

Teaching The Expression Of Time A Concise Framework*

Costas Gabrielatos

Lancaster University

c.gabrielatos@lancaster.ac.uk

www.gabrielatos.com

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, Past) and two grammatical aspects (Perfect, 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).

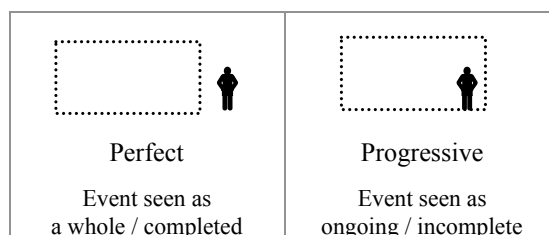


Diagram 1. Visualisation of Aspect.

* This is a summary of a paper/workshop given at the 37th IATEFL International Annual Conference, Brighton, UK, 22-26 April, 2003, and at the meeting of the *Second Language Acquisition Research Group*, Department of Linguistics and Modern English Language, Lancaster University, UK, 1 July 2003. Earlier versions of this framework were presented at the TESOL Greece Mini Convention, 31 October 1999 and the 23rd Annual TESOL Greece Convention, 9-10 March 2002. The summary was originally published in Pulverness, A. (ed.) 2004. *IATEFL 2003 Brighton Conference Selections*. Canterbury, Kent: IATEFL, 133-136. The two appendices (not published in the conference selections) contain the workshop tasks and sources.

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’.

		<i>A</i>	<i>S</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>C</i>	<i>T</i>
		<i>None</i>	<i>Perfect</i>		<i>Progressive</i>		<i>Both</i>
T E N S E	Present	Present <i>Simple</i>	Present <i>Perfect</i>		Present <i>Progressive</i>		Present <i>Perfect Progressive</i>
	Past	Past <i>Simple</i>	Past <i>Perfect</i>		Past <i>Progressive</i>		Past <i>Perfect Progressive</i>

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		<i>be, like, live</i>
DYNAMIC	Punctual	<i>hit, kick, punch</i>
	Durative	<i>learn, walk, write</i>

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

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).

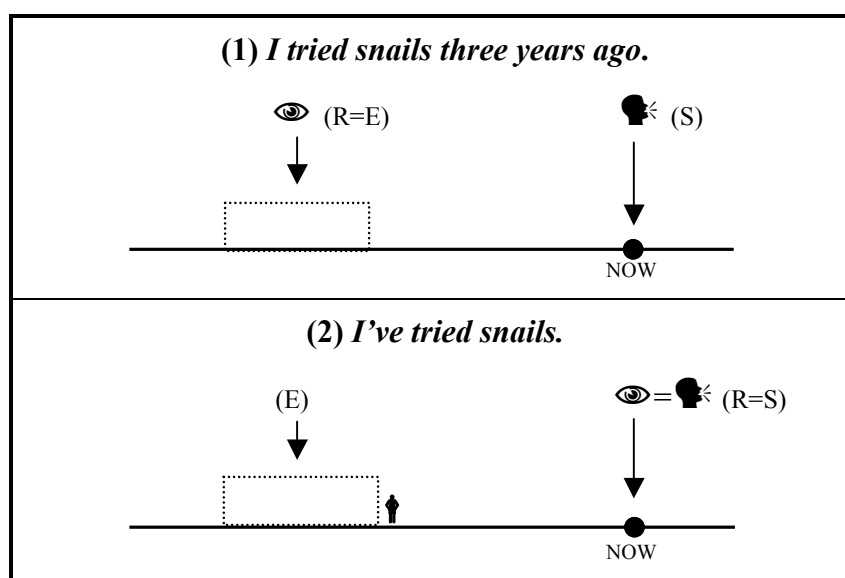


Diagram 2. The framework in use.

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 ($R=S$).

Appendix 1. Workshop tasks

Note: Examples followed by a reference code in square brackets (e.g. [A5R 019]) are from the [British National Corpus](#).

1 The following utterance is given in a coursebook as a typical example of wrong tense use. What do you think?

- *Look! It snows!*

2 What is the effect of changing the verbs in **bold** from the **Present** into the **Past** tense?

- Dr [name] from [university], who **is working** on LEP, said: "Everyone is overjoyed. We got what we wanted. This is proof of the Standard Model." [A5R 019]*
- Can** you do me a favour? [H8M 404]*
- But daddy's **having** lunch at work, aren't you daddy? [KBW 10833]*
- If they **win** on Saturday it may be the freedom of the town. [A90 33]*

3 What is the effect of adding the **Perfect** aspect to the verb in **bold**?

- We already support over 70 children who belong to the families we **visit**. [A02 141]*
- Conservationists **are visiting** thirty key sites all over the country to monitor populations of our rarest butterflies. [K1V 2439]*
- He **visited** his mother, staying the night of 24 May with her, before meeting on 25 and 26 May with [NAME], the Foreign Secretary. [A59 453]*
- The house he lived in was at the end. His flat was on the top floor. Underneath was a dentist and on the ground floor an estate agent. They had arranged between themselves that if by chance Miriam was seen entering the house by day, she could always pretend she **was visiting** the dentist. [B1X 3575]*
- The result is that a student **may answer** half the paper in a manner worthy of a Law Lord, and yet obtain a third class because he has not answered the other half. [FRA 964]**

4 What is the effect of adding the **Progressive** aspect to the verbs in **bold**?

- a. *The interviewer who changes questions, who adds bits to questions, who generally messes about with the schedule, **is not clever**, he/she **is** a bad fieldworker.* [B25 1415]*
- b. *The 76-year-old Euro-MP, who currently **lives** in West Germany, said he would of course not rule out a run some time in the future but for the moment he feels he can do more to promote his country in the European parliament.* [A2X 240]
- c. *People always **ask** me why I dress strangely, or **say**, "What does your mother think of your outfits?"* [ADG 849]*
- d. *Your family **has lived** there for ... goodness knows how long.* [ANL 3728]
- e. *The helicopter **fell** like a stone.* [CAU 1714]*
- f. *When the company **reached** the point where it couldn't meet its liabilities I was called in to wind the business up.* [K4Y 516]
- g. *The bread dough **started** to rise before its time, so Minnie jumped up and tackled the job in hand.* [FS9 1953]*
- h. *"He's got a dog," said Philip. "I know," said Mrs Wright. "I heard it. It was locked up somewhere round at the back. It **barked** when I drove in."* [ABX 1308]
- i. *My memory gets very vague here. It's like bits of a film -- I have only fragments, each image a few seconds long. I know that he **kicked** and **punched** me....* [ADG 1142]
- j. *Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating the 200 people who **will sleep** out in Glasgow on Friday night to highlight the plight of the homeless?* [HHX 3745]*
- k. *I know that the RSPCA **will campaign** vigorously to get this through Parliament.* [KRT 1288]*
- l. *It warns that pollutants in the water **may cause** insidious neurological damage in children, and infertility in adults.* [J30 515]*
- m. *Some men and women **may acquire** their foundation skills in their 30s, others discovering what a general education can be in their retirement.* [FA3 367]*

5 What is the effect of changing the aspect from **Progressive** into the **Perfect**?

- a. *We emptied it of all the old toys and the doll's house and the books, and Kitty's **decorating** it to look like a jungle.* [FA5 608]
- b. *[NAME], of High Gill Road, Nunthorpe, **was visiting** her grandfather when she was hit by a Mercedes car last week on the A283 at Upper Beeding.* [K4W 6973]

- 6** For each time-concept below decide if it is expressed by *tense*, *grammatical aspect*, *lexical aspect* or a combination and tick [✓] the appropriate box(es).

	Time Concept	Tense	Grammatical Aspect	Lexical Aspect
1	Timeless			
2	Present habit			
3	Past habit			
4	Specific past time-point			
5	Specific past period			
6	The future from the present			
7	The future from the past			
8	Sequence of repeated events			
9	Fixed future event			
10	Instantaneous			
11	Temporariness			
12	Duration			
13	Incompleteness			
14	Recency			
15	In progress			
16	Earlier-in-the-past			
17	Present result of past event			
18	Events in a period up to the present			
19	State up to the present			
20	Habit in a period up to the present			

- 7** For the following sentences

- Expand on the contextual elements given.
- Prepare explanations and/or guidance questions for learners.
- Draw time lines.

1a. <i>I was having lunch when they arrived.</i>	1b. <i>I had lunch when they arrived.</i>
2a. <i>I have tried to find a job.</i>	2b. <i>I have been trying to find a job.</i>
(Context: In both sentences the same person is talking about the same experience.)	
3a. <i>I've done some shopping already.</i>	3b. <i>I did some shopping this morning.</i>
(Context: In both sentences the speaker is talking about the same past event and does know when the shopping was done.)	
4a. <i>And now I dip the biscuit in the melted chocolate</i>	4b. <i>And now I'm dipping the biscuit in the melted chocolate.</i>
(Context: Both sentences describe the same event.)	
5a. <i>She checked the door and left.</i>	5b. <i>She left (only) after she had checked the door.</i>
(Context: Both sentences describe the same event.)	
6a. <i>I wrote three letters this morning.</i>	6b. <i>I have written three letters this morning.</i>
(Context: In both cases the time of speech is 11am on the day and the writing lasted for an hour.)	

Appendix 2. Sources

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