

# Reading and Writing Strategies in Cooperative Learning

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First of all, I would like to thank the Bureau of Education of New Taipei City for giving me this amazing opportunity to visit so many schools in New Jersey and New York City in the U.S.A.. In this trip, I have learned so much about cooperative learning and teaching reading and writing strategies in primary schools. Furthermore, I am so grateful for the people who had provided us with so many assistance during this visit in New Jersey and New York, especially Charlin Chang, director of Education Division of Taiwan Economic and Cultural Office in New York, Principal and teachers in Fidelity Chinese School in New Jersey, as well as the students in Columbia University, they did help us a lot in these fourteen days. They not only took good care of us mentally and physically, but also shared with us so many practical teaching methods and resources that we can apply directly in our class back in Taiwan. The following paragraphs are about the findings and my teaching feedback during this trip to the United States.

## A. Reading for Writing and Writing for Reading

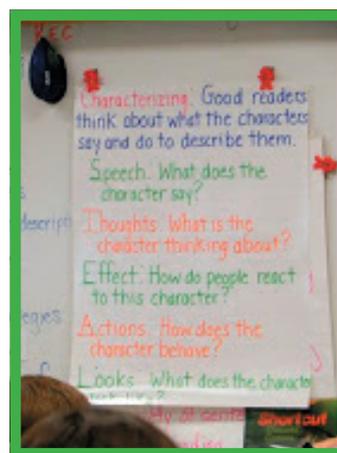
### Mini Lesson

From the observation in primary school classrooms, I noticed that teachers in America usually started a class by gathering all the students to the front of the classroom sitting on the ground or carpet. In this section, teachers would tell children what they were going to learn that day, and what they were expected to do for this class. Most of the time, teachers would quickly review the strategies and content they had learned yesterday, and after that, they asked some questions about the content to see if students did their preview jobs at home before they come to this class. These questions were often open-ended questions that allowed all the students to express their ideas as long as what they said were reasonable and logical. Most importantly,





This teaching method helps learners to learn how to read by using these reading strategies, and shows students ways to interact with the author by writing down ideas supported by clues they found from their previous reading. In the United States, reading and writing classes are usually put together, and teach as a whole concept. Teachers tend to use the reading materials to teach writing, that is, teachers teach learners strategies to read to get better comprehension, and show students the way to respond to author's questions by writing down their points of view (a paragraph) with a main sentence and a lot of supportive sentences.



## Turn and Talk

This is the technique that are widely used in reading class. First of all, teachers would ask questions about the content, after hearing the questions, students quickly turn to someone next to him or her (most of the time in pairs) to talk about their ideas. During this process, students are encouraged to share opinions with others before they talk to the whole class later on.



Students who don't know much about this topic can listen to what people said and collect ideas at this moment. For those who are shy can use this chance to talk to someone in pairs, and this opportunity gives him or her feel safe and less anxious. This activity is practical and successful because it provides students places and time to share feelings and thoughts. I will definitely apply this activity to my class more because I found myself talk more than students, and I don't think this is a good idea for language learners.

## Group Task Time

No matter in reading or writing class, after mini lesson time, teachers would assign group tasks or deliver worksheets to different groups of students according to their level or interests, and they had to complete the worksheet or the task together as a group. Every student had his or her own job,



some might be responsible for finding evidence from the book, some might talk about what they knew about the topic, and some might write down group opinions. In this activity, every student had different task to do and most importantly, they could learn not only the knowledge from the learning materials, but also the way to interact with people through the process of cooperation.

### Whole Class Sharing

Before the whole class sharing time, teachers would give each student “Editing and Revising Checklist.” At this moment, they had to work in groups to check spellings or sentences with the checklist. At the same time, the teacher would spend time talking to someone who needed extra help. When every one had done his or her own work, the teacher then invited students to express their group ideas, and every body were encouraged positively to give feedbacks for each other.



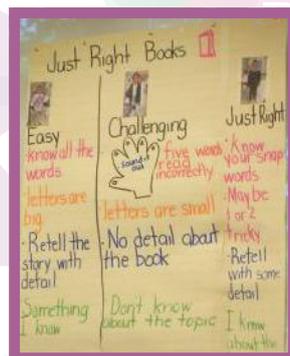
## B. Material Choosing and Evaluation Reading and Writing Materials

### Reading and Writing Materials

In New York, teachers tend to prepare lessons together, they would spend around 10 hours a week together to design their teaching activities and teaching materials. Teachers collect and give students lots of interesting and authentic materials as reading tasks. During the observation, I found that most students really enjoy reading because the book or the article that they’re reading have meaning to them. When students have strong motives to read, they read for themselves, not for scores or any body else, and that’s the main purpose for reading.

### Leveled Reading Books

In America, in every classroom, there is always a reading area where books are put into different baskets according to the levels. There are two types of book: One is fiction, and the other is nonfiction. Students usually get to choose 4 books that they’re interested in from both types of book and take them home to read for a week. Basically, Students were taught to choose books by the strategy of the “Just Right Book.” Almost



every student knew that books were divided into three categories: easy, challenging and just right. All they have to do is to pick the book that has only one or two difficult words in a page, and after generally reading over the whole book, they could retell the book with some details and will be able to know the topic.

As for how to choose suitable books for different students as reading materials, the most common way is to give students reading pretest. The reading pretest result will be the general standard for teachers to determine what level of books that students will read for the next couple months. During the whole week, students had to read these four books and could not change any book for any reason once they had chosen. If they finished reading, they were asked to reread the same material from different perspectives, or by different strategies. That's really impressive and unbelievable because students in America are trained to do so when they are so little, but many students in Taiwan are still asked to memorize these unimportant details from the text books, just what we did decades ago.

### **Evaluation-“My Daily Reading Log” and “Running Record”**

Students kept “My Daily Reading Log” wherever and whenever they wanted as long as their parents would sign on it and students would be able to fill in information in the form, for instance, book title, page started, page ended, genre, places to read, date, and so on.

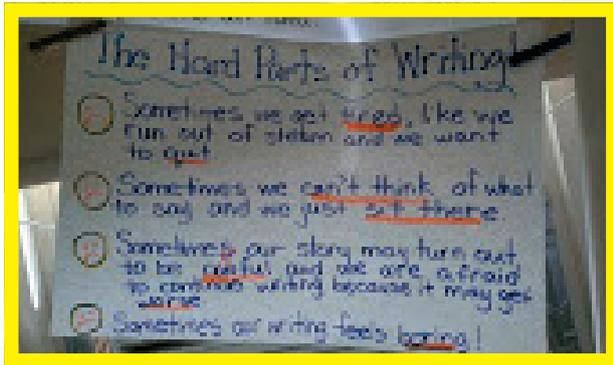
Teachers had to keep the “Running Record” for every student at least three to four times a year to check their reading comprehension and reading fluency ability. In this test, students were only allowed to make less than five mistakes, and if the learner were qualified to pass the test, they could move to next level to read. Children in the U.S. are often encouraged



to compete with themselves, not others. Students all know that other classmates in the same class read different level books, and no one should laugh at someone who is slow. They are taught that people learn in different pace, and they had to learn and show respect to each other.

### **C. Conclusion**

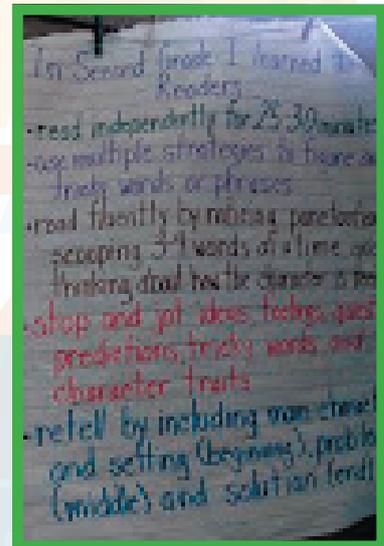
In Taiwan, teachers tend to spend too much time on lecturing without giving students enough time practicing individually and interacting with others in groups.



In addition, we also focus too much on teaching the content of text books without providing extra materials for learning. What's worse, we often put too much efforts on teaching the things that are less important for enhancing students' learning ability. On the contrary, we seem to overemphasize the importance

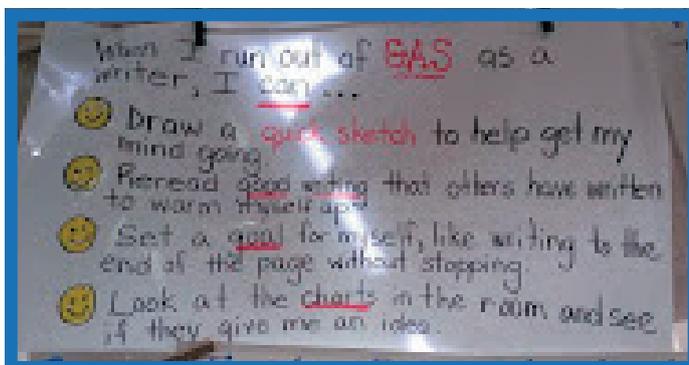
of basic learning training, such as vocabulary teaching and drilling. Even worse, some teachers don't even teach reading in class, not to mention letting students have the access to read real books in class. The fact is that learners would actually learn more vocabulary and reading or writing skills by learning directly from authentic and meaningful materials; nevertheless, sadly teachers in Taiwan seldom teach students strategies of learning, especially in the field of reading or writing. In other words, teachers don't really take time developing students with the ability of learning skills, such as taking notes, finding evidences to support their ideas, etc.

As a result, I believe that if teachers in Taiwan can provide our learners with strategies that can actually help them improve reading comprehension ability and understand what the author want them to know, students will undoubtedly learn effectively and think more logically. However, the cruel reality is that many children in Taiwan now don't even know what the main idea is after reading the whole article or story, but ironically, what they do best is recalling the details, such as the date of the event or the number of the characters, these are the things that are not helpful to their understanding of the reading. As a matter of fact, the ability of finding answers that are directly shown on the page could be important for students just at the beginning of the reading process because they might get a basic understanding of the reading material; however, as learners move on reading, what they need to learn most are the abilities to find out what the author wants readers to know, to be able to make connections to their daily lives or prior experiences, and to be able to respond to the questions or moral lessons that the author wants them to think. You might be curious who on earth made our children learn and think this way? The answer is us,

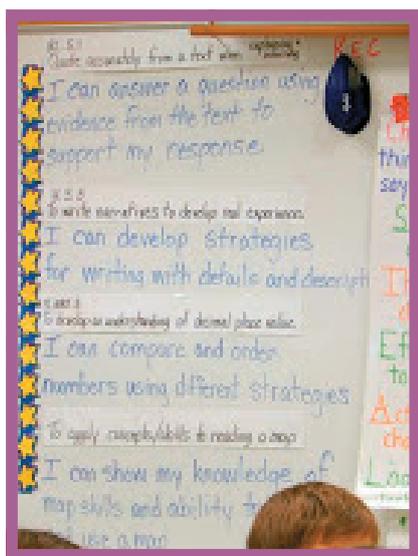


teachers in Taiwan. It is our responsibility to equip our students with abilities to learn cooperatively and to think logically and critically.

In my opinion, teachers in the United States have cultivated a lot on teaching students strategies of learning. In reading and writing classes, teachers were willing and eager to demonstrate strategies or skills that help readers understand better about the reading material.



Most importantly, right after showing students the ways to read or write, they would give students more time and chances to practice the skills that they have just learned. That is, teachers only used about 10-15 minutes to teach, and gave children the rest of the time to apply the strategy right away, and to work with other group members to complete their task together. During this 20 minutes, teachers either gathered students who need extra help, or work group by group to check students' understanding. Teachers in America made good use of the time in class and tried their best to make sure that every learner was on the right track of practicing the target strategy. For the last 5-10 minutes of the class, teachers would gather all students' attention back together by asking them to share what they had learned about the content and what strategies they had applied to help them finding the evidence to support their ideas.



Learners in the U.S. seem trained well by using strategies to complete their tasks, and they could easily work with others in pairs or in groups. The most impressive thing was that students could share with people their opinions confidently in the public, and would be able to tell people why they would think this way and where to find evidence. In sum, this is also the part that we need to work hard. Teachers in Taiwan really have to step out of the comfort zone to change the way we are used to teach, to change what we think the best for learners, and to keep on learning as a teacher.