

# MY LEARNING TOUR TO IOWA

YI-CHUN (ANITA) CHEN, HAISHAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



To me, the tour of Iowa is like reading a book. I find something exciting and interesting every time I think about it. This learning tour to Iowa gave me lots of unforgettable memories. Thanks to the Education Bureau of Taipei County and the Iowa Department of Education for arranging the trip; thanks to the principal of

Studebaker Elementary School, Mr. Francek; my host family, Mrs. Mary Paulsen, for her great hospitality and making this visit so meaningful; thanks to my partner, Lucy Wu, for helping me a lot during the trip; and lastly, thanks to my husband for supporting me always.

## THE SCHOOL—STUDEBAKER ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



Studebaker Elementary School is located in Des Moines. There are around five hundred students in the school, including pre-K up to grade 5. Studebaker is not a spacious building; therefore, most of the public area can serve multi-functions. For example, the lunchroom is also used for piano lessons and band practice. The library used to be a lobby; now it can be used as a conference room or for extra-curricular activities from time to time. The teacher's reference books are kept in a shared room inside a classroom.



There are two parts inside the building. The old building has some problems with its air-conditioning system; it gets hot and uncomfortable in summer. The old building has separated classrooms while the newer building has open-spaced classrooms. According to Mr. Francek, the Principal of Studebaker, the teachers don't really like the open-spaced classrooms; therefore, they divide the classrooms up with bookshelves or cupboards. The 'soundproofing' is still not so good, but they have worked out a solution, which is to schedule their literacy block at the same time and the loud classes at the same to reduce interference with other classes.



The space limitation affects the number of bathrooms, too. On our tour of the school on our first day, Mr. Francek asked Lucy, my partner, and I to make note of the bathrooms whenever we passed one.



I was wondering why we did so, and then I was in shock to learn that there were only FOUR bathrooms in the public area for ALL GIRLS to use. Of course, there are some other bathrooms available inside the classrooms, but the total number of bathrooms is under fifteen. Therefore, some classes need to take bathroom breaks, with all of the students lining up at the same time and taking turns to use the bathroom. SURPRISED?!



More surprisingly, the students in Studebaker behave themselves VERY WELL to cope with all these limitations. First of all, both teachers and students speak softly in the open-spaced classrooms. Mrs. Winget even uses finger claps to lower the volume when she needs some applause. The students WALK quietly in the hallway and talk softly while lining up for bathrooms. They respect each other and work out their problems instead of complaining. Often times I whine about not having my own English classroom, not having a proper working desk and not having enough this and that. Now I truly believe that complaining doesn't help anything.

There are several unique facts about Studebaker I want to share. First, most of the teachers are very experienced and have been teaching in this very same school for over twenty years. Some have even been teaching the same grade for a long time already, which means they have lots of teaching materials, classroom library book collections, etc. for that grade. In addition to the experience they have, the teachers always work as a team. They have a strong team spirit. Every morning before classes started, or after school, I saw teachers working together, talking about teaching schedules and making copies for each other. That's why whenever or wherever I went in Studebaker, the teachers were eager to share their ideas and materials. The most common words I heard from them were, "Take whatever you need." "Tell me what you need." "You've got to have these. They are helpful." THEY SHARE!



The limitations imposed by the facilities don't restrict the teaching quality. I was told that the test scores of Studebaker have been great. The parents have been very supportive of school activities, and according to my observations, the students there are really well-behaved. These excellent results came about through the hard work of the teachers in Studebaker. Teamwork is exactly what we English teachers need the most here in Taiwan.



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## CLASSROOM OBSERVATION

Lucy and I focused our classroom observation on their literacy block because we really wanted to learn in depth how reading is carried out in an American classroom. Luckily, we also got a chance to observe Ms. Nusbaum's reading recovery session which helped us get a better picture of the learning difficulties young kids may encounter. When seeing the young kids there struggle with 'ou', 'ow', 'oi' and 'oy', and the lower case letters 'b', 'd', 't' and 'f', like my students, I realized how harsh I used to be to my students. Some students just need more time and more practice.



We observed the literacy block of Mrs. O, a kindergarten teacher, Mrs. Joens, a first grade teacher, Mrs. E.J., a second grade teacher, and Mr. Eggright, a fourth grade teacher. In general, the younger the kids are, the more emphasis the teachers put on phonological awareness. For older kids, comprehension and the usage of vocabulary play a big part in reading. Therefore, Mrs. E.J. introduced Text Talk to us and arranged Mr. Eggright's class for us to observe how Text Talk is carried out in class.



Text Talk is actually a series of textbooks designed to teach reading. Because of the repetitive pattern, it's easy to incorporate the skills into our own materials. First of all, teachers start by asking guided questions about each page. By answering questions, students are thinking out aloud and the teacher is able to check comprehension at the same time. Next, the teacher provides the meaning and the synonyms for the new words and students are encouraged to use them during the discussion as often as possible. They even have an assignment which is to USE the new vocabulary at home. Students and the teacher talk through the text and have vocabulary exercise after reading.

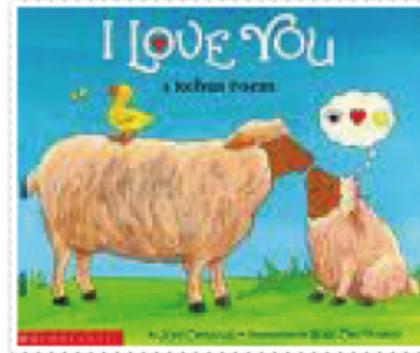


While observing Mr. Eggright doing Text Talk with groups, I was amazed to learn that different groups had different focuses of discussion because of their different life experiences. Mr. Eggright didn't try to shift the discussion toward a standard direction. He followed the guided questions and had a wonderful discussion with his students.

## TEACHING APPLICATION: I LOVE YOU, A REBUS POEM

### Teaching Objectives:

I chose a picture book—I LOVE YOU, a rebus poem, for Mother's Day reading. I wanted to apply Text Talk skills to present reading and work on rhyming words. With time constraints, I decided to use 5–10 minutes of every class period to teach the book and hopefully this pattern provided my students more time to absorb and to practice.



### Procedures

#### Day one: Guided questions and discussions (40 min)

(p. 1)

1. What do you see in this picture?

To my surprise, my third graders gave me lots of answers with thorough observation, such as green leaves, birds and birds' house (they don't know the word "nest," so I wrote the word on the board) and the small clothes. I asked them whose clothes they were and most of them told me they were the little birds' because they lived in the tree. And they saw lots of red hearts. Some said the red hearts were the fruit; some said they were the flowers. I asked them what the red hearts stood for and surprisingly a boy answered "like." "Which likes what?" I asked, and then different interpretations popped out, like, "the birds like the clothes", "the birds like the nest", etc.



(p. 2)

1. What do you see in this picture?
2. What are the bees doing?
3. Do the flowers like bees? Why?



(p.3)

1. What's the big box for?
2. What's inside the box?
3. What else do you see?
4. What shape is the lock? (One class could even identify the shape before I asked this question.)
5. Is it a boy's room or a girl's room? Why?





(p. 4)

1. What do you see?
2. Are they happy? Why?

After talking through the pictures for the first stanza, we started reading. Since students had already had some ideas about the pictures, they caught the meaning quite quickly and no translation was needed. They understood. The incredible part was throughout the whole discussion and reading I didn't use any Chinese and the kids were not aware that they'd been expressing themselves in English a lot. Almost every kid was focused.

The original plan was to start with the same pattern as the first stanza, but these kids got the pattern and read the lines out loud easily. They felt excited when they got the correct lines, and the second stanza was also read effortlessly. I went on to the fourth stanza instead of the third because there were more new words in stanza three.

### Day two: Vocabulary

1. Review the vocabulary.
2. Teach the new words in stanza three.
3. Distribute each student the picture book and read the story together.

### Day three: Rhyming words

1. Work on the rhyming sound of 'ea' and 'ee'.
2. "Sing" the poem together to the tune of "Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes".

### Day four: Rhyming words

1. Work on the rhyming sound of 'a\_e' and 'ay'.
2. Sing the poem together.

### Day five: Rhyming words

1. Work on the rhyming sound of 'u\_e'.
2. Book walk.



### Day six: Review activity

1. Sound matching: Each student has one assigned word on a piece of paper. They have to sound out the word to different students and find the students with the words that rhyme. Then each group needs to write down all the words in the notebook.

### Day seven: Worksheet

1. Worksheet: sorting activity.

## Day eight: Wrap-up

1. Vocabulary review.

## Day nine: Writing activity

1. Read the poem together again and start writing their own stanza.



## Reflection

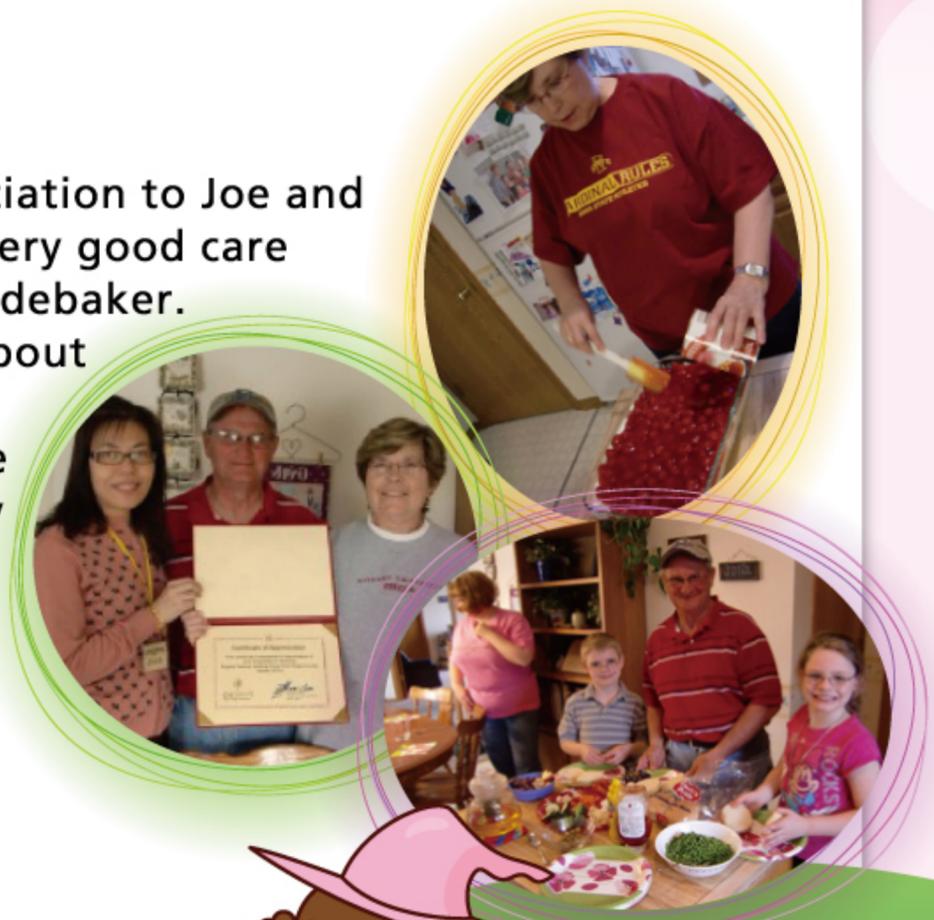
After the classroom observation in Iowa, I am convinced that working on phonemic awareness helps students do better in their future reading. However, I don't really spend enough time to work on phonological awareness, including decoding, rhyming, syllables, blending, etc. All these are crucial for later reading ability. Therefore, for this reading I put more focus on rhyming words and added in decoding skills.

This is also the first time I broke down the whole teaching process into little segments. I was worried that students might get bored or their learning could not be consistent. Luckily, it turned out fine. Most of my students can recite the whole poem or sing it. They are really familiar with the vocabulary in the poem, although they can't really manipulate it well yet. Some of the students have difficulties with providing rhyming examples, but they can differentiate the rhyming pairs. Therefore, it's easy for them to find their partners by sounding out the words, but it's harder to complete the sorting worksheet on their own.

As to writing, since it's their very first time to write, I am happy about everything they write no matter if it makes any sense or rhymes at all. And my students are more willing to express their ideas in English. At the end of the semester, I taught "Yo! Yes" and I observed the students were more engaged in reading out loud in English and relating the meaning to the pictures. I feel more confident of what I'm doing in class.

## MY HOST FAMILY

I have to express my greatest appreciation to Joe and Mary Paulsen, my host family. They took very good care of Lucy and I. Mary is also a teacher at Studebaker. Therefore, we were able to discuss a lot about teaching, learning, school policy and even tax issues. All those talks were informative to me. The Paulsens are a close-knit family with strong values. I was really lucky to stay with them.



During our week with Mary, she took us out to eat every night. We experienced everything from a traditional home cooking restaurant, to a fancy, fabulous Italian restaurant where I had the best salad and chicken; from a famous Mexican food chain store to the most popular restaurant in town. To know more about teaching, Mary took us to visit her sister and her school in Indianola. To let us experience farm life, Mary took us to her brother's farm to see cow milking! I saw beautiful baby calves and tried the award-winning cheese from her brother's farm. In order to show us more about Des Moines, Mary took us to visit the Amana Colonies, an old German town, where we had wonderful German food with another sister of Mary's. To show us the "Cyclones," the Paulsens' favorite team, Mary took us to visit Iowa State University. What a beautiful campus! We went to church and visited some covered bridges on the last day. Each unforgettable spot was a LONG drive from home. Saying millions of thanks won't be enough to show my gratitude to them. We had wonderful food, wonderful memories, and received great hospitality. What a pity that I didn't take pictures when visiting these places, so the memories were all mine, staying forever in my mind.

Next, I have to thank our principal, Mr. Francek, and his wife, Mary Beth. Mr. Francek is probably the most informative person I've ever met. He introduces everything so clearly and logically that the knowledge stays in your brain forever. Also, he is humorous. I enjoy asking him questions for there's always a great answer waiting for me. I like the way he arranged our school visit, which helped us first get a whole picture view of Studebaker, then the little pieces came in as we had interviews with teachers and had classroom observations. And Mary Beth has been very nice and helpful to us.

Lastly, I have to express my gratefulness to the teachers in Studebaker. They have been extremely kind and helpful to a total stranger. Thanks to Mrs. E.J. for many materials; thanks to Mrs. Amos for providing all the information about the reading programs and assessments; thanks to Mrs. Beumer for all the ideas and resources about reading recovery; thanks to Mrs. Winget for the culture exchange. Several months have passed and I miss them a lot. I hope the friendship will go on and the learning tour will go on between Taiwan and Iowa. It benefits us all.

