



中山外文的朋友，大家好：

I have spent the last three months talking about how you should challenge yourself, the importance of liberal education and the value of our program, Foreign Language and Literature. For those of you who do not know me, my name is Ya-Ning Hsu (許雅寧). I graduated from 中山大學外文系 and currently teach at Columbia University's Teachers College, training future American teachers on English language education and bilingual education. In the next three months, I want to shift my focus to the literacy education in U.S.

I have studied several languages, earned my Master of Arts in Teaching English as a Second Language and Doctor of Education in Bilingual/Bicultural Education. I have taught American students the subject of English in elementary school, middle school and high school for many years. From these accounts, you probably have figured out that I like languages. Yes, I love languages. The beauty and the science in language and language teaching truly intrigue me. Most important of all, I pay keen attention on language/literacy education.

American education is not perfect, but the literacy education in the U.S. truly shines. It is so effective as science and so beautiful as art. The beauty lies in its rich use of literature and interaction in the teaching and learning process. I will focus on the literature part and address the interaction aspect in the subsequent issues.

Years ago, when I first entered American classroom, I had a major cultural shock. Books, books, books, books, everywhere, everywhere, everywhere and everywhere. That was all I remembered. These books are not textbooks or wordbooks. On the contrary, these are the so-called “not important” books that we, under the Taiwan education system, only read in our spare time, if we ever do it. Children in the U.S. develop such a personal and positive relationship with books right from beginning and throughout their school years, if not their whole life. Books are their friends.

I take subway and bus all the time in New York. When I was back in Taiwan, I also rode Metro and other public transportation. The biggest distinction in ridership between these two places is that the passengers in New York City read and those in Taiwan do not read. I theorize that such a difference derives from the stark contrast in literacy education from the two places. In New York, or in the United States, reading literature is the core of learning; in Taiwan, literature reading is peripheral at best. After all, literature is for leisure; textbook is for learning.

Let's look at these two curricular: textbook-based curriculum and literature-based curriculum. From the aspect of the amount of vocabulary words one can learn, Chinese textbooks usually contain 15 lessons. The length of each lesson averages 2 to 3 pages for elementary school level. Each page has approximately 200 words. You do the math. 6000 to 9000 words, at most, are what a child is exposed to in one semester. On the contrary, a short story for the 3rd grader can

easily mount to 7000 words and students are expected to read many books as a part of the curriculum in the U.S. It is common for students to read over 100 books in one year since students are expected to read everyday for 30 to 45 minutes as their daily homework assignment since kindergarten. This dramatically increases their vocabulary size to 700,000 words. The amount of words children are exposed to under the literature-based approach far exceeds that from the textbooks. Aside from the size of vocabulary, the varying language structure, writing mechanism, genre choices and diverse topics from literature affords children a much more authentic, diverse and meaningful learning experience.

The benefits of a literature-based curriculum do not stop at the language mechanism and techniques level. The most valuable aspect, one that the textbook approach can never match, is that literature inherently pushes for critical thinking skills. Literature is the playground for human being to internalize and contest the world. It opens the possibilities between the readers and the universe. Fostering critical thinking skills is the hallmark of American educational system and the lacking of critical thinking skills is the biggest concern under the current Taiwan education system. If not addressed, it can lead to dire consequences.

Literature-based curriculum has swept the U.S. Columbia University's Teachers College is known for promoting and refining the model. Every year, we host intensive workshops and summer institutes training educators. Thousands and thousands of educators from all over the world come to advance their understanding of the model so that they can nurture the love of literature in children and help children become passionate, avid and lifelong readers, and most importantly, independent thinkers.

I was a classroom English teacher in New York City before my professorship position. I personally experienced the power of a literature-based curriculum every single day and have witnessed the benefits books brought to children. I have to tell you that I am completely jealous. I am envious that the children in the U.S. have such an access to so many books and those books ARE the core of their school life and their own life in the years to come. I taught English for almost 10 years in America and have not yet heard any student scream, "I hate books!" You might think that I had bookish students who excel in school and they naturally love reading. No, not at all. I did teach at one of the most selective schools in the U. S. But, I have also taught schools in very tough neighborhoods where children are placed in shelter homes. I did not see any differences between these two groups. The power of literature is simply universal.

I am going to stop here today. In our next conversation, I will explain to you how the model works and why it is effective, successful and meaningful.

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