Only Connect: Laughter as Alliance

Ms. Lorraine M. Somers
Instructor, Language Center

I have one standard by which I measure the success of each English conversation class: laughter. This is not to say that I see myself as a performer or entertainer; it simply means that if students are laughing, I know that they are involved. Pioneering research into the workings of the brain, into how children, in particular, learn, shows that "eclataneous, worksheet, and note memorization" do not enhance learning, not in quality, value, or appeal. Rather, this method of learning stuifides, dulls the mind by its boring routine. Instead of using these traditional methods, educators need, says Lynnell Hancock, to pay greater attention to students' emotional connections to subjects, to give them "hands-on" materials, drama, and project work. As Robert Sylvester puts it, "knowledge is retained longer if intellectual connect not only aurally but emotionally and physically to the materials." Sitting in a classroom memorizing the meaning of words and the rules of grammar as a way of learning the English language offers no connection with the subject. If, however, there's laughter in the classroom, I'm confident there's an emotional connection.

Laughter, even though it is only one of a range of responses that may arise from emotional or physical connection with learning the English language, is the most common response, the one that overtly expresses student involvement whether it be an expression of amusement, delight, gratification, or interest. Choices available for language learning are those that involve physical connection with the subject and elicit emotional response. If the situation permits preparing a meal or planning for, and taking a hike are activities that involve physical interaction with material things or nature and elicit responses from any or all of the faculties of perception or feeling. Simply asking the students outside to observe nature in their own backyard, especially during the Korean spring, leads to all manner of diverse conversation as students are readily affected by the sights, sounds, and smells of the world around them. Whether observing the multitude of flowers, the insects attracted to them or moving through the grass, the various species of trees, the surrounding mountains, or the sky, I encourage students to use their optic sense to describe; for instance, the colors of the distant mountains, the different shades of green within close range, or the shape of the clouds; their aural sense to describe (and then imitate) the sound of birds or insects; their olfactory sense to describe the smell of flowers or, say, pine needles; their tactical sense to describe how a pebble or the bark of a tree feels; their oral sense to taste, depending on the season, nature's kitchen. At the Korean markets, I can buy enormous snails, which, when taken to class, elicits animated connection with the subject as students describe its slithering trail, its color, its "shelly" shell, its movement, and its "ude" when touched. As a "subject" this creature provides limitless development as a point of departure for related discussion. As a "discovery learning" task, it develops skills of observation and expression and, like the other activities described here that involve physical and emotional connection, always elicits laughter.

Laughter is a by-product of the process of learning the English language, secondary to the process itself, but of primary importance when assessing the involvement of students. Delight in my students' efforts is one way of showing them my appreciation and approval; in turn, they are delighted with themselves. Laughter is the gift we give each other. More importantly, it empowers students to risk expressing themselves spontaneously and creatively, the two things I want to encourage if students are to become fluent in the language. I will give but one example of a classroom task that elicited laughter because of its "creative" and imaginative use of the language to express meaning. When asked to find connections between the words "love" and "garbage dump," students responded with:

In life, like a garbage dump, there is honest love.
When a man loves a woman, his mind is like a garbage dump.
Who has fallen in love with me has fallen in a garbage dump.
Even the love near a garbage dump is innocent.
We don't love a garbage dump.

In closing I would like to say that, like students I have taught in China and in Changwon, Korea, KAIST students have been unduly kind, have shown me open-hearted hospitality or, in the smallest of gestures (a greeting, a smile), acceptance. From daily contact with them, I see that they are students, who do not study with singular intent and purpose but who also express a wit and humor that compliments their determination and drive. When I leave Korea, it will be the students that I praise in Canada; they are the ultimate reason I live and work abroad.

All references are from the following articles:

The English Writing Class in the Language Center

Hello KAIST ladies and gentlemen! My name is Young-Gu Ju. I am 25 years old and working in the Microphotonics Laboratory in the Department of Physics. It's a great pleasure to contribute an article to the student newspaper and introduce the English Writing Course to you. This course was offered this semester for the first time, and I am one of many students taking the course to improve their English. When I heard that the English Writing Course for graduate students would open in our Language Center, I was so excited because I was looking for that kind of assistance to help me correct my terrible English sentences. I think that most KAIST students whose motto is "Education for the World, Research for the Future" have the same problem with writing English as I have. When we have to write a technical paper for an international academic journal or even request the quotation of a price for scientific instruments, we suddenly become depressed. In my case, I had difficulty writing a paper in English because, despite a great deal of thought and effort, I was still not sure that what I was trying to express in the paper could be understood by other researchers. To solve these problems, I decided to improve my English writing skills by taking the English Writing Class.

At first, I expected that I would learn grammar and short sentences, the formal followed by most EFL (English as a Foreign Language) textbooks written by Koreans. However, the course begins by emphasizing the writer-reader connection, that is, how communication between the author and the audience occurs and then deals with methods that effectively achieve this goal. Next, we progressed to paragraph organization. Like constructing a building, we learned how to construct a paragraph by using pre-writing techniques and topic sentences outlining controlling ideas and, by adhering to the principles of unity and coherence, "built" the