

## An Author Responds

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# Understanding and Using English Grammar: Interactive

reviewed by Abdelmajid Bouziane

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Dr. Abdelmajid Bouziane's review of the CD-ROM program *Understanding and Using English Grammar: Interactive (UUEGi)* is informative and thoughtful. UUEGi was three years in the making and took a whole team of people: writers, editors, artists, actors, tech experts, and Flash developers, among others. As the principal author, I'd like to speak for all of us to say that the reviewer's many positive assessments reassure us that we have accomplished many of our pedagogical goals in a project that has been both demanding and immensely enjoyable to create.

The section of the review dealing with methodology is most welcome, and I appreciate the opportunity to respond. But first a brief clarification of what a grammar-based developmental skills approach is. In a short description of the program, the reviewer says the program is "designed to teach grammar patterns" (p. 2). In a limited sense, that is true, but a grammar-based developmental skills approach does not teach grammar as an end in itself, but rather uses grammar as the base for developing all language skills. Grammar is a springboard to a variety of language learning activities designed to promote facility of language usage in all skill areas.

The CD-ROM program seeks to take advantage of everything the medium has to offer pedagogically--pictures, movement, color, sound, words and interactivity--to enhance development of all English usage skills. As the reviewer points out, the CD-ROM program focuses on "the integration of grammar concepts with practice in the different language skills in various lively contexts" (p. 15). That's exactly what we set out to do. It is rewarding that the reviewer feels we have succeeded.

Part of the reviewer's discussion of the methodology in the CD-ROM program focuses on what he refers to as the linear organization of the content, citing comments by Nunan (1998). In that article, Nunan says:

A strictly linear approach to language learning is based on the premise that learners acquire one grammatical item at a time, and that they should demonstrate their mastery of one thing before moving on to the next. For example, in learning English, a student should master one tense form such as the simple present, before being introduced to other forms, such as the present continuous [progressive] or the simple past. (p. 101)

The reviewer equates the kind of linear approach Nunan is describing with the approach in *UUEGi* and, by implication, with the approach in the textbooks in the *Azar Grammar Series*. The reviewer says that "the authors have assumed that potential users will understand the rule governing the target grammar pattern and, after enough practice, will internalize the rules and be able to utilize them spontaneously" (p. 14). As the reviewer then points out, that is not always the case, and indeed the *Azar Grammar Series*, including *UUEGi*, does not make those assumptions. Immediate mastery of one item at a time is not the premise upon which the CD-ROM or the series is based. Students are not expected to acquire grammar patterns in a linear fashion.

In organizing grammar information, there are pragmatic pedagogical reasons for presenting one structure prior to another, but those reasons do not include the expectation that the first structure will be "mastered" before the second is introduced. For example, a syllabus might introduce yes/no questions prior to information questions, but grammar-based practitioners do not expect mastery of the one before introducing the other. A grammar-based approach does, however, expect that familiarity with one structure will facilitate the understanding of a related structure. Teaching grammar is always an integrative process requiring much relating and recycling. The concept that students could, as Nunan suggests, "master one tense form such as the simple present, before being introduced to other forms" is, I believe, alien to most experienced classroom teachers and grammar-based materials writers.

Grammar-based teachers do not (at least should not, but I fear some still do) teach ESL/EFL grammar as subject matter to be learned, like arithmetic or the dates of the French Revolution. L2 pedagogical grammar is not about "rules" to be learned. It's about how English works. In teaching grammar, we are providing information and practice opportunities that can be helpful to students in creating their interlanguage and lead to successful communication experiences, the building blocks of second language acquisition. The reviewer aptly quotes Corder (1988) in describing what a grammar-based developmental skills approach assumes, i.e., that "Pedagogical descriptions are *aids* to learning, not the *object* of learning" (p. 30, italics original).

In other words, in the grammar-based developmental skills approach in *UUEGi*, and

the *Azar Grammar Series* as a whole, information about English grammar is made available and students are provided with numerous and varied practice opportunities. The approach does not assume to know or predict the exact timing and process by which any particular structure is adopted for use as interlanguage and/or is internalized by any given student.

Grammar teachers, to borrow from Nunan's garden metaphor (1998, p. 102), plant seeds and nurture young plants, sometimes paying special attention to these particular plants, then to those, but always knowing that a mature garden blossoms into an integrated whole. A gardener cannot take care of every plant at the same time, so his or her efforts need to be focused and well-organized, taking care of this bed here, that bed there. Gardeners are well aware that plants not being paid attention to are growing nonetheless and never presume to have full control of every plant. Many plants grow well with no attention by the gardener at all. Gardeners also know that some plants need more nurturing than others and grow at different rates even under the same conditions. But as each area of the garden is being paid attention to, the garden as a whole is being created. And that's what a grammar-based approach does: it pays attention to particulars that are part of the whole.

In sum, there is no assumption in *UUEGi* that L2 learning takes place in a linear fashion. In the methodology, there is the assumption in *UUEGi* and *the Azar Grammar Series*, however, that presenting manageable chunks of grammar information in a well-organized, pragmatic fashion is pedagogically sound and advantageous to many if not most adult (including young adult) second language learners.

As alluded to above, the reviewer cites (p. 11) Nunan's (1998) organic metaphor, which sees "second language acquisition more like growing a garden than building a wall." In his article, Nunan goes on to say:

In textbooks, grammar is very often presented out of context. Learners are given isolated sentences, which they are expected to internalize through exercises involving repetition, manipulation, and grammatical transformation. These exercises are designed to provide learners with formal, declarative mastery, but unless they provide opportunities for learners to explore grammatical structures in context, they make the task of developing procedural skill--being able to use the language for communication--more difficult than it needs to be, because learners are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning, and use. (p. 102)

From the perspective of a grammar-based approach, isolated, uncontextualized, sentence-level material has an important and valid role in L2 teaching. Students can focus on the form, meaning and use of a structure in starkly clear sentences that have simple and easily assumed contexts. They can explore variations in the form, determine

the meanings being expressed (without interference from unknown vocabulary), and notice how the structure is used--all of this despite the fact that the snippet of language is adapted, not authentic, and isolated, not in connected discourse. A grammar-based approach does not assume that these small-context or isolated samples of a structure and a few exercises are all a student needs to acquire or internalize a structure, as Nunan seems to suggest. Sentence-level teaching material is simply and only a starting point, and using this kind of material does not mean learners "are denied the opportunity of seeing the systematic relationships that exist between form, meaning, and use" (p. 102). Rather than being "denied" (p. 102), students are starting to see these relationships and are being prepared for larger understandings of how these relationships work. Working with sentence-level material at one point does not in any way eliminate the possibility of working with contextualized material at another. Indeed, both can and should be included in a well-balanced program of second language instruction. The reviewer perceptively points out that there is a great deal of contextualized material in UUEGi (pp. 8-9; 11-12) as well as sentence-level material. Both serve their pedagogical purposes.

The reviewer also suggests periodic review exercises that combine many structures to make the program less linear (p. 15). In response, I'd like to say that the program does not have cumulative review exercises that include material from many chapters precisely because it is not a linear program. The chapters are in a pedagogically pragmatic order, but linear progression through them is not required. In other words, a student does not have to start at the beginning and go straight through the program in the order in which it is presented. Indeed, most teachers who use UUEG devise their own syllabi, using chapters in any order they wish. That is possible because most chapters are self-contained units. This flexibility is purposeful and meant to serve the teacher's needs and preferences. It also serves students' self-study needs in the CD-ROM program; they can start with Chapter 12 if they want and will not be confronted with "review material" from a previous chapter that they have never seen before.

Cumulative review and recycling do come within chapters and for units of related chapters. The reviewer comments:

Even items that do get reviewed, the verb tenses (in Chapter 5), are reviewed as discretely as they were introduced. That is, future tenses are reviewed together, perfect tenses, together and so on. A chapter (or part of it) on mixed tenses would make the user's task more challenging and realistic. (p. 15)

As it would happen, Chapter 5 is exactly what the reviewer says it is not. It is a chapter that reviews all of the tenses in mixed fashion in the majority of the exercises. Future, perfect, past, progressives--all kinds of different forms can be found in the same exercise. The reviewer might have been misled by a title in the Contents for Chapter 5. The mistitled exercise says "Review of Future Tenses" but should read "Review of Verb

Tenses." We will correct that oversight immediately.

It also should be pointed out that in the *Azar Grammar Series*, many grammar structures are reviewed and recycled from one level to the next precisely because there is no expectation that a structure will be "learned" and done with after one exposure to it. Hence the simple present, for example, is presented in all three levels of the series, but presented differently, in ways appropriate to the different levels. When the CD-ROMs for all three levels in the series are completed, the students will be able to experience a lot of recycling and review as suggested by the reviewer.

In referring to the ways in which the talking heads present grammar, the reviewer points out that an "advantage of the contextualized content of the program is that it is delivered meaningfully in an entertaining way" (p. 12). The talking heads are fun, and some of them funny. But what is most pedagogically interesting about them, which the reviewer alludes to, is that they give information about language while, at the same time, engaging the students in content that requires the students to be meaningfully involved, requires them to understand, notice, listen, pay attention, react--many of the things that any meaningful content requires of a student. It just happens that in this case the content is grammar -- instead of food, perhaps, or the weather. Grammar is a motivating subject for large numbers of adult second language learners, as the reviewer points out in citing *Fortune's* (1992) study confirming that 94% of the respondents considered grammar "an important component of language learning" (p. 12). In other words, the talking heads provide at least some of the benefits of a content-based approach by meaningfully engaging students in content they are interested in. (Indeed, I believe I heard David Nunan make a similar observation about grammar being content during one of his talks a few years back, but I cannot quite put my finger on where and when.) At any rate, for me it is pedagogically exciting that when a student clicks to listen to a talking head, all sorts of integrated language learning activities are taking place.

The reviewer also discusses explicit vs. implicit grammar instruction and suggests the inclusion of "some more implicit/inductive-type tasks in the program" (p. 14). My observations would suggest that deductive and inductive intermingle all the time in a grammar-based approach. For example, when the *UUEGi* talking heads (or teachers or texts) are explaining an example (deductive approach), the students are, as people normally do when trying to understand something, rephrasing and interpreting the example in their own ways (inductive) to get to "Aha! That's what's going on here!" And even when an explanation is given first (deductive), that doesn't mean the students "get" it right away. So then they are given the opportunity to play with lots of examples (that's what exercises provide), and inductively the students have the chance to fill in the gaps in their understanding.

In addition, my experience as a teacher tells me that some students will choose to start with the exercises and not read the chart information at all. The CD-ROM program has

no rigid order the students must follow. They can choose to work inductively if that is their strategy. My experience as a teacher also tells me that those students who do look at the grammar charts pay most attention to the examples. The examples are purposefully lined up vertically on the left-hand side of a chart to encourage students to come to their own inductive conclusions, but then the explanations of the examples are available for students to refer to for clarification or reinforcement. The *Azar Grammar Series* has as one of its fundamental premises that students learn from examples, not from "rules." In *Azar*, explanations serve examples, not vice versa, and it is assumed that most learning takes place during the exercises, not from charts. But whether understandings come inductively or deductively or from a combination of the two, the *Azar Grammar Series* acknowledges an important role for cognitive skills in the process of second language learning.

Related to the inductive/implicit-deductive/explicit discussion, the reviewer mentions (p. 14) Krashen's learning/acquisition dichotomy (Krashen, 1981). The *Azar Grammar Series* methodology assumes a beneficial and robust role for explicit grammar instruction that exploits students' cognitive skills. The author has observed through years of teaching that a great many adult students naturally and beneficially engage their cognitive skills in the process of acquiring a second language and that there is no firewall between "learned" and "acquired" language. Learned language is, after all, comprehensible input. Grammar-based materials are chock full of comprehensible input, and, in addition, provide good opportunities for communicative activities. Grammar-based and communicative approaches fit hand in glove. Grammar-based materials also, by their very nature, enhance the noticing of structures; the students' attention is, after all, directed explicitly at noticing how structures are formed, what they mean, and how they are used. Grammar teaching is only one component of a well-balanced program of second language instruction and is easily supportive of other more content-based and task-based approaches within that program.

One final note on the inductive-deductive discussion is that each chapter in *UUEGi* begins with a preview in which students are invited to notice certain structures and start forming ideas about them. And reading, listening, and speaking exercises embed the target structures. So the CD-ROM does, in many ways, employ inductive as well as deductive approaches. That said, I want to assure the reviewer that his suggestion about including material that is more explicitly inductive is good and will be carefully considered when the CD-ROM is revised.

Dr. Bouziane's review of *UUEGi* has been most helpful. There are a number of other points about methodology in his review that are very interesting to contemplate, but, as he notes, there has been much said about the teaching of grammar, and one review and a response to that review cannot possibly cover all points of grammar teaching in English as a second language. In closing, I would just like to say to Dr. Bouziane that I very much appreciate his having taken the time to do such thorough and thoughtful review of *UUEGi*, and that I have enjoyed the dialogue.

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## References

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## About the Author

**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.

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