Do you sometimes feel that sentence-level examples of language do not always help learners? Do some authentic examples of spoken language not fit into neat grammar categories? This lesson aims to help you look at some ways of analysing authentic written and spoken language.

Task 1 – What about the little words?

Anna: "I've got this student, Milos. He often picks up on some of the little words and sounds that we use like 'well' and 'umm' and wants to know about them. However, there's nothing in the course book that we are using at the moment that can really help him. What should I do?"

Can you help Anna? What should she do? Jot down your ideas on a note pad, then check with the answer key below. 🔑

Task 1 Feedback 🔑

Anna probably needs to go outside the course book and find some examples of authentic spoken language. She needs to look at how these little words are used in spoken language and prepare a task of some kind that she can not only give to Milos, but the class as a whole. Students are often very keen to learn about this kind of language.

Key Skill

The analysis of authentic examples of written and spoken language is known as discourse analysis. This kind of study of language encompasses not only the "little words" mentioned above, but a whole range of features that look at language as a communicative event. This lesson is a very brief introduction to some aspects of discourse analysis.

Task 2 – Analysis of written language

a) Here is a letter that is mostly authentic (only the names and addresses have been changed). Read the letter and complete the analysis task below.

5 February 2009

Anna Martin
1 College Street
Schooltown

Dear Anna,

Thank you for sending in your application and test for our TESOL Course.

We are sorry to tell you that your work in the test is not at a high enough level for you to follow a TESOL Course. We need to be sure that the level of English of students on these courses is high because part of the course involves teaching your classmates, some of whom will be at an advanced level.

We feel you need to spend some more time studying general English to improve your English language skills and think about applying for a course at a later date.

Thank you again for the interest you have shown in our courses.

Yours sincerely,

Emily Smith
Director of Studies

b) Analysis task: Numbers 1 to 8 are language examples from the letter. Letters a to h are labels for these examples. Match the examples to the labels, then place them in the correct table below: 'key features of a formal letter to a student' or 'features of problem → solution patterning'.

Key features of a formal letter to a student

Labels		Examples from Letter
	⮐	
	⮐	
	⮐	
	⮐	

Features of Problem → Solution Patterning

Labels		Examples from Letter
	⟳	
	⟳	
	⟳	
	⟳	

Labels

a. Full name and address included at the beginning of the letter.

b. This outlines the background **situation**.

c. The salutation uses the first name of the student.

d. This is used throughout the letter by the writer to indicate that the organisation and not the individual is responding to the student.

e. This outlines the key **problem** in the letter.

f. This outlines a **solution** to the problem.

g. This signals to the reader that the information that follows will be some kind of problem.

h. This sign off is used because although the letter is official, the writer of the letter knows the name of the person she is writing to.

Examples

1. The second paragraph (beginning "We are sorry …").

2. Yours sincerely,

3. The pronoun 'we' used in the letter.

4. The third paragraph (beginning "We feel you …")

5. Anna Martin, 1 College Hill, Schooltown

6. the first paragraph (beginning "Thank you for …")

7. Dear Anna,

8. the word "sorry" (paragraph 2)

Check your ideas in the answer key. 🔑

Key Skill

This task gives an idea of the kind of analysis that can be done with authentic written texts. The 'key features' are examples of typical language that we associate with particular written genres. The situation→ problem → solution pattern in this letter is known as a discourse pattern. Discourse patterns can be found across a wide range of genres. For more information on genre features and discourse patterns, refer to the "Want to find out more...?" section below.

Task 3 – Analysing spoken language

Below is a piece of authentic spoken language:

Line 1. **A:** What's different about Tokyo to Auckland?

Line 2. **B: Well**, **for a start**, it's … **um** … I don't know if it's actually bigger in size, but

Line 3. bigger population-wise. **Of course**, it's a lot more crowded and a lot busier.

Line 4. **Obviously** the transport system is a lot different – there *is* a transport system **as**

Line 5. **opposed to** Auckland where there's … **well**, there are buses, **but** not

Line 6. as efficient as Tokyo.

Letters 1 to 8 are pieces of language taken from the text (they have also been highlighted in the text). Letters a to h give definitions or explanations of these bits of language. Match the definitions to the pieces of language.

Language from the text	Definitions
1. well (line 2)	**a.** making a contrast
2. for a start (line 2)	**b.** showing you think the listener already knows this information
3. um (line 2)	**c.** starting a new topic
4. of course (line 3)	**d.** adjusting information in a sentence
5. obviously (line 4)	**e.** showing that you expect the listener to understand because the idea is clear
6. as opposed to (lines 4 – 5)	**f.** indicating you are going to make your first point
7. well (line 5)	**g.** introducing a different idea
8. but (line 5)	**h.** hesitating

Check your ideas in the answer key.

Key Skill

Task 3 has focused on only one aspect of spoken text: words that are typically described as 'discourse markers'. It is also possible to look at the way pronouns refer forward and back to nouns, or the way that unnecessary words are often left out of spoken language. A key problem is finding material that can be used to focus on authentic spoken language. The next task suggests a strategy.

Task 4 – Creating your own spoken language samples

Letters a to f describe steps in an approach to creating an authentic or semi-authentic recording that you could use in the classroom for the purposes of analysing spoken language with students. Put these steps in the correct order.

Steps to creating an authentic recording	Order
a. Transcribe the excerpt.	
b. Give students a language task that gets them to notice some useful key features in the excerpt. You don't need to focus on everything that's there.	
c. Listen to the conversation and find an excerpt that exemplifies some interesting features of spoken interaction.	
d. Give students the transcript.	
e. Record some native speakers having a conversation or set up an improvised role play of a particular situation.	
f. In class treat the excerpt as a normal listening lesson and get students to understand the gist and more detailed information in the text.	

Check your ideas in the answer key.

⮕ Thinking about your teaching …

In the TaskBook lesson: *Teacher Language*, it was suggested that you record part of your lesson in order to evaluate your language. It could be useful to analyse your own language along the lines suggested above. It would be interesting to see how many discourse markers you use, or you could look for broader patterns in terms of the way you initiate spoken interaction with students and how they respond.

Note your conclusions in your *Teaching Log*.

⮕ Taking it to the classroom …

Try to include regular lessons in your teaching programme where you focus on language features that are not concerned with grammar or vocabulary. The suggested book below will help give you ideas.

⮕ Want to find out more … ?

The following book is an excellent introduction to the ideas introduced in this lesson: *Discourse Analysis for Language Teachers* by Michael McCarthy (Cambridge University Press 1991).

Answer Key

Task 2 – Feedback

Key Features of a Formal Letter to a Student
a → 5
c → 7
d → 3
h → 2

Key Features of Problem → Solution Patterning
b → 6
e → 1
f → 4
g → 8

Task 3 – Feedback

1) c
2) f
3) h
4) b
5) e
6) a
7) d
8) g

Task 4 – Feedback

1) e
2) c
3) a
4) f
5) d
6) b