Section 5  perfect tenses

language notes

Many languages have a way of expressing ‘perfective aspect’: the fact that an action is viewed as completed. This may also imply some relation between the completed action and the present situation (as with the English present perfect).

Western European languages have a verb form that looks like the present perfect (constructed with the equivalent of have + past participle). However, in many cases this is used as a conversational equivalent of the past tense, and can be used with expressions of past time, unlike the English present perfect:

*I’ve seen Peter yesterday.
*When have you arrived here?

The exact differences of use between the present perfect and the simple past are complex, as are the exact differences between the present perfect simple and progressive: the rules given in these pages are useful simplifications. Note that mistakes with the present perfect are generally unimportant.

Terminology: for the sake of simplicity, we use the term ‘tense’ to cover both tense and aspect (see note on page 39).

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of auxiliary have, has and had can be difficult for some students to hear or distinguish. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

possible further activities

The text is simply provided as introductory reading material, to show students examples of the present perfect and simple past tenses in context. We suggest letting students read it in their own time. There is no need for comprehension questions or other types of exercise.

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language notes

In some languages, the verb for be is used with certain verbs to make present perfect forms:

*I’m arrived last night.

possible further activities

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

Past or past participle?  Say a series of irregular past tenses or past participles (of verbs for which the two forms are different): for example ‘broke’, ‘eaten’, ‘seen’, ‘went’, ‘drank’. Students reply as quickly as possible, adding either ‘I’ or ‘I’ve’, depending on the form. Like this:

‘broke’ – ‘I broke’ ‘eaten’ – ‘I’ve eaten’

Mime  Students show by mime that something has happened. Make sure they understand they are to mime the present result, not what led to the result. For example:
I’ve got married. (Student mimes showing you a wedding ring.)
I’ve had an accident. (Student mimes showing you a bandage.)
I’ve bought a coat. (Student mimes putting on a coat.)
I’ve had a baby. (Student mimes feeding baby.)
I’ve eaten too much. (Student mimes belching.)
I’ve bought a cat. (Student mimes stroking a cat.)
The class try to decide what has happened. You may like to give out cards with the names of the happenings.

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

➔ Section 5 continues
possible further activities

Extending Exercise 1 Get students to make up their own sentences and questions for each other, like those in Exercise 1.

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language notes

It is not in fact impossible to use the present perfect with expressions of past time – this happens occasionally, for example in news reports where there is a need for economy. However, it is very unusual.

Possible further activities

Travel Each student writes and/or says a sentence saying ‘I've been to …, but I've never been to …’.

Class survey Students write questions (one each) beginning ‘Have you ever …?’. (Help with vocabulary as necessary.) If necessary, remind students of the short answer forms ‘Yes, I have’ and ‘No, I haven’t’. Then students go round asking as many people their questions as they can in three minutes, noting the number of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ answers. Finally they report to the class. (‘Six people have been to London.’ ‘Everybody has played football.’ ‘Nobody has seen a ghost.’). Make sure students use singular verbs after everybody and nobody.

Things in common Students work in pairs asking each other ‘Have you ever …?’.

Help with vocabulary as necessary. They have to find three things in common and report. (‘We’ve both been to New Zealand.’ ‘We’ve both acted in a play.’ …)

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language notes

In some situations American English prefers a simple past where British English has a present perfect – especially with just, already and yet (see note at bottom of page 51).

possible further activities

Vocabulary against the clock Tell students to write down all the English words they know for relations (son, aunt, cousin etc) as quickly as possible. Stop them after one minute or so, and ask ‘Have you written uncle?’. They answer ‘I’ve already written uncle’, ‘I’ve just written uncle’ or ‘I haven’t written uncle yet’. The results will probably be pretty chaotic, but now that they have the idea, do it all over again with another word family (e.g. pieces of furniture).

OR: Do the above exercise, but precede it by teaching/revising a word family (furniture, vehicles, weather, landscape, animals, …). Tell students to put away any written notes they have made. They then have to write down as many of the words they have learnt as they can remember, as quickly as possible. Stop them after a suitable time and proceed as above.

Internet Ask students to find sentences on the internet beginning “Britain has already …” and “The Prime Minister has just …” (or with other subjects of your choice).
possible further activities

**Never: finished or unfinished time?** Students write sentences using the frame ‘Shakespeare never …, and I’ve never ….’ (‘Shakespeare never went to Australia, and I’ve never been to Australia.’)

**How many times?** Students work in groups. They have to find something that someone in the group has done once; something that someone has done twice; and so on up to five or more times. Then they report to the class. (‘Karl has been to Paris once; Lee has broken her leg twice; … Oliver has been in love eight times …’)

**Extending Exercise 5** Ask students to write sentences saying how often they have done other things, preferably involving new vocabulary. For example:
- seen a shooting star, applied for a job, been fired from a job,
- been in a demonstration, acted in a play, performed in a concert,
- repaired a bicycle, painted a picture, written a poem, sent a letter of complaint, been in a fight, missed a train

possible further activities

**Today’s news** If students have good aural comprehension, play a part of a recorded English-language news broadcast (or read out a simplified version yourself), and ask students to write short present perfect sentences (with no time references) reporting three or more things that have happened.

**OR:** Get them to listen to the English-language news at home and do the same.

**OR:** Play a mother-tongue news broadcast and help students to translate a few of the easier announcements into English.

**Improbable news** In groups, students invent five really improbable news announcements (‘Switzerland has invaded Australia.’). Help with vocabulary; remind them not to use past time expressions. Who can produce the most improbable lot of news?

possible further activities

**Matching news and details** Split each of the following news reports (or others that you have invented) into two parts and write the parts on separate cards. Explain any difficult vocabulary in advance; then give out the cards. Students have to walk round and find their other halves.

The Prime Minister has just returned from Washington, | where he had talks with the US President.

A plane has crashed at Heathrow Airport. | Nobody was hurt.

Police have recaptured an escaped prisoner. | He broke out of prison three days ago.

A Yorkshire farmer has won this year’s sausage-eating contest. | He ate 47 sausages in five minutes: a new record.

A spaceship has just arrived from Jupiter. | It started its journey 43 years ago.

Andrew Smith has dropped out of the Tour de France. | He crashed on a bend and broke an ankle.

The singer Crazy Charlie has married his long-time girlfriend. | The ceremony took place in a small church in Ireland.

Rover the talking dog has been elected MP for Cambridge. | He beat the other candidate by 20,000 votes.

➔ Section 5 continues
A climber has disappeared on Mount Everest. He was trying to make the first ascent of the mountain by bicycle.
The world's oldest woman, Alice Stewart, has celebrated her 140th birthday. She spent the day quietly with friends.
An Edinburgh woman has failed her driving test for the 47th time. She drove through a shop window and caused £100,000 worth of damage.

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language notes

In many languages, duration up to the present is expressed by a present verb. In English, the present perfect is used (progressive with most verbs; simple with a few –see page 59).
*I'm learning English for five years.
*I'm here since Tuesday.
The students' language(s) may have a single word corresponding to both since and for (expressing duration up to the present).
*It's been raining since two days.

possible further activities

Extending Exercise 2 Say suitable phrases beginning with since or for; the class change them as quickly as possible, using the other word. Like this:
'since Sunday' – 'for three days' 'for six months' – 'since March'
This gives an opportunity to revise the names of the months, and the correct way of saying dates ('since July 23rd'; 'since 2012').
The exercise can also be done by students in pairs or groups.

Mime Students mime actions and show (by holding up fingers) how long they have been doing them (e.g. 'waiting for a bus, 20 minutes'; 'teaching, 30 years'; 'playing tennis, two hours'). The class try to say what exactly is being mimed. ('You've been waiting for a bus for 20 minutes.')

Records Find out who holds the class records for the length of time spent learning something, playing a game or a musical instrument, living in one place etc.

Internet Ask students to find interesting sentences on the internet containing "has been playing" or "has been travelling" plus since or for.

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possible further activities

Extending Exercise 6 Students say how long they have had various articles of clothing.
What are the records for the oldest and the newest? ('I've had this belt for seven years.' 'I've only had this scarf since this morning.')

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This summary will be particularly useful to those students who like to have an explicit understanding of how the grammar works. It would be very good to translate it into the students' mother tongue(s), if this is feasible.

➔ Section 5 continues
language notes

The past perfect generally causes students less trouble than the present perfect. Some students may not have an equivalent in their language:

*I knew that I saw her somewhere before.

Some learners may confuse auxiliary have and had:

*I knew that I have seen her somewhere before.

possible further activities

Split sentences  Write the following sentences (and/or others) on cards, cut them in half and distribute them. Students walk round saying (not showing) their half-sentences and trying to find their other halves.

She couldn't get in | because she'd forgotten her key.
I couldn't buy a ticket | because I'd spent all my money.
I missed the train | because I'd mistaken the time.
We couldn't find the restaurant | because we'd lost the address.
I couldn't phone you | because my battery had run down.
She passed her exam | because she'd studied hard.
I woke up late | because I'd forgotten to set my alarm.
He had trouble getting a job | because he'd been in prison.
She spoke good Chinese | because she'd spent a year in Beijing.
I wasn't hungry | because I'd eaten too much breakfast.
I was tired | because I hadn't slept very well.
I couldn't see anything | because I'd broken my glasses.

Class story  Get the class to suggest or write a few more sentences to continue the following story, including examples of ‘When I had’ or ‘After I had’.

SHIPWRECK

I managed to swim to the beach, and lay down to rest, completely exhausted.

When I had recovered a little …

Internet  Ask students to find one or more interesting sentences on the internet beginning “After we had visited/been/seen/paid/started”.

possible further activities

Vocabulary expansion and memory test  Prepare a lot of pictures (e.g. cut-out magazine advertisements, or images printed from the internet) of each of six different things whose names the students don't know. For example:

barrel, rugby ball, kettle, icicle, cardigan, golf club

Show students one picture of each thing and teach its name. Then go on showing the pictures in random order. Students have to say or write: ‘That’s the second/third/fourth/etc … that we’ve seen’ or ‘… that you’ve shown us’. As the game continues, it will become increasingly hard for them to keep count of everything they’ve seen.