

The Trip to Indiana, U.S.A

By Claire Huang

Introduction

Chicago! Portland! I am coming ☺

In May 2011, I flew to America with an education mission with two school principals and sixteen other English teachers from Taipei County. The two-week trip was a fantastic experience. The visiting tour, by accessing in primary schools and middle schools located in Chicago and Portland, make us think about and adjust our own teaching and also make our view wider in English education. On the other hand, I met many nice people there, the superintendent of Jay County, Tim Long; Redkey Elementary School principle, Tomas; my host family, Leslie and Steve and so on; it is you that make this trip unforgettable and remarkable.

In this report, the background information of Redkey Elementary School will be briefly introduced; followed by the summarization of Reading Recovery program, along with reading strategies used in class will be elaborated on next. Finally, my reflection and cultural experiences will be drawn as a conclusion.

Redkey Elementary School

The school I visited in Jay County, Indiana, was Redkey Elementary School. I love the atmosphere of the school, adorable kids, and its six characters pillars. Redkey has 209 students with 2 sections of every grade level 1-5 with one kindergarten. The principle, Tomas, is a gentle, gracious, and passionate educator. Meanwhile, he gave us lots of help in this trip and we had so much fun in the picnic time at his gorgeous house.



Reading Recovery Program

Reading Recovery is a research based intervention for reading.

It only serves the first graders who are far-behind in reading processing and vague in word recognitions. By short-term one-to-one tutoring, providing reading strategies and phonic skills, hopefully students can catch on to the concepts which needed in their reading and writing. Usually, the need-help students receive a half-hour to forty minutes lesson every school day for about 12-20 weeks with a specially trained Reading Recovery teacher. Reading Recovery teachers provoke students to meet grade-level expectation and through strategic guidance, hopefully students are able to process their work independently in the classroom.

Since 1984 when Reading Recovery began in the United States, approximately 75% of students who complete the full 12 to 20 week intervention can meet grade-level expectation in reading and writing. Follow-up studies indicate that most Reading Recovery students also do well on standardized tests and maintain their gains in later years.

(from http://www.readingrecovery.org/reading_recovery/facts/index.asp)

In short, the goal of the Reading Recovery program is to reduce the number of 1st graders who have difficulty on reading and writing processing. The Reading Recovery teachers not only teach phonics skill but also help student be able to use strategic processing to guide their reading.

At Redkey, I was lucky to observe Angela Couch's Reading Recovery class. I was impressed by her lucid instructions and her enthusiasm for education. I can sense she loves her job very much and I think she is a very professional teacher. Kids in Redkey are very lucky to have her.

In Red Key Elementary School, the test, the observation survey, will be given 3-4 times a year, beginning of year, beginning of program, end of program, and end of the school year. All results are entered on NDEC site at Ohio State University as database and used to prove R.R. really works. The skills involved in the test are letter identification, word test, concept about print, writing vocabulary, hearing sounds in words, and levels. According to Miss Couch, these six testing checks are elaborated as below:

1. Letter Identification

Most students know all upper/lower case letters by 1st grade. If they do not, Reading Recovery teachers make an ABC book and work hard at the beginning to check to see how fast and confusions they have.

2. Word Test - a list of 20 sight words

It is good to see how children decode the ones they do not know. Also teachers notice confusions they make and then decide why students are making them

3. Concepts of Print - What do children know about books

It is branched as following skills:

- a. Book handling skills - front of book, which way to go, left page before right
- b. Punctuation
- c. Visual scanning for letter, word, or line rearrangement (do they notice things are mixed around)
- d. One to one match (can they point to each word and then go on to the next line)
- e. Reversible words (on, no & was, saw)

4. Writing Vocabulary

The teacher set timer to see how many words a child can write in 10 minutes. First students write words they think of and then the teacher gives words she thinks they know. During the process, the teacher can notice how letters are formed in students' concepts and confusions they have.

5. Hearing Sounds in Words

In this part, the teacher dictates student a sentence that has all 37 sounds. Here are examples:

- *I have a big dog at home. Today I am going to take him to school.
- *I can see the red boat that we are going to have a ride in.
- *The bus is coming. It will stop here to let me get on.
- *The boy is riding his bike. He can go very fast on it.

6. Level of reading.

The books start at level 1 and go to level 30. Books get more difficult and longer as number gets higher. Reading Recovery teachers do running record. That is, they check marks for each word to see what kind of mistake a child is making. When score is below 90% or the teacher can tell there is no meaning, R.R teachers stop and say that is their reading level. The books Miss Couch teaches with are leveled also. She starts her teaching at the child's level and goes up. Her goal for the child is level 24 by the end of 1st grade. On the other hand, running records help determine what kind of mistakes a child is making and helps Miss Couch decides what she is going to teach next.

Finally, based on the diagnosed information from the test results, the teacher can know a child's current level and design the individual plan just right for him/her.

Procedures of Reading Recovery Program

In United States, Reading Recovery teachers continue to be trained each year they are teaching. At least 5 meetings each year and they have to attend the National Reading Recovery Conference in Columbus, Ohio every year.

Lesson components of Miss Couch's Reading Recovery class are routine, clear, and effective.

Step1. Fluent Writing

First, the teacher said three-four words the pupil knows and able to write quickly on chalkboard. Fluent writing can serve as a warm-up activity and also a review. Through trial and errors, students can get more familiar with letter sounds and phonics rules.



Step2. Fluent Reading

In this section, the pupil read one-two books which were read through before and the pupil has been familiar with. Sometimes, students were allowed to choose what they want to read aloud on their own. Before the student read, the teacher asked questions to help students recall the content of the story. During reading aloud, the teacher took notes for the sounds being wrongly pronounced (running record) or provided prompts and strategies while the pupil was stocked. After reading, the teacher checked his/her comprehension by prompting questions or the student was asked to briefly summarize the story.

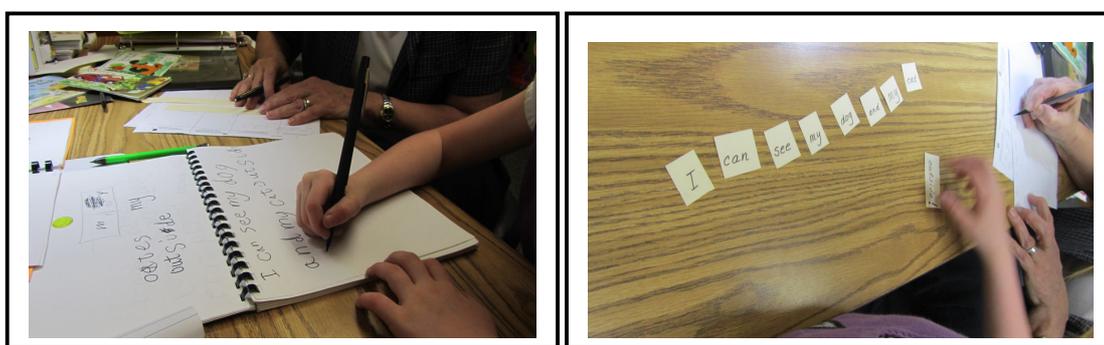
Step3. Record Book

Furthermore, the learner read a new book that assigned as homework yesterday.

The running records were kept by teacher while the kid was reading out loud. It is noted that when kids were stocked, the teacher gave prompts and provided strategies to help students solve the problem by themselves first. If they can't solve on their own, the teacher intervenes.

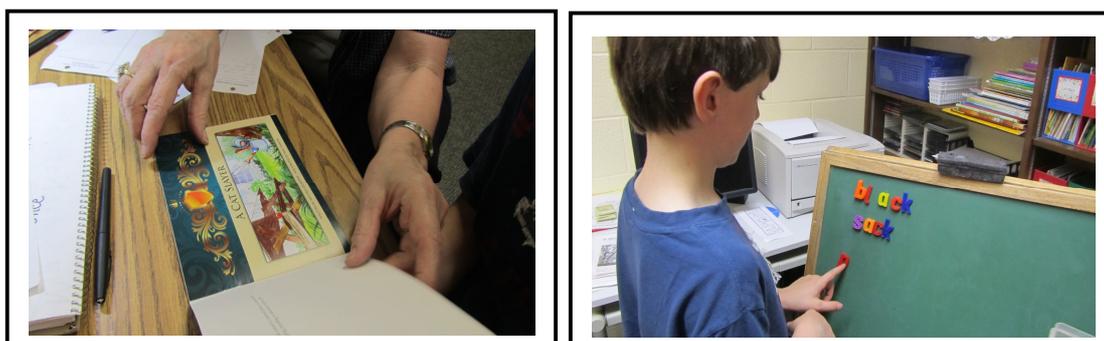
Step4. Writing

In this part, the student needed to produce at least one sentence to write on the notebook. At the same time, the teacher wrote the sentence, too. Then, the sentence was cut into pieces according to word units. The student brought them home to unscramble and stick them on notebook in order.



Step5. Read New Book

The student read a new book every school day. In the beginning, the teacher led the student to preview the story to build background knowledge and discuss unfamiliar concepts. After that, the student started to read aloud the story.



Reading Strategies

I was appreciated that Miss Couch let me access in her classroom to see the procedures of Reading Recovery lesson. The direct observations revealed the phenomenon of real practice and provided a coherent and more precise approach for teaching reading, in this case. In this part, the reading strategies used in Reading Recovery that I observed are elaborated and demonstrated.

a. Think about the story and what is going on.

Activating students' prior knowledge has been proven by much research that shown beneficial and effective. Background knowledge can be aroused by interpretation of topic-related pictures or by top-down previewing of the story.

b. Point to the word and make it match

Pointing to the word can let students much aware of what they are reading, strengthen their focus, and most important of all, it can help students develop left to right across page. For example, one student commonly says "was" as "saw". That is, while he is reading, he reads as an opposite way. Pointing to the word can help him realize what he is saying in the beginning consonant does not match with what he is pointing right now. At the same time, the kid can do self monitoring and self correcting. Referring to directional movement, it is useful to place a signal such as a sticker or an arrow to indicate the starting point in English reading is always from left to right.



c. Use color tape to cover the silent letters

Helping student to develop phonics skills is not always easy. Silent consonants sometimes are also very challenging for ELLs. The teacher used a green tape to cover the silent consonant, such as the "k" sound for "knee", "s" sound for "island". It can serve as a reminder or helper while the students are reading without companies at home.

d. Blank

It is found that when students come across the word they don't understand or don't know how to say it, they will stop reading and give up. Miss Couch encouraged students not to stop reading but to use "blank" to replace the word you don't know. The benefit is when students read through the sentences or the paragraph, the word can be possibly figured out by using context or educated guesses.

e. Reread the sentence to see if the word makes sense.

Students are told that after you think you have figured out the word, go back, reread and ask yourself the following questions:

Does it look right?

Does it sound right?

Does it make sense?

Here comes evidence from Miss Couch's class. The American kid shared the same difficulty with EFL learners, the recognition of letter "b" and letter "d". After a given wait time, the kid finally realized that the word "drave" didn't make sense in the sentences she read and then she self corrected it to "brave".

f. Check context if you don't know how to say the word, then you go back to check the word again

It was found that sometime kids might mispronounce the words because they were not aware of the discrepancy or only because they didn't know the word. For example, they say "that" instead of "the", "went" for "wanted" or "rested" for "raised". Miss Couch did not anxiously tell the kid that is wrong nor did she point out the right answer immediately. What Miss Couch did first was to ask the kid read again and said "Does that make sense?" or "Look at the picture and think what would make sense" to help the child figure out the right word on her own. If several tries were unsuccessful, the answers were then being told.

g. Pictures can always help

Pictures are beneficial for kids. First, pictures are the stimuli to arouse kids' interests and second, pictures can be a useful tool for quickly previewing or reviewing the story. Besides, pictures in a storybook can serve as visual aids and help students search the meanings while they come across difficulties in the reading process. Pictures are good references.

h. Look for a chunk you know

We need to base on what kids know to figure out and build up new words. That is, students look for the chunks they know first, such as *ing, ike, eat, ice, ack, ink, est*. What to do next is to put the first sound/cluster with the chunk as you say the word. For example, *tr + eat = treat, sl + ice = slice, spr + ing = spring*

i. Cross-checking

The kid can check their predictions by looking at clues in lines. While a child

was reading aloud, he/she can hear the sounds in a word he/she speaks and check whether the expected letters are there. After a wrong response from the clues in context or from the teacher, he can make another attempt at the word. During the process, Miss Couch said “Check to see if what you read look right and sounds right to you?” or “It could be...but look at...” After several tries, the pupil made a verbal comment on mismatch, such as “No!” or “That’s not right!”

j. Fluency

How it sounds is very important. When a student read word by word and used an even tone, Miss Couch reminded her that try to read as we are talking in daily life and watch for punctuation to make some changes in voice.

Miss Couch stated “children have to be flexible in using strategies. If one thing they try does not help, they have to try something else until they have meaning.”

At last, I would like to share Miss Couch’s reading strategies bookmaker that she used to remind her students. There are some useful prompting questions listed in it and we can make them as references when we teach English reading to our students.

1. What would make sense?
2. Does it sound right?
3. Are there any chunks I know?
4. Look for clues.
5. Are there any words that just pop out?
6. Backtrack and read it again.
7. Jump over the tricky word.
8. Backtrack and read it again.

Reflection and Conclusion

The two-week American trip has been a fantastic experience for me and it truly broadens my view of America and the education. Different countries, different people, different philosophy, but we share the same goal, to make our kids better! We are all stepping forward and trying very hard.

One thing makes me very impressive is the way the Indianans treated people, nice, gentle, and polite. I would like to firstly show my respects and appreciations to several special people in the journey. During the days in Indiana, Dr. Long and Tomas took care us in many expects, food, uploading and downloading our very HEAVY luggage, check-in hotels, how we did at schools, and so on. I saw that and

we all appreciated from deep in heart. Principle Tomas arranged well for me in the days at Redkey. It made me more easier to accommodate the environment and got what I need to see and learn. I remember on the last day we got together in school bus on the way to hotel, Dr. Long encouraged us always think positive and not to fear to make a change. He truly set us a great model to be a good leader and a good host.



Second, I have to thank Leslie and Steve, my host family, for showing me a great fun. I can feel they truly welcomed me and tried their best to show me the best of Indiana. I am so blessed to have them! I wish the days with them can be longer. Leslie is an incredible horse rider! She took us to a horse farm to have a leading ride. Also, the visit to Amish family was a wonderful and unforgettable experience.



Next, I would like to express my special thanks to Angela Couch, the Reading Recovery teacher at Redkey Elementary school, generously demonstrated me the

components of her organized class and patiently answered my numerous questions toward R.R. program. Without her, I cannot finish this report. Moreover, from her, I see the enthusiasm of a life-long career that we all need to obtain and the spirit of American education.



Lastly, I have to express my gratefulness to the teachers and people involved in this exchange program. Thanks to New Taipei City government, Principle Hu, Principle Chen, and Teacher Yvonne for planning and arranging this learning tour. You deserve so much praise. Thanks to the executive staffs of Taipei Economic and Cultural office in Chicago for being very helpful and informative. Thanks to the faculty and kids in Redkey Elementary School for being extremely kind and friendly to me, a total stranger. One month has passed and I still miss the trip, the people, and the life in U.S.A. a lot. I know the friendship will go on and one day in the future, we will meet at some place in the world. We all look forward the reunion. Moreover, I truly hope that the learning tours issued by New Taipei City between Taiwan and other English-speaking countries will keep holding on. We all benefit from that for sure.

