

From Reading to Writing: A Step-by-Step Learning Process

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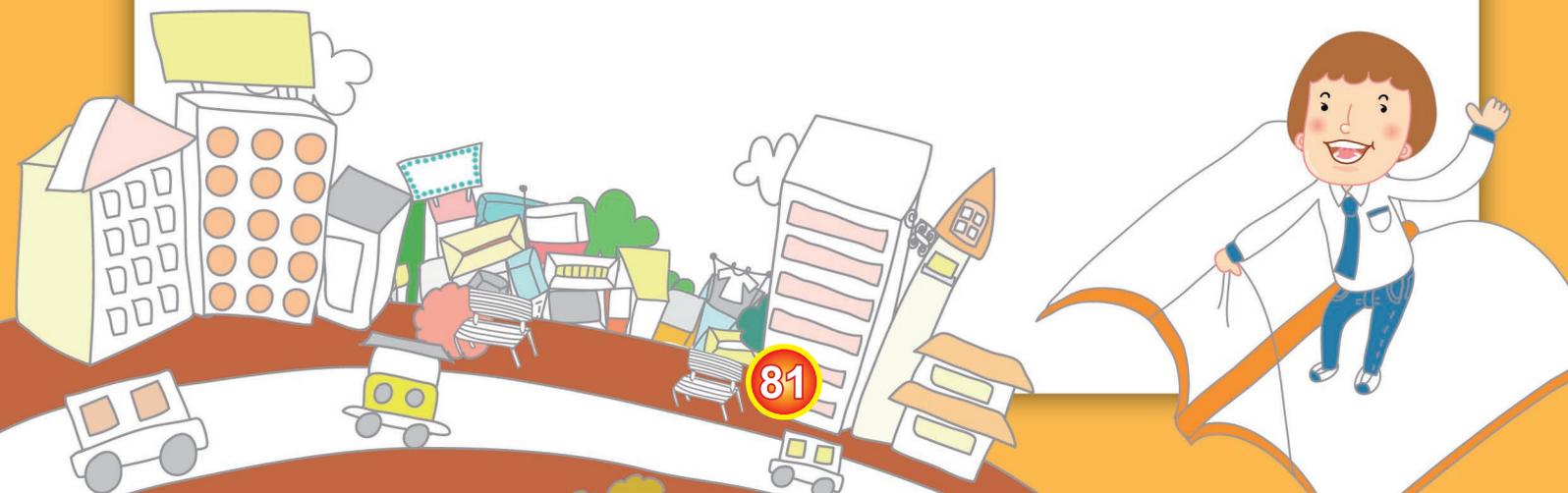
Introduction

William Arthur Ward once said, “The mediocre teacher tells. The good teacher explains. The superior teacher demonstrates. The great teacher inspires.” The great teachers in Wedgeworth Elementary School have shown, not just for their students but also for us, how true this quotation is. During these two weeks of training, apart from the excellent training program in ISC for the first week, we had the opportunity to actually step into the classroom to observe teachers’ teaching and how they interact with students in Hacienda La Puente school district. I believe that we can always learn from watching each other’s teaching no matter how long we have been in this career. However, Taiwan teachers might consider classroom observation as a hostile action from school when it’s not a regular procedure for us. As a result, since I had never been in so many classrooms for the past five-year of teaching like I did in the U.S.A., this precious experience does have a lot for me to learn from.

In the following, I will start from a general idea of what I had observed in Wedgeworth Elementary School from kindergarten to the third grade and how teachers there put what they were trained in the workshop into practice. Secondly, Nancy Fetzer’s writing strategies that have been wildly utilized by teachers there will be briefly introduced. Finally, I compile a list of ideas which I could use to improve my own teaching and which I could share with teachers in my school.

General Classroom Observation Findings in Wedgeworth Elementary School

To begin with, it is crucial to understand that true learning happens when teacher is able to manage his/her class well. Recent trends in Taiwan teaching environment have emphasized the desirability of shifting authority away from teachers and handing it to students, which is known as the learner-center classroom. This perception has been at the

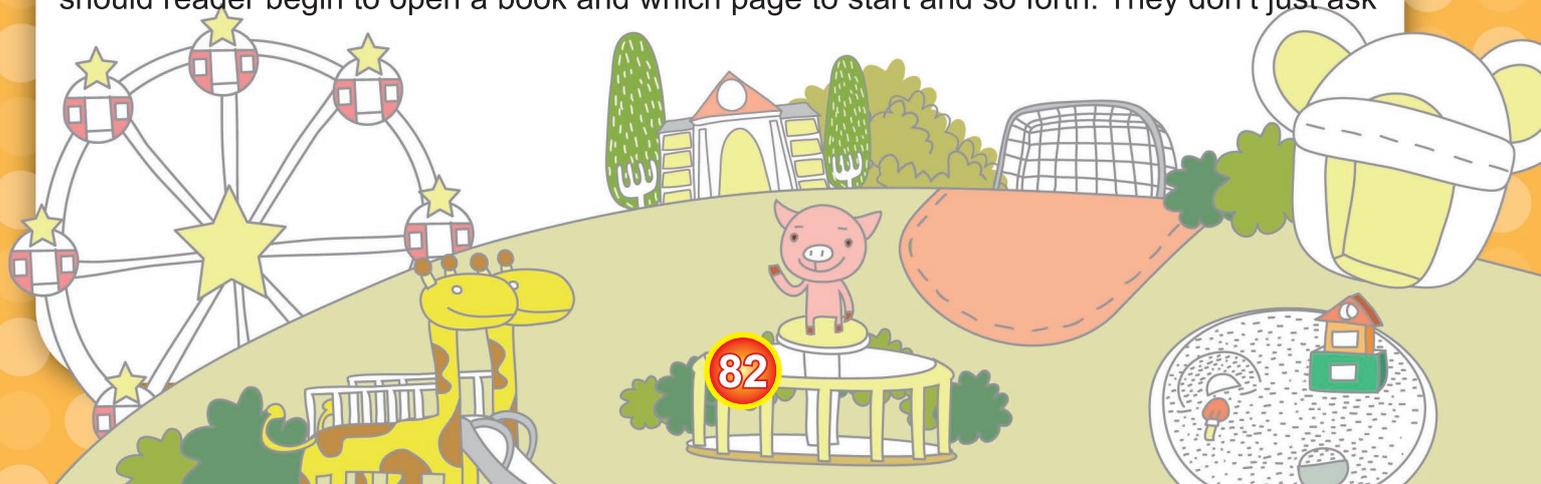


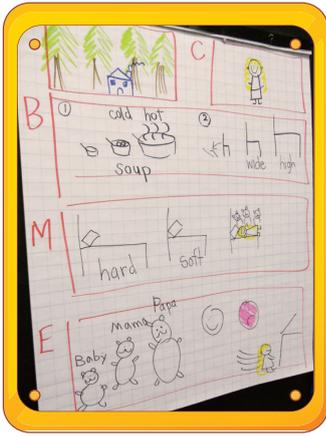


heart of Taiwan educational movements. We can infer that there has been more “teaching” than “learning” in the past decades. To put more emphasis on learning, Taiwan teachers arrange a lot of learner-centered tasks in order to engage students in learning. In my view, most of the time students are taking over the entire classroom not for learning, but for creating chaos. So when I stepped into a kindergarten classroom in Wedgeworth Elementary School, I was amazed to see that children were sitting quietly waiting for teacher’s next instruction and politely responded and listened to others’ comments. To respect others is the primary focus throughout the whole classroom rule build-up process. It has been reinforced over and over again ever since they are still, in my respect, too young to understand what that is. Also, the classroom rules are well-connected to other classrooms and school visions. Students won’t have troubles in getting used to different rules and standards just because they are in a different classroom. In Taiwan, teachers have their own way of setting up classroom routines and rules. Thus it is hard for students to quickly follow up what teachers expect them to be or to do. Sometimes children are confused about different standards.

Forming Reading Habits for Students

It seems that reading skills and reading habits are two different matters. However, without good reading skills, to form a constant reading interest certainly is not an easy job. In the three-day of visiting, we were so lucky to observe activities concerning language art and also how they assess students’ language learning results. Moreover, what intrigued me the most was that children regard reading as something fun and worth doing, not just some work that teachers force them to do. In other words, reading has become a comfortable and enjoyable habit for them. Whenever children finish their assignments or class work, they just grab a book from the classroom library and start to read quietly on their own. It is interesting to find that students in Taiwan sometimes even don’t know what to do during their spare time in class, not mentioning reading books. However, children won’t possess reading habit automatically, for it’s not a gifted talent for everyone. So, what exactly made the differences in these children? What I had seen in Wedgeworth Elementary School was that teachers there gave high-level supports on a step-by-step guided reading as well as writing for students. Learners start from knowing title, illustrator, and author of the book, which direction should reader begin to open a book and which page to start and so forth. They don’t just ask



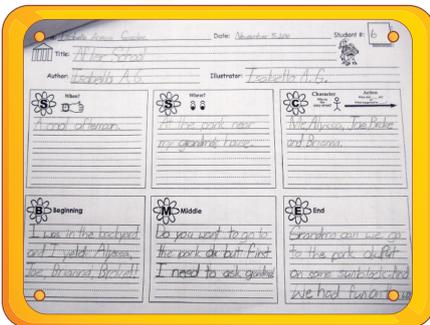


Picture 1

the students to open and begin to read a book. There is more about reading than knowing the meaning of the words or the story. Those little things that we sometimes ignore are certainly useful information and should be pointed out before we teach a child to read or write. For younger children, teachers use pictures or gestures to draw their attention on the story and hope that they can retell the story by drawing pictures or writing keywords down. Teachers utilize chants with actions to show different components of a story on a chart, for example, the setting, characters, beginning, middle and end of the

story. With the help of teachers (see Picture 1), children can easily grasp the general ideas about the story and learn some keywords in the book. Teachers use different ways to retell the story and ask questions about the details. Students are able to engage in what they are going to read next, for they have been trained with some learning strategies to comprehend the story or imitating writing long before they are really asked to write something. Trained with this process, the students will encounter fewer boundaries while they attempt to read or write on their own.

Nancy Fetzer's Writing Strategies



Picture 2

Many schools in California implements Nancy Fetzer's research-based learning strategies. She has a contract with the school district to train their teachers to utilize these writing and reading strategies. It was reported that her strategies indeed contribute to the raising of the students' writing achievement level. Nancy Fetzer develops activities and materials that engage all students to write organized and interesting contents. Just follow the easy and interesting steps outlined in the teacher's manual, teachers can teach students how to use the necessary skills in any writing forms. The concept is that students can draw on the easy formulas, graphic organizers or chants (see picture 2 for illustration) to form a simple piece of writing. Through a systematic practice, students will receive model instruction to apply those strategies in writing. Students not only lessen the anxiety about writing through the practices, but also know how to utilize the oral language information. For example, students talk to or share with others about their brainstorming ideas, and rehearse on organizers to evoke their writing potential. To those who lack of motivation and confidence to write, it would be more comfortable for them to follow the engaged structures and organized frameworks. This report will discuss more about it in the following parts.

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The Step-by-Step Writing Instruction

Writing is a highly complex language skill. Without the step-by-step instruction, many students may have troubles in writing. Children learn a great deal about written language as they see and interact with books, songs or chants early in their childhood. Through massive reading in early childhood, they first learn about the use of writing language before they know the writing forms. Start from kindergarten, what I had observed was that children not only have a lot of chances to get books of their age or interests around the classroom, but also have a sufficient and consistent block of time for daily storytelling. Apart from reading, some wrap-up activities, like I mentioned before, are followed by the story time; teachers utilize Nancy Fetzer's writing instruction and strategies to deconstruct different text structures so that students can use graphic organizers and secret formulas as writing aids. Teachers first model, then guide and teach how to use those graphic organizers and secret formulas through the whole writing process.

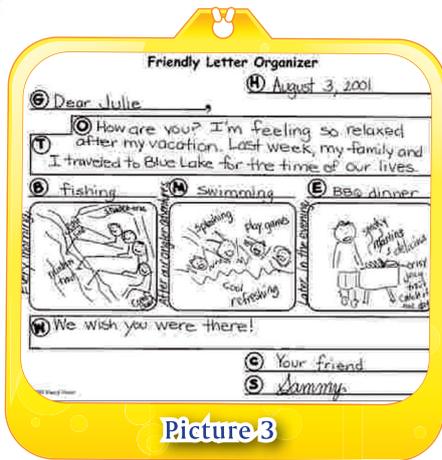
A key point is that students can't write what they can't say. So before they actually write something down, there is an oral information time and they will try to record the information on the organizers. Then students will practice those oral copied information many times before they are ready to write. These similar steps work mechanically for different genres and students soon are able to work through the steps on their own without teachers' help. Those brainstorming steps have become something they are familiar with and can soon try to write with their own words, instead of just imitating.

Writing and reading have become the tools for learning other subjects. We all expect students to get more effective instructions so that they not only improve their writing skills but also obtain skillful strategies for the rest of their lives. As I said before, a good approach might be implemented badly if we lack a whole understanding of it. Unfortunately, this report is too limited to give readers more detailed demonstration. However, it is worthwhile to evaluate the results of this writing training program and its actual impact on learning.





Nancy Fetzer's Friendly Letter Writing Book



Picture 3

The story of Friendly Letter writing book is originated from the story of *Three Little Pigs*. The bright idea that the Big Bad Wolf decides to change his evil ways and wants to become the fabulous and friendly Wolf gives the readers the authentic purpose to begin to write. It engages children in a familiar story that makes everything quite easy to start with. With the help of lovely characters like Prince Heading and Dear Lion, it successfully captures children's attention to identify

each important part of a friendly letter. Besides, Queen Manners, King Idea, and the Duke of Details ensure that the body of the letter is well written. Moreover, follow the guidance of Sir Gallent and Knight of Closing, the letter ends with proper Good-byes and Closing. With the help of the brainstorming organizers and letter organizer (see Picture 3), students can easily transfer their brainstorming ideas to the formal letter page. Students talk to their partners about what they are going to write on the letter, check spelling and make sure each idea makes sense. Teachers refer to the rule page whenever it is needed and check whether children are ready for the next part of the letter. After editing and revising the letter, students will write on a lined paper eventually. Therefore, it actually takes a long time for teachers to work through the whole writing process, starting from the retelling of the story. However, after the students master the strategies, they can use them to start writing on their own any time.

Does it Work For Us?

In my own experience, some teachers have preconceptions on new approaches which are to be applied to their local schools. They will be too eager to put it into practice without a better understanding of it. English teachers should know the appropriate timing and choose the right person to apply certain teaching approaches in order to best meet the needs of the students. It is possible for a popular language teaching approach to be implemented poorly at the wrong time and with the wrong people. In brief, I do not know about the teaching in America enough to be able to say my understanding of the observation is fully correct. Still, a passionate teacher should be realistic and considerate to children's learning needs and should never stop learning and trying new things.

