

# Do fictional characters speak just like us?

## LESSON GOAL

To teach students about characteristics of spoken (informal) communication.

## LESSON OBJECTIVE

- To identify different features of spontaneous spoken communication (comprehension)
- To compare natural spoken conversation to other types of communication (analysis)
- To discuss reasons for differences between spontaneous and fictional dialogues (comprehension)
- To evaluate and interpret quantitative findings from a corpus (evaluation)
- To develop a new dialogue implementing the linguistic knowledge about spontaneous and fictional dialogues (synthesis and application)

## Task 1

This task should guide students to identify the major features of spoken informal interaction; these features should become apparent in contrast with the two fictional dialogues. Each student can either work with all three extracts, or students can be divided into three groups, each looking at one extract and then compare their findings.

**Excerpt C:** is taken from the BNC 2014 informal conversations.

<i>Vocabulary</i>	Largely repetitive, largely simple and frequent words, not very sophisticated, containing a lot of fillers, more sophisticated vocabulary related to a particular topic (music)
<i>Sentences</i>	Simple, often unfinished, interrupted, rephrased, reformulated ungrammatical in some cases
<i>Interaction</i>	A lot of instances of overlapping talk and interruption, a lot of response tokens and back-channelling (e.g. 'yeah')
<i>Communicative style</i>	Pauses, hesitation, delays (pauses in the transcribed are indicated by a full stop, e.g. .)

**Excerpt A:** is taken from a popular young adult novel, *The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green, published in 2012. The novel concerns a romantic relationship of two teenagers battling with cancer. It was made into a movie in 2014.

<i>Vocabulary</i>	A greater range of vocabulary even in a very short exchange
<i>Sentences</i>	All sentences finished, following grammatical rules.
<i>Interaction</i>	No interruptions or overlaps. One narrative cue to a possible interruption ('He was just about to say something').
<i>Communicative style</i>	No pauses, no delays indicated, the dialogue seems to flow seamlessly. One hesitation signalled ('um'). No response tokens or fillers.

**Excerpt B:** is taken from a popular British young adult TV series, *Skins*, following a group of teenagers living in Bristol and going through their sixth-form years. The show ran from 2007 to 2013. The Extract is taken from Series 1, Episode 8.

<i>Vocabulary</i>	A range of vocabulary, but some repetition.
<i>Sentences</i>	Some unfinished sentences (due to interruption).
<i>Interaction</i>	Two interruptions. Other sentences well formed.
<i>Communicative style</i>	No response tokens, no delays, no hesitations (at least not indicated in the script – the actors could have included them as part of acting out the scene).

 Suggested time : 25 minutes

## Task 2

This task focuses on one word in particular, 'yeah'. 'Yeah' appeared quite frequently in the spontaneous conversation (Extract C) but not in the two fictional dialogues.

1) When searching for the word in BNCLab, students will find 172,887 results (12.6 per million words), making it one of the most frequent words in the corpus and informal spoken communication. For comparison, the most frequent word in the English language, the definite article 'the' occurs 233,544 times (17.1 per million words).

2) 'Yeah' in conversation has multiple functions. Some of the major ones include:

- Token of agreement and solidarity
- Response token showing that the listener is following what the speaker is saying; also signalling what is called an engaged or active listenership
- Pragmatic token which signals that the listener is not going to claim the floor (interrupt the speaker) or try to change the topic

3) There are various reasons for this, mostly to do with the aims of the fictional genres (see Monika Bednarek's argument in the Research Bite). For example, both fictional narrative and scripts use dialogues to contribute to the plot or characterisation. At the same time, there is limited space available in the TV series or novels for these dialogues (the creators use them to move the story along). As a result, they conventionally avoid the use of too many 'distractors' such as fillers, listener response tokens, interruptions, etc. despite the fact that this makes the fictional conversation rather artificial and unrealistically smooth when compared to natural conversation, which is more 'messy' in this regard.

**Suggested time : 15 minutes**



## Task 3

Task 3 guides the students to think about the reasons underlying different types of communication. While they are discussing three specific genres, they also start thinking about the relationship/connection between the communicative aims and context of different genres and linguistic forms used to achieve these aims.

a) Natural informal conversation: The language and communication used in this type of spoken discourse reflects several functions of this type of exchange:

- Exchange of information, meaning negotiation between the speakers.
- Building or confirming of relationship between the speakers (e.g. expressing agreement, solidarity, group membership).
- Managing the conversation and exchange of speakers or topics (e.g. through signalling listenership or through signalling that one of the speakers wants to take the floor, for example through interruption).

The linguistic format also reflects the context of this type of communication:

- The speakers see each other and can rely on the support of visual cues (e.g. gestures, nodding).
- The shared immediate environment also allows them to use deictic reference (that is reference to objects that makes sense only in the context when we see each other, e.g. 'him', 'that tree').
- The speakers can make use of shared (common) knowledge – referring to objects, people and events that speakers in the conversation are familiar with (e.g. 'as your dad said', 'when you had that argument with Michael').

- There are, however, cognitive demands on this type of interaction – in a spontaneous, fluent conversation, we process and produce language (in other words, both speak and listen) simultaneously. This creates greater cognitive demands on our ability to produce and process language. This results in the pauses, hesitations, reformulations, ungrammaticality, etc – we produce language on the go and our monitoring skills may be thus limited; we do not have the benefit of editing and going over what we say in advance.

b) Fictional dialogues: Some of the aims of fictional dialogues have already been discussed in Task 2 above. The following reasons can be also considered:

- The need to be more explicit (in written fiction) due to the lack of visual contact
- The need to provide more context or background for the readers/viewers as they may not be familiar with the characters' fictional lives and shared context
- Adherence to conversational conventions in fictional dialogues. Viewers and readers are not used to natural-sounding dialogues – they could find the interruptions, rephrasing, back-channelling etc quite irritating



**Suggested time : 10 minutes**

#### Task 4

This task seeks to give students an opportunity to apply their understanding of differences between spontaneous spoken communication and written or written-to-be-spoken dialogues. The students can either choose which genre they want to produce or they can be divided into two groups, each working on one type of text. After they are finished, they can compare their texts either with someone who worked on the same genre (to see how their partner tackled it) or with someone who produced the other genre (to contrast how they addressed the conventions of each genre). This task can be completed either in class or as a home task.



**Suggested time : 25 minutes**