

Using 'OK' in English

Speaking activities for discourse markers part 1
by Lindsay Clandfield

'OK' (pronounced and sometimes written as okay) is one of the most important and useful discourse markers in English. A discourse marker is a word that you use to indicate that you are ready to speak or want to keep speaking, or to show how you respond to what someone has just said. If your students are able to use discourse markers correctly and easily, their English will sound a lot more natural and less awkward. It will make a big difference in their conversation skills.

The following activities are designed to help your students become aware of the importance of 'OK' and to begin to use it in conversations.

Language Information box:

How do people use 'OK' in conversation?

The most basic use of 'OK' is to accept a suggestion, request, offer or information.

Mother: *I don't want you to come home later than 11 o'clock.*

Daughter: *OK.*

You can use 'OK' to show that you accept someone's response but you have something else to say about the situation.

Football player: *I can't run very fast. My leg hurts.*

Coach: *OK, you don't have to come to practice today.*

Another use for 'OK' is to join two topics or stages of a talk.

Teacher: *We're studying a new grammar point, and I gave some homework. Can you check it with them?*

Substitute teacher: *OK. Is there anything else I should do?*

'OK' is often used by professors or teachers to move on to another topic in the class. It is used to move on to the next item of business in meetings.

Finally, 'OK' is used to close a conversation, or when a conversation is finishing. It is often used with *bye* or *see you*.

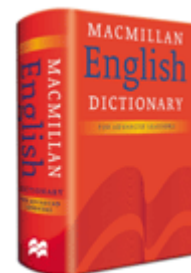
Girlfriend: *So will you come to my house tomorrow?*

Boyfriend: *Yes, I promise.*

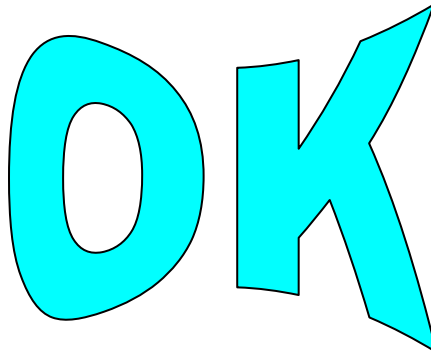
Girlfriend: *OK, see you.*

Boyfriend: *OK, bye.*

Girlfriend: *Bye.*



Adapted from the Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Learners Language Awareness section.



The following teaching ideas are to help raise your students' awareness about 'OK' and get them using it in class. While not all of these are strictly practising *speaking* skills, because of the important nature of 'OK' in spoken discourse they are still included here.

1. The Etymology of 'OK'

Aim: To find out about the origins of 'OK'.

Skills work: Reading and speaking

Divide the class into pairs A and B. Give each student A a copy of worksheet A and each student B a copy of worksheet B (on the following pages). Explain that they have to ask each other questions to find out the story of the word 'OK'.

2. Are you listening 'OK'?

Aim: To recognise when and how often native speakers use okay in speech.

Skills work: Listening

Bring in a piece of authentic English listening text of informal conversation (from the radio, or a film in English. You can also use the Web to record audio texts.). Tell the students to listen out for the number of times someone says 'OK' (you must obviously choose a text which has 'OK' in it.☺). Play the tape or video again and ask students to write down the exchange in which 'OK' was used. Use this data to raise students' awareness of how 'OK' is being used and draw out the different ways it can be used. Make copies and distribute (or write on the board) the different uses of 'OK' from the language information box above to follow up. It is very useful to look at a learners' dictionary definition for 'OK' at this stage. Try the [Macmillan English Dictionary](#).

3. 'OK' in class

Aim: To recognise when and how often the teacher uses 'okay'.

Skills work: Listening

At the beginning of the week, ask the students to listen out for when you as a teacher use the words 'OK' (teachers use this discourse marker quite a lot!). You could ask someone to keep a record of how many times you use it during the classes that week. At the end of the week ask students to report back on your use of 'OK'. Use this information in a similar way to 2 above.

4. How do you say 'OK'?

Aim: To practise intonation and using different pitch.

Tell students that you want them to practise using their voices to express different emotions. Tell them that they are going to do this by using one of the most popular words in the English language, 'OK'. Write the following words on the board: HAPPY, FRUSTRATED, CONFUSED, CONFIDENT, TIRED, SCARED
Demonstrate yourself by saying 'OK' in different ways and asking students to guess which emotion you are expressing. Then point to the different emotions and ask students to say 'OK' in the manner of that emotion.

5. Wrangling*

Aim: To practise intonation and using different pitch.

Skills work: Speaking

In a wrangling activity, students practice a two-line dialogue in pairs. The students say the lines to each other as an argument: they are allowed only to use the words in the dialogue but can use intonation and gesture to convince each other. The first to give up is the loser. You can start this activity by having two students volunteer to do this in front of the class.

Here are some sample dialogues to wrangle with, incorporating 'OK'.

*OK, then finish it later.
But I'm very busy.*

*I didn't do it.
OK, prove it.*

*I think this is stupid.
OK, but we're learning.*

*Would you like anything else?
No, it's OK.*

In Using 'OK' in English part 2

Role plays and more tips on how to incorporate 'OK' into students' speech.

* The idea for this wrangling activity is adapted from Penny Ur's book Five Minute Activities (CUP, 1992)

OK

WORKSHEET A

Where does 'OK' come from?

'OK' is the most successful of all Americanisms. The word has spread to several other languages. However, its origins are not clear and there are several explanations as to where it came from. The study of where words come from is etymology. In this activity you will find out some of the etymology of the word 'OK'.

Work with a partner. One of you has worksheet A, the other has worksheet B. Ask questions to each other to find the missing information on the worksheet.

The origin of 'OK' has been one of the most popular subjects in etymology. Here are some of the popular explanations of how the word was created.

1

'OK' stands for O (zero) Killed. American soldiers used it in _____ when they came back from missions. Zero killed meant that no soldiers had died in that mission.

2

'OK' comes from the Native American word okeh. Nobody knows what this original word okeh meant.

3

'OK' is an abbreviation for _____ (the German for Colonel-in-Command) and was used by Baron Von Steuben, an American General in the Revolutionary War.

4

'OK' comes from the French name for a port in Haiti called Aux Cayes. Aux Cayes was famous for its rum.

5

'OK' stands for Orrin Kendall. Orin Kendall was a _____ supplied to American troops during the American Civil War.

6

'OK' was originally a 1860s telegraph term for Open Key (the same kind of key that you can find on a modern computer keyboard).

7

'OK' stands for oll korrekt, a misspelling of all correct. _____ was a terrible speller and wrote 'OK' for all correct on documents. Many etymologists say that this explanation is closest to the truth.

OK

WORKSHEET B

Where does 'OK' come from?

'OK' is the most successful of all Americanisms. The word has spread to several other languages. However, its origins are not clear and there are several explanations as to where it came from. The study of where words come from is etymology. In this activity you will find out some of the etymology of the word 'OK'.

Work with a partner. One of you has worksheet A, the other has worksheet B. Ask questions to each other to find the missing information on the worksheet.

The origin of 'OK' has been one of the most popular subjects in etymology. Here are some of the popular explanations of how the word was created.

1

'OK' stands for O (zero) Killed. American soldiers used it in World War Two when they came back from missions. Zero killed meant that no soldiers had died in that mission.

2

'OK' comes from _____. Nobody knows what this original word okeh meant.

3

'OK' is an abbreviation for Oberst Kommandant (the German for Colonel-in-Command) and was used by Baron Von Steuben, an American General in the Revolutionary War.

4

'OK' comes from the French name for a port in Haiti called Aux Cayes. Aux Cayes was famous for its _____.

5

'OK' stands for Orrin Kendall. Orrin Kendall was a brand of crackers supplied to American troops during the American Civil War.

6

'OK' was originally a 1860s telegraph term for _____ (the same kind of key that you can find on a modern computer keyboard).

7

'OK' stands for oll korrek, a misspelling of all correct. US President Andrew Jackson was a terrible speller and wrote 'OK' for all correct on documents. Many etymologists say that this explanation is closest to the truth.