

IOWA TRIP 2010

VICTORIA WU, BEIFONG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

I. PREFACE

In the spring of 2010, I had the precious opportunity to attend a two-week training program sponsored by the Education Bureau of The Taipei County Government. I observed the daily operation of Willowbrook Elementary School in Altoona, Iowa, and stayed with a host family for a whole week. I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Robin Norris, who is the principal of Willowbrook Elementary School, and also the host of my home stay. She treated us as her family members and tried to squeeze in as many valuable visits into our limited time as possible. She fulfilled all our requests, no matter how unreasonable some of them may have been. Also, since it was the third year for her to host the teachers group from Taipei County, she was very experienced in assigning us an observation plan. For example, she asked Cindy and me which grade we taught, then she assigned us to two different grades so we could focus on what we needed. She suggested that we observe the new teaching method—Visual Phonics—in Ms. Sayre’s class, which now is a useful tool in my own teaching. This is my most cherished part of the trip. This trip did broaden my view on English teaching and let me experience what daily life in America is like.



During the second week, we visited the Iowa Department of Education, the Heartland Area Education Agency (AEA) teaching resource center, Iowa Public Television (IPTV), and Drake University. Also, we visited Neil Armstrong Elementary School in Schaumburg, Illinois, and School District 54 in Illinois. I’m thankful for the arrangement and support of the Iowa Department of Education and the Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Chicago. Finally, I would like to thank the Taipei County Government again for the generosity of supporting and aiming for better English elementary education.

II. ACQUISITIONS

A Classroom Observation at Willowbrook Elementary School

Willowbrook Elementary School is located in Altoona, a town in the suburban area of Des Moines. There are about 500 students in this building and 31 classroom teachers. Compared to school sizes in Taiwan, Willowbrook is a small school. But the teacher to student ratio, 1 to 16, is a little bit higher than ours. The grade span is from preschool kindergarten to the 6th grade, just like ours. Willowbrook is in the Southeast Polk Community School District.

The most impressive thing I experienced at Willowbrook was the atmosphere that every student was concentrating on learning. In the classrooms I observed, the students were quite behaved and were also enjoying studying. No student was running in the hallway. No student was shouting or even talking loudly to each other. Ms. Norris, the principal, told us that they spend two weeks at the beginning of every school year to let the students learn how to follow the rules and practice the procedures. During those two weeks, all the teachers devote their efforts solely to teaching rules and procedures. Comparing the learning attitude and the behavior of students at Willowbrook to those of our students in Taiwan, it's clear that the devotion of the teachers at Willowbrook was well worth the effort.

Besides the learning atmosphere, there are some other things that I observed in their school that would benefit our teaching:

1 Visual Phonics

Visual Phonics was taught in the kindergarten and first grade classes at Willowbrook. The teachers used Visual Phonics to help their students' spelling. The students were very familiar with the connection between letters and sounds. Visual phonics was a new method being applied to the lower grade students, and also being used by reading specialists when doing remedial teaching for the first graders.



2 Daily 5—Small Group Learning

In the kindergarten and second grade classrooms, the students were studying in small groups. They were reading to self, reading to someone, working on writing, listening to reading and spelling/word working with peers. During this time, the teacher was working with one of the groups on reading. According to the grouping schedule, all the students were working on reading independently. The Daily 5 is a structure that will help students develop the daily habits that will lead to a lifetime of independent literacy.



3 Daily Routine

The first thing the students did in the morning was gather together in the back of the classroom. After the announcements and pledge of allegiance, the classroom teacher, Ms. Joens, led the students to do the daily routines such as taking lunch count, putting the date on the calendar, recording the weather, counting coins and counting the number of school days. In this way, the concepts of date, weather and numbers were reviewed and reinforced each day. For young students, it's good for them to start the day with something they are good at. It gives them more confidence to learn new things later in the day.



4 Kindergarten Pals

Kindergarten Pals was a pal learning program between the second graders and the students in kindergarten at Willowbrook. The teachers paired the students from the two grades. During the Kindergarten Pals time, the students can read together. The big pal would listen carefully to the little pal's reading. One of the big pals even prepared his own vocabulary cards for the little pal to practice. It was a good program for cooperative learning. Besides that, the students could get a chance to work with someone from a different grade.



5 The Blue Ribbon—Teacher's Promise

There were blue ribbons stuck on the wall by the door of each classroom. Each one showed the teacher's promise to their students. Mrs. Haney, the third grade teacher, wrote, I promise to...

- ✓ plan fun and engaging learning experiences for our classroom
- ✓ encourage you to become better readers on a daily basis
- ✓ help you meet your highest potential as a learner
- ✓ be a good listener and always try to help
- ✓ prepare you for fourth grade and beyond.



Also, her students made their promises on the little blue ribbons around Mrs. Haney's. And the first grade teacher, Mrs. Sayre, wrote, I promise...

- ✓ to encourage a life long love for learning
- ✓ to share my love for reading
- ✓ to fill every day with fun, laughter, and excitement
- ✓ to take time to listen and respect each of you.

B Teaching Resources

During our observation tour, we were able to gather some useful teaching resources, as follows:

1 Between the Lions/PBS KIDS-IPTV (Iowa Public Television)

Iowa Public TV developed a free website which provides an on-line reading resource, "between the lions" (<http://pbskids.org/lions/>). There are educational reading games, stories and video clips for kids. In addition, there is also a section for parents and teachers. We as teachers can find some useful literacy activities, lesson plans, handouts, certificates, and other resources to engage emerging readers and their families.

2 Leveled Books (<http://home.comcast.net/~ngiansante/index.html>)

This website was suggested by the librarian when we were observing the operation of the library at Willowbrook. We were interested in how teachers selected books at the "right" level for their students. She showed us this website that provided a leveled book list so teachers can easily level the books they have, or get help building a leveled library in their classrooms.

III.APPLICATION

At the pre-tour meeting, the group leader, Principal Hu, set a clear mission for us. We should not only have the opportunity to observe elementary education in the United States, but after the trip, we should also try to apply some of the teaching methods we found worthwhile to our own teaching and share the results with other English teachers. During this trip, I did learn a lot, but some of the teaching methods such as the Daily 5, would need to be implemented for the long term to show any effect. I might try to apply it during the following school year. The following are the teaching methods I have applied to my own teaching:

A Visual Phonics

Visual Phonics is a system of sound associations which represent each sound in English with a hand signal and a graphic or written symbol. It's also known as See the Sound. In See-the-Sound Visual Phonics the 46 hand signals represent sounds, not letters or words. It was invented by a mother to help teach her deaf son to speak. So its first application was for those who could not hear sounds. Then, its usage extended to lower grade students and people who are learning English as a second language, which are exactly like our students in Taiwan. That is the main reason I decided to apply this method to my students.

Visual Phonics is a multi-sensory approach. Students taught with this approach are able to use hand signs to cue themselves, and teachers can use the signs and symbols to assist reading, speaking, and spelling skills. In my third grade English classes, the students are learning short vowels this semester. They seemed to be OK when I taught the vowels individually. But in the end, they tended to mix them all up.

In Visual Phonics, these hand signs link sounds to our other senses, beginning with an awareness of how the mouth moves to form sounds. This linkage is important because sounds by themselves are ephemeral. Students tend to forget them easily. But the hand signs involve muscle memory. The young students thought Visual Phonics was kind of like dancing or kung-fu movements. They like them and they can remember them easily. These hand signs are logically connected to the production of sound. The slower learners are given one more clue of cognitive information.

Visual Phonics also makes my teaching easier. On a whole-class instructional basis, it's not easy to distinguish which student is not following by only observing his or her mouth shape among the other thirty mouths. However, I can notice a wrong hand gesture easily. And the students can also recognize themselves making a mistake by observing the other students' hand signs and correct it quickly. When everyone is practicing, the teacher only needs to use hand signs to cue the students and doesn't have to speak louder and louder.

Due to time limitation, I didn't teach all my third grade English classes Visual Phonics; it was kind of like an experiment. The students who learned Visual Phonics thought it was fun and easy. They enjoyed practicing the hand signs together as a team. I also gave them a chance to review the short vowels by using the hand signs before they had a listening test. The students who learned Visual Phonics had better test results and they showed more confidence when trying to distinguish vowels.



B Classroom Management

For most teachers in this visiting group, the most impressive thing is the good behavior of the students at the schools we visited. Also, it has been mentioned in all the reports written by the teachers in the previous visiting groups. On the first day after this trip, I stepped back into my school and the noise on the campus shocked me. I realized what a big difference there was between the studying atmosphere in the elementary schools in Iowa and ours here in Taiwan.

My third grade English classes enjoy their English classes a lot, but they also make a lot of noise. Every time when I ask them to do something, all of the students try to individually tell me that they are finished as soon as they are done. So I always hear the shouting and yelling of, "Ms. Wu, I'm done!" or "I am finished!" for more than a minute. It is really annoying. So, this was the first classroom management tool I applied to my class. I told them that in this situation, the students in the United States would not speak a word, but only raise their thumb up. It means, "I'm the best", "I'm the first" and "I'm good." Since then, there has been no more shouting or yelling, but just a lot of thumbs up with proud smiles. Also, it's easy for the teacher to find out which students haven't finished and to help them in a quiet atmosphere.



Finally, I would like to thank all the persons who made this precious trip fruitful. Moreover, my deepest appreciation goes to Principal Norris. Thanks for all the warmth and for reminding us that we are "the star polishers".