

文藻外語大學公共關係室剪報表格

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[LETTER]

A non-native teacher's voice

The "Bilingual 2030" policy is an ambitious step by a non-native English-speaking country to embrace the language and compete globally. The policy not only brings challenges, but also new opportunities, especially for voices such as mine

I am a student at Wenzao Ursuline University of Languages. When I came to Taiwan from Indonesia, a friend recommended me a job as a part-time English teacher in a cram school.

As I taught more students, from elementary school to junior high, I realized that my strength was not just language ability, but also understanding what it feels like to learn English. I did not just teach vocabulary and grammar. I focused on building their confidence.

Many of my students perform well in reading, listening and writing. However, when it comes to speaking, they struggle a lot. They are used to textbook English, so when they are asked something slightly different, they get confused. I once asked a student, "How are you today?" and the answer I got was, "Today is Friday!" After class, I later learned that the word "today" confuses them, since they are more familiar with the question, "How are you?" It was a small moment, but it made me realize that students are trained to recognize sentence patterns, not to communicate naturally.

Another time, students gave me perfect answers on a written test, but froze during the oral test.

The fear of making mistakes slowed them down. That is why I focus on building their speaking confidence first. Not perfect grammar, not fancy vocabulary, just the courage to try. I became the teacher I wish I had growing up.

Their struggle to speak reminded me of my own journey learning English in Indonesia, and probably reflects what many non-native English teachers in Taiwan have experienced, too. I realized that shared experience is our strength as a teacher. We know how it feels to struggle with English and it gives us the tools to guide others with empathy and patience.

Despite my journey, I have still felt underestimated, simply because I am not a native speaker. Many schools and cram schools still prefer Western teachers, often based on their appearance. Friends of mine who are also non-native English teachers have shared similar experiences. We, as non-native English speakers, have walked the path our students are walking. That matters.

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While taking a "Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages" course, the instructor asked: "Do you think someone who speaks the language can definitively teach the language?" That question stayed with me. My answer is, not always. Teaching takes more than fluency, it requires understanding, compassion, strategy and heart.

If Taiwan truly wants to become a bilingual country by 2030, it is time to recognize that the journey of learning can be just as valuable as fluency itself. Non-native English teachers could bring more than language skills, they also have studying experience. We do not just speak English, we have learned it and grown with it, just like what our students are expected to do.

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