What is grammar?

http://englishagenda.britishcouncil.org/content/what-grammar-michael-swan

1. What exactly is grammar?
2. What you can say without grammar
3. What you can’t say without grammar
4. The three language problems that grammar solves
5. How languages became so complex
6. The benefits of understanding why we need grammar

Michael Swan

1. Introduction

Have you ever considered what the English language would be like if there was no grammar? Or why in fact we need grammar in the first place? In this entertaining seminar, Michael Swan illustrates why grammar exists and invites you to answer these questions through a selection of fun tasks.

2. Session summary and objectives

Grammar needn’t be a heavy or boring subject within English language teaching. Michael Swan helps us understand why we need grammar in a language and what grammar actually does. He talks about how grammar is essential when forming relationships in language and when dealing with the matter of modality. He shows how it isn’t enough to simply have vocabulary in order to communicate effectively, but you need grammar as well. He also explains in a straightforward way why grammar tends to be complex.

3. Who is this session for?

- All trainee and novice English language teachers looking for a good introduction on what grammar is about
- Teacher trainers who are working with pre-service teachers or who provide novice-level in-service English language teacher training

4. About the speaker

Michael Swan is a well-known writer in ELT, famous for the grammar books he has written. His works includes Practical English Usage, Basic English Usage, and a number of course books. He was awarded the ELTons Lifetime Achievement Award in 2014.

5. Before you watch

1. What is grammar? How would you answer this question?
2. Why do you think grammar is complex?

If possible, debate these questions with another English teacher before watching the seminar. Then find out what Michael Swan says in his talk.
6. Real life practice

**Task**

Consider the three grammatical functions presented in Michael Swan’s seminar: ordering, modifying words and the use of grammatical words.

Over the next few lessons that you teach, consider how the main grammar point of the lesson links to one or other of these three functions. Keep a written record that you can refer to afterwards, perhaps within the table suggested below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Ordering</th>
<th>Modifying words</th>
<th>Grammatical words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The order of grammar words to convey meaning, e.g. ‘big bear’ (not ‘bear big’); ‘I like it’ (as different from ‘It likes me’); or question versus statement (‘I like … ’ versus ‘Do you like … ?’)</td>
<td>Using word endings to change meaning e.g. ‘s’ in ‘goes’ or ‘-ing’ ‘going’.</td>
<td>Functional words to convey meaning, relevant for all phrasal verbs and prepositional verbs phrases, e.g. consider the difference between ‘get on’ ‘get off’, ‘get on with’, etc.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Grammar point/s in my lesson

Grammar point/s in my lesson

Afterwards, reflect on these learning points, and ideally discuss them with a peer:

- Was it always easy to identify which box in the table best defined the grammar point you were teaching? If not, why not?
- Afterwards, reflect on these learning points, and ideally discuss them with a peer.

7. Top tips

1. If you haven’t done so already, read one or more of Michael Swan’s grammar books, for example ‘Practical English Usage’ or ‘How English Works: a Grammar Practice’.
2. In addition to this seminar, watch the other Michael Swan seminar in the British Council seminar series called ‘Some things that matter in grammar teaching and some things that don’t’. It links nicely with this one.
3. Confidence in teaching grammar comes with study and repeat practice in the classroom. These are key to improving your grammatical knowledge. Never stop reflecting on what you teach and considering how English grammar works.
4. Always teach grammar in a way that is purposeful and meaningful, and even better, when possible, make it fun for students. Try to link teaching grammar to your students’ interests and own lives.
5. As we all know, the kind of teacher you are greatly influences the way students respond to learning. So if you are positive, energetic and enthusiastic about English grammar your students will benefit from this and respond positively. If grammar bores you, disguise this fact!

8. Staffroom discussion

During the talk you were introduced to three grammatical functions:

- ordering
- Modifying words
- Grammatical words

1. Do you agree that all grammatical purposes can be put in one or other of these categories?
2. To what extent has the talk clarified the purpose of grammar to you?