

## Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)

---

The Meaning and Discourse Function of the Past Tense in English

Author(s): Elizabeth Riddle

Source: *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Jun., 1986), pp. 267-286

Published by: [Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. \(TESOL\)](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3586544>

Accessed: 22-08-2014 18:22 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



*Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL)* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *TESOL Quarterly*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

---

## *The Meaning and Discourse Function of the Past Tense in English*

---

ELIZABETH RIDDLE

*Ball State University*

The past tense is often used inconsistently, even by very advanced ESL learners. In this article, it is suggested that a major cause of the problem is a failure by teachers and students to recognize the extent to which a speaker's point of view and purpose in performing a speech act condition the choice between the present and past tenses in actual discourse. Following an analysis of the meaning and discourse function of the past tense, suggestions are offered for teaching and practicing this tense in context.

Even very advanced students often use the past tense inconsistently, despite the fact that this tense appears to have a simple and readily explainable meaning. This is true not only of speakers of languages without past tenses per se, such as Chinese or Indonesian, but also of Korean and Japanese speakers, for example, whose languages do have past tenses. A key source of the difficulty may be that the past tense is generally taught as having a completive sense, while a more general meaning and discourse conditions on its use go unrecognized.<sup>1</sup>

Specifically, it is argued here that the past tense simply means "true before speech time" and that completion is not part of its denotative meaning, although it is an implication often associated with the past tense in many contexts. Thus, the past tense can be used to describe situations which may still exist, objectively

---

<sup>1</sup> Although this article discusses only the simple past and present tenses, the generalizations apply to the corresponding progressive "tenses" as well. For this reason, I use the labels *past* and *present* rather than *simple past*, etc. Technically, however, the progressive tenses are actually combinations of a simple tense plus a progressive aspect form.

The counterfactual use of the past tense, as in *If I were you*, is not discussed in this article. Although some linguists have proposed unitary accounts of the past tense which include this use, I feel that these treatments are too abstract to be suitable for pedagogical purposes and that this use is best covered separately. Also excluded from the discussion is the alternation between the past and the historical present. See Wolfson (1979) and Schiffrin (1981) for analyses of the latter.

speaking, at the time of speech if the purpose of the speaker<sup>2</sup> is to present the information in terms of its past psychological relevance. As shown below, this approach makes it clear that past tenses said to result from tense-harmony (also called sequence of tenses and backshifting) copying rules really occur for the same semantic and pragmatic reasons as do main clause past tenses.

First, common assumptions about the use of the past tense are briefly identified, followed by a demonstration that the speaker's point of view and communicative purpose play a crucial role in the selection of the past tense in main clauses. It is then argued that the same factors condition the choice of tense in indirect speech clauses as well and that therefore tense harmony per se does not exist. Next, it is suggested that the past tense should be analyzed as meaning "true in the past" and that the notion of completion is a contextually based implication. The final sections of the article show how this analysis explains the occurrence of a particular type of error in past tense use by advanced ESL learners. Teaching suggestions are also offered.

## COMMON ASSUMPTIONS

The completive sense of the past tense, as illustrated in Example 1, is the one most commonly recognized by teachers and most consistently used by advanced students.<sup>3</sup>

- 1a. I *had* a VW, but I *sold* it.
- b. That *was* my pudding she *ate*.

In Example 1a, the speaker no longer owns the car, and the act of selling is over. In Example 1b, the eating has been brought to completion, and the pudding no longer exists. These are examples of what may be thought of as the prototypical use of the past tense. ESL teachers and textbooks, however, generally overlook the fact that the past tense lacks a sense of completion in other contexts.

2. [Leaving a movie theater] That *was* a great movie.

Although the movie continues to be great, it is described in the past.

A second common but mistaken assumption about the past tense is that completed acts are described *only* in that tense. This

<sup>2</sup> For convenience, the terms *speaker* and *speaking* are used to cover *writer* and *writing* as well. *Speech time* also refers to time of writing.

<sup>3</sup> Examples without a source specified were constructed by the author. Those labeled spontaneous speech were naturally occurring utterances recorded by the author. The remaining examples were taken from books and television as indicated. Italics in all examples have been added by the author for emphasis.

assumption is particularly reinforced when the past and present perfect tenses are compared and contrasted. As Example 3 shows, however, a verb may occur in the present tense, even though the actual action denoted by the verb in its general sense took place in the past.

3. Werner (1948) *writes* about “primitive” languages in the following terms. (Johnson-Laird & Wason, 1977, p. 439)

Finally, it is generally thought that the present tense in an indirect speech clause embedded below a past tense main verb is converted to the past tense. The operative rule is that the tense of the main verb is copied. This particular use of the past tense is thus considered not to reflect the true meaning of the tense. An example of this so-called tense harmony or sequence of tenses is given below.

- 4a. Jane said, “I am tired.”
- b. Jane said she *was* tired.

*Was* in Example 4b is in the same tense as the reporting verb *said*, which indicates that the act of saying and the state of fatigue were simultaneous.

## THE PAST TENSE IN DIRECT DISCOURSE

In addition to the objective temporal relationship between the time of a situation (this is intended to include events and states of affairs) and speech time, the speaker’s point of view and purpose in communicating play a crucial role in the choice between the past and present tenses.<sup>4</sup> A situation whose time frame extends from the past to the present may be described in the past rather than the present or present perfect tenses if the purpose is to present information or ask a question from a past point of view.

The specific reasons why a speaker would have a past point of view fall into two major categories.

1. Past association: The fact or nature of a person’s association with a particular situation in the past is more relevant to the purpose

<sup>4</sup> Reichenbach (1947) points out the importance of point of view in the determination of tenses. He defines tenses in terms of the relations between the point of event (E), point of reference (R), and point of speech (S). For example, in English, all three points are simultaneous for the present tense, while R and E are simultaneous with each other and precede S for the simple past. This system is not used here, however, because it wrongly implies that all simple past tense verbs describe completed events (i.e., not in existence at speech time).

Lakoff (1970) was perhaps the first to draw attention to the role of speaker viewpoint in the use of the noncompletive past. See Riddle (1978) for a theoretical discussion of her analysis.

in speaking than the objective current existence of that situation. (The person in question may be the speaker or another person being described.) In this case, the past tense functions as an indicator of subjective attitude.<sup>5</sup>

2. Background information: Although the information to be presented is about a situation subjectively viewable as existing in either the present or the past (as above), this is considered to be background to other information whose present existence is to be emphasized.<sup>6</sup> Here the past tense functions as a discourse-organizing device which backgrounds information.

## Past Association

This category comes into play when a personal past experience of a situation is presented as the motivation for a past action, as in Example 5.

5. [The speaker, gesturing with an old potholder in her hand at a flea market, is explaining why she just bought it.] *It didn't* have any stains on it. (spontaneous speech)

Even though the potholder described here has no stains on it at the moment of speech, the speaker uses the past tense to show that its lack of stains was the motivation for its purchase, an act which has already taken place.

Another aspect of past experience contributing to a past point of view is the time a piece of knowledge was acquired. In Example 6, a diver employed by the police to locate a submerged car describes the body he finds in terms of the moment of discovery.

6. Diver: [Just sticking his head out of the water] There's a car down here all right. Brand new convertible.

Tragg: Anybody in it?

Diver: Fellow who was driving. He *looked* like a minister. (TV dialogue, *Perry Mason*)

It is important to note here that the man's appearance as a minister was referred to for the purpose of identification, not as a comment on his personal attributes. For this reason, the fact that he is dead is not the critical factor in the choice of the past tense in this particular exchange. The present tense is also possible in Example 6 but would

---

<sup>5</sup> Ard (1984) independently proposes some similar conditions on the use of the past tense in scientific writing but does not relate them to the use of the past tense in general or to the distinction between foregrounding and backgrounding.

<sup>6</sup> This use of the past tense is mentioned by Aristar and Dry (1982) and Wallace (1982), among others.

indicate a different point of view; the connection between the man's appearance and the moment of discovery would not be emphasized. One might think of the use of the present tense here as less egocentric than the use of the past.

Likewise, the past tense may be used in questions to focus on the addressee's experience of visiting a place rather than to request an objective description of the person or thing in question.

#### 7. How *was* Poland?

The present tense is appropriate in such a question about the addressee's experience only in a letter or phone call while he or she is still in the place referred to.

The same emphasis on past experience can be seen in Example 8, in which the speaker wants to describe an interesting sight experienced before the moment of speech.

8. [Said a few moments after a man passing in a car has driven out of sight] He *did* have an earring in his ear. (spontaneous speech)

The present tense, on the other hand, would emphasize the present characteristics of the man himself. Since the man is not in view at the time of the speech act and since the speaker has no current relationship with the man, the past tense is used.

Use of the present tense in such contexts tends to imply the existence of a current relationship between the speaker (or hearer) and the person described.

9. Anne: Jane just bought a Volvo.

John: Maureen *has* one.

Anne: John, you've got to quit talking about Maureen as if you were still going together. You broke up three months ago.

The use of the present tense in this example wrongly implies a continuing relationship with Maureen on the part of the speaker. The speaker uses the present tense, however, because he is still emotionally attached to his former girlfriend and is reluctant to break the psychological tie.

Another type of context in which information objectively known to be true in the present may be expressed in the past tense is when the speaker's purpose is to attribute a belief to a deceased person rather than to present the belief as the speaker's independent assertion. (The asterisk in the example below indicates that *revolves* is not acceptable here.)

10. According to Copernicus, the earth { *revolved* } around the sun, and nothing could persuade him otherwise.

If a name can refer either to a dead person or to an existing work by that person, in conversation the past tense more strongly suggests the person and the present tense, that person's work.

11. A name {didn't  
doesn't} mean much according to Shakespeare.

When the sentence or the context unambiguously refers to a dead person, however, only the past tense is possible.

12. Einstein *thought* that . . .

### Background Information

When it is logically possible to use either the past or the present tense, according to the conditions discussed above, the past may be used as a backgrounding device and the present as a foregrounding device. For example, when a claim from an existing work is cited as background information to a study, perhaps to offer a historical perspective, the past tense is preferred.

13. Bartlett (1932), the earliest of the theorists discussed here and the first psychologist to use the term "schema," in effect *said* it all: ". . . the past operates as an organized mass . . ." (Tannen, 1979, p. 139)

When an existing work is discussed in terms of the current validity of its claims and their bearing on the main point to be developed, the present is usually chosen, thereby foregrounding the information.

14. Bartlett *contends* that an individual "has an overmastering tendency simply to get a general impression of the whole." (Tannen, 1979, p. 139)

Example 15 illustrates the difference between backgrounded and foregrounded information within a single paragraph.

15. In November 1859, Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*, one of the greatest and most controversial works in the literature of science, *was* published in London. The central idea in this book is the principle of natural selection. In the sixth edition, which *appeared* in 1872 and which Darwin *regarded* as the definitive one . . . Darwin *wrote*: "This principle of preservation or the survival of the fittest, I have called Natural Selection." (Eigen & Winkler, 1981, pp. 53-54)

In this passage, *was* is in the past because it refers to a completed event and because the sentence provides background information. The verb in the next sentence, however, is in the present because

Darwin's book still exists and because the principle of natural selection is the main topic in this section of Eigen and Winkler's book. The first condition must be fulfilled in order for the present tense to be a possible choice. Given this choice, the present may then be chosen for the purpose of foregrounding. *Appeared* in the third sentence also refers to a completed event, and *regarded* is in the past tense because it refers to the personal view of a deceased individual. *Wrote* occurs in the past because it represents information which was true before speech time and which is background matter with respect to the main topic in the section of the book from which Example 15 is taken. That is, the quote from Darwin and the fact that it was written in a certain edition at a certain time constitute historical information and provide support for Eigen and Winkler's more primary point expressed in the present tense in the second sentence. For the past tense to be selected as a backgrounding device, the noncompletive predicate must represent information that was true before speech time.

Descriptions of experiments or empirical studies which focus on their completion in the past, as in Example 16, also tend to constitute background information, and the past tense is therefore preferred in such contexts.

16. An experiment was *carried out* to determine whether . . .

But when reference is made to something that continues to exist in the present and has immediate current relevance, such as to the results of an experiment or to data being reported, then the information tends to belong to the foreground, and the present tense is usually preferred.

17. The results of this experiment *show* that . . .

Finally, the present tense is usually used in an abstract of a paper because it represents foregrounded information as an independent summary of the paper as it exists in its entirety in the present.

18. This paper *demonstrates* that sound changes do not always affect the most frequent words first. (Phillips, 1984, p. 320)

When reference is made in a later section to something said in an earlier part of a paper, on the other hand, the past tense is usually preferred, as in Example 19.

19. As *pointed out* earlier, literary and ethnographic methods in folklore research complement each other. (Ben-Amos, 1981, p. xxxvi)

The past tense is preferred in later references because the writer is describing the paper in terms of the process of writing and of



making the claims rather than in terms of an entity existing independently and in the present for the reader. (Summaries and conclusions are often in the present perfect for reasons which go beyond the scope of this paper.)

When the point of an entire section or a whole work is to present historical information, however, then within that context the past occurs in its complete use or only as a marker of past point of view rather than as a backgrounding device.

Up to this point, the discussion has been restricted to the use of the past tense with main clause verbs. Let us now turn to instances of the past tense traditionally thought to be cases of tense harmony.

## THE PAST TENSE IN INDIRECT DISCOURSE

### Tense Harmony

The conversion from direct to indirect speech is often associated with a change in the tense of the reported speech verb. For example, the past tense of a main clause reporting verb is believed to trigger a change in the indirect speech clause: A tense reflecting real time reference changes to a tense maintaining the relevant temporal relationship with respect to the reporting verb (see Example 4b).

Many ESL teachers and textbook writers believe that the change from present to past is automatic and exceptionless. Others, such as Aronson (1984) and Azar (1985), recognize that the present tense can be used in indirect speech clauses embedded below past tense main verbs but mistakenly attribute this to informal style. Frank (1972) goes further in recognizing that "the present tense may be retained in a *that* clause object expressing a generalization (He said the train always arrives late.)" (p. 62).

In their ESL grammar for teachers, Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983) present a more complete description. In addition to noting the point about general truths, they say that immediate repetitions and descriptions still true or considered still true by the speaker occur in the present tense. Citing Chang (1981), they also remark that the present tense may be retained in indirect speech clauses containing a present or future adverbial, such as in "Jeremiah said he hopes to begin his new exercise program by early next week" (p. 462).

The best generalization, however, is that the present tense occurs in a reported speech clause embedded under a past tense verb if the situation described there is of current relevance to the speaker. The past tense in such subordinate clauses is motivated by the same

types of factors contributing to a past point of view as in the main clause examples discussed above.<sup>7</sup>

### Current Relevance Versus Past Association

Many types of situations involve current relevance. For instance, the present tense in Example 20 implies speaker belief in the truth of the information in the subordinate clause.

20. Columbus recognized that the earth *is* round.

In Example 21, the present tense serves to emphasize the current firmness of the speaker's plans.

21. "I am sorry," she said, "but I told Mr. Martin yesterday that we *are* not thinking of selling." (Wentworth, 1965, p. 23)

In Example 22, the present tense implies that the situation described in the subordinate clause is unresolved.

22. The paper claimed today that the mayor *is* involved in that big tax fraud cover-up they've been investigating.

The past tense, on the other hand, indicates a past point of view. As the next set of examples shows, the noncompletive past tense in indirect speech clauses occurs under the same conditions as those determining this use of the past tense in direct speech. (The same type of analysis can also apply to the alternation between other pairs of tenses in indirect speech clauses.)

Consider Example 23, in which the noncompletive past in the indirect speech clause reflects a past point of view on the part of the speaker, motivated by the same factors shown to be relevant for direct speech.

23. [Spoken about 15 minutes after it was discovered that there was no garlic] I couldn't make garlic butter because we *didn't* have any garlic. (spontaneous speech)

The lack of garlic is given as a reason for a past act and is therefore described in the past, even though there is still no garlic at the moment of speech.

In Example 24, although the speaker still thinks that Miss Marple has something to say, *had* is in the past tense because this conclusion was drawn on the basis of an observation of her demeanor before the moment of speech.

---

<sup>7</sup> See Costa (1972), McGilvray (1974a, 1974b), and especially Riddle (1978) for detailed theoretical discussions of the alternation between the present and past tenses in such contexts.

24. "Have you got something you want to tell me, Miss Marple?"

"Now why should you think that?"

"You looked as though you *had*," said Davy. (Christie, 1968, p. 135)

Another common context for framing a description in terms of the speaker's past perceptions is when prior ignorance about a currently existing situation is indicated.

25. B. I'm jolly lucky if I do Elstead in four hours.

.....

c. I thought it *was* four hours regularly. (spontaneous speech recorded in Svartvik & Quirk, 1980, p. 293)

The present tense rarely occurs in such contexts, not because of a need for tense harmony per se, but because its discourse function would conflict with the speaker's communicative purpose. One of the functions of the present tense in an indirect speech clause is to indicate speaker belief in the truth of the information presented in that clause. The purpose of Speaker c, however, is to emphasize past lack of awareness of certain information.

In Example 26, an unchanged geographical location is described in the past because the speaker's presence in the past in a place where he believed justice always prevailed was the motivation for his behavior at that time.

26. [An innocent boy accused of murder is being questioned in a TV interview about why he had said something honest but self-incriminating to the police.] I thought that this *was* the United States and that nothing could happen to me. (spontaneous speech, 60 *Minutes*)

The fact that the speaker's only contact with a certain car was a brief glimpse is the motivation for the use of *was* in Example 27.

27. A: Did Jack say what the make of the hit-and-run car *was*?

B: Yeah. He said it *was* a Ford Mustang.

In Example 28, Jane's ex-husband is described in the past because she and/or the speaker has no current relationship with him. Whether or not the man is still a gambler is left unspecified.

28. Jane said that her ex-husband *was* a pathological gambler and that's why she divorced him.

If the speaker wishes to describe some aspect of a current relationship, however, the present tense is more appropriate, as shown in Example 29.

29. Jane said that her ex-husband *is* a pathological gambler and she really worries when he has the kids.

When a subordinate verb presents background information with respect to a present tense main verb, it occurs in the noncompletive past tense. The same information could be described in the present tense in another context. Compare Examples 30a and 30b.

- 30a. Chomsky (1965) *ascribes* a filtering function to transformations.  
b. In his history of transformational grammar in America, Newmeyer writes that Chomsky (1965) *ascribed* a filtering function to transformations.

Conversely, a subordinate verb occurring below a noncompletive past tense main verb can be in the present tense if it expresses information believed currently valid and essential to the main point (thus belonging to the foreground) and if the main verb expresses background information.

31. I would like now to illustrate further the need for filters by discussing briefly a number of cases from English grammar. . . .  
It *was observed* many years ago by Fillmore (1965) that indirect object NP based on *for*-prepositional phrases in general *behave* differently under passivization than indirect object NP based on *to*-prepositional phrases. (Postal, 1972, p. 141)

Thus, the same reasons for the use of the noncompletive past in direct speech clauses, where there is no model for tense copying, account for its use in indirect speech clauses. This conclusion means that there is no need for a rule of tense harmony. The past or present tense is chosen in indirect speech on the basis of its general meaning and discourse function.

## THE MEANING OF THE PAST TENSE

Since the past tense commonly occurs in both the completive and noncompletive senses, the best denotation of the simple past tense may be simply “true before speech time in the real world or in the speaker’s belief world,” with the completive sense being determined by context and the meaning of the verb. Thus verbs denoting actions, such as *read* or *swim*, for example, usually carry a completive sense because of the nature of the activity, but verbs denoting states, such as *be* or *have*, will quite often be associated with a noncompletive sense. The final arbiter is the context, however.

The fact that the past and present tenses may be joined by *and* supports this analysis. If the past tense included in its literal denotation “no longer true,” then the conjunction of the past tense and the present tense, which denotes “true at speech time,” would result in a contradictory sentence. Instead, the inclusion of the present tense in the second conjunct merely cancels the potential implication that something is no longer the case or that a person no longer exists.<sup>8</sup> As Example 32 shows, a sentence with conjoined past and present tenses referring to the same proposition is not contradictory.

32. Wife: Do you think he could actually have fallen in love with Diana? They’ve only known each other 2 days.  
Husband: Why not? I flipped for you in just 24 hours. Of course you *were* the most beautiful girl in the world—and still *are*. (TV dialogue, *Love Boat*)

Although the completive sense is prototypical of the past tense and commonly occurs with many verbs, it does not occur in all contexts, and that sense may be canceled. When describing a situation which could exist at speech time, the speaker may use the past tense to focus on his or her experience or perception of that situation in the past, and there is no completive connotation. Conversely, one may choose to describe past acts or opinions in the present tense if they constitute information to be foregrounded as currently relevant.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR ESL/EFL

A major source of the problem advanced students have in using the past tense consistently may be that they do not adequately understand its actual meaning and discourse functions as outlined in this article. Consider the dialogue in Example 33.

33. Susan: Did you do anything interesting during the break?  
Mei-Li: Yeah, I went to the Grand Canyon with some of my friends. We drove and camped out on the way.  
Susan: It sounds like fun.  
Mei-Li: It *is*.

In this dialogue, Mei-Li uses the past tense for completed actions but mistakenly switches to the present tense after the native speaker Susan uses the present. The problem is one of point of view. Susan

<sup>8</sup> For a theoretical discussion of the nature of contextual implications and the cancelability criterion, see Grice (1975) and Sadock (1978).

uses the present as a reflection of her evaluation of the trip at the moment she speaks. Mei-Li, however, should have continued to use the past tense to reflect the fact that her experience took place in the past. She incorrectly switches to a present point of view and uses a tense with a habitual sense in that context rather than continuing to describe the trip in terms of her own experience.

The paragraph in Example 34 was written by a fairly advanced ESL student from Vietnam.<sup>9</sup>

34. While I *was* in the gym, I *saw* someone looks very much like somebody I know from my hometown. I *was* afraid to come and ask her if she *is* from my hometown or not. Anyway, I *guessed* she *felt* the same way, because not too long she *came* and *asked* about myself. Then I *found* that she *is* from my hometown. I *could* not be sure because she *changed* a little. However, we *talked* for awhile, then she *had* to leave.

In this paragraph, whenever a verb denotes an act, state, or situation completed in the past, the past tense (indicated by italics), is correctly used (although the past perfect would be more standard for *changed*). However, when states which can be considered to exist in the present as well as in the past are described, the verbs (indicated by italics and underlining) incorrectly appear in the present tense.

Adoption of the wrong point of view is also the source of the error in Example 35, taken from a very advanced Indonesian student's paper.

35. [Opening line of an article review] The writer *was* of the opinion that the first thought of many language educators . . .

The student mistakenly describes the writer's opinion in terms of the time that it was expressed in writing, that is, the past. He failed to realize that an opinion held in the past may still be described in the present if expressed in an existing work with current relevance for the reader and if the information belongs to the foreground.

The analysis presented in this article is not intended to account for all instances of past tense errors in interlanguage. For example, Godfrey (1980) proposes other discourse factors which can affect tense use, including distraction from maintenance of past tense continuity by extralinguistic details at episode boundaries as well as the intrusion of forms not related to the main topic continuity. In another discourse-based study, Kumpf (1984) examined the interlanguage of an individual speaker who had not had formal instruction in English. She concluded that tenses in general and the

<sup>9</sup> I am grateful to Jan Edwards for supplying me with this writing sample.

past tense in particular were generally omitted in references to completed actions in the foreground but were virtually always used for states and inconsistently used for noncompleted actions in the background.

My conclusions appear to be inconsistent with hers in that I have found that the past tense is used in some interlanguage for completed actions but not for states and actions with both present and past time reference. However, Kumpf does not claim that other speakers have the same interlanguage system as that of her subject. More important, our analyses agree in finding the aspectual contrast between completed and noncompleted actions relevant to the analysis of interlanguage, both analyses providing some support for the claim that tense as a category is universally secondary to aspect. In addition, both analyses point to a relationship between backgrounding and tense selection, although in different ways and in different language systems.

Finally, I agree with Wolfram (1985) that surface-level constraints such as the form of the past tense marking, phonological environment, and verb frequency play the primary role in determining the incidence of past tense use by many ESL learners.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

Various teaching activities can be used for both discovery and practice purposes. Most important, the past and present tenses must be discussed in context, using excerpts from novels, stories, newspaper articles, academic prose, transcribed natural conversation, television dialogue, and so on. Brief notices about recent research in magazines such as *Psychology Today* are good sources of examples of academic prose which can easily be presented to students in their entirety and which are of common interest. The newspaper, especially the school paper, is also an excellent source of examples, one which helps students to see that the distinctions being taught are part of everyday usage and are not grammatical oddities. Also, the subject matter is often of personal interest to them.

Rather than presenting ready-made explanations to the students, one approach the instructor can take is to provide them with examples first and then ask them to formulate their own hypotheses. This encourages active analysis by the students of real language input and prepares them for a more complete explanation by the teacher.

The instructor can also offer explanations in terms of individual students' experiences. For example, an instructor might say:

36. "Mohammed, remember how when you first came to the U.S. you didn't want to eat hamburgers? In telling us about that experience, you could say, 'When I first came to the U.S. I didn't know that hamburgers were made from beef, not ham.' "

Exercises can be prepared from excerpts collected by the instructor, with the present and past tense verbs from the original given only in the bare infinitive form. The students then change to the appropriate tense, based on the preceding and following discourse. Example 37 is drawn from the opening paragraph of an Agatha Christie novel (1934).

37. Mr. Satterthwaite sat on the terrace of Crow's Nest and watched his host, Sir Charles Cartwright, climbing up the path from the sea. Crow's Nest \_\_\_\_\_(be) a modern bungalow of the better type. It \_\_\_\_\_(have) no half-timbering, no gables, no excrescences dear to many a builder's heart. It \_\_\_\_\_(be) a plain, white, solid building, deceptive as to size, since it \_\_\_\_\_(be) a good deal bigger than it \_\_\_\_\_(look). It \_\_\_\_\_(owe) its name to its position, high up, overlooking the harbor of Loomouth. Indeed, from one corner of the terrace, protected by a strong balustrade, there \_\_\_\_\_(be) a sheer drop to the sea below. By road, Crow's Nest \_\_\_\_\_(be) a mile from the town. The road \_\_\_\_\_(run) inland and then \_\_\_\_\_(zigzag) high up above the sea. (p. 5)

In this exercise, all blanks require the past tense. Although there is no tense contrast, it is a useful exercise in that students generally expect the present tense in such contexts. In addition, the exercise stresses the relationship between tense choice and maintenance of point of view. Other exercises can be devised in which the past and present tenses contrast. When students do not choose the tense of the original, it should be made clear whether their choice is impossible, and on what grounds, or whether it is a possible alternative description but changes the point of view or adds or subtracts connotations.

Students themselves can also be asked to collect examples in context from speech or writing and to explain why the past or present tense was used in each case, perhaps coding their answers to generalizations presented by the instructor on a handout. This helps to build monitoring and analytical skills which enable learning beyond the classroom walls. Students can even be asked to prepare exercises based on these examples for each other. This helps them to



solidify their understanding of the tenses and can heighten their interest.

Mini-dialogues with blanks for the relevant tenses can be composed by the instructor, with space provided for the students to give brief reasons for their choice of tense. Examples 38 and 39, which require the student to use a form of *be* in each blank, are typical of such exercises.

38. a. Mary: Did you see *Passage to India* when it \_\_\_\_\_ in town?  
b. Bob: No, \_\_\_\_\_ it any good?  
c. Mary: Yes, it \_\_\_\_\_ fantastic. It's too bad you didn't get to see it.
39. Anne to Kathy: You really should go to see *Passage to India* before it leaves town. It \_\_\_\_\_ a great movie.

For oral or written practice of the noncomplete past, students can be asked to describe situations which would naturally call for this sense. For instance, they might describe a former teacher presumed still to be living but not encountered since the fifth grade, reactions to the scenery at a particular place visited 5 years ago, feelings during a moment of danger and how the surroundings looked at that moment, a former home not seen in some time, and so on. Examples 40 (by an Arabic speaker) and 41 (by an Indonesian speaker) are descriptions written by my students.

40. When I was a child, my father and my mother decided to visit my uncle in Egypt. . . . We started our trip in the morning. . . . We reached my uncle's house in the evening on the same day. . . .  
On the next day my cousin and I went to the pyramids. They *were* very nice. By the way, I had never seen the pyramids before that day.
41. When I was a child, I lived in a small village, in the area of South of Sumatra; it *was* called Campang Tiga. In this village I went to elementary school when I was seven years old. . . . While I studied at this school, I had a teacher who *was* called Mr. Mohammed. He *looked* horrible and *was* very dogmatic in his opinions. He *had* a loud voice.

The noncomplete and complete pasts can also be illustrated and/or practiced in the context of a role play in which, for example, one student takes the part of a police officer questioning another representing a mugging victim. The latter describes the events and the mugger's appearance from a past point of view. A third student then issues a police bulletin, describing the clothing and other temporary characteristics of the suspect in the past tense and

permanent characteristics such as height in the present. The students can perform this spontaneously or prepare the dialogue beforehand. In the former case, the instructor can give the students feedback on their use of the tenses via hand signals. A sample role play, with minor variations in parentheses, is given in Example 42.

42. Mugger: Give me your purse (wallet).

Victim: [Hands over purse. After mugger leaves, runs to phone and calls police.]

Police: Muncie Police Station. Can I help you?

Victim: Yes, I just got mugged. He (She) took my purse.

Police: OK, Ma'am (Sir). Where and when did this take place?

Victim: A few minutes ago, on the corner of Vine and 8th.

Police: Did you see what the mugger looked like?

Victim: Yes. He (She) was tall, had brown hair, and was wearing jeans and a red shirt. He (She) had a gun.

Police: OK, Ma'am (Sir), we'll get right on it.

.....

Police Dispatcher: [Making announcement to police cars via radio]  
The suspect is male (female), tall, has brown hair, and was last seen wearing jeans and a red shirt and carrying a gun.

Obviously the situation (and its language) are not realistic in all details, but it dramatically illustrates the use of the past tense in addition to offering an opportunity for practice once the generalizations have been presented.

This situation may be contrasted with another scenario in which the victim can still see the mugger down the block but must describe the mugger to someone who is helping him or her so that the suspect can be picked out from other people on the street. In this case, the victim's initial description of the mugger will be in the present tense.

Another possible role-play situation consists of two people riding in a bus or car and commenting on what they see, as in Example 43.

43. A: Did you see that house we just passed?

B: No. What about it?

A: It *had* a green and orange roof.

It is also helpful to devise as many real situations in the classroom as possible to illustrate and practice the noncompletive past. For example, the instructor can arrange for someone unknown to the

students to come into the class to give him or her a message. After that person leaves, the instructor elicits from the class details about the person's appearance, clothing, and so on in the noncompletive past by saying, "Did you notice that woman who was just in here? Describe her to me." The instructor can ask questions such as "What was she wearing?" "What color was her hair?" and so on, if necessary. The contrasting use of the present tense can be illustrated and/or practiced by having someone the students know come into the class and by later asking them, for example, "What is Mary wearing today?"

The instructor can also start a conversation with students about their studies, native customs, or past experiences and at various points animatedly exclaim, for example, "I didn't know you and Keiko *were* in the same chemistry lab!" or "I didn't realize that the Vietnamese *ate* curries!"

Communicative and contextually based exercises such as these are of great help in raising students' awareness of the past tense as it is actually used in discourse and may contribute to greater consistency in their use of the past tense.



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article, the writing of which was partially supported by funds from the Office of the Provost, Ball State University, is partly based on my 1978 Ph.D. dissertation, *Sequence of Tenses in English*, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. Earlier versions were read at the INTESOL Conference, Bloomington, November 1984, and at the TESOL Convention, New York, April 1985. I am grateful to the reviewers and to Christopher Ely, Herbert Stahlke, and especially Paul Neubauer for their helpful comments and discussion.

## THE AUTHOR

Elizabeth Riddle is an Assistant Professor of English at Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana, where she teaches linguistics, ESL, and TESL methods. She has also taught in Poland as a Fulbright lecturer. Her primary areas of research are pragmatics and functional grammar.

## REFERENCES

- Ard, J. (1984, March). *The semantics of tense and aspect in written scientific discourse*. Paper presented at the 18th Annual TESOL Convention, Houston.
- Aristar, A., & Dry, H. (1982). The origin of backgrounding tenses in English. In K. Tuite, R. Schneider, & R. Chametzky (Eds.), *Papers from the eighteenth regional meeting—Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 1-13). Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Aronson, T. (1984). *English grammar digest*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Azar, B. S. (1985). *Fundamentals of English grammar*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Ben-Amos, D. (1981). *Folklore genres*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Celce-Murcia, M., & Larsen-Freeman, D. (1983). *The grammar book—An ESL/EFL teacher's course*. Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Chang, Y.-W. (1981). *A contextual analysis of tense shifts in reported speech*. Unpublished English 215 paper, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Christie, A. (1934). *Murder in three acts*. New York: Popular Library.
- Christie, A. (1968). *At Bertram's Hotel*. Glasgow: Fontana/Collins.
- Costa, R. (1972). Sequence of tenses in that-clauses. In P. Peranteau, J. N. Levi, & G. C. Phares (Eds.), *Papers from the eighth regional meeting—Chicago Linguistic Society* (pp. 41-51). Chicago: Chicago Linguistic Society.
- Eigen, M., & Winkler, R. (1981). *Laws of the game: How the principles of nature govern chance* (R. & R. Kimber, Trans.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Frank, M. (1972). *Modern English (exercises for non-native speakers), Part II*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Godfrey, D.L. (1980). A discourse analysis of tense in adult ESL monologues. In D. Larsen-Freeman (Ed.), *Discourse analysis in second language research* (pp. 92-100). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Grice, H.P. (1975). Logic and conversation. In P. Cole & J.L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts* (pp. 41-58). New York: Academic Press.
- Johnson-Laird, P.N., & Wason, P.C. (Eds.). (1977). *Thinking: Readings in cognitive science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kumpf, L. (1984). Temporal systems and universality in interlanguage: A case study. In F.R. Eckman, L.H. Bell, & D. Nelson (Eds.), *Universals of second language acquisition* (pp. 132-143). Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
- Lakoff, R. (1970). Tense and its relation to participants. *Language*, 46, 838-849.
- McGilvray, J. (1974a). *A proposal for the semantics of tenses in English*. Unpublished manuscript, McGill University, Montreal.

- McGilvray, J. (1974b). *Tenses and beliefs*. Unpublished manuscript, McGill University, Montreal.
- Phillips, B. (1984). Word frequency and the actuation of sound change. *Language*, 60, 320-342.
- Postal, P.M. (1972). The best theory. In S. Peters (Ed.), *Goals of linguistic theory* (pp. 131-170). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Reichenbach, H. (1947). *Elements of symbolic logic*. New York: Macmillan.
- Riddle, E. (1978). *Sequence of tenses in English*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.
- Sadock, J.M. (1978). On testing for conversational implicature. In P. Cole (Ed.), *Syntax and semantics 9: Pragmatics* (pp. 281-297). New York: Academic Press.
- Schiffrin, D. (1981). Tense variation in narrative. *Language*, 57, 45-62.
- Svartvik, J., & Quirk, R. (Eds.). (1980). *A corpus of English conversation*. Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup.
- Tannen, D. (1979). What's in a frame? In R.O. Freedle (Ed.), *New directions in discourse processing* (pp. 137-181). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Wallace, S. (1982). Figure and ground: The interrelationships of linguistic categories. In P.J. Hopper (Ed.), *Tense-aspect: Between semantics and pragmatics* (pp. 201-223). Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Wentworth, P. (1965). *The gazebo*. Harmondsworth, England: Penguin Books.
- Wolfram, W. (1985). Variability in tense marking: A case for the obvious. *Language Learning*, 35, 229-253.
- Wolfson, N. (1979). The conversational historical present alteration. *Language*, 55, 168-182.