

Paired Stories

Introduction

In each pair, both stories have a similar subject. The stories in the first series vary in length from about 250 words, to about 800, but the two stories in each pair have more or less the same length. In the second series, all the stories are between 900 and 1100 words long.

The stories have been written in a style of English which is designed to be as comprehensible as possible to readers with limited reading skills. In other words:

- to keep sentence structure as straightforward as possible
- to avoid very long sentences
- to avoid *unnecessarily* difficult vocabulary
- when it is necessary to use difficult words, to use them literally and with the meaning they most commonly have — and also to provide contextual clues as to their meaning
- in the first series, idiomatic language — including idiomatic multi-word verbs — was avoided as much as possible. In the second series, the language is somewhat more idiomatic and a considerable number of idiomatic multi-word verbs have been used. I intend to explain the idiomatic vocabulary in 'meaning notes'.

In the hope of making the readings more engaging and making new vocabulary items more easily memorable, all the stories have been centered on a particular person — or, in a few cases, on a couple.

I wrote the first series of stories to use in my own classrooms. The activity described in the following section evolved over a period of several months. I would be pleased, of course, if other teachers tried to use the activity I developed and found it successful, but I realize that many teachers will not find the activity attractive — even as an experiment. It requires a whole day for one thing. For another, it works better in a spacious classroom — and one in which furniture can easily be moved around. It is also much easier to use successfully in a multi-lingual class than in a uni-lingual one, or one where a single language predominates. And beyond all that, because the activity is complex and demanding, a good deal of explanation and exhortation is required, especially on the first two or three occasions the activity is used.

Despite my misgivings about how generally useful my method of using the stories might be, I have high hopes for the stories themselves. It seems to me that there is a real shortage — in textbooks, and on the web — of simply written, clearly organized texts that are suitable for use in ESL classrooms. I also feel that the texts that are available tend to be either short and bland or, in the case of texts aimed at developing 'academic' reading skills, unappealingly formal and abstract.

My idea in publishing the stories here is to provide reading materials that will be useful to others who feel as I do about the shortage of useful texts — both teachers and students working on their own.

I realize that the stories themselves are, at best, a first step in the right direction. Conventional supplementary materials are also required. Those materials — vocabulary

lists, vocabulary development exercises, 'notes' on grammar and meaning, and extra readings and reading activities for each of the stories — will follow as soon as possible

How I Used the First Series of Stories in the Classroom

- (1) The class is divided into two isolated groups. One group reads one of the stories in a pair; the other group reads the other story. If the activity is being done for the first time, the students are told that each group has been given a completely different story and that, after having read the story they have been given, they will be required, individually, to retell it to the people in the other group without using the text or any notes.

Depending on the reading abilities of the class, this stage should take between twenty and forty minutes.

- (2) As the students finish reading their story, they start discussing it with other students in their group. They ask each other questions about things they found difficult to understand. If they find any differences of opinion about the details of the story, they try to resolve them by consulting the text.

Needless to say, some students will have understood the story better than others . (The idea at this stage is to use *verbal* communication to spread the information around as evenly as possible. It's important to explain this to the students. And it's important to remind them regularly that it's the responsibility of those who *did* understand well to tell the ones who didn't what they missed — and the responsibility of those who *didn't* understand well to get the whole story by listening to the others and asking them the right questions.)

- (3) When everyone has had a reasonable amount of time — say fifteen or twenty minutes to discuss the story, then the texts (and any 'notes') are taken away. Working in groups of three to five, the students then take turns practicing retelling the stories. They should be encouraged to correct each other's pronunciation at this stage — but only when they feel it is so poor as to be a serious barrier to communication.

At this stage the students should also be talking about *how* the story should be told — what should be emphasized what should be left out. They should be reminded that they will have only five or six minutes for their retell — and will have to answer questions not repeat themselves during that time.

No writing or use of dictionaries is allowed at this stage. (Confusion and disagreement about word meanings should be resolved by discussion or by asking the teacher.)

- (4) The students sit opposite each other, everyone directly across from a partner in the other group. (One long narrow 'table' made by moving individual desks works well.) They are given ten to twelve minutes to trade stories. Then the students on one side shift one space to their left and the retelling is repeated. This is repeated three or four times.

Before the retelling begins — especially if the activity is being done for the first time — it's important to emphasize that everyone must tell their story to each of their partners, **and** hear the other story from each of their partners. It's also important to emphasize that it's the responsibility of anyone who can't understand what their partner is saying to insist on repetition, clarity, simplicity of language, et cetera.

After the first or second retelling it's important to ask whether everyone has a basic understanding of the 'other' story. If anyone protests that they don't know anything about the other story because they haven't heard it yet, it's important to remind them that this means they've been spending too much time telling their **own** story.

If anyone protests that they've heard different versions of the story from different partners, then they should be encouraged to ask their next partner for clarification. Before the last exchange, everyone should be told to begin, this time, by telling the 'other' story — as a way of checking comprehension and also as preparation for the writing that will follow.

No books, paper, or writing implements are allowed at this stage.

This stage lasts for about twenty to sixty minutes depending on the level of the class.

- (5) Everyone writes down the story they were told. Dictionaries are allowed but no notes can be used. Important proper names are written on the board.

This stage lasts for about half an hour.

The 'Philosophy'

The idea is to get **everyone** working intensely, enthusiastically, and productively one hundred percent of the time over an extended period — a full session lasts about three hours — and to ensure that approximately equal amounts of time are spent on reading, speaking, listening, and writing.

The method succeeds in doing this because of

- (1) **the emphasis on *both* cooperation and individual enterprise:**

Even the weakest, most passive students participate fully and energetically. This apparently is the result of being given the responsibility of explaining their story, one-on-one, to several people who have not read it — and having to do so without being able to consult the text or notes, or to write anything down.

- (2) **the emphasis on memory, understanding, and communication:**

At first, students are disturbed by the requirement that they must carry complex information in their heads and pass it on verbally — and even more disturbed by the fact that they must receive complex information aurally and understand it well enough to reproduce it in writing. They quickly get used to the discipline, however, and accept it happily: they push themselves to **understand** what they are reading because they realize that if they don't understand it they won't be able to **remember** it well enough to **communicate** it.

Copyright

The information in the stories was found in newspaper and magazine articles. References to the sources are provided at the end of each story. The stories are not simplifications or rewrites. They are original creations which take information — and *only* information — from the cited sources.

With the exception of a few cases where I have requoted the actual words of one of the people in the stories, no sentences, or even phrases, have been taken from the original.

In most cases the information in the stories comes from several sources. In a few cases in the first series and in two cases in the second series I have taken the information from one source only. However, even in those cases where only one source has been used, my stories are completely independent of the sources both in terms of language and in terms of organization.

I retain the copyright for the stories, but hereby grant anyone the right to use any of this material in whole or part for any non-commercial purpose.

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