



A Conversation with **BETTY AZAR** and her new co-author, **Stacy Hagen**

How did you start your ESL career?

By serendipity — the proverbial being in the right place at the right time. It was 1965. I'd recently been hired to teach freshman English at Iowa State University, my first teaching job. One day the head of the English department found out he needed a second section of an ESL writing course for graduate students. By happenstance, the first teacher he saw was me. He knew I had a background of some kind in languages, for I'd come from comparative literature, so he asked me if I'd like to teach the new ESL section. I said, "Sure."

That afternoon I was teaching my very first ESL class. It was a baptism of fire — but I loved it. I thought the students were wonderful — so serious about learning, so eager to learn. And I thought their questions were terrific — penetrating questions about how English works. Even though I knew a lot about English grammar (or so I had thought), often I couldn't answer my students' questions (for example, questions about *a* and *the*), so I'd have to say, somewhat embarrassedly, "That's a really interesting question. I don't know the answer, but I'll find out and tell you tomorrow." And then I'd scramble to find reference books or

just try to figure out the answer myself. My students set me on the road to learning ESL grammar. I learned what they needed to know about English grammar by learning how to answer their questions.

Why did you decide to become a writer?

I didn't actually "decide" to write ESL textbooks. It just evolved. In answering students' questions about grammar, I would write examples on the board, drawing arrows, adding and deleting endings — the same things that lots of teachers do. Then one day a student (a man from Colombia, I believe) asked me if I'd make dittoed handouts with the grammar I talked about in class so that he could have them for reference at home. I tried to get more detailed information about what he wanted. He said, "Just do what you do in class." So that's what I did. First I gave examples and then explained what was going on in those examples, using a minimum of terminology. And the grammar charts were born.

Back in the 1970s, I kept hoping someone would publish the grammar materials I needed for my own classes. But it didn't happen, so year after year I kept writing new materials,

almost always showing up for class with purple ditto ink on my chin or nose. In 1977, a publisher's rep stopped by my office at the intensive English program at St. Louis University. He said he'd heard that I wrote a lot of my own materials and asked me if I was interested in publication. I said, "Who? Me? I'm just a teacher." And he said, "That's who writes textbooks." So I said, "Okay."

Once I decided, with some trepidation, to try to write an actual textbook, I furiously began copying examples of structure usage on 3x5 note cards. If I heard someone use an adjective clause, for example, I'd copy it on a note card. If I saw a really great adjective clause in the newspaper, I'd copy it down. Then when I sat down to write exercises with adjective clauses, I had stacks and stacks of note cards with examples of authentic usage that I could adapt for my teaching purposes. Trying to get natural language into grammar materials, I wove these usage examples into the blue book (*Understanding and Using English Grammar*), which was published in 1981. I also had in my files many years' worth of error-correction exercises. Early on I'd started dittoing sentences taken from my students' writing or speaking to use for class discussion. Those went into the textbook, too.

I have to say that I never imagined that the materials I was writing would one day reach so many people — in fact, millions of students throughout the world. It still amazes me. Without a doubt, I owe my textbooks to my students. They were my teachers. They told me what they needed from me by the questions they asked. They helped me understand their language needs and goals. I wrote my grammar materials because my students told me that what I was teaching them was helpful to them. I believed them.

How would you describe your approach?

A grammar-based developmental skills approach simply means using grammar as a base for developing all skill areas: speaking, listening, reading, writing. By teaching grammar, I don't mean teaching rigid "rules." I mean helping students see how English works and giving them lots of opportunities to experiment with their new language and gain confidence. A grammar base leads to interviews, round-robin stories, information sharing, games, small group discussions — the list goes on. Grammar becomes a springboard to successful communication experiences, the building blocks of second language acquisition.

It's important to note that grammar-based and communicative approaches are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, just the opposite is true. They fit hand in glove. A great deal of research shows that combining a grammar focus with communicative methods accelerates learning. After all the years of lively debate in ESL about whether grammar should be taught at all, a preponderance of research is showing what I believe we grammar teachers have observed in our own classes: that many, if not most, of our adult students learn faster and better when there is a grammar component in a well-balanced program of second language instruction.

Could you describe your typical writing day?

In the early years, with my first book, I wrote from four or five in the morning until I had to go to work around eight. Then I wrote from five to ten in the evening after I got home from the university. I had two full-time jobs: teaching and writing. Plus I wrote on weekends. I loved it! I did that for more than two years. I poured everything I had into writing UUEG (the blue book).

A typical writing day for me in later years could easily be ten or more hours. When I was raising my daughter, I'd work before she got up, see her off to school, work while she was away, and then stop work when she got home. At times when deadlines approached, I would often stay up late into the night reading proof. The actual writing is only one part of creating textbooks like mine. The other part is the devotion of hours and hours to the practical side of publishing: preparing a final manuscript in proper form, reviewing copyedits, overseeing art, reading three sets of proof. It does keep one busy.

What are your future writing plans?

I love writing ESL teaching materials and doubt I'll stop completely any time soon, but right now I'm focused on CD-ROMs for each level in the series. One of my favorite things in the world right now is writing "talking heads" – animated cartoon characters named for grammar terms who explain how they work. Some of my favorites are:



- **Simple Present** has purple hair and tells students how she's used to express daily activities or general truths.



- **Present Progressive** is a surfer dude who's only interested in "right now."



- **Final -S** is a surly, snarly guy who likes to cause trouble.



- **Comparison** is a sweetheart who is prone to comparing the size of insects who fly across her screen.

Through these characters, I'm able to say directly to students what I would say in the classroom. And, I hope, make grammar fun. Grammar IS fun! And there's lots and lots of practice material in the CD-ROMs.

As for the textbooks, I've recently joined forces with Stacy Hagen, an ESL author several times over, an award-winning teacher, a former IEP administrator —and a good friend. Over the years we've engaged in a lot of shoptalk about the teaching of ESL grammar. We're now working together on updating the textbook series — busily discussing corpus findings and new ways to approach practice material. The Azar Grammar Series is on its way to becoming the Azar-Hagen Grammar Series. Stacy wrote most of the new material for the recently published third edition of *Basic English Grammar* (red), and she did it wonderfully. She knows how to get beginning students talking — and we all know that's not always easy!

Stacy, how has your teaching experience contributed to the third edition of *Basic English Grammar*, or as many users call it, "the red book"?

When I began teaching, I found that my beginning students had lots to say but were kept from expressing themselves because of their limited experience with English. And though I encouraged them to interact with native speakers as much as possible, it was clear that they needed much more practice listening to and understanding authentic speech. From the start, I tried to structure simple speaking and listening



Stacy A. Hagen

activities around the grammar exercises, so that grammar became, as Betty said earlier, the base for developing all four skills.

In *Basic English Grammar*, nearly every written exercise is preceded or followed by some type of speaking/listening activity. In addition, many of the speaking/listening activities are connected to reading and writing practice. Overall, teachers and students will appreciate all the new material in this third edition.

Betty, what advice would you give to aspiring writers or ESL/EFL teachers?

Stay abreast of what's going on in the field in research and theory, but trust your own perceptions and experiences as you find the methods and materials that work best in your particular classroom for your particular students. There isn't just one right way to

teach a second language. There are many right ways. And most of all, listen to your students so you can work in partnership with them.

A last question: What do you see as the most important issues facing the ESL/EFL teaching profession today?

For both of us, the overriding issue in the world is peace. We believe that ESL/EFL teachers and students have a unique opportunity to build bridges across ethnic and cultural differences. We believe those whose lives are touched by experiences with ESL/EFL have a greater understanding of our common humanity than those who see others of different lands only from afar. And from an understanding of our common humanity will come, hopefully, progress towards a peaceful world. Each one of us in ESL/EFL, both teacher and student, can do our part.

Betty Azar is the author of the Azar Grammar Series, published by Pearson Longman:

- Basic English Grammar (3e, 2006), with Stacy A. Hagen
- Fundamentals of English Grammar (3e, 2003)
- Understanding and Using English Grammar (3e, 1999)
- Understanding and Using English Grammar Interactive (2005), with Rachel Spack Koch

