

Hook them with the Holidays

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🌱 Having taught as an elementary homeroom teacher in both the States and abroad for several years, I have witnessed firsthand the joy and learning that can take place when students are able to make a personal connection to what is being taught. When my students have been able to make a connection to the subject matter being explored, their motivation and effort has increased dramatically.

🌱 As an elementary student, I was less than excited about reading. I lacked the motivation to struggle through a book. I was, however, keenly interested in magic tricks. When it came to learning magic, my main resource was the public library. I was willing to expend a great deal of mental energy trudging through detailed explanations of how a particular magic trick was performed. As a result of my constant desire to learn magic, my reading skills grew tremendously. As a youngster, I didn't stop to think that I was developing my reading skills. I was only concerned with discovering some great knowledge and skill that allowed me to fool and entertain my friends. I relate this bit of personal history to reiterate the fact that if kids are involved and interested in what they are studying, much more learning will occur.

🌱 Here in Taiwan, there are many holidays such as Moon Festival, Double Ten Day, and Chinese New Year. As English teachers, we can capture the excitement and interest of our students by making connections of familiar Eastern Holidays with traditional Western Holidays. Halloween, Thanksgiving, and Christmas provide perfect opportunities to motivate students to not only learn more about Western culture but to also practice their listening, writing and speaking skills.

🌱 I would like to share an example of a recent lesson that engaged the students in listening, writing, and speaking while exploring the American Holiday of Thanksgiving.

This is not being presented as a “model” lesson as I certainly don’t consider myself an expert. My desire is that this lesson description will provide a simple example of how the Holidays can be integrated into a motivating and memorable lesson for the students.

 This lesson was built around telling about the history of Thanksgiving and traditions of Thanksgiving today. I met the students at the door and had the entire class practice saying, “Happy Thanksgiving!” As each student entered the room, I shook their hand and wished them a “Happy Thanksgiving!” I encouraged them to return the greeting. A large bare tree was mounted on the chalk board.

 Using flash cards that were a part of a supplemental holiday kit from one of our English textbook companies, I told a simplified version of the Thanksgiving story as follows:

 I held up a picture of a Pilgrim and asked, “Does anyone know who this is?” I explained that it was a picture of a Pilgrim. A Pilgrim is a person who lived in England nearly 400 years ago and was not allowed to worship the way they wanted. We talked about how the king was bossy and always pushing people around. As an example of bossiness, my co-teacher chose a good-natured student and told him to stand up, sit down, take out his book, and put away his book. I then asked him if he likes being told what to do. The students enjoyed this light-hearted razzing and seemed to understand that no one likes being bossed around.

 Then I held up a picture of the “Mayflower” . I explained that it was a big boat the Pilgrims used to sail across the ocean looking for freedom. When I asked the students if they knew where the boat landed, I got some interesting replies including Spain, China, and America. I asked the students if they thought the Pilgrims were worn out from such a long journey. I then suggested that the Pilgrims checked into a hotel and stopped at the Seven Eleven to stock up on food. Of course, the kids thought that was funny. We discussed that there were no hotels, stores, or restaurants in America at that time- only wilderness. This drove home the point that it was very difficult to survive in such harsh conditions. I explained that many of the Pilgrims did not survive.

 Next, I held up a picture of an Indian. I had the students guess why I had his picture. Again, I got some strange answers. I explained that the Indians helped the first colonists to survive by teaching them to raise corn. I let the kids guess what the Indians told the Pilgrims to bury in the ground to help the corn grow. Only one student in the whole school guessed “fish” . I explained that the Indians taught the Pilgrims that if

you bury a fish in the soil with the corn seed, the corn would grow much stronger. The students were fascinated by this.

 I continued by holding up the Thanksgiving Feast flashcard and continued to explain that the Pilgrims were thankful for at least three things. First, they were thankful to be free to worship as they wished. Second, they were thankful to have survived the winter. Finally, they were thankful to the Indians for helping them learn to grow enough food to survive. The Pilgrims decided to hold a feast to express their thankfulness for these things. They invited the Indians to take part in this three day feast as a way of saying thanks to them for their help. This was the first Thanksgiving.

 I then held up the final two flashcards: the turkey and the pumpkin pie. I told the students how American families gather every year on the fourth Thursday in November to celebrate Thanksgiving. We talked about the various foods we eat such as turkey, cornbread, pumpkin pie, and cranberry sauce. We discussed the importance of getting together with our families and sharing what we are thankful for.

 I brought a puppet to school that I had dressed up as an Indian by making a vest out of tan “cow skin” paper. I decorated the vest with “Indian Symbols” such as arrows and the rising sun. I crumpled the paper to give an appearance of leather. I added a bandana around the puppet’s head to act as an Indian headdress. I told the students that I had a special guest visiting who could tell them anything they wanted to know about Thanksgiving. The students had to guess who was coming as well as think of questions to ask the visitor. The students were willing to play along and seemed to enjoy the visit from the “Indian”. I let the kids ask him a few questions and he gave them answers.

 As a culminating activity, we brainstormed things that we were thankful for. As the students told things that came to their mind, I wrote them on the board. The most common response was family. I encouraged the students to stretch their imaginations and come up with some more ideas. With time, I got many different answers such as: friends, dogs, food, ice cream, teachers, and computers.

 I gave the students small squares of orange, yellow, brown, and green paper and asked them to draw and cut out leaf shapes to add to my “Thanksgiving Tree”. The students then wrote what they were thankful for on each leaf. They were allowed to come up with something on their own or copy something we had written on the board. As the individual leaves were completed, I let the students read their leaf to me and then put it on the tree. I used the same tree for the entire school and by the end of the week,

had a tree full of beautiful leaves all covered with thoughts of thankfulness. The tree is now on display for all students and guests to see. Letting the students know that the tree would be on display for the whole school motivated the students to do their best work.

 This website (<http://wilstar.com/holidays/index.htm>) lists several holidays and provides links to history and traditions surrounding each of the major Western holidays. For a good description of the first Thanksgiving as well as links to a Thanksgiving word search and song, try <http://wilstar.com/holidays/thanksgv.htm> .

 As a child, I remember learning about holidays from other cultures and how I was fascinated by the various customs and traditions. By introducing and celebrating the Western holidays with your students, you not only give them interesting information, but

you will likely motivate them to improve their English as well. 