

Cultural Introductions by Way of Storytelling

by MATTHEW JELICK



This introductory lesson is something I have used on the first day of class with students around the globe. The activity touches on each of the skill sets associated with English language acquisition, with special attention paid to cultural issues that can be applied on a country-by-country basis. No matter what country you use this technique in, the goal is to create an inviting lesson in which students exercise English abilities while sharing their cultural and personal norms (or exceptions). Whether you are a local teacher or foreign instructor, the technique offers many variations, as each of us is unique, with different likes and dislikes to share. Depending on the circumstances in your classroom, the technique can be used as a warm-up activity or take up an entire hour-long session.

The technique is based on the notion of a “Mad Lib.” You, as the teacher, make up a creative story to share with the class, leaving

blank key cultural and personal references particular to the country and individual students. By incorporating examples of celebrities, foods, music, places, and other culture-specific customs, this activity enables the students to finish their own stories, highlighting their individual preferences as the unique part that completes each sentence.

You can decide on the vocabulary used in the story, allowing for specific skill-level application in accordance with the class’s collective mastery of English. Length can be adjusted as well, shortening or expanding the exercise based on the class’s ability. There is no story too basic or too short to use as a framework for this technique, and in fact, only a sentence or two could replace a full paragraph.

Before students complete their own stories, it may be a good idea to demonstrate a sample story aloud to clarify vocabulary while

sharing examples from your own culture or personal experiences. (Just as it is useful for a teacher to learn about his or her students, it is likewise a benefit for the students to learn about their teacher.)

An example I could use with respect to the foods and places I grew up with as an American is to fill in the blanks in the sentence “When we went for a walk in _____, we *grew hungry* and decided to stop for _____” like this: “When we went for a walk in **Los Angeles**, we *grew hungry* and decided to stop for **chicken tacos**.” Here, I would stop and discuss the phrase “grew hungry” as vocabulary practice while also noting the American-specific submissions of “Los Angeles” and “chicken tacos.” I might also show pictures of Los Angeles and of chicken tacos to support the cognitive processes affiliated with learning about new places and foods.

For that same sentence, Korean students could have put “Seoul” and “kimchi” in the blanks, while Ethiopians might have used “Addis” and “injera.” One strength of this technique is that it can be used in countless countries and still have the desired academic and cultural reach.

After you complete the sample story and clarify new vocabulary, give the students a turn to fill in their own distinctive answers. One way to do this is to give each student a copy of the story with the blanks to fill in. Another way is to write the story, with the blanks, on the board or a piece of poster paper. Encouraging creativity—letting students make the story funny, scary, or anything else—goes a long way in making this an enjoyable exercise; such creativity promotes the individuality of the culture and personal preferences being addressed, but moreover, it stimulates student interest. If student input elicits laughter or equally enthusiastic emotions, then the chances of the exercise resulting in meaningful learning will be increased.

After each student has completed his or her respective story, one way to touch upon the language skill of speaking would be to pick individual students to read their stories aloud. (Stories can also be created and shared in

pairs or groups, shortening the attention-span deficit while allowing students to work together.) This approach gives students practice in pronunciation and experience speaking in front of a class; at the same time, it provides a sense of ownership and pride at sharing their personalized stories with the class. Here, each student or partner can share his or her favorite musician, movie star, and food with the rest of the class while the teacher fills in the blanks on the story written on the board. In most cases, this will provoke laughter, agreement, or casual comments from others, forming a classroom bond through language practice. If the class is small, each student could read just one sentence, culminating in a group-wide completion of the story as opposed to numerous individual stories. Class size and length can dictate what route you choose with respect to personal sharing or partner/group sharing.

This technique is geared towards an introductory class that encourages students who might not know each other to share their own individual preferences. There is no right or wrong answer to any of the blanks in the story, only an opportunity to share specifics about what we like, where we come from, and how that affects each of us individually.

Encouraging students to introduce themselves and their culture on the first day of class becomes a learning opportunity for me as a teacher; I gain insight into the ages, personalities, and preferences of my students. This opens up pathways to information that I can use later in the course. Having that initial information about my students’ likes, I am able to highlight them throughout the semester.

I have had success with this technique in various classrooms and countries. It is a creative and fun way to introduce myself to the class and in turn to learn more about my students’ culture and interests. The technique is also a means of informal assessment because I can take note of speaking skills during the oral recitation. More of a fun exercise than anything on which to base an exam, this technique serves as a first-class activity when you are working with a new

culture in an unfamiliar country, or simply with a class where you want to learn about your students' interests.

EXTENSIONS AND VARIATIONS

To extend the lesson, have students create the entire story, not just fill in the cultural blanks. This could be done individually for homework or, if time allows, with the class as a whole working together to set the "plot" of the story, perhaps with a more culturally specific setting. "Driving in a car," for example, is not something all students can relate to on a daily basis, and, depending on the context, "riding in a bus" might be more appropriate. Again, this technique can be adapted for different cultures and their respective norms, and in accordance with student ability levels.

The Sample Story is meant to serve as an example. Rather than using it, you could create a plot about going to the beach, taking a family vacation, seeing a movie, or whatever seems appropriate for your class. Preparation is minimal, with creativity being the most integral component in making this a successful lesson.

Sample Story

As we trekked through the city of _____, my pet _____ and I became tired due to the extreme humidity. "I could sure use something to drink," I thought, looking around for a store. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted a small market that was sure to sell some delicious _____, a drink that would refresh. (Pet) and I crossed the street and went inside, where the air conditioning was nice and cool. Walking around the store, we overheard the familiar sounds of _____ playing from the speakers above, putting a little bounce in our step. We continued to walk up and down the aisles and, in addition to getting a drink, picked up a delicious snack of _____. As we approached the counter to pay, we were surprised to see that the actress _____ was there buying some candy. Since I thought this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, I asked for an autograph, excited to meet my favorite movie star. Soon though we were back outside

in the heat, but at least refreshed from the cool and quenching drink. With little time to spare before the start of the television program _____, I decided we'd catch a ride home in a _____ so that we wouldn't be late. Arriving at home tired, I thought about my afternoon, amazed at what had transpired. Hoping for a relaxing evening, I took a rest, knowing that tomorrow my job as a _____ would be hard, with a long week ahead.

NOTES

- The story can be shorter, depending on the number and level of students you have and other varying circumstances. (See the simplified sample at the end of the article.)
- Fill in the blanks with your own creative ideas to demonstrate; then have students fill in their own ideas.
- You might want to highlight new vocabulary words and phrases for your students.

Sample Story (Simplified)

My pet _____ and I walked through the city of _____. We became tired. "I need something to drink," I thought. I saw a market that sold my favorite drink, delicious _____. (Pet) and I went inside. In the store, we heard the song _____ playing from the speakers. We found the drink and a delicious snack of _____. While we waited to pay, we saw the actress _____ buying some candy. I was excited to meet my favorite movie star and asked for an autograph. But it was almost time for the television program _____. (Pet) and I rode home in a _____ so that we wouldn't be late. After the program, I took a rest, knowing that tomorrow my job as a _____ would be hard.

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