

THE STRIP STORY :

Making It Work For You

by Mark James

Many teachers are familiar with the strip story, which was invented by Robert E. Gibson in the early 1970s, and its effectiveness in teaching ESL students the proper sequencing of ideas in a paragraph or story.

The method is quite simple. One needs only to type up a story sentence by sentence—one sentence to a line—and then cut the paper into strips with one sentence to a strip. A strip is given to each student, who must memorize his sentence and return the strip to the teacher. When all have memorized their sentences, they go about the classroom repeating their sentences to one another, trying to put the story back together in its proper sequence (at this point the teacher sits down and remains quiet).

Gibson states that the strip story is valuable in that it creates a real communicative setting. That is, the students are not just repeating a series of sentences such as "Where are you from?" "I'm from —," etc. The student knows full well where his classmate is from. Real communication, according to Gibson, is one which communicates unpredictable data (Gibson, *TESOL Quarterly*, IX, 2, June 1975).

The strip story has other uses besides teaching the idea of proper sequencing. One particular use for which I have used the strip story is in teaching the "when words," or those words which show a relationship in time, e.g., *before*, *at last*, *after*, *since*, *consequently*, *until*, etc. The following story is an example.

Captain Cook: Pacific Discoverer

Captain Cook was a great voyager and discoverer.

While sailing around the Pacific on the *Resolution*, he discovered many islands.

During his last trip to the Pacific in 1779, he came to Hawaii.

After anchoring in Kealakekua Bay, he came ashore.

While on shore, some of the natives stole one of his small boats.

Captain Cook tried peacefully to obtain the boat.

Since some of the sailors were left behind, they panicked and shot one of the natives.

Then the Hawaiians become furious.

Consequently, this led to a battle at the beach.

Before Captain Cook could get to the safety of his boat, he was killed.

The sailors managed to reach the boats and paddled to safety aboard the *Resolution*.

Captain Cook met his death because of the carelessness of his crew.

By getting the students to interact socially with each other, the strip story helps to set the foundation for a comfortable and healthy learning atmosphere in the classroom. During the first several days of the class, the establishment of this atmosphere is very important, especially if the students come from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds.

Another benefit of this exercise is the fact that a student's pronunciation mistakes are often corrected by other students during the exercise. Listening comprehension is also improved in that the students are forced to listen to and understand the other students.

The strip story can also be a new and exciting way for students to learn and review coordinating and subordinating conjunctions and relative pronouns. Tied in with these, of course, are compound and complex sentences. These grammatical points can be taught by dividing the compound and complex sentences in half and instead of giving full sentences giving half sentences to each student. The students must pair up the two

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halves of a sentence before going on to put the entire story together. Obviously, in this case the story should have fewer sentences with not more than a couple of simple sentences, if any.

In fact, the strip story can be an interesting way of introducing almost anything by simply loading the content of the story with those particular points of the grammar which are to be taught.

Follow up activities, such as putting the story on the board or a transparency, can be used to teach new vocabulary, grammatical points, etc.

The strip story is an easily-constructed, valuable teaching tool that can be geared to any level by tailoring the vocabulary, content, and length of the sentences and story, according to the objectives and needs of the class.