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The Big Picture: Teaching Grammar Holistically and Visually

TEACHING ASPECT HOLISTICALLY AND VISUALLY

The tense-bound approach used in many coursebooks ignores the opportunity to teach the progressive aspect as a concept, meaning learners may not make the connection between the way aspect works in English. Instead, they learn each form separately. With all the classroom hours that separate lessons on the present progressive lesson from those on the past progressive, how likely are they to make the connection between the two? And let's be honest, how helpful is the old explanation "Present perfect simple focuses on results whereas present perfect continuous focuses on the action"? Probably not very!

The difficulty with progressive and perfect aspect comes from no equivalent existing in learners' L1. These notions are expressed by other means (i.e. conjugation of "to be" + "en train de" + infinitive being the French marker of progressiveness) or other tenses (i.e. the present simple or past simple being acceptable French equivalents for the English present perfect simple and present perfect progressive, depending on context).

Materials:

A long stick (such as a hiking stick, a broomstick, or a measuring stick.)

3 signs: one "past", one "present", and one "future"

A piece of paper that can be torn into pieces

For both procedures, begin by placing 3 chairs in a row. Ask for 3 volunteers to sit in the chairs and hold "past", "present", and "future" cards.

Helping learners make connections between past, present, future, and the progressive aspect

Procedure:

1. Hold a stick horizontally over the head of the "present" learner. Make an obvious statement like "*We are working together.*" Ask learners to confirm this. Ask if this action is permanent or temporary. Explain the stick represents the period of time over which the statement applies and that this period of time has a beginning and an end. You can then apply the same concept to the progressive aspect in both past and future.
2. Hold the stick over the head of the "past" learner. Say something like "*This time last week, I was discussing a new project with a client.*" Ask a learner "*And you, what were you doing this time last week?*" Practice this with several learners, referring to the stick over the learners' head to remind them that the past progressive refers to an action that *was* in progress (contrasted with the present progressive for actions that *are* in progress).
3. Hold the stick over the head of the "future" learner. Say something like "*In 5 years, I hope I will be running my own successful company.*" Ask a learner, "*And you, what will you be doing*

in 5 years?" (or *"What do you hope you will be doing?"*) Again, point out the progressive nature of the action, but this time in the future.

Helping learners make connections between perfect simple and perfect progressive simple aspect
Procedure:

1. Ask the "present" learner and the "past" learner to hold the stick between them, each holding the stick at a different end. Allow the stick to project slightly into the future space. Ask several learners a question such as *"How long have you been leading teams?"* This sets up discussion of appropriate time expressions (i.e. *for 5 years; since March of this year; etc.*) The visual also allows learners to see the "continuousness" and the "unfinishedness" central to the present perfect progressive.
2. Take the stick away. Whisper a present perfect simple question to the "present" learner, such as *"How many companies have you worked for?"* Make sure no one hears the question. Ask the learner to give a short, audible answer (i.e. *"five, including the present one"*) Tear a piece of paper into five pieces and place them on the floor between the present and the past. The class can try to guess what the pieces of paper represent. This gives opportunities to practice the form (i.e. *"Have you been to five countries?"*, *"Have you had five jobs?"*, etc.). Ask the "present" learner *"Will you possibly work for more companies in the future?"* to reinforce that cloudy notion of 'unfinished time' we so often use to explain present perfect simple.
3. If you want to contrast the perfect aspect with the past simple, move the "past" learner's chair directly over the piece of paper closest to the "present" learner's chair. Ask *"What was the last company you worked for?"* Combined with the preceding demonstration, this can help learners distinguish between the use of the present perfect simple and the past simple, which nearly always gives learners headaches!

Ideas adapted from Bolitho, R. (2011). "Holistic grammar teaching 2." *English Teaching Professional*. Issue 74, May 2011. Pp. 37-39.

Adapting the techniques for one-on-one lessons

- Place the "past", "present", and "future" signs on chairs, the board, or the floor.
- For the activities on the progressive aspect, the learner can move from present to past to future as the teacher works through the sequence, with either teacher or learner holding the stick. The learner can also stand in front of the activity space to watch as the teacher (holding the stick) moves.
- For the activity on the present perfect progressive, teacher and learner each hold one end of the stick.
- For the activity on the present perfect simple, the teacher begins by placing pieces of paper representing a number of times he/she has done something and gives the short answer to the learner. For example, the teacher puts 4 pieces of paper on the floor and says *"4 countries"*. The learner will eventually guess that the teacher has taught in four countries.

TEACHING LEARNER-CENTERED GRAMMAR USING CUISENAIRE RODS

Cuisenaire rods are real classroom chameleons! They can add a fun colorful element to many activities. They provide visual stimulation but also give learners something they can touch, feel, and manipulate and are delightfully low-tech. If you haven't used them before, it's a good idea to play around with them yourself before the lesson so you too can get a feel for how to use them. Experiment with ways you could use them to explain different aspects of language or use them as a stimulus for an activity. Use your imagination (and then come back and share your ideas with us)!

Materials:



A set of Cuisenaire rods (or cut-up paper "rods" of different colors)

3 blank pieces of paper





Pen or pencil

1. Ask the learner to talk about something (a topic from a previous class, their morning, a meeting earlier, etc. ANYTHING!) and explain that you will note what they say. Don't let them talk too long—the text needs to be manageable. A few sentences may be sufficient.
2. Write down what the learner says as exactly as possible. Your transcription doesn't have to be neat.
3. Dictate the exact text (errors and all) back to the learner so they can write it neatly. Make sure the learner leaves double space between the lines, as you'll be putting Cuisenaire rods on the text later.
4. Using your teacher observation skills, see what areas need work. Where does the learner have the most trouble? What features re-occur as problems? (i.e. various verb tenses, lots of comparative/superlative, *-ing* vs *-ed* adjectives, reporting language, modal verbs, various uses of "get", etc. Be observant!)
5. On a separate sheet of paper, draw a chart containing the problematic grammar and provide/ elicit some examples if needed. Ask the learner to assign Cuisenaire rods to each one. Help if necessary and explain that each rod will represent that specific grammar point.

For example, if the learner confuses *-ing* and *-ed* adjectives:





	Root word + <i>-ed</i> (excited, fascinated, interested, etc.)
	Root word + <i>-ing</i> (exciting, fascinating, interesting, etc.)

For example, if the learner has problems with tenses:

	Past continuous (we were going to; I was thinking)
	Past simple (We went; I thought)
	Infinitive (to go; to think)
	Past perfect simple (we had gone; I had thought)

6. Use the correct corresponding rod to cover the target language of the learner's text.
Taking the examples above, the text would then look like:

a. -ing vs -ed words








I'm  in the project because it's an  opportunity to work with
China and I'm  by Asian cultures. Japan is really  to me.

Original text, learner errors in red, correct usage in green:

*I'm **interesting** in the project because it's an **exciting** opportunity to work with
China and I'm **fascinating** by Asian cultures. Japan is really **interesting** to me.*

b. Various verb tenses

past continuous past simple infinitive past perfect simple

While we  I  Anna  her passport because she  it
last time. We  the meeting and  it via skype two days later. Management 
furious!

Original text, learner errors in red, correct usage in green:

*While we **are packing**, I **told** Anna to take her passport because she **forget** it last time. We **were postponing** the meeting and
had it via skype two days later. Management **was** furious!*

7. Ask the learner to read their text back to you. To use the correct forms, they refer to the chart you made during step 5 (They should remember what is under the rods, but if they don't you can always give hints).
8. Once they have read through the whole text once, have them go back and read it again, pausing as they encounter each rod(s). Ask the learner to remove the rod(s) to compare their new, corrected version with the original version. This is the opportunity for them to notice where they are making errors and how to correct them.

Note: If you don't have Cuisenaire rods, you can use pieces of different colored paper cut into rectangles of various sizes.

I've found that this technique works easily with one-on-one lessons or small groups of 2 or even 3 learners. However, it can be adapted to groups by selecting a learner's text (or by compiling the 'best of class errors' into a single text) from a past activity. Project the text on the board. With learners, identify the errors together, draw a correction chart on the board using colored markers to draw 'rods', and then hide the errors with "virtual Cuisenaire rods". These can be made by creating colored rectangles in Word then copying and pasting them in the appropriate places. The class can then read the corrected version in pairs/small groups before checking in plenary.

TEACHING IN-CONTEXT PHRASAL VERBS VISUALLY AND KINESTHETICALLY

Phrasal verbs often cause problems for language learners because they see the different parts as being separate. In reality, multiple parts of a phrasal verb come together to create a single unit of meaning. If learners recognize this and learn phrasal verbs not as “verb + preposition” but as “single unit of meaning with two parts,” they can begin to learn them just as any other vocabulary. Easier said than done!

Working with a limited group of phrasal verbs in context will be more effective than giving learners long lists of “verb+prepositions” to memorize. Going beyond that, we can even get learners to associate phrasal verbs with visuals and with movement. Not only is it a bit fun, but it also caters to various learning styles within the group.

Materials:

A short text prepared by the teacher that includes several phrasal verbs (it’s a good idea to include phrasal verbs that will lend themselves to miming)

Learner copies of the same text, with the phrasal verbs gapped out (if adapting for weaker learners)

Procedure:

Dictogloss:

1. If using the adapted version, give copies to learners.
2. Tell learners you will read a text to them. They ONLY listen and do not write anything. Tell them they will hear the text 2 or 3 times but can write only between readings.
3. Read the text out loud at fairly normal speed.
4. When you finish, learners write as much as they can remember of the text (or fill in as many gaps as they can). This can be done in groups or pairs.
5. Tell learners to stop writing. Read the text out loud again.
6. Learners add more detail to their texts.
7. Repeat steps 5&6 if necessary.
8. Give learners a copy of the original and let them compare it to their version. (You may also read the original out loud but slowly or if working one-on-one, ask the learner to read their version back to you).

Drawing and miming:

9. In small groups or pairs, learners draw simple visual representations of the key events in the story (if short on time, the teacher can have each learner draw a different event on A4 paper and stick them on the board for the whole class to see).
10. Learners then write the phrasal verbs from the story on the corresponding pictures.
11. In their groups/pairs, learners take turns telling the story to each other, using the phrasal verbs on the pictures to help.
12. In each group, only one learner looks at the pictures and phrasal verbs to tell the story. As they do this, the other learners act out the story. (The “story-teller” may need to pause occasionally to give the “actors” time to perform the actions.) Learners then switch roles.
13. To round off, learners hide the text and pictures before individually re-writing the story. They should try to use as many phrasal verbs as they can remember. If appropriate, they could write a personal text on the same subject so as to use the phrasal verbs from the original story but in a personalized context.

A FEW OTHER IDEAS FOR ENERGIZING GRAMMAR WORK

1. When introducing a text in class, read it out loud. Learners should close their eyes to be able to create a mental holistic image of the text. This also gives them the chance to focus on pronunciation and intonation, which can be more effective without any other visual distractions. It can also help in “anchoring’ the structure and element of the text in the minds of students whose main channel is auditory,” (Gerngross, Puchta, and Thornbury, 2006, p. 9)
2. Pitch & practice: This is particularly a good way to inject some energy into transformation drills, but can adapt to many aspects of language. Inside a drawstring bag, put slips of paper with the relevant language point(s) to be worked on. You may need to add a light but soft weight (such as a tennis ball) to the bag to make it easy to toss. Learners stand in a circle (or the learner stands across from the teacher in 1-to-1), toss the bag to a partner who pulls out a slip of paper and reads it or uses the language on the paper, then tosses the bag to a partner. Some examples:
 - -ed vs. -ing adjectives: The paper drawn from the bag has the word “bore” on it. The “catcher” must say something correctly using both “bored” and “boring.”
 - Present perfect simple for past experiences: The paper drawn has a number on it. The “catcher” must say something they have done four times, four places they have visited, etc.
 - Direct vs. indirect language: The paper drawn from the bag has a direct request/comment on it. The “catcher” must soften the phrase to make it less direct or more polite.

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