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My Experience of L2 Acquistion – a Success or Failure?

According to Stephen Krashen’s theory, second language acquisition means learning a second language as you have learned your mother tongue- in a natural and subconscious way- as opposed to studying it. My experience of learning English during middle school and high school was rather in the form of ‘studying’ than ‘acquiring’ and therefore it was not an enjoyable process as much as it was not a successful way.

Why was it not enjoyable and successful? There are 3 main reasons.

First, in my middle school and high school days, the classroom atmosphere reflected **traditional teaching.** There were more than 50 students in one classroom with all desks facing forward in rows. The lecture was one-way from the teacher to students in a ‘chalk and talk’ fashion, and asking questions by students were not encouraged if not prohibited. **Individual learner differences** such as level of students or characteristics of students were not considered as important. The role of the teacher was the ‘explainer’ and students’ talk time was limited and only upon the teacher’s request. Classroom discussion was little to none. I remained a passive student having few opportunities to practice any speaking.

Second, certain **language skills and systems** were taught with more emphasis than others. Reading was the skill with the highest focus, then writing, listening, and speaking the lowest. The purpose of studying English was to get good scores on school tests and the college entrance test, so **proficiency assessment** was done in a paper based test format and no assessment was available for oral proficiency. Even the listening test was multiple choice exam with recorded audio passages. We did not approach English as a communicative tool for daily conversation or discussion. Thus, **effective teaching** meant forcing the students to memorize vocabulary and reading passages from the textbook as much as possible. **Classroom dynamics** was nonexistent because speaking was not encouraged. Speaking in English with my classmates felt very awkward.

Also, we spent more time learning grammar and lexis than function and discourse. The class was taught in Korean not in English, so phonology did not get much attention. We learned the language only through the textbook so what we learned in class was not applicable to diverse situations that I encountered later when I lived in or traveled foreign countries. I knew the word ‘injustice’ and ‘discrimination’ but I failed to protest when treated unfairly in dormitory room assignment while studying in a university in America as an exchange student. I did not know exactly how to phrase my statements to prove unfairness in my situation.

Third, as hypotheses of Krashen’s **second language acquisition** suggested, studying the language instead of acquiring it hindered me from speaking fluently and confidently. I was such a stereotypical **rule former student** in traditional teaching environment that I became self-conscious and hesitant to speak up in front of other people. Combined with my shy, introvert personality, my language monitor became strong in action and I would rather stay silent than make mistakes. As an introvert, talking with other people, especially strangers, was a stressful and nervous situation. With high anxiety and not much confidence in my speaking ability, I dreaded speaking English and often stuttered and stammered. I reflected and dwelled on my mistakes and that made me more nervous the next time when I had to speak in English.

When I was studying for my master’s degree in the U.S., all my classes were small with about a dozen students and participation was very important in classroom discussion and sharing experiences. The faculty always put stress on ‘everybody bringing something to the table’ and it put a great deal of stress on me. Often, I found my speaking competency was not fast enough for discussions and debates because I tended to think in Korean then translate my thoughts in English or vice versa for understanding others. It was hard for me to find a good timing to jump in because of that delay. I was the type to laugh at a joke one second after others burst into laughter.

Those reasons above show why my experience of English acquisition was not a successful one. Learning a language in a studying form definitely does not help you feel confident and comfortable with the language especially in terms of oral fluency. Thankfully, the trend is changing in Korean education system. I hope to see English teachers incorporate natural and more fun ways to learn English in the classroom.

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