**LESSON PLAN: Vague category language**

*The lesson plan below comes from the ‘Vague language’ section of my Udemy course, Spoken Grammar: a Guide for English Language Teachers. This section also includes ‘vague placeholders and quantities’ (e.g. ‘thingy’ and ‘loads of’) and ‘vague lexical bundles’ (e.g. ‘I was thinking of…’).*

**Teacher’s notes**

The term ‘vague language’ has been in use for many years. Joanna Channell wrote an influential book on it more than 25 years ago. (Channell, J. 1994. Vague Language. Oxford University Press)

Your students will already be familiar with a lot of vague language: words like ‘probably’ or ‘about’, for example, or approximate numbers like ‘thousands’ or quantities like ‘a few’. Such words are used in formal and informal English and are well covered in traditional teaching materials.

But there’s also a very useful vague language in natural conversational English: words and phrases such as ‘thing’, ‘stuff’, ‘sort of’ and ‘tallish’ (meaning ‘quite tall’).

There are several reasons why your students might want to use this kind of language: they may not have the time or knowledge to be precise; they may need some ‘filler’ language while they think; or they might simply want to put the listener at ease by being fairly relaxed about things.

And finally, although it’s called ‘vague language’ you can’t actually be vague about how you use it! As with all spoken grammar, it has its own rules of usage and collocation. Once these rules are learnt, however, vague language can make life easier for your students. Lists, for instance, can often be replaced with a phrase like ‘or something’. So, in a supermarket, instead of saying, “I’m not in the mood for cooking. Shall we get a pizza or a ready meal or some pot noodles?”, you can simply say, “I’m not in the mood for cooking. Shall we get a pizza or something?”

**Vague category language**, the subject of this plan, is the aspect of vague language where the speaker implies that the thing mentioned is part of a category or type, without actually mentioning all the members of that category.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. Or something (like that), and things/stuff (like that), and everything

2. Sort/kind of

3. Or something (like that), and things/stuff (like that), and everything, sort/kind of: recap

4. The suffixes -ish and -y

**1. Or something (like that), and things/stuff (like that), and everything**

Show your students some dialogues. Ask them to complete the dialogues by filling in the gaps. This will get them thinking about the language in context. Listen to what they say before giving them the answers so you can estimate their level of awareness.

Here’s the exercise.

Choose one of these phrases for each dialogue: *and things/or something/and everything*

Matt: What’s up over there? Has someone won the lottery \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

Abbey: No, they’re watching a football match. Someone must have scored.

Cameron: What did you get up to on your holiday? Anything exciting?

Brooke: I’m afraid not. Just swam, walked, shopped \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Faye: Yu’s gone? I don’t understand. She didn’t even say goodbye.

Cai: I know. She got a new job in Beijing, sold her car, packed up her flat \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!

Amber: We’ve got about an hour before we need to leave for the airport.

Ye-jun: OK. Shall we go for a walk \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for a change of scene?

Amber: Sure. I’ll get my coat.

Seth: Is Katie really going into business, then?

Anna: Of course. She’s bought a shop, hired staff \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!

Seth: Amazing! But it’s fairly risky, isn’t it, from a financial point of view?

Summer: Did you buy anything at the market?

Riley: Yeah. I got some fish, veg, rice \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ for our dinner.

Summer: Great. Get cooking, then!

Here are the answers:

Matt: or something

Brooke: and things

Cai: and everything

Ye-jun: or something

Anna: and everything

Riley: and things

Now ask your students in pairs to read these dialogues aloud to each other, using the correct answers that you have given them. Then they should try to work out the differences in meaning between these three phrases. Listen to their ideas.

Here are the answers you can give, or guide your students towards:

1. ‘… or something’ = or an alternative but similar thing. ‘… or something like that’ is also possible. Note that ‘or anything’ is less common but must be used in negative statements. See if your students instinctively understand this. Write these two sentences on the board and ask your students to complete both with the same word:

“I lent him my bike, but he didn’t say thanks or \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” (anything)

“I was on my own all evening. No-one called or \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.” (anything)

Note also that ‘and anything’ may also be used as an alternative to ‘something’ when making offers, e.g.: “Let me know if you need an extra towel or anything.” Look at these two questions:

“Would like a coffee or anything?”

“Would like a coffee or something?”

There’s no real difference in meaning, though some linguists might argue that ‘anything’ is a little more ‘expansive’ and therefore more welcoming.

‘Somewhere (like that)’ and the less common ‘someone (like that)’ are also used but only when referring specifically to places or people. Write these sentences on the board, tell your students that they are all correct as they are, but ask them when they could replace ‘something’ with ‘somewhere’ or ‘someone’:

1. I’m not sure what I’m going to do. I may go to the America Vintage Shop or something.

2. (in a hotel) Why don’t you talk to the receptionist or manager or something?

3. Let’s organise a party or something like that to celebrate.

4. Would you like to go to the beach or something like that?

Answers: 1. somewhere/2. someone/4. somewhere

2. ‘… and things’ = and other things which are similar (i.e. in the same category). The full version, which is also quite common, is ‘… and things like that’, and the word ‘thing’ could be replaced by ‘stuff’, which is a little more colloquial. The phrase ‘… and that sort/kind of thing’ has a similar meaning.

Note: it may be interesting to point out that this phrase is also used to withhold information without actually lying:

Mum: “What have you been doing in your room all evening?”

Daughter: (who has been texting her friends a lot of the time) “Oh, you know, doing my homework and stuff.”

3. ‘and everything’ = and the other things that complete the idea, or make a complete idea stronger. Grammatically, you could say in the third dialogue: “She got a new job in Paris, sold her car, packed up her flat and things!” but the drama of the comment demands the use of ‘and everything’ instead. You could ask your students which statement sounds better here:

1. “They’re a couple now. They’re in love and things.”

2. “They’re a couple now. They’re in love and everything!”

Number two is clearly better. Number one could sound cynical or sarcastic.

All three phrases are flexible in being able to represent nouns or verbs. Here are two examples from the dialogues:

“I got some fish, veg, potatoes and things.” (‘things’ represents other nouns)

“Just swam, walked, shopped and things.” (‘things’ represents other verbs/actions)

Your students will see more examples of these three phrases and their alternatives, and get a chance to practise them later in this plan.

**2. Sort/kind of**

Write up these three examples on your board, and ask your students to think about the meaning of the phrase ‘sort of’ both generally and in each example. Listen to their ideas.

1. What sort of car have you got?

2. A: What does your sister do?

    B: She’s a sort of doctor.

3. I’m feeling sort of tired. I might just veg out for a while.

[veg out = relax/do very little; ‘veg’ is pronounced in the same way as the first part of the word ‘vegetable’: /vedʒ/]

Here are the answers you can give or guide your students towards:

In the phrase ‘sort of’, ‘sort’ essentially means category, but it can range from something quite specific to something very general.

1. What sort of car have you got?

Here ‘sort’ almost certainly means ‘make’, ‘brand’ or ‘type’, and the answer could be, for example, ‘a Volkswagen Lavida’ or ‘a Nissan Sylphy’.

2. A: What does your sister do?

    B: She’s a sort of doctor.

‘Sort’ here could mean ‘type’ as in: ‘She’s a doctor but I don’t know her medical specialism’, or it could be an example of vague language use: ‘I do know her specialism, but I don’t want to sound too detailed or technical.’

3. I’m feeling sort of tired. I might just veg out for a while.

The vague use of ‘sort of’ here either means ‘I can’t quite define how I’m feeling but it’s similar to tiredness’ or ‘I’m not quite sure how I’m feeling but I’ll use ‘sort of’ as a filler to give myself time to think.’

Make the point here or earlier that ‘kind of’ has exactly the same meaning. ‘Sort of’ is slightly more common in British English and ‘kind of’ in American English, but UK and US speakers use both phrases from time to time.

There will be a chance to practise ‘sort/kind of’ later.

**3. Or something (like that), and things/stuff (like that), and everything, sort/kind of: recap**

Ask your students to read this dialogue aloud in pairs two or three times, taking turns to read the roles of Ashley and Su-bin.

Ashley: What are you doing this weekend? Anything interesting?

Su-bin: I’m kind of hoping to get out of town. On Saturday perhaps, into the countryside.

Ashley: To get some fresh air?

Su-bin: Sort of. And some exercise. I might take the bike. And you?

Ashley: It’s kind of difficult to say. Depends on the weather. I’ve joined a sort of tennis group. Not a club. We just text each other to see who’s free on Saturday morning. But the courts are outdoors, so if it’s pouring …

Su-bin: And on Sunday?

Ashley: Oh\*, I’ve got to do some tidying, shopping and stuff like that.

Su-bin: Do you want to get together in the evening, perhaps? We could see a film or something?

Ashley: Let’s check there’s no violence. I’m tired of films with fights and guns and things.

Su-bin: There’s that new musical, isn’t there? It’s got singing, dancing and everything! I can’t remember the name, though.

Ashley: As longs as no-one gets shot or anything, I’m OK.

\*Teacher’s note: Although there are many interjections in English, ‘oh’ is the most common, either on its own or in word pairs such as ‘oh dear’, ‘oh really?’, ‘oh no’, ‘oh yeah’, ‘oh well’, ‘oh, I see’. I cover this and other interjections such as ‘wow’, ‘ah’, ‘aha’, ‘ouch’, ‘yuk’ and ‘aargh’ in the ‘interjections’ lesson plan in my online course.

Now ask your students to look at the gapped version, and do the same thing, this time repeating the key language from memory.

Ashley: What are you doing this weekend? Anything interesting?

Su-bin: I’m \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to get out of town. On Saturday, into the countryside.

Ashley: To get some fresh air?

Su-bin: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_. And some exercise. I might take the bike. And you?

Ashley: It’s \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to say. Depends on the weather. I’ve joined \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ tennis group. Not a club. We just text each other to see who’s free on Saturday morning. But the courts are outdoors, so if it’s pouring …

Su-bin: And on Sunday?

Ashley: Oh, I’ve got to do some tidying, shopping and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Su-bin: Do you want to get together in the evening, perhaps? We could see a film \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_?

Ashley: Let’s check there’s no violence. I’m tired of films with fights and guns \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Su-bin: There’s that new musical, isn’t there? It’s got singing, dancing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_! I can’t remember the name, though.

Ashley: As longs as no-one gets shot \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I’m OK.

After students have worked with the dialogue above, you may want, if it’s possible in your teaching situation, to try a ‘mingling’ activity.

First, while they’re still sitting down, get your students in pairs to ask each other the question “What are you doing this weekend? Anything interesting?” The aim at the moment is to get them to build a conversation together in a slow and deliberate way, helping each other to try out some of the vague language you’ve covered. You may be able to assist as you go around and listen to pairs practising.

Next, they should stand up and mingle with their classmates, choosing new partners, asking the same question, and using some of the vague language they’ve already rehearsed in their replies.

Note: in an A and B pair, if A asks the question first, B should ‘return’ it later by saying, more naturally: “And you? What are *you* [stress on ‘you’] doing this weekend?”

**4. The suffixes -ish and -y**

It’s time to look at ‘-ish’ and ‘-y’. These suffixes mean ‘similar to’ or ‘in that category.’ (This is, of course, different from words that simply end in ‘-ish’ such as ‘monkfish’ or ‘-y’ such as ‘party’.)

Start by eliciting some adjectives. Ask students these questions, and guide them towards the answers at the bottom:

1. How would you describe someone who enjoys sports?

2. How would you describe an adult who acts like a child?

3. What’s another word for ‘rich’?

4. What’s another word for ‘stupid’? E.g. in the sentence, “That was a stupid thing to do.”

5. How might you describe someone who is very fond of reading and studying?

Answers

1. sporty         2. childish        3. wealthy        4. foolish               5. bookish

Say that all of these are standard adjectives that you would find in the dictionary. Other examples include words like ‘salty’ and ‘oily’. Ask your students for examples of salty and oily foods. You could also ask your class to guess the meaning of standard words such as ‘sheepish’ (looking shy, often because you’ve done something wrong/silly) or ‘speedy’ (fast).

Now tell your class that these suffixes are also used in less standard and sometimes inventive ways to mean ‘approximately’ or ‘similar to’.

Write up the ‘guide’ below on your board in your own way, selecting the examples you prefer for your class. Or, better, elicit language with questions like, “How would you describe someone who is around fifty years old?” or “How would describe a colour that isn’t red or green, but something in between?”

A guide:

1. -ish

-ish is often added informally for a vague meaning in numbers, times and dimensions:

“I think she’s fiftyish.” (= around fifty years old).

“Shall we meet at elevenish?”

“It’s a tallish building/a widish river/a steepish hill.”

Sometimes it’s even used on its own: “Are you thirsty?” Answer: “Ish.” (meaning ‘a bit thirsty but not too much.’)

2. -y

- y is often used in standard English for materials, tastes and smells:

plasticky (= like plastic), watery, woody, tinny (= unpleasant sound), sugary, fruity, flowery (e.g. a perfume), garlicky. (You may not find ‘plasticky’ and ‘garlicky’ in your dictionary.) It’s also used colloquially in words like ‘beefy’ (muscular), ‘bubbly’ (lively), ‘choosy’ (fussy), ‘geeky’ (over-interested in technology), gutsy (brave), trashy (of very poor quality, ‘yucky’ (disgusting, from the interjection ‘yuck’).

3. -ish or -y

Both are used for colours:

reddish/reddy, reddish/reddy-brown, bluish/bluey, bluey/bluish-pink etc.

4. -ish and -y:

Both are used in adjectives that people invent, often on the spot as they’re talking, but ‘-ish’ is more common unless the resulting adjective is difficult to say. If there are two words for the same thing, the shorter version is probably best, e.g. ‘a hardish exam’ rather than ‘a difficultish exam.’

It’s also quite common when you’re using these words to make the following gesture with your right or left hand: put it out horizontally at waist level or above with the fingers spread and then shake it a little.

Here are some examples:

A slowish film (= not much action).

A darkish novel (= sinister).

A loudish bang (= not too loud).

Snacky food (crisps, chocolate bars etc.)

A soupy dish (sometimes used negatively: “My risotto was a bit soupy.”)

A Spanishy sort of dance (= Flamenco-style, perhaps. ‘Spanishish’ would sound strange.)

A blackberryish taste. (‘Blackberry-y’ would sound strange.)

A chinesey vase (‘chineseish’ is difficult to say. To English people a chinesey vase would probably suggest something like a willow pattern design.)

A popstarish lifestyle. (This may be written as ‘pop star-ish’ but it’s normally spoken rather than written.)

Remember that these words generally mean ‘like the thing but not the thing itself’. So you wouldn’t normally call a soup ‘soupy’; and if you know that a vase is Chinese, you would say ‘This is a Chinese vase’ and not ‘This vase is chinesey.’

Note: -esque is sometimes used with artists, for example. In a formal talk, you would say that a painting was ‘Dali-esque’ or ‘Picasso-esque’. In conversation, you could say ‘Dali-ish’ (not Dali-y because of the sound), ‘Picasso-ish’ or ‘Picasso-y’.

Now ask your class to complete this dialogue, which is set in a restaurant. Listen to and correct their answers. Then ask them to read it aloud in pairs. ['thingies' is a placeholder: a word you use when you're not sure or can't remember what something is called. I cover it and other placeholder words/phrases in my online course under 'vague placeholders and quantities.']

Fill the gaps with the most appropriate word: *watery, thirtyish, moreish, plasticky, vinegary, browny, woody, shortish*

Darrell: So what do you think of the place?

Arun: It’s OK, Darrell. A bit \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ perhaps. I mean, look at these tables.

Annette: But they’re wood, aren’t they?

Arun: I don’t think so. It’s a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ kind of feel, but not real wood.

Darrell: The chef’s famous, anyway.

Annette: Is he? Or she?

Darrell: He’s on TV all the time, Annette. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, I reckon, or younger. Swedish or Danish.

Arun: A \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ guy, with black hair?

Darrell: A: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, yes.

Annette: Anyway, what about the soup? What do you think?

Arun: It’s OK. A bit weak and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Annette: And the salad?

Darrell: Sharp. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. It must be the dressing. And what are those thingies in the centre?

Annette: Artichoke hearts. My prawn curry is really \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_!

Here are the answers for you to give your students:

Darrell: So what do you think of the place?

Arun: It’s OK, Darrell. A bit plasticky perhaps. I mean, look at these tables.

Annette: But they’re wood, aren’t they?

Arun: I don’t think so. It’s a woody kind of feel, but not real wood.

Darrell: The chef’s famous, anyway.

Annette: Is he? Or she?

Darrell: He’s on TV all the time, Annette. Thirtyish, I reckon, or younger. Swedish or Danish.

Arun: A shortish guy, with black hair?

Darrell: A: Browny-black, yes.

Annette: Anyway, what about the soup? What do you think?

Arun: It’s OK. A bit weak and watery.

Annette: And the salad?

Darrell: Sharp. Vinegary. It must be the dressing. And what are those thingies in the centre?

Annette: Artichoke hearts. My prawn curry is really moreish!

Finally, ask your students to describe some of these things to each other, using -y and -ish suffixes and also ‘sort of’ and ‘kind of’. Students shouldn’t use too many -y and -ish adjectives for each item, because that would begin to sound unnatural. But they can invent some of their own! Here’s an example:

- Tell me about your one of your father’s friends.

- Well, he’s called James Liao. He’s fortyish, I guess, and tallish with dark-browny hair.

- And what about one of your mother’s friends?

Etc.

- an unusual dish or fruit or vegetable

- a family member

- a perfume or a new type of smoothie

- a town centre

- a painting or a sculpture

- a room

- a film or novel

- a dress or shirt

- a building

- a piece of furniture

*END*

This plan has been adapted from my online course: <https://www.udemy.com/course/spoken-grammar-a-guide-for-english-language-teachers/?src=sac&kw=spoken+grammar>