Grammar Module 1 (GM1)

Resource 2a: Trainer’s notes to accompany PowerPoint presentation

Trainer’s notes to accompany PowerPoint presentation

Title slide

Three questions included. All will be considered in the course of the module.

Slide 2

What is grammar?

Invite definitions and discuss whether these definitions will do.

Linguistics specialists have a different view of what grammar is. Slides 4–8 give a brief history of linguistic thinking on grammar and its role.

Slides 3–8

These slides may not be of interest to all language teachers, but provide the opportunity to delve a little more deeply into the relationship between language and grammar beyond the confines of the MFL classroom. Suggestions for further reading are provided at the end of these notes.

Descriptive grammar (De Saussure, Bloomfield, early 20th century) – The systematic study and description of a language as used by native speakers. Not concerned with meaning, just form.

Generative grammar (Chomsky, mid-late 20th century) – A set of statements or ‘rules’ which specify which statements in a language are possible and which impossible. Related to word categories and where they can fit in the sentence e.g. ‘noun – verb - noun’ makes an acceptable sentence:

The cat ate the mouse

If the verb was put in the ‘wrong’ place it would not be grammatically correct in English:

\*Ate the cat the mouse

This is obviously an over-simplification and there are many other factors to be considered, but the basic principle is sound.

Compare with Morecombe and Wise / André Previn sketch – the right notes but in the wrong order: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7yb-JncKow>

Transformational grammar – A system of grammatical analysis based on generative grammar that takes account of the existence of deep structure and surface structure, using a set of transformational rules to derive surface structure rules from deep structure.   
A ‘rule’ is a direction for forming a sentence which has been internalised by the native speaker.

The sentence ‘The boy saw the man with the telescope’ could have two different ‘deep structure’ meanings although the same surface structure.

The first tree diagram (slide 6) shows that the boy had the telescope since the preposition phrase ‘with the telescope’ is a discrete element of the verb phrase.

The second diagram (slide 7) shows how the grammatical structure would be different if the man had the telescope – the preposition phrase is part of the noun phrase, giving more information about the man.

Slide 8

Language teachers are mainly concerned with prescriptive grammar – the structure of a language as certain people think it should be used.

Points to consider – who decides? How can language evolve? Regional dialects? Is ‘regional grammar’ incorrect? Do these considerations only apply to FL1 or do they have implications for FL2?

Slide 9

Can learning grammar be compared with learning to play the piano? Invite participants to discuss in groups the quotes in Resource 2. Which of them, if any, do they agree with?

Discuss the questions posed in slide 10.

Slide 10

Consider David Crystal’s statement about the importance of grammar and compare it with the definitions in slide 3.

Slide 11: Why does grammar matter?

Slides 12–14

In a training situation, invite participants to work in groups to discuss why grammar matters and to choose three key reasons. Reasons offered by each group can be shared and discussed. Possible reasons which could be suggested include:

* Meaning (e.g. when the action took place, who was responsible, who was the recipient of the action)
* Avoidance of ambiguity (e.g. agreements)
* Clarity of expression
* Social status (educated speaker?)
* Stylistic effect (e.g. creative writing)

Give examples of all of the above or invite participants to suggest them.

Slide 14

Is there any difference between FL1 and FL2 in terms of the importance of grammar?

Consider how much tolerance of error there should be in FL2. May depend on the nature of the activity, the purpose of the activity, the level of the speaker, motivation etc.

Is communication all that matters – consider the situation, the motivation (integrative or instrumental), the effect etc. Look at some clips of non-native speakers speaking foreign languages and consider why they are doing it, how well they are doing it, and what the effect on native speaker might be:

Barack Obama speaking Spanish:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eK-l_0jVtEU&feature=related>

Tony Blair speaking French:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6Cu9187tCY&feature=relmfu>

Consider the relative importance of functional and social meaning.

When does how something is said matter just as much as what is said? How important are social conventions? How tolerant are native speakers of social mistakes?

Is the aim to sound as close as possible to a native speaker?

Slides 15–16

Are some languages easier to learn than others?

Before showing slide 16, give each group a set of cards with different languages on them and ask them to rank the languages in terms of how difficult they would be for a native English speaker to learn. You may like to discuss whether the same level of difficulty would apply if a native speaker of a different language were to learn them.

Compare lists and discuss reasons.

Slide 16

Consider the theory of Universal Grammar – we are all born with an innate understanding of ‘grammar’ and as we are exposed to our own language, we apply the appropriate parameters. This is what Roger Bacon means by ‘the essential properties of Grammar’.

Does this have implications for learning FL2? Do we have to take a different approach after the critical age? What different skills do we have later to replace/ build on (e.g. cognitive, analytical, reasoning)?

Extension task, if required: Where does bilingualism fit into this?

Slide 17

Contrastive linguistics – looks at comparisons between languages to find similarities and dissimilarities.

Genetic similarities – language families, e.g. Germanic, Romance languages

Implicational universals – languages which operate in a particular way in one respect (e.g. formation of future tense) are likely to show predictable similarities in other respects.

Learners usually have difficulties in areas where FL2 is different from FL1. Invite examples.

Some examples might be:

* Word order
* Case structure
* Formation and use of tenses
* Moods
* Gender
* Politeness

Affective factors – attitudes to certain languages and cultures may also affect learning. Connotations, empathy with native speakers etc. Think about how this affects motivation.

Consider which of the grammatical/linguistic and affective factors are significant for native English speakers learning French, German or Spanish.

Slide 18

Should this affect what we offer students?

Can this understanding help our teaching?

Invite participants to work in groups. Each group should give one example of an area of difficulty and how they might deal with the difficulty, taking account of grammatical and/or affective factors.

How important is intercultural understanding in relation to affective factors?

Slides 19–20

Statements from KS2 Framework Year 6.

Is this what we expect from KS3 and KS4 learners?

Suggested further reading

Transcripts of interviews with eminent linguists – Steven Pinker and David Crystal

<http://wordsmith.org/chat/pinker.html>

<http://wordsmith.org/chat/dc.html>

Chomsky’s innate language theory: <http://www.chomsky.info/onchomsky/199812--.pdf>

A comprehensive and readable introduction to studying language from a linguistic perspective. Not to be read in its entirety, but a good first chapter on grammar:

Fromkin, V. and Rodman, R. (1997, 6th edition) *An Introduction to Language* (Thomson Learning)

Theories of second language learning – strong linguistic bias, but some interesting insights for language teachers:

Cook, V. (1993) *Linguistics and Second Language Acquisition* (Macmillan)

Mitchell, R. and Myles, F. (1998) *Second Language Learning Theories* (Arnold)

An anthropological investigation into the evolution of language – very interesting and readable:

Dunbar, R. (2004) *Grooming, Gossip and the Evolution of Language* (Faber and Faber)

Linguistics and psychology:

Jackendoff, R. (1993) *Patterns in the Mind* (Harvester Wheatsheaf)

Pinker, S. (2003 paperback) *The Language Instinct* (Penguin Science)