Some Background & Techniques for Teaching

ESOL Grammar & Pronunciation

by Tom Sheehan

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Form, Meaning, and Use

When your learners are studying grammar, it's important for them to understand that each grammatical structure has three essential aspects: form, meaning, and use. In her series of ESL grammar textbooks, *Grammar Dimensions*, editor Diane Larson Freeman uses this symbol to show how these three aspects are related to one another.

When teaching a grammar point, you may want to sketch this symbol to draw your learner's attention to the aspect of grammar that you are discussing.

**Form**

Many kinds of words have different forms. Nouns can be singular or plural, for example, “book” or “books”. Verbs also have forms, for example “go”, “went”, “gone”. And “help” helped” “helps”. Other kinds of words also have different forms: “tall”, “taller”, “tallest”.

Getting the form right is important to people who want to speak English well. Consider the difference between

1. That man is really bored.
2. That man is really boring.

In examples 1 and 2 above, the words *bored* and *exciting* are both forms of the verb *bore*. (They are used as adjectives here.) The meanings of the two words are completely different because the form is different.

And what about this: “That man is really bores me.” In this example, the word *bores* just seems wrong. The form is not considered correct by speakers of standard English.

Some words never change form. Prepositions have only one form, for example, “from”.

**Meaning**

When the form changes, so does the meaning. The word “went” usually (but not always) has past meaning. The words “gone” and “going” can be used in many different ways, each with a different meaning.

* This excellent way of looking at the learning and teaching of grammar is from Diane Larson-Freeman.
The *bored / boring* example in “Form” above shows the important relationship between Form and Meaning.

**Use**

“Use” refers to how each structure is used in real life. For example, one way we use the past forms of verbs (“went”, “saw”, “ate”, etc.) is to tell a story. One way we use the word “could” is to ask a favor: “Could you open the door?” Another way we use the word “could” is to talk things we were able to do in the past: “When I was ten, I could swim a mile.”

Use is tied to cultural and socio-linguistic aspects of language. Think of these different ways to get someone to do open the window.

1. Please open the window.
2. Open the window!
3. Would you mind opening the window?
4. Could you open the window, please?
5. How about opening the window?
6. I want you to open the window.

All the sentences above have more or less the same meaning. All are correct in form. But they would be used in very different situations.

Notice, by the way, that the form of the verb *open* is not the same in all examples.

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**Tutors' Overview of ESOL Verb Forms and Tenses**

**Five Verb Forms**

Except for the verb *be*, verbs have five forms. (*Be* has seven: *be*, *is*, *are*, *am*, *was*, *were*, *been*, *being*. It is the most irregular verb in English.)

**Irregular Verbs (excluding *be*)**

Many verbs are irregular. They are called irregular verbs because two of their five forms do not follow any regular rules. That means that these two forms (Form 2 and Form 3 below) have to be memorized.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form 1</th>
<th>Form 2</th>
<th>Form 3</th>
<th>Form 4</th>
<th>Form 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>go</td>
<td>went</td>
<td>gone</td>
<td>goes</td>
<td>going</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>see</td>
<td>saw</td>
<td>seen</td>
<td>sees</td>
<td>seeing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>have</td>
<td>had</td>
<td>had</td>
<td>has’</td>
<td>having</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sometimes some forms are spelled and pronounced the same.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form 1</th>
<th>Form 2</th>
<th>Form 3</th>
<th>Form 4</th>
<th>Form 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bring</td>
<td>brought</td>
<td>brought</td>
<td>brings</td>
<td>bringing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cut</td>
<td>cut</td>
<td>cut</td>
<td>cuts</td>
<td>cutting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It’s useful to note that while two of the forms (Form 2 and Form 3) must be memorized, Forms 4 and 5 follow the same rules as other verbs. Indeed, English verbs are quite regular and easy to learn. (Compared to Spanish for French, for example!)

---

* Form 4 of the verb *have* is *has*. Except for the verb *be*, this word is the only irregular Form 4 verb. That is, we say *has*, not *haves.*
Regular Verbs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form 1</th>
<th>Form 2</th>
<th>Form 3</th>
<th>Form 4</th>
<th>Form 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>help</td>
<td>helped</td>
<td>helped</td>
<td>helps</td>
<td>helping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>study</td>
<td>studied</td>
<td>studied</td>
<td>studies</td>
<td>studying</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trim</td>
<td>trimmed</td>
<td>trimmed</td>
<td>trims</td>
<td>trimming</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forms 2 and 3 of regular verbs look and sound the same. Forms 2 and 3 of regular verbs are easy for learners once they have learned some rules of spelling and pronunciation.

What should you call these forms? The traditional names are sometimes confusing. For example, Form 5 (-ing) is traditionally called the “present participle”. However, the examples below show that it can be used equally well in the past and future:

1. The movie was really exciting last night.
2. They will be moving next year.

Form 1 is sometimes called the “present form”. But what about this sentence: “We did not see him yesterday?” The verb see is Form 1, but it's in the past. Please don't call Form 1 the “present form”!!

In addition, the traditional names are hard. While advanced learners who want to perfect their grammar should probably learn the traditional names so that they can use grammar books, other learners really don't need them.

Why not just use numbers? Form 1, Form 2, Form 3, Form 4, and Form 5. These are easy to learn, and easy to understand.

Notes:

3. See Appendix 1 on page 22 for a list of irregular verbs and for advice on helping your learner with them.
4. See Appendix 2 on page 26 for a discussion of some of the ways that the five verb forms can be used.

Verb Tenses

The five verbs forms can be used to form the tenses of English. Often helping verbs are needed, like are, has, will, etc. Sometimes, in the case of Forms 2 and 4, no helping verbs can be used.

Students learn basic verb tenses in the LifePrints series. Form and basic meanings are given below. To see where each of these tenses is presented and practiced in the LifePrints series, see “Structures” in “Scope and Sequence” in the introduction to each Teacher's Edition.

Present Tense of Be – presented in Unit 1 of LifePrints 1, 2nd edition

I am You are He is She is It is We are They are

Questions are made by changing the order of the words:

Examples
1. Am I in your class?
2. Is he a good boy?
3. Are they ready to go?

Negatives are made by putting the word not after is, are or am.

Examples
1. I am not ready to eat.
2. He is not careless.
3. She is not hungry.
Present Progressive Tense – *presented in Unit 2 of LifePrints 1, 2nd edition*

**Form:** is / are / am + Form 5 (-ing)

**Examples**
1. I am reading now.
2. You are sitting near me now.
3. She is working hard now.
4. We are learning a lot.
5. They are starting the lesson.

Questions are made by changing the order of the words.

**Example**
They are working. => Are they working?

Negatives are made by putting the word not after is, are, or am.

**Example**
They are working. => They are not working.

**Meaning:** Beginning students learning that this tense is used to indicate actions that are happening now.

Intermediate and advanced students learn other meanings of this tense. One other common way to use the tense is to talk about planned events.

**Example**
We are leaving for New York next Tuesday.

Simple Present Tense of Verbs Other Than Be
– *presented in Unit 1 of LifePrints 1, 2nd edition*

**Form:**

**Affirmative:** I / you / we / they + Form 1 (the base form) He / she / it + Form 4 (the “s” form)

**Affirmative Examples**
1. I work hard every day.
2. Lions eat meat.
3. We get up early
4. She washes the dishes quickly.
5. You study after work.

**Negative Examples**
do / does + not + Form 1
1. The secretary does not cook for the boss.
2. Cows do not eat meat.

**Interrogative Examples**
do / does + Form 1
1. Do you play pingpong?
2. Does it get hot here in the summer?
3. Where do you buy your shoes?
4. When does the weather get cold?"

**In Wh- questions where the wh- word is the subject, do or does is not usually used except for special emphasis. Example Who cleans the house? (Compare with “Who does clean the house?”) This issue of special emphasis is, by the way, an example of how *use* is important in grammar. We would ask “Who does clean...?” only when we have a special reason to do so. Normally, we would just say “Who cleans...?”**
**Meaning:** Beginning students learn to use this tense to indicate habitual or repeated actions.

It is often used with words like *always, sometimes, usually, never.*

**Example**
She *never gives* her children candy.

Advanced beginners learn that this tense is used to indicate states or conditions (rather than actions) in the present time. This involves a sub-group of verbs called *non-action or stative* verbs. This group of verbs also includes verbs of perception. See the Nicenet Internet Classroom for a link to a good list of these verbs.

**Examples**
1. She *has* a hard job.
2. He *wants* some more salad.
3. They *need* a lot of money.
4. They *see* the mountains in the distance.

**Use:** The simple present tense is used with time indicators like *every day, every year, every month,* etc.

**Examples**
1. I *go* there *every summer.*
2. We *have coffee* together *every morning.*

This tense is often used with words like *always, sometimes, usually, never.*

**Example**
She *never gives* her children candy.

The simple present tense is used to express timeless laws of nature.

**Examples**
1. Birds *fly,* and fish *swim.*
2. The earth *goes* around the sun.
3. It *gets* cold in winter.

The simple present tense is used in sentences about the future after words like *when, before, and after.*

**Examples**
1. You will meet him when you get here tomorrow.
2. I’m going to get some stamps when I *go* to the post office next Tuesday.

**Simple Past Tense of Be – presented in Unit 7 of LifePrints 1, 2nd edition**

I *was* You *were* He *was* She *was* It *was* We *were* They *were*

Questions are made by changing the order of the words:

**Examples**
1. *Was I* in your class?
2. *Was he* a good boy?
3. *Were they* ready to go?

Negatives are made by putting the word *not* after *is, are or am.*

**Examples**
1. I *was not* ready to eat.
2. He *was not* careless.
3. She *was not* hungry.
Simple Past Tense of Verbs Other Than Be

– presented in Unit 7 of LifePrints 1, 2nd edition

Form:

**Affirmative Examples**  Form 2
1. She helped Maria yesterday.
2. I got my car two years ago.
3. We watched the show a few days ago.
4. We saw him last month.

**Negative Examples**  did not + Form 1
1. The secretary did not help me yesterday.
2. She did not come here last night.
3. We did not visit the neighbors yesterday.

**Interrogative Examples**  did + Form 1
1. Did you play pingpong yesterday?
2. Did it get hot here last summer?
3. Where did you buy those beautiful shoes?
4. When did it rain?**

**Meaning:** This tense can be used for actions which took place at a specific time in the past.

**Example**
She crashed into the tree last night.

It can be used for conditions that lasted a long time in the past.

**Examples**
1. Dinosaurs roamed the Earth for 150 million years.
2. The strike continued for seven months.

It can be used for repeated actions in the past.

**Example**
She saw that video every night last month.

**Use:** This tense is often used with time indicators like: yesterday, last, and ago.

One of the hardest things for learners to master with this tense is the pronunciation of regular Form 2 verbs, like “played”, “kicked”, and “visited”. See “Some Pronunciation Techniques and Issues” on page 7.

**Past Progressive Tense – Not presented in LifePrints**

**Form:**  was/were + Form 5 (-ing)

**Examples**
1. I was reading at 8:30 p.m. last night.
2. It was raining hard when we got home last night.

Questions are made by changing the order of the words.

**Example**
They were working.  ➔ Were they working?

**In Wh- questions where the wh- word is the subject, did is not usually used except for special emphasis.**

Example Who went to the show?  (Compare with “Who did go to the show?”) This issue of special emphasis is an example of how use is important in grammar. We would ask “Who did go...?” only when we have a special reason to do so. Normally, we would just say “Who went....?”

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- 7 -
Negatives are made by putting the word *not* after *was* or *were*.

**Example**
They were working. ➞ They were *not* working.

**Meaning:** This tense is used to indicate an action that was taking place at a give time in the past.

**Example**
We were watching TV at 8 p.m. last Tuesday.

**Use:** This tense is often used to indicate an action that was interrupted by another action.

**Example**
We *were watching* TV when the phone rang last night.

**Future Tense with Going to** – *presented in Unit 5 of LifePrints 2, 2nd edition*

**Form:** *is / are / am* + *going to* + Form 1

**Affirmative Examples**
1. We *are going to have* spaghetti for dinner tomorrow.
2. They *are going to get* a big surprise when they get here.
3. The girls *are going to have* a big party for Sam next week.

**Questions are made by changing the order of the words.**

**Interrogative Examples**
1. *Are we going to have* fish for dinner tomorrow?
2. *Are they going to get* a small car next year?

**Negative sentences are formed by putting the word *not* after *is, are* or *am.***

**Negative Examples**
1. We *are not going to take* the bus tomorrow.
2. They *are not going to finish* next Friday.

**Use:** This tense is often used with time indicators like *tomorrow, next,* and *in.*

**Examples**
1. I *am going to meet with her next week / month / year.*
2. We are *going to leave in* a few minutes / hours / days / months / years.

We use this tense when talking about future plans. Often, the word *planning* can be substituted for the word *going* with little or no change in meaning or feeling.

**Example**
We *are going* to have a party for Sam next week.

*has about the same meaning as*

We *are planning* to have a party for Sam next week.

This tense is used to make a prediction based on evidence we have right now.

**Example**
Look how fast she's running. She's *going to win!*

Students may wonder about the difference between the future tense with *will* and the future tense with *going to.* It is safe to advise them to use *going to* when in doubt.
Future Tense with Will – presented in Unit 7 of LifePrints 2, 2nd edition

Form: will + Form 1

Affirmative Examples
1. The sun will rise in the morning.
2. Sam will do very well in college.

Questions are made by changing the order of the words.

Interrogative Examples
1. Will you get here for dinner?
2. How long will she stay in the job?

Negative sentences are formed by putting the word not after will.

Negative Examples
will not + Form 1
1. They will not stay long.
2. The weather will not be cloudy tomorrow.

Use: This tense is used less often than the future with going to.

We use it to make a prediction of something we really believe to be true about the future.

Examples
1. The moon will be full next Tuesday.
2. Sam left Maria, but he really loves her. He will come back to her.

We do not usually use this tense when talking about future plans. In that case, the future with going to is preferred. See the discussion on the future with going to on page 8.

Students may wonder about the difference between the future tense with will and the future tense with going to. It is safe to advise them to use going to when in doubt.

Present Perfect Tense – presented in Unit 8 of LifePrints 3, 2nd edition

Note: The word “perfect” in grammar means “completed”. Thus, this tense could be called the “present completed tense”.

Form: has / have + Form 3

Affirmative Examples
1. The sun has just risen.
2. Sam and Julie have seen that movie.

Questions are made by changing the order of the words.

Interrogative Examples
1. Has the sun risen yet?
2. Have Sam and Julie seen that movie?

Negative sentences are formed by putting the word not after has or have.

Negative Examples
has / have not + Form 3
1. The moon has not gone down.
2. Peter has not worked for three months.

Use:

This tense is often used to express past actions that have some connection to the present situation. The exact moment(s) when the action took place is unimportant or unknown.
The present perfect tense can be used to indicate repeated actions at unmentioned times in the past.

Example
Al has visited Paris twice.

Also, it can be used with some verbs that cover a long period, like *live*, *work*, *teach*, *study*, *exist*, etc. to indicate an action or condition that began in the past and has continued up to the present time.

Example
Brian has worked at that restaurant for six years. (And he is still working there now.)

The present perfect tense is often used with the time indicators *for* and *since*.

Examples
1. I have known her *since* 1999.
2. I have known her *for* many years.

It may help your learners if you tell them that you can use this tense only with living people (and live situations), not dead ones. (Living people are “present”. Dead ones are “past”.)

Example for a living person (It's possible to use the present perfect tense.)
Julie is 37 years old. She *has visited* Mexico City three times. Maybe she'll go there again.

Example for a dead person (It's not possible to use the present perfect tense. Past tense is correct.)
Julie's great grandmother died last year. She was 104 years old. She *visited* Mexico City three times during her long life. (Of course, being dead, she cannot go again.)

Present Perfect Progressive Tense – *presented in Unit 12 of LifePrints 3, 2nd edition*

**Form:** *has / have + been + Form 5 (-ing)*

**Affirmative Examples**
1. She *has been studying* English for three years.
2. I *have been cooking* a lot of chicken lately.

**Questions** are made by changing the order of the words.

**Interrogative Examples**
1. *Has she been studying* hard?
2. *How long have they been living* in Toledo?

**Negative sentences** are formed by putting the word *not* after *have* or *has*.

**Negative Examples**
1. I *have not been going* to the gym for a few months.
2. James *has not been thinking* about his future recently.

**Use:** This tense is used to indicate continuous action from the past up to the present time. The action may or may not continue into the future.

**Examples**
1. Kirk *has been working* at that restaurant for six months. (He's still working there now.)
2. I *have been reading* that book for two weeks. (I still haven't finished.)
**What Students Need to Learn for Each Tense**

**Beginning Students**

For each tense they learn, beginning students should learn:

- **Affirmative statements:** Maria works at the hospital.
- **Negative statements:** Maria does not work at Walmart.
- **Yes/No questions:** Does Maria work hard?
- **Wh-** questions type 1: Where does Maria live?

**Intermediate and Advanced Students**

In addition to the list above, intermediate students should learn:

- **Wh- questions type 2:** Who works in the supermarket?
- **Negative yes/no questions:** Doesn't Maria like Sam?
- **Negative wh- questions:** Why doesn't Maria like Jerry?
- **Tag questions:** Maria studies hard, doesn't she?
- **Tag questions:** Maria doesn't take many breaks, does she?

**Some Pronunciation Techniques and Issues**

**How to Do Give-and-Take Drills**

**Purpose:** Give-and-take drills allow learners and tutors to give and take in the lesson. At times, the learner is completely in control. These drills can be used for teaching and testing many language features, including grammar and pronunciation.

**How to use:** The drill can be used as practice or as presentation. If you use the drill to present a new language feature you may want to explain the language feature a little so that the student can understand how the feature works. If you use the drill as practice, very little explanation should be necessary once the learner understands how give-and-take drills work.

**Steps:** These steps are based on the give-and-take practice drill called “Pronunciation of Plurals” on page 15. Following these steps will help your learner understand 1) how the drill works and 2) how regular

**Wh- questions** are questions beginning with who, what, when, where, why, etc. In addition, they include all questions with how: how, how far, how old, how tall, how long, etc. The only kind of wh- question which is structurally different is questions beginning with how come. Notice that with how come, the rest of the sentence looks like an affirmative sentence: “How come you didn’t go?” (Not: How come didn’t you go?)

* This is a problem only in the simple present and simple past tenses, which use the auxiliary verbs (helping verbs) do, does, and did. Note that we usually say: “Who works at the supermarket,” not “Who does work at...?” This is because the word “who” is the grammatical subject of the sentence. Similarly, we usually say “What happened?” and not “What did happen?”

The examples above show why it's essential for learners to understand the kinds of situations in which they might use one or the other. Both “What happened?” and “What did happen?” are correct, but in quite different kinds of situations. Similarly, both “Who works there?” and “Who does work there?” are correct, but you can't use them interchangeably. This question of emphasis is an advanced topic, not to be attempted with anyone before LifePrints 3, and then only if the learner is very strong in grammar.
plurals (with “s”) are pronounced. (The exercise on the pronunciation of regular past tense endings (with “d”) is also a give-and-take drill. See page 11.)

1. Model both the question and the answer, that is, both A and B. Point at the words you choose as you speak.

   Example
   Tutor:  I see one tent. Max sees two tents. (Point at words while speaking.)
           I see one building. Max sees two buildings.

2. Invite the learner to be A. You are B. This way, the learner has the easy job of just choosing the cues for the drill. The tutor, B, must do the hard part, in this case, pronounce the plural endings correctly.

   Example
   Learner: I see one watch.
   Tutor:  Max sees two watches.

3. Invite your learner to be B. You are A. Help the learner by pointing at the words you choose.

   Example
   Tutor:  I see one leaf. (Point at this word “leaf”.)
   Learner: Max sees two leaves.

4. When the learner can do the learning drill correctly, move on to the check-up drill on page 17. In this drill, nouns with the four different pronunciations are all mixed up. The challenge to the learner is greater.

Teaching the Pronunciation of the Regular Past Tense

Tutors: See steps for give-and-take drills on page 11. See also the language notes at the bottom of this page. Copy pages 13 and 15 for your learner. Work with the learning drill on page 13 until she can do it pretty well. Then move on to the check-up drill on the next page.

Language notes:

1. It's not essential to distinguish clearly between the /d/ endings and the /t/ endings. This will come with practice because it’s natural. The voiceless /t/ sound naturally follows voiceless sounds like /k, sh, s, p/. Conversely, the voiced /d/ sound comes naturally after voiced sounds like /z, n, v/ or any vowel.

2. Counting syllables may help. In the /d/, /t/ columns, the base form of the verb and the past form both have the same number of syllables. Thus, “play” and “played” each have only one syllable. Likewise, “study” has two syllables, and “studied” also has two syllables.

   However, the past form of verbs in the /d/ column have one more syllable than the base forms. Thus, while “connect” has two syllables, “connected” has three. “Need” has one, and “needed” has two. If Form 1 (the base form) of the verb ends in a /d/ or /t/ sound, the past form (Form 2) has one more syllable than the base form.
Drill: The Pronunciation of Regular Past Tense Verbs

Past Tense Learning Drill

Person A reads the first line, inserting a verb phrase from the list below. Person B answers using the correct pronunciation of the past tense form. The verb phrases are sorted by pronunciation.

A: When did she / he ________?  (Insert a verb phrase from the list below.)

B: He ______________________ yesterday.
   last night / Tuesday / week / month / year.
   ___ ___ ago.

Example

A: When did she cross the street?

B: She crossed the street five minutes ago.

/d/
call me  ask Mary  connect to the internet
clean the room  cook dinner  count the guests
die  cross the street  invite me
die  explain the problem  need the books
live in Chicago  finish the homework  paint the kitchen
marry Chris  fix the window  visit you and Chris
move the chairs  help you  wait for you and Chris
play with you  kiss Chris  weed the garden
use the computers  mix the cards up
play the game  shop
study the lesson  wash the cars  work in Florida

/t/

Past Tense Check-Up Drill

The verb phrases at the bottom of the page are jumbled. Otherwise it is the same as the Learning Drill above.

A: When did she / he __________? (Insert a verb phrase from the list below.)

B: He __________________________ yesterday.

last night / Tuesday / week / month / year.

___ ___ ago.

ask Mary          call me          clean the room
connect to the internet  cook dinner      count the guests
cross the street      dance with Chris  die
explain the problem    finish the homework  fix the window
help you              invite me        kiss Chris
live in Chicago       marry Chris      mix the cards up
move the chairs       need the books   paint the kitchen
play the game          play with you   shop
study the lesson       use the computers  visit you and Chris
wait for you and Chris  wash the cars   work in Florida
weed the garden
Teaching the Pronunciation of Plurals

Tutors: See steps for give-and-take drills in the introduction to this packet. See also the language notes at the bottom of this page. Give your learner a copy of the learning drill on page 16. When she can do that page pretty well, give her a copy of the check-up drill on page 17.

Language notes:

1. Don’t worry if students don’t distinguish clearly between the /s/ endings and the /z/ endings. Native speakers often don’t, and this never leads to unclear meaning.

2. Counting syllables will help. In the /s/, /z/, and /vz/ columns, the singular and plural forms both have the same number of syllables. Thus, “ship” and “ships” each have only one syllable. Likewise, “apple” has two syllables, and “apples” also has two syllables.

3. However, the plurals of words in the /iz/ column have one more syllable than the singular forms. Thus, while “college” has two syllables, “colleges” has three. “Page” has one, and “pages” has two. This is a very important point for your learners to understand.
Drill: The Pronunciation of Plurals

Tutors: See the instructions for this kind of drill on page 15.

Background information: This exercise features Max a guy who drinks too much and sees double. That means that when sober people see one of anything, Max sees two!

Plurals Practice Drill

Person A reads the first line, inserting a noun from the list below. Person B answers using the correct plural form. The nouns below are sorted by plural pronunciation.

A: I see one ______. (Insert a noun from the lists below.)
B: Max sees two __________.

Example
A: I see one building.
B: Max sees two buildings.

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<td>chief</td>
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Plurals Check-Up Drill

The nouns below are jumbled. Otherwise the exercise is the same as the Practice Drill above.

A: I see one ______. (Insert a noun from the lists below.)
B: Max sees two __________.

apple    book    building    cake
camera   chef    chief      class
college  dish    dish       dog
knife    leaf    light      machine
net      orange  page       radio
roof     room    sandwich  school
ship     tent    thief      watch
How to Do Minimal Pair Drills

Definition: “Minimal pairs” are pairs of words that are pronounced almost the same, except for one sound. For example, “sheep” and “ship” are a minimal pair. The only difference in their pronunciation is the /ē/ sound in “sheep” vs. the /ĭ/ sound in “ship”. Minimal pairs are useful in teaching pronunciation because they allow learners to focus on one particular sound at a time.

Purpose: The purpose of minimal pair drills is to help learners hear and produce sounds that are challenging to them. For example, by focusing on pairs of words like sheep/ship, leave/live, and feast/fist, speakers of Spanish can learn to hear and produce the /ĭ/ sound, which does not exist in Spanish. By focusing on pairs of words like bear/pear, bill/pill, and big/pig, speakers of Arabic can learn to hear and produce the /p/ sound, which is difficult for them because it does not exist in Arabic.

How to use: The drill can be used as practice or as presentation. The examples below are from the drill “Minimal Pair #1: sheep / ship” on page 20.

Steps:

1. Have your learner look at the pictures of the sheep and the ship. Ask your learner if she thinks it's important to be able to say these two words without confusion.
2. Have your learner listen as you read down the column on the left: sheep, leave, sleep, feast, eat.
3. Ask your learner to read down this column.
   
   Note: This column should be easy for your learner. If she makes any pronunciation mistakes with other sounds, ignore them for now. For example, if she has trouble with the /st/ in “feast”, ignore it. That's not what this lesson is about.
4. Have the learner listen as you read down the column on the right: ship, live, slip, fist, it. Do not ask your learner to repeat these words for you yet. She is not ready.
5. Have the learner listen as you read each pair of words, left to right: sheep/ship, leave/live, sleep/slip, etc. Encourage her to watch your mouth as you say these words so that she can see how it changes.
6. Same or different? Point to the first line of words, sheep / ship. Say the words two at a time, sometimes the same, sometimes different. Ask your learner to tell you if the two words you say are the same or different.

Example

   Tutor: sheep sheep
   Learner: same
   Tutor: Good. Sheep ship
   Learner: same
   Tutor: Listen again. Sheep ship
   Learner: Oh! different.
   Tutor: Good.

   Note: Your learner may have trouble hearing the difference. You may want to show her that your mouth looks different when you say the two sounds. The /ē/ sound is tense.

*The slash marks // indicate that the letter represents a sound. For example, /s/ is the first sound in the word “see”. On the other hand, “s” is the name of the letter. The symbols /ē, å, år, ø, th/ etc. are the same that are used in the American Heritage Dictionaries. They are similar to those used in the Oxford Picture Dictionary.
The /ĭ/ sound is more lax. But don't let her always look at your mouth to tell the difference. She has to learn to hear the difference before she can produce the /ĭ/ sound.

7. Which one is different? Say three words, one of which is different. Ask you learner to indicate with her fingers which one is different.

Example
Tutor: sheep ship sheep
Learner: (holds up two fingers)
Tutor: Good.
Tutor: sheep ship ship
Learner: (holds up two fingers)
Tutor: Listen again. Sheep ship ship
Learner: (holds up one finger)
Tutor: Good.

8. When your learner can hear the difference most of the time, ask the learner to say the sounds in isolation. A mirror can be a useful tool here. She can look at your mouth and then try to match her own mouth’s movements as she speaks. Also, tell her anything you know about how the sound is made and how it feels to produce the two sounds.

Example
Tutor: Now, say the sound /ē/. Notice my lips are tense when I say this sound.
Learner: /ē/
Tutor: Good. Now listen and watch my mouth. /ĭ/ /ĭ/ /ĭ/ /ĭ/ See? My lips are more relaxed when I say this sound. Now you try it. Look in the mirror.

9. Ask her to read the words down the second column. You may want to use a mirror at this time to help her copy the shape of your lips as you say the /ĭ/ sound. Do not expect perfection!

10. Go on to the Quizzing Sentences. Do them one by one. First read over the sentence to be sure that the learner understands the meanings. Explain that if you say “The sheep is big.” the learner should respond: “It’s a big animal.” If you say: “The ship is big,” she should respond: “It’s in the water.”

11. Have the learner read the quizzing sentences to you, choosing either “sheep” or “ship”. You respond according to what you hear. This will allow the learner to know if she is pronouncing accurately or not.

12. Finally, the “More practice” give a chance to practice more with the challenging sounds.
Minimal Pair Drill #1: *sheep / ship*

**Tutors:** See steps for minimal pairs on page 18.

/sheep/ /ʃiːp/

<table>
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<tr>
<th>/e/</th>
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<tbody>
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**Quizzing sentences:**

1. The sheep / ship is big.
   a. It’s a big animal.
   b. It’s in the water.

2. She doesn’t want to leave / live.
   a. She’s happy here.
   b. She’s unhappy.

3. He can’t sleep / slip.
   a. He’s always tired.
   b. He’s safe now.

4. She made a feast / fist.
   a. Let’s eat!
   b. She wants to fight.

**More practice:**

1. They’re going to eat it.

2. He’ll heal in the hospital on the hill.
Minimal Pair Drill #2: sink / think

**Tutors:** See steps for minimal pairs on page 18.

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<td>sink</td>
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<td>sigh</td>
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**Quizzing sentences:**

1. That man can't think / sink.
   a. It's too noisy.
   b. He's a good swimmer.

2. Don't move your mouse / mouth.
   a. Then how can I use my computer?
   b. Then how can I talk?

3. How do you spell sigh / thigh?
   a. s - i - g - h
   b. t - h - i - g - h

**More practice:**

1. We saw the ground beginning to thaw.
2. It's no sin to be thin.
3. That the Titanic should sink was unthinkable. They said it was unsinkable.
Appendix 1: Irregular Verbs

Teaching Suggestions

Beginning students should learn only the verbs whose meanings they know.

Your learner may want memorize these verbs as a list, that is, “go went gone” “break broke broken”. There is nothing wrong with this, but it is better to devise little Give and Take Drills to help them.

Beginning and Low Intermediate Students

Beginning and low intermediate students (LifePrints 1 and 2) should concentrate on Forms 1 and 2. Concentrate on verbs whose meanings they already know – or words they want to learn.

Don't get hung up on words that are troublesome even to native speakers, like *lay* and *lie*. If you can't do it easily and automatically, your learner doesn't need to master it either!

In the drill below, fill in the blanks with meaningful phrases: *go to Cleveland, begin your job, see the news, catch a cold*, etc. Don't neglect regular verbs! You can include them in your practice here: *cook, clean your house, fix something, need some sugar, want pizza*, etc.

A: When did you ___?
B: I ____ yesterday / last night / ___ ago.

Example

A: When did you see the news?
B: I saw the news two days ago.

Sometimes the tutor can be A, sometimes the learner can be A. This gives the learner some control over the process and allows him to hear good models.

High Intermediate to Advanced Students

Students in LifePrints 2 and above can work on all three forms. Here's a more advanced give-and-take drill.

A: When did you / Maria / we ___?
B: I / Maria / we ___ yesterday / last ___ / ___ ___ ago.

___ have / has ___ many times / only a few times

Example

A: When did Maria make tacos?
B: She made them last week.

She has made tacos many times this year.

Sometimes the answers in a drill like this don't make sense. For example:

A: When did Maria become a doctor?
B: She became a doctor last year.

She has become a doctor many times. (?)

That's okay! You can talk about why it's a ridiculous thing to say. Encourage your learner to think about meaning and to avoid saying things that don't make sense. Change the drill to fit the needs of meaning!
Alternatively, you can practice Form 3 with passive verbs. Here’s one possibility, but use your imagination to come up with meaningful exercises.

A: Sam wants to ___ the ___.
B: It’s not necessary. The ___ was / were _____ yesterday / ___ ago / etc.

Example:
A: Sam wants to drive the truck to Cleveland.
B: It’s not necessary. The truck was driven to Cleveland yesterday.

Again, form and meaning (and use) go together. Encourage your learner to say only meaningful things.

A List of Irregular Verbs

This is a very complete list. Choose verbs from it for your learner!

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<thead>
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<th>Form 2</th>
<th>Form 3</th>
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Appendix 2: How the Five Verb Forms Can Be Used

There is no way to give all the ways that all the forms can be used. But here are a few. They are given in mixed order because that's the easiest way. **Note:** This discussion is for interested tutors and very advanced learners only. It would be overwhelming to most learners. Tutors who are not interested can ignore it, too!

**Form 4, the “S” Form**

Let's start with Form 4, the “s” form because it is used mostly in one way. The most common way this form is used is to indicate something that happens regularly. This is the simple present tense.

**Examples**
1. The sun *rises* in the East.
2. The mechanic *fixes* cars every day.
3. She *goes* to work at seven a.m.

Notice that the subjects (*the sun, the mechanic, she*) are all singular.

Notice also that no auxiliary verbs (or helping verbs) can be used with this form. That is, one can never say “is goes” or “has goes” or “can goes” etc. For that reason, this form can be considered a “strong form”. It stands by itself in a sentence.

**Form 2**

This form is usually called the “past form”. This is a pretty good name for this form because it is usually used to indicate actions and conditions in the past (but not always).

**Examples**
1. She *went* to Chicago in 2007.
2. The nurse *helped* the patient.
3. They *broke* the windows.

If you are teaching advanced students, however, you will find this form used in conditional sentences:

**Examples**
1. If I *had* wings, I would fly.
2. If I *went* to Chicago, I would go up the Sears Tower.

Notice that in this context, this form does not indicate past actions, so calling Form 2 the past form may confuse your learner.

Notice also that, like Form 2 above, no auxiliary verbs (or helping verbs) can be used with this form. That is, one can never say “is went” or “has went” or “could went” or “was went” etc. For that reason, this form can be considered a “strong form”. It stands by itself in a sentence.

Forms 2 (*went*) and Form 4 (*goes*) are the only forms that can never have an auxiliary or helping verb.

**Form 5: the -ing Form**

For beginning students, this form is used to indicate an action in progress at the present moment. This is called the present progressive tense.

**Examples**
1. I am reading now.
2. She is cooking now.
3. They are going out now.
Intermediate learners find out that this tense can also be used in other ways, for example, to talk about scheduled activities in the future.

Examples
1. Next Tuesday, I'm leaving for New York.
2. She's graduating next May.

Advanced students learn yet another way to use Form 5, the -ing form. It can be used after other verbs like enjoy, admit, avoid, etc.

Examples
1. She doesn't enjoy ironing.
2. The man admitted taking the money.
3. Linda avoids watching the news on TV because it upsets her.

There are other ways to use this form. This handout cannot be exhaustive.

The traditional (and confusing) name for this form is present participle. One example will show why this name is unhelpful to learners: “Cleopatra avoided wearing red.” Cleopatra lived thousands of years ago; there is nothing present about the meaning wearing in this sentence.

Form 3: A Participle

Advanced beginners learn that this form is most commonly used after the words have or has.

Examples
1. They have taken a plane.
2. James has gone to New York.

Advanced students will learn that Form 3 can also follow the word had:

Example
She had never seen snow before coming to the North.

This form can sometimes be used as a adjective, or describing word.

Examples
1. She liked cooked vegetables.
2. They will find a broken TV in that room next week.

Form 3 can be used in sentences that show what happens to something or to someone (as opposed to what something or someone does). These sentences are called passive sentences.

Examples
1. My shirt was made in Indonesia.
2. Some of the money will be given to Sam.

This form, Form 3, is traditionally (and confusingly) called the past participle. Example 2 above makes it clear why this is a confusing name for this form. The sentence indicates a future action, not a past one.

Form 1: The Base Form

Form 1 is the base form of the verb. It is used in many, many ways.

It can be used with the subjects I, we, you, and they to indicate an action that occurs regularly. This is the simple present tense.

Examples
1. I walk to work every day.
2. We usually finish dinner at 8:30.
Form 1 can be used after words like *can, must, might, should, will, may*, etc. These words are called modals.

**Examples**
1. She can *see* the ocean from her window.
2. They might *get* here any minute.
3. Could you *open* the door?
4. I will *be* there in a minute.

Form 1 can be used after the words *do, does, and did* in negative sentences and questions.

**Examples**
1. Do you *see* what I see?
2. Did they *eat* the whole cake?
3. Does she *need* help?

Traditionally, some grammarians call this form (confusingly) the *present form*. Please don't do that to your learner! The examples below will show you that it is often used to indicate actions and conditions that do not take place in the present.

**Examples**
1. Cleopatra did not *wear* red gowns.
2. We will *see* you next year.
3. You needed to *do* that last month.