

THE ROLE OF PRESENT PERFECT AND PRESENT PERFECT CONTINUOUS TENSES IN TEACHING FOR EFL STUDENTS

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Annotation

The distinction between the Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous tenses poses persistent challenges for English as a (EFL) Foreign Language Learners. Mastery of these forms is crucial for developing accurate and fluent expression of actions linked to the present. This paper explores their pedagogical significance, the difficulties learners commonly experience, evidence-based strategies for effective teaching.

Keywords

Present perfect, present perfect continuous, grammar and tense, teaching and learning, common difficulties, research and theory, methodology and tools.

Tense and aspects are central to English grammar, as they enable speakers to convey temporal relationships and nuances of meaning (Comrie, 1976)¹. Among these, the Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous are especially complex because they require learners to conceptualize time in relation to the present moment and distinguish between completed and ongoing actions (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2015)². Understanding how to teach these tenses effectively is vital for EFL instructors.

Present Perfect Tenses

The Present Perfect tense is used to express actions or states that occurred at an unspecified time before now, or that have relevance to the present moment (Murphy, 2019)³. For example: I have visited France. This indicates experience without specifying when it happened.

Common Learning Difficulties

Learners often confuse the Present Perfect with the Simple Past because many languages, including Chinese and Russian, lack equivalent structures (Thornbury,

¹Comrie, B.(1976).Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems. Cambridge University Press.

²Larsen-Freeman, D., & Celce-Murcia, M. (2015). The Grammar Book: Form, Meaning, and Use For English Language Teachers (3rd ed.). National Geographic Learning.

³Murphy, R. (2019). English Grammar in Use (5th ed.). Cambridge University Press.

1999)⁴. Moreover, the absence of a clear temporal reference can be challenging for students whose first languages are aspectually simpler (Cowan, 2008)⁵.

Present Perfect Continuous Tense

The Present Perfect Continuous is used to emphasize the duration of an activity that began in the past and continues to be present or has recently stopped with current relevance (Azar & Hagen, 2017)⁶. For example: I have been studying English three years. Learner Challenges: Students frequently overgeneralize the Present Perfect Continuous, applying it to completed actions or incorrectly substituting it for the Present Perfect (Willis & Willis, 2007)⁷.

Pedagogical Approaches

Effective instruction requires clear contrastive presentation, contextualized examples, and guided practice. Research indicates that visual timelines, communicative activities, and corpus-based materials can improve acquisition. Suggested Strategies.

- Timeline and Conceptualization Visual aids help learners see the connection between the past and the present.

- Personalization Encouraging learners to produce examples related to their lives increases engagement and retention.

- Error Analysis and Feedback Targeted correction helps students notice and internalize distinctions between forms.

- Input Flood Providing abundant input with the target forms in authentic contexts reinforces comprehension.

Functional Differences. Present Perfect.

Use: Expressing life experiences, changes over time, accomplishment, and uncompleted actions. For example: She has written three newspapers. Signal words: ever, never, already, yet, just, since, for.

Present Perfect Continuous. Use: Emphasizing the duration or continuous nature of an activity started in the past. For example: she has been waiting for two days. Signal words: for, since, lately, recently.

Present Perfect focuses on result (I have painted the room – now the room is painted).

Present Perfect Continuous focuses on process/duration (I have been painting the room – possibly not finished yet).

⁴Thornbury, S. (1999). How to Teach Grammar. Longman.

⁵Cowan, R. (2008). The Teacher's Grammar of English: A Course Book and Reference Guide. Cambridge University Press.

⁶Azar, B., & Hagen, S. A. (2017). Understanding and Using English Grammar (5th ed.). Person Education.

⁷Willis, D., & Willis, J. (2007). Doing Task-Based Teaching. Oxford University Press.

Many learner's first language do not have direct equivalents of these tenses. For example: In Mandarin Chinese, aspect is expressed differently, often with particles like (le), (Zhang, 2010)⁸. In Turkish, the perfect aspect is not used in the same way, which can cause persistent errors (Odlin, 1989)⁹. Implication for teachers: It is important to anticipate negative transfer – when learners apply structures from their L1 (mother tongue) inappropriately (Lado, 1957)¹⁰.

Research suggests that tenses combining time reference and aspect (like Present Perfect Continuous) are more cognitively demanding (Bardovi-Harlig, 2000)¹¹.

When the action started.

Whether it's finished or still ongoing.

Its relevance to the present moment.

This processing load partly explains why advanced learners still make mistakes. Corpus Evidence: Corpus studies show that Present Perfect Continuous is much less frequent in everyday English than Present Perfect. Present Perfect (I've seen it.), Present Perfect Continuous (I've been seeing her.). This disparity in frequency means may have fewer authentic examples to draw on, requiring deliberate practice in class.

Teaching tips

Contextualization – use real-life examples: I have lived here since 2010, I have been working on this project all morning.

Timelines Draw – timelines on the board to illustrate when the action started and whether it is still happening.

Contrastive Drills Set up – practice activities contrasting the tenses: I have read this book. (Focus on completed experience), I have been reading this book. (Focus on duration).

Communicative Tasks Role – plays and interviews help students use the forms meaningfully.

Error Correction Provide – gentle, explicit correction when learners confuse the forms, e.g.: I have lost my keys.

Common Student Errors

Error Example: I have been known her for years, I have finished my homework since 8 o'clock, She has been went to the store.

⁸Zhang, N.(2010). Aspectual Systems in Mandarin Chinese. Routledge.

⁹Odlin, T. (1989). Language Transfer: Cross-Linguistic Influence in Language Learning. Cambridge University Press.

¹⁰Lado, R. (1957). Linguistics Across Cultures: Applied Linguistics for Language Teachers. University of Michigan Press.

¹¹Bardovi-Harlig, K. (2000). Tense and Aspect in Second Language Acquisition: Form, Meaning, and Use. Blackwell.

Corrected Form: I have known her for years, I have finished my homework, She has gone to the store.

Explanation: Known is a stative verb; continuous form is rarely used. Since does not go with completed actions. Mixing Present Perfect Continuous with Simple Past participle.

Present Perfect Tense is used to describe actions or events that have happened at an unspecified time before now, or actions that started in the past and continue up to the present.

Present Perfect Continuous tense is used to describe actions that started in the past and are still continuing in the present or have recently stopped but have a connection to the present moment.

Both tenses describe actions or situations that started in the past and have a link or relevance to the present.

The Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous tenses are essential for expressing experiences and ongoing actions relevant to the present. Teachers need to employ explicit instruction, meaningful practice, and corrective feedback to help EFL learners master these challenging structures. With the support of visual aids, and clear examples, learners can gradually develop confidence in using these forms accurately. Over time, consistent exposure and guided feedback can make these tenses a natural part of learners' English use.

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