TEACHING THE PAST TENSE VERBS
A NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING VERBS

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Teachers are always trying to find new and easily comprehensible ways to teach different parts of grammar. The past tense and the perfective aspect on the verb are two rather difficult areas for ESL learners all over the world. ESL learners usually try several hypotheses before they can handle the past tense confidently. Especially, the Irregular Past poses problems for learners because all sorts of irregular verbs are covered simply by one blanket term. If they could be organized in a Morphophonemic classification, to make it easier for the learners to create file/folders that they can easily accommodate them in their learning process, and if the learning load can be reduced thereby, learners can grasp and remember them better and faster. This has been tried out with many ESL learners and it has been found working very well with them.

We may now look at what happens to the verb in its four forms.

In English, majority of the verbs go through 4 forms, with an exception of modal auxiliary verbs. These forms are: 2 tense forms and 2 aspect forms. For example, look at the following table.

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Four forms	Present Tense	Past Tense	Progressive Aspect	Perfective Aspect
1	Play(s)	Played	Playing	Played
2	Work(s)	Worked	Working	Worked
3	Talk(s)	Talked	Talking	Talked
4	Go(es)	Went	Going	Gone
5	Buy(s)	Bought	Buying	Bought
6	Sleep(s)	Slept	Sleeping	Slept
7	Catch(es)	Caught	Catching	Caught
8	Write(s)	Wrote	Writing	Written
9	Forget(s)	Forgot	Forgetting?	Forgotten
10	Shake(s)	Shook	Shaking	Shaken
11	Ring(s)	Rang	Ringing	Rung
12	Come(s)	Came	Coming	Come
13	Put(s)	Put	Putting	Put
14	Hit(s)	Hit	Hitting	Hit
15	Set(s)	Set	Setting	set
16	Cast(s)	cast	casting	cast
17	Shut(s)	shut	shutting	shut
18	Be (am, is, are)	Was, were	Being	Been
19	Have (has)	Had	Having	Had
20	Do(es)	Did	Doing	Done

This table shows the four types of form-change in the English verbs.

Once we have organized verbs in their four forms, we can look at the past tense first. The verb in English behaves in four different ways in the past tense:

1. There is a **regular** past tense form: Verb+ed
2. There is an **irregular** past tense form wherein it takes any shape, which is not easily predicted.
3. There is a **vowel change** past tense form in which one vowel in the verb changes to form the past tense, while the rest of the verb shape remains the same.

4. There is a **no change** past tense form wherein the verb remains as it is.

Coming back to the table, and looking at the Past Tense column, we see that the first 3 verbs are regular past tense verbs with –ed as the past tense marker. Numbers 4,5,6, and 7 are irregular verbs and have hardly any resemblance with the original form of the verbs and therefore we say that their past form is unpredictable. Numbers 8 – 12 are verbs in which a vowel has changed in their past tense form but the rest of the shape of the verb is the same as before. Numbers 13

– 17 are verbs which do not change their shape in the past tense. The verbs Be, Have, and Do function both as main verbs and as auxiliary verbs. Here in this table, 17 – 20 we consider their past tense forms as main verbs, but those same forms also occur in their function as auxiliary verbs. Regular past tense verbs are learned relatively easily. The rule verb + ed appears to be straight to recognize compared to the irregular past tense. Therefore, if we further analyze the irregular past tense and classify irregular verbs in to unpredictable form, vowel change form, and no change form, learners can recognize similar shapes of past tense verbs in these three classes, and the processing of the irregular past tense can become easier for them.

The tenses are quite well known to all teachers. However, the term **aspect** may not be familiar to all except for those who are acquainted with TG Linguistics. Just as **the tense refers to the <u>time</u> of action, the aspect refers to the <u>state</u> of action.** It tells us whether the action is in progress or if it is completed. For the ongoing action, we use the progressive aspect, <u>verb+ing</u>, whereas for the completed action, we use the perfective aspect, <u>verb+en</u>.

The learning of progressive aspect on the verb is found to be relatively easy, in all learners, universally. This form remains constant with all the verbs. In case of the other forms, for example, the present tense, verbs add –(e)s when the subject of the sentence is Third Person Singular. We have seen the various forms of the past tense.

Now, it remains to be seen what happens to each of the 4 types of irregular verbs when they change their respective forms to become the past participle forms to be used in the perfective aspect. Each type has further systematic changes occurring in them, which can be described for the practical purposes of classification and learning. This is one of the natural ways in which our brain stores information, just as it stores it in the form of rules. In fact, classification serves as a basis to formulate rules, which show how our brain processes linguistic data. Since in language acquisition process, it serves a purpose, in language teaching too, it has to serve a purpose, namely, following the natural way how our brain functions, so that the learning load on the learner is reduced. Any organized information is processed better and faster by the human brain. Hence, looking at the past participle forms of the verbs in a new way is also helpful for ESL teachers and learners.

1. The regular past: what happens to the regular past? Happily, for the teacher and the learner, this form <u>verb+ed</u> remains the same in the PP form too. Therefore, we can make a simple generalization about it that in the past participle form it is also <u>verb+ed,</u> and then go ahead. By the way, among the 4 forms that the verbs go through in English, only the Progressive, <u>verb+ing</u> is a steady form through all the types. This is the reason, among a few others, that the learners acquire this form quite early in their language acquisition process. Hence, this is the first grammatical morpheme in the order of morpheme acquisition, both among children and adults.

2. The irregular unpredictable past: what happens to the irregular verbs? Almost anything!

(a) Some of them remain the same as in the past tense form. For example, bought, caught, taught, made, slept, brought, had, dealt, etc.

(b) Some of them change in such a way that they make prediction difficult for the new learner. The classic example is "gone". It has some similarity with the original form "go", but also has a variation of <u>v+en</u>, which is symbolic of PP. Others in this class would be verbs like did - done, bore - borne, was/were - been, etc.

3. The vowel change past: what happens to these verbs in the past participle?

Well, a lot indeed! Let us see these verbs in their PP forms.

(a) Some of them remain the same from the past to PP. For Ex. sat-sat, met-met, clung-clung, dug-dug, fought-fought, held-held, etc.

(b) Some of them change the vowel further in becoming a PP form. For example. sing-sang-sung; ring-rang-rung; swim-swam-swum; begin-began-begun, etc.

(c) Some others come back to their original shape. For ex. come-came-come; run-ran-run etc.

(d) Yet some others retain the change in the vowel but also add -en to the form. They are: forgot-forgotten, stole-stolen, spoke-spoken, bit-bitten, wove-woven, etc.

(e) Some others come back to their original vowel and add -en. They are: shake-shook-shaken, take-took-taken, eat-ate-eaten, see-saw-seen, forsake-forsook-forsaken, grow-grew-grown etc.

(f) Some of them further change the vowel and add -en. They are: write-wrote-written, hide-hid-hidden, ride-rode-ridden, smite-smote-smitten, etc.

This type of the irregular past has the maximum variations taking place in shaping the past participle.

4. The No Change past: This really does not change its form either in the past or in the past participle. They are verbs like cast, cost, burst, let, hurt and so on. But this is a very limited class.

Many may wonder if taxonomy works. We must appreciate that the ESL learner does have to take cognizance of all these variations in order to acquire them. Therefore, it is better for the adults receiving formal, classroom instruction to have a readymade inventory of these verbs to help them recognize these variations. Yes, the taxonomy awakens the learner to these possibilities, creates file/folders to sort out and process data, serves as the basis for rule formation in case it is possible, and creates an awareness regarding different forms within a category, such as vowel change for example, so that in case of a difficulty, the learner can resort to these variations. In any way, a second language learner does need to think consciously during his/her "conscious competence" phase of learning. For majority, usually, learning does not become acquisition. They remain in the "conscious competence phase" forever. The concept of linguistic fossilization (Selinker, 1972) in an ESL user, as we are aware, rests on this. For a marginal minority, although, learning does become acquisition to the extent of near native proficiency; perhaps, only in those cases that remain mentally immersed in the target language environment, and for those with the integrative motivation. For most others, there is a dependence on the random figuring out for communication.

I haven't come across this kind of detailed classification of the irregular past tense forms and the PP forms of the irregular past in my long association with English Grammar and/or Linguistics. The pronunciation of the regular past tense, with its Morphophonemic manifestations as to how the inflection –ed manifests itself [/t/ when preceded by a voiceless consonant, examples, worked, talked, watched, faced etc; /d/ when preceded by a voiced consonant, examples, gazed, robbed, clogged, turned etc.; and /id/ when preceded by either /t/ or /d/, examples, wanted, waited, created, floated, or exploded, divided, guided, surrounded etc.] in different environmental contexts has been discussed, and included in teaching of ESL. But the Irregular Verb has not been discussed in its Morphophonemic manifestations either in the past tense or in the perfective aspect. Teachers and language experts are welcome to try this out in the classroom and report how it works with their students. I have given the detailed analyses but not the method of presentation. It will be up to each teacher to choose his/her own presentation. This will require several lesson units for presentation and practice.

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