

Teaching Vocabulary and Spelling

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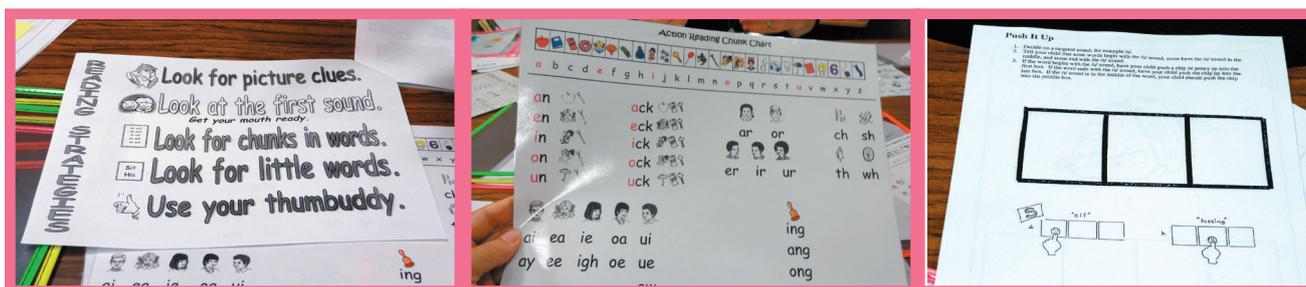
It is really a great honor to have the opportunity to visit American schools in New Jersey and New York in October, 2014. As a member of New Taipei City Educators Delegation, I was offered the chance to visit several elementary and high schools. I attended lectures in Columbia University and Brookdale Community College. The presentations made by three superintendents from Freehold Regional High School District, Linden Public Schools and Freehold Borough Public Schools inspired me much.

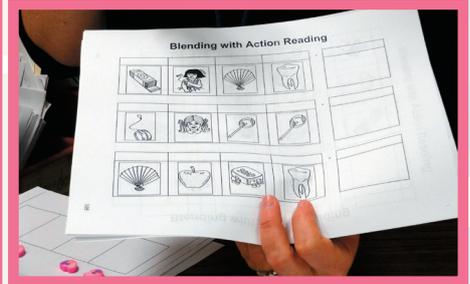
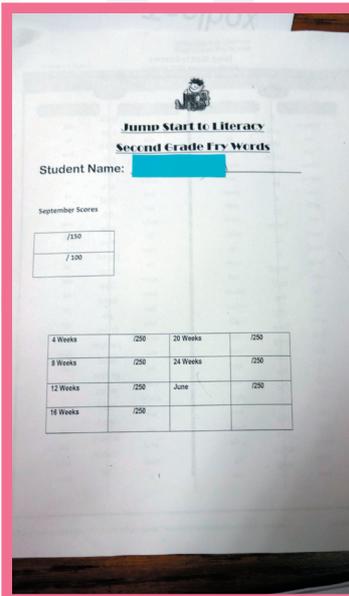
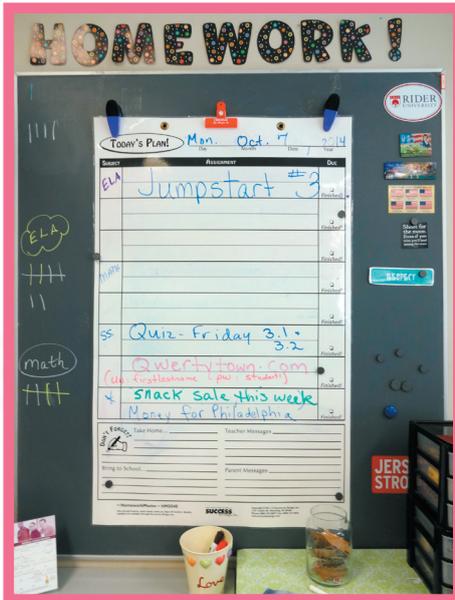
In the following, I would like to share what I have learned and experienced in teaching vocabulary and spelling. The first part is concerned with my class observation in New Jersey and New York. The second part is about vocabulary instruction, presenting and practicing vocabulary, teaching spelling and spelling activities. The last part discusses the way I teach vocabulary and spelling; the teaching ideas I acquired from the learning trip to the United States, how they can be applied, and also the challenges and difficulties I will face.

A. The Class Observation in New Jersey and New York

a. “Jump Start” Program

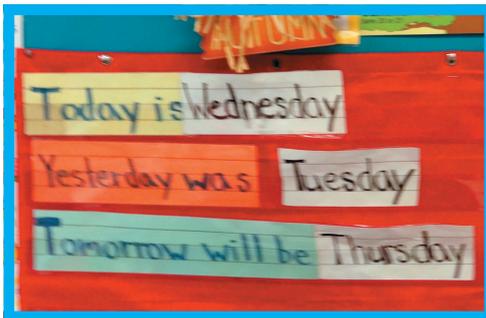
Elementary school students in New Jersey who have problems with literacy would join in the program “Jump Start.” Students would relearn English alphabet from the very beginning, do the Chunk Chart and Blending with Action Reading, and learn reading strategies and comprehension strategies. And then they would also do the Elkonin box (Push It Up) to practice pronunciation. When students do the drill, in order to make the activities more appealing, teachers would ask them to do it in different ways, such as standing up to read and then sit down quickly, or say the words with different emotions, like sadness, anger, happiness, madness, etc.





b. Learning Vocabulary from Daily Routine

Some teachers do the daily routine by asking students the day, the date and the weather, reading the calendar, doing the tally marks and pointing to colors. When doing these, teachers teach and practice vocabulary and spelling with students at the same time. For example, when referring to the word “black”, teacher would ask about the blend “bl” and the digraph “ck.” Students learn the vocabulary and spelling in a natural way without noticing it. Another example is that teachers have a writing board on the wall. It is written like “Today is _____. Yesterday was _____. Tomorrow will be _____.” After going over the days, the blanks will be filled in by saying the sentences and spelling the words together.



d. Learning New Words from Thinking Maps

Thinking maps include circle map, bubble map, double bubble map, tree map and brace map. Different maps are used differently. Teachers may choose different maps according to the topics. For example, when listing the long “ee” sound words, circle map may be applied. Double bubble map is good for comparison and contrast. For illustration, when comparing pens with pencils, students would recall lots of words such as colors and functions. Tree map can be used for classification. When using thinking maps, besides listing what students know, students are also trained to explain how they know what they know. In PS244Q The Active Learning Elementary School in New York City, students start to learn the knowledge and usage of thinking maps ever since they are in Pre-K.



e. Spelling Activity – Differentiation Learning

Three students work as a group. There is an envelope stuck on the notebook for each student. In the envelope are small word cards. One of the students leads by reading a word taken out from his/her own envelope at one time. The other two students write down the word under the right column in their notebooks. For instance, the word “suit” goes under the column “ui.” The leader would check the word and help with spelling the word. Different groups have different words. The teacher would work with one group each time. When the job is finished, the teacher would give the group new words.

f. Learning New Words – Using the Dictionary

In Colts Neck High School, I observed a modern world history class of ninth graders. Since they are ESL (English as a Second Language) (Hispanic) students, and it is the first class of the unit “The Age of Reason,” students use dictionaries to get the definition of the new words they may encounter in the next classes, such as enlightenment, logic, govern, etc. Then they write down the translation of the words in Spanish. They also have to make a sentence using the new word in their own words, not copying from the dictionary. Last but not the least, students are asked to do the visual representation for better memorization.

Name: _____	
Vocabulary Topic: The Age of Reason ESL World History: Reinfort	
WORD: Enlightenment Definition: An age of Reason where people believed reason and logic could be used to study all areas of life, not just science. Context (Sentence): In English, can't copy from the dictionary (make your own sentence) Translation: In Spanish: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation (drawing)
WORD: Logic Definition: use the first definition you see in the dictionary Context (Sentence): Translation: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation
WORD: Govern Definition: Context (Sentence): Translation: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation

WORD: Philosophers Definition: Context (Sentence): Translation: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation
WORD: Political Definition: Context (Sentence): Translation: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation
WORD: Naturally Definition: Context (Sentence): Translation: <i>Cognate?</i>	Visual Representation

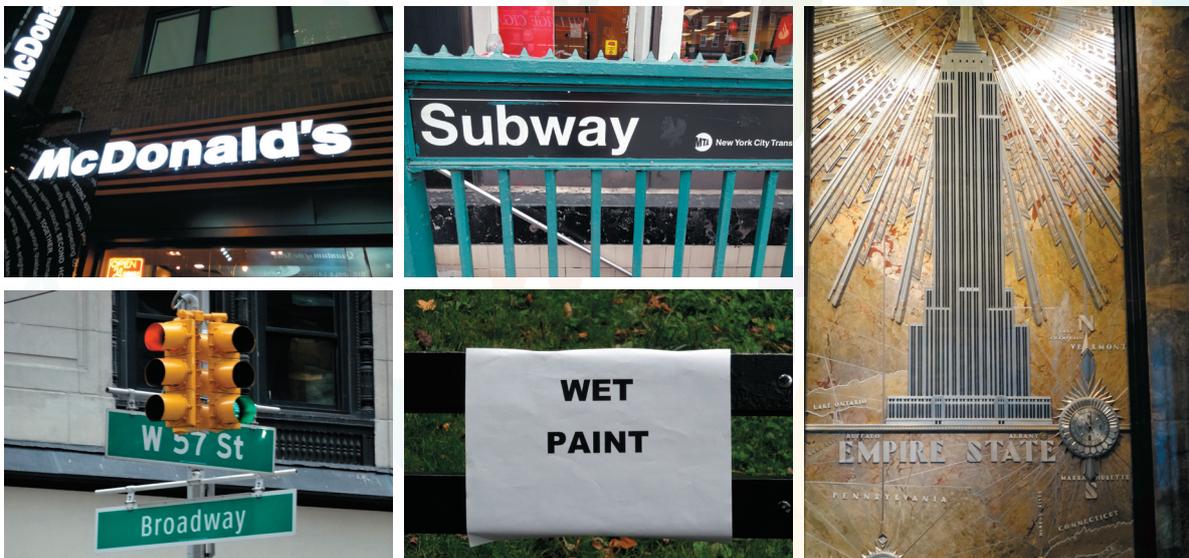
g. Learning New Words from Visual Aids

In a lab chemistry class, a teacher shares her vocabulary teaching strategies with us. With Hispanic students, she would use cognates to help students understand the new words. With Asian students who have very limited English, she would give students the word definition along with pictures, using iPad and other visual aids.

Chemical vs Physical Changes Lab Stations			
	Physical or Chemical Change	Explain observation	Is the change reversible
Station A Hydrogen after strike	Chemical	Take one and hold it. Repeat your observation	No
Station B Test Water		Observe the nut before and after	
Station C Leaves		Observe the leaf before & after	
Station D Pumpkin	physical	Carve the pumpkin and observe	
Station E Crush the marsh			
Station F Alka Seltzer		Place a piece of Alka-Seltzer and place in water	

h. Learning New Words from Daily Life

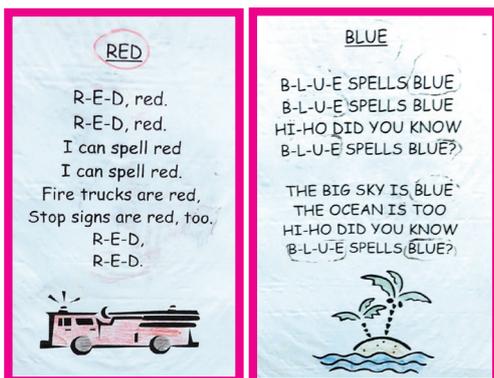
Looking at the picture clues of the items in the supermarket is a wonderful way to learn new words. Isn't it a better way to learn the word "bubble gum" than b-b-/b/-/b/-b-/b/-bubble gum? Interesting and effective! Another great example is that students can learn words from the way to school, such as the street names, the store names and the traffic signs. In addition, when learning alphabet, teachers can use pictures and store names from students' daily lives. For students in New York City, when learning b-/b/ words, teachers may put on a picture of Empire State Building. It constructs a meaningful context of learning b-/b/-building.



i. Learning New Words by Making Students' Own Alphabet Chart

When making alphabet chart, in addition to high frequency words, teachers can put on words which are meaningful to students. For example, under the letter T, students may say "turtle." Then, teachers may ask students' names starting with T like Tina. In that way, they would understand that two words both start with T.

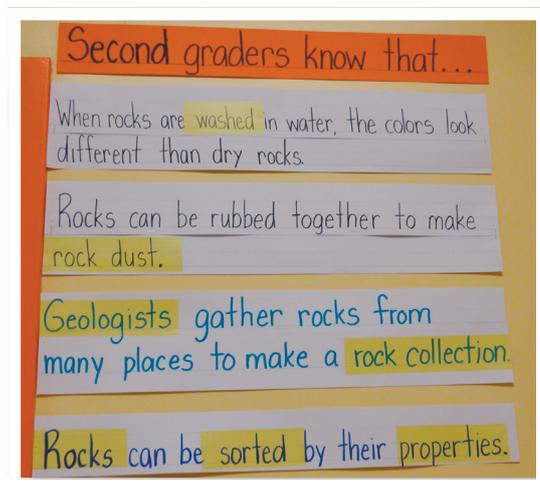
j. Learning New Words from Songs and Chants



For students who love singing, teachers may build curriculum from songs and chants. Students may make their own lyrics and learn many rhyming words and compound words. Teachers may do extended activity such as Read Aloud.

k. Learning Vocabulary from Highlight Tape

Some teachers would highlight words with yellow scotch tape in the sentences. Teachers may have students find out words by using the tape as well.



B. Vocabulary Instruction, Presenting and Practicing Vocabulary, Teaching Spelling and Spelling Activities

a. Vocabulary Instruction

“Without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed” (Wilkins, 1972). Vocabulary is the basic unit to express yourself. To know a word means to know its meaning, form and usage. In order to keep words in our long-term memory, teachers may use some strategies in class such as repetition, retrieval, spacing, pacing, cognitive depth/personal organizing, imaging, mnemonics and so on to motivate students and attract students’ attention.

b. Presenting Vocabulary

When presenting vocabulary, teachers may apply the following techniques:

1. Say the word clearly and write it on the board.
2. Get the class to repeat the word in chorus.
3. Translate the word into the students’ own language.
4. Ask students to translate the word.
5. Draw a picture to show what the word means.
6. Give an English example to show how the word is used.
7. Ask questions using the new word.

Translating is a useful technique that is simple and clear. However, students can’t see how the word is used by just having a direct translation. Teachers can give examples and then ask students to translate in return to monitor their comprehension.

Another effective way to present vocabulary is to show meaning visually. Teachers may show a real object, show a picture card, draw a picture, mime, use actions and do facial expressions.

Other techniques to present vocabulary are useful as well.

1. Using a known L2 synonym or a simple definition in L2.
2. Breaking the word into parts and giving the meanings of the parts and the whole word.
3. Giving a well-known opposite.
4. Giving a well-known word describing the group or lexical set it fits into.

Teachers may adopt and combine different techniques according to students' levels and the word types.

c. Practicing Vocabulary

Games are always students' favorite parts. Students practice vocabulary through games while having fun. There are many flashcard games that students enjoy, such as matching, listen and touch, numbering the picture cards and shouting out words, bombing, what's missing, memory game, guessing game, cowboy, etc. Other activities like pictionary, word search, charades, telling a story, songs and chants, word web, draw a map, labeling body parts, designing a menu, family tree, weather report, class/personal schedule, diary/calendar, and book making are good as well.

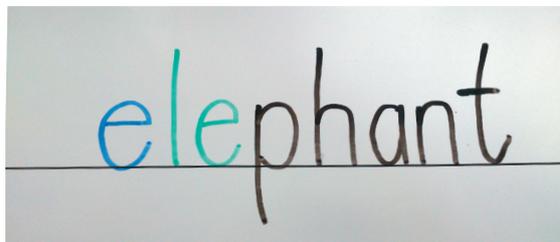
d. Teaching Spelling

Due to the historical complexities and diverse alphabet rules, spelling is a difficult task for students. To learn words well, students should have the language-processing skills as listed below.

1. Hear the sounds correctly.
2. Pronounce words correctly.
3. Remember all the word's phonemes in the correct order.
4. Recognize the letters of the alphabet and know the sounds they represent.
5. Copy words correctly from another source.
6. Discern between similar looking letters.
7. Learn new vocabulary, to use it and recognize it.
8. Understand and use affixes as well as to recognize their spelling patterns.

For teachers, teaching spelling involves phonics, including phonemic awareness and knowledge of letter-sound correspondences. To develop phonics skills, teachers may focus on letter-sound relationship, ask students to sound out words, have students

practice VC (vowel consonant) words, then CVC (consonant vowel consonant) words. The following step is to construct syllable knowledge from one syllable word to polysyllable words. Teachers may use the strategy “clap and count” and the activity “rainbow writing.”



e. Spelling Activities

When asking students to memorize words, “Look, Say, Cover, Write and Check” strategy is useful and practical (Horn and Otto, 1954). Again, to maintain students’ learning motivation, in-class activities are necessary. Games include body spelling, spelling baseball, delicious words, scrambled words, sign your words, UPPER and lower, word coding, toss a word, rainbow spelling, pyramid writing, words without vowels/consonants, crossword and so forth. “My Word Dictionary” as summer/winter vacation assignment is a wonderful wrap-up work in the end of the semester.

C. The Way I Teach Vocabulary and Spelling, The Teaching Ideas I Acquired from the Learning Trip, How They Can Be Applied, and the Challenges and Difficulties I Will Face

From the class observation in the United States, I discover that most elementary school teachers do not use textbooks. School administrators would print out the texts for teachers instead. After class, students are asked to put the texts in the folder. The situation is quite different in Taiwan. Taiwanese teachers choose textbooks for students before the new academic year begins. A workbook and a writing book are provided as well. The advantage of using textbooks is that they are systematic teaching materials. The disadvantage is that if teachers do not go over all the contents in the textbook, parents may have questions about that. In other words, Taiwanese teachers are constrained by the textbooks.

Under such circumstance, English teachers in Taiwan teach vocabulary unit by unit. Take myself for example, in the beginning of the new unit, I may teach new vocabulary or dialogue first, according to the nature of the topic. When teaching vocabulary, I would use flashcard, realia, pictures, video clips and so on and teach students to sound out the words using phonics. Then I would do drills to make students get familiar with new vocabulary. And of course students would play word games, like the games I list in part B.

Basically, I always ask students to review what we have done in class and listen to the compact disc at least three times after class. I also ask students to memorize words since they are fourth graders.

However, English is a foreign language in Taiwan, not a second language. For most Taiwanese students, the environment of learning English is not friendly enough. Forty minutes a period and two to three periods a week are not sufficient for students. Moreover, students may not have many chances to practice English at home. Therefore, curriculum design is very important. From the learning trip in the United States, I am so inspired and get plenty of teaching ideas that I would love to use in my class. For fifth and sixth graders, daily routine sentences and using the dictionary are good ways to learn vocabulary. Students can practice days of the week, date, month and so on every time they have English class. For third and fourth graders, words from daily life and the way to school would be so meaningful to them. They can not only learn English words from the textbooks, but also learn the words from the newspaper, magazines, websites, store names, street names and signboards. For first and second graders, making their own alphabet chart is interesting and impressive. In addition, word wall, thinking maps and highlight tape are for all the students. I would like to make a word wall in the bulletin board in back of my classroom. Next to the word wall, I would put on the daily routine sentences and the key sentence patterns in the textbook. In the sentences, I would highlight key words as well.

The last part I would like to mention is about differentiation teaching. Under the current educational system, students are grouped randomly, regardless of their abilities. But honestly speaking, the “twin-peak” phenomenon in English learning is getting worse in elementary schools. Teachers have to keep slow learners’ interest in learning English on one hand, and let ace students gain knowledge on the other hand. In the category of learning vocabulary, teachers may give different tasks for different students. For example, in the process of learning preposition, slow learners may be asked to be proficient in the use of “on/under the bed/table/desk/chair.” As for faster learners, teachers may introduce other words, such as “in, next to, by, across from, through”, etc.

Different tasks for different students topic by topic and unit by unit is an ideal. Honestly speaking, it definitely will take teachers plenty of time and energy in curriculum design in differentiation teaching. But it would be worth doing it. In practice, it is a difficult task for English teachers since teachers have at least twenty periods a week, not including the extra time to give assistance to slow learners during recess time and lunch break. In addition, English teachers are also responsible for

training students for competitions of English songs, readers' theater, comic, etc. Moreover, English teachers are often asked to do some unexpected projects. Slow learners need help from teachers and exhausted teachers need support from the administration and Ministry of Education.

References

- Wilkins, David (1972). *Linguistics in Language Teaching*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Horn, T. D. and Otto, H. J. (1954). *Spelling Instruction: A Curriculum-wide Approach*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.