

Introducing your students to spoken grammar

The term 'spoken grammar' is used to describe features of English that are common in the informal or conversational language, but normally absent from conventional grammar syllabuses. As I write, there is still a debate over how much of this language, if any, we should teach to our students.

I'd like to show you some ways to raise your students' awareness of four types of spoken grammar and leave it up to you to decide on its usefulness! In types 1. and 2., I would encourage students to try using the features themselves in class; in types 3. and 4., raising awareness is probably enough.

1. (Very) short questions

Short questions are good ways of making conversation. Quite often in English, we use questions that start with 'Any...' or 'More...' and don't contain a question word or a verb, but are still grammatically correct, e.g. 'Any news?' or 'More orange juice?' These very short questions are, of course - by process of ellipsis - the endings of longer questions:

~~Have you had any news?~~ ~~Would you like some more orange juice?~~

But two other types, with question words but no verbs, are complete in themselves: 'How about...(a pizza)?' and the *sine qua non* of good conversation, 'What about you?'

You could begin a short lesson on short questions by writing up the following question on the board:

Would you like some more coffee?

and asking the class how they could make it shorter. Afterwards, they could try reducing B.'s line in the dialogue:

A. *I spent the morning looking for a new sofa.*

B. *Did you have any luck?*

A. *No. Not really. I didn't see anything I liked.*

(Answer: 'Any luck?')

Introduce 'How about...?' and 'What about you?' by writing up short dialogues like:

A. *I'm ready to go home now. What about you?*

B. *No, I'm not tired yet.*

and asking students to explain the meaning of the questions.

A way of practising 'What about you?' is to write the following words/phrases on the board:

starving like romantic comedies tired don't like getting up in the morning
love the snow would hate to be famous cold/hot really enjoy long walks

Student A in a pair then chooses a word or phrase, and says it to their partner, adding 'I' or 'I'm' to the front as appropriate, and following it immediately with the question 'What about you?' Student B agrees or disagrees, e.g.:

A: *I love the snow. What about you?*

B: *No. I hate it. I like being warm.*

When the concept is clear, students can try writing and playing out their own 'short question' dialogues. Testing, reinforcement etc. can be done with simple gap-fill exercises like this:

Fill in the gaps with these phrases: How about a banana split?/Any desserts?

~~What about you?/~~ More water, Sal?/ What about you?

Sally: That was good. Are you going to have a dessert? I fancy this chocolate fudge cake. *What about you?*⁰

Kit: I'm not sure. I'll have to think about it.¹

Sally: Yes please. I'm really thirsty today. But I can't have the cake on my own! I'll look greedy.²Or some apple pie with cream?

Kit: Perhaps I'll have the lemon cheesecake and some coffee.³Are you having coffee?

Sally: No, thanks. I think I'll have a tea.

Waiter: I hope you both enjoyed your meal.⁴ There's no lemon cheesecake left, I'm afraid.

(Answers: 1. More water, Sal? 2. How about a banana split? 3. What about you? 4. Any desserts?)

2. Vague language

Good English-speakers are vague English-speakers! And it's easier for your students to say, 'She's gone for a walk *or something*.' than 'She's gone for a walk or to see a friend, or to buy some milk.' Try teaching your students four very common expressions of this type: *and things (like that), and stuff (like that), and everything, or something*

These useful expressions can follow a noun phrase *or* a verb phrase:

She bought a new car and a boat and everything, but it didn't make her happy.

Why is everyone running? Is there a train coming or something?

You could start by recording the script below with a colleague, and then asking your class to look at the following two questions, and try to answer them as they listen:

1. What four types of fish or seafood does Rose mention?.....
2. Why would Rose have a problem going sailing with Ian?.....

Rose and Bill are both students. Rose is visiting Bill just before the Easter holidays.

Bill: Are you hungry? Do you fancy a sandwich or something?
 Rose: Thanks. What have you got?
 Bill: Ham, cheese and stuff like that.
 Rose: No tuna or salmon? You should take a look in Ian's kitchen. He's got prawns and sardines and everything.
 Bill: I've got tomatoes.
 Rose: It's OK. I'm not really hungry. Anyway, what are you doing over Easter?
 Bill: Well, I've got to read a couple of books and things. What about you?
 Rose: I've got to prepare for exams and stuff, but Ian's invited me to go sailing in the Mediterranean on his boat.
 Bill: That's great! You'll see the Greek islands and dolphins and everything!
 Rose: I know. But I get seasick.

(Students lose marks if they include 'dolphins' - either as 'fish' or 'seafood' - in answer to question 1.!))

Next, explain the meaning of the word 'vague', hand out the script, and ask your students to underline the vague expressions the speakers use in the dialogue, and try to work out meanings, and any differences in meaning.

Answers:

1. 'and things (like that)' and 'and stuff (like that)' mean 'and other things which are similar.' The expression 'and stuff (like that)' is more imprecise and more informal.
2. 'and everything' is a stronger expression meaning 'and the other things that *complete* the idea', e.g.:

His family's got a yacht and everything.

The idea here is that they're rich, so they probably have a big house, expensive car etc. as well. In the example above, we could also say, 'His family's got a yacht and things.' but the meaning is weaker.

3. 'or something' means 'or something similar'. It is different from the other three expressions, because we are referring to *one* alternative action rather than a list of things: *Where's Pete? ~ I'm not sure. He's walking the dog or something.* (Not *and-things*.) (We also use 'or anything' in negatives and some questions.)

To get your students to try using these expressions themselves, you could first of all hand out an exercise like this:

Answer this question in seven ways by choosing the correct endings from the box at the end.

QUESTION: What are you up to this weekend? Anything special?

- 0 Not really. I'm just going to do some shopping *and tidying and things like that.*
- 1 Yes. It's my birthday on Sunday and we're going to cook a big lunch with a roast....

- 2 No, not really. I've got a lot of work to do, but I'll probably go for a.....

- 3 Yeah. Two old friends are coming over on Saturday, and we're going to look.....

 4 I haven't made any plans, really. I've been too busy. Why? Do you want.....

 5 Yes. Do you remember Sally from college? Well, she's invited me to her
 wedding, so I'm going into.....
 6 No. I'm just glad to get a rest. What about you? Are you going to the supermarket,
 because we haven't got bread.....
 7 Yeah. I'm trying that new Vietnamese restaurant. It's their opening night, and
 they're

(a) ...giving out gifts and free meals and everything!	(e)... walk or something on Sunday.
(b)...or milk or anything in the house.	(f)... town to buy new gloves and a hat and things.
(c)...chicken and roast potatoes and everything.	(g)... and tidying and things like that.
(d)...to go out or something?	(h)... for some CDs and see a film and stuff.

Answers: 1. (c) 2. (e) 3. (h) 4. (d) 5. (f) 6. (b) 7. (a)

After they've done this exercise, ask students to circulate in the classroom asking each other the question, 'What are you up to this weekend? Anything special?'

For more on vague language, read *Vague Language* (Channell 1994).

3. A new way of reporting speech

Ask your students to read the following dialogue:

Joe and Anne are talking about things that their friends said to them yesterday.

- Joe: Then Steve said, I'm from America, and I said, but you haven't got an American accent. So he said, *listen* we don't all speak like Tom Cruise!
- Anne: That's interesting because Mike said there are six American exchange students in our class this year.
- Joe: You spoke to Mike! I thought you didn't like him any more.
- Anne: I know, but he looked ill and I said, *hey* are you OK? And he went no, I've got a really bad cold. I said, you'd better go home then and go to bed.
- Joe: Good advice. Anyway, did you manage to speak to Kate about going to the theatre?
- Anne: Sure. She said, *oh* I can't come, I'm afraid. So I said *well* I think Joe's already got the tickets. She said, *look* I'm really sorry but my boyfriend's parents are visiting.
- Joe: Don't worry. We'll find someone else. Why don't we ask this new guy Steve?

Next, ask your class to discuss in groups the answers to these questions:

1. What do you notice about the way Joe and Anne 'report' yesterday's speech?

2. What do you think is the function of the words in italics?

Answers:

1. They don't actually change the words they heard at all! If you like, you could reconstruct yesterday's conversation to prove this:

Steve: I'm from America.

Joe: But you haven't got an American accent.

Steve: We don't all talk like Tom Cruise!

~

Mike: There are...etc.

The point here is that when we're reporting speech, we *can* change the pronoun and the tense of the verb:

'I'm going home', she said → *Then she said **she was going home.***

but we don't have to:

*Then she said, **I'm going home.***

2. The words in italics have two functions, and may not actually have been used by the speakers at all. Firstly, they can signal that we're about to use the actual words spoken (so they act like speech marks), and secondly, they give an impression of the speaker's attitude. In the context of this dialogue:

listen suggests that Steve was a little impatient when he spoke;

hey suggests Anne was surprised to see Mike looking ill;

oh suggests Kate sounded sorry (or perhaps was surprised and had forgotten!);

well suggests Anne was critical of Kate;

look suggests Kate was a bit defensive about her behaviour.

4. Changing word order for emphasis

Ask your students:

What do you think about the grammar of the question: 'This DVD player, is it the cheapest in the shop?' Could you ask the question in another way? Why does the speaker choose this way to ask the question?

Answers:

The usual word order for this question would be 'Is this DVD player the cheapest in the shop?' But when we speak, we sometimes separate an important word or phrase and put it at the front, where it becomes a 'header':

This DVD player, is it the cheapest in the shop?

Using a header is a bit like pointing at something with your finger.

Now ask your students to try and find and underline four similar examples in the dialogue below:

Amy and Tom have had a party at their flat.

- Amy: Thank goodness they've finally gone! It's two in the morning.
Tom: What a mess! That red bag in the corner, is it yours?
Amy: Oh no! Someone's left it. The girl with the tall boyfriend, did you know her name? I think it's her bag. They left at midnight.
Tom: I hope she didn't have her keys in it.
Amy: Anyway, we'd better start clearing up. Those bottles on the table, are they empty?
Tom: Yeah, they're finished. I'll take them to the bottle bank tomorrow.
Amy: And these coke cans, could you take them as well?
Tom: Let's put all the re-cycling stuff in that box, shall we?
Amy: I might get in the box myself. I think I need re-cycling after that party.

Answers: 1. That red bag in the corner, is it yours? 2. The girl with the tall boyfriend, do you know her name? 3. Those bottles on the table, are they empty? 4. And these coke cans, could you take them as well?

(You might want to ask your students to re-phrase these answers in conventional word order.)

Now tell your students:

1. We can separate the subject *or* the object of a sentence, and put it at the front.

SUBJECT: **Denise**, *she's the person you need to speak to.*

OBJECT: **Those two old computers**, *Tom's sold them, you know.*

2. You need to 'repeat' the header by using a pronoun. Ask the class to fill the gaps in the sentences below with these words: she/them/that/it

The new French restaurant on Park Street, does¹ look good?

2. My new trainers, I can't find² anywhere.

3. My mum,³ 's always shouting at me!

4. The house opposite the cinema, is⁴ where you live?

Answers: 1. it 2. them 3. she 4. that

3. Sometimes the header is a relative clause or a prepositional phrase. Ask your students if they can think of another way of saying:

I've lost the phone number again of the man who repaired our fridge.

→ Answer: *The man who repaired our fridge, I've lost his phone number again.*

Try two more examples:

Are the people you work with nice?

→ *The people you work with, are they nice?*

Did the woman in the corner tell you her name?

→ *The woman in the corner, did she tell you her name?*

Information on the features of English that are common in the informal or conversational language, but normally absent from conventional grammar syllabuses can be found in publications listed below.

Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech G., Conrad, S., and Finegan, E. 1999. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*. London: Longman

Carter, R.A., Hughes, R. and McCarthy, M.J. 2000. *Exploring Grammar in Context*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Carter, R.A. and McCarthy, M.J. 2006. *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Channell, J. 1994. *Vague Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Swan, M. and Walter, C. 2001. *The Good Grammar Book*. Oxford: Oxford University Press