

Sensitising English Language Teachers to Time and Tense Through the Use of Humour

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Introduction

Something which confounds many English language teachers is the now well-argued case for the fact that English has only two formal “tenses”—past and present. These two tenses, together with the English aspectual system, cause consternation among many English language teachers. Lewis, in a short piece in an old edition of the *EFL Gazette* (1983), commented on how few English language teachers know the difference between tense, aspect, and mood in English, and how few feel they ought to know the difference; points which he develops in his later work (see for example, Lewis, 1994).

Much has been written recently about the English tense and aspectual system (Leech, 1978; Close 1992; Batstone, 1994), with some of Michael Lewis’s work (in particular *The English Verb*, 1994) conceptualising very clearly the notions with regard to time, tense, aspect, and modality in English. What Lewis attempts to do in much of his work is to generalise concepts and categories which are often treated—or explained—by teachers to their students as numerous sub-rules falling under higher concepts, or as exceptions to the “rule” which need to be learnt.

Despite the arguments presented for the English tense system, it is nonetheless difficult (certainly in Hong Kong) to get English teachers to believe that English does not in fact have as many tenses as Spanish or German (or even Latin!). Reference to future time in English is expressed not simply as the inappropriately-named “future tense” of “will plus base form of the verb” but by the English aspectual and modal systems.

As “interesting” as this concept may be to experienced teacher trainers or to teachers with a bent for linguistics, sessions on different aspects of language systems are too often presented rather dryly—usually from a rather theoretical standpoint. Consequently, they often fail to make an impression, or worse, to rouse trainees’ interest at all. I have been experimenting with using humour as an introduction to the topic, in an attempt to get around this “linguistic impasse.” Chiasson (2002), in a

recent article on the use of humour in the second language classroom, hits the nail on the head with a quote by Dickinson (2001): “Classrooms in which laughter is welcome help bring learning to life.” In the introduction to this book on humour in the classroom, Medgyes (2000)) also suggests that jokes and humour are an effective way of helping students remember key concepts. I concur very much with these two writers, and would suggest that humour can be equally as useful in teacher training.

The thrust of this article is, about a practical session where I use humour as an introduction to sensitising trainees to time and tense in English. In order to orient the reader, however, I will briefly discuss the concepts involved in time and tense before I describe the content of the session.

A key distinction concerning present and past time which Lewis makes (1994: 69-74) relates to the concept of immediacy/remoteness. This distinction is what essentially “conditions” a speaker to use present tense or past tense:

- * *temporal distance* the generally understood difference between present and past as “now” and “then”
- * *social distance* as with explanations about politeness: that “could” is more polite than “can,” for example
- * *psychological distance* as with the immediacy perceived in story, or joke, telling (the “historic present”) or making an event appear more “vivid”
- * *hypothetical distances* with “will” for the first conditional (“likely”) and “would” for the second conditional (“unlikely”); “wish” as in “I wish that Ferrari belonged to me.”

The Practice Session

I will now describe a practical session to lead trainee English language teachers (1) towards the issues of time, tense, and aspect. There are three activities here: the first involves a joke, the second and third involve acted-out scenarios.

Prior to the activities, as a warm-up, I ask teachers, in groups or pairs, to write down how many verb tenses they think English has, and to give me an example for each tense.

Activity One

I then ask teachers to put aside the work on tenses they've just been looking at. They should sit back and relax; I'm going to tell them two jokes. There is a linguistic point to the exercise, however, I tell them I'm going to tell the two jokes rather differently, and (apart from hopefully finding the jokes funny) they have to work out how the language of the two jokes is different.

I have experimented with different types of jokes here. One type of joke that lends itself quite well are those of the "three nationalities" variety. If this type of joke is known in your trainees' culture, you're all right. If it isn't, then you need to get them to appreciate the idea that things tend to get worse as the joke progresses through the characters. (It's also important that in one of the jokes your own nationality is the butt of the joke—otherwise things may seem a bit racist). This year, I tried some less nationality-bound jokes and experimented with that well-known international statesman, George W. Bush. My teachers found these jokes easier to accept. I include the two jokes below.

George W. Bush I (Past tense)

George W. Bush, Albert Einstein, and Pablo Picasso had all died. Due to some problems with the celestial time-space continuum mechanism, all three arrived at the Pearly Gates more or less at the same time, even though their deaths had taken place decades apart. The first to present himself to Saint Peter was Einstein. Saint Peter questioned him.

Saint Peter told Einstein that he looked like Einstein, but that he had no idea the things some people would do, to try and sneak into Heaven under false pretenses. He asked Einstein if he could prove who he really was. Einstein pondered for a few seconds and asked Saint Peter if he could have a blackboard and some chalk. Saint Peter complied with the snap of his fingers. The blackboard and chalk appeared instantly. Einstein then proceeded to describe with weird and wonderful mathematics and symbols his special theory of relativity. Saint Peter was very impressed, and told Einstein that he was sure that he really was Einstein. He welcomed Einstein to heaven.

The next to arrive was Picasso. Once again Saint Peter asked for his credentials. Picasso didn't hesitate. He asked if Saint Peter minded if he used the blackboard and chalk that Einstein had used. Saint Peter told Picasso to go ahead. Picasso rubbed out Einstein's formulas and proceeded to sketch out a truly amazing

drawing. Bulls, landscapes, women: he captured their essences with just a few strokes of the chalk. Saint Peter clapped and told Picasso that he really was the great artist he claimed to be. He told him to come on in.

The last to arrive was George W. Bush. Saint Peter scratched his head. He said to Bush that Einstein and Picasso had both managed to prove their identity. He asked Bush how he could prove his. Bush looked really confused. He asked Saint Peter who Einstein and Picasso were. Saint Peter sighed and told Bush to come on in.

George W. Bush 2 (Present tense)

George W. Bush calls his vice president Dick Cheney on the phone with a problem. It's quite early in the morning, so Cheney asks him what the problem is.

Bush tells Cheney that he's bought this jigsaw puzzle, but it's too hard. None of the pieces fit together and he can't see how to do the puzzle. He's been struggling with it ever since he got up, but he just can't seem to see how it's all supposed to fit together.

"What's the picture of?", Cheney asks.

"It's of a great big chicken," Bush replies.

Cheney tells Bush not to worry, says he'll come right over and have a look, see if they can figure it out together.

When Cheney arrives, Bush thanks him for coming over and leads him over to the kitchen table where he has it laid out. Cheney takes one look at what Bush has been struggling with and says, "Oh, for Heaven sake, George, put the cornflakes back in the box!"

The first joke has to be told all in the past tense, with no direct speech, all dialogue reported, tenses back-shifted etc. The second joke has to be told, as most jokes are, completely in the present tense ("psychological distance," in Lewis's term). If there is dialogue, this should also be in the present tense. Ideally, both jokes should take about the same time to tell—a couple of minutes at most. The second joke is a bit shorter than the first; this didn't matter, I found.

After each joke, I stop and see if students have got the punch line. (If they haven't, I give them a couple of clues). After finishing the second joke, I ask them which they found funnier—invariably, it will be the second.

From this, I then lead them back to the (slightly boring perhaps!) linguistic purpose of how the jokes were different. I get them to discuss this in groups, telling them to

ignore things like gesture, local context etc. It's only rarely that I have found that they can actually pinpoint the tense difference. Often they'll say things like "direct speech," "short sentences;" this, however, is a good enough lead towards bringing out the two-tense distinction. What I have done at times, is to tape-record the two jokes so that I can play back snippets. (You have to be careful here though, as you don't want to completely kill the jokes!)

Activity Two

We now move to the next activity. (Note that I am not yet ready to formally start discussing time and tense). The objective here concerns social distance, or politeness, in teachers' terms. I set the scene by telling my teachers that they are on holiday in London. They are looking for Big Ben, the clock, but are lost. A policeman passing by stops and asks if he can help. They have to ask him for directions. As this stage, I put on a UK bobby's helmet (picked up in a souvenir shop in Oxford Street while on holiday), rock on my heels and say:

"Good morning, miss. You appear to be having a problem. Are you lost?"

The teacher I address this to will inevitably say something like:

"Yes, I am. Em, could you tell me the way to Big Ben?"

At this point, I stop, take off my bobby's helmet and say "Right, same scenario—you're a tourist in London, looking for Big Ben, and you're lost. This time a young 10-year old boy comes up to you. You have to ask for directions again."

I now put on one of my 10-year old son's cap (backwards of course), get down on my knees (so that my eye level is lower than theirs), and start making noises, playing with one of his toy cars.

"Hello, miss. Looks like you're be having a problem. Are you lost?"

This brings out a response from one of my teachers such as:

"Yes, I am. Em, can you tell me the way to Big Ben?"

Activity Three

This brings us to the final activity—which concerns indirect speech, although I don't tell my teachers as such. In this activity, I whisper something in one teacher's ear, then move to the back of the class and prompt someone—who obviously hadn't been able to hear what I whispered—to ask "What did he say?" The teacher I whispered the sentence to then has to report (in whatever way she feels fit) to the other person across the class what I said to her. Below are a couple of the sentences I whisper and common ways of reporting them.

<i>Whispered sentence</i>	<i>Commonly reported as . . .</i>
“My son’s getting married in April.”	“He said his son’s getting married in April.”
“My daughter’s having a baby at Christmas.”	“He said his daughter’s having a baby at Christmas.”
“My father died last Easter.”	“He said his father had died last Easter.”
“I’m getting divorced in January.”	“He said he was getting divorced in January.”

You can see that “good news” (marriage, having a baby etc.) tends to be reported in the present tense (*immediacy*—the speaker is happy to be the bidder of good news) whereas bad news (divorce, death) tends to be reported in the past tense (the speaker would prefer to be more *remote* from such pieces of news).

We have now concluded the presentation activities and the scene is finally set for a more formal examination of the *immediacy/remoteness* concept, and how this links in with present and past tense. The point of the jokes is that these are told in the present tense, not because of the so-called “historic present” (e.g., the *Communicative Grammar of English* (Leech and Svartik, 1973: 69) but because giving immediacy to a joke tends to increase its chance of people considering it funny (and hence getting a laugh). Politeness can be understood in the same manner, as can the reporting of events. It is now time to take feedback on how many verb tenses teachers identified at the start of the session. Answers here vary up to as many as 24, depending on whether teachers have counted conditions, passives etc. as verb tenses. The stage is now set to move ahead and try and convince them that in fact there are only two tenses.

As homework, once we have examined the simple/continuous aspectual contrast, teachers are given a task. Firstly, this involved identifying—in at least two teachers’ reference grammars—the “uses” of the “present simple tense” as they are laid out in the grammar books. Common descriptive labels here are “general truth,” “universal time,” “present event,” “habit,” “talking about planned events in the future” etc. Secondly, they have to attempt to relate (to “generalise” in Lewis’s terms) the different uses to:

- * the sense of *immediacy* that present tense conveys
- * the sense of *complete, permanent, fact* that simple aspect encapsulates

Conclusion

This article has described a series of language awareness activities designed to get English language teachers to consider the important notions of time, tense and aspect in English and to adopt a more contemporary framework for describing these notions. The activities described are usually found to be engaging and entertaining by teachers, although the latter is of course not the primary purpose. They serve as a thought-provoking lead-in to get English language teachers to consider aspects of English language as currently described and accepted. Accepting the notion that English only has two tenses is not easy for many English language teachers who have been brought up with the paradigm of a “matrix” of past, present, future tenses overlaid with perfect, continuous and conditionals. By a series of engaging activities, I would suggest that the concept of “distance,” as it relates to tense, can be made much more accessible than an initial formal lecture on the subject.

Note: (1) The teachers were all local Hong Kong Chinese degree holders enrolled in a Post Graduate Diploma in Education programme at a university in Hong Kong.

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Conference Announcements

JALT CALL SIG. June 4-6, 2004. 9th Annual Conference—JALTCALL 2004, “Human Computer Interaction,” Tokiwa University, Mito, Japan. Contact: Annette Karseras, Conference Chair. E-mail:conf-chair@jaltcall.org. [Http://jaltcall.org/call2004](http://jaltcall.org/call2004).

Teachers of English. June 10-16, 2004. Annual Conference for Teachers of English 2004. “Reflective Teaching,” Dominican Republic, West Indies, Instituto Cultural Dominico Americano, Abraham Lincoln Ave. #21. Santo Domingo, D. R. Contact: Grisel Del Rosario. Tel. 809-535-0665 ext. 265-264. E-mail:idiomas@icda.edu.do
Santiago Location: Avendia Estrella Sadhala, Santiago, June 15-16, 2004. Contact: Agustin Francisco. Tel. 809 582 6627. E-mail:agustin_efco@hotmail.com. [Http://www.icda.edu.do/](http://www.icda.edu.do/).

Far Eastern English Language Teachers’ Association (FEELTA). June 24-27, 2004. The Fifth Pan-Asian Conference on Language Teaching at FEELTA 2004, “Sharing Challenges, Sharing Solutions: Teaching Languages in Diverse Contexts,” Vladivostok, Russia. [Http://www.dvgu.ru/rus/partner/education/feelta/pac5/](http://www.dvgu.ru/rus/partner/education/feelta/pac5/).

Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, Inc. (TESOL). June, 25-27, 2004. 2004 Academy, San Diego, California, USA. Contact: TESOL, 700 South Washington Street, Suite 200, Alexandria, Virginia 22314. Fax: 703-836-7864. E-mail:edprograms@tesol.org. [Http://tesol.org/](http://tesol.org/).

Australian Association for the Teaching of English (AATE), Australian Literacy Educators’ Association (ALEA), Primary English Teaching Association (PETA), National English, ESL and Literacy . July 4-7, 2004. Conference, “Get Real...and all that Spiel” in conjunction with AATE, ALEA and PETA, Sydney, Australia. Contact: ICMS Australasia Pty Ltd 234 George Street, Sydney, NSW Australia 2000. Tel. 61-2-9241-1478. Fax: 61-2-9251-3552. E-mail:info@getreal2004.com [Http://www.getreal2004.com/](http://www.getreal2004.com/).