

1. An introduction to reported speech

In English, there are two ways of telling someone what someone else has said. Often we may choose to repeat their actual words using a **quote structure** or **quotation**, e.g:

'We're getting married on Saturday!' she said excitedly.
'Are you going to invite your father?' Joe asked.

However, when the information that someone conveys is more important than their actual words, we may want to explain what they have said using our own words, e.g:

She said that she was getting married on Saturday.
Joe asked whether she was going to invite her father to the wedding.

Examples like these are sometimes referred to as **indirect speech** or **reported speech**. Sentences in reported speech contain a reporting clause with a reporting verb like *say* or *ask*, e.g:

She said...
Joe asked...

This is followed by a **reported clause** showing someone's original statement, question or thought, e.g:

...(that) she was getting married on Saturday
...whether she was going to invite her father to the wedding

2. Reporting statements and thoughts

If we want to report a statement or someone's thoughts, we use a reported clause which usually begins with the conjunction *that*, e.g:

He said that he was going to resign.
She thinks that he has made the wrong decision.

However in informal speech and writing, *that* is often left out, especially with the most frequently used reporting verbs such as *say* and *think*, e.g:

He said he was going to resign.
She thinks he has made the wrong decision.

The conjunction *that* is less likely to be left out with less common reporting verbs, especially those which have a more specific meaning than *say* or *think*, such as *complain*, *explain*, *admit*, *agree*, etc, e.g:

He agreed that it would have been better to wait.
She complained that the seats were uncomfortable.

Sometimes reporting verbs are followed by a direct object which refers to the 'hearer', i.e: the person who the speech was originally directed towards, e.g:

She told them that she was getting married on Saturday.
He reminded her that he was working late.

With some reporting verbs, it is possible to choose whether or not to mention the hearer, c.f:

I promised Jenny/her that I wouldn't be late.
I promised I wouldn't be late.

With certain reporting verbs, if we decide to mention the hearer, we must do so with a prepositional phrase, e.g:

She admitted (to me) that she had made a stupid decision.
He agreed (with Jenny) that it would have been better to wait.

3. Reporting Questions

Questions put into report structures are often referred to as **reported questions** or **indirect questions**, though they are not followed by question marks. The following are two examples of questions being put into report structures:

"Did the children enjoy the play?" → *I asked her if the children had enjoyed the play.*
"Where do you live?" → *He asked me where I lived.*

The most common verb used for reporting questions is *ask*, though verbs such as *inquire/enquire* are sometimes used to report questions in a more formal way.

3.1 Yes/no questions

Some types of question can be answered with simply *yes* or *no*. These types of questions are therefore often referred to as *yes/no* questions, e.g:

Do you speak Italian?
Does she like her new job?

To report a *yes/no* question, we use *whether* or *if* in the reported clause, e.g:

She asked him if he spoke Italian.
I asked whether she liked her new job.

If is generally used when the speaker has suggested one possibility that might be true, e.g:

I asked her if she had met Sophie before.

Whether is generally used when the speaker has suggested one or more possibilities, e.g:

I asked her whether she'd prefer to eat out or cook a meal at home.

3.2 Wh-questions

Wh-questions cannot be answered by *yes* or *no*. They are questions in which someone asks for information about an event or situation, e.g:

What time is he coming?
Who were you talking to?
Where did you put my car keys?

To report a *wh-question*, we use a *wh-word* at the beginning of the reported clause, e.g:

I asked what time he was coming.
She asked who I was talking to.
He asked me where I had put his car keys.

When the details of the reported question are clear from the context, it is sometimes possible to leave out everything except the *wh-word*, especially in spoken English, e.g:

John seemed angry with the children, so I asked why.

If the original *wh-question* consists of *what*, *which* or *who* followed by *be* + noun complement, the complement is often placed before *be* in the reported clause, e.g:

"What's the problem?" → *I asked what the problem was.* (more natural than *I asked what was the problem.*)

4. Tense choice and meaning in reported speech

4.1 Tense choice in the reporting clause

Since reported speech is most commonly used to report something that was said or thought in the past, the reporting verb is usually in the past tense, e.g:

*On Monday night she **told** us that she was getting married.*

However there are certain situations in which a reporting verb in the present tense is used, these include:

a. when we are uncertain as to whether the information we are reporting is true e.g:

*Meg **tells** me you've decided to resign.*

b. when we want to make a general report about what many people say:

*Everyone **says** that she's made the wrong decision.*

In certain cases, either a past or a present reporting verb is possible, although a present tense is used when we want to show that something is still true or relevant at the moment we are reporting it, often suggesting that the original words were only spoken a short time ago, compare, e.g:

*He **says** he knows the way, so he should arrive soon.*
*He **said** he knows the way, so I didn't give him directions.*

Note that if the reporting verb is in the present tense, the tense in the reported clause remains unchanged, e.g:

*"I **don't** feel well." → Tom **says** he **doesn't** feel well.*
(compare: *Tom **said** he **didn't** feel well.*)

4.2 Tense choice in the reported clause

When the situation described in the reported clause is already in the past at the time we are reporting it, we always use a past tense, such as the past simple or the past continuous, in the reported clause.

"I don't want to go." → *Andy said that he **didn't** want to go.*

"What time are you leaving?" → *Jackie asked me what time I **was** leaving.*

When the situation described in the reported clause was already in the past when the speaker originally talked about it, then we often use the past perfect in the reported clause, e.g:

"I've lost my car keys!" → *She said that she **had lost** her car keys.*

If we want to emphasise that a situation still exists or is still relevant at the time we are using reported speech, we can use a present or present perfect tense in the reported clause, e.g:

We're going to buy something to eat because Tom said he's hungry.

*Scientists claim that they **have found** a cure.*

If we want to show that we are uncertain as to whether the statement we are reporting is true, then we are more likely to use a past tense in the reported clause, compare:

*I think I'll take an umbrella, the forecast said it's **going** to rain.*

*I wonder if we should take an umbrella, the forecast said that it **was going** to rain.*

In the second example, the use of the past tense in the reported clause suggests that the speaker is more uncertain as to whether what the forecast said is correct.

5. A summary of the form of tense changes in reported speech

We can summarise the form of tense changes from direct speech to reported speech as follows:

1. Present tense in direct speech usually becomes past tense in the reported clause:

*"I **feel** sick."* → *Kate said she **felt** sick.*

"We're moving house." → *She told me they **were** moving house.*

"It's David's fault." → *He claimed that it **was** David's fault.*

Note however that we can use the present tense in the reported clause if the reporting verb is in the present tense, compare:

"It's David's fault." → *He claims that it's David's fault.*

And the present tense is sometimes used in a reported clause to show that the situation reported is still relevant at the present time:

*"I **feel** hungry."* → *Tom said he **feels** hungry, so let's go and eat.*

2. Present perfect in direct speech usually becomes past perfect in reported clause.

*"I've **finished**."* → *She said she **had finished**.*

*"**Have** you **been** crying?"* → *I asked her if she **had been** crying.*

Note however that we can use the present perfect in the reported clause if the reporting verb is in the present tense, or if we want to show that the situation reported on is still relevant at the present time, e.g:

*"I've **finished**."* → *She says she's **finished**.*

*She said that she's **finished**, but I don't think she has.*

3. Past tense in direct speech often becomes past perfect in the reported clause.

*"I **was** sleeping."* → *She said that she **had been** sleeping.*

*"**Did** you **catch** the train?"* → *I asked whether he **had caught** the train.*

*"She'd **seen** the film already."* → *He told me that she'd **seen** the film already.*

Note however that a simple past tense in direct speech can also remain unchanged in the reported clause, especially when it refers to a completed action, e.g:

*"**Did** you **catch** the train?"* → *I asked him whether he **caught/had caught** the train.*

4. With modal verbs:

Will often becomes *would*, e.g:

"You'll be late." → *I told her that she **would** be late.*

Will can sometimes remain unchanged if the situation reported is in the future or still relevant, e.g:

"I'll come." → *She said that she'll come.*

Can often becomes *could*, e.g:

"I can speak Spanish." → *She said that she could speak Spanish.*

Can sometimes also remains unchanged, especially if the verb in the reporting clause is in the present tense, e.g:

She says that she can speak Spanish.

May often becomes *might*, e.g:

"It may be better to wait." → *John thought it might be better to wait.*

Must, when expressing necessity, can become *had to*, e.g:

"I must leave at 3pm." → *He said he must leave/had to leave at 3pm.*

Would, could, should, might, ought to and used to do not change in reported speech, e.g:

"I would love to come." → *She said that she would love to come."*

6. Using the appropriate reference in reported speech

Whenever we use reported speech, we have to take into account how circumstances have changed since the speaker originally spoke the words. For instance, we may now be reporting what was said from the point of view of a different time or place, or the person reporting the speech may be different to the original speaker. This will affect the choice of pronouns or adverbials of time and place in reporting/reported clauses.

5.1 Referring to people

If we were making an arrangement to meet a friend, we might say something like:

"I'll meet you in the park at 3 o'clock."

If we then later report what we have said to another friend, we might say something like:

I said that I would meet her in the park at 3 o'clock.

Notice how *you* in the original statement becomes *her* in the reported clause.

If somebody else was reporting what we said to another friend, they might say:

She said that she would meet her in the park at 3 o'clock.

Here, *I* has become *she* in the reporting clause, and *you* has become *her* in the reported clause.

If we do not meet our first friend in the park as planned, and she speaks to us about this later in the day, she might say:

You said you would meet me in the park at 3 o'clock.

Here, *I* has become *you* in the reporting clause, and *you* has become *me* in the reported clause.

The examples illustrate that pronouns always change according to the point of view of the person using the reported speech. The same is true of possessive pronouns. For instance, a question such as:

"Is she your sister?"

Could be reported with any one of the following, depending on the point of view of the speaker or listener, e.g:

She asked if I was her sister.

He asked if she was his sister.

She asked if you were my sister.

I asked if she was her sister.

5.2 Referring to places

Sometimes words which relate to place or position need to be changed in a reported clause. For instance, if someone were to say to us:

"I'll come to your place at 11:30."

then if we were at home we might report this as:

*She said that she would come **here** at 11:30.*

In the reported clause your place has been changed to *here*.

If someone is in a restaurant and says:

"I eat here every Saturday."

This statement might be reported by someone else who is not in the restaurant as:

He says that he eats there every Saturday.

In this case, *here* has been changed to *there* in the reported clause.

5.3 Referring to time

Adverbials of time such as *today*, *yesterday*, *tomorrow* etc. often need to be changed in reported speech. For instance, someone might say to you:

*“I’ll meet you in the park **tomorrow afternoon**.”*

If you were reporting this to someone else the day after, you might say:

*He said he would meet me in the park **this afternoon**.*

In this case, *tomorrow afternoon* has changed to *this afternoon* in the reported clause.

If someone says:

*“I saw her **yesterday**.”*

And we were reporting this to someone else a few days after it was said, then we might say:

*He said that he had seen her **the previous day**.*

Here, *yesterday* has changed to *the previous day* in the reported clause.

Here are some time adverbials and examples of what they often change to in reported speech. Note that the choice of time adverbial always depends on the particular situation that surrounds the reported speech.

yesterday → *the previous day/the day before/on Saturday, etc.*

today → *yesterday/that day/on Saturday, etc.*

tomorrow → *the next day/the following day/on Saturday, etc.*

this week → *that week/last week*

next year → *the year after/the following year/in 2006 etc.*

last month → *the month before/the previous month/in April, etc.*

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ips for teaching countability

New words

When new words come up, teachers will often write them on the board. When you put nouns on the board, write C or U next to it (like in the dictionary). Here for example is something a teacher has written on the board connected to the new word “advice” that came up in class. Aside from only the countable/uncountable issue, she has also written some common collocations with advice.

advice (U)

a word of advice

a piece of advice

give advice, take advice

Not only FOOD

The issue of countability and uncountability for nouns is often addressed at an elementary level and tied in with the topic of food. However, you needn’t restrict yourself to using food to teach about countability. Here are some other common uncountable nouns that might come up with low level learners:

Weather words: *wind, snow, rain, weather*

Words that could be linked to “school”: *homework, research, information, knowledge, history, education*

Travel words: *baggage, luggage, traffic, transport, tourist information, money*

Other words that could come up in an elementary class are *hair, advice* and *furniture*.

When one of these words comes up, it is worthwhile drawing learners’ attention to it and pointing out that it is an uncountable word (and therefore has no plural form)

Using texts

As with so many other grammar points, the issue of countability can be brought to learners’ attention through texts. Once

you have dealt with the meaning of a text (through comprehension questions for example), learners can be asked to find examples of different kinds of noun: a countable noun, an uncountable noun, a noun that can be both countable or uncountable. Attention can also be drawn to the determiners that precede the noun in each case.

Activities for teaching countability

Realia

One way to physically demonstrate countability and uncountability is through realia. Of course this is where food is the most obvious choice. Real objects can provide a stronger image of something than, say, a picture. To teach countability and uncountability a starting point would be to bring in a collection of different food items.

Once you have established that students know the words for the items, and before you tell them about countable/ uncountable, ask them to organise the foods into different categories. For example: *food you eat for breakfast, healthy food, food or drink, food you like/hate...*

Variations on the food theme

One classic grammar activity to practise countable/ uncountable nouns has been that of the open fridge. Students each have a picture of a fridge full of different food. They must find the differences in their pictures by asking questions, e.g.

How much butter have you got?

or

Have you got five oranges?

If you do not have a picture, you can equally make two lists of things in a fridge (less interesting, but it still works). But if you are tired of the fridge situation, here are variations you can use.

Supermarket Trolleys

Assign different “character roles” to students: the *vegetarian*, the *meat lover*, the *junk food addict*, the *Chinese food fan* etc. The students must not reveal their characters to the others. Tell them to make a list of what’s in their supermarket trolley. Then write the names of the characters on the board. The students must ask questions about what’s in the others’ trolleys to try and guess the character of the other person.

Miracle diet

Ask the students to work in groups and create a special “miracle diet”. They must create a typical day’s worth of food for someone following this diet. To give them further ideas you could prepare little cards, each with a food word on it (see below) Give each group one or two of these elements which they must incorporate into their diets.

Suggestions for “miracle diet” foods

rice

water

bananas

carrots

artichokes

tea

The picnic drill

Different kinds of drill can be used to practise countable/ uncountable nouns. The “Can I come to the picnic” drill is a common one. Tell students you are having a picnic and that they can come if they bring the right thing. Start by saying “I’m going on a picnic and I’m bringing some rice.” Students continue by repeating what you said and adding another word, e.g. “I’m going on a picnic and I’m bringing some rice and some chocolate.” If they say an uncountable noun, tell them that they are welcome to come. If they say a countable noun, tell them sorry, they can’t come. Continue this way until all the students have figured out the puzzle.

Hint: To make it extra hard, you could start by saying that you’re going on a picnic and you’re bringing some furniture, or luggage.

Insurance policy

Another situation that could bring out countable and uncountable nouns would be a visit to an insurance company. One student is the assessor, he/she must decide if other students are “worthy” of receiving a life insurance policy. To do so, he/she must ask questions to other students about their lifestyles. The questions would focus on the words much/ many and countable/ uncountable words.

For example

How much/many cigarettes do you smoke a day?

How much/many wine do you drink a week?

How much/many red meat do you eat a week?

How much/many exercise do you get every week?

How much/many hours do you sleep every night?

How much/many salt do you put on your food?

How much/many coffee do you drink a day?

etc.

Students interview their partners, then decide which one gets the life insurance policy. And which one(s) are uninsurable!

A glass vs. glass

Many nouns can be countable or uncountable, depending on whether we see them as units or as mass. For example *glass* (the material) and *a glass* (the thing you put juice or beer in). Several of these can be highlighted by using contrasting sentences.

For example:

She has short grey hair. She has a short grey hair.

We bought a coffee. We bought coffee.

I don't have any paper. I don't have a paper.

Is there potato in this dish? Is there a potato in this dish?

He had a fish for dinner. He had fish for dinner.

You can ask students to explain the difference between each pair of sentences (in English, or if their level isn't high enough to provide a translation into their own language).

Original metaphors

You can use lots of uncountable nouns to get students to create their own metaphors. Start by writing "Knowledge is power" on the board. Ask students to tell you 1) what they understand by the statement and 2) whether they agree or not

Then write the following words on the board:

intelligence

power

energy

love

baggage

information

money

peace

travel

failure

happiness

sadness

health

justice

Ask students to make as many sentences as they can using the same structure as *knowledge is power* i.e. Noun (U) is Noun (U). Once they have a good list, tell them to explain with examples why they chose those combinations.

For example, one class made the following links:

Information is power.

Love is sadness.

Money is love.

Peace is happiness.

Information is energy.

Higher level students can generate other metaphors using words they choose themselves.

Note: Many of the words in the list above are in fact countable nouns in other languages (baggage, information, knowledge...)