

Taiwan needs more students to adopt an aggressive approach

October 26, 2014 by Daniel J. Bauer

I just looked up “aggressive” in a fat dictionary which promises in a blurb on its cover to help writers to improve their efforts (hmm). The scholars there split their definition into two parts.

Part One points aggressive in the direction of anger or threat. A person may become aggressive in speech or behavior, for example, by imbibing too much alcohol. This is one reason I encourage my students to drink water or tepid tea in class, not stronger spirits such as “gao liang” and the like. For readers now feeling confused, that was an example of a little off-the-cuff American humor. A clearer illustration might picture a normally peaceful dog that leaps to its feet and snarls aggressively when a stranger dashes in, screaming and waving a knife in the air.

Part Two of the definition links aggression with the notions of goal and success. We aggressively throw ourselves into speaking a language we are studying because we want desperately to master it. We want to succeed, not fail in our efforts.

The idea of aggression caught my eye in a headline on page 12 of The China Post last Sunday, “Taiwanese youths need to be more aggressive” (10-19-14). The article, brief, but sharp as a razor, speaks of our youth and the competition awaiting them in the business world of today’s China.

That article quoted Ma Shaw-chang, vice-chair of the Straits Exchange Foundation (SEF), as recently telling a group of students that they “need to be more aggressive and enterprising.” Ma said business realities in China had created “a dog eat dog world [and] Taiwan should never be a sheep living next to such a world.” That quote gives me a second chance to refer to what some folks call “Man’s Best Friend.” I’ve got to be careful, lest, before we know it, this column really goes to the dogs. Hmm, maybe we’d better take a break at McDonald’s.

The maker of the mighty Big Mac, fragrant French fries and hot coffee for 33 “kuai” announced last week that its sales had dropped in the United States for the fourth quarter in succession (CP 10-23-14, p. 4). McDonald’s presumably has no idea who Mr. Ma is, or what the SEF is all about. His remarks, however, are related to McDonald’s concerns. The hamburger giant is reportedly newly resolved to turn

its slumping figures around. The company will be aggressive in its efforts.

To attract skeptics worried about health and food safety, the quality of the chain restaurant’s food, and so on, McDonald’s has begun a program to allow patrons to ask potentially embarrassing questions. That sounds like an aggressive sales tactic to me. (In a moment, we’ll talk of students and embarrassing questions, a hint perhaps of a teaching tactic.)

A question one customer recently asked McDonald’s was, “Why doesn’t your food rot?” Whew. Talk about aggressive question-asking, huh? And how about, “Do you use (actual) chicken in your Chicken Mc Nuggets?”

Mr. Ma’s call for more aggressive students in Taiwan sits heavily on the minds of many of us in the teaching profession. Generally, Taiwan students are a passive lot. Getting them to move intellectually is almost as difficult as getting an elephant to move by poking its hide with a toothpick. How can we push our youth into appropriately aggressive intellectual behavior? For starters, perhaps we should turn the McDonald’s model on its head. Perhaps we should ask students some direct questions. A friend urged me a few weeks ago to do precisely that. “What is the real reason you are in college? Why are you here?” Ask your students that, he said, and wrap a column around the answers you get.

But other questions also arise. “How many hours a week outside of class do you give to your studies?” “How many hours do you spend on high tech electronic devices for relaxation?” “What is your most important academic goal this semester?”

I hope these words are an acceptable offering for my readers today. That is another way to say I hope this column didn’t just go to the dogs.

I am sure of two things. Life is rough everywhere, not only in China. Secondly, if we are producing lambs or sheep in our high schools and universities, we’re letting a lot of good young people down. And we’re letting ourselves down, too. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and an associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points :

1. An important government official recently said Taiwan's students should be "more aggressive." What does "aggressive" mean to you? Do you consider yourself an aggressive student or person?
2. This column makes the somewhat risky statement that "Generally, Taiwan's students are passive." Do you agree or not agree? Why do some professors at Fu da feel that their students are passive?
3. Offer an example (a personal story?) from your life in which you were "aggressive" in a good way.

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