

## Language Unit 3: Studying spoken language

### Skills targeted: AO2 Language

Students will be expected to:

- understand variations in spoken language, explaining why language changes in relation to contexts
- evaluate the impact of spoken language choices in their own and others' use.

### Why study this unit?

This is the world around us, the world in which we live. You will be amazed at how quickly students engage with the concepts in this unit of study, comparing ideas and applying the meta-language to explore and comment on ideas of spoken language that they already knew but had not acknowledged. There is, therefore, a great deal of cultural 'ownership' to this unit.

### Getting started

Encourage the students to share comments/ideas about how their own idiolect has developed – 'in' words and 'out' words. Differing groups have differing phrases and different uses of words. Make the students the experts and enable them to teach you and each other.

Transcripts of children and adults are readily available on the internet. If these are not suitable, then it is relatively easy to create your own resources with a little imagination. Work with the class and use a group-based activity to create transcripts of conversations that the students can easily record themselves. This is rather time consuming but does illustrate the need for quantity of transcript and the need for repeated reference to the source material.

A good starting point is to take a recording that you have made yourself and involve the class in an initial transcript creation. This way the pitfalls are highlighted and the need for close listening skills are clearly illustrated. At this point, the focus is on exploration and enabling your students to open up their own innate experience. BBCiPlayer and related resources are also great; they enable a quick overview of a number of audiences, topics, styles, etc. Indeed, the whole concept of scripted or not; children's or adults'; and language complexity are easily opened up here in a visual, touchable manner.

### Choosing topics

1. Social attitudes to spoken language.
2. Spoken genres.
3. Multi-modal talk.

All three suggested task areas place the emphasis of enquiry safely into the students' hands. This is a situation where the teacher is a facilitator and the students are using their knowledge as a basis for analytical material. Choices at this point depend very much on the Centre's resources, class size and teachers' comfort zone!

- **Topic 1 Social attitudes to spoken language** – explores the privileges of speech; class, social grouping, workplace roles, etc. This is a topic that students can engage with quickly and it is relatively easy to resource with personally created transcripts.
- **Topic 2 Spoken genres** – is, again, something which is easy to resource from the plethora of internet resources and something which students may feel more at home with, as it is not as personally revealing as Topic 1. It involves the exploration of talk in various genres, including the media. A particular focus could be different modes of speech in different genres.

- **Topic 3 Multi-modal talk** – gives full ownership to the students and opens up a real world of learning for the teacher! This can be rewarding on a number of levels, both in terms of work produced and enhancing classroom dynamics by moving the centre of influence and expertise away from the supposed ‘guru’ of the teacher. This topic deals with new technologies that alter the demarcation between traditional areas of spoken and written language – MSN, text speak, etc. It opens up the ambiguity of imprecise language and, what seems like limited subject material, can actually prove a fertile ground for further analysis.

Ultimately, all three choices come down to issues of time, resources and teacher choice. All three are interesting and allow for strong exploration of the subject area; and, remember, this is actually a time where allowing the students a little more freedom will actually gain great rewards for you and them.

## Investigative approaches

Research is relatively easy and can be fun! Early sharing of transcript styles pays dividends, as this can be daunting in concept. You have to ensure that they focus on something which carries enough weight for analysis at this level. It is therefore essential to share assessment objectives with the students.

A top tip is to ensure that there is a good quantity of material to analyse; this becomes very obvious in the class-based transcribing mentioned earlier. Not covering all of the ground transcribed is perfectly acceptable; but not having enough material can be frustrating to students and teachers alike.

As a rough guide, three sides of transcribed work should provide enough information for analysis. Recordings of friends and family can easily be made with mobiles, podcasting devices, etc. Television programmes and BBCiPlayer can also be used to more easily produce transcribed work.

## Teaching tips

There are many ways to approach these topics. One way that addresses the analytical requirements for the first Assessment Category is to explain the differences between accent and dialect and encourage the students to share in this with their own experiences. This can be introduced by taking a basic sentence and saying it in three or four different accents. It is important to do this without altering any words, merely working on pronunciation. Here, students learn to listen to differences and this can open up discussions about perceptions of regional accent and social class.

It is relatively easy to build dialect into this. I use an example where a Scottish friend explains something in a dialectic sentence which I would not even have noticed when I was at school, but now that I do not live there and my ears are no longer attuned, seems strangely alien. I then take this statement and give the students a copy of it. It is plainly English, but not as we know it! There are words that are recognisable and normally someone recognises a few of the others or starts to see the origins that are apparent. I then share with students the true meaning and explain the origins and differences in structuring, etc. There are many examples of regional dialect words on the internet.

This can be further developed in a number of ways. Students can be identified as team leaders and explain the dialectic differences in their regional speech to others in the group. Good starting points for this are different words for a child, home/living, food, etc. For example: bairn (child); bide (to live); jammy piece (jam sandwich). This works particularly well if there is a mix within the group, but can work equally well without a mix as it is then a matter of best explaining to others who already own the knowledge. At this point, the teaching objective may shift from one of purely explanatory to an exploration of ‘how’ and really open up how we communicate with others; creating a basis for analysis.

This concept is then further progressed with the introduction of the concept of idiolect. Lovely work is easily established by asking students to develop their own learning by explaining their own individual speech patterns using the technical terms that they have learnt.

What do people say that singles them out from others? What are particular teachers' distinguishing features of speech? This can be conducted as a record-keeping task over a few days and then shared with the class. It can take the form of a presentation of a more formal style and form a link to assessment for Speaking & Listening, if so desired.

## **Constructing a response**

With an awareness of the Assessment Objectives, a good starting point for essay titles is: 'An exploration of...'. Using this as an opening, which then has a focus agreed by you, means that close control is established but freedom is still in the hands of the students. Five key points of analysis in this essay will serve to cover the requirements for the task. In this way a structure is given, but 'cloned' essays are not a danger. It is important that the glossary which the students use does not inhibit creativity; indeed, it is better that a close analysis be achieved without overdependence on this glossary than a low understanding of the glossary inhibits the student's keenness to analyse.

## **Improving students' grades**

At A and A\*, examiners are looking for perceptive, sustained and sophisticated analysis; a real ownership and control of the analysis. At B and C, indicators of achievement is explanation that leads to exploration. On the C/D borderline, there is an awareness of the need for exploration but the work is mainly of an explanatory nature.

## **Nelson Thornes resources to support this unit**

AQA GCSE English and Language: Student and Teacher Books Higher Tier; Student and Teacher Books Foundation Tier; Online Higher and Foundation Tiers – Section D: Studying spoken language.