Tenses in Grammar, Confused? (惱人的英文文法時態!)

By Shumin Chan(詹淑敏)

English instructor at National Kaohsiung Normal University
English instructor at Taipei Language Institute
English instructor at Oxford Language Institute

“What is passive progressive?” asked my husband, who is Canadian and an English teacher. He asked me that question with some frustration. “Hmm…,” that sounds very familiar to me since many of my students have asked me the same question over and over. So, is it difficult to learn grammar? The answer is NO. Even English native speakers have trouble understanding it. Students always complain about how hard and boring grammar is, but do they know “Without grammar very little can be conveyed; without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed?” Knowing vocabulary gives you a good start; however, with grammar it allows you to freely express what you want to say.

After years of learning and struggling, I have come to understand the beauty of grammar. I believe that to teach well, English teachers themselves must embrace it first. The know-how of how to learn grammar well is to like it first. Then, it will come to you naturally.

In my line of work, starting my lecture with small talk is a must. I find that my students always gradually put down their guard of lacking confidence in speaking English through chatting, which makes my teaching extremely effective and efficient. Our conversation always starts like this:
T: How are you doing today?
S: Oh, I am doing fine. (Of course, they never ask me about how my day is going)
T: That’s very good. So, how about your weekend?
S: My weekend IS so-so (or the same, these two items take their turns to be said)
T: So-so! What exactly did you do last weekend?
S: I STAY home and WATCH TV. On Sunday, I still HAVE to go to cram school.
T: Oh, that’s too bad.

From our conversation, you can tell that not only does my student live a boring life but also he or she uses SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE to express all of his or her ideas. Apparently, in his or her little mind, grammar does not carry any weight. To him or
her, saying something to me is more important than saying it correctly. That frustrates me sometimes since I know that explaining tenses is not hard but putting this idea into my student’s head is.

The grammar section of learning English should be the easiest part since it is explained in a systemic way. However, this systematic organization does come with one culture barrier: tense. To compare English to Chinese, there are 12 tenses in English, three times and four tenses, to cater all different expressions. Among them, PERFECT PROGRESSIVE TENSES rarely appears in most of the articles in textbooks. Hence, the emphasis will be mainly on the other nice tenses.

In Chinese, we don’t have any specific tense to distinguish the time difference. For example, “我昨天去上學.” If you take out the yesterday part from the sentence, there is no indicator of showing the tense of this sentence. However, in English “I went to school yesterday.” There are two things in this sentence pointing out the tense: *went* and *yesterday*. Thus, for all English teachers, we all need to be aware of the importance of assisting students to establish the significance of English tenses. Without building up such a strong sense in English learning, teachers will easily find that their students always express their idea in SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE, which is very likely to lead to more misunderstanding in English communication between Chinese students and English native speakers.

Here are some tricks that I find very useful in my teaching. I always inform my students in advance that I will ask them “What did you do last weekend?” and “What will you do next weekend?” in my next class. I also make sure they know the idea of past and future tenses first. SIMPLE PAST TENSE is only used when one talks about something that already happens in the past; on the other hand, SIMPLE FUTURE TENSE is employed when one talks about something that will happen in the future. Thus, the conversation of the next class would always start like this:

T: So, how are you doing today? (Of course, this is not the only way to say hi.)
S: I am doing fine. How about you? (If they have a good day or you are lucky, they normally will say hi back to you as well.)
T: I am having a wonderful day since you asked me back. And, how about last weekend? Did you do anything other than studying?
S: My family and I go out for dinner last Saturday. (They normally give you a response like this and this would be your time to remind them only using PAST TENSE for this part of the conversation.)
At this point, make sure they only use PAST TENSE and ask them more questions about what happened last week. In general, they will get used to the pattern and eventually they will get it. Use the same model to coach them for practicing FUTURE TENSE. At the end of the day, the result is usually very satisfactory.

Followed by the SIMPLE TENSE is PROGRESSIVE TENSE. Students usually get the idea the first time you present it to them. Unfortunately, they get the idea but not the pattern. They always get the V-ing part and leave out the verb Be part. That could be very frustrated to both teachers and students. Hence, when a teacher introduces PROGRESSIVE TENSE to his or her students, he or she needs to make sure that Be and V-ing go together and cannot be separated. Once they are apart, it is no longer PROGRESSIVE TENSE. Moreover, when teaching PROGRESSIVE TENSE, most teachers tend to only focus only on “the on going action.” Another usage is generally neglected. PROGRESSIVE TENSE can also be used to describe a temporary situation:

Mary always takes a part-time job every summer. However, she is not taking a summer job this year. She is going to stay with her aunt in Canada this year.

“She is not taking a summer job this year” is not talking about any on going project, but it stresses her different plan from her regular plan. It’s not permanent but only this one time even. Another good example would be:

A: Bob, What are you taking this semester?
B: I am taking ECON 102, what about you?

In this conversation, Bob is not physically taking this course now. But he is refereeing to his unique schedule which differs from his last schedule. To completely introduce the PROGRESSIVE TENSE to students, such usage shouldn’t be left out.

Now let’s move on to the most confusing part of the tenses - PERFECT TENSE. Of course, it also comes with PRESENT, PAST, and FUTURE tenses. Yet, if students can understand the core concept of PERFECT TENSE, they should be able to use it freely no matter what time zone it is. The center idea of PERFECT TENSE is to address an action that happens. There are three main uses of PERFECT TENSE. To begin with, it is used to express the idea of duration of time. If one action begins in the past and it continues until today, PERFECT TENSE should be used. “How long have you learned to play the piano?” Learning to plan the piano is not an on and off action and it requires the effort for a long period of time. So, to express such an action, PERFECT TENSE should be adopted. In addition, when taking about the past
experience with times, definitely use PERFECT TENSE. “I have been to Japan 5 times.” Please note that this is no for before 5 times! This is one of the common mistakes made by students and even by their teachers. The other usage is to explain the change of status. That means an action just happening not long ago and the effect still carrying on to the time of speaking. For instance, one just loses his or her key and still tries to find it; thus, he or she can say, “I have just lost my key” or “I lost my key.” Yes, SIMPLE PAST TIME can also be used in this situation since the action does happen at some time in the past. Students sometimes get confused about this concept as well.

To sum up, tenses are confusing to students in Taiwan, for the idea of tenses does not exist in Chinese language. It is very common to see a student express his or her thoughts in SIMPLE PRESENT TENSE no matter when the incident occurs. To avoid that, teachers need to establish the idea of tenses right from the beginning of English learning. Continuing to remind the time tenses in the later lecturing is also crucial.