

What did you eat for breakfast?

By Sheryl Zeunert

I was terrified the first time I went to volunteer at Helping Link. I went in to observe, to watch other tutors teach English. I figured if it wasn't too hard I could start as a teaching assistant, and finally move up to be a tutor after a few months. It turned out it only took fifteen minutes before I had my own class.



The tutor for Level Two did not show up that Thursday night, so Minh asked if I could take over. My hands shook as I wrote my name on the board. Ten people stared at me, hoping I could help them learn English. I started with the idea of breakfast. I asked the questions, "Did you eat breakfast? What time did you eat breakfast? What did you eat for breakfast? Where did you eat breakfast?"

I wrote each question on the board and wrote down each of their answers. All ten students copied down everything I wrote on the board. After doing about twenty questions and answers, one of my students raised her hand and pointed to the board. I looked over my work in horror. I had written the word breakfast as 'breakfeast' twenty different times on the board. In my haste to erase my misspelling I pressed too hard on the precariously balanced white board and the entire thing toppled onto my head.

Time moved slowly that night. When it was finally 8:00 I ended the class. I was exhausted. I decided I wouldn't come back, it was too hard. The students deserved better. I couldn't teach them English. I dismissed the class and all ten students got up to leave.



As I dejectedly wiped off the board and all my misspellings one of the students stood shyly to the side. I looked up, thinking she might tell me other things I had done wrong in class. She said in a barely audible whisper, "I like you teacher, you are a good teacher." From that moment on I was hooked.

Since then, I have taught two quarters of Level Two. I have attended the ESL training that is available to all Helping Link tutors. I have learned how to put a lesson plan together, how to engage even the shyest student into conversation, and how to get the class learning and laughing at the same time. Most importantly, I've learned to check my spelling as I write. My students have not only taught me how to be a better teacher, but they have taught me important lessons about life.

Many have had very difficult lives in Vietnam. They have left their loved ones to come to the United States where they work long hours for minimal pay. And yet, they all manage to come to class twice a week and work very hard to learn English. Their energy, spirit and enthusiasm have enriched my life.