

My one-of-a-kind trip of academic exchange in the U.S.A.

By Patricia Kuo, Wuhua Elementary School

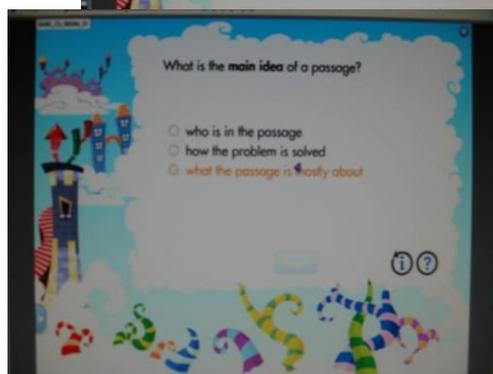
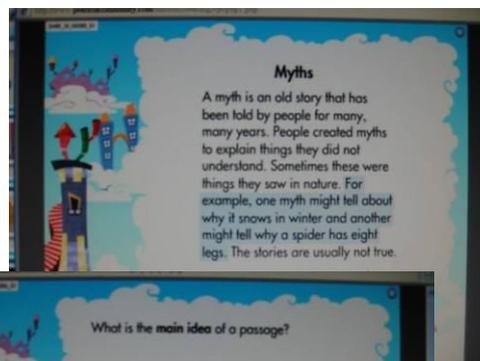
This trip will not be complete without the following participants: Dr. Long, the superintendent, and Mr. Jerles, the principal of Redkey Elementary School, who have relentlessly arranged and taken great care of every detail during this trip just to ensure everything can go as perfectly and smoothly as can be (and indeed, it is.); all the officials concerned who are kind enough to coordinate with the organizers; all the teachers at schools who are so generous to share with us their teaching and their teaching ideas (and so nice to us!); all the host families, what can I say, you really have a big heart. Thank you all, and especially thank you, Jim, Karen, and Dawn Nichols (and the three feline companions--Lily, Sisy, and Foxy); our kind and precious driver, Barbara, thank you for letting us have a peaceful rest on the bus and keeping us safe; Director Chen, John, Yu-Ching, Josephine, and Wendy from Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Chicago, every move of what you've done helps minimize the cultural shock we'd had and ensures us comfort and safety during the trip; our leaders of the band, Principal Howard Hu, Principal Handsome Chen, and Yvonne Li, whose leadership makes the whole journey filled with laughter and enlightenment; last but not least, my companion teachers, you are the brightest, the most fun mates to have and the closest to a haven, it's pure luck to know you all. My gratitude to all the above-mentioned people are beyond words.



1. Remedial tutoring

Relative ability or competence gap has always been a universal issue. I was impressed when I heard Mr. Kern, the principal of Francis Campanelli Elementary School, saying “Early literacy makes a different life.” Struggling students deserve one more chance. There are means we could refer to regarding

remedial tutoring. For starter, one software program, *Success Maker*, developed by Pearson Digital is commonly used in class. *Success Maker* is an online program which can be adjusted according to students' level. According to Stephen County Schools (time unstated), "The students seem to have no problems starting, completing, and exiting the program. The graphics are colorful and fun. The feedback is helpful for the students. The program offers places of help such as buttons for formulas, tools for measuring, and a glossary. Also, if a student needs extra support, the teacher has a resource button to retrieve worksheets for the area of need. Then the teacher can work one-on-one with that student." This method can be a diagnostic means, a helpful assessment tool, or reinforcing teaching materials for students of various levels. The *Success Maker* motivates me to want to develop a computerized remedial tutoring program of my own for my students.



Secondly, a pull-out program is implemented. For instance, in Judge Haynes Elementary School, remedial instructions are implemented from 8:00 ~ 8:30 on the low-performing students. One week later, a post test is carried out on the said same students. The same system is used for ESL students.

Thirdly, peer teaching is also a popular way for shortening achievement gap. And it is also commonly used in the class on our end. There is one thing worth noting: one teacher shared with us the profile wherein she would record how the low-achieving students were doing. The record is so detailed and rich that I really feel happy for the students that they have such a caring teacher.

Finally, there are tons of worksheets shared by American teachers that can be used as teaching materials for improving backward children's learning.

2. Cultural acquisition

The cultural parts are also what I can't wait to share with my students. There is always fun when sharing different cultures from different countries. For you mature readers out there, the content I am about to mention might be too

trivial or common for you. Please kindly be reminded those cultural materials are meant for our primary students, most of who (in my class) haven't even been on an airplane, let alone going abroad.

2.1 **School hours:** I still remember some American teachers and students were shocked when they heard that our students have to stay at school from 7:30 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. They thought that's really a long time. In the U.S., most schools start from 8:00 a.m. till around 2:00 p.m. In some schools, students will have after-school activities. Other differences regarding school are: American students don't have the habit of taking a nap, class just continues. Lunch time starts early, at around 11:00 and only takes about 20 minutes.

One principal once pointed out "too much time at lunch table means more problems they bring up."

There is only two 15-minute recess time in the morning and in the afternoon. In some schools I observed, there are no fences around the playground. Maybe this is why there is a teacher monitoring students during recess time. In my opinion, this system (the short school hours) allows teachers more time to prepare for their lessons and students (if their after-school activities are well-tended) more time to develop different skills, aside from studying. It helps build a balance between school and life.



2.2 **Food:** Food seems to bear a distinguished difference from Taiwan. In my limited observations, Americans tend to consume more meat and dairy products than vegetables. The school lunch is mostly deep fried potatoes or sweets, sausages, bread, milk or concentrated orange juice. To be honest, all I see is high calories there. Americans are not that into hot food--hot drink, hot soup, hot dishes, etc. In fact,



old and young alike, they usually have cold drinks to go with each meal. It's very different from our eating habit--mostly warm or hot food. The tiny carrots and drinkable tap water amaze my students, too. My students think it's so convenient to just turn on the faucet and drink the water. It never happens in Taiwan. Kids, don't do it!

2.3 **Houses:** In suburban areas, the houses are quite a view to watch-- big and beautiful. My students (and I) really like the clean and neat spacious lawns

constantly seen. Every time they see the large greeneries, they can't help go "Wow!" They think it's a good place to play (kids!), and I usually have to add in, "They are good for your eyes and health, too, kids."

In cities, the representative architecture in Chicago is just awesome! It seems to me every building stands out differently from its neighbor.

The skyline is really magnificent to watch. In fact, I think the architecture in Chicago can be a blueprint for our urban planning. Inside the houses, I find Americans don't have the habit of wearing slippers (like I see in the movies). They usually have shoes on when walking around in the house.

Due to cold weather in winter, the floor is always carpeted (but not in one Amish people's house that I visited). The roof is built slanted in both sides because of the snow. Probably due to freezing cold weather they have, people like the sun. So when I kept blocking the sun with a hat or paper, my host family couldn't help laughing.

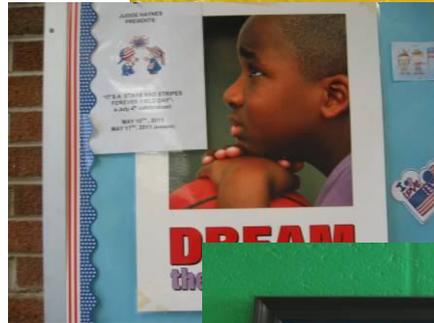
2.4 **Everything seems to be big, except...** This is a little exaggerated but bears, to some extent, truth. When I mention to my students that everything seems to be big in the U.S. except one thing. They all crane their necks for a view of what I am going to reveal, that's, the public bathroom trash bins. Of course, I later explain that they are for specific purpose. But it still shocks them a bit when I tell them, like in Japan, toilet paper is flushed away. If the tissue is soluble, I would suggest our country go with the same practice. It will cut



back on the quantity of trash. Let's go greener!

2.5 **Trash sorting and recycling:** The soluble plastic bags every store uses are exemplary. However, in public places, even in schools, I didn't see trash sorting bins or recycling propaganda. It doesn't seem to be a popular practice in the States.

2.6 **School and classroom decorations:** A lot of adages are posted on campus, such as "This school is full of terrific kids." "Dream the impossible." "Why walk when you can fly?" "Reading is the way to grow." "Even Einstein asks questions." "Nobody can make you feel inferior without your consent." etc. Each hallway carries a character name, i.e., "Expectation Street" "Motivation Way" so on and so forth. This really helps foster a positive-thinking environment. As for the classroom decorations, they just make us tongue-clicking. They are colorful, timely, useful, splendid, and rich. Maybe this (all those stimulating and rich decorations) is why American students tend to be more creative and imaginative!



2.7 **Amish people:** I am really happy to know Amish people. Their strict religious beliefs teach them to lead a simple life. Most (there are always exceptions) Amish people don't drive a car, but a buggy, don't watch TV, don't play the computer, don't take pictures, don't use electricity, and don't allow abortion. They stop going to school at the age of sixteen and go back to lead a farming life the rest of their life. They lead a simple and strict lifestyle. However, I heard from my host family that some Amish people are also most caring and forgiving people. The more I listen to stories about them, the more respectful I grow toward them. Certainly I share their stories with my students. It's just that my students are too young to appreciate the philosophy there. They just think it's not a very convenient life ("How can we live without a computer?" they say....). However, by expounding the



lifestyle and religious beliefs of Amish people, I wish to instill in the students the concepts that a simple mode of lifestyle can be a beauty and happiness, that caring for each other is more important, and that we should respect diverse kinds of peoples since in Taiwan, there are many new-immigrants, aboriginal people, and foreigners. Each people deserves the respect of their own lifestyle.

- 2.8 **Cornhole:** When it comes to games, it can always brighten children's eyes. This unique traditional Indianan lawn game doesn't fail to invoke inquiries from the kids. After explaining the rules, I tell them they can make similar kind of their own (We even plan to make one and use it for classroom activity purpose). Anyway, we really had a great time playing the cornhole back in Mr. Jerles' yard. Once again, thank you, Mr. Jerles.



- 2.9 **A gift in return:** To thank our American friends for sharing with us, I planned to give something in return. I taught some teachers and students how to play with the diabolo and shuttlecock, traditional and popular children's toys in Taiwan. Both teachers and children loved them. They (especially the children) all had a blast. At the end, I sent the toys away as a gift. I also taught some students one Chinese tongue twister.



Mandarin tongue twister

bao jhe huei ji shang fei ji (go on board
an airplane with a grey chicken)

Fei ji chi fei, huei ji yao fei

(When the plane takes off, the grey
chicken wants to fly, too.)



I know the pronunciations and tones are hard for them. However, having fun is what it counts.

The above-mentioned cultural observations are made by the writer during this short trip. It's an honest report. However, if my American friends find them too over-generalized or subjective, please kindly tell me.

3. Reflections and Suggestions

I have some reflections as well as suggestions regarding this trip or our educational systems.

3.1 **The on-the-go schedule:** I am very grateful for all the good-willed teachers who were so kind to let us observe their classes. The traveling from class to class has its benefits--we can have the chance to know different kinds of teaching styles from different teachers. However, due to the limit of time staying in each class, the observation is not deep and whole. The time for sharing with the teachers is little. My humble advice is that maybe the guest teachers can stick to the same class for the whole morning and then change class for the afternoon session. In so doing, we can better understand the students and how teaching strategies are processed. It might also be helpful for the guest teachers to assist the homeroom teachers in classroom activities. There is priority to this arrangement-- approval from the homeroom teachers should be respected first.

3.2 **People are nice.** All the people I met during this trip--the Mayor, the superintendents, the principals, the teachers, the students, all the host families, the staff and the passersby... were very nice to us. I feel very lucky and grateful for that.

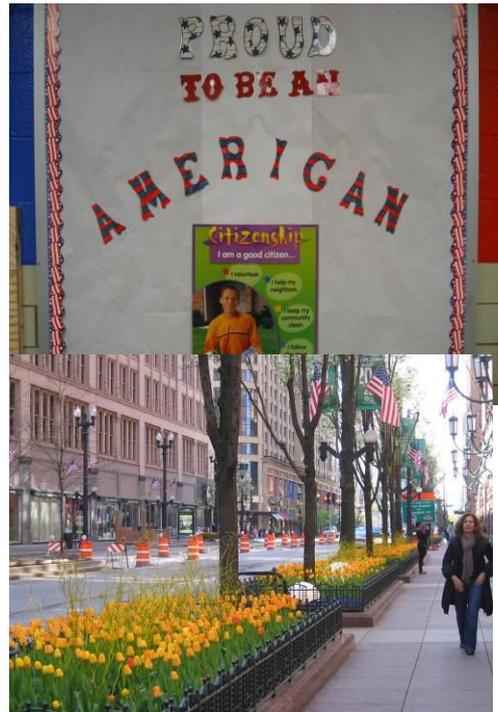
3.3 **Some inspiring words:** There were constant touching moments when talking with American teachers. I did catch some inspiring words: "A good teacher genuinely likes kids." "A good teacher should be good at at least one subject." "It's important to have many hands-on activities. You see the excitement." "A good teacher should get prepared for lessons, be organized, have good time management." just to name a few.

3.4 **Students are ardent askers.** This may not be new. We know American students are not afraid of asking questions (to whoever they are talking to) and are, often time, orally expressive. I need to encourage my students a lot on this aspect.



3.5 **Environment issue:** I believe it's a global issue. I hope countries around the world can put more efforts into it, maybe starting by sorting and recycling trash, and using soluble plastic bags.

3.6 National flag seems to be everywhere. I noticed that on the streets, on campus, in the classroom, we could see the American national flag. I guess it is one way of cultivating patriotism and sense of belongingness and cohesion. I could really feel and also saw it on the posters, Americans are proud to be Americans. This dignity of citizenship moves me. Therefore, I decide to put our beautiful national flag in my classroom as to hopefully achieve the same end. I suggest maybe our government and schools can consider doing the same thing.



3.7 “Learning should be built on things students like.” One teacher once said to us. It reminds me of the homework we generally give to our students. Mostly, it’s about writing (whatever subject it is) -- writing the workbooks, the worksheets, lots of exercises or copy vocabulary words, etc. Instead, maybe we can ask students to build something or make something, just something hands-on. I guess a more concrete measure, or maybe more constructive requirement is more likely to bring out the creativity of the children.

3.8 Supporting the teachers: When talking with American teachers, sometimes, I would hear teachers saying their principals being supportive of them. Indeed, one superintendent once said that all teachers have his phone no. and email address. “Be helpful, not critical.” I can’t help feeling envious of this. There is always distance (wide gap) between our officials or school administrators and teachers in Taiwan. Maybe teachers’ voices are not well paid heed to. I do hope the distance between the two sides can be shortened.

3.9 Chinese Fever: Some schools have sister schools in Mainland China. In some schools I visited, Chinese is either an elective or a compulsory course. Some students we met even asked us a lot about Chinese words and tried to talk to us in Chinese. It’s a good thing to know Chinese has become a popular language on this foreign land. Being in the same EFL environment, I feel the importance of asking my students to study



English harder.

3.10 **Melting pot or a bowl of salad:**

We saw many diverse ethnic groups studying under the same roof and heard many different languages spoken. I believe this diversity is a plus to a learning environment. We also have the benefits in Taiwan, too. There are many new-immigrants in Taiwan now. I hope their children can maintain their parents' heritages and share them with their peers. I also hope Taiwanese government can make good use of the assets --funding programs such as "Foreign Culture or Language Acquisition" taught by new-immigrants parents. It's very important to make it a constant activity, not just a short-lived hours-based workshop. We can also make it an elective course in schools. By taking care of the new-immigrants, we not only can solve employment problem, but also can diversify and enrich our society.



3.11 **Making English a second official language.** In Taiwan, if this dream comes true, I believe we can make learning English a smoother and more efficient way for our learners of all ages.

3.12 **AR test helps cultivate reading habit.**

AR test is a computerized reading comprehension program. In the US, from the first grader on, students are required to read books from an "AR Test Book Listing" given to them by their teachers. After reading a book, they will take the comprehension test on the computer. They have to answer correctly at least 60% of all the questions. Each book, according to its level of vocabulary, has its own point. Students have to read in order to meet certain number of points set by their teachers. The AR Test is applied in schools I visited. It is so important that many students will start reading more than required. I'd suggest our government develop a similar kind of software. I think this is a good way to



encourage students to read and, in the long term, helps students develop good reading habit. It's a measure worth thinking about.

3.13 **Pay more attention to remedial instruction.** In my humble opinion, in Taiwan, maybe we can make remedial instruction a compulsory course or an officially-required course (on main subjects only, I mean), for example, math on Monday, English on Tuesday, or two periods per week on English, etc. Struggling students should be always taken good care of. I can't help think of all the crimes in our society, it's likely that many culprits of those crimes go astray because they felt abandoned or fell far behind in different kinds of performances at a younger age.

4. Conclusion

It takes a sound policy, administrative support and a good teacher to yield a promising student and a nation with dignity. How to make good use of others' strengths and better improve our status quo is the main point of this trip. As always, I hope we teachers' voices can be heard.

As an old saying goes, "He that travels far knows much." I have traveled across the Pacific Ocean. It only makes me realize the dire need of learning more. And when it comes to the role of being a teacher, the situation could be exemplified by the words of a superintendent there, "Do you teach what you are taught or what you learn?" It's always very dangerous to be content with who we are, what we've already known, or what we are learning. By continuous learning, we could activate our brain cells, avoid being stuck in the same mind set, keep abreast of the times, and in the long run, benefit our students and maintain the self-esteem as a teacher and a human being.

References

Stephens County Schools (year unstated). Personal Use of Success Maker. Retrieved May 29, 2011 from http://www.piedmont.edu/idt/wiki/index.php?title=Success_Maker
