

## Summer Frame of Mind

Cool weather is upon us now but I find it hard to leave behind my summer frame of mind. I enjoyed the first real vacation I have had in years with time to read, garden, and just relax. I was more excited with my plans to be away for the summer with only occasional trips back here until I found out my student wanted to continue our tutoring sessions over the summer. I was in conflict because in our time together, Joy had progressed from being shy and tentative in her responses to becoming an eager and motivated student. Therefore, I offered to have sessions with her during my return trips and give her materials and exercises to work on until our next meeting. She liked the idea; we had a plan.

When I arrived at the office for our last meeting in May, I had difficulty finding the button to silence the ringer on my new cell phone. The phone has more options than I will ever use and I had not yet learned how to use the basics. Joy asked me about my phone, and if I knew how to “text”. I told her yes but I didn’t send text messages often. She went on to say she likes to “text”, and we chatted about phones and then began our lesson.

I gave it no further thought but it is a clue to what happened next. In my second week on vacation I received a text message from Joy which read “can I do page 18 in workbook”. I was surprised, but replied “Yes. Call me”. I was delighted that she wanted to progress in her learning, yet there was no precedent for this that I knew of. I was also uncomfortable that it might infringe on my time. How could I set limits and not discourage her? We had to discuss it.

As we proceeded with what Joy called “Class by Phone” her appetite for learning and progress through the Reading and Skills books did not diminish. I structured the reading and workbook lessons twice weekly in the same time slot. Joy gained more fluency in her reading. Our method especially suited her because she liked dialoguing. One of her favorite activities was to re-read the story, alternating the character’s roles with me. She showed she comprehended the material by sometimes expanding the dialogue in the story.

Joy liked to write sentences, so I sent her word lists by text once per week; she would return the completed sentences by text at a scheduled time. That kept down any frenzy of texting. I could be away from my phone, busy with other things, later pick up the messages, and assess the work she sent when it was convenient for me. Then we would review her work by phone during our scheduled lesson in the following session. It took a lot of planning initially and I felt it was worth the investment, but in a few weeks, I became enthusiastic and so excited about Joy’s progress.

Would I recommend this unorthodox approach? No. I can’t see it applied at a beginner’s level and for us it only filled in the gaps in our sessions. It was our special fit. Using the phone and texting was her choice and seemed to motivate her. It was fun but was not all easy. I marveled at Joy’s determination because there were limitations. In her zeal, initially she would want answers too difficult to text, not realizing I couldn’t make the answer simple and short enough for a message. She had to agree to accept my response of “in class”, so we could talk about it in regular phone sessions. Some practice exercises were not suited to our distance learning. I realized the value of non-verbal cues in face-to-face communication. Nevertheless, Joy stayed

engaged in the learning process and made improvement in both of her primary goals – comprehension and fluency in her reading.

This experience reminded me that one -to -one tutoring helps establish a safe space for a student to explore options. It is also critical to set limits to the work and establish personal boundaries for the benefit of both the tutor and the learner. Finally, it occurred to me that the love of learning drives all these factors and it can – as it did in this case – travel the way of serendipity rather than take a single path.