Commander and serviceman – the story of Kim

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Abstract

This is the story of Kim, a year one higher diploma student in a university in Hong Kong who failed his matriculation English examination last year. He wanted to enter a degree programme, so he had to retake that examination, but his failure last year and dislike for the language made resitting the ‘extremely difficult’ examination stressful for him. After weeks of sleeplessness and indulgence in gambling, he sought help from the university’s one-to-one Writing Assistance Programme (WAP). With the help of WAP teachers, he began to develop learning strategies that he had never thought of before. As the examination approached, sleeplessness returned and nightmares haunted him. This time, he was determined to face it as a different man.

The story is told by the WAP co-ordinator, who held conferences with Kim numerous times. Taking data from Kim’s notes of his language learning experiences, written records of each writing conference, the co-ordinator’s written recollections and those of another WAP teacher, as well as informal correspondence between Kim and his teachers, this story reveals the struggles of a typical Hong Kong student and how he adopted new learning strategies with which he finally learned how to learn English.

Learning English is quite boring and frustrating. Unlike other subjects, hardly can I see any progression in short time, but it is very comforting when I see the progression. - Kim, a first-year higher diploma student

This paper tells the story of how a college student, who failed the Hong Kong Advanced Supplementary (AS) Level Use of English (UE) examination last year, was determined to pass it this year in order to go from a higher diploma programme to a degree programme that interests him. It describes the way he has learnt English since primary school, how he faced his failure last year, the process through which he re-found his direction in learning English after going to the Writing Assistance Programme (WAP) in his university, and how his language learning strategies changed throughout the year. The author of this paper is the co-ordinator of the WAP, who conferenced with the student over 25 times in the past year. The descriptive account also includes the
recollections of another WAP teacher who met with the student numerous times.

**Education system in Hong Kong, learning styles, motivation and strategies**

The education system in Hong Kong requires students to take a public examination, the Certificate Level Examination (HKCEE), in at least six subjects after five years of secondary education before they can be promoted to Form Six. Students must also take another set of public examinations, the Advanced Level Examination (HKAL), which includes the Advanced Supplementary (AS) Level Use of English (UE) examination and a Chinese examination, in order to apply for university. Statistics published by the Hong Kong Examinations Authority (2002) show that in 2001, out of 34,602 students who took the HKCEE English examination (Syllabus B), 66% passed; and 79.8% of the 21,641 candidates who sat the AS level UE examination received an E grade or above. According to a local newspaper, *Apple Daily*, the passing percentage in 2002 was very similar to that in 2001. In the last two years, 12.6% of all candidates managed to get a C grade or above in the UE examination, while only 0.9% received an A grade (*Apple Daily*, 5 July 2002).

The teaching in Hong Kong secondary schools follows the public examination syllabuses closely and most teachers see their job as getting as many students as possible to pass those examinations. For instance, instead of teaching creative writing skills or exploring reading-writing connections, many secondary teachers simply ask their students to write composition after composition based on previous years’ examination topics. Teachers then spend a lot of their non-teaching hours marking those compositions, correcting every grammatical error, often de-emphasizing higher order concerns, such as generation of content, development of paragraphs and coherence of ideas. As a result of such drilling and practising for examinations, many students feel that grammatical accuracy is the most important aspect of language learning. As Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) observe, Chinese learners are often detail- and precision-oriented. Koch and Terrell (1991) have also found that some students feel anxious if not all of their mistakes are corrected. Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) further discovered that Chinese learners prefer a concrete-sequential learning style, using strategies like memorization and thinking in a sequential, linear manner.

A consequence of such intense examination-oriented education in English language learning is that English lessons, especially those given by
local teachers, are found to be teacher-centred and book-centred, producing a passive learning environment for the students (Liu and Littlewood, 1997). This passivity in students has caused frustration in teachers, especially expatriate teachers (Flowerdew and Miller, 1995), and researchers have given different reasons to explain this reticence. While Flowerdew and Miller infer from their survey results that Hong Kong students tend to adopt a “negative attitude to participation” (1995: 358), a survey by Jin and Cortazzi (1993) shows that Chinese students are passive in choosing research topics because they want to know first of all what topics the lecturers or department are interested in. Scollon and Scollon (1994) state that students may hesitate to ask questions because their Confucian values tell them that questioning means that the teacher has not taught well. Song (1995), who taught East Asian students in the US, supports this concept of culture-induced passivity. He believes that his students’ unease and anxiety are largely caused by a culture and previous education experience that views standing out to be the same as expressing public disagreement. Liu and Littlewood (1997), however, assert that East Asian students’ reticence may be caused less by negative attitudes or adherence to Confucian maxims than by their lack of confidence and linguistic competence. Their survey shows that Hong Kong students welcome the chance to learn English actively in school. After all, Hong Kong people fully understand the importance of learning English well through practice and see English as a world language. As McGurn (1996: 40) puts it, English is “Asia’s unifying tongue and its language of opportunity”. Many students, therefore, welcome opportunities to practise English and to receive feedback on their learning progress.

Although students in Hong Kong recognize the importance of learning English well, many of them are demotivated by the ‘chalk and talk’, ‘book and rote’ teaching and learning styles. When assessed in terms of Gardner’s socio-educational model (1982) in which motivation is divided into two basic types, integrative and instrumental, Hong Kong students are more the latter than the former (Green, 1993; Lai, 1996; Tauroza, 1997). Many of them see getting a minimum passing grade in English examinations as a stepping stone to being promoted to a higher form, getting into university or graduating from one. Using Lepper’s classification of motivation (1988), many Hong Kong learners have been identified as extrinsically motivated (Noakes, 2001) as they learn English not for enjoyment but for pragmatic reasons. Some researchers have even found that the tertiary education environment in Hong Kong endorses learning by extrinsic motivation (Moneta and Siu, 2001).

In Gardner’s model (1982), motivation is composed of three elements: effort, desire and affect. Since effort refers to the time spent and methods used
to study the language, motivation is then directly related to language learning strategies (LS). A number of scholars have attempted to define learning strategies. Tarone (1983: 67) defines them as “an attempt to develop linguistic and sociolinguistic competence in the target language – to incorporate these into one’s interlanguage competence”, and Rubin (1987: 22) defines them as “strategies which contribute to the development of the language system which the learner constructs and affect learning directly”. Mayer (1988: 11) identifies LS as “behaviours of a learner that are intended to influence how the learner processes information”, whereas in O’Malley and Chamot (1990: 1) they are defined as “the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information”. In her book on LS, Oxford (1990: 18-21) provides an overview of three types of social LS: asking questions (for clarification or for correction), cooperating with others (including peers and teachers) and empathizing with others. Putting this in the context of Hong Kong, Liu and Littlewood (1997) suggest that, since Hong Kong students have to cope with much anxiety in language learning, their social LS are also shaped by emotional and attitudinal factors. Although research suggests that students can be trained to use LS to help them learn more effectively (Lessard-Clouston, 1997), Liu & Littlewood (1997) caution that Hong Kong students need to be guided slowly from their usual passive mode of learning. One way to help students become more aware of their LS is by using ‘guided reflection’ (Nunan, 1996: 36), where students are asked to keep a journal in which they complete sentences like “This week I learned…, I used my English in these places…, My learning and practising plans for the next week are…””. This method of self-directed learning involves the students’ on-going evaluation of the LS that they have employed.

Data sources

Information contained in the descriptive accounts in this article comes from the student’s written notes of his language learning experiences and strategies, the teachers’ written records of what was done each time they met with the student, the teachers’ written recollections of teaching this student, the student and teachers’ conversations as well as email correspondence.

Before we begin the story, it is necessary first of all to explain the Writing Assistance Programme where the student and teachers met.

Writing Assistance Programme

The WAP is modelled on the Writing Centres of North American universities. It offers one-to-one consultation in English to all students
enrolled in UGC-funded degree and higher diploma programmes on their writing needs. In the past few years, most of the students coming to the WAP were those in their final year writing dissertation or job applications, as well as students in the first year having trouble with writing academic essays. There are no restrictions as to the type of writing to be discussed in a WAP session. Students can bring in whatever writing they are working on, whether academic or personal; or if they are at the brainstorming stage, they can simply bring the topic and their notes. To avoid being taken as a proofreading service, the WAP specifies that it does not correct work for students, but instead provides reader feedback on different aspects of the writing. The WAP is open at least eight hours every day and there is a minimum of one teacher on duty each hour. There are 23 teachers of different nationalities and from different educational backgrounds teaching on the programme. Students make appointments beforehand to see a teacher, since the WAP is usually full and drop-in appointment success rates are very low.

Before 2002, each consultation was 30 minutes long but since January 2002 consultation time has been extended to an hour. After a student has finished one conference, he/she can book the next one. In the second semester, when more teaching resources are available and demands from students are stronger, the WAP runs on a flexible hour system as well as the usual fixed hour system. That is, in addition to having at least one teacher on duty every hour, there are teachers that students can book to see as long as the teachers are available at the hours that the students have chosen. This flexible hour system is very popular with students as it makes it possible for them to come at a convenient time. Since the WAP is in great demand, there is a penalty for those who are late or fail to attend. If a student is late by more than 5 minutes, does not show up or does not cancel the appointment one working-day in advance, his/her name will be recorded. When a name is recorded twice, that student cannot use the service for the rest of that semester. This penalty method has been very effective and students have shown up on time, or ahead of time, to ensure that they can continue to get help from the WAP. Close to the WAP area is a Resource Room where there are course books, reference materials, language exercises, magazines, novels and dictionaries that WAP students can read. There is also a waiting area just outside the WAP area where students can read the *South China Morning Post*.

**Kim – before September 2001**

Kim is a young Chinese male student in his early twenties. He grew up in Hong Kong and was never really interested in learning English. This is how he recalled learning English in primary school:
When I was young, I only did what I had to do in learning English, doing homework, passing examination, and so on.

His grades were ‘so-so’ and he was promoted to secondary school, where the teachers put great emphasis on grammar.

At junior secondary level, lots of English lessons were grammar teaching hence I thought that grammar is the integral part in English and hence always revised grammar part.

Instead of cultivating an interest in language learning, that education environment took all the joy out of learning a foreign language. It also instilled the concept in Kim that other skills such as reading and listening did not relate to each other and were not important. The only important thing was learning dry, unreasonable, difficult-to-remember grammar rules out of context.

Learning English was equal to learning grammar for me.

Marginally passing his English examinations, he scraped into Form Four.

In senior secondary school, Kim realized that learning was equal to passing public examinations. He did not learn much in English lessons except more grammar that he could not fully understand nor successfully memorize. His teacher drilled him in the formats of the public examination papers and taught according to what was set in previous examinations. Kim was busy growing up, trying new things, learning other subjects and he did not bother spending time on English at all.

Apart from the time spent on classroom, I think that I spent less than 20 minutes a day in average.

Since most of the practice exercises for Form 4 or 5 students require around an hour to finish, spending less than 20 minutes per day meant that Kim did not complete a lot of his homework. Yet he still managed to get an E grade in the HKCEE English examination.

English language learning remained equally boring at matriculation level. It never became part of his life. He learned English just to pass the next public examination. He was not too worried as he thought he could manage to pass in the same way that he had managed to pass last time. He learned English “in a very passive and relaxed way” because he thought he “wouldn’t be the one in the 25% failed portion”. Surely, he thought he “was up to the standard to get a pass”, and that was all he needed. There were a lot of
promotions for magazines such as *Asiaweek* and *Time*, so he started subscribing to *Newsweek*, but still he did not spend much time on reading or on any aspect of language learning. The four skills remained distinct to him and integrating any of them posed great difficulty for him. That was why he had always found Section E of the UE examination problematic. That section requires candidates to read a number of short articles, letters or notices, select information and complete one slightly longer and two shorter pieces of writing. Kim would rather just read for grammar or just write using information that he already had in his head.

Each year, there is a period of around two months between the Advanced Level examinations and the announcement of examination results. Most students find a summer job, and Kim was no exception. The night before the examination results come out, many Hong Kong students like to gather together in a friend’s home and they usually play hard to forget their fears. Last year, the night before the public examination results were due to be announced, Kim went to a friend’s home and played mahjong. Kim recalled that he went there “to share my fears with my friends”, like the Chinese saying: “Afraid? Be afraid together.” He was not afraid of his English results, though. As mentioned above, he thought he would be lucky and could scrape by again. He thought that he did not do well in the Chinese writing examination and would fail it. So when his friends invited him to play for real money in the mahjong games, he went along, using gambling to make himself numb as a means of escape from facing the reality. As the night wore on, his friends, who were heavy gamblers, wanted more heavy betting on the mahjong and very soon Kim had lost a lot of money. He played until there was no money left in his wallet. That night, typhoon signal number 8 was hoisted, so he spent the whole night in “the smoky and noisy room”. He felt nothing about losing all his money, but once he left the mahjong table his head was full of guesses at his examination results. “I thought the result of tomorrow would be like tonight’s game. I guessed I would fail in my Chinese.”

But then, Kim did not fail Chinese. Instead, he failed his UE examination. Out of the 5 sections of the UE examination, he received an F for the paper that required him to write a 500-word composition and a U (unclassified) grade for the paper that required him to integrate reading and writing. He was shocked and “very upset … because I thought I could get a pass on it.” He was very confused and asked for re-checking of his scripts. He did not know what to do other than that. The only sure thing he knew was that he stood no chance of getting into a degree course at university. Like his friends, he allowed himself to be indulgent in gambling, and lost money in casinos. Fortunately, later that summer, he found another summer job as a life
guard in a swimming pool with very few users. Since he had an easy job, his mind switched back to learning English. “I’ve got nothing to do, so I brought some English grammar and usage books and revised them when the pool was empty, but the efficiency was very low.” Apparently, until that moment, learning English was still the same as learning grammar.

Kim – after September 2001

In late August, Kim received an offer from a university to study in a Higher Diploma programme in construction engineering. Shortly after the first few lessons, he knew for sure that he was not interested in this area of engineering, and wanted to change. He also wanted badly to get into a degree programme, but without a pass in UE he had no chance. The situation caused him much stress and for several nights he was not able to sleep. He knew he had to retake the “extremely difficult” UE examination. Then he found out about the Writing Assistance Programme (WAP) run by the English Language Centre in the university. He came to take a look at the environment, inquired about the service and made his first appointment to see a teacher, who happened to be me, the Co-ordinator of the WAP. We were not able to finish discussing the composition he had brought to the session, so I invited him to book another appointment. He did, and from that day on he became a regular student-writer at the WAP.

Motivation for learning English in the WAP

Kim had a utilitarian reason for learning English in the WAP: he came here solely to help him get a pass in UE. His first impression of the WAP was: “Cool! So many teachers out there and the lessons are free of charge!” There were two reasons that he gave for coming to the WAP again and again: (i) the UE examination and (ii) the welcoming atmosphere that became stronger as he came more often. At that time, he was also paying money to study English in tutorial centres where tutors coached him in all the five UE papers, but he liked coming to the WAP for help with his writing paper. “Since all of [the teachers] are highly qualified, their opinions and suggestions are more valuable and trustworthy than tutorial centres.” Knowing the late-penalty rule, Kim always arrived on time, if not ahead of time. A couple of times, he came with sweat dripping off his face and t-shirt completely soaked. He had run from the MTR station to the university in order to be on time so as to avoid being barred from using the WAP that semester. He kept seeing two WAP teachers, Juliana and me, both Chinese, so that we could understand him if he had to switch to Cantonese to explain himself.


Unscrewing the grammar lock

Each time students come to WAP, they have to fill in what they would like to do for that session; and for the first 10 sessions, Kim filled in “checking grammar” and insisted that the teacher gave his essay an overall grade. After the first few consultations, he realized that the teachers in university did not teach English the way his secondary school teachers did. They did not emphasize grammar or the final grade; rather their focus was on higher order concerns in the process of writing such as “organization, coherence and idea developing and supporting.” These teachers did not simply correct his grammar, but “would explain why you were wrong if those aren’t careless mistakes.” They preferred to explain grammar rules to him than to correct the mistakes that he had made in his essays for him. He found that although he asked to get his grammar checked, he did not get that but a lot of other things instead. Later in the semester, he wrote “checking essay” instead of “checking grammar”; and indeed started to ask the teachers different things about his essays. One day in November, he delighted me by voicing his frustrations about writing conclusions. We spent the session discussing the various ways of drawing conclusions in short argumentative essays, the presentation of stance, the choice of a mild versus an extreme conclusion, and at what stage of the writing process should a writer plan the conclusion. I found that a wonderful opportunity to explain to Kim that writing was not a linear process as he had always thought, but a cyclical one. Although he found that hard to grasp, at least he heard it for the first time.

Adopting new learning strategies

Kim’s attitude towards English learning started to change gradually; and he modified his learning strategies correspondingly. His WAP teachers as well as the teacher who taught him English for Academic Purposes suggested that he read more newspapers and other kinds of writing, listen to news on radio, and speak English inside and outside the classroom. Since he often had unnatural word choice in his writing, both Juliana and I recommended that he learn not individual words, but collocations, and notice how words are used together as he read. At first, Kim thought “none of [these ideas] was workable because not much time was left”. Then, he decided that he would make time for English learning since he had to pass his UE examination in 2002 to get into a degree programme. He dropped out of most of his courses in the higher diploma programme in order to spend up to eight hours a day on average to improve his English. He came regularly, sometimes daily, to the WAP and to read the various learning materials in the Resource Room as well as the South China Morning Post in the waiting area. Kim began to adopt learning
strategies that he “would never do… in the previous years”. To start off, he read the *South China Morning Post* every day. Here is his description of his new learning strategy related to newspaper reading:

When coming across some unfamiliar and frequently used vocabularies, I would refer to the COBUILD English dictionary, and then I would jot down the definition and the collocation on my notebook and revise them frequently.

This began an active expansion of his vocabulary range and his move further away from grammar-only learning. The use of the COBUILD dictionary was also a new initiative for him as he had never used an “English to English dictionary until coming to WAP for 2 months”. His WAP teachers noticed this change in his learning strategies as he often used some of the new vocabulary he learnt in his writing. The way he used the newly learnt vocabulary was sometimes unnatural, but that was normal for a learner exploring new territory.

Kim attempted to enlarge his pool of reading materials by reading *Newsweek* which he subscribed to, as well as online articles.

In addition, I would read some articles from internet such as Herald and Times (but most I don’t understand what they say), and refer some online dictionary. I found the VLC [Virtual Language Centre] website by PolyU is extremely useful. When I faced some unfamiliar sentence structure or collocation, I would often use the site to see if they appear frequently, and if so, I mark it down in my notebook.

This learning strategy meant that Kim started to learn English in places other than the WAP-related areas at times other than teacher-contact hours. There were no computers near the WAP area that students could access all the time, so Kim either read online articles in the library or at home. Marking down new phrases and collocations as he learned them indicated that Kim had developed a habit of carrying a notebook with him most of the time.

Another strategy that he adopted concerned audio intake of language.

When I was on the bus or walking, I would listen to BBC News services on the radio and watch some movies at home or in the [university] library.

It was obvious that by then Kim was bringing English into his life and was trying to create a favourable English learning environment which he could immerse himself in. He recalled a factor that caused his failure in English learning in the past:
The atmosphere of English study is very poor on my surroundings.

He decided to adopt learning strategies that would create a constructive study atmosphere. These learning strategies involved the acquisition not only of grammar, but also of vocabulary, reading and listening skills in real-life contexts.

To practise what he had learnt, Kim kept using new words and phrases in his essays and in February and March 2002 deliberately went to bars to practise his listening and speaking skills with foreigners.

I tried to use some newly learnt expressions or phrases as frequently as possible, and saw if they can understand or not. Actually, I’ve learnt very few in this way. But I thought these ‘stupid’ practices could make me more confident in speaking during the real exam.

To further practise his listening and speaking skills, Kim started going to different teachers in the WAP. I suggested several teachers of different nationalities with different accents, and he booked a session with each of them and talked to them about his essays. He enjoyed this experience and wrote: “Learning from different teachers is better than learning from a fixed teacher because different people may have different perspectives on your essays and you would know more about your standard.” He also commented verbally on their accents, saying how one teacher from the UK was easier to understand than another UK teacher, although they came from the same country. He now felt less worried about listening to “strange accents” in the UE listening examination.

Overall, Kim believes that the teaching methods in WAP as well as the new learning strategies that he has adopted together have helped to build up his confidence in English language learning.

After getting feedback from the WAP teachers about my dozens of essays, I am confident enough to use [newly learnt phrases and structures] if I come across some patterns in the newspapers and on the radio several times.

Another major aspect of language learning that he has become aware of in the past year is that:

I think I am now learning sentence for sentence rather than word for word that I used to be.
And definitely he has become less grammar focussed, more aware of integrating the four skills, and has learnt to pay more attention to higher order concerns in writing. In short, he has learned how to learn language.

This past year has been a “very stressful” year for Kim:

I had to endure a great deal of pressure since I knew getting a pass this year may well be the last chance for me to get a full-time degree offer in the foreseeable future.

He feels that he has been through “an intensive training camp” where “there were so many skills which needed to practise and acquired”. His failure last year and determination to succeed this year have fuelled his study, his drive and channelled his energy towards learning English. As Juliana puts it, “There was a ‘rage’ to learn and to improve. Consistent.” The motivation he got out of this rage has in turn shaped his learning strategies; and these strategies as well as his awareness of them have been effective in causing some perceptible improvements in his English standard. This progress, which he himself found to be obvious and significant, has given him a “sense of satisfaction” which has driven him “to continue English learning” because he wants “to progress further and further… getting a better job, performing better at university level and making more different friends.”

Contagious learning attitude

Kim’s positive energy shone and led to other students becoming more motivated. Jeff, a student who failed UE last year and was studying in a different Higher Diploma programme, was one of those who felt the heat from Kim. He knew about WAP all along and said that he would have made an appointment to see a teacher some time anyway but the fact that Kim kept selling WAP’s strengths gave him more confidence in WAP. According to Jeff, he went to WAP:

partly because of Kim, because his English improved very much after he had participated in WAP. Also, he always tell me WAP can help us a lot and always encourage me to go to WAP and get pass in UE exam together, so I join WAP. I want to improve my English too.

Jeff talked about Kim’s influence on him:

I know Kim work very hard at improving his English, he is really influent on me. When I saw him studying English, I will go to study too. Also he
always tells me which books are suitable for me and help me, this help me
to save a lot of time, and his study spirit always affect me.

It was not difficult for WAP teachers to see Jeff being motivated by Kim.
Kim’s positive learning attitude was contagious and it created an upbeat
learning atmosphere not only around himself but also around those he had
regular contact with.

*Relationship with teachers*

Since Kim came so often to the WAP, a number of WAP teachers met
with him and had ideas about the weaknesses in his writing. Among them,
Juliana and I conferenced with him the most and we developed a rapport with
him. The three of us all had different descriptions of our relationship. Juliana
found it mostly “tutor and learner”, then “listener and speaker”. I described it
as “teacher and student”, “helper and the helped”, “a listener and a person
who unloads”, “a well and a person who draws water from the well”, “road-
sign and direction-seeker”, as well as some kind of friends with an unequal
power relationship. Kim described his relationship with his WAP teachers as
“commander and serviceman”:

Sometimes I was highly motivated by such a relationship because I had a
team of maybe the best commanders to help me to deal with the harsh
battle. So I thought I wasn’t alone to fight.

What vivid imagery! I felt glad that he trusted us and had found support in us.
Yet I felt a bit saddened at the same time. While hoping to motivate him and
enhance his learning, professionally I had tried hard not to manipulate him in
his learning in the WAP, asserting that ultimately it was his responsibility to
learn and his decision on how to go about it. And certainly we did not only
talk about the ‘battle’. Kim and I talked about more personal things like
religious beliefs, sleeplessness, nightmares of things that he had done in the
past which haunted him in the weeks before the UE examinations this year.

*Facing the UE this year*

One of the major difficulties that Kim faced this year in retaking the UE
examinations was not his English proficiency but the psychological stress that
he felt.

“I couldn’t sleep for about two weeks consecutively before the oral exam. I
felt there was not much time left for me but a lot of things I haven’t done
yet. Hence, I became very tense.”
A couple of times he came to the WAP with blood-shot eyes and that was how I found out about his stress-induced sleeplessness. I briefly mentioned seeing a counsellor but he did not seem interested. When he told me that seeking God “played a key role when [he] can do nothing about something, at least it gives [him] psychological comfort”, I invited him to come to my church for a few different gatherings, and it was one evening after a church gathering that he told me about his nightmares. He had nightmares days before the oral examination in March, and in those nightmares he relived the “bad things” that he had done when he was in junior secondary and “dreamt of the victims”. I promised him I would not tell anyone the things that he had done. He did not know why he had those dreams and guessed they were perhaps “the effect of [his] guilty conscience”.

These unresolved internal struggles that he bore, coupled with the examination pressure expressed in the Chinese saying “Allow victory, not failure”, had a negative psychological effect on Kim. He felt extremely nervous and unsettled at the UE examinations, and thought he did not do as well as he could have done. Originally he aimed at jumping two grades to an overall D, but feared that his own nerves had failed him.

Like last year, he found a summer job as a life guard in the months between the examination and the announcement of results. He spent the day before the results were sent out at work, instead of gambling with friends. This was how he felt:

I felt I was very old. This is because some people same age as me are now promoted to year 3, but I would only be a year 1 student.

He quietly but anxiously waited for his results. He passed, with a D in four of the five papers, including the writing paper, but an F in Section E (the reading and writing paper), resulting in an overall grade of E. It was not as good as he had hoped, but he had improved: overall by one grade and in the writing paper by two grades. He emailed me and told me how disappointed and upset he was that he could only get an E grade overall. He wrote:

Very upset. … If not taught by the WAP teachers such as you and Juliana, I would be pleased by the result. But after more than half a year intense training in WAP, getting Grade E is my shame. It seems to me all of your precious input were wasted (although it is not true). I really really apologize for my performance. Perhaps there was a lack of luck in the exam. But anyway I feel grateful for your WAP teachers’ lesson.
He added later in his email message that:

Such a result won’t stop my obsession about English. I will do better next year while studying at University.

A week later, he wrote me again and reiterated this determination to continue learning English:

“I would not stop English learning unless I am very busy in the future.”

I was very pleased to read these two statements as they showed how his motivation to learn the language had shifted from purely instrumental/extrinsic to partly integrative/intrinsic. That, to someone who found English “a boring subject since lots of things had to be remembered”, was a big leap.

**What next?**

One month after the matriculation results were released, Kim received an offer from the same university to study for a degree in his favourite engineering programme. He was thrilled; that was his first choice on his university application form. He was both overjoyed and relieved that his year of tough, disciplined training was not in vain. His friend, Jeff, was admitted to the same degree programme too, also his first choice. When I saw Kim a week later, his smiled from ear to ear and his eyes sparkled with happiness. He has this advice to those who are in the same boat as he was in last year:

Don’t think that you are not the one in the 25% failed portion if you only get grade E at HKCEE level. If you are retaking UE, work harder on it.

Kim now believes in improving English with time and effort. “The more you worked on it, the better the result you would have… It is one of the driving force to me.” The fact that his friend, Jeff, jumped from a U grade in the writing paper last year to a C grade this year confirmed to Kim that this concept of learning is true. Their learning experience in this past year has made them “treasure time more”. They are now eager promoters of WAP, and are keen to share different ways of learning English with their old and new friends.

**Concluding remarks**

The above, briefly, is Kim’s story. Far from a fairytale, it is a true story of the real struggles that an ESL learner went through, full of disappointments, although fortunately some light is beginning to shine. It is the story of a
victim-turned-survivor of the Hong Kong examination-oriented education system, who, charged with the motivation to pass a public English examination the second time round, discovered and accepted learning strategies that worked for him. In this process, teachers of a university’s Writing Assistance Programme had the good fortune to cross paths with Kim and played a part in the life of this persistent learner. Through this ordeal, Kim has learnt how to learn, become more aware of his learning strategies and how they succeed or fail, and has even had positive impact on his peers. As the old adage runs, what doesn’t kill us makes us stronger.

References


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