

Observations and Reflections in 2011 Trip to Portland, Indiana

by Sonia Fang, Yu-Ming Elementary School

Giving Thanks

First of all, I would like to express my sincere appreciation to the principals, the teachers and the students in East Elementary School and Bloomfield Elementary School. Without your help, I would not have done this educational project and collected so much precious information about the education system in Indiana. Also, I found my trip very satisfying because of generous information sharing and constant interaction with teachers. I value all the teaching experiences, lesson plans and creative ideas shared by the teachers that I met, through which I can further apply to my teaching job in the future. In addition, I would like to

express my appreciation to Jay School Corporation, the superintendent, Dr. Tim Long and the principal of Redkey Elementary School, Tomas D. Jerles, who made this delegation visit so successful, and who worked so hard to contribute this project educational and entertaining. I also want to give special thanks to my host teacher, Kathy, an art teacher (and now my friend), in Portland, Indiana. Her thoughtfulness, kindness and caring, touches my heart deeply. Without Kathy, I would not know how to play Phase 10 Cards. What I received from this trip is treasure that money can't buy. Last but not least, I appreciate the Education Bureau of New Taipei City for giving me this great opportunity, and Director General Shen, Director Chen, and the staff from Taipei Economic & Cultural Office in Chicago who made great efforts to contribute this trip.



During my two week stay in America, not only did I have inside access to the education system in Indiana, which allowed me to learn from classroom observations, but also I was fully immersed in American culture. Visiting Burriss Laboratory Elementary School and other Blue Ribbon elementary schools, provided me with further insights of what education can do and the trends ahead. Happily, I have seen Chinese language study becoming a new and popular class in some schools, where educators see the benefits of Chinese as second language and see it as a key to the world. Surprisingly, public schools are competitive and all try hard to improve students' academic performance as their main goal. Also, through a short interview and visit with the Indiana State superintendent, Dr. Tony Bennett, I am more aware of the dramatic changes in the educational reforms recently in Indiana as well as some of the other states in the United States. It seems that the potential use of student assessments to evaluate teacher performance has created tension among educators, and, at the same time, this issue has become a controversial one for educators and the public. Therefore, the experience as whole has led me to look deeply into the essence of education and what it means to be a professional teacher.

This report focuses on my observations and reflections through classroom observation, visits to schools, and discussions with teachers. Since returning to Taiwan, I have tried to find a way to link what I learned from my trip with my instruction in the classroom. Only through trial and error, learning from my experiences and viewing teaching as a professional skill that is always growing, can I find a better way to benefit my students' learning.

School Overview



The teachers from New Taipei City of this delegation trip were mainly sent to Jay County Corporation Schools for three-day classroom observation, where seven schools were teamed up as a partnership group within the community. During my trip, I traveled with my host, Kathy, who has 26 art classes between East and Bloomfield Elementary schools. Below is the overview of the two schools. Each school has its own core curriculum based on state standards, goals and implementation plans.

	Bloomfield Elementary School	East Elementary School
History and School Outline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● constructed and opened in 1969 ● 2 sections each of grades K-5 ● with a total enrollment of more than 200 students ● class size is around 18-21 students ● Four Star School from 1992 until 2009 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● open concept school building with partition between classes ● 2-3 sections for each grade K-5 ● with a total enrollment of more than 250 students ● class size is around 18-20 students ● gifted and talented classrooms at grade 4 and 5
Ethnic Background of Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 97% Caucasian ● 3% Multiracial (48 Amish students speak German-Dutch) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 98% Caucasian ● 1% Hispanic ● 1% Multiracial
Curriculum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reading, English, Math, Social Studies and Science ● Special classes include Music, Art, PE and Technology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Language art, Math, Social Studies and Science ● Special classes include Music, Art, PE , Library and Technology

Belief / Visions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide a foundation for every child to succeed and continue to learn ● Maintain high academic expectations of students ● Develop citizens with character (Trustworthiness, Respect, Responsibility, Fairness, Caring, and Citizenship) ● Develop life-long learners who are ready to solve problems through critical and creative thinking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide challenging opportunities that lead to the success of each child. ● Provide challenging experiences for each child that will promote academic growth, as well as physical, social, and emotional health. ● Students showing growth in assessments that test state and local standards. ● Cooperation and support within and between the school, home, and community.
Characteristics / Improvement Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● 3-tier-program to monitor the performance of students' academic performance in language art and math, when necessary, intervention will be adopted for struggling learners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Special education program / IEP (Individual Education Program) ● Speech/Language Clinician ● Paraprofessional aides ● Integrating Technology and the Internet into the Curriculum ● Focus on increasing language arts scores as main goal
Instructional Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using small and whole group instruction ● Reading Recovery ● RTI (Response to Intervention) ● Accelerated Reading (80% success rate on AR quizzes) ● Phonemic awareness, phonics, comprehension, vocabulary, fluency ● Partner reading, writing, reading to someone, word work, and listening to someone reading ● 90 to 120 minutes daily of balanced literacy instruction in all grades K-5 that include: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1.Direct Reading & Writing Instruction 2.Self-selected and shared reading time 3.Vocabulary and word study 4.Process Writing Instruction & Journal Writing (Ideas / Content, Organization, Word Choice, Conventions, Voice, Sentence Fluency) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using small and whole group instruction ● Reading Recovery for early intervention ● RTI (Response to Intervention) ● Accelerated Reading ● STAR Reading Programs ● Scholastic Read 180 Language Arts Computer Program

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Goals for Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Be proficient readers and writers ● Develop proficient math skills ● Be prepared for the next grade level ● Develop a lifetime love for reading ● Become a lifelong learner because they understand the value of an education. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Students achieve success throughout life. ● Become lifelong learners: include mastering state standards, the fine arts, extra-curricular activities and social interactions ● Take participation in responsible citizenship.
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(Sources from : School Wide Plan (SWP) and PL 221 document of Bloomfield and East Elementary)

Reading Recovery as Remedial Help for Struggling Learners

During my stay, I had a short talk with a Reading Recovery teacher, Mrs. Zicht, from East Elementary school, who shared how reading recovery is done and how it helped struggling learners. We both believe that individual difference in the acquisition of literacy is a complex issue. I worry about the phenomena of **rich-get-richer and poor-get-poorer** patterns of reading achievement. In speaking with Mrs. Zicht, I suddenly gained a clearer picture of what we can do for at-risk learners. Understanding the Reading Recovery program provided me with further resources to assist struggling learners in Taiwan.



I. History

Reading Recovery program was developed by a New Zealand educator, Dr. Marie Clay in the 1976 and later introduced to the US in 1984. The program has since been widely implemented in 38 states in USA, as well as in Canada, Australia, England and New Zealand. After conducting long-term classroom observations, Dr. Clay concluded that reading is a message-getting activity and writing is a message-sending activity for young learners. Both activities involve with problem-solving and linking patterns. This program has developed a series of mini books for assisting kids to learn. Many Reading Recovery professionals have acknowledged the importance of learning to read, though as a complex process requiring skilled, knowledgeable and experienced teachers to make decisions about appropriate action for each individual child.

II. About the Program Today

The Program is an early and short-term intervention to assist the slow learners to read in their first years at school. Struggling learners are assessed and chosen from their class and are taught individually one-on-one, on a daily basis for an extra 30 minutes, for an average of 16-20 weeks. The daily lessons are individually designed and taught by trained reading recovery teachers. As soon as students meet grade-level

expectations and demonstrate that they can continue to make progress, their time in the program ends and a new student joins the program.

III. Reading Recovery Lessons

Children read two to three familiar, short books. They re-read the previous day's book, then work with letters, word and sentence building, and write a story or assemble a cut-up story. Then they start a new story. Teachers keep running records to analyze a student's reading behavior. The child composes, writes and reads his or her own messages and stories without the teacher's immediate correction or dictation, and the teacher designs problem solving activities for them to think about. Magnetic alphabet letters are supporting aides to use for spelling, sorting, and to analyze words. Reading skills, including phonetic skills, are taught in the context of supplemental reading and writing by reading recovery teachers who have completed a year-long training program.

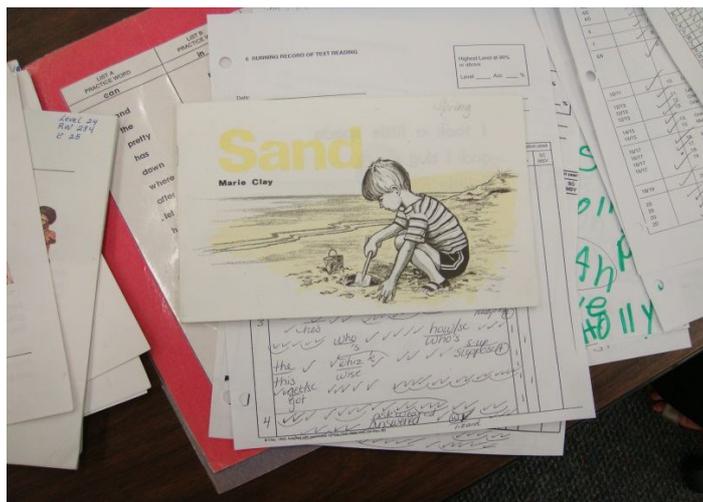
IV. Teacher's Duty

Reading Recovery teachers learn to observe, analyze, and interpret the reading and writing behaviors of individual students and to design and implement a personalized program to meet each student's needs. The teachers focus on students' strength and try to help them to become independent learners. Students learn to read by composing and writing their own sentences.

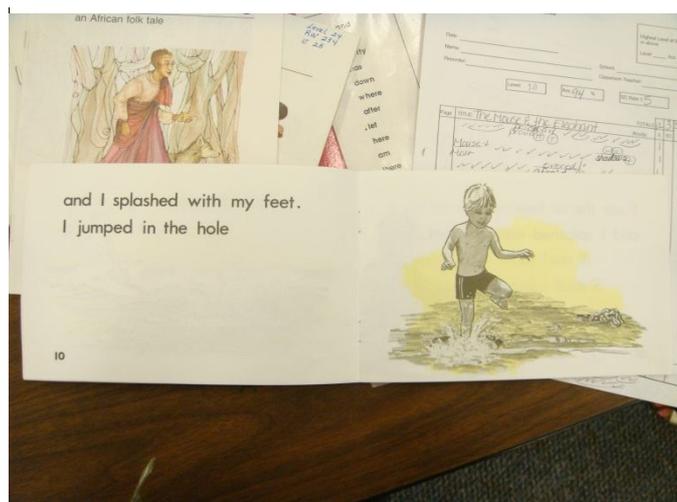
V. Facts and Figures

With more than 20 years of evaluation data, the Reading Recovery Program has been shown to improve alphabetic, fluency, comprehension and general reading achievement by students. The program reduces the gap between the poor and the middle class students, reduces the achievement gap of disadvantaged children, and yields positive benefits for non-native English speakers.

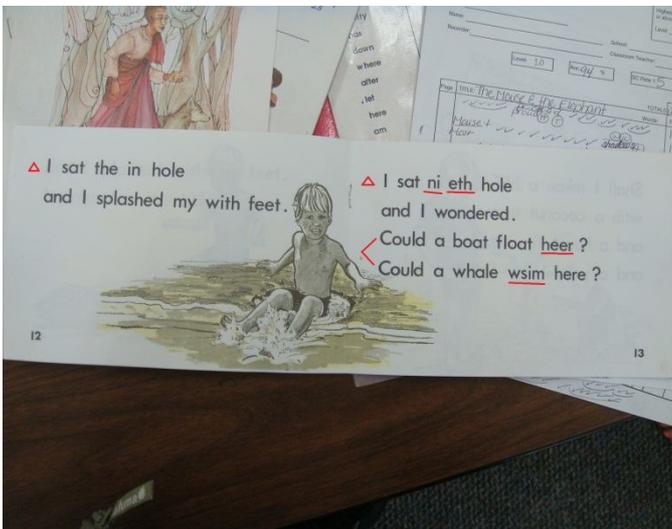
VI. How It Works - Examples



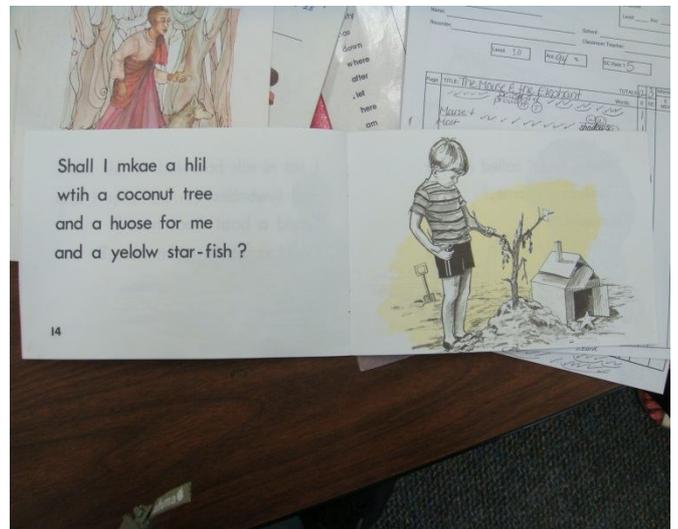
*This small book is called *Sand* used for RR Program.



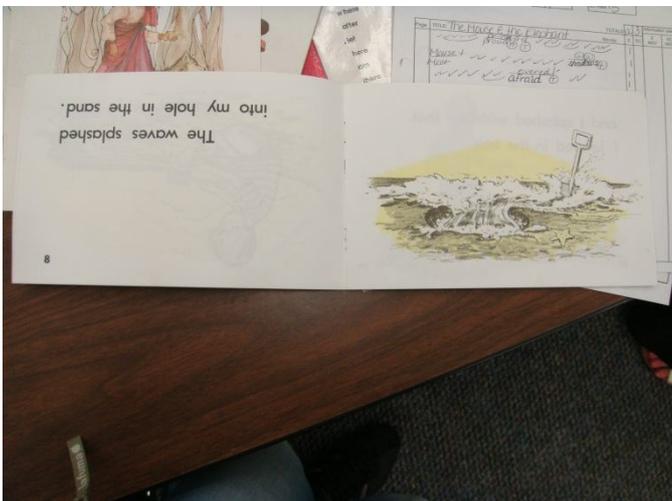
*Sentences are printed upside down on purpose for assessing children. The second line was printed as the first line while the second line is supposed to be in the first.



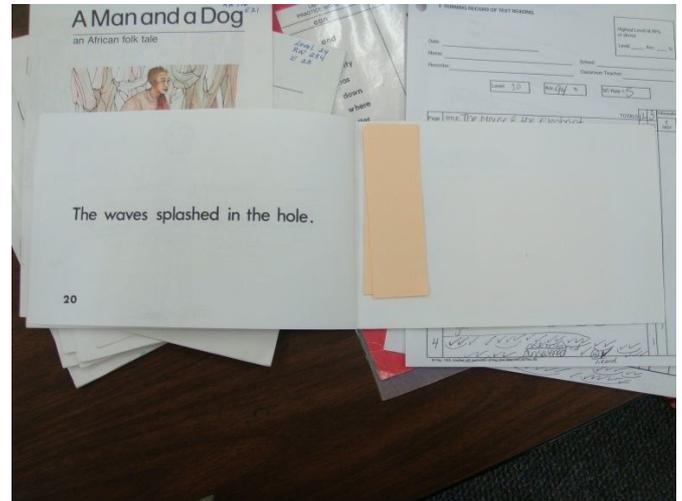
*Several misspelled words can be easily differentiated from similar sentences.



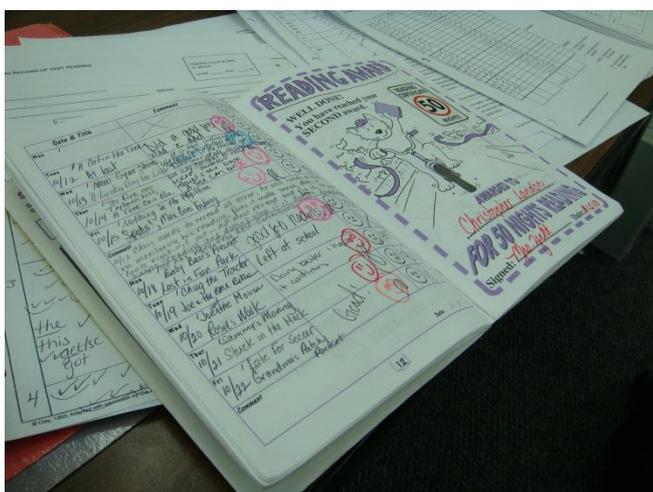
* Again, more misspelled words are easily identified by children.



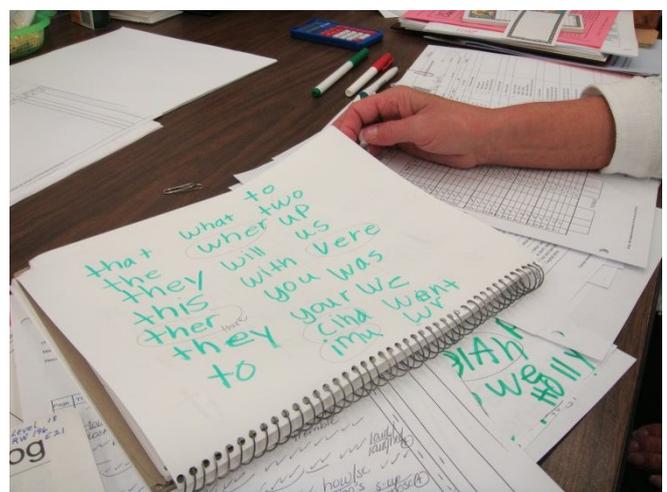
*Two pages with illustration and words are shown upside down. Again, structure and organization of the print is also a learning step can't be ignored!



* Define the meaning of the sentence. Here, children share what they know orally or in drawing format.



* Teacher keeps running records for daily reading.



* Children write down the words they learn from books.

VII. How I Apply in My Classrooms

First of all, I don't buy any new small books. I only make use of the handy resources around me to practice remedial assistance to low-achievement learners. For example, I re-read stories from my textbook. I then use some of the serial short stories as a supplement to the textbook. I now regard these stories as useable resources, whereas I ignored them in the past. Applicable strategies from word recognition, phonics, word building, sentence patterns, and meaning of the context are all included in my lessons now. I also follow the skills and strategies from "Sand," and make similar mistakes in stories or sentence patterns to assess the children after remedial assistance. However, with time constraints and the shortage of human resources, I teach 2-3 children at one time only. I also set goals for my struggling students and keep records. The objectives I set as a running record are listed as follow:

1. My Objectives for Remedial Help in Reading

- Be clear to print convention
- Recognize words in context
- Can follow simple written instructions
- Can match simple dialogues with characters
- Can predict with picture clues
- Show understanding of language in the context
- Give them opportunity to make up their own messages or language
- Can infer meaning

2. The Steps

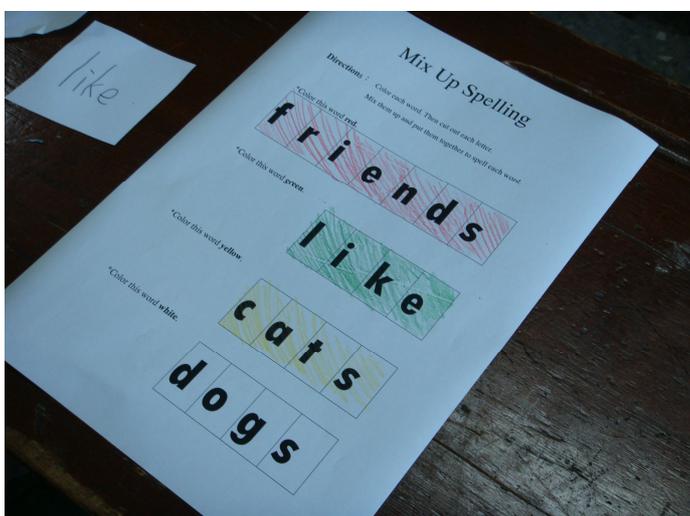
- 2-3 students at a time at a daily 15-20 minutes basis, either in the morning recess or lunch recess
- Silent reading for at least 2-3 times for their lesson dialogue as background information for new story
- Mark down unfamiliar or new words (*shown on picture below)
- Guessing meaning of new words from the pictures (*shown on picture below)
- Mix-up spelling activity to word building (*shown on picture below)
- Word collector
- My dictionary (*shown on picture below)
- Dictation Activity : students listen and write a sentence, cut up the sentence into words and then reassemble them into a sentence (*shown on picture below)
- Cut up the story into 4 pieces and re-sequencing them (*shown on picture below)
- Match up Activity (*shown on picture below)
- Find the errors activity
- New story reading (supplement mini-stories enclosed with the textbook) and go through with several steps mentioned above again
- Follow up : extra new technology to trigger their motivation in English learning, e.g. Leap Frog tag interactive learning to read system



*Independent reading- students mark down new or unfamiliar words.



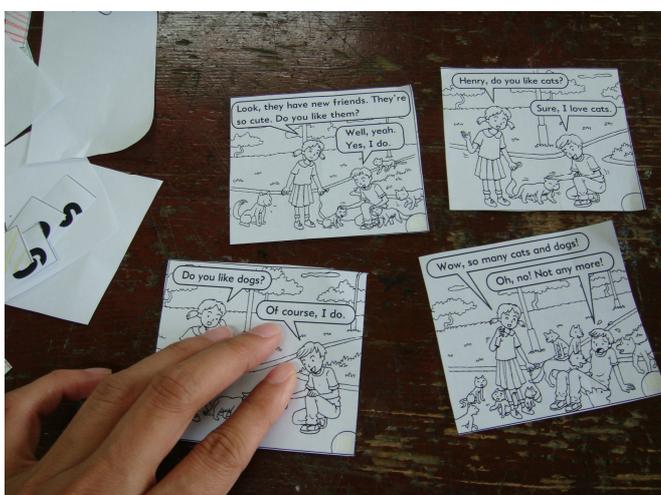
* Students try to guess meaning of new words from pictures.



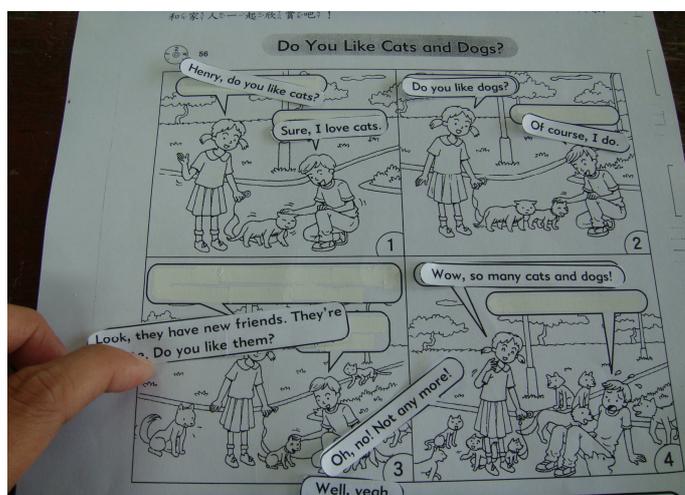
*Mix-up spelling activity to word building (from word recognition, coloring, cutting up to scrabbling)



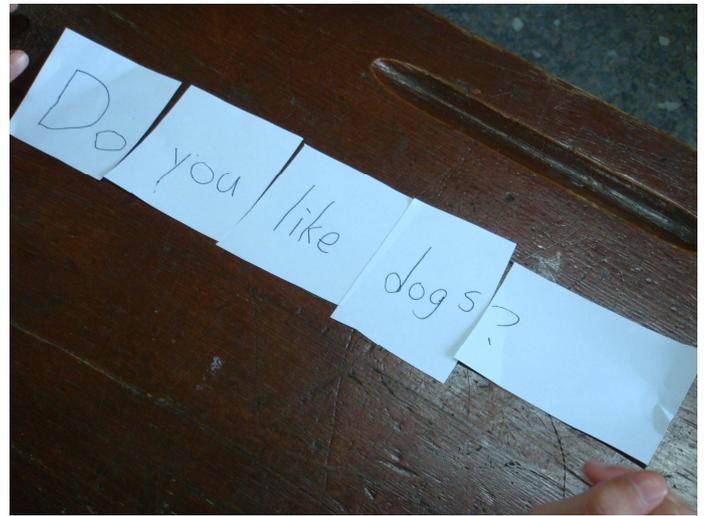
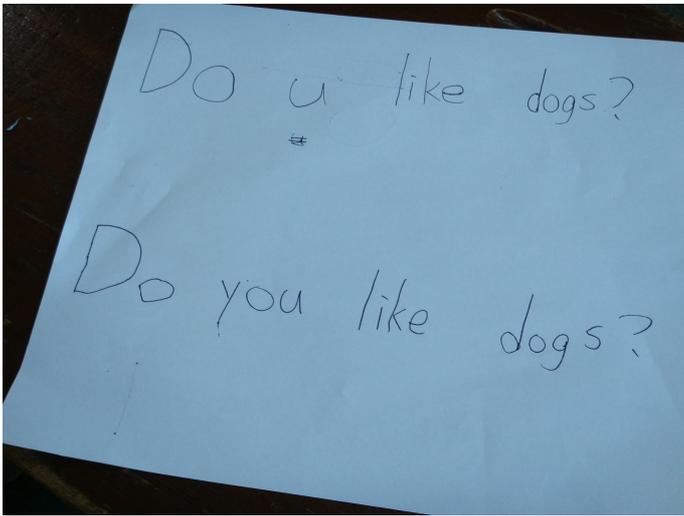
* Mix-up spelling activity



* Cutup the story into 4 pieces and re-sequencing them.

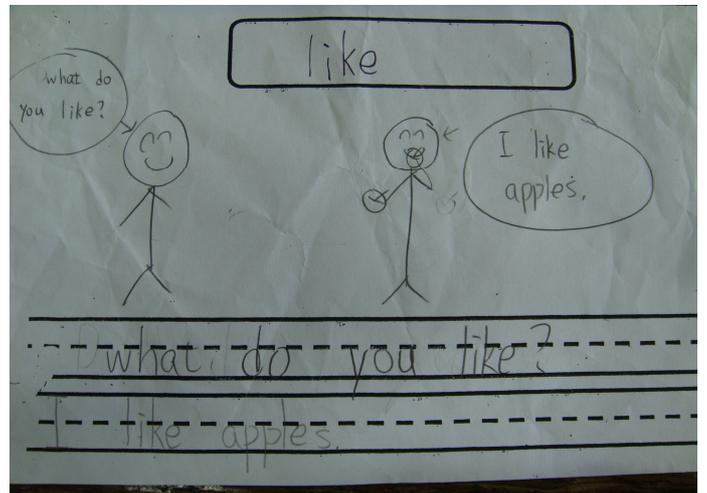
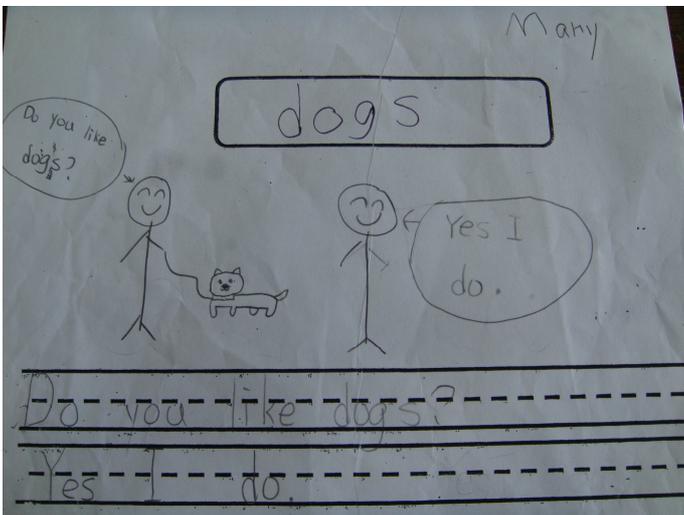


* Matching-up activity



* Dictation Activity : listen and write a sentence

* Dictation Activity : cut up the sentence into words and reassemble them



*My dictionary –new words are chosen from mix-up spelling activity and students make a sentence and draw.

* My dictionary –another example.

3. Conclusions

Although crucial, neither learning to read nor reading to learn is an easy task. Here are some tips that I found useful for encouraging those who are less confident in English learning. Those students who I believe deserve more attention and encouragement if possible. Only if they find self-fulfillment in reading will they enjoy reading and learning in the end and never give up.

- Encourage children to read aloud.
- While reading, finger-pointing word by word is useful and helpful in the beginning stages.
- Give them silent reading moment to practice and mark down unfamiliar or new vocabulary before you start to raise questions.
- Facing new words, without being panic, and guessing is a good start. Tell your children about strategies to find the clues from the pictures or stories, and so on.

- Take it easy from the easy and beginning level to start. No hurry!

Fast Thoughts Training

This idea is shared by a teacher for gifted students in East Elementary School. She works hard to train students to think quick and fast on a daily basis. I regard this as a good warm-up activity to start up classes. And it's good for vocabulary refreshing and brainstorming. According to the questions, students have to follow the prerequisites and write down answers within 2-3 minutes. Everyone shares their ideas later on. Here is the example.

P- think of three pets (words start with “p”, for example, pig.)

E- think of places you can find them (words start with “e”)

T- think of what they eat (words start with “t”)

However, I change the way to do it at my classes, because I teach 4th graders who are still in their early learning stages in vocabulary development. I always write down my question and read it to them with gestures or explanation. One question a week for them to think about and guess at. In class, students can either ask me questions about it or guess the answers right away. Here are some questions that I have shared with my students. My students enjoy it and always remind me to do this activity with them. Most often, they come up with more answers than I expect.

- What goes up but never comes down?
- What comes down but never goes up?
- What is the difference between here and there?
- What gets bigger when you turn it upside down?

Conclusions and Comments

1. Culture Matters

Language is more than words, text and sentences. It's the sum up of human activities, history and culture. What we learn is more than language itself but also culture. Language is to eliminate the barrier and boundary between people, therefore what I, as an English teacher in Taiwan, should know beyond the structure or meaning of sentences. Sports and Amish culture are things that I experienced and which impressed me most during this trip. And from these experiences, I realize how important the role of sports is for most people there. Sports and sports figures embody the state itself, school identities, and provide role models. As for the Amish, it's a mysterious culture for me. Although I've seen the movie, “*The Witness*” and the TV series, “*Grey's Anatomy*”, I can't believe that



one day I will see these people at school in real life. Additionally, the interaction that I had with my host family gave me the idea of the shape of American culture. Politeness, enthusiasm, and character mean a great deal to Americans, such as the people of Indiana. I also found my understanding of American English to change with exposure to slang, baseball terms, new food and plants, and even Spanish usage. Language is alive and new words seem to be created daily; therefore, I have to keep up with the speed of ever-changing American English. To sum up, this trip did much to broaden my mind and filled me with the true American spirit, so that I could go on to share what I saw and learned with my students. Of course, they are curious about what's behind English as a language, and the answer is American culture. I would not say what I see is what I know; rather, what is seen must also be learned.

2. Remedial Assistance is Necessary

During the recent changes in English Curriculum, it's a good time to start up remedial assistance for at-risk learners. Therefore, Reading Recovery is a good program and training for us to examine and evaluate those kids lagging behind or struggling in English learning. If we don't pull them from classes and help them, they will fall behind their next grade level in English learning. The sooner we start, the more benefits they will get.

Reference

School Wide Plan (SWP) and PL 221 document of Bloomfield and East Elementary

Reading Recovery Council of North America, *Reading Recovery and IDEA Legislation: Early Intervention Service and Response to Intervention*