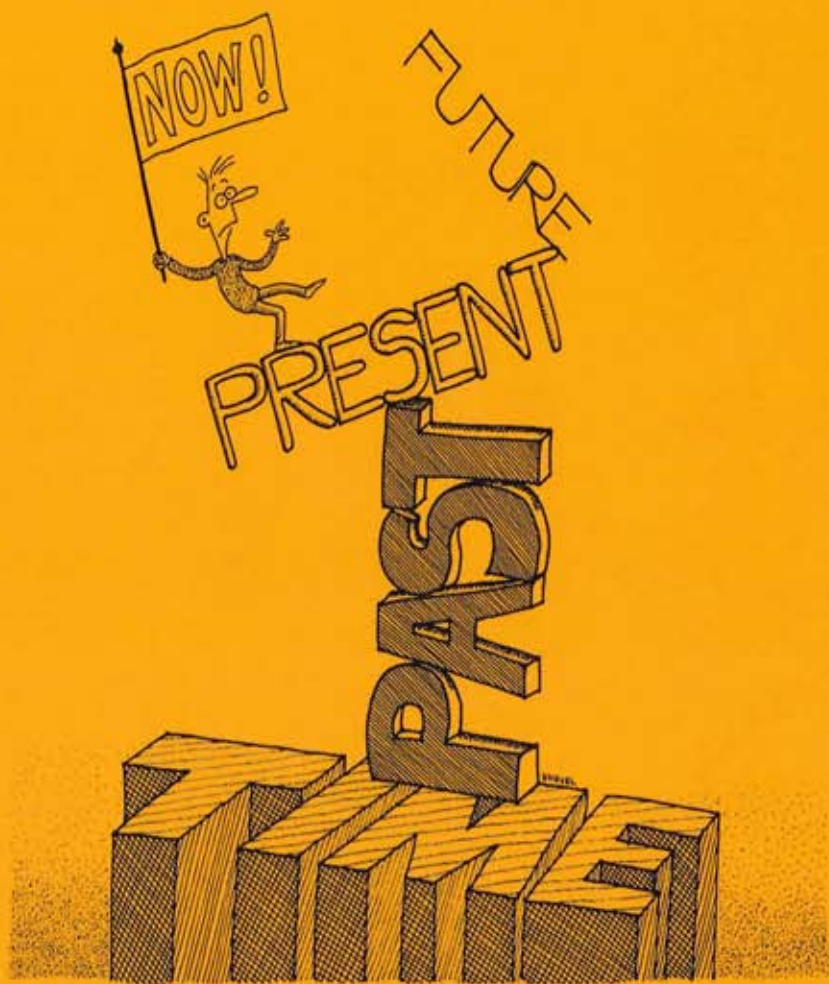


Teaching Tenses



Ideas for presenting and practising tenses in English

with photocopiable material & activities

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How to use this book

This book is intended to help you, as a teacher of English as a Foreign language (EFL), to teach common verb tenses and patterns more efficiently and clearly. Some of the material in the book may surprise you. To begin with, the explanations and commentary may seem self-evident, or the phonetic realisations may seem unnecessary. If this is so, please try to bear with me. The material in the book is designed to be of help to several groups: **the experienced native speaker** seeking a possible new approach to add to his armoury, **the novice teacher**, who speaks English with native speaker intuition, but has not yet fully analysed what it is that he does know, or why he says what he says, and also the non-native **EFL teacher abroad**, who speaks English excellently, and yet wishes to understand the subtler differences in usage and idiom which the native speaker takes for granted.

The organisation of the materials may not be what you expect – the placement of the present perfect in the section devoted to the present tense, for example. This is because you are reading a handbook for teachers, not a conventional grammar book, and the tenses are ordered in a way intended to make the concepts easier for you and your students, regardless of what grammatical purists might argue.

Lastly, I am aware that as a EFL teacher you are more likely to be female than male. Nevertheless, I have referred to 'the teacher' as 'he' throughout the text because writing 'he/she' is clumsy, 'they' is ungrammatical, 'one' is impersonal, and 'it' is insulting! If you are a female, please excuse my use of 'he' and regard this as a courtesy to the minority reader.

Please read this section of the book carefully. It is designed to help you to analyse common verb tenses and patterns, and their underlying concepts, and to choose appropriate contexts for making those concepts clear to your students. It is central to all that follows.

The rest of the book focuses closely on individual tenses and verb patterns. It is not intended to be read at one sitting, but to be dipped into for individual verb patterns. Of course, in a book of this length it is impossible to give all the possible verb patterns, with all their meanings, but the book does hope to cover most of the major ones. It will give you practical working principles, not a complete scholarly analysis. For this you need a good comprehensive grammar, and this book will work most successfully if you have one to refer to.

You will find an **analysis** of the usual forms and functions of each of the verb patterns discussed, together with a note on common phonetic problems. Then the book gives you a list of **suggested contexts** for teaching each of the functions. Although these contexts are tried and tested, they are not the only ones. The textbook which you use may well have others. Use this book to examine the examples given by your text, and see if you can see why the author has chosen them. It has been known for a good, clear textbook to be obscured by a muddled class teacher. There are times when you might feel that the textbook itself could be clearer. This book will show you how to choose clear contexts; use the ideas given here as a basis, and modify and add to them to create your own repertoire.

There is also a short section on **learner error** for each tense, one dealing with errors of **form**, and the other with common errors of **function**. The book cannot hope to deal with every possible mistake – every day learners invent new ways of getting things wrong! On the other hand, these sections do offer explanations for some of the more common errors, and by referring to them you may be able to work out why your own students make the errors that they do.

Present Section

Points to Ponder

- *For trainee teachers*

What exactly is the difference between *I eat cornflakes* and *I am eating cornflakes*?
What about *I eat more cornflakes these days* and *I am eating more cornflakes these days*?
What is 'present' about the present perfect in the sentence, *I have eaten my dinner*.

- *For teachers' workshops*

Which do you prefer to teach first, the present simple or the present continuous? Why?
Would the type of class you were teaching make any difference to your choice?

- *For non-native teachers*

How do the present tenses in English differ in concept from the present tenses in your own native language?

Tenses which have a relationship to present time

In this section you will find the tenses usually referred to as 'present' in grammars and reference works, the present simple and the present continuous. These tenses are discussed chiefly in their relation to present time and their use as future time markers is touched on only briefly here, but examined more fully under a separate listing (see page 63, Future).

Some readers will be surprised to find the present perfect and the present perfect continuous included in this section, but they are here because they have a relationship to present time. In fact this is probably their most important feature, unlike apparently similar tenses in other languages. It may help to clarify the nature of both these tenses if they are seen as describing actions which relate to the present rather than merely another form of 'past' tense. That is why the present perfect is called the **present** perfect.

The present emphatic (*I **do** walk* etc.) is not included in this section because it can be found in full in a separate section under Emphatic Tenses (Appendices, page 159). However, it is important that teachers do recognise a distinction between this and the normal form of the present simple. The Emphatics Section also includes a fuller discussion of stress and intonation, and the use of tag questions. This is not exhaustive, but should provide a guide for general teaching purposes. It has been given under Emphatic Tenses because intonation patterns become clearer when stressed, and broadly speaking, are very similar for all tenses.

PRESENT CONTINUOUS: analysis

Full Form (Spoken Form)			Negative Form (Spoken Form)		
I	am ('m)	looking	I	am ('m) not	looking
he	is ('s)		he	is ('s) not (isn't)	
she			she		
it			it		
you	are ('re)	you	are ('re) not (aren't)		
we		we			
they		they			
Question Forms					
Are you looking? (neutral question)			Aren't you looking? (expects answer 'yes')		
Tag Questions					
You're looking, aren't you? (expects answer 'yes')			You're not looking, are you? (expects answer 'no')		
I'm looking, aren't I? (no form* amn't I*)			I'm not looking, am I? (expects answer 'no')		
(Also I'm looking, am I not? expects answer 'yes', very formal)					

Questions to draw the target

What am I doing? What are you doing?

What am I doing? → You're fishing (or short answer: Fishing).
(only meaningful if the answer represents a guess)

What are you doing? → I'm reading (Reading).
(only meaningful if the questioner cannot see or guess)

Is he (verb) or (verb)?

Is he reading or writing? → He's reading (Reading).

Why is he (verb)?

Why is he digging? → He's planting potatoes.

Why has he got a (noun)?

Why has he got a hammer? → He's mending the fence.

Why is he/what's he doing+ place?

Why is he / what's he doing at the station? → He's waiting for a train.

Notes

- 1 The spoken negative has two possible forms: *He isn't looking*, tends to be more neutral; *He's not looking*, more emphatic. To avoid confusing the student it is important not to interchange the two forms indiscriminately at an early stage.
- 2 **Stative and Dynamic Verbs.** Some verbs rarely take the present continuous form at all; these can be loosely defined as verbs which describe a state of affairs beyond the person's immediate active control, (If someone *is* a man, *has* a car, *knows* French, *hears* music, (as distinct from listening to it), or *likes* apples – there is little he can actually do to change this at the moment). These verbs are often called stative verbs, as distinct from dynamic verbs, where the person is actively doing something. However, even verbs which are usually stative, can take the present continuous, but they often mean something different.

The most common stative verbs are:

- a **To Be.** Rarely occurs in the present continuous form except with adjectives of behaviour: *You are being silly*, which suggests a temporary, and deliberate act, or for mime and pretence: *I'm being an aeroplane*.
- b **To Have.** In British English the verb *To have* in the present continuous may have two meanings:
 - Where *have* implies present enjoyment or experience: *I'm having a bath*. This is dynamic and so is regular. For this usage American English prefers: *I'm taking a bath/a drink*.
 - Where *have* indicates possession. This is stative and in the present continuous always carries a future meaning: *I'm having a new coat*. *Have* for health, is always regarded as stative: *I am having a cold* is therefore future, and suggests deliberate pretence (I'll deliberately pretend to have a cold because I don't want to go to work). British colloquial English prefers *I've got* to *I have* in stative senses; *I've got a cold* rather than *I have a cold*.
- c **Verbs describing involuntary sensation** (*smell, see, hear*). These usually take the present simple, but the present continuous form exists for particular effect:
 - Pretence: *I'm smelling roses* (used when someone is miming the act of smelling roses).
 - A developing condition: *I'm not seeing very well these days* (I feel that my eyesight is getting worse).
 - To suggest a progressive event: *I'm feeling sick* as opposed to *I feel sick*.
 - To suggest deliberate action. This usage is often found with think/hope etc.:
I'm thinking of going to the theatre tonight.
I'm hoping to arrive at 6 o'clock.

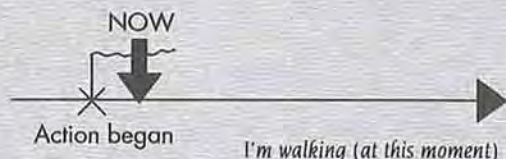
3 Spelling:

- a Verbs ending in vowel-consonant-*e* commonly drop *e* before *ing*: *I come, I'm coming*.
 - b Verbs ending in a short vowel followed by a single consonant commonly double the consonant before *ing*: *I run, I'm running*, (compare: *I sew, I'm sewing*).
 - c Verbs ending in *y* obey the rule and add *ing*, but verbs ending *ie* commonly change to *y* before *ing*:
I carry, I'm carrying; I tie, I'm tying.
- 4 Stress on the auxiliary, or on the negative will produce an emphatic form of this tense:
I am doing my best; I'm not being silly.
 - 5 Phonetics:
 - a The contracted form *he's* is sometimes heard as *his*; *it's* as *is*.
 - b The last sound of the contracted auxiliary is lost when the following verb begins with the same consonant and may cause problems for beginners; *I'm mending, I'm ending; I'm meeting, I'm eating; he's sleeping, he's leaping; you're riding, you're hiding* etc.
 - c In verbs ending with *o*, a distinct /w/ sound is pronounced before *ing*: *going*.

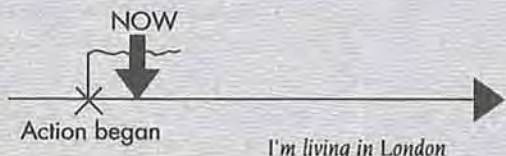
Meaning and Function

It may be helpful to view the present continuous when used as a present tense as dealing with actions which began before the moment of speaking, are expected to continue past it, but are essentially transitory.

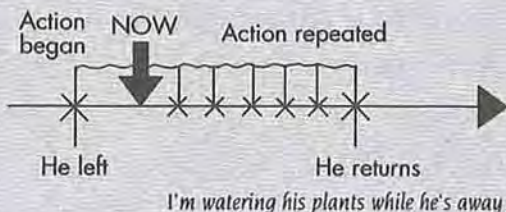
- A Temporary action** which began before the time of speaking, is continuing across it, and is not yet complete: *I'm walking at this moment.*



- B Temporary course of action**, fairly recently begun, currently engaged in, but not expected to be permanent: *I'm living in London.*



- C Temporary habit** not necessarily engaged in at the moment of speech, but temporarily contracted for: *I'm watering his plants while he's away.*



- D Regrettable habit** with *always* (This is confusing for students as habit usually requires present simple.) *I'm always losing my keys.* This suggests that the speaker is constantly in a state of having lost the keys. (The action is repeated, but transitory; compare – *I always lose my keys.*)

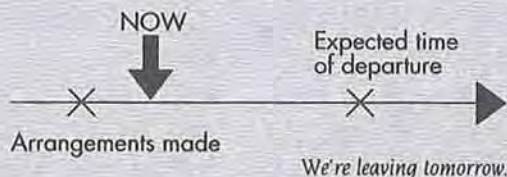
- E With verbs of hoping** etc. A more polite alternative to the present simple, especially in letters, invitations etc: *We are looking forward to seeing you; I am hoping to see you soon.* (Compare; *I hope to see you soon.*)

However, the present continuous is arguably most often used as a future tense (See page 65, Future Section)

- F Future action** (with future time marker). For plans already undertaken, and preliminary arrangements made. If other people are involved, arrangements are generally agreed between the parties.

I'm picking her up at six (she is expecting me).

We're leaving tomorrow (we have packed, bought our tickets etc).



(Note: The time marker may be implied by earlier sentences and contexts. Verbs of sensation (e.g. *enjoying*) cannot be used in this future sense.)

- a The verb *to have* in the sense of possession, *I'm having a red jumper*, can only have a future meaning and does not require a time marker.
- b The form *I'm going to (London)* appears to be a present continuous and time marker, but may be a contracted form of the *Going to* future. (See page 69, *Going to* Future.)

Suggested Contexts

A Temporary individual action:

This can be used to teach the meaning of individual vocabulary.

- Any clear mimed action. Beware of ambiguities: *I'm singing* probably means *I was singing*. If you choose *I'm talking* it becomes impossible to guess the meaning. *I'm sitting* can mean *I'm seated*.
- A series of pictures or a context (railway station) showing characters doing a variety of activities. (See **photocopiable page 4**). These are also useful for practice. Once the students know or have seen all the pictures, the teacher chooses one and hides it. Students try to guess which: *Is he swimming?* No. *Is he running?* Yes. Then students select a picture, and guess in pairs or small groups.
- A video freeze-frame. (If well chosen, an activity stopped in mid-action can be identified or guessed, depending on the level of the students.)
- Taped sound effects. Students guess what 'X' is doing to produce the sounds they hear (practice only).
- Contrastive work with the present simple, based on pictures of people at work. *What does he do? He's a doctor. What is he doing? He's looking at the child.*
- For later revision, examine unusual methods of doing things, using mimes, or film and pictures of other cultures. *What is he doing? He's rubbing sticks together. Why? He's making fire.*

B Temporary course of action:

- Role/play on the topic of a temporary stay (e.g. in England). *Where are you staying? Are you doing much shopping?*
- A similar context, or study habits, can be used for class questionnaires.

C Temporary habit:

- Using an office, or similar context, give a list of jobs usually carried out by one employee, but shared among other staff when he is on holiday. Establish who is fulfilling these tasks by using an information gap exercise. *Who's making the coffee/buying the stamps/posting the letters while he's away?* (See **photocopiable page 3**.)
- Role-play, in pairs. One student 'becomes' a customer asking for the manager, but gets a junior in his absence. (Intermediate.)

D Regrettable habit, with *always*. This is probably best taught as an idiom, at intermediate or advanced level.

E With *hope/think* etc. This is probably best taught as part of series on letter-writing, polite, formal conversation and invitations.

F Future action. This should be taught as a specific future. It is important to identify the pre-arranged nature of plans.

- Diary context. Students, in groups are given different fixed engagements in their diaries, and asked to agree a date for example an informal dinner party, *I can't come on Monday, I'm babysitting* etc.
- Students are given the 'diary' of e.g. a pop-star and try to find times for an interview appointment.
- A contrastive lesson with other futures, showing that this tense denotes plans less easily changed than some others (see also page 63, Future Section).

Learner Error: Form, Spelling and Pronunciation

- I Students attempt to make present continuous forms of stative verbs when these are not appropriate, especially to *have* for possession: **I am having a cold** for *I have a cold*; and verbs of sensation **I am smelling fish** for *I smell fish*.

- 2 Contracted forms create difficulties for beginners. Students have been known to avoid using the contracted form because they regard it as slovenly. They need to be reassured that this form is the accepted norm in conversation.
 - a *He's* may be heard as *his* or *is*: *What's he doing?* **His swimming. Is swimming.**
 - b *You're* may be interpreted as *your*: **Your swimming, his swimming, my swimming.**
 - c The last letter of the contracted auxiliary is lost or assimilated in native speech, and as a result verbs are sometimes misheard, and misunderstood or mis-produced: *I'm meeting / I'm eating*; *He's taking / *he's staking**, or **he staking**. (This can be avoided by choosing verbs carefully at an early stage.)
 - d *We're* is sometimes misheard by false beginners as *where* or *were* or vice versa.
- 3 Spelling (**comeing, runing** etc.) may be a persistent problem.
- 4 The two variant forms of the spoken negative (*you aren't/you're not*) may cause problems if teachers are unaware of this. Beginners may be taught one version, and find that the teacher is inadvertently using the other in classroom interaction.
- 5 The tag/question form, *I am, aren't I? Aren't I coming?* etc. appears grammatically confusing. *Am I not* is a possible written form, but is not commonly used in conversation now, unless for particular effect.

Learner Error: Meaning and Function

- 1 Many languages have a single present tense covering contexts of both present continuous and present simple in English.
 - a Where the L1 tense resembles the present simple (e.g. French), students may avoid the present continuous altogether: *Where is she? * She plays tennis.**
 - b Where the L1 tense resembles the present continuous, students may use that in all contexts (e.g. Indian languages): **I am hoping you are well.**
- 2 Some languages (e.g. Arabic) have no separate verb for *To be* and may produce forms such as **He running**; others (e.g. Spanish) have a form which parallels the present continuous in some senses (often that of single, interrupted action).
- 3 Statements such as *I'm sitting (down)* may cause problems, because in many languages (e.g. French) the state of being seated, and the action of sitting require different forms. Students may attempt to mark this in English with *I'm sat* or by a present continuous/present simple distinction.
- 4 Intermediate students have difficulty in distinguishing the stative and dynamic uses of *To have* for possession, and verbs of sensation: *I am having a bath, I am having a cold.*
- 5 The *always* idiom (*I am always losing my key. / I always lose my keys.*), can cause problems for those who feel they have understood the distinction between simple and continuous tenses.
- 6 The future usage is confusing to many students, who prefer to use *will*.
 - a Used inappropriately it can sound rude: *Would you like to come out tonight? I'm studying.* The student may not intend the unarguable nature of the rejection.
 - b When the time marker is *now* the tense is not seen as future, but *I'm leaving now* actually means *imminently*.
 - c Students attempt to make future versions of verbs of sensation etc: *We're going out to dinner. We're having a Chinese meal. *We're enjoying it.**
- 7 Students may avoid or misunderstand the present continuous in *when, while* and *if* clauses, where the action is often repeated. They may substitute the present simple in all cases and produce: *I listen to the radio when I wash the dishes* for *I listen to the radio when I'm washing the dishes.*