

# Teaching Reading and Writing - Two Classrooms I Observed

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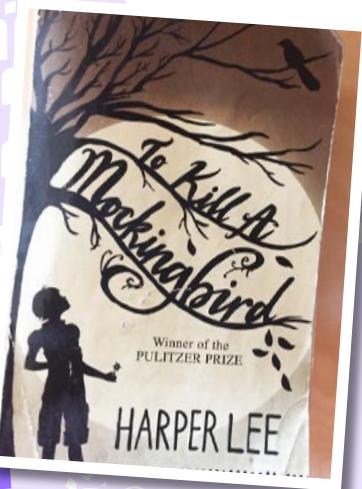
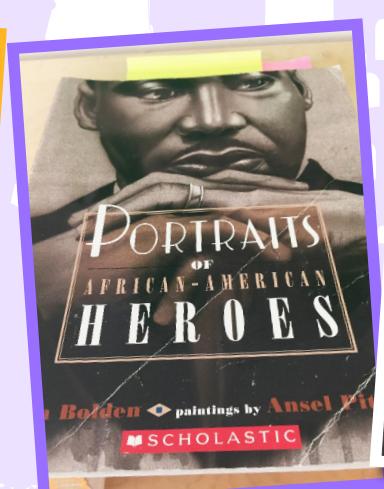
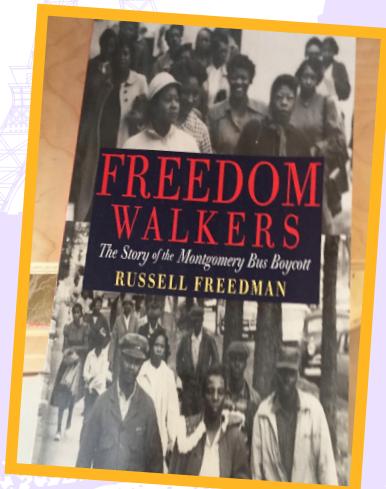
## ***The English Teaching in Junior High School in Taiwan now***

While I was doing this project, a school principal working in Education Bureau of New Taipei City quoted an article from Facebook, saying the way we teach English stays the same for decades; also she mentioned her children are exposed to a great deal of reading and writing to master English and Chinese in the United States. I gave the article a thumb up and sadly admitted that students nowadays in junior high schools learn English the same way we did many years ago, and English teaching has given way to exams to get off the hook without extra reading and writing demands, and to ascertain students' school academic performance is well taken care of. There's no so called must-read-book-list for English learning .

When seeking higher exam achievements becomes a national goal for parents and students, English learning process is tyrannously segmented into pursuing grammatical correction, finding best answer in multiple choices and tiring mechanical drills on limited repetitive articles. Learning tips for answering exam questions is not equivalent to achieving English ability and academic competence. Nowadays, students seek perfect scores in quizzes and exams, which have become the most important thing in junior high school classrooms. If learning means endless tests, and scores humiliate the majority of students in class, many students would give up learning and become guests in classrooms. As a matter of fact, English learning has become the bimodal distribution phenomenon for years, and there is nothing educators can do about it. Needless to say, the authority have tried every way to help students gain better scores. However, the effectiveness is still to be evaluated. The quoted article pointed out a cruel fact, but I think we could certainly find a way out. That is to incorporate more reading and writing into school curriculum.

## **My Own Experience in Teaching Reading**

Being an English teacher in junior high school for over 20 years, gradually I witness how my students make progress through reading and writing. Since my students are so called language gifted students, I boldly divide their five periods a week in English curriculum into four subjects. One for reading, one for writing, one for independent learning project, and two for school text. The learning schedule has been implemented for years, and students are used to reading and writing all the time. In the reading class, they are assigned to read novels or fictions as homework every day. At first they complained how tired they were to accomplish the reading load. Gradually the complaint diminished because of the magic 10 minutes in class every day. I shared the story with them and kept them hanging on, sometimes I would give away rewards on activities such as Q&A(question and answer) or just simply acted it out. I knew it brought sparkles into their dull junior high school life because I saw the eyes of the smart starting to shine and focused on the move I made and the questions I asked. The result was amazing when every single one wished to know what would happen next. Very soon I gained response and feedback from them. Ever since we could start to talk about the theme, the plot, the characters, and most important of all, what they thought about and what they could relate the character or the story to. I would ask them to compare and contrast to some Chinese work or social issues they had read or other stories they knew. Naturally, it got writing to do the wrap up at the end, and how to write it well became an important task they got to deal with. Even under the pressure of high school entrance exam, they enjoyed reading a lot. However, this year I stopped the weekly reading class because of the independent learning project which ninth graders have to accomplish; it is another issue, but we all agreed to read a book again after the entrance exam.



## The Reading Class I Observed

Personally, I think a teacher picks books according to his or her favorites. The book Ms. Malave picks has strong social concern and caring for teenagers. Since there are many purposes and benefits for reading, I think one of the ultimate goals of reading is to cultivate empathy for others and the minority. Jamie Zibulsky wrote on Psychology Today website about the purpose for reading is to seek why. She mentioned we learn to read when little, and we read to learn, to seek why, to understand, to answer the question we ask to understand ourselves and the environment. Acquiring this capacity is one of the main goals of our formal education system. Therefore, the book Ms. Malave picks totally fits in the great purpose for reading.

Take the other classroom I observed, the students were second graders, they read the book *Childtimes-A Three Generation Memoir*. According to the teacher's explanation, the author was born after the Civil War, and she tried to help students understand the situation and the history of people in Civil War. The teacher did not provide answers to those questions right away, she asked questions for further inquiries. Sometimes, she clarified the questions, most of the time, she asked if others wished to answer the same questions. Then she asked volunteers to read the paragraphs in turns, and finally she explained it. Students are obedient and nice, they abide by the rules.

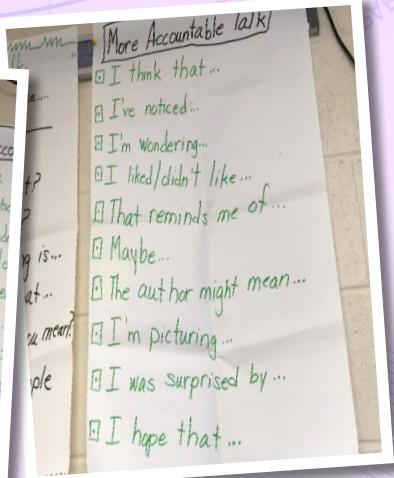
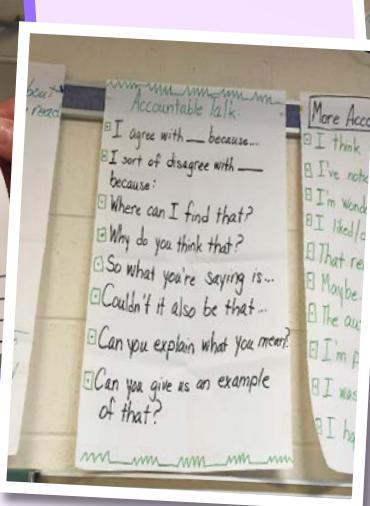
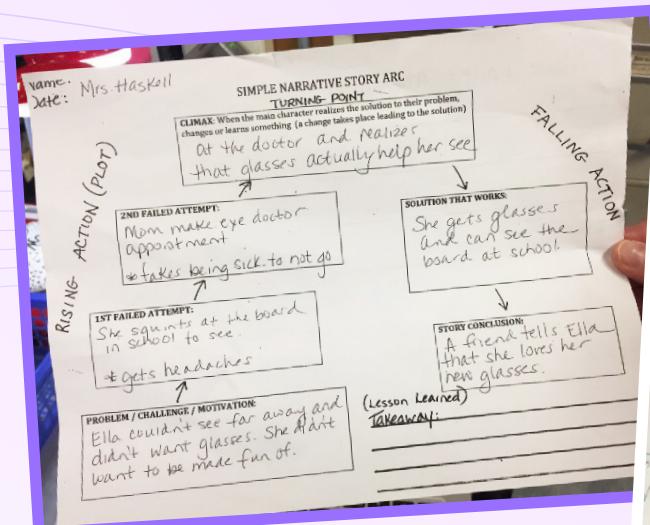


Nora Ephron once wrote, "Be the hero of your life, not the victim." That reminded me that Jamie Zibulsky once stayed in a hotel and dared not watch the horror movie "You're Next". Not until she checked the movie did she understand the story and stop her fear. We fear many things in life, and very often the questions of why, what and how fill our lives. Through reading, we realize, conquer and become brave enough to deal with the obstacle and eventually grow to be the person we are now. Reading brings security, knowledge and help. We read to learn and become the hero of our lives.

In my reading class, my students are asked to write about their opinions and find out the answers in the book they read every week. In the early years, I was inexperienced and easily imposed my own ideas and opinions on them. Now I can patiently wait for them to check and have them discuss in groups. Patience is a wonderful thing, I gain different answers, and personally, I think that is how critical thinking being cultivated.

### ***Sharing My Teaching in Writing and the Writing Class I Observed***

Since reading and writing are inseparable, therefore, I would like to share the writing class I observed. A few of the classes I went in, the students were typing their work into schoology with iPad. Schoology is a great tool for teachers to interfere and help students to adjust their writings. Correcting students' writing and helping them immediately is amazing. Without paper, they saved time and the earth, it did provide great strength for teachers. Thus, a teacher's role becomes a true helper and facilitator. In Ms. Amanda Haskell's writing class, I asked her how she taught her students to write stories, she pointed out a writing toolkit she used for fourth graders, and generously made another copy for me. She also talked about the elements of story plot on rising action, falling action and climax and many more. I thank her for her patience. I could not possibly see the whole picture of how she taught writing in such a short time, but I am so grateful she is willing to explain things and made extra copy of the toolkit for me. I also emailed her which website to learn the skill of how to teach story and plot. She wrote email back to me and mentioned a book she still refers to, it is called "Razzle Dazzle Writing Achieving Excellence".



Luckily, my colleague and I often discuss together and share how to teach writing with each other. Here I would like to brief how we teach writing. We found many useful books about writing, and we often get a little of that, learn a little from this. Most books about writing all talk about the same thing in different ways, and we have used many different books like "Write Right", "Basic Writing Skill" or "Writing for Kids.". Basically, students are asked to write about a picture within a paragraph every week for about ten weeks at the beginning of the semester in seventh grade. After that, they are required to write an essay once or twice a week. Apart from that, we have done post-crossing, and they also write weekly diary in their communication book (I called it combo). Then we would use different ways to correct their works. Many times students check each other's work and write down their comments. Then they get to review their drafts two or three times, when the work is rewritten for four times, it is a readable and fair one.

One of my favorite writer Stephen King once said, "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot." I'm not going to be a writer, but I read his masterpieces, his wisdom words and comments on writing. Therefore, I have to say he is truly a great writer, and I follow his comment to read other writers' books and see what he sees, abide by his rules on writing. I have to pay him respect, he is truly a diligent, gifted and the greatest writer that I have seen.

I remember the lecture in University Massachusetts, Dr. WanLi Hu said that American Education emphasizes on pragmatism. Since reading and writing a lot

occupy so many hours a week in school curriculum in the US education, I wonder if it is practical. The answer is definitely yes, and I will always bear in mind that there are a few things I can do to help my students. First of all, read and write as frequently as possible. Secondly, ask different types of questions to cultivate their minds with critical thinking. Last but not least, read and write a lot again.

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