

Story Retelling with a Twist

LEVEL: Lower Intermediate and above

TIME REQUIRED: About 45 minutes

GOALS: To engage learners of all ages in listening and speaking practice; to have students comprehend and retell stories with a “twist”

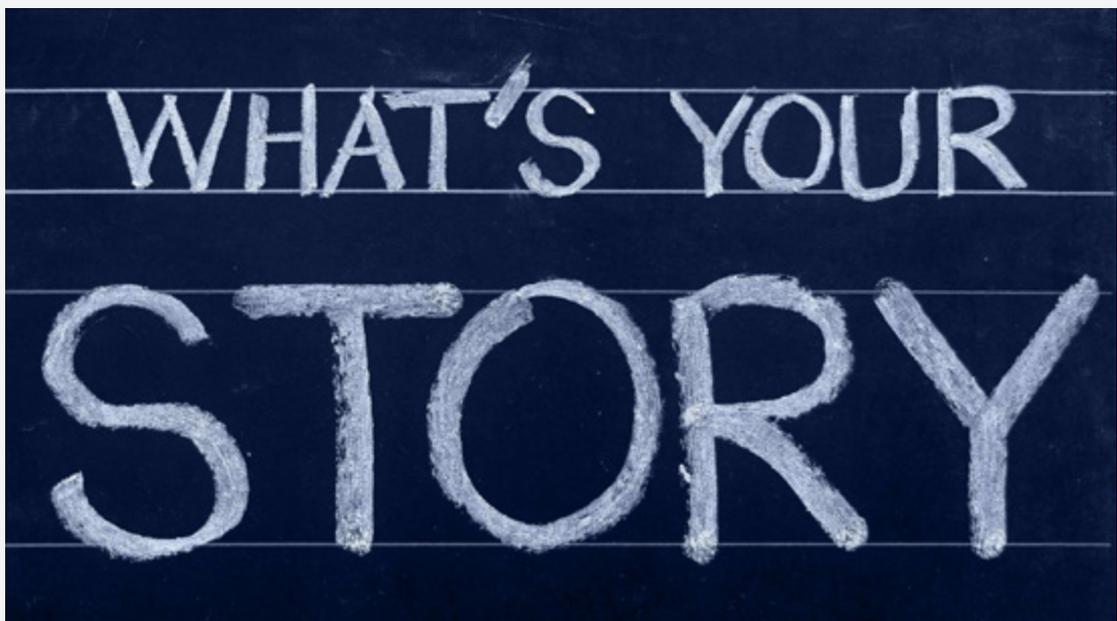
MATERIALS: One or more jokes or very short stories with a surprising ending

OVERVIEW: Who doesn't like to listen to a good story or a good-natured joke? Stories hold our attention, and in language classes, they allow students to listen to a model of extended and connected talk or discourse. However, mere exposure to extended discourse is not enough for production. This is the same for any skill. Most of us cannot simply watch someone dance and be able to replicate the moves without an instructor

breaking them down into steps. In addition, we need to put them all together to be able to enjoy and understand the dance.

So, too, with language: in order to move our students beyond words and sentences, we need to expose them to longer and longer stretches of connected speech and have them participate in this type of talk as well. Story retelling is a motivating way to extend our students' speech with a well-scaffolded structure.

Story Retelling with a Twist is a cooperative extended-discourse task with built-in scaffolding. With a few adjustments to fit age, language levels, and cultural contexts, this is a versatile activity that will motivate your whole class and keep students engaged. “Twists”—unexpected and surprising endings—pique student interest. I learned about the activity from a Hungarian



colleague while working as an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher in Debrecen, Hungary. I have also used it with Hungarian university students, with Latin American and Polish adult immigrants in community-based programs in the United States, and with Mexican children in private elementary schools in central Mexico.

PREPARATION:

1. Find a very short story or joke with a twist. Make sure the story or joke is at your students' listening level. A few examples are provided at the end of this article; you can adapt them if you need to.
2. Practice reading the story or joke so that you can read it fluently, with the correct timing for the twist at the end.
3. Identify potentially troubling grammar structures or new vocabulary. Decide how you will present these, whether with a quick drawing, gestures, the presentation of objects, or another method that you feel comfortable with. *Keep in mind that the activity works best if students are already familiar with the grammar and vocabulary in the story.*

PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students, "I am going to tell you a story." Then add, "You must listen carefully. After I finish telling the story, you will tell the same story yourselves."
2. Divide the class into groups of no larger than four or five students. If it is not possible to move desks or for groups to go to another place in the room, make sure the group members are sitting next to one another.
3. Choose one person from each group to step outside the classroom. You could do this by specifying the person with the longest or shortest hair, the one whose birthday is next, or some other

distinguishing detail. These students will be the "storytellers." If it is not possible for students to go outside the room, give the storytellers a short task to complete as a group, such as a crossword puzzle or a word search.

4. After these students—the storytellers—are out of listening range, teach or review key vocabulary (and grammar, if necessary). Be sure to leave these words visible for easy reference during the group retelling. Again, you should try to keep new vocabulary and grammar points to a minimum.
5. Read the story once at a slow place, and then read it again normally. It is important to *read* the story to make sure you tell it in exactly the same way each time. You may want to read it a third time if students insist. You may also want to ask a few comprehension questions. I don't allow my students to take notes in this activity because I want them to focus on listening only.
6. Call the storytellers back into the room and have them return to their groups.
7. The group members tell the story to their storyteller once or twice, as needed. Do not give them a copy of the story. Emphasize that everyone is responsible for telling the story to the storyteller in the group. To make sure this happens, you might want to give each group a talking piece that is passed around the group. No one can have another turn until each member has contributed something. If someone needs assistance, though, other group members may help.
8. Send all the storytellers out of the room again except for one, who will stand or sit in the front of the room.
9. Have this first storyteller retell the story or joke to the class.

10. Call the next storyteller into the room and repeat Step 9 until each storyteller has retold the story.
11. Have the class clap or snap after each retelling. You can have students who are listening let each storyteller know what he or she left out, as well as some things the storyteller did well.
12. An optional step is to give each group a few minutes to choose the best storyteller or storytelling group and to provide reasons for the choice.

VARIATIONS

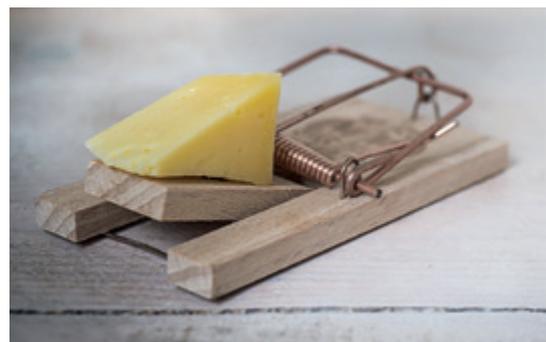
1. For large classes, after the storytellers have heard the story from their groups, have all the storytellers stay in the room but move to a different group to retell the story. You can repeat this process once.
2. At the beginning of the activity, divide the class into three groups. In this version, everyone stays in the room. As you tell the story, have one group write down nouns in the story, another group jot down verbs, and the third group write adjectives. Then allow members of the same group to compare notes before putting members from each grammar group together to reconstruct the story orally.
3. Follow up the activity by having each group write down the story with as much detail as possible.
4. Have each group come up with its own twist for the story. You could leave the twist ending out during the original telling. (You can consider doing this the second or third time you try the activity, after students are familiar with it.)
5. After several story-retelling sessions, have groups choose their favorite story to act out in front of the class, with props. They can write a script beforehand.

Considerations for Choosing a Story

- Choose a story that you like. If you are genuinely enthusiastic about reading it, the students will be receptive.
- Make it short and lively. Although Variation 1 gives a suggestion for using the activity with large classes, it is not advisable to have too many groups retelling the same story. Hearing each group's version is fun, but five groups is the limit for a very short story or joke such as those included below.
- Stories with twists make listening fun and retelling motivating for your students.
- Simple stories are best. Choose stories at the students' listening and speaking level, not above. It is excellent practice for them to listen to an entire story and repeat it, especially if this is their first time doing so. Make sure you choose stories with no more than one or two new key words or phrases that are essential to understanding and telling the story.
- Find a culturally appropriate story. If you are not sure about this, ask someone from the culture and/or a supervisor.

SAMPLE STORY AND JOKES

A Story: "The Lady and the Mouse"



Mousetrap with cheese

One day a lady went to her kitchen for a snack. When she opened her refrigerator, she saw a mouse running across the floor.

She was frightened of mice, so she screamed and stood on a chair. The mouse was frightened by the lady's scream, so it ran away. So the lady climbed down from the chair, took her purse, and went to the store to buy a mousetrap. The man at the store gave her a mousetrap and showed her how it works. He told her to put a piece of cheese in the trap.

When she got home, she realized that she didn't have any cheese in her refrigerator. So she cut out a picture of a piece of cheese from a magazine. After she set the trap, she turned off the light and went to bed. The next morning, she saw that the mousetrap had worked! Inside the trap, next to the picture of the piece of cheese, was a picture of a mouse!

A Joke: "The Duck and the Grapes"



"Do you have any grapes?"

A duck waddles into a convenience store and goes up to the cashier.

The cashier says, "Can I help you?"

The duck says, "Yes, please. Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier looks at him strangely and says, "No, I'm afraid we don't. You might want to go to the supermarket down the road."

The duck waddles away.

The next day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same convenience store and asks the same cashier, "Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier looks at the duck closely and says, "Hey! Weren't you the same duck that was here yesterday? Look, we don't have any grapes. OK? Like I said, there is a supermarket down the road."

The duck seems satisfied with the answer and waddles out the door and down the street.

The next day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same convenience store with the same cashier standing behind the counter.

The duck asks, "Excuse me, sir. Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier is visibly angry and yells, "Look. What's your problem? You came in here yesterday asking for grapes and I told you that WE DON'T HAVE ANY GRAPES! If you come in here again asking for grapes, I'm going to nail your beak to the counter. Now, GET OUT OF HERE!"

The duck's feathers are ruffled, and he quickly waddles out of the store and down the street.

The following day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same store and walks up to the same cashier, and the cashier says, "I told you to get out of here. What do you want?"

The duck asks, "Do you have any nails?"

The cashier shouts, "No, of course we don't have nails!"

And the duck replies, "So, do you have any grapes?"

A Joke: “The Man and the Penguin”



Penguins

A man is driving down the highway with his pet penguin. He is driving fast, so he gets stopped by a police officer for speeding. As the officer hands the man a speeding ticket, she notices that he has a penguin in the back seat. She asks the driver, “Where are you going with that penguin?”

The man answers, “I’m taking it to the zoo.”

The officer agrees that that is the best place for a penguin and lets them go.

One week later, the same man is stopped by the same police officer for speeding again. The officer notices the penguin in the back of the car again and says, “You told me last time that you were taking that penguin to the zoo.”

The man answers, “Yes, I did take it to the zoo last week. Today we are going to the movies.”

RESOURCE FOR JOKES

The Internet TESL Journal. “Jokes in English for the ESL/EFL Classroom: A Project of the Internet TESL Journal.” <http://iteslj.org/c/jokes-long.html> (This site offers long jokes, short jokes, riddles, and other materials that can be used for teaching English.)

This activity was written by **Wendy Coulson**, a 2017–2018 English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia, who has served as an English Language Specialist in Jordan and Tunisia with Libyan teacher trainers. She is an education consultant who designs education programs for NGO development projects and creates EFL curriculum and teacher-training courses, specializing in teaching young learners, community-based education, and limited-resource classrooms.