

Bringing Pedagogical Principles to the Classroom: An Essay on Student Motivation

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The reason why I get up early every Saturday morning is to meet my beloved students at a Korean church, which is providing a place for the Korean Community School. On the way to school, I always feel happy that I am going to see those little angels. In that school, we teach Korean to Korean-American K-12 students. My class is called the upper basic class, and I have mostly first and second grade children. When the semester began, I was worried about my inexperience. The only thing I had was the confidence that I am a fluent speaker of Korean, and I can comfortably mingle with many kinds of people. Actually, I had never taken care of children, nor even taught before. The principal of the Korean Community School was worried, too. At the interview, looking at my resume, she asked me if I could handle this job with no teaching experience. I was brave enough to have said yes. Thankfully, I was hired instantly and started my first class on September 9, 2006.

Day 1. Nervous! It was my first time to teach children and to teach in a classroom environment. Their eyes were glaring at me, and they were so bright that I could not breathe. I wrote the Korean alphabet on the board and said, "Repeat after me." That was the only thing I could think of that day. I wrote all the Hangul (the Korean alphabet) letters on the board and asked the students to memorize them as quickly as possible. How could they possibly memorize the entire alphabet all at one time? I guess my nervousness made me a bit crazy.

Then, I realized I should do some planning and preparation for class. I decided to teach four letters each day. I also tried to teach colors and the names of body parts with the color touching game and the head-shoulder-knee game. Those activities or games require a lot of physical movement. In the color touching game, once the name of the color announced, students touch the shirt of their classmate who is

wearing the target color; the head-shoulder-knee game is similar to the "Simon says" game: it is a game for more than three children and one child has to be a commander. The commander says a phrase mentioning a body part, and the others touch that body part. The children were excited and very actively involved in these activities as they ran around the classroom. They really liked the physical movement, and it worked! This success reminded me of the importance of physical movement for children as asserted by Nichols (1994):

It has often been said, "children learn through movement." In addition to the health benefits of physical activity, movement is an integral part of the young child's life and education, for it is through movement that children develop social, emotional, and cognitive skills. For young children, movement is a critical means of communication, expression, and learning. It is imperative that classroom teachers give children as many opportunities as possible to be physically active and to learn through movement. (p. 66)

After a while, when I was a little bit accustomed to the classroom environment, I started to observe individual students and found out that I enjoyed student observation. This experience taught me the value of paying attention to individual students. One particularly interesting student was Shellie (not her real name), who was 10-years-old. She was the oldest child among the students in my class. Most students in my class were 1st or 2nd graders, that is, 6 to 7 years olds. She was half Japanese and half Korean. She did not have many chances to speak Korean at home. Her intelligence was more than sufficient to learn the new Korean letters, but she was having difficulties with conversation. She did not seem to mingle with the

younger kids. She seemed to hold back and not quite enjoy the class activities. During the recess, she stayed alone knitting something. I then thought of Shoemaker, who wrote in 1991 that “it is important to provide an appropriate acquisition environment in the classroom, eliminating anxiety and encouraging students, so they feel they really can acquire the language” (p. 7). I decided to give her special attention to get her involved in class. I tried to talk to her more and, after I discovered that she played the piano well, I asked her to play the piano for us while we were singing. She gradually seemed to have a feeling that she was taking a major role in the class. My sense that I was doing something right was confirmed by two educators, Altwerger and Ivener, who had claimed (in 1994) that

teachers can play a major role in promoting a positive social climate in the classroom. It is important to show a willingness to accept students responses, particularly those of second-language learners, in order to encourage ongoing active participation in the classroom. (p. 75)

Later, I noticed that Shellie was actively involved in the classroom activities and was mingling with other classmates. Through Shellie, I realized that language learning could be enhanced when the teacher’s attitude of acceptance and inclusion is communicated to all students, and a sense of community and cohesiveness involving ESL students and their English-speaking peers is encouraged.

Surprisingly enough, my students finally started to read some simple combined characters, combinations of consonant and vowel letters. It was amazing. I can say it was my first joy as a teacher. Through the students, I also learned something important about bilingualism. Marin (also a pseudonym) was a delightful 7-year-old girl in 2nd grade. She could read and even write some words as they were pronounced. I wondered how she could progress so fast. Her mother said that she would ask Marin to read the menu whenever they went to Korean restaurants, even though before

they had rarely communicated in Korean at home. In fact, her mother seemed to be very concerned about bilingual education and that was why she enrolled Marin in a Korean class. As a result of this class, Marin’s mother began to actively teach her daughter at home. As the mother was also teaching communication at the University of Hawai‘i, she knew that teachers could not possibly teach students the meaning of every new word they see or read, and so she was trying to extend her daughter’s Korean. Marin’s mother’s commitment to raise her as a bilingual child reminded me of what Fillmore wrote about parents’ role in developing bilingualism. He pointed out (in 1991) that

if the language is not used in the school, they should encourage parents to use the home language with their children, even in the face of resistance by the children. Especially when they are older, many students regret having lost proficiency in their home language. The cost for the family can be great if older children and adolescents cannot communicate well with their parents. (p. 330)

Thanks to her mother’s help and Marin’s strong self-motivation, Marin performed very well on dictations and quizzes. (It was interesting to see that the 2nd graders were much better than the 1st graders in writing. It seemed that the 1st graders were still too young to follow Korean phonics or the writing system due to their cognitive level.) Marin’s success story also reminds me of Bialystok (2001)’s note in which she identified the benefits of bilingualism in specific areas such as metalinguistic awareness (awareness about language as a system) and cognitive processing. She asserted that bilingualism provides further education in the child’s native tongue while acquiring skills in the new language and gives them a strong sense of pride, higher self-esteem, and long term retention.

Now let me turn to the topic of motivation. As time went by, the students seemed to follow my instruction pretty well and finally, I was able to create one activity

with physical movement of my own: “Daily Routine.” I taught them to act as if they were starting their days at home with some realistic motions in order to teach these phrases: brush your teeth, put on clothes, eat breakfast, and so on. The students liked this activity a lot, as it contained physical activity and was directly connected to their lives. I find this to be a vivid example to support the National Reading Panel’s statement, “Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language” (2006). Children could learn the words of languages through everyday conversation with peers and adults, TV shows they watch, and listening to books that are read aloud. I noticed that the more the children were exposed to it, the more they develop a sense for the language.

By the time the students were able to recognize the Korean spelling system and could write some simple syllables of one consonant and one vowel, I tried to do some story telling to get them interested in reading literature. I chose a traditional Korean folk tale, which I thought would be suitable in terms of content and level. The reason why I chose a Korean folk tale was that I knew the students were very much interested in Korean culture. Once, the principal and I took them on a field trip to the Korean Studies Center at the University of Hawai‘i, and they showed a lot of interest when they were listening to the principal’s explanations about Korean architecture and customs. The children’s interest in the Korean culture as they learned the language once again showed the close relationship between language and culture. Fishman wrote, “most of the culture is in the language and is expressed in the language. The culture could not be expressed and handed on in any other way” (1996, p. 90).

However, contrary to my expectations, the children did not seem to be interested in Korean folk tales. To them, even recognizing the characters’ names was challenging because they were so foreign. The story was too old-fashioned, and they got bored. Thus, I decided not to use the folk tale as reading material. Still, I wanted to find something to

motivate them to learn Korean. This is because according to Dörnyei (2001), “motivation is thought to be responsible for why people decide to do something, how long they are willing to sustain the activity and how hard they are going to pursue it.” I continued to search for topics that interested the children. What might interest them in reading and writing? If the material were not familiar to them and too foreign, they would not be able to get involved in the activity. I remembered the importance of background knowledge that I learned in AL 6720, Teaching ESL/EFL Reading and Writing. My special interest went to “activating what they do know and letting the students know they do know something” (Anderson, 1999, p. 16). I asked them how they spent their free time and found out that they usually watched the Disney Channel during the evening. I surveyed them about their favorite Disney Channel programs. Although they liked many programs, they unanimously agreed that High School Musical was the best one. I came up with the idea that it would be great if we could do some role-play acting with High School Musical. This show is about high school students who share a passionate love for music and singing. The main characters, Troy and Gabriella, try out for the lead parts in their high school musical. Despite other students’ attempts to thwart their dreams, Troy and Gabriella persist and inspire others along the way.

To make it work, I let each of the students choose their favorite characters and explained that we were going to make our own Korean version of *High School Musical*. The classroom was full of excitement. The children eagerly described their favorite characters and gave me explanations about the story line and relationships between characters. Frankly, I was not really familiar with the story line or the program itself. Those students who had been quiet during previous classroom activities also started to become actively involved. I asked them to write about each character’s personality and characteristics as homework in English first and then in Korean. All of them looked so happy to be working on this project. I real-

ized that motivating them to be learners is best accomplished by fostering a supportive climate in which the teacher serves as facilitator and the students have the opportunity to choose the learning activities.

At the next week's class, some of the students had already brought the assigned homework translated into Korean, and others got help from me and from their peers in the class. The reason why I did it in this way was because Brown and Palincsar (1989) explained how group activity and collaborative work can help to motivate students by allowing them to share the thinking load and to act as models of planning and strategy use for each other in guided, cooperative learning and individual knowledge acquisition. Some who were better in writing Korean helped others spell correctly, and some who were better in speaking Korean helped others translate. Interestingly, this divided the class into two groups: children who are full Korean vs. children who are half Korean. Children who are full Koreans, meaning both of their parents are Korean, mostly communicated using the Korean language at home. This full Korean group is faster at learning new vocabulary words. The half Korean group is more interested in reading and writing skills, such as phonics and the combination of vowels and consonants. I thought if the full Korean children were deliberately trying to learn phonics, they could learn faster than others. However, they were just enjoying the class. Nothing seemed exotic or new to them, but they were interested in and willing to learn from their peers. This reminded me of the theory of the Near Peer Role Model and group synergy that I learned about in the course that I had taken on group dynamics. "Modeling is held to be one of the most powerful ways of teaching: it involves setting an example that learners find worthy to follow" (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2004, p. 128). My students discussed the whole story line of *High School Musical* as well as the characters with their peers to make it perfect, and they became teachers to each other.

In teaching, there are often unexpected coincidences. My Korean class actually got

the chance to put on their play. The school customarily holds a festival at the end of each semester. Each class has to give a couple of performances, such as singing, dancing or acting. I decided that we would perform our version of *High School Musical* as the main contribution of our class. To make this activity professional enough to satisfy all of the audience (teachers and parents as well as students in other classes), we drew pictures of each character to explain the characters when we went up on the stage. Visual aids would be helpful to make parents and teachers who were not familiar with the TV show to understand this skit. This functioned as background knowledge for them.

Creating the script for the skit was the easiest job compared to other steps we had to work on. For example, my students were 1st and 2nd graders, they were too young to understand how to act or perform as a part of an organized production. It was hard to have them practice again and again. At first, they could not sustain their attention through several rehearsals. What was worse, once they realized that we were going on the stage, the shy students showed some hesitation. In addition, I realized that producing the skit at a low-tech level is actually a challenging job in this high-tech age. With technology, one can easily add vivid and realistic images to grab the audience's attention. For example, another class was dubbing a movie using their own voices, taking advantage of Microsoft's Windows Movie Maker. My students were to hold the picture they had drawn of each character while they were performing to let the audience know which character they were representing. In the end, my students learned from the rehearsals. They began to look at the many rehearsals and preparation as a game. They seemed to become professional actors and actresses. I was able to succeed in lowering their anxiety level in the classroom. Games are associated with fun, and thinking that they were having fun caused my students to learn more. This was a good example to support the following observation from other educators such as Nguyen and Khuat, who wrote, in 2003:

Games have been shown to have advantages and effectiveness in learning vocabulary in various ways. First, games bring in relaxation and fun for students, thus help them learn and retain new words more easily. Second, games usually involve friendly competition and they keep learners interested. These create the motivation for learners of English to get involved and participate actively in the learning activities. Third, vocabulary games bring real world context into the classroom, and enhance students' use of English in a flexible, communicative way. (p. 7)

In my experiences, games, and game-like activities in the classroom setting were very useful in encouraging students to reflect on what they learned in other contexts. It also reinforced the knowledge they got from the curriculum.

Finally, the festival day came. My class was to perform after the kindergarten class. All of the students and teachers at the Korean Community School gathered in the biggest hall of the church, and many of the parents came to see the performances. A couple of reporters from the *Hankook Ilbo*, a Korean newspaper with a branch based in Honolulu, brought their microphones and cameras to report on the festival. At first, my students were overwhelmed by the fact that they had to be on the huge stage, but once they got going, they seemed to be obsessed with the performance. Of course, I kept encouraging them: "You can do it, look at the kindergarten class children, they were doing well, too!" Students from all the other classes were excited to watch the play because they all knew about this TV show. At the end, the audience gave us a big round of applause. Even though there were many pauses as they forgot some lines and they mixed Korean and English, my students performed much better than when we were in the classroom, thanks to the audience's support.

If the performance had been done only on the classroom level, my students' satis-

faction or self-confidence would not have been this high. After the stage performance, they were really proud of themselves for having done something great. What I found was that the long-term project as part of classroom instruction also helped to increase students' investment in classroom learning. They became motivated by their achievement. My students all became confident and satisfied. Through this project, I truly realized that motivation led to confidence building as has been described by writers such as Brophy, who noted in 1997,

Children who experience success in meeting one challenge will become motivated, welcoming another. These motivated learners will choose an activity that is slightly difficult for them, but provides an appropriate challenge. When they successfully complete such a task, children gain a high level of satisfaction. (p. 29).

In conclusion, my teaching experience with the children at the Korean Community School has helped me make sense of several pedagogical principles which previously had only existed in theory for me. These include learner motivation, learner confidence, the value of paying attention to individual students the value of physical movements and games for children, and the important role of parent involvement in developing bilingualism.

On a personal level, my experience with the children has been extremely rewarding. I was amazed to see how my students collaborated with each other and organized the order of how they were going to act while they were preparing the High School Musical role-play. During the semester, I realized that adults are sometimes very much unaware of many things that we should know, such as how smart and brilliant children are. Children seem to be intrinsically motivated, and they are natural learners. In this sense, it is a rewarding job to teach a second language, especially to children. They blossom every day. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to watch their endeavors to learn a second language

and their growth as persons. That fall se-

mester of 2006, I saw miracles happen.

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