

# Grammar learning and teaching: Time, tense and verb

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**Abstract:** The learning of English tenses and verbs is obviously the major and challenging part of second language learning and acquisition for Chinese students. The paper analyzes the features of simple present tense, simple past tense and verbs in them from the aspect of Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk's student grammar book as an instructive example. It is suggested that, it be meaningful and practical if the grammar rules are reflected rather in sentences or contexts than in the formula. Some possible pedagogical activities and materials are recommended to make tedious grammar learning and teaching more understandable and interesting.

**Key words:** tenses; time and space; aspects; verbs; teaching of grammar

## 1. Introduction

Grammar as the basic rules of a certain language has its prominent position in language learning and teaching, although someone might argue that it should not be a necessary section in language assessment. Compared with the ways of acquisition of the first language (L1) learners, learning various grammar rules for the second language (L2) learners should be in a co-current way rather than in a linear way. A student grammar book of Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk (1990) introduces the tenses with the help of verbs rather than the markers of tenses or the adverbials. Learning tenses seems to be meaningful and easier to understand.

## 2. Grammar in language learning

It is generally believed that, L1 learners acquire the mother tongue by imitation, practice and "the interaction position" (Lightbown & Spada, 1999, p. 26), in which vocabulary and grammar rules are learned and developed by constructing a set of rules which will characterize the language that surrounds them and enable them to use it for both speaking and understanding (Chomsky, 1969, p. 3). However, for L2 learners, most of them are taught as grammatical knowledge beforehand and develop the knowledge into practice afterwards. This learning experience differs from the L1 acquisition either in aspect of sequence in language input or in cognitive system as well. And most of the time, grammar is the indicator of the difference during the learning process. All the languages have symbols of identity and they are differed by two elements: time and space. These are the differences not only separating languages, but also making each grammar rule unique in each language.

Grammar is defined as "the way words are put together to make correct sentences" (Ur, 1996, p. 75), which is functioned as a rule to make the language output possible. Thus, the teaching of grammar is a necessary component in language teaching program and grammar itself takes the fundamental and dominant position in "accumulated entities" (Rutherford, 1987, p. 4), which help learners improve their learning from nil to certain language proficiency. Nevertheless, when the teachers teach L2 learners to acquire a certain language, they would

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better take the social contexts and their implications for the learners into account. As Hasan and Perrett (1994, p. 198) noted that, the L1 creates “the learners’ primary world of reference for understanding reality”, while a foreign language does not influence their daily life directly. Therefore, this indirect learning and practicing process could not make L2 learners internalize all the intricate grammar rules like the L1 learners do naturally, and most of them reset the procedure of the language acquisition by learning the rules first and then the practice afterwards. Thus, analyzing the language itself seems to be the necessary step during the learning process, like Rutherford (1987) mentioned, “We break language down in order to build it up”, that is to say “If knowledge of language is analyzed, the rules may be generated” (Bialystok, 1988, p. 40). The acquisition of the L2 undergoes the induction-deduction-induction circular process, which is one of the prominent features in the L2 learning.

### 3. Tense and aspect

According to the ideas of the L2 learners, they ought to acquire one grammatical rule at a time like learning each new word separately, and until they demonstrate that their mastery of one thing could they move to the next, which is regarded as a strictly linear approach (Nunan, 2001, p. 191). However, when time and space become the fundamental components in our communicative learning, the linear model does not suit anymore. Rutherford (1987, p. 37) suggested a proper metaphor by comparing the growth of language as “organism”, which suggested that the process of learning language should not be a mechanical step-by-step one but rather cyclical interconnections. And Nunan (2001, p. 192) provided a more vivid organic metaphor—L2 acquisition more likes growing a garden than building a wall. Language itself needs renewing and language learning needs rebuilding and reconfirming.

In whatever kind of language, time and space are fundamental to cognition and experience, which rooted in the structural organization of language (Klein, 1994, p. 1). When it describes what has happened, it is not as simplistic as the arranged order in the assembly lines, one follows another involving “before” and “after”, but a flow of matters which may have happened simultaneously, in which some matters may have continued for quite a long time while some may change instantaneously. Meuler (1995, p. 2) pointed out in descriptions of what happened, the choice of tense and aspect matters a lot.

Both tense and aspect are concerned with time, the “temporal relations” (Klein, 1994, p. 3), but they are concerned with time in different way and sometimes are hard to distinguish from one another. Tense is grammaticalized expression of location in time, usually with reference to the present moment that something occurred rather than how long it occurred for, which is realized by verb inflection, while aspect is concerned with “the internal temporal constituency of the one situation”, i.e., the duration of the activity indicated by the verb. Therefore, aspect is a way of viewing processes rather than locating them in time (Comrie, 1976, p. 5; Comrie, 1985, p. 9; Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990; Klein, 1994, p. 15; Lock, 1996, p. 161; Finch, 2000, p. 85). Therefore, “The selection of a verb tense form will reflect either the speaker’s knowledge of the prevailing time references, or else his/her interpretation of the situation” (Stranks, 2003, p. 333).

Tenses have consistent relational values: anteriority, posteriority and simultaneity, with the present moment as deictic centre, past, present and future (Comrie, 1985, p. 11; Smith, 1991, p. 145). And Klein (1994, p. 120) introduces “the basic time concept”, which divided the time spans into “before”, “after” and “included” in the temporal relationship between the TU (time of utterance) and the TT (topic time). However, in Greenbaum and Quirk’s (1990, p. 47) book, they claimed that in English, there are only two tenses, present and past respectively, which Radford (1997, p. 273) also concluded as a binary (2-way) tense contrast, since English has no future

inflected form of the verb. In another words, a finite verb marked with “-d” or without that marker could be categorized into tense, however, “non-finites can have voice and aspect and phase, but not tense” (Joos, 1964, p. 120). Moreover, except modal auxiliaries, the present tense could also convey future meaning. According to Wallace (1982, p. 202), “The English ‘future’ auxiliary ‘will’ in earlier times expressed not so much futurity as desire or intention”. Further, the “present” tense is also used to narrate past events to make the narrative more vivid and the indirect use of the “past” tense to express the present with regard to cognition and emotion.

However, many researches show that, Chinese is one of the languages which have only aspect and no tense (Lock, 1996, p. 163). In Chinese, adverbials (such as before, yesterday, last year, first, next and then) and clause are often used to refer to a specific time, which are made relative to the present and time markers (Hinkel, 1997, p. 293). Thus, it seems that there some problems for the Chinese learners to acquire the English tense system since they are not so sensitive to the expression of time during their speaking and reading in English. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) presented the tense not from abstract definitions but from much smaller component of a sentence and verbs, to demonstrate the main focus in the learning of tenses. This starting point reflects Quirk and Stein’s (1990, p. 108) point of view: Vocabulary is the word stock, and grammar is the set of devices for handling this word stock. Moreover, the order of their presenting differs from the average grammar books, which is helpful for the learners to distinguish the difference between tenses and aspects with systematic learning. Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) do not present tenses in contrast, for example, the simple present with the present continuous or the simple past with the present perfect, since with these mixed conceptions, learners will be more frustrated. Thus, first of all, the much more appropriate way is to start to introduce the basic form to enable the learners practice and produce each context before another one can be introduced.

#### **4. Simple present tense**

According to Greenbaum and Quirk (1990, p. 47), they demonstrated the difference between the “present moment” and the “present time” by defining “moment” as a certain point located in the line of time that indicates the moment could exist in the past and in the future while there is no paradox in “time”, since it is known that, yesterday is past and tomorrow is in the future, which provides a reasonable implication that “present” could refer to either in the past or in the future. Comrie (1985, p. 36) pointed out that, “The only way of locating a situation in time is relative to some other already established time point”. Therefore, better understanding time in the real world could help learners use the simple present tense to indicate different moments in the sentences.

A great number of grammatical features encode some semantic information (VanPattern, 1996, p. 21). By giving the first two examples with the English verbal inflection “-s” to indicate the third person singular, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) displayed the general feature in the simple present tense. For example, in the sentences “Pairs stands on the River Seine” and “John boasts a lot”, they all use lexical marker “-s” to illustrate the only grammatical feature the third person singular in the simple present tense. However, to detect the markers of temporal reference is easier than to use the proper tense to express a particular meaning. As Knepler (1990, p. 8) mentioned, “often more than one choice of tenses is correct for any situation”.

Superficially, two examples illustrated above seem to be plain and simple, however, Greenbaum and Quirk’s (1990) idea coincides with one of the principles that claimed by VanPatten (1996, p. 17), that is, “Learners process input for meaning before they process it for form”. For any L2 learners, only after adequate exposure to the target language, could they detect and generalize the systematic rules in grammar, which is similar to the acquisition of

L1. Nevertheless, at the very beginning, Greenbaum and Quirk (1990) did not simply use the temporal adverbials to present the simple present tense, since in most cases, they appear without argumentation, like in the later example the adverbial “every year” in “We go to Brussels every year”, which refers to the repeated event without limitation to specify the frequency of the event. Since adverbials constitute abundant and various expressions both in form and in function (Klein, 1994, p. 158), language teachers prefer to use them to decode the intricate shades of temporal reference in the tenses for the benefit of the L2 learners.

Greenbaum and Quirk started their illustration from the most important one in content words, verbs, to present the subtle part in the tenses. And this is also the principle they define that there are only two tenses in English, all of which are realized by verb inflection. Before talking about the tenses, on the one hand, they draw a distinct line between “stative” verbs like “be, have and know” and “dynamic” verbs like “drive, speak, and attack”, etc. Like what Leech (1971, p. 4) defined “a state”, it is undifferentiated and lacking in defined limits, while dynamic verbs include what Leech has defined as event verbs, activity verbs and process verbs, which have progressive meanings. For both simple tenses, stative verbs always fit for the state present/past, meanwhile, the dynamic verbs are confined to habitual/event/instantaneous present and past. The distinction between stative and dynamic aspect is clearly important in the grammatical description of verbs in English. This way of classification is benefit for the learners who might seek help from verbs to understand the meaning in tenses. On the other hand, their starting point differs from the average grammar books, which emphasizes more on the distinction between verb “be” and verb “do” with more specific meanings. It is easy to discover that, the common grammar books highlight the forms of verb inflection, which require the learners to make choice between “the base and the base + s/es form depend entirely on the subject of the sentence” (Knepler, 1990, p. 11), while Greenbaum and Quirk focused more on the meaning of the verbs to help learners choose appropriate tenses to meet the needs of sentence expressing and communicative value.

#### **4.1 Simple present tense for present time**

The simple present tense is the commonest usage for most learners at their beginning level of learning. When they explain the simple present tense for present time, L2 learners are given a brand new recognition about verbs in stative senses and dynamic ones. Stative verbs senses refer to “a single unbroken state of affairs that has existed in the past, exists now, and is likely to continue to exist in the future” (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, p. 48), which is defined as the “state present”, the timeless present. In order to highlight the different forms of the verbs in this tense in a more restricted time spans, they provide 4 examples, including the verb “be” (is) and verb “do” (believe, live and taste) in the state present, the third person singular “tastes”, the other pronoun using the base “live” and the negative form of the third person singular “does not believe”. It includes the “eternal truths” and less extreme instances of timelessness.

From Greenbaum and Quirk’s peculiar point of view to look at verbs, it could borrow the activity suggested by Rinvoluceri (1984, p. 117): “The shout in the circle” to highlight the verb forms, especially the third person singular in the simple present tense. Students could sit in a circle with one of them standing in the middle. When the student in the centre tells others the daily routine of someone or the timeless facts he or she knows well, e.g., “2 and 3 make 5”, etc., the other students could shout out the verb, e.g., “make” in the sentence and if the verb is incorrect, the circle must try to chorus the right form. This activity is suitable for the beginners who first need to identify the verb in a sentence and then make a proper choice on the form of the verb. Meanwhile, they could have a better understanding of the simple present tense in the reality.

Talking about the habitual present and instantaneous present, Greenbaum and Quirk introduced verbs with



The historical present refers to the past. But in order to make the narration vivid as it happens at the time of narration, the sentence uses the simple present tense to refer to the moment in the past as if it was happening now. Normally, the historical present is introduced with the companion of an adverbial expression indicating past time. Take the example from Leech's (1971, p. 7) book as an example, "Last week I'm in the sitting-room with the wife, when this chap next door staggers past and in a drunken fit throws a brick through our window". Here, the sentence uses "last week" to indicate the event happened in the past, but the whole sentence is portrayed as if the event was going on at the present time. In the example given "Just as we arrived, up comes Ben and slaps me on the back as if we're life-long friends", Greenbaum and Quirk hardly relied on the adverbial phrases to indicate the time but on using the verb with tense marker "-d" on event verb to make the whole story in the past highly colored with the effect of story-telling. From the component of the sentence "we arrived", it could see the narrator stands at the present time to talk about the thing happened in the past, but for the dramatic effect, the narrator puts himself into the past time to narrate the event happens at the present moment by using the verb "comes". Figure 2 is the changing positions of the narrator.

Narrator

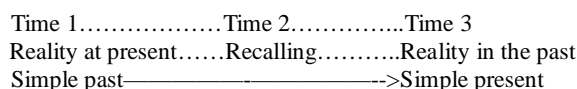


Figure 2 The changing positions of the narrator in his story

When Greenbaum and Quirk explained the situation that using the simple present tense to indicate the past, they provide several examples usually appeared in the dialogues. This implies a kind of tense selection in a rather informal and loose conversation. If it wants to introduce the usage of present simple to refer to the past with information communicated which is still valid now or to achieve the dramatic effect of narration, the best approach which could be used is to retell a story or a dialogue, or to take a message for someone else. When the events are almost certain to take place at a scheduled time, it could apply the simple present tense as well.

### 5. Simple past tense

Mentioning the past tense, Greenbaum and Quirk used the similar methods to categorize the general past tense into 3 parts: the event past, the habitual past and state past. It could find the similarities and difference by drawing a chart to indicate the relationship between them (see Figure 3).

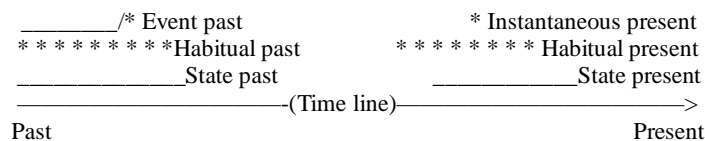


Figure 3 Simple present tense and simple past tense on the time line

Notes: "\_\_\_\_\_" indicates an unbroken state; "\* \* \* \* \*" indicates repeated occurrence; "\*" refers to a single definite event.

Comparing the simple present tense and simple past tense, Greenbaum and Quirk pointed out that, except the state past and state present use stative verbs, the other kinds use the dynamic verbs, which give the learners the implication that verbs are the most important component in the tenses. They do not provide a large number of superficial rules, which might leave the impressions to the learners that "the relevant grammatical area is bitty and arbitrary" (Stranks, 2003, p. 333). Thus, the bottom-up approach might be the wise choice for the learners to learn

the rules from rich examples in sentences and context. Several teaching materials might highlight the key position of the verbs in the learning of tenses.

“Silent sentence” is one of the activities recommended by Rinvoluceri (1984, p. 59): Writing up a long sentence in simple past tense according to a picture and then telling the class to reduce this sentence to one word by taking out the words up to 3 consecutive words. But they are not allowed to change any endings or re-arrange words. When students reduce the sentence, the meaning changes radically. This could make students aware of the importance of the sentence components. Once they reduced the sentence into one word, they need to build up a sentence by adding up to 3 words consecutively. This activity is to catch the students’ attention to the verbs in sentences and use them in a proper tense when required.

Another activity suggested by Rinvoluceri (1984, p. 115) should be a good one to form an idea of time in the students’ mind, that is, “Our lives”. Give each student 10 labels, on which need to be written the important things that happened to them in the past, the month and year, too. The teacher should ask the students to work in threes and correct the grammar mistakes on the labels, with the help of the teacher if necessary. Then he/she can ask the students to stick 30 labels on a sheet of paper in chronological order. Students will throw the die one by one and if the number indicates a certain label, the person who wrote it should speak for one minute about the label described the event. The activity ends when all the players finished their description about the events. This activity could help students better understand the situation time in the past tense and provide the students adequate chances to practice the simple past tense. And if possible, the teachers could let students practice the historic present to reach a dramatic effect and make the whole narration vivid.

## **6. Verbs in the tenses**

The most prominent feature of the introduction about the tenses in Greenbaum and Quirk’s book is the presenting of words, especially verbs, but not structures or rules. Learners derive their grammatical knowledge system from analysis of particular examples of language in use, thus, Greenbaum and Quirk treated the verbs as the key of understanding the distinction between tenses and the same tense in different usage. Little (1994, p. 106) claimed that only after teachers know some of the words, could they know the behavior the explicit grammatical rules described, and for the implicit knowledge of grammatical rules, a developing mental lexicon is the necessity in the development.

Noticing the verb in sentences is beneficial for understanding and exchanging the meanings. Types of meaning within grammatical structures could be identified in several ways. According to Richards (1996, p. 9), one way to identify meanings is by experiential meaning, such as the example given by Greenbaum and Quirk: “The plane left at 9 am” is about a certain plane (the plane) took an action in the past (left) at a certain time (9 am), which represents an experience which might involve some personal thoughts and feelings. Another way reflected in the examples of Greenbaum and Quirk is the textual meaning. Such as in the example “The crowd swarms around the gateway, and seethes with delighted anticipation; excitement grows, as suddenly their hero makes his entrance...”, the author applies the fictional use to put the readers in the place of someone witnessing the events in the past. The verbs “swarm, seethe, grow” represent a certain sequence of the crowd, until the hero “makes his entrance”, the whole event is highlighted dramatically.

In order to make the learners understand the special usage of simple present/past tense, teachers could adopt the exercise from Adamson (1990, p. 4). Giving the students some pictures about things happened on someone or

the imaginary incidents happened on the students themselves. They can let the student describe the events happened at that time with some key verbs provided. This is one of the examples to present the simple present tense to indicate the past event. The teachers could encourage students apply these special usage to their writing to narrate some events that they would illustrate as examples. Only after those practices, could students break the traditional ideas that simple present tense simply refers to the event happen repeatedly, and simple past tense plainly indicate a single definite event in the past.

## 7. Conclusion

Learners are learning grammar by using it, but not by knowing it. Thus, a certain grammar book bears the responsibility to tell the learners what he/she ought to do. Greenbaum and Quirk reflected the grammar rules rather in sentences or contexts than in the formula, which at least leave the impression that learning grammar is a meaningful task but not a tedious one.

Before they introduce two tenses of simple present and simple past, verbs become the focus of the induction. In this paper, the author has analyzed Greenbaum and Quirk's idea about the key role that the verbs play, that is, the stative verbs and dynamic verbs could refer to a state or event while verbs with state and event senses could emphasize different meanings according to the time. Moreover, Greenbaum and Quirk have distinguished moment from time and tense from aspect by drawing two parallel lines: One indicates to the time of event that happened, and the other refers to moment of speaking about the event. These help the learners understand the differences between tenses: The present tense indicates a location at the moment of speaking and the past tense refers to a time before the moment of speaking. Declerck (1991, p. 254) said that, tense does not usually locate a situation in time solely, and sometimes, it needs the co-operation of time adverbials or context. Nevertheless, Greenbaum and Quirk presented the tenses in variety ways, not simply with the help of time adverbials. They remind the learners that, English sentences are not always so perfect and complete by providing all the components like a "subject + verb + object" with a couple of adverbials indicating time, place and purpose, etc. And sometimes, learners need to be sensitive to the core of a sentence, verb, since it conveys much more meanings beyond the meaning of itself.

Greenbaum and Quirk's idea about learning tenses can benefit for learners a lot, especially for the students whose native language has no tenses at all, e.g., Chinese. Thus, their viewpoints could be carried out by some teaching materials. "The shout in the circle" is a perfect activity to emphasize the verb forms in a sentence, and "silent sentence" could be a good exercise for students to reduce and accumulate the components of the sentences, which could have an effect to highlight the verbs in sentences. "Animal habits" is one of the proper exercises to practice a certain tense in a certain situation. If teachers want students to try some special usages of two tenses, "our lives" and the description about the imaginary incidents could be a perfect practice. No matter what kind of teaching materials could be, Greenbaum and Quirk taught us to understand and learn the tenses from different angles. Verb is the core in a sentence. Only within a context, could it be more meaningful and understandable. Even without the help from the adverbials, learners could still be aware of the functions and correct uses of the tenses.

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