

Milestones of a life in Teaching

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Before I became a teacher, I used to work at a Japanese IT company as an administrative staff. Although I graduated from a two-year college in Nagoya with an English degree, my English wasn't up to business level. I never dreamed that I might use English at work after I entered a two-year college program. I chose to pour my energy into socializing instead of learning English. Although I was not planning to become an English teacher, with my mother's strong encouragement, I pursued and attained an English teacher's license so I could teach at a junior high school.

After working for a company for over two years, during my third year in the company, I realized that I would not be able to continue working as an administrator any more. I became bored with the routine job tasks. I consulted with my boss but it seemed that there were no creative options. I was in strong need for a career change. When I thought about what area I would like to pursue next in my career, I remembered the enjoyment I felt while learning English during my junior high school and high school years. I decided to pursue a career that involves English in some way although I was not sure which specific career path I would like to pursue. I quit my job after working for four years and entered Minnesota State University in Akita to strongly prepare myself for studying at a university in the United States.

My field of study for my undergraduate degree was Journalism; however, I noticed that my English was not fluent enough to work as a journalist in America. Moreover, I wanted to continue studying in America, so I decided to work on an MA in TESOL. The reason why I chose this major was because one of my

Japanese friends and other good friends of mine happened to be in the same course and they all seemed to enjoy their field of study. In addition, there was a Teaching Assistant opportunity in the TESOL program to teach undergraduate ESL courses for international students. Most of the college ESL students were highly motivated because they were hoping to start their major area of study as soon as possible. Three semesters of taking college ESL courses and one summer of intensive English teaching courses made me determined to teach English in higher education.

The first teaching English job I landed was at a public junior high school. I was assigned to teach the 7th and 9th graders. My supervisor was an experienced English teacher. He used the communicative teaching method while teaching his courses. During my training period, he let me join his classes and had me act a part of a skit with him to demonstrate grammar points in the unit. I was imagining public junior school and high school English classes would be highly teacher-centered employing grammar translation methods, so it was an eye-opening experience for me to join his classes. Since I was determined to teach at a university, I was thinking this job would be just temporary. However, he inspired me and showed me that English teaching at junior high school could be interesting. I tried to make my classes as interactive as possible and students seemed to like my style. I ended up teaching at two different junior high schools for two years. I learned that communicating with students outside of the classroom helps my teaching greatly in terms of learning what they were interested in and what kind of struggles they were facing in their current life. I realized that building a good relationship with students inside and outside of the class is one of the key elements of good teaching and learning.

My ultimate career goal was to teach academic English in a higher education setting, so I shifted my teaching career to teaching

adult learners. I started working at AEON, a private English language institute, in Nagoya. There, I taught private and group conversation classes and TOEIC prep courses. I worked there for one and half years. My students were a couple of high school students and many adults with jobs or retired adults. There were many opportunities to interact with them outside of the classroom as well. Again, building a good relationship with students helped me and my students felt less nervous in class and enhanced their learning. However, I also faced a challenge of keeping students motivated in learning English even though they did not see immediate progress in the short term.

In 2012, I finally got a job at a university. Although I only had an MA in TESOL and two years of junior high school teaching as well as one and a half years of private English language institution, I was employed as a contract full-time English teacher. My responsibilities were to teach 5 mandatory English for General Purpose (EGP) reading and conversation classes and 1 elective communication course, as well as help manage a constructive English learning environment for foreign language learning. In general English courses, I struggled with classroom management. In the classroom with many students considered to be a large size class, I experienced seeing low motivation. In the junior high school and English language school, the number of students in one class was up to 15 students. At the university, a reading class contained close to 30 students. I constantly wondered and continue to think about how it is possible to raise students' motivation to learn English.

One course I taught for my first five years in the university was always enjoyable. It was an elective English course for any major of the college students. The students who took the course were only those who truly wanted to improve their communication and English skills. The class was called Practical English and I taught the class in English only. I realized that Japanese university students

lack speaking and listening skills since they generally lack opportunities to use English. I constantly pushed them to work in pairs and groups, and gave them chances to talk in English and to learn about their classmates. In the English communication course, the key to motivate students to keep talking is to have them feel the joy of understanding and being understood by others. Although all of the students in the class were Japanese, they tried to speak English as much as possible and convey their message. Listening to students' lively discussion and seeing students excited to learn about their classmates made me realize my passion for guiding students to communicate in English.

Looking back on my higher education in the US, I remembered enjoying discussions with my classmates, figuring out the answers for questions and learning from my classmates. Unconsciously, I was willing to provide my students with a similar experience because most of them did not experience this kind of learning style for learning English. From sharing their opinions and experiences and comparing them with classmates, they could expand their world view. I would like to continue teaching not only English, but all classes employing this teaching method. Students start paying attention when the focus is on them, not on the teacher.