

Get Your Tenses Right

Ronald Barnes



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Introduction

Many students of English have acquired a basic knowledge of English but still make mistakes in the tenses, especially when they speak. They have not had sufficient oral practice and are not clear about how the tenses should be used.

Most course books include a brief revision of the tenses with an explanation of their use and some written exercises. This book first systematically examines each tense separately with the emphasis on oral/aural practice, and then contrasts those tenses which cause most difficulty to students. An explanation of the use of the tenses as well as the tense changes in Reported Speech appear at the end of the book, which can be thus adapted to any method of teaching.

What the book contains

The book consists of 21 Units, a Summary of Tenses, a section on Reported Speech, and a list of Irregular Verbs.

Each Unit deals with one particular tense or compares the use of two or more tenses, e.g. Unit 4 Present Continuous, GOING TO, Simple Present. Each Unit is divided into five parts:

- 1 Presentation of the tense through a picture and dialogue.
- 2 Intonation exercise using the tense and other tenses previously introduced. Twenty of the basic English patterns are explained and practised.
- 3 Oral/Aural practice of the tense.
- 4 Listening comprehension. A dialogue based on the tense with questions for comprehension practice.
- 5 An exercise on the tense for written or oral work.

The Summary of Tenses at the end of the book explains the formation of each tense and its main uses. Although this is intended for the teacher, it may be useful to some students who like to study at home, especially if they were absent for a particular lesson.

A brief explanation of the tense changes from Direct to Indirect (Reported) Speech is also provided. Again this is for teachers, but it will also be useful to students for reference.

How to use the book

The following notes are intended as a guide to the teacher so that he may put the book to best use. An experienced teacher will naturally adopt the material to suit his or her own individual style of teaching and to meet the students' needs. Unit 9 is used as an example.

9.1 Presentation of the tense, in this case the Present Perfect. Books open. Discuss the picture first, then read the text. Explain any vocabulary and draw the students' attention to how the tense is used. Ask the questions and, where appropriate, relate them to the students, e.g. 'Have *you* just come back from France?' 'Have *you* ever been to France/abroad?' 'Where have *you* been?'

9.2 Intonation. Books open. Demonstrate the pattern. Make the students aware of the different tunes by exaggerating the fall or rise of the voice. There may be resistance at first from students who think it is not important. Point out that their intonation is just as important as their English accent. 'What were your holidays like?' and 'What were your holidays like?' have two different implications. The patterns can be revised later with books open or shut at the teacher's discretion.

9.3 Oral practice. Books shut. Elicit short and long answers by asking questions like this:

Teacher Have you just had lunch?

Student Yes, I have.

Teacher What did he say?

2nd Student He said he's just had lunch.

Where there is no sample dialogue, there is a prompt in the margin.

These questions should relate to actual classroom situations. Thus, if the question in the book is 'Have you just had lunch?', and the class is working in the morning, the question must obviously be changed to 'Have you just had breakfast?'

Ask these questions very fast, firing them at the students at random. Do only what is necessary: if they respond fluently and correctly, then stop before they become bored or restive. On the other hand, weak students can have further practice by forming the interrogative like this:

Teacher Ask me if I've just had breakfast.

Student Have you just had breakfast?

Some Units have more than one type of Oral practice. These are marked a), b), c) etc., and correspond to the grammatical explanation of the Unit in the Summary of Tenses. e.g. 9.3 a) corresponds to the Summary of Tenses Unit 9 a).

- 9.4 Listening comprehension. Books shut. Set the 'scene' first by telling the students the names of the characters in the dialogue and where they are, e.g. 'Hugh is waiting at home for Wendy. She has just come back from the hairdresser's.'

Read the dialogue, or better, play the recording. Encourage the students to understand the general meaning of the dialogue first and not to lose track of the whole because of one word or phrase they do not understand. Read it again, then ask the questions on it.

Go over the dialogue with books open, explaining and commenting on the vocabulary and use of tense.

Both the dialogues in 9.1 and 9.4 can be used for pronunciation practice.

- 9.5 Writing. This can be done either in class or written for homework. Some Units have more than one exercise, marked a), b), c) etc. These correspond to the grammatical explanations of the Unit in the Summary of Tenses.

Some teachers may prefer to teach the change of tense in Reported Speech as they work through each Unit. The dialogues can be used as transformation exercises from Direct to Reported Speech.

Intonation

Before starting the book, explain the basic uses of the two tunes in English intonation.

Tune One The falling tune. The voice begins fairly high, and descends on each stressed syllable with the fall on the last main stressed syllable. The falling tune is used for

- a) ordinary statements.

I've just got back from France.

- b) exclamations.

Good heavens. What a pity.

- c) questions beginning with question words

(WHO/WHAT/WHERE/WHY/WHICH/WHEN/HOW?)

What [↗]time is it?
Where are you [↗]going?
How [↗]are you?

Tune Two The rising tune. Like the falling tune, the voice begins fairly high, descends on each stressed syllable but rises again on the last important word.

The rising tune is used for

a) ordinary questions.

Are you going away on [↗]Saturday?

Are you [↗]English?

Is he [↗]coming?

b) sentences beginning with a subsidiary clause, followed by a main clause.

The rising tune is usually used in the first part and the falling tune in the second.

As soon as he [↗]got there, he felt ill.

c) sentences or questions with two objects.

She speaks [↗]English and [↗]French.

Arrows have been used in the first 4 Units to demonstrate the rising and falling tunes. From Unit 5 the sign ` is used for the falling tune and , for the rising tune, ' for high stress, and ^ for the fall-rise on one word, e.g. 'She's It'alian. ^Spanish ('Spa,nish). These signs are less obtrusive and easy to learn, so the student will be able to mark intonation in any book neatly and quickly. Only the main stress is marked in each case.

The recording

The dialogues and intonation practice are available on a recording.

Play the first dialogue of each Unit while the student studies the picture. After discussion of the picture, play the recording again while the student follows the text.

The second dialogue (4) of each Unit is a Listening comprehension. Play it twice with the student listening only before asking the questions. At the end of the questions, play it once with the books shut and again with the student following the text. Then make any necessary comments and explanations.

Both the dialogue recordings can be used for pronunciation practice.

The intonation practice should be played after the teacher

- has demonstrated the pattern on the board. The student should
- listen to the prompt
 - respond
 - listen to the correct response.

Reference

The following books are recommended for additional practice material and detailed explanation of intonation and stress:

Living English Speech, W. Stannard Allen (Longman)

Better English Pronunciation, J. D. O'Connor (Cambridge University Press)

Intonation of Colloquial English, J. D. O'Connor and G. F. Arnold (Longman)

For a more detailed explanation of the tenses:

A Practical English Grammar, A. J. Thomson and A. V. Martinet (Oxford University Press)

Unit 1

1.1 Reading

What's going on here?



Policeman What's going on here?

Man You mean, what's happening? Well, constable. I'm trying to get out of the window and Fred 'here is helping me.

Policeman Why are you climbing through the window and not leaving by the front door?

Man Well, you see I can't find the key and I'm in a hurry. Come on, Fred, we're wasting time.

Policeman Just a minute you two. I don't think you're telling me the truth. This isn't your house, is it?
 Man No, it's my brother's. I'm staying with him for a while.
 Policeman Is he at home?
 Man I'm afraid not. He's in jail for house-breaking at the moment.

What's the man doing?
 What's Fred doing?
 What's the policeman doing?
 Why aren't the men leaving by the front door?
 Who's climbing through the window?
 Who's the policeman talking to?
 What's the man carrying?
 Who's Fred looking at?
 Who's the man staying with?

Do you think the man's telling the truth?
 What do you think they're really doing?

1.2 Intonation

Tune One This isn't your house, is it?

The voice falls twice: once in the statement and once in the tag, with no pause between. This implies that you are sure of what you are saying and expect the other person to agree with you. It is *not* a question.

You're English, aren't you?

He isn't English, is he?

Now say these with the appropriate tags in the same way. There must be no hesitation between the statement and the tag. The comma is a formality and does not indicate a pause. He's climbing out of the window, ?

Fred's helping him, ?

It isn't his house, ?

He's in a hurry, ?

He can't find the key, ?

He's not at home, ?

He's staying with his brother, ?

They're wasting time, ?

They aren't telling the truth, ?

We're working hard, ?
You're not concentrating, ?

1.3 Oral practice

Teacher Are you listening to me?
Student Yes, I am.
Teacher What's he doing?
2nd Student He's listening to you.

Are you/they listening to me/him/her?
Is he/she listening to me/them?
Am I sitting down/standing up/reading a book/going to the window/door/blackboard/teaching English/ learning English?
Is he/she sitting down, etc.?

What am I doing?
Where am I going?
What are you doing?
What are you wearing today?
What's she wearing?

1.4 Listening comprehension

Policeman stops a man and an old lady in the street.

Policeman What's going on here?
Man Nothing, constable. I'm helping this old lady across the street, that's all.
Policeman Is that your suitcase?
Man Er – as a matter of fact, it's the old lady's. I'm carrying it for her to the bus station.
Policeman But the bus station is the other way.
Man Oh, is it? Thank you for telling me. Anyway, I'm taking her to the bus station because she has to go to Brighton.
Policeman But there aren't any buses to Brighton from here.
Man Now you're confusing me, constable, and this poor old lady. Look, now she's crying.
Policeman Excuse me, madam. What's the matter? Why are you crying?
Man She can't understand you. She's a foreigner and can't speak English.

Policeman Then how can you understand her?
 Man She's Russian, and I'm learning Russian at night-school.
 Goodbye, constable.

Is the man or the policeman helping the old lady across the street?

What's he carrying?

Whose case is it?

Where's he taking the old lady?

Why is he taking her to the bus station?

Is the old lady crying or laughing?

Why can't she understand the policeman?

Who's learning Russian?

Tune Two Ask me if
 he's helping her across the street.
 he's taking her to the station.
 she's crying.
 he's learning Russian.
 she can speak English.

Tune One Ask me
 where he's taking her.
 what he's carrying.
 why he's taking her to the bus station.
 why she's crying.
 what he's learning.

1.5 Writing

Put the verbs in brackets into the correct form: AM/ARE/IS DOING

- 1 She (sit) under the tree.
- 2 He's thirsty, so he (drink) a glass of water.
- 3 What you (do)? I (write) a letter.
- 4 We (look at) our books, but we not (read) them.
- 5 You not (study) German this year?
- 6 She not (speak) to me.
- 7 Where he (go)? He (go) home.
- 8 They (wait) for you outside.
- 9 They not (listen to) the radio.
- 10 Our teacher (stand up) but we (sit down)..