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# Could You Repeat That?: An Innovative Way of Getting Students to Speak Up

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From 1985 to 1989, the Texas International Educational Consortium operated a special program in which government-sponsored Malaysian students did their freshman and sophomore years in Malaysia before transferring to complete their degrees at various Texas universities. Before entering the academic track, students were required to take EAP classes until they had achieved certain TOEFL and writing exam scores.

Teaching these students was extremely rewarding but also challenging in many ways. One general language problem was simply getting the students to speak loudly enough. Perhaps as a unique aspect of their culture, Malay students tend to be *extremely* reticent in class. Even when they do speak, they do not speak up. Female students, most of them wearing partial veils, had to be prompted quite often to raise their voice to a level which the whole class could hear.

A more specific language problem was the students' pronunciation, particularly their non-English stress patterns. These include stressing the incorrect syllable in words, a common error being stressing the last syllable in a word (quick-ly, bu-tter, bicy-cle), and inappropriate sentence level stress. While Malay students have very few problems with any of the English phonemes (vowel plus /r/ combinations are exceptions to this statement), these stress mistakes often make the students' statements totally incomprehensible to a

native speaker even though all the individual sounds are correct.

To practice speaking loudly and to practice emphasizing certain words within a phrase (i.e., stressing certain words), I developed the game "Could You Repeat That Please." It requires little preparation on the teacher's part, is easy to use in class, and generates LOUD English from normally quiet mouths.

## General Plan

In this game, the class is divided into two teams. From each team, one student will write at the board, one will dictate a sentence, and the others will be the support team in the audience and will eventually have a chance to participate. The board should be divided into two equal areas, one for each team. The area must be big enough to write a sentence of about ten words. First, send a writer from each team to the board. The people writing at the board must face the board and cannot turn to the audience. Second, the dictating students (again, one from each team) will each be given a small slip of paper with a sentence on it that he must dictate to the person at the board. The dictating person should not be able to see the blackboard. In Malaysia, our boards were on stands and were not fixed on the wall. In my class, I always had the dictating student actually sit in a desk which had been set up behind the board. If your board is on the wall, you could have the dictating students sit in

the back of the room, facing the back wall. In this way, they would not see the board and their voices would have to be very loud for the writing student to hear.

When the teacher says, "Go," both of the dictating students will attempt to say their sentence to the person who is writing at the board. For the first minute, I do not let the audience help. They are well aware of what the dictated sentence is as well as what is being written on the board and are all too eager to help their team.

The sentences that are distributed to the dictating students contain numerous minimal pairs or similar sounding words or phrases which have been placed in the same general positions within a sentence. This causes confusion and requires the students to speak loudly, speak clearly, and, above all, stress the words that the student at the board is having problems with.

After one minute, I allow the two students at the board to ask the dictating students questions. The students often repeat what they have written already and then stress the missing parts: "He went to the market and bought some WHAT?"

If the sentence hasn't been solved within a minute, the dictating person rejoins his team in the audience and another team member takes over that position. If the sentence has not been solved within another minute, then anyone from the team is free to make comments to the person at the board.

Since this game practices pronunciation and listening skills, the game must be done completely in English. If any team member uses a non-English language hint,

the other team is automatically awarded the point for that sentence.

### The Sentences

For one game, the teacher should prepare seven to ten pairs of sentences. In the following sample sentences, note the similarity in individual word pronunciation and stress patterns:

- 1A: After she drank the tea, one of the other passengers spoke to her.
- 1B: When the ship sank at sea, none of the passengers was saved.
- 2A: First, he studied math. Then, he watched a movie on T.V.
- 2B: First, she studied math. Then, she saw a show on T.V.
- 3A: He deposited the coins in the machine and then chose a drink.
- 3B: She dropped the coins on the ground, so she couldn't buy a drink.
- 4A: The wind was blowing wildly. You could hardly walk.
- 4B: The men were talking loudly. I could hardly hear.
- 5A: If the test is not too hard, I think I might pass.
- 5B: If this is not a heart, I think it might be a circle.
- 6A: Her tomato salad looks very good. Perhaps she ought to add some lettuce.
- 6B: Her lettuce salad looks very good. Perhaps she ought to add some tomatoes.
- 7A: Of all the questions, the most difficult to get right is number six.
- 7B: Of all the answers, the most difficult to write is number sixteen.

In choosing minimal pairs for these sentences, the teacher should use those

phonemes which are problematic for the students to hear. This will cause the student who is trying to write down the sentence to have to ask for clarification. In addition, it is a good idea to choose two words that are similar linguistically, i.e., two nouns or two adjectives. In this way, the words will probably have occur in similar positions within the stress pattern of the sentence. An excellent source for such words is *Pronunciation Contrasts in English*. In addition, for the teacher in a multi-lingual class, this text also tells which minimal pairs are problematic for which L1 backgrounds.

Teachers can make the game more relevant by including contexts with which the students are familiar (living in the dormitory, having to open a bank account, etc.) or by including grammatical patterns and vocabulary and idioms recently studied. Also, it is important that the teacher make use of the particular minimal pair phonemes which are troublesome for that language group. Because the sentences are similar in stress patterns and may contain minimal pairs, this exercise is very challenging for the students.

One final piece of advice: With this game, even those students who haven't murmured a word all term might suddenly come alive, so you should consider the size of your class and what noise problems could be generated. In Malaysia, teachers in nearby classrooms asked me after class what all the commotion had been. They could hardly believe that our quiet, shy Malay students had actually generated that much noise.

### Reference

- Nilsen, D. L.F., and Nilsen, A. P. (1973). *Pronunciation contrasts in English*. New York: Regents Publishing Company.

### About the Author

*Keith S. Folse is the author of Intermediate Reading Practices (University of Michigan Press). He has taught and coordinated in programs in the U.S., Saudi Arabia, Malaysia, and Japan. Currently, he is the Educational Director at Language Academy, Gumma, Japan.*