Chapter 5
Syntax Rules and (Un)Grammaticality

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ABSTRACT
This chapter deals with syntax rules and grammaticality judgments in the teaching and learning of English as a second and foreign language for linguistically diverse learners. Grammaticality judgment tasks are used in linguistic research to probe speakers’ implicit knowledge about the syntactic rules of language. This chapter discusses grammaticality judgment tasks in educational contexts and proposes a method for teaching syntactic rules of English based on the grammaticality judgments of second and foreign language learners of English. The chapter also attempts to raise grammatical consciousness for teaching of English as a second or foreign language as well as illustrating how various media can be used to design and present grammaticality judgment tasks to support language learning and learner engagement, participation, and motivation.

WHAT IS (UN)GRAMMATICALITY?
This chapter is framed theoretically within generative grammar, dating back to the early works of Noam Chomsky (see Chomsky 1957, 1965 and later works). Since the first version of generative grammar in the 1950s, the theory has developed and been known as Transformational Grammar, Government and Binding Theory, the Principles and Parameters approach, Minimalism etc. As the proposal is not framed within any specific branch of the theory, the generic term Generative Grammar will be used throughout the chapter. The theory presented here is a simplified and slightly adapted version which aims to capture core aspects of generative grammar of relevance to language teaching and learning. For more elaborate descriptions of generative grammar, the reader is referred to Haegeman (1994) for an introduction to

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An important concept in Generative Grammar that is central to this chapter is (un)grammaticality. (Un)grammaticality refers to the well-formedness of a sentence, that is whether a sentence is constructed according to the grammatical rules of a language. An English sentence that follows the grammatical rules of English is categorized as grammatical, whereas a sentence that violates the grammatical rules is categorized as ungrammatical. For example, the sentences in (1) are well-formed; they follow the grammatical rules of English and are thus grammatical. By contrast, the sentences in (2) are ill-formed; they are not constructed according to the grammatical rules of English and are thus ungrammatical. In linguistics, an asterisk (*) is used to indicate that a sentence is ungrammatical.

(1) a. Elena bought milk.
    b. The children sleep quietly in their beds.
    c. Do the children sleep quietly in their beds?

(2) a. *Elena bought. / *Bought milk.
    b. *The children sleeps quietly in their beds.
    c. *Sleep the children quietly in their beds?

(1a) and (2a) concern rules of argument structure. The verb buy is transitive and requires two arguments: a subject (Elena) and an object (milk). Violating this grammatical rule makes the sentence ungrammatical. (1b) and (2b) illustrate rules of subject-verb agreement. A 3rd person plural subject (the children) needs to agree with the verb in number, in this case plural (sleep). Incorrect subject-verb agreement, as illustrated by the 3rd person singular -s (sleeps) in (2b), makes the sentence ungrammatical. (1c) and (2c) illustrate rules of question formation in English. Yes-/No-questions are formed with do-support. Violating this grammatical rule, for example by trying to form a yes-/no-question by fronting the finite verb (which is common in the other Germanic languages), as in (2c), makes the sentence ungrammatical.

(Un)grammaticality relates to and needs to be contrasted against another important concept in Generative Grammar, (un)acceptability. Whereas (un)grammaticality concerns whether a sentence is formed according to the grammar of a particular language, as formulated by linguists, (un)acceptability concerns native speakers’ intuitions about a sentence, that is what the speakers find appropriate. As acceptability generally follows from grammaticality, (un)acceptability and (un)grammaticality often, but not always, coincide. The sentences in (1) above are both grammatical and accepted by native speakers of English, whereas the sentences in (2) are both ungrammatical and not accepted by native speakers. However, a sentence can be grammatical but still not be accepted by native speakers. A classic example is shown in (3), taken from Chomsky (1957, p. 17). The sentence is syntactically well-formed but semantically ill-formed. Ideas cannot be green and colorless at the same time, and they cannot sleep. Also, one cannot sleep furiously. Native speakers may thus not accept the sentence due to its strange meaning. Syntactically, however, the sentence is well-formed.

(3) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
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