

Ursula Dubosarski



Teachers' Notes
Written by Jean Yates

The Word Spy by Ursula Dubosarski

The Word Spy is totally different in style and tone from the more traditional (and dreaded) Grammar textbook. Whilst being informative and educational, this book is written in such a way that it brings language to life and allows students (and teachers) to have fun with it. Unlike traditional books that require students to parse and break language down to a series of rules and parts of speech, *The Word Spy* asks students to play with words, to immerse themselves in them, and, most importantly, to have fun with language.

The tone of the book is wonderful and has the ability to draw in even resistant students.

Teachers will be able to find many complementary activities that tie in with this text, enabling them to use it as a ready reference tool, or as the foundation for a year's worth of lessons.

The book can be used as a whole, working through from start to finish, or as a ready reference tool where teachers draw on parts of the content. Either way, it should be used in such a way that language is engaged in through fun and challenging activities. By charting and displaying student responses, the classroom can become a living hub of language in which the students can be totally immersed throughout the year.

The inclusion of hands-on activities and codes for the students, each of which reinforces the point of grammar just outlined, helps to keep students stimulated and engaged.

This is the grammar book that every English teacher will wish he or she had written.

The following activities have been devised to enable teachers to extend the use of this book. They have been designed to cater for a broad range of ages and levels of learning. The number and complexity of tasks will obviously need to be varied according to the age group of the specific class.

The aim is really to make language activities as hands-on, engaging and interesting as possible so that students come to enjoy rather than dread

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language lessons. These activities have been designed to help teachers keep language alive and the students surrounded by it.

Chapter One: *How it all began...*

Activities:

- Provide students with a set of hieroglyphics, or have students design their own pictograms.
- Have students write their own messages to each other. Ask them to consider what problems or limitations there may be in using this system.
- Have students to create their own alphabet (as per p17).

Shorthand (p18)

Activity:

- Have students create their own versions of shorthand. Students could be encouraged to write in this new shorthand throughout all lessons for the week.

Discussion:

- At the end of this time, discuss with them the pros and cons of using such a system of notation.

Chapter Two: *Why is English so strange?*

Silent letters (p25)

Activity:

- Give the students a passage of text and ask them to re-write it using as few letters as possible. Have a competition to see just how few letters it can be boiled down to.

Discussion:

- Are there any problems with this sentence (e.g. are any words now identical where previously their different spelling helped us differentiate between them).

Activities:

- Have the students make a list of all of the words they can think of that contain silent letters. Ask them if they know or can discover the origins of any of these words? Do their origins give us any information about why the words may have been spelt in these ways?
- Create a class display of silent letters.

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The invention of printing (p29)

The printing press is regarded as one of the world's greatest inventions.

Discussion:

- Have a look at some scrolls copied out by monks. Look at the intricate writing. What problems may have emerged as a result of this type of 'printing'? Would this printing have been available to all people? Why? What impact would this have had on society?

Research:

- Research the creation of the printing press.
- Research Samuel Johnson.

Discussion:

- Make a list of the ways in which you think the printing press may have changed people's lives.
- Are there any disadvantages to having a printing press?

Plurals (p39)

Activity:

- Have students make individual lists and then collate a class list of plural words that have irregular endings.

Hurray for Anglo-Saxon! (p43)

Activity:

- Complete the suggested exercise page 44, writing a sentence using only Anglo Saxon words.

Discussion:

- Can you see any common themes in the Anglo-Saxon words? What does this tell us about Anglo-Saxon society? What sorts of things would we now have trouble discussing if we only used this vocabulary?

Chapter Three: *Dots and dashes, interrobangs and cat's claws*

Punctuation (p55)

Activity:

- Provide students with unpunctuated passages and have them punctuate them correctly. Include some where the unpunctuated sentence is ambiguous e.g. the teacher said the monkey is a fool.

(Try to find as many interesting and amusing sentences as possible to really engage the students).

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- Find and play the students a copy of Victor Borge's *Phonetic Punctuation*.

Chapter Four: *Letters, letters, letters*

Anagrams (p77)

Activity:

- Have students make anagrams from their names.
- Give the students words and ask them to make as many anagrams from the word as possible. Have a prize for the student who can make the most number of words from a word or phrase.

Pangrams (p81)

Activity:

- Have the students write a story in which each word begins with a different letter of the alphabet in order.

Lipograms (p84)

Activity:

- Have the students write their own lipograms. Have other students in the class guess what type of lipogram it is.

Acronyms (p88)

Activity:

- Have the students write an individual list of Acronyms (many of them they will know from texting). Collate these into a class list.
- Have the students create a dialogue between two (or more) characters written entirely in anagrams.

Backronyms (p96)

Activity:

- Have students create their own backronym (p98).

Chapter Five: *Is that another Greek word?*

Palindromes (p105)

Activities:

- Have students make a list of words that are palindromes. Collate a class list.
- Collect a set of palindrome puzzles that students can complete.

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- Challenge students to create their own palindromes.
- Have the class create a palindrome song (p 108).

Mnemonics (p110)

Discussion:

- Why do we use mnemonics?

Activities:

- Have the students make a list of any mnemonic devices they know.
- Collate a class list of common mnemonics that they already use. Have the students collect others from parents, etc, and add these to the class list.
- Choose some mnemonics that are most suitable and useful for this age group and have the students consciously learn these.

Some common examples:

For remembering what happened to Henry VIII's wives:

Divorced, beheaded, died, divorced, beheaded survived

Spelling mnemonics:

Potassium has one tea and two sugars
you can't separate a rat
rhythm has your two hands moving
a dessert is sweeter than a desert as it has two sugars
i before e except after c

The colours of the rainbow:

Richard of York gave battle in vain

Sine, Cosine and tangent

SOHCAHTOA

Some Old Hags Can't Always Hide Their Old Age

Compass Directions:

North East South West = Never Eat Soggy Weetbix

Oxymorons (p113)

Activities:

- Have students locate the oxymorons in the passage on page 116.
- Have students write a descriptive passage of their own using as many oxymorons as possible.

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Chapter Six: *Who likes playing games?*

Pig Latin (p 123)

Activities:

- As a class, listen to Lead Belly's 'Pig Latin Song'.
- Encourage the students to speak in Pig Latin.
- Have the students play language games in Pig Latin e.g. I went shopping and I bought.
- Show flashcards of objects that have to be said in Pig Latin.
- Have students play Pig Latin bingo.
- Have students write a letter to a friend in Pig Latin. Have them reply.

The Rebus (p127)

Activities:

- Have students make a rebus for their own name.
- Have students write a message to a classmate using a rebus.
- Have them decode other rebuses.

Rhyming Slang (p131)

Activities:

- Collate a class list of any rhyming slang.
- Have students write a story told in as much rhyming slang as possible. Encourage them to make their stories as colourful as they can.

Chapter Seven: *Say that again!*

Puns (p 139)

Activity:

- Have students make a list of any puns they can think of.

Discussion:

- Why do we like to use puns?

Homophones (p142)

Activity:

- Collate a class list of homophones.

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Mondegreens (p145)

Activities:

- Read *Olive the Other Reindeer* by Vivian Walsh and J. Otto
- Have students compile a list of common sayings or song lyrics that they now realize they said incorrectly e.g. Australia's sunset ostriches (Australian sons let us rejoice).
- Have students write a dialogue between two characters in which at least one character says many expressions incorrectly, having misheard them.

Onomatopoeia (p149)

Activities:

- Read *The Giant and the Joneses* by Julia Donaldson.
- Read *The BFG* by Roald Dahl.
- Listen to *The Trolley Song* by Judy Garland.
- Collate a class list of onomatopoeic words.
- Have students write their own stories in which the bulk of the story is conveyed through the use of onomatopoeia.

Tongue Twisters (p154)

Activities:

- Read and listen to *Tongue Twisters* by Danny Kaye.
- Collate a set of known tongue twisters from the students.
- Have students write their own twisters based on their own names.
- Have tongue twister competitions.

Portmanteau Words (p158)

Activities:

- Have students create their own portmanteau words.
- Have students create portmanteau animals, illustrate them and write a story about them.

Chapter Eight: *Hmm, I wonder what you're really saying...*

Euphemisms (p 169)

Activities:

- Collate a class list of euphemisms.
- Have students write a dialogue in which one character constantly speaks in euphemisms. Consider the effect this has on communication.
- Watch Monty Python's *Dead Parrot's Sketch*.
- Watch an episode of *Yes Minister*.

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Clichés (p180)

Activities:

- Collate a class list of clichés.
- Have students re-write the passage on page 180 removing all of the clichés.
- Have students write a descriptive passage using as many clichés as possible.

Tautologies (p183)

Activity:

- Collate a class list of tautologies.

Chapter Nine: *Is that a real person?*

Nicknames (p 195)

Discussion:

- Do you use nicknames for your friends? How are these nicknames usually formed? (After a physical characteristic e.g. bluey for a redhead, fatso for a skinny person; as an abbreviation of their name e.g. Gazza from Gary; from a behaviour e.g. chucka)

Spoonerisms (p200)

Activities:

- Collate a class list of known spoonerisms.
- Have students create their own spoonerisms.

Tom Swifties (p204)

Activities:

- Have students make up their own Tom Swifty.
(The notions of adverbs and adjectives may need to be revisited here)
- Read *The Rivals* by Richard Sheridan.
- Watch an episode of *Kath and Kim*.

Discussion:

- What types of language devices can you identify in this episode?
- Discuss how language is used to achieve humour in these two scripts.

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Chapter Ten: *Back to the future*

Activity:

- Read Lauren Myracle's books *tfn* and *ttyl*.

Discussion:

- Consider how language is used in these books.
- Should we change our dictionaries to this more contemporary style of spelling and language usage? Why? Consider when it is appropriate to use this style of language. Are there times when more formal language is more appropriate? What might we be able to tell about a person by their language choices?

Solution to Chapter Codes:

Now that you have finally managed to crack these rather dastardly codes I'm very happy to say that you are a top secret fully qualified and licensed word spy. Congratulations!

Teachers may like to make up a certificate for their students once all of the codes have been cracked.

Additional resources (as suggested in the text)

Phonetic Punctuation by Victor Borge
Eats, Shoots and Leaves by Lynne Truss
Pig Latin Song by Leadbelly
Olive the Other Reindeer by Vivian Walsh and J. Otto Seibold
The Giants and the Joneses by Julia Donaldson
The BFG by Roald Dahl
The Trolley Song by Judy Garland
Tongue Twisters by Danny Kaye
The Dead Parrot Sketch by Monty Python
Yes Minister
Kath and Kim
The Rivals by Richard Sheridan
ttyl and *tfn* by Lauren Myracle

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