**LESSON PLAN: Spoken discourse markers**

The lesson plan below comes from the 'Marking spoken discourse' section of my Udemy course, [Spoken Grammar: a Guide for English Language Teachers.](https://www.udemy.com/course/spoken-grammar-a-guide-for-english-language-teachers/?src=sac&kw=spoken+grammar) This section also includes 'adverbials' (such as 'anyway', 'actually' and 'of course') and 'ways of using direct speech.'

**Teacher’s notes**

Spoken discourse markers could be described as the linguistic equivalent of the indicator lights in a car: words and phrases that you use to signal your intentions during the journey of the conversation.

They are sometimes known as ‘inserts’ or ‘stand-alone words and phrases’. In other words, they stand outside a statement or question, e.g.:

She’s a doctor, you know. (‘you know’ here is a discourse marker)

You know that she’s a doctor. (‘You know’ here is part of the statement)

In this plan, you’re going to teach eight selected and common discourse markers that allow speakers to ‘step outside’ the conversation in order to comment on what’s happening.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. I mean, you see, you know

2. Right, so, well

3. I mean, you see, you know, right, so, well: recap

4. Listen, look, hey

5. Longer phrases using ‘mean’, ‘speak’, ‘talk’ and ‘tell’

**1. I mean, you see, you know**

Ask your students to try this exercise.

[Idiom: and pigs might fly = it would be very surprising]

Put these short conversations in their original order by numbering the lines as you see in the example.

Example

(Outside a cinema)

(3) Ryan: I know what you mean. There wasn’t much plot, was there?

(4) Jess: No plot at all as far as I’m concerned.

(2) Jess: I got a bit bored, actually. I mean, how many explosions do you need to see in two

hours?

(1) Ryan: Well, what did you think of it?

1.

Charlie: OK. Good idea.

Ben: Have you had a look at Paul’s painting? It’s not very good, is it?

Ben: You could just say it’s interesting.

Charlie: No, it isn’t. I don’t know what to say to him. You see, he’s really proud of it.

2.

Ji-min: That dog, you know, the one that bit you, did you hear what happened to it?

Ji-min: Well, if you do go out, you won’t see it around.

Luke: Really? Perhaps it’s been put down.

Luke: No, but I haven’t been out much, you see.

3.

Sana: You’re a star! Are you sure you’ve got the time?

Sana: Yes, but you see I still won’t get it.

Blake: Then I’ll watch it with you. That might help.

Blake: If you found it tricky, you can always watch a recording of the class later.

4.

Katie: I’m sure it’ll get easier.

Katie: How’s the French going?

Megan: And pigs might fly!

Megan: Slowly. I mean, the teacher’s great but it’s so tough!

5.

Josh: You need to get down to the gym then, don’t you?

Josh: It’s quicker to cycle through the park, you know.

Ollie: True, but I’m not very fit these days.

Ollie: I think I’ll take the bus to college.

Here are the answers for you to give your students.

1.

(4) Charlie: OK. Good idea.

(1) Ben: Have you had a look at Paul’s painting? It’s not very good, is it?

(3) Ben: You could just say it’s interesting.

(2) Charlie: No, it isn’t. I don’t know what to say to him. You see, he’s really proud of it.

2.

(1) Ji-min: That dog, you know, the one that bit you, did you hear what happened to it?

(3) Ji-min: Well, if you do go out, you won’t see it around.

(4) Luke: Really? Perhaps it’s been put down.

(2) Luke: No, but I haven’t been out much, you see.

3.

(4) Sana: You’re a star! Are you sure you’ve got the time?

(2) Sana: Yes, but you see I still won’t get it.

(3) Blake: Then I’ll watch it with you. That might help.

(1) Blake: If you found it tricky, you can always watch a recording of the class later.

4.

(3) Katie: I’m sure it’ll get easier.

(1) Katie: How’s the French going?

(4) Megan: And pigs might fly!

(2) Megan: Slowly. I mean, the teacher’s great but it’s so tough!

5.

(4) Josh: You need to get down to the gym then, don’t you?

(2) Josh: It’s quicker to cycle through the park, you know.

(3) Ollie: True, but I’m not very fit these days.

(1) Ollie: I think I’ll take the bus to college.

Now ask your students to try and answer these two questions.

1. What’s the meaning of ‘I mean’?

2: What’s difference in meaning between ‘you know’ and ‘you see’?

Listen to your students’ answers, and guide them towards these explanations:

1. What’s the meaning of ‘I mean’?

Normally it means ‘I’m about to clarify, correct or expand on what I’ve said.’

2. What’s difference in meaning between ‘you know’ and ‘you see’?

You normally use ‘you know’ when you think that the listener knows what you’re talking about. (Sometimes people extend the phrase to ‘you know what I mean’.)

‘You see’ means ‘this is the reason’. Normally, it suggests that the speaker is saying something (usually an explanation) that they think is new to the listener.

It’s worth remembering that although these phrases have the specific meanings above, a few speakers have acquired the habit of using one or more repeatedly as a habit or hesitating device. This is particularly the case with ‘you know’ and ‘I mean’ (which are both more common than ‘you see’.)

Now that your students have understood the core meanings of these phrases, you could ask them to practise reading aloud the five dialogues in their correct order. There’ll be a chance for some ‘freer’ practice later.

**2. Right, so, well**

Ask your students to try this exercise, and to think about the meaning of the three words as they are used in these contexts. [Idiomatic language: polish off = finish quickly; to have a bad hair day = to have a day when things go wrong for you; grub = food]

Complete the six dialogues by putting ‘right’, ‘so’ or ‘well’ in each gap. Decide where more than one word could work.

1.

Amar: Are you going to polish off that essay tonight?

Sam: \_\_\_\_\_\_, I hope so. I’ll give it a go, anyway.

2.

Jake: I think I’ve got everything we need for our open day display.

Holly: \_\_\_\_\_\_, shall we go then?

3.

(Lucy and Jess are decorating a room)

Lucy: You need to put a thin coat of paint on first.

Jess: \_\_\_\_\_\_.

Lucy: Then let it dry for at least two hours.

4.

Min-jun: Have you seen Jade recently?

Dan: Yeah. I spoke to her yesterday, \_\_\_\_\_\_, a couple of days ago, anyway.

Min-jun: Was she alright?

Dan: Yeah. Just having a bad hair day when I rang.

5.

Matt: We may need to eat before we go, and we’ll need to make sure we get there in good time to pick up the tickets.

Molly : \_\_\_\_\_\_, let’s see if there’s any grub in the kitchen.

Matt: There’s usually some rice. And there may be some eggs.

Molly: Fried rice, then?

6.

Bethany: I’ll need to spend a month in Madrid as part of the project.

Lauren: And can you speak Spanish?

Bethany: \_\_\_\_\_\_, I did a short course a couple of years ago.

Listen to what your students think, and guide them towards these answers and meanings.

1.

Amar: Are you going to polish off that essay tonight?

Sam: *Well*, I hope so. I’ll give it a go, anyway. *[‘Well’ here suggests the speaker is doubtful]*

2.

Jake: I think I’ve got everything we need for our open day display.

Holly: *Right/So/Well*, shall we go then? *[All of these mark a transition to action. ‘Right’ is the strongest; ‘so’ is softer; ‘well’ is rather hesitant]*

3.

Lucy: You need to put a thin coat of paint on first.

Jess: *Right. [‘Right’ here means ‘I understand’]*

Lucy: Then let it dry for at least two hours.

4.

Min-jun: Have you seen Jade recently?

Dan: Yeah. I spoke to her yesterday, *well*, a couple of days ago, anyway.

Min-jun: Was she alright?

Dan: Yeah. Just having a bad hair day when I rang.

*[‘Well’ is used in the middle of this statement to introduce an element of doubt]*

5.

Matt: We may need to eat before we go, and we’ll need to make sure we get there in good time to pick up the tickets.

Molly: *Right/So/Well*, let’s see if there’s any grub in the kitchen.

Matt: There’s usually some rice. And there may be some eggs.

Molly: Fried rice, then?

*[See the explanation for 2. above]*

6.

Bethany: I’ll need to spend a month in Madrid as part of the project.

Lauren: And can you speak Spanish?

Bethany: *Well*, I did a short course a couple of years ago.

*[Again, ‘well’ is doubtful - here about the ability to speak Spanish]*

Your students can now practise reading the correct dialogues aloud, choosing either ‘right’, ‘so’ or ‘well’ in dialogues 2. and 5, and softening the intonation for ‘so’ and ‘well’.

**3. I mean, you see, you know, right, so, well: recap**

It’s time for some freer practice in a situation where decisions need to be made, decisively or hesitantly (using ‘right’, ‘so’ and ‘well’) and explanations for those decisions can be given using ‘I mean’, ‘you see’ and ‘you know’.

Get your students into groups, and ask them to try this activity.

**Teacher’s note:** Your students can create the conversation spontaneously, but it might be better at the beginning for them to work at it slowly, helping each other to practise some good, natural-sounding lines. You can listen and assist. (Even if students make mistakes that you miss, the awareness-raising element of this activity will help your students to listen out for these words and phrases when they hear fluent speakers using them.)

Here’s an example of a dialogue that your students might have:

- Shall we look at the Mediterranean Ceramics first? I mean, we’ve got to start somewhere.

- Right. Let’s go up to the second floor.

(Students pretend to climb the stairs to the second floor)

- You know, we saw a picture of that vase in class.

- Well, I’m not so sure. It was similar, but not the same.

Etc.

**Student instructions**: You are visiting a large museum to report back for a project that you’re doing. You won’t have time to see everything, so you’ll have to decide in advance where to go and why, depending on the preferences of your group. Try to make decisions (decisively or hesitantly) using ‘right’, ‘so’ and ‘well’. Give explanations for those decisions using ‘I mean’, ‘you see’ and ‘you know’. Here’s a plan of the museum:

First floor:

Gallery 1: Exhibition of 19th century Japanese painting

Gallery 2: Artefacts of Ancient Egypt

Second Floor:

Gallery 3: Exhibition of Mediterranean Ceramics

Gallery 4: Islamic Art and Science

Third Floor:

Gallery 3: Exhibition of Chinese Jade

Gallery 4: The World of Alexander the Great

Fourth Floor:

Gallery 3: Exhibition of Central African Sculpture

Gallery 4: Early Mexican Civilization

**4. Listen, look, hey**

Ask your students to try this exercise.

[idiomatic/informal language: shift = move; where are you off to? = where are you going?; pop into/to = make a quick visit to; not see eye to eye = disagree; have a go at someone = criticize someone]

Make two-line dialogues by matching each line in the Group 1 with the correct following line from Group 2.

Group 1

A. (answering the phone) Oh, hi there, Mia. Listen, can I call you back? We’re about to have dinner.

B. Hey, what are you doing? I just shifted that table into the corner so I can do my yoga.

C. Look, it’s your decision, but I reckon it’s the wrong time to quit your job.

D. (shouting) Hey Serena, where are you off to?

E. I believe it’s always wrong to keep animals locked up.

F. I just think you need to take a break from junk food but hey, I’m not your mum.

Group 2

1. Oh, hi there, Sue. I didn’t see you. I’m just popping into the supermarket.

2. Sorry, Callum. I thought you’d done it this morning.

3. You may be right, Ava. I’m just in too much of a rush to eat these days.

4. That’s fine. We’ll talk after you’ve eaten.

5. Listen, Tom, why don’t we just accept we’ll never see eye to eye on this whole zoo thing?

6. You might be right, Ella. It’s just that my boss is having a go at me almost every day.

Here are the answers for you to give your students. : A4, B2, C6, D1, E5, F3.

Now ask your students to practise reading the dialogues aloud in pairs, and then try to answer these two questions:

1. What do ‘listen’, ‘look’ and ‘hey’ have in common?

2. What’s the difference in meaning between 1) ‘listen/look’ and 2) ‘hey’?

Dialogues in the correct order:

- (answering the phone) Oh, hi there, Mia. Listen, can I call you back? We’re about to have dinner.

- That’s fine. We’ll talk after you’ve eaten.

- Hey, what are you doing? I just shifted that table into the corner so I can do my yoga.

- Sorry, Callum. I thought you’d done it this morning.

- Look, it’s your decision, but I reckon it’s the wrong time to quit your job.

- You might be right, Ella. It’s just that my boss is having a go at me almost every day.

*- (shouting)* Hey Serena, where are you off to?

- Oh, hi there, Sue. I didn’t see you. I’m just popping into the supermarket.

- I think it’s always wrong to keep animals locked up.

- Listen, Tom, why don’t we just accept we’ll never see eye to eye on this whole zoo thing?

- I just think you need to take a break from junk food but hey, I’m not your mum.

- You may be right, Ava. I’m just in too much of a rush to eat these days.

Listen to your students’ views. Here are the suggested answers:

1. ‘Listen’, ‘look’ and ‘hey’ are all ways of attracting the attention of the person you’re speaking to. (Sometimes they’re called ‘attention signals’.)

2. ‘Listen’ and ‘look’ (which have the same meaning) tend to focus attention on something you’re about to say in the conversation you’re already having. Note that if your students don’t want to sound too assertive, they should use these words softly, in a polite manner.

‘Hey’ is most often used to get someone’s attention when they’re doing something else. (In other words, you want them to do something different: turn round and look at you, for example.) Note though in the dialogue about junk food, that it’s also used in the phrase ‘but hey’ to introduce a light-hearted or ‘jokey’ comment. It may also be used, particularly in American English, as an emphatic replacement for ‘Hi’ as in, “Hey, Mike, how are you doing?”

You may like to follow up with this activity.

‘Listen’, ‘look’ and ‘hey’ have now been removed from the dialogues that you’ve seen. Read through the dialogues aloud in pairs, and try to put these words back in the right places.

- I’ll see what I can do but, Mia, can I call you back? We’re about to have dinner.

- That’s fine. We’ll talk after you’ve eaten.

- What are you doing? I just shifted that table into the corner so I can do my yoga.

- Sorry, Callum. I thought you’d done it this morning.

- It’s your decision, but I reckon it’s the wrong time to quit your job.

- You might be right, Ella. It’s just that my boss is having a go at me almost every day.

*- (shouting)* Serena, where are you off to?

- Oh, hi there, Sue. I didn’t see you. I’m just popping into the supermarket.

- I think it’s always wrong to keep animals locked up.

- Tom, why don’t we just accept we’ll never see eye to eye on this whole zoo thing?

- I just think you need to take a break from junk food but I’m not your mum.

- You may be right, Ava. I’m just in too much of a rush to eat these days.

Note: ‘listen’, ‘look’ and ‘hey’ are also used in an interesting way when people incorporate direct speech into their conversation (thus avoiding the pronoun and tense changes of reported speech):

Max asked her to help him with the washing-up, but she said, look, I cooked the meal, didn’t I?

(I cover this in my online course in the lecture ‘Ways of using direct speech’.)

**5. Longer phrases using ‘mean’, ‘speak’, ‘talk’ and ‘tell’**

Finally, mention that there are some longer phrases that act as discourse markers, all containing verbs associated with the act of speaking. See if your students are familiar with them by asking them to try this exercise.

[It’s not my cup of tea = it’s not what I like]

Complete the dialogues by putting one word in each gap.

*(Watching a team sport)*

Adam: I’ll tell you \_\_\_\_\_\_\_, they won’t win unless they start taking some risks.

James: I know. It looks like they’re playing for a draw.

*(At an art gallery)*

Sophie: That dark red colour is really expressive.

Isabella: You \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to say you like it? It’s not my cup of tea, I’m afraid.

Amelia: So we had a very pleasant week hiking in Scotland.

George: Good. Talking \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ holidays, did you know that Greg has gone to Chile?

Amelia: Really? That’s a bit adventurous, isn’t it?

Katie: Ray said he might catch up with us later if we go for a pizza.

Alex: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_ of Ray, did you know he’s getting married in the autumn?

Katie: No, I had no idea.

Here are the answers and some explanations for you to give your students. Afterwards they can read the dialogues aloud in pairs.

Adam: I’ll tell you **what**, they won’t win unless they start taking some risks.

James: I know. It looks like they’re playing for a draw.

*[‘I’ll tell you what’ draws attention to what you’re about to say]*

Sophie: That dark red colour is really expressive.

Isabella: You **mean** to say you like it? It’s not my cup of tea, I’m afraid.

*[‘You mean to say…+ clause’ normally indicates surprise]*

Amelia: So we had a very pleasant week in Scotland.

George: Good. Talking **about/of** holidays, did you know that Greg has gone to Chile?

Amelia: Really? That’s a bit adventurous, isn’t it?

Katie: Ray said he might catch up with us later if we go for a pizza.

Alex: **Speaking/Talking** of Ray, did you know he’s getting married in the autumn?

Katie: No, I had no idea.

*[‘Speaking/Talking about/of…+ noun phrase/gerund’ have the same linking function, but the preposition ‘of’ rather than ‘about’ tends to be used for people]*

*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>