

# Discussing Disasters

## Levels

Intermediate +

## Aims

Practice past modals  
*should have, could have, must have, might have, and would have*  
in a realistic context

## Class Time

50 minutes

## Preparation Time

30 minutes

## Resources

Magazine accounts of disasters (e.g., from *Newsweek, Time, Life*)

Students practice past modals by simulating a debate between two insurance companies as to which party was at fault in a disaster.

## Procedure

1. Make copies of the magazine article for every student.
2. Present the disaster to the class in some engaging manner. (For example, for the crash of two 747s in Tenerife on the Canary Islands in 1977, I taped a model runway on the classroom floor and two students manipulated two cardboard planes as two others read aloud an adaptation of the radio messages between the planes and the tower described in the news article.)
3. Divide the class into groups, each representing the insurance company for one of the parties concerned. In the case of the Canary Islands disaster, one group represented Pan Am, one represented KLM, and one represented the Tenerife Airport.
4. After designating a group leader and a group speaker, each group discusses why it is not at fault and how it can avoid higher insurance premiums for the party it represents.
5. Each group's speaker presents its arguments to the whole class.
6. Debate among the parties then occurs, with everyone in each group participating at will.
7. The class as a whole votes on which group presented the best argument.
8. Ask the students to write up their views of the disaster as a follow-up assignment.

## Caveats and Options

1. Show a videotape or magazine pictures of the disaster so that there is as much information available as possible.
2. In the final discussion, the students will make spontaneous use of the past modals or some approximation to them because what they have to do is report on an undesirable matter that is already past. At this point, decide if and when it would be beneficial to engage the class in some grammatical consciousness raising about the way that actions that should have been taken (but were not) are reported in English. If you notice that the students are having trouble with this area of grammar while preparing their arguments, it might be a good idea to provide the whole class with some guidelines in grammatical usage concerning past modals before the final presentation is given.

## Contributor

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