International Business Story
by Mark White

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a series of interactive stories
for intermediate economics
and business English students

How to use an interactive story

Phase One
1. Student A read the text to student B. Read one sentence at a time.
2. Student B say “Uh-huh” if you understand.
3. Student B say “One more time” if you do not understand.
4. Student B answer the question, IF it is a question.

Phase Two
1. Student B read the same text to student A but convert all verbs to past tense.

Contents with structural focus marked.
1. The Factory in China (nouns and adjectives with “be” verbs)
2. The Trading Company in Panama (there is/are)
3. The Holding Company in the Caribbean (present simple tense)
4. The Spanish Port (present continuous tense)
5. The German Pharmaceutical Company (future “going to” tense)
6. The American Pharmaceutical Company (present perfect tense)
7. The French Pharmaceutical Company (“would” conditional)
8. The Chinese Government (adjective plus infinitive)
9. A New Medical Company (comparatives, metaphors, deixis)
10. Doing Business (gerunds)
1. The Factory in China (‘be’ verbs with nouns and adjectives)

There is a factory in China. It produces chemicals. Is it in north or south China? What province is it in? The factory is big. Is it clean? Is it safe? Are the workers happy?

The factory is not in a city. It is outside a city. How many kilometers is it from the city? Is the road good? The manager of the factory is a middle-aged man. His name is Mr Lin. How old is he? Is he tall and thin? Is he healthy? The manager is very very busy. He is at his desk. Is it late?

The manager finishes work. He goes home. He has a car. What kind of car is it? What color is it? The manager is married. Where is his wife from? He has a daughter. She is not married. Mr Lin worries about his daughter. His wife makes dinner. Mr Lin eats dinner. What is it? Is it good?

The next day Mr Lin goes to work again. He goes to work very early. What time is it? Is it a fine day? Is the air clean? Is the road busy? How far is it from Mr Lin’s house to the factory? Is the factory noisy?

What is the name of Mr Lin’s chemical company? The company produces chemicals. Are they dangerous chemicals? Are they flammable chemicals?

Mr Lin goes into his office. He sits down. Is his chair comfortable? Is it imitation leather? What color is it? How old is it? Mr Lin opens a drawer in his desk. He takes out a file. What color is the cover? How thick is it?

There are documents in the file. Mr Lin reads the documents. The phone rings. Mr Lin’s business partner is on the phone. Mr Lin’s company exports chemicals. It exports the chemicals to Panama. Where is Panama? Mr Lin’s business partner is in Panama. He talks about prices. Mr Lin’s company’s prices are too high. The market is tough. It is very competitive. The man in Panama wants a discount. Mr Lin gives him a discount.

Later that day Mr Lin signs some documents. He ships 150,000 liters of chemicals to Panama. One tanker truck holds 15,000 liters. How many truck-loads is that? Are the trucks Japanese? How old are they? What make are they?

The tanker-trucks take the chemicals to the port. How far is the port? The trucks pump the chemicals into a ship. It is a tanker. How long is it? It carries chemicals. Is it new? It is from Panama. What is the national language of Panama? How many days is Panama from China by ship?

A week later the ship sails. It crosses the Pacific Ocean. It goes straight to Panama. Is the weather rough? Is the food on the ship good? What kind of food is it? Where are the crew-members from? Where is the captain from?
2. The Trading Company in Panama (there is/there are)

Is Panama an independent country? There is a trading company in Panama. It is a large company. The head office is in Panama City. How many workers are there in the office? What is the name of the company?

The name of the purchasing manager is Mr Coleman. He is at his desk. Is there a computer on his desk? Are there any books on his desk? Are there any documents? Mr. Coleman is very busy.

There is a real estate boom in Panama. Many foreign tourists and retirees are in Panama. There are retirees from the United States. There are also retirees from Canada. Are there any retirees from Europe? Are there any tourists from Europe? Many foreigners want to buy land. Mr. Coleman wants to help them. Is there a real estate section in Mr. Coleman’s company?

Mr. Coleman checks his email. There is one message from China. It is from a chemical company. It is from Mr. Lin. Are there any messages from Japan? Are there any messages from the United States? Are there any messages from the Cayman Islands? Where are the Cayman Islands?

Mr. Coleman reads the email from Mr. Lin. Is it a long message? The email has an attachment. It is an invoice. What language is it in? It is an invoice for some chemicals. Mr. Coleman wants to buy the chemicals but the chemicals are expensive.

Mr. Coleman wants to telephone Mr. Lin. Is there a telephone on his desk? Mr. Coleman telephones Mr. Lin. Is it a long phone call? They talk about prices. They talk about a discount. Mr. Lin gives Mr. Coleman a discount. Mr. Lin ships the chemicals to Panama.

Mr. Coleman is very busy. There are many problems at work. He does not have enough time. He goes to a hotel. He meets a client. The client is in the bar at the hotel. How many people are there in the bar? Is there a piano in the bar? Is there a karaoke machine? Where is the client from? There is a problem with the client. Is it a big problem? It is a problem with his bank. Which bank is it? Mr. Coleman talks to the client for a long time.

Late that afternoon Mr. Coleman returns to his office. Is there an email from Mr. Lin? There is an email from a pharmaceutical company. The company wants to buy chemicals from Mr Coleman’s company. Mr Coleman needs the chemicals quickly. He emails Mr Lin. Is there a time difference between Panama and China?

Meanwhile in China Mr. Lin is also very busy. He is in his office. He is reading a report. It is about the pharmaceutical industry in China. Is there a big pharmaceutical industry in China?
3. The Holding Company in the Caribbean. (do/does)

A shipment of chemicals arrives in Panama. Does it arrive during the day or during the night? What time does it arrive? It is from China. Is the ship a Chinese ship or a Panamanian ship? Mr. Coleman meets the ship. He collects some documents. He telephones a holding company in the Cayman Islands. A holding company owns other companies. How many tax havens are there in the Caribbean? What is the rate of personal income tax in the Cayman Islands? Mr. Coleman sends the documents to the Cayman Islands.

Mr. Coleman wants to go on vacation. He wants to visit his family in the US. He has a sister. Does he have a brother? Mr. Coleman’s parents are deceased. Two days later he flies to Miami. Which airline does he fly with? Does he fly business class or economy class? Are there many people on the plane?

Mr. Coleman stays with his sister in Atlanta. She is divorced. Where is Atlanta? Mr. Coleman’s sister has a daughter. Mr. Coleman loves his niece very much. What is her name? How old is she? Does she go to a private school? How many people are there in her class at school?

Mr. Coleman works on the internet. He is mobile. His employer is in Panama but he often flies to the Cayman Islands and other tax havens. What is a tax haven? He always takes his laptop computer with him. Does it have anti-virus software? What kind of computer is it?

Mr. Coleman writes letters and sends emails from his sister’s house in Atlanta. He visits some old friends. He has a good time. He does not think about Mr. Lin. He does not think about the shipment of chemicals from China.

Meanwhile in the Cayman Islands another company buys the shipment of chemicals. The company is part of a conglomerate. The conglomerate has subsidiaries in many countries in Europe. Does it have a subsidiary in the Netherlands? Does it have a subsidiary in Italy?

The shipping manager in the Caymans is Mr. Davis. He is Welsh. Is he good at his job? Does he have an MBA? Mr. Davis sends a message to Panama. The shipping manager of Mr. Coleman’s company in Panama sends the shipment of chemicals from China to Europe. Does he check the shipment personally? Does he check the documents carefully? Does he contact Mr. Lin in China?

A week later Mr. Coleman flies back from his vacation. Which airline does he use? He talks to Mr. Davis in The Cayman Islands. Does he talk for long? He talks to the shipping manager in Panama. What is the name of the shipping manager? Does he speak Spanish? Mr. Coleman feels good. He is happy. Everything is ok.
4. The Spanish Port (is/are doing)

It is late at night in the port city of Valencia. Is Valencia in Spain? A crane driver is going to work. Is he wearing a pair of overalls? He is driving a car. What kind of car is he driving? The man is working night shift. Does he like shift work? He starts work at midnight. He finishes work at eight o'clock in the morning. How many shifts are there in a twenty-four hour period?

The man arrives at work. It is eleven thirty at night. He is a little early. A large container ship is coming into the port. Is it flying the Panamanian flag? It is carrying a cargo of chemicals. Are they pharmaceutical chemicals or industrial chemicals? The chemicals are in special liquid containers.

The Spanish crane driver starts work. He climbs the ladder to the top of his crane. He unloads the ship. How many other cranes are unloading the ship with him? How many crew-members are working on the ship?

At eight thirty in the morning the crane driver goes home. Is he tired? Are there any containers left on the ship?

That afternoon a fleet of trucks comes to the port. Another crane driver loads a container of chemicals on to the back of a truck. The truck leaves. Another truck comes. The crane driver loads another container on to the second truck. A third truck comes. The crane driver loads a container on to the back of the third truck. The first truck is going to Italy. Which city is it going to? The second truck is going to France. Which city is it going to? The third truck is going to Switzerland. Which city is it going to?

More trucks come. The day shift crane driver loads the trucks. The trucks leave. Where are they going? A man checks the invoices for the containers. He looks at the documents. Does he check the contents of the containers? Do customs officials inspect the containers?

Meanwhile in China Mr. Lin is preparing to send another shipment to Panama. Is it the same chemical or a different chemical? He is walking through the factory. He is talking to a chemical engineer. He is talking about prices and quality control. Is the engineer listening? Is he wearing earphones?

Meanwhile in Panama Mr. Coleman is talking on the phone. He is talking to Mr. Davis in the Cayman Islands. They are talking about the chemical shipment from China. They are talking about the price. Are they arguing?

Mr Davis finishes his conversation with Mr. Coleman. He checks his email. How many messages are there in his inbox? He sends emails to Europe. He ships the chemicals to subsidiary companies in seven European countries. What are the names of the countries? Mr. Davis looks up from his computer terminal. He looks at his secretary. She is checking documents. Is she checking the documents for the chemical shipment from China?
5. The German Pharmaceutical Company (going to do)

A laboratory worker at a German pharmaceutical company is arriving at work. He is wearing a pair of overalls. Is he carrying a lunchbox? The man goes inside. He washes his hands. He puts on special protective clothing. He puts on a lab coat. Does he put on a hair net?

The German pharmaceutical worker is going to make a cough syrup mixture. He is going to combine different ingredients in a large vat. Is he going to check the quality of the ingredients first? How many liters is he going to make? Is he going to bottle the mixture?

The telephone rings. Is it loud? It is the worker’s boss. There are not enough chemicals to make a batch of cough syrup. Is the worker going to get in trouble? The boss is going to order some more chemicals. Is he going to order them now? Are they going to arrive soon? The name of the boss is Mr Schwartz. What is the name of the pharmaceutical company?

Mr. Schwartz sends an email to a supplier in France. Two hours later he receives a phone call from the supply manager at the French company. Her name is Ms. Durant. A shipment of pharmaceutical chemicals is going to arrive in France tomorrow. What time is it going to arrive? It is going to arrive from Valencia. How many trucks are going to bring it?

Mr. Schwartz places an order with Ms. Durant. He sends her an order form as an email attachment. She sends him an invoice. How many liters is the German company going to buy? When is the French company going to send it? How long is it going to take to reach the factory in Germany? Is the German company going to be able to meet its production deadline?

A few days later Mr. Schwartz receives a phone call from Ms. Durant. There is a delay. There is a problem with the certification of the chemicals. Some documents are missing. Ms. Durant is going to send the chemicals anyway. Is she going to send them now? Is she going to look for the missing certification documents?

A week later everything is finished. The cough syrup is ready. It is in a vat. The workers are going to bottle it with a machine. Are they going to label it? Are they going to test the contents of each bottle? Are they going to work overtime to finish the job? Half of he cough syrup is in bottles. The pharmaceutical company is going to sell it in Germany. The other half is in a tank. The company is going to export it to a subsidiary in the United States. Are they going to ship it from Hamburg? Where are they going to ship it to? Is it going to go via Canada? Are the American customs agents going to check the quality of the cough syrup?

Meanwhile in China Mr. Lin is talking to his daughter. She is going to study in the States. What is she going to study? Which city is she going to study in?
6. The American Pharmaceutical Company (has/have done)

It is a beautiful day in New York City. A young Chinese woman is walking down the street. She is a foreign student. Her father is a factory manager at a chemical company in China. Her name is Ms Lin. She has been in the United States for less than a week. How many days has she been in New York? She is going to study at Columbia University. Has she been to the campus yet? Has she been to America before? Has she been to any other countries apart from China and the US?

The young woman buys a newspaper. She sits down in Central Park. She opens the paper. Has she ever read an American newspaper before? There is a story about poisonous cough syrup on the front page of the paper. Forty-five children have died and a hundred and twenty are in hospital. Are they in a serious condition? The children have caught colds. They have stayed home from school. Their parents have given them cough syrup. The syrup is tainted. It is poisonous. Many of the children have died. The young woman is shocked. Has this ever happened before in America? Has it ever happened in Europe? Has it ever happened in China?

Meanwhile in Panama Mr Coleman is talking on the telephone. He is talking to his sister. They are talking about the sister’s daughter (Mr. Coleman’s niece). Mr. Coleman’s niece is in hospital. She has taken the tainted medicine. She is in a critical condition in the hospital. Is she going to die?

Mr. Coleman goes to the airport. He catches a plane to the US. Has his niece ever been really sick before? Mr. Coleman is really worried. Has he ever been this worried before?

Meanwhile in New York City a journalist is researching the story. He is talking on the phone to the public relations manager at an American pharmaceutical company. What is the name of the public relations manager? What is the name of the company? Has the company recalled the medicine? Have all the bottles been taken off the shelves in drug stores? How many bottles have been sold? How many people have died so far? How many people have fallen ill?

The public relations manager says the cough syrup is from Germany. The journalist flies to Germany. Which city does he fly to? Which airline does he use? Has he been to Germany before? He visits the German pharmaceutical factory. He interviews the manager and the workers. Dies he interview them in German or in English?

Have any German people fallen ill from the poisonous cough medicine? Has the company recalled the bottles in Germany? The manager tells the journalist the ingredients come from France. The journalist takes a train to France. He visits the French pharmaceutical supplier. He interviews Ms Durant. Has she heard about the deaths in the United States?
7. The French Pharmaceutical Company ("would" conditional)

An American journalist is in France. Would you work as a journalist? He is in Paris. Would you go to France? He is talking to a French woman. She is the supply manager for a French pharmaceutical company. Would you work in France? Would you work in the pharmaceutical industry?

The French woman is upset. Her company has sold industrial chemicals to a German pharmaceutical company. The German company has sold them to an American company. A lot of American children have taken the medicine. More than a hundred of them have become sick. How many of them have died? Would you take cough syrup for a sore throat?

The French woman tells the journalist that the chemicals come from the Cayman Islands. Would you go to the Caymans? Would you live there? Somebody has labeled the chemicals as “pharmaceutical quality” but they are “industrial quality”. They are not fit for human consumption. They are poisonous. Would you take poison? Would you mis-label a shipment of chemicals to save money? Would you deliberately kill another human being? What would you do if your child died?

The journalist flies to the Caymans. Has he been to the Caymans before? He meets Mr. Davis. Mr. Davis says the Caymans company is a holding company. Would you own shares in a holding company? Would you buy shares in any company? What sort of company would you buy shares in? Mr Davis gives the journalist the contact details of Mr. Coleman in Panama. Would you do the same thing? The journalist goes to Panama. Would you go to Panama? He looks for Mr. Coleman. He cannot find him.

Mr. Coleman is in the States. His niece has passed away. Her mother is in shock. Is Mr. Coleman going to sue the American pharmaceutical company? Would you sue the American pharmaceutical company? Is the American pharmaceutical company going to sue the German pharmaceutical company? Would you sue the German pharmaceutical company? Is the German company going to sue the French supplier? Would you sue the French supplier? Is the French supplier going to sue the Spanish shipping agent? Would you sue the Spanish shipping agent? Is the Spanish shipping agent going to sue the holding company in the Caymans? Would you sue the company in the Caymans?

The journalist returns to New York. He cannot find the origin of the tainted cough syrup. He cannot find the source of the mis-labeled shipment of chemicals. Does he give up? Would you give up?

A week later Mr. Coleman comes to New York. Has he quit his job in Panama? Would you quit your job in his situation? Mr. Coleman tells the journalist the chemicals come from China. The journalist gets a visa for China. He flies to Beijing. Would you do that?
8. The Chinese Government (easy to do)

An American journalist is at the Chinese Embassy in New York. He is getting a visa. Is it easy to get a visa for China? Is it easy to get a visa for France? Why? The journalist is filling in a form. The form is in English. Is it easy to understand?

The journalist has to wait for several days. Is it expensive to get a visa for China? Is it possible to get an express visa? Does it cost much more? How much more? Why would it not cost less?

The journalist catches a plane to China. Does he have a stopover? Is it possible to get a direct flight from New York to Beijing? Is it possible to get a direct flight from Los Angeles to Beijing?

The journalist changes money at the airport. What is the currency in China? He goes to the information desk. He talks to the attendant. They speak in English. Is it difficult to understand the attendant? Is there a bus to town? How far is the airport from town? Is there a rail link to the airport?

The journalist checks in to a hotel. Is it expensive to stay in a hotel in Beijing? Is it safe to walk in Beijing at night? Is it difficult to get a hotel reservation in Beijing?

The journalist contacts a Chinese government official. Is it difficult to find English-speaking people? The government official contacts another official in the trade ministry. The second official contacts a third official. The third official sends a subordinate. He speaks to the journalist. Later the first official contacts the police.

The police go to Mr Lin’s town. They search his office. They confiscate his computer and his documents. Later they arrest him. They close his factory. Do they give the workers any compensation? Is it difficult to find another job?

A court tries Mr Lin. He receives the death penalty. The government executes him. The journalist writes a story about the case. The American government contacts the Chinese government. They talk about quality control.

The American government sends an officer to inspect facilities and documentation at chemical factories in China. Is it difficult to obtain records? Is it hard to get information? The American hires a car. Is it expensive to hire a car? How much is it? What kind of car is it?

The American visits Mr Lin’s factory. It is closed. He meets the former chief engineer. They talk. Do they talk through an interpreter? Can the American speak Chinese? Can the Chinese man speak English? Is it easy to learn to read Chinese? Is it easy to learn to pronounce Chinese? Is it difficult to become an engineer? Is it hard to get a job?
9. A New Medical Company (easier than)

It is late at night. Two men are in a bar in rural China. How does rural China compare to rural Australia? How does rural China compare to Urban China? One of the men is American. How does urban America compare to urban Europe? The two men are drinking a regional brand of beer. Is it safer than the well-known brands from the city? Is it more dangerous? Why are expensive “brand-name” products attractive to many consumers? Compare and contrast the Chinese and American political and economic systems.

The two men are drunk. They are building a cross-cultural bridge. They are cementing a business relationship. They are going to do something on the side. They are going to start a side business. The business will have nothing to do with their current employers. Are they going to exploit relationships with corrupt government officials? Are there any corrupt government officials in that area? How deep does corruption go? Is honesty the best policy?

The American’s name is Mr. Coleman. He is cleaning up his mess. Would you clean up your mess? Mr. Coleman has a new job. He works for the US government. He is a trade ministry official. He is a troubleshooter. He is a problem solver. Is his new job better than his old job? Is it harder? Is it better-paid?

The Chinese man’s name is Mr. Wang. Is he older or younger than Mr. Coleman? Does he look older or younger? What are the signs of ageing? What are the signs of youth?

Mr. Coleman and Mr. Wang are going to go into business together. They are going to start a new company. They are going to start their own company. Is it difficult to start your own company? The company is going to produce and sell natural medicine. What are they are going to call the company? Is finding a suitable name for a company hard? Is finding the finance harder?

Coleman and Wang plan to produce traditional natural medicines. Are traditional natural medicines more effective than modern antibiotics? The two new friends also plan to invest in real estate. They want to build health centers and resorts in southern China. They want to open a school that teaches homeopathic medicine. What is the difference between homeopathic and allopathic medicine? Which one is more effective in which circumstances? How does traditional Chinese medicine compare to traditional Ayurvedic medicine in India?

Mr Coleman returns to America. First he flies to New York then he goes to Atlanta. How does New York compare to Atlanta in terms of weather? How do the two cities compare in terms of population and ethnic diversity? Mr. Coleman stays with his sister. How does her house compare to his apartment in Panama? How does Panama compare to the US?
10. Doing Business (being in business)

A new player in the global pharmaceutical industry has come on the scene. The name of the new company is Coleman and Wang. It is a Chinese American joint venture. The company produces natural medicines. Is working in the pharmaceutical industry lucrative? How long has Coleman and Wang been on the scene? Is doing business in China difficult? Is doing business in America easy? How does doing business in Hong Kong compare to doing business in Shenzhen?

Coleman and Wang float their company. They list it on the New York Stock Exchange and the Hong Kong Stock Exchange. They open a chain of traditional Chinese medicine pharmacies in South Korea, Japan, Thailand and Hong Kong. They also open in The United States and Canada. Is listing a company on the stock exchange a good way to raise capital? Is starting a new company expensive? Is finding finance a problem in the United States? Is finding capital difficult in the Caymans? Is investing in offshore funds a good idea?

“Coleman and Wang” expands very quickly. It grabs thirty per cent of the retail non-prescription pharmaceutical market in Thailand. In Japan it scores almost fifty per cent of the market in a short time. In Korea it is slow to develop due to specific local factors in the Korean market. What are the factors? Is breaking into the Korean market difficult? Is breaking into the Japanese market possible? Is breaking into the US market conceivable? Is keeping control of your own company a good idea?

Mr. Coleman visits India and signs a joint venture agreement with some Indian businessman. How does doing business in India compare to doing business in China? He needs to raise more capital. Is raising capital in the Caribbean easier than raising Capital in Britain? The company issues more shares. A cartel of international venture capitalists buys up the shares. They manage to get a controlling interest in the company. The sell all the company’s assets and then re-sell the shares as they continue to rise. With no assets the company cannot operate. The company goes broke. The shares plummet. The venture capitalists do not care.

Global financial pirates have stripped Coleman and Wang of their assets and livelihoods without breaking any laws. The market is a jungle. There is no morality. Is being in business really as dog-eat-dog as all that? Is investing in the stock market a good way to make a living? Is investing in the stock market gambling? Is gambling addictive? Would you prefer a holiday in Las Vegas or the Cayman Islands? Is buying lottery tickets an investment or a gamble? Have you ever bought a lottery ticket? Would you like to buy a lottery ticket now? Is life a gamble?

Mr. Coleman visits his sister and talks and thinks about the future. Mr. Wang scratches his head and wonders what to do next. What would you do next?