

Exploring Contexts: A Tense and Aspect Activity for Online or In-Person Instruction

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Learning tense and aspect often proves challenging for students of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL). Not only do students have to learn the correct sentence-level tense and aspect combinations (think, for example, about simple present versus present progressive or simple past versus present perfect), they must also understand how each form contrasts in meaning. Additionally, teachers often have a difficult time explaining or illustrating these subtle yet critical differences. The amount of technical information in tense and aspect lectures can also overwhelm students, and subsequent activities and exercises are not always the most exciting. Now, add to all this the varying dynamics and challenges of online and in-person learning environments. How can an educator make teaching tense and aspect effective, engaging, and fun for students in both settings?

Exploring Contexts is an activity I adapted from similar in-person tense and aspect activities and designed for online instruction during the COVID pandemic. The activity is quick to prepare, easy to explain, and effective in both online and in-person formats.

BACKGROUND

I got the idea for this activity in late 2020 after preparing an online tense and aspect grammar workshop, which included university-level ESL students from China and Brazil, as well as native English speakers who wanted to review specific grammar topics. The activity was adapted from teaching suggestions in *The Grammar Book: Form, Meaning, and Use for English Language Teachers* (Larsen-Freeman and

Celce-Murcia 2015). In the suggestions for the tense–aspect system, Laura Collins in a 2007 article describes activities where students are asked to pick the correct tense–aspect sentence for a given context (cited in Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia 2015, 130) or create their own contextual sentence using a specified tense and aspect form (cited in Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia 2015, 131). Additionally, Collins explains that the benefit of these exercises is that students can make choices about the meanings they want to express and see other appropriate examples from their peers (cited in Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia 2015, 131).

Although these activities allow students to focus on learning the correct sentence-level combinations of tense and aspect and their different meanings, I wanted to adapt the activities for more-interactive partner/group work and give students a chance to create and role-play their own contextual-based dialogues. Thus, for this activity, students create multiple short A–B dialogues while integrating given sentences to explore the differences in meaning.

Exploring Contexts works well through online platforms such as Zoom, where students can work collaboratively in breakout rooms before rejoining the rest of the class to present the conversations they create. For in-person classes, the basic idea, preparation, and procedure are the same. Exploring Contexts can take anywhere from 15 to 30 minutes, or perhaps a little longer, depending on how many students you have, their proficiency level, and which tense and aspect forms you have students work on.

MATERIALS

The only materials you need to prepare are those that explain the tense and aspect forms covered (e.g., slideshow, chalkboard, poster) and the Exploring Contexts activity worksheet. For online use, the worksheet should be on a Google Doc, a Microsoft Word document, or another similar format so that it can be easily shared; students will type their work in the document via a web browser. When preparing these materials, you should be mindful of where the students are geographically located, as this can affect what documents and links students can access. For example, students in certain countries might not be able to access a Google Doc. For in-person classes, you can print out the appropriate number of copies of the same

document or write the content on the board or on poster paper for the entire class to see.

PREPARATION

Preparation for Exploring Contexts is relatively simple. It includes having an idea of which tense and aspect forms your students have trouble with and creating the resulting activity worksheet students will work from (for suggestions on what forms to cover, see the next section).

1. *Know which tense and aspect forms to cover.*
Before class, decide which tense and aspect forms you will cover in this activity. You can do this through observation of prior classes and by noting the forms your students have the most difficulty with. You might even conduct a pre-lesson diagnostic quiz if

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Purpose: This activity will allow you to create different contexts using different tense and aspect forms.

Instructions:
For each of the three sentences below, create a short A–B dialogue with your partner using the sentence provided. Think about the context and meaning of each one. Have fun and be creative!

Sentence 1: Someone ate all the food. (*simple past*)
A:
B:
A:
B:
A:
B:

Sentence 2: Someone has been eating all the food. (*present perfect progressive*)
A:
B:
A:
B:
A:
B:

Sentence 3: Someone is eating all the food. (*present progressive*)
A:
B:
A:
B:
A:
B:

Figure 1. Template for the Exploring Contexts activity worksheet

you are teaching new students and want a better understanding of what tense–aspect forms your students need to work on. Nevertheless, you should plan to cover only two or three forms at once. For the lesson I conducted, the activity covered three forms based on a diagnostic quiz: simple past, present perfect progressive, and present progressive (see Figure 1).

2. *Create your worksheet.* After you have decided which tense and aspect forms to cover, it is time to prepare the activity worksheet. Write the purpose and instructions of the activity at the top of the page, followed by the tense and aspect sentences and space for the A–B dialogues with at most six lines each (students do not have to use all six lines). Refer to Figure 1 as a template. The example in Figure 1 shows the purpose of the activity, instructions for students, three sentences with different tense and aspect forms, and space to create the A–B

dialogues for each one. Students work collaboratively: on paper if in-person, or online using this template as a shareable and editable document.

Note: If you do not have access to a photocopier, printer, or computer and you are teaching an in-person class, you can write this template on a whiteboard or chalkboard. The students can then write down the sentences and create the dialogues in their notebooks.

3. *Prepare enough pages and create an example.* Depending on how many pairs you have, you will want to create enough pages of the worksheet to assign to each one (Pair 1, Pair 2, Pair 3, etc.). Online, students will work collaboratively on the same document and will type their conversations on their assigned page. For in-person classes, pass out one activity worksheet per pair. You might also want to prepare

Exploring Contexts
Tense and Aspect
Teacher Example Dialogues

For the teacher

Examples:

Sentence 1: Someone ate all the food. (*simple past*)
A: Hey, I'm going to make some lunch. Do you want anything?
B: Sure! What are you making?
A: How about a sandwich?
B: Okay!
A: (**looks in the refrigerator*) Hey! Someone ate all the food! Everything is gone!
B: Oops, sorry.

Sentence 2: Someone has been eating all the food. (*present perfect progressive*)
A: Why do you keep going to the store? This is the third time this week.
B: Because someone has been eating all the food.
A: Oh really? I wonder who?
B: Yeah, I keep having to buy more and more food.
A: Oh, that reminds me! While you're there, can you pick up some more chips and salsa? Thanks!

Sentence 3: Someone is eating all the food. (*present progressive*)
(*At a work/office party*)
A: This is a big party huh?
B: Yeah, I wasn't expecting this many people to come.
A: Do you think we have enough food for everyone?
B: (**looks at person A's plate with a huge pile of food*) Hmm, I'm not sure. Someone is eating all the food.

Figure 2. Example dialogues for teacher use

example dialogues using each of the tense and aspect sentences. These examples can be used either before the activity for demonstration or during the activity to guide students if they struggle. Figure 2 shows ready-to-use dialogues I created for the Figure 1 worksheet, which focuses on the simple past (“Someone ate all the food.”), the present perfect progressive (“Someone has been eating all the food.”), and the present progressive (“Someone is eating all the food.”). These examples show what is expected of students in the activity and encourage them to have fun and be creative with their dialogues.

SUGGESTIONS AND EXAMPLE FORMS TO COVER

You can cover many tense and aspect forms with this activity. As mentioned, you may conduct a diagnostic quiz or observe other lessons to see which forms your students struggle with the most. However, Larsen-Freeman and Celce-Murcia (2015) describe a few tense and aspect combinations that prove particularly difficult for ESL/EFL students (121–127). Thus, focusing on one or more of these forms could be a good place to start.

The simple present versus the present progressive forms, specifically with action verbs, can be difficult for students. The present progressive describes a current action in progress, and the simple present describes a more habitual one. Using the same template in Figure 1, students can work in pairs and write two dialogues, using the two sentences below. As the teacher, you should feel free to change any of the following example sentences to your liking.

Sentence 1: She is dancing. (*present progressive*)

Sentence 2: She dances. (*simple present*)

Many students also have difficulty with the simple past versus the present perfect. Simple past is generally used to describe actions or events that are completed and have no relation to the present. Present perfect, on the other hand, generally describes an action or event that

started in the past and is still ongoing; present perfect can also describe finished actions or events that have a relationship with the present. This distinction is difficult for many ESL/EFL students, so an activity like this one that focuses on context-level dialogues can help your students understand these subtle differences. Again, using the same template in Figure 1, students create dialogues based on the sentences below:

Sentence 1: They practiced self-defense. (*simple past*)

Sentence 2: They have practiced self-defense. (*present perfect*)

Finally, the simple future versus the future perfect can be challenging, as both forms describe events or actions that will occur at a later time. Simple future describes a general event or action that takes place in the future. Future perfect, however, describes a future action or event that will be completed before a specified time or another event. Example sentences you might use for this tense–aspect combination include the following:

Sentence 1: They will move to Hawaii. (*simple future*)

Sentence 2: They will have moved to Hawaii by December. (*future perfect*)

PROCEDURE

1. *Introduce the activity.* After giving your explanation of tense and aspect, introduce the Exploring Contexts activity by reviewing the two or three forms the activity will cover. You might have learners read example sentences or show them graphic timelines to illustrate how the meanings of the forms differ. After this, give the instructions of the activity and check students’ understanding with comprehension questions. If you are teaching online, assign each pair a number (Pair 1, Pair 2, Pair 3, etc.) before sharing the document link.
2. *For online use, share the link to the activity worksheet.* Copy and paste the document

link into the classroom chat box. Students should be able to click the link and open the document. Make sure the settings of the document allow anyone with the link to edit.

For in-person use, pass out the activity worksheet. Pass out one copy of the activity worksheet to each pair. If you cannot make copies of the activity worksheet, write the tense–aspect sentences on the chalkboard or whiteboard, then have students write the sentences in their notebooks with space to create their dialogues.

- 3.** *Support the students.* Give the pairs time to work on their dialogues. Depending on how many tense and aspect forms you are working with and the level of your students, you should allocate anywhere from ten to 20 minutes. If your class has a wide range of proficiency levels, it is best to arrange the pairs so there is at least one higher-level (or more confident) student to lead. When it comes time to present the dialogues, each student will have an equal part in the role play. As the teacher, you should observe each pair (or join each breakout room if online) to check students' understanding of the activity and their progress. Some pairs might need extra help with context and dialogue ideas or with understanding the differences between the assigned tense and aspect forms. If this is the case, use examples (see Figure 2) to help guide the students.

- 4.** *Model and present.* After all the pairs have finished creating their dialogues, bring the students together (if online, close the breakout rooms). Tell students that it is time for them to share the dialogues they created. You might want to choose a student to help model one of the dialogues you prepared as an example (see Figure 2). During the demonstration, focus on the emotion, intonation, and feeling of the language and situation. You may also encourage students to use gestures and facial expressions. Tell students that you want them to act out the

part, just as you did in the demonstration. Have the pairs present their dialogues (or only their best dialogue if time is a factor) starting with Pair 1, then Pair 2, and so on. Give positive and encouraging comments after each pair presents.

- 5.** *Reflect.* After all the pairs have presented their dialogues, ask students if they have a better understanding of the forms they worked with and how their meanings are different. It is a good idea to share some of the common errors and challenges you noticed from the pair-work session. You can also use this time to address any major grammatical or contextual concerns from the dialogues.

CONCLUSION

Exploring Contexts allows students to work together in a fun and collaborative way in both online and in-person learning environments. Students can create dialogues using their own ideas while exploring the subtle differences between tense and aspect forms. Additionally, when students have a full understanding of this activity, you can ask them to come up with their own contexts for another round. This will further student practice by allowing them to think about new contexts, create new dialogues, and then share these ideas with classmates. I recommend trying Exploring Contexts if you are introducing tense and aspect concepts or if you want to review challenging tense and aspect forms with your students.

REFERENCE

Larsen-Freeman, D., and M. Celce-Murcia. 2015. *The grammar book: Form, meaning, and use for English language teachers*. 3rd ed. Boston: Heinle Cengage Learning.

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