



Learn English Through Stories

D Series

D53

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1. The Fun They Had

By Isaac Asimov

MARGIE even wrote about it that night in her diary. On the page headed 17 May 2157, she wrote, "Today Tommy found a real book!"

It was a very old book. Margie's grandfather once said that when he was a little boy his grandfather told him that there was a time when all stories were printed on paper.

They turned the pages, which were yellow and crinkly, and it was awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to — on a screen, you know. And then when they turned back to the page before, it had the same words on it that it had had when they read it the first time.

"Gee," said Tommy, "what a waste. When you're through with the book, you just throw it away, I guess. Our television screen must have had a million books on it and it's good for plenty more. I wouldn't throw it away."

"Same with mine," said Margie. She was eleven and hadn't seen as many tele-books as Tommy had. He was thirteen.

She said, "Where did you find it?"

"In my house." He pointed without looking, because he was busy reading. "In the attic."

"What's it about?"

"School."

Margie always hated school, but now she hated it more than ever. The mechanical teacher had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse until her mother had shaken her head sorrowfully and sent for the County Inspector.

He was a round little man with a red face and a whole box of tools with dials and wires. He smiled at Margie and gave her an apple, then took the teacher apart. Margie had hoped he wouldn't know how to put it together again, but he knew how all right, and, after an hour or so, there it was again, large and black and ugly, with a big screen on which all the lessons were shown and the questions were asked. That wasn't so bad.

The part Margie hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers. She always had to write them out in a punch code they made her learn when she was six years old, and the mechanical teacher calculated the marks in no time.

The Inspector had smiled after he was finished and patted Margie's head. He said to her mother, "It's not the little girl's fault, Mrs Jones. I think the geography sector was geared a little too quick. Those things happen sometimes. I've slowed it up to an average ten-year level. Actually, the overall pattern of her progress is quite satisfactory." And he patted Margie's head again.

Margie was disappointed. She had been hoping they would take the teacher away altogether. They had once taken Tommy's teacher away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely.

So she said to Tommy, "Why would anyone write about school?"

Tommy looked at her with very superior eyes. "Because it's not our kind of school, stupid. This is the old kind of school that they had hundreds and hundreds of years ago." He added loftily, pronouncing the word carefully, "Centuries ago."

Margie was hurt. "Well, I don't know what kind of school they had all that time ago." She read the book over his shoulder for a while, then said, "Anyway, they had a teacher."

"Sure they had a teacher, but it wasn't a regular teacher. It was a man."

"A man? How could a man be a teacher?"

"Well, he just told the boys and girls things and gave them homework and asked them questions."

"A man isn't smart enough."

"Sure he is. My father knows as much as my teacher."

"He knows almost as much, I betcha."

Margie wasn't prepared to dispute that. She said, "I wouldn't want a strange man in my house to teach me."

Tommy screamed with laughter. "You don't know much, Margie. The teachers didn't live in the house. They had a special building and all the kids went there."

"And all the kids learnt the same thing?"

"Sure, if they were the same age."

"But my mother says a teacher has to be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl it teaches and that each kid has to be taught differently."

"Just the same they didn't do it that way then. If you don't like it, you don't have to read the book."

"I didn't say I didn't like it," Margie said quickly. She wanted to read about those funny schools.

They weren't even half finished when Margie's mother called, "Margie! School!"

Margie looked up. "Not yet, Mamma."

"Now!" said Mrs Jones. "And it's probably time for Tommy, too."

Margie said to Tommy, "Can I read the book some more with you after school?"

"May be," he said nonchalantly. He walked away whistling, the dusty old book tucked beneath his arm. Margie went into the schoolroom. It was right next to her bedroom, and the mechanical teacher was on and waiting for her. It was always on at the same time every day except Saturday and Sunday, because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

The screen was lit up, and it said: "Today's arithmetic lesson is on the addition of proper fractions. Please insert yesterday's homework in the proper slot."

Margie did so with a sigh. She was thinking about the old schools they had when her grandfather's grandfather was a little boy. All the kids from the whole neighbourhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the schoolroom, going home together at the end of the day. They learned the same things, so they could help one another with the homework and talk about it.

And the teachers were people...

The mechanical teacher was flashing on the screen: “When we add fractions $\frac{1}{2}$ and ...”

Margie was thinking about how the kids must have loved it in the old days. She was thinking about the fun they had.

2. Summary

This is a story set in a futuristic scenario of around 150 years hence. In this phase of human development, every activity of education has become dependent on electronic media. There are tele-books in which the words move across the screen. The teachers are mechanical robots and the school is in an adjacent room in the house, where the student sits with the mechanical teacher, reading instructions on the screen and giving answers. It is a very boring process as there is no interaction between the teacher and the student.

One day, Margie, an eleven year old girl, made an entry in her diary, 'Today Tommy found a real book'. Tommy was two years older to Margie. He had found the book in the attic of his room. Till then, they had never seen a real book. They had only heard from grandfather that there used to be books written on paper. They were very excited to find this book because it was a new discovery for them. The book was on the concept of school. The school was that of an old system. From this book they learnt a lot of things about the schools in the past. They learnt that there used to be a separate building for school where children went for studying. The classrooms contained a number of students who were taught by a human teacher. Since all learned the same things, they could easily help each other and could also easily interact with the human teachers. Margie used to dream of lot of kids going to school together laughing, playing and helping each other. This appeared more interesting than sitting alone in a room in front of a computerised robot and reading instructions on the screen, without being able to ask any questions. As a result she started hating her school even more.

3. Questions and Answers

Question 1: How old are Margie and Tommy?

Answer: Margie is eleven years old and Tommy is thirteen.

Question 2: What did Margie write in her diary?

Answer: Margie wrote in her diary. "Today, 17 May, 2157, Tommy found a real book."

Question 3: Had Margie ever seen a book before?

Answer: No, she had never seen a book before.

Question 4: What things about the book did she find strange?

Answer: The book had yellow and wrinkled pages.
The words of the book were still. They did not move as the words move on the computer screen. She found these things odd and strange.

Question 5: What do you think a tele-book is?

Answer: A tele-book is displayed on the television screen and the text of a tele-book is similar to a book. Nowadays we have e-books that we can read on computer screen, tablets and mobile-phones.

Question 6: Where was Margie's school? Did she have any classmates?

Answers: Margie's school was a small room next to her bedroom. She had no classmates.

Question 7: What subjects did Margie and Tommy learn?

Answer: Margie learnt Geography and Mathematics. Tommy learnt History and Mathematics.

Question 8: "I wouldn't throw *it* away."

(a) Who says these words?

(b) What does 'it' refer to?

(c) What is it being compared with by the speaker?

Answers:

- (a) Tommy says these words.
- (b) 'It' refers to books.
- (c) The paper book is compared to the tele-books.

Question 9: "Sure, they had a teacher, but it wasn't a regular teacher. It was a man."

- (a) Who does 'they' refer to?
- (b) What does 'regular' mean here?
- (c) What is it contrasted with?

Answer:

- (a) 'They' refer to the people of the old times.
- (b) Here, regular refers to the mechanical teacher that they had.
- (c) It is contrasted with a normal teacher of earlier times, who was a living human being.

Question 10: Answer each of these questions in a short paragraph (about 30 words).

1. What kind of teachers did Margie and Tommy have?

Answer: Margie and Tommy had mechanical teachers. They were taught on computers and television screens. They didn't have a living person as a teacher who would teach the pupils in a classroom.

2. Why did Margie's mother send for the County Inspector?

Answer: Margie's mother sent for the County Inspector because the mechanical teacher was not functioning efficiently. It had been giving her test after test in geography and she had been doing worse and worse.

3. What did he do?

Answer: He slowed down the mechanical teacher's speed upto an average ten-year level. The mechanical teacher's speed was controlled and adjusted according to the IQ level of Margie.

4. Why was Margie doing badly in geography? What did the County Inspector do to help her?

Answer: Margie had been doing badly in geography. This was because the mechanical teacher was very fast in displaying the questions. The County Inspector adjusted its speed to an average ten-year level. Thus, the mechanical teacher's speed was controlled appropriately. The County Inspector assured that the overall pattern of Margie's progress was quite satisfactory.

5. What had once happened to Tommy's teacher?

Answer: Tommy's teacher was taken away for nearly a month because the history sector had blanked out completely. So, Tommy had nothing to do during that period. He only relaxed and enjoyed.

6. Did Margie have regular days and hours for school? If so, why?

Answer: Yes, Margie had regular days and hours for school because her mother said little girls learned better if they learned at regular hours.

7. How does Tommy describe the old kind of school?

Answer: Tommy says that the old schools were different. They had a special building and all the kids went there to study. They laughed and shouted in the schoolyard. They enjoyed time together and learned lessons together in a classroom.

8. How does he describe the old kind of teachers?

Answer: He says that the old teachers did not live in the house. They had a special building and all the kids went there. All the kids learned the same thing. They gave homework to students. They were not mechanical teachers, but living human beings.

Question 11: What are the main features of the mechanical teachers and the schoolrooms that Margie and Tommy have in the story?

Answer: Margie and Tommy have mechanical teachers. They need not go to school for getting a formal education. The mechanical teacher is placed in one of the rooms of the house and they can get the knowledge of various subjects of individually from the mechanical teacher. They don't have such classrooms where students sit together. They study from the tele-books. So they don't require books and exercise books. The examination system is very different. They do homework in a different way. Margie has to write them out in a punch code. She learnt it when she was six years old. So the system of their education is technologically advanced and not based on printed books

Question 12: Why did Margie hate school? Why did she think the old kind of school must have been fun?

Answer:

Margie hated her school because she had a mechanical teacher. It was in her house. She was supposed to sit in that room alone to complete her home-task or assignments. The part Margie hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers. She thought that the old schools must have been fun because the students used to sit together in the classroom. They enjoyed, laughed and shouted in the schoolyard. Children needed company to enhance their skills. If they are isolated, they get depressed and dejected.

Question 13: Do you agree with Margie that schools today are more fun than the school in the story? Give reasons for your answer.

Answer:

There is no doubt that today's schools are more funny than the future school discussed in the story. This school has nothing but a mechanical teacher with no emotions and sentiments. It does not have the ability to understand the psychology of a child. Moreover, it guides a pupil according to its adjusted modes. But today's schools work for the overall development of a child. They learn the same thing. The teachers are real human beings. They learn how to adapt themselves to the new surroundings and cope with the strangers. The students sit and learn together. These activities don't give vent to the feelings of depression, alienation and segregation.

However, the students may not be able to cheat in the schools of future.

Question 14: In spite of all comforts and luxuries in today's world, our grandparents still cherish their own time when life was quite tough. Give your own views regarding this in 150-200 words.

Answer:

Our grandparents lived from the years 1950s to the 1970s. At that time, life was very simple yet tough. Their possessions were scarce, but they were content with what was available. There was less pollution: parks, rivers and air were cleaner than today. They played games such as wrestling, kabaddi, hockey, etc. These sports are more physically demanding.

Unfortunately, not everyone attended school, but those who did attend received a good education. Most schools were run by the government or Arya Smaj. Teachers were fully qualified and they took good care of their students genuinely. Today in Punjab, ninety percent students go to private schools. Apart from a small proportion, the standard of education is very low. In these schools, the salary received by teachers is not enough. 'If you pay peanuts, you get monkeys.'

The world we live in today is very different: we have cars, mobile phones, televisions, tablets, computers, etc. Although everyone is not blessed with these privileges, they dream of having them. This gives rise to competition and greed. More and more people are becoming self-conceited: they want to be in a better position than their neighbours; students want to be better than their peers.

4. Grammar page

The Past Progressive Tense

Use the **past progressive tense** to talk about actions that were going on at a certain moment in the past.



Mary **was waiting** for the bus when Peter passed by.

Miss May **was cleaning** the chalkboard.

Sally **was packing** her books into her schoolbag.

Jenny and I **were tidying** the classroom.

The twins **were fighting** in the corner.

Michael and John **were washing** the paint brushes.

Mom **was cooking** our supper when I came home.



You form the **past progressive tense** like this:

was + present participle

were + present participle

In the examples above, **was** and **were** are called **helping verbs**, or **auxiliary verbs**. They help to form the **past progressive tense** when you join them to the **present participle** (the form of verbs ending in **-ing**). For example:

Ben **was doing** his homework.

Peter **was making** a model of a bridge.

