

How Do You Get to Timbuktu? Improving ESL Listening/Speaking Skills Through Team Competition

by Ruth Todd-Chattin and Keith S. Folse

English as a second language teachers often encounter students in their classrooms who are capable of learning, but who have attitudinal problems which keep them from progressing in their acquisition of English. For example, there is Juan, who truly believes that he should have been admitted to a higher level English class in spite of his low placement scores. Each new lesson is boring for him. Then, there is Kyoko, who copies everything the teacher writes on the blackboard neatly into her notebook. Her test scores are almost perfect. Yet, if you ask her a question, she freezes. Finally, there is Ahmed, who did not want to enroll in English classes at all. Studying English was his father's idea. No matter what the lesson, his mind is always elsewhere. How can the ESL teacher challenge the bright student like Juan who believes he knows the material already, put at ease the inhibited student like Kyoko who has difficulty communicating orally, or involve the disinterested student like Ahmed who is not motivated to learn? One answer is games.

Certainly, games are not a miracle cure for all pedagogical problems and not the basis for a teaching method, but they can serve as a complement to an ESL curriculum which might otherwise become tedious. Games challenge students like Juan to use what they know. They provide students like Kyoko with an opportunity for real communication in an informal situation. They capture the attention of students like Ahmed who might otherwise remain mentally disengaged.

One particular game which has helped students like these to overcome attitudinal

problems is "ESL College Bowl". "College Bowl" was originally a TV game show in which teams of university students from various universities across the United States tested their knowledge by answering questions such as "Who was the first man to set foot on the moon?", or "What is the square root of 625?", or "Where is Timbuktu?" (The answers are respectively Neil Armstrong, 25, and in Mali.) Not only did this game entertain the audience, but it also demonstrated which school had the brightest, most well-informed students. Though the game decreased in popularity as a TV show over the years and eventually was cancelled as a network program, many local TV stations across the U.S. still offer their own weekly version as a competition among local high schools. Moreover, university student associations often hold their own in-house trivia competitions based on the original TV show format. This game continues to be played in one form or another because it is so entertaining for both the audience and the participants.

Advantages of ESL College Bowl

"College Bowl" can also be fun for ESL students. But more importantly, it can provide them with an opportunity to improve their listening and speaking skills in English. At times the classroom situation, with the convenience of books and paper, makes it easy for students and teachers to focus attention on reading and writing rather than listening and speaking. Playing "College Bowl" forces students to pay attention to the oral skills. In this game, the students must listen intensively in order to understand and answer questions. They must also pronounce words correctly in order to be

understood. Thus, oral skills are tried, practiced, honed, and tested.

Game Procedure

The object of the game is for participants to try to answer as many questions correctly as possible and thus score as many points as possible for their team. The first team to reach 300 points wins the game.

The game requires two teams made up of an equal number of students. In the classroom, three students per team works best. Other students in the class may observe and listen or may function as score keepers, time keepers, judges, or emcees. The two teams should sit facing each other with the team captain sitting between his team members so that he can consult easily with everyone on his team. The emcee, who could be the teacher or a student, should stand so that all participants can see him clearly.

The emcee will give two kinds of questions--a toss-up, which either team may answer, and a bonus, which is answered by the team that gave the correct answer to the toss-up. The toss-up is a question which is to be answered by any individual on either team. However, the individual should signify that he knows the answer by raising his hand (ringing a bell, pressing a buzzer, etc.). The emcee then recognizes the first individual to raise his hand by saying the student's name. If the student answers the question correctly, he wins ten points for his team. If his answer is not correct, the opposing team gets an opportunity to answer the question. In this situation, the opposing team may consult and the team captain will give the answer. If the answer is correct, this team scores ten points. If neither team can give a correct answer, the question is eliminated and the emcee will ask another toss-up question to be answered by either team. Toss-up questions are usually about general knowledge. For example, "What is the largest landlocked country in the Western Hemisphere?" (Bolivia is the answer.) The team which answers the toss-up ques-

tion correctly has won not only ten points, but also the right to attempt the accompanying bonus question.

The bonus question is generally a listing or naming question within the same field of knowledge as the toss-up. The team will list four items for five points each. Therefore, a bonus question carries a maximum value of twenty points. Again, a bonus question may be attempted only by the same team which correctly answered the toss-up question. After the emcee has read the entire bonus question, the team members may consult for 30 seconds to come up with their four answers. At the end of the thirty seconds, the emcee will ask the captain for the team's answers. Once the captain has given all four answers, the emcee should reveal the correct answers and the points to be awarded. Because the bonus question has four answers which are worth

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five points each, the team might receive five, ten, fifteen, twenty, or no points. For example, a bonus question appropriate for the toss-up given in the example above would be: "For five points each, name four other South American countries."

Question Selection and Construction

The difficulty and content of the questions asked will depend on the background and proficiency in language skills of the students in the class. One game can in-

clude a variety of questions ranging from geography to mathematics. Students most often enjoy questions which ask them to recall English vocabulary and grammar which they have previously learned. The questions can be made up by the teacher or by groups of students. Whoever is responsible for inventing the questions needs to remember a few things in order to come up with effective questions. First, every question must have a specific answer. A question such as "How do you get to Timbuktu?" is unacceptable because a variety of answers could be given. A question such as "What do you think of nuclear disarmament?" is also unacceptable because the answer would involve personal opinion rather than a specific fact. Secondly, true/false and yes/no questions should be avoided. A question such as "Is the earth round?" is unacceptable because if Team A answers incorrectly, then Team B already knows the correct answer by elimination. Finally, the bonus question should be kept simple. The best bonus questions require students to name four items in a category related to the toss-up question. Asking four separate questions requires students to retain too much information before answering. For example, "Name four planets" is a better bonus question than "1. Name the largest planet. 2. Name the smallest planet. 3. Name the hottest planet. 4. Name the coldest planet."

Guidelines

For the teacher as manager of the ESL classroom it is also necessary to remember that a few basic guidelines need to be followed in order for the game to be successful. First, the teacher should be sure that the questions are not beyond the student's language level. Secondly, the students must understand the rules of the game completely before they play. Thirdly, the students should be permitted to use only English while playing the game. The emcee should penalize students for using their native language by disallowing the question. Fourthly, the emcee must control answering out of turn by recognizing only the team captains' answers to the bonus questions. Finally, in every situation the rules must be applied fairly but inflexibly.

Conclusion

"ESL College Bowl" generates a great deal of enthusiasm in students. It motivates students to learn English, gives students a chance to practice their listening and speaking skills, and provides them with a break from the tedium of the textbook. ESL teachers at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and at Spring Hill College in Mobile, Alabama found that their students enjoyed the game so much that they took this classroom activity a step further. In July of 1982, students met for an "ESL College Bowl" competition between the two schools. The activity was so successful that it is now an annual event to which teachers and students alike look forward.

Appendix: Sample Questions

25 toss-up/bonus questions for ESL students
(various levels)

1. Toss-up: What language is spoken in Argentina? (Spanish) Bonus: Name four other countries in which Spanish is the official language? (Spain, Mexico, Venezuela, Colombia, Cuba, etc.)

2. Toss-up: In what sport would you hear phrases such as "the 25 yard line, safety, touchdown"? (American football) Bonus: Tell the number of players on these teams: 1. soccer (11) 2. baseball (9) 3. basketball (5) 4. American football (11)

3. Toss-up: inch, gallon, century--Which is a measure of time? (century) Bonus: What do these terms measure? 1. mile (distance) 2. pint (liquid) 3. ounce (weight) 4. week (time)

4. Toss-up: What is the shortest month? (February) Bonus: Each of the four seasons generally lasts for three months. Tell in which months these seasons occur. 1. spring (March, April, May) 2. winter (December, January, February) 3. summer (May, June, July) 4. fall (September, October, November)

5. Toss-up: In order to see better, people often wear a pair of ? . (glasses) Bonus:

Name four other pairs of things people wear. (earrings, pants, shoes, socks, cuff-links, contacts, underwear)

6. Toss-up: What is the longest river in the U.S.? (Mississippi) Bonus: In what country is each of these rivers located? 1. Volga (USSR) 2. Ganges (India) 3. Loire (France) 4. Yangtze (China)

7. Toss-up: Say and spell the past participle of the verb 'spend'. (spent) Bonus: Say and spell the past participles of these verbs: 1. write (written) 2. read (read) 3. drive (driven) 4. swim (swum)

8. Toss-up: am not, are not, is not--Which one does not have a contraction? (am not) Bonus: Give the contractions for these words: 1. we are (we're) 2. did not (didn't) 3. will not (won't) 4. have not (haven't)

9. Toss-up: What is the chemical symbol for iron; (Fe) Bonus: Give the chemical symbol for these minerals: 1. salt (Na) 2. sulfur (S) 3. uranium (U) 4. copper (Cu)

10. Toss-up: What is 144 divided by 12? (12) Bonus: Solve these division problems: 1. 295 divided by 5 (59) 2. 21 divided by 7 (3) 3. 49 divided by 7 (7) 4. 100 divided by 10 (10)

11. Toss-up: What relation is your father's father to you? (grandfather) Bonus: What relation are these people to you? 1. your mother's brother (uncle) 2. your brother's daughter (niece) 3. your father's mother (grandmother) 4. your daughter's son (grandson)

12. Toss-up: Panama, Nicaragua, Argentina--Which is not considered part of Central America? (Argentina) Bonus: Give the capitals of these Central American countries: 1. Honduras (Tegucigalpa) 2. Nicaragua (Managua) 3. El Salvador (San Salvador) 4. Panama (Panama [City])

13. Toss-up: What is the past tense of the verb freeze? (froze) Bonus: What is the past of these verbs: 1. steal (stole) 2. ring (rang) 3. grow (grew) 4. fly (flew)

14. Toss-up: Say and spell the past tense of the verb wear (wore) Bonus: Say and spell the past tense forms of these verbs: 1. wake (woke) 2. break (broke) 3. write (wrote) 4. choose (chose)

15. Toss-up: yard, quart, hour, ton--Which one measures weight? (ton) Bonus: What do each of these measure? 1. foot (distance/length) 2. decade (time) 3. acre (area) 4. gram (weight)

16. Toss-up: Say and spell the plural of 'tooth' (teeth) Bonus: Say and spell the plural of these words: 1. woman (women) 2. loaf (loaves) 3. mouse (mice) 4. child (children)

17. Toss-up: What is the longest river in the world? (Nile) Bonus: On what continent is each of these rivers located? 1. Seine (Europe) 2. Congo (Africa) 3. Nile (Africa) 4. Amazon (South America)

18. Toss-up: Say and spell the past form of the verb 'begin' (began) Bonus: Say and spell the past form of these verbs: 1. drink (drank) 2. take (took) 3. know (knew) 4. sit (sat)

19. Toss-up: Who was the U.S. president immediately before Reagan? (Carter) Bonus: Name any other 4 U.S. presidents before Reagan. (Etc.)

20. Toss-up: What is the capital of Austria? (Vienna) Bonus: Name the capital of these European countries: 1. Poland (Warsaw) 2. Italy (Rome) 3. Hungary (Budapest) 4. Switzerland (Bern)

21. Toss-up: 3 times 3 = 9. In other words 3 squared equals 9. What is 4 squared? (16) Bonus: Give the result when these numbers are squared. 1. 2 (4) 2. 5 (25) 3. 10 (100) 4. 12 (144)

22. Toss-up: Which large South American country has no coastline? (Bolivia) Bonus: Name 4 of the 5 countries that surround Bolivia. (Brazil, Peru, Paraguay, Argentina, Chile)

23. Toss-up: Albania, Argentina, Australia--Which one is completely surrounded by

water? (Australia) Bonus: Name 4 countries which begin with the letter 'B'. (Belgium, Bolivia, Bhutan, Brazil, Bulgaria, Burma, Burundi)

24. Toss-up: What is the capital of the U.S.? (Washington, D.C.) Bonus: Give the capital cities of these U.S. states: 1. New York (Albany) 2. Georgia (Atlanta) 3. Colorado (Denver) 4. Texas (Austin)

25. Toss-up: What language is spoken in Syria? (Arabic) Bonus: What language is spoken in these countries? 1. Brazil (Portuguese) 2. Japan (Japanese) 3. the Netherlands (Dutch) 4. Norway (Norwegian)