Trench talk…and how we use it today when speaking

Today, let's talk about some words that are used in everyday English that originate from the trenches of World War One. Really? You'd be surprised just how many words there are, for example, *bloke*, *binge drink, wash out,* and *snapshot*. Research has been done by military historian Peter Doyle and Julian Walker, an etymologist, who have analysed thousands of documents from the period to trace how language changed during the period.

They discovered that the war brought military slang into the mainstream. French and German words and local UK dialects became part of national conversation. Mr Walker who works at the British Library: "The war was a melting pot of classes and nationalities, with people thrown together under conditions of stress. It was a very creative time for language. Soldiers have always had a genius for slang and coming up with terms…"

Their results can be read in a new book *'Trench talk: Words of the First World War'* which documents new words and phrases, with other words spreading from an earlier narrower meaning into a newer wider meaning. Many of the words were created by soldiers to describe their unfamiliar surroundings. Words like *lousy* and *crummy* were introduced. Both referred to being infested by lice, while *'fed up'* emerged as a widespread expression of weariness among the men. Communiqués from headquarters became known as *bumf* – from b_ _ fodder, a term for toilet paper.

Other interesting phrases include *snapshot* (from a quickly aimed and taken rifle shot) and *wash out* (a process by which aspiring soldiers who failed their missions were sent back to their regiments) and *dud* (generally a faulty shell that failed to explode). Being on the front line meant facing the brutality of life so phrases like *'pushing up daisies'*, *'snuffed it'*, and *'gone west'* were used. Those afraid were said to have *'got the wind up'*.

Technical devices could be quite baffling to some soldiers and hard to describe, which explains why the word *thingumyjig* was popular. Aircraft could *conk out* and pilots complained of *blind spots*. The most well-known Hindi Indian phrases used include *cushy* from khush (pleasure) and *Blighty*, from bilati, meaning foreign, which, when applied by Indians to Britons, came to be perceived by Indian army servicemen as the term 'British'.

Category: Language / English Language / Trench Talk
Level: Intermediate / Upper Intermediate

EXERCISES

1. Words from wartime: Think of three words you know that originate from wartime. Go round the room swapping details with others.

2. Dictation: The teacher will read four to six lines of the article slowly and clearly. Students will write down what they hear. The teacher will repeat the passage slowly again. Self-correct your work from page one - filling in spaces and correcting mistakes. Be honest with yourself on the number of errors. Advise the teacher of your total number of errors. Less than five is very good. Ten is acceptable. Any more is room for improvement! More than twenty - you need to do some work!

3. Reading: The students should now read the article aloud, swapping readers every paragraph.

4. Vocabulary: Students should now look through the article and underline any vocabulary they do not know. Look in dictionaries. Discuss and help each other out. The teacher will go through and explain any unknown words or phrases.

5. The article: Students should look through the article with the teacher.
a) What is the article about?
b) What do you think about the article?
c) Was this an easy or difficult article to understand?
d) Discuss the article.

6. Trench talk: In pairs look at the following words and phrases. Explain them to each other. Why might these have been used? Discuss together. Look on the internet to help you.

	Student A		**Student B**
1	snapshot	1	lousy
2	pushing up daisies	2	cushy
3	Blighty	3	blind spots
4	thingumyjig	4	bloke
5	bumf	5	binge drink
6	wash out	6	fed up
7	dud	7	snuffed it
8	gone west	8	thingumyjig
9	conk out	9	got the wind up

The teacher will choose some pairs to discuss their findings in front of the class.

7. Let's roleplay 1: In pairs/groups. One of you is the interviewer. The others are one of the following people. You are in the *Discussion FM* radio studio. Today's interview is about: *Trench talk.*

1	Peter Doyle	3	A historian
2	Julian Walker	4	A student studying history today

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8. Let's think! In pairs. On the board write as many words as you can to do with 'Trench talk'. *One-two minutes.* Compare with other teams. Using your words compile a short dialogue together.

9. Let's roleplay 2: In pairs. You are in a bar in your town/city. Start a conversation about '*Interesting new words*'. *5-minutes.*

10. Let's do 'The Article Quiz': Have the students quiz each other in pairs. They score a point for each correct answer and half a point each time they have to look at the article for help. See who can get the highest score!

Student A
1) What is an etymologist? (See page 8!)
2) Who is an etymologist?
3) Where is this person an etymologist?
4) Name the book.
5) Who is Peter Doyle?

Student B
1) What was a term for toilet paper?
2) What was a melting pot?
3) Soldiers had a genius for what?
4) Where did Communiqués come from?
5) Who has analysed what?

11. More trench talk: Below are some more words and phrases that were used during World War One. In pairs try to explain their meanings. Why might these have been used? Discuss together. Look on the internet to help you!

	Student A		Student B
1	swipe	1	souvenir
2	to come unstuck	2	gaffs
3	snuffed it	3	whacked out
4	scrounging	4	blotto
5	fag	5	chum
6	rumbled	6	knocked off (stolen)
7	trench coats	7	bint or binting
8	guff	8	become a landowner
9	gasper	9	cooler
10	swipe	10	strafe

The teacher will choose some pairs to discuss their findings in front of the class.

12. Let's write an e-mail: Write and send a 200 word e-mail to your teacher about*: Trench talk*. Your e-mail can be read out in class.

13. Sentence starters: Finish these sentence starters. Correct your mistakes. Compare what other people have written.

a) Slang words _____

b) Trench talk _____

c) Soldiers _____

DISCUSSION

Student A questions
1) Did the headline make you want to read the article?
2) Do you have social classes in your country today?
3) Are there many English words used in your language? If yes, give some examples.
4) What is the most popular English word used in your language?
5) Do you know any trench swear words?
6) Would you like to have been in the Great War?
7) How harsh do you think it was in the trenches in WWI?
8) Why did the Great War change all of our lives?
9) Do you use any of the words in *italics* in today's English lesson?
10) Have you learnt anything in today's English lesson?

Student B questions
1) What do you think about what you've read?
2) Had you heard of any of these words before today's English lesson?
3) Which are your favourite three WWI words from the lesson?
4) Do you use any of these words in your language?
5) What do these words tell us?
6) Have you ever invented a word? If yes, what word was it?
7) Can you think of any words in your language associated with WWI?
8) Will you be buying the book?
9) Has this been a difficult lesson in English for you to understand?
10) Did you like this discussion?

SPEAKING

Let's play a game: My great grandfather and the Great War

Allow 10 minutes – As a class / small groups – in a circle in a clockwise direction…

My great grandfather was in the Great War
I remember him talking about…
Repeat the previous things mentioned then add one more…
Forget one and you are eliminated!

The teacher can moderate the session.

GAP FILL: READING:

Put the words into the gaps in the text.

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slang

creative

stress

mainstream

trenches

trace

dialects

originate

Their results can be read in a new book '*Trench talk: Words of the First World War'* which documents new words and phrases, with other words spreading from an earlier (1)_____ meaning into a newer wider meaning. Many of the words were created by (2)_____ to describe their (3)_____ surroundings. Words like *lousy* and *crummy* were introduced. Both referred to being infested by lice, while '*fed up'* emerged as a (4)_____ expression of weariness among the men. Communiqués from headquarters became known as *bumf* – from b_ _ fodder, a term for toilet paper.

afraid

widespread

regiments

soldiers

narrower

faulty

phrases

unfamiliar

Other interesting (5)_____ include *snapshot* (from a quickly aimed and taken rifle shot) and *wash out* (a process by which aspiring soldiers who failed their missions were sent back to their (6)_____) and *dud* (generally a (7)_____ shell that failed to explode). Being on the front line meant facing the brutality of life so phrases like '*pushing up daisies'*, '*snuffed it'*, and '*gone west'* were used. Those (8)_____ were said to have '*got the wind up'*.

GAP FILL: LISTENING

Listen and fill in the spaces.

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GRAMMAR:

Put the words into the gaps in the text.

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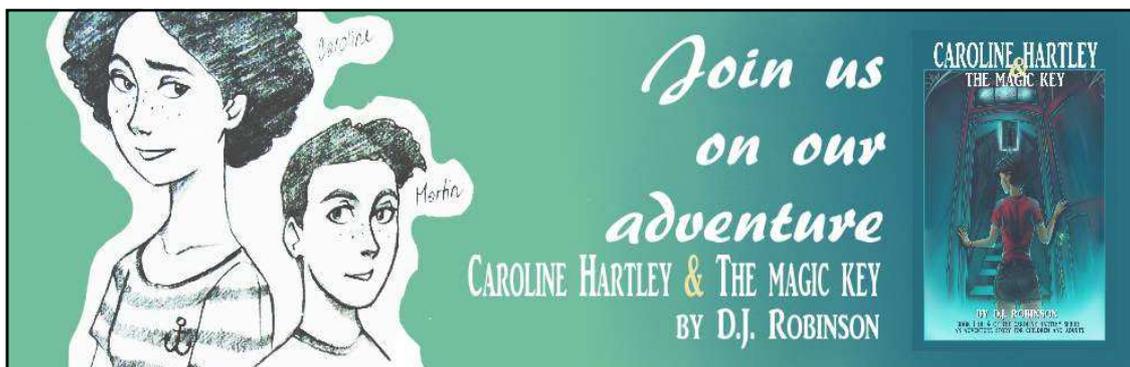
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SPELLING TEST

The teacher will ask the class individually to spell the following words that are in the article. Afterwards, check your answers with your teacher, using the following ratings:
Pass = 12, Good = 15, Very good = 18, Excellent = 20

1	lousy	11	snapshot
2	unfamiliar	12	binge drink
3	etymologist	13	bloke
4	mainstream	14	trenches
5	dialects	15	research
6	melting pot	16	analysed
7	nationalities	17	everyday
8	snuffed it	18	bumf
9	Blighty	19	thingumyjig
10	perceived	20	cushy

LINKS

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Trench-Talk-Words-First-World/dp/0752471546
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/howaboutthat/9700432/The-trench-talk-that-is-now-entrenched-in-the-English-language.html

Note: Etymologist: An etymologist is a person who studies etymology. Etymology is an account of the history of a particular word or element of a word. Through old texts and comparisons with other languages, etymologists try to reconstruct the history of words — when they entered a language, from what source, and how their form and meaning changed.

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