

WHY TEACH THIS?

It's the bane of many English teachers' lives: **how to teach** spelling, punctuation and grammar (SPG). Finding ways, **without reverting to a textbook**, to **help students** learn how to write accurately is tricky, but there are **engaging ways** to do it that result in those textbooks being left in the cupboard.

The expectations on students' uses of SPG in English Language and English Literature have grown in recent years. Now, due to GCSE reforms, these expectations are stretching from English to other subjects.

Therefore, the English teacher becomes much more than a teacher of English; more than ever before, what we do in the classroom will directly affect our students' grades in other curriculum areas. Textbooks can, of course, play their part, but using real-life encounters and experiences to develop students' understanding of what is right and what is wrong in their language use will provide an engaging alternative approach to teaching SPG. Using the inaccuracies that students are exposed to (unaware) on a daily basis can be wonderful inspiration for developing their explanation skills and, ultimately, their understanding.

This lesson aims to encourage independent thinking while giving students an opportunity to get to grips with elements of language use that they might otherwise study in a textbook. But there is no textbook here; there is simply a wealth of material out there, wherever you are, that you can employ as examples and discussion starting points.

WHAT DID YOU SAY?

USING EVERYDAY EXAMPLES OF DELIBERATE AND ACCIDENTAL GRAMMAR MISTAKES CAN IMPROVE THE ACCURACY OF STUDENTS' WRITING LIKE NO TEXTBOOK EVER COULD, INSISTS **KARL VADASZFFY**...

STARTER ACTIVITY

Place the following words on the board: 'Driving down the road, a rabbit ran in front of me'. Ask students: what is the intended meaning of this sentence and what is the actual meaning we get because of how it is written?

Ask students in pairs or small groups to come up with an explanation that highlights what is wrong with the sentence. Then, rather than take immediate feedback, show them this sentence: 'By pulling on this cord, staff will immediately enter the toilet'. Again, what is the intended meaning versus the actual meaning? Tell them this sentence is incorrect in the same way as the first example. Allow students to check their explanation about the first sentence by seeing whether it can be applied to the second sentence (both sentences have the same problem).

You could give students the above examples on cards, allowing them time to move the words around on their desks to try to work out why there is the potential for misunderstanding.

After giving them enough time to try to break down the sentences, take feedback and work out collectively what is wrong with the sentences.

In terms of sentence order, sentences should be constructed as **subject-verb-object** or in the reverse order when writing some complex sentences (remember that the **subject** is the **noun** that does the **verb**). In the examples given, the subject is actually missing: subjects could be 'I' in the first and 'you' in the second. As it is written, the first example actually suggests that the rabbit is driving. As it is written, the second example suggests that the staff pull on the cord (as well as enter the toilet).

Tell students they (and you) have very probably seen the second sentence before in a very public place: 'By pulling on this cord, staff will immediately enter the toilet' is actually used as a sign in every Costa coffee shop toilet where it is displayed next to the emergency alarm cord.

Ask students to work out an accurate way to write each of the sentences, noting that there are countless possibilities.

Here is how the sentences could look:

- Driving down the road, I saw a rabbit appear.
- By pulling on this cord, you will alert staff to immediately enter the toilet.

How could the above examples be inverted so that the meaning remains the same (these follow the

subject-verb-object rule)?

- I saw a rabbit appear while I was driving down the road.
- You will alert staff to enter the toilet by pulling on this cord.

Give students some sentence starters about things they do every day. Follow the pattern above, starting the sentences with the gerund (-ing form of the verb). Ask students to complete the sentences, ensuring they have the subject doing the verb. Then ask them to invert the sentences without changing the meaning.

Some examples:

- Getting dressed this morning, ...
- Brushing my teeth, ...
- Failing to get to the bus stop on time, ...
- Arriving at school, ...
- Screaming at my little brother, ...



MAIN ACTIVITIES

Spelling challenge

In groups, students think of companies whose names deliberately use incorrect spellings – for example, Kwik Fit and Krispy Kreme. They should create a list of up to ten, correct the spellings and then snowball with another group so that they can host a quiz to test each other. Wrap up this activity by asking students to explain why they think companies deliberately manipulate language by using incorrect forms.

The punctuation game

Use company names as an opportunity to explore how to use apostrophes for possession (J. Sainsbury's = belonging to Mr Sainsbury) and omission (Dunkin' Donuts). How many do students know? Give them some exercises that practise using apostrophes – as simple as gap filling and as complex as constructing paragraphs that contain a mixture of apostrophe types. Finally, explore why people misuse apostrophes, both in general but also when referring to company

names – for example, people often write/say Tesco's but the retail chain is called Tesco, and Marks and Spencer's when the actual name of the company is Marks and Spencer.

Twitter enabled

All young people have access to Twitter and the majority of them use it. So why not provide them with a transcript of a short Twitter conversation, or a series of Tweets, comprising elision, neologisms, acronyms and all the other things that Twitter enables in its grammar-destroying splendour? They could even

create their own or use their own authentic Twitter entries. Ideal would be for them to sew the posts back together again, paying attention to full and formal SPG. And a question that will support the study of Spoken Language in the current English Language GCSE: why do we use Twitter and why do we deconstruct language in such a way?

INFORMATION CORNER

ABOUT OUR EXPERT



The Head of English at St Michael's Catholic High School in Hertfordshire, Karl Vadaszffy is also a freelance journalist and bestselling novelist. He is the author of the thrillers *On Guard* and *The Missing*.

STRETCH THEM FURTHER

AFTER INCORRECT USAGE HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED, YOU COULD WORK ON PERSUASIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS AND PRODUCE LETTERS TO COMPANIES THAT UTILISE INCORRECT FORMS, WITH THE INTENTION OF PERSUADING THEM TO CHANGE THEIR WAYS. THIS WOULD BE AN OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS TO TAKE A VERY SMALL IDEA AND BUILD IT INTO A DETAILED AND CONVINCING ARGUMENT.

HOME LEARNING

Students could locate all the examples of incorrect language use they can identify next time they are in a shopping centre, on a high street, or online.

They could find examples of incorrect language use in posts written by celebrities. (Use Stephen Fry's Tweets as a way to highlight formality and put some of these side by side with those by Joey Essex – a field day for comparison!)



SUMMARY

This lesson plan focuses on empowering students to work out what is often wrong with writing and then it enables them to reconstruct it. I think that's the key: rather than place a textbook in front of them or lead a lesson when you explain elements of SPG in technical ways, offer them ways into it that they can relate to while thinking for themselves.