

STORYLINES

Conversational Skills
Through Oral Histories

by
Priscilla Karant

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Storylines: Conversation Skills Through Oral Histories

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My love to

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*My thanks to all the students who told me their stories and made
this book possible.*

Introduction

Storylines: Conversation Skills Through Oral Histories, is a conversation text for intermediate to advanced students of English as a second language who need practice in fluency. Its goal is total participation of a class by using small discussion groups.

The core of *Storylines* is the role-play of sixteen characters, familiar stories of foreigners living in the United States. An oral history of each character is included in Chapter 20. One student in each group studies the oral history and comes to class as the character of that story. The three other students in the group have not read the story; they interview the mystery student, with the goal of learning about the student's past, problems, and dreams. During the interview process, all conversation skills are practiced: asking questions, asking follow-up questions, rephrasing questions and answers, hesitating, paraphrasing, interrupting, asking for repetition, and asking for a response. All verb tenses are reviewed as students ask about the mystery student's present, past, and future.

The second stage of this group work is the response of the class to what the mystery student has revealed. Responses can take many forms: speculation, suggestions, praise, and disapproval.

Storylines was developed because of two problems commonly encountered in teaching conversation classes. The first is the silence of many students. The second is the inability of students to communicate personal feelings. With *Storylines*, these constraints are lifted, as students assume a different identity and work together in groups.

This book enables foreign students to practice basic communication skills in very natural settings while stimulating them to express their feelings.

The Level

Storylines has been used successfully with intermediate- to advanced-level students (TOEFL scores of 400 to 550). Low-intermediate students will be more challenged by some of the vocabulary and grammar structures. Encourage students to figure out the meaning of words from their context. Expressions can be memorized.

The Shy Student

These stories have been used with hundreds of students of different nationalities and temperaments. At first, the results were surprising; shyest students often became outspoken when it was their turn to be the mystery student. In my observation, working in small groups promotes self-confidence. Also, telling someone else's story tends to free shy students from their inhibitions. In fact, when students were videotaped while presenting their mystery characters, some of the best performers had been the quietest in class.

Why Use Mystery Students?

Whenever a visitor came to my classroom, an ideal situation for conversation was presented. Students were curious about who the person was, why he/she was there, and where he/she came from. In this natural situation, all levels of conversation skills were practiced, including listening, interacting, and responding. To make oral communications classes more real, I needed to have a constant stream of new faces. The mystery student fills the need to stimulate students to talk.

Why Use Stories of Foreigners?

America is a nation of immigrants. It is a place where thousands of young people from more than a hundred nations come to study. Many of the students of today become the workers of tomorrow. They are changing the face of America. What better way to help them adjust to a new society, even if they are here for only a short stay, than to discuss how others have adjusted to life in the United States?

The Cast of Characters

You will meet sixteen different people from different countries. Their stories are true. They have come to the United States for diverse reasons. Some have come as students, some as political refugees, some as temporary workers, some as permanent residents, and some as illegal aliens. They have come either alone, with their parents, or with their spouses. As culturally diverse as their backgrounds may appear, their stories are universal. Here to study or to work, they tell of their homesickness, their frustration with the language, their struggle to make friends, their visa problems, their difficulties at work, their “culture shock” on returning home, and their conflicts in love. Their problems are the human problems that anyone in a new country faces.

The chart on pages xiv–xv describes the characters and the goal of the activities within each chapter.

These oral histories are based on the experiences of real people. The names of the characters have been changed. Each story presents one person’s point of view about a situation. These individuals are not representatives of their countries.

The oral histories should be used as springboards for discussion. If a story seems inappropriate, modify it to fit the needs of your students.

How to Use *Storylines*

Since the core of *Storylines* is group work, it is essential to work through Chapter 1, *How to Be a Group Leader*. Chapter 2 develops telephone skills, and should also be introduced during the first week of class. Complete guidelines and phrase lists for improving conversation skills are in Appendix 2, page 103. Words and phrases used in expressing feelings are in Appendix 1, page 101. This material is designed for use as part of each lesson before the mystery student is interviewed. The oral histories, printed at the back of the book, are on perforated pages. Some teachers may wish to collect them from the students’ books at the beginning of the course, and then distribute them as each story comes up.

A sample lesson plan for the mystery student chapters, beginning with Chapter 3, is found on pages xvi–xviii.

Mystery Students and Chapter Activities

Name	Country	Age	Profession	Think It Over	Act It Out	Call Up	Chapter
Yoko Hiyakawa	Japan	27	Office worker, Japanese bank	Being Single, Marriage Pressures, Sex Discrimination	Asking for a Promotion, Greeting a Guest	Inviting Someone to Dinner	3
Jaime Gonzalez	Puerto Rico	48	Superintendent	Job Complaints, Dream Job, Acculturation Problems	Complaining	Getting Information about an English Course	4
Jeong-Ja Kim	Korea	23	Dancer, waitress	Marrying for a Green Card, Living Together, Gambling	Giving Negative Opinions of a Person	Getting Information about Changing a Visa	5
Gerard Le Pont	France	24	Hotel management student	Image of Foreigners, Marrying Person with a Different Background	Giving Good News	Giving Bad News	6
Dina Rubinov	Russia	43	Chemical engineer	Changing Careers, Religious Persecution, Choosing a Religion	Making Excuses to a Teacher Complimenting a Teacher	Getting Information about an Advertised Job	7
Hector Rodriguez	Mexico	26	Janitor, parking lot attendant	Illegal Aliens, Working Mothers	Expressing Anger	Making Excuses for Being Late	8
May Chang	Taiwan	20	College student, math major	Generation Gap, Dating Practices, Changing Traditions	Changing Someone's Mind	Turning Down an Invitation	9
Taab Omar	Afghanistan	28	Owner of a fast-food restaurant	Land of Opportunity, Draft System, Draft Dodgers	Ordering at a Restaurant	Getting Information about a Good Restaurant	10

Name	Country	Age	Profession	Think It Over	Act It Out	Call Up	Chapter
Heidi Tobler	Switzerland	22	Graduate student, art therapy	Choosing a Profession, Privacy	Making Small Talk with a Neighbor	Confronting a Nosy Neighbor	11
Ali Fahrid	Egypt	28	Security guard, dental student	Obeying Authorities, Making Judgments about People	Apologizing for a Mistake	Getting Information about Hotels	12
Alejandra Maldonado	Colombia	22	Graduate student, social work	Stereotypes, Apartment-Hunting, Attitudes toward Pets	Making Polite Requests	Getting Information about an Advertised Apartment	13
Stanley Wolinski	Poland	40	Translator, doorman, taxi driver	Learning English, Changing of Job Status, Educational System	Teaching Your Language	Giving Advice to a Tourist in your Country	14
Marie Lionne	Haiti	19	College student, education major	Traits in a Mate, Brain Drain	Giving Compliments	Saying Good-bye	15
Koji Watanabe	Japan	27	Trainee at Japanese trading company	Living Alone, Eating Habits, Obeying Signs	Borrowing Money	Reporting a Theft	16
Kenny Lee	Hong Kong	21	Graduate student, business administration	Culture Shock on Return Home, Humor	Telling a Joke	Getting Information about Airline Flights	17
José Ojeda	Venezuela	32	Graduate student, counseling psychology	Trips, Services, Exchange Rates, Cost of Living	Saying Good-bye to Classmates, Greeting Old Friends	Asking for Help	18

Step One

Ask all students to prepare for a class discussion of the Think It Over questions. Have them read the questions, analyze the problems presented, and form their opinions before coming to class.

Step Two

Ask one-fourth of the students to read the oral history of the same mystery student. Try to assign them a person whose nationality is different from theirs. In other words, if the students are Chinese, do not assign a Chinese mystery student. Ask the students assigned to these sketches to think about the character before coming to class and develop their sketch as they see fit.

Step Three

Have students respond to the Think It Over questions in class (thirty to forty minutes). This can be done in small groups (three or four students). Assign one student in each group to the role of leader; have the leader rotate every class. Leaders should elicit responses from their classmates as practiced in Chapter 1, "How to Be a Group Leader" (ten to twenty minutes). At the end of the session, the leader of each group should review the main points and report back to the class.

Step Four

Have students use the Think It Over questions as the basis for a one-minute talk in front of the class (five to ten minutes). This assignment helps to build a student's confidence in speaking in front of groups. This speech should be prepared and rehearsed at home. Students should *not* use notes while speaking and should adhere strictly to the time limit. In class, you can focus on a student's individual problems in grammar and/or pronunciation.

Step Five

Students can work on a particular conversation skill (fifteen to twenty-five minutes). Practice exercises are included for students who need extra work on a skill. Have students concentrate on using the new expressions during each interview session.

Step Six

One student of each group will have read the assigned oral history; in class, he or she becomes the mystery student (thirty to forty minutes). The other students in the group will interview the mystery student. All students will practice whatever skill(s) they have studied so far (such as questioning, paraphrasing, hesitating, or interrupting).

Step Seven

When the interview has been **completed**, have students read the oral history. Discuss the italicized **expressions** (five to fifteen minutes).

Step Eight

Assign students to the Act It Out role plays and have them spontaneously act out a situation. Then the class can discuss how a native English speaker might act in such a situation. These role plays can be done several times, with students switching partners until they feel comfortable in the situation (twenty to forty minutes).

Step Nine

Have students exchange phone numbers. Before students make a call, give hints on how to proceed (ten minutes). For example, two students can act out a specific call in front of the class. Everyone can comment on the performance. Sometimes a Call Up exercise will ask a student to call a real organization and not a classmate. If the suggestions given are not appropriate for your group of students, substitute some that are. Make sure students know how to use a telephone book to find what they need. Students should be encouraged to report back to the class on what happened when they made their phone calls (ten to twenty minutes).

Step Ten

Many of the exercises in *Storylines* can be used to teach writing skills. Here are some suggestions for writing assignments:

a response to the mystery student sketch;
answers to the Think It Over questions;

a script for the role plays;
an oral history of someone they know to create their own mystery student;
an autobiographical sketch;
a report on their telephone conversations;
a story about the mystery student ten years from now;
a letter giving advice to the mystery student.

Guidelines for Correcting in a Group Setting

1. Beware of overcorrection. You are interested in promoting fluency practice, so do not create an atmosphere that is inhibiting to students.
2. Emphasize one type of correction in each session. If you are working on asking questions, focus on making sure that students are using the correct word order and verb form.
3. If possible, have students self-correct. This forces students to think more about their errors. If this is not possible, see if anyone in the group can help. Teaching students to help themselves and others on their own is ideal.
4. Be sensitive to each student you are working with. Is the student highly sensitive to criticism? Try to compliment the student while pointing out errors. Is he/she the type who becomes defensive about being right? Encourage other students to help you. It can also be helpful to tape such students. Does the student speak so quickly that he/she pays no attention to the correction and just keeps on talking? If so, slow the student down and suggest writing out the correction.
5. Avoid correcting during a heated discussion. Instead, jot down the error you want to point out and wait for a break in the discussion.
6. Do make corrections. The most frequent student complaint is that teachers do not correct enough.

It takes time to feel out the students in a classroom and to understand what will work best for them. Just try to remain sensitive to the individual and to the situation.

Table of Contents

Introduction		xi
How to Use <i>Storylines</i>		xiii
Chapter 1	How to Be a Group Leader	1
Chapter 2	How to Use the Telephone	9
Chapter 3	<i>Yoko Hiyakawa</i>	19
	Think It Over:	Being Single, Marriage Pressures, Sex Discrimination
	Act It Out:	Asking for a Promotion, Greeting a Guest
	Call Up:	Inviting Someone to Dinner
Chapter 4	<i>Jaime Gonzalez</i>	25
	Think It Over:	Job Complaints, Dream Job, Acculturation Problems
	Act It Out:	Complaining
	Call Up:	Getting Information about an English Course
Chapter 5	<i>Jeong-Ja Kim</i>	29
	Think It Over:	Marrying for a Green Card, Living Together, Gambling
	Act It Out:	Giving Negative Opinions of a Person
	Call Up:	Getting Information about Changing a Visa

Chapter 6	<i>Gerard Le Pont</i>	33
	Think It Over:	Image of Foreigners, Marrying a Person with a Different Background
	Act It Out:	Giving Good News
	Call Up:	Giving Bad News
Chapter 7	<i>Dina Rubinov</i>	37
	Think It Over:	Changing Careers, Religious Persecution, Choosing a Religion
	Act It Out:	Making Excuses to a Teacher, Complimenting a Teacher
	Call Up:	Getting Information about an Advertised Job
Chapter 8	<i>Hector Rodriguez</i>	43
	Think It Over:	Illegal Aliens, Working Mothers
	Act It Out:	Expressing Anger
	Call Up:	Making Excuses for Being Late
Chapter 9	<i>May Chang</i>	49
	Think It Over:	Generation Gap, Dating Practices, Changing Traditions
	Act It Out:	Changing Someone's Mind
	Call Up:	Turning Down an Invitation
Chapter 10	<i>Taeb Omar</i>	55
	Think It Over:	Land of Opportunity, the Draft System, Draft Dodgers
	Act It Out:	Ordering at a Restaurant

	Call Up:	Getting Information about a Good Restaurant	
Chapter 11	<i>Heidi Tobler</i>		59
	Think It Over:	Choosing a Profession, Privacy	
	Act It Out:	Making Small Talk	
	Call Up:	Confronting a Nosy Neighbor	
Chapter 12	<i>Ali Fahrid</i>		63
	Think It Over:	Obeying Authorities, Making Judgments about People	
	Act It Out:	Apologizing for a Mistake	
	Call Up:	Getting Information about Hotels	
Chapter 13	<i>Alejandra Maldonado</i>		69
	Think It Over:	Stereotypes, Apartment-Hunting, Attitudes toward Pets	
	Act It Out:	Making Polite Requests	
	Call Up:	Getting Information about an Advertised Apartment	
Chapter 14	<i>Stanley Wolinski</i>		75
	Think It Over:	Learning English, Changing Job Status, Educational System	
	Act It Out:	Teaching Your Language	
	Call Up:	Giving Advice to a Tourist in Your Country	
Chapter 15	<i>Marie Lionne</i>		81
	Think It Over:	Traits in a Mate, Brain Drain	

	Act It Out:	Giving Compliments	
	Call Up:	Saying Good-bye	
Chapter 16	<i>Koji Watanabe</i>		87
	Think It Over:	Living Alone, Eating Habits, Obeying Signs	
	Act It Out:	Borrowing Money	
	Call Up:	Reporting a Theft	
Chapter 17	<i>Kenny Lee</i>		93
	Think It Over:	Culture Shock on Returning Home, Humor	
	Act It Out:	Telling a Joke	
	Call Up:	Getting Information about Airline Flights	
Chapter 18	<i>José Ojeda</i>		97
	Think It Over:	Trips, Services, Exchange Rates, Cost of Living	
	Act It Out:	Saying Good-bye to Classmates, Greeting Old Friends	
	Call Up:	Asking for Help	
Appendix 1	Vocabulary List of Feelings		101
Appendix 2	Conversation Skills		103
	1. Asking Questions		
	2. Asking Follow-Up Questions		
	3. Hesitating		
	4. Reporting		
	5. Paraphrasing		
	6. Rephrasing		
	7. Listening Attentively		
	8. Asking for Repetition		
	9. Interrupting		
	10. Returning to the Story		
	11. Asking for Response		
	12. Reacting Positively		

- 13. Reacting Negatively
- 14. Giving Suggestions
- 15. Accepting Suggestions
- 16. Turning Down Suggestions
- 17. Ending a Conversation
- 18. Thanking
- 19. Responding to Thanks
- 20. Leaving

Oral Histories

111