

BOOK REVIEWS

GET YOUR TENSES RIGHT. Ronald Barnes. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977. pp. 1-158.

TENSE TIME: EXTENSION MATERIAL IN SPOKEN ENGLISH. Edited by Patricia Ahrens. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1977.

BOOK I: Introduction pp. vii-xxiv, Workbook pp. 1-35, Tapescripts and Keys pp. 36-72; BOOK II: Workbook pp. 1-37, Tapescripts and Keys pp. 39-75; BOOK III: Workbook pp. 1-33, Tapescripts and Keys pp. 34-68.

English students, and even English teachers, are often tense about tenses. Students need to know when they can choose from two or more tenses for the same idea. They need to know when they should use one particular tense for a certain idea. They need sufficient practice so they can control verb structures while they learn how to use these structures for real communication. Mastery of verb forms and their use is crucial for the second language learner because verbs often carry more information than any other part of discourse.

How can teachers help students overcome their difficulties with verbs? Get Your Tenses Right, a book with short readings and practices, and the three workbooks in the series Tense Time, contain materials for understanding and producing verbs in context. The materials are primarily oral, although written exercises are given too. Many selections are provided for the present tense and regular and irregular past tense verbs. (In keeping with the problems presented by the present tense, neither Get Your Tenses Right nor Tense Time teach it until other tenses have been presented and reviewed.) GOING TO and WILL future forms, present and past continuous, present and past perfect, and conditionals (IF clauses) are taught. In addition, Get Your Tenses Right covers the present perfect continuous, past perfect continuous, and modal auxiliaries such as USED TO and BE ABLE TO; and Tense Time covers the passive voice in present, past and future forms.

Correct verb structure is a challenge for students because they must learn distinctions in tense, aspect, mode and voice. The two grammatical simple tenses in English, present and past, combine with different aspects such as continuous or completed; modes such as intended, necessary, or impossible; and voices -- either active or passive.

In Get Your Tenses Right and Tense Time the word "tense" is used to refer to all of the variations in verb structure. Additionally, verb structure is difficult because of the building-block, periphrastic nature of the English verb, "If we'd known the plane was late we wouldn't've hurried and rushed." (Tense Time, Book 3, p. 46) Although sufficient work to drill the use of auxiliaries is found in these books, block diagrams for clarity or rules such as transformational grammar provides are lacking. Students must often use inductive logic to understand the structure of the verb phrase, a pedagogical approach highly acclaimed at present.

Even more of a hurdle to the language learner than verb structure, however, is the appropriate, fluent use of verbs in discourse. What is the difference between "I could drive when I was 16." and "I was able to drive when I was 16."? Get Your Tenses Right explains that COULD may mean permission as well as ability, while BE ABLE TO can only refer to ability. Also, while you might say, "I was able to pass my driver's test last May.", you would not use COULD in this sentence since BE ABLE TO is used for a single action successfully completed in the past (pp. 131-132). Most intermediate and advanced students need many exercises with all of the modal auxiliaries, even more than either of these books contain.

Another example of verb use, taken from Tense Time, Book 1, pp. 9 and 46, exercise 8:

Have you joined the library?
 No, I'm afraid I haven't joined it yet.
 But you have been there, haven't you?

In Tense Time it is pointed out that the full pronounced form of HAVE/hæv/ in the last sentence, the stress on the past participle, and the form of the attached question all show that the speaker hopes that the answer is "Yes."

The three workbooks, Tense Time, are designed to be used in a language laboratory or with a tape player in the classroom. The tape-scripts are included in each workbook, but it would be almost impossible to teach the sections without having the pre-recorded tapes since the exercises are for the most part based on the tapes. There are 18 sections in all, each with listening comprehension, repetition, cued role-playing and other drills. Although I did not have the opportunity to hear the tapes, the tapescripts seem to reflect natural, colloquial speech, and the practices exhibit variety. Book 1 of Tense Time contains an important 17-page introduction which is a guide to the use of the tapes and all three workbooks. A useful distinction is made in this introduction between "teaching up", reviewing and expanding knowledge for more advanced students, and "teaching down", using the same material in a more elementary and introductory form for beginning students.

There is also a recording available for Get Your Tenses Right, but this book could be used in the classroom without a tape. There are 21 units, each of which has a reading, intonation, oral practice, listening comprehension, and writing section. The introduction states that the tape only includes material that is found in the text itself. There are no instructions with the exercises, but instructions are clearly stated in the introduction. In addition, there is a Summary of Tenses, a section on Reported Speech, and a list of Irregular Verbs at the end of the book.

Although more thorough proofreading would have caught the page error in Get Your Tenses Right on page 134 (the irregular verbs are listed on page 156, not 155) and a larger format or longer books would have permitted a more readable layout for Tense Time, the books are generally attractive and clear. The language throughout is natural and colloquial, with some examples of differences in styles also given. The black and white illustrations in all the books are realistic and relate well to the written content.

Teachers using any of these books will need to devise or adapt additional practice for their students, making the contents more relevant to their students' communicative needs in Mexico. They will find, however, that these texts provide ample practice for intonation, an important element of communication which is often sorely neglected. Another point of interest to many teachers is that those who use American English should have little trouble using these books, since the obvious cases of British spelling and British usage are limited. One example, of course, is the use of SHALL and SHAN'T for first person singular future (Get Your Tenses Right p. 141), which is quite unfamiliar to many speakers of American English.

In conclusion, either Get Your Tenses Right or Tense Time Books I, II & III (if the tapes are available), could provide the textual material necessary for a verb tense review for intermediate students. The teacher will need to be willing to prepare further communicative practice for students, of course. Or these books can be mined for material to be given students when they have some specific problem with verbs. At any rate, here are some books that we will all want to have on our bookshelf to help lower the tension and confusion our students feel about tenses.

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