Section 2 present tenses

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language notes

Many of the world’s languages have no tense systems – time relations are expressed in other ways. Those languages that do have tenses may have only one present form (though a simple/progressive distinction can be made in Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and one or two other languages). Consequently, many beginners have difficulty choosing the correct present tense in English:

*Look – it snows.
*I’m not working on Saturdays.

Students may use a present tense instead of a perfect to talk about duration up to the present:
*I know Julia for a long time.
*We’re living here since April.

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of auxiliary am and are can be difficult for some students to hear. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

possible further activities

Song titles These are simply provided for introductory reading, to show examples of the two present tenses. However, you could get students to suggest or find more present-tense song titles.

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language notes

Dropping third-person -(e)s is a very common and persistent mistake:

*My father work in a bank.

It can happen for several reasons. The student’s mother tongue may not have different verb forms; or it may have some verb endings, but nothing to distinguish third-person singular (Scandinavian languages are like this). Final (e)s may be difficult to pronounce after a consonant, or difficult to pronounce at all, for students whose languages have different phonetic structures from English (e.g. Spanish, Chinese or Thai speakers); sounds which are not pronounced are also easily dropped in writing.

The pronunciation of third-person -(e)s depends on what comes before it:

– /s/ after an unvoiced sound like /p/, /k/ or /t/
– /z/ after a vowel or a voiced consonant like /b/, /g/, /d/, /m/, /l/ etc
– /ɪz/ after /s/, /z/, /ʃ/ and /tʃ/.

The distinction between /s/ and /z/ is unimportant except for learners who want a very high level of accuracy in pronunciation, but students should be clear about when to pronounce the ending /ɪz/. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

pages 17–22

language notes

The structure of simple present questions and negatives can cause problems:


An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.
possible further activities

Class survey: likes and dislikes  Get students to write questions (one each) beginning ‘Do you like …?’ Teach the short answer forms ‘Yes, I do’ and ‘No, I don’t’. Then students go round asking their questions and report back to the class. (‘Everybody likes ice cream.’ ‘Only three people like jazz.’ …) Make sure students use singular verbs after everybody and nobody.

Class survey: games  As above; students ask ‘Do you play …?’

Class survey: how often?  As above: students ask ‘How often do you …?’ Before starting, run over common expressions of frequency (see page 17).

Asking you  Students ask you similar questions. Then they ask their questions about one of your friends/relations. (‘Does your father like …?’ etc.)

Lies  Tell the class some things about yourself or your family using simple present forms. Include one or more lies. Students should raise their hands when they think they hear a lie, and if called upon should correct the lie. (‘You don’t live on a boat.’ ‘Your partner doesn’t sing in a rock group.’) Students can then work to write their own sets of statements and play the game in a group or with the whole class.

Prepared interviews  Help the class to prepare a large number of interview questions, including plenty of simple present questions about people’s routines, interests, likes and dislikes, preferred reading matter/TV programmes/food, etc. (‘What do you …’ ‘Where do you …?’ ‘What sort of … do you …?’ ‘Do you speak/play …?’ etc). When they are ready, bring into the class one or more English-speaking friends or colleagues to be interviewed by the students. If there is more than one interviewee, divide the students into groups: one visitor sits with each group and answers their questions; then each visitor moves round to the next group and is interviewed again. Students make notes, and afterwards write reports on the people they have interviewed. (‘John is Scottish. He lives in a small town. He works in a garage ….’)

Biographies  Expand Exercise 3 on page 22: get students to write as much as they can about themselves, using a lot of simple present affirmatives and negatives. Help with vocabulary. The adverbs always, often and never will be useful. Get students to include three things they love and three things they hate.

Guessing identities  Collect students’ biographies, and read them out to the class. The class have to guess who wrote each one.

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language notes

British English illogically doubles / before -ing in unstressed syllables. American English doesn’t normally do this:

BrE: travelling  AmE: traveling

possible further activities

Contractions  Write up or say full-form present progressive sentences and get students to say them with contractions.

pages 24–27

language notes

Word order in present progressive questions can cause difficulty:

*What is studying your brother?
*What your brother is studying?
possible further activities

What’s (not) happening?  How many things can the class think of that are happening now?  (‘It’s raining.’ ‘People are walking in the street.’ ‘Prices are going up.’) Help with vocabulary where necessary. How many things can students think of that are not happening? Write up everything on the board; then remove it and get students to work in groups to write down everything they can remember.

Miming actions  Students take it in turns (individually or in groups) to mime various actions (e.g. driving, getting dressed, eating a boiled egg). The class try to guess what is being mimed. (‘You’re driving.’) NOTE: the mime must continue while the class are guessing; otherwise the present tense makes no sense.

Observation  Two volunteers come to the front of the class and stand facing each other for one minute. Then they stand back to back and each in turn says what the other is wearing (beginning each sentence ‘You’re wearing …’). You will need to help with vocabulary (see page 33 for some useful words).

OR: Turn your back on the class: they test your memory by saying things that may or may not be true (‘I’m wearing a necklace.’ ‘Reza’s wearing brown shoes.’) You have to reply appropriately.

pages 28–29

possible further activities

Habitual activities  Everyone writes or says a true sentence about themselves like those in Exercise 2 on page 28. (‘I …, but I’m not …ing now.’)

Two pictures  Choose two volunteers. Give each volunteer an envelope: one contains a suitable picture; the other is empty. The volunteers go out of the class for a few minutes. When they come back, each describes the picture (real or imaginary) that was in their envelope. (‘There’s a man. He’s sitting in an armchair. He’s reading a newspaper. There’s a big bird on his head. …’) The class decides who had the real picture.

Similar pictures  Give two students similar, but not identical, pictures. (For example two different advertisements for cars.) Without seeing each other’s pictures, they have to find three differences by talking to each other. (‘There’s a woman in my picture. She’s looking at a blue car.’ ‘There’s a man in my picture. He’s looking at a black car.’ …) If you prepare a lot of pairs of pictures, this can be done with the whole class working in pairs, and passing pictures round as they succeed in finding the differences.

True or false?  (Prepare this first.) Say a lot of things about yourself, mixing simple present and present progressive verbs. The truth will depend on the tense: students have to say ‘Yes’, ‘No’ or ‘Maybe’ as quickly as possible. For example:

‘I’m speaking English.’ ‘Yes.’
‘I drive a small car.’ ‘Maybe.’
‘I’m drinking a lot of coffee.’ ‘No.’
‘I speak French.’ ‘Maybe.’
‘I’m looking at you.’ ‘Yes.’
‘I’m speaking German.’ ‘No.’
‘I watch TV.’ ‘Yes.’
‘I play tennis.’ ‘Maybe.’
‘I drink a lot of coffee.’ ‘Maybe.’

➔ Section 2 continues
language notes

Remember that tense use is complicated; students need to realise that the rules we give them are useful simplifications, but that they are not true all the time. For example, ‘non-progressive’ verbs like love or understand do sometimes have progressive forms:

I'm loving it here.
I'm understanding English much better now.

It's just that this doesn't happen very often.

possible further activities

Conversations with non-progressive verbs  Students work in pairs to script short conversations with 4–6 exchanges. Each conversation must include two or more of the ‘useful expressions’ at the top of page 31.