

Advanced ESL Listening Activity, with Comprehension & Discussion Questions, based on Chimamanda Adichie's TED Talk on "The Danger of a Single Story"

"The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. ...It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar." --

Chimamanda Adichie in her TED talk on the Danger of a Single Story

Chimamanda Adichie's TED talk on "The Danger of a Single Story" is a thought-provoking 19 minute listening activity for high intermediate or advanced ESL students. It might help prepare them for listening to university lectures, and should certainly stimulate class discussion or essays on student experiences with single and multiple stories.

If 19 minutes is too long for a class, her crucial points are well-presented in the first 14 minutes (through 14:07.)

http://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?language=en

On the next pages are some possible comprehension questions and discussion and writing topics you might find useful, or use as a springboard for creating higher-level questions or prompts. (Answers page 4.)

“The Danger of a Single Story”: Questions

1. Why did the first stories Chimamanda Adichie wrote include children eating apples & playing in the snow?

- A She thought apples must be much better than mangoes and snow was the best weather.
- B. She thought books always included activities like that, like all the stories she had read.
- C. She had lived in England when very young and remembered apples and snow as very special.
- D. She didn't have any imagination, so she just copied what she read.

2. Why did Adichie tell the story of her first college roommate (the girl assigned by her college to share a room with her when she started at the university?)

- A To show how geographically uninformed American young people are
- B. To demonstrate how much more she knew about American life than her roommate knew about Nigerian life.
- C. To show how much her roommate didn't understand about her since she only had a single story in her mind about Africans.
- D. To illustrate the importance of learning about American music before starting university study in the U.S.

3. In minute 8:20-9:00 Adichie tells about visiting in Mexico and being surprised to see people happy in their daily lives. She said “I realized that I had been so immersed in the media coverage of Mexicans that they had become one thing in my mind, the abject immigrant. I had bought into the single story of Mexicans...” What does she mean when she says “I had bought into the single story of Mexicans...”?

- A. She had paid for newspapers and cable so she wanted to accept what they showed.
- B. She had accepted without questioning that what she was hearing about poor Mexican immigrants was the whole story about Mexico.
- C. She had bought one book about Mexicans and that was enough.
- D. She had bought tickets to travel in Mexico.

4. Which of these quotes most closely expresses the main theme or idea of this talk?

A. "So I was an early reader, and what I read were British and American children's books. I was also an early writer, and... I wrote exactly the kinds of stories I was reading..."

B. "But I must quickly add that I too am just as guilty in the question of the single story."

C. "The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story."

D. "I teach writing workshops in Lagos every summer, and it is amazing to me how many people apply, how many people are eager to write, to tell stories."

5. Adichie admitted, "Africa is a continent full of catastrophes" (terrible things going wrong.) Then she added, "But there are other stories that are not about catastrophe, and it is very important, it is just as important, to talk about them."

After listening a second time to min. 14:08 to the end of the talk, give two examples of other important stories about Nigeria that Adichie gave to balance the stories of catastrophes.

6. Adichie said "All of these stories make me who I am. But to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook the many other stories that formed me." Discuss with a partner (or write about) an experience that by itself would "flatten" the story of your life. Which stories do you think are important in explaining who you are?

“The Danger of a Single Story”: Answers

1. Why did the first stories Chimamanda Adichie wrote include children eating apples & playing in the snow?

>>> B. She thought books always included activities like that, like all the stories she had read.

2. Why did Adichie tell the story of her first college roommate (the girl assigned by her college to share a room with her when she started at the university?)

>>> C. To show how much her roommate didn't understand about her since she only had a single story in her mind about Africans.

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>>> Answers will vary, but might include: the story of her Nigerian publisher who proved Nigerians would read if literature were available, or the working lady who had read Adichie's novel and cared enough to suggest changes in the sequel, or heart operations in Lagos, or contemporary Nigerian music or films (Nollywood), or many Nigerians starting their own businesses or taking writing workshops.

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