Systems--Perfect Aspect With a Focus on the Present Perfect

Introduction

I have chosen to research the perfect aspect with a focus on the present perfect.

Although the present perfect is only one use of the larger perfect aspect, I have chosen to narrow my focus for three reasons. Firstly, because grammar textbooks usually focus on the present perfect much more than the future perfect or past perfect. Secondly, because the present perfect usually has a wide range of uses attached to it in pedagogical grammars that make it a full subject for analysis in its own right. Thirdly, because in my experience learners are often confused by the contrast between present perfect and past simple.

In my teaching experience, I have noticed that the present perfect is often taught by textbooks frequently. It also occurs very early on in the syllabus (in the elementary or pre-intermediate level). However it confuses students more than any of the other common verb tenses. It also has confused me frequently, as I have in the past struggled to explain to students why certain verbs are in the present perfect instead of the past simple.

Analysis

Unfortunately, the terminology used to describe the present perfect differs from grammar book to grammar book, causing confusion for both students and teachers alike. In many books, structures like the "present perfect" and the "past perfect" are referred to as "tenses". In this view, English is said to have 12 tenses (Celca-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman p.110).

However, many linguists claim that English technically only has two tenses: present tense and past tense. This is because linguists use the word "tense" to refer to how verbs are inflected (Thornbury, p.226). Inflection refers to a change in the form of a verb, for example "I look" changing to "I looked". Only the present simple and past simple structures are made purely by changing the verb inflection. All other verb structures in English are made using modal verbs and auxiliary verbs combining with the main verb.

According to this view, structures such as perfect and progressive are not types of tenses, but aspects. Michael Lewis differentiates between tense and aspect in the following way: tenses are used to give the facts of the situation, aspects are used to give the speaker's perception of those events (Lewis p.51). For example aspect can be used to show whether a speaker views an event as singular or repeating, completed or uncompleted, instantaneous or extended in time, et cetera. However aspects also combine with tenses to produce structures like "present perfect simple" and "past perfect simple". The perfect aspect can also combine with the progressive aspect to produce structures like the "present perfect progressive".

The perfect aspect is made by combining the auxiliary verb "have" and the past participle of the verb. (Thornbury, p.158). The tense is inflected on the auxiliary "have" so that the present perfect is "have + past participle" and the past perfect is "had + past participle". The auxiliary verb is frequently contracted as "'ve" or "'d". In casual speech, the contracted "'ve"

sound is sometimes pronounced like an /f/. Future forms of the present perfect are made by adding modal verbs like "will".

It is argued that all uses of the perfect aspect are similar in that they are looking back in time from a particular reference point. (Lewis, 2002). Thus the past perfect is used to look back in time from a particular point in the past ("I had eaten before he got there."), and the future forms of the perfect aspect look back in time from a particular point in the future. ("I will have already eaten when you get here.")

Accordingly, the many uses of the present perfect are all said to be some variation of looking back in time from the perspective of the present. However pedagogical grammars and textbooks often teach the present perfect as a series of disparate unconnected uses that have to be all individually memorized by learners. Michael Swan identifies 8 uses: finished events connected with the present, finished events reported in the news, repetition up to now, continuation up to now, thinking about the past and present together, exact time not mentioned, announcing news, and causes and origins. (Swan, p.438-442) In my own teaching experience, I have found the most common uses presented in textbooks are: an event that started in the past and continues to the present, a past action with a present result, a past experience without an exact time, and announcing recent events.

Another researchers, Kyung-Hee Suh, has noticed that in the databases the present perfect was often used to "introduce or sum up a habitual present-tense narrative" (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman p. 167). The present perfect is also used when beginning a past tense narrative. In this case, the present perfect acts as a transition from the present to the past, and then the rest of the verbs are reported in the past tense (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman p. 168)

Issues

There is some debate over whether or not it is preferable to teach the present perfect as one meaning, or as several meanings. There is also a theoretical debate over whether all the different uses of the present perfect can really be covered under one unifying meaning. Michael Lewis argues for a "Principle of General Use" when describing any grammar form, including the present perfect. "A general rule describes the characteristics which are shared by *all* uses of the form." (Lewis, p.31, italics in the original) Thus, in Lewis's view, *all* uses of the present perfect relate back to the general theme of "looking at the past from the perspective of the present". But evidence for a "Principle of General Use" is debated among grammarians generally, and for the present perfect specifically some uses are less obvious than others. For example, the tendency of native speakers to announce news in the present perfect but give details in the past simple (Swan, p.442) is difficult to explain under the "Principle of General Use."

In my own personal experience, the biggest point of confusion for learners is the contrast with the past simple. My students always struggle on gap-fill exercises that require them to differentiate between past simple and present perfect.

My students also frequently notice that the uses of the present perfect that they encounter in real life do not fit the rules that the textbook teaches them. (Or often the textbook itself will include uses of the present perfect that do not fit its own rules.)

Part of the problem, according to Michael Lewis, is that textbooks teach that the difference between verb structures is dependent on external contexts. But actually, the choice of aspect depends on the speaker's subjective interpretation of events more than the external reality. Thus in any given context, both the present perfect and the past simple could be correct depending on how the speaker viewed the event.

According to Michael Lewis, students therefore need to be taught "grammar as a choice" rather than "grammar as a fact". However how to effectively teach these subjective choices opens up its own pedagogical difficulties. Scott Thornbury writes that the "present perfect is baffling for many learners…" precisely because "...notions such as relevance, connectedness, and unfinishedness are subjective and difficult to pin down" (Thornbury, p.159). Perhaps it is no wonder that most textbooks opt to teach the present perfect in relationship to concrete situations instead of the subjectivities of the human mind.

Thornbury concludes then that "Rather than try and teach rules, therefore, it may be easier to relate the perfect with the kinds of time expressions it co-occurs with (such as *yet*, *just*, *already*)..." (Thornbury, p.159) However one potential problem with this is that in American English, it is equally common to use the past simple with these words. David Crystal gives the examples of "You told me already" and "Did they come home yet?" (Crystal, p.81). Moreover Swan notes on the same topic that: "British English is changing under American influence, so some of these uses are becoming common in Britain as well." (Swan, p.444)

Suggestions

Although it can be difficult to make definitive rules about when the present perfect can and can't be used, it is possible to identify contexts in which it is likely to appear.

A situational based approach might be preferable to a rules based approach anyway. Michael Lewis argues that getting students to explore the grammar point on their own is better than giving them artificial simplified rules (Lewis, p. 78-80)

In my own teaching, I have found the "present perfect for experiences" context to be the most enjoyable. This is because it lends itself to a lot of personalization (students usually enjoy sharing about their experiences). Also present perfect for experience lends itself to a lot of games (guessing games like 2 truths and a lie, last man standing games like "Have you ever…", mixing games like "change chairs if you've ever…", et cetera).

However as fun as these lessons can be, the problem is that practicing the present perfect in isolation does not help the students to learn the contrast between the other forms.

Scott Thornbury, in his book "Uncovering Grammar" has a funny story about drilling present perfect for experiences. Right in the middle of the drill, a student interrupted to ask a question about an experience, but the student used the past simple (Thornbury, p.38).

Thornbury's lesson was that many students only pay attention to the grammatical form when it conveys an important message. Practicing the present perfect on its own did not convey the message, but forcing students to notice differences in meaning between the past simple and the present perfect will. Thornbury suggests a consciousness raising activity for the present perfect. Students listen to answering machine messages from friends on holiday. After doing some gist tasks (identifying which town or city the friends are calling from) students then listen again to identify which students are still on holiday, and which students are back home. The distinction is only conveyed through the contrast between past simple and present perfect, ("I've met some really interesting people" versus "I met some really interesting people). This forces students to pay attention to the grammatical distinction. (Thornbury p.39-40)

In the same chapter, Thornbury suggests a grammar interpretation activity for the present perfect. The advantages of grammar interpretation is that, as with consciousness raising, it does not yet require the students to produce a grammar item they do not yet fully understand. The students simply have to notice the way the grammar point works in order to understand it. In this activity, students are given the biographies of two writers--one living, and one dead. The sentences are jumbled together, and the students have to decide which sentences refer to which writer. The living writer is described with present perfect sentences, and the dead writer is described using the past simple. (Thornbury p.40-41)

In terms of production, it is also possible to design role plays which highlight the use of the present perfect. A popular one among teachers in my staff room is "The Burglary". Students role play a couple who have just come home from a night out to find their house has been burgled. They then observe what has happened, and report on what the burglars have done using the present perfect for present results. For example, "The fridge is empty. They've eaten all our food."

Another activity, one that I have used on my own, but which is also suggested by Rosemary Aitken, is to role play a job interview. Students explain past experience that is relevant to the job using the present perfect.

Conclusion

The present perfect has frequently been frustrating for me to teach in the past. But by writing this assignment, I have learnt different theories regarding its use, and different ways to teach it.

Bibliography

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