

12 The grammar movie project

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Abstract

In this case study, I will show how directing a movie on grammar can help students improve their oral skills as well as their language competency, team working and planning skills, and also teach them about learning itself. I will present an innovative teaching project that uses the medium of film to get students engaged with grammar and that aims at providing them with a form of assessment that makes revision by the students possible and gives control of the final version to the student.

Keywords: movie, language awareness, teamwork, collaboration, creativity, grammar, revision, exam preparation.

1. Context/rationale

Following the urge to modernise assessment methods for a second year German language degree course at the University of Bristol, the language team of the German Department in the School of Modern Languages developed a new method for oral exams. The tutor-led oral exam for students of German has been replaced with a group-based project, the grammar movie project. Previously, the German oral exam had consisted of a 10 minute talk/discussion about newspaper or magazine articles and took place on an individual basis in the tutors' offices. The mark was thus a result of a one-off, 10 minute performance without the opportunity for the student to revise, go over his/her performance and with little

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chance to prepare properly as mock-exams with the teacher would be too time and labour intensive.

2. Aims and objectives

The aim of our oral exam revamp was to come up with a form of assessment that:

- incorporates outcomes of modern research into pedagogy and learning;
- allows for the use of new media;
- gives the students an opportunity to rehearse, practise and use feedback from peers to improve their oral production before handing in the final work for marking;
- combines several aspects of the curriculum;
- takes the student from solitary confinement to a helpful team working environment;
- invites the students to reflect on their own learning;
- boosts student enthusiasm through the use of new media and the creative freedom of the project;
- increases employability: organisation and teamwork skills are a highly sought after assets on the job market and many previous students mentioned that listing the project on their CVs has resulted in very positive feedback from employers.

With this project, we combined the oral exam with other fields from the curriculum and decided to address grammar needs directly. There is significant dispute amongst scholars whether grammar should be taught explicitly or

whether grammar awareness comes with exposure to language. Research into the subject provides evidence for both sides of the argument (Ellis, 2006; Norris & Ortega, 2000). Irrespective of which side one is on, everyday life proves that teachers are faced with the conundrum that instructed knowledge can often be reproduced and rattled off by students but is not incorporated into active language production.

3. What I did

Once our students reach the second year of their German degree, they should all have a substantial knowledge of German grammar, but reality is different and leaves the teacher in a dilemma: how do we make sure that the teaching caters for everyone's needs? These are the needs of the grammar geek who knows even the smallest detail and also the needs of students who find it very hard, struggle and tend to blank out grammar altogether. This dilemma is largely due to the different approaches to grammar teaching the students have been exposed to in the wide variety of schools that they have come from before they all join the same language course at university level. The grammar movie project was started in 2010 to tackle this with an innovative student-friendly teaching approach that utilises new media, respects different learning styles and learning backgrounds and sets an example as a multi-dimensional approach to grammar learning.

After a short exercise-based repetition of the most important grammar topics in the first teaching block, the students are split into groups of two to three and have to select one of those already familiar grammar topics, but are advised to choose –under the guidance of their tutor– the one they feel is their weakest point. Exercising their own creativity, the students are asked (outside class hours) to produce a 5-8 minute educative and instructive video in the target language that is meant to explain the characteristics and important features of their chosen grammar topic. This movie is then part of a 15-20 minute grammar teaching session, which is fully managed and led by the students, who also have to support their session with exercises they see fit to strengthen further what they

have just taught. Putting together a concise hand-out explaining the grammar topic in a way that helped them themselves to understand their topic is also part of the assignment. In order to help students who find keeping to a strict schedule hard or who might have worked away on the wrong tangent, all teams have to meet with the teacher a week before they are due to present. At that point, they have to present their plans and submit their hand-outs. By doing this, the teacher can make sure that hand-outs are fit to be given to the rest of the class and that the team is on track.

The presentation itself includes a short introduction to the grammar topic, the showing of the grammar movie and several exercises. All of this is to be done by the students; they become teachers for the period of the presentation and also for a short while again when grammar specific homework, which is always given to the class at the end of each grammar movie presentation, is corrected at the beginning of the next class. A substantial reflective journal about their experiences, learning processes and outcomes has to be handed in to the lecturer at the end. Each year, tutors then select suitable videos to be incorporated in their year 1 grammar teaching, often as part of our online grammar course. In order to make sure that all teachers on the course are aware of the research background, the underlying teaching methodology, the guidelines, and specific staff training are offered. Furthermore, members of staff are encouraged to participate in conferences and seminars suitable to the field.

3.1. Guidelines and marking criteria

Clear guidelines are mandatory for the success of the project. Student feedback from previous years, results of meetings with fellow lecturers teaching the unit, and questions and advice from scholars met at conferences and international seminars where the grammar movie project was presented (such as the 8th LLAS e-learning symposium) are all incorporated and we are still improving the project. Whereas students were given oral instructions in the first year of the project, they are now supplied with a multi-page handbook with all the guidelines, clear instructions, tips where to get help and support (other

than the teacher), rental equipment for the filming, helpful links and ideas for further reading. The handbook also contains a breakdown of the weighing of the grammar movie project within the framework of the course and of the project itself. It is crucial for the success of the project that the students are informed about the weighing of the sets of criteria and that they know about the marking criteria in the first place. Experience from previous years has shown that some students get carried away with the artistic side of the project and are oblivious to the fact that even though the artistic aspect does count –albeit for only 10%–, the grammar movie project is not a unit in Film Studies but first and foremost a German language assessment. Explaining the reasoning behind the aims and objectives of the project to the students, talking them through it and highlighting the ‘whys’ and ‘hows’ improves the student experience and means that they, at the same time, get another chance to learn about their own learning.

The grammar movie project is predominantly a group project, and aspects of group collaboration, collaborative thinking about the best way to achieve the criteria and reaching the common goal as well as tackling obstacles on this way together (such as pronunciation, vocabulary, intonation, spelling and grammatical accuracy but also technical aspects such as cutting, sound, putting the handout together, time management and the creative site as a whole) are central to the project. Thus, the mark awarded goes out to the group as a whole. This also encourages students to help each other perform better. Only the final reflective report is marked for the individual student.

The main focus of attention is on oral performance. The students are urged to speak during the movie; there must not be silent characters or students that only fulfil the role of director or camera man. Instructions in the grammar movie guidelines and also verbal instructions during class are making it very clear that the students are in charge; they decide which version of their movie they present. Thus, they are given the opportunity to revise and rework their project as many times as they want until they then agree on a final version on which the mark is going to be based. The previous version of their oral exam did not offer this opportunity to revise, to fine-tune aspects of pronunciation or intonation

by recording sections again or to eliminate mistakes altogether by using the knowledge pool of the entire group. Different levels of language skills and awareness within the groups will lead to the opportunity for correction amongst peers without the inclusion of a teacher. The use of digital video recording equipment allows multiple recordings of which the students can then choose the one they are most happy with. This selection process is again a process of critical reflection, of dealing with language in an analytical way, selecting their best version.

3.2. Feedback and feed-forward

After their presentation, the students are invited to an extensive feedback session, both as a group and as individuals. The tutor incorporates material from the reflective reports into the session, thus encouraging the students once again to reflect on their own learning experience and performance. Besides talking about the overall presentation, they are also given written feedback on their oral performance and feed-forward.

4. Discussion

In 2013, the project was evaluated with a comprehensive questionnaire, the results of which have led to improvements of the project and the handbook. In the following, I will present the results of this questionnaire as well as excerpts of the reflective reports and answers to the open questions. [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#) illustrating the results are given below. Due to the small numbers of students each year, the number of completed questionnaire is low at 29, but nonetheless representative of the cohort as most students returned the questionnaire.

The evidence of the questionnaire backed up by observation during the project itself shows clearly that the students reflect on their own language skills and also shows willingness to improve them. 80%, for example, selected their grammar topic on the basis of what they found hard or usually struggled with.

Figure 1. Effects of the grammar movie project

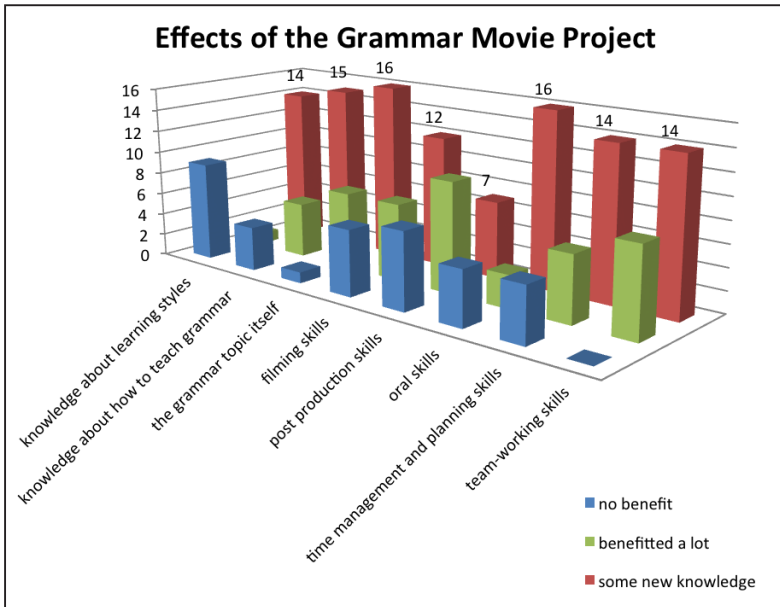
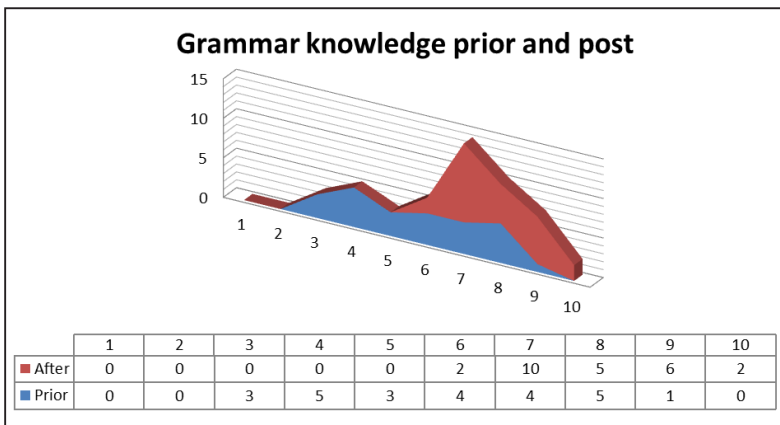


Figure 2. Self-assessment of grammar knowledge prior and post grammar movie project; the students had to rate their knowledge, 1 being the lowest score, 10 the score reflecting the highest level of knowledge



Thorough understanding of the subject is a prerequisite for teaching and encourages students to dig deep into grammar: it is intrinsic motivation to know more. When asked to estimate their knowledge about their specific grammar topic prior and post project, a significant increase can be seen in the data set (see [Figure 1](#) and [Figure 2](#)).

By being put in the teaching role, the students have to talk about and apply logical connections, grammatical classifications and useful terms, and are no longer mere sponges but are encouraged to engage critically with the material.

The results also highlight that the students could gain team-working skills as well as other important skills such as time management. Because the project involves various stages, and through its nature requires good structuring (as not only the filming but also the cutting and editing take up a lot of time), many students mentioned that they would take away valuable lessons.

The students themselves are in charge of their final version: they are actively encouraged to re-record passages they are not happy with, to discuss how their project can be improved and to only hand in/present what they consider to be their best piece. 88% used the opportunity to re-record passages to improve their performance. This aspect was also mentioned numerous times in the reflective reports:

“As we filmed, we noticed errors and room for improvement and honed the performance” (A.E., 2013).

“We completed each part of our project in good time ensuring we had enough time to overview and edit any work that we produced. This gave us a good opportunity to analyse our oral performance and encouraged us to listen carefully for our own and others’ grammar mistakes. The filming process was also useful to improve listening skills and to help focus on accuracy in speaking, particularly word order that I am aware can be a frequent source of errors in my spoken language” (A.B., 2013).

“The language skills that we practiced will undoubtedly be useful in future study, not only the grammar we learnt but also the ability to speak clearly and more fluently” (A.S., 2013).

That the project also led to an improvement in their oral skills is underlined by the students’ self-assessment: 67% were of the opinion that their oral skills had improved because of the project.

The results of the students’ self-evaluation show that through completing the grammar movie project, the students not only enhanced their grammar knowledge and language awareness but also their agility in using the language. There was a clear increase in their self-assessed level of grammar knowledge. That this is not just theoretical knowledge but rather language awareness was emphasised by the students numerous times in their written reports.

“The filming process was also useful to improve listening skills and to help focus on accuracy in speaking, particularly word order that I am aware can be a frequent source of errors in my spoken language. As a result I feel our presentation was much more grammatically accurate due to an increased awareness of the errors we regularly make” (A.B., 2013).

“I feel that by writing a script we came across vocabulary and grammar structures that we weren’t certain of so we really had to take time to work it out, thus we practiced grammar we found difficult and learnt new vocabulary” (A.S., 2013).

“Having to explain a topic to others really requires you to fully understand the grammar yourself in the first place, and this exercise highlighted where I needed to brush up on my grammar myself!” (I.A., 2013).

“I had to learn anything I didn’t fully understand in order to put it into my own words and explain it” (E.S., 2013).

“We were able to collect as much information as possible through research and revision (online, in grammar books and previous class notes and work) then continually revisit and edit our tutorial to make it accurate, comprehensive and with as few mistakes as possible” (I.A., 2013).

“From my own topic I’ve learnt that I understand and retain grammar rules much more efficiently by contextualising them in realistic situations or dialogue, and will be sure to do this when I come to revise for the summer exams” (F.P., 2014).

5. Conclusion

A major question in language methodology is ‘does it help to know the rule in order to use grammar correctly?’ (Schulz, 2002¹). The results of teaching with the grammar movie project in place as an assessment method that combines grammar revision with an oral assessment clearly show that “reflecting on language use and using language do not have to be opposites” (Hutz, 2006, p. 22).

The results prove this: selective grammar teaching can lead to building language awareness, if it is carried out according to the age and learning level of the learner and provides ample opportunity and space for exploration and trial and error. The grammar movie project agrees with the current trend of incorporating a discussion of grammatical structures in the communicative context thereby encouraging the learner to become aware of the relation between meaning and form. But the benefits of the project do not stop here: working on this multi-faceted project, the students acquire additional transferable skills, such as team-working, problem-management, time-management and software-skills. The results of the questionnaire so far are proof for the success of the project in various aspects of the university curriculum.

1. Article title originally in German.

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