

EFFECTIVE WAYS OF TEACHING PAST TENSES IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This article examines effective methods of teaching past tenses in English, focusing on both theoretical and practical aspects of grammar instruction. It analyzes common learner difficulties, including confusion between tense and aspect, and highlights strategies such as explicit explanation, inductive learning, storytelling, role-plays, and task-based activities. The importance of corrective feedback and the integration of digital tools are also discussed. The study concludes that a balanced approach combining accuracy and communicative practice is essential for successful mastery of past tense forms.

Keywords: *past tenses, grammar teaching, communicative approach, storytelling, task-based learning, corrective feedback.*

Annotatsiya

Maqolada ingliz tilidagi o'tgan zamon fe'l shakllarini samarali o'qitish usullari nazariy va amaliy jihatdan tahlil qilinadi. Unda o'quvchilarda uchraydigan qiyinchiliklar, xususan zamon va aspektni farqlashdagi chalkashliklar ko'rsatilib, aniq tushuntirish, induktiv yondashuv, hikoya qilish, ro'l o'ynash va topshiriqqa asoslangan mashg'ulotlar kabi usullar tavsiflanadi. Shuningdek, xatolarni tuzatish, qayta aloqa va raqamli vositalardan foydalanishning ahamiyati ta'kidlanadi. Tadqiqot natijasida o'tgan zamon shakllarini samarali o'zlashtirish uchun aniqlik va kommunikativ yondashuvni uyg'unlashtirish zarurligi xulosasi beriladi.

Kalit so'zlar: *o'tgan zamon, grammatika o'qitish, kommunikativ yondashuv, hikoya qilish, topshiriqqa asoslangan o'qitish, xatoni tuzatish*

Introduction

The teaching of English grammar has been one of the central concerns of applied linguistics and language pedagogy. Among grammatical categories, tense and aspect are particularly important, as they allow learners to express temporality, sequence of events, and relationships between actions. The past tenses in English – including the simple past, past continuous, past perfect, and past perfect continuous – often pose significant challenges for learners whose native languages mark time differently or not at all (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). The effective teaching of these forms

requires a combination of explicit instruction, communicative practice, and contextualized usage.

This paper explores theoretical foundations and practical strategies for teaching English past tenses. It will examine challenges faced by learners, compare traditional and communicative approaches, and discuss effective classroom techniques supported by empirical research.

The teaching of past tenses can be situated within two major approaches to grammar instruction: the **form-focused approach** and the **communicative approach**.

- **Form-focused instruction** emphasizes explicit explanation of grammatical rules, drilling, and controlled practice (Ellis, 2006). It aims at accuracy and ensures that learners understand the formal properties of tenses.
- **Communicative language teaching (CLT)**, in contrast, prioritizes meaning and fluency, encouraging learners to use language in authentic communicative contexts while focusing less on explicit rule explanation (Richards & Rodgers, 2014).

Modern language pedagogy often advocates for a balanced approach: explicit explanation followed by meaningful communicative practice, known as **focus on form** (Long, 1991). In the case of past tenses, this means combining explicit clarification of tense usage with tasks that encourage learners to narrate stories, share personal experiences, or describe historical events.

Learners face several difficulties with English past tenses, depending on their first language (L1) background:

1. **Absence of tense markers in L1:** Many languages (e.g., Chinese, Vietnamese) rely on context or adverbs of time instead of verb inflection. Learners from these backgrounds struggle to consistently apply past tense morphology in English (Shirai & Nishi, 2003).
2. **Confusion between tense and aspect:** Learners often find it difficult to differentiate between the simple past ("I ate") and the present perfect ("I have eaten"), or between past continuous and simple past (Comrie, 1985).
3. **Overgeneralization:** Students sometimes apply past tense -ed endings incorrectly to irregular verbs, producing forms like "bayed" instead of "bought" (Brown, 2007).
4. **Limited exposure:** In foreign language contexts, learners rarely hear authentic usage of past tense forms outside the classroom, which reduces natural acquisition (Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

Understanding these challenges helps teachers select techniques that target learners' specific difficulties.

Effective Methods of Teaching Past Tenses include:

1. Explicit Explanation and Visual Timelines

Research shows that explicit grammar explanation benefits learners, especially adults (Ellis, 2006). Teachers can present rules using **timelines** that visually illustrate the relationship between events in time. For example, a timeline can clearly differentiate between the past simple (“event completed in the past”) and past perfect (“event that occurred before another past event”).

2. Inductive Learning through Context

Rather than giving rules first, teachers may provide learners with texts or dialogues in which past tense forms naturally appear. Students analyze the texts and infer rules themselves (Thornbury, 1999). This **inductive approach** encourages active discovery and deeper cognitive processing.

3. Storytelling and Narrative Tasks

Narrative activities are particularly effective because they naturally require past tense usage (Bygate, 2009). Learners can recount personal experiences, retell stories, or create fictional narratives. Such tasks promote both fluency and accuracy, as learners must structure events chronologically.

4. Communicative Role-Plays

Role-plays situate past tenses in realistic communicative contexts. For instance, students may role-play police interviews (“What happened last night?”) or job interviews (“Tell me about your previous experience”). These contexts provide authentic motivation to use different past tenses.

5. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT)

TBLT engages learners in completing meaningful tasks (Ellis, 2003). For teaching past tenses, tasks may include writing newspaper reports, reconstructing historical events, or conducting interviews. Such tasks require learners to use past tense forms functionally rather than mechanically.

6. Error Correction and Feedback

Corrective feedback is vital. Research suggests that **recasts** (reformulating incorrect utterances) and **metalinguistic feedback** (explaining the error) are effective strategies (Lyster & Ranta, 1997). For example, if a learner says, “*Yesterday I go to the park,*” the teacher may respond, “*Oh, you went to the park yesterday?*”

7. Use of Technology and Multimedia

Digital storytelling tools, language learning apps, and online grammar games can reinforce past tense learning in interactive ways. For example, learners may create video diaries or podcasts about past experiences, integrating technology with narrative practice (Godwin-Jones, 2018).

Classroom Activities and Examples can be illustrated by the following:

1. **Past Tense Bingo:** Each square contains an irregular verb; the teacher calls out the present tense, and students mark the past tense equivalent.

2. **Timeline Race:** Students work in groups to place sentences on a timeline, identifying which tense matches each context.
3. **Two Truths and a Lie (Past Tense Edition):** Students share two true past experiences and one false one; classmates must identify the false statement.
4. **Historical Figures Interview:** Students prepare questions and answers for a role-play with famous historical figures, using past tense to discuss their achievements.
5. **Error Hunt:** Learners analyze a short story full of past tense errors and correct them collaboratively.

Such activities balance controlled practice with communicative use, ensuring that students not only learn the forms but also apply them effectively.

Teachers play a central role in guiding learners from controlled to free production of past tense forms. They should:

- Scaffold learning with clear examples and gradually reduce support.
- Provide **form-focused feedback** while maintaining communicative flow.
- Encourage self-correction and peer feedback.
- Integrate cultural and authentic materials, such as biographies, newspaper articles, or oral histories.

By adopting a flexible teaching style that combines explicit instruction with communicative practice, teachers can create a learning environment that supports both accuracy and fluency.

Conclusion

Teaching past tenses in English requires more than memorizing forms; it involves fostering learners' ability to express time relationships meaningfully and accurately. Effective pedagogy integrates explicit explanation, communicative practice, and contextualized usage. Techniques such as visual timelines, storytelling, role-plays, and task-based activities provide learners with opportunities to internalize tense forms. Corrective feedback and the integration of digital tools further enhance instruction.

Ultimately, successful teaching of English past tenses lies in striking a balance between **focus on form** and **focus on meaning**. By adopting varied strategies grounded in research and tailored to learners' needs, teachers can overcome common challenges and promote effective mastery of past tense usage.

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