



Teachers of English as an Additional Language in Manitoba

**TEAL MANITOBA JOURNAL**  
VOLUME 27 NUMBER 1—SEPTEMBER 2011



# TEAL MANITOBA ARTICLE SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

## TEAL Manitoba Article Submission Guidelines

TEAL Manitoba Journal welcomes submissions from teachers, students, academics, and anyone interested in the field of teaching English as an additional language. There are three regular sections in the journal:

**Features:** These articles can be theoretical or practical. The range of articles in this section includes: classroom-based activities, methods, strategies, workshop presentations, theoretical and/or academic perspectives, and issues in the TEAL/TESL profession. Articles may include example worksheets, and all articles must include a reference list of materials consulted and quoted when writing the article.

**Reviews:** Reviews of teaching materials and resources are written by practicing teachers and instructors. In addition, we publish reviews of fiction and nonfiction books, websites, articles, movies or anything related to EAL, newcomers and international cultures and issues. A bibliographic reference of the resource being reviewed must be included with the review.

**Voice Box:** Lesson plans, exercises, and resources can be submitted. The purpose of this section is to provide teachers with a forum to share resources that have been useful in the classroom.

**TEAL News:** This section includes updates and news from and about the various associations and schools that are related to teaching EAL in Manitoba.

TEAL Manitoba encourages you to make submissions to any of these sections of the journal. Please submit articles or article ideas to the editor as a Microsoft Word e-mail attachment. Please ensure your submissions arrive by the deadlines listed.

The editors make final publication decisions, but they regularly seek advice from the TEAL Manitoba Executive at its monthly meetings. If you wish to collaborate in the editing of your submission, please let the editor know. We appreciate your input and assistance.

**Contact:** Kevin Carter at [khsuz@hotmail.com](mailto:khsuz@hotmail.com)

Eunhee Buettner at [tgilj1980@yahoo.ca](mailto:tgilj1980@yahoo.ca)

## ARTICLE SUBMISSION DEADLINES 2011-2012 ACADEMIC YEAR

- October 25 (for November issue)
- February 14 (for March issue)
- May 16 (for June issue)

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# Teachers of English as an Additional Language

## TEAL MANITOBA JOURNAL

VOLUME 27 NUMBER 1— SEPTEMBER 2011

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## EDITORS' VOICE

Kevin Carter

Another school year is upon us and it is time to reflect on the new students in our classrooms. Regardless of the grade levels being taught, each one of us is blessed with a room full of students with different strengths, interests, needs, and goals. Our challenge is to assess how best to realize the latent potential of each individual student within a diverse student body; a difficult task indeed but one which our chosen profession demands of us. It is a challenge that I am sure that each of us is ready to embrace in both easy and stressful times. This issue of the TEAL Manitoba Journal is therefore dedicated to exploring the needs of EAL students and how we, as teachers, can address these needs to the benefit of our students.

In the field of Second Language Education, there is arguably no greater belief than the superior language learning abilities of young children compared to their older counterparts. Rarely is this notion challenged, but Rebecca Book argues in her paper, "Younger is not always better: Debunking a language learning myth", that older students are actually superior to younger ones in learning a second language. Rebecca argues that older students' proficiency and mastery of their first language facilitates their learning of additional languages. While many people may not be ready, or willing, to accept that younger students' superior language learning abilities is a myth, let alone it being debunked, this paper does provide insight for EAL teachers. First of all is the importance of students' development and maintenance of their first language in the acquisition of an additional one. Methods and practices in the classroom which uses the students' first language may therefore prove to be beneficial. Secondly, regardless of the age of the student, we must always strive to teach them to our fullest abilities so that our learners may realize their full potential. In other words, we should not just leave a student to their own devices in the belief that they will just absorb the language and content (in the case of a younger

student) or that it is too late for them to fully acquire the target language anyways (in the case of an older student). The debate into the interaction between age and second language acquisition is sure to continue as second language acquisition is a complex phenomenon which encompasses both internal (biological) and external (sociocultural) factors. In the end, what we can take away from this debate is that we, as teachers of EAL students, must devise methods and practices that are tailored to the needs and abilities of each student because all learners are capable of success.

After having explored how older learners may be competent language learners through their developed cognitive structures and mastery of their first language, we shall explore the needs of older language learners in the field of literacy. Elena Dupuis discusses the literacy needs of adult learners in her article, "Building literacy skills in adult EAL students". While the context is that of adult learners, the content of the article can just as easily be applied to secondary students and therefore the applicability and interest of this paper is far reaching. Our modern society is built upon the foundation of print and therefore EAL students who lack literacy skills are at a disadvantage. Elena discusses the challenges faced by students who lack literacy skills in both their first and second languages and steps that we can take to facilitate their progress. Elena advocates a whole language approach that incorporates authentic materials that are relevant to the students' lives and which acknowledges their strengths and needs, thus helping students to meet their responsibilities and goals in life.

In continuation with the topic of literacy, Kevin Carter discusses in his paper, "Improving the reading comprehension of novice EAL students: A literature review", how explanatory notes may help the reading comprehension of novice EAL learners in content based courses such as math and science. It is widely recognized that reading comprehension

is directly proportional to one's vocabulary knowledge. However, within the context of a content based course, it is not always practical to explicitly engage in vocabulary instruction; there just simply is not enough time. Explanatory notes may therefore be a means to facilitate learners' access to text at nearly the same rate as native speakers. This method may therefore allow novice learners to participate in class readings and follow up discussions and activities without the unnecessary stress associated with burdening EAL students with additional work that may decrease motivation and success. This article also shows that there must be consideration to the goals of instruction when lessons are developed. In other words, explanatory notes may be appropriate scaffolds where the goal of instruction is reading comprehension, not vocabulary building. Whereas dictionary use may be appropriate where the goal of instruction is vocabulary building, not reading comprehension. In addition, this article also cautions that what is appropriate for one group of learners may not be appropriate for another. In other words, explanatory notes are believed to be beneficial for novice learners' reading comprehension but detrimental for more advanced learners. Kevin also discusses how the use of the students' first language in the explanatory notes may provide additional benefits for students.

In addition to the featured articles described above, inspiration and knowledge into addressing the needs of our students can be found in the reviews of Taare Zameen Par (Like stars on Earth) by Tawonga Mkanda, and The storytelling class by Karin Warkentin. For additional resources and classroom activities, please see Susan LaSpina and Cecile Roy's Voice Box article, "Literature and activities for the EAL classroom".

Thank you to all of our contributors.

## PRESIDENT'S VOICE

Kim Hewlett

The TEAL Manitoba Executive is excited to present to you a variety of professional development opportunities for this school year. Our volunteer board consists of approximately twenty members who are eager to prepare journals, plan EAL Café gatherings, and organize conference events. Your financial support through subscriptions and membership fees enable us to serve an increasing demographic that is occurring in our K-12 and adult education programs. We would like to thank you for your interest and encourage you to submit ideas for initiatives you would like us to consider to further develop EAL programming in Manitoba.

I would like to welcome our new executive for this year! Some are returning members and others are new. It is an honor and privilege to present to you:

### 2011-2012 TEAL MB APPOINTMENTS:

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### PROMOTION OF OUR TEAL MANITOBA CONFERENCE

Our major professional development initiative this year is to organize and host the TEAL Manitoba Conference during SAGE (October 21, 2011). We invite K-12 teachers and adult educators interested in EAL programming to register for this conference as soon as possible. It will be held at Fort Richmond Collegiate. The theme of this year's conference is EAL in the Classroom: Enhancing Student Engagement and School Success. Dr. Pérsida Himmele, author of the ASCD book, *The Language-Rich Classroom: A Research-Based Framework for Teaching English Language Learners* (2009) and *Total Participation Tech-*

*niques: Making Every Student an Active Learner* (2011) will be our key note speaker and will also offer break out sessions following her address. Her research work consists of a 5-part practical framework aimed at purposefully planning to maximize learning for EAL students in a language-acquisition rich classroom environment.

We have also arranged some break out sessions following the keynote addresses to appeal to elementary, middle, senior high school, and post-secondary clientele. Several publishers will display the latest EAL materials for participants to preview. The TEAL Manitoba Conference information package and registration form can be found on the TEAL Manitoba website.

We look forward to seeing you there! Please let others know in your school, circulate the TEAL Manitoba Conference program, and encourage those who are involved with EAL students (content area teachers, teacher assistants, counselor or resource teachers, administrators, superintendents, professors, and directors of post-secondary programs) to attend!

The coming year holds many promising opportunities for development and growth. I am very appreciative of the Executive for its dedication, creativity, perseverance, commitment and many volunteer hours in keeping TEAL Manitoba responsive to the needs of EAL educators and students. Please contact me with questions, suggestions, or concerns as to how we can better serve you at [khewlett@mts.net](mailto:khewlett@mts.net).

### The EAL Learners' Fund and EAL Professional Development Fund

Throughout our history, TEAL Manitoba [formerly TESL Manitoba] has provided financial support and professional development opportunities to the Manitoba EAL community.

In an endeavour to increase this involvement, we are happy to announce that two separate funds have been set up: *The EAL Learners' Fund* and *EAL Professional Development Fund*. Students can apply to the EAL Learner's Fund for a bursary of up to \$500 and EAL professionals working within the Manitoba EAL community can apply for up to \$1000 funding.

For more information and application forms, please visit our website at [www.tealmanitoba.ca](http://www.tealmanitoba.ca).



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## YOUNGER IS NOT ALWAYS BETTER: DEBUNKING A LANGUAGE LEARNING MYTH

Research has shown that, “when adults learn a second language under the same conditions as children, the adults are superior” (Asher & Price, 1967, p. 1225). Until I learned this in my university class, I believed that the opposite was true. I believed that the younger a person is, the easier it is to learn a second language. I soon realized that what I believed was a common myth about second language acquisition, so I decided to conduct my own informal study. I asked ten people (friends, family and colleagues) at random if it was easier for a younger person or an older person to learn a second language. Nine out of ten people I asked thought that it was easier for a younger person to learn a second language, and when I prompted further and asked why they thought this; their responses were exactly what I had believed as well. It is these responses (myths) that I am going to explore further in this paper, and by using research and what I have learned in my university class, I am essentially going to debunk them and prove that it is not easier to learn a second language the younger a person is. In particular, I am going to focus on the three most common responses (myths) that people gave for why they believed the younger a person is the easier it is to learn a second language. These responses include “the earlier the better” belief, the “a child has more exposure to a new language” belief, and the “it has to be easier because we see children translating for their parents all of the time” belief.

### COMMON MYTHS DEBUNKED

#### THE EARLIER THE BETTER

Many of the responses I received about why people thought a younger person learns a second language easier had something to do

with a child’s brain being more flexible and receptive to learning a second language than an adult’s. Several theories also support this idea, “examples would be the brain plasticity theory, the biological predisposition theory, and an imprinting theory” (Asher & Garcia, 1969, p.334). While these theories may be different, they all share the common theme, “that something in the early development of the child maximizes the probability that the younger the human organism when he is exposed to a language, the greater the probability that the individual will acquire a native pronunciation” (Asher & Garcia, 1969, p. 334). These theories may be true, but as Asher and Garcia state, “there is no direct evidence that the child has a special language learning capacity which is absent in the adult” (1969, p. 335).

It is also common to hear people say that that in learning a second language, they wished they would have done it when they were young (which supports the belief that it is easier to learn a new language the younger a person is). However, several studies have been conducted that prove the exact opposite is true. Marinova-Todd, Marshall and Snow (2000) outline several studies that “call into question the alleged advantages of younger learners in foreign language programs and demonstrate that older students can learn more than younger ones in the same period of time” (p. 12). One of the arguments that support this statement is that it is more difficult for a younger person to learn a second language because younger people have less cognitive development and proficiency in their first language. According to Collier (1989) “second language acquisition research has found that this process of L1 development has a significant influence on the development of L2 proficiency” (p.

510-511). In support of the above mentioned argument, this means the more cognitively developed and proficient a person is with their first language, the easier it is to learn a second language. As Collier (2000) states: “adults and adolescents with solid L1 development master basic interpersonal communicative skills faster than children” (p. 517). Collier (1989) also refers to the Genesee (1978) study which, “concludes that older students are efficient L2 learners...because their ability to abstract, classify, and generalize in the first language may aid in second language acquisition for academic purposes” (p. 515).

While many people believe that a young person’s brain is more receptive to learning a second language (for whatever reason), a person can see from the above mentioned arguments and research that this simply is not true.

### MORE EXPOSURE = FASTER AND BETTER LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

It is quite easy for people to assume (as I did) that when learning a second language, it is best to start young because as compared to starting to learn a language later in life, a child will have more years of exposure to the new language. This automatically translates into the belief that the more years of exposure a person has in the new language, the better the language acquisition will be. For the sake of the argument, a person will have more years of language exposure if he/she starts to learn the language in kindergarten as compared to junior high, but it does not necessarily translate into better language acquisition. As Collier states, “older children (ages 8-12) who have had several years of L1 schooling are the most efficient acquirers of L2 school

language. Adolescents with solid L1 schooling are equally efficient acquirers of L2 school language, except for pronunciation” (p. 517).

It is also believed that while acquiring a second language, the first language needs to be abandoned and that the more immersion a person has in the language they are learning the faster and better he/she will learn it. However, Cummins (1980) argues that there is an interdependency on the first language (L1) and the success of learning the second language (L2). He calls this the “interdependence hypotheses,” which, “predicts that the development of L2 school language is partially dependent upon the prior level of development of L1 school language [and that] there is a common underlying proficiency that makes possible the transfer of school skills across the two languages” (Collier, 1989, p. 516-517). As a result of this interdependency, studies have shown that maintaining a first language while learning a second is actually beneficial to the person (unlike contrary belief). For example, Cummins (1980) makes reference to the reanalysis of the Ramsey and Wright data in which the findings show that, “older L2 learners, whose L1 CALP [Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency] is better developed, manifest L2 cognitive/academic proficiency more rapidly than younger learners because it already exists in the L1 and is therefore available for use in the new context” (p. 184). He also refers to several studies conducted on bilingual education programs where the results indicate the benefits of the interdependence hypothesis. For example, in the Carey and Cummins (1979) study on francophone students in Canada, results indicate that, “the instruction through French (L1) is just as effective in promoting English proficiency as instruction through English” (p. 184). Cummins also refers to the Hebert et al. (1976) study which included grades 3, 6 and 9 francophone students in Manitoba. Results in this study show that, “francophone students receiving 80% instruction in French and 20%

instruction in English did just as well in English as students receiving 80% instruction in English and 20% in French” (p. 184).

It is easy for me to understand why people believe that an “immersion” exposure is the best strategy to use when learning a new language. People make the assumption that it will force a person into learning the new language. However, what they do not realize (and what I did not know until I took a university course) is the importance of the interdependence between a person’s first language and their second language and how the level of proficiency in L1 can actually help a person with their L2 acquisition.

### **IF YOU CAN SPEAK IT, YOU HAVE ACQUIRED IT**

People assume that when a person can speak the language, they have acquired it. While conducting my own informal study, this was the response that was most interesting to me. Several people said that because they see children translating for their parents all of the time, “it just has to be easier for younger people to learn a language.” This illusion, where children appear to be fluent in a second language, is what several researchers refer to as the “linguistic facade.” However, researchers caution against this illusion and advise that just because a person appears fluent in a language; it does not mean he/she has fully acquired the language. This is what Cummins refers to as the difference between BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills) and CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency). If a person was to imagine an iceberg, BICS would be the portion of the iceberg on top of the water that everyone could see, or the context embedded cognitively undemanding aspects of language. The basic skills required to communicate in a language. On the other hand, CALP would be the portion of the iceberg that is underneath the water, or the context reduced cognitively

demanding aspects of language. So, while someone may appear to be fluent in a language they may have only acquired the BICS of that language. Collier (1989) refers to Cummins (1981a) study in which he found that, “immigrants took approximately 2 to 3 years to reach proficiency in basic communicative skills in English,” (p. 516) as compared to the “5 to 7 years of study in the second language [that] is required to reach native-speaker levels in school language” (p. 516). However, as I learned in this class, current research is now showing that it can take 7 – 10 years to acquire CALP in a new language.

Another reason why children appear to have acquired a new language (but people do not realize) is the, “vast difference in the level of language complexity expected for each age. Children’s second language acquisition appears superior largely because the structures and vocabulary they need for adequate communication are so much simpler than those required of adults” (Collier, 1989, p. 513). Asher and Garcia (1969) also refer to this illusion by explaining that people may believe children learn a new language faster when a child’s utterances are combined with physical movement. However, they refer to Asher and Price’s (1967) study that tested this theory and the results show that, “when adults and children (ages 7, 11 and 14) all learned to understand Russian in situations in which the Russian utterances were synchronized with physical movement, the adults were vastly superior to the children in any age group, and the older children outperformed the youngest children” (p. 335).

When a person sees a child speaking a second language and/or translating for his/her parents, it is easy to assume that the child has completely acquired a new language – especially when the person also believes the other two myths. However, in professions like teaching it is critical that teachers are aware of this illusion as the success of ESL students heavily relies on the correct assessment of the student by the teacher.

## CONCLUSION

This paper examines three common language learning 'myths' often associated with why people think learning a second language at a younger age is easier. One, that the earlier a child learns a language the faster they will acquire it. Two, the more a person hears the new language the faster they will pick it up. Three, that children must learn a new language quicker as they are often seen translating for their parents. By examining various research studies and through the information gained in this course, all three of these language learning myths associated with why people think learning a second language at a younger age is easier have been debunked. After examining the data, despite popular belief, it is clear that it is easier for an adolescent/adult who has well developed language skills in their first language to learn a second, or in some cases a third or fourth language.

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# TESL Canada Educational Foundation

Teachers, did you know that TESL Canada has an educational fund for students?

### **Purpose of the Funding:**

Funding is available for different educational purposes:

- To assist ESL learners in continuing their education, either by taking a course that assists other ESL learners in some way, or by working on a project that is useful as a learning resource for the ESL community.
- To assist ESL organizers working on a project with ESL learners; the project should create a useful learning resource for the ESL community.
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Any ESL learner currently in an ESL school or in a volunteer ESL organization who is recommended by the board of a provincial affiliate of TESL Canada.

### **Value:**

Funding is available up to \$500.  
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### **Time Frame:**

The project should be completed within 12 months after the funding.

If you have any questions, please contact the TESL Canada office at:

**admin@tesl.ca**  
**604-298-0312.**

Encourage interested students to visit **www.tesl.ca** for application details.

## BUILDING LITERACY SKILLS IN ADULT EAL STUDENTS

### *Editor's Note:*

This article was first published in 2011 by the BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education, 3(1), 21-24. It is republished here with permission.

### **Biography:**

Elena Dupuis has a B.Ed. from the Russian State University, and a Financial Services Diploma from Assiniboine Community College in Brandon, Manitoba. She teaches English as an Additional Language for Westman Immigrant Services, and is currently completing an M.Ed. from Brandon University. Elena enjoys teaching EAL for adults and is passionate about her students.

### **Abstract**

English as an additional language (EAL) adult learners have special needs and unique characteristics. The various challenges they face include decoding, comprehending, and developing basic skills for reading and writing. At the same time, it is extremely important to understand EAL adult literacy programming, as the right approaches for EAL adult literacy learners might become a turning point in their future learning. EAL students bring positive experiences, strengths, and needs to the adult EAL classroom. Teachers need to acknowledge and address these strengths and needs.

When assessing English as an additional language (EAL) students and their literacy skills, it is difficult to determine which combination of teaching and learning activities will bring the best results. Adult EAL students own unique characteristics and abilities to handle the appro-

priate learning material. Building literacy skills can present many challenges. In addition to learning English, EAL learners face some challenges of developing basic skills for decoding, comprehending, and producing print (Condelli & Wrigley, 2006, p. 111). EAL educators need to understand what “literacy” is, who EAL literacy learners are, what challenges EAL literacy students face, and which approaches will achieve the best possible results among Adult EAL learners.

Before analyzing the best ways to teach EAL adult literacy students, one needs to understand what literacy is. Literacy refers to the skill base that helps people to participate and adapt to certain changes in the workplace, the home, and community life (Manitoba Advanced Education and Literacy, 2008, p. 6). It also provides a foundation for further learning that includes “written and communication skills (reading text, document use and writing),

“In fact, as second language teaching has moved away from an emphasis on grammar alone toward emphasis on communication, literacy has changed its focus on skills to a focus on meaning (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 19).”

numeracy, thinking skills to learn and solve problems, oral communication and interpersonal skills” (Manitoba Advanced Education and Literacy, 2008, p. 6). However, this definition can be extended into a broader term, whereby literacy learners, including EAL literacy learners, need to have the ability to work with computers (The Centre for Literacy, 2008, p. 3).

Therefore, the definition of

literacy is quite complex, as it does not include just the abilities to write and read. In fact, as second language teaching has moved away from an emphasis on grammar alone toward emphasis on communication, literacy has changed its focus on skills to a focus on meaning (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 19). In order to understand the complexity of the literacy issue, one needs to realize who EAL literacy learners are. In the literature, individuals are usually categorized as EAL literacy learners, based on their level of education and native language alphabet (The Centre for Literacy, 2008, p. 3). The category of ESL literacy learners may also include people with up to eight years of schooling who have not acquired “study skills’ and . . . anyone who comes from a country with a non-Roman alphabet” (The Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000, p. ii). It is obvious that EAL adult literacy learners will differ from one another in skills

and personal backgrounds. Ricardo (a pseudonym), for example, has only six years of schooling in his home country. He has been living in Canada for the last

eight years. During these years, he did not formally attend an English literacy program, but chose to join the regular EAL classes. He is competent enough to maintain a basic conversation and shows good results in listening and speaking. Despite the fact that Ricardo can read a little, he has absolutely no writing skills that would allow him to develop further. The latest tests show that his ability to write stops when he sees a challenge (spelling a

word or expressing some thoughts). The fact that he does not have necessary study skills would prevent him from exploring opportunities for self-study and advancing at a faster pace. Therefore, the individual abilities, as well as formal literacy classes, play a large role in achieving positive results. Literacy and EAL teachers are aware of the fact that the less education students have, the more challenges and obstacles they will encounter on their way to full literacy (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 26).

The challenges that Adult EAL learners face are different and special. Some students may have come from politically unstable countries, which means they may lack education; others may experience problems with reading (dyslexia); and still others may be physically disabled, which might affect their reading, listening and comprehension skills (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 26; Beatty, Mikulecky, & Smith-Burke, 2009, p. 3). Immigrants from various countries, and refugees with low literacy in their own language, will experience extreme disadvantages in a culture that is governed by print (Folinsbee, 2007, p. 15). Other challenges include their different approaches to learning new material, which affects their ability to comprehend a foreign language. Thus, they tend either to accept the teaching methods or to reject them completely. In addition, some students might “resist the notion that learning literacy in their own language will help them to learn English, especially if they see acquisition of English as their primary goal” (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 26). Another challenge is the multilevel classroom environment. As it is complicated to decode text in a new language and impossible to comprehend text in a language one does not know, different levels of English proficiency have to be taken into account, especially if all students want to make progress in literacy skills (Condelli & Wrigley, 2006, p. 6).

Because immigrant adults have a great deal of knowledge of the “real world” (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 27), they bring a wealth of experience to class. Furthermore, these adult students are eager to learn, go back to school, and start from the beginning in a new country. They are self-directed, practical, and resourceful adults who have “reservoirs of experience to help them learn new things; and they want to know why something needs to be learned and how it will be applicable to their lives” (Florez & Terrill, 2003, para. 8). Thus, the correct start is crucial, because EAL adult literacy learners come to English classes with a “knowing the world” (Alamprese, 2004, p. 263) package that, if approached correctly, can bring very good results in learning.

Adult education should therefore be oriented towards using functional context material. In teaching reading, for example, it is essential to focus on the students’ particular world experience (DaSilva Iddings, Risko, & Rampulla, 2009, p. 53) and make the connection to life outside

“Because immigrant adults have a great deal of knowledge of the “real world” (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 27), they bring a wealth of experience to class.”

the classroom (Wrigley, 2003, para. 5). This connection means bringing in content such as flyers, teacher’s notes, utility bills, application forms, and résumé sample, because this kind of material contains information of practical interest and importance to the learner (The Centre for Literacy, 2008, p. 5). A critical element is to find material suitable to the student’s English level. Language input far beyond the learner’s level (for example, original movies, and TV and radio programs) will result in no comprehension, and, therefore, no persistence by the learner (Yang, 2005, para. 5). Instead, the teachers need to find the most suitable materials for their learners.

A highly effective approach for adult learners is based on the “whole language approach” (Huerta-Macias, 1993, para. 2), as it focuses on the social and cognitive aspects of the language. Whole language teachers build on learners’ existing knowledge and work with learners on authentic reading and writing activities, such as reading brochures, a bus schedule, utility bills, writing letters, or working on extended writing projects (Guth & Wrigley, 1992, p. 23). Reading becomes a very important element not only in building literacy skills for comprehension and speaking, but also for linking real-life vocabulary, pronunciation, and spelling. Focusing on pronunciation, including rhythm and expression, develops phonemic awareness and fluency, listening comprehension, and verbal expression (Condelli, Cronen, & Silver-Pacuilla, 2009, p. 9). Spelling is filled with hidden challenges for EAL learners: it is very difficult, confusing, and not always exciting for students. The extra practice that these students need has to be made interesting and rewarding by means of such activities as bingo and group work wherein the words are discussed and spelled out loud, and linking particular words with real-life examples. The spelling test results for Ricardo, for example, have dramatically increased due to implementation of these techniques and additional practice. Thus, using authentic material in a whole language approach helps students to reach their best possible results.

Students need practice not only in spelling, but in all literacy skills. Sometimes, it is easy to forget how much practice is needed before literacy and the English language become “internalized” or “automatized” (Wrigley, 2003, para. 10). Students who are given both sufficient time on task with a particular component and a chance to encounter that component in various ways (reading, writing, hands-on activities, discussing

their reading) usually show improved results. They need to “interact” (Wrigley, 2003, para. 12) with print and practice it, as they benefit from different kinds of experiences that reinforce language and literacy skills.

Writing also plays a significant role in developing strategic literacy skills. Writing instruction should be much more than filling out forms or responding to externally defined norms, because “functional approach limits both the kinds of writing students can do and the roles for which it prepares them” (Wrigley, 2003, para. 5). Nevertheless, these small elements are crucial in building literacy blocks of any writing component. As students progress, the teacher’s focus can shift to serious and complex forms of writing: free writing in journals, diaries, and stories. In dialogue journals, for example, students write about their thoughts, experiences, reactions to texts or issues of importance to them, and teachers respond to the content of students’ entries by sharing their own experiences, ideas, and reactions, and by modeling correct usage (Auerbach, 1999, para. 7). Authentic communication, such as the dialogue journal activity, is highly effective with adult EAL learners (Larrotta, 2009, p. 36). These personalized strategies give students the freedom to express their own thoughts and ideas in writing.

In other writing contexts as well, EAL learners need opportunities to write about topics that are relevant to their lives and to feel that their writing has value. Including writing with content at every level of instruction will help learners to find their own style in their new language and develop the ability to communicate effectively in various contexts (Bello, 1997, p. 3). Thus, the approaches to cultivating writing skills are critical in EAL adult literacy programs.

EAL learning activities should be based on individual students’ abilities to comprehend certain material. For early literacy learners, for example, vocabulary-building activities should include the following:

matching pictures to words, using flash cards, implementing concentration games, labeling, attempting to write vocabulary journals, using picture dictionaries, and playing bingo activities. More advanced learners will benefit from activities such as dialogues, retelling a story, finishing a story, class surveys, phonics exercises, unscrambling words, and hands-on building of sentences. The goal is to ensure that students develop a variety of skills to acquire English literacy at an appropriate level (Florez & Terrill, 2003, para. 13).

Thus, building a variety of teaching activities has become increasingly important in developing successful EAL adult literacy programs. EAL students bring diverse strengths and needs to the adult EAL classroom, and they require appropriate instruction that acknowledges and addresses these strengths and needs. It is important to engage these learners in challenging and relevant topics, and to provide them with tools that they can use to meet their responsibilities and goals in life.

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## IMPROVING THE READING COMPREHENSION OF NOVICE EAL STUDENTS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

English as an additional language (EAL) students who are taking secondary courses in math and science are often faced with reading difficulties related to both their depth and quality of vocabulary knowledge (Zhang & Anual, 2008; Wallace, 2008; Cummins, 2008). Counter intuitively the effect of vocabulary knowledge on reading comprehension involves a small percentage of the words in a text. Research has shown that comprehension of text is affected by as low as 2% of the words it contains (Wallace, 2008), whereas academic texts generally contain about 5% of low frequency words (Zhang & Anual, 2008). Compounding the influence of these low frequency words on reading comprehension is the finding that oral speech contains fewer rare words than written text, suggesting that speaking proficiency is insufficient for indicating reading proficiency (Cummins, 2008). The implication of these findings is that EAL students studying math and science are very likely to struggle with course readings due to the frequency of rare words despite their proficiency in speaking. As such, math and science teachers should develop reading scaffolds for the benefit of EAL students. This paper will present the state of affairs of academic reading in science classrooms and suggest how explanatory notes may help novice readers gain access to complex texts. It concludes with suggestions for further research, including the potential use of students' first language in content area reading. Unfortunately, support of students' reading in secondary courses is not a common occurrence; with observations of classes revealing that only about 3% of instructional time is devoted to teaching reading comprehension strategies (Ness, 2007). Part of the reason for this de-emphasis in reading instruction may be the belief that since there are

only a relatively few rare words in a text (Zhang & Anual, 2008), students can simply use dictionaries or glossaries to make meaning of the readings. However, there is a question as to what it means to know a word since vocabulary knowledge is a very complex construct (Zhang & Anual, 2008). For example, the terms place, borrow, and product are high frequency words that are used in everyday conversations, yet has very specific mathematical meanings which students must understand in an academic context (Schleppegrell, 2007). How many contexts for each word must a student know before she can claim knowledge of that word?

Confusion concerning the sense of a word is a common source of frustration among second language learners in secondary content courses; illustrating the need for "contextualizing linguistic input" (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, pp. 204-224). Consider a student studying math or science and the text refers to "figure 1"; there may be some confusion as to whether the figure is referring to the ordinal meaning (i.e., diagram 1) or nominal meaning (e.g., shape -a noun, solve/think -a verb), as was the case in a study by Lager (2006). Schleppegrell (2007) argues that words with multiple meanings are often more difficult for students to learn in the context of an academic class than the more technical ones with specific meanings. EAL students must therefore negotiate both the effects of low frequency words and those with multiple definitions in order to make meaning of text. However, the knowledge of the contextualized meanings of each word may still be insufficient to promote comprehension of a text due to the format in which the vocabulary may be presented.

Research has suggested that the length of sentences used in textbooks should be appropriate to the reading expertise

of the student (Mikk, 2008). For example, Mikk (2008) suggests that text intended for grade 10 students should have sentences about 13 words in length, while those in grade 12 should be able to process sentences with 15-17 words. A cursory examination by the author of a typical grade 10 Science textbook (Grace et al, 2000) reveals that content area textbooks may be written beyond the reading expertise of the students. A random selection of 10 sentences reveals an average word count of 16.4 ( $\pm 5.3$ ); suggesting that the text may be more appropriate for grade 12 students. However, contradictory evidence comes from 7 random selections from the textbook, consisting of 100 words each, which were analyzed by the author using the fry readability graph (Longo, 1982; Vacca & Vacca, 2002, pp. 105-106). From the samples collected, there was an average of 7.1 sentences ( $\pm 1.2$ ) per 100 words, containing an average of 161 syllables ( $\pm 23.9$ ); suggesting readability may actually be appropriate for grade 10 students after all. While further research into the readability of this particular textbook is required, the contradiction between the two methods used may result from the nature of the content area. A grade 10 science textbook covers 4 units of study; Ecology, Chemistry, Physics, and Weather. Each unit has specialized vocabulary that may enhance or inhibit readability. Whether the text is at grade level for native speakers or more advanced, this text may be too complex for EAL students compared to their reading expertise; therefore scaffolds should be implemented to allow these students access to content knowledge.

Mikk (2008) provides a word of caution in discussing the use of readability formulas, stating that sentence complexity goes beyond the number of words present and that "two to

three very familiar words may be as easy to process as one word of average familiarity; but one new or strange word may require the whole capacity of working memory” (p. 124). He goes on to discuss other aspects which affect the complexity of sentences, such as word patterns and grammatical constructions. For example, active voice is easier for readers to process than passive voice; therefore texts which contain a large proportion of passive voice sentences will affect comprehension negatively (Mikk, 2008). Similarly, sentences with long, dense noun phrases are common in mathematics and provide students with a challenging reading task even when they are knowledgeable about the vocabulary terms (Schleppegrell, 2007).

It is apparent that reading an academic text is a very complex task which involves the interactions between vocabulary, sentence length, grammatical structure, and context. It would be unreasonable to suggest that students can make significant gains in academic reading while forming schemata related to content knowledge without some form of scaffolding. Since the primary purpose of the students being in the class is to gain content knowledge, significant efforts should be made to ameliorate the linguistic difficulties of EAL learners. The challenge is to concurrently increase both the linguistic skills of the students and their content knowledge in the shortest time possible. Unfortunately, while science educators may do an exceptional job at developing students’ speaking proficiency and content knowledge through presentations, experiments, and group projects; they may be undervaluing reading and hindering literacy development.

In my experience the most common reading scaffold employed in secondary courses is allowing EAL students to use a dictionary while completing assignments and writing tests. I once observed second language students in an EAL designated social studies course writing a test where they had to read a short story (2 pages) and answer direct and inferential questions

related to it. The students had about an hour to write the test and their only assistance was the use of dictionaries. These students were very diligent and constantly looked up words that they did not know and wrote the definitions on their paper. By the end of the testing period very few students had completed their questions. The test appeared to be designed for comprehension and to have the students relate their own experiences to the situations described in the text, but the students never got to this higher-order task. They were still trying to make meaning of the vocabulary used in the text.

The vocabulary these students were searching for were not ones they would likely or frequently encounter again in the course, whereas the social implications related in the story were a part of the theme of the unit. I do not believe the effort expended on finding the vocabulary definitions was worth the time that could have been spent on higher order critical thinking skills related to the content. The students at the greatest disadvantage were those whose reading expertise were at a novice level. It is the objectives of the teacher and the expertise of the students which should dictate the instructional design of each lesson. A one size fits all approach is insufficient in education, especially concerning second language students (Schnotz & Kurschner, 2007).

A method to help novice EAL learners gain access to the information written in secondary content texts is explanatory notes. These notes consist of vocabulary definitions or explanatory phrases imbedded into the text readings (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997). They can be developed by the classroom teacher or EAL specialist who recognizes grammatical constructs, low frequency words, or vocabulary with context specific meanings that may cause novice readers difficulty. Yeung, Jin, and Sweller’s (1997) study suggests beneficial effects of explanatory notes on comprehension in reference to novice readers. Cognitive Load Theory (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005) explains this increase of comprehension

through ameliorating what is called the Split attention effect, where the learner must split her attention between two sources of information in order to make meaning of the text (Schnotz & Kurschner, 2007). For example, if an EAL student is using a dictionary to help him with difficult vocabulary, the limitation of the working memory (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005) reduces his comprehension of the text.

Yeung, Jin, and Sweller (1997) describes this complex process for novice readers: “Given a separate glossary, when readers encounter an unfamiliar word, they need to leave the text, turn to the vocabulary list, temporarily store its meaning, and then revert to the text and try to incorporate the word meaning into the passage” (p. 2). The Human working memory has a limitation on the number of unprocessed elements it can store and the length of time they are held; approximately 7 elements can be held for about 20 seconds without rehearsal (van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005). This limitation of the working memory explains the beneficial results of using explanatory notes on comprehension; the students have immediate access to explanatory phrases and definitions integrated right into the text, thus reducing the time the student’s attention is split between two sources and increasing comprehension (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997). However there is a price to be paid, which is the building of vocabulary knowledge. The integrated definitions are made easily available, therefore the students’ working memory do not spend much time or resources processing the new vocabulary, resulting in the failure to transfer the terms into their long-term memory (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997). It should also be noted that the study (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997) on the use of explanatory notes showed beneficial effects of comprehension only on novice readers; more experienced readers showed a decrease in comprehension due to the redundancy effect (Diao & Sweller, 2007; Schnotz & Kurschner, 2007; van Merriënboer & Sweller, 2005; Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997).

The results of the study on explanatory

notes (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997) are promising as a tool to help novice EAL learners gain access to secondary math and science texts while leaving enough working memory resources available to accomplish higher order thinking skills. It should also be stressed that the use of explanatory notes is just a tool to allow students to think critically about the content of a text. At other times the teacher may want to build the students' vocabulary and the explanatory notes should be removed for this purpose.

A gap in the research on the use of explanatory notes is the possible use of students' first language (L1) in making the notes. The debate between English-Only or English-Plus policies in the classroom is a controversial one in the field of EAL (Brown, 1991; Canagarajah, 2006; Lucas & Katz, 1994). Regardless of whether an English-Only or English-Plus policy is adopted, students are going to use their first language when they encounter difficulties with text and therefore we should make use of this tendency. For example, Seng and Hashim (2006) conducted a study to research the role of students' L1 in reading comprehension among L2 students in a group setting. The results showed that L2 students frequently resort to using their L1 when encountering difficulties in comprehension. Seng and Hashim (2006) describe this tendency by stating that "when tackling vocabulary difficulties, the L1 was used by the students to confirm, to reason through or to guess an unfamiliar L2 word. And in tackling idea-related problems, the L1 was used to help verify the accuracy of their comprehension or to check their comprehension" (Seng & Hashim, 2006, p. 45). I therefore hypothesize that if explanatory notes are written in the students' first language, the benefits on comprehension will be greater than explanatory notes written in English.

Lucas and Katz (1994) discuss the benefits of using students' L1 in English classrooms. They argue that using students' L1 does not affect the learners' ability to acquire an L2, but rather gives them access to academic and literacy skills which are transferable

across languages. While Lucas and Katz (1994) advocate for bilingual teachers who speak the same language as their students' L1, they recognize that this situation is not always feasible. However, they maintain that the students' L1 can still be incorporated through group work where less experienced learners are paired with more experienced learners who speak the same L1. Since research has shown that explanatory notes decreases the comprehension of advanced L2 learners (Yeung, Jin & Sweller, 1997), these students can be used to create the L1 explanatory notes for the novice L2 learners. In this way the L1 explanatory notes are created for the novice learners and the vocabulary knowledge of the advanced students are increased.

Research in the use of explanatory notes written in the students' first language can have profound implications for secondary instruction of EAL students. It may illustrate the need to scaffold students' reading when critically thinking about the content of the text is the objective. It can also add support for the establishment of English-Plus policies in classrooms; giving equal respect to both the English language and the first languages of minority students. This research into the use of L1's in L2 reading may also lead to additional studies in the use of L1's in L2 writing, speaking, and listening situations. It is a tool whose potential is worth investigating.

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## REVIEW/ANALYSIS OF: TAARE ZAMEEN PAR (LIKE STARS ON EARTH)

Director...Aamir Khan

Writer...Amole Gupte

Cast

Darsheel Safary... Ishaan Awasthi

Aamir Khan... Ram Shankar Nikumbh

Sachet Engineer... Yohan Awasthi

Tisca Chopra... Maya Awasthi

Vipin Sharma... Nandkishore Awasthi

## ABOUT THE FILM

Taare Zameen Par (Like Stars on Earth) was India's 2009 entry into the Academy Awards. The film was directed by Bollywood actor/producer Aamir Khan and originally released in theatres December 2007. The film did not receive much international attention, however, until Walt Disney Home Entertainment purchased the rights to distribute it on DVD. The film follows the story of eight year old Ishaan who is gifted artistically, but does not perform well in his other subjects at school. He constantly fails his tests, does not complete assignments and gets into fights. His brother Yohan on the other hand is an exemplary student and star tennis player. Ishaan's mother has given up her career in order to spend more time with him, but still cannot figure out why he is so unlike his older brother. Ishaan's father is convinced that his younger son is lazy and feels that the best way to discipline him is to send him to boarding school. After being sent away, Ishaan becomes depressed and loses his interest in art. It is the arrival of substitute art teacher Ram Shankar Nikumbh that cures Ishaan of his depression. Ram discovers that Ishaan has dyslexia, a condition that he also suffered from during his childhood. In addition to being his Art teacher, Ram decides to become Ishaan's tutor, and dedicates his spare time in helping Ishaan

overcome his condition. He explains Ishaan's problem to his parents and the school's headmaster and brings both parties to understand Ishaan's talent and weakness, he makes it clear that Ishaan is a talented student who is, however, being held back by an education system that is inconsiderate towards his needs.

## DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

Like most dramas, the movie follows the five part dramatic arc.

**Introduction:** Ishaan's life at home, his struggles with school and his parents.

**Rising Action:** Ishaan's father becoming the antagonist by deciding to send him away to boarding school.

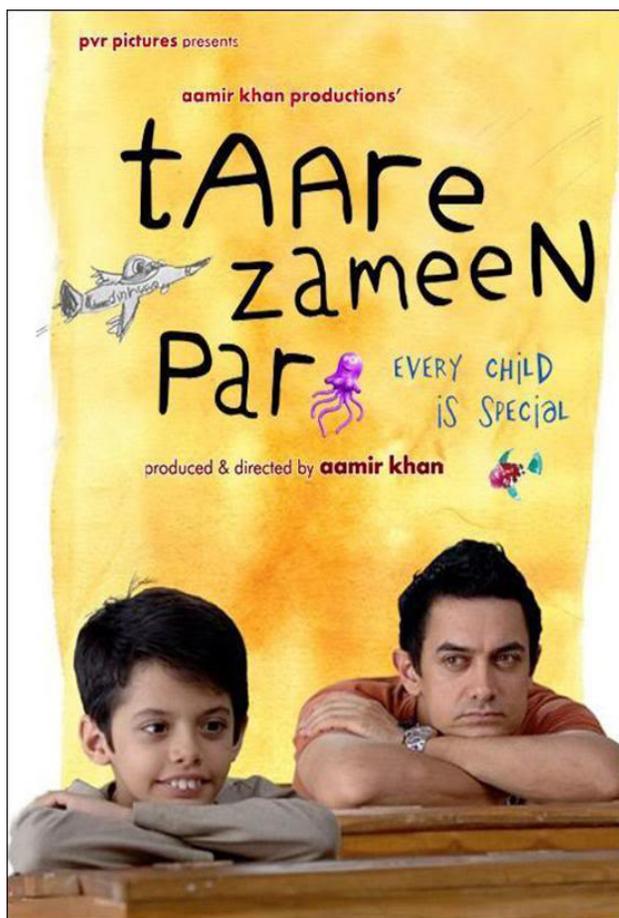
**Climax:** The teacher at Ishaan's boarding school falling ill and being replaced Ram Shankar Nikumbh, who helps Ishaan overcome his dyslexia.

**Falling action:** Ram informing Ishaan's father of his sons condition, which results in Mr. Awasthi being able to better understand his son.

**Resolution:** Ishaan overcoming his dyslexia, winning the school art competition and returning home.

## WHY I CHOSE TO WRITE ABOUT THIS FILM

Teaching methods in the third world have been slow to progress as many schools still push forth the long held



misconception that teachers are all knowing. I feel teachers in places like India and Africa could benefit a great deal from watching this film as it breaks this mould and demonstrates that teachers are not all knowing and that in certain instances, they can actually learn from their students. I also feel that the film could be used to spread cultural awareness to beginner EAL teachers, who have little or no experience traveling abroad. The classroom environment in traditional societies like India's differs greatly from the environment found in western schools. Thus I feel EAL teachers who watch this film, will be less likely to experience culture shock when teaching in foreign countries as they will have some idea about how teaching methodologies and approaches vary in other parts of the world. Parents everywhere could also

benefit a great deal from watching this film as it provides some insight into the challenges students and teachers experience in the classroom. It is often the case that teachers and schools are blamed for children not performing well academically. I feel parents who watch this film will be less likely to jump to conclusions as it demonstrates that in some instances, the problems children face at school are out of the teacher's, school's and student's hands. I also feel that younger learners experiencing difficulties with their studies will find this film to be very motivating; inspirational.

Dyslexia is not well known in third world countries and I feel the movie could help in spreading more awareness about it. My mother taught at several public and private elementary schools and high-schools in Malawi for 14 years before immigrating to Canada in 2000. She only found out about dyslexia after my sister introduced her to one of her friends who was in the process of overcoming it. I could not help but think about all of the potential dyslexic students my mother might have had in her in her classes that she was unable to assist, due to lack of knowledge on the subject. I also could not help but associate what Ishaan's parents went through in the film, to what my mother and father went through with my younger brother Mabuchi. During his elementary school days in Malawi, Mabuchi often got into trouble for acting out in class, skipping class and not doing his homework, much like Ishaan. Mabuchi is a kinaesthetic and social learner but none of his teachers knew this as the Malawian method of instruction does not really take into account this particular learning style. Students are expected remain silent in the classroom and speak only when asked a question by the teacher. In addition, there is little to no emphasis on group work, and the only time you ever really get to walk around while at school is during recess. My parents tried all sorts of methods to discipline him, but

it always seemed like the more they would push him towards studying, the more he would rebel. It was not until we immigrated to Canada and he was enrolled into the school system here that my parents began to notice a change in him. He began attending all of his classes and even stayed after school to complete assignments as it was also an opportunity for him to socialize. His grades also improved from studying regularly as he had to maintain a certain percentile to participate in after school sports. I could not help but feel that if my parents and his teacher in Malawi had seen *Taare Zameen Par* or a film similar to it, they would have spent less time attempting to discipline my brother, and more time attempting to address what was causing him to become frustrated and to act out at school. I visited Malawi in 2009 and was not surprised when I found out that my 10 year old cousin was experiencing exactly the same issues as Mabuchi. For teachers in the third world, I feel there is a lot to be learned from this film.

I feel that EAL teachers could benefit a great deal from watching *Taare Zameen Par* as it provides some insight into the issues they are likely to face when teaching abroad, especially in third world countries. Schools in places like India and Africa will not always have the necessary resources to accommodate the needs of their students. This is demonstrated in the film through none of the teachers, apart from Ram (a fellow dyslexic) being able to recognize Ishaan's condition. By watching this film, EAL teachers who have little experience traveling, can also gain some insight into how the classroom environment and education system in places like India differs from that of developed countries. As the film demonstrates, the classroom environment in developing countries tends to be more formal. Students are expected to wear uniforms, stand up when answering teacher's questions and teachers are allowed to verbally abuse their students and use physical punishment.

In addition, as demonstrated by the children's awe, when Ram requests that they paint something out of their imagination, making lessons fun; engaging is not really considered part of a teacher's job in traditional societies. I feel that these are important lessons to be learned by anyone who intends to teach abroad as they will help reduce culture shock and potential conflicts with fellow teachers.

I also feel that parents could benefit a great deal from watching the film as it will provide them with some insight into the challenges that both teachers and students face in the classroom. It is often the case that some parents blame the school and teachers for their children not doing well. This is an issue that is raised in the film when Ishaan's father decides to remove him from the local school and send him to the boarding school, where it is only by chance that he encounters Ram (his regular Art teacher falls ill) and is able to get help with his dyslexia. While in Malawi, my father attempted the same thing with my brother, he removed him from the local public school and sent him to a private one. His attempt failed however as it only led to my brother resenting him for separating him from his friends, leading him to act out more. I also believe that by watching the film parents can gain some insight into what goes on in the minds of their kids. Although Ishaan's father assumes that his son's acting out is a form of rebellion against his authority. The film makes it clear that this is not the case. Ishaan is always looking to spend more time with him despite his constantly scrutinizing him, verbally abusing him and attempting to remain emotionally distant. The film also demonstrates how easy it can become for parents to ignore their children when the needs of one child are emphasized more than that of another. There is an instance in the film when Ishaan's mother and brother call him to inform him that they will be unable to visit him over the weekend due to his brother's tennis tournament. Ishaan remains silent

throughout the conversation, puts down the telephone and eventually leaves the room as his mother pleads for his forgiveness.

I feel students could also benefit from watching the film as it is very much an inspirational story. The film stresses that all children are capable of great accomplishments given the right type of care and support. The film's ending has Ram organizing a school art completion in which all of the students as well as teachers are invited to participate. The prize for the winner is their work being posted on the cover of the school yearbook. Ram invites his guru/teacher, critically acclaimed painter Lalita Lamji (real life daughter of Guru Dutt and playing herself in the film) to the competition to judge the art show. To everyone's surprise, the painting she chooses for the year book cover is Ishaan's painting of a pond rather than Rams painting of Ishaan. Although older viewers might find the ending a little cliché, I am certain it will inspire younger ones to strive for greatness.

Although the film received much praise upon its release, competition from *Slum Dog Millionaire*, a British film about orphans growing up in India kept *Taare Zameen Par* out of the spotlight. *Slum dog millionaire* went on to win eight Academy awards and *Taare Zameen Par* did not even make the nomination shortlist. I personally find this tragic as even though *Slum Dog Millionaire* is the superior film cinematically; as a work of art, *Taare Zameen Par* is far richer in terms of content. I learned more in the two and a half hours I spent watching *Taare Zameen Par* than I do during most university lectures. *Taare Zameen Par* is a shining example of how cinema can be used for more than just entertainment and I truly hope that more film makers take Aamir Khans route with their future endeavours and try to educate their audience's on top of entertaining them. I hope the film receives more exposure and more teachers, students and parents across the globe get to see the film as I do believe it makes the ones who view it

better at what they do.

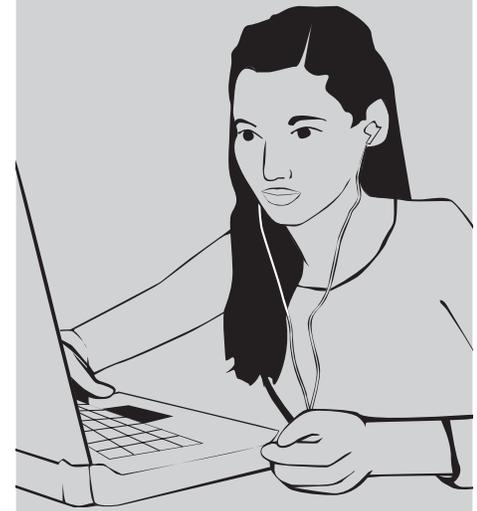
## WORKS CITED & TIDBITS

*Taare Zameen Par*. Dir. Aamir Khan. Perf. Darsheel Safary, Aamir Khan, Sachet Engineer, Tisca Chopra, Vipin Sharma. Walt Disney Studios Home Entertainment, 2010. DVD.

This was the first ever Indian film to be distributed by a major International studio.

Aamir Khan did not direct the entire film, like most Bollywood films, the movie includes a musical segment. As this was Khan's first time directing, the more camera intensive musical segment was directed by Ram Madhvani who at the time had more experience behind the camera than Khan.

Renowned Indian painter Samir Mondal created the paintings that Ishaan and Ram enter into the school Art competition at the end of the film.



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## A FILM REACTION ESSAY ABOUT THE STORYTELLING CLASS

This paper is a reaction to the film *The Storytelling Class*, directed by John Paskievich and John White-way, released in 2009. Marc Kuly, a teacher at Gordon Bell High School, upon reading Ishmael Beah's book *A Long Way Gone*, decided to employ a volunteer class of students to share their stories and make history. Marc Kuly invited his Grade 12 students to participate in bridging the gap between the immigrant and refugee students and the Canadian students by way of sharing their personal experiences or stories. It is my belief that this endeavor inspires hope in the human spirit for all who care to listen. I will try to help you understand the depth of this hope and the miracle of human interaction in the following paper.

My first reaction to the film *The Storytelling Class* was one of awe. The students had immense character growth as the class progressed. At first they were wary of each other and even embarrassed to bow to each other and acknowledge the human being across from them. As time went on, there were little smiles across the room and intense listening as the immigrant and refugee students began to share their stories. After some time, the Canadian students began to voice their concern over not being heard. They had listened to the stories of their peers and wanted to share of themselves the same way. Then they were given the opportunity to do so and amazingly a bridge was gapped. The students who participated in the class were allowing each other's voices to be heard. They were learning from each other and learning to listen to each other. The Canadian



students were humbled at the hardships their peers had endured before coming to Canada, and the immigrant students were amazed that they weren't the only ones who had problems. The Canadian student's problems were so different from those from war torn countries but theirs were still real problems. The fact is that people are people with feelings and desires and wishes, and these desires finally had a place to be heard. One of the students in the film said succinctly "When you've heard someone's story you see them as someone. When they listen to each other they have joined hands." How important it is to listen to each other, no matter what walk of life we come from. For listening to each other builds compassion and empathy and allows us to walk alongside our fellow human being, even as a brother.

In the film, there is a clip of Jamie Oliviero, a storyteller who tells of two men, one a hunter and one a blind man. The blind man "sees" the error of the hunters' ways. He sees with his ears and listens with his

heart. What I take from this clip is that Marc Kuly's students were meeting each other at a basic human level. They were learning to listen with their hearts, without judgment of each other. They were learning to listen to their own hearts, their own wishes, and express the story that they wanted to tell others about. The students were seeing for maybe the first time in their lives, with their hearts.

Morley Walker, in his article for the *Winnipeg Free Press* (11/27/2009), stated that the students in Marc Kuly's class were "bridging the various solitudes"<sup>1</sup>. He was talking about the fact that the students at Gordon Bell High School were in segregated groups. In the beginning, no one was mixing with groups of people that were different from themselves. The students in *The Storytelling Class* did bridge a gap. They came to learn and to be heard and in doing so they became energized. They became beacons of light for the entire school. They crossed boundaries and great divides and acted as a bridge. This is where I

see an immense potential for hope in humanity. People are basically afraid of other people. They don't want people to judge them and they are afraid of opening up and sharing themselves because of it. The Storytelling Class is a film that proves otherwise. It is a film that shows humans can change. Humans can have empathy and compassion for one another just by virtue of sharing their story and being allowed to share it in a safe place.

So how can we as Canadians find ways to build on this hope? The hope of bridging the gap between people of all walks of life. All people have a right to exist in this world and all people have a right to be heard. All people have a story to tell and a wish in their heart to be accepted by others. Marc Kuly's class accomplished what some people would say is impossible. They accomplished a change for the better. They found that when they got to know each other better, the world was a better place. The problems didn't necessarily disappear, but there was a purpose to their stories. That purpose was to open the hearts of the listeners, to change their hearts for the better and to help people move on with a stronger spirit. This is the hope that I found while watching the film. As one of the students put it in the film "every kid imagined a better world for themselves, their friends and their families." The strength that the students gained from bonding with each other made them better people, stronger than ever before, able to accomplish change. A clear Canadian example promoting change and healing is the gathering that was held at the Forks in Winnipeg on June 19th, 2010. This was an historic gathering for Aboriginal people who were former Indian Residential School students. During this gathering, the students were allowed to share their stories in order to engage and educate the Canadian public about the Indian Residential School sys-

tem. The gatherings purpose was also to promote healing and honor to the lives that had been touched by the Residential Schools. A third purpose of the gathering was to celebrate regional diversity. This is a story of hope. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada chair person Justice Murray Sinclair said, "My fellow commissioners and I have made a commitment to former students that we will hear from as many of them as we are logistically and humanly able to."<sup>2</sup> There is a commitment of the committee to host 7 meetings in total, across Canada in the next 5 years to promote the miracle of healing and building of hope. Change is happening in our city and in our world. Just as the students in Marc Kuly's class reached out to one another, there is opportunity for the Indian Residential School students to reach out. And hopefully our country will embrace them and reciprocate by listening to their stories.

I really appreciated the film *The Storytelling Class*. It was a strong story of the human spirit. It was a story that had a good ending to new beginnings. We as Canadian people can take courage from the students in the film. There is always a way to explore relationships no matter what walk of life we are in. This is the time to get rid of fear of the unknown and embrace a life of change. This is the time to get real with other people, to form relationships that are based upon time well spent. Wherever I go from here on out, I will be aware of the gaps between our cultures and see that if I make the first move to be in relationship with someone whom I don't know, I will be helping to build bridges. With a domino effect, change can be made. Ishmael Beah spoke in the film *The Storytelling Class* about listening with your heart deeply to allow ourselves to meet people and know them for who they are. Developing empathy for another person is a gift. Who

I am and who I become is going to make a difference in the lives of other people. Because of this film, I believe that I can change. I can become more empathetic to others by listening to and opening my heart to their human experiences. Understanding that other people have the right to be and to exist is the attitude the world needs to adopt.

The film *The Storytelling Class* is a film of hope and of miracles. The students in the film experienced great character growth. They came to a better understanding of who they were as people and what they desired in life. They also became full of empathy for their fellow student. By the end of the film there was laughter and hugging, a forgiving spirit had transpired to allow the students to move freely among each other with acceptance and grace. The students gained the ability to hear the suffering of each other and accept it as part of their stories. A miracle happened and because of that miracle I have hope in the future, hope for all people to embrace each other's differences and similarities.

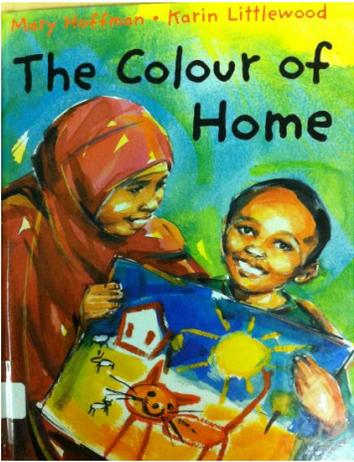
## ENDNOTES

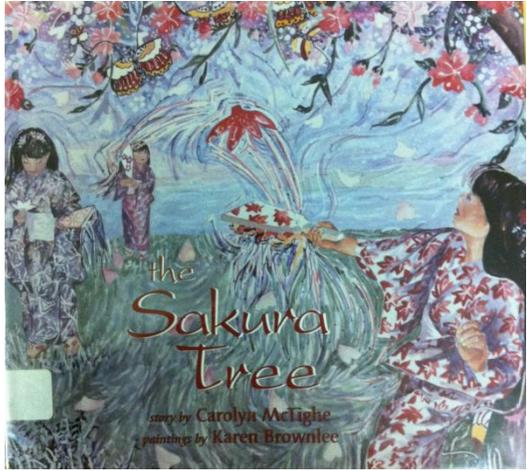
- 1 Winnipeg Free Press, 11/27/2009
- 2 trc-cvr.ca Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (newsletter, winter 2010)

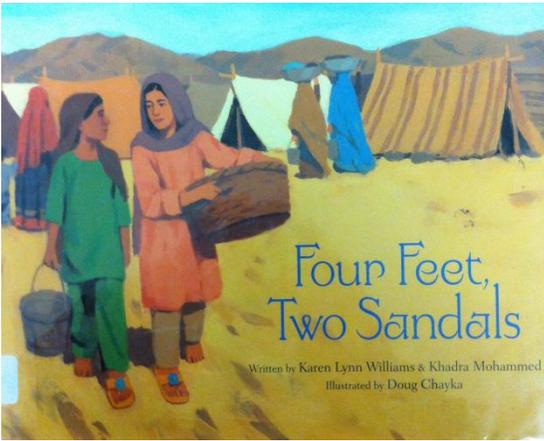
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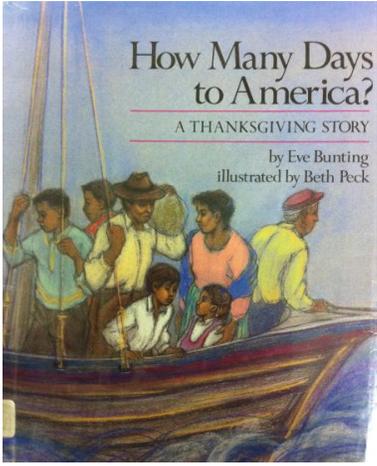
- The Storytelling Class*, John Paskievich and John Whiteway, 2009  
 Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, Newsletter, 2009, trc-cvr.ca  
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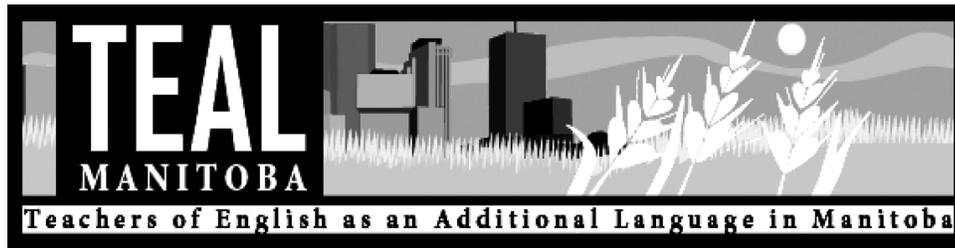
## LITERATURE AND ACTIVITIES FOR THE EAL CLASSROOM

	Title: The Colour of Home
	Author: Mary Hoffman
	Illustrator: Karin Littlewood
	ISBN: 0-7112-1940-0
	Culture: Somalia/Arabic
	Age Level: 7 years and up
	Topic: Acceptance, adapting and war affected children
<p>Synopsis: Hassan moves to the U.K. from Somalia and starts at his new school. He finds his first day very challenging because he knows little English and he's adjusting to a very different environment. He paints a colourful picture of his home and life he has left, but the finishing touches are dark and ominous. The next day an interpreter joins the class and the reasons for the dark and harsh colours are revealed (war). The story concludes with Hassan painting another picture of his home which he shares with his mom. It is then hung in a place of honour next to the prayer mat, and thus begins his new life.</p>	
<p>Vocabulary: qu'ran (Koran), hajab, shivered, easels, splattered, smudged, spoilt, luggage, nappies, spindly, mimosa, pushchair and prayer mat.</p>	
<p>Discussion or Comprehension Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What do you think the title means "The Colour of Home"?</li> <li>2. If you were to paint a picture of your home, what would you draw and what colours would you use?</li> <li>3. What colours make you feel happy, safe, sad, etc.?</li> <li>4. What colours do we see during the different seasons in Canada?</li> </ol>	
<p>What makes this book unique: The paintings in this story are beautiful and most appropriate. The colours themselves tell the story and complement the idea of the little boy's picture perfectly.</p>	
<p>Connections and Extensions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Creating art work and painting similar to the idea presented in the story.</li> <li>2. One colour artwork to show emotions, using just tints and shades of the same colour.</li> <li>3. Discussions about seasons and the colours that prevail in each one.</li> </ol>	

	Title: The Sakura Tree
	Author: Carolyn McTighe
	Illustrator: Karen Brownlee
	ISBN: 978-0-88995-354-3
	Culture: Japanese
	Age Level: 11 years to adult
Topic: Arranged marriages and staying connected to family	
<p>Synopsis: Poetic story about three young sisters who journey from Sendai, Japan to British Columbia as “picture brides”. Each brings an item as a reminder of their home, the youngest bringing seeds from a Sakura tree. They each meet their businessman to marry, but become separated from each other in the process. Eventually the Sakura trees grow large and blossoms. The two older sisters are able to follow the scent and trails of flowers to become reunited as a family.</p>	
<p>Vocabulary: “picture brides”, blossoms, majestic, beloved, remind, sensible, sentimental, whimsical, meagre, kimono, fragrant, mist, towered, cling (clung), unfamiliar, wander, recognize, honoured, weep, comfort, ceased, neighbourhood, clusters, boughs, delicate, swirled, soared, paths, confessed, overcome, renewed and search.</p>	
<p>Discussion or Comprehension Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Discuss arranged marriages and the choice to marry or not.</li> <li>2. Why would these businessmen want to marry a “picture bride” and why would the Japanese ladies want to marry the businessmen?</li> <li>3. In today’s age, what are the beliefs and understandings about arranged marriages in Canada?</li> <li>4. Have you brought something from home to help you remember? If you had to choose something, what would you bring and why?</li> </ol>	
<p>What makes this book unique: The artwork is flowery and poetic to match the story. Talks about a topic that is often avoided (arranged marriages). True story with real places in BC and Japan referred to.</p>	
<p>Connections and Extensions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Science connection to wind carrying seeds to scatter populations.</li> <li>2. Write about the object you would bring from home, why it is important to you, how it reminds you of your homeland.</li> </ol>	

	Title: Four Feet, Two Sandals
	Author: Karen Lynn Williams and Khadra Mohammed
	Illustrator: Doug Chayka
	ISBN: 978-0-8028-5296-0
	Culture: Afghanistan
	Age Level: 6 years to adult
Topic: Living in a refugee camp and empathy	
<p>Synopsis: Lina is a 10 year old girl living in a refugee camp. She finds a brand new blue and yellow sandal, but another girl, Feroza, has the matching sandal. The two girls decide to share the sandals and become very close friends. Lina’s family eventually gets to leave the camp and move to America. Feroza tells Lina to take the sandals, but they decide to keep one sandal each, to remember each other by.</p>	
<p>Vocabulary: refugee, relief workers, squatted, grabbing, perfectly, as-salaam alaykum, shalwar-kameez, cracked, swollen, scrubbing, removed, greeted, resettled, nodded, peeked, mistakes, giggled, sparkle, sliver, crescent moon, signalled, Ramadan, memories, whispered, tiptoes, squinted, barefoot, admired, trail, climbed and alongside.</p>	
<p>Discussion or Comprehension Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Why were the two girls living in a refugee camp? What would it be like?</li> <li>2. Compare and contrast how living in a refugee camp would be the same and different from living in their home.</li> <li>3. How would you feel having to wait for relief workers to bring the necessities you need and trying to grab and reach what you could?</li> <li>4. List the necessities for the refugees in the camp.</li> </ol>	
<p>What makes this book unique: it is based on real life experiences that help the reader “feel” the experiences of the girls in the book. The experiences shared in the book could be experienced by many refugees all over the world on any day.</p>	
<p>Connections and Extensions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Write about some of the discussion questions above.</li> <li>2. Social Studies connection to needs verses wants discussions.</li> </ol>	

	Title: How Many Days to America?
	Author: Eve Bunting
	Illustrator: Beth Peck
	ISBN: 0-89919-521-0
	Culture: Caribbean
	Age Level: 5 years and up
Topic: Fleeing a country by boat and being thankful	
<p>Synopsis: A Caribbean family must leave their home and all of their belongings in the middle of the night. They hire a boat to travel to America. The engine breaks down, so the group uses a make-shift sail. Their voyage is longer and harder, but they eventually arrive in America on Thanksgiving Day.</p>	
<p>Vocabulary: peered, stitch, nurse, restless, bobbed, quay, garnets, bundle, chugged, harbour, motors, knotting, shore, cliffs, buckets, whale, barnacles, roaring, scrambled, surf, gripped, tugged, rough, clasped, anxious, shed, Thanksgiving, celebrate and joined.</p>	
<p>Discussion or Comprehension Questions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Have you ever traveled by boat? What was it like?</li> <li>2. Discuss cultural celebrations. Compare them to Thanksgiving. What makes Thanksgiving special?</li> <li>3. Why would the first country turn them away? Why do you think they were or were not enemies of these people?</li> <li>4. Compare and contrast the meeting with the pirates and the soldiers on the first island.</li> </ol>	
<p>What makes this book unique: Good connection between a motherland and a celebration of Thanksgiving. Has a focus on the journey and their life while on the sea. These people moved to a new country, but still spoke the same language.</p>	
<p>Connections and Extensions:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Social Studies connections to mapping, geography, sea life (lots of this vocabulary and ideas to expand upon).</li> <li>2. Compare and contrast the Caribbean and the USA.</li> <li>3. Discussions about different modes of transportation.</li> <li>4. Discussions about cultural celebrations and how celebrations are a way to give thanks.</li> </ol>	



## Call for Submissions for TEAL MB Journal

Dear Colleagues:

As editors of the TEAL Manitoba Journal, we are always seeking contributions that will be of interest to our readers. We encourage you to submit articles or reviews. We have also now included a new section in the journal called Voice Box. Here you can submit lesson plans, assessment tools, activities, resources, or information for field trips. This is a great way to contribute to the EAL community. If you are not sure how or what you could submit, please do not hesitate to contact us.

We are willing to assist you.

More information can also be found online at:

<http://www.tealmanitoba.ca/journal.html>

### **Deadlines for submissions are:**

October 24th

February 13th

May 14th

We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

**Kevin Carter**, [khsuz@hotmail.com](mailto:khsuz@hotmail.com)  
**Euhnee Buettner**, [tgilj1980@yahoo.ca](mailto:tgilj1980@yahoo.ca)

