

## A Description of Grammar-Based Teaching

by Betty Azar

The Azar Grammar Series uses a Grammar-Based Teaching (GBT) approach. Following is my description of Grammar-Based Teaching, with some of the methodological considerations, assumptions, and practices of those of us who use this approach.

### *The Basic Approach*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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

### *Communicative Methods*

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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*

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The immediate goal is to help students develop an interlanguage sufficient to their needs and purposes. Native-speaker proficiency is a long-term goal, 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*

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GBT seeks to create awareness and understanding of English structures, i.e., awareness of the form, meaning, and 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*

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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*

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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*

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GBT teaches grammar conceptually even as the focus is on particular morphology. In other words, students are taught the concept of number, i.e., 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, i.e., 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*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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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, and
- appropriate spiraling, adjusting depth and breadth according to level.

### *Recycling and Spiraling*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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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*

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Those of us who engage in GBT often notice that students enjoy talking about grammar; they become meaningfully engaged in the content. Communicative interaction with grammar as the topic is seen as a valuable language-learning experience in GBT, as equally valuable as talking about any other academic subject that requires negotiation of meaning and cognitive understanding of information and ideas.

### *Laying Foundations*

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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.