Grammar modules
(GM1 and GM2)

CfBT Secondary training activities and resources

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The What, Why and How of Grammar

These two modules on grammar are designed to be either freestanding, or to be looked at as a two-part package. Elements of them can also be incorporated into the Pedagogy modules, particularly spontaneous speaking. They could be used in small chunks in departmental meetings or could be used by a trainer in a session of two or three hours. They could even be extended to cover a whole day’s training if that is what is required.

The first module may contain more linguistic information than some language teachers are comfortable with, so trainers may wish to take selected elements of module 1 and use them as an introduction to module 2. On the other hand it may be an opportunity to involve a linguistics tutor from an HE partner institution, or English language A Level teachers.

Pre-session tasks are suggested for each module to maximise the training time available and to encourage teachers to begin the thinking process before arriving at the session.

Module 1 – What is Grammar?

This module looks at grammar from a general linguistic perspective and sets the whole notion of grammar in a wider context than how to apply rules. Grammar in the most general sense of the word is intrinsic to all forms of human language and the underlying principles explored in this module are considered in the context of both first and second language acquisition. It gives teachers the opportunity to stand back from the prescriptive grammar which tends to dominate our thinking as language teachers and indulge in some philosophical discussion about the nature of language itself.

Such notions as Universal Grammar, the innateness of language, surface and deep structure, and contrastive analysis have informed linguistic thinking over the past century in particular and, although they are unlikely to be discussed in the MFL classroom, they have to a greater or lesser extent influenced trends in MFL teaching.

Learning grammar rules could likened to learning to play the piano. The starting point has to be learning to play the correct notes in the correct order, but if the student does not progress beyond playing the dots on the page to developing an emotional response to the music and having a ‘feel’ for what is being played, it will lack that spark which takes it beyond being a mechanical exercise. The ultimate goal must surely be to lead language students to that point, the point where they have a ‘feel’ for the language, where they enjoy the beauty of it and apply the rules almost instinctively. Of course this is unlikely to be achieved at an early stage in the language learning process, but it is the teacher’s enthusiasm and love of the language which has to be transmitted to the students in order to encourage them through the early, less emotionally engaging, stages of the language learning process when they are learning to play the dots on the page.

Module 2 – The Why and How of Grammar

The second module looks at more familiar territory:

* What is the purpose of grammar?
* How important is it in the context of MFL teaching?
* How accurate do I want my students to be?
* How do I deal with error?
* Am I looking for competence or performance?
* What do we mean by ‘spontaneous speaking’?
* How can we teach grammar in an interesting and ‘communicative’ way?
* How ‘authentic’ do the activities have to be?

The whole notion of ‘communicative’ language teaching is re-evaluated, as is the use of ‘authentic’ tasks and materials. Sample activities are given in a range of languages and should provide a basis for discussion and a springboard from which teachers can develop their own ideas and materials.

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**The What, Why and How of Grammar?**

**Pre-session tasks**

Module 1 – What is Grammar?

Before attending the session participants should be asked to do a web search on ‘grammar’ and see how many different types of ‘grammar’ they can find.

They should then consider how many of these are relevant in the MFL classroom. They can be divided into at least two categories:

* Those which are relevant for the teacher as background knowledge to give a deeper understanding of the nature of language and the mental gymnastics the brain is being asked to perform
* Those which are directly relevant to the students’ understanding of why they are being asked to perform certain tasks.

Examples should be given of each category.

Module 2 – The Why and How of Grammar

Two or three weeks before attending the training session, participants should be asked to reflect on at least one activity they are using in their class and to consider the following:

* What is the purpose of this activity?
* Is it pre-communicative or communicative?
* Is it ‘authentic’ in any sense of the word?
* If not, will it lead to an ‘authentic’ activity?
* How central is an understanding of grammar, or at least a particular grammar point to the activity?
* How much correction of grammar am I doing / should I be doing?

Participants should be prepared to share and discuss the activity with other members of the group.