



MY TWO BLANKETS TEACHERS' NOTES

WRITTEN BY IRENA KOBALD

ILLUSTRATED BY FREYA BLACKWOOD

PUBLISHED BY HARDIE GRANT EGMONT, MARCH 2014

LEARNING OUTCOMES

Students will:

- Understand the themes of the picture book
- Explore and develop other ways of communicating without language
- Partake in an immersion activity
- Hear more about why the author wrote the book

ABOUT THE STORY

Cartwheel came to a new country to be safe. She was safe, but everything around her was strange. The strangest thing about her new country was the way people spoke. She couldn't understand what people were saying and Cartwheel felt like she wasn't herself anymore.

When she was at home, she could speak her language with her relatives, which made her feel safe and warm. She wanted to be understood like that forever.

Cartwheel was walking in a park and saw another little girl who was about her age. She desperately wanted to smile at the little girl; to speak to her and play with her. But it made her nervous, so instead she kept walking.

Hoping to see the girl again, she went back to the park another day. This time, the girl came up to Cartwheel and said something. Cartwheel couldn't understand what the girl was saying; but the girl was smiling as she was speaking these strange words, so Cartwheel smiled back and played with her on the swings. Cartwheel was glad to have made a friend.

The next time she went back to the park, the girl taught Cartwheel some words. Some were simple words, describing the things around them. They spoke these words over, and over again. Some of the words were easy; easy to remember and easy for Cartwheel to say. Some were hard to say and they sounded funny and strange when Cartwheel said them.



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Bit by bit, Cartwheel started to use these words with her other words. She wove them together so that they didn't feel so foreign anymore. Cartwheel became more and more confident using her new words and she felt less lonely.

She discovers that she can use both of her languages and that being somewhere new does not have to be lonely and frightening. In the end she feels confident and more like herself again.

QUESTIONS & ACTIVITIES

- Ask the children to investigate their life and discover if they know anyone who is new to an environment. It may be a friend or a relative who has recently arrived in Australia, or perhaps started a new job. Even a classmate who has just moved schools. Ask them how they first felt when they arrived in that foreign environment.
- What did they miss most?
- What was really strange?
- Were there different ways of doing things in this new environment?
- If they were arriving from another country, how did English sound to them?
- How did they feel when they had to be in a classroom where everyone spoke a different language?
- When they couldn't understand what was being said on TV/Radio?
- When they couldn't understand ads or billboards?
- When they were given or offered strange food which looked or tasted weird or maybe even awful?
- Did they have a special food which made them feel 'at home'?
- How did they feel when people laughed at them when they made mistakes?
- What did they do if they felt homesick, but knew that they had to stay?
- How did they make their first friends?



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MAKE A LANGUAGE

Freya shows Cartwheel learning new words with use of pictures. Ask the class to describe what they did on the weekend using only pictures.

They should think about every word they would use to describe their experience and create a picture to illustrate what they want to say. They should then present their picture sentences to the class to see if their peers can understand what they are saying.

After they have presented their sentences, ask the students to explain why they chose certain pictures to represent particular words.

IMMERSION ACTIVITY

The author, Irena, mentions that to Cartwheel the words of the new country feel like a 'waterfall' of sound. When Cartwheel begins to use her new words, she is happy to forget the 'cold and lonely waterfall'. This image is used because it is in total contrast to the blanket. While the 'waterfall' is harsh, cold and discomfoting; the blanket is soft, comforting and warm. Irena explains this here:

Whenever I have personally undergone the experience of trying to learn another language, I have 'stood underneath this waterfall' myself, maybe that's why I can so much identify with these emotions. They come from my very personal self and memories. Having an unintelligible language 'poured over' your head for hours a day is draining, exhausting and can be very daunting and even depressing. I think Cartwheel experiences that very clearly.

As a way of giving the children a small taste of this sensation, invite a native or confident speaker of another language to come into the classroom and deliver a short demonstration in the other language, talking at 'normal speed' for 5-10 minutes. The speaker can ask the children questions, and expect a response. This is a miniature 'immersion-experience' and afterwards, you can ask the children how they felt when they couldn't understand what the person was asking of them.



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MORE FROM THE AUTHOR

Why I wrote 'My Two Blankets'?

I had to. It just poured out of me in about half an hour after experiencing a special meeting with Sudanese refugees, where nobody spoke any English for several hours.

The 'blanket' metaphor is a highly personal one because although I have spent more than half of my life in an English-speaking environment, I still love the sounds of my native Austrian dialect and the memories they evoke.

Now, when I go travel to other countries, my English 'blanket' offers the same kind of comfort. Last year I spent some time in Finland and loved the challenge of learning some very basic Finnish – which is much more organized and logical than English.

Sometimes I wish that English would not be spreading with the speed it does because it is almost impossible to escape it at times.