

# Reading Whole Books in ESOL

by  
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A few months ago, we had a staff meeting at East Boston Harborside Community Center, where I work, and we were told that Tana Reiff would be coming to our center in the near future. She was coming to meet with staff and to spend a few minutes with a group of students. We were shown a couple of her books and were asked to read or at least look through them quickly to see if anything was interesting. After we had passed them around, the second question came up: “Who would like to meet with Tana Reiff and have their class meet with her as well?”

My first response was “What do I need to do if I want my students to meet with her?” I was told that we needed to read at least one of her books in class to make students more familiar with her before the meeting. That was not a bad idea, I thought. Even though I had never heard of her or seen her books, just the idea of meeting with a writer was enough for me to say: “I am interested in doing it.”

In order for me and my class to get ready for the big day, I started to spend more time going through her books. When I read *The Family from Vietnam* I said to myself, “This is the one. This is the perfect match with my class.” I found this book so interesting and informative, and, most of all, I found the story to be somewhat similar to many situations I went through back in my country,

El Salvador, because of the war. *The Family from Vietnam* is a book based on how families get separated because of the political problems Vietnam is going through. It shows how much they suffer while they are away from each other. At the end, they reunite and everybody is happy. The same thing happened in El Salvador. Many families were split apart. Some people moved to the cities looking for safety, others came to the USA if they could afford it, while others lost their relatives for periods of time and were reunited after months. I thought about many things after I read the book. That is why I decided to use it. Also, the following reasons came to my mind when I chose to use this book in my ESOL 2 class:

- The story is nice. It has a very sad beginning. It takes you through a journey of difficulties until it gets to a nice, happy ending.
- The writing level, the vocabulary and the length of the story seemed appropriate for my class.
- Most of my students did not know too much about Vietnam, and I had some Vietnamese students who could tell us more about their country.

I was very nervous at the beginning of using this book just because I had never had students read an entire book in class. I always thought that reading a book was out of the question in my class. I was afraid that students might feel like they were wasting class time. Although we had read stories from several books, reading an entire book was quite challenging. The only advantage I had was the fact that, in my mind, I had chosen the perfect book to read.

Before we began reading, I told my students that Tana Reiff was a writer who was coming to spend some time with our class. As a class, we would have the opportunity to ask questions about writing. I also told them that in order for us to get to know her a little bit, we needed to read at least one of her books together during class time. They all liked the idea!

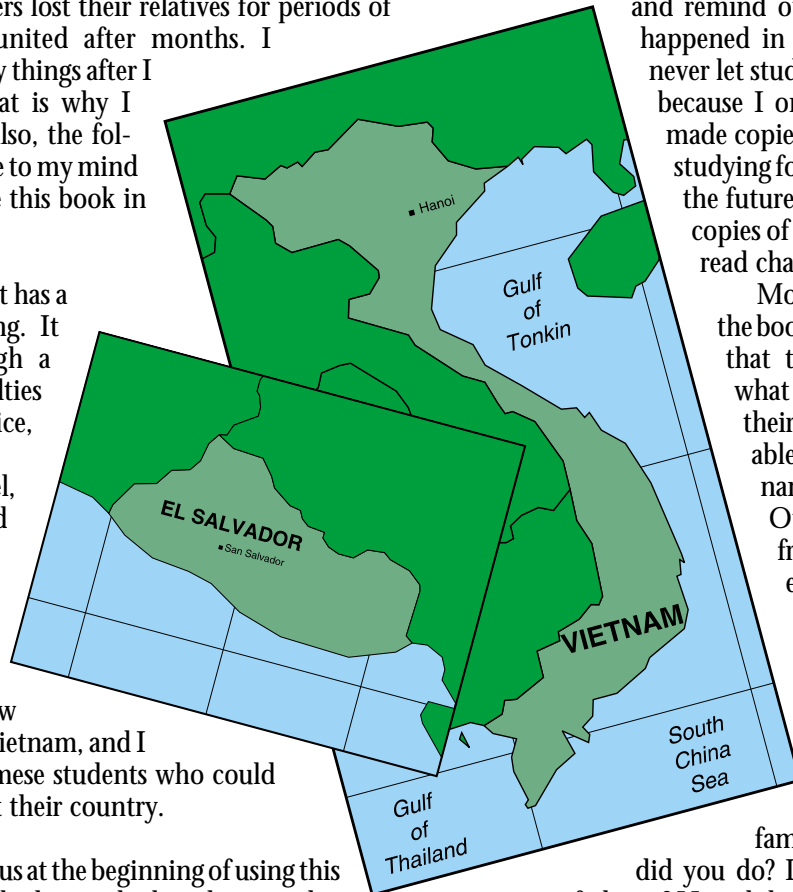
My lessons were simple and straightforward. For four days, we would spend enough time to read three chapters. It was easy to read three chapters as part of a lesson, because the chapters are very short. I think that I

would have read fewer chapters if they had been longer. Students took turns reading. We stopped after each chapter to go over vocabulary and to talk about the chapter in general. By doing this, we made sure everybody was understanding the story before we continued. We would also predict what would happen in the next chapter. We would write a little summary of every chapter so we would be able to go back and remind ourselves about what had happened in the previous chapters. I never let students take the book home because I only had one copy. I just made copies of the chapters we were studying for the night. I think that in the future I might try to give them copies of the book and ask them to read chapters for homework.

Most of the students loved the book! Many of them thought that the story was similar to what they had lived through in their native countries and were able to identify with my Vietnamese students a lot more. Others just learned a lot from reading this book. Everybody wanted to learn more about Vietnam and started asking questions to my Vietnamese students. Some of the questions they asked were: How did the war start? Did your

family get separated? What did you do? Did you know why they were fighting? How did you come to the USA? The Vietnamese students became an informal panel for a great discussion about what had happened in Vietnam. At this point one of the quietest students in the class started talking and talking as I had never seen him do before. I am sure the familiarity of what we were talking about made him feel really comfortable. I have to say that this was the best part of the project! The discussion was very interactive. Other students also shared similar experiences of living in countries going through wars, especially the Salvadorean students.

I also shared my own experience by telling them how my family was split when the war first began in El Salvador. My father had to buy a house in the city for my teenager brothers and sisters and myself, because it was not safe for us to be in the country. My father and my mother had to stay in the country with my younger brothers and sisters. A year later, my mother had to move to the city and my father had to stay in the country. He



moved to live with his parents because he could not be living by himself. I also shared many other things that happened.

I felt somewhat uncomfortable when we first started reading the book. Lots of ideas came to my head: Would they like this? Is this going to work? Are they going to understand it? Is this going to be boring? On the other hand, I was excited to see what the outcome would be. Although things worked out okay this time, there are many things I would do differently if I were going to do it again:

- I would plan better lessons. I would adapt them to what we are working on, instead of doing the reading separately. In the case of *The Family from Vietnam* I could have talked about comparatives, past tense, etc. to extend the reading a little more.
- I would have a panel where students from other countries with similar experiences could share their stories. I would make sure they feel comfortable doing it, though.
- I would research more about whatever reading I am working on, to make sure I do a good job when leading a discussion group.
- I would write a list of questions to be asked, in this case, to the Vietnamese students. I would copy them and give them to every student in the class. These questions would be used to ensure that everyone participated in the discussion.
- I would pick what I think would be new vocabulary words for the students and prepare exercises using them: Use this word in a sentence (verbally), fill in the

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blanks, etc.

- I would ask students to write in response to the reading. I would compile those writings, type them up, print them, and bring them back in a following lesson to use as reading materials.
- As we are reading the book, I would ask students to write predictions about what they think will happen in the next chapter. I would use these predictions for discussion before reading the next chapter.
- We would write a summary after each chapter to have as a reference throughout the reading time.
- I would do more follow-up activities with each chapter. I would white-out some words and ask students to fill in the blanks. These words could be prepositions, past tense verbs, comparatives, or whatever we are working on.
- I would have a bigger list of questions to be asked after each chapter. Some questions could be answered verbally, others in writing.

Looking back at what I did, I am glad I took the risk of doing it! It was worth trying. I really think I would do it again. I feel like this was a great learning experience where I once again convinced myself to never take anything for granted. I truly believe that students enjoyed it as much as I did, which pleases me.

I completely believe that, as a teacher, I have to take risks to do new things. If they don't work, fine. At least I tried them. Many times, the lesson you are thinking of—but are afraid of trying—could be one of the best lessons in your teaching career! •