

Reflection on Conversation Partner Volunteer Activity

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Abstract

This is a reflection on Conversation Partner volunteer activity at the Academic English Program (AEP) INTO CSU. It was meaningful to experience different cultures through different students. This paper includes what I learned from the activity in terms of AEP learners' language usages and AEP instructors' useful teaching skills. Additionally, my view about World English and the stories of new friends whom I met during the Conversation Partner activity are provided.

Key words: culture, language usages, World English, accent, teaching skills

Reflection on Conversation Partner Activity

I volunteered in the Conversation Partner activity at the AEP every Thursday from Aug. 30 to Sep. 27. It was a great experience to meet new people with different cultures and to share some ideas on current issues with them. It gave me a chance to develop myself as an EFL teacher in that I could observe the language usages of EFL learners from different countries. These observations were useful to understand EFL learner's language development, and to learn teaching techniques to get students motivated to take part in speaking activities from the instructor. In addition, I was proud of myself because I helped the EFL learners with their speaking improvement through facilitating as a conversation partner.

The class I was involved in had twelve students, five female and seven male. Three students were from Saudi Arabia, three from China, one from Qatar, two from Kuwait, one from Oman, and two from Japan. The students' level was Intermediate.

Experience Different Cultures from Different Students

It is always wonderful to meet new friends with different cultures. When I met the students once a week, they told me exciting stories about themselves, their families, friends and countries. The AEP seemed to be the place where never-ending interesting and funny things happened. Their personal stories were valuable not just because they were interesting, but also because they opened the window toward the world I had never experienced.

Majid from Saudi Arabia had a big family of eight brothers and four sisters. I assumed that his father might have two or three wives, but I didn't ask him about it because I was afraid that the question about his mother(s) might have offended him.

In contrast, *Xiaoxiao* from China was an only child. According to him, the Chinese government has a "one child policy" and it is forbidden to have more than one child in each

family. If some parents have more than one child, they have to pay a fine for each additional child. I do not agree with the idea that a government has control of the rights of individuals about birth, however, I couldn't express my opinion in front of him. It was interesting to see the difference in families between two countries.

Aza from Oman had difficulty studying because she had to do house chores and take care of her baby. Whenever I saw women from Arabic countries, I was interested in their outfit. *Aza* always wore Arabic traditional clothing from head to toe. She told me that women have to cover up their bodies, have to wear a *hijab* (head scarf), and sometimes have to hide their faces when they go out in public or when they stay with men who are not family or relatives. When they are at home, however, they don't need to do that. While listening to *Aza's* story, it popped into my head that *Al-Batul* hid her face as soon as *Junyoung* came into the classroom.

It seems that the topic of eating makes us happy regardless of nationality. We had fun talking about each country's traditional food and table manners. *Ibrahim* told me that they eat food without using utensils in Saudi Arabia and they must use only their right hand. Then, interesting questions continued: How do you eat hot food with your hand? What happens if they eat with their left hand? What about left-handed person, etc.?

The four girls from Asia had something in common in that they liked shopping, cooking and Korea. They have been to Korea and enjoyed Korean food and Korean entertainers. They seemed to know much more about Korean movies, TV dramas and singers than me. *Penny* from China showed me her cell phone with *Top* (a Korean popular singer) on her wall paper.

I realized that the status of Korea is getting higher thanks to the entertainment business. While watching *Psy* (a Korean pop singer who sings "Gangman Style" and has been ranked the second on Billboard charts for many weeks) on CNN and NBC, I realized the power of

entertainment again to introduce Korean culture to a wider audience in the world, which might be mightier than political or military power. Who could imagine that *Noam Chomsky* says, “I’m Chomsky style.” in a parody music video of “Gangnam Style” made by MIT students?

Language Usages

It was another pleasure to observe the EFL learners’ English usages from the different countries while I was taking part in the Conversation Partner activity. It was valuable to experience English as World English which might not be possessed only by American or British people anymore. In other words, it was an interesting experience to have a chance to listen to Arabic English, Chinese English and Japanese English at the AEP. I can’t overgeneralize their English pattern based on the limited data, however, I found out there was something common according to their nationalities.

First, the Arabic EFL learners were relatively fluent speakers compared to the Asian EFL learners. It seemed that Arabic learners were not afraid of making mistakes while they were speaking. In contrast, Asian learners seemed to be more cautious when they spoke out. Another conversation partner, *Rebecca* agreed with my opinion. She told me that Arabic learners tended to dominate the conversation depriving the chance to speak from Asian students. Therefore, she had to stop Arabic students’ talking many times to give Asian students a chance to speak out. However, I think that not having fear of making a mistake is the best condition to be a fluent speaker from the language learner’s viewpoint.

Second, students from the same country showed their own accent which might represent their mother language. Even though I didn’t know about Arabic, Chinese and Japanese, I figured out their own accent according to their native language. To be specific, Chinese and Japanese learners showed totally different accents though they were from Asia. Their different accents did

not matter in communicating with me, though I felt it was a little harder to communicate with Arabic learners. Especially, I felt it most difficult to communicate with *Meshal* from Saudi Arabia. While we were talking with each other, we had to repeat “Excuse me” so many times for successful communication. I still wonder what language factors played as an obstacle between us.

Lastly, the Asian students spoke English relatively accurately compared to the Arabic students. I found many grammatical errors from the Arabic learners such as S-V agreement or interrogative. For example, I often realized that the Arabic learners said, “Does she lives in Fort Collins?” “Does he a singer?” “How many sisters are you have?” “Do you studying to be a teacher?” “When you come to Fort Collins?” “She have five children.”

In contrast, the Asian learners tried to speak accurate English though they spoke a little slowly. I felt that the difference was evident from observing their English. I assumed that the English curriculum of Asian countries tended to focus on more accuracy than fluency based on the grammar translation method, and judging from my learning experience during my school days. For the moment, I asked myself which one was better, teaching English focusing on fluency or teaching English focusing on accuracy. Following the trend of communicative teaching, we are likely to treat teaching grammar as old-fashioned and inefficient. While taking part in the Conversation Partner activity, I think that good language use is based on accuracy and fluency. In other words, we need to teach students how to use appropriate expressions in an appropriate way.

Useful Teaching Skills

Though I volunteered as a conversation partner, I got to learn many useful teaching skills from the instructor, which will be useful and beneficial to improve my teaching skills when I go back to Korea. It was another valuable experience to me in that I could develop myself as an EFL

teacher. The instructor used timely activities according to the objectives of each lesson.

In the first week, she designed an activity to break the ice between conversation partners and the students. She let everybody stand in a circle, introduce themselves and introduce all the previous people. In other words, the last student should introduce all the people in the room. Though it seemed a daunting task to the last people, it was a great idea for everybody to listen to what other people were saying.

Second, she used “Find Someone Who...” activity. The students went around the room asking the classmates and conversation partners the given questions: (1) is studying to be a teacher (2) gets up before 6 am every day and (3) hates winter and snow, etc. She emphasized that the students should ask questions and answer with a full sentence. She intentionally didn't present a perfect interrogative sentence, rather, she wanted for the students to make a complete question sentence. She didn't forget to give a sample question to the students to help their understanding. To be specific, in the case of (1) *is studying to be a teacher*, the students were asked to speak, “Are you studying to be a teacher?”

Third, the teacher designed a well-organized lesson about cultural differences about eating. The first activity was to discuss the “Prelistening Questions” on page 102 in the *Interactions* textbook. There was a picture of a restaurant on page 102 in the textbook and a foreign customer was ordering food from the American waitress in the picture. Unfortunately, there seemed to be miscommunication between them. The students and conversation partners talked about the picture guessing the possible situations in this process.

The second activity was to talk about each country's food. We talked about what a typical breakfast/lunch/dinner is, what time people eat, and where they have this meal? The third activity was about table manners: What is considered polite or good behavior when sitting at the

dinner table in each country? Do you actually sit at a table or on the floor? What is considered to be impolite, rude, or bad behavior? The students seemed to be proud of their eating culture when they introduce their typical food and eating customs. I think the students improved their communicative skills and got to learn about the different cultures about eating thanks to the instructor's lesson plan focused on cultures.

Fourth, she designed another "Find Someone Who..." activity focused on present perfect interrogative. To be specific, the question is "Have you ever been to ___?". If the answer is yes, write that person's name, and then ask extension questions such as "What did you do there?" There were written the names of many cities such as *Cairo, New York, London, or Paris*, etc. on the activity paper. The activity "Find Someone Who..." seems to be very easy and quick to construct based on the objectives of the lesson. The instructor seemed to take advantage of this activity fully.

Fifth, the instructor liked to design a group discussion. One of the interesting topics was to plan a spring break vacation working in groups. She presented the suggestions for the places and activities and the students had to decide on an actual place and specific activities, and tell how they would get there. This activity was designed to let the students prepare for their final presentation.

Instead of letting them tell about their vacation plan freely, she presented the following suggestions to prompt the students' speaking: type of place (the mountains, the beach, a big city, a small town, a resort, the jungle, an out-of-the-way hotel or resort) and activities (sports-walking, bicycling, boating, etc. shopping, sightseeing-museum, historic monuments, or natural wonders. relaxing, socializing-dancing or visiting friends, camping). I think those suggestions might have facilitated the students' speaking.

Sixth, the instructor wanted the conversation partners to help each student to prepare their final presentation about a trip. The presentation was made up of three parts: (1) destination (Where did you go? What did you go there? Information about this place-What direction is it from Colorado? What city/state/country is it in? Other information such as population, weather and other interesting facts) (2) travel plans (How did you get there? When did you arrive? Who did you travel with? Where did you stay? How expensive was the trip?) and (3) activities during the trip. This process was linked tightly with the previous one which I mentioned in the previous passage. Because we already talked about a similar topic the previous week, what we had to do was elaborate on their presentation and share some feedback about each student's presentation.

Finally, I'd like to mention the instructor's personality as an EFL teacher, which is actually the most impressive to me. She is always smiling and she always tries to give compliments to students with positive feedback words: *good job, excellent, amazing, excellent or great*. I know a teacher's personality might be much more important than a teacher's knowledge or teaching skills in some ways. To be honest, I do not often compliment anyone in public. When I come back to Korea, I would like to be a teacher who has a bright smile on my face, and try to see the positive sides of students.

World English

As the world is getting globalized, English is used internationally as a Lingua Franca around the world. What I want to say is that English is not occupied only by the Inner Circle such as America or U.K any more. Who knows that Chinese English or Arabic English might be a dominant World English with a large number of the language users? Considering the fact that English is not limited to American or British English any more, we need to change the perceptions about non-native English teachers.

Unfortunately, I hardly see non-native instructors or international students having an internship at the AEP. I was told that it is hard for international students to have an internship at the AEP if they don't have native-like proficiency. If they don't have enough English proficiency to teach English, it makes sense that the AEP do not allow international students to have an internship. Having Korean or Arabic accents, however, should not be a reason not to hire non-native instructors or not to give an internship opportunity to international students.

My New Friends

There were four conversation partners in the class I was assigned to. One of the conversation partners was *Rebecca*. She volunteered for this activity to help international students and she used to work at the AEP as an instructor. I think that I was lucky to meet *Rebecca* there because I learned many things from *Rebecca* as well as the instructor. *Rebecca* is an open-minded friend toward the different culture and likes to listen to other people's story. She knows about the difficulties of the international students which they might be faced with in a whole different country.

Therefore, she holds a tea party for international students at her place every Saturday and I was invited to her house. Her apartment was another small world where people with different cultures got together. There were international undergraduates, graduates at CSU and international students at AEP as well as native friends. I spent a valuable time there with new people. I befriended some of them as well as *Rebecca* and keep in touch with them while dining together and relaxing.

Another special friend, *Cristina* had lived in Korea for a few years and she loves Korean people and Korean culture. When I made some special Korean food, I invited her to my apartment. When I saw her trying to say something in Korean, I realized that learning a foreign

language is one of the hardest works we can. At the same time, I realized that knowing a language is not only a tool to learn another culture, but also a tool to introduce my culture.

Rebecca is in her early 30s and Cristina is in her early 20s and an undergraduate student at CSU. Though they are 10 ~ 20 years younger than me, we have become friends. The age gap does not matter when we befriends, which I could hardly imagine in Korea. Without taking part in the Conversation Partner activity, I could not have met these precious friends. It is an unexpected present from the Conversation Partner activity, but one of the most valuable experiences to me.