Reading Comprehension Worksheet

Grade 8

Answer Key

The Word I Couldn't Say

A memoir

When I was eleven, my family moved from Lima, Peru, to a small town in Ohio. I had studied English in school, so I believed I was ready. I knew the grammar rules. I could conjugate verbs faster than anyone in my old class. What I could not do, it turned out, was say the word *squirrel*.

It happened on my second week. Our teacher asked us to take turns reading aloud from a nature article. I counted the paragraphs and found mine, and my stomach dropped. There it was, three times: *squirrel, squirrel, squirrels*. When my turn came, the word came out as something like "skwee-rel," and the room filled with laughter. I finished the paragraph in a whisper. That night I practiced in the bathroom mirror until my mother knocked on the door and asked if I was okay. I told her yes. I was not.

Rescue came from an unlikely place. Danny, the boy next door, was failing Spanish. One afternoon he leaned over the fence and asked, without much hope, how on earth anyone rolled their r's. "Say *perro*," I told him. He tried, and it sounded like a car engine dying. I laughed so hard I sat down in the grass, and then, because it seemed only fair, I told him about the squirrel.

We made a deal that afternoon. Every day after school, we traded words. He gave me *squirrel*, *world*, and *thorough*. I gave him *perro*, *ferrocarril*, and the sound of a proper Spanish r. Neither of us got it right for weeks. But somewhere in all that stumbling, the laughter changed. It stopped being something done to us and became something we shared.

I am grown now, and I speak English every day without thinking about it. Still, whenever I see a squirrel racing up a tree, I remember that fence. I understand now what I could not see at eleven: a language does not belong to the people who were born speaking it. It belongs to anyone brave enough to keep stumbling through it out loud.

Part A: Multiple Choice

Circle the best answer.

1. Where did the writer's family move from and to?

   Answer: b) From Lima, Peru, to a town in Ohio

2. Which word was hardest for the writer to say?

   Answer: c) Squirrel

3. What happened when the writer read the word aloud in class?

   Answer: b) The class laughed.

4. How did Danny and the writer help each other?

   Answer: b) They traded words in English and Spanish.

Part B: True or False

Write T for true or F for false.

5. The writer was eleven years old when her family moved.

   Answer: True

6. Danny could already roll his r's perfectly.

   Answer: False

7. The writer is looking back on this experience as an adult.

   Answer: True

Part C: Elements of Memoir

A memoir is a true story from the writer's own life, focused on a meaningful experience. It mixes narration (what happened) with reflection (what the writer understands about it now, looking back).

8. Copy one sentence of narration and one sentence of reflection from the memoir.

   Sample answer: Narration: "When my turn came, the word came out as something like 'skwee-rel,' and the room filled with laughter." Reflection: "A language does not belong to the people who were born speaking it." (Accept any accurate pair.)

9. How is the adult writer's view of this experience different from how she felt at eleven?

   Sample answer: At eleven, she felt embarrassed and alone, practicing in the mirror and telling her mother she was fine. As an adult, she sees the experience as meaningful and believes that stumbling through a language takes courage and gives you a right to it.

Part D: Think and Explain

10. Why do you think the writer titled her memoir "The Word I Couldn't Say"? What larger meaning does the title have?

Sample answer: The title refers to the word squirrel, but it also hints at the larger struggle of finding her voice in a new country. By the end, the word she couldn't say becomes a symbol of how she and Danny turned embarrassment into friendship and courage.