

Talking about Immigrating:  
Adult Immigrants Read and Respond to Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*

**Introduction**

In this paper, I discuss a mini study I conducted in which five immigrant adults (including myself) read and responded to the wordless/graphic novel The Arrival by Shaun Tan. My study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How might a group of adult readers respond to a text without words?
2. How might a group of adult immigrants deal with and discuss Tan's portrayals of immigration?
3. What might these reading and response sessions imply about conversation and reading exercises in adult ESL classes?

*New Approaches to Conversation Exercises in the Adult ESL Classroom*

Despite the increasing number of immigrants in America, literature about immigration and immigrant experience in schools is sparse. Because one of the goals of American public schooling is to acculturate students, ESL students might find that their in-school reading experiences encourage that same type of acculturation, rather than encouraging their exploration of their own experiences as immigrants.

The same is not necessarily true for immigrant adults who take English classes in the states. Existing outside the sphere of the public school system, adult ESL classes seem less likely to conform to a larger, many-needs curriculum. Though some of the goals of adult ESL classes are to help learners develop a comfort with spoken English and familiarize learners with American culture and lifestyle, existing outside a regulated

curriculum means that the literature in these classes can potentially reflect immigrant experiences, even if not on a large scale, and that it can address adult topics and take risks in terms of form and style.

In beginning ESL classes where the goals are to get adult learners to feel comfortable with speaking English with their peers, teachers often use skills-based, vocabulary-building, and conversation modeling exercises rather than read-and-respond exercises, which might distance learners who do not have experience reading English. While these types of conversation exercises can be useful, they can also be met with awkward silences as learners grapple with topics that might seem irrelevant to them.

On the other hand, give a group of immigrant adult learners a book about immigrant experience and the conversation might evolve naturally. But how can a group of people who speak and read different languages (or who are not English readers) read the same book? Reading a graphic novel or picture book, like Shaun Tan's *The Arrival*, is one approach to conversation exercises that adult ESL instructors can take in order to touch on immigrant experiences, give learners a way in to reading, and help learners to connect with each other in the classroom.

#### *Picture Books, Adult ESL, and Conversation*

While there is seemingly little research on the use of wordless books in adult ESL classrooms, there is available literature that focuses on the use of children's literature in secondary and adult literacy classrooms and the use of picture books in K-12 ESL classrooms. Looking at these two groups of research together can help develop our understandings of how to successfully use picture books in adult ESL classrooms. Most of the teaching and writing in this area focuses on children's literature that is not

wordless, the use of children's literature in classes where adult learners are fluent English speakers, the use of children's literature in secondary, rather than adult ESL classrooms, and the use of children's literature and accessible texts to encourage the development of reading habits, rather than text inquiry and conversation. On the other hand, literature that focuses on ESL conversation exercises emphasizes structured lessons, such as question-and-answer and dialogue models, or unstructured lessons that emphasize both conversation and skill learning. Still, the findings in this literature support the use of picture books in adult ESL classrooms.

*Reading Habits, Engagement, and Adult-Appropriate Themes.* One set of studies describes multiple uses of children's and young adult literature in adult literacy classrooms, focusing on finding texts that interest and engage adult learners in order to encourage the building of successful reading habits. As Nixon-Ponder et al (1995) suggest, adult literacy learners preferred reading "authentic books," i.e. whole books rather than parts of books or workbooks (the equivalent of basal readers). In addition, learners in this study were encouraged to read short young adult books about topics that were interesting to them. The writers/educators found that these reading experiences helped learners to claim ownership and engagement with books; in addition, they found that learners were more likely to engage with texts when the focus was reading for interest and pleasure, rather than for skill-building. In addition, after readings texts that covered topics of interest, many learners initiated their own research projects and some even shared texts with friends and neighbors, whom they then encouraged to sign up for library cards. Nixon-Ponder et al use these examples to show how reading whole texts

that engage learners on a personal level can help them to feel a sense of ownership with reading and desire to share their aesthetic readings of texts with others.

Bloem (1995) further encourages the “whole language perspective,” talking in more detail about finding children’s literature that is *appropriate* for adults in terms of both subject matter/text and style of illustration. Bloem agrees that using the whole language approach deepens adult learners’ engagement with texts while removing the worry that often accompanies the reading of longer texts or the focus on “skill-and-drill” reading exercises. In other words, adult learners have successful reading experiences when they read whole texts that cover adult topics and when their engagement and response is not limited to skill-building. Bloem and Padak (1996) further emphasize using texts that present “quality art” and subject matter that is adult-appropriate. These two texts address adult literacy teachers, providing a question/answer format, i.e. “Here are some answers to questions the adult literacy teacher might ask about using children’s literature with adult literacy learners,” that attempts to ease educators into this approach. This piece also highlights successful practices of using picture book readings to prompt writing assignments and conversation.

As Bloem, Padak, and especially Nixon-Ponder emphasize, picture books and short novels help to remove new readers’ anxieties about reading lengthier texts – the same is surely true for adult ESL learners who are interested in connecting with texts but are not necessarily readers of English books yet. All three articles support using children’s literature and picture books with adult learners to encourage the building of positive reading habits. In addition, the researchers show that adult learners responded positively to whole texts, especially ones that featured characters or topics that were of

personal interest to them. Finally, the research shows that picture books and children's literature work in adult classrooms when they cover adult themes and that they can help in prompting both writing and conversation exercises.

*Graphic Novels, Picture Books and ESL Learners.* Salminen (1998) writes on the "gift" of wordless picture books to ESL students. Although she focuses on primary grade students, she explains that using wordless books in the classroom can help students to bridge gaps in experience and language by communicating their own experiences, engaging their imagination in reading these books, and working creatively to interpret and write stories. Salminen includes a bibliography of wordless picture books that she has used in primary grade classrooms. This text shows how wordless texts can be used in ELL classrooms to encourage creativity, communication, and writing.

Schwarz (2002) writes about using graphic novels in secondary classrooms, with an emphasis on viewing the graphic novel as a form of alternate media and a tool to help students to learn about difficult topics, such as the Holocaust and Japanese Internment, and challenging ones, such as statistics, Shakespeare, and Kafka. Schwarz suggests that "reading graphic novels may require more complex cognitive skills than the reading of text alone" because of their multimodal forms of storytelling, emphasizing graphic novels' ability to cover a wide variety of disciplines and topics in digestible formats.

Hadaway and Mundy (1999) and Wilson (1993) discuss uses of picture books in secondary and primary ESL classes, respectively. In their study, Hadaway and Mundy focus on using "informational picture books," with a specific focus on the weather in order to help students to develop conversation, use multiple forms of media, improve writing in multiple forms, and teach each other. Wilson discusses her use of "whole-

language ESL” teaching in order to encourage language acquisition rather than language learning. Her article shows ways that students’ use of first languages in their work with picture books enabled them to develop their English reading, writing, and speaking – in addition, she focuses on using literature that is interesting and exciting to students. Like the earlier body of literature, this set, too, emphasizes using picture books that feature topics of interest to students. This set of literature points to the special significance of using picture books in ESL classrooms to reduce anxiety about English reading and focus instead on conversation and creativity. The literature also supports the use of wordless and graphic novels in whole-language ESL curriculum.

*Family Literacy.* Mountainbird (1991) describes a small community-based project that she in which she participated in the 1980s in which adult ESL learners and their children enrolled in two parallel community programs that worked with the same body of children’s literature and often collaborated in reading, listening, and storytelling activities. This project enabled both adult learners and children to learn to read, speak, and engage in English language work together. This project also emphasized the importance of practicing family literacy, reading aloud at home, and community storytelling. This article supports the use of picture books with adult English language learners, especially in the context of family literacy programs. However, it also supports the notion that using picture books and children’s literature in adult ESL classrooms and workshops can lead to successful practices of conversation and storytelling.

*Conversation and Adult ESL Classrooms.*

Beginning ESL adult classes often focus on the teaching of useable spoken English through skills-based learning, vocabulary building, and conversation modeling

exercises. A focus on spoken English, rather than reading and writing, can sometimes influence teachers to avoid read-and-respond exercises, which might distance learners who do not have experience reading English. Conversation exercises, such as modeling or playing games, can be useful, especially in enhancing skills such as pronunciation and usage, but they do not necessarily give adult learners opportunities to have whole conversations.

Two instructional guides for ESL adult educators, one from 1988 and the other from 1999, offer insight into changing ideas about ESL spoken language learning and the differences between language learning and language acquisition. Batt et al (1988) offer a guidebook for ESL teachers which emphasizes skills-based conversation exercises that are both structured and unstructured. Their suggested exercises use question-and-answer sessions and workbooks to model conversation. While they stress the importance of limiting the instructor's speech and maximizing the students' speaking time, they still use skill-building models for conversation.

Frank (1999) provides guidelines for volunteer one-on-one ESL language tutors. Her text highlights a mix between whole-language approaches and skill-based approaches to conversation. However, she suggests activities for conversation, such as role-playing, explanation, and game playing. This is similar to the training I received as an adult ESL teacher at a local non-profit in Philadelphia. The classes focused on the use of skill-building exercises, pronunciation, games, and conversation modeling, rather than the use of whole texts to create authentic conversations.

### **Immigrant Adults Reading a Picture Book about Immigrant Experience**

*A Picture Book for Adults*

Shaun Tan's long picture book The Arrival depicts the immigrant experience in beautiful sepia-tone illustrations and is not necessarily a picture book for young children. The hardback book has 128 pages. The front cover, as one participant commented, looks like a weathered suitcase and the inside cover shows a portrait study of many different faces, depicting people of many cultures from all over the world. The peritext shows yellowed pages and includes citizenship documents like inspection cards and passport pages. As Tan (2008) explains on his website, his books "are best described as 'picture books for older readers' rather than young children, as they deal with relatively complex visual styles and themes." The book is considered a graphic or wordless novel.

Though the images use relatively subdued color, Tan uses shading and light to hint at the deep emotional and exploratory themes of the story. Like most of Tan's books, *The Arrival* portrays many aspects of the experience of immigrating and touches on serious topics like slave labor, loneliness, war, and fear. In addition, while the landscapes in Tan's text are subdued in color, they maintain a fantastical quality and excite the reader's imagination. In addition, Tan takes time to deeply study certain landscapes and the book allows the reader to go deep as well. For example, early in the picture book, there is a two-page spread showing a series of cloud drawings, allowing the reader to get lost in cloud-gazing and to feel the passing of time in the character's journey.

*The Arrival* follows the story of a man who leaves his wife and child in his home country, in which their lives are plagued by some sort of suffering, in order to immigrate to a new land. His journey is long and the new country is full of strange and different objects and experiences. Arriving, the man goes through a process of examination and

naturalization, his papers being stamped in the language of the new country. Tan takes his time depicting the man's confusion in the immigration process and in the process of getting to know the new and strange land he is in.

When he first arrives, the man is confused by the language, customs, and technologies of the new country. With the help of strangers, he is able to find a place to live, learn about the customs and food of the new land, and even find work. Most of the strangers he meets are immigrants as well and each tells him about his/her own experiences of immigrating; these include stories of war, slavery, and imperialism. In this land, most people are accompanied by animals and the man, too, gets an animal companion who helps him to navigate this new place. Tan also takes care in depicting the man's feelings of loneliness and his love of his family.

At the end of the book, the man goes back to the place where he first arrived in the new land and he greets his wife and daughter there. They now live together in a home similar to the one they left, but in this home, their gadgets and house wares are more modern, more advanced. Not only is the family happy and united again, but they have seemingly also become citizens of this new world. In fact, the book ends with the man's daughter roaming the streets with their animal companion, meeting a new immigrant to the country, and offering her help.

#### *Adult Reader Responses to The Arrival*

As an immigrant adult, I was immediately excited about *The Arrival*, its portrayal of the process of immigration, and its accessibility as a wordless novel for adults, and wanted to see others' reactions to it. I decided to invite a group of adult immigrant friends to read this book and respond to it in group discussion sessions.

*Study Participants.* The study involved five participants (including myself). All five participants are immigrant adults who currently live in the United States and range in age from 24 for 66. Two are males, both European-born, and three are females, two of whom were born in Asia and the third born in Central America.

A, a 27-year old man, moved to the US from Hungary at age 8. He has been living in the states ever since and considers himself a Hungarian American. R, a 25-year old woman, moved to the US from India at age 6 and identifies as a South Asian American. S, a 28-year old man, is the only participant who immigrated to the US as an adult. He grew up in Romania and moved to the states at 18 for college. Since then, he has completed graduate school and gotten married, and now works in finance.

V, a 66-year old woman, immigrated to Panama from Costa Rica with her family when she was a young child. When her mother married her stepfather, her family moved into the US territory of the Panama Canal Zone where V was introduced to American life. At 22, she immigrated to mainland America, where she has been living for over 40 years. She considers herself an American.

*Researcher and Participant.* I am a 24-year old ethnically-Indian woman who moved to the US from the United Arab Emirates at age 7 and identify as a South Asian American. In transcripts and conversation discussions, I refer to myself as M. As a researcher and participant, I played a dual role in the read and response sessions. Because all of the participants are people I have been friendly with, I found that I could speak comfortably about the study and its goals. In addition, I found that I could participate with them in personal conversations and that we very quickly developed a space of trust within which those candid conversations took place.

On the other hand, my role as a questioner was somewhat compromised because of my friendships with the other participants. For example, I felt hesitant to ask prodding questions when participants failed to elaborate on certain statements. While I sometimes asked participants to go deeper and explain their statements further, at other times, I felt unsure of myself because of my negotiations as a researcher, participant, and friend.

*Study Sessions.* Since the book is separated into six chapters, I chose to break our meetings into two sessions, each about two hours long. My husband and I welcomed participants into our home and offered them a home-cooked dinner in exchange for their participation in the study. The first half hour or so of each session was spent eating and chatting. In the first session, I used this time to explain the basic premise and goals of the study and to introduce the book. Then, we spent about a half hour or so reading Chapters 1 – 3 and talked for about 45 minutes afterwards. In the second session, we spent the first half hour eating and talking about our expectations for the second half of the book. Then, we read Chapters 4 – 6 and had a similar 45-minute long conversation. All five of us were present for the first session, but R was unable to make the second session.

*Data Collection and Coding.* I tape-recorded our pre-reading conversations, readings (especially because some readers shared books and made comments while reading), and discussions; the recordings totaled about 3.5 hours. I later transcribed these sessions myself – about 2 hours of recordings were irrelevant to our readings (for example, conversations about work, wine, and other random topics which took place during pre-readings and eating times, and periods of silence) and so, I chose not to transcribe these conversations, except for select bits that were relevant to our reading discussions.

*Response Framework.* While transcribing, I noted certain reoccurring topics and categories, which I eventually used in my coding of the data. I came up with ten conversation categories, which ranged from “retelling the story” and “talking about the author’s intentions” to “reflecting on oneself as a reader” and “making claims about immigration.” I divided these categories into four groups, which I titled “Ways of Talking.” This framework is shown in Figure 1 below.

<b>Figure 1 – Response Framework – Ways of Talking</b>		
<b>Ways of Talking</b>	<b>Conversation Categories</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Talking about the Text	Retelling the story	"Then he meets these people who show him what to eat."
	Analyzing literary/artistic elements	"They were trying to show the military sucking everyone up."
	Talking about the author's intentions	"So you think he's misrepresenting?"
	Doing guesswork, making predictions	"I thought it was a dog."
Talking about the World	Making connections to the outside world	"It looked like the Chrysler Building"
	Commenting on the world in general	"America is at war usually"
Talking about Immigration	Making claims about immigration	"They try to categorize you and fit you into this mold."
Talking about the Self	Making surface comments about reading the text	"I like how everything was changed."
	Reflecting on oneself as a reader	"I guess I'm rigid in my thinking and my reading."
	Using the text to tell personal stories of immigration <sup>1</sup>	"It reminded me of when I moved here."

Figure 1 shows four ways in which participants talked during our discussion sessions. It also shows the conversation categories I used in coding my data, examples of conversations that fit each category, and the categories in relation to the four ways of talking. I will further explain each conversation category using examples from an early excerpt of conversation from our first discussion session.

<sup>1</sup> The last category, “Using the text to tell personal stories of immigration,” falls into two ways of talking, Talking about the self and Talking about immigration.

1. S: I never heard of a picture book like that before that has a real story-story to it.
2. A: I liked it a lot. I like how everything was changed, like all the symbolism,
3. so that you would kinda have to imagine how that related to you rather than
4. like what it's actually trying, making you think. It's more like you putting in
5. the actual pieces together in your own head, rather than the book doing it for
6. you, but it is definitely leading you in an obvious direction.
7. M: What direction is that?
8. A: I guess the immigrant experience, you know, escape from something
9. that's really terrible and then come here – I'm pretty sure they're talking
10. about the US – and you're coming to the US.
11. S: Yeah, like, it looked like the Chrysler building
12. A: Yeah, and the whole like, trade, so you know, like a country of trade.
13. S: I didn't get that he like, left a terrible place because like in the beginning,
14. I didn't get the feeling that they were in a terrible place.
15. R: I think that dragon thing, like, it must have represented some kind of evil
16. because you realize the other characters, one of them was being forced to do
17. labor, the other one had been attacked by another group of people, so they had
18. escaped, I don't know, I don't know what the dragon meant but it could have
19. been famine or economic crisis.
20. M: Well, and then, later on, when he sees the cat and the tail comes out, he
21. automatically drops his vegetables because he thinks it's that thing and then he
22. tries to explain that to the people he meets like the vegetable shop owner.
23. I don't think I realized that it was bad until that, you know?
24. Like, I thought, "Oh it's weird," but I didn't realize it was bad.
25. A: For some reason, I thought that was a picture of Britain or Ireland with the
26. arms reaching out trying to control everything, almost like there's dark
27. tentacles telling everyone where to go or what to do, almost like a
28. harsh guiding force that's trying to lead the country in a negative way.
29. M: Keep in mind the guy is from Australia, you know, so...
30. S: He probably immigrated to Australia?
31. M: His parents immigrated to Australia and he was raised there.
32. A: It could be them escaping to Australia instead of America.
33. Australia could be that special place of commerce or whatever.
34. M: I guess what I'm saying is like, is it possible that that other immigrants in
35. other countries could also relate to it, you know?
36. S: Yeah, I think it's meant to be kind of general, but it doesn't have to be the
37. US. The one picture where they were showing him on the boat and they
38. were showing the city, it kind of looked like it could be New York.
39. M: Yeah, I said to V too that when they're first coming and they have the
40. two statues, it's like the statue of liberty.
41. S: Yeah, and if you look at the skyline, there's one building that kind of
42. distinctly looks like the Chrysler building... no, Empire State building.
43. V: I find it a little confusing. The color bothers me.

Retelling the story During discussions, participants often retold parts of the text, as they read it. This was especially interesting because the wholly graphic text required participants to share their interpretations of images and events. In lines 20 – 22, M retells a scene that happens in the text to remind other participants of that part of the story so that she can make a claim about its meaning.

Analyzing literary/artistic elements In this category, participants analyzed literary and artistic elements, such as Tan’s portrayal of war and slave labor. This category focuses on analytical connections and deeper readings of the text. In lines 15 – 19, R analyzes what she calls “that dragon thing,” explaining that it must be representative of some kind of evil, such as famine or economic crisis. In this way, she close reads the text and analyzes the abstract artistic choices made by the writer.

Talking about the author’s intentions In post-reading discussions, participants often discussed their ideas about the author’s choices of creating the story world as he did and in portraying certain aspects of immigrant experience. Participants also questioned the author’s intentions, including his intended goals and audience. In lines 6 and 28 – 36, the participants touch on the author’s background and his intentions in writing the text. A suggests that the text is “leading you in an obvious direction” (6) to which M later responds that he might be trying to relate to many immigrants (34-35) and S agrees that “it’s meant to be kind of general” (36). These statements suggest that the participants are trying to look at the text in the larger context of the author’s experiences and intentions.

Doing guesswork, making predictions Working with a wordless text, participants often felt that they were interpreting certain more abstract images in disagreeing ways. In talking about the texts, participants used discussions as spaces of negotiation, sorting

through their ideas and multiple readings, as well as making predictions together about what would happen in later chapters. One example of this kind of guesswork can be seen in S's response (lines 13 - 14) to A's assertion (lines 8 – 10) that the main character is leaving some place terrible to come to the new world. R, too, in lines 15 – 19, attempted to work with A and S to get to the bottom of this abstract meaning. In doing guesswork, participants had to work together to find ways of connecting their different readings of abstract aspects of the text. In a later section, for example, R and V made predictions together, stating that they were waiting for the book to show bad experiences associated with immigrants. For them, making these kinds of predictions about the book also enabled them to comment on what they believed would make the book more “realistic” in its portrayals of immigrant experience.

Making connections to the outside world This type of response showed how participants used comfortable images and objects in the real world to navigate the strange world of the text. Because participants associated the story world with their own world, they often relied on familiar ideas and images to fill in the gaps of the story world. For example, in lines 37, 38, 40, 41, and 42, S and M use descriptions of New York City, the Chrysler building, and the Statue of Liberty to describe the new world that the main character is entering. Their references to these places and objects in the real world helped them to understand and situate themselves in the story world.

Commenting on the world in general Often in the post-reading discussions, participants made claims about the world in general and argued with each other on these claims. Navigating *The Arrival's* unusual world helped the participants in their thinking about the real world, especially when they made comparisons between the two. In lines

25 – 28, A makes comments about the world in general by talking about the “controlling” arms of Britain. He essentially (and somewhat subtly) describes the country as a “harsh guiding force that’s trying to lead the country in a negative way.” In doing this, A makes comments or claims about the world in general, rather than making claims only about the story world.

Making claims about immigration In the process of reading the text and talking about its connections to portrayals of immigration, larger conversations unfolded that dug deep into ways of thinking about immigrant experience and ways of talking about it. Lines 8 and 9 show A making a simple but specific claim about the immigrant experience, which he describes as, “you know, escape from something that’s really terrible and then come here.” This claim surfaced many times in the participant discussions as they worked to clarify their notions of what is typical of immigrant experience. Participants made other claims about the immigrant experience as well, such as defining it as isolating, as a desire to advance technologically, and as a process of being changed, re-identified, labeled, and objectified. I will discuss more examples of these later in the paper.

Making surface comments about reading the text This category covers matter-of-fact statements about readings of the text, such as how a participant felt about an aspect of the text. For example, line 2, in which A remarks, “I liked it a lot,” shows a surface comment about his immediate reaction to the first reading session. Similarly, in line 43, when V says, “The color bothers me,” she is referring to the way a certain aspect of the reading has effected her.

Reflecting on oneself as a reader Because this text is wordless and the participants were, for the most part, avid readers, they grappled with the challenges of reading a story without words. They talked a lot about this, particularly in the second session when they had finished the book. For some, reading also helped them to reflect on how they digest texts and what roles they play as readers. In lines 2 – 6, A reflects on how he read and reads the text. In this conversation, he described the book as an active player in how he had read the text, but also described himself as the vehicle that made these multiple textual ideas fit in a cohesive way. In this discussion, he essentially described his own experiences as a reader of the text.

Using the text to tell personal stories about immigration Connecting texts to personal experiences is a natural part of reading a text and so, it is reasonable that many conversations about the text naturally transitioned into conversations about personal experiences as people coming to a new country. For many of the participants, taking part in a reading group in which they were identified as adult immigrants meant that they could talk about immigration in a sort of safe and knowing space, one that might not necessarily exist in other arenas of life. Connecting textual examples to personal ones often led to the telling of personal stories. Participants' decisions to share personal stories showed their identification with the text and subject matter, but also gave them agency, making them storytellers in the larger space of discourses of immigrant experience. Although the above transcript does not show this category, in the following sections, I will show conversation transcripts in which people tell their stories.

## Deeper Readings: Ways of Talking about Reading and Immigration

In my closer study of the response data, I chose to focus on five conversation categories which were most relevant to my research questions: Analyzing literary/artistic elements, Talking about the author's intentions, Reflecting on oneself as a reader, Making claims about immigration, and Using the text to tell personal stories about immigration. I was particularly interested in how participants (all adults and all but one avid readers) reacted to the wordless aspect of *The Arrival* and how they negotiated their varied interpretations of the text, especially with regard to Tan's choice of the "strange" and ambiguous imagery of the different countries/worlds he depicts. Also of interest were two themes that emerged from the participants' readings: their retellings of their own immigration stories and matter-of-fact claims they made about the experience of immigrating.

### *Reading without Words*

"*I really like words.*" In the second session, after everyone had finished reading the book, V immediately announced, "Well, I've decided I really like words." This spurred on a conversation about the limits of reading picture books and analyses of how participants see themselves as readers:

44. V: I don't dislike [the book], but I found myself puzzling over stuff and having
45. to go back and ask, "Wait a minute, what is that? What's going on?
46. What does this mean?" and "Oh yeah... okay, this looks like the four seasons.
47. Okay, does this mean that a whole year has gone by?" It just left me with
48. my appreciation for the ability to read. And I've always thought of myself as
49. a very visual person. Like, George will explain something he's going to build
50. or something he's going to do in a room or something that he's doing and he'll
51. talk and talk and talk and tell me about what he's doing in a closet or whatever,
52. and it's like, "Oh my god – I need to see a picture. I need to see what he's
53. talking about." And so, here, I have a whole book of pictures and I was
54. still struggling.
55. A: It felt really quiet the whole time. It was almost like it was an empty mood

56. even though I could feel the mood from the pictures, it was just really quiet  
57. and... almost as if people would talk to each other with sign language.  
58. It almost seemed like nobody even talked. It's weird.  
59. S: It gives you an appreciation for writing because even though a picture is  
60. supposed to be more descriptive, you know, when you read a book that has  
61. regular writing, it does seem like you get a lot more out of it. And this one felt  
62. like, "Alright, is there more to the pictures than what they are showing?"  
63. A: I feel like with writing, you get more, with your imagination painting a  
64. picture in your head so you feel like you're seeing more because it's in your  
65. head. This is more like a movie, like a silent movie.  
66. V: I think it made me a little anxious because I think I felt like I expected  
67. to find and see and understand symbolism and like, "Oh my god, what am  
68. I not getting here? What am I missing?"  
69. M: Maybe we're so used to reading stories, like a complete story. I don't think  
70. this leaves me with a complete story – like there are certain things that we  
71. expect from stories, like there's a plot and there's a problem and then they  
72. solve the problem, or do they solve the problem?

All participants grappled with the question of whether they were getting a full sense of the story the author was trying to tell. In lines 44 – 48, V describes the process of reading a text that is wordless. She describes it as “puzzling,” explaining that reading the book required that she do a lot of inference and think hard about what points the author was trying to make. In lines 55 – 58, A describes the “quiet” and “empty mood” of the text. To him, because there was no writing, he felt that there was no dialogue between the characters in the text. For him, wordlessness meant silence, even though he could see the characters connecting and telling stories. He even later commented that the text felt “like a silent movie” (line 65).

In lines 59 – 62, S describes the benefits of books with “regular writing,” explaining that you “get a lot more out of it.” A adds to this in lines 63 – 65, agreeing that when reading a book with words, the reader has the ability to use his imagination to develop and further understand his sense of the plot. Both S (in line 62) and V (in lines 66 – 68) describe the challenges of meaning making when reading a wordless picture

book. In these lines, both describe their anxieties with having to understand symbolism and get at the deeper meanings behind the plot. M adds to this in lines 69 - 72, saying that the story felt incomplete because it didn't seem to have all of the typical plot elements, such as "a problem" that needs solving.

For all participants, reading a book with no words limited their sense of story. All seemed to suggest that the book's being wordless distanced them from the story, or that it created a feeling of an incomplete story. This brings up the question of whether picture books can be useful in adult classes. It is important to note that a picture book that is not wordless might have been more useful here; in addition, the reading group may have reacted differently if it were a group of immigrant adults who were new readers or speakers of English.

*Is this book for adults?* In their discussions of the text, participants also questioned the intended audience of the text, questioning if this was really an adult picture book.

73. A: I wasn't disappointed, but I guess I was waiting for more of a climax, but  
74. I guess it's more just like, describing the immigrant experience in a  
75. really light-hearted way. I guess it's just more for like, kids because of  
76. that, like it's not too dramatic and not too serious. It seems like it wants to  
77. go there, but not all the way.  
78. M: I mean, I think that it's possible that there are some things that it covers  
79. that are negative. You know, he's told stories of three different immigrants  
80. that have come here and their stories are really, really painful, you know?  
81. They're all dealing with stuff that's scary like war machines, slavery.  
82. I think those things are really painful experiences.

In lines 72 – 76, A also references the need for a climax, adding that the "light-hearted way" in which Tan portrays the immigrant experience makes the text more kid-appropriate. For him, because some of the "dramatic" and "serious" aspects of immigrant experience are left out of the text, he didn't consider the text an "adult" text.

He asserted that the content was light enough to be digestible for children. As he and other participants decided many times during each conversation, the true immigrant experience can be very painful and negative; for him, the fact that the painful and bad parts of immigration were toned down and even in some cases non-existent meant that the book was geared towards children. M counters this in lines 77 – 81, saying that she felt that Tan’s portrayal of different immigrant stories did touch on “scary” and “painful experiences” and hence, might not be appropriate for children.

*Filling in the gaps.* A’s use of the word “disappointed” helped V and M to think more about how they approached reading the book and what they felt about themselves as readers:

83. V: You use the word disappointment and I hadn’t thought about it, but I  
84. guess I am disappointed because there are so many stories within this story  
85. and we don’t get... we can only guess at by how vivid the pictures are,  
86. how big the picture is, or...  
87. M: I think maybe the difference between your reading of it and my reading  
88. of it is that I’m not thinking of it like I’m guessing it and it’s not true.  
89. I’m thinking of it more like, “Well, maybe this story means this to me?”  
90. For me, I’m thinking that I can fill in the gaps however way I want and  
91. that’s accurate for him because you know, like, my experiences are also like...  
92. I have also had experiences as an immigrant and those experiences also play  
93. a role in how I’m thinking about this new, strange place or whatever.

In lines 83 – 85, V expresses her disappointment in the text because she felt that it didn’t give her enough in terms of the story. She uses the word “guess” to describe the way she felt as she attempted to make meaning of the reading. In lines 86 – 92, M responds by describing her approach to reading the text. She says she read the text knowing that she would have to make her own meaning and used Iser’s concept of “gaps

and indeterminacies”<sup>2</sup> to explain this. V returned to this later, reanalyzing her own approaches to reading:

94. V: I guess I’m a lot more rigid in my thinking and in my reading habits  
95. where I don’t think it ever occurred to me too much that I was supposed  
96. to interpret and come up with my own conclusions about what’s going on  
97. and what happened and what they’re doing.

In line 94, V refers to herself as a “rigid” reader, saying that she had never thought of coming up with her own conclusions when reading the text. This is especially interesting because, as Iser suggests, every text has holes that the reader must fill. In other words, whether or not V realizes it, this is something she does in reading every text. It’s possible, then, that reading a wordless picture book leaves too many gaps for a more seasoned reader.

*Navigating a Strange World.* One powerful way that Tan portrays the unfamiliarity that often accompanies immigrating is through his depiction of the strange new world his narrator enters. In this world, there are flying buses, strange vegetables, and companion animals for every person. Even in immigrants’ countries of origin, Tan uses symbolism to depict things like war and famine. Participants talked about this symbolism and negotiated meaning as well as intention.

In an early conversation, participants tried to figure out what had caused the narrator to leave his country of origin. In the images of the main character’s homeland, the shadow of a large, spiky tail twirls and loops through the city – participants referred to this shadowing thing as “that dragon thing” and “that tail,” but had difficulty naming it. In an early conversation, as can be seen in lines 98 and 99 below, R inferred that the

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<sup>2</sup> Iser, W., in “The Act of Reading” (1978), describes his theory of gaps and indeterminacies, explaining that texts often have story holes that readers fill in as they read. These gaps might be as simple as the color of a character’s hair, but filling in the gaps helps the reader to situate him/herself in a text.

thing might have represented a national crisis. Most participants agreed with this, though all felt that the image was ambiguous.

98. R: I don't know, I don't know what the dragon meant but it could have  
99. been famine or economic crisis.

Later on, when talking about the overall incompleteness of the story, V returned to this question:

100. V: Yeah, like why does he leave to begin with?  
101. A: Well, because his world is bad.  
102. V: Yeah, but you don't know what's bad about it, except for those tails of  
103. those creatures that's curling all through the town and it looks deserted.

In line 101, A reiterates the groups earlier agreement that the narrator's country of origin was decidedly unsafe. However, in lines 102 and 103, V presses this point, expressing her frustration at the text's overly vague way of presenting the crisis of the man's country.

Participants also used chat and guesswork to come to conclusions about what exactly certain images and objects were supposed to represent. Readers discussed the strangeness of the new country:

104. V: I wondered, to me, the drawings and all of the different characters that are  
105. depicted are kind of strange and scary looking and I wondered...  
106. M: Like who? Like what?  
107. V: Pretty much everybody, everything... all these little creatures.  
108. I mean, like, a couple times you said "oh pretty" and that wasn't my reaction.  
109. All the little creatures... and there's lots of things with pointy tails and  
110. pointy stuff like, that to me, it's sharp, it's not warm and fuzzy.  
111. S: Well, the white creature seemed to be a friendly one. I guess to me it  
112. symbolized that he's seeing something that he's not familiar with so it looks  
113. like a strange creature to me.  
114. V: Well, like, I wondered if the reason that all of those, that once he gets off  
115. the ship and he gets to this place, that everyone and everything is depicted  
116. this way is to give you a sense of how strange everything looks to him.  
117. He's in a strange land, he's seeing things he's never seen before, he's seeing  
118. people and things that he's never seen before and he's overwhelmed.

In lines 107 – 113, V and S talk about strange images of the new world – this type of negotiation and questioning came up in many different points of the conversation as readers played around with and talked about certain objects and creatures Tan depicts. In lines 114 – 116, V further connects the strangeness of the new country with the unfamiliarity one might feel when traveling to a new place. While in the earlier discussions, V referred to both the general illustrative style of the text and the images of the new land as strange, sad, and scary, she later decided that the strangeness was just a way for the author to express the newness of the experience in general.

*Immigration is Like This*

Throughout the response discussions, participants continually likened aspects of the book to aspects of the experience of immigrating. In other words, they made claims about what immigration is like and what the process involves.

*Being Labeled, Objectified, Renamed.* In an early scene in *The Arrival*, when the man first arrives in the new land, he is put through the customs process. A describes how this scene pulled him into the book:

119. A: Really what got me paying attention a lot at first is the scene where  
120. they're examining him and they go through the process of measuring what he  
121. is, why he's here, who he is and then they like, stick all these weird symbols  
122. on him. I remember coming to the US and like, they did the whole passport  
123. thing and I didn't know what they were doing. They were just like "stamp  
124. this," "do this." They ask you why you're here, this and that, and like, it  
125. makes no sense to you, it's like, "So what? I'm just trying to be here." But  
126. they try to categorize you and fit you into this mold that you'll eventually be  
127. in almost. That's the sense I'm getting from the book.

In lines 120 – 122, A describes how the character is objectified, using the phrase "measuring what he is." A also relates this to his own experiences in coming to the US, explaining how he was told to do many different things he didn't understand. In lines

126 and 127, A says, “they try to categorize you and fit you into this mold,” describing how quickly the immigration process asks newcomers to acculturate. V later comes back to that scene, describing the process of being labeled and named.

128. V: I liked that too, which A pointed out, where he’s getting looked at  
129. and getting the stickers stuck on him. I liked that he finally walks out  
130. with his little thing that says “Me.” It made me feel like, “Who is me?”  
131. Does he understand that they decided on “me” as him? Because even  
132. as little, a couple, two or three months back, I have met people that  
133. are immigrants and um, I met a man and his nephew who are from the same  
134. family, but they have different names. They are very close, but the names  
135. got misspelled going through immigration so the nephew has the correct  
136. name and the uncle has a misspelled name. I don’t know what the name is  
137. but he says, “It’s too complicated, it’s too difficult.” He would have to go  
138. back to – I forget where – and he says that if he goes back, he probably  
139. wouldn’t be able to get back here and you know, it’s... I just wondered who  
140. that little “me” turned out to be because when you watch him, they checked  
141. everything and stamped it and there you are. That’s who you are.  
142. Who is that?

In lines 128 – 130, V describes the many labels that are placed on the main character. In the book, the writing and language that are seen throughout the new world use made-up characters that look similar to English, but are not. When V refers to “Me” in line 130, she is describing her own interpretation of a label that is placed on the character. V uses this example to further talk about the process of immigration as a process of labeling, of losing or changing one’s identity. V asks, “Does he understand that they decided on “me” as him?” (line 131).

V follows this question of understanding who “Me” is with a story (in lines 131 – 139) to describe the process of being given a new identity and explain that while coming to a new place can bring lots of opportunity, it can also bring loss. Finally, V asks (in lines 140 – 142), “Who is that?,” further emphasizing that the man comes out of customs as a different person. Later, A also talked about a series of images in that same scene

which show the man's confusion at being labeled and being given a new identity, which V had defined as "Me," but even the man is not yet sure of what that "Me" means. M responded to V's comments with an example of her own experiences of immigrating, adding, "So for me, I have always liked the idea that I could come here and be somebody else." This helped the group define another quality of immigration, the fact that it doesn't simply lead to a name change, but also a change in identity and more importantly, a change in sense of self:

143. S: So now that he has moved here, he can be whatever he wants to be.

144. Is that what you're saying?

145. M: Yeah, or like...

146. R: Or maybe the immigrant experience can change you and just that

147. process of immigrating. I feel like this confusion on his face.

S reasserts M's points in lines 143 and 144, suggesting that the main character has the opportunity to start over and be someone new. R adds to this in lines 146 and 147, saying that the process of immigrating alone can change a person and reshape his/her identity.

*Sharing Experiences, Building a Community.* The group talked further about how being an immigrant and surviving a new world often involves meeting other immigrants, sharing experiences, and helping each other to find opportunities.

148. A: [Every person he meets,] they're able to, I guess, share that and build  
149. something better because of the fact that it's all different so maybe they  
150. could find a better solution to working together and not having the same kind  
151. of government as what they had before.

152. S: Maybe that's why they help him, too – because they've been through  
153. the same experience before.

154. A: Yeah, that's kind of like what sticks them together. It's like a common  
155. friendship without even knowing someone, you like have to work together  
156. because you know that someone else in this country is probably there  
157. because they came from a worse place

In lines 148 - 150, A talks about how most of the people the main character of the story meets are also immigrants. S suggests (lines 152 - 153) that maybe this is why they help him, because they know how he feels and share his immigrant experience. A calls this “a common friendship” (line 154 – 155), and later even added that he continues this behavior of creating friendships with other immigrants now that he is an American. He explained that while he may not feel like helping every person he sees on the street, if the person seems like an immigrant or seems like someone who is struggling with language or directions, he feels the need to help.

All of the participants talked about the closeness they feel with other immigrants and most agreed that a part of immigrant experience is developing relationships with other immigrants. Other than V, who described her early immigration as an isolating experience, the remaining participants discussed the practice of befriending other immigrants as part of the early experience. In the following excerpt, M and S use personal storytelling to describe the immigrant community-building that was a part of their early immigrant experiences.

158. M: I think that reminds me of when I first moved to the states too because  
159. when I first moved here, we lived in, like I went to an international  
160. elementary school and we lived in a neighborhood that had tons and tons of  
161. immigrants from like, every single country. So, many of our experiences  
162. involved the retelling of those stories and you know, like our parents could  
163. make friends with the parents of other kids from our school bus, so my mom  
164. had friends from Honduras and friends from like, other parts of India, from  
165. Israel, and from Europe and that was a very normal part of those early  
166. experiences. I wonder if that would have been different if I would have been  
167. living somewhere else because I think that I assume that that’s a normal part  
168. of first immigrating here that you automatically meet other immigrants who  
169. are all fresh off the boat and you can all talk about that.  
170. S: I think you definitely relate because you go through the same things.  
171. Like, when I was first in college, it was the same thing. I had a lot of friends  
172. that were international students than American. Part of it is that you don’t  
173. already have a network of friends, you know... when you grow up

174. somewhere, you have people that you've known for years and years, so a lot  
175. of the "local people" already have their crowd and everything and they're not  
176. looking to meet new people as much as somebody who doesn't know  
177. anybody so that's why you have these connections with people that are in the  
178. same situation you are.

In lines 158 – 165, M describes her own experiences as an early immigrant living in a diverse community of immigrants. In lines 166 – 169, she talks about assumptions she made as a child that those experiences were typically of immigrant experiences, emphasizing the importance of building an immigrant community. In lines 170, S agrees that connecting with other immigrants is easy because of common experiences. In lines 171 – 178, he describes his own early experiences with an immigrant community, adding that he had found it easier to make friends with other immigrants because they were all equally new and because "local people" were not necessarily looking for new friends.

*Escaping a Bad Place for Someplace Better.* Most of the participants referred to immigrating as a process of leaving a bad place or "escaping" from someplace bad to come to a better place.

179. A: I feel like the whole book so far emanates like, dreams and opportunities,  
180. just because like, every single person that he's like, running into so far are all  
181. people that like, when he talked to them so far, they all came from a worse  
182. place and now they're in a better place

In lines 179 – 181, A explains that all of the immigrants in the story escape their home countries to come to the new one and that a common reason for immigrating is to get away from bad conditions at home. Many times in the conversation, other participants agreed with this. S, however, questioned this and attempted to correct this stereotype about reasons for immigrating:

183. S: It's interesting that in all the stories of immigrants, all the immigrants  
184. immigrated because of a bad experience. You don't see people... all of the  
185. stories are like that. You don't see stories of anyone who immigrated

186. because they wanted something different or for whatever reason people  
187. immigrant besides being at war or coming from a bad place.  
188. A: Are you saying that because you feel like that's why you immigrated?  
189. S: Yeah, maybe. Well, not only that, but there are other people who have  
190. immigrated for work or...  
191. M: To advance... not necessarily to get away from something.  
192. S: For something different like a new challenge. And I guess it just  
193. captured.... He showed that many stories, he could have captured the  
194. different reasons, not all being something bad.  
195. A: Yeah, but that's not interesting in a storybook.  
196. S: Well, since he had four different immigrant stories, he could have had 1 or  
197. 2 that were bad and maybe 1 or 2 that were just normal or neutral, I guess.  
198. M: So you think he's misrepresenting?  
199. S: No, just not capturing the whole spectrum of it.

In lines 183 – 187, S questions the author's decision to portray all the immigrants in the story as people who had escaped something bad for something better. For S, it was important that the author depict immigration as more than just one experience (lines 193 – 194). While the other participants liked the variety of portrayals of immigrants' lives in their countries of origin (escaping from economic trouble or famine, from slave labor, and from war), S found this unrepresentative of the larger gamut of reasons for immigrating (lines 196 – 197) and added that Tan does not capture the “whole spectrum of” immigration (line 199).

*Experiencing New, Strange, Tech-Advanced Worlds.* Participants agreed that one aspect of immigrating to a new country, regardless of reason, is that the new place is typically more advanced (lines 191 – 192) than one's country of origin. In the conversation below, participants talk about the technological advances of the main character's new world.

200. R: It almost feels like he's going from a... cos if you look at where he lives  
201. before he moves, you can recognize everything – everything has a, is very  
202. similar to what we use now, but when he moves to this other country, it's  
203. more technologically advanced, it's got all these new gadgets that he doesn't  
204. know how to use and so I wonder – yeah, it's the idea of going to a country

205. that has more than what he does.  
206. M: Yeah, I really like the buses in the new country, too – it’s like a weird  
207. ship that flies. But I wonder, like, is the new country more technologically  
208. advanced or is it just different?  
209. A: It’s definitely...  
210. M: You know, like all the gadgets, maybe they do the same things and they  
211. just look different.  
212. S: I could see both because in the beginning, the pictures are very simple,  
213. you know, not a lot... so I can see your point that where he was, things were  
214. not that intricate and where he goes to this new place where things are more  
215. intricate and there are flying ships that everybody travels on and all that stuff,  
216. so yeah – maybe that’s it.

In lines 200 and 201, R talks about the recognizable objects in the man’s country of origin and confirms that the new country has “more” and is more “technologically advanced” than the one he has left. In lines 206 – 208, M questions the difference between advancement and difference, adding in lines 210 and 211 that the gadgets “do the same things and they just look different.” S questions this too in lines 212 – 216, commenting the objects are more “intricate.” Talking about the new world the narrator experiences also gave participants a chance to tell stories about the new and strange things they experienced in immigrating to the states. I have included a few of these stories here:

217. M: One other thing I liked was the part when he first gets to the place, that  
218. little apartment. A lot of that stuff, we don’t even know what it’s going to be  
219. used for yet. I liked that – when we moved here, we moved into an  
220. apartment that didn’t have bidets and we thought it was the most hilarious  
221. thing, you know, like, “How do people wash their butts?” We just thought it  
222. was like, so funny that no bathrooms had that. And it’s the same thing – you  
223. go to a different place and in every country, the toilet’s different. Like in  
224. Hungary, you pull the cord and the water tank is up above you. It was just  
225. really applicable to anywhere you go.  
226. R: Yeah, I couldn’t even sit on the toilet. I didn’t know how cos I was so  
227. used to squatting on the toilet in India and I got here and I just felt like I was  
228. going to fall in and going to the bathroom was such a pain in the ass. I  
229. wouldn’t want to go and I remember the food confusion. My parents bought  
230. lettuce thinking it was cabbage because there was no such thing as lettuce in  
231. India and they cooked it and they were like, “What is wrong with the

232. cabbage in America?” but then our aunt told us that it’s lettuce.

In this conversation, both M and R relate to the narrator’s feelings of confusion at not being able to recognize certain objects in his new apartment. In lines 217 to 229, M and R liken this to the foreignness of toilets and bathrooms in different countries and of their own confusions when dealing with bathrooms in the US. In lines 229 – 232, R also talks about what she calls “food confusion,” a topic that comes up later in the text when the main character learns about the strange vegetables of the new world.

233. A: Speaking of everything being new, I remember that when I came to the  
234. US, I went to my mom’s apartment and I thought the closet doors, they  
235. looked almost as if they were elevator doors and in Hungary, we only had  
236. one type of elevator doors because we lived in this complex that was just, I  
237. don’t know, now I’m thinking that it was just ghetto, but as a kid it was  
238. normal, you know, how it was. But over here, I actually thought the closet  
239. doors were actually elevator doors and there was a button somewhere and I  
240. didn’t even know how they opened. There were these like, wooden doors  
241. with these little notches in them and I think it might have been like, after a  
242. week, I mean, I never saw my mom use them but after I saw her get  
243. something out and leave... she closed it right away and I asked her, “How do  
244. you get the elevator doors open?” and she was like, “These are actually  
245. closet doors.” It was just so foreign to me as a kid.

In lines 233 to 245, A adds to the conversation about new and strange objects by talking about how he thought a closet was an elevator when he first moved to the US. This discussion about the new, strange, and advanced helped participants to connect to each other’s experiences, tell stories about their own lives, and share both laughter and pain with each other. These conversations fueled the most discussion and created a lively and community-forming atmosphere in the discussion sessions.

## **Conclusions and Reflections**

### *Limits and Future Research*

This study focuses on adult reader responses to a completely wordless text. In addition, the adults in this study were fluent speakers of English and were not new immigrants to the United States. To connect this work to conversation work in adult ESL classrooms, future research studies should focus on the use of many picture books, picture books with words, longer read-and-respond sessions, and work with new immigrants and non-fluent speakers of English. As Bloem and Padak suggest, children's literature used in adult classrooms should cover adult themes and be "mature." In addition, future research should look at adult ESL programs' pedagogical teachings and approaches to the larger scope of work, including their ideas about skills-based versus whole language approaches to classroom work.

Another approach that adult ESL programs do not often consider is Mountainbird's family literacy-style program. More study in this type of educational setting is likely to cause educators to reexamine the isolating and non-family oriented aspects of current adult ESL programs. In addition, using children's literature might be less daunting or insulting to adult learners who are avid and fluent readers in their first language if the use of children's literature is paired with time spent reading to children.

A third study might focus on individual adults using picture books to learn to read. As Nixon-Ponder et al discuss, having adult learners read whole texts encourages their participation in and enjoyment of reading and using an unfamiliar language to build personal relationships with reading and texts. This could be tested through the use of English children's literature or children's literature of other languages.

## *Implications for the Use of Picture Books in Adult ESL Classes*

*Adults Reading a Picture Book?* The adult readers in this study experienced some discomfort and confusion at reading a book without words. Potentially, the same could be true for English language learning adults who are avid readers in their first languages. It is important to distinguish between wordless novels and graphic/picture books that do use words – most of the literature referenced in this study focuses on picture books, but does not talk specifically about whether all of the texts used in each study had words.

As Mountainbird and Salminen show, incorporating storytelling into the use of picture books in adult language classes can be successful. In fact, in this study, while participants felt de-centered and uncertain about the “story” when reading *The Arrival*, they did feel comfortable retelling the story and spent time negotiating over meanings and analyzing certain textual and artistic aspects of the book. S, R, and M especially took time to retell certain section of the book; in addition, in many conversations M and A worked through their multiple and often disagreeing views of what certain images and symbols meant.

*Conversation.* Despite the de-centering experience of reading a wordless book, the adults in this study felt moved to speak about and share their own experiences of immigration with each other. This supports the use of picture books, especially in whole language ESL adult classrooms in which authentic texts can potentially inspire authentic conversation. For the adults in this study, although they felt unsure about the “whole story,” including details of the main character’s past, they very much related to Tan’s overall portrayals of immigrant experience. In talking about the immigrant experiences within the text, participants were able to connect textual events to their own personal

immigrant experiences and talk about these connections in detail. In addition, participants were able to use these conversations to make claims about the immigrant experience, including claims about isolation, newness/strangeness, language learning, advancement, and labeling. The ability of participants to build a safe space for conversation in a short time also supports the notion that using whole language approaches to create authentic conversation in adult ESL classrooms is bound to invite adult learners to share personal stories and create collaborative communities in the classroom.

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