

The present perfect – chimera or pussy cat?

Abstract

This is an attempt to re-work the Present Perfect so that its intrinsic simplicity comes out and so that it can be more easily learnt. It has been tried and found, on the whole, to work quite well. A number of suggested materials using the new approach are included at the end. I welcome all feedback from your own experiments with the approach.

Introduction

So, a teaching sequence might go something like this. The teacher (Eddie) is focusing on the meaning of the Present Perfect, and isolates some examples:

Eddie: So ‘They’ve been building the bridge since 1999’. Why is this present perfect continuous? Kaz?

Kazimierz: Because it is not finished.

Eddie: Yes, that’s right, because they’re still building the bridge. And here: ‘I haven’t had anything to eat today’ Why is this present perfect? Juan?

Juan: Because you are still hungry after not eating.

Eddie: Yes that’s right. And this one: ‘My goodness, you’ve had you’re hair cut’. Mariella?

Mariella: Because you can see the result of the action now.

Eddie; Exactly.

Now this is all true. The students can answer the teacher’s check questions on concept. But can they deploy those concepts with confidence?

As we know, the Present Perfect continues to be a problem well into the ‘advanced life’ of our learners? So I want to suggest a fundamental shift in the way we approach the present perfect in the classroom. And I know this shift makes a fundamental difference in the classroom, because I have seen the dramatic effects in my students after only 45 minutes of teaching, 45 minutes of undoing all the complexity and confusion they say they still have after years of studying this awkward tense.

There are two principles behind the shift. The first is: *simplify*. The second is: *focus on the time frame not on the verb*.

As a legacy from the structuralist (or in Saussurian terms, syntagmatic) period in language teaching, we still tend to see the present perfect as ‘have + past participle, with already, never, just, yet, for, since, etc’ or ‘have been + present participle, with for, since, etc’. We still tend to see the present perfect simple as distinct from the present perfect continuous, and you will always see these two tenses differentiated from each other in textbooks. And we still tend to divide up the conceptual meaning into 3 (or 4) parts: result in the present, indefinite time (experience), action continuing to the present, state continuing to the present. (viz *Headway New Intermediate Students Book* pp150-151 and pp153-154).

The time adverb thing

My innovation is this: focus away from the verb and on to the time period.

You will see a different and simpler picture emerging. It is like this. In the context of tenses which refer back, there are two categories of adverb phrase of time (i) phrases of time which connect the past

to the present (ii) phrases of time which separate the past from the present. And once this distinction is established, your students never need to make a mistake with the present perfect again.

Here are some examples:

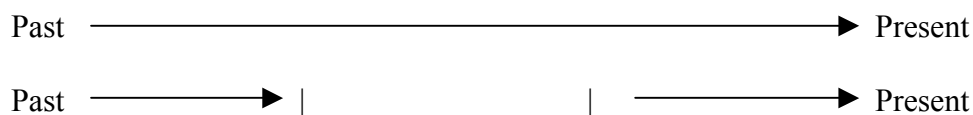
Time which connects the past to the present:

in the last five days over the past few months so far during this trip to London this week/month/year today always/often/never still (+ negative verb)	just during this meeting since I was 19 for fifteen minutes (leading to now) already (= so I don't need to do it again) yet (= so I still need to do it) in the last week (cf 'last week', and NB false friends such as German 'in the last week')
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Time which separates the past from the present

two minutes ago last week (NB confusions such as French 'the last week') on Friday in March at 10.00pm (last night)	when I was 7 for fifteen minutes (last Wednesday) between 1970 and 1980 during the last century before she left earlier this week
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Now you will certainly see that by focussing first on the time period (we haven't even mentioned verbs yet), you can show students a fundamental conceptual difference in English from, I think, every other language! And by not yet focussing on the verb, you can really reinforce that conceptual difference, of course, using time-lines.



And to end this section with a fascinating language point. From my observation (never mind the native speaker corpus), the most useful, and I think most common, time context for the present perfect is the phrase 'in the last X minutes, days, weeks, months, years'. Why not check this out for yourself by listening carefully to what people say?

The absolutely key basic realisation here is that *whichever time phrase you choose determines which tense you use!* A phrasal difference between 'two minutes ago' and 'just' determines which tense we use, past simple and present perfect respectively, while in their communicative meaning I would argue there is no difference. Compare these two answers to: 'Have you seen Peter?' 'Yes, I saw him two minutes ago', and 'Yes, I've just seen him'

It is worth noting that there are two arguments against this approach, with claims that the 'adverb solution' confuses rather than clarifies.

- (i) Take the 'European' present simple tense for period connecting past to present, as in 'I work for Adidas since 1999', where students find it very hard to eradicate their ingrained present

tenses. However, these students' make this mistake, not because of the time adverb, but because of the L1-L2 transfer of the verb! It is therefore not an argument against my system – the actual concept is the same! The solution is to have the student, using the same time adverb, transfer their European simple present for a very English Present Perfect

- (ii) Could there be a confusion with the present continuous if we start from the concept of connecting past to present? No, I don't think there can be a confusion. If we adopt the 'adverb first' approach, this issue does not arise. Almost always, an adverb 'leads' to the present continuous, just as for the present perfect. Hence, for the present continuous, we get 'nowadays', 'these days', 'now', 'at the moment', etc. And as long as the verb denotes a process not a state, the verb will be in the continuous form. For example: 'We're completely redecorating the house at the moment'. The adverb phrase 'since last Sunday' could not go with the present continuous tense except in certain marked native speaker contexts, such as for example, 'Since last Sunday I am feeling very excited'.

So, to conclude my argument against these arguments, I think the 'adverb first' principle stands up well.

The verb thing

Once the underlying conceptual distinction in our past-time system (i.e. connected to present vs separated from present) is made real and 'gettable' for our students, we can set to work on the verbs. First, I want to suggest that (i) there is no intrinsic difference between the present perfect simple and the present perfect continuous, in that they both always fit into a time context connecting the past to the present (ii) the key determinants of whether a verb is simple or continuous is whether it is an event, a process, or a state.

'Event' verbs are short duration verbs which are completed: arrive, choose, borrow,
swallow, break, join, etc

'Process' verbs are long duration verbs which are not completed: cook, write, play, develop,
build, grow, etc

'State' verbs do not tend to have continuous form, because they suggest a factual state:
know, believe, love, like, prefer, want, be, etc

The only area of ambiguity here is when the 'longer' verbs are completed – then they become 'event' verbs (e.g. compare: 'I have been writing all day and I need a rest' vs 'I have written three letters today').

Putting the verbs in context now, let's see what happens. Adverb phrases are underlined.

1. *Events happening in a period connecting past to present – present perfect simple:*
In the last ten days, we have completed the first stage and started the second stage.
He has sent off five applications this week.
I haven't eaten anything all day.
Hey John. Good to see you. I haven't seen you for ages.
- 2a. *Processes happening in a period connecting past to present – present perfect continuous:*
I have been getting increasingly worried about you over the past few days
You have been writing that book for three years?!
Ever since I met John, he has been acting strangely.
They haven't been waiting for a long time, have they?
- 2b. *'Long duration' verbs which are completed (the tricky group) – present perfect simple*

past to present, the event clearly is finished! As for the rest of the concepts, they all speak for themselves. I find that, once addressed in this way, always focusing on the time not the verb, the present perfect becomes very easy for my students.

For instance, early in a course, I normally do a quick 45 minute outline of the ins-and-outs of ‘connected’ vs ‘separated’ past-time, with some examples of the event, process, and state verbs. This then makes future feedback sessions after a communicative task really easy, because if there are any present perfect slips it is effortless to refer them back to the exposition, and they correct themselves. The exposition has become a reference point for reminders, with a simple nudge like “‘Since our last meeting . . .’ Is ‘since our last meeting’ a period connecting past to present? Does it go from then till now? Yes? So the verb must be?”

Similarly, “‘China has joined the WTO in 2002’ – is ‘2002’ a period joining past to present, or a point separating past from present? Yes, that’s right it separates. So is ‘has joined’ correct? No it isn’t. Well-done. It should be” “What about ‘China has been in the WTO since 2002’?” “Yes, ‘since 2002’ is a period starting in the past and coming up to now. So is ‘has been’ correct? Yes it is. Well-done. These two sentences mean the same thing but the time phrase makes you use a different verb and a different tense”.

So, as you can see, there is only one concept question: Does the period of time connect the past to the present or does it separate the past from the present?

For exercises to enable your students to practise these new concepts – you will have to make your own material, as none yet exist except my own sample drafts (see below).

Some teaching materials

1) Here are three simple formats for getting the students to discriminate. I use the first exercise from Pre-Intermediate up, and the second two from Early Intermediate up.

(a) In the box, there are some expressions of time. For each one, decide if it is a period which (i) *connects* the past *to* the present (ii) *separates* the past *from* the present.

in the last five days during this holiday twelve months ago at 3.30 yesterday afternoon last Saturday	when I was 6 years old for the last six months all my life between 1992 and 2000 in the 18 th century	today since my last appointment since the accident for ages (finishing now)
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(b) Make sentences with the time expressions on the left, using one of the verbs on the right in the correct tense. There are several correct answers.

in the last two days since the start of this course	over the last week for several hours (to now)	be very cold read three books visit a lot of museums get a new job learn a lot of things rain John study in the USA my brother get married
in February for several years (to 2003)	last week the day before yesterday	

3) Here is some more draft textbook material. This time, it is purely to give examples of typical contexts. Practice exercises have still to be devised.

MI	the present perfect tense 4 - common contexts of use news/advice/meetings/interviews/etc
A	Examples
1	News headlines on radio and TV <i>Fourteen people have been injured in a motorway accident . . .</i> <i>The government has announced new funding to combat Internet crime . . .</i> <i>The actress, Michelle Pfeiffer, has decided to go into politics . . .</i> (Note: the tense tends to change into the Past Simple after the headline. So we get: 'The German Chancellor has arrived in London for economic discussions with other European leaders. On his arrival, he spoke of a positive agenda, and then went directly to a gala dinner hosted by the Goethe Institute.)
2	Advice <i>Have you tried talking to your boss about the problem?</i> <i>Have you phoned the police?</i>
3	Meetings <i>So let's summarise. This is what we have agreed so far.</i> <i>Peter. The drive mechanism. How much progress have you made on that since last time?</i>
4	Economic updates <i>In the last quarter, the company has increased net profits by 1% to 7%.</i> <i>In the twelve months to this month, the UK inflation rate has gone down from 2.4% to 2.1%.</i>
5	Interviews (job, police, television) <i>So, Miss Wilkinson, what experience have you had with selling designer clothes?</i> <i>Have you seen this man before?</i>
6	Getting-to-know someone <i>Have you ever been snowboarding?</i> <i>Which countries have you visited?</i>
7	Catching up on friends' news <i>I haven't seen you for ages?</i> <i>How have you been?</i> <i>You have changed your hairstyle! I'm sorry, but it looks absolutely awful.</i> <i>30 years! And you haven't changed at all!</i>
8	Reacting to a current situation <i>We've won!</i> <i>What (the hell) has been going on here!?</i> <i>What have you done!</i> <i>My God. You have finally gone crazy . . . What is that tattoo on your arm!?</i>
9	Ending stories <i>. . . And ever since then they have been extremely happy.</i>
10	Talking at the end of a hard day <i>What kind of day have you had?</i> <i>I haven't stopped all day</i> <i>I haven't eaten since eleven o'clock</i> <i>I have sent a hundred e-mails</i> <i>I've given a presentation to the Board</i>

Conclusion

I think that, in the area of grammar expositions in language learning textbooks, we have got rather complacent. Because of the lexical revolution, writers are focussing their attention on making textbooks so lexically rich and useful that they are forgetting the importance of improving the clarity of their grammar. The old grammar explanations need to be overhauled just as much as the new lexical syllabuses need to be fleshed out.

In fact, what used to constitute grammar has got much smaller, as structures which used to be in the grammar section have been transferred to the lexical section. The person largely responsible for this shift of awareness is Lewis (1994). For example, look at ‘used to’ + infinitive. Not a tense, but an idiom, so nowadays we see it as lexis rather than grammar. Similarly, look at: ‘need’ + ing, ‘stop’ + ing, interesting vs interested, absolutely + extreme adverb, etc, etc. What is left, once all the non-essential grammar is taken out, is rather manageable. The tenses, the modals (although some say even these are actually lexical in nature and would be best taught as such), the article system, countables vs uncountables, noun phrase syntax, verb phrase syntax, whole sentence syntax, pronouns, etc.

Perhaps we just need a new kind of reference book, which covers both essential grammar *and* key lexis. Nowadays, this is what is happening more in practice, as with the very good *Business Grammar Builder* (Emmerson 2001), in which you will find much key lexis, including possibly the best explanation of ‘get’ yet to be found in a textbook.

But to get back to the point, the Present Perfect tense is definitely ‘grammar’. And it is definitely important in English. And its meaning and use are peculiarly English, which is why it is such a problematic false friend. My contention in this article has been that it is much easier to teach (and learn) using this approach, than it is using the approach traditionally taken in textbooks.

I would like to suggest a challenge. Try teaching it, and get back to the IH Journal with your experiences. We will collate them and post the results on the IH website in due course.

References

- Emmerson P (2001) *Business Grammar Builder* Macmillan
Lewis M (1994) *The Lexical Approach* Thomson Heinle
Soars L and J (2003) *Headway New Intermediate Students Book* OUP