

## USING METAPHOR IN TEACHING THE ASPECTS OF THE PAST TENSE TO ROMANIAN LEARNERS OF ENGLISH

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### **Abstract:**

Starting from the author's belief that a single methodology does not ensure success for all learners, the paper offers a synthesis of teaching strategies from both traditional/explicit grammar and learner-centred/constructivist camps which incorporate metaphors of various types. The new instructional strategy proposed includes an explicit pedagogical grammar reference (in the form of a student's portfolio), followed by rules and metaphors about the choice of tense-aspect. The paper explains in detail the abstract metaphor of "the tree" (trunk/leaves/root) chosen to help students understand the relationship between the simple, continuous and perfect aspects of the past tense, as well as the symbols helping students visualize the usage of these aspects. There are also tasks for the students, making use of these metaphors designed to provide learners with multiple ways of learning aspect.

**Keywords:** *aspect, past tense, tree metaphor, narrative discourse.*

Although unquestionably of paramount importance, teaching the verb aspect is not the favourite subject of teachers of English since, basically, it is grammar teaching. Grammar sometimes seems to be a collection of unconnected, rather random rules, which makes it difficult to teach and learn. In trying to show students that grammar is, in fact, systematic and easy to handle, I have developed some techniques, one of which I describe in this paper. One of its aims is to help students grasp some of the concepts which underlie each choice of tense-aspect. Another is to provide teachers with an alternative solution for teaching the aspects of the past tense while trying to keep the meta-language level to a minimum.

The practice presented here, which in fact is a synthesis of teaching procedures, covers several classes corresponding to one unit of the curriculum for the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Writing a narrative using aspects of the past tense is dealt with in textbooks *Click On 4* (unit 3) – for intermediate learners, and *Mission2* (Exam Focus 2) for advanced learners. My instructional strategy includes an explicit pedagogical grammar reference

(in the form of a homework package) for the rather complex rules about the formation of *past simple*, *past continuous*, *past perfect simple* and *past perfect continuous* in English. I follow then with rules and metaphors about the choice of tense/aspect. The focus of this article is on using metaphors of various kinds (abstract, visual, kinaesthetic) in explaining the choice between different aspects of the past tense within narrative discourse.

### Theoretical considerations

In the presentation of material which is new to the students, and which deals with the choice between *past simple*, *past continuous*, *past perfect simple* and *past perfect continuous*, I followed fairly closely Bardovi-Harlig's proposal that both Andersen's aspect hypothesis and the discourse hypothesis must be activated (though not necessarily overtly or explicitly) to assist second language learners toward a more native-like distribution of tense-aspect morphology. The aspect hypothesis claims that the distribution of inter-language verbal morphology is determined by **lexical aspectual class**, that is, the certain verbs tend to be used in one tense-aspect or the other – punctual events as primarily perfective, and statives as imperfective. While acquiring English as a foreign language, learners tend to use the past tense marking *-ed* with verbs and predicates which semantically entail inherent endpoints (e.g. *die* and *draw a picture*) and add the progressive affix *-ing* to verbs which are semantically dynamic and durative (e.g. *play* and *swim*).

The discourse hypothesis claims that the distribution of inter-language verbal morphology is determined by narrative structure, that is, perfective to **foreground** the sequential events that move the storyline and imperfective to **background** the atmosphere, the description, the evaluative comments, and so forth. In English, non-progressive forms will generally indicate a shift in the current reference time (i.e., move the story forward), whereas progressive forms will be mainly associated with its maintenance.

Combining these theories with others, we can summarize that several factors need to be taken into account to establish which events constitute the **foreground or background** of narratives in English. In non-progressive sentences, telic predicates (accomplishments and achievements) shift the current **reference time** (RT) and constitute the foreground of the narrative, while atelic predicates (states and activities) maintain the current RT and constitute the background of the narrative. In progressive sentences, the presence of the imperfective marker triggers RT maintenance, irrespective of the (a)telic nature of the predicate. Nevertheless, when the current RT is updated by means of temporal expressions, unbounded sentences (progressive and/or with atelic predicates) can be understood as

RT shifting. The conclusion is that the distribution of the progressive/non-progressive verbal morphology and the lexical aspect of the verb shape the temporal organization of a narrative.

The presentation I have designed for the students incorporates both aspect and discourse hypotheses by including both a **trunk/ leaves/ roots** metaphor which underlines narrative discourse, and the usage chart which objectifies the lexical aspect. The student is thus able to formalize declarative knowledge by analyzing other narratives in order to eventually construct his/her own narrative without burdening him/her with complex meta-language. Also helpful to these learners is a visual mnemonic (“How events take place in time”) that helps symbolize the characteristics of each tense/aspect and that can be used as a reminder when the student is “on line”. An answer key is provided for the numerous exercises designed for the student to work through outside the class.

### **Practice (presentation and tasks for the students)**

When talking about the past, the perspective one assumes is central to the discussion between *past simple*, *past continuous*, *past perfect simple* and *past perfect continuous*. Up to this point (10<sup>th</sup> grade), textbooks have been careful to focus on the use of these tenses at sentence level or presenting pairs of contrast (e.g. past simple vs. past continuous). Often, however, the four perspectives appear together in the same paragraph or story.

As a general rule, the *past simple* (the simple aspect of the past tense) is used to report events that were completed in the past. Think of verbs like these in the *past simple* as moving the storyline forward (the **trunk** of a tree). However, the *past simple* form is also employed when we want to describe a situation existing in the past (using verbs like *be* or *own*), since this kind of verbs do not normally have a continuous form or a past habit (here, it can be and it usually is replaced by the expression *used to*). The *past continuous* (the continuous/progressive aspect of the past tense) expresses an activity in progress at a certain moment in the past. So, we can visualize verbs in the *past continuous* and those in the *past simple* of the latter category (situations and habits) as the **leaves** of the tree, used to enhance the listener’s ability to picture more fully the circumstances of the past event being described. On the other hand, when we refer to a previous activity (anterior to another past action or a past moment), completed or in progress, the *past perfect, simple* or *continuous*, (the perfect aspect of the past tense) is used. These verbs may be pictured as the **roots** of the tree, used to explain the causes of the past event being narrated. This distinction will be presented in three ways:

- (1) As a metaphor to guide you as you analyze and create past time discourse
- (2) As a general explanation of when to use the *past simple*, the *past continuous* or the *past perfect simple or continuous*
- (3) As an explanation of how events take place in time.

### (1) The Metaphor

The **trunk/ leaves/ roots** metaphor can help you understand the relationship between the *past simple*, *past continuous* and *past perfect*. Think of the **trunk** as the information that moves a story forward, a series of completed actions. As each event ends (as represented with an X), a new event begins, which in turn moves the story forward in time. Notice that, in the events narrated below, each verb in the *past simple* moves the storyline forward in chronological order, from the point of waking up to the point of going back to bed.

<i>Julie woke up at 6.30.</i>	X
<i>She got dressed.</i>	X
<i>She left her apartment at 7.05.</i>	X
<i>She missed the bus.</i>	X
<i>She returned home.</i>	X
<i>She went back to bed.</i>	X

Verbs in the *past continuous* do not introduce new events into the story and therefore do not move the storyline forward. The *past continuous* is connected to a time that has been or will be referred to in the *past simple*. In other words, the *past continuous* stops the storyline to fill in descriptive details. The same goes for those verbs which, even though have a *past simple* form, express states of facts (expressed by *be*, *own*, *know*, *have*, *see*, *need*, *etc.*) or habits (*used to*) at specified times in the past. (They can be thought of being “in progress” at those moments, thus being similar to *past continuous*. However, they fall into that category of verbs not normally used in the continuous); hence, the reference to the *past continuous* (and the above mentioned situations) as the **leaves** of the tree/story. Notice how these sentences add details to the above story.

*Julie was still sleepy.*  
*She was tired.*  
*She needed to be on campus early.*  
*The colours of her clothes didn't match.*  
*It was raining and cold.*  
*Julie wasn't feeling well.*  
*The bus was already leaving.*

Notice how the *past continuous* refers to a time specified by the *past simple* storyline. The same goes for the situations expressed by *was*, *needed to*, *didn't match*.

The verbs in the *past perfect*, either simple or continuous, reveal events in the story that happened before those presented in the *past simple* storyline, usually explaining their causes. Hence, they can be thought of being the *roots* of the story. Notice how the *past perfect* adds details explaining the course of events. The story “moves backwards”.

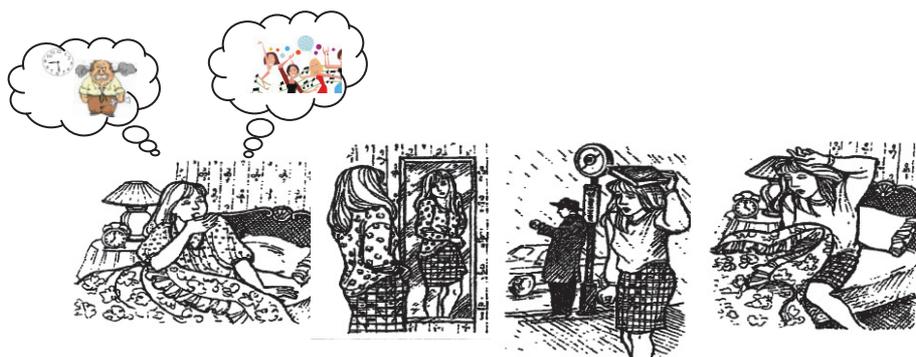
*Julie had been hanging out with friends till 2 in the morning.*  
*They had painted the town red.*  
*Julie had been late for classes a couple of times before.*

Notice how the *past perfect* refers to the “roots” of some events or situations introduced by *past simple* or *continuous*.

„La 6.30 când s-a trezit, Julie era încă somnoroasă și obosită. Julie ieșise în oraș cu prietenii până la 2 dimineața. Se distraseră de minune. Ea trebuia să fie în campus devreme. Mai întârziase de câteva ori înainte la cursuri, iar profesorul ei era supărat pe ea. Așa că s-a îmbrăcat, dar culorile hainelor nu se potriveau. La 7.05 când a ieșit din apartamentul ei, ploua și era frig, iar Julie nu se simțea prea grozav. Autobuzul deja pleca, astfel că l-a pierdut. S-a întors acasă și s-a culcat la loc.” (Romanian translation of the story)

### Practice 1 Using the metaphor (synthesis)

Now use the metaphor of **trunk/leaves/roots** to put the whole story together in English with the pictures.



1. wake up; to be sleepy; be tired

2. get dressed; try a blouse and a skirt; colours not match

3. leave; rain; be cold; not feel well; wait for the bus; bus not come

4. return home; go back to sleep

- 1. hang out with friends till 2 a.m.
- 2. be late before; teacher be angry

Pictures from <http://www.chumpysclipart.com/illustration/>  
and <http://zeneria.blogspot.ro/2011/05/story-so-far.html>

### Practice 2 Using the metaphor (analysis)

This metaphor is helpful in analyzing existing texts in English and it will also be very helpful when you create your own stories in the past. Read the following narrative. On a separate sheet of paper indicate the **trunk**, **the leaves** and **the roots** found in the narration using the previous example as a model.

*“It was a cool evening in September 1895. John Markhan had had a hard day at work, and he was looking forward to getting home. Suddenly, a woman rushed out of the office next door. She was shaking with fright because she had heard someone screaming in the cellar. She was sure it was a ghost.*

*John didn’t believe in ghosts so he went into the building to investigate. It was very quiet. But just as he was thinking that it was all the woman’s imagination, he heard screams.*

*“Who are you? What do you want?” cried John. The screaming didn’t stop so he hurried towards the place where it was coming from. He reached the door leading to the cellar, took a candle and went down the cellar stairs. Suddenly, the door slammed behind him, making a piece of paper fall from a shelf above his head. He examined the piece of paper carefully. It was the death certificate of a fifteen-year-old girl called Alice Pick. She had died of starvation.*

*The next day, John told his neighbour about the evening’s extraordinary events. Apparently, the building had not always been an office. It had once belonged to a rich woman called Eva Tyndale who had shut Alice, her servant, in the cellar. One of the other servants told the police, but by the time they discovered Alice, she was dead and Mrs Tyndale had disappeared.” (Abbs, 2001)*

### (2) Usage chart

Here are some of the most common uses of *past simple*, *past continuous* and *past perfect*.

PAST SIMPLE	PAST CONTINUOUS
1. Completed Action	1. Interrupted Action in the Past
2. Narrative past (a series of completed actions)	2. Action in progress at a specific time in the past (specific time as an interruption )
3. Duration in past	3. Parallel actions
4. Habits in the past	4. Atmosphere

5. Past Facts or Generalizations	5. Repetition and irritation with "always"
PAST PERFECT SIMPLE	PAST PERFECT CONTINUOUS
1. Completed action before something in the past	1. Duration Before Something in the Past
2. Duration before something in the past (non-continuous verbs)	2. Cause of Something in the Past

**Practice 3** Using the usage chart

In these exercises, for each tense indicate which of the uses (1, 2, 3, 4 or 5) discussed above are being expressed.

**past simple**

- a. I really liked the 80's music. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Sharon went to the funfair on Sunday. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. They played Counter Strike all night. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. I came home, took a shower and went straight to bed. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. He wrote articles for "The New Yorker". \_\_\_\_\_

**past continuous**

- a. Dean was running in the park at 7 a.m. yesterday morning. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. The Simpsons were watching TV while they were having dinner. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. They were always laughing at him in high-school. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. When I got there, they were preparing for Christmas Eve. Linda was cooking, Jerry was decorating the Christmas tree and the children were helping him. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. I was walking back from school when I saw a house on fire. \_\_\_\_\_

**past perfect simple**

- a. By the time I arrived at the University, the lecture had already finished. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. They had been married for twenty years when she filed for divorce. \_\_\_\_\_

**past perfect continuous**

- a. The house was spotless because they had been cleaning it all morning. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Suki had been waiting outside the cinema for twenty minutes before her friends arrived. \_\_\_\_\_

**(3) How events take place in time.**

You may use the following symbols to help visualize the usage of the *past simple*, *past continuous* and *past perfect*:

At a specific point in time:

She said no. X

Sequential:

*She read the ransome note, grabbed the phone and dialed the police number.* X X X

Habits and past generalizations:

*Tom used to play the violin.* O

*He was a shy child.* O

*He didn't like playing outside with other children.* O

Continuous, in progress:

*I was playing with Max.* →

Action completed in the past before another past action:

*He had seen that car before.* IX

Action which started and continued for some time before another past action, with emphasis on duration:

*The jury had been deliberating for hours before they reached a verdict.* ↪ X

! The usual translations of the verbs into Romanian expressions may also give you clues on the use of the *past simple*, *past continuous*, *past perfect simple* and *past perfect continuous*:

*I spoke to her yesterday* = Am vorbit cu ea ieri

*I used to speak with her every day when she was living here* = Vorbeam cu ea (Obişnuiam să vorbesc cu ea) în fiecare zi când locuia aici.

*I was speaking to her* = Vorbeam cu ea

*I had spoken to her before the accident* = Am vorbit (Vorbisem) cu ea înainte de accident

*I had been speaking to her for thirty minutes before I convinced her.* = Am vorbit (Vorbisem) cu ea 20 de minute până am convins-o.

#### Practice 4

Next to the sentences of PRACTICE 2, place the appropriate symbol (X, O, →, IX or ↪ X) and also the probable Romanian translation.

#### Practice 5

Using “the tree” metaphor. Write the verbs in the story in the appropriate column. Then identify the aspects of the past tense used and explain the author’s choices.

##### *A Strange Vanishing Act*

*“One summer afternoon in New York in 1875, while his wife was preparing dinner, Mr Levi Gamin left his house to buy some tobacco. He never returned. Sixty years later in 1935, The New York Times printed a story about a man ‘dressed in strange old-fashioned clothes’ who stepped in front of a car while crossing Times Square. He died instantly.*

The dead man was carrying no identification and there was nothing in his pocket except some old bank notes from the year 1875. The police had no idea who the man was or why he was wearing such strange clothes, until a police officer decided to check the missing persons file for 1875. In the file was a description of Mr Gamin which matched the description of dead man exactly. It was then the questions began.

Why did Mr Gamin disappear in 1875? How did he suddenly turn up in Times Square in 1935? Where had he been for the past sixty years and why hadn't his appearance changed? Had Mr Gamin really vanished into thin air or something unknown had taken him into another dimension?" (Abbs, 2000)

		Trunk X	Leaves O	Leaves →	Roots IX or 
1	prepare				
2	leave				
3	return				
4	step				
5	die				
6	carry				
7	have				
8	wear				
9	decide				
10	be				
11	match				
12	begin				
13	disappear				
14	turn up				
15	be				
16	change				
17	vanish				
18	take				

Learners then continue practice with a series of exercises in which they analyze native narratives in both cartoon and text formats beginning with visual and then discourse based metaphors before re-analyzing with lexical aspect and translation.

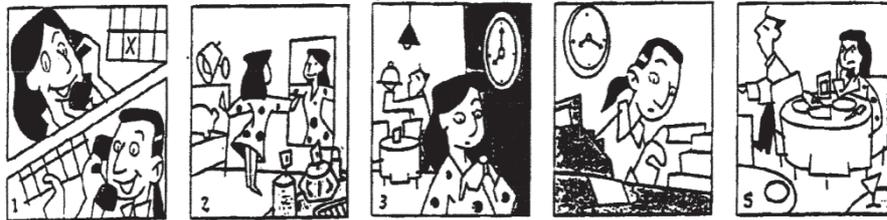
In Practice 6, students are divided into five groups and assigned one of the pictures. Each group is to pick which sentences match their picture and then write some logical original sentences. While the groups are working, the discourse metaphor of the tree is drawn on the board as well as the pop-up reminder of the points of usage chart, the symbols X, →, O, IX and , and a reminder of the formation of *past simple*, *past continuous* and *past perfect simple and continuous*. The sentences are

eventually written on the board in the appropriate column (trunk/leaves/roots) and each group justifies usage and formation.

### Practice 6 Constructing stories

#### *A Night to Remember*

Look at the cartoon and tell what happened to George and Susan last week. Match the sentences below to the pictures. Then write some of your own sentences that logically add to the story. Finally, write how the evening ended.



After Karen Cody (2000)

- a. *It was a very nice black and white dress.*
- b. *She was getting furious.*
- c. *Finally, George asked Susan on a date on Friday night at 8.*
- d. *They had been talking for an hour.*
- e. *George called Susan on Tuesday night at about 8.15.*
- f. *She had bought a smart, designer label dress to wear on her date.*
- g. *She got to the restaurant on time.*
- h. *George was working late in his office.*
- i. *They both loved chatting on the phone.*
- j. *On Friday, Susan got all dressed up before 7 o'clock.*
- k. *Susan was waiting impatiently for George.*

I then incorporate TPR (Total Physical Response) exercises using both the Romanian narrative and its English translation to provide a kinaesthetic metaphor. The class turns to face me at the back of the room while I read the entire story out loud. The students either snap fingers for the *past simple* or clap their hands for *past continuous* or stamp their feet for *past perfect*. I remind them: “You will be indicating if the verb I read is trunk, leaf or root (the tree metaphor, discourse hypothesis); if it is a completed action, sequential action or a description or background detail (usage chart, lexical aspect hypothesis); i.e., if the verb could be symbolized with an X or a line or Roman number nine (visual mnemonic).” And afterwards: “So, when you *heard* a verb in the *past simple*, what did you

do?” (snap) And when you *heard* a verb in the *past continuous*? (clap). Now what happens when I tell you the same story in Romanian? Can you *hear* whether it is “perfect compus/imperfect? So you’ll really have to concentrate on what the verb does, move the storyline or add details or explain the causes. Remember the hint about translations and adverbs possibly helping you decide”, and so on.

Eventually, learners engage in a communicative activity in which they analyze an oral narrative they hear using as many of these metaphors as possible while negotiating with their learner-partner the possible motivation of the use of *past simple*, *past continuous* or *past perfect*. Once the class comes back together, we list on the board trunk X events and leaf description in order to decide if the story was more eventful (active) or descriptive (emotional). Then the script of the narrative with all verbs omitted is flashed on the screen while each pair is separated into two groups: the group of John Grey, who use only *past simple* in boring voices, and that of Gabby Sparrow, who use only *past continuous* (or *past simple* of non-continuous verbs for states and habits) in excited voices. John’s group brainstorm some additional sentences to add events to the story, while Gabby’s group adds descriptions and details. Finally, the first student from John’s group gets up in the middle of the room to start forming a *trunk*, while students from Gabby’s group link arms on either side to start fleshing out the story, thus providing both kinesthetic and visual metaphors.

### Conclusions

Trying to keep the meta-language to a minimum level, using the metaphor of “the tree” together with the visual aid (the symbols visualizing how events take place in time) has proved to be helpful for Romanian-speaking students of intermediate and upper-intermediate level in grasping and manipulating the differences in the uses of the three “past tenses”. This approach to teaching the aspects of the past tense has resulted in the production of much more native-like narratives in the learners in my classes and in higher scores on objective tests, even for the less-able language learners.

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