

THE EXPERIENCE OF VISITING AN AMERICAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL IN IOWA

YA-CHUANG GRACE HSU, ANKENG ELEMENTARY SCHOOL



With the principal, Tim Schott

"Is this heaven?—No, it's Iowa." It's the dialogue from *Field of Dreams*. "Are they angels? No, they are the Staplins." It's my feeling about my host family. First of all, I really appreciate this opportunity to visit Des Moines, Iowa. People in Des Moines are well educated and very friendly, especially the teaching staff of Hubbell Elementary School. They shared everything with us. And I would

like to share what I've seen and learned with my colleagues and students in Taiwan. Secondly, it was my first time to stay with a host family. The family treated me very well, and I had many chances to see how American parents educate their children. They spent a lot of time teaching how to respect others, make decisions, ask questions and solve problems. As a one-year-old baby's mom, it's a very unique and important experience for me!



The Staplin family

In the following part, I am going to focus on literacy teaching at Hubbell Elementary School and discuss how I applied the strategies of the Daily Five in my English class. Then, some of my experiences with our host family related to parent-child interaction will be mentioned as well. I hope this report can provide some good ideas for teachers, parents and those who are interested in American education.

I. LITERACY TEACHING AT HUBBELL

I. The Daily Five

The Daily Five's independent work helps learners become better readers and writers. Students are comfortable with and accomplished at the routines by doing Read to Self, Read to Someone, Work on Writing, Word Work and Listen to Reading every day. The routine becomes a habit through practicing each day, and learners can use these self studying strategies in their lifelong learning.



(1) Materials

Every student has a personal book baggie which contains several suitable readings assigned by the teacher according to the student's individual proficiency. In addition, there are about one to two hundred books provided by the homeroom teacher in their own classroom. Every day the students follow the sequence of the five focuses arranged by the teacher and choose the reading materials they like to read from the bookshelf. Some



The notifying card—library



Classroom bookshelf

teachers divided the books into several categories, such as ABC books, rainforest books, weather, magazines, poetry, math books, Bailey school kids, once upon a time, chapter books, fiction, non-fiction, winter, plants, Gail Gibbons, Henry and Mudge, Eric Carle, and so on.

During the practice of the Daily Five, students can even put on a notifying card and go to the library to borrow books for more readings or information if there is a need. Therefore, in the same class, some may read chapter novels, but some only read fairy tales based on their preference and language ability. Teachers help students with individual needs in small groups, which are based on different proficiency. Every group takes turns to discuss with the teacher. There is a record put in each book baggie to record the performance and the comprehension about the assigned reading and what they've read.

(2) Time

It is about twenty minutes for each activity and around 1.5 to 2 hours to finish the Daily Five practice. If time is limited, the activity may become the Daily Three. The teacher is always working with one of the groups while others are doing other activities. There is a learning schedule for each group. Each student thus has at least one chance for about twenty minutes to sit by the learning table with the teacher and get help personally.



(3)Steps

The instructions for students to practice the Daily Five were discussed and decided by the teacher and all students at the beginning of the semester. Then the teacher wrote all the steps on the posters and pasted them on the wall. Therefore, students can follow the steps and know what to do without asking and interrupting the teacher and other classmates. They can have fun in their own studying. When it's a student's turn to meet the teacher, he or she can discuss the findings and the comprehension of the reading or the writing with the teacher. Based on the theory of the Daily Five, each class designs their own steps, and here is a sample from one of the third grade classes. I modified some parts of it and added a Chinese translation for the fourth grade students in my English class (see table 1).



Table 1 Instructions of the Daily Five

	Original version	Modified version by Grace (p.s. the learning material is from Unit 5, New Wow English 4)
Read to Self	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Stay in one place. 2. Read the whole time. 3. Pick a quiet spot (away from friends). 4. Keep hands and feet to yourself. 5. Keep eyes on your book. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read pp. 49-55. • Pick a quiet spot (away from your friends). • Keep hands and feet to yourself. • Keep eyes on your book. • Read the whole time. • Read the pictures and words.
Read to Someone	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Elbow-Elbow/ Knee-Knee 2. I read, you read. 3. Choral read. 4. Read one book. 5. Read different books. 6. Always check for your understanding! 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read pp. 49-55. • Pick a quiet spot with a partner. • Elbow-elbow/ knee-knee • I read, you read. • Be a good listener. • Use a quiet voice. • Discuss the whole time.
Work on Writing	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Work quietly. 2. Choice of what to write. 3. Get started right away. 4. Write at your desk. 5. Stay in one spot. 6. Write the whole time. 7. Underline words were not sure how to spell and move on. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sentences with the words "want" and "like". • Work quietly. • Get started right away. • Write at your desk. • Write the whole time. • Underline words that you are not sure how to spell and move on.
Word Work	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get materials and go to a quiet place. 2. Stay in one spot. 3. Work the whole time. 4. Work quietly. 5. Try your best. 6. Work on stamina. 7. Get started quickly. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word sorts: plural/singular with other examples. • Spell the words with different materials, such as chalk, magnetic letters, clay, color markers. • Get materials and go to a quiet place. • Get started quickly. • Put away all the materials.
Listen to Reading	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Get out materials. 2. Get started quickly. 3. Listen to the whole story. 4. Listen quietly. 5. Follow along with the pictures and story. 6. Stay in one spot. 7. May listen to another story if time. 8. Put materials away neatly. 9. Be careful with the equipment. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen to pp. 49-55. • Get out materials. • Listen to the whole story. • Follow along with the pictures and story. • Listen quietly. • Be careful with the equipment.



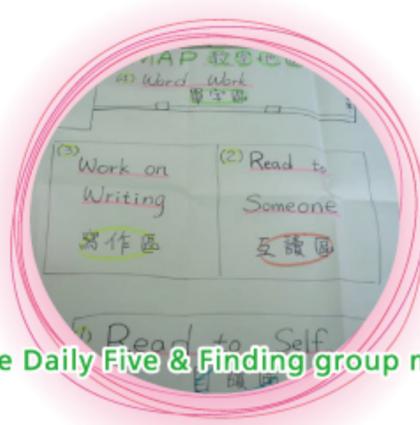
2. How to Apply the Daily Five

In order to make my students be better readers and writers, I tried to apply the Daily Five in my English teaching. However, the reading material became the textbook we use (New Wow English 4), and time was reduced to forty minutes only. The purpose of the activity is to preview a unit by doing self learning for having the better understanding of my lecture. I hope students can enjoy the moment of self studying and practice the strategies of self learning. Besides, I can give the lower proficiency learners more help during the activities.

(1) A Classroom Trip: The Monthly Five

Because of time limitation, I would like to do these five activities monthly for previewing or reviewing a unit. In the beginning, I told my students that we were going to have a classroom trip. And they were very excited! Then I showed them the map of the five activities to let them know where to go and what to do. After introducing the name of every activity, I briefly explained the instructions at every station. Students might forget what I said, and so I prepared the guiding posters at each station. In order to help lower proficiency students to understand better, the Chinese translation was provided as well. The students read the instructions first and then started to work. When I rang the bell, every group needed to stop and move to the next station according to the position of the group's name card on the map. The teachers at Hubbell also put the students' name cards on a board to show what they should do. Thus, it was quiet when the class was doing the Daily Five.

(2) Grouping



The map of the Daily Five & Finding group members—"Hungry"

Next step was grouping. It would be more efficient to group students than just to let them choose what to do on their own. Because most activities are self learning but not group cooperation, I prefer the random selection. I chose the topic, feelings, to review the related vocabulary and made a lottery. Every student picked a piece of paper and made the corresponding facial expression quietly. The students with the same expression, such as "hungry," had to get together to find their group members. This kind of random selection can help lower proficiency students to imitate other classmates and get help from others. The group members will be different each time.

(3)The Process

Read to Self

At Hubbell, students can find a comfortable place to read to self. Some may sit on a chair, the floor or the rocking chair, and some may lie on a small sofa. Although we don't have such a large classroom, students just took their own seats or stood around the reading spot to enjoy reading the story in the textbook. They had about five minutes to finish the reading. I asked the students to get the meaning of the sentences from the pictures, and encouraged the higher proficiency students to describe the pictures in English orally to self. Therefore, they not only read words but also read pictures. In the future, I may prepare some picture books related to the topic for reviewing the unit and further reading.



It would be better if they could read out loud without interrupting others. One of the classes at Hubbell used a U-shaped tube as a tool to read to self. Students could hear themselves very clearly through the tube. I believe that students can benefit more by hearing their own voice. I would like to try this kind of tool in my next Monthly Five!

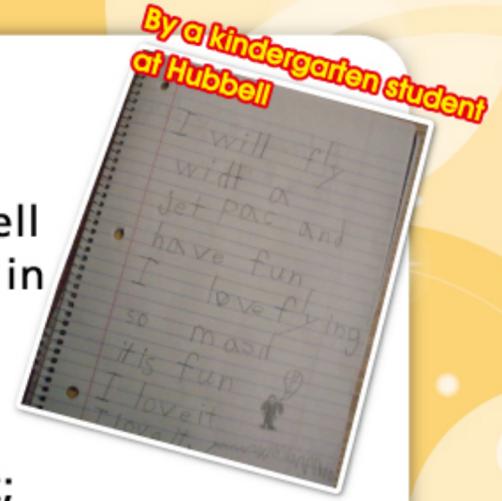
Read to Someone

My students liked this activity because it's the only activity in which they can talk with others. They focused on the same story and had a discussion with each other after taking turns to read to each other. Classroom management is essential to make sure every student keeps his voice low. I found that my students could do as well as the students at Hubbell by sitting elbow to elbow and knee to knee.



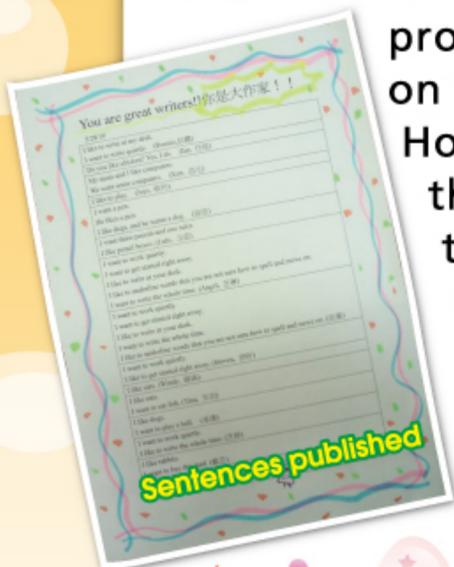
Work on Writing

One of the writing activities in the kindergarten of Hubbell was that five to six students sat in a group and made sentences in their own individual notebook. The words were action verbs, including walk, skip, fly, read and eat. I noticed that students might spell words the wrong way or write the letters in the wrong place. But their teacher didn't use a red pen to correct it; instead, she checked the meaning and told the student orally how to correct it. It's natural to make mistakes, and teachers usually showed a positive and patient attitude toward them. This attitude also appeared in the poetry class in the third grade. However, most teachers in Taiwan are stricter than the Hubbell teachers when dealing with mistakes. I think because we are EFL teachers, we have to provide correct input for students to imitate. But native speaking students can correct themselves from different sources in their daily life. That's why we place more emphasis on correction.



At the Work on Writing station in my class, students were asked to make sentences with the action verb "like" or "want." In order to save time and provide correct usages, I still made marks on the mistakes in their notebooks.

However, I retyped and printed out all their sentences correctly with their names to share with the whole class. I said, "You are great writers!" I hope students can enjoy their writings published.



In addition, there is a word wall in every classroom at Hubbell. All the words had been taught, and students can see how to spell words without looking them up in a dictionary or interrupting the teacher. If I had my own English classroom, I would like to decorate it in this way to help improve my students' spelling ability.

Word Work



My students were excited to do the word work because they could use different kinds of materials to spell vocabulary words. They may use chalk or magnetic letters on the blackboard, clay, colored markers, stamps, and so on. Besides, they decided where to practice. Many students liked to spell on the blackboard as a teacher, and some may make use of their notebooks by drawing and writing. Another challenging task for my students was to find out the rule of plurals. When they knew the answer, they wrote it down in their notebooks. More than half of the students were able to answer the question. In the future, I would like to review this unit by giving more tasks concerning phonics and spelling. In addition, one important procedure for this word work that should not be forgotten is to remind students to put away all tools for the next users before they go to another center.



Listen to Reading

My students were asked to listen to the story with the CD player. It would be better if each student could control the playing speed individually. However, I didn't have enough machines for every student, and so they had to do listen to reading together with only one CD player.

At Hubbell, there are book packages with CDs. Every student used a CD player and earphones on his or her own. He or she could jump, repeat or pause as needed. Therefore, there is a need for me to think about how to solve the problem and practice this activity more smoothly.



3. Spanish Class

The students at Hubbell have Spanish class twice or three times a week. There is only one Spanish teacher, and she has forty periods a week! The teacher used Spanish all the time in class, but students could answer in either English or Spanish. If a student answered in English, the teacher would translate it into Spanish. Because there is no Spanish classroom, the Spanish teacher has to move from classroom to classroom. She wore a big name card, put many teaching posters in her car, and used some puppets in class to help students understand better. If the class was getting noisy, she turned off the lights to let everyone know.

I observed the first, second and fourth grade classes. As the Spanish teacher walked into the classroom, she began to sing two to three songs to get the students' attention, and then reviewed the numbers and the weather to warm up. For the lower grades, she designed some games, such as rolling a die with a partner, and had them complete a worksheet. For the middle grades, she played a CD and showed picture books for students to make the connection between what they saw and heard. For the higher grades, she found some related clips from the YouTube Website to provide more authentic input.

I think sometimes we do the same things in teaching a language. However, speaking the target language all the time in my class is workable, but difficult. I tried to adopt her teaching strategies in my class. For example, I only spoke English with actions, drawing or finding someone to translate to everyone. The learners in the fourth grade had better feedback than the fifth graders. Therefore, I believe that the younger, the better. Once they feel comfortable and familiar with whole English teaching, they can benefit more from the class. However, our native language,

Chinese, is much more different from English than Spanish is. So, Chinese translation still plays an important role in English learning. I am still thinking about the proper percentage of target language use and how to reduce the students' nervousness.



II. LIFE WITH OUR HOST FAMILY



I feel lucky to know the Staplin family. The lovely family includes a smart father, a perfect mother and two cute little girls. Bill is a scientist, and Ruth works in a counsel office. Mary, 6, is the elder daughter who studies in the kindergarten at Hubbell Elementary School. And Esther, 4, goes to the preschool at Walnut Street School near her mom's office. There are also a great grandfather, who was a music professor at Drake University, and a wonderful grandmother, who is the director of the Learning Resource Center in West Des Moines, coming often to take care of their grandchildren.

Before each meal, they joined hands and sang a beautiful prayer song together. It is sung to the tune of the song "Are You Sleeping?" ("Two Tigers" in Chinese), and it goes: "Thank you, Father. Thank you, Father. Give us food; give us food. Thank you for the pancakes; thank you for the pancakes. A-men, a-men!" They substituted the underlined words with different items. I would like to sing it with my child and students, too.

I noticed that Bill and Ruth educate their children very well. They don't stop their kids from doing things or ask them directly to do something, but let them make decisions and choices on their own. One time we went to Union Park and then to Snookies to buy some ice cream. Mary wanted to try a new flavor. But when she found that she did not like the taste and did not want to eat it anymore, Ruth took it away and said, "It's good for you to try something new! Maybe you will find it's awesome and delicious, or maybe it's not. But at least you try it!" Then Ruth suggested that Mary get the smallest size the next time she wanted to try a new flavor. She said, "Right, trying new things is not a bad idea." In this case, Mary didn't regret it, get angry or mad at something, but just comforted herself and found a good solution for next time. And her mom tried to lead her to a solution without scolding her wrong choice. As for Esther, she shared her favorite gummy worm with her sister! After that, they made a funny story about the worm. They kept asking questions like, "How can it be...?" I really enjoyed the moment they created the story. I hope that I can do it with my own baby soon!



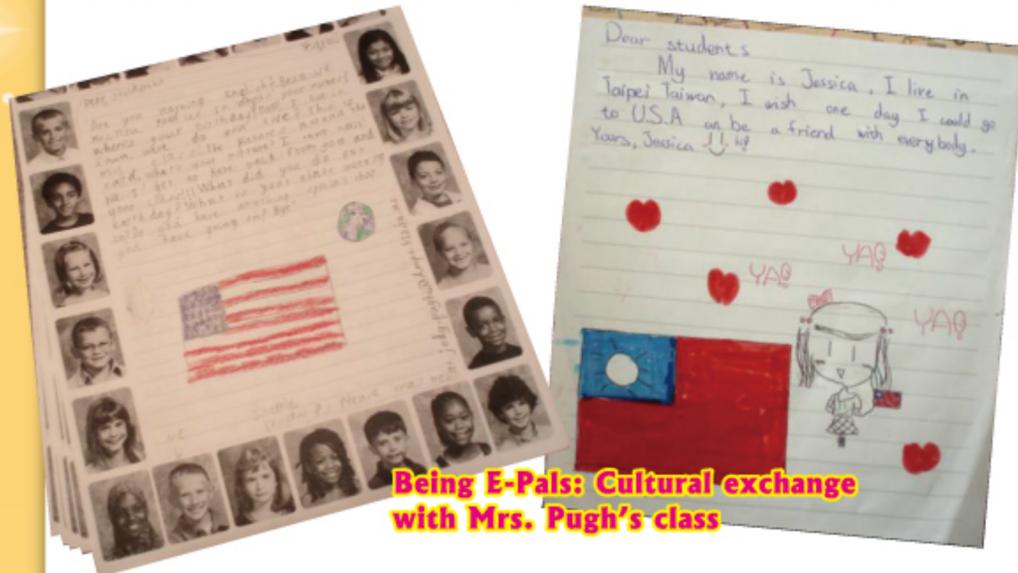
However, when the kids are naughty, what do the parents do? They start to count. If it's a time out, kids will be asked to sit down alone in a certain spot. So usually kids will behave when their parents start to count. One morning I felt touched again. Mary and Esther had a quarrel because of a hat. Both of them wanted to wear it! But finally, after Ruth's guidance, they thought of a fair way to have that hat. Mary said that the hat was too small for her, and so Esther could have it first. But Esther suggested that Mary should wear it first for her school performance. I think respecting each other can solve many problems. I want to use this way to educate my children instead of not thinking in their place.

III. CONCLUSION

This trip was a wonderful experience for me. It not only increased my knowledge of English teaching through observing classes at Hubbell Elementary School and visiting Iowa Public Television, Heartland Area Education Agency, the

School of Education at Drake University and the Iowa Department of Education, but also allowed me to experience American life by staying with a host family for a whole week. Many students were excited to be e-pals with Mrs. Pugh's class after they saw their letters and heard what I shared with them. Some of them even made the decision that they would

like to study English hard in order to visit different countries around the world in the future. Both my students and I have benefited a lot. Moreover, being with the host family helped me to think and speak English all the time, and we appreciated the cultural exchange very much.



Being E-Pals: Cultural exchange with Mrs. Pugh's class

