6.8 Teaching the expression of time: a concise framework

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Introduction

ELT materials adopt a system of twelve 'tenses'. Typically, they present three factors as affecting choice of 'tense': event time, event duration and speech time. This is misleading, as many more elements are in play. Their treatment is form-based, giving piecemeal information about the uses of the forms, or providing rules with quite a few exceptions or 'special cases', a practice that tends to confuse learners.

   This framework is informed by descriptive and theoretical accounts of English. It takes into consideration all the component elements of expressing time in English,

including the meaning of verbs and speaker subjectivity. It presents a small number of consistent and flexible guidelines, provides a systematic visual representation of time reference and helps learners put in perspective the information in pedagogical materials.

Tense, grammatical aspect and modality

The system of twelve 'tenses' is actually the formal realisation of the interaction between *tense, grammatical aspect* and *modality.*

English has two tenses (Present and Past) and two grammatical aspects (Perfect and Progressive). Tense expresses *proximity* (Present) or *distance* (Past), in relation not only to time, but also to possibility and status. Aspect indicates whether the user's view of an event is *external* (Perfect), or *internal* (Progressive).

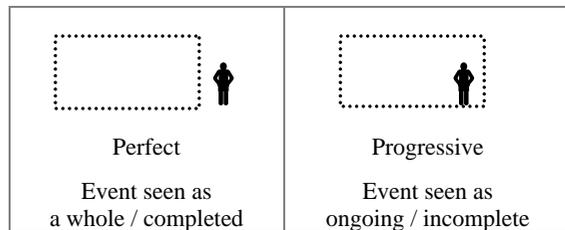| Perfect	Progressive
Event seen as a whole / completed	Event seen as ongoing / incomplete

Diagram 1. Visualisation of Aspect

Finite verbs can be marked for one, both or neither of the aspects, but must be marked for tense. Infinitives can be marked for aspect, but not tense. Table 1 shows the correspondence between tense-aspect marking and eight of the pedagogical 'tenses'.

		A S P E C T			
T		**None**	**Perfect**	**Progressive**	**Both**
E	**Present**	Present *Simple*	Present *Perfect*	Present *Progressive*	Present *Perfect Progressive*
N S	**Past**	Past *Simple*	Past *Perfect*	Past *Progressive*	Past *Perfect Progressive*
E					

Table 1. Tense-Aspect combinations and pedagogical 'tenses'

Futurity is expressed either by tense-aspect combinations and contextual information (e.g. *the plane is leaving at 14:35],* or by modal verbs and the infinitive (e.g. *must +* progressive infinitive: *We must be leaving soon).* The forms presented as 'Future tenses' in ELT materials are the combinations with *will.*

Lexical aspect

The meaning of verbs plays a crucial role. Verbs generally fall into two categories of *lexical aspect* (Table 2).

STATIVE		*be, like, live*
DYNAMIC	Punctual	*hit, kick, punch*
	Durative	*learn, walk, write*

Table 2. Categories of lexical aspect

The interaction of lexical and grammatical aspect creates nuances of meaning. For example, lexical aspect determines whether the Progressive presents an event as durative *(They're staying with friends]* or repetitive *(They were punching him).* Also, compare *He's clever* and *He's being clever.*

Subjectivity

The actual time and duration of an event do not dictate choice of tense and aspect; the choice is largely subjective and context-sensitive, depending more on the time-point the user wants to focus on. Table 3 presents alternative expressions of the **same event** (personal experience).

Facts	*Date*: 26 July 1999. *Time*: 10 – 11 pm. *Place*: Crete. *Event*: Trying snails for the first (and last) time.
Alternatives	1. *I tried snails in Crete four years ago.* 2. *I've tried snails.* (i.e. I know what they taste like.) 3. *At 10:30 pm on 26 July 1999 I was eating snails.* 4. (Pointing at a picture taken during the meal) *And here I'm eating snails.*

Table 3. Example of subjectivity in expressing time

Note: Tense and grammatical aspect mark verbs with general meaning attributes that become specific when they interact with context and lexical aspect. It is these attributes that users manipulate to express time relations.

The framework: visual representation and time-lines

Table 4 summarises the components of the framework and introduces the symbols used to mark the traditional time lines.

	Speech time (S)	The time point when the statement/question is expressed .	Objective
	Event time (E)	Time point/period the event took place. The box size is irrelevant. The actual duration of the event does not alone determine choice of grammatical aspect.	
	Reference time (R)	The time point/period the user is concerned with.	Subjective
	View of the event	The visual representation of grammatical aspect (when marked).	

Table 4. The framework: components and symbols

Space limitations allow for only one example, the difference between the Past Simple and the Present Perfect, using two sentences from Table 3, because they share the same event and speech time (Diagram 2).
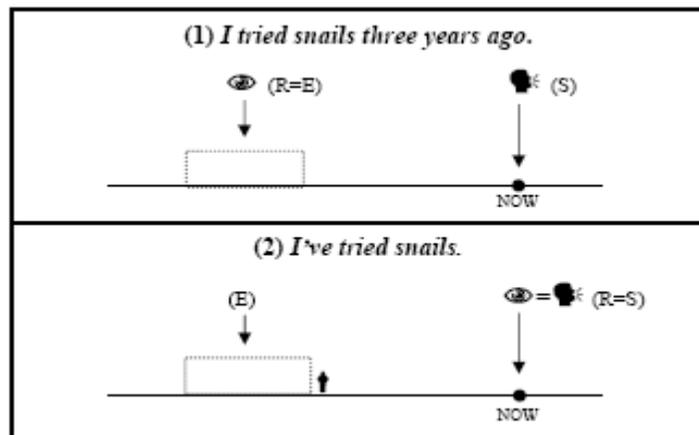

Diagram 2. The framework in use

It is clear that the key difference is in the subjective focus (reference time). In (1) the focus is on the event, so reference time coincides with event time (R=E). In (2) it is on the present relevance (the speaker now knows what snails taste like), so reference time coincides with speech time (R=S).

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Task sheet and bibliography available at:
http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/staff/florencia/slarg/sum/gabrielatos03.pdf