

Boy Soldiers

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Overview

This powerful non-fiction text tells the story of two young soldiers, Stan Stanfield and Len Coley, whose ideas and lives were transformed by their experiences fighting in the First World War. The depiction of war, vividly conveyed through the text and images, is a disturbing one and is likely to prompt a lot of discussion.

The lesson below relies on students having some prior knowledge of the First World War. Even with that knowledge, however, most students are unlikely to have an immediate experience of war to connect to. For this reason, the lesson focuses on using the illustrations and descriptions to help students visualise and respond to the experiences of the two boy soldiers.

When deciding to use this text, teachers will need to be aware of and sensitive to their students' experiences of war. Some refugee students may have recent experiences of war that are traumatic and that need to be addressed outside the classroom.

Note: This article is also included in Selections 2009. See ESOL Online (<http://esolonline.tki.org.nz>) for Selections Teachers' Notes to support English language learners.

Suggested reading purpose and teaching purpose

Based on the information I have about my students' learning needs, what would be appropriate reading and teaching purposes for the lesson?

- To explore a historically factual text that portrays the hard reality of war from the perspective of two young men
- To support the students in developing the comprehension strategies of **visualising** and analysing and synthesising.

Suggested learning goal

We are learning to use the illustrations and descriptions in a text to help us visualise people's real-life experiences.

Success criteria

To support our comprehension of the text, we will:

- identify and share responses to the illustrations (not just what we see but what we imagine we can hear, smell, taste, and touch)
- explore the text to identify the sights, sensations, and emotions that the soldiers experienced
- use the descriptions and our own prior knowledge to help us create pictures in our minds to gain a deeper understanding

- identify and discuss the specific language choices and illustrations that contribute to those pictures.

Features of the text

What are the potential supports of this text in relation to my students' learning needs and to the reading and teaching purposes?

- **Text form:** A non-fiction recount using past-tense verbs.
- **Themes:** The tragic impact of war, even on those soldiers who survived.
- **Supporting themes:** The “idea of war” compared with the “reality of war” – that is, the excitement the boys felt before going to war versus the disillusionment they felt when they got there.
- **Structure and organisation:**
 - The parallel stories of Stan and Len, including the fact that both lied to join the army
 - The glossary at the end, with bold text to indicate the glossary entries throughout
 - The images that help the reader to visualise the experiences of the soldiers, including:
 - the picture of the soldiers training, which conveys a sense of order and calm
 - the picture of the celebratory farewell to the soldiers leaving for war
 - the images showing the horror and chaos of war, including in the trenches
 - the photos of Stan and Len
 - the photo of the seemingly endless lines of war graves (the result of war).
- **Language choices:** The text features that help the reader to visualise the experiences of the soldiers, including:
 - the vivid descriptions (“wildly enthusiastic”, “the rumbles and flashes were like Ngāuruhoe erupting”, “feeling like ‘gun fodder’”)
 - the details (the moment on the farm described at the start, the description of the sergeant cutting his hand off, and “Len had to bury a mother and her baby”)
 - the quotes from Stan and Len (“the only place I felt at home was in the pub”, “I could hear the shells wailing and the machine guns firing”, “I have felt nothing more than a corpse floating in a shell hole of stagnant water”)
 - The extract from the poem published in the 1914 *School Journal*, which reflects the feelings of Stan and Len before going to war.

- **Specific vocabulary:**
 - The language of war, including the names of places and events, for example, “war had been declared”, “cadets”, “soldiers”, “rifle”, “training camps”, “marching drills”, “shooting”, “serve”, “enlisting”, “British Empire”, “medical examination”, “army headquarters”, “unfit to fight”, “troopship”, “battles”, “Western Front”, “trenches”, “Salisbury Plain”, “military base”, “Battle of the Somme”, “Battle of Messines”, “ammunition”, “bullet belts”, “rations”, “bayonet”, “charge the enemy”, “heavy fire”, “shell hole”, “sergeant”, “shrapnel”, “tourniquet”, “Passchendaele”, “gas masks”, “battalion”, “shelling”, “attack”, “Allies”, “Jack Johnsons”, “machine guns”, “Ypres”
 - The colloquial language of the time, for example, “bunkum”, “blundered”, “gun fodder”.

Readability

Noun frequency level: 9.5–10.5 years for guided reading

What text features might challenge my students and require a prompt or a brief explanation?

- The incomprehensibility (for students) of the experience and effects of war
- The names of the places and events of the war
- Particular words and concepts, including “rheumatic fever”, “shovel”, “bunkum”, “blundered”, “forearm partially severed”, “tendons”, “came to”, “baited”, “rubble”, and “kerosene”, as well as the language of war (see Features of the Text)
- The historical and geographical context of the First World War.

What prior knowledge or experience might help my students to read this text?

- **Knowledge of the world:** Their knowledge of the First World War or other wars (for example, the war in Iraq), including through their studies, family stories, books, or films
- **Literacy-related knowledge:**
 - Interpreting and finding information in historical factual texts
 - Using visualising to imagine and picture a setting, events, or experiences.

Preparation for reading

- This lesson depends on a certain level of knowledge about the First World War. If you are using the text around Anzac Day, you may have done suitable preparation already. If, however, this text is going to be your starting point for a unit, you will need to provide your students with some background information, as below. (Making connections)

- Introduce a recent article or newspaper story about a current war to activate prior knowledge of war and the hardships of soldiers and civilians. (Making connections)
- Bring in a selection of books about the war a week before the lesson. The books might include sophisticated picture books, short novels, or non-fiction works. Introduce each book, for example: “This book is about ... If you like real-life action stories, then you may like this one.” Let the students choose a book to browse through. Then have them share with a partner or small group what they have read and discovered. Books of photos would also be useful. Newspapers in Education offers some useful photo packs, including a photo of the youngest-ever Anzac soldier. (Making connections)
- In the day or two before reading, introduce vocabulary from the text that your students may struggle with, for example, the language of war. The students could categorise the nouns according to whether they are names of places, battles, people, weapons, or other equipment of war. (Building vocabulary)

A framework for the lesson

How will I help my students to achieve the reading purpose and the learning goal?

Before reading

- Briefly revisit your book-browsing and/or photo viewing activity. Draw out the students’ impressions of the war. (Making connections)
- Have a world map at hand. Show the students Europe, noticing how far it is from New Zealand. If they know about Gallipoli, point out Turkey. Also show the regions mentioned in the text – France, Belgium, England, Germany. (Making connections)
- Share the reading purpose with the students and briefly introduce the text.

Pages 2–3

- Discuss the title. “I wonder what ‘boy soldiers’ refers to?” Look at the illustrations. “What sort of impression or feeling do you get from these images?” Discuss the sense of order and regimentation in the first. “What’s happening in the picture of the boat?” Notice the streamers and smiling faces, and draw out the sense of celebration. Also observe the map, noting that the boundaries of the countries were different at the time, for example, the Czech Republic does not appear. (Visualising; analysing and synthesising)
- “Let’s keep these images in mind and notice any changes as we read.” Explain that you will be looking at the picture of war that the text builds through both its illustrations and its descriptions. “We’re going to hear about the experiences of two people, Stan and Len.” Record the names on A3 paper, ready to create mind maps of the sights, sensations, and emotions the two boys experienced. (You could divide the group in half

and have one group focus on Stan and the other on Len). (Visualising; analysing and synthesising)

- Share the learning goal and success criteria with the students.

During reading

Refer to Effective Literacy Practice in Years 5 to 8, pages 80–93, for information about deliberate acts of teaching.

Pages 2–3

- “I’ve noticed that the boys both felt strongly about going to war.” Draw out their excitement and sense of duty. “What parts of the text indicate this?” Remind the students to record these aspects on their mind maps. (Analysing and synthesising)

Pages 4–5

- Explore the illustrations. “What’s your response to these images?” Encourage the students to consider the effect on their senses: “What sounds, smells, and tastes can you imagine? What about your sense of touch? Can you imagine how the boys might feel after their initial excitement?” Discuss how these images of horror and chaos contrast with the illustrations on the previous pages. “Add to your mind maps.” (Visualising; analysing and synthesising)
- Ask the students to read the text and record the sights, sensations, and emotions that Stan and Len experienced. (Analysing and synthesising)
- “Having read about these experiences, what other sensations come to mind?” Imagine the feel and taste of mud, the sensation of being covered in lice, the smell of rats, the taste of blood, the sensation of hunger, and the volume of the explosions. To get a sense of what carrying all the equipment would be like, you could load willing students with weights and have them cross the school field. (Visualising)
- “What did the author do in order for you to feel and sense those things?” (Analysing and synthesising)
- Discuss why the sergeant jokes about losing his arm. Draw out the idea that humour can be a coping mechanism. (Inferring; making connections)

Pages 6–7

- Explore the illustrations. “What do you think is going on here? How might the people feel?” (Inferring; visualising)
- Have the students read the text and go through the same process of recording Stan and Len’s experiences (sights, sensations, and emotions). (Analysing and synthesising)
- Discuss the meaning of “gun fodder”. Establish the literal meaning (“food for guns”) before inferring the metaphorical meaning (they were fighting a hopeless battle). Discuss why Stan felt there was no place for him back home except in the pub. Remind the students that the two soldiers were still only boys. (Building vocabulary; inferring)

Pages 8–9

- Explore the images. Discuss what the man in the illustration might be holding and what the fire could be. “What is your response to seeing the photos of Stan and Len?” (Clarify that both are dead now and that the photos are from the past.) Discuss the image of the war graves. “Does this image help you to visualise the impact of war? In what way?” Observe the seemingly endless graves, the well-kept flowers (indicating the impact on others), and the code “20A” in the foreground. Link to the sheer number of war deaths and the idea of soldiers as “just numbers”. (Forming hypotheses; visualising)
- Ask the students to read and check their hypotheses and to add to the mind maps. (Testing hypotheses, analysing and synthesising)
- “I wonder why Len visited the old battlefields after his experiences there?” (Inferring; making connections)

After reading

- Review the mind maps and tease out any important ideas. Discuss the transformation that both boy soldiers went through. Elicit the idea that death is just one tragedy of war – another is the lasting effect on those who survive. (Analysing and synthesising)
- “What overall picture of war do you have after reading this text?” Point out that the students are similar in age to the boys when war was declared. Encourage them to make connections with their own lives: “Can you imagine leaving your family and friends and going into that sort of environment?” (Visualising; making connections)
- Discuss the impact of the illustrations and photos in helping to imagine what the war was like. Compare the colourful images on pages 2 and 3 with those later on – dark and almost drained of colour. Point out the wire separating the images – a symbol of entrapment. (Analysing and synthesising; visualising)
- With reference to the mind maps, discuss what specific aspects of the text helped to build a picture of war. Draw out the author’s use of vivid descriptions, details, and quotes. (Analysing and synthesising; visualising)
- With the students, review the learning goal and success criteria and reflect on how well the learning goal has been achieved. “Explain how visualising when reading this text helped you to comprehend the experience of war.” Note any teaching points for future sessions.

Links to further learning

What follow-up tasks will help my students to consolidate their new learning?

The students could:

- revisit the text (copied) and highlight the phrases or sentences that support their visualisation. This could be done using a graphic organiser.

Phrase or sentence from the story	How it affects my senses or how it
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	creates a picture in my mind

- write a diary entry and a postcard home from Len’s or Stan’s perspective – “Does your private record differ from what you tell your loved ones?” (Making connections)
- read books such as *Letters from the Coffin-Trenches*, by Ken Catran or *Scarecrow Army* by Leon Davidson (Making connections)
- listen to and explore songs about war, such as “Waltzing Matilda”, by the Pogues, or others they know (Making connections)
- compare the text with “Hingakākā” (SJ 4.1.09), focusing on how “Boy Soldiers” tells a side of the story not told in “Hingakākā” – the negative impact of war (Making connections)
- further explore (as part of a visual unit) the illustrations and layout, focusing on the impact they have and the meaning they convey. (Making connections; visualising)