

# The power of storytelling: a book review of *More True Stories*

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## OVERVIEW

*More True Stories* by Sandra Heyer (2009) is a collection of 22 short stories written for an ESL audience of high-beginners. A typical story is about half a page long and is followed by a series of multiple-choice/fill in the blank questions that focus on reading comprehension. The unit ends with a discussion question which asks the students to offer a unique or interesting opinion about the topic. The stories in *More True Stories* are mostly human interest much like the ones that you are likely to hear at the end of a local news cast. The stories are upbeat and lack a complex story line. An example of one such story is the story about a Japanese dog that swam several hours to find his master. Other stories in this book are lackluster because they don't have a real beginning, middle, and end but overlooking these less inspired stories most teachers will find the stories presented in the book are interesting and funny and sometimes thought provoking.

## RIGHT LEVEL FOR YOUR STUDENTS?

There are two factors that will make these stories difficult for your students: vocabulary and issues related to listening comprehension. Vocabulary plays a pivotal role in comprehension. Nation (2001:2) reports that a listener needs to be able to take in and understand 95% of the vocabulary for comprehension to occur. Incomplete understanding of the vocabulary will leave the students unable to understand the story. Many teachers assume the students can understand the vocabulary in context, but as Batia, et al. (2005: 3) detail in their article, teachers cannot “count on guessing strategies to replace vocabulary knowledge”.

Accompanying the book is a CD that contains the reading of the story told at a native-speaker speed. How does the teacher match the level of the CD to the student's ability? Listening is also another obstacle to comprehension. Although the students may be able to read and understand a story, listening and comprehending the same story is a more difficult challenge. Some listening issues

include interest, cultural accessibility, and length of the passage, pronunciation issues, speed and density of the passage. Wilson (2008:33) states that CDs that accompany reading texts have a lot of difficult listening issues that will often leave most students unable to understand even the general meaning of the stories they are listening to. The best way to make the stories assessable to students is to break down a story into 6–8 sentences and provide L1 translation for the difficult vocabulary. Breaking down the story into smaller manageable chunks will solve some of the issues that were talked about earlier, most notable speed, text density and length. The teacher can manage unfamiliar vocabulary by providing a quick L1 translation.

## LESSON IDEAS

There are a lot of different ways that a simple story can be used in class and in this section I would like to present a few. Most of these are from Folse (2006).

- Mystery ending. Read the story but leave out the ending and have the students guess the ending.
- Jigsaw puzzle. Cut the story into 8 sentences and hand one sentence to each student. The students read their sentence out loud to each other and then put the story in the proper order. Be sure to avoid cutting the story from one sheet of paper because the students will just put the story together by matching the cut paper.
- Cartoon the story. Divide students into groups. Each group reads a different story. Hand out a paper with 8 blank panels. Each of the groups will read the story. They are not allowed to take notes but they can draw pictures in the 8 panels. Now students tell the story to a new group by showing the pictures as they tell the story.
- Retelling the story. Have the students get into pairs and hand out an 8 panel cartoon of the story. Student A will look at the pictures and tell the story to student B. After this is done the teacher will retell the story and accept questions. The students will have a chance to take clues from the teacher and improve their story. Student A will tell the story again. Then

the teacher will again retell the story and take questions. Repeat this process several times.

Overall I would highly recommend *More True Stories*. Of course there are some caveats. The teacher needs to focus on comprehension and especially on vocabulary comprehension. Next the teacher needs to make sure that the lesson is presented in a way that is interesting to the student. What makes this book so effective is that it can be used in a lot of different ways.

### **References**

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