

TIME AND TENSE WAIT FOR NO LEARNER...

Those of you whose learners are interested in grammar will often be asked which verb tense is *correct* for a particular expression. In my opinion, the most sensible way to respond to such a question is to tell the learner which verb form native speakers *use*, and invite the learner to read up about the use of that tense and tell you about it (in English) next week!

However, it may be handy to have some familiarity with tenses just in case.

- Basically, **the tense of a verb gives information about the verb** (the action).- about when the action took place (usually in relation to other bits of the sentence)
- Over what period it took place
- Whether the action was completed or interrupted or repeated
- Even whether the action really happened or not.

(There is a good deal of jargon involved in a detailed discussion of the information a verb phrase can give, but let's skip that for today.)

Importantly, the **tense** doesn't always match the **time** (present, past, future) we might use, and the *name* of the tense doesn't always show the right time, either.

Past tense doesn't always refer to past time, nor present tense to present time.

Here are some examples:

If Hector didn't always arrive so late, we could have tea while the crumpets were still warm.

Now, we're actually complaining about something Hector does (in the present as well as the past, and probably the future as well) on a repeated basis. But the tense of "*didn't arrive*" is past simple. So is the part about the crumpets.

Aunt Agatha rang to say she was coming next Thursday instead of Tuesday. What a relief!

"*She was coming*" is plainly past (continuous) tense, but Aunt Agatha's arrival is still in the future!

*When we get to the beach I want an ice cream and then a swim.
Of course Lucretia darling, anything you say. Only another two hours to go....*

What tense is "*we get*?" Yes indeed, present (simple). But the arrival at the beach is still in the future for the unfortunate speaker.

Orlando was finishing the ironing when Dolores came in from the party.

This sentence is really exciting, because the verb tenses show us that while Dolores's arrival was a one-off ("*came in*" – past simple), Orlando started doing the ironing before Dolores arrived home and quite possibly continued the last few bits after her arrival (past continuous). It could have taken him hours, the poor chap.

Discussions about verbs easily become long and detailed. If you like that sort of thing, go for it – just make sure you have correct information about names and functions of tenses as ammunition for your side of the discussion. In all other cases, introduce your grammar-hungry student to Murphy or a similar grammar reference book and invite them to report back to you on their research!