

## Grammar-Based Teaching: A Practitioner's Perspective

Betty Azar  
<bazar@whidbey.com>

### Abstract

This article addresses the role of grammar in second language instruction from the point of view of a longtime practitioner. It outlines the basic methods and assumptions underlying Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT), which the author sees as an effective, ever-evolving, and widespread pedagogical practice. The article discusses the importance of fundamental understandings of grammar concepts to effective language use by native and non-native speakers alike and explains that GBT engenders conceptual awareness of language structures even as it focuses on morphological particulars. Distinctions are made between GBT and other ways of including a grammar component in L2 curricula. With the fading of the naturalist movement in language teaching, the author sees a blending of GBT with Communicative Language Teaching and growing accord among academics and practitioners in terms of the positive role grammar teaching can play in balanced programs of second language instruction.

### Through the Eyes of a Practitioner

*Do both.* Those are the two words I write most often in margins when I read academic articles about the teaching of grammar in second-language instruction. Focus on fluency or accuracy? Do both, in proper balance given the students' needs and goals. Have students work with grammar structures inductively or deductively? Do both: you never know where any particular student's "Aha!" is going to come from. Use authentic or adapted language? Students need both. Work with sentence-level vs. connected-discourse material? Both can have good pedagogical purpose and effect. Engage in open-ended communicative interaction or controlled response exercises? Both are beneficial for students. Explicit instruction or communicative exposure? Both. "[F]ocus on awareness rather than performance" in teaching grammar? (Ellis, 2002, p. 29). My handwritten note in the margin: *Do both.*

These "do-both notes" I write to myself in margins reflect, I believe, a fundamental difference between the perspectives of what I will call "academics" and "practitioners." By academics, I mean those whose focus is on research and theory. By practitioners, I mean teachers and materials writers. By academics, I mean those who study and write about the teaching of language. By practitioners, I mean those

who actually teach language. The academic focuses on analysis: It is the nature of research that one has to divide the subject of study into component parts so that they can be measured and compared. The practitioner focuses on synthesis: The real classroom is a complex arena where teachers tend towards eclecticism and pragmatism in blending various practices and principles. Many in our field, of course, are both academics and practitioners. But by my definition, I am not.

I say all this by way of introduction to explain that I am solely a practitioner and that my goal in this article is to present a practitioner's view of the role of grammar in second language instruction. I am not a researcher. I have no empirical data related to the use of my materials. Since I published my first textbook in 1981, several millions of English language students have used the grammar-based materials that I have written. I do not know why. To my knowledge, no one has ever researched why students and teachers use my textbooks in such large numbers and what the learner outcomes are. I have considerable anecdotal input from users and have my theories, of course, but, rather than research, my full-time energies and skills go into materials development.

From my practitioner's perspective, I will outline in this article the basic methods and assumptions underlying a widespread practice in our field: Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT). In my reading of academic literature today, I perceive that many academics now agree that those in the naturalist movement (most prominently Stephen Krashen) were mistaken in advocating zero grammar. As just one example, I would cite a recent Ellis article in *TESOL Quarterly* that states that there "is ample evidence to demonstrate the teaching of grammar works" (2006, p. 102). A consensus in favor of including grammar in L2 curricula does, at last, seem to have solidly formed, and to me that means the academic community has become more in line with the practitioner community vis-à-vis the teaching of grammar. Through the eyes of many practitioners, grammar teaching is vibrantly alive and well (and has been throughout our careers), ever-evolving in innovative ways, and an integral component of effective second-language instruction for many students.

## **The Nature of Language and Concepts of Grammar**

One important aspect of grammar teaching is that it helps learners discover the nature of language, i.e., that language consists of predictable patterns that make what we say, read, hear and write intelligible. Without grammar, we would have only individual words or sounds, pictures, and body expressions to communicate meaning. Grammar is the weaving that creates the fabric. One of the reasons I begin my upper-level textbook, *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, with the entire English verb tense/aspect system is to demonstrate that language has grand and wonderful patterns and to convey that grammar is not just "rules." (Indeed, "rules" is a word I, as a grammar-materials writer, use only in connection with spelling. I do not see teaching grammar as teaching "rules.")

Along with an understanding of the nature of language, one of the principal benefits of GBT is that it helps students gain an understanding of grammar concepts: concepts such as subordination and coordination; concepts of expressing time relationships through the use of verb forms; concepts of nouns and adjectives, subjects and verbs, clauses and phrases. Students can understand grammar concepts with simplified terminology, with a minimum of metalanguage and grammatical

analysis, and even without definition of key terms such as *noun* or *verb*. In my grammar materials, for example, I use but do not define the terms *noun* and *verb*; I just show students how these grammar components work in patterns of English to convey meaning.

The conceptual nature of teaching grammar is a fundamental element of GBT; however, it seems to me, it is often overlooked in the discussions of the values of grammar teaching. One place it is not overlooked is in Mulroy's *The War Against Grammar* (2003). Mulroy analyzes how the lack of grammar instruction in U.S. school curricula during the naturalist movement heyday adversely affected native-speaker students' ability to use English as best they could, principally, he argues, because of students' lack of an understanding of what language is and lack of concepts (not rules, but concepts) of grammar.

In my teaching experience, almost nothing is more difficult than trying to explain to a student with no concept of grammar where to put a period or why a certain verb form is needed. I am referring to some Generation 1.5 students I have encountered in my university classrooms, students with four or eight or more years of schooling in the United States (and a high school diploma) whose written English does not meet the academic expectations of a university, though their speaking and listening could be described as fluent and communicative (but with fossilized ungrammaticality).[1] Many of these students have profound difficulties in producing university-level academic writing. For them, accuracy did not "just happen," not even after many years in the U.S. school system.

I observed that many of my Generation 1.5 students with no concept of grammar also found it difficult to grasp principles of rhetoric. Students who cannot understand how a sentence is structured also cannot readily see how one sentence relates to another or how the sentences in a paragraph relate. So in addition to writing problems, these students have difficulty with academic reading. In short, they have difficulty seeing beneath the surface of the words to the complexity of the ideas expressed in complex, interrelated language structures. Mulroy (2003) forwards some excellent arguments for the teaching of grammar to anyone who uses language—which is, of course, everyone.

Sentences always have and always will consist of clauses with subjects and predicates and of words that fall into classes fairly well described as verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, and interjections. Individuals who understand these concepts have a distinct advantage over others where the use of language is involved—and that means everywhere. (p. 118)

I agree with him.[2] Those who wish to use a language to the best of their ability, and especially those who wish to use a language well in academic discourse, are helped by fundamental understandings of its grammar, native speaker and non-native speaker alike.

### **Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT) vs. Focus on Form (FonF)**

Grammar teaching has received renewed attention in academic circles since the late 1980s or early 1990s, when the naturalist movement began to fade. This attention

has generally taken on the nomenclature of Focus on Form (FonF), even though a focus on grammar includes a great deal more than simply a focus on form. Form and meaning are inseparable, especially in any worthwhile L2 grammar instruction. Basically, FonF, in my understanding, seeks ways of introducing grammar instruction into Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which is often content- or task-based.

Both GBT and FonF blend grammar and communicative teaching, but approach the integration of grammar into a curriculum differently. Generally speaking, FonF seeks to integrate a grammar component into a CLT curriculum. GBT seeks to integrate CLT into a structural syllabus, usually in one class (often called a grammar class) within a larger, varied curriculum. Simply stated, the issue facing practitioners today is whether (1) to teach grammar separately but integrated with CLT methods and materials as one component out of many in a well-balanced program of second language instruction, or (2) to integrate grammar into a content- and/or task-focused approach, either incidentally as opportunities arise (reactively) or by a predetermined grammar syllabus (proactively).

Though I have limited experience with FonF, I have taught variations of it, most notably in some basal series and in composition classes. For reactive teaching of grammar in composition classes, I would excerpt common errors from the students' writing and use them for a grammar-teaching segment within the composition syllabus. However, it was not difficult to notice that semester after semester students made the same errors, so I decided it would be more efficient and effective to prepare a grammar syllabus to integrate into the writing syllabus in a systematic way. I still did reactive FonF teaching, but I found it more effective when combined with proactive FonF teaching. For example, after the class had covered subject-verb agreement in proactive FonF, I found reactive FonF teaching of that grammar point easier and more efficient in that students just needed a quick reminder or recast.

I observed that students in my writing class who had experienced grammar instruction had an advantage over those students who had not. Students with a good grounding in grammar needed only to be reminded that, for example, they were trying to say "I was really bored" not "I was really boring." Those without that grounding in grammar needed a lot more teaching time in order to understand, just as one example, the difference between *-ing* and *-ed* adjectives. Students with numerous problems in structure usage but without grounding in grammar concepts were, unfortunately and heartbreakingly, often unable to reach the level of academic language skill they needed to continue their university studies. In sum, I observed that FonF worked well for students with a good grounding in grammar. However, it was not, in my experience, sufficient for students lacking basic concepts of how English works, and especially not sufficient for those without an understanding of the nature of language itself, as is the case with certain Generation 1.5 students.

My experience tells me that placing specific grammar structures within their larger conceptual framework is more helpful to students than a random, piecemeal approach to explicit grammar teaching. Let's continue with the example of participial adjectives. If students already understand that *-ing* can signify the active meaning of a transitive verb and that the *-ed* can signify a passive meaning (whether they know the terminology or not), the difference between *boring* and *bored* becomes less difficult for the teacher to demonstrate or the student to grasp than if the student

had no understanding of active vs. passive meanings.

Indeed, Williams and Evans (1998, p. 152) suggest that participial adjectives can be "easily sorted out" in a FonF approach and imply that one explicit "straightforward explanation" can suffice. However, from my experience, I would conjecture that Williams and Evans would find participial adjectives "easily sorted out" only when students already understand the passive meaning conveyed by *-ed* verbs, and even then, in my experience, "one straightforward explanation" of participial adjectives is not easily accomplished by a teacher or textbook and is rarely sufficient for students who have confusion on this point. The success of a FonF lesson on participial adjectives would depend, in my experience, on students' already having a good foundation in the concept of the passive in English.

To me, the passive is a good example of how GBT allows students the necessary exposure, experience and time to grasp a grammar concept, while FonF does not allow the same learning opportunities. As Williams and Evans note, the passive is a complex teaching task, not quickly nor easily done in a FonF approach. They acknowledge that the passive "cannot be grasped by virtue of one straightforward explanation" (1998, p. 152). When, as a teacher, I would finish a unit on the passive in my GBT classes (perhaps five or six hours of teaching time), I felt the students had a good grasp of the passive, one that would help them interpret what they read and help them better say what they meant as their experience and facility in English grew over time.

FonF certainly has a place in second language teaching. And so does GBT. The variables are many as to which approach is best suited to the students: teachers need to take into consideration the course purposes and the best use of available teaching time. They need to consider the students' learning preferences, educational and grammar backgrounds, skill level, and academic or work goals, among other things. In intensive university-level ESL programs such as I taught in, setting aside time to focus on grammar seemed to me effective and efficient, as well as a good support for and supplement to the students' many other language learning experiences, both in and out of class. Feedback from my students told me that they appreciated having that time to look at how English works, to find answers to their many questions, and to take risks in experimenting with newly understood structures through varied practice in an accepting classroom environment.

### **Varieties of Grammar Materials**

Not all grammar teaching or grammar-teaching materials are the same. I see wide variations among them. For instance, GBT is not to be confused with Grammar Translation. There is no translation nor rule-memorizing in GBT, instruction is not conducted in the L1 (even though the L1 may be included in the teaching, depending upon the situation), and GBT focuses on spoken as well as written language, and has a listening and speaking component not generally found in Grammar Translation.

Other varieties in grammar materials (*e.g.*, some grammar handbook-workbook combinations) are limited fairly strictly to a focus on form, providing information accompanied by a small sampling of manipulative exercises, with no particular attention paid to the development of speaking, listening, writing, and reading skills. Such texts provide explicit information but little practice and almost no

communicative methods are employed. Essentially, they function as sources of explicit grammar information and their lessons could be excerpted or used as supplements in a consciousness-raising FonF approach. Materials such as these do not come under the umbrella of GBT as I define it.

By comparison, GBT materials go beyond the goals of providing grammar information and raising awareness levels by proactively seeking to develop communicative competence in all skill areas through widely varied practice opportunities and the inclusion of communicative methods. GBT materials have many subtle shades of difference, but generally they divide into two types.

1. There are those GBT materials that are complete courses organized around areas of grammar; they are, in essence, basal series with a grammar syllabus. These materials use a four-skill approach (i.e., include readings and composition instruction in addition to listening and speaking practice) and, like basal series, contain enough material, including ancillaries, that other texts are presumably not required for a language course.
2. Then there are GBT materials such as mine, which do not attempt to be all-in-one texts. Instead, these materials focus on providing a grammar component directed at skills development and are intended to support other approaches and materials within a balanced program of second-language instruction.

## **A Description of Grammar-Based Teaching**

The following is my description of GBT, with some of the methodological considerations, assumptions, and practices of those of us who use this approach.

### **The Basic Approach**

As its name implies, GBT uses grammar as the base, the starting point and foundation, for the development of all language skills--speaking, listening, writing, and reading. GBT provides information about English grammar accompanied by numerous and varied practice opportunities.

### **Explicit Information about How English Works**

GBT makes available explicit linguistic information about the structure of the English language in order to help speed and otherwise facilitate the development of the students' interlanguage. GBT does not "teach rules" but describes how English works. Grammar is not taught as subject matter to be memorized; grammar is never taught as an end in itself.

### **Practice**

Practice ranges from simple manipulation of form to open communicative interaction. GBT uses a wide variety of exercise types to encourage and accommodate a variety of student language-learning strategies. The purposes of practice are multifaceted, but all lead toward the goal of creating successful communication

experiences.

### **Blending Approaches**

GBT blends a grammar syllabus and explicit grammar teaching with communicative methods, using grammar as a springboard for interactive, communicative practice opportunities.

### **Communicative Methods**

GBT seeks to engage students in communicative practice that ideally provides ample opportunity for creative use of target structures (which may or may not occur). Communicative practice is usually centered on the students' own lives: their opinions, experiences and real-life situations, including the fact that they are in a classroom trying to learn English. GBT often uses the classroom as context, building language practice around the people and objects and activities in the here-and-now classroom. In GBT, communicative practice means that real people are communicating in real time about real things in a real place for a real purpose.

### **Usage Ability Goals**

The immediate goal is to help students develop an interlanguage sufficient to their needs and purposes. Native-speaker proficiency may be a long-term goal, but is not an immediate one. "Mastery" of structures is not expected, as though the students were learning geometry formulas. A GBT approach does not presume to know when any particular structure is internalized by any particular student.

### **Structure Awareness**

GBT seeks to create awareness and understanding of English structures, i.e., awareness of the form, meaning, and appropriate use of structures. This awareness is seen as one of the first steps many students rely upon in the process of creating their interlanguage. Understanding how a structure works helps many students formulate how to say what they mean and helps lead to successful communication experiences, the building blocks of second-language acquisition.

### **Building Familiarity and Comfort Level**

To assist the development of the students' interlanguage, GBT seeks to build familiarity through repetition and variety in practice modes and promote the students' comfort level in using their new language. Risk-taking is encouraged as students gain confidence from the solid footing GBT provides.

### **Error Correction**

In GBT, mistakes are viewed as opportunities for learning. Corrective feedback is a natural and accepted part of a grammar-based class. Students are encouraged to make their own corrections and at times to give corrective feedback to their

classmates during interactive activities. During independent communicative activities among students, mistakes are largely ignored.

### **Grammar Concepts**

GBT teaches grammar conceptually even as the focus is on particular morphology. In other words, students are taught the concept of number, that is, how English expresses singular and plural, or the concept of how verbs are used to express time. Students are taught the concepts of subordination and coordination, even though that terminology may not be used. Students are taught the concepts underlying such basic grammar terms as *noun*, *verb*, *sentence*, and *preposition*—without ever defining those terms. Parsing or student use of metalanguage to complete language-learning tasks is very rare, done only for specific, pragmatic purposes in particular circumstances.

By teaching grammar conceptually, GBT helps students gain a better conception of language itself, that is, that language consists of intricate patterns that combine through sound or writing to create meaning. Students come to understand that language is not random and is not something that flows willy-nilly out of one's mouth. It has structure and predictability—and without that structure and predictability the sounds humans make and the scribbles they write would have little depth of meaning.

### **Use of Cognitive Skills**

GBT assumes that students naturally and beneficially utilize their cognitive skills in pursuing second-language acquisition. Many students find it helpful to understand how English works, and GBT supplies information and answers as well as lots of practice in a comfortable environment that encourages cognitive exploration of both the particulars of grammatical usage and the underlying organizational principles of English.

### **Inductive vs. Deductive**

Inductive and deductive approaches intermingle. Students are encouraged to figure grammar patterns out for themselves, and are also given explicit information about grammar. Both approaches are helpful for students.

### **Examples vs. Explanations**

In optimal GBT, explanations of grammar are keyed to examples, not vice-versa. It has been my observation that students learn from understanding what is happening in examples of usage, not from knowing "rules." For example, in the Azar series, the grammar charts are set up so that students look at examples first—then at an explanation if necessary, not the other way around. Explanations are there on an "as needed" basis only. Many students can discover a grammar pattern simply from studying the vertically aligned examples on the left-hand side of a chart. The explanation is not the important part of a chart; the examples are. The teacher's job as well as the text's job is to clarify the grammar information students can discover

from examples. Simple form-and-meaning exercises are essentially examples for the students to explore as their cognitive awareness of a structure increases.

### **Descriptive vs. Prescriptive**

GBT provides descriptive information about how English works. It does not take a prescriptive approach to language teaching, but it does give usage guidance, especially as to register, e.g., informal vs. formal or spoken vs. written.

### **Terminology**

GBT uses grammar terminology as a temporary tool to facilitate teacher-student communication and as a later tool for those students who choose to use reference texts such as dictionaries and grammar handbooks after leaving class study. Students are very rarely asked to supply grammar terms in exercises—and only for very well-defined purposes. Otherwise, they are not asked to use metalanguage, and terminology is not taught as an end in itself. Terminology is seen as just a little help along the way as students begin to grasp grammar concepts and understandings of how English works.

### **Syllabus Construction**

- In GBT, the syllabus and sequence of presentation are principally based on:
- the grammar information needs of second language learners
- the pragmatics of organizing a complex subject for pedagogical purposes
- frequency vs. nonfrequency of usage
- simplicity vs. complexity of structure
- usefulness to students' interlanguage
- areas of difficulty for students
- appropriate spiraling, adjusting depth and breadth according to level

### **Recycling and Spiraling**

GBT gives repeated exposure to and practice with structures throughout a unit and a series. Through spiraling, grammar concepts are explored more deeply and expanded upon; tasks require more complex language use; students experience more variety in the linguistic contexts and collocations associated with a structure.

### **Contexts**

GBT uses both sentence-level and extended contexts. Even single-sentence items can have clear contexts if properly written, though some single-sentence items are directed purely at manipulation of form. Sentence-level exercises can help clarify form and meaning, expose students to a variety of typical usages of the target structure, and allow students to focus on grammar in uncomplicated contexts. GBT also employs short contextualized passages. It is assumed students will have access to lengthy extended discourse contexts from other sources.

### **Spontaneous Communicative Interaction**

Much of GBT exercise content is selected for the purpose of sparking communicative interactions among students and between students and teacher. Spontaneous give-and-take generated by interesting and informative items is central, not peripheral, to the intended use of GBT materials and is a prime language-teaching opportunity teachers are expected to exploit.

### **Authentic vs. Adapted Language**

The exercise content in most GBT materials is often based on authentic sources that have been adapted for pedagogical purposes. Adapted material allows for a streamlined focus in the classroom at times that authentic materials might lead to digressions from the main teaching points or confusion about unfamiliar names, references, and the like. GBT assumes students will have ample exposure to authentic language materials from other sources. Students benefit from both authentic and adapted materials; the use of one does not exclude the use of the other. Indeed, they are mutually supportive within a curriculum.

### **Vocabulary**

New vocabulary is not introduced at the same time a new structure is introduced. Unfamiliar vocabulary can interfere with students' understanding the meaning of a grammar form. After the structure is well understood and practiced, new vocabulary is brought in, especially in contextualized exercises. When structures have common collocations (such as the passive with *get*, e.g., *get tired* or *get excited*), students are made aware of these collocations and practice them in typical contexts.

### **Grammar as Content**

Those of us who engage in GBT often notice that students enjoy talking about grammar; they become meaningfully engaged in the content. And as Ellis points out, "For some learners at least, talking about grammar may be more meaningful than talking about kinds of general topics often found in communicative language courses" (2002, p. 165). Communicative interaction with grammar as the topic is seen as a valuable language-learning experience in GBT, equally as valuable as talking about any other academic subject that requires negotiation of meaning and cognitive understanding of information and ideas.

### **Laying Foundations**

As is clearly observable, significant second-language acquisition demands a relatively lengthy period of time. Many GBT practitioners understand that they are laying the foundation for future growth in language usage ability. Practitioners realize that despite explicit teaching, learners may continue to make errors in structure usage for a certain period during their interlanguage stages, but perceive that with appropriate instruction those errors are less likely to become fossilized and more likely to be replaced by accurate language use over time. Longitudinal GBT studies are needed. I believe that only through longitudinal studies are we going to find unequivocal, replicable, data-supported evidence for the overall effectiveness of GBT in terms of learner outcomes.

## Conclusion

Grammar teaching has held a dominant place in English language teaching for the entire forty-some years I have been in the field, and during this time, it has developed considerably and eclectically in its methods and materials. Certainly I need only to look at the evolution of my own published materials as well as those of other grammar materials developers to see a steady progression toward a blending of methodologies within grammar syllabi, resulting in what I have termed Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT). Today, GBT is an effective, widespread and robust pedagogical practice in the teaching of English as a second or foreign language.

The old-fashioned notion that teaching grammar is a matter of teaching "rules" has given way to a recognition that grammar is, as Pennington says, "nothing more or less than the organizing principles of a linguistic or (broader) communicational system, without which, there is no system" (2002, p. 78). The teaching of grammar means teaching how English works through helping students to understand grammar concepts (i.e., the organizing principles of a linguistic communicational system) as well as particulars. Pennington calls for the field to bring grammar "back from the margins and into the heart of language and the language teaching profession where it belongs" (2002, p. 78). However, I would maintain that for legions of teachers and students, grammar never receded into the margins, even as CLT developed and became a strong pedagogical force. Many practitioners embraced both GBT and CLT, although the two became either/or's in a great deal of academic thought and literature.

Fotos says of this dichotomy: "[I]t is time to take the position that a combination of grammar instruction and the use of communicative activities provide an optimum situation for effective L2 learning" (2005, p. 668). That simple statement addresses what is actually happening in our field: large numbers of practitioners and academics can currently be seen to be in accord that a focus on grammar plays a positive role in second language instruction and that GBT and CLT are mutually supportive, not mutually exclusive. To return to my starting point in this article, when it comes to grammar teaching and communicative teaching, my answer is simply, "Do both."

## Notes

[1] The following is a sample of writing from an immigrant student who arrived in the United States at age eight, graduated from a U.S. high school, and was enrolled in a U.S. college at the time this was written: "We never forgat that they are teen, they are staring to live, they have a lot of confuse, they can't control there impulses and they want to do what they see on tv or video games. Also if the court sente a kid in adult presons will get worse not better, or this, I think the society or the court need to build a new jail for the juveniles that have doing crimes and the court should treatre them as adulth but only in court." (Elaine M. McCollom, "'But I Was Born Here—I Can't Be ESL!' Generation 1.5 Students in Today's Classroom." Unpublished presentation at CATESOL 2006, San Francisco, CA.)

[2] I might note, however, that for second language students I do not choose to use the terms predicate and interjection in my materials, but I do use all the other traditional terms listed by Mulroy. Choice of terminology in relation to GBT is

separate topic beyond the scope of this article.

### **About the Author**

Betty Azar is the author of *The Azar Grammar Series*,  
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