

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 some 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.*

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

**Where you live?*

**What does she wants?*

**I no understand.*

And word order in present progressive questions can cause difficulty:

**What is studying your brother?*

**What your brother is studying?*

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of auxiliary *am* and *are* can be difficult for some students to hear. The CD-ROM exercises will help with this.

possible further activities

The texts are simply provided for students to read as examples of present tense use. No exercise is necessary. However, 'Just Words' could be extended, with students writing three sentences beginning 'You always' and 'You never', either about somebody they dislike/hate, or about somebody they like/love, or about their imaginary ideal partner.

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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.

Class survey: 'Do you ever...?' Get students to prepare questions (a different one each) about other people's habits, beginning 'Do you ever ...?'. They should look for things that are probably true of everybody or nobody. If they are slow to think of questions, it might be better to give out prepared questions on cards. A few suggestions:

Do you ever read the newspaper?

Do you ever watch daytime TV?

Do you ever wear an orange hat?

Do you ever forget people's names?

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

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Do you ever sing on the bus?
Do you ever get very tired?
Do you ever go without sleep for a week?

Students ask their questions (three minutes to ask as many people as possible), noting the number of 'yes' and 'no' answers. Then they report to the class, using 'everybody' and 'nobody' where appropriate. ('Six people watch daytime TV.' 'Nobody ever sings on the bus.' 'Everybody forgets people's names.' 'One person sometimes wears an orange hat.')

With the right kind of class, mildly indiscreet questions can be fun. ('Do you ever fall in love with the wrong people?' 'Do you ever eat too much chocolate?')

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 groups 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 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 them 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.

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

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 they think of that are not happening? Write up everything on the board; then remove it and get students to work in groups writing down everything they can remember.

Mime: 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.

Vocabulary expansion: observation Teach or revise the names of articles of clothing and accessories (try to include everything visible that students are wearing). Then 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.

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.

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Pictures The activities suggested for practising there is/are (see notes for pages 4–5) are also useful for practising the present progressive.

Extending Exercise 2 Students say what they often/sometimes/never read, and what they are reading currently. (You will need to teach some additional vocabulary.)

OR: do this as a class survey: students choose one kind of reading matter, go round asking each other 'How often do you read ...?' and then report back to the class. ('Three people never read newspapers.' 'Everybody reads magazines.')

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.'

Students could turn this round and fire statements at you (after preparation), trying to trip you up and get you to give the wrong responses. Or they could do it in groups of six or so, with all but one making statements and the others having to answer appropriately.

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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. Or students may simply feel, with some justification, that third-person *s* doesn't really matter very much.

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 CD-ROM exercises will help with this.

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

BrE: *travelling* AmE: *traveling*

possible further activities

Spelling practice Say aloud the *-ing* forms in Exercises 3–5. Students have to say, as quickly as possible, how many letters there are in each word.

possible further activities

Vocabulary expansion: extending Exercise 2 Get the class to make as many sentences as possible using the frame ‘... is/are getting + comparative adjective’. Possible comparatives: cheaper, bigger, smaller, colder, warmer, hotter, wetter, drier, faster, slower, better, worse, darker, lighter.

They will need a good deal of help with vocabulary.

Internet Get students to look for interesting sentences on the internet including the words “is/are getting steadily worse” or “is/are getting steadily better”.

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language notes

Note that directions and instructions can also be given using imperatives; and that present-tense narrative is mainly conversational and informal.

possible further activities

Directions Get students to give directions from one place to another in their current environment (e.g. from home to school).

Where are you? Volunteer students give directions from the school (or town centre or wherever) to somewhere else without saying where this is. The others have to follow the directions and work out where they are.

Comparing directions If students are in an English-speaking country, get them to ask people (separately) in the street for directions between the same two places. (Teach a suitable formula like ‘Excuse me – could you tell me how to get to ... / the way to ...?’) Students make notes of the answers they get and compare notes – they are likely to find a surprising number of differences. It will also be interesting to check whether the directions were simple present (‘You go ...’) or imperative (‘Go ...’).

Instructions Get students to write instructions for playing a card game, driving a car, flying to somewhere, or some other suitable activity.

Extending Exercises 6–7: another silly story Make two or more copies of the following story, cut it up as shown, shuffle the pieces, and give a copy of the mixed-up story to each of two or more groups. Who can put the story back in order fastest?

A man is walking in the park
when he finds a penguin.
So he goes up to a policeman
and says
‘I’ve found a penguin.
What should I do?’
The policeman says
‘Take it to the zoo.’
‘OK,’ says the man.
The next day
the man is walking in the park
with the penguin
when he meets the policeman,
so he says
‘OK,’ I took it to the zoo
and it liked that.
What do you think
we should do today?’

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Extending Exercises 6–7: students' stories Get groups of students to write out their own present-tense mini-stories or jokes, cut them up and shuffle the sentences. They exchange stories with other groups, who have to put them back in the correct order.

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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

Personalisation Ask students to write two sentences beginning 'I believe', two beginning 'I don't believe', two beginning 'I remember', two beginning 'I don't remember', two beginning 'I understand' and two beginning 'I don't understand'.

Conversations with non-progressive verbs Students work in pairs to script short conversations with 4–6 exchanges. Each conversation must include three or more of the non-progressive verbs listed on page 20.

Internet: checking progressive and non-progressive uses Get students to see how common or uncommon progressive uses of some of these verbs are. For example, suggest that they use an internet search engine to compare the relative frequency of "I believe" / "I'm believing"; "It depends" / "It's depending"; "We understand" / "We're understanding".

Internet: beliefs Get students to look for interesting sentences on the internet beginning "I believe".