Working mothers learn English with their kids

Yoshiko Kosaka / Yomiuri Shimbun Staff Writer

Despite having to look after their children, many working mothers want to learn English. This means they often have to fight the clock to find the time, sometimes attending English classes during lunch break, while at other times taking their children along.

Although not all of them use English at work, the women say learning the language during their spare time helps energize them.

One recent Sunday, The Yomiuri Shimbun visited a community hall in Suginami Ward, Tokyo, where a group of women and their children were attending an English class.

The class, organized by Yumi Senda, a 45-year-old woman who works at the planning department of Taisei Corp., was actually for the children, but their mothers were also interested in the language.

Classmates of Senda's 3-year-old daughter and their parents gather once a month at the hall to learn English from a Japanese-American instructor, a friend of Senda's.

"The class is primarily for children. But my real motivation was exposing myself to English," Senda said. In fact, she spoke in English when discussing class details with the instructor.

At Senda's workplace, she and her colleagues speak Japanese. But on occasion, she examines blueprints written in English and takes phone calls from abroad.

She learned English by chatting with foreign participants at a hula dance club she had joined. Before her daughter was born, she often spoke with friends she made in the club, but after the child's birth, she couldn't find the time to meet them.

Senda said she felt she would lose her command of English if that continued, so she decided to organize the class to expose herself to the language as much as possible.

"When my daughter gets older, I want to seriously study English and use it at work," she said.

"A lot of working parents want to learn English or polish their skills while they're busy raising their kids," said Tomoko Itofuji, editor in chief of Bizmom magazine, which targets working mothers.

"Caring for children while at work doesn't allow them enough time to study either at night or on weekends. That prompts working mothers to make full use of their lunch breaks or the early morning before going to work," Itofuji said.

Indeed, working mothers use every opportunity to learn English: attending English classes near their workplace, studying while they commute to work or taking classes with their children.
Some mothers even go abroad with their children to study English during the summer vacation.

Some mothers want to study the language in order to provide a better English education for their children, rather than use English at work.

"Regardless of whether they can turn their language proficiency into a career, learning in its own right helps encourage working mothers, allowing them to revitalize themselves as they lead their busy lives," Itofuji said.

Ayumi Kawasaki, a career adviser who learned English while taking care of her own children, offers some tips from her own experience:

• Read magazines and newspapers that have something to do with your job. Kawasaki subscribes to the U.S. magazine Working Mother, which helps her not only to improve her English, but also to obtain information of professional interest to her.

• Watch DVDs in English with family members, using English subtitles. It helps you to understand the content as well as to brush up your listening skills. When you watch them with your children, choose titles that suit your children's interests. "Make it a family event on weekends. It's fun!" Kawasaki said.

• Make it a rule to study English every day, even for a short time, with an English-learning Web site. While there are plenty of English learning sites on the Internet, Kawasaki's favorite is "iKnow!", which offers a class that lasts about 10 minutes. Such a site requires very little time, and can be easily squeezed in before the start of a day's work.

"What is important is to continue your studies. For that purpose, setting a clear goal is essential," Kawasaki said. "I found many people don't know their own English level. You need to measure it through such methods as TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication). Then, set a conservative target, for example, aiming for a certain TOEIC score or setting a goal such as 'to be able to take phone calls from abroad without hesitation,'" Kawasaki said.

She also advises mothers to study together with their children and, if the children are of an appropriate age, competing to see who gets the higher scores.

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