

The Learning Trip to California 2011

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I. Preface



In October 2011, I was very lucky to have the chance to attend the international short-term training program supported by the Education Bureau of New Taipei City Government. During the first week, I observed ESL (English as a Second Language) classes and joined English Language Institute Workshop at ABC Adult School in Cerritos, California. I learned some different teaching methods and techniques the ESL teachers used in ESL instructional programs. Also, I was impressed by their passion of teaching and considerate teaching style. Besides, I took part in the annual Harvest Parade at Stowers Elementary School. That was an unforgettable event of international cultural exchange for me. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Pao-Ling Guo who is the principal of ABC Adult School. She was responsible for the whole visiting schedule and tried her best to meet our various needs, no matter how difficult some of them might have been. During the second week, I visited the class of 5th Grade at Elliott Elementary School



and the class of 1st Grade at Cerritos Elementary School. There are big differences in the daily schedules and learning styles of elementary school students between Taiwan and the

United States.

II. English Language Institute Workshop at ABC Adult School

A. Mission and Philosophy

The English Language Institute is established for instructors from different countries who are interested in learning instructional strategies and methodologies and gaining experiences in American language classrooms. English Language Institute workshops are taught by some trainers who have many years of teaching experience and are famous for their professional expertise at ABC Adult School. They deeply believe that all students learn better when learning activities are creative and meaningful. Therefore, the teacher training concentrates on methodologies and strategies that boost energetic participation.

B. Songs, Chants, and Drama



Songs usually create a relaxing and friendly learning atmosphere. It's good for teachers to use some famous songs or rhythms as the "ice breakers" in their new classes. Firstly, the trainers used a lot of adaptation of common songs such as "I'm Glad to Meet You" and "Speak, Speak, Speak your English" to teach English. After working on the two examples, we were asked to cooperate with our team members to decide on a familiar tune, write new English lyrics and then teach it to the rest of the class. It was fun and inspiring when we demonstrated our ideas with each other.

Secondly, we learned a rhyme which focused on the use of subject pronouns and action verbs. Subject Verb agreement was the teaching goal in this rhyme. After this



activity, I realized that chants in combination with grammar teaching ensured the automatism of language learning process for learners.

Finally, we researched on the process of dramatizing a child's story through "tableaux" including story telling, structure analyzing, and team work. The trainer read the story "the 3 Little Pigs". After that, we were assigned to take turns to come up with some frozen pictures to dramatize the story. In that way, dramatization helped to gain a more lasting retention of information than verbal story telling alone.

C. Vocabulary and Cooperative Learning

"Conversation Bag Activity" focused on practicing a vocabulary recall that involved listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. The trainers prepared questions on individual strips of paper to put into the bag.

There were various questions about some informative topics for us. They also prepared a few number cards for discussion groups, so each of us got a number card. The card was for discussion groups in the end of the activity. Each of us took one question strip from the conversation bag. Then we had to ask 3 people in the class the question we got from the trainers to record their names and answers on our papers. We should not ask anyone who had the same number on their name card. After we all finished asking questions, we sat in our discussion groups that had the same number on our cards. In the discussion groups, we took turns to report our own questions and



answers we wrote down. When all members of each group had reported, then we could ask our group members the same questions and had a short group discussion. In my opinion, this activity encouraged language learners to integrate four skills to develop communicational competence to collect any answers they got effectively. The trainers also offered a website (www.iteslj.org) to help us to search for more

conversation questions.

In addition, the trainers introduced the song "Head and Shoulders". The theme of body parts

was taught in this song. After we sang the song, we were put into groups of four. Each person in the group was assigned a role: the model and spell checker, the tracer and spell checker, the labeler for the head, and the labeler for the body. According to that, the tracer traced the outline of the model's body on the butcher paper. Then the 2 labelers labeled the body parts in the song. We could write in both English and our first language. In this way, we could work with our group members to use the vocabulary words through the way of cooperative learning in the process of language learning.

D. Writing and Conversation

When it comes to the strategies of developing writing skills, the first factor that may be taken into consideration is grammar. Developing good writing skills is a process of discovering one's "grammar errors" and learning how to correct these errors. According to that, the trainers shared some methodologies that encouraged us to make informative conversations with each other in the process of developing writing skills.

First, in the activity of "Inside/ Outside" we were labeled as 1s and 2s. The 1s were requested to make a circle, and the 2s were asked to make a circle around 1s. Then everyone faced their partners and greeted with each other. We got some daily topics to have some conversations. The topics were as follows:

1. Where are you staying?
2. I'm staying in ____ with _____.
3. Do they have any children?
4. Yes, they do. They have ____./ No, they don't.
5. Do they have any pets?
6. Yes, they do. They have ____./ No, they don't.
7. How many hours sleep did you get last night?
8. I got _____.
9. What have you had to eat?
10. I've had _____.
11. What are you going to do this weekend?
12. I'm going to _____.

Owing to the limited time of conversations, the trainers rang the bell to signal stop. After that, the 2s had to move 2 people to meet the new partners, greet and practice new

conversations. The purpose of this activity aimed at developing proper conversation skills to get important messages in the conversations.

Secondly, in order to finish the “Conversation Tasks”, we copied one or two questions from the trainers. Then we asked 8 people the question in the limited time. After that, we wrote down each person’s name and important messages. When we all finished asking the questions, we took advantage of the interview information to write sentences on the writing papers. I realized that it was good for language learners to use their proper conversation skills to develop writing skills.

Thirdly, in the activity of “Interactive Writing”, every group got a picture of a person. The picture was attached to the writing paper with a paperclip. The trainers wrote down the “Character Wheel” that included several questions on the whiteboard. The questions in the “Character Wheel” were as follows:

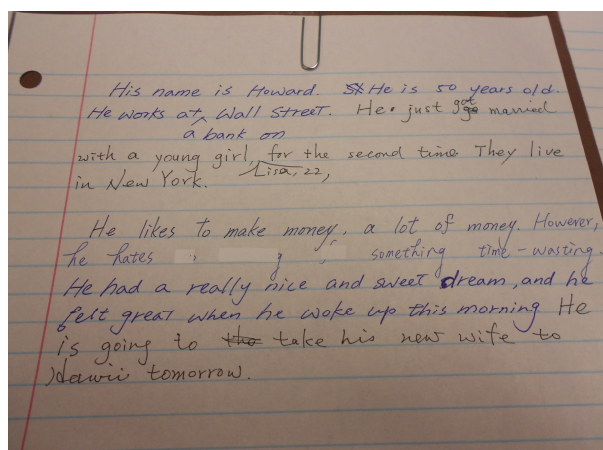
1. What is his/her name? How old is he/she? Where does he/she work?
2. Is she/ he married or single? Who does he/she live with? Where does he/ she live?
3. What is something this person really likes?
4. What is something this person really doesn’t like?
5. What did he/she do yesterday? How did he/ she feel about it?
6. What will this person do tomorrow? Why?



the group had read the story, we voted to decide on the story we liked the best.

Finally, the trainers shared some thoughts and suggestions for using moves in the classroom. In their opinion, teachers could list the key vocabulary words and

Each member of our groups answered one question about the person in the picture and then gave the picture to the partner who was sitting next to. After we finished writing, we took turns to show the picture and read the story to the other members in the group. Then a person from each group came up and read the story in front of the class. After each person in



phrases in advance of watching the movie scene. Then teachers could start to discuss with students about the definition or meaning of the vocabulary words and phrases. After that, the whole class could watch the movie scene again and review the vocabulary words. Or teachers could rewrite the movie as a short story and then read the story to students. After that, they could watch the movie to discuss questions with each other. In addition, the trainers offered some sources for movie reviews. The websites were as follows:

1. www.rottentomatoes.com
2. www.imdb.com
3. www.pluggedin.com

E. Improving Listening Skills

Listening is undoubtedly the most frequently used language skill when speaking of communication competence. However, students develop their listening skills effectively if teachers could bridge the gap between classroom materials and authentic materials. Therefore, the trainers focused on the teaching method, Total Physical Response, to help learners to listen first, understand visually, lower anxiety, and so on. Then the trainers shared an example of Total Physical Response lesson: how to make a booklet from single sheet of paper? In order to make a booklet step by step, we obtained some strategies such as “Clarification Strategies” to practice listening skills. The “Clarification Strategies” were as follows:

Excuse me?

Pardon me?

Say it again, please?

Can you repeat that?

Would you speak more slowly?

In addition, we also practiced the cloze activity using songs and films. That gave us the chance to think about the listening difficulties language learners may face. So we need to take the speed of

the songs, the accents of the singers, and the vocabulary abilities of the learners into consideration when we design the cloze activity using songs or films.

“Peer Dictation” was a kind of information gap task for learners to work in pair. In order to finish the task, my partner had to read a sentence to me, answer my requests for



clarification, and watch me write. When I finished all the sentences he dictated to me, it was my turn to read a sentence to him, answer his requests for clarification, and watch him write.

“Participatory Listening” was a game-like activity. One person read a story in front of the class. The rest of class was divided into two teams. Each member of the 2 teams was assigned to take turns to use the fly swatters to clap the key words on the whiteboard immediately when the person read the same key words of the story. The purpose of the activity was to offer a cooperative learning atmosphere which could help learners to lower their learning anxiety and raise the motivation to listen first.

III. Conclusion

After the two-week fruitful trip in California, I would like to express my deep appreciation to all the instructors and staff at ABC Adult School, Stowers Elementary School, Elliott Elementary School, and Cerritos Elementary School. All their effort has made this trip so beneficial and impressive. In addition, I am very grateful to Eurique and Fiona Huertas and their lovely daughter, Kasidy for being my host family. They treated me with passion and hospitality. The two-week American life with them has become my valuable memories and made me believe that beautiful people exist everywhere. Most important of all, I would like to give my special thanks to New Taipei City Government for offering me the precious opportunity to enjoy a taste of American life. The learning trip to California has surely had a positive and beneficial influence on my instructional strategies and techniques in teaching English.