



Learn English Through Stories

G Series

G74

Adapted and modified by

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1. Naga

Adapted from R K Narayan

The boy lifted the lid of the wicker basket and peered at the cobra coiled inside, muttering, “Naga, I hope you’ve kicked the bucket, so I can sell your skin to the purse-makers. At least then you’d be worth your salt.” He prodded it with a finger. Naga raised its head, looking around with a dull, fish-out-of-water expression. “You’re too lazy to even spread your hood. You’re no cobra—you’re more like an earthworm, dragging your feet! I’m a snake charmer trying to make a buck showing you off, but I’m barking up the wrong tree. No wonder I’m often left holding the bag, pretending to be blind and begging at the bus stop. Nobody gives a hoot about you, nobody’s scared of you, and that leaves me high and dry, starving.”

Whenever the boy showed up at a doorstep, householders shooed him away like a fly in the ointment. He’d watched his father handle the same cold shoulder. His father would climb the steps, cool as a cucumber, plop down with his basket, and go through his act, turning a deaf ear to the naysayers. He’d pull out his gourd pipe and play that snake-charming tune until its shrill notes hit like a ton of bricks, lulling folks into listening to his spiel: “In my dream, God Shiva appeared and said, ‘Stick your hand in that crevice in my sanctum’s floor.’ You all know Shiva’s the big cheese of cobras—he ties his braid with one, its hood shading his head. And Vishnu? He lounges in the coils of Adi Shesha, the mightiest serpent, who holds the universe on his thousand heads. Think of Parvathi’s armlets—sleek little snakes. If our gods wear them as ornaments, who are we to turn up our noses? So, I followed Shiva’s orders, slipped my arm into a snake hole at midnight.”

His audience would shudder, and someone would pipe up, “Were you bitten?”

“Bitten? You bet! But here I stand, fit as a fiddle, because Shiva also said, ‘Find that weed on the old fort wall.’ I’m not spilling the beans on its name, not for all the tea in China.”

“What’d you do with it?”

“Chewed it,” he’d say. “After that, no venom could touch me. That snake in this basket sank its fangs into me like a kid nursing, but I just laughed and knocked out those arrogant fangs with a stone. Then he saw I was a friend, not a foe, and we’ve been thick as thieves ever since. A serpent? It’s just a great soul doing penance, waiting to wing it back to its heavenly home.”

After this, he'd flick open the basket, play the pipe, and Naga would shoot up like a bat out of hell, swaying to the tune. Folks were scared stiff yet couldn't take their eyes off it. By the end, they'd toss coins, rice, maybe an old shirt, and if he spotted a hen, he'd sweet-talk an egg out of them. He'd grab Naga by the throat, slide the egg down its gullet, and the crowd would eat it up. Then he'd pack up, hit the next street or bazaar, and when he'd raked in enough, he'd head back to their hut by the park wall, under a tamarind tree's shade. He'd cook the rice, feed his son, and they'd sleep under the stars, living hand to mouth but content.

The boy had tagged along since he could toddle, and by ten, his father let him handle Naga and spin his own yarn for the crowd. His father always said, "Don't skimp on Naga's two eggs a week. When he's old, he'll shrink daily, and one day, he'll sprout wings and fly off, spitting out a jewel from his venom that could make you richer than Croesus."

One day, too bone-idle to go out, the boy stayed by the hut, gawking at a tiny monkey swinging in the tamarind tree, his jaw dropping like a ton of bricks. He didn't even notice his father roll in.

"Boy, what's got your goat?" his father asked, handing him a packet of sweets. "They gave me these at the big house—some shindig's going on. Naga was on cloud nine today, dancing to the pipe. He's wise to our talk now. He stood six feet tall on his tail, spread his hood, hissed, and sent the crowd running for the hills. They loved it, though, and forked over cash and sweets." His father, grinning ear to ear, opened the basket. Naga poked its head up. He held it by the neck, shoved a sweet down its throat, and watched it slide down. "He's family now—gotta eat what we eat," he said, clapping the lid shut.

The boy, still munching his sweet, kept his eyes glued to the monkey. "Father, I'd give my right arm to be that monkey, swinging free up there. Look at him chowing down on tamarind fruit! Hey, monkey, toss me one!" he hollered.

His father chuckled. "That's no way to win friends and influence monkeys. You gotta give him something, not expect him to feed you."

The boy spat out his sweet, wiped it clean, and waved it, shouting, "Come on, monkey! Here!"

His father said, "Call him 'monkey,' and you're barking up the wrong tree. Give him a proper name."

“Like what?”

“Rama, after Hanuman’s master. Monkeys go bananas for that name.”

“Rama, take this!” the boy called, waving the sweet. He climbed the tree, placed it on a branch, and slid down, waiting with bated breath. The monkey eyed it, but a crow swooped in and snatched it. The boy let out a curse that’d make a sailor blush.

“Hey!” his father snapped. “Where’d you pick up that filth? No monkey’ll respect you if you talk like that.” After some coaxing with another sweet, the monkey came down, and his father nabbed it by the wrist, holding it firm to avoid a bite.

It took fifteen days of tough love—starving, scolding, and dangling fruit—to teach Rama his place. He stopped biting and scratching, learning to perform on cue. He’d act out Hanuman setting Ravana’s city ablaze, a village girl balancing a water pitcher, or a shy groom flirting with his bride—chattering, blinking, and grinning. Topped off with natural acrobatics on a bamboo pole, Rama was a hit. His master got a tailor to whip up a frilled jacket and a fool’s cap, leaving his tail free. Rama hated the getup, trying to rip it off, but a few whacks with a switch made him toe the line. At day’s end, when the costume came off, he’d do somersaults, free as a bird.

Rama became the talk of the town. Kids went wild; householders called him in to cheer up crying tots. He earned cash for his master and peanuts for himself, plus hand-me-down baby clothes. The father and son hit the road daily, the boy with Rama on his shoulder, his father trailing with the cobra basket—Rama chattered and shrank, scared witless, whenever Naga hissed. While the boy showed off Rama’s tricks, he’d hear his father’s pipe in the distance. At village market fairs, they were a hot ticket, raking in enough to ride the bus home. When passengers fretted about the cobra escaping, the father’d say, “Lid’s tied tight as a drum.” Someone always chimed in, “A snake minds its own beeswax unless you step on its tail.”

“And this monkey?” another would ask.

“Gentle as a lamb,” the father’d reply, slipping the conductor a tip.

They travelled far and wide, performing at fairs, earning enough to splurge on restaurant tiffin now and then. But come evening, the father would ditch the boy, saying, “Stay put. Got a stomach ache—need medicine.” He’d stumble

back late, three sheets to the wind. The boy, spooked, would lie on his mat, monkey tethered nearby, playing possum. His father'd kick him, slurring, "Get up, you lazy dog! Sleeping while I slave for you? You're no son of mine!" But the boy stayed still as a statue.

One night, the boy actually dozed off and woke to find his father gone—along with Rama. "They've flown the coop together!" he cried, pacing and shouting, "Father!" He peeked into the hut, spotting the snake basket with eighty paise in coins on the lid. "This is my ticket!" he thought, feeling like the cat that got the cream, though uneasy about his father's vanishing act. His father never left without a word—whether for a bath, "medicine," or shopping.

He lifted the basket lid. Naga popped up, eyeing him. "I'm the boss now, so shape up," the boy said. As if getting the memo, Naga flicked its tongue and half-spread its hood. The boy tapped it down. "Not yet, pal." Should he wait for his father? Hunger gnawed at him. He eyed the coins, worried his father might come back and give him a piece of his mind for touching them. He replaced the lid and coins, sat at the hut's entrance, and stared at the tamarind tree, pining for Rama's morning antics. He grabbed the monkey's nut bag, munched a handful, and thought, "Too good for a monkey." His father would've boxed his ears for that, but today he felt free as a bird, though a nagging fear lingered.

He snatched the gourd pipe from the thatch and blew, coughing but pleased he could play like his father. The notes drew passers-by—labourers and basket-carrying women—who nodded, saying, "Chip off the old block." Everyone in the squatters' colony by the fountain knew him. The municipality couldn't bulldoze their huts; they'd spring back like weeds. When a bigwig from Delhi passed by, they'd hide behind the park wall, but otherwise, they held their ground.

A woman asked, "Why aren't you out earning?"

"My father's gone," the boy said, voice breaking.

She set her basket down, sat beside him, and asked, "Hungry?"

"I've got money," he said.

Patting his head, she sighed, "Poor thing. I knew your mother—she was a gem. To think she left you in the lurch like this!" Though he didn't remember her, her mention brought tears he licked off his cheeks. "What now?" she asked.

"I'll wait for Father," he said.

“Foolish boy! He’s flown the coop,” she said. “Someone saw him board the mountain bus with that floozy in the blue sari.”

“And Rama?” he asked.

She had no answer. A hawker’s cry rang out, selling rice cakes. She called him over, demanding, “Give this boy two fresh idlies.”

“Yesterday’s stuff? Not for love or money,” the hawker snapped.

“Pay him,” she told the boy. He fetched the coins, and she begged, “Throw in a little extra—he’s down on his luck.”

“Everyone’s got a sob story,” the hawker growled. “Sell your earrings if you care so much!” He took the cash and left. The boy wolfed down the soft, spicy idlies, feeling ready to take the bull by the horns.

As the woman left, muttering about the “floozy,” the boy recalled her—a woman always at her door beyond the park wall. His father would linger there, telling him, “Keep moving, I’ll catch up.” Once, curious, the boy tied Rama to a post and went back. The door was shut, his father gone. When his father emerged, he raised a hand, barking, “Didn’t I say keep going?” The woman called the boy a “mischievous devil.” Later, his father said, “Obey when I say go.”

“Who is she?” the boy asked.

“A relative,” his father lied. “I had tea. Ask more, and you’ll get a hiding.”

The boy wanted to scream, “She’s no good!” but bit his tongue. After that, he’d hurry past her house, waiting for his father, who’d pass if a burly man stood at her door instead.

Months passed. The boy mastered the pipe, tamed Naga’s fangs, and earned his keep, though Naga grew sluggish, barely stirring. He never stopped missing Rama—the cruellest trick his father had pulled was stealing him.

When earnings dried up, the boy decided to cut his losses. “No more snake. I’ll catch another monkey and start fresh,” he thought. A monkey on his shoulder would open doors, maybe even to a palace. Later, he’d keep it as a pet and try his luck as a railway porter, dreaming of hopping a train to see the world. First, he had to ditch Naga—no more eggs and milk for a useless snake.

He lugged the basket to a quiet riverbank in Nallappa's grove, far from prying eyes, where snakes could live without a target on their backs. "Plenty of anthills and crevasses here," he told Naga. "Your kin'll welcome you with open arms. Forget me—you're a dead weight. My father might've waited for your wings, but I'm done." He opened the lid, lifted Naga, and set it free. It lay still, then crawled lazily, glancing back at the basket. The boy grabbed it and flung it far, muttering, "You won't budge with me around." He turned Naga toward an anthill, gave it a nudge, and bolted. Hiding behind a tree, he watched. Naga slithered halfway up the anthill, hesitated, then doubled back toward him. "You stubborn snake!" he cursed. "Go home to your own kind!"

He ran through the grove, pausing to catch his breath. Naga glided across the ground, gleaming like a silver lining in the sun. The boy muttered, "Goodbye," but looked up and saw a Brahmany kite circling. "Garuda," he whispered, touching his eyes in reverence. Vishnu's sacred bird ate snakes. "Leave Naga be," he prayed. But the kite swooped closer, its shadow trailing Naga. "No!" the boy yelled, racing back, grabbing the basket. Seeing it, Naga slithered inside like it was coming home after a long day.

Back at the hut, Naga reclaimed his corner. The boy grumbled, "If you don't sprout wings soon, someone'll bash your head in, like any old cobra. I won't play nursemaid forever. I'm off to the railway station, and if you wander out, you're toast. Don't blame me when you bite the dust."

2. Idioms Used:

Kicked the bucket: Meaning: To die.

Context: The boy hopes Naga, the cobra, has died so he can sell its skin.

Worth your salt: Meaning: To be competent or valuable.

Context: The boy complains that Naga isn't useful enough to justify its keep.

Fish out of water: Meaning: Feeling out of place or uncomfortable.

Context: Describes Naga's dull, disoriented expression when it raises its head.

Dragging your feet: Meaning: Being slow or reluctant to act.

Context: The boy criticizes Naga for being lazy and not performing energetically.

Make a buck: Meaning: To earn money.

Context: The boy is trying to earn a living by showing off Naga as a snake charmer.

Barking up the wrong tree: Meaning: Mistaken or pursuing the wrong goal.

Context: The boy feels his efforts with Naga are misguided as they aren't profitable.

Left holding the bag: Meaning: Abandoned to deal with a problem alone.

Context: The boy feels abandoned with the responsibility of Naga, resorting to begging.

Give a hoot: Meaning: To care or be concerned.

Context: The boy laments that nobody cares about Naga, leaving him in trouble.

High and dry: Meaning: Abandoned or left without resources.

Context: The boy feels stranded and destitute because Naga isn't earning money.

Fly in the ointment: Meaning: A small annoyance that spoils something.

Context: Householders treat the boy as an irritating nuisance when he shows up.

Cold shoulder: Meaning: A dismissive or unwelcoming attitude.

Context: The boy's father faced rejection from householders but ignored it.

Cool as a cucumber: Meaning: Calm and composed.

Context: The father remains unruffled despite being shooed away.

Turn a deaf ear: Meaning: To ignore or refuse to listen.

Context: The father ignores naysayers while performing his snake-charming act.

Hit like a ton of bricks: Meaning: To have a strong, overwhelming impact.

Context: The shrill notes of the father's pipe have a powerful effect on listeners.

Big cheese: Meaning: An important or influential person.

Context: The father refers to Shiva as the supreme figure associated with cobras.

Turn up our noses: To show disdain or contempt.

Context: The father questions why people scorn snakes when gods adorn themselves with them.

Fit as a fiddle: Meaning: In excellent health or condition.

Context: The father claims to be unharmed by snakebites due to a divine remedy.

Spill the beans: Meaning: To reveal a secret.

Context: The father refuses to disclose the name of the protective weed.

Not for all the tea in China: Meaning: Not for any price or persuasion.

Context: The father emphasizes he won't reveal the weed's name under any circumstances.

Thick as thieves: Meaning: Very close or friendly.

Context: The father describes his bond with Naga after taming it.

Like a bat out of hell: Meaning: Very quickly or energetically.

Context: Naga rises swiftly from the basket when the father plays the pipe.

Scared stiff: Meaning: Extremely frightened.

Context: The audience is terrified yet captivated by Naga's performance.

Eat it up: Meaning: To enjoy or believe something eagerly.

Context: The crowd loves watching Naga swallow an egg.

Hand to mouth: Meaning: Living with just enough to survive, without savings.

Context: The father and son live a precarious, day-to-day existence.

Richer than Croesus: Meaning: Extremely wealthy.

Context: The father tells the boy a snake's jewel could make him fabulously rich.

Bone-idle: Meaning: Extremely lazy.

Context: The boy is too lazy to go out and perform one day.

Jaw dropping like a ton of bricks: Meaning: Being extremely shocked or amazed (variation of "hit like a ton of bricks").

Context: The boy is astonished watching the monkey in the tree.

Got your goat: Meaning: To annoy or upset someone.

Context: The father asks what's bothering the boy.

On cloud nine: Meaning: Extremely happy or elated.

Context: The father says Naga was delighted and performed well.

Running for the hills: Meaning: Fleeing in fear.

Context: The crowd scatters when Naga performs impressively.

Grinning ear to ear: Meaning: Smiling broadly, showing great happiness.

Context: The father is delighted with Naga's performance and the rewards.

Give my right arm: Meaning: To want something desperately.

Context: The boy expresses his longing to be as free as the monkey.

Go bananas: Meaning: To become very excited or enthusiastic.

Context: The father says monkeys love the name "Rama."

With bated breath: Meaning: Waiting anxiously or excitedly.

Context: The boy waits eagerly to see if the monkey takes the sweet.

Make a sailor blush: Meaning: Extremely crude or offensive language.

Context: The boy curses colourfully when the crow steals the sweet.

Win friends and influence: Meaning: To gain favour or persuade others (from the book title by Dale Carnegie).

Context: The father advises the boy on how to approach the monkey.

Talk of the town: Meaning: Something everyone is discussing.

Context: Rama, the monkey, becomes a local sensation.

Scared witless: Meaning: Extremely frightened.

Context: Rama is terrified when Naga hisses.

Hot ticket: Meaning: Something very popular or in demand.

Context: The father and son's act with Rama and Naga is a hit at fairs.

Tight as a drum: Meaning: Secure or tightly sealed.

Context: The father reassures passengers that the snake basket is secure.

Minds its own beeswax: Meaning: Stays out of trouble or others' affairs.

Context: A passenger notes that a snake won't bother anyone unless provoked.

Gentle as a lamb: Meaning: Very mild or harmless.

Context: The father describes Rama as harmless to reassure passengers.

Three sheets to the wind: Meaning: Very drunk.

Context: The father returns intoxicated, leaving the boy alone.

Play possum: Meaning: To pretend to be asleep or unaware.

Context: The boy pretends to sleep to avoid his drunk father's anger.

Still as a statue: Meaning: Completely motionless.

Context: The boy stays still to avoid his father's wrath.

Flown the coop: Meaning: To leave suddenly or escape.

Context: The boy panics, thinking his father and Rama have run off together.

Cat that got the cream: Meaning: Feeling smug or satisfied.

Context: The boy feels triumphant finding money, despite his father's absence.

Give a piece of his mind: Meaning: To scold or express anger.

Context: The boy fears his father's reaction if he uses the coins.

Free as a bird: Meaning: Completely free or unburdened.

Context: The boy feels liberated without his father, though uneasy.

Chip off the old block: Meaning: Someone who resembles their parent in behaviour or traits.

Context: Passers-by see the boy's pipe-playing as similar to his father's.

Left in the lurch: Meaning: Abandoned in a difficult situation.

Context: The woman laments that the boy's mother left him in a tough spot.

Take the bull by the horns: Meaning: To confront a problem directly.

Context: After eating, the boy feels ready to face his challenges.

Cut his losses: Meaning: To abandon a failing endeavour to avoid further loss.

Context: The boy decides to give up on Naga and focus on a new monkey.

Welcome with open arms: Meaning: To accept eagerly or warmly.

Context: The boy tells Naga other snakes will accept it readily.

Dead weight: Meaning: A burden or something useless.

Context: The boy sees Naga as a liability that's holding him back.

Silver lining: Meaning: A positive aspect in a bad situation.

Context: Naga's gleaming body is described as a hopeful sight as it slithers away.

Bite the dust: Meaning: To die or fail.

Context: The boy warns Naga it will die if it doesn't stay safe.

4. Grammar Page

Unit
74

the 2 (school / the school etc.)

A Compare **school** and **the school**:



Ellie is ten years old. Every day she goes **to school**. She's **at school** now. **School** starts at 9 and finishes at 3.

We say a child goes **to school** or is **at school** (as a student). We are not thinking of a specific school. We are thinking of **school** as a *general* idea – children learning in a classroom.



Today Ellie's mother wants to speak to her daughter's teacher. So she has gone to **the school** to see her. She's **at the school** now.

Ellie's mother is not a student. She is not 'at school', she doesn't 'go to school'. If she wants to see Ellie's teacher, she goes to **the school** (= Ellie's school, a specific building).

B We use **prison** (or **jail**), **hospital**, **university**, **college** and **church** in a similar way. We do not use **the** when we are thinking of the general idea of these places and what they are used for. Compare:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> When I leave school, I plan to go to university / go to college . (as a student) | <input type="checkbox"/> I went to the university to meet Professor Thomas. (as a visitor, not as a student) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Joe had an accident last week. He was taken to hospital . He's still in hospital now. (as a patient) | <input type="checkbox"/> Jane has gone to the hospital to visit Joe. She's at the hospital now. (as a visitor, not as a patient) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Ken's brother is in prison for robbery. (He is a prisoner. We are not thinking of a specific prison.) | <input type="checkbox"/> Ken went to the prison to visit his brother. (He went as a visitor, not as a prisoner.) |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Sarah's father goes to church every Sunday. (for a religious service) | <input type="checkbox"/> Some workmen went to the church to repair the roof. (a specific building) |

With most other places, you need **the**. For example, **the station**, **the cinema** (see Units 72C and 73D).

C We say **go to bed** / **be in bed** etc. (*not* the bed):

- I'm going **to bed** now. Goodnight.
- Do you ever have breakfast **in bed**?

but

- I sat down on **the bed**. (a specific piece of furniture)

go to work / **be at work** / **start work** / **finish work** etc. (*not* the work):

- Chris didn't go to **work** yesterday.
- What time do you usually finish **work**?

go home / **come home** / **arrive home** / **get home** / **be (at) home** / do something **at home** etc. :

- It's late. Let's **go home**.
- I don't go out to work. I work **at home**.