Couldn’t Be Better: Understanding the Modal Verb ‘Could’

Directions for the teacher:

Step 1 – Warm up with polite requests using could.
  - Could anyone tell me what a surprise party is?
  - Could you explain why some people don’t like surprises?
  - Could you give examples of pleasant and unpleasant surprises people experience on vacation?

Step 2 – Have students complete Task A as a class. Allow any form of could (affirmative, negative, perfect, progressive, passive). Simply find out how comfortable they are expressing possibilities and abilities. If little is suggested, you can prompt them:
  - Where could this be?
  - Who could the woman be greeting?
  - Who could have taken the photo?
  - What could have taken her by surprise?
  - Who could have planned the surprise?

Photo credit: Surprise by Mark Levin. Retrieved from the Creative Commons on Flickr.

Step 3 – Have students complete Tasks B and C in pairs. Correct their work as a class.

Answers:
1. I couldn’t believe it was you!
   a. ability/possibility
2. I love talking to Layla. I could talk to her for hours.
   a. ability/possibility
3. Could you please take our photo?
   b. request
4. I could help you if you’d like.
   c. offer
5. That couldn’t have been Marcus. Marcus wasn’t even in the country.
   a. ability/possibility
6. She had a tremendous voice. She could sing any song.
   a. ability/possibility
7. What an odd expression. What could he be thinking?
   a. ability/possibility
8. They said it couldn’t be done, but she proved them wrong.
   a. ability/possibility

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present/Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>couldn’t believe</td>
<td>could believe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couldn’t have been</td>
<td>could take</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>could sing</td>
<td>could help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>couldn’t be done</td>
<td>could be thinking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 4 – Have students complete Task D in pairs or small groups. Challenge students to identify which verbs refer to real events and which refer to hypothetical events.

By Jennifer Lebedev Retrieved from: http://englishwithjennifer.wordpress.com
**Couldn’t Be Better: Understanding the Modal Verb ‘Could’**

**Task A.** Use the modal verb *could* to describe the photo below.

*Example: This could be a family vacation.*

**Task B.** Identify the meaning of *could*. Circle the correct answer.

1. I *couldn’t believe* it was you!
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

2. I love talking to Layla. I *could talk* to her for hours.
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

3. *Could* you please *take* our photo?
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

4. I *could help* you if you’d like.
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

5. That *couldn’t have been* Marcus. Marcus wasn’t even in the country.
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

6. She had a tremendous voice. She *could sing* any song.
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

7. What an odd expression. What *could* he *be thinking*?
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

8. They said it *couldn’t be done*, but she proved them wrong.
   - a. ability/possibility
   - b. request
   - c. offer

**Task C.** Look back at Task B. Identify the period of time that *could* refers to. Write the verbs in the correct boxes. The first one has been done for you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Past</th>
<th>Present/Future</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>couldn’t believe</em></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

By Jennifer Lebedev

Retrieved from: [http://englishwithjennifer.wordpress.com](http://englishwithjennifer.wordpress.com)
Couldn’t Be Better: Understanding the Modal Verb ‘Could’

Task D. Complete the postcard with your own ideas.

Life couldn’t be better! I’m writing to you from______. Did I tell you I won a free trip? They said I could choose between a week at a mountain resort or ____________. Can you guess which one I chose? Too bad it’s only a week! I could live here for ____________. Just look at the photo on this postcard. Isn’t it amazing? I know I could have sent you email, but a postcard is proof that this is real. I myself couldn’t believe it was happening until I arrived and I saw _________________. They have Wi-fi here, so I could be working, but in a place like this on a day like today, how could I? Ha ha! See you when I get back. ☺

Share your completed postcard with the class.

Discussion: If you could choose any destination, where would you travel to?