

Active Learning: The Key to Mastering English

Lauren Hansen(산자평 학원)

In my years of working with teens, I have noticed a fundamental shift in attitude and learning style which begins at age 12 or 13. In the process of maturing, students tend to lose the confidence and spontaneity of youth. Suddenly, the same student who once sang songs with his teachers is shy, more self-conscious. Afraid to seem 'un-cool,' the teenager will wait to see how others behave, and act accordingly. Worse yet, he or she rarely asks questions of the teacher, for fear of seeming stupid. All of a sudden, being accepted is more important than understanding the day's lesson.

The problem is, of course, that learning English requires intense teacher-student interaction. Regardless of a student's age, he or she will not gain true fluency without questions, in-class comments and, yes, plenty of mistakes.

In the classroom, I try to bridge this gap by teach critical thinking and analytical skills in tandem with more traditional 'English' skills like grammar and pronunciation. After all, what good is knowing a list of vocabulary words if a student has nothing interesting or important to say with them? Language, after all, is about communicating ideas - my job, then, is to help students formulate their own ideas and enable them to express themselves with the greatest accuracy and fluency possible.

I propose that students become more active learners. Rather than just read and absorb information, I encourage my students to engage texts: to put the lessons into the context of their own lives and respond to the material with their own thoughts and opinions.

Parents can also use these methods at home to promote English learning. A great way to boost critical reading and writing skills is with an online reading journal. Once or twice a week, have your child log on to one of the websites listed here, and let them browse to a news article that catches their attention. This doesn't have to be boring or overly academic; it just has to be a serious news about science or current world events. Then, ask them to print the article, and on the back of the paper, write a short summary as well as an editorial-style piece on the topic. Again, the goal here is to practice 'simple' English: fancy vocabulary and complicated grammar structures are less important than clear organization and consistent logic.

With this exercise, reading and writing skills are improved simultaneously. However, one of the greatest deficiencies among language students - and particularly Korean students - is speaking skills. The problem, though, isn't vocabulary or intonation; rather, most students lack the confidence to express their own opinions. To boost students' confidence, I have them debate silly, almost comical topics, and I try to keep conversations light-hearted.

This technique works at home, too. I have had students implement 'English night' once a week, where the family (or just the children, if the parents are not comfortable in English) only speak English to each other. Also, parents can follow up with their children's on-line reading assignments, asking what the child read and what they thought of that topic. No matter what strategy is employed, the goal is to bring teens 'out of their shell:' to tell them less and ask them more. If students are used to expressing their own ideas and opinions at home, it becomes much easier to do the same in school.

Finally, in school and at home, learning English should be enjoyable. Remember, the goal isn't to punish you child. Good teachers seek out a child's personal preferences - be it sports, sci-fi or Greek mythology - and creates lessons that are interesting and relevant to the child. After all, students learn best when they can personally engage with the material and have the confidence to say/write/express their own views on the subject.



구베이에서 밀지 않지만 찾기가 쉽지 않은 신지평학원에서 TOEFL과 SAT 명강사인 로렌 선생과 인터뷰를 시작하면서, 자신의 역할은 학생들이 자신의 생각을 체계화해 가능한한 정확하고 유창하게 표현하도록 돕는 것이라는 그의 말에 신선한 충격을 받았다. 통상적으로 영어선생은 학생들의 영어구사력을 향상시키는 데 초점을 맞추기 때문이다.

실제로 영어는 우리의 모국어가 아니기 때문에 한국학생들은 영어공부를 언어학습으로만 생각하는 경향이 있다. 하지만 로렌 선생은 영어도 언어이기 때문에 단순히 말하고 듣기 능력뿐만이 아니라 논리적으로 읽고 쓸 수 있는 능력 함양이 더 중요하다고 강조한다.

로렌 선생은 수업에서 다른 선생들의 전통적 수업방식인 문법문제 풀이나 발음훈련 대신에 비판적 사고와 분석력 향상에 초점을 맞춘다. 지당하신 말씀이나 외국어인 영어를 배워야 하는 한국학생들의 수준을 너무 높게 평가하는 것이 아닌가 하는 의구심이 들었다. 하지만 신지평학원의 강과가 주로 토풀이나 SAT 수업임을 감안하면 일리가 있을 것 같다.

학생들은 수업시간에 보다 능동적인 학습자가 될 수 있다고 강조하는 로렌 선생은 학생들에게 단순히 교재를 읽고 정보를 주입하는 것이 아니라, 교재에 학생들이 스스로 몰입하도록 유도한다. 수업내용을 학생들 자신의 삶에 대입하여 경험에서 우러난 자신의 생각과 의견을 논리적으로 표현하도록 후려시킨다.

로렌 선생은 이런 방식을 집에서 학부모들도 사용하길 권한다. 아울러서 학생들의 비판적 독해와 논술 능력을 향상시키는 좋은 방법 중 하나가 인터넷에서 저널을 읽는 것이라고 하며 다음과 같은 인터넷 주소를 추천해 주었다.

● Useful websites:

kids.nationalgeographic.com (ages 5-12)

dsc.discovery.com (ages 5-12)

<http://edition.cnn.com/studentnews/> (12-18)

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/worldservice/learningenglish/> (15-adult)

● For more mature/SAT style reading, I suggest entries from

www.salon.com

www.slate.com