

English Verb Tenses: a dynamic presentation

...using the Cuisenaire Rods

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The reasons for presenting the English verb tense system

This article describes an exercise I often do in class when I hear a student sigh, after making yet another mistake, "I never know which verb tense to use!" and I see the rest of the class nodding in agreement. These people are usually French adults whose four to eight years of school English has left them with a lot of words, but very few criteria for organising them into correct sentences. They may have a few, half remembered, over simple "rules" such as "*The Present Perfect means the action began in the past and continues in the present*" but generally they feel that English is a language with no grammar and getting sentences right is something mysterious which hopefully just comes with practice. Others, having had a lengthy and rigorous training in French grammar, either feel that English is somehow more primitive than French or they try to apply French grammatical concepts to English. Neither of these attitudes having led to much progress in the language, they are usually quite happy to attempt a new way of looking at English verb tenses. This new way is of course only new to them; it is one that has been accepted by most academic grammarians for over a hundred years but has yet to filter down to school textbooks. My objective in writing this article is not so much to describe or defend this theory of English verb tenses, but to show how it can be presented in class in a game-like way. I shall attempt to describe step by step, everything significant I and my students say and do in a typical presentation. Naturally, each group of students responds differently, so this is a synthesis of my experience with dozens of groups over the past 30 years during which time my own understanding of English tenses has evolved considerably.

An example of a scientific model

I introduce the activity by explaining that what I am proposing is a different *model* of verb tenses from that they learnt at school. I use *model* in the scientific sense and refer to the well-known examples of the Ptolemaic and Copernican models of the planetary system to make it clear that a model is neither true nor false, but only a more or less economic and/or useful presentation of facts. The English students were taught at school was not incorrect, but it was presented in terms of a model which was originally devised to describe the functioning of a completely different language – Latin. However adequate this model may be for explaining the complex system of declensions and conjugations expressed through suffixes in Latin, there is no reason to suppose it appropriate for English which has no such declensions and almost no conjugations.

Creating a mental image: the bubble

My first step is to create a mental image in the minds of my students. I say, "*As English speakers we imagine ourselves in the centre of a bubble – something like a chewing gum bubble – which is infinitely elastic. For example...*" I put a red rod near one student, Catherine, and a blue rod further away from her. "*Which of these*

rods is 'here' for you and which one 'there'?" Catherine says, "Here." pointing to the red one and "There." pointing to the blue one. I ask the class, "Where is the limit of Catherine's bubble?" They gesture to indicate somewhere between the red rod and the blue one. Then I put a yellow rod beyond the blue one in relation to Catherine, and cover the red one with my hand without moving it. I say to Catherine, "Now look at the blue rod and the yellow one and say which is 'here' and which is 'there'." Catherine points to the blue rod and says 'Here' and the yellow rod and says "There". I ask the class again, "Where is the limit of Catherine's bubble now?" and they indicate a point between the blue rod and the yellow one. Then I open the door and throw a green rod into the corridor and say to the whole class, "Everybody can play now, which rod is 'here' and which is 'there'?" They have no hesitation in saying that the one in the room is "here" and the one in the corridor is "there". When I ask, "Where is the limit of our bubble?" the students reply, "The classroom." We continue in the same way but with virtual rods, one in the building and one in the street, the one in the street and one in London, the one in London and one on the moon, etc. until we have expanded our bubble to the size of the universe.

Then I ask,

"Have the rods moved?"

"No."

"So what causes us to say 'here' or 'there'?"

"Our point of view./It's a question of relativity."

"This image of the bubble works not only for space but for time, too. We'll come back to it, but first I want to ask you some questions about tenses."

What is a tense and how many are there in English

Here I check that everyone knows the difference between time and tense because in French there is only one word. Then I ask them how many tenses there are in English. The only people I have ever found (other than English teachers, and not even all of those) who could give a rapid and confident answer were students preparing the CAPES (the French competitive examination for secondary school teachers) and those who had previously done courses with my colleagues. Usually they either say they do not know or start muttering to themselves and counting on their fingers and come up with any number between 3 and 10. My next question is about the function of tenses, "What do they do? Why do they exist?" Somebody will say something on the lines of "They situate an action in time." I accept this for the moment. Then I ask, "How do you recognise a tense when you see or hear it?" and I will get an answer about endings or suffixes to the verb. So then I ask, "How do you recognise that a word is a verb?" This usually leads to a silence so I write "gollar" on the board and ask if anyone knows what it means – so far no one has – and then if they know if it is a verb.

Of course they do not. I then write "a gollar" and ask them again and they say,

"No, it's a noun."

"What proves it's a noun?"

"The 'a' in front."

"What can you put in front to test if a word is a verb?"

Here I often get the answer "to" so I write "to London" and ask for a better test and usually get "I", so I write "I gollar." I ask if in this sentence they are sure "gollar" is a verb, so far everyone has agreed they are sure. Then I point to "a gollar" and ask,

"Is there anything here which indicates time?"

"No."

"And in 'I gollar.', is there anything to indicate time?"

They are obliged to answer "No." but it is often obvious that some people are not comfortable with this answer. So I say, "Let's leave 'gollar' and use a common action verb you all know 'play.'" and I write "I play." on the board. "You said before that tense was a question of endings, so what endings can you put on 'play'?" As they make suggestions I write them on the board like this:

I play.

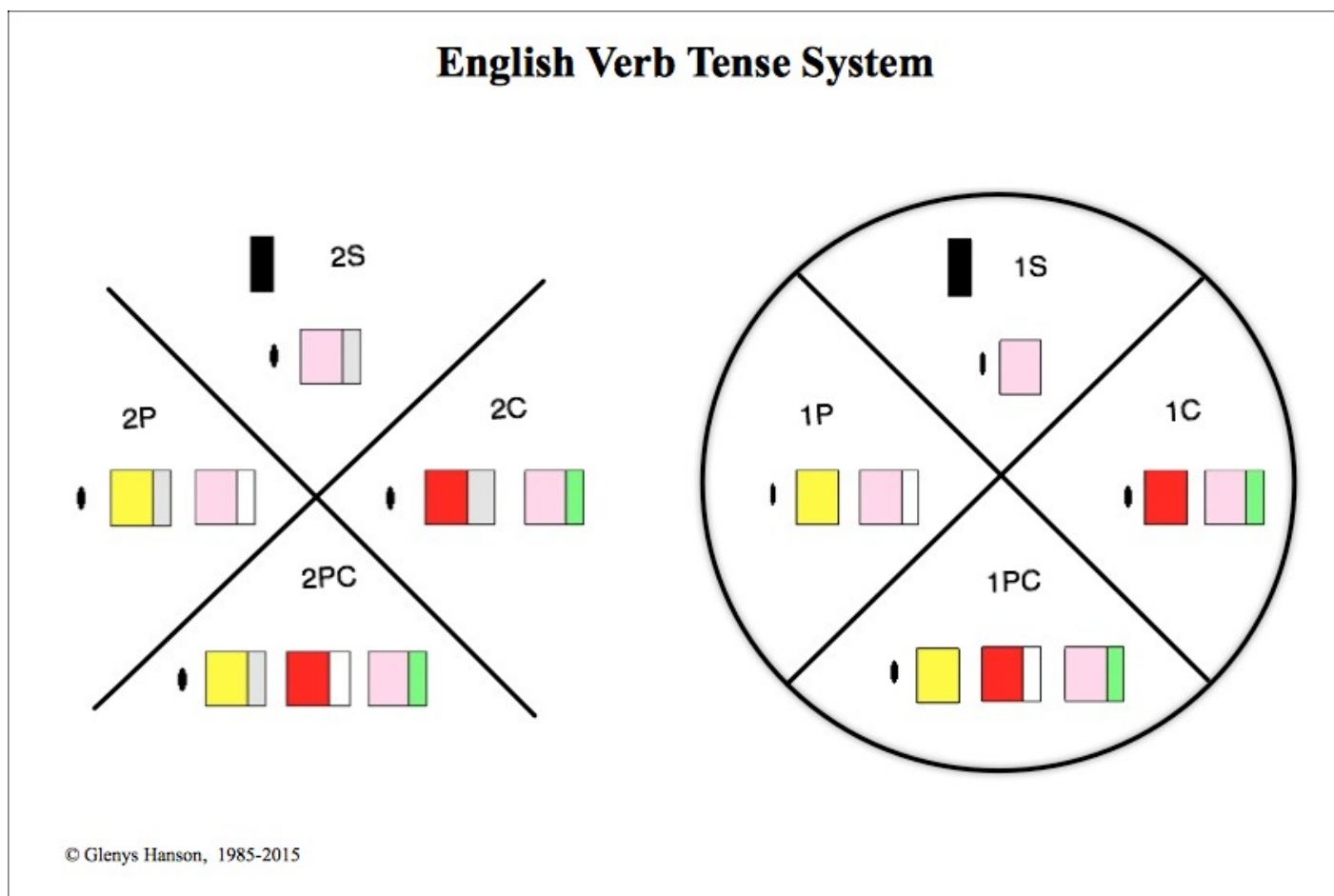
He plays.

I played.

At this point someone always suggests '-ing' so I write: *I playing.* and of course they all point out that it is impossible, so I say, "Then 'playing' is not a verb according to our test." Sometimes they accept this, and sometimes someone protests, "But 'I am playing' is the Present Continuous of 'play.'" So I write up, "I like playing." and ask what tense it is and if playing is the verb here. If I still feel there is resistance I might say, "In terms of the model you learned at school, you're right. This model is different. Can you wait a bit to see what advantages there might be to looking at these words in another way?" and I rub out "I playing." but put 'playing' in brackets under the list. Then I ask them if the difference between 'play' and 'plays' is one of time or person and when they answer 'person' I bracket them together on the board and then I ask them for the second time how many tenses there are in English and everybody agrees, some reluctantly, that there are just two.

The beginning of the presentation

For the next step I use a large piece (about 90 cm by 55 cm) of white flip chart paper on a table, eight paper clips, a box of Cuisenaire rods and two markers of different colours. I ask the students to come and sit around the table as close as possible. On the right hand side of the piece of paper (from the students' point of view) I draw a large circle to materialise the "bubble". I divide the bubble into four equal "boxes". On the left hand side of the paper I also draw four "boxes". When they have finished, the students will have laid rods on the paper so that it looks roughly like this (only roughly, because real rods are of different lengths).



English verb tense system - coloured rectangles - labelled

Note

For the convenience of readers here, I have labelled the boxes 1S, 1C, 1PC, 1P, 2S, 2C, 2PC, 2P. (1 = base tense, 2 = distanced tense, S = Simple, P = Perfect, C = Continuous). Naturally in the classroom situation I and the students simply point to the box concerned and say "Here".

If I give it to the students as a handout it is not labelled and looks like this:

- English verb tense system – coloured rectangles (PDF)

The colour code

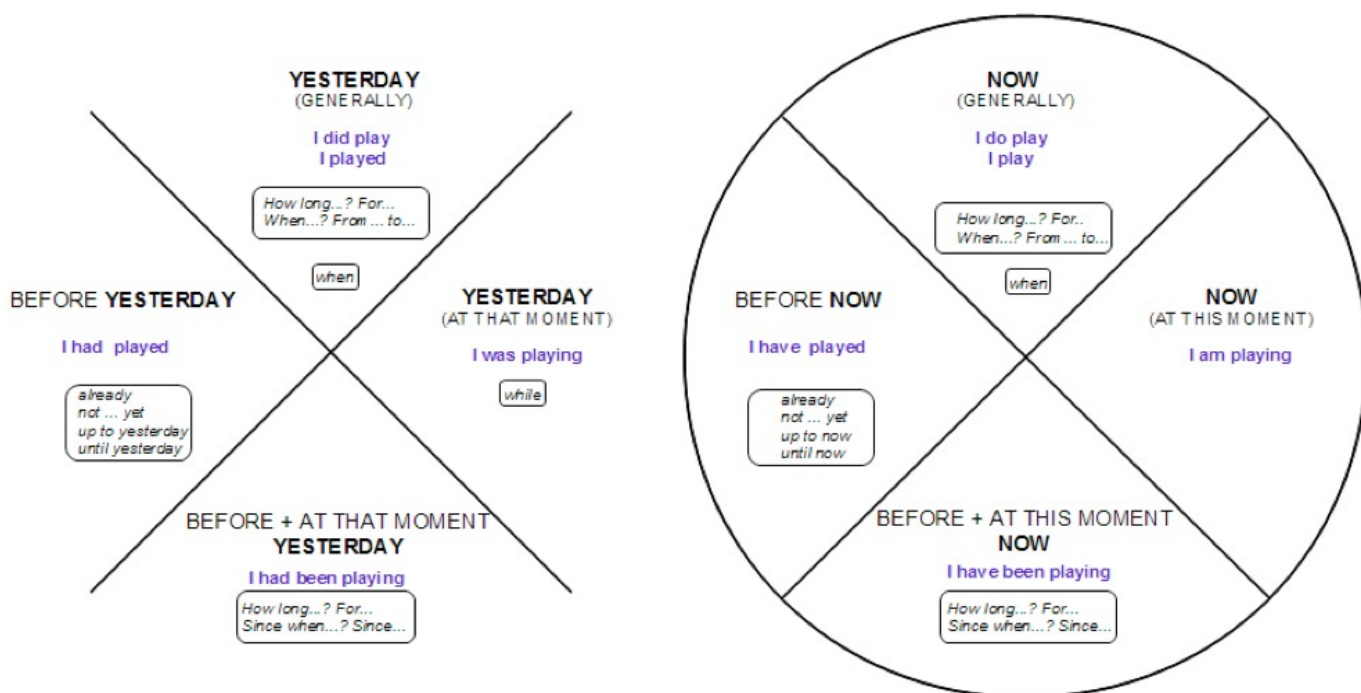
Sometimes I let them choose their own colours, sometimes I direct them to using certain colours so that I can use a paper version later on as a reference. The colours I use are:

- pink = any action
- red = the verb *be*
- yellow = the verb *have*
- black = the verb *do*
- orange = any modal verb
- green = *-ing*
- a white cube = *-ed* or the past marker in irregular verbs
- a beige cube = the past participle (often called the *-en* form)

I use two slightly different coloured cubes (I take advantage of the fact that in different boxes of rods, the "white" rods can be a little different in colour) because sometimes it is useful for students to pay attention to the difference between the Past form and the Participle form, but often it is not.

Here is what the rods represent written out as sentences plus the other words the students will have written on the paper by the end of the exercise:

English Verb Tense System



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English verb tense system – words

English verb tense system – words (PDF)

The beginning of the exercise

I ask the students to give me the shortest form of their verb beginning with "I..." they say, "I play". I pick up a paper clip and say "I" and then a pink Cuisenaire rod and say "play" and ask, "Inside the bubble or outside?" The students answer, "Inside" and I place them side by side in the top right hand quarter inside the bubble, 1S. Then I ask for another construction beginning with "I". They usually say "I played" and I ask again, "Inside or outside the bubble?", they answer, "Outside" and I pick up a paper clip, a pink rod and a small, white rod and

place them, in that order, in the top right hand "box" outside the bubble, 2S. I ask for another construction; they might say, "*I am playing*". I push the box of Cuisenaire rods and the paper clips towards them and say, "*Now, it's your turn to play.*" They understand that they have to take a paper clip and a certain number of rods and put them on the paper. It is usually clear for them that they have to decide to put the "sentence" either inside or outside the bubble, but it is not always clear to them that they have to put it in one of the "boxes". Neither is it always obvious to them that "-ing" should be represented by a separate rod. They discuss these questions among themselves and when eventually (it can take ten seconds or ten minutes) they agree on which rods to use and where to put them, I do not indicate whether or not I consider they are right but ask for another construction. They continue in the same way until they have found the eight constructions. If someone suggests, "*I will play*" I say, "*Keep it till later.*"

The discussion around "I have played"

A good group – I mean one that is sensitive to the problems and willing to discuss them – can spend over an hour on this. The most interesting discussions are usually about where to place "*I have played*". Many French people feel that it should be half in and half out of the bubble. I insist that they choose one or the other. Only if it is clear that they have no criteria for making this choice do I intervene. I ask them which part of "*I have played*" (represented by a paper clip and three rods of different colours) represents the action. If they point to all three rods, I pick up the white rod and ask,

"What does this represent?"

"-ed"

"Is that an action?"

"No."

Then I pick up the rod representing "have", maybe a yellow one, and ask the same questions. Then I ask again which rod represents the action and they point to the pink one. My next question is, "*Which rod represents the verb?*" If they again point to all three rods, I point to, "*I gollar.*", which is still written on the board, and ask them to remember what their criterion was for saying it was a verb and to apply the same criterion in the case of "*I have played*". If they accept that the verb is "have", they no longer have any problem in deciding whether it is inside or outside the bubble.

For a few people it can help to make them aware of why they have been taught that the verb is "have played". I ask,

"In Latin, how many words are needed to express, 'I have played'?"

"One."

"So in Latin, one word expresses both the action, the verb and the subject. That's why you've learned to look at several English words and call them all 'the verb.'"

All this is usually unnecessary for groups with a scientific or technical bent because they are used to playing around with different models and are willing to suspend judgement on what I am presenting until they have seen how it works.

Questions about the eight constructions

Once they have found the eight constructions and placed them in a regular way inside and outside the "bubble" as indicated in the second diagram, I ask them to look at the colours and say:

"What happens when you move from 1S to 1C?"

"You add red and green."

"And from 1P to 1PC?"

"You add red and green."

This is enough for many people, but for some I have to continue with 2S to 2C and 2P to 2C before they can say, "*Ah, it's the same.*" Which shows me that they have had the awareness that each construction at the top has a parallel construction at the bottom. Sometimes they make it explicit,

"There are 4 constructions with "be" and "-ing" and 4 constructions without."

Then I ask:

"And if you go from 1S to 1P?"

"You add yellow and beige."

"And from 1C to 1PC?"

"You add yellow and beige."

And the same with 2S to 2P and 2C to 2PC until everyone has noticed a second pattern in the constructions.

Finally for this part, and for me the most significant awareness to force here, I ask,

"And if you go from 1S to 2S?"

"You add white."

"And from 1C to 2C?"

"You add white."

And the same with 1P to 2P and 1PC to 2PC. For those with a mathematical background I point out that the constructions outside the bubble are a translation of those inside the bubble. (I don't really know what this means; a mathematical student told me this years ago and every time I trot it out the mathematical types go, "Ah!" so it seems to be worth saying.)

By this point some students will have tried to use the traditional grammatical labels. I ask them if words like "preterite", "participle" or "pluperfect" really have meaning for them. 99% of my students have declared they do not, so I suggest we give each construction a new label using words we are sure we understand. (The 1% for whom the traditional terms do have meaning are welcome to continue using them, but not to say them aloud.)

Naming the eight constructions with "time words"

I point to the 1C construction and ask them to say it aloud and add the time word that comes spontaneously. Almost without exception, they say: "*I am working now.*" I hand a marker to a student and ask him to write *now* in the 1C box. I point to the 2S construction, and without exception, they say: "*I worked yesterday.*" A student writes *yesterday* in the 2S box.

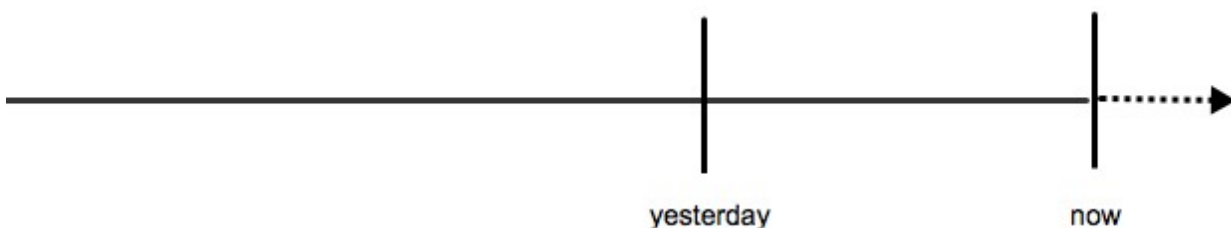
Then I say:

"If this (2S) is yesterday what is this (2P)?"

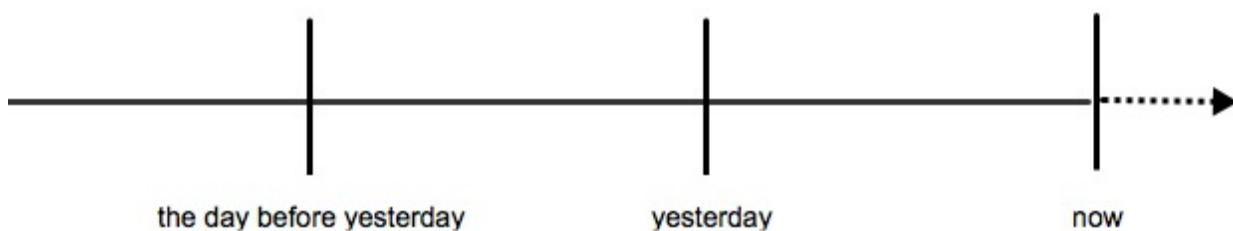
This often gets the response *before yesterday*, in which case they write it in the box. But just as often the answer given is, "The day before yesterday". If this is the case I tell them I am going to use a different model, and I draw a line:



I ask, "If this point is now (I point to it), where is yesterday?" A student will come and add it, usually like this:



Then I ask them to put in *the day before yesterday* and someone will draw this:



Then I say, "This is perfectly logical if we're naming days, but it's not the logic of English tenses. If we have another reference point, we would need another tense and English only has two."

So I remove *the day before yesterday* to return to the second diagram, and make a sweeping gesture with my hand from the point *yesterday* towards the leftwards end of the line, "What's all this?" "Before yesterday." "How far can I continue?" and I continue the gesture along the wall beyond the board. "As far as you like."/ "To infinity." I go back to the paper and someone writes *before yesterday* in the 2P box.

Then I point to 1S and ask, "What about this one?" This one, too, can take a little while. Though I accept as correct suggestions such as *every day* or *often*, I say, "For the sake of simplicity and economy we are going to use as few different words as possible. Which of the words we have already used can be used here?" With lower level groups it may be necessary for them to find a few examples before they are sure that *now* is also possible for 1S. Then I say:

"We have the problem of distinguishing the two 'nows'. What does *now* mean in 1C?"

"At the moment./At this moment."

"And what does it mean in 1S?"

I push them until they find, "in general" or "generally" and agree it is more useful as a label than *every day* or *often*. Then I say (if necessary -students often find it spontaneously), "

If this is yesterday and this before yesterday, what is this (1P) if this is now (1S)?

"Before now."

and this becomes the label for 1P. Even if the more analytical students can make the jump for themselves, I make sure that everybody sees that 1PC is made up of the addition of 1P and 1C by temporally moving the red and green rods from 1C to 1PC and the yellow and beige ones from 1P to 1PC. Then they can label 1PC "before now and now" or "before now and at the moment," or some similar paraphrase. In the same way, 2C is labelled *at a/that moment yesterday*, 2P *before yesterday* and 2PC *before and at a/that moment yesterday*.

Making examples for the eight constructions

The next step is for the students to make examples for each of the eight constructions. I insist that the examples not only be true ones, but that their truth can be verified by everyone in the classroom. This is so that the students really feel the meaning of the constructions, and are not just mechanically making sentences. Here are some of the questions I ask them during this work to help them develop criteria for using each construction and how each one corresponds to a different perception or feeling to be expressed:

Inside the bubble questions:

1. Which construction is the longest?
2. Which construction is the shortest?
3. Which one is most/least frequently used?
4. Which one gives the most/least information?
5. In 1S how many pieces of information are given?
6. In 1S is there anything which explicitly indicates time?

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7. What is the meaning of the green "-ing"?
 8. What is the meaning of the red "be"?
 9. What is the meaning of the yellow "have"?

The "-ing" form

For the last three questions they often need some help to find the base meanings. They often think "-ing" form in itself indicates time. I write some examples on the board where this is clearly not the case:

1. *Running keeps you fit.*
2. *I like running.*
3. *I wore my running shoes yesterday.*

If it seems necessary for the group, it might be the moment to distinguish between an action (performed by a subject) and an activity (a general performance where the actors are not specified) by writing on the board:

1. *Glenys likes to box.*
2. *Glenys likes boxing.*

And then asking:

- which sentence creates the ridiculous picture in their minds of elderly me in the ring, dressed in shorts and boxing gloves;
- which sentence is compatible with me sitting comfortably in front of my television watching a match.

"Have" and "be"

These frequently dismissed as mere auxiliaries with no particular meaning – which is why some students seem to use one or the other more or less at random. It can be useful for them to understand that, though it is not as easy to create a mental picture of their meaning as it is for "dance" or "ski", they do have separate and identifiable meanings.

Be

For "be" I have yet to find an elegant way of doing this. I have tried putting a marker on a table and saying or writing, "The marker is on the table" and getting them to see that the only reason for saying a sentence like this is to situate the marker in relation to the table – for someone who was looking for the marker. The only way to situate an object in space is to situate it in relation to another object. The verb we use for situating in space is "be". It is also used for situating in time. The only way of situating anything in time is in relation to an event, action or activity. The only way I can know myself in the present is by situating myself in some activity, "*I am writing this article.*" (No, I have never actually said this last sentence in class, it's just for you, Reader.)

Have

For "have" I think I do a little better. I write the following sequence of sentences on the board. For each sentence I ask them what the relationship is between "I" and the words I have underlined:

1. I have a watch. (What I have/possess is an object)
2. I have a mother. (What I have/possess is a relationship, not the person herself)
3. I have lunch at 12 o'clock. (What I have/possess is a habit, not the lunch itself)
4. I have visited Paris. (What I have/possess is the experience of visiting Paris)

Other points I try to make clear to the students

For reasons of space, I will not write out step by step how I do these:

1. The 1S form is the base form. They do not have to have any particular reason for using it. It is the choice by default. It is all the other constructions they need a reason for using.
2. The reason for using the 1C construction is to situate the subject in an activity at the present moment, in spite of its traditional label (Present Continuous) it does not express past to present duration.. Of

course, activities take place in time and therefore have duration, but a sentence such as "I am sitting" does not in itself express the duration of the sitting any more than the sentence, "The marker is on the table" expresses the dimensions of the table.

3. Sentences such as "We are staying here for 18 weeks" are possible but they have present to future reference. When my French students said such sentences they intended them to have past reference and mean they arrived 18 weeks previously.
4. If they wish to express duration the construction to use is 1PC.
5. 1P and 1PC are not only used to describe recent events, "The universe has been expanding since the Big Bang."
6. The only reason for going outside the bubble, is because they want to attach an event or an action to a moment other than now – often referred to as dating.
7. My decision to say, "I have had breakfast" or "I had breakfast" is not directly related to how long ago I had the meal, to objective time, but to whether I perceive the meal as inside my bubble or outside my bubble.
8. Outside the bubble, 2S is the base form and the most frequently used one.
9. Not only do they have to have good reasons for using 2C, 2CP and 2P (the same, *mutatis mutandis*, as for 1C, 2CP and 1P), but they have to be related to some other action or event often expressed by 2S, but which may also be a significant date or time.
10. In spite of its traditional label, 2C is **not** used just because an action lasts a long time.

Triggers

As the students make examples, it is often useful for them to write down next to each form the time expressions particularly associated with that form. We (my colleagues at the CLA and I) call them "triggers". For example, "How long...?" and "For..." are written, in a second colour, in 1PC.

Interrogative forms – do

Another useful exercise is to get them to turn each of the forms into questions. I get them to start with 1C. They invert the paper clip and the red rod and say, "*Am I working?*" or "*Are you working?*" – the second often comes more naturally to them. They continue with 1PC, 2C, 2PC and 2P in that order. Then I cover 2S with my hand in order to force them to move to 1P.

Then I ask them to make explicit what they have been doing to create the question form. "*The pink rod, the action, has never been moved.*" I let them take a black rod from the box to represent "do" and place it in IP so as to represent "*Do you work?*". Then I remove my hand from 2S and say to them: "*This is a trap. I'm going to catch some of you. How many rods do you need to take from the box to make this form?*" They all know they want to represent "*Did you work?*" Up to now at least one person has always answered, "*Two.*" I never allow the faster people to show how it is only necessary to take one, in fact I drag it out as long as possible so that the tension of the moment will provide a high moment of energy when the realisation comes that they have to move the white cube from the pink rod to the black one to make "*did*". For me, this is a good example of how to work on retention – as opposed to memorisation. I ask the students to invert the rods and paper clips back to their original positions. Some students will try and remove the black "*do*" from the system at this point. I suggest they switch it in the same way as the other forms, i.e. "I do work" and "I did work". Lower level students may not even be aware these forms exist, but for me, what is now presented by the rods is the basic system in English .

(And you, Dear Reader, are you feeling some resistance to this? It is true that having invested so much of my time and energy on considering how tenses work, I find reading what others have to say about the subject a great opportunity for observing whether I can still keep myself open to different ideas or whether I meet them with my prejudices.)

I point to 1C,
"How do you say this one?"
"I am working."
"And if you speak quickly?"
"I'm working."
"And this one?" and I make an emphatic gesture towards the yellow rod.
"I have been working."
"And if you speak quickly?"
"I've been working"
"And this one?"
"I have worked."
"And if you speak quickly?"
"I've worked."
"And this one?"
"I do work."
"And if you speak quickly?" and I remove the black rod.
"I work."

It can be important for some students to realise that "do" does not just come from nowhere in an arbitrary fashion just to form questions and negatives but is an essential part of the system. The most basic thing we can do with an action is to simply *do* it. It is so basic that it is almost a tautology – which is why we don't usually feel the need to make it explicit.

I realise I am making it seem as if the whole lesson is a neat question and answer routine. In practice, of course, it is not really like that, it's much messier! The students spend a lot of time discussing things among themselves (in French, if their English is not sufficient to express themselves accurately on such a topic) while I listen and wait for the appropriate moment to provide another challenge. I should, perhaps, say here for non Silent Way readers, why I ask questions rather than just explaining the system. Some people feel it is illicit and manipulative for a teacher to ask questions to which she already knows (or thinks she knows) the answers. For me, it serves two purposes. It puts the student in an "actively seeking" state of mind; when he finds the answer it is *his* answer – it is irrelevant to his learning whether or not someone else has found that answer before. It also serves to give the teacher feedback about where the student is in his process of learning so that she can decide what exercise to propose next.

The future

If they have not already done so, at about this point students will start to ask, "*What about the future?*" I throw the question back to them as, "*Which of the forms we already have here can be used in a sentence about tomorrow?*" I am always amazed at how many French people are surprised at the fact that such sentences as, "*I start work at eight tomorrow*" or "*I'm going to New York in November*" are possible. Even though the Present Tense in French is also frequently used to refer to the future, they feel that, because a Future Tense (there are suffixes which are traditionally thought to indicate future time) exists, it is not "correct" to use the Present in this way. And as for using Past forms with future reference... I often have to give examples myself, in English and in French. So certain are many people that they cannot exist, they will not even start to look for them. If students have school English behind them (this is generally the case for the people I teach) they will already have proposed "will" several times, and each time I put them off with, "Later, later!" Even at this point I feel it is useful for them to become aware of other ways of referring to future time before considering "will" which has been drilled into them as "the Future in English". I slide the pink rod in the 1 P form to the right, then I take another pink rod from the box and lay it next to the paper clip leaving a space between it and the first pink rod. In the space I put an arrow drawn on paper.

From the work done at other times on prepositions they usually recognise the arrow as a trigger for "to". I point to the pink rod next to the paper clip and ask the students, "Which verb could this represent?" Sometimes they have enough English to suggest "want" or "hope", otherwise I give them the word "want" and ask them to read the new form:

"I want to work."

I point to the two pink rods, *"Are the forms of these verbs the same or different?"*

"The same."

"And the real time this one refers to?" and I indicate the one representing "want".

"The present."

"And the real time this one refers to?" and I indicate the one representing "work".

"The future."

Then I take another arrow and another pink rod and lay them to the right of the others.

"What could the sentence be now?"

They might suggest, *"I want to work to earn money."* I represent "money" by any small object handy, but not a rod.

"What about the time of "earn"?"

"It's further in the future?"

"And the form?"

"It's the same."

I continue to add arrows and pink rods until the length becomes inelegant but not incorrect, *"I want to work to earn money to buy a car to go to Paris to see a friend."* As a student recently put it, *"The action on the right is the target of the action on the left."* This target is not necessarily in the future of course, it depends on the meaning of the verb. In for example, *"I like to swim"* though "swim" can be seen as the target of "like", it is not in the future in relation to "like".

After this, I take an arrow and a pink rod and lay them to the right of the 1C form.

"If I change this to another verb (I indicate the first pink rod), what could this be?"

Unless it is a very small, low level group, someone manages to find:

"I'm going to work."

"How many actions are there in this sentence? What are they?"

"Two, go and work."

"Are they used as metaphors or do they have a physical meaning?"

"Go is a metaphor and work is physical."

This may be clear for some of the students but I can often see from the dubious looks on faces of others that more needs to be done. So I go and stand with my back to a wall of the room,

"Can I say I'm going physically at the moment?"

"No."

I use mime and facial grimaces to indicate a sudden interest in something on the other side of the room, say a pen, and start to walk towards it slowly,

"Can I say I'm going physically, now?"

"Yes."

I freeze in mid-stride and ask,

"What happened inside me when I was at the wall, just before I started to move? It's normally something you can't see."

"You made a decision."

"And what's the pen for me?"

"Your target."

I go and pick up the pen. Then, so that we can refer to it when they give examples, I make a simple representation on the board with lines and a stick figure something like this:

Even if I could draw better, I would not make the drawing more realistic. More details are just a distraction. Then I get the students to find examples – true ones – and to make it explicit how the subject is metaphorically moving between his decision and his target. For example, Catherine says, "*I'm going to walk in the mountains with some friends on Sunday.*" Someone points to the blue line which represents the time when she and her friends made their plans, then points to the stick figure which represents Catherine, who though physically immobile in the classroom, is moving in time towards her objective, the red line, the time when she will be walking in the mountains with her friends. Later, the stick figure can be Bob, Mary or whoever. It can sometimes take a little while before they can let go of what they have often been taught: that the "going to" form is only used for actions in the "near future".

Only after exploring these other ways of talking about the future, do I take an orange rod out of the box and say, "*This represents will.*" Then I take seven other orange rods from the box and distribute them, one each to eight students, "*Now, put will into the system.*" They often look quite flabbergasted at the idea that there can be eight places for *will* in the system. Somebody will start by putting an orange rod between the paper clip and the pink rod in 1S. I ask them to say it aloud, "*I will work.*" Many students feel this is the end of the story and I may need to gesture to 1C or 1P and say, "*Do the same here*" before they will place the orange rod after the paper clip in the other forms inside the bubble. Each time I get them to say the sentence aloud. Then I gesture to the forms outside the bubble. There are often objections: "*You can't have will in the past!*" I pick up a black rod and ask: "*What happened when you put do here?*" and I point to 2S. "*Ah!*" and somebody will quickly lay down the orange rod after the paper clip in 2S and move the white cube from the end of the pink rod to the orange one. "*I would work.*"

The other three forms usually pose no problem for the form, though "*I would have been working*" often provokes exclamations, "*It's too long*", "*I don't understand*", "*I'll never use it*", etc. With lower level groups, I do not ask them to find examples, for if the forms are outside their experience of the language, such examples can only be mechanically formed with no feeling for the meaning.

If it seems useful for the group, I ask questions to make sure they understand how modals function differently to other verbs. I point to 1S and ask:

"*Do you need do to ask a question, now?*"

"*No.*"

I pick up an arrow, "*Do you need to place this between the orange and pink rods?*"

"*No.*"

"*What other words function like will/would?*"

Depending on their level, they will take from a few minutes to over an hour to find and discuss *can/could*, *(shall)/should*, *may/might* and *must* (no student has ever suggested *need* or *dare* so far). As they find them, I write the modals on the board and we look for a base meaning for each of them in the same way as we did for *be*, *have* and *did*. As this article is already long enough, and the work does not directly involve the Cuisenaire rods, I shall not describe it here. Nor shall I describe how to demonstrate the Passive in the system. I scarcely ever do so with students as it usually takes two three-hour sessions to get this far and, by this time, they are in need of a different type of activity.

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An earlier version was published in: *Caleb Gattegno's Science of Education: Ten Years After – Conference Proceedings and Related Offerings*, Association for the Science of Education, New York 1999.

A shorter version of this article was published in the proceedings of the 1996 Colloquium of TESOL France: *An Update on Grammar: How it is learnt – How it is taught*.