

# Listening and Speaking: Putting Meaning to Words

Esther P. Huang  
Acaciawood School, (Anaheim, CA, USA)  
estherphuang[at]yahoo.com

## Introduction

Carrying on a conversation is not just about hearing the words and saying the right words. Knowing where, when, who, how, what, and why can help the listener understand the conversation better. Being able to determine setting, interpersonal relationship, mood, and topic of a certain “scene” can help the listener comprehend more of what is going on, and in turn, enhance the chance of successful predicting, hypothesizing, and inferencing (2000, Mendelsohn). A simple expression such as “oh” can be said in many different ways depending on what is happening, the characters’ relationship, the mood, and setting. It can be said out of surprise “Oh!,” in confusion “Oh?,” or realization “Ooooh.” The goal of this activity is to heighten the students’ listening awareness of how changing certain words or tones can create different meanings. This will in turn also hone their speaking skills and understanding of certain American expressions.

## Level

This activity is designed for advanced level ESL/EFL students.

## Prior Knowledge

Students will need to know the meaning of settings, interpersonal relationships, moods, and topics (similar to story elements) before embarking on this activity. Students will need to understand different factors that create different setting, interpersonal relationship, mood, and topic. For example, using the title Mr./Ms. will signal a formal relationship and using informal contraction (“gonna”) may signal an informal conversation.

## Purpose

Students will use different tones and expressions in different settings and situations even though the word phrasings are the same. Students in the audience will listen for changes in tones and subtle word changes to detect how the changes alter the situation. Students will learn how certain American expressions are used in different ways.

## Materials

Worksheet

## Procedure

### Teacher Presentation

The teacher will write “get out of here” on the board, and ask students what this means—how can it be said differently to mean different things. The teacher will model the expression in different ways, discuss the different setting, interpersonal relationship, mood, and topic or “plot” that fit with the expression, and suggest possible responses for each expression:

#### “Get out of here!”

Plot: An unwelcomed sibling has entered another sibling’s room.

Possible response: “OK, I’m leaving.”

### **“Get outta here.”**

Plot: A friend has said something unbelievable to another friend.

Possible response: “I’m not kidding. It’s true.”

### **“Let’s get out of here.”**

Plot: A friend suggesting to another friend that the party is not exciting.

Possible response: “Yeah, it’s boring. Let’s go.”

## **Pair Work**

In pairs, the students will be assigned different expressions. The partners will come up with three different ways to say the phrase and corresponding responses to each expression. The students will also give a possible background to each expression (fill in the worksheet).

## **Demonstration**

Each pair will present their dialogues in front of the class. The audience can guess the different plots to the dialogues and give feedback, such as what they liked, disliked, or were confused with. Then the partners can explain the rationale to their expressions and the corresponding responses to each expression.

## **Some Expressions**

- Come on
- Forget about it
- Get out of here
- I don’t think so
- No problem
- No way
- That is not funny
- You look really nice

## **Worksheet**

Phrase:

New Expression:

Topic:

Setting:

Mood:

Characters’ Relationship:

Response:

New Expression:

Topic:

Setting:

Mood:

Characters' relationship:

Response:

New Expression:

Topic:

Setting:

Mood:

Characters' relationship:

Response:

## Reference

- Mendelsohn, D. J. (2000). Learning to listen: A strategy-based approach for the second-language learner. Carlsbad, CA: Dominic Press, Inc.

---

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. XI, No. 7, July 2005

<http://iteslj.org/>

---

<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/Huang-Meaning.html>