

Universal Access in Language Arts Instruction

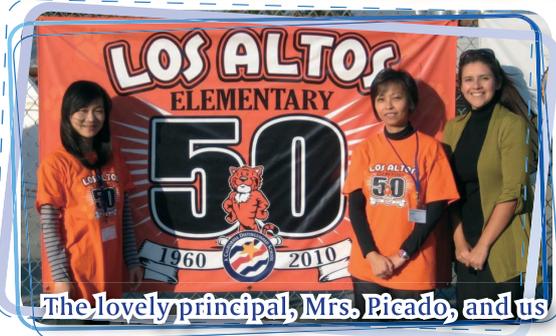
By Yu-Ling Chang, Dengkong Elementary School



Introduction

It was a great honor for me to be a member of the Taipei County English Teachers Delegation to visit the prestigious Hacienda La Puente Unified School District in California. During those two weeks, we received intensive training courses and observed classes in the host schools. Among the instructional techniques we've learned, the strategy of "Universal Access" caught my attention. It has been the focus of Reading/Language Arts instruction in California elementary schools. Therefore, this strategy will be further discussed in this paper.

Los Altos Elementary School Profile



The lovely principal, Mrs. Picado, and us

Located in the southern section of Hacienda Heights, Los Angeles County, Los Altos Elementary School is one of the 20 elementary schools in the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District (HLPUSD). The school has approximately 350 students in kindergarten through grade five. The average class size is 20 students. The student population is composed of multiple ethnic groups, mostly Hispanic/Latino and Asian. Due to its progress in meeting the state standards and narrowing achievement gaps, it has been recognized as a California Distinguished School.



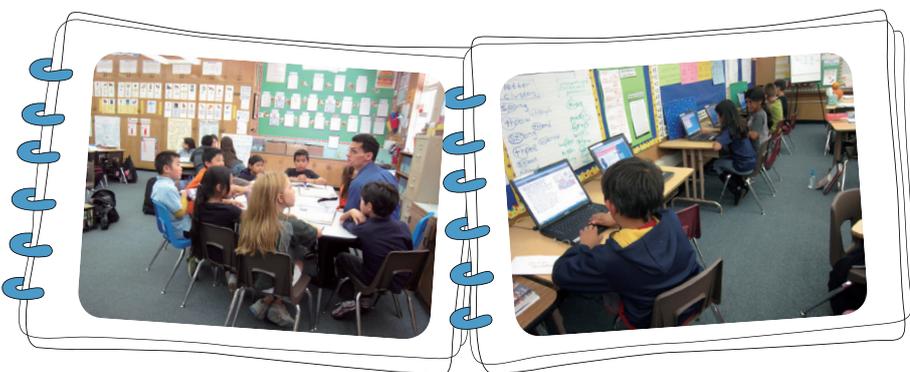


Mrs. Vandagriff's kindergarten class

Universal Access (UA)

I. Purpose

Affirmed in the Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools (2007), the ultimate goal of language arts program is to ensure that every student has access to high-quality curriculum and instructions. The access has been referred to as “Universal Access”. In order to make Universal Access happen, teachers must offer scaffolding of instruction and effective and intentional teaching (Diamond, 2004). In Los Altos as well as other California elementary schools, “Universal Access Time” (UA Time) has been adopted to daily class schedule. Basically, it takes approximately 30 minutes every day¹. It has been designed to provide the differentiated and diagnostic teaching based on student needs. In UA time, students work independently or collaboratively from a “Menu” of activities. The Menu consists of Must-Do and May-Do activities which will be explained further later in this paper.



Mr. Montano (3rd grade teacher) in UA Time with one of the groups



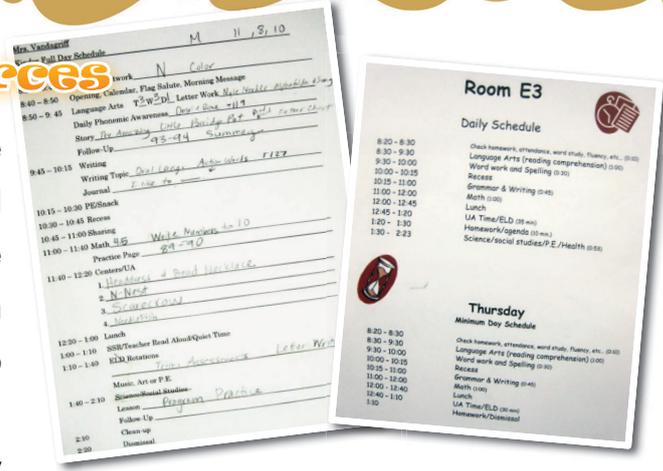
Students fully engaged in Centers Activities in Ms. Lee's kindergarten class

1. Kindergarten begins with 10 minutes and increases over the year to 30 minutes.



II. Instructional Resources

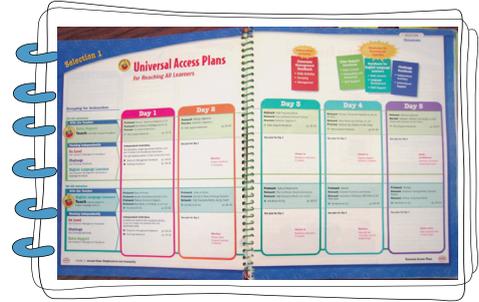
In HLPUSD, instructional materials are selected from the State’s standards-based materials. For the subject of Reading/Language Arts, the textbooks published by Houghton Mifflin have been chosen since 2002. To achieve the objectives of Universal Access, Houghton Mifflin Reading Program not only provides a wide variety of resources for meeting the needs of all students, but also designs



Kindergarten’s (left) and grade 3’s (right) daily schedules. UA time is scheduled before and after lunch respectively.

“Universal Access Notes” in every lesson. In addition to Teacher’s Edition-Theme Resources handbook, the following resources also serve to equip teachers with ready-to-use activities and worksheets, such as:

- ★ Classroom Management Handbook
- ★ Handbook for English Language Learners
- ★ Extra Support Handbook
- ★ Challenge Handbook
- ★ Level readers: I Love Reading/Phonics Library/Reader’s Library



Universal Access Plans in Teacher’s Edition handbook

With the various supporting classroom materials, teachers’ preparation would not be too time-consuming as long as the students know where to look for assistance among the resource books.



Teaching resources and graded readers





Grouping

Grouping is the key element of UA. It is a tool which “should be used flexibly to ensure that all students achieve the standards.” (Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools, 2007) The groupings should be dictated by the instructional objectives as well as students’ needs, interests, skills, abilities, and subject knowledge. (Diamond, 2004)

In Los Altos, students in a class are divided into four groups according to previously assessment and classroom observations. These four groupings represent progressive levels of intervention: challenge, benchmark, strategic, and intensive. Challenge learners are the most advanced students, while intensive are the least. However, the groupings should be flexible at all times. When a student makes a notable progress, the teacher can switch him/her to a higher group.

Around the Pond: Who's Been Here?			
Green	Pink	Orange	White
Teacher ~ ES 2-6 Categorize and Classify	SSC	ES 2-6 Categorize and Classify	SSC
1	1	1	1
Cut and Paste	Teacher ~ ES 2-6 Categorize and Classify	SSC	ES 2-6 Categorize and Classify
2	2	2	2
Teacher ~ SSC	Cut and Paste	Cut and Paste	Cut and Paste
3	3	3	3
Final Copy - Fetzter	Teacher - Guide Words	Guide Words	Final Copy - Fetzter
1	1	1	1
Teacher - Guide Words	Final Copy - Fetzter	Final Copy - Fetzter	Grammar - Nouns
2	2	2	2
Grammar - Nouns	Grammar - Nouns	Grammar - Nouns	Guide Words
3	3	3	3
Art - Dinosaur Cover	"Hats off to addition" Worksheet	Art - Dinosaur Cover	"Hats off to addition" Worksheet
1	1	1	1
Art - Dinosaur Cover	Art - Dinosaur Cover	Art - Dinosaur Cover	Art - Dinosaur Cover
2	2	2	2
"Hats off to addition" Worksheet	Art - Dinosaur Cover	"Hats off to addition" Worksheet	Art - Dinosaur Cover
3	3	3	3

Henry, Mudge and the Stary Night			
Green	Pink	Orange	White
PMES 2-1 & 2-2 Compare and Contrast and 2 sounds for "y"	SSC 1-15	Phonics Library Mike & Dave Trip to Central Park	Glossary Definitions Vocabulary
1	1	1	1
Story Map	Compare/Contrast 2-2	ES Teacher	Phonics Library Mike & Dave Trip to Central Park
2	2	2	2
SSC 1-15	Story Map	Glossary Definitions Vocabulary	Are you a Spider? Teacher
3	3	3	3
Phonics Library Mike & Dave Trip to Central Park Teacher	Compare and Contrast Moving and Bridges	Cut and paste	SSC 1-15
1	1	1	1
Glossary Definitions Vocabulary	Key	Phonics Library Mike & Dave Trip to Central Park Teacher	SSC 1-15
2	2	2	2
Compare and Contrast Moving and Bridges	Glossary Definitions Vocabulary	Key	Are you a Spider? Teacher
3	3	3	3
Cut and paste	Are you a Spider? Teacher	PMES 2-1 & 2-2 Compare and Contrast and 2 sounds for "y"	Cut and paste
1	1	1	1
Are you a Spider? Teacher	Phonics Library Zuke and Peter In the Woods	Story Map	ES Compare and Contrast and 2 sounds for "y"
2	2	2	2
Synonym Worksheet	Cut and paste	Phonics Library Zuke and Peter In the Woods	Math - Find a pattern EW4.6 & PS 4.6 Teacher
3	3	3	3
Phonics Library Zuke and Peter In the Woods	Are you a Spider? Continued	Math - Find a pattern EW4.6 & PS 4.6 Teacher	Compare and contrast - Algorithms and Cooedles
1	1	1	1
Math - Finding a pattern Teacher	Synonym Worksheet	Are you a Spider? Continued	Phonics Library Zuke and Peter In the Woods
2	2	2	2
Are you a Spider? Continued	Math - Finding a pattern Teacher	Synonym Worksheet	Synonym Worksheet
3	3	3	3

Universal Access Group Activity Plans for grade 2



Writing activity in Ms. Lee's kindergarten class. The student was leaving “one finger's space” between two words.

Mrs. Tulcan is one of the teachers whose specialty is in UA in Los Altos. She divides her second-grade class into four groups: white, orange, pink, and green. The four colors correspondent to the levels of challenge, benchmark, strategic, and intensive respectively. Each group has 5 students. Mrs. Tulcan explained that she moves students around after some time and changes what she does with the students as well. She also stated that, when grouping, not only students’ academic performance is a factor; their behaviors/attitudes toward learning are also considered. She believes that problematic behaviors hinder a student’s learning.



III. Activities

For a second grade language arts class, it generally requires six days to complete a lesson or story. As mentioned earlier, typically, UA Time is 30 minutes per day. However, Mrs. Tulcan modifies her class's daily schedule for UA. Among the six days, she schedules UA Time on three days, one and an half hour each day. And it's usually arranged after the break in the morning, during 10:00 to 11:30AM. In Los Altos, there are some teachers arrange UA before lunch, some after lunch. It all depends on individual teachers to set up their preferable UA time in their teaching schedule.

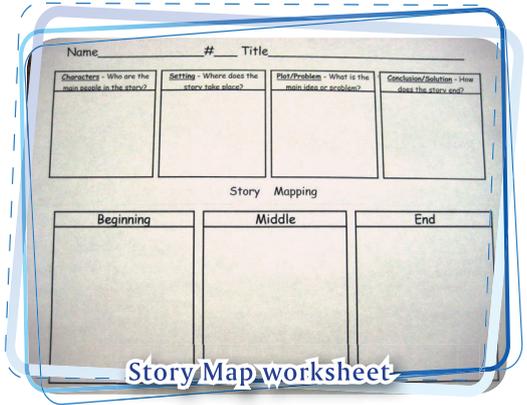
Universal Access activities are similar to Student Center Activities (Florida Center for Reading Research, 2004), or simply called Centers. Other than whole-class instruction, the types of the activities are small group teaching, group/collaborative work and independent work. Each group would have different schedules for UA tasks. Ideally, students are expected to complete all tasks within 6 days. However, it is alright if lower group students cannot complete certain tasks. As mentioned above, there are Must-Do and May-Do activities in each group's UA Menu. Must-Do activities must be literacy-based activities and related to the Language Arts Houghton Mifflin (the textbook) program. On the other hand, May-Do activities provide expanded learning opportunities. The basic target is for all students to complete their Must-Do activities.

Some recommended UA activities for language arts are:

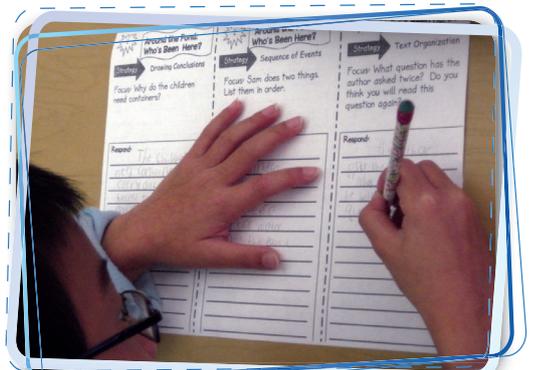
- ★ Fluency
- ★ Vocabulary
- ★ Checking Skills
- ★ Comprehension
- ★ Spelling

Recommended UA activities for reading strategy are:

- ★ Phonics/Decoding
- ★ Predict and Infer
- ★ Monitor and Clarify
- ★ Question
- ★ Evaluate
- ★ Summarize



Story Map worksheet



Student is working on the worksheet for reading comprehension strategy



Two third graders doing pair reading under the focus wall



IV. Differentiation of Instruction

Prior to grouping, differentiation of instruction is the primary concern in UA. Four dimensions of the modification are: pacing, depth, complexity and novelty. Among them, pacing and complexity are most commonly used. For example, when the teacher works with advanced students, it is appropriate to accelerate the



instructional pace and make the tasks more challenging. As for lower achievers, instruction time can be extended and the focuses should only be on fundamental or critical concepts; the teaching pace can also be slower which allows additional reinforcement and practice to take place. According to Mrs. Tulcan, the result of students' progress shows that UA is more beneficial to lower level kids, probably because they can have more time to comprehend.

Reflection

In my opinion, Universal Access is a valuable idea which puts individual needs into consideration. It serves to meet the goal of no child left behind. More importantly, it demonstrates the significance of equality and democracy. It may also be the remedy to some of Taiwan's problems. Due to the wide gap of students' academic performance, teachers in Taiwan have suffered from frustration. However, the result of the UA implementation relies greatly on the competence and efforts of teachers. Mrs. Tulcan even admitted that "it was hard at the beginning", because it takes time for both teachers and students to accustom to the adoptions of the strategy. Teachers need to manage multiple groups and conduct effective teaching simultaneously. Fortunately, teachers in California have rather solid support from the school district and the textbook publishers. As a comparison, teachers in Taiwan definitely need more support in terms of administrative support, curriculum modification, teacher training, and teaching references on this particular topic. And it seems that lots of overall arrangement needed to be done on the part of our Education Bureau to help improve teaching effectiveness.

Last but not least, I would like to express my gratitude to the Education Bureau of Taipei County and the Hacienda La Puente Unified School District for offering us this valuable opportunity to explore the classrooms on the other side of the earth. It brought me not only the innovated teaching ideas but also the enthusiasm for doing the right things for our kids. Thanks also to the principal of Los Altos Elementary School, Mrs. Lilia Picado, for her hospitality, big support, and wonderful smiles.

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