In the Classroom

Enhancing Intermediate English Learners' Proficiency in Narrative Tenses

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This article explores the meaning, form, and pronunciation of narrative tenses for intermediate English language learners, addresses common learner issues, and proposes solutions through a combination of literature review and classroom-based activities. Challenges include differentiating between tenses, correct usage, and pronunciation of past forms. Solutions involve using engaging activities and games to enhance understanding and retention. Additionally, the article addresses teaching issues related to memorization and pronunciation of irregular verbs, offering methodologies for improving student engagement and accuracy. Practical strategies are provided to help language teachers improve narrative tense instruction and overcome common obstacles in language learning.

Cet article explore le sens, la forme et la prononciation des temps verbaux narratifs pour les apprenants d'anglais de niveau intermédiaire, aborde les défis communs des apprenants et y propose des solutions en combinant une revue de la littérature et des activités à réaliser en classe. Les défis comprennent la différenciation des temps verbaux, l'usage correct et la prononciation des formes du passé. Les pistes consistent à utiliser des activités et des jeux engageants pour améliorer la compréhension et la rétention. En outre, l'article aborde les défis d'enseignement liés à la mémorisation et à la prononciation des verbes irréguliers, en proposant des moyens pour améliorer l'engagement et la précision des apprenants. Des stratégies pratiques sont proposées pour aider les enseignants de langues à améliorer l'enseignement des temps narratifs et à surmonter les obstacles communs à l'apprentissage des langues.

Keywords: intermediate English language learners, narrative tenses, pronunciation, regular and irregular verbs

According to Thornbury (2006), "a narrative is the recounting of a series of past events" (p. 139). It typically involves the use of past tense-aspect verb forms such as past simple, past continuous / progressive, past perfect, and past perfect continuous / progressive. While some narratives, such as jokes, conversational storytelling, or news reports, may use present tense-aspect verb forms more frequently, these are more common in informal spoken or media discourse and require a good command of aspectual meaning (Biber et al., 2002; Teaching English, n.d.; Thornbury, 2006).

Intermediate learners are still consolidating their knowledge of fundamental tense-aspect verb forms, particularly in narrative contexts. At this level, verb forms are no longer studied in isolation but are introduced together to emphasize their different narrative functions. This approach is typical for many general English language teaching (ELT), English for academic purposes (EAP), and exam preparation programs that are often structured around CEFR-aligned proficiency levels (Cambridge University Press, 2011) and provides a useful framework for integrating past tense-aspect forms in storytelling tasks.

Even though this consolidation enables students to re-evaluate the tenses and develop a clearer sense of sequencing (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995; Kamont, 2015), it remains somewhat problematic to correctly combine the tenses while making stories. Learners frequently omit past continuous, past perfect simple, and past perfect continuous in favour of past simple or present simple. While simple tenses can be used for storytelling, overreliance on them may restrict learners' grammatical range and impede their progression to higher proficiency levels (Cambridge University Press, 2011; Hudson, 2016).

The conventional way of teaching grammar follows the form-meaning-use pattern (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia, 2016). However, within the framework of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), there has been a shift toward analyzing and presenting grammar through meaning-form-pronunciation sequence. Teacher training programs, especially Cambridge CELTA and DELTA, prioritize the communicative purpose of the structure before analyzing its form and practicing its pronunciation in meaningful contexts (Cambridge English, 2018; Scrivener, 2010; Thornbury & Watkins, 2007). This article therefore aims to explore the meaning, form, and pronunciation features of what we refer to as narrative tenses, describe the difficulties intermediate English language learners face while mastering narrative tenses, and propose effective teaching strategies to address these challenges. Past perfect continuous will not be a part of this study because it is introduced at the upper-intermediate level and is therefore beyond our scope (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Description of Meaning, Use, and Form

Description of meaning, form, and pronunciation, also known as language analysis (Cambridge University Press, 2011; Thornbury & Watkins, 2007), is key to successful lesson planning because it allows instructors to check their own language awareness, readiness to teach the target language successfully, and ability to predict and address potential learners' difficulties (Thornbury, 1997). This section is intended for instructors and aims to support lesson planning and scaffolding by analyzing the meaning, use, and form, including pronunciation, of narrative tenses at the intermediate level.

Meaning and Use

Narrative tenses are used to talk about the past. They are found in stories and descriptions of past events (Teaching English, n.d.; Thornbury, 2006). Past simple talks about the past if the speaker does not have a reason for differentiating between tense-aspect forms (Swan, 2009, p. 394), whereas past continuous and past perfect introduce background events to set the scene, thus sounding less important for the story. The former describes actions in progress, while the latter refers to the events preceding the main ones (Latham-Koenig & Oxenden, 2013a, p. 140; Parrot, 2004, pp. 221–224; Scrivener, 2010, pp. 151–179): *I was walking in the park when I suddenly realized I'd forgotten something important*.

Let us now take a closer look at how each tense-aspect form is used. Past simple is typically used to describe short, quickly finished, and sudden events, as well as longer or repeated situations (Parrot, 2004, p. 220; Scrivener, 2010, p. 136; Swan, 2009, p. 394). It also functions as a "time anchor," helping to establish the overall timeframe of a narrative and clarify the sequence of events (Latham-Koenig & Oxenden, 2013b, p. 136; Parrot, 2004, p. 220; Scrivener, 2010, p. 136). Additionally, past simple is often used with stative verbs such as *hear*, *see,* or *like*, particularly in contexts where the speaker recounts a state or condition rather than an action (BBC: Learning English, n.d.-a).

We now turn to the tense-aspect forms typically used to present background events in narratives. Past continuous describes incomplete actions or continuous situations interrupted by another action (Latham-Koenig & Oxenden, 2013b, p. 136). As for past perfect, it is used primarily to clarify the order of past events, making it especially useful in narratives involving flashbacks. It helps indicate that one event occurred before another in the past. In addition to sequencing, it often helps express that something did not happen at a specific moment, and it commonly appears in reported speech to reflect prior actions or states. Past perfect can also describe superlative experiences, such as *the best meal I'd ever had*, to highlight a unique or unmatched past event. Furthermore, it can be used with stative verbs like *hate*, particularly to emphasize prior emotional or mental states (Parrot, 2004, p. 221; Scrivener, 2010, p. 179; Swan, 2009, p. 397). Having established the meaning and typical use of the tense-aspect forms, it is now important to examine their grammatical form to ensure accurate production and comprehension.

Form

At this level, learners are expected to be familiar with the basic forms of past tense-aspect forms, including past simple, past continuous, and past perfect. Past simple is typically formed by adding -ed to regular verbs, as in *worked*, while irregular verbs follow distinct patterns, such as *go – went*. Past continuous uses auxiliaries *was/were* followed by *the present participle* of the main verb, for example, *was / were walking*, whereas past perfect uses *had* plus the *past participle*, as in *had forgotten*.

Each of these tenses can appear in affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms. For instance, *She finished school* illustrates past simple in its affirmative form; *She wasn't at home* demonstrates past continuous in a negative form; and *Had she lived in London by 1992?* shows the interrogative use of past perfect. A full summary of these grammatical forms, including their variations and spelling conventions, is provided in the Appendix. After addressing the form, it is equally important to consider its phonological features, since accurate pronunciation supports both fluency and intelligibility.

Phonology

When teaching the pronunciation of the -ed ending in simple past and past participle forms, it is important to note how it changes depending on the sound that precedes it. After [t] or [d], the -ed is pronounced as [ɪd], as in needed [ˈnɪdɪd]. After voiced sounds, it is pronounced as [d], like in lived [lɪvd], and after unvoiced sounds, it is pronounced as [t], as in shopped [ʃɒpt] (BBC: Learning English, n.d.-b).

In contractions such as *didn't*, *wasn't/weren't*, and *hadn't*, the final -t is usually elided. For example, in *He didn't say* [hi dɪdn seɪ], the -t disappears. However, if the following word begins with a vowel sound, the -t is pronounced and linked to the next word, as in *She wasn't eating* [ʃi wɒznt iːtɪŋ] (BBC: Learning English, n.d.-a). In questions and negations, the auxiliary verbs are often in their weak form: [wəz] for was, [wə] for *were*, and [(h)əd] or [d] for *had*. In contrast, when these auxiliaries appear in short answers or negations, they tend to be pronounced more strongly: [wɒz] for was, [wɜː] for *were*, and [hæd] for *had* (Latham-Koenig et al., 2013). For example, *Was she eating?* is pronounced [wəz ʃi ˈiːtɪŋ], and the final word of the response *Yes, she was* would sound like [wɒz]. Lastly, elision and assimilation frequently occur in phrases like *Did you…?* which might be pronounced as [didjə] or [didʒu/əː] (Scrivener, 2010, p. 144). While understanding meaning, use, and form is essential, instructors should also anticipate potential classroom challenges and be prepared to address them effectively.

Learner Problems, Teaching Issues, and Possible Solutions

Learner Problem 1: Differentiating between Past Tenses

English tenses are often challenging for students whose first language does not have such a variety of past tenses. It is very common, for example, for Russian-, Ukrainian-, and Portuguese-speaking students to be overwhelmed with English past tenses. Learners often cannot differentiate between the situations requiring the use of past simple and past continuous, as well as past simple and past perfect, while telling a story. Kamont (2015) states that when intermediate students focus on sentence-level exercises, they do not seem to experience any difficulties. However, when challenged with the task of telling or writing an entire text, the learners become puzzled as to what tense would be best in a certain situation. During my lessons, I have noticed that it is a real problem, as students tend to use past simple for all descriptions. It happens because the more complicated tenses have not been mastered yet; therefore, learners try to oversimplify, hoping that it will help them avoid making mistakes and sound more confident (Parrot, 2004; Scrivener, 2010). Additionally, language learners are not able to reincorporate different happenings into a sequence of connected events (Heathfield, 2005), which can impact their language development and might often lead to the fossilization of mistakes. For example, a learner might state, *I got up and went to the kitchen. I had breakfast. I went for a walk.* While these sentences are grammatically correct in isolation, they lack narrative cohesion and fail to demonstrate how the events relate in time.

To help learners show the difference between past simple and past perfect, it might be helpful to use a technique of changing the "start point of the story" (Scrivener, 2010, p. 181) through two texts and a timeline and play a "go backwards" game. For example, a student says four sentences that describe the previous day's activities: *I got up and went to the kitchen. Then I had breakfast. After that I went for a walk*. The student's partner is instructed to listen and remember or write down the events. Afterwards, they are expected to shift the starting point to the back, e.g., *So, you went for a walk. Before that you had had breakfast. Before that you had gone to the kitchen. Prior to that, you had woken up.* The activity is expected to guide learners to notice how semantic and grammatical information of the story can interact and change the target forms (Collins, 2007). In my experience, some problems can arise, even if the model is provided. Students can be confused about the steps. So the instructor should provide examples and closely monitor to address the problem.

Learner Problem 2: Mistakes in Using Irregular Forms of the Verbs

Intermediate-level students generally distinguish regular from irregular verbs, so it is not likely that they will be overgeneralizing the rule and forming past simple and past participle forms by adding -ed (Swan, 2009). However, the learners are still prone to confusing past simple and past participle forms or making their own versions of irregular verbs based on previous experience with this group of verbs. If an English learner uses a wrong form of the irregular verb, it can affect the general understanding of the story and confuse the interlocuters, e.g. *He lied*. The audience might start wondering if the speaker meant *He lay, lied, or laid* when there is not enough context provided. It might also influence the order and sequencing when the mistakenly used form does not clarify if the action was in past simple or past perfect and if this event belonged to the main narrative or was setting the scene and referring to something preceding it, e.g., *He spoken to me*. Is it the main narrative? Then it is *He spoke*. Or did it happen before? Then it is *He had spoken.*

The procedure to help learners practice irregular forms is similar to a tic-tac-toe game (Teach This, n.d.). Students will receive a sheet with multiple boxes filled with an irregular verb in its base form (see Table 1). In pairs, students should take turns to choose a verb, name the correct past simple or past participle form and make a sentence. If done correctly, they can mark the square. The other person should follow the same procedure; however, their sentence should be linked to that of their partner to make a story.

Table 1

Tic-Tac-Toe Verbs

go	write	eat
see	*take*	**run**
buy	begin	know

Note. The verbs in bold were chosen by Learner 1; the verbs in italics were chosen by Learner 2.

For example, Learner 1 chooses the verb *go*, mentions its past simple form *went*, and makes a sentence, *Yesterday, I went to the park*. The learner has done everything correctly, so they can mark off the square with the verb *go*. Then it is the turn of Learner 2. They choose, for example, the verb *see*. Its past simple form is *saw*. They sentence can be *When I got there, I saw a tiny dog*. The activity continues until one of the students can mark off all squares in a row. The first person to do so is the winner. Research shows that when given opportunities to hear and make stories without a script, learners are more likely to elaborate on their answers and produce longer texts in the future (Shin, 2010), which guarantees their language development. The activity also allows fresh starts, as students choose verbs and make their own sentences (Baxter, 1997).

Teaching Issue 1

Teaching the forms of irregular verbs is essential but often challenging, as it requires consistent memorization, repetition, and practice from students at all levels. While intermediate learners may feel that they have already mastered most irregular verbs or believe that they can guess unfamiliar ones based on patterns, they often overestimate their accuracy and fluency when using irregular verbs in spontaneous speech. In my experience at various language schools, learners frequently request to focus more on speaking activities than on drills. However, student feedback also reveals that errors with irregular verb forms still commonly appear in their oral and written production, especially in narrative contexts where accurate tense use is crucial. This creates a teaching dilemma: while learners perceive verb drills as redundant, they still benefit from targeted review and practice to avoid the fossilization of errors that impact clarity and accuracy. The challenge, therefore, lies not in identifying the importance of irregular verbs but in addressing students' resistance to practicing them.

It is not easy to choose a meaningful automatizing practice and to motivate students to participate at the same time. An option could be using a game or a competition. The activity described in Learner Problem 2 is a good example. Instructors should also keep in mind that competitions are important, but if there is a teacher involved, the students are not likely to win. When a student wins against another student, it can be celebrated as success, especially when a fresh start enables them to improve their previous result (Yukseloglu & Klymyshyna, 2016) or that of their partner.

Learner Problem 3: Difficulties Pronouncing -ed in Different Contexts; not Distinguishing between [d], [t] and [ɪd].

Another widespread problem involves difficulties with the pronunciation of -ed. It might happen because of L1 transfer or lack of knowledge of voicing rules. For example, in Spanish words are read the way they

are spelled. This makes it difficult to distinguish between the cases when the ending -ed should be pronounced as [t] and as [d]. Learners also tend to overuse the option [ɪd], which might be explained by not learning correct pronunciation rules, difficulties with consonant clusters, and confusion with the adjectives that have the same form, for example, the word *wicked* (Parrot, 2004). Inaccurate voicing might impede understanding and interrupt the flow of the story, as the listener will try to clarify certain moments instead of following the narrative (Walker, 2020).

The first step is to assist learners with mastering voicing rules. It should be clarified that phonological competence is an important stage in acquiring languages and a key component of language competence (along with grammar, vocabulary, and the four skills) (Jannuzi, 2013a). Clear pronunciation helps to focus on the flow of the story and avoid "stereotyping of accents" (Jannuzi, 2013b). The instructor should explain the difference between voiced and voiceless sounds. The practice procedure goes as follows. Learners can be asked to put one hand on their throat and say certain sounds, e.g. [s]. The instructor should clarify that if they can feel the vibration, it is a voiced sound; if not, it is voiceless. Students should try to pronounce the verbs with voiced and voiceless sounds and practice the voicing rules firstly by type and then mixed. Sounds need to be practised in isolation for learners to get adjusted to the way they are pronounced and to get immediate error correction when needed (Jannuzi, 2013b; Parfitt & Reid, 2019). This activity is beneficial because students are involved in a guided discovery as active participants responsible for the outcome.

The second step is to use minimal pairs to help learners develop the ability to differentiate between the problematic sounds. According to Walker (2020), practicing sub-skills detached from communicative activities might seem unwise. However, the more automatic sub-skills (segmentation, recognition, etc.) are, the quicker the decoding can be. It will help to focus on the content of the story in future recollecting and decoding certain sounds. Thus, the activity "Pronunciation Journey" offered by Hancock (1996, p. 37) might be a fun way to practice listening to and pronouncing the verbs.

The first step is to write two columns of verbs in which -ed is pronounced as [d] and [t]. For example, Column 1 can include the verbs *learned*, *studied*, *reviewed*, *saved*, *lived*, *allowed*, and *assigned*, whereas Column 2 will have a list of such verbs as *worked*, *accomplished*, *addressed*, *approached*, *coughed*, *attached*, and *announced*. It is important to model and drill pronunciation prior to allowing learners to play the game. After the pronunciation practice, students will take turns leading their partner to a certain city by calling out the verbs. The partner should listen to the verb and if the -ed is pronounced as [t], they should turn, for example, right. If it is pronounced as [d], they should turn left. This will be repeated until the partner reaches a certain city after taking several right or left turns, or even both. The next round should include the verbs with the sounds [d] (see the list from the previous step) and [ɪd] (*wanted*, *landed*, *adopted*, *collected*, *attended*, *avoided*, and *treated*).

Conclusion

Teaching narrative tenses effectively at the intermediate level involves addressing specific learner difficulties and adopting practical teaching strategies. This study has highlighted the main challenges intermediate English language learners face when learning narrative tense-aspect forms such as differentiating between tenses, using irregular verbs correctly, and pronouncing past forms accurately. By introducing activities that promote understanding and correct usage of tenses, and address pronunciation challenges, language instructors can foster a deeper understanding and retention of narrative tenses. Ultimately, instructors can create a more dynamic and effective learning environment that supports language learners in overcoming the most common obstacles in language learning.

The Author

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Appendix: Summary of Narrative Tense Forms

Table A1: Formation

	Past simple except "to be"	**Past simple of "to be"**	**Past continuous**	**Past perfect**
Affirmative	+ S + verb in past tense *She finished school.*	+ S + was / were. I, he, she, it – was You, we, they – were *She was at home.*	+ S + was / were + present participle I, he, she, it – was You, we, they – were *The music was playing.*	+ S + had + past participle Aux. "had" is used with all persons (I, you, he, she, it, we, they). *She had lived in London by 1992.*
Negative form	- S + did + not / didn't + base form. *She didn't finish school.*	- S + was + not (wasn't) / were + not (weren't). *She wasn't at home.*	- S + was + not (wasn't) / were + not (weren't) + present participle *The music wasn't playing.*	- S + had + not / hadn't + past participle. *She hadn't lived in London by 1992.*
Interrogative	? (Question word) + did + S + base form? *When did she finish school?*	? (Question word) + was / were + S? *When was she at home?*	? (Question word) + was / were + S + present participle? *Was the music playing?*	? (Question word) + had + S + past participle? *Had she lived in London by 1992?*
Negative Interrogative	? (Question word) + did + S + not + base form? *Did she not finish school?* ? (Question word) + didn't + S + base form?	? (Question word) + was / were + S + not? *Was she not at home?* ? (Question word) + wasn't / weren't + S?	(Question word) + was / were + S + not + present participle *Was the music not playing?* ? (Question word) + wasn't / weren't + S + present participle?	? (Question word) + had + S + not + past participle? *Had she not lived in London by 1992?* ? (Question word) + hadn't + S + past participle.

Note. S = subject

Spelling Rules

Most regular verbs add -ed to make **past tense** and **past participle** forms: *work – worked*. The exceptions are:

- final -e: add -d: *hoped*;
- verbs with one stressed vowel + one consonant (except -y/– w): double the consonant + ed: *shopped*;
- last syllable unstressed: *offered*;
- consonant + -y: change -y to -i and add -ed: *studied*;
- (vowel + -y): *played*;
- final -c changes into -ck: *picnicked*.

Past tense and **past participle** forms of irregular verbs are given in the list of irregular verbs, the second and third columns respectively.

Another specific feature of **past perfect** is the contraction of the auxiliary "had" after a pronoun subject in conversations. It has the same form for all persons singular and plural, e.g. *I'd, you'd.*

Present participles add -ing with some exceptions:

- final "e," remove "e" + -ing: *preparing*;
- final "ie," change into "y" + -ing: *lying*;
- last stressed syllable "consonant-vowel-consonant", double the consonant + -ing: *running*.

(Grammar Monster, n.d.)