



Tick Tock Verb Review

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I have been teaching English to junior and senior high school students for several years. I have found it important and useful for students to learn irregular verb forms because many of the verbs used in daily conversation and presented in junior and senior high school textbooks are irregular verbs. It is not easy for students to learn them consciously, so I have been exploring ways to help them acquire the forms through gradual practice over a long period of time. Like the chants that are a popular feature of many language classes today, reading and reciting to a rhythmical beat can help students acquire a degree of automaticity in the use of irregular verbs forms.

First, I prepare a handout compiled from the index of the junior high textbook series with a list of all the irregular verbs introduced in the series. For each verb in the list, I list the present form, the past form, the past participle, and a translation. Some readers will disapprove of the translation column. However, I do not use it; I simply provide it. I give the same list to all age groups in junior and senior high school. This means the first year junior high school students have many unknown verbs at first. This has not created a problem, and over a long period of time, students gradually learn them all.

The verbs are divided into four different categories depending on the shape of their past and past participle forms.

- A-B-C verbs like *eat, ate, eaten* or *take, took, taken* have different shapes in the present, past, and past participle forms.
- A-B-B verbs like *bring, brought, brought* or *stand, stood, stood* have the same shape in the past and past participle forms.
- A-B-A verbs like *come, came, come* or *run, ran, run* have the same shape for the present and past participle forms.
- A-A-A verbs like *cut, cut, cut* and *put, put, put*, have the same shape in all three forms.

In each category, the verbs are listed alphabetically. This arrangement helps students use the list as a verb dictionary.

Once the list is made, I spend a few minutes at the beginning of each lesson reading the list to the beat of a metronome, starting slowly on the first day, and gradually going faster as students get more used to the list. In the beginning, I have students just listen as I read with the metronome. I usually spend several days doing this. When they are ready,

I ask them to repeat after me. For example, I say, “*give, gave, given,*” and they repeat “*give, gave, given*” reading all three forms as an intact set. Sometimes they cannot pronounce the verbs correctly at first, but gradually, over a period of several months, depending on the level of the students, they improve a great deal. When they become comfortable with repeating after me, I sometimes have students read together with me. Another degree of difficulty can be added by having students fold their lists so that only the present tense verb column is visible.

With first year junior high school students, I usually introduce the chant in the second term. By then they are familiar with the English writing system. I might say, “Let’s look at the first quarter/half of the list today. While you listen to me read, follow the words with your finger.” With students in their second year or more, I introduce the whole list on the first day, because it is review for them. The key is not to stress them and not to use more than a few minutes each day. I usually tell them at the beginning, “Don’t worry if you don’t get it at first. We are going to use this list for a long period of time. Gradually, you will remember all the verbs without noticing.”

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Is it just for fun? At first when students see a metronome, they may think it is both fun and funny and get a bit excited. You may find some of your students dancing or moving their body to the beat of the metronome. As long as they are listening or repeating at the same time, this is fine. After a few days, students will concentrate more on the language. Even after it has become routine, however, students still find the activity to be fun. I often see students in the corridor, reciting words while rhythmically moving their bodies. If my students find review and practice to be fun, I think they will remain motivated.
2. Should we go faster and faster? Sometimes students ask, with big smile on their faces, to go really fast. I try to speed up only gradually knowing that I will use the list for a long period of time. I do not want to rush it. However, once in awhile, for a change, it is not a bad idea to set the metronome really fast so students are challenged to keep up with the beat. Students can have fun, and they can also see that they need more practice. In the next class, I continue with the usual speed again.
3. Do you test students? The standardized tests that my students take are more than enough testing, so I generally do not test them on this information formally. However once I think they know all the verbs in the list, I begin informal oral testing. For example, I have students work in pairs to “test” each other.

Conclusion

This rhythmical reading of verb forms takes only a few minutes out of a busy teacher's lesson. Students enjoy the chanting routine, but they also indirectly learn the value of review and repetition. In most cases, they end up knowing all the verbs on the list. When we reach that point, I use the list less frequently, rather than stopping it altogether. For example, I might use it every other day or once a week. Of course, students need more interactive classroom activities before they can actively and confidently use these verbs in spontaneous situations, but learning the list helps. I have many exchanges like this one:

Student: I have saw this movie twice.

Me: See...saw...?

Student Oh, scen!

About the Author

Saeko Tsukimi is a MATESOL candidate at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. She is also an English teacher at Okazakigakuen Junior and Senior High School in Aichi, Japan. She has been teaching English for 7 years. Although she devotes a few minutes each day to warming up her class with Tick Tock review, she is most interested in helping her students develop their communicative English language skills.

