Helping Students Make Appropriate English Verb Tense-Aspect Choices

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Grammatical Rules and the English Tense-Aspect System

One of the difficult grammatical areas for ESL/EFL students to master is the English verb tense-aspect system. Paradoxically, this area is not usually perceived as being especially difficult to teach. The reason for this is that many grammatical rules exist that capture the structural facts concerning the various tense-aspect combinations and the semantic facts related to what meanings these combinations convey.

For instance, in terms of describing the structures involved in the system, it is well known that English has two tense forms, present and past. It is equally well known that English speakers make use of a wide variety of other structures to indicate futurity (e.g., modals, phrasal modals, simple present, present progressive), but that the modal *will* is usually assigned to fill the role of the simple future. To these, the aspectual markers of perfect and progressive are added, giving us 12 verb tense-aspect combinations (Table 1). When it comes to semantics, it gets more complex. Although it would be beyond the scope of this article to deal comprehensively with the meanings of these 12 forms, for the purpose of illustration, the following is a synthesis of the meanings to which the simple present tense has been applied (based on Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999):

   a. habitual actions in the present
       I read the *New York Times* every Sunday.

   b. general, timeless truths, such as physical laws or customs
       The earth revolves around the sun.
   c. states
       It is cloudy.
   d. subordinate clauses of time or condition when the main clause contains a future-time verb
       When she comes, we'll find out.
   e. events or actions in the present, such as in sporting events
       The goal counts!
   f. speech acts in the present
       I nominate Chris.
   g. conversational historical present (in narration)
       "So he enters the room and crosses over to the other side without looking at anyone."
   h. events scheduled in the future
       My flight departs at 9 a.m. tomorrow.

With this list, we can begin to understand why ESL/EFL students struggle to learn verb tense-aspect in English. It is not really a simple present, is it? Furthermore, the semantics of the verb often constrain the form that is used. For instance, it is well known that students overextend the present progressive and use it where the simple present would be preferred (e.g., **I am knowing that*).[1] To counter this, teachers are well advised when introducing a new tense-aspect combination to contrast it with one that is already known.

For instance, to minimize the problem with the overextension of the *-ing* to stative verbs, it may be helpful

Table 1. Twelve Verb Tense-Aspect Combinations.

	Simple 0	Perfect *have + -en*	Progressive *be + -ing*	Perfect Progressive *have + -en be + -ing*
Present	Simple present *plays*	Present perfect *has/have played*	Present progressive *am/is/are playing*	Present perfect progressive *has/have been playing*
Past	Simple past *played*	Past perfect *had played*	Past progressive *was/were playing*	Past perfect progressive *had been playing*
Future	Simple future *will play*	Future perfect *will have played*	Future progressive *will be playing*	Future perfect progressive *will have been playing*

Note: Adapted from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 110.

to show students that two contrasting meanings can often be portrayed with the same verb:

> I am thinking about the answer. (mental activity)
> I think the answer is 144. (mental state/report)

Moreover, whereas the English system may seem straightforward enough, the exact mapping of form and meaning varies considerably from language to language. For example, although many languages use one future tense, a student learning English has to distinguish among several different structures, each conveying a nuance of meaning encompassed in the more comprehensive future tense of other languages. Learners of English, therefore, must not only learn the markings of the tense but must also suspend their customary way of marking temporality and adopt a new approach. Naturally, this leads to frequent misuse, not to mention a lot of bewilderment among teachers who wonder why their students "just don't get it."

Verb Tense-Aspect As a System

Helping students adopt a new approach to learning verb tense forms can be facilitated by having them understand that verb tense-aspect combinations in English function as a system. Although the system is complex, a key to understanding it is to see it as a whole. Of course, for practical reasons, each tense is likely to be introduced singly. However, teachers can show students how each works as part of a system by showing how each contrasts with its neighbors, the ones with which it is easily confused. Thus, for example, when they introduce the present progressive, teachers should contrast it with the simple present because knowing the present progressive is not simply a matter of knowing its form and meaning. Importantly, knowing a verb tense-aspect entails knowing when to use it. Larsen-Freeman (in press) refers to the verb tense-aspect system as one of the grammatical equivalents of the vowel sound system. This is because, just as it is very difficult to say exactly where /I/ changes to /iy/ in the vowel system space, so a long-term challenge when it comes to learning the English verb tense-aspect combinations is knowing where one leaves off and another starts in the verb tense-aspect system space.

Indeed, it is very important to recognize that students' greatest learning challenge lies in knowing the difference between the present perfect and the simple past, or the past perfect and the simple past, or, as we have seen, the simple present and the present progressive (quite apart from the semantics of the verb itself, which compounds the learning and teaching challenge; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). It is clearly insufficient to work on the form and meaning of each tense-aspect combination independent of other related tense-aspect forms.

Tense-Aspect Operating at the Level of Text

However, there is a second implication to appreciating that English verb tense-aspect combinations function as a system. As we have seen, the challenge of learning the English tense-aspect system is learning to make appropriate use choices. Therefore, not only is it important for students to understand what sets one tense-aspect form apart from the others, it is equally important for students to understand why certain forms cluster together. Here the point must be made that, in order to truly understand this and to understand how the system functions as a system, a sentence-level treatment of the form-meaning combinations is insufficient. The system operates as a system most visibly at the level of text.

Purely sentence-level descriptions of the grammar of the tense-aspect system leads to explanations such as the following:

> The present perfect is used to depict past actions or events that have recently taken place.

Although this statement represents a reasonable attempt to capture an important generalization about one member of the English tense-aspect system, as with all such grammatical explanations, exceptions abound. Here is one such exception that appeared in a magazine automobile advertisement a few years ago for a minivan with the name Town & Country.

> In their recent study, Town & Country tied as "America's most Appealing Minivan" after its owners rated it on over 100 attributes (Chrysler, 1998, p. 129).

Here we see the conflict between the rule, as given, with the use in this text of the word *recent* in a sentence using simple past tense, undermining the confidence of ESL/EFL students in the rule about the present perfect that they have been given.

However, we can take the same sentence and put it back into the text from which it came and see that the use of the simple past makes perfectly good sense.

> For the second year in a row, the Chrysler Town & Country has been honored with J.D. Power and Associates' prestigious APEAL award. In their recent study, Town & Country tied as "America's Most Appealing Minivan" after its owners rated it on over 100 attributes. So while we always insist that it be quiet, we certainly don't mind hearing this sort of noise.

The use of the present perfect in the first sentence introduces the result, which has current relevance. The simple past in the second sentence is used to relate the events that led up to the result. The simple present in the third sentence concludes the text, commenting in an evaluative way on the result that has been reported.

Learning to recognize the way that the tense-aspect combinations operate in discourse is thus key to helping

students learn to use the tense-aspect system as a resource in promoting cohesion of texts.

On the Uses of Tenses to Show Sequences of Events

There is further inference that can be drawn from the above example: A simple linear time line often fails at the level of text. This is because the tenses do not relate simplistically to the linear passage of time. There is no simple one-to-one relationship between tenses and time. If there were, the choice that Beth faces in responding to Alan's invitation in the following example would correspond to different time periods, which, at least in U.S. English, they need not.

Alan: Do you want some lunch?
Beth: No thanks. I've already eaten.
       or
       No thanks. I already ate.

Of course, there is a temporal dimension to the uses of tense in language. We humans not only report our present experience; we also have the ability to anticipate or to recall an event that has already taken place. However, we also use tense-aspect combinations to show sequences of events within a given period of time. Indeed, for William Bull, a linguist who did research on Spanish, what is less important about verb forms is signaling the time an event occurs. It is more important to convey whether an event occurs before, after, or at the same time as another one. When people speak about an event, they place themselves in relation to the event they are actually or imaginatively observing. They can do so by adopting a present axis of orientation, a past axis of orientation when recalling an event, or a future axis of orientation if they are anticipating an event. Each of these axes represents a different time segment. However, importantly, where time lines leave off, Bull demonstrates how, within each of these segments, the tense-aspect forms can signal anteriority, simultaneity, or posteriority to a reference point on an axis of orientation.

So each axis in Bull's framework has a basic time in the middle, one to the left, signaling a time before the basic time, and one to the right, signaling a time after the basic time of that axis. Any given language may not have unique forms for each of these points. As Bull's framework is applied to English (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999; Houts Smith, 1993), for example, the perfect combinations work well to signal the time before the basic axis points, but for the time after the basic axis time, other forms are appropriated (Table 2). If we were to use the tense-aspect combinations of each axis in simple texts, it is easy to see how the tense-aspect combinations cluster within an axis of orientation, as the following examples illustrate.

Present
He sings in the church choir. He has sung in the choir for years. He is going to sing in it as long as he can carry a tune.

Past
He even sang in the church choir when he was a teenager. In fact, he had sung/sang in the school choir before that. He would sing every chance he got.

Future
He will sing in the holiday concert next week. He will have sung in that event 20 times. He will likely sing for 20 more.

It is significant to note that speakers and writers of English tend to adopt an axis of orientation and remain within it unless prompted to shift to another axis. When they do so, they often, though not always, license this with some grammatical marker, such as a temporal adverbial, indicated in italics in the following sentence.

He has sung in the church choir for years. *Next year*, he will take some time off.

The following excerpt from a newspaper article discussing the rebirth of Chattanooga, Tennessee, shows how this works in authentic discourse. The first paragraph opens with the present tense followed by a modal perfect, a sequence that allows the author to make the contrast with how the city is now compared to how it had been in 1982. The first sentence of the second paragraph uses the past perfect to signal a past axis of orientation, which is maintained throughout the middle paragraphs. The final paragraph uses the present axis once again, with its initial sentence in the present perfect along with the adverb *now* acting as a discourse bridge between axes. The article concludes by reprising the contrast using the adverbs *once* with the past perfect and *today* with the simple present.

Table 2. Tense-Aspect Combinations Using Bull's Framework.

Axis of Orientation	Anteriority (a time before)	Basic (at the time)	Posteriority (a time after)
Present	*has sung*	*sings*	*is going to sing* *will sing* (formal)
Past	*had sung* *sang* (with adverb)	*sang*	*sang* *would sing* (habit)
Future	*will have sung*	*will sing*	*will sing*

Note: Adapted from Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 163.

In 1982, the city that now stands as a monument to effective downtown rebirth could have been a war zone.

Some 18,000 manufacturing jobs had left in the previous 10 years. Homeless people wandered the streets, living in abandoned warehouses. In 1969, the federal government determined that Chattanooga had the dirtiest air in America, even worse than that of Los Angeles.

"The air was so bad that you had to drive to work with your headlights on every day," recalled resident Roy Anglin, who was a manager in one of the factories that stayed. "We're situated in a basin, so the pollution was trapped."

"Downtown was basically a ghost town," said Rich Bailey, director of the local chamber of commerce's news bureau. "That was a result of economic changes all across the country. Historically, Chattanooga was a manufacturing town, and many of the manufacturers left the city. We had entire blocks with almost empty buildings and parking lots. It was scary."

All that has changed now. The air is much cleaner, the warehouses have either been torn down or renovated to accommodate the new business, and the Tennessee River waterfront that had once been used for slag heaps and empty coke furnaces is today lush, green and vibrant. (Seitz, 1999, p. 1)

Working With ESL/EFL Students on Tense-Aspect Use in Text

Thus, the Bull framework helps us to see one way the tense-aspect system operates to enhance the cohesion of texts. To help raise the grammatical consciousness of ESL/EFL students around this matter, Kuehn (1998) shows how choppy a paragraph sounds when writers shift from one axis (indicated by underlined verbs) to another without signaling their intention to do so.

I don't know what to do for my vacation. It will start in three weeks. I saved enough money for a really nice trip. I went to Hawaii. It will be too early to go to the mountains. I worked hard all year. I really need a break. (n.p.)

Although the ideas expressed in this paragraph are totally comprehensible, the writing style is not felicitous. It is not difficult to see how ESL/EFL students would construct such a paragraph by following the sentence-level rules they have been given. In fact, each sentence conforms perfectly to sentence-level grammatical descriptions. The first sentence is the statement of a present state, the second is a statement about a future event, the third states a fact about a completed process, and so on.

Notice, however, that the discourse cohesion is significantly improved (although, admittedly, the style is still repetitive) if this text is rewritten within a single axis of orientation, here the present axis.

I don't know what to do with my vacation. It starts in three weeks. I have saved enough money for a really nice trip. I have been to Hawaii. It is too early to go to the mountains. I have worked hard all year. I really need a break. (Kuehn, 1998, n.p.)

Kuehn refers to the first paragraph as an example of *discourse hopping*, in which there are changing reference points. The revised version represents *discourse freezing*, in which meaning is not sacrificed, but the discourse cohesion is enhanced by the consistent use of present axis forms.
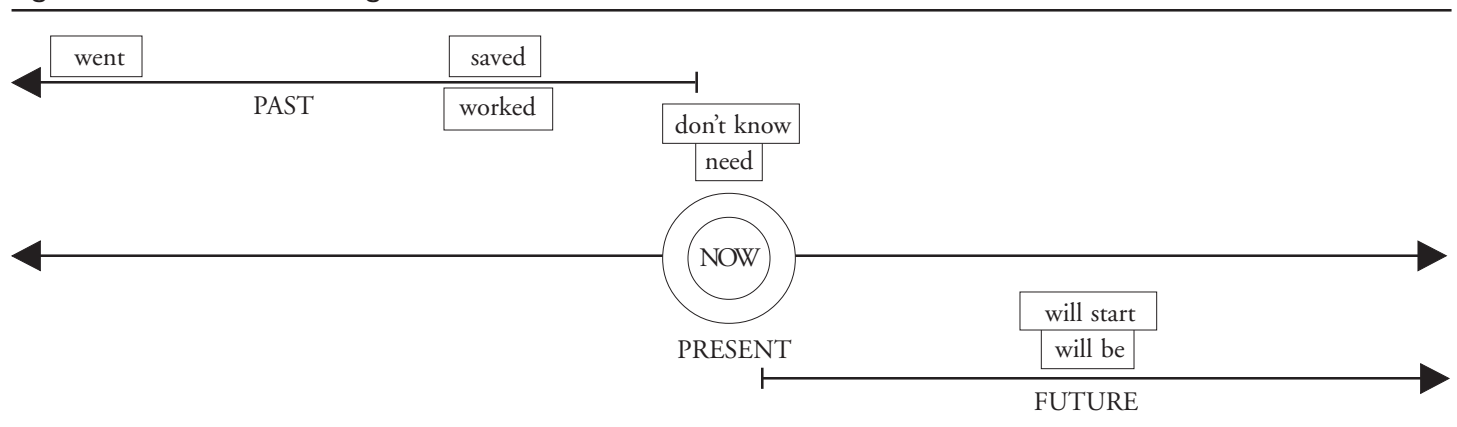
Providing students with the text-level convention of staying within a single axis obviates the need to get into unhelpful and difficult-to-answer sentence-level questions that would be prompted by the sentences in these two paragraphs, such as when to use present perfect or past (in the third, fourth, and sixth sentences) and when to use simple present or simple future (i.e., with *will*) in the second and fifth sentences. To impress this point upon ESL/EFL students in a more tangible way, Kuehn suggests creating a visual three-axis Bull framework in the classroom by placing three ropes on the floor (see Figure 1 for a

Figure 1. Time line illustrating the Bull framework.

Note: Students, represented by verb boxes, arrange themselves on the time line according to their sentence from the discourse-hopping paragraph sample. The "Now" circle represents a clock with the current time.

pictorial view of this layout). The longest center rope represents the present axis, the upper left rope represents the past axis, and the lower right rope represents the future axis. Ask seven students to serve as volunteers. Give each student a copy of the first paragraph illustrating discourse hopping. Ask the volunteers each to choose a different underlined verb and go to the section of one of the ropes that corresponds to the tense-aspect combination of their verbs.

Next, ask the volunteers to read their sentences aloud in the order in which they appear in the paragraph. Instruct the other students in the class to listen and watch.

After performing this activity with the ropes, students can see and hear how choppy the text sounds. This exercise gives them a visual display of the choppiness, which makes a more vivid impression on them than if they were simply to critique the lack of cohesion of the use of the tense-aspect combinations.

Next, invite the same students or seven other volunteers to take the revised version of the same paragraph, the one that has been rewritten to maintain the time axis (discourse freezing), and ask them to follow the same procedure. This time, observers will see that all the volunteers are gathered along the rope, signifying the present tense axis (Figure 2). Volunteers with sentences in the perfect tense-aspect could be asked to show a connection to the reference time by extending their arms. The volunteers and the other students should perceive that the second version is more cohesive than the first. The two paragraphs invite direct comparisons with the uses of the tenses.

Kuehn offers another way to understand the Bull framework by using an analogy of three city streets, named Present, Past, and Future Avenues (Figure 3). In this exercise, ask students to imagine they are standing on Present Avenue looking down the street at a specific building. From that view (reference point), the building has a distinct look (present perfect). If they travel one block over to Past Avenue and walk to the backside of the same building, it looks different from that focal point (simple past), and so forth.

Haccius (2002) offers another way of helping students improve the cohesion of their writing while drawing on the insights of the Bull framework. He makes the point that, before students start to produce discourse, they must first decide what axis they are on and their point of reference. He then has them practice shifting reference points in a chronological chain of events. For instance, he begins by asking one student, whom we shall call San, to describe the activities of his morning routine. Haccius summarizes them on the blackboard.

> San gets up at 5:00.
> He has a shower and gets dressed.
> He has breakfast and then brushes his teeth.
> At 6:15 he goes to the station to catch his train.
> He gets to school at 7:25 and has to wait half an hour for class. (Haccius, 2002, n.p.)

In this case, the events are situated on the present axis. Asking the students to rewrite the events starting with the fourth sentence as their reference point and applying the Bull framework will require them to change the first three sentences from the simple present to the present perfect while leaving the final sentence in the simple present, even though it occurs after (or in the future from) the point of reference.

> When San gets to the station at 6:15, he has gotten up, has had a shower and has gotten dressed. He has had his breakfast and has brushed his teeth. He catches the train and gets to school at 7:25 and has to wait half an hour for class. (Haccius, 2002, n.p.)

This exercise highlights the present perfect as the tense-aspect combination that marks anteriority along the present axis and can help students resolve the confusion between the present perfect and the simple past.

Changing the axis from present (here, used habitually) to the past (for a specific day) would then produce the following.

> When San got to the station at 6:15, he had gotten up, had had a shower, and had gotten dressed. He had had his

Figure 2. Students regrouped on the Bull framework time line to illustrate the cohesiveness of the tense-aspect sentences in the discouse-freezing paragraph sample.
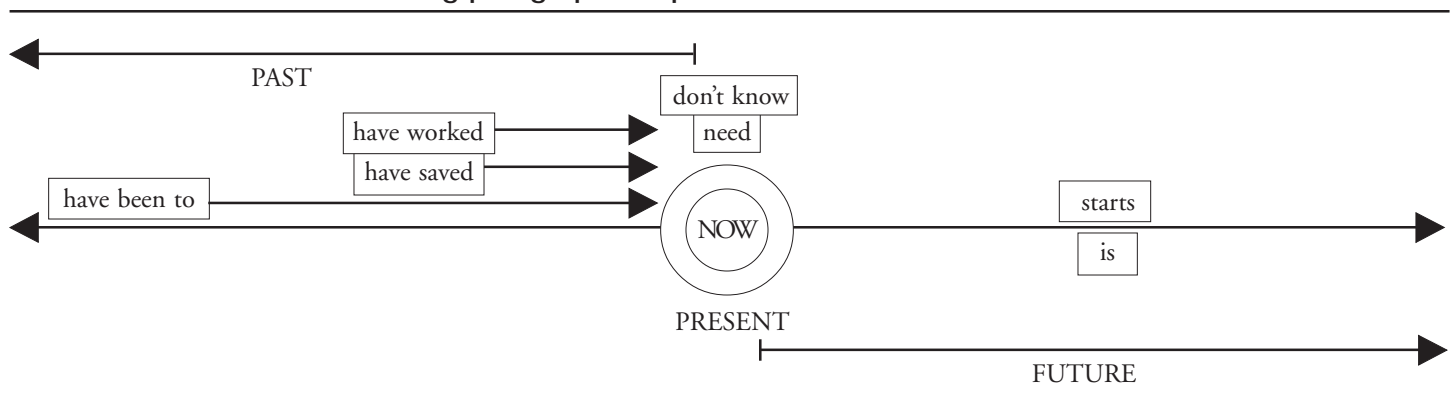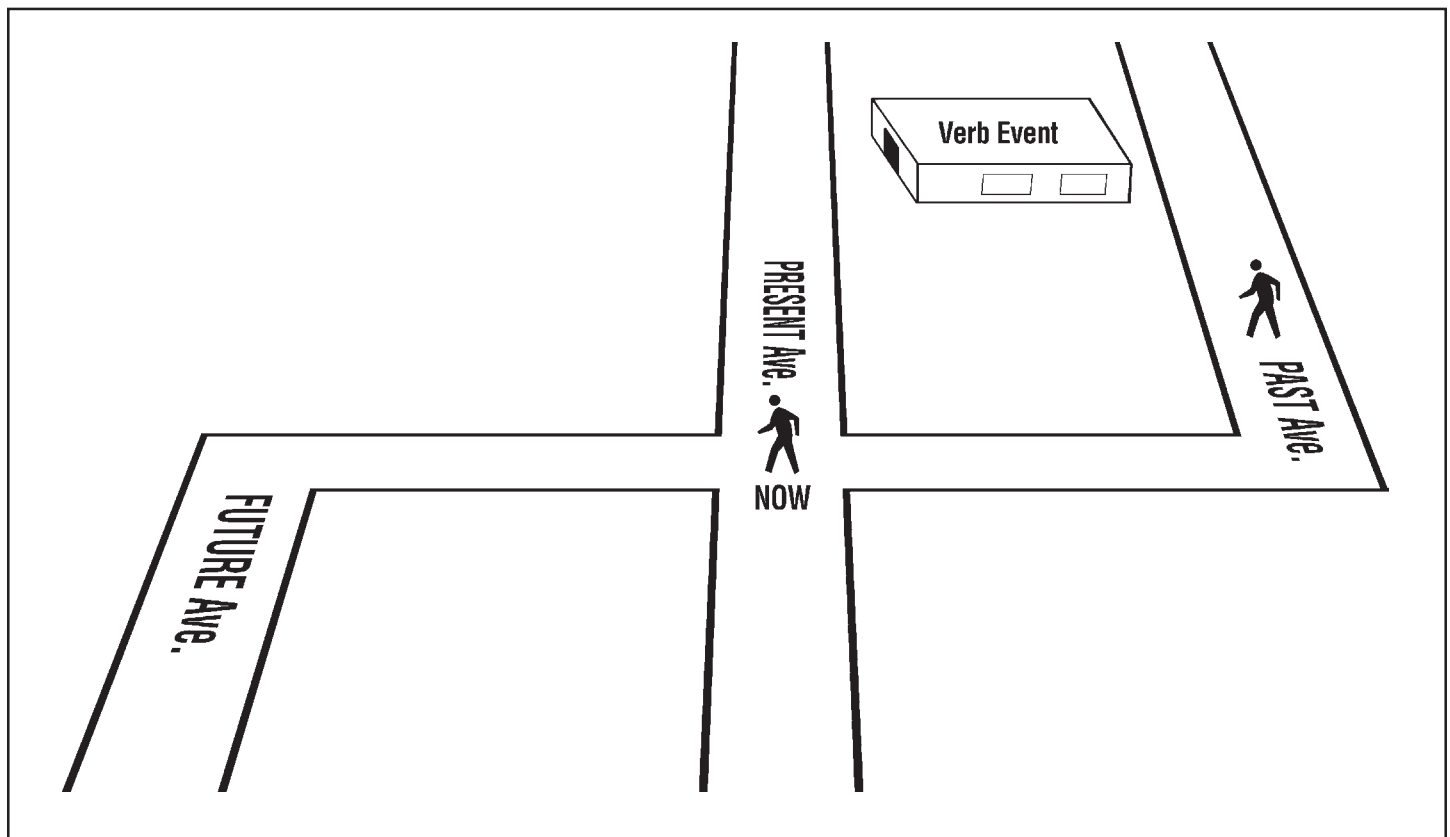
Figure 3. The Bull framework depicted as three streets with a building, representing a verb event that can be viewed from several tense-aspect focal points.

breakfast and had brushed his teeth. He caught the train and got to school at 7:25 and had to wait half an hour for class. (Haccius, 2002, n.p.)

Although these texts still need editing, they demonstrate the cohesion of the tense-aspect system when organized along a time axis.

Conclusion

In sum, the English verb tense-aspect system is not easy to learn. For one thing, the tense-aspect system of one language does not neatly align itself with another. For instance, unlike many other languages, there is no true future tense in English. Prototypically, the modal *will* or the phrasal modal *be going to* serve this purpose, but other modals such as *may, could,* and *might,* not to mention the simple present and present progressive, are also appropriated to fill this gap among the formal markers of tense in English.

For another thing, English verb tenses are often taught in a piecemeal fashion, and important opportunities to contrast them within an overall system are missed. It is important for students to see that each tense-aspect combination fits as part of an overall system.

Finally, the point that we have emphasized in this article, English verb tenses have too often been taught at the level of individual sentences. This approach obscures

the fact that the tense-aspect combinations work together to contribute to the cohesion of discourse.

It is crucial to understand that the long-term challenge that students face in choosing appropriate verb tenses has to do with learning when to use one tense versus another. This challenge can be partially addressed by helping students see that their orientation will determine their initial choice of tense-aspect and constrain their subsequent choices. Working with this insight gives us a way of assisting students to meet the challenge.

Note

[1] The asterisk (*) is a linguistic convention that indicates ungrammaticality.

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