

What a Fruitful Trip: My Reflections on the California Training Trip

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At the end of this summer vacation, I checked the website of Taipei County Education Bureau to see if there was any news of California training trip. I was so thrilled when I saw my application approved. I want to say thanks to Education Bureau for offering such a terrific opportunity for us to go abroad to observe and learn.

At this training trip, we visited the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District, which is the largest district in the San Gabriel Valley and one of the largest suburban school districts in California. During this trip, we spent the first week on teacher training program in the I.S.C. (Instructional Services Center). We learned a lot from this program, including phonemic awareness, phonics and syllabication which are the whole new ideas for me. The training program included four skills of learning English and I think the writing part helped me the most. All of the presenters were fantastic and passionate. That was another great quality for us to learn - enjoy our work!



During the second week of the training, we went to different schools in the district to do the classroom observation. Visiting Palm Elementary was an unforgettable experience for me because the teaching in American classroom is quite different from ours in Taiwan. Teachers there have more time to help those slower students and I think the way they teach is more student-oriented. I'll explain it in details later. Actually, most students in Palm are Hispanic, and that means students' mother tongue is Spanish. Therefore, the situation is a little bit similar to Taiwan's English education. Besides classroom observation, I had opportunities to exchange teaching ideas with those teachers in Palm. They are all very friendly and offer lots of help. I even brought back many festival worksheets from some of them.

The following report will focus on how American teachers develop students' writing ability.

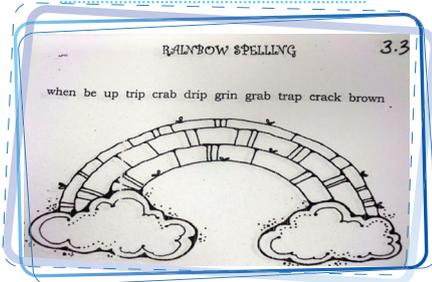
Introduction

In Taiwan, we put more attention on developing student' listening and speaking ability. We started to put much more attention on building reading fluency recently. However, because of time limitation, students' level and other reasons, we spend very little time on writing. Luckily, we started to try out activated curriculum in these three years in Taipei County and that means teachers have spare time to teach writing. Therefore, I not only paid most attention on teaching writing during the training program, but also got inspired from the classroom observations.

Spelling Practice

Before starting to write, students need to know as many words as they can. That means they have to do some vocabulary memorizing and some mechanical drills. I learned, from teacher Louise McMillan, an interesting way for students to copy new words. It is called "Rainbow Spelling."





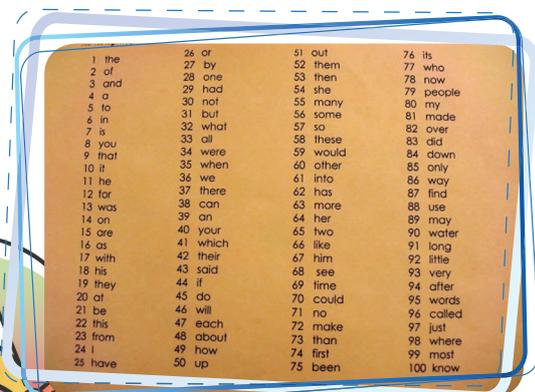
On top of the sheet are the words that the teacher wants students to copy. The reason why it is called “Rainbow Spelling” is that students use different colors of crayons to copy those words. Take the first word “when” as an example, student A may pick a red crayon to copy the word “when” five times at first and then he needs to use other colors of crayons to copy the same word “when.” He needs to use at least three colors of crayons to copy each word so that all the words look like rainbows. I think this sheet is a brilliant idea because most of the students like

to draw. Using this sheet makes students feel like they are drawing, instead of doing some mechanical practice. Additionally, they copy a word at least fifteen times in an interesting way. I found students really enjoyed creating their “rainbows” and they even asked how I feel about their “rainbows.”

As for the spelling part, teachers have three tips for students when they start to write:

1. Spell high frequency and decodable words within a snap!
2. For unknown words, say the word slowly and write down what you feel and hear.
3. Circle the word and keep writing!

Every teacher has a different way to help students memorize those high frequency words (or known as sight words). Take Mrs. Campa’s class for example, every student in her class has a sheet of sight words which is laminated. She would ask students to take out the sheet and listen to the CD once and they need to repeat these words afterwards. She asks them to do this every day.



Genre and Rubric

According to the curriculum standards of California, writing is divided into different genres: Descriptive, Narrative, Friendly Letter, Summarize, Research, Response to Literature and Persuasive. Every grade has its own requirement. As for students in Taiwan, I think the first two parts would be the most suitable for them. Before writing, teachers would remind students that:

1. Never start the same way as the sentence before.
2. Always go back and read what you wrote.
3. Never stop writing a word you don't know how to spell.

As for how to guide students to write, the teachers use lots of charts and thinking maps to brainstorm and they even teach some chants to help students memorize the tips of writing.

Descriptive Writing

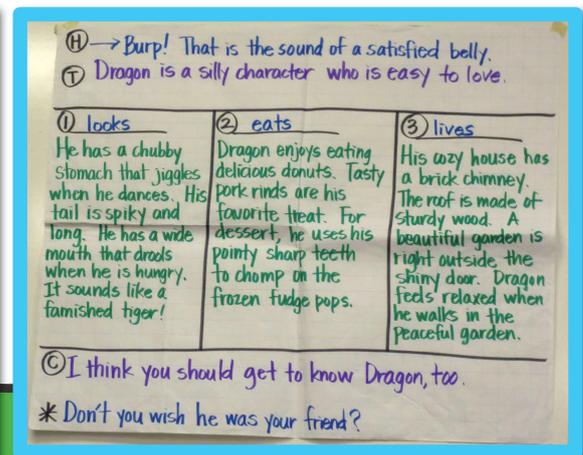
There are seven steps to Descriptive Writing:

1. Draw pictures.
2. Label nouns.
3. Label adjectives.
4. Add verbs.
5. Figurative Language.
6. Get organized!
7. Say it! Write it!

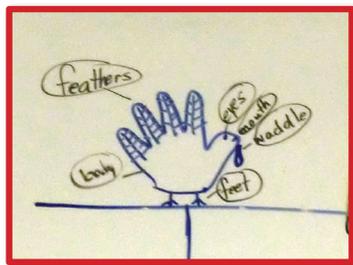


These are parts that I never noticed but they actually help students a lot. I think except for beginners, it's better for them to recognize parts of the speech. It's because it will help them organize their writing. Take my students for example, some of them would write sentence like: "My like food is ice cream." If they know "like" is a verb here, they wouldn't make mistakes like this.

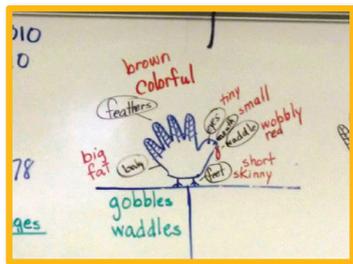
Here is the example:



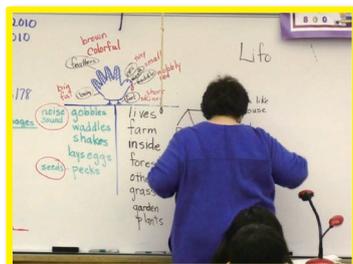
Here is another example I observed in Mrs. Cordero's second grade class. She had taught the origin and some customs of Thanksgiving for a few classes and the last part of this lesson was to write a short story about Thanksgiving.



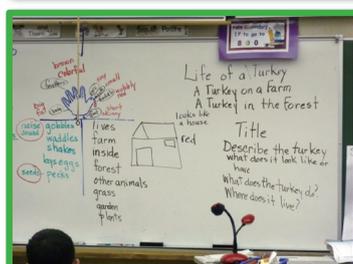
At first, she asked students to use their own hands to draw a turkey.



Then she brainstormed some words students need to use and help them to label their parts of speech.



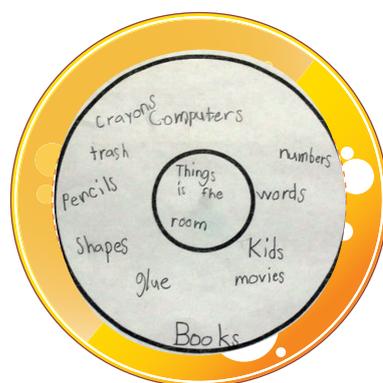
Mrs. Cordero and the students tried to brainstorm as many words as possible.



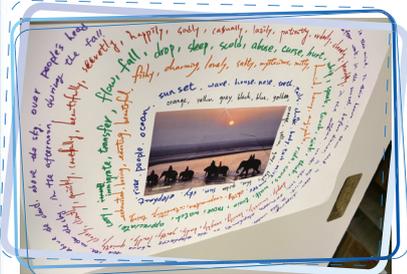
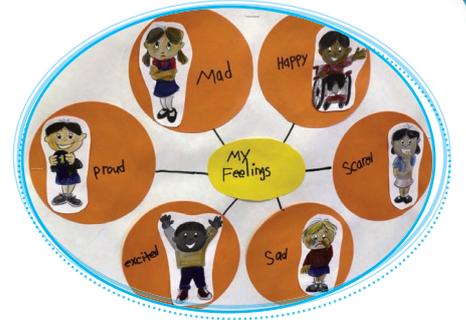
At last, Mrs. Cordero helped her students organize these ideas and even the title of the story.

I find it's really interesting the way these teachers guide their students to write and I believe that through the same kind of guidance, our students can write, too. I'm going to let my fifth graders to write something about Christmas in the coming week. Writing is always difficult when you can't think of the words you need. Class discussion can ease students' anxiety of writing and it also helps students enrich their writing.

They also use some thinking maps to organize their ideas or words that we seldom use in Taiwan.



As for teachers, they have a set of sheets of word bank and they include words of physical features, emotions, actions, personalities...etc. It's very useful for teachers to guide students to write.



There's another way of building the word bank- Cooperative Learning Round Table. The teacher divides students into several groups and gives each group a photo. Each group member takes a marker of different colors. When the teacher says "Go", each group member with black marker has to write down all the colors of the photo and other group members should try hard to help the writing representative. The second round is that the student with blue marker will write a noun on the photo and go round and round until everyone write once. We tried this activity during the training program and it was really exciting!

Narrative

At first, teachers would introduce the meanings of setting, character and plot. Here is the chant for Narrative Text Structure:

Every story has a setting and a character.

The setting is the time and place.

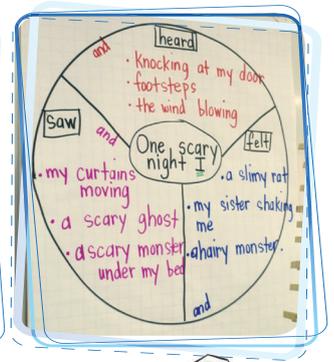
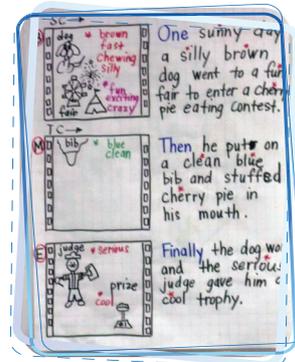
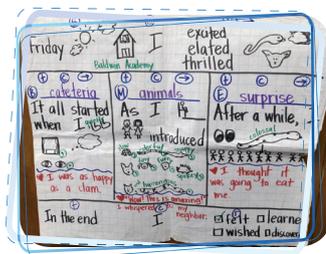
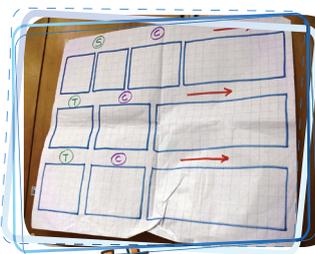
The character drives the action of the story in a beginning, middle, and end.

In the beginning, the author needs to make the setting and character come alive, or we will close the book!

In the middle, the character goes through many actions, actions, actions in the story:

The end! What was the last thing that happened to the character?

I think this is also very useful for us to start teaching writing. And they would use some of the charts to help students write. Here are two examples:



Besides writing, there's one more thing that catch my attention. When I went to TAS seminar a few years ago, the teachers there showed us how the "Learning Stations" worked. Before classroom observation, I didn't believe that would work because most of my students are passive learners and they would start talking when the teacher is not around.

However, when I observed the first classroom, Ms. Rivera asked me to help assist one of the learning stations. Honestly speaking, they didn't need my help; they could quietly finish their tasks on their own. Only one or two children could not focus on the tasks because they are just kindergarten kids.

After I observed more classrooms, I could see that some of the classes used learning stations successfully. I couldn't help but wonder: is this possible in Taiwan? I would definitely try that when I get back!



It was a terrific trip indeed. I would like to express my appreciation to the elegant principal of Palm Elementary, Edna Moore, and all the friendly and generous teachers. Their hospitality and their sharing of their ideas and work sheets really made our visit wonderful. The kind staffs and amazing students are awesome, too. Without them, I couldn't learn this much! I also want to

thank all the people from The Hacienda La Puente Unified School District Office. Thank you so much for the warm welcome and I would never forget that I had the chance to attend the board meeting. Also, I would like to show my most gratitude to Rosie and Norman Hsu for taking care of us for those two weeks. I would like to thank Rosie for inviting us to their house for the Halloween party. That was a great experience. I would never forget Mr. Hsu, who arranged so many wonderful schedules for us. We not only learned a lot from the program but also experienced American culture.

I'll try my best to apply what I have learned to my teaching and hope there would be more training programs soon!

