

# Rethinking the teaching of the Past Perfect tense in an ESL classroom in Vietnam: An observation

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## Abstract

The teaching of the Past Perfect tense in English as a Second Language (ESL) classrooms in Vietnam remains a challenge, with many learners struggling to grasp its function and application. Drawing on personal experience and classroom observation, this article examines the limitations of traditional instructional approaches, particularly the tendency to define the Past Perfect tense solely as an indicator of an earlier past action. This narrow explanation neglects its key function in expressing events out of chronological order, leading to persistent confusion with the Simple Past tense and diminishing learners' perception of its relevance.

This article situates the issue within the broader literature on second language acquisition, highlighting the role of noticing in grammatical development. It critiques the widespread reliance on deductive instruction, which prioritises explicit rule presentation and controlled practice but often fails to foster deeper understanding or engagement, particularly among younger learners. While inductive approaches—where students infer rules from contextualised examples—have been shown to enhance engagement, they can be impractical within the constraints of typical Vietnamese classroom settings.

To address these challenges, the article proposes a blended instructional approach that integrates elements of both inductive and deductive teaching. By first exposing learners to the Past Perfect tense in meaningful discourse and subsequently reinforcing its structure through comparative analysis, this method provides multiple opportunities for noticing and conceptual clarity. In doing so, it seeks to improve students' ability to distinguish between tenses while maintaining motivation and participation.

## Context and problem

Despite being a compulsory subject since the 3rd grade in Vietnamese general education, English remains difficult for many Vietnamese students primarily due to inadequate teaching quality (Sundkvist and Nguyen, 2020). As a Vietnamese person, I encountered numerous challenges in my English classes at school, especially with the Past Perfect tense. Although I am now an advanced user of English, I occasionally still struggle to navigate the complexities of this tense. This struggle propelled me into reflecting on my experience of learning the tense as a student many years ago and rethinking the way the tense was taught to me. To do so, this article will detail my experience with the Past Perfect tense and review a prominent feature of the tense that was absent from how it was taught to me. Lastly, I will suggest approaches that might assist future teaching and learning of English as a second language in the Vietnamese or a potentially wider context

## The learners

The class in which I first learnt the Past Perfect tense took place when I was about 12-13 years old. It was a large-sized classroom occupied by 30-40 Vietnamese students, and none of us could speak any other languages other than Vietnamese. As I remember, our proficiency level ranged from A2 to B1 according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (Council of Europe, 2020). Although English language was a mandatory subject at my school, not all of the students were interested in learning the language.

## Keywords

ESL classroom  
Tense confusion  
Inductive and deductive teaching  
Noticing hypothesis  
Grammar instruction  
Learner motivation  
Task-based learning

## How I was taught

Similar to any other English lessons at school, the lesson for the Past Perfect tense lasted 45 minutes in total. In this 45-minute class, the teacher introduced the tense to us by giving its definition and explicitly explaining its structures, including how to form declarative, negation, and interrogative sentences using the tense. After the introduction, our teacher gave us stacks of worksheets with extensive fill-in-the-blank exercises to practice the tense.

What appeared most problematic about this approach was how my teacher defined the function of the Past Perfect tense, i.e. it is to indicate an action that occurred before another action in the past. An example was given to demonstrate the function, in which two actions in the past were mentioned but with different moments of occurrence:

“Before I went to bed, I had brushed my teeth”.

In detail, my teacher explained that the action of brushing teeth happened before the action of going to bed, hence it should be written in the Past Perfect tense to showcase which action took place before the other. Following this instruction, I produced sentences such as:

“I had finished homework, and I went to school”

Although the action of finishing homework happened before the action of going to school, the teacher advised that the Past

Perfect tense is not necessary to describe the first action, and that the Simple Past tense would suffice. Unfortunately, she never explained why. This has caused confusion not only for me but also to my peers because both Past Perfect and Simple Past tend to describe actions that happened in the past, and even in cases where the Past Perfect tense should be applied (according to my teacher's definition), the Simple Past tense can replace the Past Perfect tense. Therefore, the vague understanding of how this tense functions leads to two major problems: (1) the confusion with the Simple Past tense; and (2) the misconception that learning the Past Perfect tense is pointless since Simple Past is enough to talk about past actions.

Unfortunately, the confusion worsened due to the students' apathy towards understanding the tense which resulted from the fact that we were young teenagers with little motivation to learn English. Therefore, we were not interested in seeking further clarification from the teacher. In essence, the confusion between the Past Perfect and Simple Past tenses, combined with the lack of motivation and purposes to overcome ignorance led to my limited ability to use the Past Perfect tense.

Therefore, it is crucial to seek better explanation of the function of this tense to deal with the 2 consequences mentioned above, i.e. clear the confusion and simultaneously highlight the importance of learning it. To do so, I will discuss in the next part the characteristics of the Past Perfect tense in addition to how it should be taught.

## Literature review

### The characteristics of the Past Perfect tense

Apart from the students in my own 3rd grade class, many learners regard the Past Perfect tense as one of the most difficult tenses to deal with which causes learners numerous difficulties with the most common problem being the confusion with the Simple Past tense (Listia and Febriyanti, 2020; Esfandiari and Rath, 2014; Owen, 1967).

Although both tenses function to talk about the past, what distinguishes Past Perfect from Simple Past is that the former is used in circumstances where an action is not introduced in the chronological order in which it happened (Richards, 1979). In other words, the Past Perfect tense notifies the listeners of a false order of occurrence of the actions and vice versa, when a series of events are described in the correct sequence, there is no need to use the Past Perfect tense for preceding actions. For example:

(1) I woke up early, made coffee, and went to work.

(2) I woke up early and went to work, but I did not buy coffee because I had made some.

Evidently, the actions in (1) are reported in a chronological manner; therefore, the Past Perfect tense is not necessary for the actions of waking up early and making coffee even though they happened before the action of going to work. On the other hand, the action of making coffee preceded the action of going to work in (2), yet it is reported non-chronologically. Accordingly, the Past Perfect tense is applied to emphasise that the real sequence in which these actions happened differs from how they are reported.

However prominent this feature may be, many learners including myself were unaware of the out-of-sequence feature

possibly because it is neglected in many books written either for teachers or learners. Authors such as Hornby (1954); Allen (1967); Garner (2009) and Parrott (2010) provided a definition that is similar to what our teacher gave us and did not mention the out-of-sequence feature. Indeed, such neglect may prevent learners from drawing a distinction between the Simple Past tense and the Past Perfect tense, hence contributing to the confusion between the two tenses. This raises the necessity to provide supplementary information for solutions to these errors. Thus, viable methods to introduce the out-of-sequence aspect of the Past Perfect tense will be discussed in the next section.

### What is needed to learn a new language?

For learners to internalise a new idea, in this case is the function of the Past Perfect tense, learners must receive a sufficient amount of input (Krashen, 1982). Nevertheless, despite teachers' efforts to provide multiple resources to facilitate the learning process, learners can only take in what they pay attention to (Batstone, 1996). This phenomenon is called "noticing" (Schmidt, 1990), yet what is involved in the process of noticing remains a controversial topic among scholars. While Schmidt (1990) and Batstone (1994, 1996) view noticing as the realisation of the new language item in input, this concept is rather regarded as a learner's acknowledgment of both the gap between their current ability and the target language (Gass and Mackey, 2007). Arguably, both views appear persuasive as Thornbury (2001) concludes that the intake of a target item only happens when a learner recognises both the linguistic aspects of the item and his/her inability to use it to communicate a meaning. Considering this complex nature, teachers should provide multiple opportunities for noticing as learners do not always notice the new language item on the first try (Batstone, 1996). When looking back at how the tense was presented to us, the teacher unfortunately failed to provide any opportunities for noticing as we neither recognised the out-of-sequence feature nor the purpose of learning the grammar. This necessitates the recurrence of noticing tasks as well as better approaches to promoting the noticing of the function of the target tense for learners in my context.

### How to make students notice?

To ensure noticing, teachers should ask themselves the question to what extent of explicitness should noticing be? (Batstone, 1996). In other words, whether a teacher should approach teaching deductively, i.e. providing overt explanation of grammatical rules and structures, or inductively, i.e. allowing learners the opportunity to figure out the language themselves (Thornbury, 1999). Various studies have been conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the two approaches, yet the results are debatable. For example, Herron and Tomosello (1992) demonstrated how teaching inductively can be advantageous whereas Robinson's (1996) study identified the benefits of deductive instruction. More importantly, Ellis (2006) proposes that simple grammar rules can be taught deductively while more complex rules may require the inductive approach. However, it has been reported that neither of these approaches prevail (Rosa and O'Neill, 1999) and which approach should be used depends on the target learners and the aims of each lesson (Shaffer, 1989). Therefore, it is essential to analyse the pros and cons of both approaches to identify which is more appropriate for the teaching of the Past Perfect tense in my context.

When it comes to the deductive approach, there are many advantages to be noted such as time efficiency, allowing teachers more classroom control, and compatibility with adults or learners who prefer an analytical explanation of knowledge (Thornbury, 1999; Ur, 2011). The most prominent teaching model representing this approach is Presentation – Practice – Production (PPP) in which grammatical rules and structures are first straightforwardly delivered to learners, then are practiced under teachers' control and finally applied to real communication (Harmer, 2007; Ur, 2011). In this sense, it seems that our teacher employed the deductive approach to teaching the Past Perfect tense to us as we received explicit explanation of the rules. Arguably, this choice of approach was inappropriate which may have partially contributed to the failure of the lesson as deductive instruction as well as the PPP model being open to criticism for being too teacher-centred, leading to disengagement among young learners like students in my context (Scriveener, 1994; Thornbury, 1999).

Accordingly, it is worth shifting attention to the inductive approach which is considered more suitable for children due to its explorative characteristics. This approach is demonstrated by the teaching sequence named Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) which is viewed as the reverse model of PPP. Although both methods respect the importance of practice and afford learners chances for real communication, TBLT is thought to be less reliant on teachers' guidance and places emphasis on the learners' autonomy in identifying the target language through tasks (Willis, 1994; Harmer, 2007; Ur, 2011). Even though the inductive approach or TBLT appears more attractive and engaging, it requires a certain amount of time for the learners to work out the rules on their own (Thornbury, 1999). Considering the 45-minute time limit that we had for each lesson and the complex nature of the out-of-sequence feature, the inductive approach or the TBLT model appears to be an insufficient means of delivering the aims of the lesson.

Given the limitations of both approaches and teaching sequences, many educators subscribe to the idea of combining both inductive and deductive approaches to harness the advantages of both concepts. As noted by Thornbury (1999), the fusion of "elements of a task-based approach with a traditional grammar syllabus" (p.129) is in favour in many classrooms. Additionally, Ur (2011) advocates for the integration of both methods in accordance with the characteristics of the classroom. Specifically, the study by Esfandiari and Rath (2014) has proved the success of the mixed approach in teaching the Past Perfect tense by introducing the tense in two steps in which the first step is inductive and the second step is deductive. This also aligns with Batstone's (1996) suggestion for repeating opportunities for noticing. In particular, the first step provides input in the form of a conversation bringing together the Simple Past, Past Perfect, and Past Continuous tenses to reflect the fact that the Past Perfect tense always occur in combination with other tenses (Thornbury, 1999). Next, the rules and structures of the tense are presented explicitly alongside some examples extracted from the previous task to reinforce noticing.

Since this teaching sequence efficiently combines both inductive and deductive introduction as well as providing multiple chances for noticing, I will make some adaptations to operationalise such an approach with students in my future teaching context.

## Solutions

Similar to the study conducted by Esfandiari and Rath (2014), I plan to arrange two noticing tasks in my future lessons with the first being inductive and the second being deductive. My aim is to introduce the function of the Past Perfect tense to address its confusion with similar tense and assert the necessity of learning this grammar item.

To carry out the first task, the complicated nature of the Past Perfect tense and how TBLT or the inductive approach can be time-consuming as argued by Thornbury (1999), must be considered. Additionally, students' young age and their apparent lack of motivation to learn English can make them feel frustrated due to unsuccessful attempts to understand the tense by themselves. To avoid this frustration, it is important to use short, simple, and interesting texts such as stories which use both the Past Simple and Past Perfect tenses to demonstrate their regular co-existence of the two tenses in authentic contexts (Thornbury, 1999). Additionally, combining two tenses might aid students in identifying the sequence of actions mentioned in the story (Esfandiari and Rath, 2014). Notably, the use of the Past Perfect tense in the story must be compulsory and cannot be replaced by the Simple Past tense to affirm the significance of this tense in English. To achieve this aim, the use of Past Perfect tense here "represents a shifting back of a narrative use of Simple Past" (McGhie, 1978, p.72), or in other words, the tense must refer to an action that is reported in an unchronological order. McGhie (1978) also proposes some exemplary stories that are applicable to my context, such as the following story:

"May ran up the path to her house. She opened the door and called to her brother, Din. She was very excited. She had seen two elephants on the other side of the river. May and Din hurried back to the river to see the elephants" (p.72).

In this story, only the action of May seeing two elephants was introduced in the Past Perfect tense while the rest of the actions are described in the Simple Past tense. This isolation is likely to attract students' attention and leave them pondering why this specific action was told in a different tense. When reading this story more carefully, it is not difficult to realise that the action of seeing the elephants in fact happened before any other actions mentioned, yet it is not introduced first. With this implicit introduction, it is possible that students will notice both the form as well as the function of the Past Perfect tense.

Despite having been exposed to the use of the Past Perfect tense in comparison to the Simple Past tense through the story, it is still not guaranteed that noticing will happen. Therefore, there remains a demand for a second task to reinforce noticing by deductively introducing the forms and functions of the target tense along with examples to help students understand how the tense is used in discourse. For this task, I propose using comparative examples to showcase the difference between the Past Perfect and the Simple Past tenses. Simply put, two actions are described in two different ways, one of which conforms to the chronological order of occurrence whereas the other is reported in the wrong order in which the actions happened. For example, the two sentences below appear applicable:

(1) I finished homework, and I went to school.

(2) I went to school after I had finished my homework.

Obviously, both sentences describe the same actions of finishing homework and going to school, yet the time order of each example differs. As both sentences clearly point out that the action of finishing homework happens before the action of going to school, students can easily notice that example (1) reported the correct order of the actions, hence using the Simple Past tense for both actions. On the other hand, the Past Perfect tense is used in example (2) when referring to the action of doing homework as it is reported in the wrong order.

With this new approach, it is possible that learners will more likely have a better grasp of the function of the Past Perfect tense in comparison to the old teaching approach.

### Conclusion

To sum up, this article has addressed the most challenging aspect of the teaching of the Past Perfect tense in the classroom where I was a student. It is the insufficient explanation of how the tense functions that causes serious misunderstanding of the tense and its importance in our journey of learning English. To deal with such issues, a mix of both inductive and deductive approaches has been proposed to explain the function of the Past Perfect tense.

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