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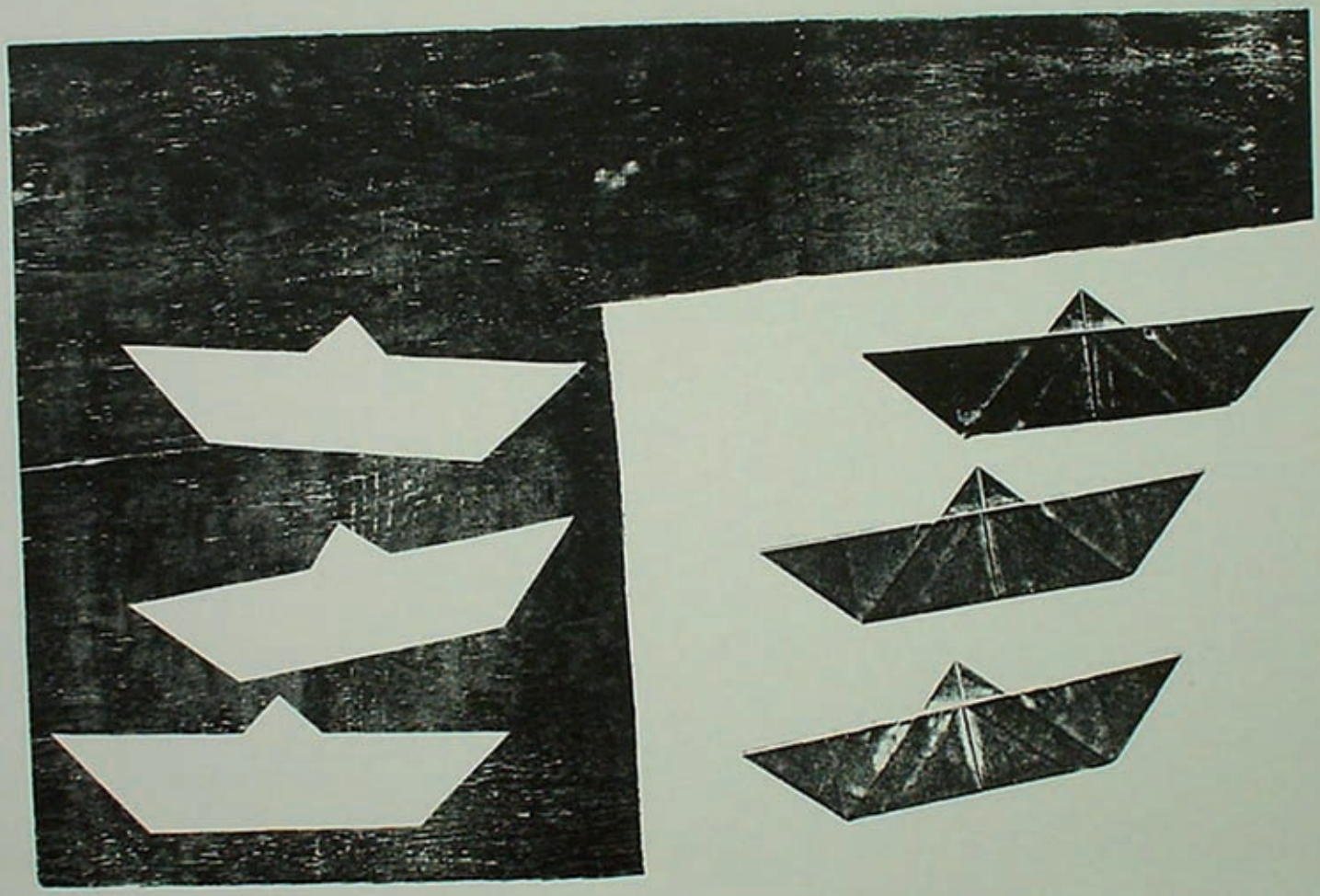

SURVIVAL ENGLISH GRAMMAR FOR ESOL TUTORS AND STUDENTS

Written by: Kieran Harrington
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Introduction

This guide was originally written for the Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) TESOL modules for students on the Higher Literacy Certificate and BA in Adult Education courses. It is also suitable for trainee tutors of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and for all English language students. In particular, it will be useful to the many tutors, both volunteer and paid, who work in the adult basic education services of the Vocational Education Committees in Ireland and who have not had formal language training. Native speakers of English or any other language know how to construct a sentence, express themselves clearly and intuitively identify when something sounds out of place. But native speakers cannot always explain the reasoning behind such processes. This guide will help tutors explain them to their students.

The guide is presented according to traditional grammar sections - verbs, nouns, etc, but tutors need to be aware that grammar should not be taught in this way. I have also included some elements of greater subtlety in response to questions that I have been asked during the delivery of the WIT course.

I wish to acknowledge the help of Dr Anne O'Keeffe, Mary McMahon and Martina Mannion in proofreading earlier and final drafts.

Kieran Harrington

1. VERBS

Verbs are usually the main focus of grammar books and language courses. They are defined normally with regard to action, but this is not always the case. *The Rottweiler killed the cow* is clearly an action, but *He understands his mistake* is not.

Learners of English initially encounter problems with tenses, auxiliaries, modals, negation, interrogation and tag questions and we will deal with these questions here. On the subject of "tenses", English has only two, the present and the past, and this is why I prefer to use the term "forms". The "future tense", for example, does not exist in the sense of Latin and Greek and modern European languages; the *shall / will* form is only one of many ways of expressing future. There is no change to the verb itself.

1. VERB CATEGORIES

1.1 Lexical verbs, auxiliaries and modals

Verbs are divided into two large groups, lexical verbs and auxiliaries and modals. Lexical verbs carry their own dictionary meaning; for example, *go* signifies movement from one place to the other. Auxiliaries and modals are used in conjunction with lexical verbs as helpers and mood providers as their names may suggest. Lexical verbs are further divided into transitive and intransitive, the former referring to a verb which affects a direct object:

He killed (transitive verb) *Kennedy* (object / receiver)

and the latter referring to those which do not have a direct object / receiver:

She arrived early

1.2 IRREGULAR VERBS

These are verbs that do not conform to the regular norms of conjugation. For example, we say *I like*, *you liked* (regular) but not *I goed*, *she goed*. These verbs are usually presented in grammar books in the following tabular format as follows:

Verb	Infinitive	Past	Past participle
Go	*go*	*went*	*gone*
Be	*be*	*was / were*	*been*

As far as learning strategies are concerned, tutors should be careful about presenting huge lists of verbs to be learned off by heart. This may be standard practice in secondary schools, but is hardly advisable in the ESOL context. The lists should be presented rather as a guide. Another point is that 'native' speakers of English do not always conform to the 'correct' forms to be found in these tables. One even hears journalists on both the BBC and Sky say such things as *He should have went* (for *he should have gone*). The point is that ESOL learner should be given a little space.

1.3 MODAL AUXILIARY VERBS

Modal verbs indicate the judgement of the speaker as regards likelihood (possibility, probability) desirability, obligation, necessity, expectation, prohibition, permission, refusal, willingness, suggestion.

1.3.1 Structure:

i)

Can + infinitive without *to*: *You can go*

Could + infinitive without *to*: *You could go*

May + infinitive without *to*: *You may go*

Might + infinitive without *to*: *You might go*

Shall + infinitive without *to*: *They shall pass*

Will + infinitive without *to*: *He will go*

Would + infinitive without *to*: *He would go*

Must + infinitive without *to*: *He must go*

Should + infinitive without *to*: *He should go*

Ought + to + infinitive: You ought to go

ii) None of the modals can be preceded by the auxiliaries *do* or *have*

iii) None of them can be conjugated (*I like*, *you like*, *he likes*, etc)

1.3.2 Use

Modals can be used to express likelihood, but all of them also have a second function. Below is an example of the some of the more important uses.

I must go (obligation)
He must be crazy (logical conclusion)
You must not enter (prohibition)
You can swim (ability)
It can get really hot here (possibility or inherent potential)
You can go in now (permission – informally)
You can't go in (prohibition)
You can't be serious (logical conclusion)
You may go in (permission)
It may rain (possibility)
You may not go in (prohibition)
You will already be familiar with this book (belief)
You'd (you would) be familiar with this, wouldn't you? (more tentative than *will*)
You should go now (suggestion)
He should be there by now (logical expectation)

You ought to go (suggestion)
You need to go over that (necessity)
They shall not pass (determination, decision)
Note: *will*, *shall*, *should* are also used as auxiliaries in tense formation:
It will rain tomorrow (future)
I should be grateful if … (conditional)

Note: auxiliary verbs will be dealt with below in the sections on different verb forms.

1.4 AUXILIARIES *DO*, *HAVE* AND *BE* IN NEGATION AND INTERROGATION

1.4.1 Interrogation (question forms)

We use the auxiliary do (did in the past) to form questions with lexical verbs in the simple present and past. The structure is:

DO / DOES / DID + SUBJECT+ INFINITIVE

Examples:

Affirmative (present): *He likes apples*
Interrogative: *Does he like apples?*

Affirmative (past): *He liked apples*
Interrogative: *Did he like apples?*

With the verb *be*, the various past and present forms are used to ask the question. The structure is:

IS / ARE / WAS / WERE + SUBJECT + ADJECTIVE

Examples:

Affirmative: *He is rich*
Interrogative: *Is he rich?*

Affirmative: *You are rich*
Interrogative: *Are you rich?*

Affirmative: *He was rich*
Interrogative: *Was he rich?*

In the perfect forms[1] (*I have painted* / *I had painted*), the auxiliary *have* is used to ask the question. The structure is:

HAVE / *HAS* / *HAD* + SUBJECT + PARTICPLE

Examples:

Affirmative (present): *He has painted the ceiling*
Interrogative: *Has he painted the ceiling?*

Affirmative (past): *He had finished before we arrived?*
Interrogative: *Had he finished?*

With modals the modal itself is used to ask the question. The structure is:

MODAL+SUBJECT+INFINITIVE

Examples:

Affirmative: *He must go now*
Interrogative: *Must he go now?*

1.4.2 Negation

We use the auxiliaries *do*, *be* and *have* and the modals to form the negative. The structures are:

SUBJECT+NEGATIVE OF *DO* + INFINITIVE
SUBJECT+NEGATIVE OF *BE* + ADJECTIVE
SUBJECT+NEGATIVE OF *HAVE* + PAST PARTICIPLE
SUBJECT+NEGATIVE OF MODAL +INFINITIVE

Example:

He does not (doesn't) care
He is not (isn't) rich
He has not (hasn't) finished
He must not (mustn't) go

1.5 THE PRESENT SIMPLE (THE 'SIMPLE PRESENT' IN SOME TEXTBOOKS)

- Structure:

I live
You live
He lives
She lives
It lives
We live
You live
They live

1 See sections 1.10.2 and 1.10.3

Note: it only changes once, adding the 's' for *he*, *it* and *she*.

- Use:

(i) For routine events:

I go to school every day

(ii) For permanent states:

He lives in Cork

(iii) With verbs that do not normally take the *–ing* form. These are usually verbs of perception, emotion, comprehension

I understand the Bible
I love Cork
I see the sun in the sky when I wake up in the morning

Note: when any of these verbs take the *–ing* form, it is because they are used with a different meaning.

He is seeing her = (he is going out with her)

They are hearing the case = (the trial is being held)

1.6 THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS / PROGRESSIVE

- Structure:

Subject + auxiliary *Be* in the present + the main verb with the *–ing* form

I am singing
You are singing
He is singing
She is singing
It is singing
We are singing
You are singing
They are singing

- Use:

(i) To express an action that is happening now

I am preparing this document

(ii) To express an action that is happening continuously over a certain period of time

I am reading a book on Shakespeare (but I am going to finish some day)

(iii) To express emotions such as irritation (from the point of view of the speaker) with adverbs of routine

The neighbours are always shouting

1.7 FUTURE ACTIONS OR EVENTS

There are various ways of referring to the future, here are some of them:

The Present Continuous / progressive

- Use:

(i) When a future event has been pre-arranged:

I'm flying to New York on Friday

The Present Simple

- Use:

(i) In schedules:

The bus for Limerick leaves at 6 pm

(ii) Definite impersonal-sounding future arrangements:

His case begins on Monday

Will / shall

- Use:

(i) Predictions:

It will rain in Galicia tomorrow

(ii) Spontaneous decision referring to immediate future:

I'll get it (after phone rings)

(iii) Conditions:

If it rains, I'll go home

(iv) After the verb *think* and the expression *I'm sure*:

I think I'll go

Note: The first person of the *will* form is *shall*; it is not used in some regions, but does appear more regularly in formal contexts.

Going To

Use:

(i) Intentions:

I'm going to travel to New York in the spring (but it's not arranged yet)

(ii) Inevitability:

She's going to have a baby

1.8 CONDITIONAL SENTENCES

Conditional sentences take the form *if*… (*then*)…, and as the name suggests, they express conditions. Below we will look more closely at the four types of condition.

1.8.1 Open Conditions

- Structure

If + subject + present simple, + subject + *will* + infinitive

The *if* part of the sentence is expressed with the present simple, and the realizable / possible part of the condition is expressed by *will*+infinitive.

If you leave now, you will get there by noon

	Subject	**Present simple**		**Subject**	**will**	**Infinitive**	
If	you	leave	now	you	will	arrive	by noon

You can also turn the sentence around, but the condition (*if*) and the possible realization are still expressed by the same forms:

You will get there by noon if you leave now

- Use

These are conditions that may or may not be fulfilled. We make such statements when the action or event is realisable / possible. Here are a few examples:

If you touch that plate, you'll (you will) burn your hand
If it rains, I'll go home
I'll go home if it rains
If he passes the exam, he will go to university

1.8.2 Counterfactual (to present fact) or hypothetical conditions (also referred to as the 'second' conditional)

- Structure

If + subject + past simple, + subject + *would* + infinitive

The *if* part of the sentence is expressed with the past simple, and the counterfactual / hypothetical part of the condition is expressed by *would* + infinitive.

If I won the lotto, I would have loads of friends

	Subject	Past Simple		Subject	Would	Infinitive	
If	I	won	the lotto	I	would	have	loads of friends

You can also turn the sentence around, but the condition (*if*) and the hypothesis is still expressed by the same forms:

I would have loads of friends if I won the lotto

- Use

In these sentences, the conditional part expresses what is slightly possible, remotely possible, imaginary or hypothetical, or contrary to fact. Here are a few examples to demonstrate these points:

If I caught the train at nine, I would get there by ten > slight possibility
If I won the lotto, I would have loads of friends > remote possibility
If I lived in California, I would be happy > contrary to fact

Note: sometimes the speaker has to choose between using an open condition or a hypothetical condition, and this depends on the degree of possibility:

If it rains tomorrow we won't be able to play the match
(You are in Ireland)

If it rained, we could collect some water in the cup
(You are in the Sahara dessert)

1.8.3 Unreal conditions (past time reference and often referred to as the 'third' conditional)

- Structure

If + subject + *had* + past participle, subject + *would* + *have* + past participle

The *if* part of the sentence is expressed with the past perfect, and the counterfactual / hypothetical part of the condition is expressed by *would* + *have* + past participle.

Note: past perfect = *had* + past participle (*had lived*)

If I had won the lotto, I would have made loads of new friends

If	Subject	*had*	Past Participle	Subject	Would	*have*	Past Participle
If	I	had	won	I	would	have	made …

You can also turn the sentence around, but the condition (*if*) and the hypothesis is still expressed by the same forms:

I would have made loads of new friends if I had won the lotto

- Use

These sentences express what is contrary to fact, what in fact you didn't do, what in fact was not the case. There is also an element of regret in the expression, in the sense of *if I had done that, this wouldn't have happened*. Here are a few examples of the use of unreal conditions in the past:

If you had studied, you would have passed your exams
(The sense is: you *didn't* study)

If Maldonado had not taken drugs, he would have continued playing much longer
(The sense is: he *did* take drugs)

If it hadn't rained, the match would not have been called off
(The sense is: it *did* rain and the match was called off)

1.8.4 0 (zero) conditions: cause and effect

- Structure

If + subject + present simple, + subject + present simple

The *if* part of the sentence is expressed with the present simple, and the realizable part of the condition is also expressed by present simple

If you heat water, it boils

If	Subject	Present Simple		Subject	Present Simple
If	you	heat	water	it	boils

You can also turn the sentence around, but the condition (if), and the possible realization, are still expressed by the same forms:

Water boils if you heat it

- Use

These are statements of universal truth, laws or validity. The sense is really not of a condition but of an eventuality and the *if* corresponds closely in meaning to *when*. Here are some examples:

If I make a promise, I keep it (this is something you *always* do)
If you don't water flowers, they die
If you heat ice, it melts

Note the difference in these two sentences:

If you don't water flowers, they die
If you don't water the flowers, they will die

The first is a (zero) condition, a universal truth, referring to all flowers. The second is an open condition referring to specific flowers, as when someone is going on holidays and asks someone else to water the flowers.

1.9 *HAVE*

Have is used both as an auxiliary and as a lexical verb.

As an auxiliary verb it functions as follows:

1. In the present perfect:

I have looked / we have looked
You have looked / you have looked
He / she / it has looked / they have looked

Notice that the question and negative are also formed with have / has:

Have you been in England? No, I haven't

Notice that the tag question is also formed with *have / has*:

He has been in England, hasn't he?

Careful with the abbreviated form *He's*, this can mean:

He is (as in He's late again)

or

He has (as in *He's taken the car again*)

Learners may confuse these forms, especially in tags: *He's late again, hasn't* (sic) *he?*

1.9.1 In the Past Perfect

I had looked / we had looked
You had looked / you had looked
He, she, it had looked / they had looked

Notice that the question, the negative and the tag are formed with *had*:

Had he rehearsed the speech before going on stage? No, he hadn't
He had killed the cat before his wife came home, hadn't he?

1.9.2 Expressing possession but accompanying *got*

I have got a car / we have got a car
You have got a car / you have got a car
He, she, it has got a car / they have got a car

Notice that the question, the negative and the tag question are formed with *have / has*

Has he got a car?
He hasn't got a car
He has got a house, hasn't he?

This is a typical British usage of *have* with *got*, and essentially means *to have obtained*. *Got* comes from the verb *get*.

As a lexical verb *have* functions as follows:

1. Expressing possession without '*got*'.

I have a car / we have a car
You have a car / you have a car
He, she has a car / they have a car

Notice that the question, the negative and the tag question are formed with *do / does*.

Does he have a car?
He doesn't have a car.
He has a house, doesn't he?

This is a typical American and Irish usage.

2. With *breakfast*, *lunch*, *dinner*, *supper*, *a bath*, *a drink*, *a coffee*, *a beer* etc..

I have lunch / we have lunch
You have lunch / you have lunch
He, she, it has lunch / they have lunch

Notice that the question, the negative and the tag question are formed with *do / does*.

Do you have lunch?
No, I don't
He had lunch, didn't he?

3. *Have to* expressing general obligation

I have to go to work every day, etc.

Questions, negatives and tags use *do / does*:

Do you have to go?
No, I don't

He has to read that book, doesn't he?

Got forms are possible in informal English:

I've got to go ('*I've gotta go*' in American)

4. Causative '*have*'

I have my son cut the grass every week
I had my son cut the grass

Notice: the question, the negative and the tag are formed with *do/does*

Do you have your son cut the grass?
No, I don't
You had your son cut the grass, didn't you?

1.10 FORMS USED TO EXPRESS PAST TIME

1.10.1 The Past Simple

- Structure

The past simple is formed by adding *–ed* to the infinitive of the regular verb. There are many irregular forms, especially with common verbs such as *be*, *go*, *have*, etc.

Notice that the *–ed* form has three different pronunciations, the mastery of which is important for the foreign learner.

The *–ed* ending is pronounced /t/ after an unvoiced consonant (p, k, f, s):

Look – Looked – pronounced /lukt/

The *–ed* ending is pronounced /id/ if the infinitive ends in /t/ or /d/:

Start – started – pronounced /sta:tid/

The *–ed* ending is pronounced /d/ after vowels and all other consonants (voiced):

Rob – Robbed – pronounced /robd/

- Use

1. It is used when a definite date (a moment in the past) is mentioned:

He became King in 1976
They left at 4pm

2. When you know that the action has definitely finished:

I lived in London until I was fourteen

3. It is used for repeated, sequential happenings in narratives:

He walked in, ate a hamburger, shot the barman and left.

Notes:

1. Its use is distinguished from the present perfect (*have/has looked*) in that the action referred to is finished, whereas with the present perfect the action is either finished or there are still possibilities for an action to be carried out.

Did you see the United Nations building? (you have come back)
Have you seen the United Nations building? (you are still in New York)

2. Its use is distinguished from the past progressive (*was/were looking*) in that the past simple is the tense that refers to an action that happens whilst another *was* taking place:

When I got up this morning my wife was painting the kitchen.

3. Its use is distinguished from the past perfect (*had looked*) in that if there are two actions in the past, the most recent one is expressed by the past simple:

I explained that I had suffered a delay (i.e. I had suffered the delay first)

1.10.2 The Present Perfect

- Structure

Have + past participle of the main verb (the *–ed* form of regular forms, or the second irregular form of irregular verbs given in verb tables – *Speak – spoke – spoken*).

Regular	Irregular
I have looked	*I have spoken*
You have looked	*You have spoken*
He/she has looked	*He/she has spoken*
We have looked	*We have spoken*
You have looked	*You have spoken*
They have looked	*They have spoken*

- Use:

1. To refer to actions that began in the past but continue in the present:

He has lived in Ireland four years (He arrived four years ago and is still here)

2. To refer to actions in the past or recent past when the time/date is not mentioned.

200 people have died in a bomb blast in Madrid (news bulletin)

3. To refer to an action which may be considered part of your life experience:

I have been in New York

4. When an event in the past has important results in the present (we are more interested in the effect on the present or future):

I have decided to run away

Notice:

She's crying. Oh, dear. What have you said?
She's crying. Sorry, what did you say?

In the first question we are interested in the result with reference to the present. In the second, we are interested in the past, i.e., *you didn't hear*.

5. With *since* and *for*:

He has been living in Ireland for four years
He has been living in Ireland since 2000.

Note: *since* is used with a date and *for* with the duration of the action

1.10.3 The Past Perfect

- Structure:

Had + past participle of the main verb:

I had looked	*I had spoken*
You had looked	*You had spoken*
He/she had looked	*He/she had spoken*
We had looked	*We had spoken*
You had looked	*You had spoken*
They had looked	*They had spoken*

- Use:

1. We use this form for events or states that precede a particular point in the past. If there are two actions in the past mentioned, the most historic is in the past perfect form, the most recent in past simple:

George Bush had never been (1st action) *outside the USA before he became* (2nd action) *president.*
I explained (2nd) *to him that I had not studied* (1st) *the lesson.*
When I met (2nd) *my wife she had been* (1st) *chairwoman of Coca Cola for five years.*
He told (2nd) *the judge he had never seen* (1st) *that woman*

2. The present perfect becomes past perfect in reported speech:

I have lived in Ireland for four years
He said he had lived in Ireland for four years.

1.10.4 The Past Continuous / Progressive

- Structure:

Subject + *Was / were* + *ing* form of main verb

I was reading when …
You were reading when …
He / she was reading when …
We were reading when …
You were reading when …
They were reading when …

- Use:

1. We use the past continuous to refer to an incomplete or temporary action in the past (usually what was happening, when something else occurs (this action is expressed in past simple):

We were watching TV when the phone rang
The girl was drowning (But she didn't drown)

2. The present continuous becomes past continuous in reported speech:

"I'm reading a book by Tolstoy."
He said he was reading a book by Tolstoy

1.10.5 *Used to / would*

- Use:

Used to and *would* are semi-modal verbs and refer to habitual past events

Events:

I would run all the way home after a school when I was a child
I used to run all the way home after school when I was a child
I used to go to see Manchester United with my dad every weekend
I would go to see Manchester United every weekend

States:

Herein lies the difference between *would* and *used to*. Only *used to* can be employed to refer to states (not repeated actions) in the past

I used to live in a house on the outskirts of the city
~~*I would live in a house on the outskirts of the city*~~

Note: residing in a house is considered a state, not an action.

You can't say: *I resided in my house every day for three years.*

I used to be able to swim when I was a child. But now I can't.
~~*I would be able to swim when I was a child.*~~

Note: ability is a state in the past, not an action.

Contrast: *I would go for a swim every day after school* (action)

1.10.6 The Progressive / Continuous Perfect Forms

Present Perfect Continuous / Progressive

- Structure:

Subject + *Has / have been* + *-ing* form of main verb:

I have been studying here for two months
You have been studying here for two months
He has been studying here for two months
She has been studying here for two months
We have been studying here for two months
You have been studying here for two months
They have been studying here for two months

- Use:

The Present Perfect and Present Perfect Continuous are similar in usage.

Remember: the Present Perfect is used for actions that began in the past and continue in the present. This is true also of the Present Perfect Continuous, except that it reflects actions and situations that are more temporary and emphasizes the continuity of the action. Notice the difference:

Temporary

My parents have lived in Cork all their lives.
I have been living in my friend's flat for the last month

Continuity

She has been sitting there all day (emphasizes the continuity to the point of annoyance)
She has sat there all day (no connotation attached; it just reflects duration)

Sometimes the choice may be open, depending on the speaker's intention, attitude and focus:

I have been studying French for thirty years (focus on activity)
I have studied French for thirty years (focus on duration)

Notice also the following:

I have read your book (this means that you are not reading it any more)
I have been reading your book (this simply states that you have had somebody's book, but doesn't state whether you have finished it or not)

Note:

1. The Present Perfect Continuous can't be used for repetition:

I have read that book ten times
~~*I have been reading that book ten times*~~

2. The Present Perfect Continuous can't be used with verbs that do not normally take the *–ing* form (verbs of perception, etc)

I have seen that film
~~*I have been seeing that film*~~

1.11 PHRASAL VERBS

- Structure

There are three possible combinations:

Verb + (adverbial) participle: *slow down, take off*

Verb + preposition: *rely on, be with*

Verb + particle + preposition: *put up with*

The following is a list of those phrasal verbs which the foreign learner will encounter on a daily basis.

Turn, stand, be, go, get, call, carry, break, take, put, give, work, bring, see, run

Note: One of the most important aspects for the foreign learner, apart from learning the phrasal verbs themselves, is to determine whether it is possible to separate the verb from the adverb or preposition. The patterns are

a) Verb+ particle + object

b) Verb + object + particle

Make up your mind / make your mind up > a) or b)

Stand in for someone > a)

Work out the sum > a) or b)

Show him in > b)

- Use

A phrasal verb normally has more than one meaning and may be idiomatic or non-idiomatic. If it is idiomatic it has a special meaning which is not easily deductible from the original lexical verb meaning. They pose a great difficulty for learners as many languages do not have such equivalents. It is useful to note the different influences on English here. The phrasal verb usually comes from Anglo-Saxon and there is a corresponding verb which has come from Latin-influenced Norman French, for example, *carry on* (phrasal verb) and *continue* (Latin-derived equivalent). Phrasal verbs are used in an informal context, whilst the Latin-type verbs are used in formal contexts such as writing

A) *The ice was thin and Joan fell through.*

Non-idiomatic meaning closely connected to the original meaning of the verb *fall*.

B) *I had plans to go to the States, but they fell through*

Idiomatic meaning which bears no relation to the original, 'physical' meaning of 'fall'.

1.12 QUESTION TAGS

The most common use of question tags is in questions which expect confirmation of the speaker's statement.

- Structure:

i) If the statement is affirmative, the tag is negative, and vice-versa.

He is Spanish, isn't he?
He isn't Spanish, is he?

ii) If a modal or auxiliary is used in the statement, it is also used in the tag

He must go, mustn't he?
He has arrived, hasn't he?

iii) If a lexical verb is used in the statement in the simple present or past, *do* and *did* are used in the tags:

He likes apples, doesn't he?
He liked apples, didn't he?

iv) The imperative (ordering) is tagged with *will you*:

Shut the door, will you?

v) *Let's* is tagged with *shall we?*

Let's go home, shall we?

2. Prepositions

The most basic use of prepositions is to indicate location and direction. But they are also used quite commonly with expressions of time, and here they cause the foreign learner many problems. I have concentrated mainly on the prepositions *in*, *at* and *on*, but I have also highlighted some areas of doubt, such as the difference in use between *in* and *into*. A good test here with regard to a native speaker's awareness of the use of language is to ask him or her to explain the difference between *in* and *into*.

2.1 *ON*, *IN*, *AT* USED IN EXPRESSIONS OF TIME

On

- Use:

Whenever the day is mentioned:

On Sunday
On Sunday morning
On Christmas Day

In

- Use:

1. Whenever the month, the season, the week, the year, the century, the millennium are mentioned:

In March
In spring
In 1963
In the First Millennium
In the 20th Century

2. In certain phrases:

In the meantime
In the afternoon
In the morning
In the evening
In two days' time (which means: within two or three days)

At

- Use

1. With festivals

At Christmas
At Easter

2. With the hour / time

At 6pm

At 3:30am

3. For mealtimes:

At lunch
At dinner

4. In certain phrases (which usually refer to certain times):

At night
At once
At the break of day
At nightfall
At dawn
At midnight
At the weekend

2.2 PLACE AND LOCATION: *AT/ON/IN* USED IN EXPRESSIONS OF PLACE AND LOCATION

In general *at* is used when we talk about position *at a point*:

At the door
At the table
At the window
At the crossroads
At the pole

On is used when we talk about position on a surface:

On the roof
On the table
On the river
On the coast
On the land
On the island

In within a three dimensional place:

In the room
In the tall building
In the shed

But with two dimensions:

In the garden
In the field

Further usage:

At

- Use:

1. When we are more interested in the activity going on rather than the place:

At the party
At school
At church
At a lecture
At he cinema
At the theatre
At the meeting
At mass
At the match (but in the stadium)
At work
At home

Contrast:

My son is at school (I am at work talking about him, saying that he is attending class)

He is in the school (meaning his bodily location, not the fact that he is attending class)

Similarly *at church* means worshipping, *in the church* refers to your location, the place you can be found if someone is looking for you.

At the corner (normally of a road)

In the corner (normally in a room)

2. It is often used with roofless 'buildings':

At the airport
At the bus station
At the train station
At the market

In

- Use:

1. With geographical place names:

In the city
In Liverpool
In the country
In Ireland (Note: we say *on* if the words *island* or *isle* appears: *On the Isle of Man)*
In Europe
In the town
In town (in the city centre)

2. When we are more interested in referring to the building and not the activity:

He is in the church talking to his parishioners
He is in the school looking for his books

Contrast:

In the garden refers to someone's position with the larger bi-dimensional space
On the lawn refers to position on top of something
In the tree refers to position within the leaves and branches
On the tree refers either to position relative to the ground or to refer to topmost position

2.3 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *IN* AND *INTO*

The difference is best seen in examples:

He is in the house
He went into the house
He went in

In is used when there is no mention of the place and when the verb expresses motion. We do not say, for example, '*get into*' when we want someone to enter a car, we say: '*Get in*'.

2.4 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *THROUGH* AND *ACROSS*

Across: the movement is on a surface

Through: the movement within

We walked across the street
We walked through the forest

2.5 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *OVER* AND *ACROSS*

The terms are usually interchangeable:

We walked across / over the bridge

but sometimes a difference can be seen:

He climbed over the fence
He climbed across the fence

Across is not used for movement over hedges, fences, barriers etc.

He walked across the room / He walked ~~over~~ the room

Over is not used for movement across an area (pitch, field, court, desert) when we mean from one side to the other.

2.6 THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *OVER* AND *ON*

On usually expresses that there is friction / touch with a surface, *over* usually the opposite, although *over* can refer to a position above a door, for example:

The book is on the table

The book is over the table (either someone is holding it or it is on a shelf over the table)

3. Determiners

Determiners are a class of words that are used alongside nouns and have the function of defining, limiting or locating the noun. The most common determiners are:

The (definite article)

A / an (indefinite article)

This, these, that, those (demonstrative adjectives)

My, your, etc (sometimes defined as possessive adjectives)

Many learners will make mistakes with the use of the article in English, and even some advanced or fluent speakers will have reached a phase of fossilization, i.e., the mistake is almost impossible to correct. The Slavic languages (Russian, Ukrainian, Serbian, Croatian, Bulgarian, etc) do not use the definite article and tend to omit it (*the*) in English. The Romance languages (Italian, French, Spanish, Galician, Catalan, and Portuguese) on the other hand use the definite article (*the*) before abstract nouns and you will very often hear them make mistakes such as, "the (sic) happiness".

3.1 GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF THE ARTICLE:

1. The indefinite article is not used with uncountable nouns: *milk, sugar.*
2. The definite article is only used with uncountable nouns when it refers to a specific one:

   Milk (in general) is good for you.
   The milk on the kitchen table

3. The article is not used with proper nouns:

   Ford makes great cars
   ~~The~~ Ford makes great cars

4. Certain common terms of time, place and transport don't take the article:

   At midnight
   By train
   In bed

5. The article is not used with abstract nouns in general terms, when it is only qualified by an adjective in front of it or when the qualifying words after it refer to place:

   Life is sometimes difficult
   Modern life is complicated
   He has written a book on life in Greece

   But:

   He has written a book on the life of ancient Greeks.
   He decided to give up the life he'd been leading

Note: We give learners the rule – *a* is used for *an* before a vowel. But it is not a vowel in the graphological sense. We are referring to the sound. Thus, the occasion will arise when the learner will come up with some of the following 'anomalies':

A university (this is because the 'u' here sounds as a consonant)

An FAI spokesman (this is because the letter 'f' (ef) begins with a vowel sound.

3.2 *THIS, THAT, THOSE, THESE* (DEMONSTRATIVES)

These words are used to refer to people or things in a specific way. *This* and *these* are used to refer to people or things that are close to the speaker; *that* and *those* are used about people who are more distant in time and place.

Note: *this* and *these* are used in conjunction with the adverb *here* and the verb *come*; *that* and *those* are used in conjunction with the adverb *there* and the verb *go*:

This table right here
That house over there
Come over here to this table
Go over there to that house

3.3 POSSESSIVE DETERMINERS: *MY, OUR, HIS, HER, OUR, YOUR, THEIR*

Note 1: These words are used in English to refer to a specific part of someone's body, whereas many other languages use the article *the*.

Note 2: Careful with *his*, which functions as both adjective and pronoun:

He gave me his garden tools (adjective)
because his are better than mine (pronoun)

All the other forms have separate pronoun forms: *mine, yours, hers, ours, yours, theirs:*

My house/mine

3.4 GENERAL DETERMINERS: *FEW, LITTLE, MANY, MUCH, SOME, ANY*

3.4.1 *Few, little*

Few is used with countable nouns and *little* with uncountable nouns:

I have few friends
I have little patience

Note: *few* and *a few* cause foreign learners problems. The difference is one of point of view. *Few* is negative in outlook and suggests 'not many'; *a few* is positive and suggests two or three at least:

I have few friends (not many, it worries me)
I have a few friends in Cologne (positive statement of fact)

Little and *a little* behave in the same way:

I have little money
I have a little money in the Caherdavin branch

Note: at times learners are a little perplexed when you tell them that money is uncountable. We are actually referring to the word and not the countable elements, such as pesetas, dollars, etc. You can say:

I have a few dollars left

but not:

I have ~~a few~~ money left.

The correct form is:

I have a little money left

3.4.2 *Many, much*

Many is used with countable nouns:

I have many friends

Much is used with uncountable nouns and normally in the negative:

I haven't much patience

A lot of replaces *much* in affirmations:

I have a lot of patience

3.4.3 *Some, any*

Some is used with plural countable nouns and with uncountable nouns:

I've got some books (plural countable noun)
He's got some patience (uncountable noun)

Any is used with plural countable nouns, with uncountable nouns in questions and negatives:

Have you eggs?
Have you any patience?
I haven't any eggs
I haven't any patience

Note: *Any* and *no* are synonymous in negatives, as are their compound varieties:

I have no friends
I haven't any friends
I have nothing left
I haven't anything left
I have nowhere to go
I haven't anywhere to go

If the verb is positive *no* or its compounds are used

If the verb is negative *any* or its compounds are used.

Note: some teachers tell students that *any* is used in questions and *some* in positive statements, but this is not always the case:

Have you any wool?

You would not normally say: *Have you some wool?*

However when one is offering something or when one knows that the other person does possess the thing asked about, *some* is used:

Would you like some coffee?
Mum, can I have some money?
Have you some friends in London?

(Here the speakers will have heard the other person / interlocutor say before that he or she does have friends in London and is only confirming).

4. Adjectives

In traditional Grammar books, adjectives are said to qualify nouns, but it is perhaps easier to think of them as either describing the noun or adding information about it. Adjectives used in English are problematic for learners, especially with regard to adjectival order and the fact that many other languages place the adjective after the noun.

4.1 ADJECTIVES TYPICALLY OCCUR

i) after forms of *be* > *He is intelligent*

ii) after articles and before nouns > *A good boy*

iii) after intensifiers like *very* > *A very good boy*

4.2 PARTICIPLE ADJECTIVES

The past and present participles of verbs sometimes function as adjectives:

i) *A boring book*

Boring comes from the verb *bore* and substitutes the clause "*that will bore you*".

ii) *The umbrella left in the café in Medina del Campo*

Left comes from the verb *leave* and substitutes the clause "*that was left*".

iii) *A good-looking girl*

Compound adjectives can be formed by adding a participle to a noun, another adjective or adverb – in the above case another adjective (*good*).

iv) A broken glass

Participles act as classifiers that cannot normally be qualified by *very*. You can't say "*a very broken glass*".

v) A talented musician

Adjectives formed by adding *–ed* or *–ing* to noun phrases.

4.3 ADJECTIVAL ORDER

When more than one adjective is used to describe a noun, the following (simplified) order scheme is followed:

	Quality / size	**Colour**	**Class / nationality**	
A	Handsome	brown	German	Rottweiler
A	Huge	brown	pedigree	Rottweiler

Quality: these adjectives identify a special quality the noun has

Class: these adjectives further classify or identify

This order is not always followed, especially when either the speaker or the writer intends to highlight something:

A handsome, brown enormous Rottweiler

4.4 COMPARISON OF ADJECTIVES

4.4.1 Degree of Comparison

There are three degrees of comparison, positive (equal), comparative and superlative.

4.4.2 Positive comparison

Affirmative: *as…. as*

Negative: *not as/not so…. as*

He is as tall as his father
He is not as tall as his father
He is not so tall as his father

4.4.3 Comparative

i) We use the word *than* to link the two elements that are being compared.

ii) One syllable adjectives form the comparative by adding *–er*:

bright – brighter
fat – fatter (notice the double 't')

iii) Adjectives of two (with some exceptions) or more syllables are preceded by *more*:

more interesting

iv) Exceptions:

Two-syllable adjectives ending in 'y' changes the 'y' to 'i' and add *– er*:

happy – happier

Two syllable adjectives ending in –er usually add –er:

clever – cleverer

4.4.4 Superlatives

v) We use the word *than* to link the two elements that are being compared.

vi) One syllable adjectives form the comparative by adding *–est*:

bright – brightest
fat – fattest (notice the double 't')

vii) Adjectives of two (with some exceptions) or more syllables are preceded by *the most*:

The most interesting

viii) Exceptions:

Two-syllable adjectives ending in *y* changes the *y* to *i* and add *–est*:

happy – happiest

Two syllable adjectives ending in *–er* usually add *–est*:

clever – cleverest

4.4.5 Irregular comparisons

Good	*better*	*the best*
Bad	*worse*	*the worst*
little	*less*	*least*
many	*more*	*the most*
far	*farther*	*the farthest* (distance and time)
far	*further*	*the furthest* (people and things)

Note: *fewer* is used when referring to countable nouns and *less* when referring to uncountable nouns:

I have fewer friends than my brother
I have less patience than my wife

However, in practice, this 'rule' does not seem to be followed any more. I heard the writer, Roddy Doyle, recently say that a problem for inner-city schools in Dublin was that there was 'less' children there than ten years ago.

5. Adverbs

An adverb usually modifies the verb, which means that if there is an action taking place, the adverb tells you how, when and where. Below we will look at the different categories of adverbs, how they are formed, how they are used, and where they are placed in a sentence with relation to the verb. We will also take a brief look at some adverbs whose similar meaning may cause problems for the learner.

5.1 FORMATION

Most adverbs are formed by adding *–ly* to the corresponding adjective:

Slow – slowly
Grave – gravely

Notes:

i) a final *y* changes to *i* > *day – daily*

ii) a final *e* is retained except in the following:

true – truly
due – duly
whole – wholly

endings in *–able* / *–ible* drop the '*e*' and add '*y*':

sensible – sensibly

iii) The adverb of good is well. We say:

He did it well, not
He did it ~~good~~

We do say: *it tastes good*

iv) most adjectives ending in *–ly* don't change;

He is very friendly (adjective)
He behaved in a very friendly way towards us

v) The following words are used as adjectives or adverbs:

High, low, deep, near, far, fast, hard, early, late, much, little, straight, pretty, wrong, kindly, enough

Note: *hardly = almost never* and is not the adverb of *hard*.

5.2 USE

Adverbs are traditionally understood to qualify verbs. It is perhaps easier to think of them as elaborating or expanding the information conveyed by the verb.

5.3 KINDS OF ADVERBS

Traditionally, there are eight kinds of adverbs:

Manner: *quickly*
Location: *here*
Time: *now*
Frequency: *twice*
Certainty: *surely*
Degree: *fairly*
Interrogative: *when?*
Relative: *when, where*, etc

5.4 COMPARISON OF ADVERBS

The construction of comparative adverbs follows the same rules as those for adjectives. However, care must be taken with adverbs that have been formed from the adjective by adding *–ly*. These do not add *–ier* and *–iest* as in the case of the adjective, but are preceded by *more* and *most*:

Happy – happier (adjective)
Quickly – more quickly (adverb formed by adding *–ly*).

5.5 THE POSITION OF ADVERBS

The position of adverbs causes a great deal of distress to the foreign learner, principally due to the fact that languages other than English seem to have strict rules as to where to place the adverb, whilst position in English 'seems' to be erratic. The following are some guidelines.

i) Adverbs of manner are placed after the verb:

She spoke fluently

However, the adverb is placed after the object if there is one:

She spoke to him fluently

ii) Adverbs of place generally behave in the same way as adverbs of manner. If there are two adverbs, an adverb of place and an adverb of manner, the adverb of place comes last:

He played well there

iii) Adverbs of time can be divided into the following groups:

a) *afterwards, eventually, lately, recently, now, soon, then, today, tomorrow* are placed either at the end or beginning of a sentence:

He is coming tomorrow
Then he went home

b) late comes at the end of the sentence:

He arrived late

c) *yet* is placed at the end: *he hasn't finished yet*

d) *still* is usually placed before the verb, but after the verb *to be*

She still hates him
He is still just as obnoxious as ever

e) *just* is used with the perfect forms and is placed after the auxiliary *have*:

He has just finished

(iii) Adverbs of frequency:

Always, frequently, occasionally, often, once, twice, usually, ever, never, seldom, rarely, hardly ever are normally placed next to the verb:

a) after the verb *to be*: *He is always late*

b) but before the simple tenses of all other verbs:

He always comes to school with a cap on

c) with tenses / forms consisting of more than one verb, they are placed after the first auxiliary: *You have always said not to do that*

d) with tenses / forms consisting of more than one verb in the interrogative form, they are placed after the subject:

Have you always travelled by bus?

5.6 THE MEANING AND USE OF CERTAIN ADVERBS

Certain adverbs with different nuances of meaning may cause foreign learners problems. The Spanish adverb *bastante* can be translated into English by *quite*, *rather* and *fairly*, but these three adverbs differ slightly in meaning in English. Let's look at some of these deceptive adverbs then:

i) *fairly* and *rather* both mean '*moderately*' but *fairly* is mainly used with 'favourable' adjectives (*good, nice*, etc):

She's fairly nice

But

She's rather stupid

ii) *Quite* has two meanings. It means '*completely*' when it is used alongside a word that expresses 'completeness' (*full, empty, finished*). When used with other adjectives it has a slightly 'lessening' effect:

I'm not quite finished (totally finished)

The book is quite good (meaning it's not great)

6. Nouns

Nouns are not usually taken as elements of language that cause trouble to foreign learners. But learners do sometimes despair when decisions have to be made with regard to countable and uncountable nouns, with regard to pluralization and with regard to agreement between noun and verb (which provokes the error '*the people is good*', for example). Below we will deal with these problems and with the different categories of noun.

6.1 CATEGORIES

The main categories of the noun are:

a) proper nouns: names of specific and unique people and places: *Barcelona*, *Tom*

b) common nouns: any noun that is not a proper noun: *river*, *street* (concrete); *happiness*, *depression* (abstract)

c) collective nouns: these refer to groups

6.2 COUNTABILITY

Nouns that can be counted are countable and nouns which cannot be counted are uncountable:

Countable: *One friend, two bicycles*

Uncountable: *sugar, oil, happiness*

Note: uncountable nouns are usually substances or abstract concepts.

6.3 PLURALIZATION AND AGREEMENT

6.3.1 Plurals

The plural is relatively easy for the foreign learner in that we either add *s* or *es* to nouns ending in *o*, *ss*, *sh*, *ch* or *x*:

Boy > boys
Watch > watches

However there are some exceptions:

i) words that end with an unvoiced /f/ change to voiced /v/ in the plural: *wife > wives*; *wolf > wolves*; *calf > calves*; *knife* > knives. The word *chief* is an exception > *chiefs*. *Scarf* can be either *scarves* or *scarfs*.

ii) *mouse – mice*

iii) *goose – geese*

iv) *man – men*

v) *woman – women*

vi) *foot – feet*

vii) *tooth – teeth*

viii) *child – children*

6.3.2 Singular / plural forms and agreement

Some words have no singular form and usually take a plural verb:

Trousers: *My trousers are too tight*

Jeans: *My jeans are too tight*

Pants: *My pants are torn*

Tights: *Her tights are pink*

Some words have the same form for singular and plural and take either a singular or plural verb:

Salmon: *Salmon are tasty fish / This salmon is very slippery*

Sheep: *Sheep are woolly / This sheep is swimming in the Shannon*

Fish / fishes both exist, the first is commoner; the second is normally used when referring to the live variety

6.3.3 Collective nouns and agreement

Here are some examples of collective nouns:

The press
The public
The people
Manchester United
The Government
The Cabinet

Many foreign learners find difficulty with these nouns as they would be taken as singular in their own languages. In Spanish, for example, we find

El Real Madrid va a ganar la Liga de Campeones

Word for word translation:

Real Madrid is going to win the Champions League

It would be more normal to use the plural verb in English, as (from an English cultural point of view) we usually are thinking of the players (plural):

Real Madrid are going to win the Champions League.

However, both are now acceptable, depending on point of view, which means that both the pronouns *it* and *they* can be used to substitute these nouns:

The Irish Government is great; it has turned the economy around.
The Irish Government are great, aren't they?

The word *people* also causes problems. It takes a plural verb in English:

People are always telling me to be quiet

Note: the word peoples exists in the sense of nation.

6.4 THE POSSESSIVE CASE (REFERRED TO AS "SAXON GENITIVE" IN OTHER LANGUAGES)

Possession is indicated in English primarily by the use of the apostrophe 's'. The Saxon genitive is also used in expressions of time, such as a *few weeks' time*; *ten years' experience*.

Structure:

i) With a singular noun it comes after the last letter:

The boy's bike

ii) With a plural noun the apostrophe comes after the 's' of the plural word:

The boys' bike (this means that the bike belonged to different boys)

iii) Classical names ending in 's' just add the apostrophe:

Archimedes' Law

iv) Other names ending in 's' can add the apostrophe or add another 's' + apostrophe:

Mr Yeats' unusual opinions
Mr Yeats's unusual opinions

Notes:

Notes:

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