

The Use of Frameworks in Teaching Tense
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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes three frameworks that will assist students in their understanding and use of English tenses. It argues that the English tense system really is *a system* (and not just a collection of rules) but that this system is only apparent if tenses are taught at the textual level instead of at the sentential level. To this effect, it argues against the traditional approach of teaching tenses individually in that it is restrictive and counter-productive to students expressing themselves independently. Finally, this paper gives practical hands-on guidance as to how the frameworks can be used in class, along with suggestions for practice and supporting exercises.

EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) DESCRIPTORS

Communicative Competence (Language)

Verbal Communication

Verbal Ability

Language Attitudes

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Introduction

This paper sets out to explore how teaching tense at the contextual level instead of the sentential can help clarify the use and application of the tense system. More specifically, with this paper, I would like to propose three frameworks:

- **A framework to demonstrate Form**
- **A framework de demonstrate Meaning**
- **The BOSTOS chart**

In order to demonstrate the cohesiveness of the tense system in a way that is simple and useable by both teachers and students. Finally, I intend to suggest practical applications of these frameworks, along with an examination of results obtained in class using these frameworks. In so doing, I will apply several supporting frameworks in the form of practical exercises. In short, I would like to propose a map that will enable students and teachers to situate themselves and to decide what tense will convey their meaning after two “uh-huh”s. In order to do this I write this paper very much the way I would teach tenses in class, stopping along the way to give comments, explanations and further arguments.

Part 1: Personal motivation and introduction to the difficulties involved in the teaching of tense.

Teaching students the English tense system is complicated by the fact that it is so much more subtle and complex than other languages,” explained an experienced teacher to me when I was considering taking up teaching as a career. The difficulty, he went on to explain, was that English tenses were so much more precise than those of other languages. Where, for example, French used one present, a student learning English would have to distinguish between three or four different structures, each to convey a nuance of meaning encompassed in the more comprehensive French one.

Tu manges ici, for example, can mean either you eat here or you are eating here, while adding a time adverbial such as *depuis des mois*, means either you have eaten or you have been eating here for months.

If these two languages, though only separated by the English Channel geographically, have developed very different solutions to the problem of expressing actions in a time frame, how much more complicated must it be for speakers of Chinese, Thai or Swahili? Learners of English do not only need to learn the makings of the tense, but also to suspend their own cultural definitions of time and adopt an often entirely new perception of the organisation of time. Naturally, this leads to frequent misuse on behalf of learners, and bewildered head scratching among teachers, who wonder why it is that their students “just don’t get it”.

Not only do we, as teachers, have to be able to analyse and understand the differences expressed in shades of meaning of different structures, but we have to make them understandable to our students so that, we hope, they will be able to use them themselves. To do this we refer to rules that are, in fact, not rules at all, but rather fallible attempts to explain what the language does. In this English differs from, say, French or German, which are both codified languages: their rules have been written down and the language, sometimes rather tyrannically, forced to obey those rules. As this never happened with English, our rules don’t have the force of law. We are forced to come up with new, visual and clear ways of illustrating the rules, which we suspect are really only half-truths that do not express the full reality of the tense system. We try to illustrate the rules with examples in an attempt to get our students to feel the latent meaning behind the structures we are trying to teach. We explain the rules to help our students focus on that one nugget of truth, which, once understood, may give them a point of reference from which to cope with the exceptions. Then, we deal with the exceptions, trying to find a way of explaining them, trying to squeeze them, distort them or cram them into the rule, so that the rule can have a semblance of validity.

The present perfect provides an excellent example of the problems facing a teacher:

I have seen her two days ago. When have you been to Paris?

These sentences are considered wrong, whereas

I saw her two days ago. When did you go to Paris?

are considered acceptable.

Thompson & Martinet (A Practical English Grammar, OUP, 1985) tells us, explaining the Present Perfect, that the present perfect is used for past actions whose time is not definite. So, we can deduce that the Present Perfect is not used with expressions of past time (which are definite), until:

When have you ever done the washing up?

which is perfectly acceptable, even though it breaks the above rule as “when” here is obviously referring to a definite time in the past.

At this point the teacher (or grammar book) will step in with hurried explanations and footnotes as to why this exception does not really break the rule (which it clearly does), and we end up with a general rule, followed by sub-categories, each with their own rules and exceptions. In fact, Thompson and Martinet (1986) list six main categories of when the present perfect is used, and these six categories have, between them, more than fifteen sub-categories, which the authors feel are worthy of note.

Whereas it may be useful for teachers to have listed over three pages all the instances in which we can hope to use the present perfect, even if our students understand them, it seems highly unlikely that they will internalise them and use them independently and of their own accord. It seems more likely that this collection of different rules and instances related to the Present Perfect will confuse, baffle and discourage our students. Teaching the rules governing the usage

of English tenses often appears to be like shoring up the sagging walls of a house with bolsters, which in turn need to be bolstered by others.

Throughout my years of teaching I have wrestled with the tense system, trying to pin it down and bang it into some understandable (and thus teachable) straightjacket. I sought rules that I would then be able to pass on, but it seemed that whenever I had found an unbreakable rule about the tenses, something that would hold, an exception would invariably spring up out of nowhere - often a student's question - which would tear gaping holes into my truth. English tenses seem so resistant to being confined to any useful form to a teacher trying to help her students along the path towards mastery that she could be forgiven for questioning the use of the word "system" in the first place. Where is the system in the tense system?

More often than not, however, we are forced to accept that the rules at our disposal are not rules but a tendency, or an attempt by grammarians to explain what the speakers of the language are doing with the language at the time of writing, rather than what the language is meant to do according to agreed-upon precepts. Nevertheless, while it is true that English grammar is descriptive and not prescriptive, this is of little reassurance to our students, who are trying to understand the underlying precepts of English internalise them and apply them to their own use of English. Furthermore most teachers suspect instinctively that there must be a system, some form of logic or a rationale to our use of tenses, and that this rationale must have more consistency than a loose-knit collection of rules.

A little history:

Grammar has always been a central issue in the teaching of language. One of the earliest teaching methods in the history of modern language teaching was the Grammar-Translation Method. Its underlying principle was that there was an underlying common grammar and that all

languages could be explained in the same way as Latin and Greek. These rules, having been understood (or at least, learnt by rote), could then be applied to translation. Moreover, as the Grammar-Translation Method gained acceptance as a teaching technique, texts were adapted to illustrate a particular grammatical rule, so that even the language being studied was in itself unnatural and adapted. This is perhaps the most vivid illustration of grammar stripped of context and devoid of meaning. The focus was distinctly on accuracy over fluency.

The emphasis on the rules of grammar was further advanced by Noam Chomsky's ideas of an internal grammar known to the native speaker, of a limited number of grammatical rules from which all utterances was created. The focus on structure presupposed that having internalised these rules, the learner would, like the native speaker, have an inner grammar from which she could create an unlimited number of utterances.

Skinner (1968) had previously claimed that language was a system of stimulus/response, and that language learning should also be a question of training (or programming) the learner to instinctively respond to an external stimulus (in this case, another speaker of that language). To do this, Behaviourist language teaching developed grammatical stepping-stones to build up a student's arsenal of responses. The student was first introduced to the verb "to be" in the present. This laid the foundation for the Present Continuous, which was merely a question of pinning a present participle onto previously learnt language. Gradually a student's body of knowledge was built up, one structural brick laid upon another to develop automatic responses to language stimuli. Critics of Behaviourism argued that students in a Behaviourist classroom acquired structure automatically and without understanding. Cognitivism required the student to develop her own internal grammar and to use her understanding thereof to create new language. Again, the focus was on grammatical glue to scaffold a student's acquisition of language.

Hymes (1974), however, pointed out that language was more than grammatical form; it was used to communicate certain meanings and thus the teaching of form devoid of reasons for which the language was being used, failed to give the student a context in which to apply her new understanding. Language, Hymes asserted, was used to accomplish certain tasks or functions, and so the resulting functional approach was an attempt to create a syllabus around the uses to which a student might put language: how to make an apology, give instructions, etc. It soon became apparent that this presented certain difficulties as the variations available to native speakers for these functions ranged from very simple (and thus accessible to elementary students) to extremely complicated. Requesting the use of someone's lighter could be as simple a structure (or function) as "got a light?" to "I wonder if I could trouble you for the use of your lighter?" This presented problems of grading for levels, and, more to the point for the purposes of this paper, grammatical difficulties as the structure involved in one function is considerably simpler than in another.

Whatever the approach, be it Behaviourist or Functional/Notional, whether argued for or against, Grammar seems to be a central issue. Although it can go under different names, there is a real fascination, both on the teacher's and the student's behalf, for its enigmas. Not only do we as teachers sense that mastery of grammar is essential to our profession, but our students, less impressed than we are with the arguments of Chomsky and Hymes, require a sound grammatical understanding, and demand explanations.

"Although teaching of phrases may have some value, students will not be given an ability to create new language as they are with grammatical items...without some understanding of grammar students would not be able to do anything more than utter separate items of language for separate functions." Harmer (1983)

Whether we like it or not, grammar is present in our classrooms. Not only is it present but, according to Harmer, it is central to our students' capacity for creating new language; and if grammar is a central concern of both teacher and student, the tense system is the aspect of grammar that dominates. The question is how to teach it.

While it seems clear that there is both a place and a need for the teaching of grammar in the classroom -- a point ceded even by supporters of the functional approach -- how then do we avoid our students becoming grammatically fluent and communicatively incapable? The Communicative approach appeared as a sort of compromise between cognitivism and functionalism, arguing that communication was the purpose of language and that while functions, notions and structure all had their parts to play, the primary of focus of a language teacher was to encourage communication.

Even this approach, however, had difficulties in navigating the tricky path between the extremes of functional usage and grammatical correctness, falling at times into the camp of one (accuracy) and at others into the camp of the other (fluency). A teacher was, in her teaching aims, to decide whether she would concentrate on one or the other, as if both were somehow a mutually exclusive ideal, desirable, of course, but unrealistic.

I believe that the problem stems not from *whether or not* structure should be taught, but *how* it should be taught. As mentioned above, both students and teacher accept that there is a need for grammar in the classroom, and a large number of textbooks on the market are even now structurally based, in that they make use of a progression in grammatical competency as a syllabus. On the whole the majority of these course books try to assist student understanding by concentrating on a grammatical rule, which is usually illustrated by contrasting examples. This is usually followed by some drill exercises set into a more or less meaningful context, depending on the awareness of the authors. In short, the focus of teaching structure has remained firmly anchored in the sentential level, as if in some silent tribute to Chomsky's attempts to isolate the fundamental structural rules from which all language is created. This, it seems to me, is part of the problem. Language doesn't happen at the sentential level; it happens at textual level. Rather like the magic 3-D pictures in which the hidden image only becomes apparent when the viewer stares through the painting rather than at it, the invisible fabric of the English tense system takes

on a completely different allure when examined at a textual level, and reasons invisible at the sentential level, become clearer when taking in the greater picture.

Part 2: What's wrong with the standard approach?

The problems inherent with teaching at the sentential level:

First, it must be re-emphasised that language, outside the classroom, does not occur at the sentential level. Even a monosyllabic grunt over the breakfast table occurs within a context and has communicative value. To understand the nature and implied meaning of the grunt, we need to understand the context within which it is made. The same grunt would have a different meaning in the context of an offer of coffee than it would in the context of an accusatory question concerning the activities of the grunter the night before. Language and thus communication cannot occur outside a context. This being the case, it seems strange that most of our classroom activities centre on examining structure stripped of its context.

Indeed if we accept the precept that "Grammar is meaning", then the emphasis should be less on getting it right according to grammatical rules, but more a question of getting it right according to our intended meaning. In this case, it becomes impossible to consider accuracy outside a context. In other words, we need to know what the context is before we can ascertain correctness. Many teachers are familiar with a student question concerning accuracy: is it right to say? Sometimes, the answer is clear. More often than not, however, the teacher is forced to reply: it depends on what you mean. Increasingly, within my own teaching, I find difficult to pronounce on accuracy without considering:

- a) the supposed intended meaning.
- b) the level and the likely usefulness of my explanation.
- c) the probable context.

Very often it is possible to imagine a situation or context in which that utterance might be possible. So is it wrong? Only if it fails to express the intended meaning of the student. Accuracy, therefore, is dependent not only on the context, but also on what the speaker wanted to express. It is less a question of obeying rules, be they prescriptive or descriptive, but more a question of control - making the language do what the speaker intends. Using tenses is less a question of getting it right, but more a question of usage so that the intended meaning is expressed effectively. As teachers, therefore, before we can answer the question: is it right to say.....?, we have to get inside the student's head and try and understand what meaning she is trying to convey. We need her context and intended meaning – almost exactly the opposite of what a student has to do when studying grammar in most textbooks, which still teach tense at the sentential level.

A common approach is a mini-grammar explaining the rules briefly, followed by a number of exercises, designed to practice the required structure. A classic example is putting the verb in brackets into the correct tense:

1. I wonder who that man is. I never (see) him before.
 2. You've had too much to drink. I (drive).*
 3. I always (help) her.
- *accompanied by an image of a woman taking the car keys

Figure 1: A typical exercise on tense

Students carrying out these exercises are required to have understood the rules governing tense usage, to recognise the cues within the sentence and to apply the required tense. Apart from the previously stated argument that such utterances are artificial in their nature, as the context has to be imagined (and this in itself is open to subjective if not cultural interpretation) a further difficulty exists in that each sentence must contain a cue for the students to be able to complete the exercise. Very often the cue is to be found in the heading of the exercise: Put the following verbs

into either the Present Simple or the Present Continuous. Needless to say, a student will not have such obliging assistance when trying to create language independently.

If the cue is not in the actual heading of the exercise, then it must be found within the sentence. Sentence 1, from the examples in Figure 1, requires the student to guess the context. For me, this would probably be something like two girls discussing a new member of staff, or a new face at a local club, but other readers could envisage a multitude of other situations/contexts in which to place this exchange. What is important is that they are talking about a present situation, not one that occurred in the past. However, the assumption being made is that the student will recognise a relevant context (one that the writer intends) and will therefore apply the rules according a correct interpretation of the clues. So, if the student imagines the context around sentence 1 correctly, she will see that this exchange is indeed happening in the present. By applying the rules, she will realise that the verb in brackets is referring not to finished time (whatever that means - if we stop to think about it) but to an action which has begun in the past (before) and is still true now (as hinted at by the use of the present in the leading question). Putting this information together she will be able to complete the first sentence by answering:

I have never seen him before. - which, of course, is what I, the teacher, am hoping to see. Examining the same sentence from another angle, however, might lead to different conclusions. Culturally, the use of the present perfect is insisted on more in British than American English, in which the use of the Simple Past is more tolerated. Having completed her sentence “correctly”, my student may well then read in a North American novel: I never saw him before. Without even examining the different cultural interpretation possible around the sentence, within the English-speaking world there is already altercation concerning acceptability.

Question 2 illustrates another difficulty inherent in imagining context. My intended cue for my student to be able to complete the task relies fundamentally on a culturally imagined context. The

situation I am hinting at, and which I assume will be understood is this: they have just left a party and he is drunk so she decides she will drive. To guess this context, however, requires of my reader a familiarity with western culture, male-female roles within that culture. She has to know that:

- people drink alcohol, and that one can't/shouldn't drive under its effect.
- within a couple the man usually drives
- women can and do drive
- women can over-ride a man's decision

With this cultural information, one can imagine the context and decide that in this case the verb in brackets refers to the future, and by applying the rules governing the use of future tenses decide that this is either a spontaneous decision, indicating the future simple, or an intention requiring going to. This cultural knowledge may not be available or indeed imaginable to many cultures in which alcohol is not consumed and it is not considered acceptable for a woman to challenge her husband.

Question 3. is, of course, impossible to complete correctly, as there is not enough information contained within the sentence. Any number of tenses could be acceptable or correct. This is not the case in discourse.

The point here is that when working at the sentential level, not only is the language used artificially because it is taken out of context, but even the sentences we construct are in themselves artificial as we are constantly forced to make it clear what tense we require within the sentence. Although it is not unnatural English for these indications to be included within a sentence, it is highly unlikely that they will always be there, and if we assume that the student's purpose is producing language (rather than just putting the verbs in the correct tense) then it is she who will have to make her own decisions about the time-context, and there will be no helpful time adverbials to indicate what tense she should use.

A final objection to this type of exercise lies in the fact that to complete the exercise, the student is required to put her own desire to communicate on hold, to read the cues and to produce the language that she believes is required of her. Not only, then, do controlled exercises of this type create artificial language and restrict student choices by obliging them to produce language in a prescribed manner, but the essence of language itself is eroded: a student is asked to try and imagine what someone else wants to say and to communicate this. She cannot express herself as she wishes; she actively has to express what another requires of her, by getting into the exercise writer's head and seeing the world from their eyes. Ironically, this is precisely what the teacher should be doing when trying to decide what the student's intended meaning is in order to judge correctness. The student, on the other hand, should be concentrating on communicating her message, not trying to figure out how to express someone else's message correctly.

In teaching tense we are trying to give students the tools to make language choices. In reality, rather than freeing our students to make choices, we seem to be enslaving them by binding them to restrictive language. Not content with forcing them to use language that we consider suitable, we are also forcing our students to perceive the language through another's eyes. Far from giving our students the tools they need to make independent language decisions based on their own intended meaning we are, in fact, controlling language and requiring students to express approved intended meaning.

Language, learnt for communicating actively (as distinct from a language like Latin, which tends to be learnt for passive understanding), is essentially a creative enterprise. As language doesn't occur realistically in sentences alone, but within a situation or context, and in conjunction with other sentences, it seems more rational to teach our students to create text within the language rather than just complete another's intended meaning. We need to empower our students as soon as possible to be able to produce text instead of writing meaningless sentences. They need

to take control of their language and be enabled to produce meaningful text as quickly as possible. To do so, they must be able to manipulate and make decisions about tense with the understanding that they are the ones in control, and that the better they master their tenses, the more easily their meaning will be conveyed and, hopefully, understood.

What is needed is a system that goes beyond the myriad conflicting rules of the textbook and the grammar book. What is needed is the elusive pattern that binds the tenses together in a way that is simple and practical, a system so simple that it can be taught at early elementary level and yet complex enough to be still valid at an advanced level. What is needed is a simple key that, once understood, gives the student the freedom to make decisions on tense without having to rely on rules or brainwashing. What is needed is a map!

Part 3: Knowing a tense: Form, Meaning & Use.

William Bull's (1960) framework to describe tense offers such a map. It contains a simple and useable solution to the problems of tense in discourse. In brief, the Bull Framework suggests that text is produced along three axes (past, present or future) and that once situated on an axis, there are a limited number of tense options available. If this is so, the implication is that a student need only situate her text or message on an axis to immediately restrict the number of tenses she need juggle. Ideally, it might even help her decide which tense to use. Teaching along the lines proposed by the Bull Framework enables students to open a door into tense usage to express their meaning, allowing even elementary and lower-intermediate students an understanding and access to the tense system as a whole. This holistic approach to the teaching of tense, working immediately at discourse level, offers students a working model, which, once understood can be easily and simply applied to language at any level, thereby enabling students to start navigating between English tenses and thus exercising control over their own intended meaning.

However, the Bull Framework remains essentially a framework governing the *use of tenses*, and before a student can hope to use it, she needs to be familiar with the construction and meaning of a tense. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983) propose the following framework:

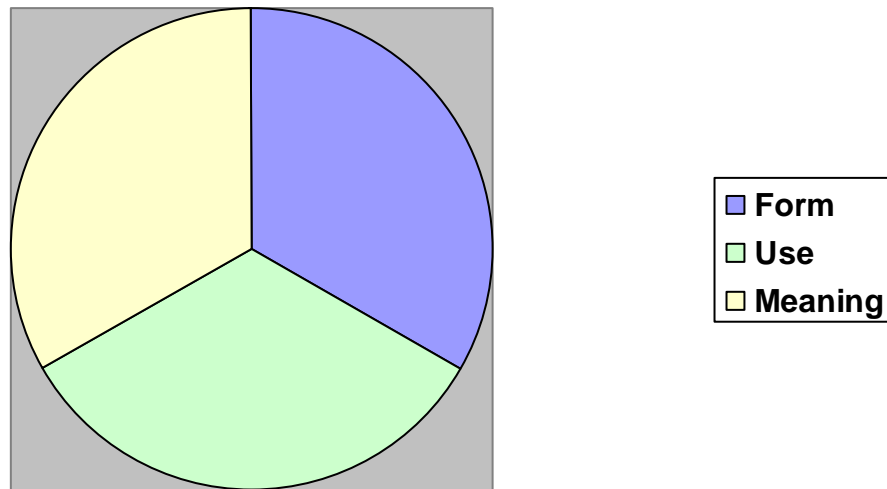


Figure 2: Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman's Form/Meaning/Use Pie Chart.

According to Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman's pie chart, to know a grammatical item, a student needs to understand its form - how to make the structure, its meaning, and its use. Each segment of her pie chart is inter-related, so that altering one segment will automatically produce change in the other segments.

In my teaching of tense, I apply the same approach. Before discussing the application of the Bull Framework to creative discourse, it is necessary to make sure that my student can construct the tenses that she will be using (form) and that she understands what these tenses mean (meaning). Only then, can she reasonably be asked to use them (use). Thus, before a student can manipulate and use tenses to express her intended meaning to maximum effect, she needs to know three things:

how to construct the tenses

what the tenses mean

how to use the tenses

Applying Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman's framework to the actual teaching of tense, I intend to propose a framework for each segment.

Part 4: A framework for teaching Form.

In my teaching of tense I have found it useful to start with Form¹. This has the advantages of:

- Ensuring that students are familiar with the meta-language involved around our discussion of tense - that a student be able to connect a structure with its name, so that when we mention the Past Continuous, for example, a student understands which tense is being discussed.
- Demonstrating that within the nomenclature of the tenses there is useful and helpful information.
- Making certain that a student has the means to be able to construct the tenses in question.

Form in English tenses offers a bewildering array of possibilities. Consider the palette of auxiliaries available to a student: am, are, is, was, were, will be, have, had, will have, without even taking modal auxiliaries into consideration. To this add present participles, past participles (many of which are irregular), not forgetting that with the formation of the passive tenses, the possible combinations almost double. In view of this, the traditional approach of teaching one tense at a time seems not only understandable, but also sensible. It seems too much to ask of a student, especially at a lower level of proficiency, to construct 12 different tenses. Nevertheless, it

¹ Some teachers I have discussed with prefer to teach this inductively, letting the students work out the rules of form for themselves. Students often get nervous when forming tense, so my approach to teaching tense is to demonstrate simplicity and ease as much as possible.

is possible to provide a framework to facilitate students by organising tense formation into 3 rules of thumb:

All	Continuous Tenses	are formed with the	Auxiliary Be	and the	Present Participle
	Perfect Tenses		Auxiliary Have		Past Participle
	Simple Tenses ²		Auxiliary Do/Will		Infinitive

Figure 3: Form Framework

This framework, as all frameworks, remains unhelpful unless it is worked. Remembering that the purpose here is no more than to assist our students to actually construct the tenses, I can now demonstrate the application of this framework to the task. So:

Present Continuous = auxiliary be [in the present] + [v] -ing. > I am walking.

Likewise, Past Continuous = aux be [in the past] + [v]-ing. > I was walking.

Past Perfect = aux have [in the past] + past participle.

Future Perfect = aux have [in the future] + past participle.

It is also possible to introduce and practice the construction of the more complex compound tenses:

Present Perfect Continuous = Continuous (all continuous tenses are formed with be + [v]-ing) > aux be [in present perfect] Perfect (all perfect tenses are formed with have + past participle) > aux have [in present] Have been + [v]-ing > I have been walking.

Needless to say, especially at lower levels, students will need help with the various forms of the auxiliary: *she is, we are, he has, he doesn't* etc., and may well need to refer to irregular verb chart for the past participles, but this is less of a problem that it appears because the students are focusing on the similarities between structures. The aim here is to help students see the interconnectedness of tense formation - that a perfect, no matter whether it is past, present or future, will always be formed with *have*, a continuous tense will always be formed with *-ing*, that there is a direct relationship between the name of the tense and the tense of the auxiliary.

² Simple Tenses will need a little extra explanation; they are not that simple.

A lesson on Form

I start by asking a student to choose a verb, any verb. I then ask her to choose a tense. For our purposes, we will say she has chosen the verb walk and the Present Continuous. Referring to the framework, I elicit the –ing form of walk, and write up going on the board. Referring back to the chart, I put up the auxiliary Be. My board³ now looks like this:

[be] WALKing

I then show that, helpfully, English tenses contain useful information in their nomenclature. The second part of the tense name tells us if it's simple or continuous. If we want the Present Continuous, then the main verb goes into the present participle (-ing) and it is like a dead insect being carried by some ants. The verb doesn't move; it's dead! The auxiliaries (the ants) do all the work. (Drawing a dead insect being carried by two ants on the blackboard is helpful visual aid.) The first part of the tense name tells us what to do with the auxiliary – it goes into the present. So, in this case, the auxiliary is Be, and it wants to go into the present: am, are, is

[be] WALKing

[He] [Present] is walking

Likewise, in the Past Continuous, the student can apply the same approach:

[be] WALKing

[He] [Past] was walking

And in the future:

[be] WALKing

[He] [Future] will be walking

The same approach can be applied to forming the Perfect tenses, with the additional explanation that some past participles are irregular and can be found in the 3rd column of their irregular verbs chart:

³ It is very important to have clear visuals.

[have] WALKed/TAKEN > [He] [Present] has walked/taken [have] WALKed/TAKEN >
 [He] [Past] had walked/taken [have] WALKed/TAKEN > [He] [Future] will have
 walked/taken

Perfect Continuous Tenses can equally be explained with this framework. I first establish that the Present Perfect Continuous is a continuous tense (and thus subject to the same form: [be] + -ing). Thus: [be] WALKing

Reminding the students that to form the Present Continuous, they put the auxiliary (the ant) into the present, to form the Past Continuous, they put the auxiliary into the past, and for the Future Continuous, they put the auxiliary into the future, it follows that to form the Present Perfect Continuous, they should put the ant (auxiliary) into the Present Perfect. So, what is the Present Perfect of BE? Well, referring back to the chart, All perfect tenses are formed with aux have + the past participle (3rd column). So:

[have] + BE > BEEN > [He] [Present] has been

Combining the two ideas, we get:

[He] has been walking

It is important to demonstrate the underlying system. It is important that the student understand that she is not required to learn 12 different tenses, but that by applying 3 simple rules⁴, they have the means to construct all these tenses themselves. Obviously they need to practice, apply the rules and see for themselves.

⁴ Well, two simple rules really. The simple tenses do not fit so snugly into these rules as there are many more auxiliaries – do, does, will, did - which are often not used in the affirmative, but only in the interrogative or the negative. Simple Tenses are, in short, anything but simple. Fortunately, they have a very high profile and students are more likely to have been exposed to them than to other tenses, and to be familiar with the variations. More often than not, it is the contrasting of other tenses with the Simple that causes difficulty rather than the Simple itself. Nevertheless, with very elementary students, this must be taken into consideration.

Bearing in mind that the aim, at this stage, is to demonstrate cohesiveness and to empower students with the ability to form 12 tenses, I have found game/puzzle activities ideal to practice tense construction, because they are non-threatening, contain entertainment, while simultaneously providing the challenge of “working it out” found in crosswords and suduko. I have used activities ranging from a simple list of verbs to be put into a required tense, Snakes & Ladders, Noughts and Crosses to Cuisenaire rods, in which the students are asked to form structures according to colour codes. On the board, I explain that each colour represents a part of speech:

White	pronoun
Red	“not”
Light Green	aux be
Violet	aux have (or had)
Yellow	aux do (or does/did)
Dark Green	will
Black	question word
Brown	Infinitive
Blue	past participle
Orange	present participle

Figure 3: Colour codes to illustrate parts of speech

Student A decides on a sentence without showing it to Student B. For example: We have finished. She then makes up a colour code White [We]+Violet [have]+Blue[past participle].

Student B then has to find a sentence. She is unlikely to come up with We have finished, but may well produce: It has rained – an answer which would require Student A to rethink the answer within the context of her own code to ascertain whether or not it is correct.

The joy of this exercise is that it is a two-way drill that focuses both students on the form of the tenses, while still leaving students totally free to make up whatever sentences they want. Should, however, either Student A make a mistake in constructing a colour sentence [white+violet+orange, for example] or Student B suggest an answer which does not conform to

the code, the other student, finding that they are unable to produce a sentence, will probably question the combination. Thus, the two students are not testing each other, but combining their individual understanding in order to create knowledge together in the form of a game.

Students generally perceive these as a non-threatening activities, as they have access to scaffolding in the form of the above framework and, if needs be, reference books and of course, the teacher. It must be made clear that the aim of the activity is to allow the students to familiarise themselves with the form that they will be using later on. They are not expected, at this stage, to use the structures. In my experience, students tend to find this activity both engrossing and satisfying, as they feel that they are finally getting to grips with something that is often a source of worry and confusion for them.

Other activities can be used to practice form at this stage, from a straight-forward chart-completing exercise (Figure 4) to an information gap exercise, so beloved by the Communicative Method, in which each student receives a partially completed chart, containing information that does not figure on their partner's chart. Students then co-operate to complete their charts.

Person	Verb	Tense	+/-/?	Example
3 rd p s	Talk	Present continuous	+	
1st p s	Think	Past Perfect Continuous	?	
2nd p pl	Eat	Future Continuous	+	You will be eating
3rd p pl	Find	Present Perfect Simple	-	
1st p pl	Ask	Past Simple	-	We didn't ask

Figure 4: Verb Construction Exercise

A variation on this theme is to use an excel chart (see Figure 5) with the correct answer masked in one column, to produce a simple practice exercise.

Tense	Verb	Pronoun	Case	Your Answer	[Masked]	result ⁵
present perfect simple	go	He	Affirmative		he has gone	?
past simple	eat	We	Negative		we didn't eat	?

⁵ By inserting an IF function (=IF(F2=E2,"right","?")) here, students can immediately see if they are off target or not.

past perfect simple	see	She	Interrogative		had she seen	?
present continuous	take	You	Affirmative		you are taking	?
past continuous	copy	They	Negative		they weren't copying	?
future simple	live	I	Interrogative		will I live	?
future perfect continuous	drive	She	Affirmative		she will have been driving	?
past simple	believe	they	Interrogative		did they believe	?
present perfect simple	have	you	Negative		you have not had	?

Figure 5: Spreadsheet used to practice tense formation.

The game of Categories can be adapted. Students have two minutes to write down all the tenses for a verb that begins with.... "P". I use "Scattergories" – a commercialised version of this game because it has a handy 26 sided dice and useful pre-printed charts with 12 lines and 3 columns.

Noughts & Crosses: Instructions: Students play as a normal noughts and crosses game, but before placing their X or 0 in a square, they must conjugate a given verb in the tense of the square:

Present Perfect Simple (+)	Past Perfect Continuous (?)	Present Simple (-)
Past Simple (-)	Past Perfect Simple (+)	Present Continuous (?)
Future Perfect Simple (?)	Past Continuous (-)	Future Continuous (+)

Figure 6: Example of Noughts & Crosses practice activity (adapted from Rinvolutri (1985))

Of course, at this point I am making no attempt to focus on meaning, and I make sure that the students are aware that, by focusing on form, the intention is to see the underlying rationale in tense construction. In my experience, students tend to get a sense of satisfaction out of creating the tenses and realising that there is a method in the madness; they find it both stimulating and reassuring. With an appropriate approach this lesson can be perceived more as puzzle solving than as struggling with tense, as the students piece together examples of the tenses.

A final note on the teaching of form: as teachers, our instinct is often to limit the challenge (as, indeed, I am doing with the above approach by concentrating solely on form). The fear is that, by introducing too many new items, the student will get hopelessly confused and will never manage to use them all. This can be seen in many course books which introduce the 1st Conditional in unit 5, the 2nd in unit 8 and the 3rd in unit 11. Students are discouraged from using one structure until the teacher feels that a previous one has been sufficiently mastered. Apart from commenting that even with this linguistically buffered approach, students will still muddle, it is important to clarify here that I do not expect my students to miraculously start using all the tenses perfectly at this stage. All I want is for them to see that they can form the tenses. The objective is to demystify and to give pointers. Metaphorically, I am preparing the soil for future crops; I do not expect a harvest immediately.

I have taught form this way to all levels – from beginners (well, post beginners) to advanced. For more advanced students it can come as a relief to finally have a means of creating those tenses – such as the Future Perfect – that they have never really felt sure of. Elementary students can also benefit from learning form. Apart from the tremendous boost to their confidence when they realise that they have learnt all the tenses that there are in English, it gives them a reference onto which they can pin tenses as they come across them. More importantly, it gives them the means, once they have seen meaning and use, to start creating meaningful text right from the start. A successful lesson will have brought together all the parallels existing in tense formation and will have helped the student to see a pattern, where before there was little but an enormous array of possibilities, all of which needed to be learned separately and independently. More importantly, at some stage during the various practice activities, a student will comment that, although they can now construct the tenses, they still can't use them, which paves the way for a framework for Meaning and Use.

Two separate systems

Having satisfied myself that my students can make the 12 tenses, this is a good time to step back and to start making sense of these 12 tenses. I ask the students to divide the tenses into a) 2 groups of 6. and b) 3 groups of 4. The aim is to produce the following chart:

	Situations	Events
Future	Continuous Perfect Continuous	Simple Perfect Simple
Present	Continuous Perfect Continuous	Simple Perfect Simple
Past	Continuous Perfect Continuous	Simple Perfect Simple

Figure 7: Dividing Tenses into groups of 2x6 and 3x4

In this way, my students can see that: Just like their own language, there are three times: past, present and future. However, in English, there are two completely different tense systems: a Simple system and a Continuous system. Each tense in each system has its own Perfect. For example, both the Simple and Continuous system has a Present [time]. Each of those tenses has its own Perfect counterpart. I tell my students to think of the Perfect like a shadow, so there's the Present Simple and its shadow, the Future continuous and its shadow.

The questions that need to be answered are:

- a) Why does English have two separate systems?
- b) What does the Perfect do?

There is absolutely no point in teaching the above and to deny students any understanding of what it all means. To do so would be to slip back into the Grammar Translation method, without even the benefit of the translation. The aim here is still one of demystification. So far, without yet addressing what the tenses mean and how to use them, the students have seen that the forming of the tenses is within their capabilities (and that it can be fun!) and that far from being a bewildering array of different tenses that they somehow have to master and use, there are ways of seeing the similarities between them, and that if these similarities can be understood, they can then apply that understanding across the board.

Part 5: A framework for teaching Meaning

Once satisfied that the students have reasonable dexterity in construction and forming the different tenses it becomes important to ensure that the students understand the meaning of the tenses they will be using. Again, rather than focusing on each individual tense and constructing a table of contrastive meaning (Figure 8), as is the usual approach, I have found it more practical, helpful and effective to approach meaning from the perspective of Aspect – the different perspectives of meaning that a choice of Simple, Continuous or Perfect will give to the verb. Are we discussing an event – simple, a situation – continuous, or an explanation – perfect, remembering that the perfect itself will either be a situation or an event?

In keeping with the notion of helping students to see the underlying logic, and having seen that each tense has its own corresponding Perfect counterpart, it now seems useful to examine aspect to see if and how the notion of Perfect differs from that of Simple or Continuous. If the students can see the similarities between all Simple tenses, for example, and see that all Perfect tenses express a similar idea, then we have gone a long way to simplifying the confusions that exist between the tenses. Before doing so, however, I like to get right back to basics and remind my students of what we are really talking about.

Tense	Meaning	Contrasted with	Meaning
Present Simple	Habitual action, State	Present Continuous	Action in progress
Past Simple	Finished Time	Present Perfect	Action linking past to Present
Present Perfect Simple	Action linking past to present focusing on result	Present Perfect Continuous	Action linking past to present focusing on action itself

Figure 8: Contrastive teaching of tense meaning

What is a verb?

Tenses are about verbs. They concern the alterations we make to a verb phrase in order to situate our activity in a time perspective. Perception of time is cultural and so, therefore, are different peoples' approaches to expressing it and explaining it. Ultimately, however, a verb and what it represents is acultural and universal. It begins with an action. Although there are many different types of action, I will stick with a visible dynamic action:



Figure 9: An action as we perceive it

So what is a verb? It is an abstract sound we make (or a set of symbols we write) to express something that is real and (in this case) visible. In English, we call the above action: Run. Our eye will communicate Figure 8 to our brain wordlessly and our brain will translate that image into a word. Words that describe actions, we call verbs. So a verb is an abstract symbol (aural, oral or visual) to express a real action.

However, in communicating that action to others we need to be able to situate it in time - a problem that provokes different cultural solutions. In some languages the solution is found morphologically - by adding a time adverbial: *He run tomorrow*. In English, however, the problem is solved by altering the structure of the verb phrase so that it includes the information about the event we wish to convey. This is what we call tense. Before we can start, therefore, the verb is dressed in information to convey time. If this were all, the problem would remain relatively simple: There are three times, irrespective of tense, and this is common to all languages: Now, Before Now and After Now. This would indicate a need for three tenses, but in English, unlike other languages there are at least twelve⁶, without counting phrasal models such as "going to". This points to a clear difference between time (present, past & future) and tense (the 12 odd structures we employ to talk about actions).

⁶ I include the Future Perfect Continuous

Taking: *Last summer I explored Paris with an Iranian girl* as a model sentence. Not only is our expression of the action embedded with information regarding the time in which the action takes place [*Last summer, -ed at the end of the verb*], but we also choose to express information about our perception of the action: by choosing to use a simple, we express the idea of an event, something that happened at a specific moment [*last summer*] rather than a situation in progress during that time – as would be suggested by choosing a continuous: *Last summer I was exploring Paris with an Iranian girl*.

We have already seen that there are two separate tense systems, and within those systems, English allows us to express three ways of perceiving the action, which can be demonstrated in the next framework, which I use to explain meaning.

Why does English have two systems?

We can choose to express our perception of the action as an event. This means that the action is something that takes place at a specific point in time. Whether it be something finished in the past, or something repetitive in the present, an event is something that can answer to the question: *When?* In this framework, an event is shown thus:



where X is the moment that the event takes place:

- *When did you wash your hair? When will you change? When do you play golf?*

We use the Simple to express events, irrespective of the time in which the event takes place.

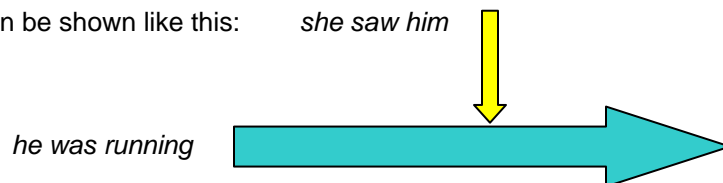
Thus the first system of Tenses, the Simple, is one that is chiefly⁷ used to describe actions that happen at a specific time, or actions that are viewed as events, no matter in what time they occur.

On the other hand, we can see the action in Figure 8. and decide that we don't want to express a punctual event taking place at a specific time, but rather, to describe a situation. Contrary to expressing an event, our desire here is to show that this is a circumstance, a description of a situation. This can be shown like this:

The man was running. The sun is shining. She will be sleeping.



In these examples, nothing happens at a given, specific time; the situation at play is being described. Often, though, against the backdrop of a situation, an event occurs: He was running when she saw him. And this can be shown like this:



A good way of explaining the concept of circumstances, I have found, is to ask the students what the circumstances in the class at the time of speaking are. The students are thus prompted to use language like:

The sun is shining. Eric is sleeping. We are learning English. You are teaching.

In contrast, dropping a pen, waking up Eric or opening the window can be seen to be events. In this way I can establish that circumstances describe a situation and are different in concept to events. I ask my students what they were doing at the same time yesterday and what they will be doing at the same time tomorrow. This helps them see that the continuous, be it past, present or

⁷ I think it's important to see that while the simple and continuous describe events and situations respectively, they are not our only ways of doing so. Stative verbs, for example, also describe situations even though they are always simple, and the verb "to be" invariably describes a situation, but is very rarely found in the Continuous. This seems to indicate that while the concept of event and situation are strong enough in English to merit their own tense system, they are not the only means at our disposal to convey this difference in meaning.

future describes a situation. Alternatively, situations can naturally be described using a well-known event:

Where were you on September the 11th? What were you doing? establishes the concept of situation quite adequately, while: *What did you do when you heard?* is useful for establishing the nature of events.

There is a lot of material available to practice the difference between the Simple and the Continuous. The only addition I make is to focus on the meaning of the forms and to extend it over the three times, or axes, as they are called in the Bull Framework.

What does the Perfect do?

Finally, an action can be expressed as an explanation⁸. By this, I mean an action which has influence on the event or the circumstances. Usually the explanation occurs before, and if it isn't the direct cause of the action, has some bearing on it. What is important about an explanation is that it is timeless - that is to say the action (or explanation) happened is of little or no interest; what is interesting is the effect it has on the event or the circumstance.

Consider these examples:

I am hungry [circumstances now] because I haven't eaten [explanation]

She will wait [future event] until you've finally decided [future explanation].

In sentence 1 the direct cause and effect is quite clear, whereas in sentence 2 it is not so obvious what it meant by explanation. What is clear is that we are referring to a future event and that there is a relationship between the first and second clause. Furthermore, the use of the perfect indicates that the decision, when it finally comes, will be before, or coinciding with, the end of

⁸ The perfect is considered in more detail when we discuss use.

event (waiting). So although this is not an explanation in the accepted sense of the word, the two actions are related and one has influence on the other. Perfect tenses are not normally time-bound and as such do not need to be represented on a time fine as a fixed point. They can be depicted in the framework like this:

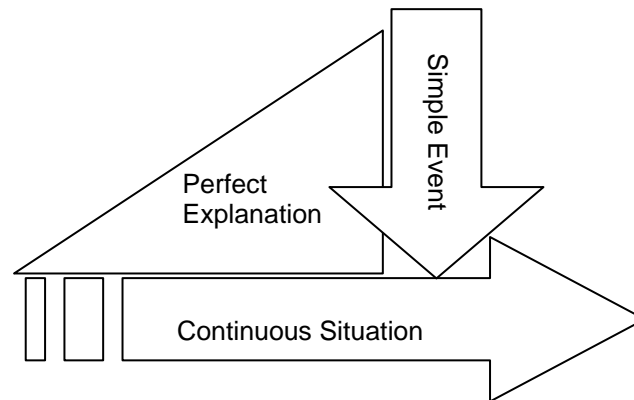


Figure 10: A Framework for Meaning

This framework can be used to explain the meaning of the tenses: All simple tenses, wherever they may find themselves in the time zones, refer to events, i.e. complete actions that happen at a certain point in time. All perfect tenses refer to directly or indirectly to an explanation of the event or circumstance in that time zone. All continuous tenses describe an ongoing situation and are often contrasted with an event, which is to say they describe a scene against which the event takes place. Thus, Perfect Continuous tenses are situations that explain, and Perfect Simple tenses are events that explain. And this is true in all time zones. The implications of this framework for students is that instead of having to learn eleven or twelve contrasting tenses, each one contrasted with the other in an attempt to highlight its meaning, a student using this framework need only understand what a simple, continuous or perfect tense signifies, and can then apply that meaning to the past, present or future.

Having understood this framework, a student has a key to the English tense system she can apply to the future, the present or the past.

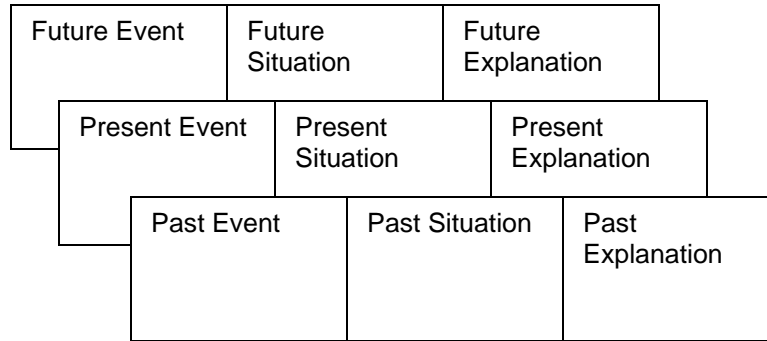


Figure 11: Aspect in the three time zones or axes

However, if the framework is to have validity it must also be able to explain the Perfect Continuous.

If we accept that the continuous itself is a situation and that it is situated around the time of speaking, or the time we are referring to (if we say: The sun is shining. The time we are referring to is now.) then the perfect continuous is a circumstance (it is continuous) that is being used by way of an explanation (perfect). So the Perfect Continuous is a situation which has been shifted back before the event to be offered as an explanation. As such, it can be illustrated thus:

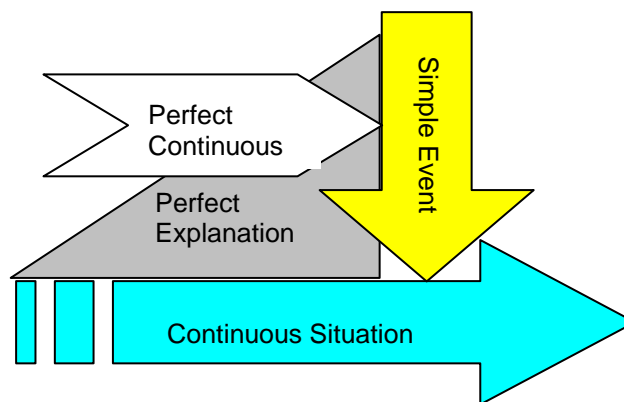


Figure 12 The Perfect Continuous

Examples:

I am tired because I have been carrying boxes.

(Circumstance) (Perfect continuous as a circumstance used as an explanation)

The white arrow indicates circumstances, but it is not situated at the time of reference, but rather before or leading up to it, showing that these circumstances have the function of an explanation. Although these are rather sophisticated concepts, if the notion of situation and event has been understood, the Perfect Continuous is nothing more than a situation that explains, and the Perfect Simple is but an event that does the same thing.

One way of illustrating this in class is by comparing the easily comprehensible: I have cut my finger with the less obvious: I have been cutting my finger and exploring the shift in meaning. Although the latter is often considered incorrect, it is only because the situation it describes is unusual. Students grasp quite quickly the former, as it is common and graphic. The Perfect Continuous, however, would describe a situation that would involve one's finger being numb. Nevertheless, the example serves (along with I have been breaking my leg) to show that one is an event that explains a present wound (or the blood on the carpet) and that the other is a situation. Once students understand a) that it makes a difference to the meaning and b) what that difference is, it becomes a lot easier for them to make those choices, freed from the imposition of grammatical rules, but based on a desire to convey their own meaning.

Like all frameworks, it is their application to creating language that really counts. For it to be useful it must be a hands-on tool that can open doors of understanding for our students, so students must be given practical situations to which they can apply and test the framework. I have used major events like the Titanic and September 11th to illustrate:

The circumstances:

The ship was sailing across the Atlantic. She was going to work. The plane was flying low.

The events:

Suddenly the ship hit an iceberg. She looked up. The plane crashed into the building.

The explanations:

They hadn't seen it in time. They had been sailing too fast. Nobody had believed it could happen.

This can be done quite convincingly with the help of cuisinaire rods (I use the white one to denote the iceberg) so that students can see the ship and its circumstances: sailing across the Atlantic, the moon shining, the lookouts shivering in the crow's nest. They can imagine the situation on board: passengers eating, drinking and dancing, Jack and Rose testing the springs of a Model-T Ford. Removing the rods (the ship sinks) from the table (the Atlantic) shows them visually that they are explaining a catastrophe.

However, asking students to imagine the events, circumstances and explanations behind famous paintings also works well. The raft of the Medusa, for example, offers many possibilities:

Circumstances:

They were dying of thirst. They were drifting aimlessly. One man was praying.

Events:

Suddenly they saw a ship on the horizon. They threw him into the sea. They waved frantically.

Explanations:

They had been drifting for weeks. Their ship had sunk. They had almost given up hope.

Students can be asked to create their own narrations to apply the framework. Once they have got the hang of applying this framework in one time (axis), I ask them to shift it from the past to the present, for example.

"The Titanic was sailing from England to America. The passengers were dancing and drinking champagne. Suddenly the lookout spotted an iceberg. He warned the bridge.

The captain tried to turn the ship but it hit the iceberg and began to sink. The next day, the ship had sunk and over 1500 passengers had died.”

for example, becomes:

“The Titanic is sailing from England to America. The passengers are dancing and drinking champagne. Suddenly the lookout spots an iceberg. He warns the bridge. The captain tries to turn the ship but it hits the iceberg and begins to sink. The next day, the ship has sunk and over 1500 passengers have died.”⁹

Having got the idea, we can now demonstrate the effectiveness in other time zones:

Present:

I’m feeling a bit nervous (circumstances) because, although I’ve been studying all night (perfect continuous), I haven’t understood anything (explanation). Nervously, I open the door and walk into the examination room (event, event).

Future:

Will you join us in the living room (event)? We’ll be expecting you (circumstance). We’ll have served the port. (explanation)

Although it is still not natural discourse because the students are being limited to one time zone, with time and practice, by applying this framework, students find themselves juggling between three tenses, possibly four (if we include the perfect continuous) and creating realistic text which is far removed from the kinds of exercises seen in figure 1.

In class, the great advantage of using such a framework is that it simplifies the use of tenses in discourse and gives the students a visual plan they can hold onto and apply to their own writing. Having explained and practiced this framework, I can now tell my students to go off on their own and to describe the situations, the events and explain:

When I opened the door, my sister was crying because her boyfriend had left her.

In 2010 I’ll be living in London. I’ll have made a lot of money so I’ll buy a house in the Bahamas.

Everyday I get home at 19:00. I’ve been working all day and I’m starving.

⁹ This is not as artificial an exercise as it may appear at first. There is nothing shocking about the text above. We frequently use the Present Simple to relate stories in the past (jokes, for example). It is not a bad thing that students get used to the idea that time and tense can have a rather fluid relationship.

Naturally, there will still be mistakes, but they won't be mistakes made due to a misunderstanding of a rule, or a lack of comprehension of what is meant by "unfinished" time. The mistakes made will not require long theoretical explanations. I can show my student on the map, where she went wrong. I can follow her reasoning and ask her if it is an event, a situation or an explanation. The grammar of tenses has been simplified, made tangible, visual and stripped of long, abstract and theoretical grammatical clichés, that neither mean very much nor reflect the truth, really.

Part 6: Teaching Use: Teaching along the axis: How to use it in class: Explanation of terms and an example of how I have used the Bull Framework to teach in class.

Having proposed two frameworks to assist students with the formation of tenses and to demonstrate their meanings, it is time to address the third segment in the Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1983) pie chart (figure 2), which deals with use. Assuming that our students can now construct the tenses they will need and that they understand what they mean, the final step is to provide for them a framework which will aid them to create realistic text. To do this they will need to control not only aspect in different time zones, but to be able to change between time zones as their language slips from past, through present to the future.

Consider a letter to a friend:

Dear Sue,

Here I am in London and everything is just too good to be true! The weather is a bit grim - it's raining, but apart from that there is so much to see and do. Yesterday, we visited the tower of London, and it was amazing. I'd read so much about the kings and queens of England, and there I was - standing on the ground they actually walked on. We decided not to go to Speaker's Corner last Sunday (because of the rain) but that we would leave it till next weekend. Tonight is the big night! I'm meeting Enrique at Piccadilly Circus by the statue of Eros (appropriate, don't you think?) I hope it'll work out all right - we've only ever chatted on the net, but if he's anything as nice as in the chat rooms, I'm sure we'll have a wonderful time. By the time I get back, I'll have had my whirlwind romance in London. Maybe then I'll be ready to marry Jed.

Figure 11: Example of discourse

Without going into an in-depth analysis of all the tenses used, it is immediately noticeable that the writer hasn't limited herself to one time zone. She begins her letter in the present to relate her situation, and then slips back into the past to explain her previous activities. Finally she ends up in the future pondering the events in store for her. Students communicating in English must likewise be capable of switching between zones without losing sight of where they are in their discourse or in time. The students will already have understood the idea of activities in the past, the present and the future (simple, continuous, perfect) because of the work they will have done on the previous framework, but this is not really enough to enable them to manipulate and control their tenses. Its purpose is more to help them understand what the tenses do. At this point what we need is a new framework that helps the students apply what they have understood.

The Bull Framework: what it proposes and why this is useful.

The Bull Framework (Bull, 1960) reorganises the English Tense system to suggest that English tenses work along a time zone (hereinafter referred to as an axis). It puts forward the proposition that the tense system works more effectively when considered as primarily functioning along a prescribed time axis. If, for example, our discourse is situated in the past (along the past axis) then there is a time of reference, a time before the time of reference and a time after the time of reference. Chafe (1970) goes on to propose that in discourse we keep to the same axis unless there is a new discourse marker which tells the reader that there has been a change and that we are now in a new axis. This, in a framework, looks like this:

Axis	Time before the basic axis time.	Basic axis time corresponding to the moment of reference.	Time after the basic axis time.
Future	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Present	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Past	Perfect	Simple	Simple

Figure 13 The Bull Framework

So, if we are in the past axis, the time we are talking about would be past simple (according to the framework), what happens before that time would be past perfect and what happens after that time would be past simple again. Considering the previous example (figure 11), we see that the writer begins her letter along the present axis. In the second line she shifts her reference point to the past with the time adverbial “yesterday”. Once she has established her reference point (or time of speaking) as yesterday, she remains in that axis, using tense to show what happened before that reference point (I’d read...). So far the text seems to follow the framework. However, in the next sentence she changes her reference point (last Sunday) and explains what happened after the reference point, still along the past axis, but doesn’t use the simple (we would go). After that she seems to have a future reference point (tonight) and a corresponding future tense (I’m meeting) but thereafter slips back into the present axis (I hope) and explains before that time reference (we’ve only ever chatted) before continuing onto a projection of after the time of reference (I’m sure it will be all right). Towards the end of the letter she changes axis again, this time to a reference point in the future (by the time I get back) and from the perspective of that reference point she mentions what happens before (we’ll have had) and after (I’ll be ready).

Whereas the above model seems to lay out a blueprint for the use of tense in discourse, I have modified it slightly to suit my teaching needs. Although the Bull Framework is indeed complex, with modification it can be used to teach tense quite early on in the language acquisition process

and produce surprising results. In the following section I will give an example of how I used the Bull Framework in a lower level class, explain the modifications I have made to the Bull Framework as well as why.

I start my introduction to the Bull Framework with a chart of the week:

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Met Suzie	Played Tennis	Went to the cinema	Did the Laundry	Dinner with parents

Asking one of the students to read out the contents of one of the boxes at random: *On Thursday I did the laundry.* I ask the students what time we are talking about. This question produces all sorts of replies, but very often I get: Past Simple (which is, in itself interesting, because it means that as soon as students realise that they're doing grammar they start thinking grammar, and no longer give realistic answers.) Eventually, we establish that the time we are speaking about is Thursday, so, I write TOS (time of speaking) above Thursday. From this we can establish that Wednesday is Before the Time of Speaking (BTOS) and Friday is After the Time of Speaking (ATOS). By shifting the emphasis, and asking what I did on Tuesday, I can show that now Tuesday has become TOS, Monday remains BTOS, but Wednesday has become ATOS. In this way, I can demonstrate the idea of reference point My Chart now looks like this:

BTOS	BTOS TOS2	TOS1 ATOS	ATOS	
Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Met Suzie	Played Tennis	Went to the cinema	Did the Laundry	Dinner with parents

This can easily be used to introduce a slightly modified Bull Framework:

Axis	BTOS	TOS	ATOS
Future	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Present	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Past	Perfect	Simple	Simple

Figure 14: The adapted Bull Framework (The BOSTOS chart)

I explain that to use tense correctly, students need only ask two questions (the two uh-huhs, mentioned in the introduction): What axis am I on? And when is TOS? Once that is clear, there is nothing else to decide. I then ask the students if the events in the first chart happen in the past, present or future. [Past!] and then I walk them through the process:

Question 1: What axis? Past.

Question 2: When is TOS [in the first example]? Thursday.

So:

Last Thursday I did my laundry [TOS]. I had dinner with my parents [ATOS]. I had played tennis [BTOS].

I ask the students to do the second example:

On Tuesday, I played Tennis [TOS]. I had met Suzie [BTOS]. I went to the cinema [ATOS].

The intention here is to show that depending on my reference point (TOS), an action will be either Past Simple or Past Perfect in relation to whether it comes before or after the reference point. I then ask another student what the first thing she did that morning was:

I woke up. What time? 06:30. And then? I took a shower. 06:40. And then? I had breakfast. 07:00. And then? I left for work 07:30.

If TOS is 07:00, I ask, referring to the chart:

At 07:00 I had breakfast. What is BTOS? I had woken up and had taken my shower. And ATOS, after 07:00? I left for work. And if you get to work and you want explain your morning? When I left for work [TOS], I had woken up, taken a shower, had my breakfast.
[All BTOS]

The idea of BTOS/TOS/ATOS can be reinforced with exercises such as a text from which the students have to put events into chronological order:

It had been a miserable summer. It hadn't stopped raining and the beaches were empty. Suzanne, who had gone for a long walk along the cliffs was late. She had stopped for tea and scones in the little seaside café. It was there that she had finally allowed herself to think about Paul. It had been the shock of meeting him again, and how it had happened that had upset her the most. When she finally pushed open the door to the hotel restaurant, James was sitting angrily alone at a table.¹⁰

When does the writer start his story? [establishes TOS]

In what order did the following events occur?

Suzanne opened the door to the restaurant.

Suzanne met Paul.

Suzanne stopped at a café.

Suzanne went for a walk.

Students need to decide that Suzanne opening the restaurant door is TOS [first past simple] and that therefore, all past perfect tenses must have happened before that moment.

Inventing a fictitious weekend for one of the students provides practice too, and can also be used to incorporate situations and events:

Cindy walked [event] into the pub at 21:00. [TOS]. It was full of people [situation]. Paul hadn't arrived yet [BTOS/event]. She walked up to the bar and ordered a gin and tonic [ATOS/event]. A man offered her a cigarette [ATOS/event]. At 21:30 her mobile rang [new TOS/event]. It was Paul [situation]. He had crashed his car [BTOS/event]. Cindy smiled at the stranger [ATOS/event].

English tense in discourse is a bit like driving along a highway. Depending on how fast you want to go (and what car you drive), you select a lane and stick to it. The police are notoriously

¹⁰ Inspired by Meanings into Words (Higher Intermediate)

suspicious of drivers who zigzag from one lane to another. When you're driving in one lane you concentrate on the car in front of you in that lane [the ATOS car] and the one behind you [the BTOS car]. What is happening on the lane on your left or right is not your problem. To help students get accustomed to the idea of sticking to a lane [or an axis], I tell my bad-luck story about last Friday night (any one will do) once in the present axis: So last Friday, I meet a friend I haven't seen in years and he says to me... and again in the past: So last Friday, I met a friend I hadn't seen in years and he said to me.... Depending on the level of the class, I can ask them to do the same, or to write a story.

A picture such as this one can be used for free practice:



What axis do you choose? The present. When is TOS? 16:50. So:

John is exhausted [situation/TOS]. He's been working non-stop all day [situation/BTOS]. He's been to three meetings [event/BTOS]. He's written seven letters [event/BTOS] and he hasn't eaten anything all day [event/BTOS]. Now it's 16:50 [situation/TOS] and he hasn't finished yet [event/BTOS] so he takes a break and calls his wife to tell her not to wait for him [event/event ATOS].

This can then be transferred onto the past axis with:

When John got home last Friday, he was exhausted....¹¹

With practice students get accustomed to making choices about tense, and this is where the fundamental difference lies. Far from asking students to complete distorted sentences designed to provide practice on tense, by trying to work out what the writer of the exercise intends them to say and then being marked down as right or wrong for their pains, students are taking the

¹¹ These exercises were inspired by and adapted from Meanings into Words Upper Intermediate, Doff et al (1983)

initiative and creating text for themselves. First, they choose which axis they want to situate their story on. Jokes, for example are always told on the present axis, while horoscopes and company reports predicting growth over a certain period will have quite a lot of activity on the future axis. Having selected their axis, they decide at what point they want to tell their story [when is TOS]. If they have a doubt, they can choose to refer to their BOSTOS chart (as my students have come to refer to it). Depending on how they decide to tell their story, they can either go back in time to explain with a BTOS, or proceed with their story [ATOS]. Doubtlessly there will be mistakes, but they will be mistakes from which they can learn by referring to a simple map, rather than by ploughing through countless exceptions to a rule in the hope of finding an example that resembles their mistake.

Changing axis

However, my students, free though they may be to make choices about their discourse, are still not totally in control. In my highway example, previously, I warned of the dangers of zigzagging along the highway, and advised my students to pick an axis and stick to it. In reality, nevertheless, we don't stick to an axis (nor to a lane, either) and students need to be able to change axis. I often use a "Dear John" letter to illustrate this.

Dear John,
I am sitting on the balcony of my hotel, overlooking the Mediterranean and thinking of you. It's so lovely here. Everyday, I have my breakfast here before going down to the beach to lie in the sun and relax. In the evenings I usually go out dancing with Suzie, and this is my real reason for writing.

Last Monday night, while I was at the El Mocambo club, Suzie and I met some really charming guys. Suzie had spotted them checking us out, so she wasn't surprised when they started talking to us. I'd been missing you, so I was quite pleased to have something to cheer me up...

Figure 11: Example of discourse

Letters invariably start on the present axis; we start by explaining our situation – which is now [TOS], at the time of writing. Very quickly after that, we change axis – usually to go onto the past – to give details.

The writer changes axis in the second paragraph, just as she would if she was driving along the highway: she puts on her indicator to warn others that she's moving to the left or to the right. In this case, the indicator [Last Monday] warns the reader that a shift is going to take place, and that the writer is no longer talking about the present but is changing axis.

The Future from TOS?

At a more advanced level, the BOSTOS chart needs more developing because it needs to incorporate the future in the past and two different types of ATOS in the present.

Consider the following sentence:

My alarm clock rings at 06:30 [TOS] but I stay [ATOS] in bed for a bit because I haven't slept [BTOS] enough.

The sentence is on the present axis, and ATOS is clearly the next event after TOS. However:

I quickly read the report because I haven't prepared the meeting I'm going to have with my boss.

Here, although the events are all on the present axis, ATOS [I'm going to have] isn't the next event but a future event. However, the text remains on the present axis, so it is the future after TOS in the present, not a series of events along the future axis. Likewise, on the past axis:

I drove home quickly after my wife had called, dreading to think what I would find.

ATOS is not the next event after TOS in a narration; it is the future of that TOS, but it is not an action on the present or future axis. To incorporate this, it is necessary to specify the two types of

ATOS in the chart (Figure 14). AFT [A Future Tense] shows that ATOS can either be the next event (and thus Simple) or it can be the future from that moment [TOS] (and thus any one of the seven structures at our disposal for expressing the future). There is no AFT on the future axis, because we cannot have this distinction in the future. ATOS on the future axis will have to be future.

So, if we return to the example of discourse in Figure 11, when the writer says:

I'd read so much about the kings and queens of England, and there I was - standing on the ground they actually walked on.

We understand that *read* is BTOS and happened before was – a situation in TOS. When the writer explains:

We decided not to go to Speaker's Corner last Sunday (because of the rain) but that we would leave it till next weekend.

We understand that *decided* is TOS (event/past- last Sunday) but that would leave [ATOS] doesn't refer to the next thing that happened after TOS, but, in fact refers to a future from TOS.

Axis	BTOS	TOS	ATOS
Future	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Present	Perfect	Simple	Simple AFT
Past	Perfect	Simple	Simple AFT

Figure 14: The Complete BOSTOS chart

Further applications of the Frameworks:

I. Indirect Speech

The complete BOSTOS chart can also be used to teach indirect speech. In figure 15, the speaker is saying something in TOS on the present axis because he is saying something now.

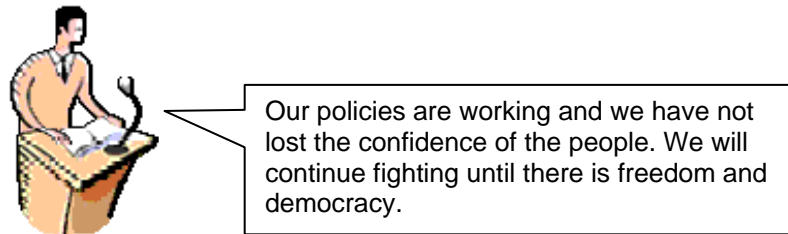


Figure 15

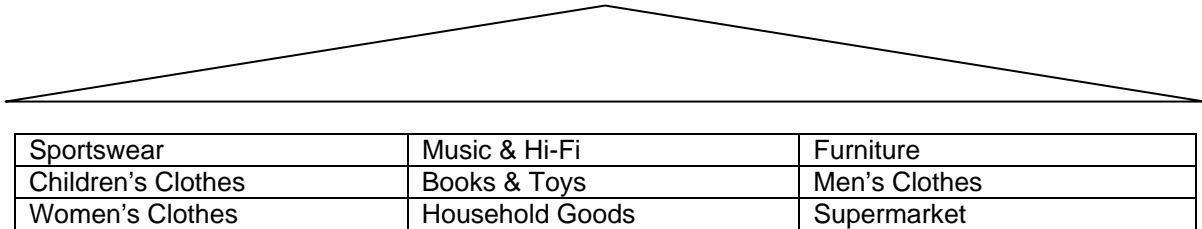
To report what the speaker is saying we need only consult the chart and shift down an axis, because, normally, we report what someone said before. In the case of simultaneous reporting, we remain on the present axis. Thus:

The speaker said [TOS/past] that his policies were working [situation/TOS/past] and that they hadn't lost [event/BTOS/past] the confidence of the people. He said that they would continue [event/ATOS-AFT/past] fighting until there was [situation/ATOS/past] freedom and democracy.

II. The problem of Present Perfect/Past Simple:

Of all the tense combinations likely to give students trouble, this is the most frequent – in my experience. The difficulty comes from the similarity of form [aux have + past participle] with structures in their own language. Many Indo-European languages have this combination, but unfortunately for language learners, the meaning and use of the present perfect differs considerably to structures in their own language. The precision of the English tense system requires students to clearly understand that the simple is an event in the past (finished time!) and that the present perfect is a situation or an event that explains the present (unfinished time!?). Without repeating my previous explanations on the Perfect, I think it is nevertheless useful to show how the Bull Framework can be used again to give students a clear visual map of the

difference. To address this problem, I give students a plan of a department store, and ask them to decide what there is in each department on each floor:



I ask the students what they do first when they walk into a department store, assuming there is something particular they want to buy – an electric kettle, for example. They look at the floor plan to see where the correct department is. If they are on the wrong floor, they won't find that department. Similarly, transferring the plan of the department store onto the BOSTOS chart:

Axis	BTOS	TOS	ATOS
Future	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Present	Perfect	Simple	Simple
Past	Perfect	Simple	Simple

If a student wants to tell her story in the present, she only has to look at the plan to see where her tenses are. If she's on the present floor, there is no Past Simple there; it's on another floor.

Likewise, if she's telling her story in the past, she's on the ground floor, and there is no present perfect there. This doesn't answer the question of meaning – which is explained in a previously examined framework, but it is a simple and convenient reference for students who hesitate between the two tenses.

III. Teaching conditionals

The concept of axis is particularly useful to help students situate the 3 basic conditional structures, but care needs to be taken to ensure that students understand the illusionary nature of the unreal past. This means that although structurally the conditionals situate themselves on the respective axes, their meanings do not necessarily follow. When teaching real conditionals, the

structures correspond to the axes: If you were here [yesterday], I didn't see you. [past axis, TOS + ATOS.] Unreal conditionals aren't quite so obliging: If you were here [now], I would marry you. [past axis TOS + ATOS (AFT)], but the meaning refers to the present. The BOSTOS chart can also be put to effect when explaining mixed conditionals; If I had known [BTOS past axis]... I would be rich [TOS present axis].

IV. Teaching the 4 infinitives

Once the concepts of situation and event are clear from the framework on Meaning, the notions of axis can be easily applied to demonstrate the mini-tense system behind the four infinitives.

Present axis	Event	Go	Situation	Be going
Past axis	Event	Have gone	Situation	Have been going

Conclusion

My premise in teaching tenses is that students need to work at discourse level from the start because this is necessary for creating meaningful communicative discourse. I have come to resist the notion that students should be steered and controlled into limited language expression restricted by the grammar point being studied in class at the moment. Instead of, for example, doing the phrasal model "going to" and setting up communicative tasks which would seem to require the use of that structure, thereby trying to trick students into spontaneously using a structure under the guise of allowing them the choice (and invariably suffering the frustration of hearing them communicate within the situation with anything but the target language), I believe that teachers should give students the tools they need to communicate, and then let them make decisions. Why should a student (or anybody, for that matter) use a Present Perfect Continuous? Why do I? The answer is not because it is correct, but because it is the simplest way of communicating a particular idea. I could say: I started teaching in 1987. I'm teaching now and I haven't stopped. Alternatively, and more simply, I could say: I've been teaching since 1987. English is not a codified language, and as such, correctness is far more difficult to evaluate.

For me, an utterance is only wrong if what the receptor understands (without having to correct the utterance mentally) is not what the speaker/writer intended to be understood. English is thus about communicating meaning. With that in mind, as teachers, we should be giving our students the means to communicate meaning rather than losing ourselves in theoretical explanations that at times seem to have more in common with Chess moves than communication. This, to me, is why the Bull Framework is particularly useful.

Having taught tense in this way for several years now, I have found it an extremely useful tool to help my students make choices about tense, but it would be untrue to claim it to be the miracle solution to discourse. Students still make mistakes of form, still end up using the Present Perfect instead of the Past Simple, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise. There are no miracle solutions to language because neither language nor people are bound by rules and regulations.

Some students don't want to bother with reading a map and prefer to rely on their instinct (like many male drivers, often with similar results!) Cultural issues such as uncertainty tolerance are involved:

Yana, a Ukrainian student, complains that before learning tenses with me she felt sure of everything because she knew all the rules – but she couldn't use them. Now, she feels that everything she believed before has been challenged and that she no longer knows anything. However, despite all the uncertainty, she sees that she can use tenses (more or less) and when she gets it wrong, she understands why. Nevertheless, she still feels insecure where before – apart from the fact that she could do exercises but not write or speak correctly - she had fewer doubts.

As with all aspects of teaching, there is the personality of the student to consider along with their previous learning experience. Not all students will buy into this approach. Some students find clear rules reassuring and insist on absolute truths. For them, it can be difficult to abandon well-

learnt edicts such as “the Perfect is an action that begins in the past and is still true in the present.”, or “the past tense is used for finished time.” There is a certain security in completing exercises that require you to put the verbs in brackets into the Present Simple or the Present Continuous.

In my opinion, both for teachers and students, the Bull Framework does present certain invaluable advantages over the traditional approach, some of which are not even related to language:

- ✓ **Integrity.** I have found that when I teach tense this way, I am less haunted by the suspicion that what I am teaching is only partially true. In other words, I am not teaching tense and at the same time ignoring the little voices in my head that whisper all the exceptions I know to exist. Nor do I have to think on feet when a student comes up with a question that doesn't fit into my, or the grammar book's, explanation. In short, the Bull framework works.
- ✓ **Naturalness.** Teaching the Bull Framework enables me to teach tense in such a way that I am satisfied that my students are free to use the language I am teaching naturally. It does not oblige me to give my students restrictive exercises and situations that will get them to practice the target structure to the exclusion of others. In other words, instead of teaching a particular structure, I am teaching my students to use tenses naturally.
- ✓ **Empowerment.** Instead of controlling and restricting my student's language, I am empowering my students to take initiatives and make decisions about where they want to go with the language. The Bull framework, for me, offers an excellent solution to the control/initiative dichotomy. Using the Bull Framework, my students are free to go any which way they choose with their discourse, but they have a means of controlling that the discourse they are creating is correct in that they are expressing what they wish to express and increasing the likelihood of a listener/reader understanding their intended message. It also enables me to correct their discourse by showing them how to auto-correct. In other words, when correcting, I don't have to

re-explain the theory yet again like some sort of incomprehensible mantra. Rather, I can refer them to the chart and get them to work out where they are and where they think they should be.

✓ **Control.** I believe that using tenses is not a question of right or wrong, but more a question of control. We all know that there is a correct way to drive a car, as prescribed in the Rules of the Road. However, we also know that we would prefer to be driven by someone who controls her vehicle, rather than with someone who knows the Rules of the Road chapter and verse, but has slow reflexes. Rather than constantly focusing on correctness, I try to encourage my students to make the language do what they want it to do. This does not mean to say that I don't insist on accuracy, but accuracy is only important because otherwise you confuse the receptor. I can understand a student who says "I went tomorrow" – particularly because, as mentioned before, she is unlikely to say this outside of a context – but that doesn't mean I will accept it. The phrase is confusing and makes the receptor work to try and guess, and it's hard enough to get someone to listen to you even if you don't require them to struggle to grasp your meaning. Controlling language means making the language communicate your intended meaning as effectively as possible; it doesn't imply linguistic anarchy.

✓ **Confidence.** Tourists visiting a foreign city invariably take a map. Some more romantic souls prefer the experience of losing themselves, but this is less probable for learners of a foreign language. The Bull Framework offers student a map of tenses and this gives them the security of knowing that they have a clear and easily comprehensible guide that with two short questions can tell them where they are and where they should go. Secondly, the fact of knowing, even at an elementary level, that they have seen and to some extent mastered all the tenses that there are, is a tremendous boost to confidence.

✓ **Fear.** One of the greatest impediments to progress in language acquisition, particularly with adults is fear and fear of ridicule in particular. A large part of the responsibility for this lies with previous experiences in the classroom, where often the emphasis seems to be more on what is wrong than what is right. My daughter gets "credit" for her mistakes, but none for what is good. Teaching tense in a way that breaks away from the wrong /right approach, but that concentrates

more on a question of meaning [If you use this tense, I will understand this. Is that what you want me to understand?] seems worthy of serious consideration, if nothing else.

✓ **Student-centred.** Any approach that allows students to see for themselves why a tense seems inappropriate rather than relying on the teacher to illuminate the question seems in keeping with the idea of focusing on learning rather than on teaching. As teachers, we should be encouraging students to break away from us and to learn independently, rather than binding the students to us as the source of all knowledge, correctness and clarity – no matter how tempting and reassuring it is for us to have this kind of student-dependency.

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