

Human Learning and Cognition Make up Assignment:
Reflections on Human Learning and Cognition and the Sookmyung MA TESOL
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Human Learning and Cognition, Professor van Vlack
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Reflections on the MA TESOL: Its Influence and Guidance

From bus driver, to taxi driver, to mechanic. This metaphor describes the duties of various roles I had more or less assumed as an English teacher prior to beginning the Sookmyung MA TESOL. The bus driver follows the given route and takes his passengers to *his* destination. The taxi driver learns all the other possible routes, and takes his passenger to *their* destination. The mechanic identifies and fixes people's problems. All 3 of these roles essentially provide a service. However, I think the MA TESOL has helped me to take on my new role: the driving instructor! The driving instructor sits in the passenger seat of the dual-control car while the student takes control of the steering wheel, practicing the skills of driving until they can eventually drive by themselves. Then, when the student is self-reliant, they can independently choose where they want to go, and know the best way to get there. In my former roles, perhaps I provided too much service. As an English teacher, I did just that: I taught only *language*. However, the Sookmyung MA TESOL has enabled me to take a new outlook: I now teach *language learning*. The difference may at first seem trivial, but this change has seen me move away from simply providing a service, towards helping to create autonomous, skilled and knowledgeable learners of English. The MA TESOL's variety and scope has given me fresh perspectives and a deeper understanding of how language *and* learning *and* teaching all interconnect.

Growing up studying French in high school feels like a long time ago. Grammar was king. Language form was what we were learning: the final goal was to master French in all its forms. We memorized the "*rules*" - especially the verb conjugations - with the theory being we could then piece it all together. To do so required pencil, notebook, sharpener and eraser. We drilled a lot, wrote a lot, and were tested a lot. Learning French was all about the language itself. This was seemingly how to learn a language, and we didn't know any other way. After 5 years of study, not 1 of the 30 students in my "higher-level" class had above low-intermediate level French.

Only now can I diagnose the problems. Only now can I understand what language is, and what it is not. The language in itself, almost ironically, is not really the ultimate objective. Language is the means by which we think, feel, act and communicate. First and foremost, I've come to focus on how language is spoken and listened to: it takes two to tango, and two to converse. I can now clearly see how different spoken and written language actually are. "*Air*" language and "*text*" language are two totally different systems. A detailed transcript of a conversation would bear little resemblance to a formal written composition. In terms of how we mostly use language in

our day-to-day social lives, speaking and listening are primary; reading and writing are a distant second. And the skill we use most is listening, not speaking. I've learned language is pattern-based and meaning focused. Spoken language is transactional and interactional. It's functional. It's casual conversation. It's high frequency vocabulary, like phrasal verbs and lots of small words like "*it's*", "*this*", "*those*" and "*yeah, maybe*". And it's all context dependent, vague and messily put together and impossible to describe through written text! And it's equally difficult to teach spoken English predominantly through written forms. Only teaching the written forms of language in many ways is much simpler for the teacher, but isn't necessarily optimal for the learner. Spoken language is social, functional, emotional, neurological, and physical. At its core, language is all these things, and so much more than its written forms. And language, by this definition, is what I think people really want to learn.

Our brain's capacity to learn makes it perhaps one of the most powerful instruments in the universe. Human learning is perhaps, similarly, the most complex of processes. However, understanding some of the fundamentals and principles has made a big difference. Learning *is* associations; it's making connections; it's strengthening and remembering connections. The plasticity of the brain allows us to associate and connect *any* two concepts. We learn through action and emotion, through seeing and listening, feeling and doing. Mirror neurons allow us to model and copy behavior. This means exposing ourselves to large quantities of authentic input and output. We are far better at learning when we *want* to learn, not because we have to. Enjoyment is key: as social creatures, people enjoy learning in social environments. Play and movement produce dopamine and more memorable positive emotions and experiences. We have different ways of remembering different things: facts, experiences and processes. And the order of learning is vital. We chunk and group concepts to make them simpler and so we can learn more. We don't learn randomly, but build knowledge upon existing knowledge: scaffolding lets us climb higher. Reprocessing and connecting new knowledge to old knowledge helps retain the new, and keep everything connected and fresh: this means washback and practice of transferable skills in all their real-life contexts.

When I studied French, I didn't know how best to learn, or that effective learning requires effective learners. When I first started my career in teaching I used to hear expressions like, "*Who are the best students? The best students are the ones in front of you!*" I now think this is ridiculous. It puts too much emphasis on the role of the teacher. For learners, to know how to learn well should not be a secret held by the teacher, but prerequisite knowledge for all. As teachers, I think we need to ask ourselves, "*Do our learners really know about learning? Do they know how to learn a language effectively and efficiently? Do they know the difference between good and bad study habits?*" Even if the answers to these questions are "*No*", as humans, our amazing capacity to learn means that our Korean students have much greater potential than many teachers, and they themselves, often realize. The MA TESOL has helped me much better understand the learner, and the importance of the learner, in the process of learning.

I've come to understand that as an English teacher, it's my job to teach my learners about 3 things: learning, language learning, and only then, language. This means first focusing on their metacognitive skills and their overall awareness of the language learning process, and their own position within this process. It means first addressing these gaps and their weaknesses (while harnessing their strengths). This requires a candid approach: to show students the problems of Korea's traditional, academic and assessment-centered approach; to insist upon proactive, inquisitive, and imperfect learners; to insist upon collaboration and *not* competition. I had previously underestimated just how ingrained notions of face and apprehension about publicly making mistakes were in Korean students, and how these aspects had come to almost define their identity as learners. This identity manifests itself in a predominantly extrinsically motivated approach, and as such, students can see learning English as a chore: something they *have to* do, not something they *want* to do. I see many Korean students with an overemphasis and over-reliance on their teacher, textbook and the language itself. I've seen the passive, repetitive, solitary learning styles this provokes. I've seen the boredom, the lack of enjoyment, the lack of achievement, and the dropouts. Korean students, especially, want to feel good, feel like they are achieving, and feel part of a learning community. The way our students feel, particularly in Korea, is very important.

I want to take a teaching approach which encapsulates all these aspects of language, learning, language learning, and the learner. Only then can I begin to think about the teacher, the classroom and my teaching. I think the teacher needs to reflect on what language - by my previous definition - is and how it affects their role. By this I mean that teachers should be in every sense a *real* and *whole* person (more than just a teacher in the traditional sense): someone who expresses their opinions and feelings, and makes mistakes along the way. The social status between teacher and student contributes to particular classroom language and its artificiality and limitations. If left unchecked, this power imbalance amplifies aforementioned student reticence. I want to see empowered students who make decisions, focus on each others' self-assessed learning gaps, and tell me what to do! The discourse of the classroom has its own nature, and it is important students know how to ask for clarifications, how to iron out misunderstandings, and can use appropriate language to engage and maneuver within this environment. I've also come to see the importance of mitigating the sterile nature and bland appearance of the classroom, and its often limiting, rather than conducive affects towards learning English. I want my classroom to be a place of rich contexts for practicing interaction, which encourages risk, imagination and expression. Korean students need life-like experiences using English, involving the negotiation of meaning, and meaningful input resulting in tangible outcomes. This means creating opportunities for episodic and procedural memories for students in English, and moving away from rote memorization and drilling, and fact-based semantic memories. However, it's always hardest to see what's not there, than what is - and I think it is beyond the classroom where I see the biggest opportunities to help students. I think Korean students need to be exposing

themselves to far greater quantities and quality of input. This means insisting students have graded reading and graded listening instilled as a regular habit.

Moving into my thesis semester, my experience thus far on the MA TESOL has led me towards focusing my understanding of how best to help Korean students. I've come to be interested in moving away from assessment-based, written-form-based, and academic language. I'm interested in the true nature of language, and for me this means how informal, casual conversation actually transpires. Interactional language, conversation skills and strategies, the pragmatics of spoken interaction, and the skill of listening, all appear to be underrepresented in mainstream English language teaching. I'm interested in how best to make the often unseen nature of oral communication more overt and obvious to students. Hence, my thesis topic is centered around investigating a mix of implicit and explicit ways of presenting how English speakers actually interact with each other. I'm interested in using audio-visual technology as a form of graded, narrow listening, which would constitute the vehicle for potentially vastly increasing the amount of available input to Korean students beyond the classroom.

As I reach the end of my 4 taught semesters, I finally feel like I have a direction and know where I'm headed, albeit having hardly taken a step. The Sookmyung MA TESOL has given me this direction and helped me to become a more independent learner, and more resourceful. I know what I want to know more about, how to find out, and what to do next. I have confidence in what I've learned so far and how I'm applying it in my teaching. But I also see how much room there is for improvement. The breadth and depth of the course covers many aspects of TESOL, from many perspectives and from many angles. The key has been exposing myself to so many different ideas, and taking a step back and merging them to see the different ways they overlap, connect and interrelate. Learning, language, language learning, the learner, the teacher, teaching, the classroom, and technology. I now better appreciate and understand the importance of each, how each affects the other, and how my students need to know this even more than I do. Just as teachers study the contents of an MA TESOL, students would do well to cover a course of similar content: an *MA LESOL, Learning English as a Second or Other Language*. This would elevate learners and teachers to a shared level of mutual understanding. Students need to *know* that they are the driver, and the teacher the driving instructor. When people learn to drive, they learn both the theory and the practice. The Sookmyung MA TESOL has helped me realize this, and become better prepared to keep my feet by the pedals, and let my students take the wheel.