

On the Practicality of Using Formal and Semantic Matrixes in Teaching English Tenses

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Received 24 December 2017 Accepted 1 June 2018

Abstract

Starting from the idea that English tenses share a mathematical formal matrix, the present paper aims at demonstrating that the various uses and meanings of English tenses may be taught more easily when the formal matrix is combined with the semantic one. Special attention will be devoted to the moods and tenses which support the aim of this paper.

Keywords: *Repeatedness, Development, Duration, Temporariness, Modality*

Introduction

Many of the people studying English as a foreign language, whether young learners, teenagers or adults, consider that understanding and correctly using English tenses represents one of the most difficult tasks that non-native speakers of English have to cope with. In the first stages of the learning process, the problems regarding the correct use of English tenses are due to the formal restrictions that learners have to bear in mind when building the verb phrase. Later on, the learners' problems regarding the correct use of tenses envisage a series of complex semantic aspects which originate in the various possible combinations of the tense and aspect markers in English. Difficult as it might seem, this learning process can be greatly facilitated if teachers find appropriate ways of highlighting the obvious formal and semantic matrixes which exist in the English tense system. Once clearly and accessibly explained, the formal and semantic matrixes should be appropriately and extensively practiced so as to ensure the learners' logical understanding and their ability to

later adapt their tense and aspect choices to specific linguistic and communicative restrictions. Such an approach to teaching English tenses may prove very useful and it may ensure longer term results in all learners, irrespective of their age or level of linguistic competence. This is due to the fact that

*[t]here is a **matrix** in any language and [...] human beings tend to set their brains so as to identify and memorize useful linguistic patterns in order to make minimum efforts in communication. Once speakers identify patterns, they can go to the next level of abstraction, that which implies establishing points of symmetry between the various assimilated patterns. The result of this complex process will be a **linguistic matrix** easily accessible and ready to be used when necessary. Speakers using the matrix of a language will understand the way that language functions considerably faster and better than those ignoring it.” (Mardar, 2008: 175)*

Method

Starting from a description of possible approaches to teaching English tenses, the present section of the paper will select relevant aspects to be taken into account for the formal and semantic matrixes to be suggested in teaching English tenses.

The various approaches to teaching English tenses have generally been divided into two main trends, namely traditional and modern. Traditional approaches to teaching English tenses are known to focus on rules and regulations explaining how verbs are formed and when they are used. To put it differently, such approaches usually separate formal and semantic aspects, the grammatical and semantic values of tenses being presented in a rather linear manner. Comparative – contrastive approaches to the simple and the progressive aspects of the same tense are common in traditional teaching, but parallels are not always possible, and in such cases the grammatical and semantic values which cannot be compared or contrasted have to be merely listed and memorized by learners. More recent approaches to teaching English tenses, i.e. modern approaches, focus on the language function to be performed by speakers and suggest various “grammatical guises” or “structural encodings” which may be used in order to convey a certain language function (Vizental, 2007: 210). In other words, modern approaches to teaching English tenses take into account possible groupings of verb tenses (sometimes by combining the simple and the progressive aspects) and of verb forms, according to the language function which learners might need to express in a certain communicative situation. Moreover, a series of modern approaches to teaching English tenses use the notions of tense and aspect as a starting point for further discussions on the grammatical behaviour of specific classes of verbs (e.g. verbs of mental activity, verbs of perception, verbs of feelings and emotions, verbs of likes and dislikes, dynamic vs. static verbs, time-point verbs vs. durative verbs). Although interesting, such approaches seem to be tailored for specialists in the field and researchers, having only limited practicality for the non-specialist learners of English. That is why a logical grouping and presentation of the formal and semantic matrixes characterizing English tenses might prove very useful for the common learners of English of all ages and all levels of linguistic competence.

The existence of a formal matrix which could be used in teaching English tenses is not new. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) use the term ‘matrix’ in explaining English tenses and they point out that “[...] *the tense-aspect combinations demonstrate that “tenses” are simply combinations of tense and aspect*”. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 111) In order to prove the validity of their opinion, the two authors suggest a table which combines the three main temporal coordinates, i.e. present, past and future with the four types of aspect identified, i.e. simple, perfect, progressive and perfect progressive.

	Simple 0	Perfect have + -en	Progressive be + -ing	Perfect Progressive have + -en + be + -ing
Present	write/writes	have/has written	am/is/are writing	have/has been writing
Past	wrote	had written	was/were writing	had been writing
Future	will write	will have written	will be writing	will have been writing

Table 1 (Source Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman 1999: 111)

Although such a formal matrix might be less accessible to certain learners depending on their age and/or linguistic competence, once understood it is likely to facilitate their learning of English tenses. The same idea is emphasized by Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) when they state that by “*viewing the tenses and aspects as a system, the learning burden is lessened.*” (id. *ibid.*)

A similar formal matrix of English tenses is suggested by Mardar (2008) who presents the same grammatical information in a more mathematical manner:

<i>Present Simple</i> V1	<i>Past Simple</i> V2	<i>Future Simple</i> will + V1
<i>Present Continuous</i> be1 + V-ing	<i>Past Continuous</i> be2 + V-ing	<i>Future Continuous</i> will + be1 + V-ing
<i>Present Perfect Simple</i> have1+ V3	<i>Past Perfect Simple</i> have2 + V3	<i>Future Perfect Simple</i> will + have1 + V3
<i>Present Perfect Continuous</i> have1 + be3 + V-ing	<i>Past Perfect Continuous</i> have2 + be3 + V-ing	<i>Future Perfect Continuous</i> will + have1 + be3 + V-ing

Table 3 (Source Mardar, 2008: 176, adapted)

Referring to teaching English tenses, Mardar (2008) states that this activity implies taking into account

“two golden rules: 1. tense and aspect are marked only once in the form of the verb, giving the name of the tense used, and 2. the first verb in the sentence is always the first served”. In other words, “*students should know that the auxiliary verbs will be used only once and will combine with a specific form of the main verb in order to make up the predicate and that auxiliary verbs which come first in the form of the verb, will take over all the information regarding the verb categories, the main verb making reference only to the action or state of affairs described*” (Mardar, 2008: 178).

Once made aware of the formal matrix of the English tenses, learners will easily and correctly form any tense by simply looking at the name of the tense envisaged.

Lewis (2002) approaches the formal matrix of the English tenses, without specifically calling it as such, when he makes a summary of the basic verb forms in English. He combines formal aspects with elements which should be integrated in the semantic matrix of English tenses and this is clearly illustrated by his statement that: *“basic semantic features of the verb are characterized by particular elements in their form. Each structural element always contributes the same element to the meaning of the total form. Each of these forms is made using an auxiliary (Lewis, 2002: 137).* In order to support his opinion, Lewis (2002) explains that speakers *“may draw particular attention to the fixed or limited duration of an event by using a form containing (be) + ... ing”.* Moreover, they *“can look back in time by using a form characterized by (have) + third form”* (Lewis, 2002: 137-138). Elements of personal judgment or non-temporal features of an action or event may be expressed by using modal auxiliaries, each of these verbs having easily traceable semantic features.

At this point mention should be made that the various types of formal matrixes identified by specialists in the field are undoubtedly useful in teaching, but many of them limit the formal matrix to the tenses of the indicative mood, without demonstrating that some aspects may be transferred to the tenses of the conditional, subjunctive and infinitive.

As far as the semantic matrix of English tenses is concerned, some grammars attempt to group the meanings of English tenses according to the grammatical behaviour of certain classes of verbs (e.g. verbs of mental activity, verbs of perception, verbs of likes and dislikes, state verbs, dynamic vs. static verbs, time-point verbs vs. durative verbs), but without considering a parallel to be drawn between different tenses and different moods. Such an approach may prove useful especially with adult learners of English who are able to draw parallels between grammatical use and real life situations. Some teenagers might also grasp differences of meaning between the use of the same verb(s) in the simple and the continuous aspect of a given tense, but most of them are likely to memorize grammatical rules or specific examples without necessarily noticing the same semantic nuance(s) in similar linguistic or communicative contexts.

The formal and semantic matrixes discussed in the present paper may prove useful in teaching English tenses, but, the obvious limitations regarding the formal and semantic aspects approached and the age groups of learners envisaged, require that a new, combined matrix be suggested. This new matrix should include further comparative approaches to the tenses of the conditional, subjunctive and infinitive and an adaptation of the matrix to all age groups and to all levels of linguistic competence. Consequently, the formal and semantic matrixes combined should include common aspects related to verb forms, to verb uses and meanings and to their grouping according to various language functions, a grouping of tenses according to the three time coordinates: present, past and future with reference to both finite and non-finite forms and, whenever relevant, information about the grammatical behaviour of certain classes of verbs.

The aspects suggested to be taken into account for the formal matrix of English tenses focus on the restrictions imposed by the English auxiliary verbs (be, have, do, will, would) on the main verbs and on the fact that they are formal marks of a tense or aspect category.

The auxiliary verb *to be*, for instance, is a mark of the continuous aspect and of the passive voice in English, which means that this verb is used with all the tenses in the continuous aspect and is always present in when the passive voice is used. Being an auxiliary, all the changes in terms of voice, mood, tense, person and number are visible in the verb *to be*. As far as the restrictions imposed by this verb are concerned, *to be* always requires the present participle of the main verb for the continuous aspect and the third form of the verb for the passive voice (e.g. *I am reading a book now. He was playing tennis this time yesterday. Jack would be sleeping instead of working. He may be sleeping right now, so call him later. The dictionary will be sold in all bookshops.*).

Similarly, the auxiliary verb *to have* is a mark of the perfect aspect in English which means that it is used with all perfect tenses. The changes in terms of voice, mood, tense, person and number are visible in the auxiliary *to have* and formally, this verb always requires the past participle of the main verb. (e.g. *I have read many books for the literature exam. I had solved all the problems before he came back from work. He must have known the truth about this situation. I remember having talked to him some time ago.*) .

The marks of the continuous and perfect aspects combine, the result being a series of perfect continuous tenses: e.g. *He has been reading for two hours. They had been sleeping for four hours when the phone rang. I will have been driving for three hours by the time we get there. She would have been trying harder before giving up.*

As far as the auxiliary verb *to do* (the dummy auxiliary) **is** concerned, it is used to form present simple and past simple (the only grammatical tenses proper) and, formally, it always requires the short infinitive of the main verb (e.g. *Does she always carry such heavy bags?; I did not buy the ingredients for making his favourite cake.*)

Last, but not least, the auxiliaries *will* and *would* are used with all future tenses, and with the future-in-the past and conditional tenses, respectively. These auxiliaries combine with *to be* and *to have* to mark the continuous and /or the perfective aspect(s) of the tenses they form. (e.g. *They will be running in the park this time tomorrow afternoon. We would be watching TV right now, but we are too busy. I will have bought that lovely dress by the end of next week. I would have gone to Paris by plane last week, but the ticket was too expensive.*)

Moving from the formal matrix to the semantic one, mention should be made that the **simple** aspect of a verb is commonly used in English when speakers want to express repeated or habitual actions, associated with neutrality or permanent situations.

The use of the simple aspect to express repeated actions marked by the speakers' neutrality may be illustrated examples such as: *He always helps his friends.* (repeated action in the present + neutrality); *He always helped his friends when he was a teenager.* (repeated action in a past completed interval of time + neutrality); *He has always helped his friends.* (repeated action from

an indefinite past moment till now + neutrality); *He **had** always **helped** his friends before he moved to Bucharest.* (repeated action from an indefinite earlier past till then + neutrality).

As far as the use of the simple aspect of a tense to make reference to permanent situations is concerned, examples such as: *I **work** for a local company and I am happy with my job.* (permanent job at present) or *I **lived** with my parents when I was a child.* (permanent residence within a past completed interval of time) are relevant in this respect.

Furthermore, speakers of English select the **continuous/ progressive** when they want to express actions in full progress and incomplete, durative actions, temporary actions/situations, changing situations or repeated actions associated with modality.

The first and most common use of the continuous aspect to mark actions in progress and incomplete is obvious in examples such as: *I **am reading** a book now.* (action which is in progress at the moment of speaking); *He **was playing** tennis this time yesterday.* (action which was in progress at a given moment in the past); *They **will be running** in the park this time tomorrow afternoon.* (action which will be in progress at a given moment in the future); *We **would be watching** TV right now, but we are too busy.* (action which the speaker would like to be in progress at the moment of speaking); *I wish he **were not repairing** his car now.* (wish for an action not to be in progress at present- contrary to what is happening now); *He **may be sleeping** right now, so call him later.* (action which is possibly in progress at the moment of speaking).

The frequent association of the continuous aspect with durative actions may be illustrated by examples such as: *He **was working** all day long yesterday. I **have been reading** for three hours. She has been talking on the phone all morning. Those kids **would be playing** all day long. If only he **were not spending** so much time playing computer games. You **must have been sleeping** the whole afternoon if you had no time to call me.* Mention should be made that the durative nature of the actions expressed by the main verb is doubled by temporal indicators which make direct reference to a longer interval of time (e.g. *for, all or whole, since last Monday*).

Furthermore, if reference is made to the selection of the continuous aspect for temporary situations/ behaviour, examples such as: *I **am working** for a local NGO this month.* (temporary job within a present limited interval of time); *He **was living** with my grandparents those days and I was very happy.* (temporary residence within a past completed interval of time) clearly illustrate the idea of temporariness and exception from the normal or repeated situation.

The continuous aspect of a tense is also commonly associated with changing situations: *She **is getting** thinner and thinner.* (changing situation in the present); *When I met her, things **were changing** for the better.* (changing situation in the present); *Looking at the sky, I think it may be starting to snow.* (possibility for a situation to change at present/future).

Last, but not least, the continuous aspect of a tense may be used in English if speakers want to express a certain attitude, positive or negative, towards a repeated action. For this common meaning of the continuous aspect the following examples may be taken into account: *He **is always helping** his friends.* (repeated action in the present+ admiration); *He **was always helping** his friends when he was a teenager.* (repeated action in a past completed interval of time + admiration); *He **has always been helping** his friends.* (repeated action from an indefinite past till

now + admiration); *He **had** always **been helping** his friends before he moved to Bucharest.* (repeated action from an indefinite earlier past till then+ admiration). Standing in the same line of modality, the continuous aspect may be used to express politeness and tentativeness on the part of the speaker: e.g. *I **was wondering** if you could join us for dinner.* (polite and tentative invitation); *Jane was hoping you could lend her some money.* (polite and tentative request).

The **perfect** aspect of a tense is common among speakers of English when reference is made to a past event or situation or when emphasis is laid on the completion of an action: e.g. *I **have read** this novel so I can easily write an essay about it.* (action completed in the past + present result); *I **had solved** all the problems before he came back from work.* (action completed in an earlier past + past result); *I **will have bought** that lovely dress by the end of next week.* (action which will be completed in before a future interval); *I **would have gone** to Paris by plane last week, but the ticket was too expensive.* (action which the speaker would have liked to complete in the past); *I would rather you had not told her the whole truth.* (regret about a past completed action which cannot be changed); *He must **have sold** the car when I called him.* (action probably completed in the past).

A semantic matrix of the English tenses may also be created and used for those classes of verbs which are characterized by a special grammatical behaviour, namely: verbs of mental activity (e.g. *to think, to believe, to consider, to expect, to guess, to forget, to remember, to know, to understand,* etc.), verbs of perception (e.g. *to see, to hear, to feel, to smell, to taste*), verbs of likes and dislikes and verbs of feelings and emotions: (e.g. *to love, to like, to dislike, to hate, to want, to wish, to prefer, to hope,* etc.), dynamic (*to play, to run,* etc.) vs. static verbs (*to be, to belong, to matter,* etc.), time-point verbs (*to start, to begin, to stop,* etc.) vs. durative verbs (*to gaze, to stare, to sleep, to talk,* etc.).

Verbs of mental activity, of perception, of feelings and emotions and of likes and dislikes, together with static and time-point verbs are generally used in the simple aspect of the various tenses required in a context. On the other hand, dynamic and durative verbs are traditionally associated with the continuous aspect of various tenses due to the fact that they semantically express actions which imply progress and duration.

Nevertheless, with such classes of verbs, there are exceptions regarding their use in the continuous and simple aspect, respectively. Verbs normally associated with the simple aspect are used in the continuous if a change of meaning is envisaged (see verbs such as *think, expect, see, hear*), if the speakers want to make their statement more emphatic and more expressive (e.g. *I am loving that boy* - to be crazy about sb.), if temporariness needs to be pointed out (e.g. *He is being so selfish these days and I cannot understand why. He is not usually like this.*), or if a changing situation needs to be pointed out (*Look outside the window! It is starting to snow*). As regards the verbs traditionally used in the continuous, they are likely to take the simple aspect if their durative or the dynamic character is not contextually relevant: e.g. *He gazes at her every time they meet.* (repeatedness); *Mary runs a lot and eats healthy food* (habit).

A last aspect worth mentioning is the fact that the formal and semantic matrixes suggested in this paper may be combined if teachers consider a modern approach to teaching English tenses.

For instance, students may be explained that requests are expressed by combining the markers of tense and aspect in various ways: e.g. *Can you lend me this dictionary?* (+ possibility/permission); *Will you lend me this dictionary?* (+ willingness); *Could you lend me this dictionary?* (+ possibility/permission+ politeness/tentativeness); *Would you lend me this dictionary?* (+ willingness + politeness/tentativeness); *I was hoping you could lend me this dictionary.* (verb of feelings and emotions in the continuous + politeness/tentativeness); *I was wondering if you could lend me this dictionary.* (verb of mental activity in the continuous + politeness/tentativeness).

Discussion

After teaching English tenses to BA students specializing in English language and literature for over 14 years and practicing my teaching skills with young and teenage learners of English independently for over 18 years, I could notice that students of all ages learn English tenses more easily if they are given a logical formal and semantic pattern to be further adapted to the tenses which allow such an adaptation. An important part in the long and sometimes difficult process of learning, understanding and correctly using English tenses is played by the extensive written and oral practice by means of various types of exercises and by the constant increase in the degree of difficulty of the contexts selected by the teacher for the students' practice.

Although the aspects included in the formal and semantic matrixes suggested in the present paper might seem difficult to approach with young learners of English, some points may be easily adapted so as to ensure a good learning and use of the aspects regarding the form and basic uses of English tenses. The more abstract notions regarding the meanings of the various English tenses cannot be taught to the young learners of English, as they are not mentally able to grasp such notions. Nevertheless, such notions may be gradually introduced to teenagers by drawing parallels with real-life situations which are relevant for their age and interests. Finally, the group of adults learning English tenses may benefit from both the formal and the semantic matrix if the teacher finds the most appropriate ways to introduce and practice the aspects involved. Moreover, when it comes to adults, their ability or lack of ability to see and understand the formal and semantic matrixes behind the English tenses is an essential factor which will further condition their correct decoding and encoding of English tenses in new and unpredictable contexts.

Conclusions

All the aspects considered, the conclusion may be drawn that the practicality of the formal and semantic matrixes suggested in the present paper results from the following aspects:

- the formal matrix of English tenses may help non-native speakers of English form and use English tenses correctly and it may be adapted and used for different age groups and for different levels of language competence that learners might have;
- the semantic matrix of English tenses may be used for a logical study of the uses and meanings of different tenses when there exists a shared semantic value, the time reference and thus, the grammatical tense being the only variable; moreover, this matrix may be

used for different age groups and for different levels of language competence, depending on the complexity of the uses and meanings envisaged;

- the teacher is the key to making the formal and semantic matrixes accessible and to appropriately adapting them to the students' needs and level of competence;
- formal and semantic matrixes used appropriately in teaching English tenses may favour logical learning and long-term results.

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