

## A World of Pure Imagination

Joseph G. Tillman



A few weeks before the start of each semester, I receive a flurry of emails from new graduate students asking if they have ordered the correct book for their upcoming course, Second Language Acquisition. They often say that they must have received the wrong book because it doesn't contain any words and humbly ask if they still have time to re-order and receive the correct book before the start of class. Granted, they did order and receive Patsy Lightbown and Nina Spada's *How Languages Are Learned*, but they weren't prepared to expect the unexpected. When I assure them they are in possession of the correct book, they question how a picture book could have anything to do with understanding SLA.

According to Australian author Shaun Tan, *The Arrival* is "a migrant story told as a series of wordless images." It is a story of "struggle and survival in a world of incomprehensible violence, upheaval, and hope."<sup>1</sup> Tan's emotive sepia images entice the reader to bring voice to the voiceless immigrant on a journey of self-discovery and humility. As the semester progresses, my students evolve from skeptics into champions of the wordless graphic novel. Their own students' journey to acquire a second language is the immigrant's journey. Through weekly reflections, students invoke the travails of their own ancestors, the immigration stories of their

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.shauntan.net/books.html>

own students, or the tales of their own tours abroad to teach English. The concept of empathy becomes tangible as the students learn to become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

The study of second language acquisition is inherently theoretical and does not provide students with an opportunity to put the various theories into practice, as this opportunity will be available in the Assessment and Methods courses as well as the field-based Practicum. *The Arrival* enables students to see both SLA and an immigrant's journey as a process that may last for several years and is naturally fraught with challenges, risks, and rewards. I want my teachers of English to understand their role as guide, counselor, role model, and advocate by finding the humanity in their own students and looking beyond their obvious deficits and imagining their boundless future. "We are the music makers," Willy Wonka says, "and we are the dreamers of dreams."

*About the author:*

*Joseph G. Tillman, Assistant Teaching Professor, coordinates and delivers the online TESOL program for the University of Missouri from his home in Manhattan. For nearly twenty years, he has worked in immigrant and migrant education and has developed and implemented professional development workshops and courses for educators of English learners. Joe may be reached at [tillmanjg@missouri.edu](mailto:tillmanjg@missouri.edu).*

Lightbown, P.M, & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tan, S. (2007). *The arrival*. New York: Scholastic Inc.

Reprint from NYS TESOL Idiom Vol. 40, No.3 (Fall 2010)