

EFL/ESL Grammar Textbook Review

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Abstract

I have reviewed the grammar book *Understanding and Using English grammar* 4th edition (Azar & Hagen, 2009) in terms of (1) aims and approaches (2) exercises and activities (3) interesting and useful characteristics and (4) a special grammar topic: gerunds and infinitives. It includes integrated grammar learning to develop four English language skills and exercises for students to practice and extend their language skills. I have concluded that this grammar textbook is great for EFL/ESL intermediate and advanced learners.

Keywords: grammar, integrative, approach, exercise, gerund, infinitive, EFL/ESL

EFL/ESL Grammar Textbook Review

I review the EFL/ESL grammar book *Understanding and Using English Grammar* 4th edition (Azar & Hagen, 2009). The level of this grammar book is for intermediate to advanced English language learners. It is made up of 20 chapters, appendix of 5 units, listening script, answer key, index and audio CD tracking list

To review the textbook, it is important to set up proper criteria first. Sheldon (1998) argues a certain criteria can't cover every context without considerable modification and "We would obviously emphasize factors that relate specifically to our own unique situations" (pp.241-242). Generally, most standardized evaluation checklists have similar and common criteria in reviewing any textbook. I examined the textbook in terms of aims and approaches, exercises and activities, useful characteristic, and a special grammar topic: gerund and infinitive.

Aims and Approaches

First, *Understanding and Using English Grammar* is a grammar book integrated for English skills reading, listening, speaking and writing for intermediate and advanced language learners. Though the main focus is grammar, they tried to make a more meaningful and authentic textbook by connecting each grammar point with practical and communicative exercises. Second, this book deals with 20 chapters in regard to linguistic categories: the major parts of speech such as verb, nouns, adjectives, and adverbs; and the minor parts of speech such as pronouns, modals, or conjunctions. But, the books does not deal with the other parts in more detail, which EFL/ESL students might feel confused by such as prepositions or articles. To be specific, though articles are dealt with in Chapter 7 and prepositions are mentioned briefly in regards to combinations with gerunds, adjectives or verbs. This book didn't cover articles or preposition fully. These two parts are worthy of being dealt with separately. Interestingly, verb

tenses and aspects are dealt with throughout the first five chapters, and it is assumed that because this book supplies plenty of information about tenses and aspects, the authors seem to think them to be the most important.

Additionally, each chapter consists of one distinctive grammar point and extended concepts related to it. For example, Chapter 7 Nouns has twelve subcategories including regular and irregular plural nouns, possessive nouns, count and non-count nouns, and expression of quantity used with count and non-count nouns, etc. By presenting detailed information with meaningful exercise and practice in each category rather than merely presenting basic grammatical concepts, the book seems to be adequate to the needs and level of students who want to enhance their English knowledge after completing basic courses. Because the textbook provides a wide range of meaningful exercises in the form of listening, writing, and reading, if learners complete each chapter guided by a teacher, they are likely to enhance their communicative competence as well as linguistic knowledge of each chapter.

This book also provides lots of charts and illustrations to help students understand the abstract concepts of English grammar. Furthermore, using multicultural pronouns in the exercises considers learners' various cultural background such as Chicago (p.105), Michiko (p.109), Ms.Chang (p.35), Aziz (p.39), Abdullah (p.111), the Chinese, the Vietnamese (p.97), this gets EFL/ESL students more motivated and they feel more personal and inclusive.

Finally, the approach to teaching grammar starts from exercises or warm-ups composed of simple practice or builds on their previous knowledge. Then, the grammar points are presented with relevant exercises in each chapter. When grammar points are presented in chart form, detailed explanations on the right help students understand the points better, similar to as if the students heard from a teacher in class.

Exercises and Activities

Textbooks should include exercises that get students to practice and extend their language skills. The exercises and activities are the key to the success of a grammar book. Students can consolidate their knowledge and practice in reality through exercises and activities. An analysis of this grammar book showed that each section has eighteen to fifty exercises.

This book provides a large number of exercises, including activities. In addition, the sequence of exercises is from easiest and simplest to hardest, which is effective for learning. To be specific, in the case of Chapter 14-2 (p.302), the first exercise is a relatively easy warm-up using a grammar chart with common forms of verbs that follows each preposition. After the grammar chart is presented, the exercises get more difficult and challenging, from completing each sentence with a preposition and a form of go, to interviewing their classmates using by+gerund. The exercises are designed well to promote the students' language development and reinforce their previous knowledge through repetitive exercises with a variety of ranges of difficulties and types.

Second, the balance between controlled exercises and free exercises, and between individual exercises and group exercises-pair, small group, class seems good enough. To be specific, in the case of Chapter 15: Gerunds and Infinitives, Part 2, they provide thirty-nine exercises. Approximately, seventy percent of the exercises are controlled exercises and thirty percent are free exercises. On the other hand, seventy percent of the exercises are individual practice and thirty percent are group activities such as interviews, pair work, or small group work. This ratio of each is fairly reasonable and well balanced, but they might provide more free exercises considering the target students' level, which could meet their advanced needs.

One of the book's strong points is the various formats of the exercises and activities. For

example, in Chapter 15, in spite of the frequent use of “complete the sentence” type exercises—the most common type in grammar textbook—they try to provide diverse forms, such as: correct errors, interview, discuss, make statements, and describe pictures. They also try to enhance different language skills through reading, writing, speaking and listening exercises or activities.

In sum, the exercises and activities in this grammar book are fairly well planned in terms of numbers and qualities they provided, despite a small imbalance in controlled versus free exercises. It surely will facilitate and promote learner’s motivation and language development.

Interesting and Useful Characteristic of this Grammar Textbook

First, this grammar book is part of a series based on the learner’s level: *Understanding and Using English Grammar* (for upper-level students), *Fundamentals of English Grammar* (for mid-level students) and *Basic English Grammar* (for lower or beginning levels). The intention is for students to learn and practice English continuously with this series.

Second, they provide many integrated exercises and practices linked with listening, which seems helpful to enhance students’ practical English proficiency, rather than focusing on grammar relying only on texts. Furthermore, since they provide an audio CD and a full audio script, learners can get access to listening exercises anytime they want.

Third, there is another eye-catching part that seems very useful. They provide a very practical appendix in the last part of the book. The appendix is composed of basic grammar terminology, questions, contractions, negatives, preposition combinations, the subjunctive and troublesome verbs. By organizing this useful content into a short reference section that does not have overly detailed explanations, learners of intermediate and advanced levels can experience more in-depth and practical grammatical terms and usage.

The most useful characteristic of this grammar book is the focus on verb tenses through the first five chapters. Compared to other grammar textbooks, this book shows the importance of verb tenses by devoting five chapters (chapter one to chapter five) to verb tenses. For example, in the case of Barron's Grammar, The Easy Way (Mulvey, 2002, pp.36-39), tenses are mentioned only briefly under the category of Chapter 5 Verb. Actually, verb tenses and aspects are really difficult and abstract concepts for EFL/ESL learners. Though tense and aspect are different concepts, the author's choice of combining the two concepts under the name of tenses is helpful to EFL/ESL learners because it helps them to not get confused about the difference. Furthermore, detailed explanations according to form and meaning of each tense, accompanied by tense charts and examples with illustrations like the book provides will likely lead learners to understand the abstract contents with more ease.

The Special Topic: Gerund and Infinitive

Attention will be given most to gerunds and infinitives more than anything else from this grammar book. This book provides detailed knowledge about gerunds and infinitives in terms of form and function, with specific explanations and meaningful exercises. The only insufficiency in this part is that not enough explanation about the different semantic features of gerunds and infinitives are given.

They deal with gerunds and infinitives over two chapters: Chapter 14 and Chapter 15. They show the form of gerunds and infinitives and how they function in terms of syntax in Chapter 14. They give more in-depth explanations about each for intermediate and advanced English language learners. For example, when they mention the form of gerund (p.301), they add additional information to tell a gerund from present participles used as a progressive aspect and an adjective. They also categorize verbs according to the type of verbs taking a gerund,

infinitive or both, which might be helpful to choose the proper complement of the verb. But as a teacher, students should be made to produce a meaningful sentence with regard to context, rather than having students organize and learn them by rote.

Furthermore, they show more usages of gerunds and infinitives such as: infinitives of purpose, adjectives followed by infinitives, passive infinitives and gerunds, using the simple form after let and help and using causative verbs make, have and get. While Chapter 14 focused on the binary category between gerund and infinitive, Chapter 15 shows their more diverse usages. For example, Chapter 15-6 (p.341) deals with perception verbs: certain verbs of sensory perception are followed by either the simple form (the infinitive form without to) or *-ing* (the present participle) form of a verb. They give pairs of example sentences with each explanation as follows:

- (a) *I saw my friend run down the street.*
- (b) *I saw my friend running down the street* (p.341).

Example (a) and (b) have essentially the same meaning, except that the *-ing* form emphasizes the idea of “while.”

However, according to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), there is a crucial difference between the pair (a) and (b): perfective and imperfective. To be specific, “The simple form in (a) denotes an event as punctual, limited and bounded or perfective, whereas the *-ing* form in (b) denotes an imperfective event seen as durative, ongoing or iterative” (p.652). That’s why a main verb in the simple present tense is compatible with an *-ing* form, but not a bare infinitive as follows:

Look! I see him breaking the window.

**Look! I see him break the window.* (p.652).

The majority of other grammar textbooks do not give detailed information about the difference between the simple form and the *-ing* form as a complement of sensory perception verbs.

Rather, they show a general rule about their complements: Certain verbs of sensory perception are followed by either the simple form or the *-ing* form of a verb. While this is to not make EFL/ESL students confused about the complements, the difference of each form as a complement should be mentioned because the difference between perfective and imperfective aspects is an important feature of each form and the students of intermediate or advance levels are good enough to accept that feature.

Additionally, the grammar book deals with causative verbs *make*, *have* and *get* in Chapter 15-8 (p.344). Looking back on my teaching, I taught causative verbs as having similar meanings, that X causes Y focusing on the forms. But in this book, they give a detailed and subtle difference of each as follows:

Forms	Examples	Meanings
X makes Y do something	I made my brother carry my suitcase.	My brother had no choice. I insisted that he carry my suitcase.
X has Y do something	I had my brother carry my suitcase.	My brother carried my suitcase because I asked him to.
X gets Y to do something	I got my brother to carry my suitcase.	I managed to persuade my brother to carry my suitcase.

I think giving the explanation about the slightly different meanings is really valuable. If learners focus on the forms of each, they could not feel the difference. This grammar textbook presents the subtle difference among them using simple examples and paraphrasing the difference. However, the last part of Chapter 15-8, about passive causatives, seems to need a more elaborate explanation about the difference of (c) *I had my watch repaired* and (d) *I got my watch repaired*. First, they need to mention *get* and *have* take passive complements and *make*

doesn't take passive complements. The book also says there is usually little or no difference in meaning between *have* and *get*. Since they used the word *little*, some advanced students might wonder about the slight difference between them. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p.653), the difference of (c) and (d) is that the *get*-sentence implies some difficulty is involved. So we could say that in the case of (d), we were uncertain about whether the watch was repaired or not. Though the explanation seems to be too detailed and difficult, I would say it is valuable to teach to intermediate, and especially advanced students. It is the subtle difference of meaning, rather than a form of language, that makes EFL/ESL learners challenged and overwhelmed.

Last but not least, is the abstract concept of the semantics of gerunds and infinitives. While I learned gerunds and infinitives in terms of different forms in school, I didn't learn the semantic difference until I studied it at the university. They deal with the difference of infinitives and gerunds in Chapter 14-7: Common Verbs Followed by Either Infinitives or Gerunds. They divide it into two parts as follows:

- (A) Verb + infinitive or gerund, with no difference in meaning
- (B) Verb + infinitive or gerund, with a difference in meaning

According to Bolinger (as cited in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.648), infinitive implies events that are "hypothetical, future and unfulfilled," whereas gerund implies "real, vivid, fulfilled." And Biber (1999) argues that, "A *to*-clause has a meaning that is more hypothetical or potential than the meaning of the corresponding *ing*-clause (with the same verb). However, the specific meaning difference between a *to*-clause and an *ing*-clause depends on the particular controlling verb" (p.757).

The type (B) is more substantial and the explanation in this grammar book seems to be

near and clear. The grammar book presents each pair of examples of verbs + infinitives or gerunds, with a difference in meaning as follows (p.317):

(e) *Judy always remembers to lock the door.*

(f) *I remember seeing the Alps for the first time. The sight was impressive.*

Remember + infinitive refers to remembering to perform a responsibility, duty, or task as in (e), whereas *remember* + gerund refers to remembering (recall) something that happened in the past as in (f). Instead of the grammarian's difference using "fulfilled" or "unfulfilled," they provide an easy and more comprehensible explanation by using more familiar words for learners. It is also great that they get learners to practice this difference through follow-up exercises relevant to this concept. To sum up, this grammar book shows the information about the type (B) with organized and easy explanations. The remaining daunting part is the (A) type: Verb + infinitive or gerund, with no difference in meaning. From the moment I thought of this grammar textbook review, the type (A) was constantly in my mind. Compared to the (B) type, the (A) type seems to be problematic to say there is no difference in meaning. The difference in meaning is so subtle that EFL/ESL teachers or learners might feel difficulty in grasping the difference. In this grammar book, they say there is no difference between *It began to rain.* and *It began raining.*, while saying the verbs in Group (A) may be followed by either an infinitive or gerund with little or no difference in meaning. To be honest, I can't notice the difference and my other native friends noticed little about the difference when they were asked. That's why this grammar book used the word *little* again rather than only saying *no difference*. According to Biber (1999), "The meaning difference between *to*-clauses and *ing*-clauses can be illustrated from consideration of verbs from different semantic domains" (p.758). He insists that, "The meaning difference controlled by aspectual verbs (e.g. start, begin) is subtle and in some cases the two

seems to be virtually interchangeable” (1999, p.759). But he argues there is a difference in potentiality as follows:

(g) *He started to answer, then shrugged.*

(h) *I started smoking when I was thirteen in the barn with my buddies.*

Start + infinitive in (g) shows that the action itself was not in fact carried out; start + gerund in (h) generally indicates that the event in question has truly begun to happen (1999, p.759).

Hamawand (2004) supports Biber’s idea saying “With the *to*-infinitive the success of complement event is not guaranteed, whereas with the *-ing* gerund it is guaranteed” (p.452).

Kempson and Quirk (1971, p.553) attempt to apply to this type of verb a general distinction between 'fulfillment' (gerund) and 'non-fulfillment' (infinitive) as follows:

(i) *I like to visit her.*

(j) *I like visiting her.*

(k) ? *I liked to visit her last Wednesday.*

(l) * *I'd like visiting her.*

They argue that *like* + infinitive denotes “aim” in (i), whereas *like* + gerund denotes “enjoy” in (j), and that’s why (k) and (l) sounds weird or ungrammatical.

In total, some verbs categorized into the type (A) Verb + infinitive or gerund, with no difference in meaning in this grammar book need to be elaborated more. As we have seen, infinitives and gerunds are totally different in terms of the semantic view. Therefore, the basic semantic notion of infinitives and gerunds should be given first and more expose to meaningful contexts are needed for students to notice the difference of infinitive and gerund complements.

Conclusion

This grammar textbook includes integrated grammar learning for English four skills and

exercises for students to practice and extend their language skills. Students can fully consolidate their knowledge and practice English through a variety of integrated exercises and activities with this grammar book despite a small imbalance in controlled versus free exercises.

As to a special topic *gerund* and *infinitive*, this book provides detailed knowledge about gerunds and infinitives in terms of forms and function, with explanations and relevant exercises. The only weakness is that the book does not provide enough explanation about the different semantic features of gerunds and infinitives. Overall, I have concluded that this grammar textbook is great for EFL/ESL intermediate and advanced learners.

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