

Keep your English up to date 2

Teacher's pack

Lesson plan and student worksheets
with answers

Dumb down



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BBC Learning English – Keep your English up to date

Lesson Plan: Teacher's notes

Dumb down

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Level: Intermediate and above

Topic: Media quality

Aims: Listening skills – A short talk

Language – ‘Dumb down’ and other phrasal verbs with ‘down/up’

Materials: Worksheet 1 – Introductory speaking and vocabulary exercises, Listening section 1
Worksheet 2 – Listening section 2
Worksheet 3 – Extra work: Vocabulary and language
Audio script – Available in teacher’s notes
Recording of the talk – Available online at bbclearningenglish.com

This plan was downloaded from:

bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1130_uptodate2/page2.shtml

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LESSON STAGES

A

Explain to the students that they are going to listen to a talk by Professor David Crystal, an expert on the English language, and that the talk is about the way English is changing. This particular talk is about the phrase 'dumb down'.

B

Hand out **Student Worksheet 1**. Students do **Speaking, Exercise 1** in small groups or pairs.

C

Students do **Vocabulary, Exercise 2** - without dictionaries at first.
Practise the pronunciation of the vocabulary, as they will hear it in the talk.

D

Students read **Listening: Section 1, Exercise 3** and then listen to Section 1 of the talk.
They answer the questions 'a' and 'b'.

Students listen again and do **Listening: Section 1, Exercise 4**.

E

Hand out **Student Worksheet 2**
Students read **Listening: Section 2, Exercise 5** and then listen to Section 2 of the talk.
They answer question 'a'.

F

Students try to answer **Listening: Section 2, Exercise 6**. They listen again to Section 2 to check/complete their answers.

G

If you wish to do some extra work with the class, hand out **Student Worksheet 3**

For the vocabulary exercise, give the students copies of the audio script and play the complete talk as they read.

The language work focuses on other phrasal verbs that use 'down' and 'up' to mean decrease and increase.

The final discussion activity is connected to the general topic of the lesson – 'is your country dumbing down?'

AUDIO SCRIPTS

Listening Section 1

Way back in the 1930s, you could dumb something down. For instance, a newspaper making a story more appealing to the masses would say, 'we're dumbing it down', or something like that. It was an American usage, dumb meant stupid. It was transitive that is the verb governed an object, 'you're dumbing something down'.

Now in the 1990s, we get a different grammatical use - a use of the verb without an object, an intransitive use, 'they're dumbing down'. It has the same meaning; it means become less intellectually challenging.

Listening Section 2

It now refers to any of the media where the content is being trivialised in the opinion of somebody. 'Television is dumbing down ... Britain as a whole is dumbing down,' because of its fascination with trivia and reality TV and all sorts of undemanding watching. 'Are we dumbing down?' said a newspaper headline recently.

It's got a whole range of grammatical uses now, both transitive and intransitive, you get, 'it's been dumbed down', 'it's being dumbed down' ... I've even heard the word as a noun – or the phrase really – 'I don't like the dumbing down of programmes', or for short, probably the commonest use of all now, 'I don't like all this dumbing down'. No need to worry here, there's no dumbing down on this website!

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ANSWER KEY

VOCABULARY

Exercise 2

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| a. appealing | attractive or desirable |
| b. stupid | not clever or not intelligent |
| c. intellectually challenging | clever; you have to use your brain |
| d. trivia | unimportant or useless information and stuff |
| e. reality TV | simple television programmes which feature normal people; there are usually no scripts e.g. Big Brother |
| f. undemanding | requires little effort; easy to do |

LISTENING: SECTION 1

Exercise 3

- a. iii. make something easier in order to attract people
- b. ii. the verb with an object

Exercise 4

- a. False – ‘Way back in the 1930s’
- b. True – ‘It was an American usage.’
- c. False – ‘It has the same meaning’

LISTENING: SECTION 2

Exercise 5

- a. ii. The information and ideas in the programmes are unimportant or silly

Exercise 6

- a. False – ‘It now refers to any of the media where the content is being trivialised’
- b. False – ‘I’ve even heard the word as a noun’
- c. True – ‘there’s no dumbing down on this website!’.

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EXTRA WORK

VOCABULARY

Exercise 7

- a. the content
- b. as a whole
- c. commonest

LANGUAGE

Exercise 8a

- a. That music is too loud. **Turn it down!**
- b. Now the music is too quiet. **Turn it up!**
- c. Come on, **hurry up** or we'll be late.
- d. The death of his dog has really **got him down** - he's feeling really sad. I'm going to buy him a present in order to **cheer him up**.
- e. This music is too slow. Put on some dance music – we need to **liven up** this party.
- f. There are too many applications for the job. We need to **narrow them down** and make a short list.
- g. The government doesn't want people to panic, so it is **playing down** the danger from the hurricane.

Turn something down – to make something less loud

Turn something up - to make something louder

Hurry up – to increase your speed

Get someone down – to make you feel less happy, to make you feel sad.

Cheer (someone) up – to feel happier

Liven something up – to give something more energy and a better, livelier atmosphere

Narrow something down – to reduce the number of things on a list

Play something down – to say something is less serious than it really is

WORKSHEET 1

SPEAKING

1. Discuss these questions with a partner

- a. Do you read newspapers regularly? Which do you read and why?
- b. Are there some newspapers that are better quality than others? What makes a good quality newspaper?
- c. Do you watch television much? Which channels and programmes do you watch?
- d. Are there some TV channels and/or programmes that are better quality than others? What makes a good quality channel or programme?
- e. In general, do you think newspapers and TV programmes are improving in quality? Why/why not?

VOCABULARY

2. Match these words and phrases to their definitions

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| a. appealing | unimportant or useless information and stuff |
| b. stupid | attractive or desirable |
| c. intellectually challenging | simple television programmes which feature normal people; there are usually no scripts e.g. Big Brother |
| d. trivia | not clever or not intelligent |
| e. reality TV | requires little effort; easy to do |
| f. undemanding | clever; you have to use your brain |

LISTENING SECTION 1

3. Now, listen to Professor Crystal talking about the use of the phrase 'dumb down' in English and answer these questions.

- a.** Which is the best definition of 'dumb something down'?
- i. make something more difficult in order to attract people
 - ii. make something more difficult in order to exclude most people
 - iii. make something easier in order to attract people
 - iv. make something easier in order to exclude many people
- b.** Which grammatical use came first?
- i. the verb without an object
 - ii. the verb with an object

4. Listen to Section 1 again and decide if the following statements are true or false, according to Professor Crystal.

- a.** The phrase was first used in 1913.
- b.** The phrase was first used in the USA.
- c.** The change in grammar led to a change in meaning.

WORKSHEET 2

LISTENING SECTION 2

5. Listen to Section 2 of the talk and answer this question.

- a.** In general, what does someone mean when they say ‘TV is dumbing down’? Choose the best answer from below.
- i. The presenters and reporters are not good at their jobs
 - ii. The information and ideas in the programmes are unimportant or silly
 - iii. The programmes are not well-made; the visual quality is poor

6. Listen again to Section 2. Are the following sentences true or false?

- a.** ‘Dumb down’ is, nowadays, only used to talk about television.
- b.** The phrase is still only used as a verb.
- c.** Professor Crystal thinks that the BBC Learning English website is intellectually challenging.

WORKSHEET 3 - EXTRA WORK

VOCABULARY

7. Find the phrases in the text that have the following meanings.

- a. the information and ideas in a TV programme or newspaper
- b. all of something
- c. most usual

LANGUAGE

8a. ‘Dumb down’ is a phrasal verb – a verb made of two words. In this phrasal verb, ‘down’ has a meaning of reduce, lower or lessen. In this case ‘dumb down’ means make less intelligent, to lower the quality. Other phrasal verbs use ‘down’ in a similar way. There are also phrasal verbs with ‘up’ – ‘speed up’ – and in these verbs ‘up’ can mean increase, raise or make bigger.

In the example sentences below, the second word of each phrasal verb is missing. Is the missing word ‘up’ or ‘down’? Compare your ideas with a partner and try to explain the meaning of each phrasal verb.

- a. That music is too loud. **Turn it** ____!
- b. Now the music is too quiet. **Turn it** ____!
- c. Come on, **hurry** ____ or we’ll be late.
- d. The death of his dog has really **got him** ____ - he’s feeling really sad. I’m going to buy him a present in order to **cheer him** ____.
- e. This music is too slow. Put on some dance music – we need to **liven** ____ this party.
- f. There are too many applications for the job. We need to **narrow them** ____ and make a short list.
- g. The government doesn’t want people to panic, so it is **playing** ____ the danger from the hurricane.

DISCUSSION

9. Discuss these questions with your partner.

- a. Are there many reality TV shows in your country? What do you think of them?
- b. How do people become famous or celebrities in your country?
- c. Do many people read magazines about the lives of famous people?
- d. Who do you think has more influence on people's opinions and lifestyles?
 - i. popular celebrities
 - ii. serious journalists and newspapers
 - iii. politicians
- e. Do you think your country's education system has improved over the years?
- f. In general do you think your country, its media and its people are dumbing down?
Why/why not?