

Teaching The Present Perfect

As a non-native speaker of English, I first learned English at school. One of the problems I had was the use of the Present Perfect. From my first encounter with it until I could use it more or less confidently, it took me many years in different schools, with different teachers and in different countries. Now, as a teacher, I can observe that many of my students also struggle with the correct use of the Present Perfect even though they have some knowledge of it¹. Why is that and how can we help students? I have chosen this topic for my essay to find answers to these questions.

I will first look at the form, meaning and use and phonological issues of the present perfect. Next, I will look at general approaches in the classroom and give an overview of the problems students have with the Present Perfect and possible reasons for these. Finally, I will suggest some general and specific strategies and ideas for the classroom.

The form of the present perfect

Present Perfect Simple

Affirmative:	I/She	have/has	+	verb (3 rd form)/past participle
Negative:	I	have not	+	verb (3 rd form) /past participle
Question:	Have	you	+	verb (3 rd form) /past participle

Present Perfect Continuous (Progressive)

Affirmative:	I/She	have been/has been	+	verb (+ -ing)
Negative:	I	have not been	+	verb (+ -ing)
Question:	Have	you been	+	verb (+ -ing)

Word order: This table can be expanded to highlight the position of some of the words commonly used with the Present Perfect. (e. g. already, (not) yet, just, still; ever, never)

I/She	have/has	(already) (just)	+	done my/her homework.
I/She (still)	have/has not		+	done my/her homework (yet).

Meaning and use

The Present Perfect is not a tense but an aspect of the present tense. It has been defined by many grammarians in different ways. None of them can be disregarded if we want to explain the various aspects of the Present Perfect. Here are some of the most common definitions:

1. The Present Perfect is a “retrospective” or “achronological present tense” or a “pre-present” (Tregidgo: 1884) as in the examples “I’ve been there before.” “Have you ever climbed a mountain?”

¹ Alfred North Whitehead calls the inability to transfer or activate the “learned” into practice “The Inert Knowledge Problem”.

However, sometimes there is no “looking back” but rather a looking at the present as in “I’ve cooked a nice dinner for us.”

2. Therefore, some grammarians say, that there must be a current or present relevance. In the example stated above the cooking is as important as the fact that it is ready now.

This description also has its weaknesses as the past simple could also be used and have a present relevance as in “I was fired yesterday.”

3. The difference can be explained, however, with another theory: The Present Perfect is used when we talk about an indefinite past versus a definite past (yesterday, last year, etc.) which makes the use of the Past Simple obligatory.

4. Agnes Svalberg combines two descriptions saying that “the Present Perfect relates to an undefined time and there is a reverse time connection (Present Perfect <--- Present) (A. Svalberg, 1986: ELT 40-2-9)

As we can see that sometimes there is no “reverse time connection” we could exchange the “and” in her definition with “or”, which would then encompass most of the usages of the Present Perfect.

Differences between British and American (Canadian) English

Americans and Canadians tend to use the Past Simple in many situations where in British English the present perfect is used. This is especially true in spoken language.

Examples²:

American English: I can't find my keys. Did you see them anywhere?
British English: I can't find my keys. Have you seen them anywhere?

American English: A: Are they going to the show tonight?
B: No. They already saw it.
British English: A: Are they going to the show tonight?
B: No. They've already seen it.

American English has two past participles for *get* - *got* and *gotten*. But there is a difference in meaning:

Have you got the tickets. (Meaning: Do you have the tickets.)

Have you gotten the tickets (Meaning: Have you received the tickets.)

Phonology

The auxiliary *have* is normally weak or unstressed in connected speech at the beginning of questions.

Have you bought the tickets yet?
[həv]

² Taken from www.onestopenglish.com

In questions starting with question words and in contracted forms with pronouns or names the [h] sound disappears.

What have you done. / Sarah has lived her for three years.

[əv]

[əz]

In short answers, tag questions and for emphasis, however, *have* is stressed and pronounced [hæv] or [hæz].

Yes, I have. / She has been there, hasn't she?

[hæv]

[hæznt]

Approaches and techniques in the classroom

The present perfect can be taught deductively by highlighting the form³ and giving the rules, or inductively with guided discovery exercises and plentiful exposure to the form in meaningful, and at higher levels authentic, contexts⁴. We cannot teach the present perfect in one lesson but should introduce its various forms and uses at different levels over a longer period of time contrasting them with other tenses and aspects whenever possible to help students grasp the meaning.

At beginner levels it is more situational and sentence-based teaching with traditional controlled pattern practice drills and a high degree of repetition to practise accuracy and pronunciation. This can be made fun, personal and meaningful with students creating their own sentences (e.g. questionnaires to talk about past experience or achievements)⁵. Questionnaire and survey tasks can lead to simple writing or speaking exercises reporting on their findings and, thus, practising the third person.

However, even at lower levels an inductive approach can be chosen by guiding students through a series of sentence-based discovery exercises which students have to compare and try to come up with the rule⁶, e.g.

- 1 a I've seen all of Jim Jarmusch's films⁷.
- b I saw his latest film last month.

At higher levels the focus is more on reviewing⁸ and expanding the use of the tense with more discourse-based teaching. Consciousness-raising activities are important at all levels

³ On the board or with cuisenaire rods (See webcast link for seminar with Larson-Freeman)

⁴ Nunan (1998) and Petrovitz (1997) mention contextualising as crucial for learning.

⁵ Appendix 1 (sample questionnaire created by a group of teenage students of mine. Many fun accuracy activities can be found in Thornbury's book "Grammar" (2005).

⁶ Life line, Headway Language in Use, and Inside Out Pre-Intermediate all use inductive approaches to highlight the difference between past simple and present perfect, some stating the rules afterwards. Cutting Edge simply gives the rules. This is usually followed by controlled and semi-controlled practice drill activities like gap-fill and sentence completion exercises.

⁷ Thornbury: 1999 p. 63

⁸ Many course-books at intermediate and higher levels (e.g. Inside Out, Cutting Edge) test students' previous knowledge first followed by a review of the tenses and rules. Headway intermediate uses an inductive approach with concept check questions. Headway and Inside out follow up with exposing students to longer text.

if we want students to be able to actively and correctly use the tense. A good activity, especially for visual learners, is matching up information with graphs⁹.

I use questionnaires with more complex language and vocabulary with higher levels, leading to more substantial speaking and writing tasks. I also have my students analyse texts which they have read before, to see how the tense is used in context¹⁰. This sometimes leads to students' writing a text of a similar genre.

The tapescript of a listening activity can equally be used to analyse tense usage within a context (e. g. two old friends meeting after a long time). This can be followed by students' interviewing each other about what they have done so far in their lives. A role-play is a nice activity at the end.

Problems learners have with the Present Perfect and strategies to help them

Students have many problems with the present perfect. These range from intralanguage¹¹ problems, especially by those students who have a perfect aspect in their language but use it differently, to interlanguage¹² problems. They often mix up the terms *tense* and *time* and cannot distinguish between *tense* and *aspect*. For the purpose of this essay, I will concentrate on some major issues which I can relate to through my experience as a learner and which have caused problems to my students.

Form

Students at pre-intermediate level or lower often use the wrong auxiliary, mix up forms of past simple and present perfect or even combine them (e.g. *I didn't gone. / *I don't have done my homework).

They also have problems with recognising contracted forms as they tend not to use them themselves (e.g. He's - He *has* or *is*).

Irregular verb forms cause problems at pre-intermediate and at intermediate levels.

The progressive form is complicated for students.

Students makes mistakes regarding the position of *still*, *just*, *already* and *yet*.

In German, Turkish and other languages, there is also only one word for *for* and *since*.

Solution:

Highlighting forms clearly, drilling and providing students with plenty controlled practice activities can help.

We can help students notice what follows the 's (a noun/adjective or a past participle). Accuracy can be practised with substitution tables at beginner levels. If it is a review of a form, the task can be made more challenging by having students create the substitution

⁹ Appendix 2 (Thornbury: 2005): This is a very useful activity to show when and how we switch between past simple, present perfect and present perfect progressive.

¹⁰ inductive approach

¹¹ As defined by Corder (1981)

¹² *ibid.*

table¹³. Students can also be given skeleton sentences to complete. Backchaining can be very effective for accuracy and help with natural pronunciation.

Irregular verbs have to be memorised like new vocabulary items. We can, however, help students find regularities by having them group verbs which are formed in a similar way. Reviewing can be fun with games like game of dominoes or bingo. A fun way of practising the progressive form is the job game¹⁴.

Meaning and use

1. Past Simple or Present Perfect

Both the past simple tense and the perfect aspect exist in German, French and many other European languages. However, they are used differently. Thus, students often say "I have watched TV yesterday." or "I was there two times." The confusion is not always due to L1 interference but to the learners' interlanguage. Often the difference is not clear because both can refer to the past.

Solutions:

Time lines help to illustrate the difference between indefinite and definite time in the past, especially for visual learners. There are various models that can be used¹⁵. Symbols help the visual learner (e.g. a bridge for the present perfect showing connection between past and present).

Pointing out / eliciting signal words (e. g. time phrases)

Helping students discover the underlying concept¹⁶ by asking concept check questions (e.g. Do we know when it happened? Are we interested in the time?)

Swan's (1980) explanation to introduce the idea of remoteness and present relevance is useful: Sentences in the Pres. Perfect can easily be transferred into the Present Simple¹⁷: "I have broken my leg." -> "My leg is broken now."

I give memorable personalised sentences to my student: Imagine you are hungry. You come home and see the food on the table. Do you want to know when your partner cooked or are you interested in the present result - the food on the table? Would your partner say "I made the soup two hours ago" or "I've made soup"?

2 Aspect: Present Perfect or Present Perfect Progressive

One reason for this problem is students' L1. German and Turkish as well as many other languages don't have a progressive aspect. Therefore, students use the simple or mix up both aspects seemingly randomly. The difference in meaning is often not clear to students making it difficult to apply correctly¹⁸.

¹³ Thornbury: 2005 p. 54-55 Substitution jigsaw

¹⁴ Appendix 3

¹⁵ See article by Svalberg listed in the bibliography for an alternative way.

¹⁶ Appendix 4, exercises 3 and 4

¹⁷ Swan, M. Practical English Usage p. 419

¹⁸ Thornbury: 2005

Students who understand when to use the progressive get confused when they are told they cannot use it because the verb is stative.

Solution:

Pointing out that with the Simple aspect the result is more important and that we use the Progressive aspect when the focus is on the (ongoing) activity. This can be done by asking concept check questions¹⁹. At higher levels students often know that stative verbs cannot be used with the progressive form. If they do have problems, they can be asked to put a list of verbs into two groups (stative and dynamic). A discovery activity would be to give students sentences using the progressive form with dynamic verbs and the simple form with stative verbs and asking them to come up with an explanation.

3. Aspect: Present Simple or Present Perfect

Arabic, German and Turkish use the present simple to refer to a duration of time up to now (e.g. *I live here since 1992).

Solution:

I point out that the perfect is not a tense but an aspect of the present. After explaining the different concepts of the simple and perfect aspects, students need to be exposed to typical sentences and need constant practice. My experience shows that feedback after fluency activities is especially helpful and memorable as this is about the students' own sentences.

Often it is better not to contrast L1 and L2 too much but to tell students that English, although, it might have similarities to other languages, has its own consistent system²⁰.

Error analysis tasks can help students (especially at higher levels) to really grasp the difference between different tenses and aspects.

4. Meaning of signal words

This issue comes up when some typical adverbs are used with the present perfect (e.g. already, (not) yet, just, ever, never, and still).

Solution:

An activity which works well with my lower-level students is using a to-do list or itinerary. Students prepare to-do lists and ask and answer questions about what they "have already done" or "haven't done yet."

Concept check questions (e. g. Is it a point in time or a period of time) and drawing time lines, followed by exercises in which students put time expressions in two groups can help with understanding the use of *for* and *since*.

5. Confusion caused varieties / dialects of English.

Students hear or read past simple and present perfect used for the same situation by speakers of American or British English.

¹⁹ Appendix 5 and 6. At pre-intermediate level, Cutting Edge simply give the rule (deductive). Headway's approach is more inductive. At upper-intermediate level Cutting Edge tests previous knowledge before giving the rule.

²⁰ Lewis: 1986

Solution:

Pointing out differences in varieties of English is generally useful as students understand why they see different tenses used for the same purpose. We need to help our students appreciate that these differences are natural and there is no good or bad version.

Pronunciation

Students tend to stress every word in a sentence, including auxiliaries. They also get confused when they hear *have* or *has* sometimes stressed and sometimes weak in addition to contracted forms. Because of this, they have problems understanding spoken English. Students often do not use contracted forms in speaking making them sound stilted. They often misinterpret contracted forms (e. g. *he is* and *he has*) when listening.

Students need to understand to differentiate between weak and stressed forms, not only to be able to understand spoken language but also because “change of stress means change in meaning²¹.

Solution:

Writing up sentences on the board, saying them and eliciting and highlighting difference usually help students to notice that grammar words are not normally stressed. I give students a list of sentences with weak and strong auxiliary forms (highlighted) and they try and find a pattern²². I then give them the rule. This is usually followed up by discrimination listening exercises²³ and controlled speaking tasks²⁴. Sometimes I give students sentences or a tapescript and have them predict and underline the stressed words. Advanced students have to write the phonemic symbols under the auxiliary verbs, listen and check. Practising contracted forms helps students sound more natural²⁵. Getting intonation, which is a supra-segmental features of a language, right is often more important than getting every individual sound right²⁶.

Conclusion

The Present Perfect is a very complex issue and it will always be challenging for our students. There is a lot more one can say about its concept and use, about the problems and solutions as well as the many activities that can be done in order to practise accuracy and fluency. However, it is this complexity that also makes it interesting to teach. What I have learned through my research for this essay and my teaching experience before and during this course is that helping students notice and raising their awareness of use, form and

²¹ Lewis: 1986

²² inductive approach

²³ Appendix 7: Lower levels: Headway Pre-Intermediate pronunciation Unit 2. Higher levels: authentic recordings.

²⁴ To personalise the task and make it more memorable, I do this often with sentences written by the students.

²⁵ Listening and saying sentences with contracted forms: Language in Use Pre-Intermediate p. 42

²⁶ Underhill: 2005. Listening and practising intonation: Language in Use Pre-Intermediate p. 42

pronunciation through guided discovery tasks helps them much more to understand and use the forms correctly and appropriately than any solely teacher-centred techniques and explanations can. I also had never thought of seeing the difference between the past simple and the present perfect as a difference in remoteness²⁷. I used this notion in helping my students understand and they seemed to grasp the difference much better. This does not mean that I will abandon explaining grammar in my classes, but I will definitely incorporate more awareness-raising and guided discovery activities into my lessons in the future. I will also do more discourse-based work when teaching grammar at higher levels and think more about authenticity and meaningfulness of tasks and not only the material. As Thornbury (2005) says: “Unless the learner notices *the effect that grammatical choices have on meaning*, then the noticing is not sufficient to have long-term effects.”

(Word count: 2,744)

²⁷ Yule: 1998

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