

Reading and Writing Strategies for EFL Students

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New York, the largest city in the USA, is the dream city for everyone who speaks English. It is also called the Big Apple since everyone is fond of the Apple. We can feel its energy and diverse culture even just through movies, dramas and songs. The neighbor state, New Jersey, is a beautiful state full of green trees and grasses so it is also known as Garden State. Our delegation group visited New York and New Jersey in this two-week training.

It's a great pleasure to be part of the delegation group, which gave me an opportunity to finally visit this dream city, to observe American's elementary school classrooms, as well as to share teaching experiences with experienced teachers. I have learned so much on this trip and will be using most of them in my classroom.

In order to make more efficient use of time, before this trip took off I've chosen a subject to observe. That's what I'm going to share in this report- reading and writing strategies for EFL(English as Foreign Language) students.

Respect Students' Expertise

In this trip, we were lucky enough to attend lectures in Columbia University, one of the best colleges in the Ivy League. The topic of Dr. Susi Long's lecture happened to be the subject I was going to focus on. However, rather than jumped right into different strategies, Dr. Long shared a brand new viewpoint: respect students' expertise.



Dr. Long suggested that students would develop their own expertise since they come from diverse backgrounds. If we teachers consistently evaluate students with uniform textbook knowledge, we may overlook the impact of students' own expertise.

Dr. Long told us a true story about an African refugee boy who just arrived the

USA. Dr. Long was working with the volunteers at the camp, that was where she met the boy. The boy hand-made a score of an African folk rhyme and taught Dr. Long how to sing. This boy sang beautifully, also he could recognize the relationship between note and lyrics, and was a great singer. However, as he entered the elementary school in the USA, he was classified as a student with learning disability. Dr. Long popped the question: does this boy really have learning problem? Or he just simply couldn't connect with the school materials?

Dr. Long provided a furthermore example to support her point. Base on the viewpoint “respect students’ expertise”, Dr. Long worked with a group of researchers, teachers and students to develop their own texts, which is meaningful because they were based on the students’ own expertise. Most of these students came from the so-called sub-cultures, such as African and Mexican. Dr. Long and her group helped these students take pictures along their way to school, and then composed stories by using repeated sentence patterns. Dr. Long showed us a video, we amazingly found out those students who weren't able to read textbooks could recite and chant their own creation beautifully.

Another example is to create a “Me Box” in the classroom and asks the students to bring representative symbols of important events in their lives every week, such as a necklace given by the grandmother (it can be pictures or drawings if the symbols are difficult to create or bring in). In addition to sharing with the students’ peers, these symbols can also be used as the themes of their writing courses. Dr. Long stressed that by understanding and respect of students’ life experiences, teachers can design courses that are suitable for students. What’s more, students will naturally become active learners in such curricula.

Dr. Long’s viewpoints truly opened up my horizon. Before I had never considered the students’ expertise and just blindly fed them the textbooks and materials that “I” thought was important. Was this the root cause of their learning difficulties in my classroom?

It was more enlightened for me to see “respect students’ expertise” is not just a theory, but also an actual practice in American elementary schools. At the



back of any American elementary school classroom, regardless of grade, there are many book boxes of different themes. Books in the boxes are labeled with different color to indicate difficulty levels and number of new words. Thus students are able to select books from the themes that he/she is interested and that suits to his/her level to read. With such a practice, a student can avoid the problem that he/she will give up on a book because it is too difficult. It not only encourages students to read, but also enables the teacher to understand students' interests in order to design suitable future courses.

Perhaps it is because of different cultures; there are no textbooks in American reading class, while teachers in Taiwan often rush to finish the contents of textbooks because they are supposed to be finished in that semester. But in any case, this is something we should always keep in mind when designing courses: the leading role of learning is always the student, not the teacher.

“Do the most difficult problem first”!

In my own teaching experience, I often encountered many students who think that they will never have chances to use English, so they had low motivation for learning and even considered that “learning” is teacher's responsibility only. Some of them even totally gave up on learning English. After asking Dr. Long, she recommended that it would be helpful if the teachers help students find their objectives of learning, even help them create objectives for learning and help them experience the usefulness of English. Dr. Long mentioned that the forming of sister schools during this visit could be served as a good objective of learning. Students can apply the English that they have learned to communicate with their foreign friends. They can write E-mails/send postcards to each other in English.

Interestingly, Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns, the speaker of Differentiated Instruction of the other lecture, also insisted, “do the most difficult problem first,” meaning, teachers in the classroom should put forward the most difficult subject for students to understand what is the “vision” of learning. In addition to saving unnecessary mechanical exercise of the high-achieving students, it also helps middle and lower-achieving students understand the destination of this learning trip.



Indeed, if we can create learning objectives that students can identify with, “English” will then be the means to achieve the objective and the students will be more willing to find their own learning resources, such as dictionaries and related websites. The students’ study pressures will naturally be reduced. Currently the learning objective of English in Taiwan’s elementary schools is “communication”. Yet English is a foreign language in Taiwan, cultural deprivation students lack for the opportunities to speak English in authentic scenario, which requires the help of teachers to create the environments of English. In the meantime, high achievers will be more motivated in meaningful learning environments, where provide the basis for future independent learning.

The objectives I mentioned above are not just “objectives that are important for teachers”, but also have to meet the students’ needs. I also observed its actual



practice in the American elementary classroom. I saw a group of 5th graders in freelance writing class. At that time the students had already completed their drafts in the previous class. The teacher picked some students’ work and share with the class by reading them aloud. I noticed the work that the teacher picked had some types of beauty, such as wonderful metaphors and detailed

description. By showing the example, the teacher encouraged students to polish their words and reach to another level within their self-pick topics.

Furthermore, I noticed that the teacher did not comment on the drafts of the students, instead she issued the self-checklist for students to self-check their spellings, punctuation as well as the structure of the whole story. That way, “writing” is no longer formulated since there is no so-called template made by teachers. Instead, students can use their imaginations. When I heard the students’ work read aloud by the teacher, I was surprised at the students’ rich expression and creativity. It was apparent that the students had made a lot of efforts to achieve the objective of “telling their own stories.”

Due to culture differences, how can this work in Taiwan? Although my school does not have an active sister school, but I am working with another teacher, who's in my grade, to start a program to help students write to Santa Claus. Also in my future writing lesson plan, I will encourage students to write more often by assigning "little angel" for each "little master". They can write short English letters to express their moods to their angel or master. These activities are very different from the traditional English lesson plans. The initial steps will take a lot of time, but if we could bring up students' motivations and interests, everything is worth it.



Respect student's learning time

Currently I'm participating in the Differentiated Instruction Workshop held by the New Taipei City. I had not thought about the purpose of applying differentiated instruction in class until this visit abroad. After listening to Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns' explanation, I re-recognize the importance of Differentiated Instruction. Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns mentioned that applying differentiated instruction is not only about pulling out the lower-achievers, but also about respecting the learning time of the higher-achievers. So that students in the same class could complete learning contents/ learning tasks according to their own learning paces.

Similarly, "respect students learning time" is not just a slogan, I've observed a lot of instances in American elementary classrooms. For example, in a Phonics reviewing



class, the teacher gave each group different envelopes with a variety of Phonics words. Students are required to form groups and each group will work together to classify the words that are given to the group. I found that almost each group has a lower-achiever. The rest of the group would patiently help the lower-achiever to work together to complete their task. The group that has completed its task

can pick a Chrome Book and practice doing reading exercises, while the teacher was helping a group of much lower-achievers to review spelling in a corner of the room. It was a very busy classroom, however, according to my observation, everyone is so engaged in and focused on their tasks.

Another example I observed is the reading class. When the other students in the class were busy with independent reading, there were two Chinese students who just arrived in the USA used computers to learn listening and reading simple words, in the meantime the teacher in another corner was guiding a low-achiever. This classroom was equally busy (because students in the independent reading group also had their own post-it task), but no student was looking around and being absent-minded. No one had even noticed that the stopwatch the teacher set on the blackboard had been set to zero.



The lectures I took and classes I observed make me reflect on the situations in Taiwan. We often ask others to show respect; nevertheless as a teacher, do we show respect to students? In addition to the “students’ expertise” I previously mentioned, I rarely take students’ differences in learning time in consideration. Now I am trying to change the formerly teaching activities into a differentiated approach. Through showing respect to students’ learning time, I hope I can get the students to learn more actively.

Summary

Overall, I’ve learned a lot through this delegation trip especially those theories from Dr. Susi Long on respecting students’ expertise, as well as Dr. Heather Pinedo-Burns on Differentiated Instruction. One thing I would like to practice first with my students is to create the learning objective for them. I noticed that American teachers are used to illustrate the goal of learning at the beginning of the class, including homework quality and performance level. That way, students understand where this learning trip leads to and are more willing to fight hard for the final goal. In Taiwan, we traditionally do it in a reverse order showing the goal at the end of the class.

For my future lesson plans, I am planning to design a different small project for each unit. By the end of a semester, they can put together each smaller project and make a bigger one, just like the jigsaw puzzle. It is just an idea right now; I'm still working on the details.

Overall, I think this visit is a very valuable one. We had an opportunity to finally observe American's elementary school classrooms, as well as to share teaching experiences with experienced teachers. I believe we could benefit so much if we keep having more visits to America and other countries that are more advanced in education.