



# Teacher-Student Interactions in an Effective Language Classroom

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As an English teacher, I enjoy sharing with students about my understanding of this global language-English. And the best way to understand a language is to see the place that witnesses the variety and vigorousness of the language. That's why I was so honored and excited to be a member of New Taipei City Educators Delegation and to have the chance to visit American elementary schools in Virginia, New Jersey and New York. Although there are many differences in cultures and education systems between Taiwan and America, I believe we share the same belief-care about each child's needs! Therefore, I chose teacher-student interactions as my focus of observation. I am sure the findings would be of great use when I re-examine my teaching practices.

To summarize my observation and reflections of this informative trip, I would like to employ the Classroom Assessment and Scoring System (CLASS) developed at the University of Virginia's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning as the framework of my report. The CLASS (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) covers ten dimensions of teaching that are linked to student achievement and social development. All these ten dimensions can be further categorized into three domains: emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support.

## Emotional Support

Language learning is a complex process that involves both objective and affective factors. Krashen (1985) argued in his five input hypotheses that people acquire second language only if the input is comprehensible and if their affective filters are low enough to allow the input in. In his theory, affective factors include motivation, attitude, anxiety and self-confidence.

The emotional support of the CLASS (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) elaborates the ideas of Krashen's affective factors hypothesis. It refers to the ways teachers help children build up warm and supportive relationships, experience enjoyment and excitement about learning, and develop autonomy or independence.

### 1. Positive Climate

To foster positive climate in the classroom, it is important to build up teacher-student connection and peer interactions. Once the connection is confirmed, students would feel safe and comfortable to start the journey of learning with the teacher and peers. So here are some things I would like to try in my class.

First, welcome my students in different ways. At the door of Centreville Elementary School classrooms, we saw "Today I want a ..." poster. Teachers try to reach every single

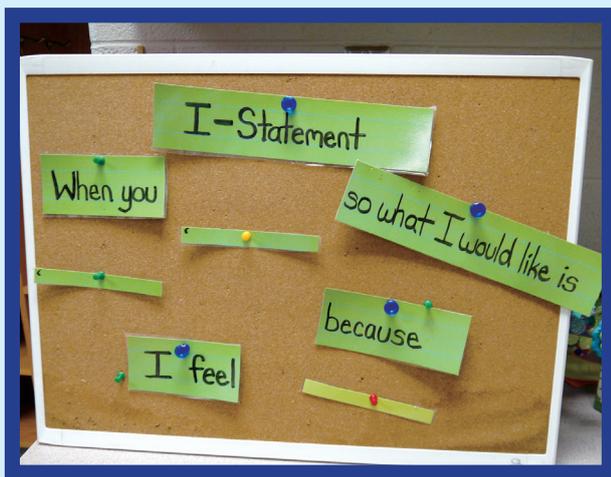
student at the beginning of each day. I used to exchange quick greetings with students and rush into lessons due to the tight schedule. Now I will stand at the front door and give each student a hello or a smile. It might just take couple minutes but I can tell the differences in students' faces. They get the message that the teacher cares about them. And I get to know better whether students are ready for learning before the class starts.

Second, Cub Run Elementary School has Power Block in the last thirty minutes of the school day. During that time, students can finish their assignments or unfinished paper, read with partners or review what they learned today. But most important of all, teachers have more time to work with students who might need enrichments. It's the time for all the students to settle down and check their daily progress. And that's what I like to try in my class-give students chance to think about their own learning progress. It could be daily routine or weekly event. But I do hope that students can pick up the sense of autonomy and know that I would be their best helper whenever they need me.



## 2. Negative Climate

Negative climate talks about how teachers or students express negative feelings such as anger, hostility or aggression. If teachers could show or guide students to think about better solutions, students would know how to deal with similar situations next time.



In a kindergarten class, a girl went to the teacher and complained her partner said something mean to her. The teacher asked, "Did you tell him that you feel bad when he said that to you?" And there is an I-Statement bulletin board in a grade 2 classroom that shares the same idea. I like the way that teachers guide students to think about the solutions instead of being a judge or referee all the time.

Also, I learned that teachers need to be persistent and acceptive when dealing with misbehaviors. In Cub Run Elementary School grade 4 class, a boy was fooling around when everyone else was working. The teacher said to him in a calm voice, "Where is your folder? Please take out your folder and finish the worksheet. I won't do that for you because I know you can do it and you can do it very well." The teacher just waited there for couple minutes till the boy took out his worksheet and started working. Before the teacher moved on to check other students, she gave him compliments about making a good choice and doing

well on his worksheet. Be firm and don't push too hard. Give students chance to make good choices. And never forget to praise them for making good choices and emphasize the positive results of the good choices.

### 3. Teacher Sensitivity

No matter how busy we are, teachers should have the sensitivity to respond to students' academic and emotional needs. Then students would feel safe and free to explore and learn.

I like the ways how teachers responded to students who are not ready to answer questions. Expressions like "It's okay if you still need to work on that" and "Let me know when you are ready to share with us," can surely ease students' anxiety to catch up with others.

In a grade 4 class, a student refused to sing with the class. If I were the teacher, I might be irritated by his attitude but the teacher simply said to him, "You don't have to sing but it would be great if everyone can sing together." When he saw others have fun singing with the teacher, he couldn't help humming along with the class.

In grade 1 writers' workshop, the topic was how to show a story by adding details about facial expressions, body language and voice. Two advanced students shared great ideas in mini lessons. So the teacher pulled them out in individual writing time for further instruction. And I could see their faces glow with joy because with the teacher's help they could put those wonderful ideas into words.

### 4. Regard for Student Perspectives

Teachers' interaction with students and classroom activities should place an emphasis on students' interests, motivation and points of view. Students are the center of learning. If teachers could design activities from students' perspectives, students would have greater motivation and interests in learning.

In the Reading Together Project of Greenbriar East Elementary School, grade 5 students with low reading levels was paired up with grade 2 students with higher reading levels. The objective of this project is to boost students' reading ability without harming his/her self-respect. Give everyone the chance to succeed.

In grade 2 circle time, a girl was doing her show and tell. During that time, she was in charge of sharing her ideas and answering other students' questions. The teacher showed her support only when it was needed. Then students found their common interests in the topic of birthday presents. So the teacher let the students decide their next topic would be birthday present. I could see students couldn't wait to share their birthday presents next time.



## Classroom Organization

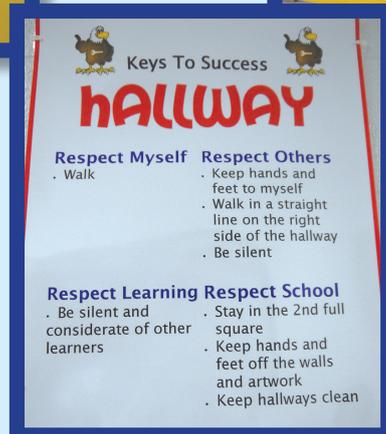
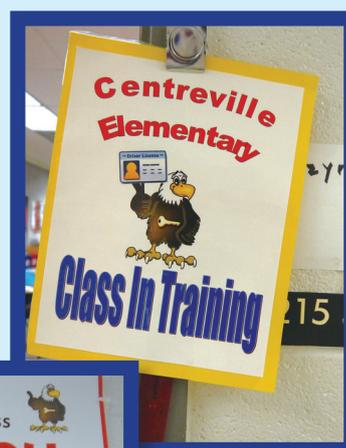
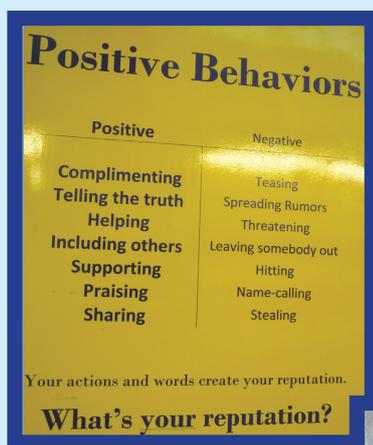
Effective teachers take time in the beginning of the school year and especially on the first day of school (Evertson, Emmer, & Worsham, 2003) to establish classroom management, classroom organization, and expectations for student behavior.

### 1. Behavior Management

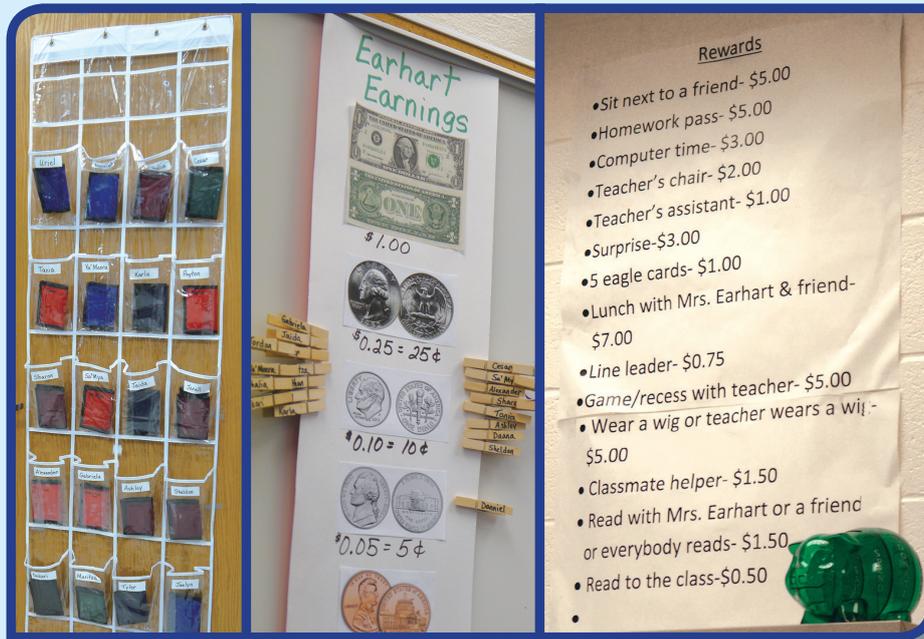
How teachers monitor, prevent and redirect behaviors decides the atmosphere of the classrooms and has great influence on teaching and learning.

In Centreville Elementary School, the motto of the school is respect: respect myself, respect others, respect learning and respect my school. Teachers present the motto through modelling. Students not only pick up the idea of respect from teachers but also learn the idea through self-restraint. Instead of shouting at misbehaved students, teachers say, “Show me your expectations” in a soft voice. In addition, teachers will explain the consequences of misbehaviors and let students decide what to do next. When students make good choices, teachers never forget to praise them with explicit expressions like I am so happy that Mark made a good choice to join our activity and do his work.

There are posters and signs in the classrooms and on the hallways to remind students how to behave properly. Also the whole school follow the same Key to Success reward system. Individual students are given a yellow key. In school assembly, there will be a lucky draw from the pool of yellow keys to publicly praise positive behaviors. Classes with positive behaviors can have keys and get rewards. On the contrary, classes in training will get more instructions and practice. Teachers use the same incentives to encourage positive behaviors, too. With the same standards, students know their expectations and learn to behave properly.



There is one more thing I would try in my class. A teacher in Park Avenue Elementary School cleverly combined their learning topic with reward systems. Students can review the concepts of learning topics while learning positive behaviors.



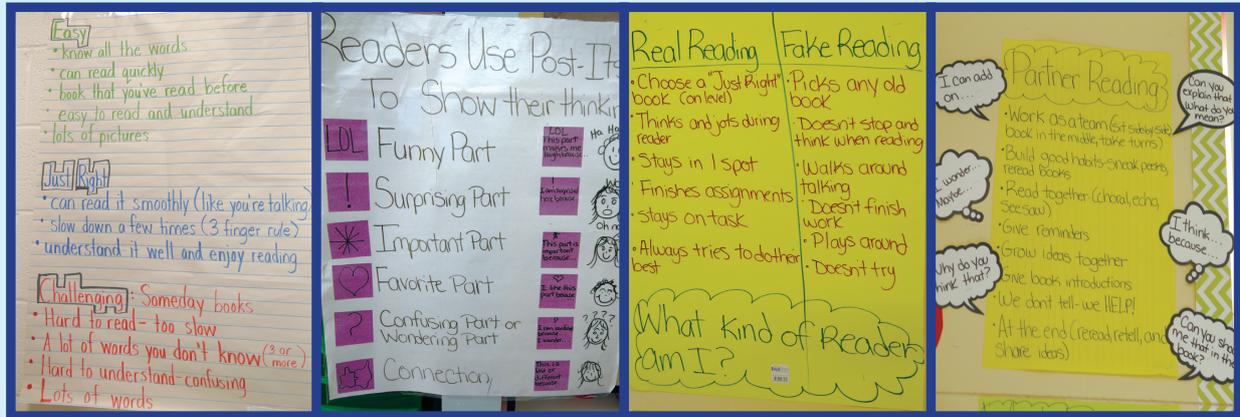
## 2. Productivity

Many teachers are complaining about limited class time and too much work. So it's important that teachers provide activities and directions to make best use of learning time. To me, I would adjust my ways of building up class routines and giving sound and clear directions.

In this trip, we were all very impressed to see students doing their group work attentively and quietly. After active learning in one small group, students know they need to clean up and get ready to move on to next group when they hear teachers' signals. The signals could be clapping, chanting or even just a beat at the chime. Teachers would spend couple weeks at the beginning of the school year to let students be familiar with these class routines. In addition, there are clear job descriptions to keep each student engaged in active learning while teachers have time to talk to individual students or specific groups.



In the readers' workshop, students learn about reading strategies. But more importantly, I like the ways teachers show their students how to make their reading time more enjoyable and interactive-choose the RIGHT book and use POST-IT to show their thinking. When the whole class was fully engaged in reading, teachers could have time to reach those students who need enrichments.



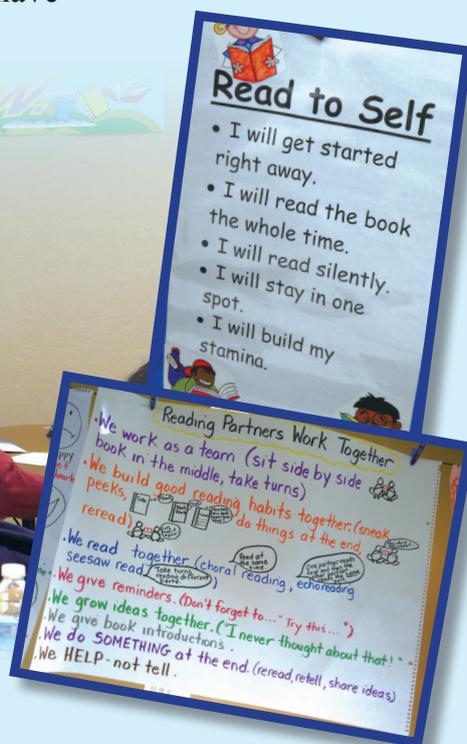
In the writers' workshop, teachers started with reading teachers' sample pieces or passages from familiar books to demonstrate target writing techniques. Then teachers worked with students to highlight the key writing techniques and then write down those key concepts on posters. Instead of calling for teachers' help or fooling around during writing practice time, students could just look up to these posters for reference. A grade one teacher even offered a word list in every student's writing folder. With these reminders at hand or at sight, students could learn to work on writing by themselves.



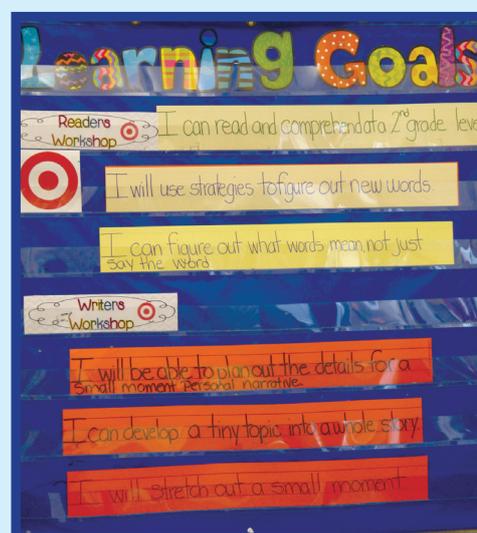
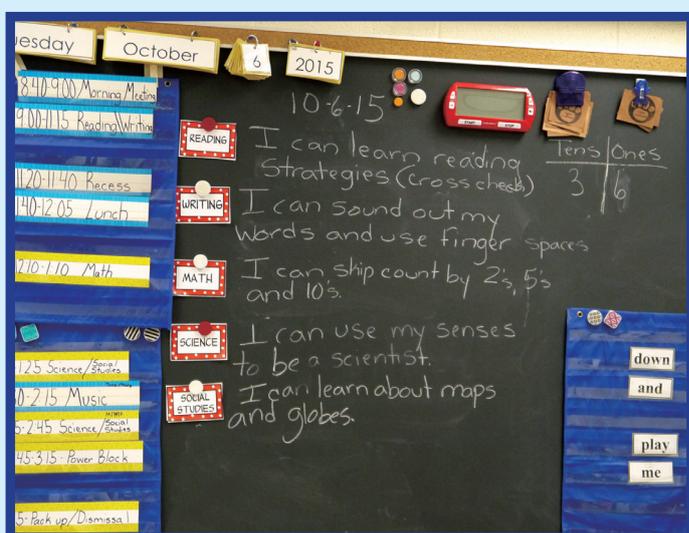
### 3. Instructional Learning Formats

In classrooms with effective instructional learning formats, teachers provide instruction through various ways such as visual, oral, or movement, look for opportunities to actively engage children, and facilitate learning during mini lessons, centers, and one-on-one time. For example, the Daily Five includes reading to self, reading with someone, writing, word

work, and listening to reading. These daily literacy tasks aim to foster independent literacy behaviors and allows teachers to meet with small groups or confer with individuals. I love the ideas of boosting students' learning interests and independence through different tasks. The Daily Five might be too demanding to a subject teacher like me but Weekly Two or Monthly Five would be a good start. When the students are taking more responsibility in learning, teachers would have more one-on-one time to meet individual needs.



Another way to foster learners' autonomy is goal setting. With clear and attainable learning objectives, students have better ideas about what they are working on and can learn to check their own learning progress. Gradually, students could set up goals, arrange time schedule and then check the progress all by themselves.



## Instructional Support

According to Vygotsky (1978), zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the range of tasks that a child can perform with the help and guidance of others but cannot yet perform independently. Scaffolding is the support mechanism that helps a learner successfully perform a task within his or her ZPD (zone of proximal development). Teachers' instructional support is like scaffolding mechanism, which helps students achieve his or her learning goals and a deeper level of learning.

### 1. Concept Development

As a reaction to rote instruction, teachers can use instructional discussions and activities to promote high-level thinking skills and cognition.

Peer learning and group discussion are both good ways to increase learning interests. After discussing with partners, fifth graders were led by the teacher into an idea debate. During that process, the teacher offered essential language support and demonstrated clarifying techniques. What I learned from this class is that students should have the chance to express their ideas and teachers should have the wisdom and strategies to extract valuable thoughts and demonstrate in the ways that students can pick up and reproduce again.

In a language art class, the topic is about fake reading and real reading. After discussing with the whole class about their ideas of reading, the teacher introduced the big word metacognition to sum up their ideas. She tried to make this abstract concept more comprehensible through chanting (metacognition is thinking about my thinking), salad making (green lettuce is thinking and red tomato is the text) and TPR (total physical response) (point to the book when you are reading the text and point to your head when you are thinking).



Students in Centreville Elementary School learn about plants and environments in science class. So they grow vegetables in the garden and enjoy the food after harvest. Also, they share the produce with women shelter organization. In this project, students not only learn the relationship between plants and environments but also know their responsibility as a member of the school and the community. That's why Centreville Elementary School is awarded as an Eco-School by National Wildlife Federation.



## 2. Quality of Feedback

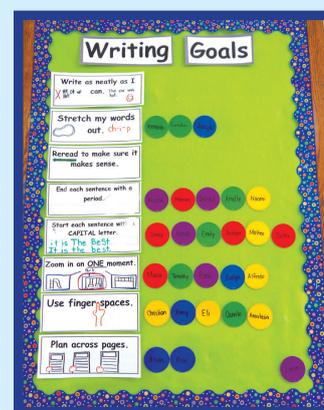
Teachers' feedback to students has great influence on students' participation and learning. The following questions were frequently used in almost every class we visited. And the teachers not just asked the questions but also demonstrated how to use and respond to those questions. So students are actively learning and participating because of teachers' feedback.

- How do we know that?
- What do you think? Why?
- Do you agree? Why?
- Can you do it in different ways?
- Do you have any questions for (Mary)?
- Do you remember we talked about...

Moreover, I like the ways some teachers responded to students' good thinking. I could feel the students' excitement and full engagement in learning afterwards.

- As a great listener, you just asked the speaker a very good question.
- I thought no one would notice that. I am so glad (Jimmy) mentioned that for me.
- The answer might be different from mine but I do love the way you tried to bring all the factors into consideration.

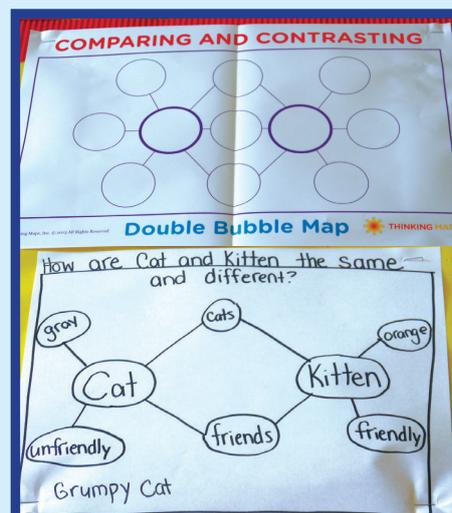
Teachers' feedback could be in verbal or written forms. After reviewing writing pieces, the teacher could set up writing goals for each student and adjust these goals according to their progress. This is the perfect combination of progress monitor and specific feedback of individual students.



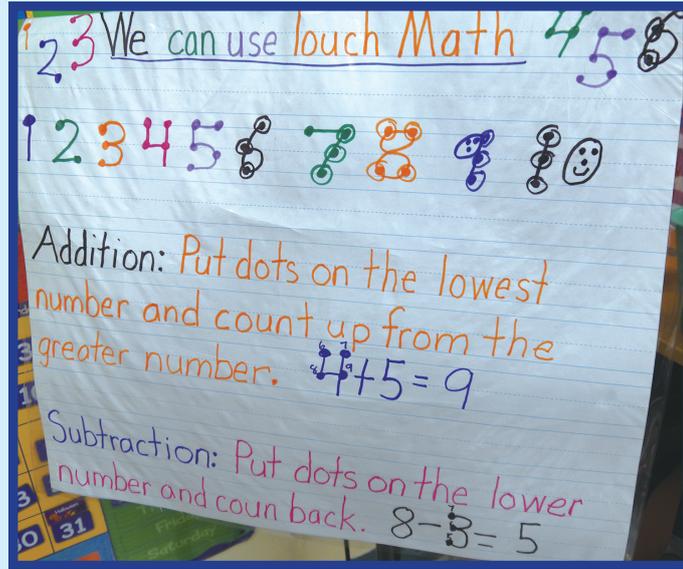
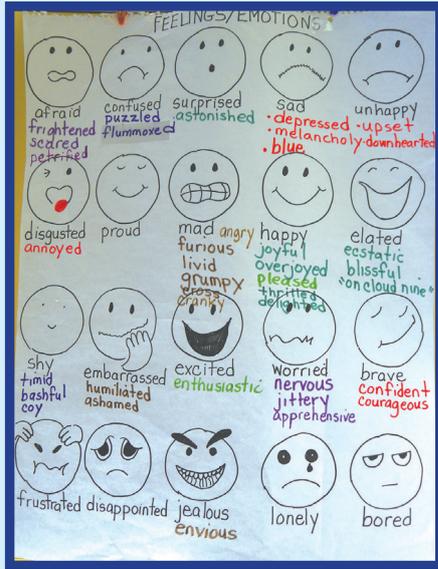
## 3. Language Modeling

In an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classroom, teachers are usually the main source of language models and inputs. The extent to which teachers stimulate, facilitate and encourage students' language use decides how successful this class is.

Classroom decorations are great resources of language inputs. What amazed me was the ways teachers made those decorations more meaningful and useful to their students. In a grade one class, the teacher talked about graphic organizer with examples. Second graders would love to refer to the self-made emotions/feelings posters when they talk about feelings. When first graders are doing addition or subtraction practices, they could

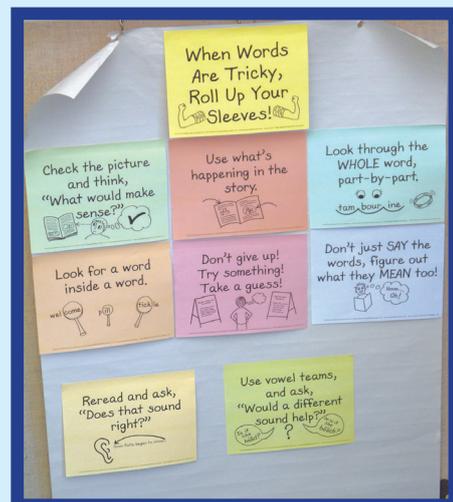


look at the poster and recall how they played with dots to learn about math.



To demonstrate how to show a story instead of just telling a story, the teacher first discussed with first graders about key elements of making stories more vivid. Then she worked with students to add more details to a short passage and make it more appealing to readers. After the little writers used this technique to modify their previous writing piece, the teacher invited some excellent writers to share their works. The whole class could review this technique over and over again through peer learning.

Teachers in grade one and two mentioned good habits of solving tricky words in readers' workshop: Does it look right? Does it sound right? Does it make sense? When teachers were doing mini lessons with the whole class, they would use these strategies repeatedly. Little readers could learn to use these strategies in individual reading time. More specifically, the teacher asked little readers to write down the strategies they used on the post-it and then share with their reading partners. Students not only learn by themselves but also from their teachers and peers.



## Conclusion

The ten dimensions of Class (Classroom Assessment and Scoring System) help me review and reflect in different ways about what I saw and learned in this informative trip. There are a lot of things I would like to try in order to build up an effective language classroom. However, underneath all these indicators of effective teaching, I found the ultimate belief is respect. Respect each student's individuality. Believe in each student's potentials. Show students how to respect themselves and others. Give them confidence and support. Then you will see them enjoy learning, dare to dream big and be ready for more challenges in the future.

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