

National  
curriculum

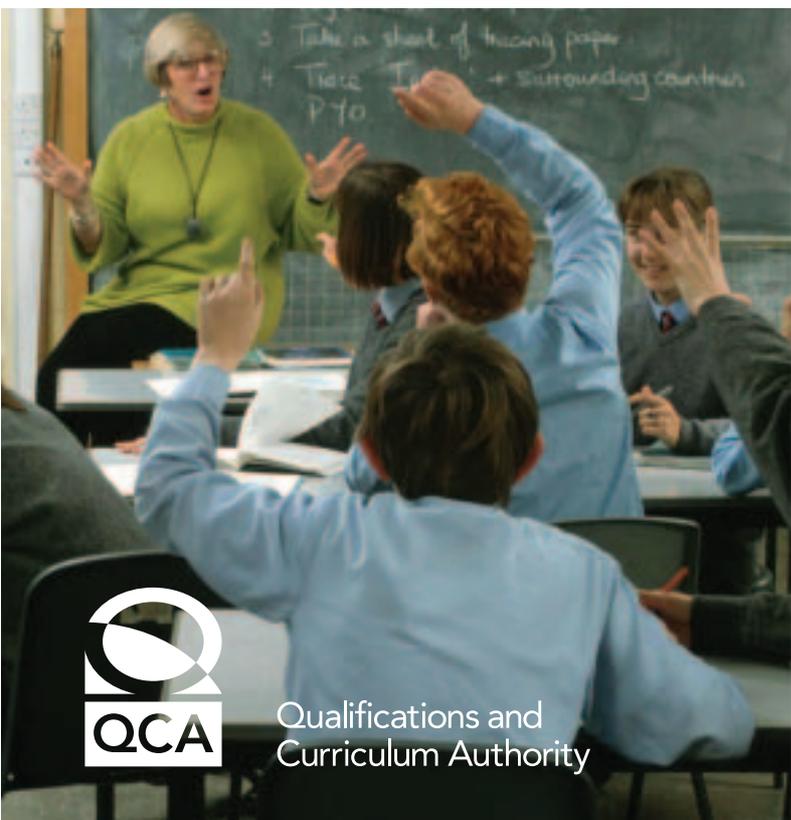
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KEY STAGES

3-4

2004

# Introducing the grammar of talk



Qualifications and  
Curriculum Authority

First published in 2004

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ISBN 1 85838 552 0

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Printed in Great Britain.

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Qualifications and Curriculum Authority  
83 Piccadilly  
London W1J 8QA  
[www.qca.org.uk/](http://www.qca.org.uk/)

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# Acknowledgements

The QCA English team is grateful to the many teachers, advisers and researchers who have contributed to the shaping of ideas in this publication, together with colleagues from the DfES, Ofsted and the primary and key stage 3 national strategies.

Particular thanks are due to Professor Ronald Carter of the University of Nottingham whose work on spoken English provided the foundation for this project. Professor Carter had a major role in the work, from identifying the features for study and guiding the work in schools to drafting sections of the publication. Professor Carter has been able to draw on corpus evidence on spoken English from the Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse of English (CANCODE) project. Copyright of the corpus is owned by Cambridge University Press and thanks are due to Cambridge University Press as well as to Professor Michael McCarthy (co-director of CANCODE) for permission to use examples from the corpus and from Carter and McCarthy (forthcoming).

We would also like to acknowledge the collaboration of the major subject associations: the English Association, the National Association for Drama, the National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum, the National Association for the Teaching of English, the National Association of Advisers in English and the United Kingdom Literacy Association. We would like to thank them for their help in taking forward aspects of the work.

Particular thanks are due to the following teachers and schools and their pupils:

Joe Byrne, Seven Kings High School, Ilford  
Andrew Cox, Willenhall Comprehensive School, Willenhall  
Martin Drury, King Edward Five Ways School, Birmingham  
Kevin Eames, Wootton Bassett School, Wootton Bassett  
Jane Edwards, St John the Baptist CE Primary School, Leicester  
Sarah Farthing, Abbot Beyne School, Burton-on-Trent  
Kerry Forster, St Wilfrid's School, Sheffield  
Caroline Gibson, St Martin's School, Brentwood  
David Gilbert, Eaton Bank School, Congleton  
Kate Harris, Bishop Stopford School, Kettering  
Chiquita Henson, Cirencester Deer Park School, Gloucester  
Sue Hillstead, Hassenbrook School, Stanford-le-Hope  
Tracey Loverock, Windsor Girls' School, Windsor  
Nick Murray, Wood Green High School, Wednesbury  
Isabel Palmer, Hardenhuish School, Chippenham  
Ravi Pawar, Pen Y Dre High School, Merthyr Tydfil  
Bernadette Pearce, Madeley High School, Madeley  
John Perry, Pool School and Community College, Pool  
Eddie Slater, Oathall Community School, Haywards Heath  
Ben Sugden, Castle School, Bristol  
Chris Sutcliffe, Huntcliffe School, Gainsborough

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# Preface

The English national curriculum is made up of three components: speaking and listening, reading, and writing. Several recent initiatives have aimed to develop the teaching of speaking and listening both in English lessons and as a key component of other curriculum subjects. These initiatives include:

- *Speaking, listening, learning: working with children in key stages 1 and 2* (DfES, 2003)
- *Giving a voice* (QCA, 2003)
- *Year 7 – Speaking and listening bank* (DfES, 2001)
- speaking and listening objectives in the *Key objectives banks for years 7/8/9* (DfES, 2002)
- *Drama objectives bank* (DfES, 2003)
- *Drama in schools* (Arts Council England, 2003).

This publication addresses a different set of questions about talk in the classroom. The main theme of this publication is what kind of shared language we can use to describe talk itself, rather than dealing with where, when or how to raise standards in spoken language. It builds on *New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom* (QCA, 2003), which explored new approaches to teaching spoken English, ranging from suggestions about defining a canon of spoken texts to descriptions of the ways different kinds of talk support thinking and learning. A key paper in *New perspectives* drew on extensive computerised collections of spontaneous conversation to select core features whose use and frequency gives us the making of a grammatical description of spoken language. A group of teachers subsequently worked with us over several terms to find ways of teaching these features in their classrooms and to assess their value to existing schemes of work. Their work forms the basis for a large part of this publication.

The approach taken in this publication is similar to *The grammar papers* (QCA, 1998) and *Not whether but how* (QCA, 1999). These earlier publications surveyed current thinking about written grammar before putting new ideas to the test in the classroom.

The grammatical features of spoken English are not intended as an additional requirement for teaching. Neither the English national curriculum nor the key stage 3 strategy *Framework for teaching English* (DfES, 2001) sets out an explicit set of requirements for teaching the grammar of spoken English, although the importance of teaching about talk is central to both these documents. The investigations show that systematic ways of analysing and describing spoken language have beneficial spin-offs in the classroom. However, it is up to individual teachers and departments to make their own decisions about how to incorporate or adapt any of the approaches outlined here, perhaps using some of the suggestions offered in the ‘Starting points and classroom procedures’ section.

Comments about this publication are welcome and should be sent to:

Janet White, English team  
whitej@qca.org.uk  
QCA, 83 Piccadilly, London W1J 8QA

# Starting points and classroom procedures

The material in this publication offers different possibilities for teachers and schools who want to review their current provision in developing opportunities for work on spoken language. Choosing a starting point depends on school circumstances, current provision, development plans and priorities. Here are some suggestions for starting points:

- make talk visible
- select a grammatical feature to teach
- embed the features in longer-term planning
- look for creative uses of spoken language in writing.

## Make talk visible

Most pupils are surprised and intrigued by seeing transcripts of talk. Simply recording a short discussion between pupils and transcribing a couple of minutes of it will provide material for work on any number of significant features. For example, use a brief transcript alongside the description of some of the key characteristics of spoken language in section 2. This gives pupils an opportunity to see:

- how face-to-face communication affects the language speakers use
- how speakers signal changes of topic or intention to their listeners
- the ways speakers work with ‘real time’ constraints to ensure that their meanings are clear.

## Select a grammatical feature to teach

Read through the classroom investigations in section 4 and, with a colleague who teaches the same year group, select one feature to teach over three lessons. Follow or adapt the approaches suggested in the investigation, and compare notes on success/progress at the end of a half term.

- Were there benefits in raising the profile of spoken language in this way?
- Did pupils’ ability to use the feature change significantly?
- What implications does the focus on spoken grammar have for other work in English or different parts of the curriculum?

## Embed the features in longer-term planning

Begin by establishing some general awareness of the nature of spoken English through informal investigative work. Then read and discuss section 3 with the whole department. Consider the possibilities for embedding the core grammatical features in schemes of work that span key stages 3 and 4.

- What are the opportunities for more explicit teaching about spoken grammar in relation to the key stage 3 *Framework for teaching English* objectives or as part of GCSE, along lines suggested in section 5?
- What picture of progression emerges from teaching about spoken grammar to different year groups?

## Look for creative uses of spoken language in writing

The work of the project was based firmly on talk in its own right. Nevertheless, a total separation of spoken and written language is artificial and unhelpful. Fruitful links can be made to:

- the techniques for writing realistic dialogue and a knowledge of how actual conversation works
- how contemporary prose writers exploit characteristics of spoken language for particular effects and purposes.

Some of these stylistic choices are analysed in section 5 in the context of suggestions for classroom activities. Working with pupils on these aspects of the speech–writing continuum provides easy access to broader study of language variation.

Work of this kind on spoken language also prompts questions about classroom procedures. Based on your own adaptation of ideas in this publication, you may find it useful to discuss with colleagues what the work shows about the following.

- Teaching techniques – how does teachers’ behaviour encourage pupils to focus on talk and encourage them to talk about talk? For example, wait time, use of questioning, body language and tone of voice.
- Evidence of pupils’ learning – what does a focus on talk reveal about the way pupils learn? For example, making intuitive knowledge about language explicit, promoting clearer awareness of how to use talk effectively, and clarifying some distinctions between ways of talking and ways of writing.
- Classroom management and organisation – what forms of classroom management are effective in allowing focused attention to talk? Consider, for example, particular types of groupings, investigative work in which pupils devise and follow their own questions, and collaborative working between AS/A level students and those in earlier key stages.

# Introduction

## Making talk visible

Talk is something that most people can do very naturally and unselfconsciously. It is easy to overlook how successfully people do it and to neglect the precise nature of spoken language.

When we talk, the human mind shows a remarkable capacity for dealing with large amounts of information. The processes involved are dynamic, constantly changing and fluctuating as new meanings emerge. These processes place demands on speakers and listeners. Our ability to record, interpret, adjust to and use spoken language to create meanings, often with the mind working at very great speeds, underlines that when we speak we are using language at full stretch.

This publication focuses on the grammatical features of talk that make possible the largely unconscious agility, rapidity and subtlety of spoken language. Other projects have looked at the purposes of various kinds of talk, such as spoken narratives, recounts, debating and discussion. The investigative work of this project confirmed the value of talk in learning, but was not its main focus. We put the language of talk under the microscope and increased teachers' and pupils' knowledge about the grammatical organisation of talk. This approach has both direct and indirect benefits to broader teaching agendas designed to increase pupils' competence in using spoken English.

## Reasons for teaching about talk

One aim of this work is to balance a long history of attention to written grammars and written language organisation by showing how systematically spoken language is organised. Work with teachers and pupils has demonstrated that teaching about talk from this point of view has intrinsic interest, especially when pupils can work on their own spoken language through the use of simple transcripts or recordings.

Talk is also the first form of language most of us learn, but we rarely reflect on what it is that we have learnt, or whether we know enough about this basic system of communication.

Moreover, spoken language deserves attention in its own right because of the special and distinct characteristics that enable speakers to communicate complex ideas and feelings in changing and fluid environments – quite unlike the situation typical of writers composing 'in tranquillity'.

Spoken language works effectively by exploiting patterns of grammatical variation, such as those that foreground and emphasise main topics, heighten or tone down degrees of certainty, and check and monitor how effectively listeners are participating. Writers also make use of these same features of grammar, but the special quality of writing is seen more typically in its density of lexical content than in the intricacy of its grammar. For example, in a written sentence such as 'Misbalance of functional integration of the immune system was revealed' the clause structure is simple, but the tightly packed lexical content gives a sense of complexity to the sentence. Translating such a sentence into speech would give 'We saw that there was something wrong with the balance between various functions of the immune system and the way these worked together'. At once, we have had to use more clauses to express the meaning,

creating a greater grammatical complexity, while at the same time lessening the lexical density of the written sentence.

Speakers work creatively with the grammar of English all the time to shape ideas, relate to others and construct different kinds of texts, but there is no Palgrave's 'Golden treasury' of spoken English. There is no 'Oxford book' of good conversations. Compendia and collections with these kinds of titles are reserved for canonical written texts.

Where can we find 'spoken texts' to start the process of selecting and describing the characteristics of talk? The best resources of spoken language data come from relatively recent bodies of recorded data – linguistic corpora – held on computers. Major collections of data, totalling over 400 million words, include the British National Corpus (BNC), Cambridge and Nottingham Corpus of Discourse of English (CANCODE) and the spoken component of Collins Birmingham University International Language Database (COBUILD). Analyses of these resources offer ways of exploring and describing a basic grammar of talk, both in its particular grammatical properties and in the ways dialogues and conversations are structured. It is in these jointly constructed spoken texts, rather than in formal spoken presentations or solo performances, that talk is most distinctive and least like the written mode; this is the source of our current, developing understandings about the characteristic features of spoken English.

This project mainly involved secondary teachers and their pupils working together on investigations into the nature of talk. The work they did highlights the following.

- The importance of increased linguistic awareness of spoken English. The tasks designed by teachers in the project (to elicit, record or collect samples of naturally occurring talk) show the value of awareness and reflection by pupils themselves on the nature and purposes of the talk.
- Key pedagogical issues. Despite many differences in approach and lesson focus, the teachers' work was characterised by similar principles. These included explicit teaching about spoken language, using pupils' own talk for analysis and a decision to maintain the focus on talk rather than writing.
- The significance of work on spoken grammar for all pupils. In particular, for pupils learning English as an additional language, knowledge of the cluster of grammatical features highlighted in this publication could significantly enhance their fluency in talk and contribute to a clearer understanding of how interpersonal relationships are negotiated through talk.
- Continuities as well as contrasts between spoken and written language. There are a number of spin-offs from the close focus on some of the grammatical features of talk: in terms of sharpening pupils' awareness of why some things work in speech but not in writing and vice versa; and how writers can use distinctive features of spoken grammar to achieve particular effects in writing.

# The grammar of spoken English

## Characteristics of spoken language

Some of the grammatical forms and uses of grammar in talk that we need to describe relate to the way speech is characteristically used. These forms and uses are not haphazard. Understanding of them can be more effectively incorporated into pupils' developing spoken repertoire.

The key characteristics of spoken language are that it:

- involves speakers and listeners in orienting to context by means of different types of signalling
- takes place in a context of real time and space
- involves face-to-face communication.

These characteristics are described further on the following pages.

Explicit understanding of features of spoken grammar is also helpful in sharpening pupils' awareness of key differences between talk and writing. In particular, knowledge of how meanings are created and conveyed in talk reveals that many uses of language (eg how to organise what is said and to keep listeners on track) cannot simply be carried over into writing. On the other hand, an exploration of the ways talk is adapted precisely for its purposes is an important corrective to views that spoken language is inherently sloppy and inferior to writing – a possible factor in some pupils' low valuation of talk, and of themselves as speakers.



### **Characteristic 1: signalling the shape and structure of talk**

In spoken communication, speakers and listeners constantly signal how they want things to be taken and interpreted. This spoken punctuation reflects the need for speakers to give structure and shape to their talk.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Example</b>
Where necessary and appropriate, speakers explicitly signpost things for the listener, showing how what is being said relates to what has just been said or to what is to follow.	We use words such as <i>now</i> and <i>so</i> to indicate that we are changing from one topic to another or that we are concluding a stretch of talk: <i>Now, we have covered the fifteenth century. Today we do revision; so, let's discuss what we do after two o'clock.</i> In more formal talk, numerals such as first, second and third can be used.
Spoken utterances can be meaningful when only a single word or phrase is used.	Words such as <i>anyway, right, OK</i> and <i>really</i> can all be highly meaningful as single speaking turns.
Spoken utterances can be meaningful when seemingly half-finished or when apparently incomplete. Often such utterances are entirely meaningful in the context in which they occur, but are not meaningful outside this context.	Speakers commonly avoid elaborating or over-specifying things and rely on a mutual understanding of context to decode meanings.
Writing relies much less on immediate context. Isolated words or phrases can be used for effect in writing, but in quantity they are hard work for the reader, whose expectation is for contexts to be actively described in a way that enables them to stand alone.	Speakers signal less explicitly if what is referred to can be seen. Words such as <i>this, that, these, here, now</i> and <i>over there</i> allow us to show what we are referring to in ways that would not normally make sense in writing.

## **Characteristic 2: communicating in real time and space**

Spoken language is a process of real-time communication. It takes place in real time and space.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Example</b>
Spoken language is mostly unplanned. Usually it is constructed with little time for advance planning or editing. Consequently, much talk has a temporary, of-the-moment quality.	Spoken exchanges are typically open and fluid. Speakers can change direction and topic, return to things they had forgotten, insert comments and anecdotes, and be altogether more exploratory as the occasion demands or allows.
Writing usually has a more permanent character and is often constructed accordingly. Writers are aware that they are producing something less ephemeral.	Changing between topics in writing needs to be managed carefully to avoid confusion for the reader. Writers can take advantage of editing to rearrange portions of text in the order they want. Speakers, on the other hand, have less time but find it much easier to switch directly between topics. They use phrases such as: <i>as I was saying earlier</i> , <i>like you were just saying</i> and <i>to go back to ... again</i> .
Spoken language is relatively varied in style. Stylistic variation in talk can be between different accents or dialects as speakers respond and adapt to the expectations of different contexts.	Speakers can switch from one level of formality to another as the occasion demands or as they respond to other speakers. When we write, there is time to plan and control a particular level of formality.

### **Characteristic 3: communicating face to face**

Spoken language is normally a process of face-to-face communication. We are alert to feedback and constantly adjust what we say in the light of an ongoing situation.

<b>Feature</b>	<b>Example</b>
Speaking is essentially a collaborative and interactive process. It works as a dialogue between two or more people in which meanings are made mutually.	Although people do make speeches, tell long solo narratives and sustain monologues, spoken language exists primarily to be exchanged with listeners. We may finish each other's comments, interrupt, compete to take a turn, argue, disagree with or extend what is said. Some talk takes place with speakers speaking at the same time.
Speakers also give feedback to each other as they talk and listen. Sometimes this feedback involves specific words or it may involve no more than vocalisations. It may even be non-verbal.	Feedback words and phrases include <i>exactly, definitely, right, absolutely, good, oh I see</i> and <i>that's interesting</i> . Simple vocalisations given in feedback to another speaker include <i>yeah, mmm, uh huh</i> and <i>oh</i> . Non-verbal feedback could be a nod of the head.
Speakers use more than words. Non-verbal communication supplements and sometimes subverts verbal communication.	Speakers use eye contact, gestures, body language and movements, intonation and volume, pauses and silences to convey meaning. Not replying to someone or remaining silent in a discussion can be construed as subversive.
Spoken language is full of expressions, above and beyond the modal verbs, which help speakers negotiate and adapt the forcefulness or certainty of what they are saying, depending on the responses of their listeners. This is one of the ways speakers adjust their points of view and develop meanings together.	Modal expressions such as <i>possibly, probably, maybe, I guess, I suppose</i> and <i>perhaps</i> help us to negotiate what we mean in an essentially non-assertive way.
Written language is relatively sparse in ways of indicating that there is more to a message than what the words alone denote, or that words are not intended to be taken at their face value.	Although we can use capital letters, italics and underlining to emphasise things, dots to indicate silence and exclamation marks to indicate the pitch of the voice, none of them can capture the precise nature of spoken utterances.

## A sample stretch of talk: a grammatical perspective

We have discussed some of the things we know about spoken language in general and some of the ways in which spoken language is distinctive as a mode of communication, especially when compared to written language. Now, with a focus on grammar, we look closely at an actual transcript of a stretch of talk.

When we do so, perhaps the most marked problem we encounter is the frequent occurrence of units that do not conform to the well-formed 'sentences' that are often used to illustrate common patterns of language in traditional grammars. The following extract shows some of these and other units frequently encountered in a spoken corpus. Problematic areas for a traditional grammar are in *italic*.

The following is an extract from a transcript of a group talking about a car accident that happened to the father of one of the speakers. The conversation takes place at the dinner table. Notice how difficult it is to 'read' a transcript. Speaking turns change rapidly and we do not have 'local knowledge', such as knowing the people involved or the context. We do not have visual clues, gestures or tones of voice to give us extra help in working out what is going on.

<i>Speaker</i>		
2	I think your dad was amazed wasn't he at the damage?	
4	Mm.	
2	It's not so much the parts. It's the labour charges for	
4	<i>Oh that. For a car.</i>	➤ These are phrasal utterances, communicatively complete in themselves, that are not sentences.
2	Have you got hold of it?	
1	Yeah.	
2	<i>It was a bit erm.</i>	
1	Mm.	
3	Mm.	
2	<i>A bit.</i>	
3	That's right.	
2	I mean they said they'd have to take his car in for two days. And he says All it is s= straightening a panel. <i>And they're like,</i> Oh no. It's all new panel. You can't do this.	
3	<i>Any erm problem.</i>	
2	<i>As soon as they hear insurance claim.</i> Oh. Let's get it right.	➤ These are 'subordinate' clauses not obviously connected to any particular main clause.
3	Yeah. Yeah. <i>Anything to do with</i>	
1	Wow.	
3	<i>Coach work is er</i>	
1	Right.	
3	<i>Fatal isn't it.</i>	➤ Ellipsis is common. Ellipsis occurs when words are omitted because it is assumed that they can be understood from context or from shared knowledge between speaker and hearer.
1	<i>Now.</i>	

These are structures that are difficult to define. The word 'like' appears to function as a marker of direct speech. ←

These are words that have more than one grammatical class. For example, 'now' is normally an adverb. Here it seems to be organisational or structural, functioning to close down one section of the conversation and to move on to another topic. Such discourse markers connect one phase of the talk with another. ←

This extract illustrates details of the use of grammar, showing clearly that the notion of a sentence does not apply easily to spoken language. While the conversation shows that speakers do use some conventionally formed sentences, these exist side-by-side with forms that cannot be described in this way. However, to call either of them well-formed or ill-formed, complete or incomplete does justice neither to their social appropriateness and acceptability, nor to the success of speakers in using them.

This conversational extract involves more than one speaker, but the same features of conversational management apply whether the talk is multi-party or two-party. In this extract we can observe the following specific features that we have already described in general terms.

- Punctuation is marked by the taking of turns rather than by a transition from one sentence to another. These turns are not neat and tidy, however. The speakers regularly interrupt each other, or speak at the same time, intervene in one another's contribution or overlap in their speaking turns.
- The speakers co-construct each other's discourse. There is backchannelling (eg *Mm* and *Yeab*), whereby speakers give supportive feedback to each other. The speakers also support each other in making meanings.
- Some structures are started, but then not finished (eg *It was a bit erm* and *A bit*). Sometimes there is no need to 'complete' them because they are completed by others or are simply understood. This is the case when Speaker 3 responds to an incomplete utterance with the phrase *That's right*.
- Spoken communication takes place in real time. There are pauses, rephrasings, hesitations, false starts and revisions because we often do not have time to edit and shape what we say.
- Speakers are also sensitive to their listeners and construct what they say so that they can be understood easily. Listeners often have difficulty processing real-time spoken communication and speakers know this.
- In addition, speakers use more than words to convey meaning. They also say what they want to say by means of the pitch and tone of the voice, by eye contact, by gestures, movements and body language and sometimes by significant pauses or silence. Inevitably this is not captured in a transcript.

The phenomena highlighted in the transcript are normal in everyday talk. Our stance towards such talk and the forms of language that make it up can have major implications for what is considered correct or acceptable in a grammar. Not only does the presence of some forms of spoken English cause difficulties for our traditional descriptions of English grammar, it also leads to questions about what it is now possible to call 'standard' English.

However, evidence from multimillion word corpora of spoken English<sup>1</sup> shows that such forms are standard in so far as they are used by all speakers, even though (for the reasons given above) these same forms do not appear – or appear only very rarely – in 'standard' published grammars of English, and feature equally rarely in many formal uses of writing.

The spoken examples collected in these corpora are obtained in naturally occurring everyday contexts of use, such as service encounters, workplace exchanges and family conversations, often involving personal exchanges and narratives. People recorded in modern British corpora come from different regions of the country and careful preparation ensures a balance between the gender, age and social class of the speakers. The data collected on tape is then transcribed

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<sup>1</sup> Major collections of data include: the BNC, which now totals 10 million words of spoken British English; the 5 million-word CANCODE corpus held at Nottingham University; the spoken component of the 400 million-word COBUILD corpus held at the University of Birmingham.

and made computer-readable, so that very fast and sophisticated computer programs can identify frequent or salient structures alongside the contexts in which they are used.

The corpora clearly show that features such as different forms of ellipsis, phrasal utterances, subordinate clauses that stand alone, and words whose grammatical class changes to serve different purposes, are random neither in frequency nor in function. Such features are widely used and, in combination, enable speakers to organise their thoughts, to respond to the pressures of communicating in real time and to link what they say to shared contexts.

## Dialects of spoken English

The description of some important grammatical characteristics of spoken English is not related to discussions about ‘non-standard’ or ‘standard’ spoken English. The national curriculum requirements for teaching standard spoken English refer specifically to a set of non-standard usages in England:

- subject–verb agreement (*they was*)
- formation of past tense (*have fell* and *I done*)
- formation of negatives (*ain’t*)
- formation of adverbs (*come quick*)
- use of demonstrative pronouns (*them books*)
- use of pronouns (*me and him went*)
- use of prepositions (*out the door*).

These features are described as non-standard because they are found in regional dialects of English. Of course, any or all of them may occur in instances of spoken language, where acceptance of their use will often be a matter of judgement based on the context of the talk and who the participants are, for example whether speakers are the of the same age, status, class or gender. The judgement about acceptability is more absolute in written language: in most kinds of formal, non-fictional texts destined for public readership, the occurrence of these dialectal features is not considered correct. Teaching about the reasons for using standard forms of the grammar in most kinds of writing and in certain occasions of speaking may be done in parallel with teaching about the core features of spoken English, but it is a slightly different agenda.

# Some core grammatical features of spoken English

Some of the core grammatical features of spoken English (for example, ellipsis) share a grammatical label with similar features of written language. Some of the other features (for example, heads and tails and discourse markers), however, exist on the boundaries of what is conventionally understood as a grammar of sentences, and these have different labels. Both vague language and modal expressions directly involve lexical and pragmatic features as well as grammatical features. The terminology used throughout this publication recognises this new territory and tries to capture something of the distinctive features of the grammar of speech.

We now explain these distinctive features in detail, using examples from different corpora of spoken English. The headings under which they are grouped indicate the ways in which aspects of spoken grammar work together to realise the functions associated with talk.

## Signalling the shape and structure of talk: discourse markers and heads and tails

Although when we speak there are no full stops or commas or colons, we do need a kind of spoken punctuation. This helps us to organise what we say, to signpost for others what is coming up and to place what has just been said so that the listener knows how to take it. In general, signalling is a vital component of interactive communication, linking, highlighting and re-emphasising stretches of talk for our own benefit and the benefit of the listener. Features of spoken grammar that are particularly associated with signalling are discourse markers and heads and tails.



### **Discourse markers**

Discourse markers are the individual words and phrases that are used to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and the next (eg *anyway*, *right*, *okay*, *I see*, *I mean*, *mind you*, *well*, *right*, *what's more*, *so* and *now*).

They often have 'pragmatic' meanings different from their dictionary meanings. Thus, in actual dialogue *now* or *right* do not mean *at this moment* or *correct*, respectively. *Now* signals a change in topic or a return to an earlier topic. *Right* indicates that speakers need to make a decision or that a decision has been accepted or has at least been acknowledged.

*Anyway*, give Jean a ring and see what she says.

*Right*, okay, we'd better try to phone and see what they have to report.

Discourse markers signpost and signal interactively how a speaker plans to organise a dialogue. Thus, people speaking face to face or on the phone often use *anyway* to show that they wish to finish that particular topic or return to another topic. Similarly, *so* can indicate that a speaker is summing up, while *okay* often serves to indicate that a speaker is ready to move on to the next phase of business; or it can signal that a speaker is checking that the listener approves what is being done.

A: *Mm. So did you feel that the points that you made in your original letter were all covered in this reply?*

B: *Oh yes. I think they've answered me very well indeed.*



Discourse markers can have more than one function. For example, the main function of *well* as a discourse marker is to indicate that the speaker is thinking about things and it can be used to indicate that what has just been said needs to be modified or qualified.

A: *What do you think we should do about it?*

B: *Well, I'm going to think about it. I don't know at the moment.*

*Well* is also used to indicate that the speaker is saying something that contrasts with what has just been said. In addition, it can be used to signal the end of an exchange.

*Well, that's all for now. We'll see you again at the same time next week.*

### **Heads and tails**

These are words and phrases placed at the start or finish of utterances in ways that help the listener to orient to the topic or remember what has been said.

A head involves a noun or noun phrase placed strategically at the beginning of a clause which is then followed by a subsequent pronoun to ensure that the listener follows the reference.

*The white house on the corner, is that where she lives?*

*That book over there, the one with the red cover, that's it, can you pass it over here?*

*That girl, Jill, her sister, she works in our office.*

*Paul, in this job that he's got now, when he goes into the office he's never quite sure where he's going to be sent.*

*A friend of mine, his uncle had the taxi firm when we had the wedding.*

*His cousin in Beccles, her boyfriend, his parents bought him a Ford Escort for his birthday.*

Tails occur at the end of clauses, normally echoing an antecedent pronoun. They help to reinforce what is said, adding emphasis and ensuring that the listener does not lose reference to the original topic.

*She's a very good swimmer Jenny is.*

*It's difficult to eat, isn't it, spaghetti?*

*I'm going to have steak and fries, I am.*

*It can leave you feeling very weak, it can, though, apparently, shingles, can't it?*

## Communicating in real time and space: deixis, ellipsis and spoken clause structure

Talk is immediate and spontaneous. When we write we can take time to revise, edit and re-edit our message. Writing promotes repeated rereading and analysis, fostering messages that are normally carefully shaped. The speed at which we speak also means that we communicate with each other in a transient, time-bound way. Features of spoken grammar that are particularly associated with communicating in real time and space are deixis, ellipsis and clause structure.

### **Deixis**

Deixis describes the 'orientational' features of language, including words and phrases which point directly to particular features of the immediate situation. It occurs in both written and spoken language, but is more common in spoken English where it can be used to locate an utterance spatially. In writing, deictic expressions often lead to ambiguities because we cannot see or identify easily what is being referred to. Common examples in spoken English are the words *this, these, that, those, here* and *there*.

Deictic words are especially common in situations where speakers are doing something together and everyone can see what is going on.

*Could we just move **that** into **this** corner **here**?*

Temporal deictic words such as *now* and personal pronouns such as *I* and *we* are also common. They indicate the extent to which a speaker is close to or involved with something at the moment of utterance. They refer to who is speaking and who is included or excluded from the message, orientating the listener interpersonally and in time and space.



*Then I'd like to pop in to **that** little shop over **there**.*

*Looks like **that's** the right **one** for **them**.*

Deictic words are likely to occur with ellipsis. Both features assume shared knowledge and that the speakers occupy the same common ground, having the same understandings about the time and space referred to.

Message left on an answerphone:

*I'm phoning up about **this** trying to set up a meeting and various other things I believe. Erm **there's** a staff meeting at two on Friday twenty-fourth. And **I** was thinking perhaps we could meet in the morning beforehand if you're going to be free **that** day. Anyway er give **me** a ring. I'm around tomorrow. Though tomorrow afternoon I'm not about because I've got an appointment at **the** hospital. Don't know how long I'll be **there**. But I'm here tomorrow morning Friday so ring.*

### **Ellipsis**

Ellipsis occurs when subjects and verbs are omitted. It happens when speakers can assume that listeners know enough about people and things in the immediate situation to be able to supply 'missing' information. In written English, ellipsis is mainly textual. That is, it normally involves the omission of a word where it is obvious what is being referred to, for example the repeated pronoun *she* in *She went to the party and (she) danced all night*. Ellipsis in spoken English is, however, mainly situational, affecting people and things in the immediate situation.

*Didn't know that film was on tonight. [I]*

*Sounds good to me. [It, That]*

*Lots of things to tell you about the trip to Barcelona. [There are]*

A: *Are you going to Leeds this weekend?*

B: *Yes, I must. [go to Leeds this weekend]*

A: *What's the matter?*

B: *Got an awful cold. [I've got]*

A: *Just seen Paul. [I've just]*

B: *Did he say anything?*

A: *Nothing.*

B: *Interesting, isn't it? [It is interesting]* (from Carter and McCarthy, 1997)

In these examples the words omitted do not cause any ambiguity or create a lack of clarity. It is obvious who is speaking or what is being referred to.

Ellipsis enables efficient, clear communication. Speakers are highly sensitive to their listeners and skilled in deciding just how much it is necessary to include in the message for the listener.

Although ellipsis is often defined as the absence of elements normally required by the grammar (eg a subject before a finite verb), in reality nothing is 'missing' from elliptical messages; they contain enough for the purposes of communication. Conversely, formal speech and writing typically need to elaborate more, for the sake of readers/listeners, and so 'add' items that might otherwise be unnecessary in everyday informal speech.



### **Spoken clause structure**

The spontaneous nature of spoken English, with only limited planning and thinking time, is particularly marked in clause structure, where one clause is added to another in a linear and incremental way.

*Sure we got there um at seven actually around six fifteen and class starts at seven and I went up in this building that was about five or six stories high and I was the only one there and I was the only one there I was. And I yeah I was thinking gosh you know is this the right place or maybe everyone's inside waiting for me to come in there's nothing said you know come on in knock on the door and come in or anything like that.*

Speakers do not normally have time to construct elaborate patterns of main and subordinate clauses. Much more common are chains of clauses linked by coordinating conjunctions (eg *and*) or by simple subordinating conjunctions (eg *cos* or *so*). In talk, these conjunctions often function in a dynamic and listener-sensitive way to coordinate rather than subordinate information. For example:

*[The speaker is describing a motor accident in which she was involved] I was driving along talking to Jill and we'd, like, stopped at some traffic lights and then – bang – there was this almighty crash and we got pushed forward all of a sudden.*

When they do occur, subordinate clauses commonly stand alone and highlight or reinforce a topic.

*I can't angle it to shine on the music stand, and the bulb's gone, which doesn't help.*

They can also serve as a signal that another speaker may want to take a turn, keeping a dialogue 'open'. Such clauses often occur after a pause, or after feedback from a listener or to elaborate on what someone has just said. The clauses also comment on what has been said, often introducing an evaluative (positive or negative) viewpoint.

A: *Well actually one person has applied.*

B: *Mm.*

A: *Which is great. [reinforces the topic]*

B: *Though it's all relative, of course. [evaluates comment]*



## Communicating face to face: vague language, modal expressions and adverbs

It is very unusual to communicate with someone in writing when we can see them. School pupils do this when they do not want to be heard or if they wish to exclude someone present. With one or two exceptions, such as telephone calls, spoken language involves face-to-face communication. When we can see someone's reaction, we are likely to be more sensitive and to qualify what we say. Features of spoken grammar that are particularly associated with communicating face to face are vague language, modal expressions and adverbs.

### ***Vague language***

Vague language is lexical as well as grammatical. When we think of vague language, we think of individual 'general' lexical terms (eg *thing, stuff* and *whatever*) as well as high-frequency verbs (*make, do, get* and *take*) and basic adjectives and adverbs (eg *nice, good, terrible, usually, totally* and *hopefully*). However, vague language also involves grammatical forms, especially when these general words link with other words to form phrases or when they are used grammatically to modify nouns.

*Between then and like nineteen eighty four I just spent the whole time, I mean for that whole sort of twelve-year period or whatever, erm I was just working with just lots and lots and lots of different people.*

When we interact with others, there are times when it is necessary to give accurate and precise information. In informal contexts, however, speakers may prefer to convey information that is softened in some way. Vague language is used to mark friendliness or to avoid sounding over-assertive or too elaborate, although such vagueness is often wrongly taken as a sign of careless thinking or sloppy expression. So a more accurate term would be 'purposefully vague language', for example *I've got coursework and stuff to finish*.

Vague language is commonly used for number approximations (eg *lots of, round about, or so* and *or thereabouts*).

*There were sixty or so people there.  
We'll see you at seven or thereabouts.*

It can be used when listeners know what is being referred to and share the same common ground, and when to say more would be over-elaborate and unnecessary.

*A: She doesn't like coffee.  
B: Well, she can have a coke or something.*

### **Modal expressions**

In most standard written grammars of English, modality is described mainly in terms of modal verbs (eg *may, might, can, could, must, should* and *ought to*). In spoken face-to-face communication, however, the picture is more varied and modal expressions regularly play a part in making sure that utterances do not sound too assertive or definite. Like 'vague language', modal expressions (eg *possibly, probably, I don't know, I don't think, I think, I suppose* and *perhaps*) help to hedge and soften what is said.

[Students talking to each other in a group. They all know each other well and are talking informally about how they have changed after the first year in college]

A: *But you don't notice so much in yourself, do you? I don't think so, on the whole.*

B: *I don't know. I definitely feel different from the first year. I don't think I look any different or anything.*

A: *You're bound to keep changing really, all your whole life, hopefully.*

B: *I don't know, I think it's probably a change coming away, I suppose.*

Modal expressions make it possible for the speaker to shift their stance towards a subject as they speak, becoming more or less tentative, positive or definite, depending on the listener's response.

*I suppose it must be sort of difficult to phone or whatever.*

*I feel they maybe should resign really.*

*We maybe ought to perhaps have a word with him about it?*



### **Adverbs**

In casual conversation in English, adverbs are usually added after the main content of the message has been communicated. This positioning is more flexible than in written language, and is brought about by the demands of real-time and face-to-face communication. Adverbs and adverbial phrases are commonly used to qualify, hedge or modify what is said. When writing, there is time to plan ahead and to organise these qualifications; when speaking, there are different constraints. For example, adverbials may occur after question tags (eg *isn't it?* and *shouldn't it?*), or at the end of clauses in ways that would not be acceptable in written texts.

*Spanish is more widely used isn't it **outside of Europe?***

*I was worried I was going to lose it and I did **almost.***

*You know which one I mean **probably.***

*It's a bit panicky, but I've not got any deadlines like you have **though.***

*It should be a lot easier playing Poland after Germany, shouldn't it, **in a way?***

The ordering of elements in the clause is also likely to be different because of the need in speech to simultaneously orientate the listener to the topic and, as here, to soften, qualify or emphasise what has been said.

## **Links between the grammatical features**

Individual forms of spoken grammar do not normally operate in isolation from each other. Although we have discussed spoken clause structure and deixis under one heading and vague language under another, they clearly combine to convey the ebb and flow of interactive speech. For example, a speaker may simultaneously not wish to be assertive and direct (and so soften what they are saying); be struggling with the demands of real-time communication; and wish to point out something to someone who can see what is being referred to.

These forms of grammar, though common in spoken English, are not exclusive to spoken English. While there are systematic differences between spoken and written English, they are both varieties of the same language. We need to understand what links them in order to be able to compare them and to show the influence of one mode on the other. For example, the immediacy of forms such as email communication, advertising copy, and some notes, letters and memos means that speech-like informality is often the preferred style. Such choices deliberately construct a relationship of equality between writer and reader. We illustrate some of these features of writing more fully in the section on approaches to spoken English in the classroom, see pages 53–59.

In the following section we look at ways in which the characteristic grammatical features can be investigated in classrooms and how awareness of these forms can stimulate classroom activities.

# Foregrounding spoken English: classroom investigations

This section contains illustrations of work from classroom investigations. Teachers and pupils explored the following six grammatical features of spoken grammar (selected from those discussed in section 3):

- discourse markers
- deixis
- ellipsis
- spoken clause structure
- purposefully vague language
- modal expressions.

The examples illuminate the core functions of:

- signalling the shape and structure of talk
- communicating in real time and space
- communicating face to face.

Of course, a focus on one aspect of spoken grammar does not mean that investigations did not consider other features of spoken grammar in particular or spoken language in general. Many of the teachers' comments show that the work engaged with more than one aspect of spoken grammar, especially when pupils studied transcripts of talk.

The form of the investigations is:

- aims – a brief overview of what the teachers hoped to achieve through teaching the particular aspect of spoken grammar
- context – information on the school and the particular class that undertook the work
- lesson planning – the number and sequence of lessons, the stages within them and how they fitted into existing teaching plans.

The teachers' observations consider:

- findings about spoken language – language data emerging from the investigations, sometimes in the form of recordings or brief notes of what pupils said
- outcomes – initial conclusions about the study of spoken grammar and implications for future work.

## Great Britons

### *Year 10: discourse markers*

Ways of marking boundaries between parts of an utterance

#### **Aims**

- to raise awareness of spoken English
- to encourage recognition of discourse markers in spoken English
- to explore how discourse markers work interpersonally to punctuate or ‘oil the wheels’ of talk, for example to encourage or discourage, exemplify, affirm, invite turn-taking, set and structure agendas and check understanding.

#### **Context**

The school is an 11–18 mixed comprehensive in Gloucestershire, with approximately 1,750 students. In 2002, 71 per cent of pupils achieved five or more GCSEs at grades A\*–C. The year 10 class consists of 30 pupils who achieved levels 4–7 at key stage 3, working towards grades A\*–C at GCSE English and English Literature.

#### **Lesson planning**

This was planned as a short, discrete investigation related to a whole-school competition entitled ‘Who’s the greatest?’. It took place over three lessons. The work was mainly oral, supported by handouts for discussion and copies of short transcripts from classroom interaction. The final lesson required pupils to write about their investigation of talk, finding examples to support their analysis of discourse markers.



#### **Lesson 1**

The overall project was briefly described to pupils and the specific focus of the investigation (discourse markers) was explained.

A quick, whole-class session (10 minutes) generated criteria about what makes a good discussion.

Pupils worked in groups of about five to discuss the question ‘What makes a great person?’, followed by feedback to the whole class.

Using these criteria, pupils then discussed ‘Who is the greatest Briton of all time?’ (see handout 1 for lesson 1) by ranking candidates in descending order of greatness. Pupils attempted to reach a consensus of opinion (20 minutes). Some discussions were recorded for later transcription by the teacher for use in lesson 2.

A spokesperson from each group gave feedback to the whole class.

*Lesson 1 handout*

**Great Britons**

In a recent BBC TV programme, *Great Britons*, various celebrities were invited to argue the case for the person whom they considered to be the greatest Briton of all time. Having heard the arguments, the public were then able to vote. Winston Churchill was finally declared the winner, with Isambard Kingdom Brunel second, and Princess Diana third.

Complete the following tasks to decide who our ‘Great Briton’ is.

- Decide on what makes someone ‘great’. Make a list of five criteria that someone must fulfil in order to be considered ‘great’.
- Using your greatness criteria, put the following 15 Britons into descending rank order (1 = greatest) according to how great you think they are. Be prepared to argue your case to the class.

Person	Rank (1-15)
Bobby Moore	
Florence Nightingale	
Sir Isaac Newton	
John Lennon	
Charles Darwin	
Robbie Williams	
Ian Botham	
Oliver Cromwell	
Isambard Kingdom Brunel	
Margaret Thatcher	
Winston Churchill	
William Shakespeare	
Princess Diana	
Emmeline Pankhurst	
William Caxton	

## Lesson 2

Pupils were presented with a transcript of discussion from one group (see handout 1 for lesson 2) and were asked the following questions about it.

- How does the transcript differ from what was expected?
- Is this a 'good' small group discussion according to the criteria defined in lesson 1?
- Can you identify any words or phrases in the discussion that do not seem to carry information or add to the discussion in any obvious way (ie discourse markers)?

Following feedback to the whole class, discourse markers were explained using a handout (see handout 2 for lesson 2).

Pupils then annotated examples of discourse markers on the transcript and discussed their function. An overhead transparency (OHT) was used to summarise observations of the whole annotations. The class went on to discuss what additional information might be needed to make sense of the transcript and the discourse markers, for example non-verbal language and intonation.

### Lesson 2, handout 1

#### Transcript of a group discussion (excerpt)

##### Speaker

- A Right, what do you mean by equal society?
- B Equal minded.
- A Equal minded...mmm...what does that mean?
- B Like, non-biased I put.
- C Non-biased means what?
- A No. I don't really understand what you mean.
- B Like, equal minded means they're not on any side, they're, like, equal.
- D Yeah, like fair.
- C Yeah, but sides in what though?
- B Like, no, like some kind of person. Oh yeah, it's like fair treatment of everybody. That's what I kind of mean, you know?
- D Like one of them suffragette sort of people. Whatever, you know?

*Lesson 2, handout 2***Discourse markers**

Discourse markers are words or phrases that are used to mark boundaries in conversation between one topic or bit of business and another. For example, *right, OK, I see, I mean, whatever, well* and *know what I mean?* help speakers to work their way through conversation, indicating whether they want to open or close a topic or to continue it, whether they agree with what's being said and to encourage people to continue or to stop speaking.

In telephone conversations, for instance, the words *right* and *anyway* usually show that the speaker wishes the current bit of conversation or even the whole call to come to an end. Look at this example.

Speaker

- A I told her that I couldn't come.  
 B Yeah...**anyway**.  
 A She knows it's Thursday...I keep...er...saying.  
 B **Right...anyway**.  
 A **Well**.  
 B **OK. Right. OK.** Bye then.  
 A Bye.

It's clear in this conversation that Speaker B wants to conclude the discussion, although it takes A some time to realise it!

Look carefully at your transcript of the 'Great Britons' discussion. Highlight any examples of discourse markers and decide what function they serve in the discussion. Be prepared to feed back your ideas to the whole class.

*Lesson 3*

After a recap of the previous lesson's work, pupils were asked to write about their investigation and focus on the following questions.

- What are 'discourse markers'?
- What functions can they serve in discussion?
- How could knowing about them improve the quality of small group discussion?

Pupils were asked to support their answers with quotations from the transcript.

## Teacher's observations

### Findings about spoken language

The pupils were very responsive and reported that they enjoyed the work. The 'Who's the greatest?' discussion stimulated lively and interesting debate, with pupils holding some trenchant views, which they defended enthusiastically. More revealing in the context of this investigation were pupils' observations about what makes a good discussion. Typical comments included *no hesitations, no long pauses, fluent and clear*. When I presented the class with the transcript (handout 1 for lesson 2), the initial feeling among many pupils, including those who had participated in the discussion, was that it was an example of *inferior* talk.

However, after I had introduced the pupils to the notion of discourse markers, their response to the transcript became more perceptive and, in some cases, more sympathetic towards the speakers. Typical responses included an observation in written work that: *Speaker B is trying to explain what she means by 'equal minded' but she is not too sure what it means herself, so, to give herself extra time to think, she says 'like' at the start of her sentence*. Another pupil suggested: *When the speaker says 'you know?' she is actually wanting the others to agree with her or to start speaking*. Another comment was that: *Speaker B usually says 'like' when she wants to explain something or answer a question with an example [of] what she means*. Finally, one pupil argued: *'like' shows that the speaker isn't sure and doesn't want to be really certain in case it's wrong*.

The challenge for these pupils was to understand how the effective use of discourse markers contributed to successful speech in ways that differed from the pattern of writing. Their aim was to 'improve our speaking and listening techniques in that speech will be on-going without pauses or *ums* and will flow smoothly'. It seemed to me important that they did more work on other features of spoken grammar, such as deixis and vague language, in order to see more clearly the way such features in combination shape and structure conversation, and play a part in keeping the topics moving.

As anticipated, the work did raise the profile of spoken English. Before the class many pupils seemed to view speech as an aberrant form of writing, suggesting, perhaps, that talk in our classrooms is undervalued in comparison with the other attainment targets. Views about how talk was structured were changed.

Pupils learned that discourse marking is important in discussion, especially for inviting others' contributions, signalling, turn-taking and organising what is said. They recognised the functions and potential usefulness to discussion of discourse markers (rather than regarding them as simply *sloppy* talk) and recognised that they can employ them to '*initiate and sustain*' (GCSE speaking and listening marking criterion).

### Outcomes

- It occurred to me that of all the forms of spoken grammar being explored as part of the project, discourse markers were perhaps the most 'straightforward'. As such, would they make a good starting point for a scheme of work about spoken English and grammar?
- Although pupils enjoyed the idea of being part of a research project, there was a sense among some of *why are we doing this now?* (we had just finished reading *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*). These activities would fit into the curriculum more naturally elsewhere, perhaps as part of a discrete scheme of work on spoken English.
- There needs to be planning for more coverage of the distinctive features of spoken English. Pupils are quite familiar from the national strategy and the writing triplets at GCSE with the idea that different text types have different grammatical conventions, but are less comfortable with the notion that the same could apply to speech.
- Schemes of work might need to be revised (particularly in view of the above) in order to integrate speaking and listening objectives and/or the specific speaking and listening units of work that were devised.
- Pupils need to see good models of talk for a range of purposes and audiences.

## Tying knots

### Year 7: deixis

The words and phrases that are used to point to features in the immediate situation and to locate an utterance spatially

#### Aims

- to increase pupils' awareness of speech, and of deixis in particular
- to explore how deixis in speech is different from deixis in writing.

Pupils investigated instructional language in both spoken and written form. The initial focus on deictic speech allowed pupils to consider why effective uses of deixis in oral communication might create ambiguities in written language. Pupils also had the opportunity to analyse their own speech and to develop awareness of spoken discourse structure.

#### Context

The year 7 class of pupils of above-average ability were at a very large comprehensive school in Essex. The class contained 10 girls and 18 boys. The average national curriculum level of pupils in the class was 4/+.

#### Lesson planning

The work related to year 7 teaching objectives from the key stage 3 *Framework for teaching English*:

- investigate the differences between spoken and written language structures (sentence level 15)
- revise the stylistic conventions of non-fiction, write instructions which are helpfully sequenced and signposted (sentence level 13d).

The first lesson involved a video-recording of dialogues between groups of pupils in which they attempted to instruct a partner in the particular task of tying a knot. In a connected homework task the pupils produced written instructions. The second and third lessons planned to use the products of the homework exercise to compare the uses of deixis in speech and writing.



### Lesson 1

A number of pupils were asked to teach a partner how to tie a particular knot, using either string or a tie. The volunteers were filmed using a video camera, ensuring that pupils would have the opportunity to note body language – gestures and facial expressions – as well as features of talk and delivery.

Twelve groups of pupils were filmed. The length of the entire film was 9 minutes 30 seconds. The class watched the videotape three times. On each occasion they were asked to focus on a different aspect of the speech used. On the first viewing, pupils were asked to watch the 12 examples and rank them in order of effective instruction. They were very excited to see themselves on film and, at the first viewing, their focus was less directed on communication. They were, however, able to provide justification for their choices for which groups were more effective in communicating. For the second viewing, pupils were asked to note specific mannerisms and behaviour used by those speakers in the more successful groups. On the third viewing, pupils were asked to focus on the type of language that had been used during the instruction. They were asked to note words or phrases that were used regularly or repeated frequently in the interactions.

A homework task was set to produce a set of written instructions on how to make a cup of tea. Prior to writing the instructions, the class agreed that the following details should be included: ingredients, equipment, steps necessary and a formal style. No other framework or structure was provided. These instructions were to be used to compare to the spoken instructions they had viewed on the video (which were made into a simple transcript by the teacher between lessons).

### Lesson 2

Pupils read out their instructions on how to make a cup of tea and peers commented on effective phrases and how instructions could be improved. They wanted instructions to be clear, well organised, sufficiently detailed and *easy to understand*. Pupils were asked to predict how they thought spoken language in the video would be different from their written instructions.

### Lesson 3

Pupils were given seven simple transcripts of the video examples that they identified as being successful. Transcripts were relatively basic due to time constraints and only included words spoken and general indication of pauses (the more dots, the longer the pause).

The following examples are transcripts of conversations between pupils that were recorded and used as a basis for further analysis of deixis.



### Pair 1

- N You go in a circle like that.....then you put that bit through like that.....and then you...go through like that.....and then you pull.
- R Is that it?
- N Yeah.
- R Undo the knot....Is that it?

### Pair 2

- C That one?
- R And then make a loop like that...and then just twist it round so it's...
- C Twist it?
- R So it's like crossed....there.
- C Like that?
- R Yeah that's it...Then make it smaller by pulling the string..by putting your fingers like that.....and then do another loop through.
- C What?
- R No.
- C How you supposed to?
- R You make a loop....Do a loop..and then it's free....and then just pull it....and then just put that bit through.
- C What...like that?
- R And then put your fingers out...pull it.....it comes undone.

Pupils studied the transcripts in pairs and commented on the language used. They considered the following questions.

- How is the language in the transcripts different from what you expected?
- How is the speech different from writing?
- Why is the speech different from writing? Try to pick out specific examples.
- What words are used most frequently in the speech?
- What are the benefits of spoken instructions?

Answers were discussed by the class as a whole. The discussion raised issues about the difference between speech and writing as forms of communication. There was also some debate as to the benefits and limitations of each form of language.

Pupils were provided with some examples of written instructions. Written instructions included a guide on how to use a computer program, a guide on using a palmtop computer and a book on how to make a variety of complex knots (one set of instructions included written prompts, the other contained only images). Pupils were asked to complete the following tasks.

- In pairs, rank the written instructions. Decide which one is the best and which one is the worst.
- Why is the best set of instructions so good? Give examples.
- Why is the worst set of instructions so bad? Give examples.
- How are these instructions similar or different to the spoken instructions we heard on the video?

Views were then shared in class. Pupils were asked to draw instructions on how to make a cup of tea without using written language. They compared their image instructions with their written instructions.

## Teacher's observations

### Findings about spoken language

Pupils were highly motivated by this approach and enjoyed being a classroom resource. After the initial pair of pupils were filmed, the other pupils began to relax as they were filmed. Following the first viewing of the video, the class made the following comments about the groups they identified as being the most effective:

*They talked between themselves; They were talking to each other well; They talked a lot. C— was asking a lot of questions; They had a conversation and could see how the knot was being done; and L— was speaking clearly...step by step...waited until S— had finished and went onto the next step.*

Following the second viewing, pupils noted that gestures were very important: for example pointing, facial expressions, keeping the conversation going, eye contact, giving time to complete the action and modelling what had to be done.

During the third viewing, pupils noted the following words or phrases which they thought were regularly repeated:

- |             |             |             |              |           |
|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|-----------|
| - right     | - left      | - through   | - wrap round | - now you |
| - loop      | - go over   | - under     | - big bit    | - you go  |
| - small bit | - like this | - like that | - yeah       |           |
| - then      | - pull      | - huh       | - what       |           |

The pupils produced effective written instructions on how to make a cup of tea. They all chose to follow the basic framework they identified in the lesson, namely a step-by-step approach. Pupils chose to use full sentences or bullet points. All chose to use imperatives at the beginning of the sentence or phrase. We discussed why imperatives had been so important when writing instructions. They felt each other's instructions were clear and, on the whole, served their purpose. Pupils thought that the written instructions were good because they had had the time to plan what they wanted to say and to consider the order of the points they made, and the words they wanted to use.

Pupils were very surprised by the transcripts of their conversations on the video. They said: *The language in the transcripts is different from what I expected because I expected that they would make sense and that more had been said. I never thought people repeated themselves so much. When people are asked questions they don't always answer because they probably nodded; I expected people to speak in full sentences, instead they use a lot of short phrases. On the video you understand what they are saying and doing, but on paper it's not so clear; I thought I said much more. I didn't answer E—'s questions, I think I nodded; and The language was not very formal and they did not speak in full sentences. What they said was very short and they repeated themselves.*

Pupils thought that speech was different to writing in the following ways: *Speech is a shorthand and you don't think a lot about what you say. When you write you plan and it has to be clear because you are not there to help if they get stuck; Speech is a lot shorter and only makes sense along with the actions; Speech makes sense if you can see what's happening; In writing it's more difficult to show feelings; When we were filmed we didn't have time to plan. If we had, we would have seemed more formal; When you write you have to give more detail and write clearly. When you're speaking you don't have to be so careful because you can use gestures; and When you speak it's much quicker than writing and you can see them [the partner] so it's easier.*

Comments on the words and phrases most frequently used in the transcripts (eg *a bit, okay, like that, here like this, right* and *yeah*) indicated that the pupils were aware that this seemingly vague language was used because *with actions it makes sense*. They noted such words also *explain what you are saying* when people were able to point. Some pupils also felt that these words were part of a 'checking' process.

Pupils were asked if they felt one form of instruction examined so far was more effective. They decided that the spoken instructions had the benefit of being a quicker form of communication and began to understand that speech and writing were very different forms of communication and each had benefits. They noted that in speech there was the advantage of speed, vision, facial expressions, tone of voice and interaction.

When pupils ranked the instructions, they were aware of the importance of the graphics that clarified the written instructions. They realised that this made the written instructions rather like the spoken instructions on the video, because of the visual elements that were available. Most pupils found the instructions that relied purely on the written format were least successful because they lacked the support of graphics. The written instructions that they believed were the least effective were those describing how to create the 'incredible magic loop'.

There was an increased understanding of the importance of body language, prosodics and facial gestures to pupils' oral self-expression and interaction. This understanding constitutes an invaluable life skill.

### Outcomes

Pupils were motivated because they themselves were one of the main resources and they had not previously looked at speech in this way. I had anticipated that using pupils' speech as a resource would be very demanding in terms of teacher preparation time, but by keeping transcription very simple this was not an issue.

The project increased awareness of some of the main differences between speech and writing and raised the status of speech in their eyes. Pupils had to consider why each form was suited to its purpose. It also made them consider different degrees of formality in spoken communication and writing. Their responses showed an implicit understanding of the difference between speech and writing, noting that the spontaneity of speech limits the ability to engage in complex advance planning. They noticed the amount of repetition due to the pressure of having to think on the spot, and commented on the effects of instant feedback from listeners.

Pupils also showed an ability to identify some features of deixis. Their surprise at the language they found they used in the transcripts was pleasing and refreshing. They were aware of the need for greater precision and clarity in their choice of language when writing, compared to speech. They realised that writing has to be planned and organised carefully, can be reread and offers little feedback. Therefore, it does not use as many deictic expressions. This raised consciousness of the difference between speech and writing was beneficial for both areas of the English curriculum.

Overall, the work showed there is a place for studying speech in its own right and this can reflect positively on writing. Studying one's own speech has a high interest value for pupils and can be developed into many areas of the English curriculum.

This type of work provided opportunities to study language at word level. In the written follow-up pupils were able to consider sentence construction in the light of their awareness of the different structures used in speech.

Pupils could go on to study media texts that are meant to represent real speech (eg soap operas). Study of planned speeches would also be interesting, including looking at degrees of formality. Video footage of political speeches would be valuable in observing the extra linguistic cues given in planned speech. Comparing this to writing would emphasise sentence structure, level of precision, variety of vocabulary and structured repetition and how it differs from unplanned speech.

## Is anything missing?

### *Year 12: ellipsis*

The result of omitting subjects and verbs in sentences when speakers can assume shared knowledge

#### **Aims**

- to enable students to investigate ellipsis in spoken English, using transcripts of students' own conversation
- to draw conclusions about their findings about the function of ellipsis in talk.

#### **Context**

The group comprised nine sixth-form English literature students, two of whom were also studying English language. This proved useful in helping to define the specific parts of speech.

#### **Lesson planning**

There were three one-hour lessons. The work was mainly oral, supported by several prompt sheets of data and questions. The final lesson applied the findings from work on everyday spoken conversation to an analysis of dialogue in dramatic texts.

#### **Lesson 1**

The students were informed that they would be looking at one aspect of spoken language, and to help with this it would be useful to record a short informal conversation involving all of them. Apart from reassuring them of no ulterior or sinister motive for this, and putting them at ease with the presence of the tape recorder, no other explanation was offered at this stage. As it was the first lesson back after Christmas, the topic of 'What did you watch on TV over Christmas?' was the start to the conversation. About 20 minutes of conversation was recorded, from which three short extracts were transcribed for use the following day. One of the transcripts used for analysis is included on page 36.



## Lesson 1 handout

### Speaker

- 1 So what is the most memorable TV programme you watched?
- 2 *Monarch of the Glen*. [ellipsis: is the most memorable programme I watched]  
[laughter] No,...I tell you... [ellipsis: it really was good]
- 1 Is that why you are wearing that jumper? [laughter]
- 2 No...seriously, tho'...I tell you. [ellipsis: it really was good]
- 1 What about you?
- 3 *Mary Poppins*... [ellipsis: is the most memorable programme I watched] [laughter]
- 2 Oh, yeah... [ellipsis: It is a] Classic film that... [ellipsis: is] *Shakespeare in Love*...  
[ellipsis: is a good film]
- 4 Yeah, I really liked that... [ellipsis: film]
- 2 *Mary Poppins*... Yeah... [ellipsis: it is] mixed with adult humour and child humour.  
[laughter] It appeals to me... I watched it every Saturday when I was young...
- 3 I did...yeah...
- 2 [ellipsis: At] My Nan's...it was the only thing she had on video... It's class... [ellipsis: It was] really good. She's god [laughter] ...no, [ellipsis: When she is] sitting in those clouds... [laughter] ...no, seriously, she is tho'... And Bert knows more than anyone else... [edit] I mean, why does she always have Wednesday off?...

## Lesson 2

Instead of specific names, each speaker was defined as Speaker 1, Speaker 2, etc. This form of transcription, distancing students from actual names, helped the analysis and provoked interesting discussion. There were occasions when the students did not realise in the reading of the transcript that it was they who had said such a phrase. Indeed, on a couple of occasions the original taped version had to be played back to convince students that they had made certain utterances in certain ways.

To help students analyse the transcript from lesson 1, a series of printed prompt questions were offered (lesson 2, handout 1).

Using the transcript from lesson 1, answer the following questions.

- What words are missing?
- What type or 'class' of words are those that are missing?
- What is the function of the *Mm* and *Yeah* type responses?
- Devise a code that explains what each line/comment is 'doing', for example agreeing or supporting.
- By doing this, what things can you work out about each speaker?
- Devise some 'stage directions' to explain how you think each line is delivered, thinking especially about verbal tone as well as physical/visual gestures. For example is the speaker looking at the other speaker and is one speaker pointing? These spoken language features are clearly different from written. Why? Why are there apparently so many omissions?

Students worked in pairs to annotate the transcript sheet using the following codes:

- |                   |                   |
|-------------------|-------------------|
| ■ explaining EX   | ■ clarifying CLA  |
| ■ agreeing AG     | ■ defending DEF   |
| ■ disagreeing DIS | ■ questioning QUE |
| ■ commenting COM  | ■ unclear U       |
| ■ supporting SUP  |                   |

There was feedback and discussion after each question was answered.

Partly because time was running short, but also because with these sixth-form students the nature of the analysis had taken a more academic form, the extension into writing stage directions was not developed. Perhaps with younger, less specialised students, more active dramatising or scripting activity would be appropriate as well as useful in promoting more reflective feedback. The awareness of talk being more than just words had clearly come through in the students' comments, touching on gesture, situation, shared understanding and experience, expression and tone. The use of the codes was particularly helpful in establishing initial consideration of this.

Although time was very tight, by the end of the hour the group was able to draw some important and specific conclusions about the nature of ellipsis (the terminology had now been introduced to the students) within spoken grammar. Depending upon the group, different ways may be used to gather a general overview of findings.

The handout shown on page 38 was provided to summarise.

## Lesson 2, handout 2

### Key features of ellipsis in spoken English

- face-to-face proximity means that you don't have to say it
- shared knowledge of a subject, experience, etc means that you don't have to say it
- shared context or vision means you don't have to say it (eg a TV sports commentator describing the action on screen)
- informal/formal axis - there are times when saying every word may seem inappropriate (eg *I am going to the shops* becomes *I'm going shops*)
- economy of communication (eg *scalpel...scissors...swab...*)

When relationships between speakers alter, we may need more 'elaboration' or descriptive detail to ensure clarity and precision of communication. The questions *what, when, who, why* and *where* prompt the use of more subjects and verbs and more nouns and adjectives in narrative context.

### Lesson 3

In this lesson the following questions were set:

- If ellipsis is so prevalent in spoken English, what challenges does it pose to a dramatist, for instance, in capturing the naturalness of speech/dialogue in a drama script?
- How successfully have some achieved this?
- Is it possible or useful, or does printed text for an audience prohibit this natural spoken ellipsis?

Students were given samples from the following modern drama texts:

- Alan Bennett, *Talking Heads*
- Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman*
- Willy Russell, *Educating Rita*
- Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
- Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*.

They were asked to consider the effectiveness of any examples of ellipsis they could find. Did it capture the qualities of spoken ellipsis previously identified or was it different? If so, then why might this be?

Some interesting observations and reflections were raised. Students suggested that, although Bennett made extensive use of ellipsis, occasionally capturing spoken ellipsis, much of these monologues tended to be formally written. Bennett's technique appeared to suggest authentic speech by using textual ellipsis rather than replicating the spoken grammar form. The general agreement was that Pinter from the very opening of *The Birthday Party* appeared to draw on features of the ellipsis of informal spoken conversation, capturing it well in his script. Pupils commented on the way a sense of comfort turned to threat as the feeling of shared experience suddenly fell away when connections were not made, as would have been expected in conversation.

## Teacher's observations

### Findings about spoken language

- The stimulus of working on their own speech motivated interest, and the level of thought, comment and growing perceptiveness towards the language structure was pleasing.
- However good/natural the script is, a writer/director still needs the intuitive skills of the actor to work with the text, for example the addition of pauses, contractions, and *ums* and *ers* in order to capture the naturalness (including ellipsis) of authentic spoken English.
- The ability of the dramatist/actor/director to construct the convincing context is especially important if understanding of ellipsis is dependent upon situation.
- Does plot drive language or language drive plot? Certainly a lot of recent modern drama seemed to have experimented more with improvisation as opposed to rigidity of form/structure.
- Equally, a drama script is an artificial construct that needs to use specific techniques in order to connect to an audience, which is markedly different from the usual dynamics (and audience) of informal, everyday spoken communication.
- The nature of spoken grammar changing at certain levels along the formal/informal continuum was also of interest, but was only touched upon.
- Communication involves more than words.

### Outcomes

- This was, of necessity, a short and narrowly focused investigation. The study here works with a mainly discursive approach, while younger students and larger groups may benefit from a more active and kinaesthetic investigation, although this would open up further logistical considerations.
- It was a worthwhile exercise from which the students (and the teacher) gained a lot, including a greater awareness of ellipsis within both written and spoken contexts. If anything, it opened it up as a bigger issue than we had all first expected and, frustratingly, the three lessons were enough to whet the appetite but not to take it further. Students gained a lot from discussion and looking closely at transcripts of spoken language. So much is intuitive that it requires transcription to make clear just how the grammar of speech is functioning: it is a lot harder to detect by just listening.
- The approach to teaching tended to be mainly oral group discussion. It would have been interesting to try the transcripts on other students who were unfamiliar with the initial conversation to see if similar levels of interest and response were evident. Nevertheless, the principles that support this investigation can easily be adapted for use with younger groups. Use of stage directions, scripting actors' gestures, and working out the precise tone and meaning for delivery as a drama script might also be helpful. The overall spin-off, hopefully, would be some increased understanding and a more tuned ear to identify some of these features of language.
- There may be risks in teaching about spoken grammar and written grammar in the same lessons and in linking written, literary grammar and spoken features as has been done here. Nevertheless, there are some clear links between the two that can be used within the demands of busy classroom time. Whilst we might need to be cautious, we also need to be open to the potential teaching and learning possibilities investigations like this may offer teachers and their pupils. I'm hopeful that my sixth-formers may now have a better tuned eye and ear for these particular features, should they be present (textually) in their A2 synoptic materials at the end of their A level course!

## Telling tales

### **Year 10: spoken clause structure**

Chains of clauses coordinated by *and* or linked with *cos* or *so*, rather than developed into sentences with main and subordinate clauses

#### **Aims**

- to investigate how units of sense ('clauses') could be linked together in talk
- to concentrate on spoken rather than written English
- to develop an understanding of the oral tradition, particularly storytelling, as a point of reference for their own talk
- to speak with greater fluency and coherence.

#### **Context**

The class was a year 10 English group in a mixed comprehensive school in Wales. Of the 30 pupils, 24 pupils are expected to achieve A\*–C grades at GCSE. A main focus of the school has been to give pupils greater confidence in speaking and listening activities and more opportunities to extend their talk.

#### **Lesson planning**

Four lessons formed the basis of the investigation, using picture stimuli, brainstorming and audio-recording to focus pupils on the structure of stories, helped by transcripts of some of the stories told.

#### **Lesson 1**

Pupils were shown national curriculum level descriptions for oracy. To attain a level 7, pupils need to do some of the following:

- confidently adapt the way they speak to the demands of the context
- use vocabulary precisely and organise clearly
- structure speech carefully
- use standard English confidently
- use appropriate vocabulary, tone and emphasis in speech.

Pupils were given pictures from *Little Red Riding Hood* and *Cinderella*. Simple, well-known stories were chosen so content could be generated easily, and to maximise the short time available for the investigation of spoken clause structure. Pupils were asked to brainstorm the main features of these stories and we created a class OHT of common features. The whole class discussed these stories as part of the oral tradition. In the past, all tales such as these would have been told, rather than read, by skilful storytellers. There followed a brief discussion of why an oral story would differ from a written one.

In pairs, pupils were asked to think of the structure of a traditional story (eg *Sleeping Beauty* or *The Three Little Pigs*). They organised the story into five chronological steps in very brief note form.

In each pair one took the role of storyteller, the other the listener. The storyteller used the notes to tell the story. The listener's role was to assess the performance of the storyteller using the criteria in handout 1 for lesson 1.

### Criteria for effective storytelling

- \*\*\*\*  
very good

The storyteller includes all parts of the story. S/he is confident and links the separate parts of the story well so that it is well organised and easy to follow. S/he speaks very fluently. The storyteller varies the tone and expression when s/he speaks. S/he delivers the story in an entertaining way.
- \*\*\*  
good

The storyteller describes most parts of the story fluently. He/she is quite confident, but does hesitate a bit. The story is told in the correct order. The storyteller sometimes varies tone and expression. He/she tries to make the story entertaining.
- \*\*  
average

The storyteller gives an account of all parts of the story. He/she is able to tell the story in the correct order so that it makes sense. The story, however, is brief and over-reliant on notes. There is little variation in tone and expression, and the storyteller does little to entertain.
- \*  
poor

The storyteller gets muddled and does not link the separate parts of the story. There is a lot of hesitation; some parts of the story do not make sense or are too brief.

The pupils then swapped roles. Some students in the groups were advised to consider organising the structure of their stories in different ways, for example beginning at the end of the story and using flashbacks or telling the story from the viewpoint of different narrators. Although the activity and speech was informal, they also took their role as assessor seriously.

#### Lesson 2

Pupils recorded some of their stories from lesson 1 using dictaphones and tape recorders. Pens were banned for this lesson and the focus was completely on speaking and listening. Transcripts were made from two of the pupils' stories (both on Goldilocks). One had been marked as good (\*\*\*); the other as very good (\*\*\*\*).

#### Lesson 3

At the beginning of the lesson, pupils listened to the two stories on tape and considered the differences in quality. They said the *very good* story was better because it was *longer, clearer, had a bit more information*, and was *funnier* and *more fluent*.

In groups of four, pupils were asked to use the transcripts to explain why they thought the *very good* story was better than the *good* story. Their initial observations were relatively informal, for example: *It's funnier; It's clearer; There is less hesitation; You can understand it better; It's in the right order; It's more fluent*.

Obviously some of the points were the same as before, but the aim was for pupils to use the transcripts to identify the features that made the 'very good' story more fluent. It was at this point that pupils were asked to identify 'units of sense' in the speech and how they were linked. In groups they were asked to annotate the transcripts, highlighting 'units of sense' with one colour and 'linking devices' with another colour.

They recognised that the ‘better’ story was more effectively organised because the ‘units of sense’ were linked well. At the start of the transcript, it was very much like the written version, beginning with a traditional opening: ‘Once upon a time...’ and because of the familiarity of the narrative, the units of sense were generally well-remembered sentences. These written language constructions were impossible to sustain and the units of sense became a mixture of sentences and clauses.

The groups identified the most significant common links in the clause chains and placed them in rank order: *so, and, because, but, well, then, now, like* (to denote direct speech or used as a filler), *also, however, finally* and *once again*.

The class was asked to identify which words did not link well; they chose *well* and *like* because they were seen as *fillers* rather than *linkers*. Finally, pupils were asked to consider alternatives to the ones listed above in order to expand the ‘link bank’. Some of the class went on to test the apparent frequency of the links and to find reasons for why this might be the case.



#### *Lesson 4*

Pupils were allowed to use their link banks to help them tell another story. No pens were allowed for this activity. In groups of four, pupils were given three sets of picture cards with the general headings: ‘person’, ‘place’ and ‘object’. The cards were shuffled and individual pupils asked to select a card from each set. They were then asked to make up and tell a story using each of the three cards. This produced some entertaining combinations and stories, for example the story of the caretaker in the headmaster’s office with the tape recorder.

Pupils were encouraged to extend their talk and to talk more fluently by using the words they had identified in their link bank. Pupils were once again asked to assess one another’s performance.

## **Teacher's observations**

### **Findings about spoken language**

- Lesson 1 was an activity the pupils enjoyed and they certainly entertained one other.
- Pupils learned much about the way in which the voice contributes to emphasis in a spoken story.
- Pupils learned that links between units of sense are crucial to the way in which both sequences of individual spoken clauses and the whole stories are heard and read.
- They understood that there are key differences between spoken and written media for narration. The study of transcripts was an important stimulus to such understanding.

### **Outcomes**

- Initially, I found it difficult to think of ways of extending pupils' speech without providing them with a structured framework. I was afraid of turning it into a 'written' speech. I was also keen to ensure that pupils thought about their own structure and that the words in the link bank were words that they used themselves. At the end of the exercise, pupils were using a variety of linking devices, which helped to improve coherence and fluency. Of course, this is just one of the many features which help a storyteller narrate an entertaining story. I asked the pupils to choose familiar stories at the start so that they could concentrate on developing the skill.
- The idea of using the term 'units of sense' to apply to sentences and clauses seemed to make sense to the pupils and I will use the term again when teaching speaking and listening.
- When preparing pupils for individual speaking tasks in the future, I will try to help them structure their talk by encouraging them to use a variety of linking words and phrases as opposed to 'fillers'. This will have a positive impact on the fluency and coherence of their talk.

## Negotiating through talk

### **Year 8: purposefully vague language**

Words and phrases that make assertions less definite, more appropriate and sometimes more polite

#### **Aims**

- to explore the relationship between vague language and purpose, audience and degrees of formality in naturally occurring speech
- to examine possible gender or other socio-linguistic differences in the use of purposefully vague language
- to provide pupils with a choice of models for persuasive speaking.

#### **Context**

The year 8 pupils were in a class of 31, and included a number of boys underachieving in written tasks but confident in oral activities. The pupils were following a programme of active listening activities, linked to the implementation of a whole-school citizenship initiative, as part of a thinking skills focus.

#### **Lesson planning**

The investigation was carried out in three 100-minute lessons as part of a wider programme of speaking and listening activities, many of which arose from class study of *The Tulip Touch* by Anne Fine. Links to the teaching objectives<sup>2</sup> for speaking and listening in the key stage 3 *Framework for teaching English* were:

- tell a story/recount an experience, choosing and changing the mood, tone and pace of delivery for particular effect (Y8SL2)
- recognise their own skills, strategies and responses as listeners in different situations (Y8SL6)
- listen for a specific purpose, paying sustained attention and selecting for comment or question that which is relevant to the agreed focus (Y8SL7).

Additionally, sixth-form students of English language and literature were briefed on the concept and application of purposefully vague language in talk. Transcription skills were revised and arrangements were made for these students to visit the year 8 class on at least three occasions to participate in preparation, recording or feedback sessions.

#### **Lesson 1**

Pairs of pupils were given two minutes to come up with suggestions for new words ending with 'ish', identifying whether the word was an adjective, a number or a noun. They had to put one example in a sentence.

We discussed the context and purpose for adding this suffix. This developed into a discussion on the differences between purposefully vague language and direct language in terms of purpose and context. Other features of purposefully vague language were explained using examples

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<sup>2</sup> In the key stage 3 *Framework for teaching English*:

- Y = year
- SL = speaking and listening
- LV = language variation.

drawn from the 'At the hairdresser's' unit from *Exploring spoken English* (Carter and McCarthy, 1997, pages 104–7).

Working in pairs, pupils were asked to highlight a particular linguistic feature. The features allocated to pairs were:

- discourse markers
- modal expressions
- ellipsis
- the suffixes *-ish* and *-y*
- time approximations
- slang expressions
- the word *just*.

Pupils asked each other questions on what they had learnt, ranging from simple definitions of linguistic features to conventions of transcribing speech and purpose/context for using particular features.

### *Lesson 2*

As the register was called, pupils had to call out another word for toilet. Pupils discussed which of these were appropriate when speaking to a teacher, a friend or a shop worker.

Pupils decided to email askoxford.com to request euphemisms for difficult subjects: death, disability and obesity. They discussed the link between speech choices and purpose explicitly in this context, highlighting the softening function of purposefully vague language.

The class listened to a short extract from *The Hiding Place* by Trezza Azzopardi, in which a young girl attempts to tattoo her younger sister's arm. The extract contains no dialogue. In pairs, pupils were asked to role-play the scene in which the older child tries to manipulate the younger one into having the tattoo. The pairs went on to role-play a conversation in which one tries to persuade the other to have a treatment, for example a piercing, new hair colour/style or fashion makeover.



Several pairs performed their role-play and pupils in the audience raised their hands when they identified a feature of purposefully vague language. At the end of each performance, the pupils in the audience commented on the purpose of the feature identified. The lesson ended with a recap on how useful purposefully vague language can be in negotiation/manipulation.

For homework, pupils paired up to produce a short recording and transcript of a conversation between two people about what they had done at the weekend.

### *Lesson 3*

The sixth-formers introduced themselves to their group and groups were allocated rooms and workspaces. They had been briefed to prompt and chair discussion on purposefully vague language features in the recording.

Sixth-formers and groups discussed their findings and evaluated what they had most enjoyed and what they had learnt from the activity.

All the activities were much enjoyed and many pupils commented on how much they welcomed the opportunity to talk informally in the classroom. They particularly liked working with the sixth-formers and many said they would like to take the research further themselves when they are older. Predictably, the least popular activity was the transcription, because *it was so fiddly*, although they said they were glad they now knew how to do it.

Future plans were developed: a bookmark competition to invent a design to explain the use of purposefully vague language, with features on one side and uses on the other; a lunchtime session in which the group demonstrated some features of purposefully vague language through paired role play, while the other year 8 group of similar ability made persuasive speeches. The theme was persuading someone to get fit.

## Teacher's observations

### Findings about spoken language

- An enhanced ability to make conscious, informed choices about language.
- A stronger sense of the dynamic and interpersonal dimension of talk.
- A more confident and purposeful approach to class talk.
- A sense of themselves as highly skilled and versatile users of spoken language.
- Higher expectations and pride in spoken outcomes, comparable with (and sometimes superior to) that of written outcomes.
- Understanding that formal does not always mean correct and vice versa.
- An awareness of the relationship between purposefully vague language and other features of spoken language, especially modality.
- A greater respect for classroom talk.
- A wider repertoire of learning approaches in the classroom.

I was astonished at how quickly pupils picked up the terminology. It became a feature of lessons that, when I used modal expressions or discourse markers, someone would put their hand up to comment! It made all of us much more conscious of how teacher and pupil talk worked on a daily basis.

I was surprised by the differences between the way boys and girls incorporated purposefully vague language into their speech. Girls used backchannels, tag questions, modal expressions, vague suffixes, general words such as *thing* and *stuff* and time approximations more than boys. Boys used more discourse markers. Overall, purposefully vague language was more frequently and richly used in paired discussions of girls and this applied to everyday interactional speech and to speech with a more direct negotiating function.

### Outcomes

Although I decided to focus on features of everyday speech, I would have preferred to tie this in with the work we were doing on *The Tulip Touch*, but the timing was wrong. This would have enabled pupils to probe the characterisation much more deeply and would have released them from a degree of self-consciousness if the speakers were fictitious but highly plausible fictitious characters. I am convinced that speaking and listening should have a more prominent place in many of our schemes of work and this research has demonstrated that we can do this without losing intellectual rigour or challenge.

I used an example of pupils' work from this research to show governors how pupils can achieve outcomes beyond expectations for their age group if they are given opportunities to do live research, using methods and terminology usually reserved for older pupils.

Future plans will include:

- using the correct terminology to describe linguistic features of classroom talk and dialogue in literature
- extending the range of key features covered incrementally
- spending more time consolidating understanding of the relationship between purposefully vague language and modal expressions
- revising schemes of work to incorporate more explicit teaching of formal and informal techniques in speech
- further investigating the impact of group size and gender on different kinds of speaking and listening activities.

## Formality and informality

### *Year 7: modal expressions*

Words and phrases that make it possible for speakers to shift their stance towards a subject, as they speak, depending on their listeners' responses

#### **Aims**

- to develop specific awareness of differences within spoken English, especially the continuum from informal to formal usage
- to enhance pupils' ability to pick up on subtle clues to people's mood and intention in ways that would benefit oral presentations across the curriculum, including drama and PSHE.

#### **Context**

The school serves a post-mining community in Cornwall, and is part of an Education Action Zone. The class taught was a top-set year 7 group, working with year 8 objectives. The 28 pupils in the class (18 girls and 10 boys) were cooperative and enthusiastic. There were four 50-minute lessons, including one double period.

#### **Lesson planning**

The investigation followed on from a unit of work in which pupils carried out investigations and taught mini-lessons to the rest of the group.

The teaching objectives from the key stage 3 strategy *Framework for teaching English* were:

- year 7 sentence level 15 and 16; Y7SL2, 15, 16, 17 and 19
- year 8 sentence level 12; Y8SL7, 8, 12, 15 and 16.

Pupils were organised into groups of three or four according to ability. Each member of the group was given a specific role (task manager, assessment manager, resource manager or motivator) and trained appropriately. Groups were also coached in collaborative group work. Resources consisted of two transcripts of conversations, one from a more formal setting, the other less formal. Pupils also used highlighter pens and wrote on large paper rather than exercise books. The work on modal expressions built on previous key stage 2 work.

#### **Lessons 1 and 2**

Each group was given a piece of plain A4 paper to make notes on. On the board was written 'It must be sort of difficult to phone or whatever'. The groups were asked to discuss the following questions.

- What is the central message?
- Why has the speaker used the other words?
- Who is speaker addressing and what is the evidence for this?

After a short whole-class discussion, the term 'modal expressions' was introduced, and the appropriate words and phrases from the text were highlighted and discussed.

Each pupil was then given a handout of a transcript taken from a pre-match discussion between three football pundits. The aim of this activity was to highlight the modal expressions used by the pundits, to identify who might be speaking and to describe the effects of the modal expressions. This activity was repeated with a second transcript, which represented a more formal conversation involving a person asking a secretary for an application form for a teaching position.

### Transcript A

#### Speaker

- 1 Great setting, Mark Lawrenson.
- 2 Fantastic John, and, uh, we, **you know**, and every time we do a game at St James's Park, we rave about the atmosphere; **well, I'll tell you what**, that was **absolutely** the best, which is a big thing to say when you consider the fifty-odd thousand at St James's. The streamers that came down from the roof of the stand, that was extremely impressive. They're **obviously** very, very vocal as well, Ian, **you feel like, well**, we are sat right amongst them.
- 3 Yeah, Bobby Robson was saying, Sir Bobby last night, that I think, **well obviously** he was here many times because he's worked here in Holland at PSV Eindhoven, and, uh, he was saying that it is very like St James's Park in terms of the atmosphere and they **really** do throw themselves into it the Feyernord supporters. And the two captains shaking hands across the half way line now, Paul Bosfeld of Feyernord and Alan Shearer. Both sides in their first choice shirts tonight: Feyernord red and white shirts, Newcastle in the black and white stripes.

### Transcript B

[The setting is a school office.]

- A Good morning, **may** I have an application form for the position of Science Teacher?
- B **By all means** - and your name?
- A ... Durber - D.U.R.B.E.R., tricky one isn't it?
- B Um. **Can** I take your telephone number Mrs Durber?
- A **Of course**, it's...
- B Lovely!
- A **Would there be any chance** of me coming into school, at your convenience, for a look around? If that was alright?
- B When were you thinking?
- A **I don't mind, I suppose** when things are not too busy for yourselves.
- B I'll speak to Mr... Head of Science.
- A That **would** be great, if it isn't too much trouble. You see it **might** give me a greater insight into the school!
- B Yes. So **we'll** get back to you on that, we have your number. As soon as I've spoken to..., **I'll** ring you.
- A Oh, that's great, thanks.
- B Right, see you soon.
- A Bye...thanks.
- B Bye now.

Pupils were then asked to place both texts on a continuum:

Informal speech ←————→ Formal speech

The pupils decided that both texts are informal but that the TV commentary is a little less formal because the speakers are interacting by giving opinions in a relaxed and familiar environment. They stress their personal viewpoints with modal expressions such as *absolutely* and *obviously*. In the second text, the situation is a little more formal because a specific request is being made in a context in which the speakers are not familiar and in which it is important to be both more precise and at the same time polite. There is a polite softening of response with modal expressions such as *I suppose* and *would there be any chance* alongside more conventional modal verbs such as *may* and *might*.

#### Lessons 3 and 4

Groups organised a role-play, in which one pupil was a teacher attempting to evacuate a class when a fire alarm has been signalled and another pupil played a frightened pupil who does not want to leave the building. The third pupil in the group was trained as an observer, specifically looking for the use of modal expressions. When there were four pupils in a group, two of them played as pupils, but only one not wanting to leave. After the role-play, the observer debriefed the group on their use of modal expressions. It was decided that in this context the language used is more direct and unambiguous; for example, the use of imperatives and modal verbs such as *you must*, *you have to* and *you cannot* indicate that softening would be out of place here.

This was followed by a second role-play, focusing on a less formal situation. Groups were given the choice of telling a friend that their new haircut was unsuitable, or that they had been 'dumped' by a boyfriend or girlfriend. Before the role-play began, groups were asked to guess whether more or fewer direct modal expressions would be used in these situations, compared to the earlier role-play. The pupil who had been the observer in the first role-play now took part in the new role-play, with another pupil being trained as the observer. Again pupils were debriefed by their observers and their original hypothesis was tested. It was found that language that is too direct can be hurtful so softening occurs, but the group pointed out that it can sometimes be kind to be direct in such situations.



## Teacher's observations

### Findings about spoken language

In the first lesson all groups had a good level of discussion about the phrase written on the board. Suggestions ranged from *It could be a doctor talking to another doctor about trying to get bad news to a family* to *It's one friend saying to another about his broken phone*. Every group, however, was able to recognise that the phrase was most likely to be used between peers. Some pupils were also able to identify the softening effects of the modal expressions quite quickly, with one pupil introducing the phrase *to soften*, with which I was especially pleased.

However, while most groups could identify the modal expressions in the first transcript, they also thought that some of the other phrases, especially *Um*, were also modal expressions. This led to some interesting discussion about the differences and overlaps between modal expressions and other types of spoken language, which covered purposefully vague language, discourse markers and deixis. The second transcript of the more formal discussion proved to be more straightforward, and it was when pupils had completed the analysis of this transcript that I felt confident in pupils' ability to recognise modal expressions accurately. All groups were in agreement about the respective positioning of the transcripts on the informal-formal continuum.

The role-plays went particularly well. In itself, role-play was not an activity I had previously used with this group, but they had used it in primary school and in drama at secondary school. When the observers had left the room with a colleague to prepare their roles, I was impressed by the level of discussion about the subject of evacuating a school in an emergency. All pupils recognised that few modal expressions would be used initially, and a few quickly picked up that there may be occasions when such strategies would be necessary, and this was what they then prepared. I was surprised at most groups instinctively reaching for pen and paper to script the role-plays, which I allowed initially, but I was also surprised that most groups did not actually use their scripts during their mini-performances. The role-plays did not take very long, so I asked participants to swap roles, which they did very easily and with a greater sense of improvisation. It tended to be from the second role-play that the observers took most of their comments.

Ultimately, then, I am confident in saying that the pupils successfully learnt about modal expressions and how to use them appropriately. This was demonstrated by their role-plays and the comments of observers. There were no real written outcomes, which makes such an assessment problematic to an extent, but in fact this was one of the aspects which pupils enjoyed the most.

## Outcomes

I was impressed with how this activity developed, and I would not make any major changes. The only significant change would be for pupils to study the transcripts in a different order. The second transcript, which involved fewer modal expressions, allowed pupils to identify them more easily than the first transcript, and I would rather pupils first experience success, rather than confusion. Other than that I would not make any significant changes. This activity was enjoyable and challenging for pupils and teachers alike, and the fact that it involved no major written outcomes was especially motivating for the pupils.

- In terms of progression, I would like to develop this unit to include the elements of spoken English which we discussed at quite an early stage. This would have helped to clear up any confusion with the first transcript. Such a unit might become part of an even larger unit, focusing on speaking and listening, which is a key objective for our school's 'literacy across the curriculum' programme. Our school is in an area where pupils do not enjoy much opportunity to develop their spoken language, and many suffer as a result. I see the development of understanding how spoken language operates as crucial to the future success of our pupils. Traditional speaking and listening activities often concentrate on more formal, and sometimes simply artificial aspects of spoken language, which may meet examination criteria, but are of no real use in other situations. By working on elements such as modal expressions, pupils can develop an understanding of how their own language works, and how they can use it to best effect.
- Making talk about spoken grammar more explicit will move pupils closer to becoming more conscious and articulate about forms and functions of language, as encouraged by the key stage 3 strategy. I feel that this will empower pupils by recognising their 'own' speech as worthy of study, rather than the more traditional approach of studying examples of famous speeches. By teaching pupils how to analyse and develop their own speech in realistic ways, we are equipping them with very useful tools indeed.
- I would broaden any unit of work to include other elements of spoken grammar, most notably vague language, discourse markers and deixis, as these were the elements that would have benefited pupils the most, and they seemed to grasp these elements relatively quickly.
- As head of English, I will be revising our schemes of work to include elements of spoken grammar, but I will also need some INSET time with my team, because they are not familiar with the terms.
- Assessing the use of key features of spoken English would have to be considered carefully. It may become an empowering experience for pupils. However, it is important to distinguish pupils' use of these key features as part of their everyday experience from more conscious use in a school setting. As part of everyday experience talk can be studied and analysed, but the purpose and focus of assessment of talk needs further thought.

# Approaches to spoken English in the classroom

## Focus on talk as talk

The features described in previous sections are unique to talk; they have no straightforward correspondences in writing. Teaching about them needs to start with this in mind and aim to focus on talk as talk, using the spoken language as both medium and message. This will help pupils appreciate the distinctiveness of the grammar of spoken language. The group of features highlighted in this work forms a good basis for further learning about and exploration of language, but it is not an exhaustive account of the grammar of talk, nor is it a prescriptive system. The value of the approaches suggested lies in their way of enhancing what is already planned.

As the classroom investigations show, some of the principles underlying effective teaching about talk are based on:

- the use of oral not written texts that capture the spontaneity of talk
- practical examples arising from classroom exchanges
- investigative work done by pupils themselves
- clear and explicit descriptions of the selected grammatical features.

With these principles in mind, both pupils and teachers found the work interesting in its own right and worthwhile in relation to other aspects of the English curriculum. In particular, pupils responded to the clarity and explicitness with which aspects of talk could be described and discussed.



Teachers who carried out the investigative work in their classrooms used different teaching strategies. In years 7 and 8, two of the investigations were mapped directly onto key stage 3 strategy *Framework for teaching English* objectives and were carried out within a lesson structure of starter, main activity and plenary. In all of the classes, there was a mixture of explicit, whole-class teaching and active investigation by pupils working in groups.

## Developing the national curriculum programmes of study

A focus on the grammar of talk offers new routes into the national curriculum requirements for speaking and listening. It not only balances the tendency to think of grammar only in relation to written language, it also (as with explicit teaching about writing) begins to map out for pupils an explicit understanding of how oral communications are structured and how, as speakers and listeners, they can make use of this knowledge in and out of the classroom.

- Work on the grammar of spoken language will aid understanding of how and why talk is different from writing. This could include clarifying why some written texts, unlike spoken exchanges, are not well served by extensive use of deixis or clauses chained together, and contrasting this with the advantage of using talk when we are trying to explore complex subject matter.
- Language variation is an important section throughout the programmes of study. It covers the study of current influences on speech and writing and how language changes. Over recent years our ability to record, classify and access large collections of spoken language data electronically means that it is now possible to trace change and variation in speech in ways that have previously only been viable for writing. This adds a new dimension to the requirement to teach about current influences on spoken and written language, and to explore in a more informed way some of the differences between speech and writing.
- A further dimension of the programmes of study concerns work in drama, improvisation, working in role or scripting dramatic performances, which will be enhanced by greater understanding of the features of authentic oral language.
- A theme in all work on spoken language is for pupils to develop clearer understanding of formality and informality and how to move effectively along this scale. All of the grammatical features we have looked at contribute to patterns in formal or informal usage: knowing how and why such features cluster together is a way of refining pupils' understanding of variation in talk, whether in terms of clues when listening or as help when speaking in a range of situations.

These features of spoken language do not need to be taught in a particular order. In the project as a whole, we found that primary as well as secondary classes were able to develop work around them. We are not yet able to define progression in teaching spoken grammar: all the classroom work done so far has indicated that teachers are able to introduce these ideas and ways of attending to language to pupils in several key stages and in different year groups.

## Using the strategy objectives for teaching

A logical place to start would be in key stage 3, as this is the key stage in which there is most scope for developing knowledge about language in all modes. It is also where the *Framework for teaching English: years 7, 8 and 9* (DfEE, 2001) has already mapped out a termly programme of objectives. For instance:

- in work on drama, when improvising or scripting scenarios, knowledge about how actual conversation relies on ellipsis, deixis and clause chaining is helpful in enabling pupils to devise more convincing exchanges (links to Y7SL15)
- fluent use of deixis and modal expressions is part of giving effective spoken instructions (links to Y7SL4)
- awareness of the place of vague language and how this connects with modal expressions will help pupils participate in a range of spoken interactions where it is important to negotiate complex or sensitive subject matter, or to establish productive working relationships in groups (links to Y7SL10, leading to Y8SL10)
- pupils' skills as critical listeners can be sharpened by knowing more about how speakers may structure their talk, using heads and tails to introduce or recap on what they have said (links to Y8SL2)
- similarly, knowledge about the prevalence of clause chaining in talk, and the intricacy of the utterances that sometimes develop because of this, can alert pupils to a resource for sustaining their own talk as well as suggesting moments when, as listeners, they might strategically intervene in a conversation (links to Y7SL3, helpful for Y8SL7)
- as part of an oral assignment for GCSE, pupils benefit from understanding more about the use and impact of a range of discourse markers (builds on Y8SL3).



Further ways of embedding teaching about spoken grammar into existing schemes of work are outlined. The approach suggested is about enhancing opportunities in speaking and listening, not planning a new curriculum.

### **Examples**

#### *Year 7*

A teacher worked on ways of developing pupils' confidence in telling oral stories and promoting more focused listening in class. She saw this as a way of extending pupils' knowledge of some of the contrasts between spoken and written texts. This work drew together three teaching objectives for the year group and introduced pupils to spoken clause structure and deixis.

The teaching objectives were:

- to recount a story, anecdote or experience, and consider how this differs from written narrative (SL2)
- to recognise the way familiar spoken texts are organised and identify their typical features (SL9)
- to investigate differences between spoken and written language structures (Sentence level 16).

#### *Year 8*

A teacher linked work on formal presentations with critical listening and encouraged pupils to notice how varying degrees of formality impact on the selection and organisation of subject matter. She taught pupils about signalling spoken clause structure and purposefully vague language in the context of relevant strategy objectives.

The teaching objectives were:

- to make a formal presentation in standard English, using appropriate rhetorical devices (SL3)
- to recognise the range of ways in which messages are conveyed, for example tone, emphasis and status of speaker (SL8)
- to explore and use different degrees of formality in written and oral texts (Sentence level 12).

### *Year 9*

A teacher used the instruction of interview techniques to develop explicit self-evaluation of listening skills. The work was underpinned by exploration of heads and tails, vague language and spoken clause structure.

The teaching objectives were:

- to develop interview techniques, including planning a series of linked questions, helping the respondent to give useful answers, and responding to and extending the responses (SL3)
- to reflect on and evaluate their own skills, strategies and successes as listeners in a variety of contexts (SL4).



### **Finding opportunities on the speech–writing continuum**

A fruitful and engaging starting point for work on spoken grammar is the speech–writing continuum. Successful and effective writing now sometimes contains features more usually associated with the spoken language and with spoken grammar. Indeed, a significant change affecting the English language at the end of the twentieth century has been the growing presence of spoken forms in writing.

One of the effects of inserting spoken features into written texts can be to form texts that are playful and creative, exploiting the inherent capacity for wordplay and departures from norms that is characteristic of much spoken interaction. Space has restricted our opportunity to display this kind of creativity in common talk and everyday informal discourse, but further explorations can be found in Crystal (1988) and Carter (2004).

Pupils' existing familiarity with emails, text messages, popular journalism and reportage means that subject matter for discussion is not hard to find. Pupils are probably less clear about how writers draw on this resource to achieve particular impact and effects, and the ways in which spoken language is being used in written texts.

'Starters' (the opening phase of many lessons) are an ideal context for introducing teaching features of spoken grammar because they are short, focused and interactive.

Note that not all the core features of spoken grammar are covered here. The examples are indicative only.

### ***Informal journalism***

Writers also achieve impact and get on a 'conversational' wavelength with their readers by using ellipsis in combination with common spoken discourse markers such as *OK*, *right* and *well*, and modal expressions such as *actually*, *certainly*, *definitely*, *exactly* and *of course*, which can often serve as response tokens and replies in conversational exchanges. Such styles are common in advertising discourse and in journalism. Here is an example of a year 11 pupil writing for a school sports newsletter:

Well, you won't believe how the team did this year. OK, you do. Exactly. We lost eight out of ten matches. But, guess what? We won the last two matches and we now have every confidence to prepare for the coming season. We are going to improve. Right?

In addition to applying knowledge about these features in various types of persuasive writing of their own, pupils could explore the ways in which 'actual' spoken dialogue is represented in fiction and drama, taking note of overlapping grammatical patterns.

### ***Making descriptions more immediate***

In spoken language, heads and tails help to orient the listener to what is happening or to reinforce what has been said. Increasingly, writers are using them strategically for similar reasons.

A quick 10-minute starter could take the form of a game, making use of commonly occurring samples from everyday sources.

Resources needed: a collection of clearly printed heads and tails projected on an OHT slide and coins to toss. Each time the coin is tossed, and heads or tails called, the pupil has to identify one from the overhead transparency.

Heads are common in menus, for example *Very special, our locally caught sea-bass*. The ellipted head *very special* is fronted in order to draw our attention to what is to follow. The full head would be, *It's very special, our...* It can seem (and sound) as if the writer is addressing the reader more directly and more as part of a dialogue.

Tails have a similar effect, where the tail not only adds emphasis to the statement but also imparts a specifically 'spoken' character to the writing.

She's a woman who really knows her own mind is this *former royal reporter*.  
(*The Daily Mail*, 30 January 2004)

A more 'written' version of this sentence would be:

This former royal reporter is a woman who really knows her own mind.

Follow-up work could include using heads and tails for emphasis in specific text types, such as advertising copy or biographical sketches, making sure that pupils understand what is unusual about these expressions and how they convey a sense of immediacy.

### ***Emails and faxes***

Ellipsis appears increasingly in written contexts and is especially common in faxes, email and internet communications. The relative immediacy of much email communication means that the preferred style is one of friendly informality and the ellipsis encodes this, as this email from a year 10 pupil to her aunt shows.

Hi there! Change of plan. Going to be staying in Brum after all. All trains are booked up for coming back up, and none of my m8s are coming back anyway. Got 4 essays to write and I want to get them done b4 Xmas. Sorry to disappoint, and give my love to the oldies!!!

jillxxxxxx

Pupils could talk about how much of a ‘message’ can be abbreviated and, in a range of electronic and other texts, begin to categorise the grammatical features which are most easily elided or abbreviated.

### ***Creating informality in writing***

Speakers often use vague language to soften expressions so that they do not appear too direct or assertive. Writers import words and phrases such as *thing, stuff, or so, or something* and *sort of* as a way of sounding casual, informal and friendly.

He’s been to all the big sports events: the Rugby World Cup, European Cup Football Finals, Wimbledon and all **that kind of thing**. (*Observer Magazine*, 15 January 2004)

We reckon congestion charges could cause a hundred **or so** fewer cars to enter the city centre. (*Nottingham Evening Post*, 21 January 2004)

In examples such as these, pupils can be encouraged to analyse the ways that spoken grammar and vocabulary go together to reinforce the impact.

A useful extension of discussion about writers’ purposes in not wishing to ‘talk down’ to their readers – and how effective these techniques are – would be to encourage pupils to review their own writing, looking for instances of unintentional informality. Work on the grammar of spoken language will help pupils identify more precisely the ways they have structured both sentences and whole texts, and in turn this will develop more informed choices about how to vary levels of formality in writing.

## Useful resources

*Giving a voice*, QCA, 2003 ([www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/subjects/2933\\_1215.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/subjects/2933_1215.html))

*New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom*, QCA, 2003  
([www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/subjects/6111.html](http://www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/subjects/6111.html))

*Not whether but how: teaching grammar in English at key stages 3 and 4*, QCA, 1999

*The grammar papers: perspectives on the teaching of grammar in the national curriculum*, QCA, 1998

*Drama objectives bank*, DfES, 2003

*Key objectives bank: Year 7*, DfES, 2002

*Key objectives bank: Year 8*, DfES, 2002

*Key objectives bank: Year 9*, DfES, 2002

*Speaking, listening, learning: working with children in key stages 1 and 2*, DfES, 2003  
([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/publications/framework/818497/](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/literacy/publications/framework/818497/))

## Further reading

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<b>Type</b>	Guidance
<b>Description</b>	Explanation of what makes spoken language distinctive as a means of communication. Discussion of some of the key features of the grammar of talk, exemplified by teaching sequences
<b>Cross ref</b>	<i>New perspectives on spoken English in the classroom</i> (QCA, 2003) <i>Speaking, listening, learning: working with children in key stages 1 and 2</i> (DfES, 2003)
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**Price and order ref:** £6 QCA/04/1291