

Do younger and older people still speak the same language?

LESSON GOAL

To teach students about age-related differences in language use.

LESSON OBJECTIVE

- to list differences in vocabulary depending on speakers' age (knowledge)
- to compare and discuss results with peers (comprehension)
- to use and practise independent searching for linguistic evidence (application)
- to interpret findings according to results and learned theory (evaluation)
- to conduct a small-scale research study following own hypotheses about language change (application)

Task 1

Proposed items here will most likely mostly consist of adjectives as they change over time relatively quickly. The teacher might also suggest a change when words are used as a new word class ('like' as a noun for instance, following social media trends – as in the example 'How many likes did the post get?').



Suggested time: 5 – 10 minutes

Task 2

'Awesome' is used mainly by younger speakers under the age of 30. Similarly, it is mostly used in the 2014 corpus, indicating that it only recently entered informal British English.

There are two possible explanations for these words falling out of use. 1) In an oftentimes hyperbolic use, the word is used mostly by speakers who will use greater emotional stance in their language. Similar patterns can be seen with the use of intensifiers that are also used most often by younger speakers. 2) As it is a new form that is only just entering the language, it has not been picked up by older speakers. It might be that the form is not so much falling out of use, as the fact that it has not reached the older generation yet. A corpus representing language use in 20 years' time might show that the word has reached speakers who are 50 or older.



Suggested time: 5 – 10 minutes

Task 3

'sick' as in 'unwell': 1, 4, 5

'sick' as in 'great': 2, 3, 6

The first use is more prevalent with older speakers, whereas the second use is commonly found with younger speakers.

Other words that also work in a similar way are, for instance, 'cool', 'literally', 'dope', ...



Suggested time: 10 minutes

Task 3

Students are encouraged to write a short report on their findings. Special attention should be paid to the reported evidence: what exactly can this data tell us, and where more in-depth research is needed? Students should also read the concordance lines to see the individual contexts in which the terms are used.



Suggested time: 10 minutes