



Teach to Read and then Read to Learn

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Chen and Ms. Yvonne Lee. They made the best of the best fifteen-day plans for twelve of us. With their abundant experience in the US tour, they arranged the available transport for us and managed a variety of yummy meals for us. With their greatest patience, they spent a lot of time helping us check in the hotels and taking good care of us throughout this journey. I deeply appreciate their great effort during this trip. Without them, this program would not have been accomplished. Many warm thanks are extended to the local teachers, Mrs. Jennifer, Mrs. Claudia and Ms. Caroline, for being the best hostesses of Virginia. Special thanks are owned to Mr. Ching-Jen Liu, Mrs. Luping Chen and the officers of Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in New York, especially Charlin Chang and Jennifer Wang. Without their assistance, the completion of this trip would never have been possible.

Reading: The Essential Skill for Kids

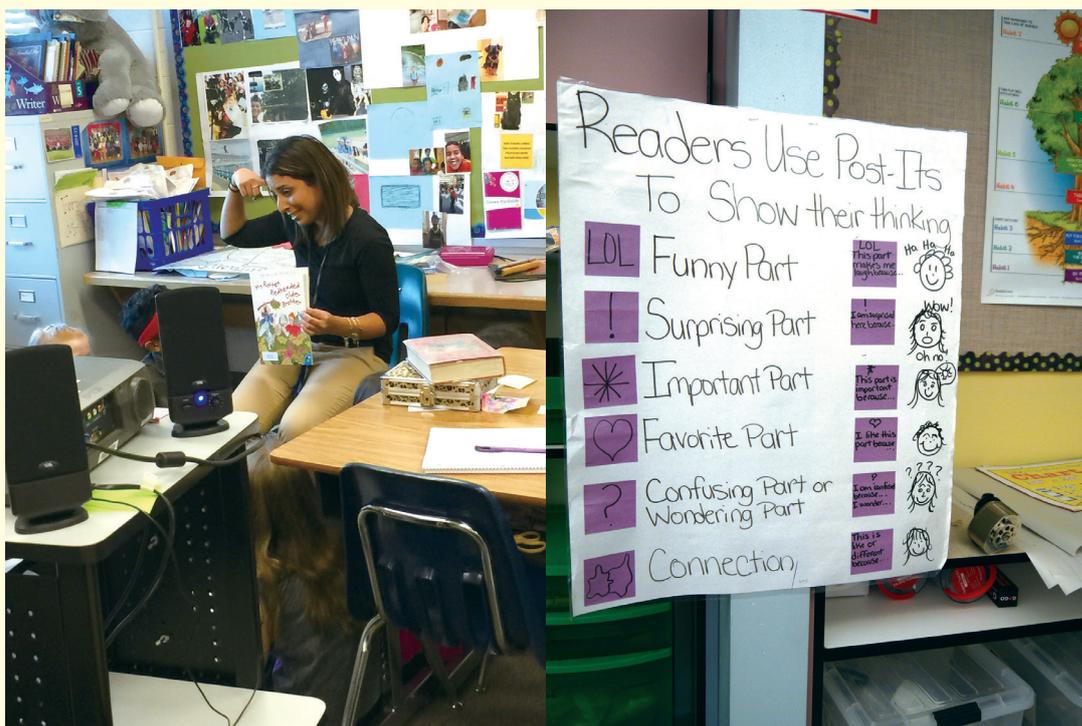
As well-known, reading is theoretically recognized as one of the most important skills among the four language aspects. For me, it might be practical until I visited several elementary schools in the United States. Take Centreville Elementary School (hereafter CES) for example. While walking on the hallway, I noticed that most of school bulletins showed us lots of reading work the students had been working on. In addition to reading learning environments, I found out that language arts, that is reading, was included in the daily class schedule. By the means of classroom observation, I noted that the teachers designed very insightful and brilliant reading lessons and actually implemented them. All the circumstances mentioned above not only could be found in CES, but also in other schools,

such as Greenbriar East School (hereafter GBE), Cub Run Elementary School and The Fresh Meadow School-PS173. Just as Mrs. Molly Wang (the principal of The Fresh Meadow School-PS173) stated, “we should teach our kids to read, and then they can read to learn.” To sum up, reading competence is the ultimate goal for students to achieve.

A. Reading is Thinking

Before reading instruction, it is of importance to teach students what reading is. For the purpose of giving a clear picture of reading, the American teachers guided students the concept of “reading is thinking” at the beginning of the lessons. The students needed to distinguish “real reading” from “fake reading,” so that they could keep a good habit of reading and enjoy reading in their future reading time. If a student is pretending reading, he/she might just (1) stare at page, (2) read but not understand, (3) look only at pictures, or (4) waste time. In contrast, if a student is doing real reading, he/she will (1) be focused, (2) understand, (3) not want to put the book down, (4) write a response, (5) summarize the book, (6) have questions about the content, and (7) THINK.

Thinking is a very abstract concept for young learners, not to mention “metacognition,” which is to think about your thinking. Ms. Asmuseen, who taught the fifth graders reading in CES, introduced the idea of metacognition by using Reading Salad Activity. She prepared a bowl, several green cards, red cards, and a picture book. Green cards represent readers’ thinking (point to the brain), and red cards represent the author’s writing (point to the book text). We need to combine thinking and text together to make a wonderful reading salad. By reading a picture book, she clearly presented how reading process works and therefore students can read books by using post-its to show their thinking, rather than handing in feedback or reflection all the time.



B. Reading Focus Lesson

Since reading is the indispensable key for kids' learning, Mrs. Wert, a teacher in GBE school, told me that she must read her students a book every day. After observing the American teachers' reading lessons, I was thrilled that reading instruction in the States could be efficient, effective and joyful. For example, in New Jersey, GBE school executed "The Daily Five," which creates classroom communities where all students are reading, writing, and self-monitoring. There are five phases of the readers' workshop: (1) Read to Self, (2) Read to Someone, (3) Listen to Reading, (4) Word Work, and (5) Work on Writing.

In the first phase, students can select books that they'll enjoy and are required to (1) read the book the whole time, (2) read silently, (3) stay in one spot, and (4) build their stamina. During the silent reading, students could find any comfortable place to sit down, or even lie down on the carpet and read alone. For the second and the third phase, students were paired by similar reading levels. Some of them were grouped as A-listen to reading, and the others were grouped as B-read to sentence. The reading rotation works every day with the following five rules: (1) We will sit in EEKK (elbow to elbow, knee to knee) position. (2) We will get started right away. (3) We will read the whole time. (4) We will stay in one spot. (5) We will use soft whisper voices. I was quite surprised that the reading rotation worked so well. The students sat side by side. They placed the book in the middle and read to each other with soft voices. As for word work, students made a list of unknown words retrieved from the books. After word list making, they looked up the dictionary for the definition, sentence and picture, and wrote down a sentence for each word. In the last phase, they needed to work on writing. For lower level learners, it was suggested to adopt Sticker Story, in which students needed to write a story relating to the sticker.



C. Engaging Students and Teachers as Readers

Can you imagine a ten-year-old student finish reading 20 books in a semester? I was amazed by American students' independent reading. Schools and teachers shared the same goal to achieve. That is, students should read independently. Since reading is crucial for students, teachers discussed the benefits of independent reading with students. For instance, if we read independently, we can learn new things and become a better reader at the same time. While reading, we also practice reading strategies and build reading confidence. After finishing reading, we will expand our vocabulary size and become a better writer. Students then realized that reading is lifelong learning.

How to get our kids into the reading world is not that difficult. Students' reading should be public and shared. When I walked on the hallway in CES, I noticed that the topic of "We Love To Read" was widely posted on school bulletins. The content could include a number of student's portraits and his/her reasons to love reading. It could also be the sharing of books students recently worked with. Besides, classroom bulletins can do something good for reading.

In Ms. Penguin's classroom in GBE, the bulletin showed "We love to read COOL book." During reading time, I found out that one of the students named Jessica walked to the bulletin, took a marker, and wrote the title of the book she was working with. By the way, Jessica did it without any order, just like a routine.

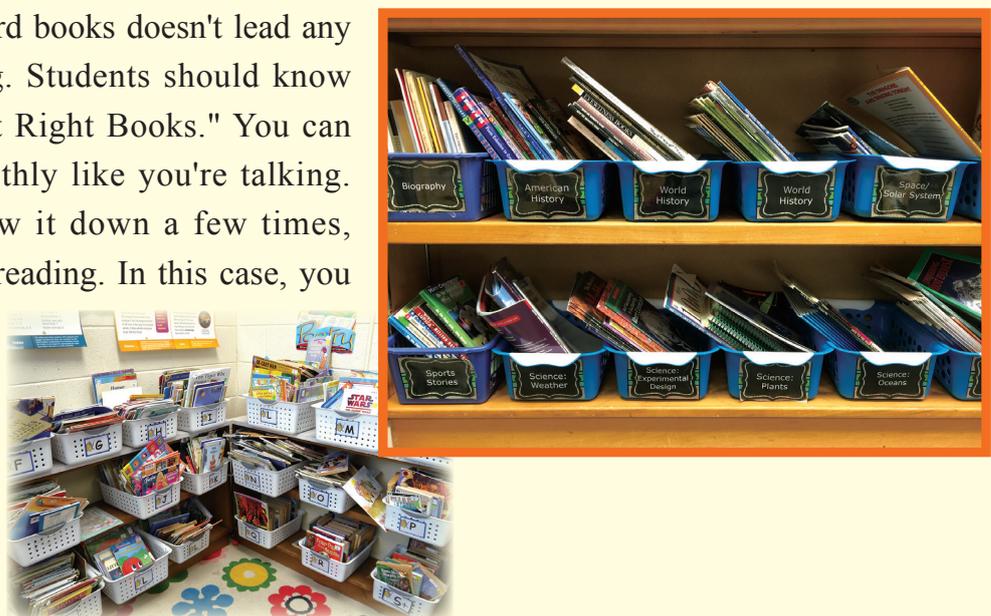


Another way to show student's reading work is book log. It could be two types of book log: one is for individual, and the other is for the whole class. It could track the record of the date, the title of books, the pages, and reading status. Believe or not, it had been recorded twelve books in the class book log in two weeks. Some of the class focused on students' reading time. Before entering in the classroom, you might see the notice that showed "Our class reads for 20 minutes. Our goal is to read 25 minutes by the end of Sept." It set a concrete objective for students to accomplish. Some of the class posted teacher's reading work, such as Ms. Wert is reading *The Boxcar Children*. It is proved that "teachers' reading habits significantly affect student achievement, motivation, and reading engagement." (An Applegate 2004 Study). Hence, teachers must also engage reading and set a good model for students.

The last but not the least way to engage students as readers is "DEAR TIME." CES School in New Jersey promoted "DEAR TIME," which students read a small book about ten to fifteen minutes before going home. It was an easy transition from school and home. Students could read anything they want. In other words, students were encouraged to read, not forced to read. It was a quiet time to calm down students. In Taiwan, we might ask students to do reading on Wednesday morning session. Sometimes we asked all the students to read the same book and write down reading reflections or some worksheets. This may cause discouragement toward reading. Reading should be self-motivated, not enforced.

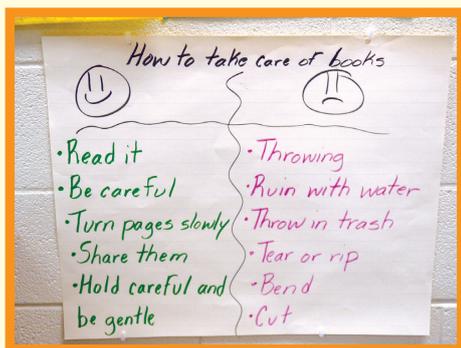
D. Leveled Reading Books

Since students have the choices of books, it is very important and useful to teach student how to choose just right books. For young learners, books can be classified by three reading levels: (1) easy books with green mark, (2) just right books with blue mark, and (3) someday books with red mark. The American teachers taught students how to choose the appropriate books for themselves. If the books are easy for you, you might know all the words from the books, so that you can read very quickly. Books which contain a lot of pictures are easy to read and understand, too. On the other hand, if the books are challenging to read, they might contain lots of words you don't know. Therefore, it is hard to understand and very confusing. Choosing easy or hard books doesn't lead any pleasure for reading. Students should know how to choose "Just Right Books." You can read the book smoothly like you're talking. Sometimes you slow it down a few times, and think about the reading. In this case, you understand it well and enjoy reading.



In terms of selecting the favorite genres of books, there are other ways to categorize books, such as by genres and by alphabet order. Students can look at front covers, the pictures, read the middle part of the book or back cover information, and then decide which book they want. It is also possible to choose a book whose the authors we know and like. Other ways to choose books are by subjects that interest us or by characters we've read about in other books. We also may read the book simply because we heard about the book from a friend or teacher, or the book is new and popular. In the aspect of book contents, there is no specific and correct way to choose the book.

Other details, such as how to take care of books and how to take care of reading bags, were also instructed and displayed in the following two pictures.



Conclusion

To sum up, reading instruction in the States is one of the emphases of the students' learning. Teachers should teach students to think through reading and design a specific reading lesson plan. In addition, reading is for everyone, not only for students but also teachers. Moreover, choosing a right book is also an important skill for students. Therefore, it is worth putting much work on Chinese reading and English reading as well.

The last but not the least thing I want to share is that kids learn how to respect others. While someone was speaking or sharing, the students listened carefully without any interruption. In fact, there were more than five races in one class, like Caucasians, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Asians, and Indians. As a result, respect is quite essential. There were a lot of posters which conveyed only one concept "RESPECT." For instance, in CES, there were four keys to success: (1) respect myself, (2) respect others, (3) respect learning, and (4) respect my school. Respect is what we need, especially in the Taiwanese context. With respect, it is more possible that students can learn successfully. Without respect, learning will never be done.

