed up natural acquisition of English. Working with foreigners at work occasionally provided me with such English-only environment and accelerated my learning process.

So far, I recalled my personal experience of many trials and errors to overcome the barriers to learning English. Unfortunately, I could not achieve the level of English proficiency that I had hoped to reach, and thus I strongly feel the need to make more efforts to reach a more advanced level in English. Still, in the end, my experience of English acquisition as a second language was a partial success. The lessons of my past learning experience will help me seek for more effective ways of teaching English to non-native English speakers in the future.

731 words