



# An Analysis of English Learning and Teaching Environment: A Case on Taiwan and the States

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## Introduction

As water is to fish, so is environment to learning and teaching. What the environment is composed of definitely plays an essential role in learning and teaching. From what I observed in the States, I realized that learning environment, in which teacher and students interact with each other on a daily basis, does play a key role in successful English learning and teaching. In the following paragraphs, I will illustrate two aspects of environment and make comparisons between Taiwan and the States as well in order to understand more about the similarities and dissimilarities. Last but not least, thoughts about how to deal with those dissimilarities will be highlighted.

## Environment for Students' Learning

Based on my observation in the States, I will discuss the environment for students' learning in the following three parts: stationery supplies, peer learning and character cultivation plus reading reinforcement and diverse accesses to learning.

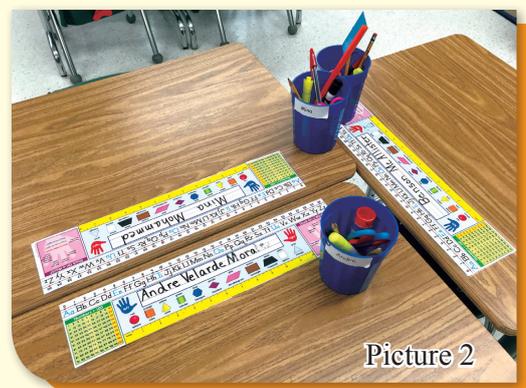
### 1. Stationery Supplies

We all understand that you cannot make bricks without straw. This implies how important tools are and there is no exception to learning. As the picture shows (See Picture 1), students have stationery supplies just right available on their desk so whenever they need to use they can easily get them and continue their learning, color the worksheet or cut and glue stuff for instance. I believe this facilitates students' learning in a way that teacher does not always need to remind students of getting such basic supplies ready. Therefore, teacher can go help the students in need instead of running back and forth carrying supplies and distributing them. Here in Taiwan very often we ask students to prepare their stationery supplies on their own. However, there are always some kids very easily lose their supplies so precious learning time is spent on looking for the supplies or borrowing them from their friends which usually ends up with leaving themselves behind learning. Therefore, if such stationery supplies are available on the desk for students to use, maybe they can pay full attention to learning and they can learn better.



Picture 1

Besides stationery supplies, I also noticed that on each student's desk there is a learning banner (See Picture 2) full of basic information such as alphabet (capital and lowercase letters both), numbers 1-100, shapes, colors, even a little strategy showing how to deal with tricky words. I was really amazed by such a small learning banner as it contains so much learning information for students to easily make



Picture 2

reference to for their daily learning. I believe such a learning banner must help students in many ways. For example, when they are uncertain about the correct positions of the alphabet or when they simply forgot how to name some shapes, with the help of this learning banner, they do not have to go ask their teacher about it every single time when they have questions. Instead, they can do self-learning which I believe is an indispensable step for independent learning. Here in Taiwan we don't prepare such learning banners for each student in the class. So it is quite natural that students would raise their hands and ask questions about what may be settled easily and explicitly if they have such learning banners.

## 2. Peer Learning and Character Cultivation

As for peer learning and character cultivation, from the observation in the States I noticed that students' works, no matter what kind, are always displayed on the walls in the hallway on campus (See Picture 3 and Picture 4). Displaying students' works makes students feel not only respected but also proud of themselves. This action may arouse students' intrinsic motivation that facilitates their learning. Appreciating each other's works everywhere around the school is a great way not only to cultivate students' respectfulness but also to develop their sense of sharing let alone make them learn from others. In addition, students get to reinforce their learning interestingly by browsing someone else's work when walking in the hallway. Here in Taiwan we do display students' works such as prized ones, and we display works that are purposeful for some promotions as well. For instance, we post students' posters for official promotions of health or public safety issues, monthly moral core values, etc. Although we also display students' learning worksheets or art works in classrooms, yet it seems to lack something to make learning experience as a whole, instead of bits and pieces scattered around.



Picture 3



Picture 4

### 3. Reading Reinforcement and Diverse Accesses to Learning

Regarding reading reinforcement and diverse accesses to learning, I observed that there is a small library in each classroom decorated and designed by the homeroom teacher (See Picture 5 and Picture 6). All the small class libraries I visited in the States all have three things in common: organized, comfortable, and colorful. Take “organized” for example: all the books are categorized either by alphabetic order, content types, or different topics/themes. Some are even color-coded for young learners. Due to such a well-organized class library, students get to easily find the books of their interest to read to reinforce their learning, no matter what the content is. Besides such independent reading, teacher also does guided reading in class and teaches students reading strategies. So it is just like two sides of a coin, the importance of either cannot be overstated. As for “comfortable” and “colorful”, I believe both play essential roles in students’ reading when it comes to cultivating students’ intrinsic motivation for reading to learn. Here in Taiwan, we also have such class libraries and both Chinese and English books are available. Probably what we have to do more is to encourage students to read English books of their interest for starters then teach them to choose books that suit their level when they become proficient readers.



Picture 5



Picture 6

One more thing I would like to add about diverse accesses to learning is I noticed that American teachers tend to use sticky posters or big poster paper to teach so that after teaching, they can tear the sheets off and paste/post them around the classroom. It is like displaying what students have been learning in the classroom for them to make reference to at anytime, whenever there is a need to. For instance, in a math class (See Picture 7), the teacher demonstrated three concepts about how to do multiplication then asked students to discuss in groups and come up with their own examples. After the discussion, students went to the sticky posters and wrote down their examples. I believe later the teacher would tear the sheet off then paste it on the wall or the board so that students can easily see and review what they have been learning. It is really a good way to reinforce students’ learning, math concepts in this case.



Picture 7

Another example is from a grade four's classroom (See Picture 8). On the wall there are two big posters about the station work that the class has been doing. On the posters students can easily find the information about what to do with each station, what tasks it includes, strategies for word study, even teacher's expectations for each station. In this way, during the station work, whenever students forget what to do or how to do it, instead of going and asking the teacher, they can just go to the posters and look for answers. The teacher gets to focus on working with some students and helping them with some tricky words even completing the worksheets for making a summary of the reader they have been reading. In other words, with the help of such posters, learning goes smoothly in the class and both teacher and students enjoy teaching and learning, simultaneously!



## Environment for Teachers' Teaching

Based on my observation in the States, I will discuss the environment for teachers' teaching in the following five parts: class job distribution, classroom management, ready-to-use posters, morning meetings, and seating arrangement.

### 1. Class Job Distribution

Well goes an old saying, "Unity is strength." I believe this is the same with class job distribution. From what I observed in the States, I understand that one of the best ways to engage students in teacher's teaching is to distribute different class jobs to the students. As the picture shows (See Picture 9), there are several class jobs such as line leader, paper passer, lunch sweepers, calendar, pencil, library, etc. I believe kids all love to help their teacher and it seems just a way to satisfy their desires. However, such class job distribution definitely means more than that. By assigning class jobs wisely, based on students' personalities for instance, teacher can cultivate students' sense of responsibility as well as cooperation. In addition, teaching itself also benefits from these class job helpers as teacher gets to focus more on the teaching and also gets to learn with the students together. Put it more specifically, making students learn from doing these diverse class jobs serves as a kind of daily-life learning which is as important as knowledge learning. Another example is very interesting (See Picture 10). From the picture we can see that almost everyone in the class has a job to do for the class. I felt amazed upon seeing this poster, as I believe the teacher must have spent much time coming up with all these different jobs for the students. One of the advantages of having everyone a job is that they may feel themselves important to the class because every single job is essential and they can make the class better. I think this is also a very good opportunity for students to learn skills they need in daily lives, which also expand their knowledge. After all,



not all knowledge comes from books. Here in Taiwan we also have lots of classroom helpers and from my observation, kids all love being teacher's helpers. Just that in terms of English class, maybe it is worth trying to have such class job distribution as well, such as weather reporter, calendar helper, paper passer, table cleaner, work collectors, etc. Let class job distribution engage our students more in English class!



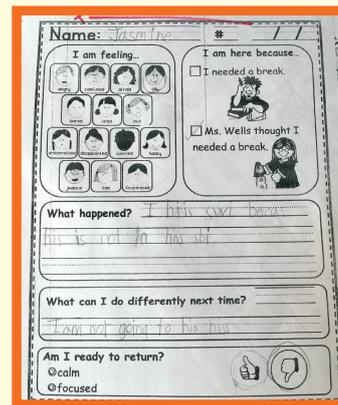
Picture 10

## 2. Classroom Management

In view of classroom management, we all agree that its importance cannot be overemphasized let alone it plays a key role in teaching. From my class observation in the States, I noticed that American teachers indeed manage their classes very well so that I realized real teaching and learning truly happens only when the class is well managed. Instead of introducing all different techniques American teachers use in class to facilitate teaching, I would like to focus on two techniques that are very special to me. One is visual behavioral chart and the other is think sheet. The visual behavioral chart (See Picture 11) illustrates the teacher's expectations of the students explicitly. From top to down are Super Star, Fantastic Day, Ready to Learn, Uh-oh, Think Sheet, and Parent Contact in different colors. Those wooden clips attached to this chart are all the students in the class. During the observation, the teacher made good use of the chart in order to let students realize how they have been performing during the day. This does not mean that the teacher was very busy running back and forth and moving up and down students' name clips. Instead, she started from oral reminders and gave students many chances to self-correct their misbehaviors. Not until she felt the need to let the students actually see it (the consequence of what they did) would she go and move the name clips. I found that the teacher and the students both understand how this behavioral chart works and respect the way it works. So when the teacher moves someone to Uh-oh! or Think Sheet even Parent Contact, no one would disagree or yell or shout to express dissatisfaction for instance. In this way, the whole teaching gets to go very smoothly without too many behavioral disturbances (minor disturbances occur yet acceptable) or negotiations going on between the teacher and the students; hence, real teaching and learning emerges.



Picture 11



Picture 12

As for Think Sheet, here is an example (See Picture 12). In the picture we can see that it is more or less a reflection sheet for misbehaved students. First of all, they have to think about their feelings that the teacher offers many to choose from. Then they have to tick a box to decide why they are having this Think Sheet. The following parts are for the students to describe what happened and what they can do differently next time. I find the last part really interesting, which involves another self-reflection: Am I ready to return? The Think Sheet really inspires me because it allows time for misbehaved students to rethink what they did and make a reflection on their misbehaviors. Besides, it also provides an opportunity for students to realize and understand their feelings and through the process of completing this Think Sheet, they get to calm down and have to come up with a solution to the problem. It is really meaningful and also a good way for students to learn how to deal with their feelings and the problem they caused. Here in Taiwan, as far as I know, some homeroom teachers also have something similar to this Think Sheet called Reflection Sheet or A Diary of Reflection. The names may vary yet the purpose is the same: guide misbehaved students to rethink about and reflect on their misbehaviors then come up with a solution to do differently next time. I do think this is a very useful technique for classroom management and we should keep doing it!

### 3. Ready-to-Use Posters

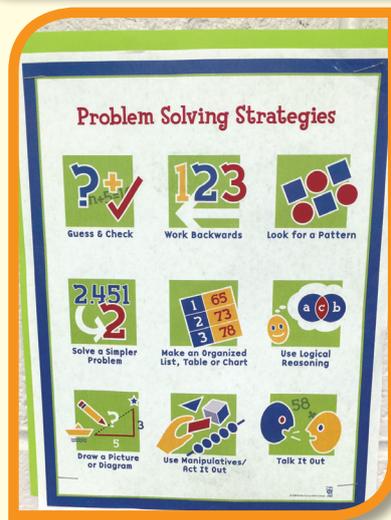
In the environment for students' learning section, I stated how great it is to have sticky posters around the classroom so that students have the access to the learning content at anytime. I think it is the same with ready-to-use posters. From what I observed in the States, I saw lots of such posters in different classrooms as well as schools (See Picture 13-15). For example, there are posters about punctuations, writing process, problem-solving strategies, and reading strategies. All these posters can be used in two ways, either before teaching or after teaching. The former involves students' preview about what to learn or how to do something, how to write for instance. The latter serves as a good way for students to review what they already learn or a great reference for them whenever they need such information. To teachers, making a good advantage of these ready-to-use posters indeed creates a great teaching environment because they can easily go to the posters and talk about the concepts. In other words, they do not have to write the same concepts every time when



Picture 13



Picture 14

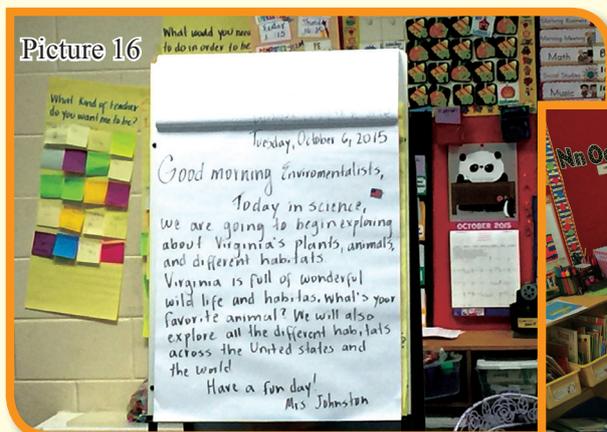


Picture 15

they teach. These posters definitely can make teaching more efficient and effective. Here in Taiwan, because we use textbooks, publishers usually provide such posters for us and we also post them in the classroom for students to learn or simply as a reference. However, those posters are mainly about content knowledge. Maybe it is worth trying to put up some posters related to strategies so that teachers can also focus on such strategic training to equip students with some know-how that may enhance their learning.

#### 4. Morning Meetings

With regard to morning meetings, from my observation in the States, I realized this is what American teachers do to start a day. Usually it is about what to do or learn for the day, the main learning content or concept for instance. In a grade four's classroom (See Picture 16), I noticed that the teacher calls her students environmentalists because the main learning for the day is about exploring Virginia's plants, animals, and different habitats and, based on that, they will explore all the different habitats across the States and the world. Besides, the teacher also makes a connection between the content knowledge and the students such as asking about their favorite animals. Morning meetings are really good for starting a day as I think it, in a way, sets students in the mood for learning. I believe teaching works best only when students are ready to learn. Another example for morning meetings is kind of special as it involves error-corrections (See Picture 17). As the picture shows, the teacher has a short and simple morning message for the students. Although it may not contain lots of information regarding what to learn today, yet it provides the students with an opportunity to focus and find out several mistakes in the message. From the class observation, the teacher had a morning meeting helper to guide the class to read the message together. During reading the message, some of the students noticed something was wrong with the spelling as well as the punctuations and they helped the teacher correct those mistakes. In other words, the teacher used the morning meeting to teach spelling and punctuations, indirectly though. Here in Taiwan we do not really have this morning meeting thing to start a day. However, maybe what we can try is both homeroom and subject teachers can start their class by introducing what to learn in order to let students have a rough idea about the main learning for the class, which may help get them ready for learning.



## 5. Seating Arrangement

As for seating arrangement, we all understand that good seating arrangement indeed facilitates students' learning. For instance, sitting in groups is good for discussion and teamwork than sitting in lines. Yet actually a proper seating arrangement can also benefit teachers' teaching. Take small group teaching for example, such seating arrangement, the semi-circle desk and the stools around it (See Picture 18), allows students to sit around the teacher and somehow the distance between the teacher and the students is shortened. From the class observation, the teacher got to approach each student sitting around her easily so that she could offer immediate guidance or reach any student as soon as he or she had any questions during the writing lesson. In addition, I found that such seating arrangement probably also works well with remedial teaching. During the independent writing session, the teacher called for several students who needed help with their writing and taught them individually. Here in Taiwan, although we may not have semi-circle desks and stools for such a seating arrangement, yet we can make good use of what we have and try our best to create a similar one for small group teaching. For example, when doing small group remedial teaching, teacher can rearrange students' desks and chairs in order to shorten the distance between each other. In this way, teacher gets to guide each student more easily and this may more or less facilitate their learning.



Picture 18

## Conclusion

According to the discussions about two aspects of environment and the comparisons between Taiwan and the States, I realized that, due to our culture differences, we do have a lot of dissimilarities, yet among those dissimilarities, still I can find many in common. I believe what is important is to observe and analyze those differences and to understand how they can help either teacher or students in terms of teaching and learning. Besides, the need to adjust or to modify cannot be overemphasized. We cannot just copy everything from the States and paste them in Taiwan. We have to adjust to see what really works and what does not. Even for what works in Taiwan, still we have to modify to suit our students. Moreover, any adjustment relies on both teacher and students. In other words, change happens only when teacher and students work together. As an old saying goes, "Where there is a will, there is a way." as long as teacher and students cooperate with each other, they can benefit as well as learn from each other; in the end, they can create a learning and teaching-friendly environment!