

L101 taster and preparation tasks

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Welcome to the taster and preparation tasks for L101 *Introducing English language studies*. We've designed this item to give you a feeling for what it's like to study this module with the Open University or, if you've registered for the module, to complete some preparatory work if you wish. The tasks are typical of those you'll encounter as part of L101. We hope that by working through the tasks you'll get a feel for the level of the module, its general style and approach and the topics covered.

Remember, though, that these taster tasks represent a small proportion of what you'd encounter in the full module and so can only give you an approximate idea of level and content.

Activity 1 is designed to help you start noticing the language you encounter in everyday life, and to find out about English language issues in the news. You'll find the material you collect as part of this activity useful to you as a source of examples for your study when the module starts.

Activity 1 Noticing language matters

In the weeks or months before you start L101, collect instances of news or other items relating to language in general or the English language in particular. You could try:

- noting down or photographing adverts, graffiti, shop signs and so on
- the websites of national newspapers – such as, for the UK, *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent* or *The Times*
- print versions of national, regional or local newspapers and/or other print media such as community newsletters
- the websites of broadcasters which provide news items and links to recent programmes that may cover relevant topics – such as, for the UK, BBC television and radio (including Radio 4 and especially its programme *Word of Mouth*) and Channel 4 television
- other online sources, such as other news websites or blogs by linguists such as Deborah Cameron's *Language: a feminist guide* or L101 co-author Philip Seargeant's *A post-truth lexicon*
- accessing the selection of short films and courses available for free via OU OpenLearn (try searching 'applied linguistics' or 'English language').

Collect these items together as photos, online links or texts either pasted into a document or a 'favourites' folder, or as 'hard copy' in a scrapbook or cardboard folder. Jot down what each item is about, and where and when you found it.

From your set of sources you can then choose a particularly interesting item, and jot down answers to one or more of the following questions.

- What does the item tell you about language in general, or the English language in particular?
- Who do you think is the main intended audience for the item?
- Are particular views about language or the English language being put across, and do you agree or disagree with anything that's said?
- Did you learn anything from the item that you didn't know before?

Discussion

With even a cursory glance through the available media you'll have noticed that news and other items frequently touch on language and on English as a language. There are dedicated programmes on radio and sometimes on television. English usage is often a controversial topic, and relevant items almost always involve broader issues relating to society, history, economics, politics or education. Once you begin taking an active interest in the language you encounter you may well find interesting examples not only in the news media but also in the language that you encounter in your daily routines, in the landscape around you, or when you are travelling to less familiar places.

Activities 2 and 3 are designed to illustrate the sorts of thing you might find for Activity 1 and the reflections they might trigger.

Activity 2 Noticing the language around you

Now you'll focus on aspects of language on display. Figure 1 illustrates one sort of item you might find in the area where you live – at least, if you live in the UK.



Figure 1 Sign on a seventeenth-century cottage, Somerset, England

This sign, spotted in a village in the summer of 2017, reads *Billt by A E K 1679*.

What does the item tell you about language in general, or the English language in particular?

Discussion

What I found interesting about it is the spelling *billt* – which is very different from the modern spelling *built*. Can you think of at least two explanations for this divergent spelling?

A couple of possibilities come to mind:

- spellings, like other aspects of English, have changed over time
- in the seventeenth century spellings were not fixed or agreed on.

In other words, this item suggests that back in 1679 there was no such thing as ‘correct’ spelling. In this case it’s also clear that the use of a particular spelling makes no difference to the meaning – in context, it’s perfectly clear even to the modern passer-by what the sign means. This in turn suggests that our attitudes to spelling, and the importance we give to identifying and maintaining a single ‘correct’ form, have changed a lot since the 1600s, and raises a question about why all this might be the case.

Activity 3 Languages and language learning

I came across the following item in the online version of the UK newspaper *The Guardian*.

- Weale, S. (2017) ‘Britons “should learn Polish, Punjabi and Urdu to boost social cohesion”’, *The Guardian* [online], 18 January. Available at <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2017/jan/18/britons-should-learn-polish-punjabi-and-urdu-to-boost-social-cohesion> (accessed 22 May 2018).

Go to the item, either by pasting its URL into your internet browser, or by navigating your way to the item via *The Guardian* online and searching for ‘Britons should learn Polish’.

- What does your item tell you about language in general, or the English language in particular?
- Who do you think is the main intended audience for the item?
- Are particular views about language or the English language being put across, and do you agree or disagree with anything that’s said?
- Did you learn anything from the item that you didn’t know before?

Discussion

The *Guardian* news item makes a point about the decline in interest in foreign language learning in the UK and suggests some explanations for this. This doesn’t surprise me as I know that, at time of writing, language courses in UK schools and universities are under threat.

The article cites an academic who recommends that learning of ‘community languages’ in parts of the UK should be promoted among members the general population in those areas – not just among people who already speak such languages at home.

This article resonated with me because while I did learn foreign languages at school, and have kept up some Spanish and French, I’ve recently become aware that I know almost nothing about some of the languages spoken in the city I live in – which I feel hampers my ability to chat with certain neighbours, for example, and makes me less confident going into our local Polish supermarket (see Figure 2) – and maybe even more significantly, I live near the Welsh border and frequently visit Wales on holiday but have next to no knowledge of Welsh.



Figure 2 *Polski sklep*

I would welcome the opportunity to learn a community or national language other than English. I tend to agree with the suggestion that language learning should be a ‘two-way street’, and that if we all learned each others’ languages in the UK this would promote community cohesion.

We hope you’ve found these tasks interesting and useful. Now you’ll be in a position to start the module!