



Active Learning in the Classroom

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For high school teachers in Taiwan, it's really an unpleasant task to conquer the sleepy and unwilling students in class. We teachers all agree that students can learn well if they are interested, but it's not easy to help students keep engaging in learning English. Students' active learning is the best way to get the burden of the teachers' shoulders but how to do it?

Thanks to the assistance of Education Department, I was lucky to be a member of the delegation of English teachers of New Taipei City and got the chance to enter some classrooms in public schools in Massachusetts and New Jersey to observe their learning. We visited many schools not only in kindergartens and primary schools but also in middle schools and high schools. Wherever we were, students' active learning in class really impressed me! Thus I tried to figure out why students were busy learning in class automatically.

Here is what I saw in the States. I hope my observation would let more teachers think about the teaching and learning in their own classroom and try to make active learning happen in class.

I Noticed What Students Did in the Classroom

1. They listened to the teacher.

During this trip we visited four elementary schools, two middle schools, one high school and a charter school. I noticed some teachers gave a lesson or tasks at the beginning of a class, and students listened to their teacher attentively even though they were very young, like the second graders in Josiah Quincy Elementary School. What they surprised me more was their classrooms were separated by only

low furniture and we could hear other teachers' voice easily. But every student just listened to their class teachers.



Figure 1-2.
Pupils in Josiah Quincy Elementary School, Boston
(Figure 1: the class we observed Figure 2: another class)

How about the older students? They paid attention to what they should get involved. When the seventh grader in Sherwood Middle School knew we would give a mini culture lesson, they turned to us quickly and quietly. I was really encouraged because they were earnest. The older students are, the more they know when and how to stop and follow their teachers. When we visited AP (Advanced Placement) class in Freehold High School, I saw the students stop discussing, go back to the seats to give a vote on the Internet, and then continue the discussion again. The steps were complicated but students fit their jobs. They are quite different from the absent-minded students who make teachers exhausted in high schools in Taiwan.



Figure 3.
Students in Sherwood Middle School,
MA (Massachusetts)

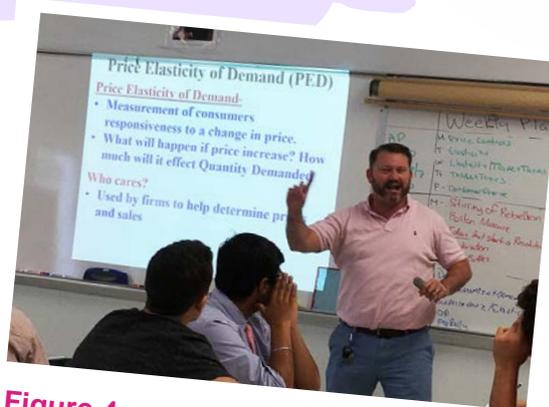


Figure 4.
Students in Freehold High School,
NJ (New Jersey)

2. They followed the classroom rules and schedules and learned on their own.

The students I visited seemed to know their schedules well and behaved themselves. Whether they were elementary school pupils or high school students, most of them knew what to do and worked hard. It was hard to find a sleepy or a lazy student in class.

In Josiah Quincy Elementary School, fourth graders worked in groups either to draw the mind-maps or review the vocabularies. The progress of each group was different, but they were focused and helped each other. Even second graders also knew the classroom rules and worked step by step. First, they worked individually to finish the worksheet. After that, they returned to their own group to finish the rest of the work.

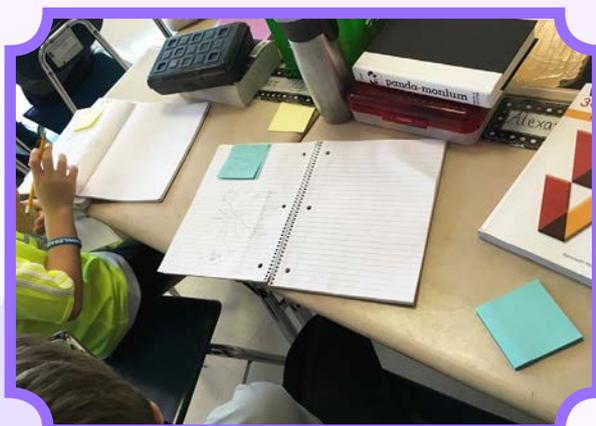


Figure 5.
Fourth graders are drawing mind-maps.



Figure 6.
Fourth graders are reviewing the vocabularies.



Figure 7.
Pupils are doing worksheets individually.



Figure 8.
Pupils go back to their seat to work for another task.

Middle school students also noticed their teachers and worked spontaneously. Generally speaking, the students I visited in the States respected their teachers. Thus teachers didn't have to repeat the tasks that students should keep in mind. If more students know their duty, teachers will have more time to make learning more effective.(Figure 9~ Figure 12)

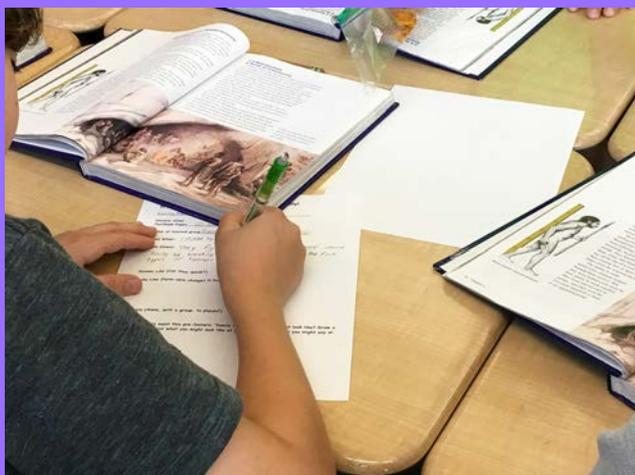


Figure 9-10.
Sherwood Middle School, MA

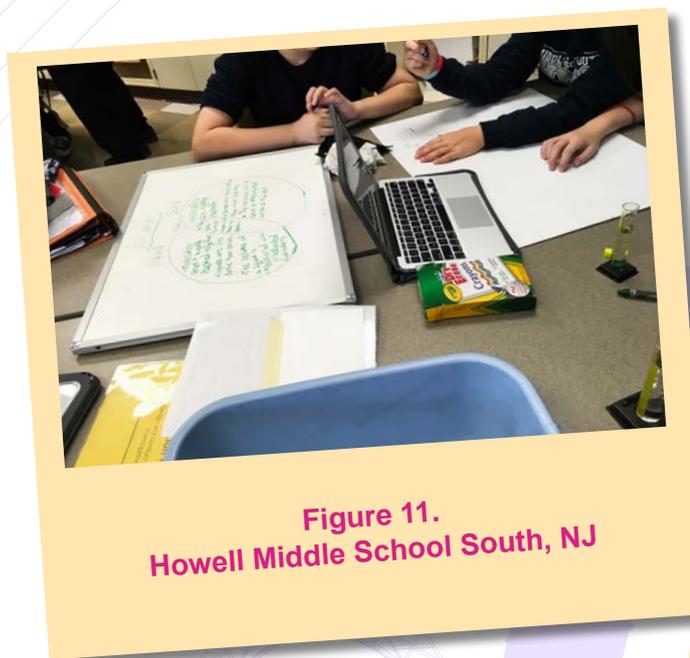


Figure 11.
Howell Middle School South, NJ

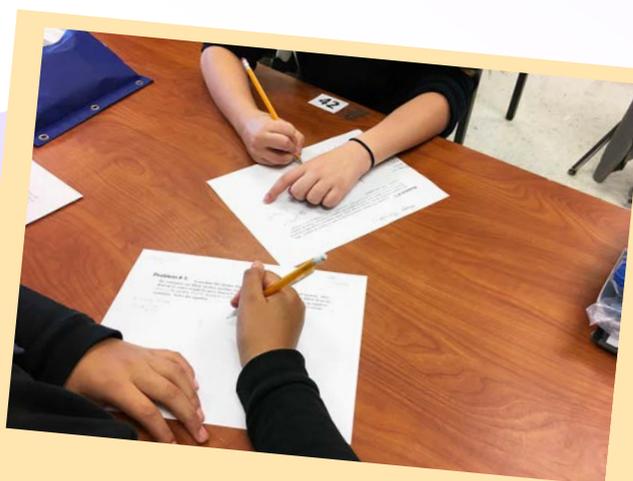


Figure 12.
Freehold Intermediate School, NJ

3.They tried to use strategies to learn and asked for help if necessary.

Forming habits of using strategies to explore something new makes students active and confident. The students I saw were accustomed to using strategies. Second graders moved their desks near the posters to look for the clues. Fourth graders highlighted the words with different colors and then helped the buddies. Middle school students underlined the main ideas themselves. Before asking for help, they tried by themselves first.

Small-group team work was common in class. They shared their opinions and solved the problems together. The collaboration happened naturally. However, students self-managed and took charge of their own works instead of waiting to copy others’

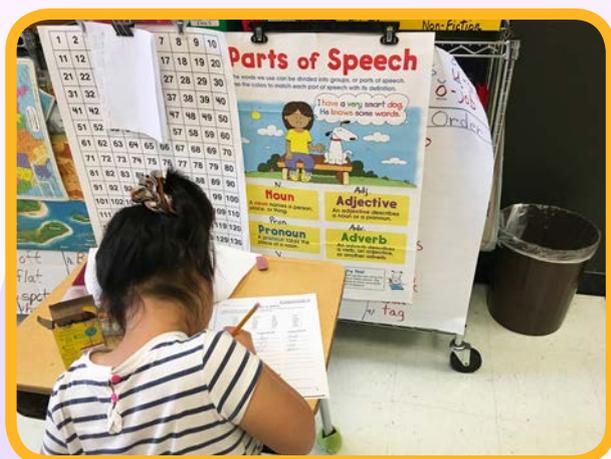


Figure 13.
Moving closer to find the answers.



Figure 14.
Highlighting words with different colors.



Figure 15.
Using stickers and taking notes.



Figure 16.
Underlining the main ideas themselves.



Figure 17.
Four-year-old children are learning in groups in Freehold Learning Center.



Figure 18.
Students are working in pairs in Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School.



Figure 19.
Third graders in Ramtown Elementary School are building a house together.

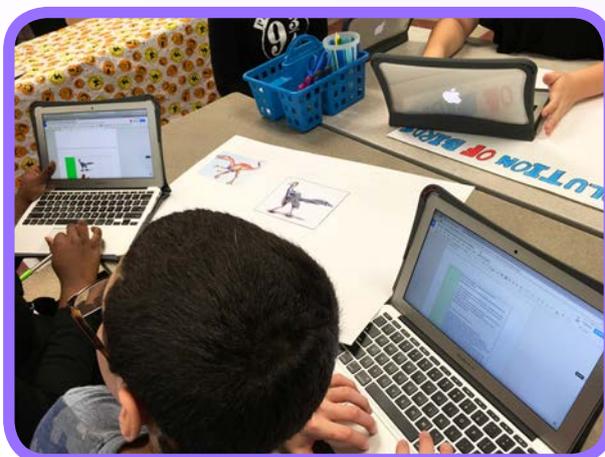


Figure 20.
Students in Howell Middle School are doing a report about the evolution of birds.

4.They were curious and confident.

The students we met seemed willing to try everything and liked to ask questions. They talked about their works confidently. They were optimistic and active, and they weren't afraid to take on a challenge. When I met a boy whose leg was hurt in Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, I asked him what happened in Chinese. He thought for a minute and answered in Chinese. Active and interested students were easy to find in the schools.



Figure 21.
Students in Sherwood Middle School are eager to play Taiwanese yoyo.

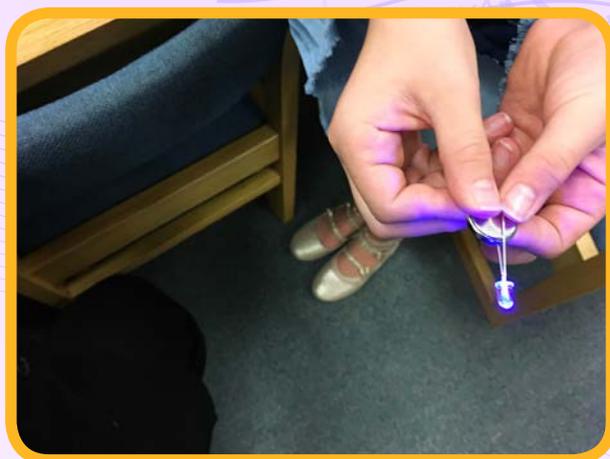


Figure 22.
A fifth grader in Ramtown Elementary Schools are teaching how to make a LED bulb.



Figure 23.
A girl in Howell Middle School is telling us how she compares solids, liquids and gases.



Figure 24.
Students in Freehold High School are talking about the characters in Shakespeare's plays.

Students who knew how to learn were involved in projects easily, and they became more absorbed in the learning. They were proud of themselves after finishing a task, and they got the motivation to go on.

I Noticed What Teachers Did in Class

1.They managed the class, but they didn't talk loudly all the time.

I noticed the teachers I visited just talked loudly to the whole class to give a just-in-time teaching. After that they talked in a low voice unless they thought it was a must to speak out loud again. When the students realized their teacher wanted to announce something, they became quiet immediately. No wonder there were only few teachers using microphones.

The teachers had some tips to make students follow the rules. I saw teachers used methods like clapping hands, saying something like “Thumbs up if you understand,” “100 percent is hard work,” or using body language to remind students instead of yelling at them. Teachers here looked graceful.

2.They created an active learning space.

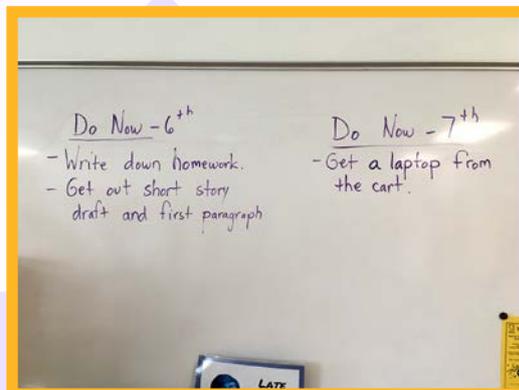
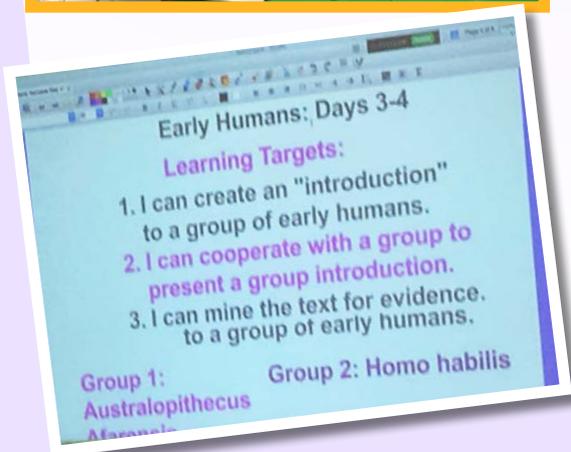
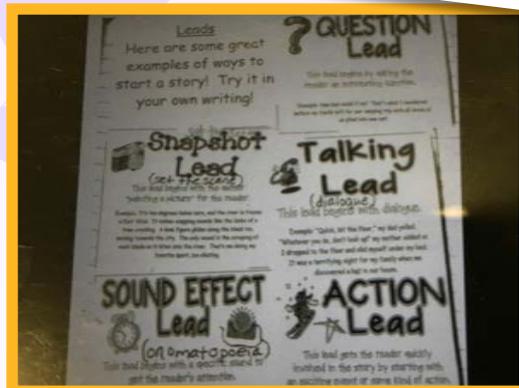
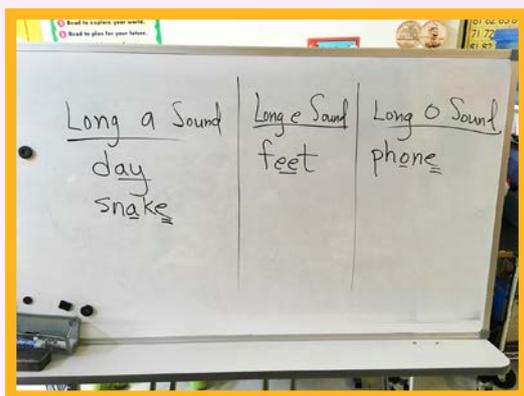
The classrooms I visited were full of teaching aids and decorations. On the walls were a lot of pictures and posters. In the classroom were books and some stationery products for students. The teachers made their classrooms become a space for active learning. Those aids and decorations in the classroom not only showed the teachers' styles but also provided some clues for students' learning.



▲ Figure 25~ Figure 32

3.They provided the methods and the instructor information on students' existing knowledge to make students want to explore.

The teachers showed the ways to finish tasks and provided helpful information for reference and sometimes they told students where to get the information. On one hand, we realized teachers had worked hard to scaffold for students. On the other hand, the content teachers provided was rich and authentic, so the learning went deep.



▲ Figure 33~ Figure 38

We saw a math teacher in Howell Middle School used Quaker Oatmeal containers as an example to teach eighth-graders the equation. She asked a lot of questions to lead her students to comprehend. The math class looked like a process of trial and error, and the teacher was very patient. In other classrooms, I heard teachers ask students questions like “Why do we learn this?” “What’s your opinion?” “Please tell me more.” “Does that work?” to clarify the issues.



▲ Figure 39

Teachers encouraged effective collaboration and gave directions to each group. They have different expectations toward students in different levels and what’s more, they gave more difficult tasks to improve their students’ achievement. As far as I know, their instruction was concise, clear, and easy to understand.

4.They accepted students’ mistakes, kept encouraging students and facilitated independent and creative thinking.

In Freehold Learning Center, I witnessed how four-year-old kids were encouraged and eager to try. The teacher told me young children’s typo was acceptable. I also saw another teacher make the whole class give the thumbs up to encourage the child who did a good job. Students who were encouraged would enjoy learning from then on.



▲ Figure 40~ Figure 41

In order to increase students' motivation and performance, many teachers made their students do some reports or wrap-up presentations. The teachers I visited really respected and trusted their students. They let their students work freely and students knew to avoid the bottom line. The teachers in Sherwood Middle School said they believed students would behave themselves. In fact, I didn't have the chance to see teachers discipline their students, and I just saw busy students in class. Hard-working students should be praised, not disciplined.



Figure 42.
A fifth grader in Ramtown Elementary School is taking a photo with an iPad.



Figure 43.
Second graders in Josiah Quincy Elementary School are concentrating on their studies.

5. They took care of fewer students than the teachers in Taiwan and focused on their teaching.

In the classroom there were less than twenty students, but sometimes there were more than one teacher. Sometimes we even found one more teacher sitting next to the students with special educational needs.

I admire the teachers in the States. In Taiwan, there are more than twenty-five students in the classroom and we teachers have to deal with a lot of students' problems alone. In high schools in Taiwan, classrooms belong to students and teachers go to different classrooms to teach. However, in middle schools in the States, teachers don't need to do that because classrooms belong to teachers. Thus teachers have more energy to make their space more suitable for students' learning. They don't have to worry the computer might not work in different classrooms.



▲ Figure44~ Figure47

6.They used digital age skills proficiently.

Educational Technology was used very often in the schools we visited. Students in Sherwood Middle Schools were allowed to take photos with iPads for learning. In Ramtown Elementary School, we saw students answer questions on Kahoot and practice writing programs on Scratch. Schoology and Google Classroom were popular with many teachers. Teachers posted the information on the platforms, and students handed in their assignments like clips, reports and slides online. Moreover, I saw students express themselves by voting on Google Classroom and other students learn how to make a clip from watching their fellow's works on Flipgrid.

Using technology doesn't just save paper and ink. It's the capability people in 21th Century should need. Technology helps students develop their creativity and the skills to update what they have learned and what's more, it makes learning effective. Using technology properly makes students' collaboration happen, and teachers don't need to explain again and again because students can learn on their own by their devices.

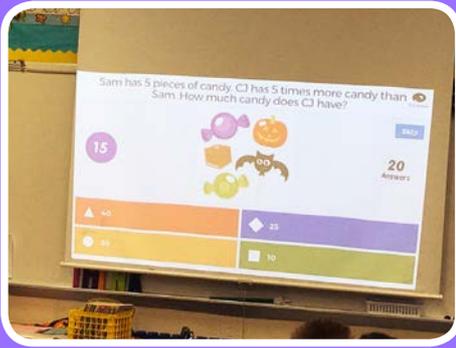


Figure 48. Kahoot

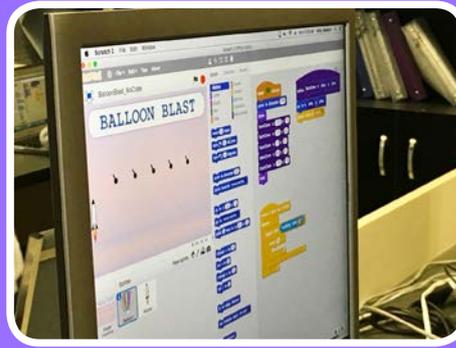


Figure 49. Scratch



Figure 50. Homework on Schoology

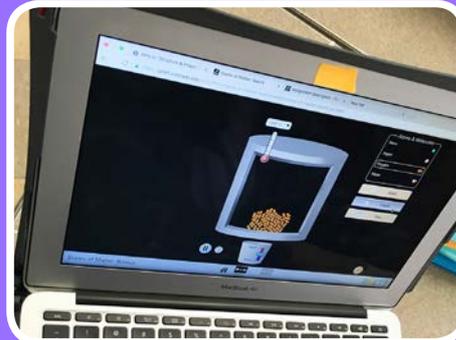


Figure 51. Information on Schoology

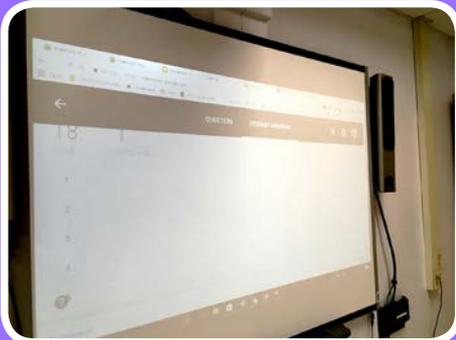


Figure 52. Poll on Google Classroom



Figure 53. Fellows' clips on Flipgrid

I Noticed Teachers and Students Got Strong Support

1. Teachers got sufficient manpower.

Compared to the teachers in Taiwan, teachers in the States took care of fewer students and they can ask for help if they find students have behavior issues. Teachers in Taiwan often spend so much time dealing with students' behavior issues that they sometimes forget to put their minds on teaching. Moreover, teachers in the States are accompanied by their professional learning communities. They could also get the useful materials from professional academic institutions.

Schools took care of teachers and got support from their own school districts. Not only schools but also school districts helped teachers know the trend to update their teaching. They even had parent orientation. For example, Shrewsbury Public Schools District taught parents how to take care of their children's iPads. Tough works seemed easier with the help of schools or school districts.

2. Students and teachers have excellent aids and facilities.

These were some interesting teaching aids and facilities I saw at school. These schools really put lots of money and effort to make a student-centered space.



▲ Figure54~Figure 59

Besides, all the schools we visited provided students technology devices. In Josiah Quincy Elementary School and Pioneer Valley Chinese Immersion Charter School, students used laptops. In Shrewsbury Public Schools, students used iPads. In Howell Schools and Freehold Borough Schools, students used a MacBook Air. Not only schools but also school districts spent a lot buying devices and the peripherals to build an easy, smooth, and active learning environment. Anyway,

their generosity made more teachers and students familiar with technology, and therefore, people who got benefit from the technology would like to update their concept about the future.



▲ Figure 60~ Figure 61

What I Learned from my Observation

1. I can make my teaching better.

I learned a lot from this trip. The teachers in the States were really trying their best to make no child left behind, and I did see teenagers in the States learn actively and happily. Even slow learners could read with the help of their teachers. But in Taiwan, we teachers often complain about the bimodal distribution in class and high school students lack of motivations. Why are many of the students in Taiwan like the guests in the classroom? Is it possible that students feel bored because they find no activities to get involved? It's impossible to move the whole American style of active learning to Taiwan, but I can try my best to make my students more active in in my class.

First, I will try to listen to my students and let them interact with me. If I am busy with finishing the content myself, I will lose the chance to understand my students. I will try to ask my students more questions or give them more tasks to work on their own. Then I would know how to help them appropriately.

Second, I am not patient enough and don't trust my students. Sometimes I cannot wait to tell my students the answers but forget that it will deprive their opportunity to learn. I should let them find themselves. My students should respect me, and I need to respect them as well.

Third, I will try to talk less and let students discuss more. I used to talk a lot in class, and students were just busy copying my instruction without thinking. I should

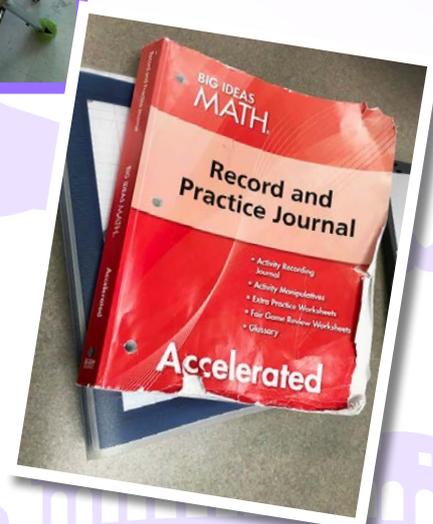
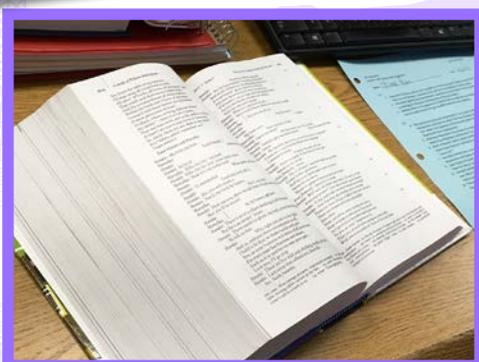
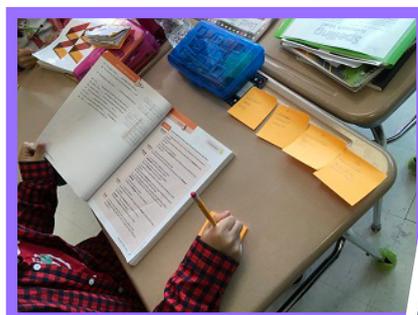
try to lead my students to use some strategies first. It's necessary to let my students work in pairs or in groups to find the main ideas or practice with each other.

Finally, I will try my best to find more authentic materials which are interesting for my students.

Old habits die hard. I hope I can really improve my teaching in the future.

2.I want more teachers to know.

Here are some pictures of students' books in the United States. Obviously they look much thicker and heavier than textbooks in Taiwan. Teachers in Taiwan are always busy catching up the progress and explain the textbook from the first page to the last page. If our textbooks are as heavy as these books, do we still have to do the same thing? Do our students really know how to use these heavy books without help?



▲ Figure 62 ~ Figure 65

In the past, we taught content just in case students might need it. But now all the information in the world won't be very useful unless we know how to get it. Learning content is not so important as learning to use learning strategies. We should teach our students how to get essential knowledge and where to get credible information. We need to help our students become life-long learners rather than make them recite the dialogues and readings on the textbooks. That's why we need to develop competence-based curriculum.

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