

LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 8 : 9 September 2008

ISSN 1930-2940

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

K. Karunakaran, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Mastering Tenses Creatively

Olive Thambi, Ph.D.

Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.

Mastering Tenses Creatively

Olive Thambi, Ph.D.
Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.

Rules of English Grammar

Foreign and second language learners of the English language usually find it difficult to master and use the rules of English grammar for various reasons. The teacher's inability to show the learners the practical side of the application of the grammatical rules could be one of the reasons. Another reason is that learners are often encouraged to memorize rules, and are not given adequate practice using the same in appropriate contexts. However, there are certain features of the language that make application a bit more difficult. Tense in English is one such category.

Use of Tenses

Tense has something to do with the time of the sentence. There are three tenses: past, present, and future. To begin with, a sentence like "Mary ----- her dog" with the form of the verb "walk" can be given to the students. They could be asked to use all the tense forms and after the exercise is over the sentences of the students can be taken up for discussion. The following sentences could be given for further clarification and explanation.

My bus to Coimbatore *leaves* at 10 pm.

Mallika *walks* her dog each evening.

Your mother *tells* me your plan to go to law school.

Shanthi will be sorry that she *missed* seeing you this evening.

If Jamaluddin *studied*, he could pass the upcoming test.

In the above sentences, the verb forms do not indicate their specific intended time. For example, the verbs "leaves" "walks" and "tells" are in the present form but they do not indicate a present ongoing action. The verbs, "studied", and "missed" are in the past tense but they do not indicate the past tense. So, tense does not always equate with time.

Present Tense

At the outset, students need not be told that they are going to learn tenses. If we warn them in advance, which is a good practice in most cases but not in the present context, they would begin to relate to the tense forms and formations in their first language.

Self-introduction for Present Tense Practice

To begin with, self-introduction on the first day can give more food for thought than anything else. Mostly, the present form of the tense is used while introducing oneself. There may be deviations in between, depending on the context. Given below are samples of a self-introductory session.

"I am Sabapathy. I hail from Chennai. I have great ambitions for my future. Just looking forward to a great future."

"I am Sunita. I come from Cochin. I am hoping to make friends."

"I am George. I am fond of music."

This session which does not in the least resemble a grammar class, helps the student break free of fears and inhibitions and it also gives them an outlet for their thoughts. The teacher can make a note of these sentences and take them up for discussion.

Interesting anecdotes can be used to teach tenses. They can be personal or imaginary. A news item can be brought to class. Current events in India can be used to teach the present tense.

An example is given below.

A News Item

Read the following news item from *The Hindu*:

Kamat reviews security after Bangalore bomb blast.

Panaji (PTI): Goa Chief Minister Digamber Kamat on Saturday reviewed the security situation here in the wake of serial bomb blast in the neighbouring state of Karnataka. In his review on the recent bomb blast in Bangalore, the Goa Chief Minister Mr. Digamber Kamat said, "*The way terrorism is creating problem in our neighbourhood, they can create problem anywhere.* Each state should take the precaution."

"*We are ready to face any terror attack, there is no Goa specific threat but still we have intensified the checking across the state,*" continued Kamat. "*We have decided to deploy policemen in civil dress at crowded places and also activate the criminal investigation division (CID),*" he said. "*The state police have been working on speculation that Goa may be a terror target since the incident took place.*"

Derive Other Sentences!

The italicized sentences can be categorized into the following tenses: Present Continuous Tense, Present Tense, Present Perfect Tense, and Present Perfect Continuous Tense respectively. As the news item focuses on the present day scenario of a state in India, the students' interest in the subject is ignited. The student not only learns tenses but also keeps himself or herself updated about the latest happenings.

Keeping in mind the same tense, further illustrations can be given. As far as college students are concerned, their interests centre around people of their generation. So, it is better to give examples of young iconic celebrities who have captured their imagination. For instance, the current happenings revolving around Sania Mirza can be cited to teach present tense. An example is given below.

Story of Sania Mirza



It's Sania Mirza's day By Abhijit Sen Gupta

DELIGHT AND DESPAIR: India's Sania Mirza (right) is all smiles on the victory podium as compatriot Rushmi Chakravarthy, the loser, wears a dejected look. — Photo: P.V. Sivakumar

Right now you are looking at an ecstatic Sania Mirza amidst a crowd of wildly cheering fans. There is no sign of the stiff shoulder and elbow that Sania complained about just a few minutes before the game.

Sania had earlier won a gold as a member of the Indian women's squad in the team championships. She has the chance to win two more gold medals since she is in the women's doubles final with Rushmi Chakravarthy and the mixed doubles final with Mahesh Bhupathi.

This morning the top-seeded Sania was a little below her best but her determination and a little luck helped her take the women's singles crown against Rushmi Chakravarthy 7-6 (8-6), 6-3.

She is a great source of inspiration for aspiring youngsters.

Past Tense

The same person can be dealt with in the past tense. An example is given below:

Sania Mirza was born on November 15th, 1986 in Mumbai, Maharashtra State. She was born to Imran Mirza, a builder and his wife Naseema. The family relocated to Hyderabad and Sania Mirza along with her sister Anam grew up in Hyderabad.

Sania Mirza began playing tennis at an early age of six. She learnt her basics in tennis from her father initially. Later, she found a professional coach, who reluctantly took her under his tutelage. Recalling the incident Sania Mirza said, "My mother took me to a coach, who initially refused to coach me because I was too small. After a month, he called my parents to say he had never seen a player that good at such a young age."

Sania Mirza showed much promise in her young age and was seen as the rising star on Indian tennis circuit. Sania Mirza at 12 had already tasted trail-blazing successes in tennis when other aspiring players were struggling to gain entry in the same field. Before she got recognition as a champion, she had captured the hearts of her fans. Sania Mirza turned professional in 2003. Ever since, there was no turning back for this marvelous tennis star.

The above example traces Sania's upbringing. Besides, she is described as a person who had a small beginning. The story behind Sania's success can generate interest in the learner to know more about her past. So the past tense is learnt effortlessly.

Practice of Past Tense and Other Tenses

To illustrate, the words "grew up" can open up a discussion on childhood days. Students can be asked to reflect on their childhood memories. This gives ample opportunity for much thought and exchanges. Without being aware of it, the students would have already learnt the use of past tense.

A number of other examples can be used to illustrate this idea of using familiar and encouraging stories to learn to master various tenses.

The following expressions, 'found a professional coach', 'took her under his tutelage', 'I was too small', 'Sania Mirza turned professional', 'there was no turning back' can be used to teach the simple past tense.

The above expressions can generate similar sentence patterns in different contexts. For instance, read the following examples:

1. A young amateur cricket player finally found a professional coach to train him.
2. My uncle took me under his tutelage to train me in basketball.
3. When he started his career, Michael Jackson was too small for the music world.
4. Sachin Tendulkar turned professional at a very young age.
5. The encounter with Gandhi was a turning point in the lives of many. These people never turned back from their commitment to fight for the freedom of India.

Additional Exercises

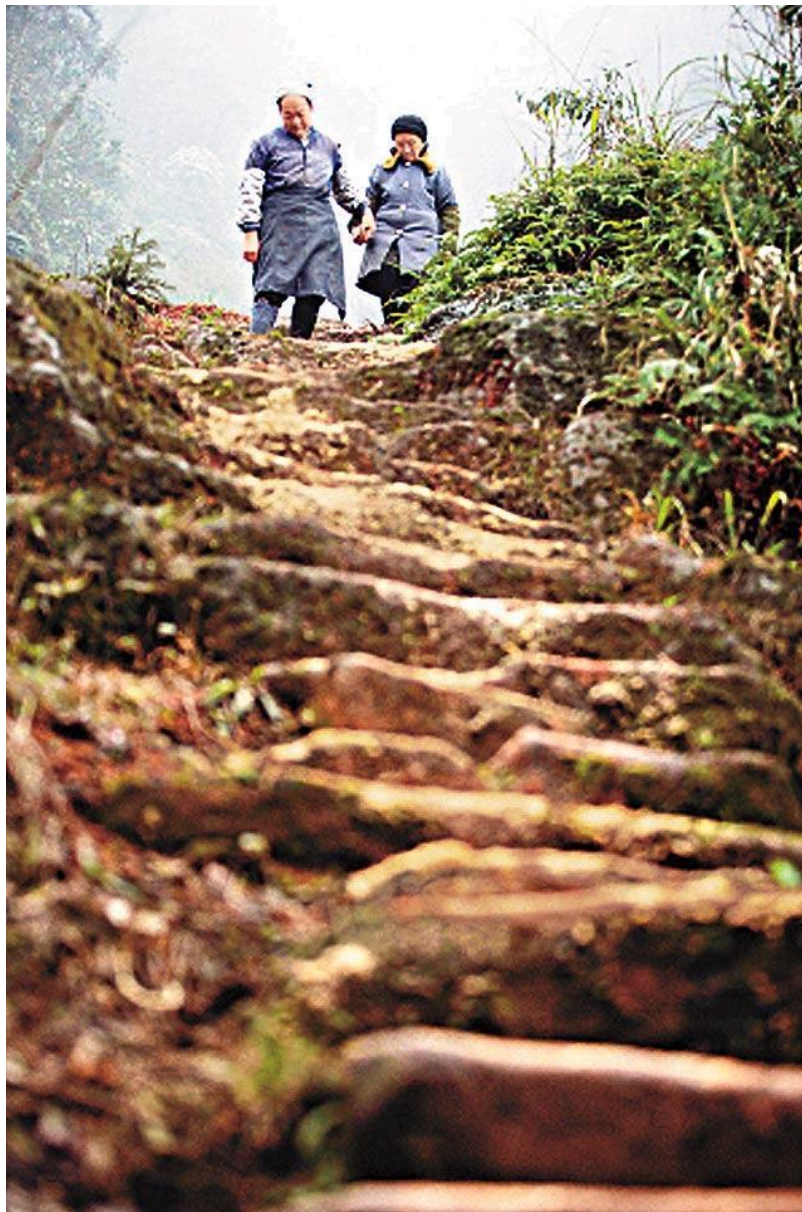
Students can be asked to think of more examples. They can get involved in making more sentences even with their classmates. This can make the class lively. Then, using the examples, we can talk about the use of the present tense. In the above examples, the present tense has been used to highlight achievements of great personalities. Even while learning

tenses, students can be motivated to think high. They can be encouraged and taught only if they are given examples of young aspiring people like them

Stories can be narrated to stretch the imagination of the students further. A story is given below:

An Incredible Love Story

An incredible love story has come out of China recently. This story has touched the hearts of many in the world. It is a story of a man and an older woman who ran off to live and love each other in peace for over half a century



The 70-year-old Chinese man, who hand-carved over 6,000 stairs up a mountain for his 80-year-old wife, has passed away in the cave, which has been the couple's home for the last 50 years. Over 50 years ago, Liu Guojiang a 19 year-old boy, fell in love with a 29 year-old

widowed mother named Xu Chaoqin. In a twist worthy of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet, friends and relatives criticized the relationship because of the age difference and the fact that Xu already had children.

At that time, it was unacceptable and immoral for a young man to love an older woman.. To avoid the market gossip and the scorn of their communities, the couple decided to elope and lived in a cave in Jiangjin County in Southern Chong Qing Municipality. In the beginning, life was harsh as they had nothing, no electricity or even food. They had to eat grass and roots they found in the mountain, and Liu made a kerosene lamp that they used to light up their lives.

Xu felt that she had tied Liu down and repeatedly asked him, 'Are you regretful? Liu always replied, 'As long as we are industrious, life will improve.' In the second year of living in the mountain, Liu began and continued for over 50 years, to hand-carve the steps so that his wife could get down the mountain easily.



Half a century later in 2001, a group of adventurers were exploring the forest and were surprised to find the elderly couple and the over 6,000 hand-carved steps. Liu Ming Sheng, one of their seven children said, 'My parents loved each other so much, they have lived in seclusion for over 50 years and never been apart a single day. He hand carved more than 6,000 steps over the years for my mother's convenience, although she doesn't go down the mountain that much.' The couple had lived in peace for over 50 years until last week. Liu, now 72 years, returned from his daily farm work and collapsed. Xu sat and prayed with her husband as he passed away in her arms. So in love with Xu, was Liu, that no one was able to release the grip he had on his wife's hand even after he had passed away.



'You promised me you'll take care of me, you'll always be with me until the day I died, now you left before me, how am I going to live without you?' Xu spent days softly repeating this sentence and touching her husband's black coffin with tears rolling down her cheeks.

In 2006, their story became one of the top 10 love stories from China, collected by the Chinese Women Weekly. The local government has decided to preserve the love ladder and the place they lived as a museum, so this love story can live forever.

This story is taken from www.cqwb.com.cn.

Innovative Ideas – Supply Story Lines for Practice

Innovations involving day to day examples, current news, future possible events, first hand experiences, anecdotes and stories can kindle the interest of students. When these are cited as examples for tenses, there is a lot of creativity in the classroom and learning becomes much easier and enjoyable. This approach can also draw the attention of the students to the actual use of the language.

As can be seen in the story, the tenses are inconsistent. This is because the various events of the couple's lives unfold at different points in their lives. Again, different tense forms come into play, at the end of which everything is analysed. In a similar vein, a conversation or a story could be started and students could be asked to fill in the vacant spaces using their imagination. Another example is given below.

‘Something startled her from behind.....She turned around but saw no one.....’

Students can be asked to supply a story to the line given above, using their imagination. Students may be given a series of such enticing sentences and asked to write or tell stories based on the lines given. It is not necessary that the lines with story potential be presented only to develop stories of their own. We may also give lines drawn from well known movies, folk tales, epics, known historical documents, sacred texts, and so on. In these, content is familiar to the students but they are asked to compose the stories using English in their own characteristic ways. Let all these be done in some graded steps. Remember some of the structures such as conditional clauses, double negatives, future perfect constructions, etc. may be more difficult than other structures.

Make it a point to pick up some interesting expressions from the stories and examine them at length with the students.

Future Tense

Scientific predictions about the future can excite us and prepare us for the days ahead. The lecturer can initiate a discussion among students on scientific predictions on natural phenomena and watch their interactions. For example, an impending tsunami looming on the horizon can spark some interactions which could result in interesting leads. Various possibilities as suggested by experts can be analysed and reviewed. News reports from the meteorological department can shed light on this further. There is always an element of uncertainty in these predictions. Considering the nature of the prediction, it can cause mixed emotions of fear, anxiety and excitement. This again could lead to varied responses, triggering a number of sentences in the process.

A news item in *The Hindu* involving the possible occurrence of a tsunami is given below:

Future Tsunami in next 30 years will kill 60,000.

Two years after an earthquake off western Indonesia unleashed a monster tsunami, scientists *expect the same fault to rupture again within the next few decades. They predict a large swath of Sumatra island's* densely populated coast just south of the tsunami-hit area will be pounded by a giant wall of water. "*All this area in red will disappear,*" Padang Mayor Fauzi Bahar said, pointing at a satellite map on his office wall showing the likely reach of the waves into the town. "*The people will be washed away,*" Bahar said. "We are not saying *the quake is going to happen tomorrow or next week*, but on the other hand we don't want people to forget about it and be lax," he said. "I'd be surprised if it were delayed much beyond 30 years."

The tsunami will likely crash into the shore within 20 minutes because the fault line is so close, meaning the town must make expensive infrastructure changes to enable people to flee.

Additional Practice – New and Exciting Content

The italicized sentences can be analysed and studied at length. In fact, the topic of the impending tsunami can be narrowed down to personal responses of the students. Their feelings could be voiced thus:

1. I wish it would never happen.
2. I am waiting to see and hear things.
3. I am going to watch the entire event on television.
4. I will keep you updated on the latest developments.
5. Is it going to be a major disaster?

Apart from predictions, even encouraging words and motivating thoughts can be phrased in the future tense:

The prospect of a sensational world cup event such as tennis, cricket, and football can cause a real stir in class, bringing even the most inhibited student to the forefront. The personal opinion of the students should matter a lot to the lecturer. Regardless of the nature of the opinion or its authenticity, the lecturer should respect them. Acceptance is one main key which is instrumental in making the students speak.

Personal Future

We can make the students visualize their own future with questions like how do you see yourself in the next five years? A situation can be given wherein the students could be asked to respond to imaginary roles.

In particular, tenses help us to choose our expressions in keeping with the existing situations. They give us a time sense and shape our thoughts. Using different tense forms in everyday situations can enliven the class and eliminate monotony in learning. The techniques suggested above can add a new dimension to the art of teaching tenses.

Olive Thambi, Ph.D.
Shanthi Nehemiah, M.A., M.Phil.
Department of English
Karunya University
Coimbatore
Tamilnadu, India