

Grappling with the present perfect

Daniel Xerri looks at why learners struggle with this particular tense and offers some solutions.

This article focuses on how learners can be helped to begin to understand the present perfect. In my experience the present perfect is particularly problematic for some L2 speakers of English because it is not exactly similar to how it is used in their mother tongue. The fact that it has a number of uses in English compounds the problem of understanding, but at the same time makes it a really useful form.

In English the present perfect is a combination of the present tense and the perfect aspect and it can thus refer to events that happened in the past but which have present relevance. According to Parrot (2010: 235), 'learners find it difficult to think of the present perfect as a form that can refer to present time in some contexts, and past time in others'. This problem is mostly due to the fact that in a number of other languages there is either no such form or else a similar form that has different meanings. For example, in spoken German and Italian the present perfect replaces the past simple form.

The perfect aspect

In my experience learners find it hard to fully conceptualise the perfect aspect, especially when it is presented out of context. According to Comrie (1976: 64), the perfect aspect is 'retrospective in that it establishes a relationship between a state at one time and a situation at an earlier time'. Aspect has to do with 'the speaker's perception of the event' (Thornbury, 1997: 79) and 'concepts such as duration and completion are

abstract, often subjective, and difficult to explain' (Thornbury, 2006: 18). Encouraging learners to get to grips with such concepts does not necessarily help them to communicate more effectively and is particularly hard at low levels.

Meaning and use

The present perfect indicates that an event is perceived as taking place in the time anterior to and including the present moment. For Parrott (2010: 236), 'What unites uses of the present perfect is that they link the past to the present, focusing on the effect or result at the time of speaking or writing'. For learners these 'meanings of anteriority and indefiniteness' (Downing & Locke, 1992: 375) are particularly challenging to understand. In fact, what is required of learners is to embrace the concept that when 'we say that something has happened, we are thinking about the past and the present at the same time' (Swan, 2005: 438).

Unfinished time

The present perfect simple is used to talk about completed past events that occurred within an unfinished period of time. The events in the past usually 'connect to the present' (Carter *et al*, 2011: 413). Hence the present perfect simple can be used to refer to experiences up to the present. e.g. *Lex has jumped off a high building.*

The present perfect simple does not allow the speaker to use expressions that give a definite past time indication of the event

(e.g. *last week, at 10 o'clock, yesterday evening*). However, it is still possible to use general or present time expressions. e.g. *The serial killer has murdered 10 women so far.*
I've read 10 books this week.

Completed and uncompleted events or states

The main difference between the present perfect *simple* and present perfect *continuous* is that the former is used with action verbs to highlight the completion of an event or state in the recent past whereas the latter refers to repeated events or states that started in the past but are still occurring at the present time (Carter *et al*, 2011). e.g. *I've written the essay.*
Completed event.
I've been writing the essay.
Ongoing activity.

However, Carter *et al* (2011: 417) point out that 'Sometimes we can use either form and the meaning is the same'. e.g. *I've worked here for 10 years.*
I've been working here for 10 years.

This means that both forms can be used to talk about completed and uncompleted events. This is when it becomes increasingly difficult for learners to feel they have mastered this tense since there are a number of grey areas. For example, the present perfect simple can refer to recently completed events (e.g. *Charles and Francis have just come back from a week in Tenerife*) and to

a present situation that started in the past (e.g. *That warehouse has been empty for three years*). The present perfect continuous can be used for recently finished activities (e.g. *It's been raining*) as well as for a single continuing event (e.g. *He's been living in Gozo since 2000*) and for repeated continuing events (e.g. *I've been going to Ibiza for holiday since 1999*).

Present relevance

The present perfect is used for events that are 'psychologically related to the present' (Downing & Locke, 1992: 373). Swan (2005: 440) makes it clear that 'We use the present perfect if we are thinking about the past and present together. We do not use the present perfect if we are not thinking about the present'. Hence we use the present perfect simple in order to refer to a single past action that is connected to the present.

e.g. *A fire has broken out in the church.*

It's still burning.

My brother has learnt Greek.

He can speak Greek.

If the past event is not connected to the present, then speakers usually use the past tense. This makes the past tense typical of biographies of dead people and narratives.

e.g. *Shakespeare probably learnt Italian.*

Once upon a time a witch lived in a forest.

Even though both the past simple and the present perfect simple can refer to finished events, the past simple is specifically used to refer to events in a finished period of time whereas the present perfect simple refers to events in unfinished time (Parrott, 2010). Notwithstanding this rule, 'The difference between the present perfect and the simple past is not always very clear-cut. It often depends on our "focus": are we thinking mostly about the present relevance of a past event, or about the past details?' (Swan, 2005: 445). This question is particularly important given that in certain contexts sometimes both the present perfect and the past simple are possible.

e.g. *I've given your old room to*

Genevieve.

I gave your old room to Genevieve.

Some problems

These are some of the problems that learners experience when trying to use the present perfect.

Use of present simple/continuous

Elementary learners usually find it hard to understand that when talking about 'time up to now' in English the present perfect needs to be used rather than the present simple or continuous. So some learners make mistakes such as the following:

e.g. **We know each other since August.*

**We knowing each other since August.*

Use of past simple

In my experience one of the biggest problems that learners have is that of confusing the present perfect with the past simple:

e.g. **I loved sports since I was a child.*

**When has the earthquake happened?*

When referring to unfinished time, learners sometimes make the mistake of using definite past time expressions:

e.g. **I've been to London last summer.*

For and since

When using the present perfect learners also tend to confuse the prepositions *for* and *since*, not realising that *since* cannot be used with periods of time:

e.g. **I've lived in Malta since most of my life.*

On other occasions they either over-associate *for* and *since* with the present perfect or else avoid using these two prepositions altogether:

e.g. **I have been living in Gozo for two years when I met her.*

**Most of my life I live in Malta.*

Past participles

Some elementary learners struggle with irregular past and past participle forms. They sometimes use regular forms when these cannot be used or else replace the past participle with a present form:

e.g. **We've spoken about football in class.*

**Have you eated breakfast?*

**She's the oldest woman I've ever talk to.*

Effective teaching activities

These are five activities I have found to be effective in enabling elementary learners to understand the present perfect.

1. Dictogloss (adapted from Wajnryb, 1990: 33–34)

Aim: To enable learners to reconstruct a text collaboratively and notice the gap.

Procedure: Find a brief text that contains the use of the present perfect. Introduce its topic, activate schemata by means of a word rose, and pre-teach vocabulary. Read the text and learners try to answer a gist question. Read the text again while learners take notes. Ask them to reconstruct the text in groups of four. Analyse learners' texts and encourage them to discuss their linguistic choices (e.g. choosing present simple/continuous rather than present perfect). Ask learners to compare their text with the original and encourage them to notice differences in terms of use of the present perfect.

Commentary: This activity places emphasis on meaning and helps elementary learners to notice the gap between the provided input and their own output and to think about 'how the collaborative work of grammaring has produced a grammatically correct text' (Thornbury, 2001: 73). The collaborative aspect is highly important because through discussion learners' 'various hypotheses about the target language have to be voiced' (Wajnryb, 1990: 16). For this reason dictogloss is a consciousness-raising activity.

2. Matching (adapted from Gerngross *et al.*, 2006: 117–118)

Aim: To enable learners to distinguish between past simple and present perfect.

Procedure: Show learners two pictures of stick figures. The first picture contains a speech bubble with a statement in the past simple, the other one a statement in the present perfect. In pairs, learners decide whether to fill in an empty speech bubble in each picture with a question in the past simple or the

present perfect. Ask learners to identify the form of the verb in each case and then encourage them to establish rules of thumb for the use of the two tenses.

Commentary: This activity employs a discovery learning approach. According to Thornbury (1999: 52), this involves cycles of trial and error, with guidance and feedback provided by the teacher'. By asking learners to work out the rules, such an activity ensures that these are more memorable; it also encourages learners to become more autonomous.

3. Dialogue writing (adapted from Walker & Elsworth, 2000: 105–109)

Aim: To enable learners to write dialogues including the present perfect.

Procedure: Learners are provided with the rules of how to form the present perfect and when to use it. They are asked to work out a number of different exercises that give them practice in the use of auxiliaries and past participles. These include gap-fills, table-completion and sentence rewriting. Then they are provided with a model dialogue in which two friends ask each other about their travels. In pairs, learners write three similar dialogues and practise reading them out. Finally, they interview each other.

Commentary: Most of this activity adopts a deductive approach to the teaching of grammar. However, Ellis (2006: 102) points out that 'A focus-on-forms approach is valid as long as it includes an opportunity for learners to practise behaviour in communicative tasks'. The final stage of this activity does just that.

4. Communicative chunking (adapted from Ur, 1988: 244)

Aim: To enable learners to practise the use of the present perfect with *for* and *since* by means of curricula vitae.

Procedure: Provide learners with the curriculum vitae of four different job applicants. By means of a substitution table, learners will be able to use the present perfect in order to talk about the four applicants. In small groups learners

discuss whom to choose for the job based on relevant past experience.

Commentary: By means of this communicative activity, elementary learners will be able to understand how the present perfect is used to express past events with relevance for present situations. This activity attempts to motivate learners to be accurate while at the same time devoting attention to meaning (Thornbury, 1999: 92–93). Most importantly, it enables them to use 'short memorable chunks which can be automatised' (Thornbury, 1999: 94) through repetition.

5. Noticing (adapted from Ur 1988: 236)

Aim: To help learners notice the use of the present perfect in a news broadcast.

Procedure: Play the news broadcast and make sure that learners have understood the content. During a second and third listening, learners make a note of as many instances of present perfect forms as possible. In pairs, learners discuss the meaning of these forms and use them to write sentences that are typical of a news broadcast.

Commentary: After some kind of deductive approach to the use of the present perfect, elementary learners would be able to notice the target language being used naturally. While discussing Richard Schmidt's ideas on noticing in his account of learning Portuguese, Thornbury (2001: 36) claims that 'Without the formal instruction, specific features of naturally-occurring language use might have washed right over him. But without the real-life interaction, the outcomes of formal instruction may have simply sat on a shelf in the brain and gathered dust'. This highlights the significance of the idea that 'a differentiated approach involving sometimes deductive and sometimes inductive instruction may work best' (Ellis, 2006: 102).

Conclusion

In this article I have explored how learners can be helped to begin to

understand the often challenging nature of the present perfect. Given the abstract concepts associated with it, learning would probably be more successful if teachers integrated the focus on the present perfect into communicative activities.

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