

WAYS WITH WORDS

By Sara Epstein Moninger

From grammar textbooks to stories for television, CLAS alumni use their diverse talents to enlighten and entertain.

A Teacher's Teacher

Betty Schrampf Azar had no way of knowing as a University of Iowa undergraduate that she would become the best-selling author of a series of grammar books that reach nearly a million people every year worldwide.

After graduating in 1963 from the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences with a major in European literature and thought and continuing her studies in graduate school, Azar took a job teaching English at Iowa State University.

Then serendipity took over.

"I was walking down the hall one day with a fellow faculty member, who was the only one teaching English as a Second Language at Iowa State, when we ran into the head of the department," Azar says. "He started talking about how he needed another ESL teacher, and he looked at me and said, 'How about you?'"

Azar accepted the challenge and began teaching English to nonnative speakers that day.

"It was such a kick to be in a room with students from all over the world," she says. "They were all so highly motivated, and did they ever have a lot of interesting questions about English grammar!"

Grammar is different for ESL students and native speakers, Azar explains, because second-language students have questions about usage that native speakers never have to consider.

"Take article use," she says. "ESL students might say, 'The water is necessary for life,' so a teacher must explain why English speakers say, 'Water is necessary for life.'"

"Much of my teaching methodology developed out of those early years of just listening to my students and figuring out how to consider their many questions."

After three years at Iowa State, Azar took a job teaching intensive English at St. Louis University.

"I couldn't find a textbook that met my needs, so I started writing my own material and mimeographing it for my students," she says. "Then one day a publisher's rep visited campus and asked if I'd ever thought of publishing my materials. When I said no, that I was 'just a teacher,' he replied, 'That's who writes textbooks.'"

Azar worked on her first text, *Understanding and Using English Grammar*, for seven years before it was published in 1981. Within two years she was able to quit teaching and devote her time to writing.

Azar's textbooks, intended to prepare nonnative speakers for academic work in American colleges, also include *Basic English Grammar* and *Fundamentals of English Grammar*. Her company, Azar Associates, which consists of Azar, a staff of two, and hired writers, creates a variety of ESL grammar teaching materials, including interactive CD-ROMs.

"Prior to my series, there was no grammar-based developmental skills series for beginning through upper-level ESL students," Azar says. "Teachers seem to like the books as much as the students, especially the clear explanations of how English works. In a way, my books have taught ESL grammar to a whole generation of teachers."



Betty Schrampf Azar
Photo courtesy of Bill Ruth