Message from the President

Lily Mirjahangiri

Dear Colleagues!

Although last October marked the beginning of my presidency at VATESOL, I have been on this joyous ride since fall 2004 when I attended my first VATESOL conference. I am absolutely thrilled and delighted to continue serving this wonderful and dynamic association in this capacity. What makes VATESOL stand out and shine is its spirit of collegiality and the consistent support among the past and current board members.

This year was indeed the most exciting and promising year for VATESOL as we hosted our first Southeast TESOL conference in Richmond, Virginia. VATESOL joined the SETESOL affiliate in 2007 and committed to hosting the 25th Regional SETESOL in October 2011. As a result of the hard work of all board members and the strong leadership of the past presidents since 2007, SETESOL 2011 conference was a success for VATESOL. On this note, I would like to extend my sincere thanks to all past presidents, Tanya Gray, Jennifer Kuchno, and Laurie Weinberg who work tirelessly with me and the team to ensure that each year VATESOL has a successful annual conference. I could not have asked for a better team and a stronger leadership for SETESOL 2011!

As many of you are aware, the conference theme was “Celebrating Culture & Heritage through Language Teaching” which set the tone for embracing diversity in our classrooms and exploring the most effective ways to better serve our student population across all levels. We had more than 300 participants from Virginia and beyond, and the conference was packed with sessions centered on diversity and multiculturalism in ESL education. The conference kicked off with the Pre-Conference Institutes (PCIs) on Thursday, October 13 in the early afternoon and a very festive reception on the same evening where we enjoyed a live music performance and a great dance show by ESL students from one of our local high-schools. Kudos to Laurie Weinberg and Angelique Clark from VATESOL board who contributed to such a rich program!

SETESOL 2011, also, provided the attendees with ample opportunities of networking on the conference site where teachers and administrators could connect with one another and share their stories and practices. Most importantly, hearing our colleagues and members’ voices helped the VATESOL board with setting goals and plans for next year’s conference. Ms. Laura Ray, our 1st Vice President and Conference Chair for VATESOL 2012 has been working round the clock since last October on building a theme which speaks to advocacy and inclusion, and also securing the conference site in October 2012. I invite and encourage all of you: stay tuned for more updates.
on VATESOL 2012.

As we proceed with this year and next, we continue to work on the current goals of VATESOL which include but are not limited to maintaining an effective communication with TESOL and our Southeast TESOL affiliates, enhancing VATESOL’s web site and its features, and outreach for a larger pool of membership. I would also like to make note of few transitions on board of VATESOL. Mr. Ross Retterer, our dedicated and much appreciated web master stepped down from this position this year. Words cannot express how much Ross has contributed to the growth and effectiveness of VATESOL throughout the years of his service. Ross will be dearly and sorely missed by all of us. Ms. Leslie Bohon-Atkinson who was our wonderful newsletter editor also stepped down this year. Leslie has historically been one of the most dedicated members of VATESOL and has served our association in many different capacities wearing multiple hats at the same time. Leslie has done a fabulous job with the VATESOL newsletter over the past few years, and we will miss her energy, dedication, and professionalism, as we wish her all the best in her personal and professional life. Ms. Melinda Leitner, our SIG Chair for Elementary Education could not continue on board due to other obligations and commitments. Melinda not only served as a SIG Chair, but she was always literally an email or phone call away when there was a call for volunteer help. Our best wishes are with Melinda, as we will miss her on board.

While I extend our utmost gratitude to all these dedicated past board members, I am happy to share that our past president, Ms. Laurie Weinberg, worked very hard last summer to fill in all the vacant positions on board. On this note, I would like to extend our warm welcome to all the new VATESOL board members:

- Liz Bowles, Web Master
- Audrey Short & Brendan Downey, Newsletter Editors
- Kimberly Cossey, Treasurer
- Linda Sandford, Higher Ed. SIG Chair
- Carol Zurat, Elementary Ed. SIG Chair
- Pamela Smart Smith, Regional Contact-Western
- Elizabeth Sexton, Regional Contact-Central

Last but not least, on behalf of all of us on board of VATESOL, I wish all of you happy holidays and a time filled with happiness and joy!

Lily Mirjahangiri is an instructor in the English Language Program at Virginia Commonwealth University, Assistant Coordinator of the Academic Support Centers at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College, and the VATESOL President.

---

Using Blogs to Entice ESL Writers

Marty Watkin

I teach a course we call Writing Workshop, the final writing course before our ESL learners mainstream into regular English courses such as English 111 and English 112. In this course student writers craft formal essays with a distinctly academic focus. Still, hardworking writers need a regular break from the tedium of usage errors and a focus on appropriate formats for various rhetorical essay patterns. They need a forum that’s more informal but which lends itself to metacognitive reflection.

For this reason I made the decision a year and a half ago to abandon Blackboard’s Discussion Board feature for a more creative and flexible alternative: the blog. Three semester’s worth of crops of ESL writers have now taught me how to use the blog in our writing classes, and we’re making these blogs our own. When we blog, we seem to become more personally invested in our own writing, we take our job as a reading audience for others more seriously, and we truly think more deeply about the content of our blog posts.

Student writers, particularly those who are repeating this writing
course, really adore the added challenge of blogging. They may be sated with present perfect tense exercises and the differences between gerunds and infinitives, but in a blog, they can put their own stamp on their writing. All bloggers get to choose a page layout, downloading photos that intrigue them, and inserting relevant video clips. Creative types love blogs, and visual learners find them refreshing alternatives to text-heavy essays. Each writer’s blog is his/her own personal writing nest, feathered with twigs of thoughts, images and phrases that nourish and inspire them. All the way to the end of the semester, these student writers remain highly motivated to blog regularly, something that never happened when I used Blackboard’s Discussion Board feature. Best of all, writers who pass the class at the end of the semester can keep their blogs as a semi-permanent course souvenir. As long as they choose to, they can maintain these blogs. Some former ESL writers have continued to blog, at times changing the name of their blog site or even the language in which they make their postings. No matter; the principle is the same. Blog more, write more.

Blogs give a huge boost to a learner-centric classroom. They also promote a sort of informal peer feedback loop that I marvel at. Simply by setting up small groups of 4 bloggers each, I get a built-in reading audience for each student writer along with some (mostly) constructive criticism about that writer’s content in each blog post.

My energy for teaching writing has bubbled up and over. It is a joy to read these less formal, more personally reflective, responses to structured writing prompts that I design. I hop onto the blog sites each week to see glimpses through text and image of the students’ strongly held views. The blog posts often peel back the skin on life experiences that are often less academic but perhaps more authentic. These ESL learners write on things worth writing about. That’s the beauty of blogging.

*Marty Watkin is an instructor at J. Sargeant Reynolds Community College.*

---

**Creating a Program Blog**

Ashley Green

This fall, instead of the usual newsletter, I decided to create a blog for my program. We have traditionally published a student newsletter each session, and it’s a wonderful opportunity for students across levels to engage with each other and see that writing is more than just the academic essays they’ve been taught.

The motivation for the blog was simple: why not publish our students writing several times a session in an interactive, online format where students can access and comment on each other’s writing anywhere, at any time?

We’re still in the beginning stages of the blog process, but it has been a great project. My writing class has written about local events and attractions in Hampton Roads. Other writing students at different levels have shared their best writing samples, about a variety of topics from how to get a conversation partner to how they would spend $5 million. And it hasn’t just been a project for writing students: we have posts from reading students about research they’ve done and videos from speaking students. The blog has also been a perfect place to share photos from our many program events.

If you have a chance, please visit our blog and leave a comment or two. Encourage your own students to visit as well. The students love (and are bit a bit daunted by) the fact that the blog opens their writing up to a potentially global audience. I’m sure they would love to know that teachers and students outside of our program have enjoyed their work.
You can find our blog at http://elca-todu.blogspot.com.

Ashley Green is a lecturer at the English Language Center at Old Dominion University.

---

**Using Honolulu for Teaching Purposes**

Lynn Kovacs-Reid

“What? My choices are *The Great Gatsby* or *Ragtime*?” I gasped! How was I possibly going to convince my students to read a book that I did not want to read? Alas, I only had a few days to narrow down the options for a book that met both my and my department’s requirements of being in the correct historical time frame (1900-1920), containing factual information, being the right length and difficulty level, and able to interest students. This was for my Reading 350 class at Virginia Commonwealth University. Fortunately, I found a nearly perfect match. It is called *Honolulu* and the author is Alan Brennert. Although *Honolulu* was on the long side for a seven week class, it proved to be a great book for my group.

*Honolulu* is the story of a young Korean woman born at the turn of the last century. Her birth name is Regret, a moniker of her family’s dissatisfaction with the fact that she is a girl, and she lives in a world where women are largely invisible. Wanting to make something of herself, Regret changes her name to Jin, and with the help of a talented but unrespected woman, she learns to read, which angers her father greatly. She then auctions herself as a picture bride to a supposedly young, handsome, well-to-do Korean man living in Hawaii. Before long she realizes that her new husband is a laborer in the sugar plantations and their future is bleak. He often drinks to excess, gambles away his wages, and beats her. Jin’s life really begins when she leaves her husband to start a new life in Honolulu.

This book is such a wonderful story with such great character descriptions that it is hard to put down. My students absolutely loved it. Well, most of them. The Korean men did not like the way the author portrayed other Korean men – mainly as violent chauvinists. I had to keep reminding them that there are some “good Korean men” in the book and that there are “all kinds” in any ethnic group. This was just one of the challenges of using a book about a Korean women and Korean culture.

Another concern that I faced was that the non-Korean students would feel left out or at a disadvantage, or, worse, not like the book because it was not about their own culture. After all, there were many Korean “translation” words. However, the students quickly realized that along with Korean “translation” words, there were also Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiian, Spanish, Portuguese, Filipino, and even Pidgin translation words. True, the Korean students had a slight advantage, but the translation words were almost always explained, so non-Korean students were almost on equal footing. *Honolulu* is not the sort of book that requires one to be a linguist to enjoy reading it, and I can honestly say that the non-Koreans enjoyed the book just as much as the Koreans.

One of the reasons for this is all of the nationalities could see aspects of their own culture in Korean culture and they enjoyed comparing Korean culture to their own. It also gave me, as the language teacher, an appreciation for continuously learning new vocabulary.

*Honolulu* is rich in historical information. Although the main plot is fictitious, there is a fair amount of underlying authenticity. Brennert incorporates some major historical events including the Japanese annexation of Korea beginning in 1910, the Oriental Exclusion Act of 1924 and the Massie trial of 1932. As a result, the students received an added bonus – a history lesson on top of an amazing story. In addition, the racial tension found throughout the book gives the book tremendous substance and educational value.

This brings me to a third challenge of using *Honolulu*. My students were doubtful as to how a white American author living in contemporary times could possibly know anything about Korea or Korean culture, especially in the past. My answer to them was “a lot of research”. They now appreciate the dedication of this (and other) author(s) once they realized the painstaking gathering of information required for a novel containing factual information. This was a revelation to them – that it is possible for somebody to know more about the history of their country than they do. This, in a sense, highlighted the importance of education for them.

Enough about difficulties around choosing this book – and there were not many of these…. How did I actually use this book? This book
was a wonderful fluency builder. Although it was a monster in pages, it was fairly easy to read, even for L2 students. They were not at all threatened by it. In fact, the flow of the book is so incredible that the reader does not want to put down. This is a great feature of a novel being used as a language building tool. We want to encourage our students to be readers, to like to read and of course to become better readers. I am confident that each and every one of my students improved his or her fluency by reading Honolulu. Brennert also has all of the nineteen chapters divided into subsections, which provides good scene changes and resting or discussion points. My students completed chapter questions and were given three larger tests requiring them to synthesize the information. The unit test questions often helped my students to explore concepts of reading theory, such as character development.

Honolulu also shows a change in Jin’s view toward the Japanese over time. It is so touching that she moves from intolerance, to tolerance, to having a giving relationship with two female Japanese characters. Although many of the students in our programs get along with those of other nationalities, they are rarely put in a situation of dealing with individuals of a nation that has invaded their country. I had no Japanese students in my class, yet I am confident that we could have handled such a situation because Jin, the heroine of the book, successfully conquered her prejudices. She was a true model.

What makes Honolulu so special is Jin returns to her native land to visit her family at the end of the book. She learns that the little things she did greatly influenced people’s lives. She discovers the fate of those in her past and finally puts her questions to rest. This return to the past is very evocative to L2 students, even for those who return to their country frequently. They can identify with the main character – feel her joy and her pain. Although it is not identified as such, Jin, to her surprise, experiences some reverse culture shock after over 20 years in Hawaii. She is at times stunned and confused by Korean culture, having been away from it for so long. She does not understand why the police throw dirty water on Korean citizens wearing traditional white clothes. Her brother, Joyful Day, explains that “the police have forbidden … traditional white garments…but this is difficult if not impossible to enforce. So in the larger cities they set up those tubs full of dirty water in order to embarrass and intimidate those who would continue to wear white.” (Brennart, 2009, p. 406) Jin appreciates this explanation as well as the explanation of the loyalty her nieces and nephews display to the Japanese empire. Joyful Day remarks, “If I try to dissuade [my daughter] from her views, she might bring it up at school, and then we will receive a visit from the High Police.” (p. 405). Seeing these cultural shifts allows Jin to view Hawaii as her home more than ever when she returns to her newly made family. Awareness of personal, cultural and structural changes, whether on a conscious or subconscious level, helps international students to realize that change within their homeland and themselves is inevitable, and they will never be the same people again. I cannot recommend Honolulu enough for English learners. It is a vocabulary builder. It is an interracial and social networking eye-opener. It allows students to connect with their inner selves and their world through its multicultural focus, something that the classics often do not offer. It is a great story!


Lynn Kovacs-Reid is an instructor in the English Language Program at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Reading for Pleasure and Experience America

Laura Ray

I really wish I could have cloned myself in order to attend all of the sessions that I had the pleasure of reading about while serving as the 2011 SETESOL Program Chair. I was impressed by how many of the sessions had content that was relevant to or could be adapted for any given combination of ESL teachers, administrators, teacher educators, and advocates in institutions ranging from K-12 environments to Higher Education. I was a presenter in two of the sessions - Reading for Pleasure: The Student Library in Theory and Practice and Experience America: A Program Increasing Student Interactions and Fostering Interdepartmental Collaboration - which were applicable to both teachers and administrators in Intensive English Programs.

Presentations

Reading for Pleasure was a session for which I was a co-presenter with my colleague, Angela Huynh. We discussed the theory behind why
extensive reading is valuable to ESL students, as well as how extensive reading can be implemented in the classroom. We also discussed how we established a student library for the ODU English Language Center. Angela recommended that people check out www.extensivereading.net, which is a website that provides a number of valuable resources for those interested in extensive reading. Her ideas for getting students to read included “selling the idea” to the students; visiting the library with the students; helping them learn to choose books; and checking to see if the students are actually reading the books they borrow through written reports, oral presentations, and teacher conferences. With regard to establishing a student library, I focused on the “administrative” side of things by covering topics such as completing an inventory of current materials; choosing new materials for the library; placing orders; devising a check-out and tracking system; and establishing a budget for the library.

Experience America was a session that I presented on behalf of the ODU ELC and the Office of Intercultural Relations. Experience America was a joint initiative that consisted of a series of presentation and workshops in spring 2011 that provided an opportunity for international students to connect with Americans through exploration of topics related to society and culture in the USA. The session focused on the rationale behind running the program, as well as its considerations for planning (workshop topics, date, time, location, speakers, materials, marketing, catering, etc.) and the successes and challenges we met along the way. The greatest successes in the program were found to be increased visibility, leveraged resources, and increased student engagement. Challenges and possible solutions were also discussed.

For copies of the PowerPoint presentations for these two sessions, please contact me at lray@odu.edu. I also welcome you to contact me if you have questions about or ideas for new projects and initiatives at your IEP. I hope to see you again next year at the 2012 VATESOL Conference!

Laura E. Ray is the Faculty/Administrative Coordinator at Old Dominion University English Language Center and 1st Vice President of VATESOL.
Jo Tyler: “Flexibility”—What does it really mean?

A recent article in TESOL Connections reported that “On 23 September, President Obama held a press conference to offer flexibility exempting qualified states from some of the most burdensome provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)” (Segota, 2011, para. 5).

continued on page 8

Daniela C. Wagner-Loera: Aloha

Aloha everyone, my name is Daniela C. Wagner-Loera and I have been the Adult Ed SIG Leader for almost a year. I am currently teaching full-time for the University of Maryland English Institute as well as part-time for Prince George’s Community College. One may wonder why I am in VATESOL when working in MD.

continued on page 8

Linda Sanford: Greetings from Blacksburg!

I’m Linda Sanford, your new Higher Ed Sig Chair, and the Assistant Director for Academics at the Virginia Tech Language and Culture Institute. I hope that my work with the Higher Education Special Interest Group will allow me to become better acquainted with all of you working across the state, and that we will be able

continued on page 9

Angelique Clarke: Seedfolks: Building a Garden Where Love Blooms, People Grow, and Lives are Transformed

I can remember the day as if it were yesterday: the day I realized that I had grossly failed my students. No, I hadn’t failed them in content. They were well-prepared for and quite successful on the state standardized test. I had failed them in a more critical area; I had failed them in life skills.

continued on page 10

Carol Zurat: Welcome to all Elementary ESOL Teachers!

Greetings from Northern Virginia, where the teachers are all sophisticated, the traffic is horrendous and the children are all gifted! Well, at least I got your attention! I am very happy to be your SIG leader for the Elementary membership of VATESOL. I am currently teaching K ESOL for Prince William County Schools, and also am an adjunct professor at George Mason University,

continued on page 10
As explained by Segota, the movement for flexibility is in response to the problems with the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) provisions of NCLB: “Schools that do not meet AYP in all subgroups are deemed failing. In his remarks, President Obama stated that this type of situation is why he has moved forward with granting state flexibility around these troublesome provisions” (Segota, 2011, para. 6).

However, “flexibility” is not necessarily as promising as it sounds. In an informal presentation at the University of Mary Washington on September 29 of this year, Congressman Rob Whittman of Virginia explained that the added flexibility is in response to the public outcry over “unfunded mandates.” He announced that he would like to see fewer federal mandates and allow states to allocate federal funds as they see fit. One proposal currently under debate, according to the Congressman, is to mandate only what is required for special education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Under such a plan, the concept of “flexibility” would give states and localities the responsibility for funding programs for English language learners.

According to the International Reading Association’s Director of Government Relations, “flexibility” in meeting AYP is “essentially being proffered as part of a trade. The states will get more flexibility, but only under specific terms” (Long, 2011, p. 26). One of those terms involves how teachers are evaluated in the school accountability process. As Long explains, although teachers and teaching effectiveness are the most important factors in student achievement, using student performance to determine teacher compensation is an ineffective approach to reform.

It remains to be seen whether “flexibility” will actually result in the reforms needed to ensure that English language learners and other students will be effectively served in the public schools. Will the current system of punishment and rewards prevail, or will we find a more progressive solution to allocate resources where they are needed most?


to share ideas and experiences that will help us to improve our personal practices, our respective institutions, and better serve our students. Towards that end, please feel free to send me suggestions, ideas, and news from your programs.

One upcoming opportunity for students in higher education programs is the Second Annual VATESOL Writing Contest. This essay contest is sponsored by the Higher Ed SIG and winners will receive cash prizes.

**Guidelines**

- Students who are currently enrolled in a Virginia college ESOL class at the time of the submission are eligible to participate.
- Submitted writings must be original works of 200 to 2,000 words.
- Papers must be submitted by teachers in order to minimize the possibility of plagiarism.
- Teachers’ feedback to students should be limited to comments about content, organization, and clarity, (the revision process). Students are responsible for their own final edit for grammar, mechanics, and spelling, though they may utilize peer editors or school writing centers.
- Papers should address topics related to the 2012 VATESOL Conference theme, “Inclusivity and Advocacy.”
- Each submission must be in Microsoft Word (DOC) or Rich Text Format (RTF) and must be sent as an e-mail attachment.
- Submissions should be e-mailed to Linda Sanford at linda1@vt.edu by March 31, 2012.

Each submission should include a cover page with the following information:

- Title of submission
- Student’s first and last name
- Student’s mailing address
- Student’s e-mail address
- Teacher’s first and last name
- Teacher’s school mailing address
- Teacher’s e-mail address
- Teacher’s daytime phone number AND/OR alternate phone number(s)
- A note explaining the ESL level of the student

A committee of VATESOL members will review all submissions meeting the above criteria. Winners and their teachers will be notified by April 23, 2012. If you have questions or would like additional information, please contact me at linda1@vt.edu.

**Call for donations**

The Higher Education SIG (HESIG) requests donations for the cash prizes awarded to the winners. If interested in making a contribution, please contact or send donations to VATESOL President Lily Mirjahangiri, 4095 Mineral Springs Lane Apt. 1A, Glen Allen, VA 23060. Thank you for your consideration and good luck to your students!
teaching graduate classes for teachers pursuing Virginia Certification in ESOL. Over the years I have taught at all grade levels and enjoyed them all. Each student is a unique person, and we need to acknowledge and validate who they are.

I moved to Virginia six years ago, after a teaching career in Special (Deaf) Education and ESOL in South Carolina. I am a certified reading specialist, and an expert in language development. I would like to assist you with any special problems you might have regarding particular students that are not making fast enough growth in comparison to their ESOL peers. It is a fine line for teachers to identify students who are developmentally delayed and those who truly have learning disabilities or some type of cognitive difficulty.

I also would like this year to be one in which we can exchange ideas on topics of great interest within our cadre.

Does your school promote pullout or push-in services? Are you co-teaching content with the classroom teachers? Are you able to scaffold successfully? Are you wondering if data collection will put you over the edge? Let’s talk about these during this coming year. I will give you more information after I receive our email list.

Best Wishes for a great year!

---

After some reflecting, I realized that if I was going to blame the students; then, I would have to shoulder much of the blame myself as well. What had I done to help students get to know one another? Sure, I had group and partner work in class; but, I did not have the students introduce themselves or get to know one another. Then, I thought, “My God this is what the administration does to me when they tell me the day before class that I will have a co-teacher.” Sure, as an adult, I can work with that person. But, the best partnerships are forged from a genuine understanding and appreciation of the other person. So, you look for ways to build on commonalities and capitalize on each other’s strengths. The collaborative relationship usually takes anywhere from a few weeks to a couple of months (sadly, sometimes a partnership is never formed and the two teachers grudgingly tolerate each other’s presence until June). I can always tell when the moment happens because it is almost like we begin reading each other’s mind. We just know instinctively what the other person needs to be able to help the students, and we provide it without being asked or told to do it. It becomes automatic. I was robbing my students of the ability to learn how to form collaborative relationships to help get tasks completed, a job skill that most employers list in the top ten qualifications necessary for their employees’ success. It was nothing short of an epiphany when I realized that I had essentially asked them to build partnerships with strangers. No wonder students hated group work. Most of us would help a stranger in need; but, we do not generally form working relationships with strangers and trust them enough not to let us down.

It was this revelation that forced me to think of ways to build relationships with my students. Flash forward to 2008, two of my closest friends tell me to read a book called *Seedfolks* by Paul Fleischman. I put it on my list of things to do and promptly forgot about it. Then, in 2009, one of those same friends mentions that the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts was doing a teacher workshop on the book and asked me to go. Needless to say, I did and it transformed my life. After that brief workshop, I knew I had to find a way to integrate this book into my Social Studies classroom.

So, what is so special about this book? One of the best reasons is that no matter how old you are; whether you are male or female; no matter whether you are a native, a migrant, or an immigrant; no matter your socio-economic status; and no matter what your ethnic composition, you will discover a character with whom you can personally connect and take an interest. It also allows you to critically look at any stereotypes or prejudices you may have through the lens of the character without fear of social repercussions. The book inspires you to be and do more in your community and remains you with what
Clarke

continued from previous page

is right in the world. The book is a children's book but is accessible to people of all reading levels. Officially, it is listed as being of interest to 5-7th grade (I used it with high school and adult learners, and I know several elementary teachers who have used the book). The grade level equivalent is 4.0 with a Lexile measure of 710L and a DRA of 50.

Another great quality of the book is that you can integrate it into just about every subject: science (plants, flowers, and environmental issues), history (urban versus rural living and how to communicate with elected officials), English/Reading, and even math (calculating the costs of materials, figuring out the dimensions of the garden, or graphing the results). The themes are endless: diversity, friendship, love, prejudice, intergenerational relationships, and self-discovery to name a few.

Another great use would be to turn the book into an author story since the character of Sam (an older Jewish character) is based on the author’s life experiences. Paul Fleischman is a Newberry Medal award winning author who was born and raised in Santa Monica, California. His father is the famous children’s author Sid Fleischman (also a winner of the Newberry Medal). So, I guess it is fair to say that he is a chip off the old block.

Application

I first used the book in my ESOL World History classroom. I used it as a post-SOL activity. We took turns reading about the characters and creating character charts each day. We also spent a great deal of time discussing the characters in the book and comparing their experiences in America with those of the immigrants and natives in the book. Since we are working on speaking, reading, writing, and listening better, we role played some of the scenes and wrote some journal entries about the events. Students also had to select a quote from each chapter that describes the character as well as using context clues to try and determine the character’s gender, age, and ethnicity.

We also talked about whether the character’s contribution to the garden was symbolic of their life story or not and the power of the individual to effectuate change. One of the most powerful lines from the whole novel comes on page 59. Amir says, “the garden’s greatest benefit, I feel, was not relief to the eyes, but to make the eyes see our neighbors” (Fleischman, 1997). We spent a vast amount of time talking about how this was possible and how we could achieve this in our country, community, school, and classroom. Another quote that we spent more time on was found in Gonzalo’s chapter where he is talking about his uncle, Tio Juan: “the older you are, the younger you get when you move to the United States” (p. 13). This helped many of the students to articulate the frustration and responsibilities that come with being the mediator between their parents or grandparents and the rest of America, and the conflict between being true to their culture while trying to assimilating into American culture.

When we finished reading the novel, I challenged the students to write their own book called Smartfolks. Each student wrote their own chapter telling their unique story. My co-teacher and I also wrote chapters in the book as well. When we finished editing our chapters, we published these in class using a copy machine and a binding machine. We then had a book premiere/signing where we shared our cultural foods and talked about our favorite stories. The book was so moving that several teachers and administrators asked to have copies published for them as keepsakes. I have since left that school, but their teachers have asked for suggestions to do a similar project this year because they have requested it. In addition, many of the students Facebooked each other to stay in contact outside of class since many of them were moving on while others needed to remain in ESOL classes another year. It is great to know that with the help of this book I was able to build connections with and between students that extend far beyond the classroom and into their personal lives. This was no easy feat given that several of the African and Hispanic students strongly disliked each other. At the end of the day, they may not all have been friends; but, they all respected each other and each person’s unique contribution to our classroom community.
In conclusion, I would like to say that the effects of a classroom community in terms of student safety, satisfaction, and achievement cannot be over-stated. When talking about America, President Theodore Roosevelt said, “This country will not be a permanently good place for any of us to live in unless we make it a reasonably good place for all of us to live in” (Theodore Roosevelt Association). In terms of our classrooms, I believe that our classrooms will not be a good place for any of us to learn unless we, the teachers, make it a good place for all of us, including the teachers, to learn. Seedfolks might help you build a strong classroom community. Give it a try. You will be hooked after reading the first couple of chapters; I know I was! If you decide to use the book, I would love to hear how you utilized it in the classroom. Or, if you want some additional tips, you can email me at angelique_clarke@ccpsnet.net.


---

**News Note**

The VATESOL Newsletter, the official newsletter of the Virginia Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, is published quarterly.

All VATESOL members may contribute. See the guidelines on the VATESOL website (vatesol.cloverpad.org).

The deadline for the next issue is Feb. 1, 2012.

The Newsletter, distributed to educators across the Commonwealth, accepts advertising. See website for ad rates.

Editors: Brendan Downey & Audrey Short

Contact us: vatesol.news@gmail.com