

# Teaching GMAT in an ESL Environment

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## Introduction

Test preparation is one of the most in demand specialties for ESL instructors. Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), Graduate Records Examination (GRE) and other test preparation courses consistently call for creative, capable instructors. But possibly the most daunting test preparation course is the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT). Not only does it demand excellent skill teaching grammar and writing, but it also requires a comprehensive grasp of logic, college level mathematics, and test strategies.

## GMAT Examination

Educational Testing Service (ETS), which produces TOEFL and GRE, designs GMAT. The examination is required for admission to Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs in North America and many programs in Europe, Japan and Australia. Oddly enough, although the exam is designed for MBA programs, it has little to do with business. Business vocabulary and business concepts may appear in the readings, but GMAT generally tests the skills needed for any graduate level academic program.

GMAT is a computer based test which always follows the same pattern. The test begins with two 30-minute essays. Following this comes a 75-minute quantitative section, including problem solving and data sufficiency questions. A 75-minute verbal section, including critical reasoning, reading, and sentence correction, is the final portion. Question types appear in a random order and have five possible multiple choice answers. Questions must be answered in order and once an answer choice is confirmed, it cannot be changed. Test takers receive two scores: 0 to 6 for each essay and 200 to 800 for a combined score on the verbal and quantitative sections.

GMAT is a Computer Adaptive Test (CAT), meaning the answer to one question determines the difficulty of the next. For example, the first question is averaged about 520. If that question is answered correctly, the computer will assign a higher average score and raise the difficulty of the following question. Conversely, if the question is answered incorrectly, the computer lowers the average score and presents an easier question. In CAT, the initial questions are weighted more heavily than later ones. Therefore, getting the first ten to twenty questions correct is imperative.

## Writing

Writing is the only section that is not computer adaptive. In this section, two essays are given: Analysis of an Issue and Analysis of an Argument. In the former, test takers build an argument. In the latter, test takers attack an argument.

Essays need not be works of art. Clear, thoughtful and concise essays will suffice. Each essay should be brief, 350 to 500 words, yet broad enough to examine the topic. Although essays should not be formulaic, students can have several templates in mind. Paragraphs should include topic sentences, be from three to six sentences long, and support the main idea. Conclusions should allude to the question and state the author's opinion. Using transitional phrases, numerous sentence types, illustrations, and a variety of word choice will enhance essays.

Teaching a nominal amount of writing skills can noticeably improve student essays. Inexperienced writers tend to ramble. Point this

out and show students how to break apart long-winded sentences. Students benefit from learning a variety of sentence types. Take this sentence:

*"GMAT includes three sections: writing, verbal, and quantitative."*

Students can use this type of sentence as a thesis statement. Place it as the last line of the introduction, then the following body paragraphs can explain each of the three points. The use of rhetorical questions, the simple five word sentence, and sentences with relative clause and reduced clauses also come in handy. Additionally, teachers should watch for language-specific flaws. For example, Mandarin and Spanish students combine independent clauses with commas instead of conjunctions.

For most, analysis of an issue is the easier essay. Test takers will receive a question. One states their opinion about the question and backs this belief with evidence. An introduction should start the essay. Three sentences will do. The first should introduce a topic. The last should state the thesis. The body paragraphs should support the thesis. Make sure paragraphs begin with topic sentences, include several sentences and clearly support the topic. When using transitional phrases, make sure they are used correctly. For example, writers might mistakenly use "as conclusion" as the transition to their concluding paragraph. This phrase is not idiomatic and using it destroys the writer's credibility. The correct phrasing, "in conclusion" should be used instead.

In analysis of the argument, writers should attack the argument at once. The easiest methods are to criticize assumptions and to point out fallacies. All analysis of argument questions are flawed. Instructors would be wise to review common analytical fallacies: unwarranted assumptions, fallacies of equivocation, faulty analogies, ad hominum attacks, and problems with statistical information. ARCO's *Teach Yourself the GMAT CAT in 24 Hours* includes a concise review. Additionally, instructors must stress the need to attack arguments. For example, one GMAT question states that women have unequal rights in the workplace. Many women could agree; nonetheless, they need to attack the argument regardless of personal beliefs.

In both essays, write quickly but save time for editing. Use the last five to ten minutes to examine word choice, subject-verb agreement, redundant expressions, and punctuation. One trick is to proofread from the last sentence to the first. In this way, one looks at sentences differently and finds mistakes that otherwise might be bypassed. Finally, clearly connect the thought of each topic sentence with the essay's thesis. Be certain the conclusion specifically addresses the topics that was written about.

## Verbal

Critical reasoning has many things in common with the analysis of an argument essay. Tests takers are presented with an argument. Many arguments are flawed, and students must determine the strengths and weaknesses of many arguments.

Critical reasoning presents tests takers with questions about each argument. The most popular question is how to strengthen the argument or how to weaken the argument, in other words, introduce new evidence that makes the arguments stronger or weaker. Other questions might be to supply a conclusion, mimic the argument's reasoning, find the assumption, and infer information from the argument.

Mapping out the argument is the key to understanding critical reasoning. One should find premises, assumptions, and conclusions. Premises are the argument's facts. Assumptions are the unstated ideas. Conclusions result from the premises and assumptions. The arguments can be convoluted. The conclusion might appear as a rhetorical question or a premise might appear as the last line, where the conclusion often appears. To clarify the confusion, map out the argument. P1 might stand for the first premise and C for the conclusions.

Additionally, a review of some vocabulary and common decoys is in order. Students should know that a conclusion follows "therefore." They may not know the synonyms "hence" or "entails that." Likewise, by reviewing *The ETS Official Guide to the GMAT*, a compilation of actual GMAT questions, teachers can emphasize common decoys in the answer choices. Most answer choices are irrelevant. Others restate erroneous details or pose heartstring choices appealing to emotions which are immaterial to the argument.

Argument comes into play in the reading comprehension portion of the GMAT, too. Oftentimes, a reading presents an old idea and then goes on to present an enhancement of or a replacement for the idea. In this way, the readings mimic case studies or journal articles presented in graduate level courses.

GMAT readings cover three topics: business, including finance and marketing; social science such as history, archaeology, sociology and psychology; and science, ranging from astronomy to botany. Prospective MBA students might feel that some topics are out of their scope. Nonetheless, topics as peculiar as boll weevil infestations and Mesopotamia architecture could appear among the excerpts.

Obviously, speed and precision are critical in reading comprehension. First, test takers should practice reading for information. Train students to take notes, make lists, spot details, and find topics. Second, practice scanning for general ideas and skimming for specific ones. Extra time could be spent with "imply and infer" questions-- frequently seen on the GMAT-- and eliminating answer choices based on being too broad, too specific, irrelevant, restatement of an incorrect detail, and common sense information which is immaterial.

It takes years to build a broad vocabulary in a second language, but some vocabulary instruction is helpful. Cover frequently confused words such as farther and further or disparate and desperate. Also, review common American idioms. These appear in reading comprehension and sentence correction.

Sentence correction most often stifles non-native English speakers. In this style of question, a portion of or an entire sentence is underlined. The task is to decide if the underlined portion is correct or incorrect. If incorrect, choose the best possible replacement. Every question has five choices for the answer. The first repeats the underlined section; therefore, 20% of the sentences are likely to be correct.

Errors tend to be obscure. When they are, look for repetitions in the choices for the answer. Why? One or two of the choices are a repeat the error. One or two others correct the initial error but create a new error.

Students should focus on two things: errors ETS frequently tests and basic grammar. Non-native speakers often don't know grammar of their native language much less in English. Therefore, instructors should review the grammar of a sentence and the parts of speech. Make sure to cover dependent clauses, as they are frequently tested. Additionally, eight primary errors are tested on the GMAT: pronouns; subject-verb agreement; verb tense; idiomatic language; misplaced modifiers; comparing unlike things; redundant expressions; and awkward structures. Other problems that regularly appear include commas, infinitives, gerunds and the passive voice.

## Quantitative

ESL professionals are not math experts, but some schools call upon them to teach the problem solving and data sufficiency questions students will face on the GMAT quantitative section. Many English teachers would initially balk at this. However, as teaching professionals and university graduates, most can review enough mathematics to lead their students to high scores.

Quantitative questions include the math most students needed to enter university: geometry, algebra, arithmetic, word problems, and statistics. With a strong review, most students have the math skills to perform well, but many have problems with the tricks and decoys of the test as well as the language. They tend to show an increased improvement if they study English vocabulary and phrasing of mathematics.

Some vocabulary is unfamiliar or easily confused by non-native speakers. Integer, coefficient, reciprocal, and "to the power of" as well as odd and even are oftentimes new. U.S. measurements--including miles, yards, pounds, and ounces--are used, but are not tested. Students do not need to know how many feet are in a mile. Likewise, one needs to know dollars and cents, the vocabulary for mixture and work problems, and terminology for cards and dice which are used in probability questions. Regularly confused terms like ratio and fraction are more problematic than new vocabulary.

About half of the sections in the quantitative section are word problems. For example, rate, time, and distance problems and interest problems are frequently tested on the examination. These require students to read 30 to 50 word passages that use phrases like "interest compounded daily", and "the time it takes to surpass". Data interpretation questions, questions that ask questions about graphs or charts, tend to be wordy and convoluted. They also ask for approximations which slow down those engrossed with precision.

Data sufficiency is also full of word problem questions, as well as awkward phrasing. In this section, the student is presented with the

question. Following this, there are two answers. Test takers must determine if one answer, both answers, either answer or neither answer is sufficient to answer the questions. Throughout the examination, the order of the answer choices is consistent. Students need to memorize the answer choices. By memorizing the choices, students save time and have no chance to become confused. Since this is a question type unique to this test, it can be confusing at first. It does not ask for an answer but asks if there is sufficient information to answer the questions. First, emphasize that data sufficiency tests concepts. A question might ask for the distance between a and b. The number is immaterial. It is trying to determine if the test takers know that rate multiplied by time equals distance. Data sufficiency questions take practice but with practice one can master them.

Whether data sufficiency or word problem questions, test writers consistently use a number of decoys. Questions always ask for several steps. If a problem needs five steps, the answer to the fourth step might appear as one of the choices. There will be geometrical figures shown in the exam. Some will not be drawn to scale. Triangles might be inverted so the base is the top part of the figure. Test writers will use raw numbers and percentages. If percentages are needed, one of the answer choices will no doubt be what the answer would be if raw numbers were sought.

## Strategy

Since the GMAT tests academic skills, instilling a sense of strategy will only increase a test takers score.

When students enter the testing room, they are given a pencil and six sheets of scratch paper. This leads to strategy one: using scratch paper. The exam begins with an untimed test tutorial. Teachers should have taught all test procedures in classes, therefore, the student should take advantage of this time to write down math formulas, essay outlines, and difficult grammar structures. Second, students should write down rows where they can take notes and other rows with sets of a, b, c, d, e. These are used for process of elimination. Students should practice setting up their scratch paper in class so that they know exactly what they will write on the day of the test.

Process of elimination is helpful throughout the exam. It is essential on data sufficiency. In data sufficiency, a test taker is presented with a question followed by two possible solutions, usually a formula or a phrase. Test takers must choose from five choices:

- A--The first formula alone solves the question
- B--The second formula alone solves the question
- C--Both formulas are needed to solve the equation
- D--Either formula can solve the equation
- E--Neither formula can solve the equation.

The five options are always the same and always appear in the same order. If choice A is incorrect, then choice D is also incorrect. Similarly, if A is correct, then C and E are also automatically wrong. Likewise, in the problem-solving sections, savvy test takers will see impossible solutions. Most answers have solutions that are greatly diverge of the correct answer. Other answer choices are the solution of one step of a multi-step problem.

Process of elimination also is useful on the sentence correction portion, too. Two of the five often begin with similar groups of words. If the group of words is correct, other answer choices can be eliminated. If the group of words is incorrect, those choices can be thrown out.

In critical reasoning, eliminate answer choices using the following criteria:

- too broad
- too specific
- irrelevant
- correct information that fails to address the question

Most answers are irrelevant. Also, train students to spot faulty reasoning.

Strategy for their writing portion involves having a clear idea of what type of structure you are going to use to write the essay. After reading the question, begin to brainstorm. Decide on the topics to address quickly, within the first three minutes. Then, begin to write.

Know how to use transitional phrases, introductory and conclusion paragraphs, as well as vocabulary to attack an argument. Many of these phrases or words can be written on the scratch paper before the exam begins.

Time management is always a concern. Bear in mind that GMAT is computer adaptive. On the multiple-choice sections, getting the first questions correct is critical. Spend extra time if need be: give the readings a complete read; recheck your answers.

## Materials

There is a variety of material both for sale and on the Internet to help GMAT professors. ARCO publishes an excellent text, *Teach Yourself the GMAT CAT in 24 Hours*. Regrettably, this does not include a CD-ROM. We think that the Princeton Review's GMAT book is not as thorough as ARCO's, however, it includes an excellent CD-ROM with exercises and practice tests. Several subject specific guides are noteworthy. The Princeton Review publishes a spectacular GMAT verbal review text and ARCO publishes a great GMAT writing book that includes examples of all essay questions one might face. Any course must include *The ETS Official Guide to the GMAT*. The book includes several thousand actual GMAT questions that the students can use for practice, although their explanatory answers are almost laughably complex.

Internet now offers a variety of teaching options. Regrettably, most are subscription based. Two free services are Test Tutor (<http://www.testtutor.com/>) and the ARCO practice page (<http://www.west.net/~stewart/gmat/gmgance.htm> ). Both pages offer explanations of the types of tests and complete practice tests with explanations. Test Tutor includes an excellent section in which high scoring students explain how they prepared for the GMAT. The ETS GMAT site also has a downloadable file with all the possible essay questions and all information needed to register for the exam.

## A Final Thought

Student success depends on a number of things: determination, study, strategy and skills. While there is no substitute for the significant study the GMAT requires, a proper GMAT course has the potential to boost a student from a mediocre score, to an exceptional one. Teachers just need to point their students in the right direction.

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<http://www.aitech.ac.jp/~iteslj/>

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<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Langdon-GMAT.html>