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Two Tenses for All Sixteen Tenses: A Constructivist Approach

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Abstract

Getting to know and distinguishing the sixteen English tenses formula for some students, even college students, is not simple and straightforward. The construct of verb changes and modification in English is carefully considered one of the sources of the learning problem, and this concept – verb form changes - cannot be found in the any Indonesian "dictionary". By means of conceiving the verb changes concept presented hierarchically (contractedly), comprehensively, simple, and fun, it is expected that the sixteen tenses formula can be facilely understood. This article aims at presenting descriptively (qualitatively) a learning design of sixteen English tenses with a constructivist approach. Those namely sixteen tenses formula are to be simplified through the classification of two tenses. Those two distinctively tenses are namely present and past. All the English tenses are explained through the concept of the two tenses. The construct of present and past tenses is explained and through understanding the minimum requirements for the formation of a sentence, namely the existence of a subject and predicate. Some of the previous research results are selected in order to elucidating the intended learning design.

Keywords: *constructivism; present tenses; past tenses; sentence structure*

A. Introduction

English has firmly established itself as the global language of communication, connecting people from diverse linguistic backgrounds across the world. Whether it is for academic pursuits, career advancement, or cultural exchange, proficiency in English is a valuable skill.

In academic settings worldwide, proficiency in English has become increasingly crucial. As English serves as the *lingua franca* in academia, students and scholars need to effectively communicate their research findings, engage in scholarly discussions, and comprehend complex academic texts.

Among the various components of English language learning, understanding and mastering English tenses hold particular significance. Tenses serve as the backbone of communication, allowing us to express actions, events, and states in different time frames. English tenses also enable precision and clarity in academic communication, enhancing comprehension, fostering critical thinking skills, and facilitating effective interaction.

Learning English tenses is of utmost importance for several reasons. Firstly, English tenses provide the necessary tools to express actions, events, and states in different time frames (Phuwarat, 2020; Stephens & Sanderson, 2022). By mastering tenses, individuals can communicate with precision, conveying the exact time and duration of an action, establishing temporal relationships, and expressing various shades of meaning. This accuracy in communication leads to better understanding and avoids confusion or misinterpretation.

Second, understanding English tenses enhances comprehension of written and spoken English (Saun, 2014). When reading texts or listening to conversations, recognizing tenses helps decipher the intended meaning,

timeline of events, and relationships between them. It allows learners to follow discussions, engage with academic materials, and navigate through a wide range of written and spoken content effectively.

Related to the academic success, third, proficiency in English tenses is vital for academic success, particularly in subjects such as literature, history, and social sciences. It enables students to analyze texts, understand the context of historical events, and effectively communicate their ideas in essays and research papers (Huan, 2011). A strong command of tenses demonstrates language competence, attention to detail, and contributes to the overall quality of academic writing.

Fourth, mastery of English tenses is a key component of overall language proficiency. Tenses provide a framework for organizing thoughts, constructing sentences, and understanding the structure of the language (Saun, 2014). By learning tenses, individuals develop a deeper understanding of grammar, sentence formation, and linguistic patterns, which in turn strengthens their overall language skills.

Fifth, when learners have a solid grasp of English tenses, they gain confidence in their ability to communicate effectively. The knowledge and understanding of tenses allow for smoother and more fluent conversations, both in formal and informal settings (Stephens & Sanderson, 2022). This increased fluency enhances self-expression, promotes active engagement in conversations, and builds confidence in using the English language.

However, when it comes to learning English tenses, learners often encounter several common challenges. Getting to know and distinguishing the sixteen English tenses formula for some students, even college students, is not simple and straightforward. The first prominent problems in learning English tenses are complexity and variability. English tenses can be complex and challenging due to their extensive rules, exceptions, and irregularities. The English language has twelve tenses, each serving a specific purpose

and indicating different time frames. Learners must understand the rules for forming each tense, the appropriate time expressions, and the differences between similar tenses (e.g., present simple vs. present continuous). Additionally, irregular verbs and exceptions further complicate the learning process. Navigating this complexity and variability can be overwhelming for learners, leading to confusion and difficulty in applying tenses accurately (Thakur, Sulaiman, & Elahi, 2021).

Second, another significant challenge in learning English tenses is understanding their appropriate usage in different contexts (Koh, 2021). English tenses convey not only time but also various shades of meaning, such as certainty, probability, and conditionality. Knowing when to use each tense requires a deep understanding of the specific context, the intended message, and the temporal relationships between events. This aspect of contextual usage can be particularly challenging for non-native speakers, as it often involves cultural nuances and idiomatic expressions that may not exist in their native languages.

Third, many English learners face the problem of overrelying on patterns and structures from their native language when attempting to learn English tenses. Each language has its own unique tense system, and directly translating tenses from one language to another can lead to errors and incorrect usage (Huan, 2011). Learners may attempt to fit English tenses into the grammatical structures of their native language, resulting in confusion and inaccuracies. Breaking free from native language patterns and developing an intuitive sense of English tenses is crucial for achieving proficiency and accuracy in their usage.

To overcome these challenges, learners can employ effective strategies such as systematic and constructed learning, ample exposure to authentic English materials (Bolandifar, 2013), regular practice through exercises and conversations, and seeking guidance from experienced teachers or

language resources. By addressing these problems head-on and practicing consistently, learners can gradually overcome the difficulties associated with learning English tenses and achieve greater proficiency in their usage.

This article aims at presenting descriptively (qualitatively) a learning design of sixteen English tenses with a constructivist approach. Those namely sixteen tenses formula are to be simplified through the classification of two tenses. Those two distinctively tenses are namely present and past and firstly introduced by Stephens and Sanderson (2022). All the English tenses are explained through the concept of the two tenses. The construct of present and past tenses is explained and through understanding the minimum requirements for the formation of a sentence, namely the existence of a subject and predicate. Some of the previous research results are selected in order to elucidating the intended learning design.

B. Literature Review

Learning Tenses for EFL Learners

The acquisition of English tenses is a critical aspect of language learning for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Proficiency in tenses enables learners to express actions, events, and states accurately in different time frames, facilitating effective communication and comprehension. This literature review aims to examine the existing research on the learning of tenses among EFL learners, focusing on the challenges they face, instructional strategies employed, and the impact of various factors on tense acquisition.

- **Challenges in Learning Tenses**

Numerous studies have highlighted the challenges encountered by EFL learners in acquiring English tenses. The terminal decision of the most identified problematic sources goes to complexity and variability of

tenses (Rahman & Ali, 2015), the influence of the learners' native language (Handayani, Salija, & Amirullah, 2022), and the difficulty in understanding contextual usage as significant hurdles. The complexity and irregularities in the English tense system often lead to confusion and errors among EFL learners, who may struggle with forming and using tenses accurately. Furthermore, the interference of learners' native language structures can result in inappropriate transfers and hinder tense acquisition.

- **Instructional Strategies:**

Various instructional strategies have been proposed to enhance the learning of tenses among EFL learners. Research suggests that explicit instruction, including the provision of clear explanations, rules, and examples (Ahmad, 2011), is effective in fostering tense acquisition. Additionally, task-based approaches, such as communicative activities, have been found to promote meaningful language use and improve learners' understanding and usage of tenses. Contextualized teaching introduced by Littlewood (1986) and Abdulbari and Abdulmalik (2017), integrating tenses into meaningful and authentic contexts, has also been shown to enhance learners' comprehension and production of tenses.

- **Factors Influencing Tense Acquisition:**

Several factors have been identified as influential in the learning of tenses for EFL learners. Age has been found to play a role, with younger learners demonstrating greater ease in acquiring tenses compared to adult learners (Ellis, 2008). Proficiency level also affects tense acquisition, with beginners facing more challenges than advanced learners. Additionally, individual learner differences, such as motivation, cognitive abilities, and exposure to the English language, have been found to impact the rate and success of tense acquisition (Yoke & Hasan, 2014).

- **Technology and Tense Learning:**

The integration of technology into tense learning has gained attention in recent years. Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) programs, interactive multimedia, and online resources (Dashtestani, 2012; Bolandifar, 2013) offer opportunities for self-paced learning, practice, and feedback on tenses. Furthermore, technology-enhanced tense instruction can improve learners' motivation, engagement, and accuracy in tense usage (Al-Munawwarah, 2014).

Constructivism

The constructivist approach to language learning has gained significant attention in the field of education, offering a learner-centered perspective that emphasizes active engagement, social interaction, and the construction of knowledge. This literature review aims to examine the existing research on the constructivist approach in language learning, focusing on its theoretical foundations, instructional strategies, and its impact on learner outcomes.

- **Theoretical Foundations:**

The constructivist approach is rooted in the cognitive theories of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky, which propose that learners actively construct knowledge through their interactions with the environment and social interactions (Aljohani, 2017). In language learning, constructivism posits that learners actively engage in meaning-making processes, drawing upon their prior knowledge, experiences, and interactions with others to construct their understanding of the language (Gitakarma & Tjahyanti, 2012).

- **Instructional Strategies:**

Constructivist language learning environments emphasize the importance of learner autonomy, collaboration, and authentic tasks

(Supardan, 2016). Learners are encouraged to actively participate in problem-solving activities, engage in meaningful interactions with peers and instructors, and make connections between new language knowledge and their existing understanding. Project-based learning, cooperative learning, and inquiry-based approaches are commonly employed to foster critical thinking, problem-solving skills, and the construction of language skills in real-life contexts.

- **Social Interaction:**

Social interaction plays a central role in the constructivist approach to language learning. Collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions, peer feedback, and language exchanges, provide learners with opportunities to negotiate meaning, practice language skills, and co-construct knowledge (Supardan, 2016). Those sorts of activities are modified and implemented in the real classroom for the learning strategies.

- **Role of the Teacher:**

In a constructivist language learning environment, the role of the teacher shifts from being a transmitter of knowledge to a facilitator and guide. Teachers create a supportive and interactive learning environment, provide scaffolding, and encourage learners to take ownership of their learning. They promote reflection, provide feedback, and facilitate meaningful interactions that foster language development and metacognitive skills (Aljohani, 2017).

- **Learner Outcomes:**

Research on the constructivist approach in language learning has shown positive effects on learner outcomes. Studies have found that learners engaged in constructivist activities demonstrate improved language proficiency, critical thinking skills, and motivation (Aljohani, 2017). They

exhibit increased autonomy, confidence, and a willingness to take risks in their language use. Furthermore, constructivist approaches have been associated with the development of a positive learner attitude, fostering a lifelong love for learning languages.

C. Method

Descriptive qualitative research is a methodological approach that aims to provide a comprehensive and detailed description of a particular phenomenon or research topic (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014; Sugiyono, 2018). This research method focuses on exploring and understanding the characteristics, qualities, and meanings associated with the phenomenon under investigation. It involves gathering rich, textual data through various techniques such as observations and document analysis.

Inductive Approach: This research method typically adopts an inductive approach, allowing themes, patterns, and insights to emerge from the data rather than imposing hypotheses (Arikunto, 2019). It emphasizes exploring the topic with an open mind, enabling researchers to gain a deeper understanding of the phenomenon from the perspectives of the participants.

Descriptive qualitative research primarily relies on non-numerical data, such as words, images, and narratives, to capture the complexity and depth of the phenomenon being studied. Researchers collect data through interviews, observations, focus groups, and document analysis, focusing on participants' perspectives and experiences (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Data analysis in descriptive qualitative research involves a systematic and iterative process of coding and categorizing the data. The researcher identified patterns, themes, and connections, and developed a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014).

Analytical techniques such as content analysis were used to organize and interpret the data.

Findings and Interpretation: The findings of descriptive qualitative research are typically presented by using citation, quotations, diagram (design), examples, and (limited) illustrative stories to support the description of the phenomenon (Heigham & Croker, 2009). The researcher interpreted and discussed the data in relation to the research question or objective, providing insights, explanations, and contextual understanding.

D. Findings and Discussion

In this article, the research findings and discussion are intricately woven together, constituting a unified and cohesive section. By merging the two aspects seamlessly, the research findings are presented hand in hand with an in-depth discussion, allowing for a comprehensive exploration and interpretation of the results. This integrated approach ensures that the significance and implications of the findings are thoroughly examined, while simultaneously fostering a deeper understanding through critical analysis and contextualization within existing literature. Through the concurrent presentation of research findings and discussion, a holistic perspective is attained, enriching the scholarly discourse and facilitating a more nuanced comprehension of the research outcomes.

The Learning Design

The learning design of constructivism in this context entails a strategic sequencing of sentence definitions and concepts, as well as tense, to facilitate effective comprehension and application. In this design, the foundational aspects of sentence structure and grammatical concepts are introduced gradually, building upon prior knowledge and experiences. Learners are encouraged to explore and experiment with sentence formation and tenses,

allowing them to make connections, identify patterns, and construct their own mental models of language usage. This sequential approach fosters a deep understanding of the interplay between sentence construction and the appropriate use of tenses or verb formulation and modification, empowering learners to navigate language with confidence and proficiency.

Learning sentence structure before learning tenses is beneficial for students for several reasons. Firstly, understanding sentence structure lays the foundation for effective communication in any language (Suhrob & Vasila, 2022). By grasping the fundamental components of a sentence, such as subject and verb, students can construct grammatically correct and coherent sentences. This enables them to express their thoughts and ideas clearly, enhancing their overall language proficiency (Aki & Rorintulus, 2023). Moreover, learning sentence structure before tenses helps students develop a strong linguistic foundation. It allows them to recognize sentence patterns, identify different clause types, and comprehend sentence complexity. Lastly, focusing on sentence structure initially allows students to develop their syntactic awareness. They become familiar with word order, sentence types (declarative, interrogative, imperative, etc.), and other structural elements, enabling them to manipulate sentences and experiment with different sentence constructions.

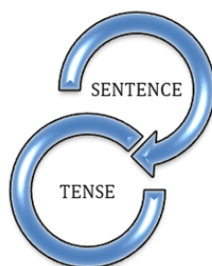


Figure 1. The constructed knowledge of tense formulation

What is Sentence?

Understanding the definition of a sentence is crucial for students as it provides them with a clear and comprehensive understanding of the basic unit of language communication. By knowing what constitutes a sentence, students gain the necessary knowledge to construct grammatically correct and meaningful statements. The definition of a sentence encompasses its essential components, such as subject and verb which form the building blocks of coherent communication. With this understanding, students can effectively organize their thoughts, convey ideas, and engage in meaningful conversations. Moreover, by grasping the definition of a sentence, the students establish a solid foundation upon which they can develop their language skills, including vocabulary expansion, sentence structure variation, and effective use of tenses.

A sentence is a grammatical unit that consists of a group of words expressing a complete thought. It is the basic building block of written and spoken language, allowing us to convey meaning and communicate with others. A sentence typically contains a subject, which is the person, thing, or idea that the sentence is about, and a predicate, which includes the verb and provides information about the subject.

In English, a sentence generally follows a specific word order, known as the subject-verb pattern. However, there are various sentence structures and types that can be used to convey different meanings and functions. These include declarative sentences (making statements), interrogative sentences (asking questions), and imperative sentences (giving commands).

What is Tense?

A brief question about the definition of tense is delivered to the students. Tense is a grammatical feature of verbs that indicates the time at which an action, event, or state takes place (Stephens & Sanderson, 2022). It allows

us to situate actions or events in relation to the present, past, or future. Tense is an essential component of language as it helps convey the temporal aspect of a sentence, enabling us to understand when something happened or will happen. In English, there are two primary tenses: present and past (Stephens & Sanderson, 2022). Each tense has different forms and uses, allowing for a more precise expression of time.

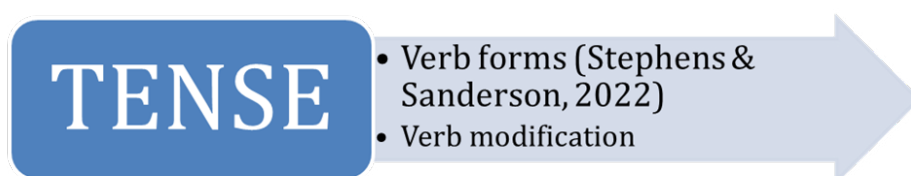


Figure 2. The concept of tense.

Does Indonesian Have Tenses?

The next question given to the students is related to the comparison of learning the mother tongue to the target language. This is simply to look up the existence of the learning target, which is tense, in the linguistic structure of the first language. The intention behind this investigation is to explore the potential existence and potential influence of tense in the students' first language, which can aid or hinder the acquisition of tense in the target language.

Basically, Indonesian has no tenses when tense is defined as verb form modifications to indicate the time occurrence of the events. However, when tenses are briefly defined as “adverb of time”, the Indonesian might have tenses, but the tense system in Indonesian is simpler compared to some other languages, such as English. In Indonesian, tenses are not formed by changing the verb itself but by using time expressions or additional words to indicate the time of the action or event.

The basic tenses in Indonesian are Present Tense (Tenses masa kini): This tense is used to describe actions or events that are happening at the

present time or are generally true. For example, "Saya makan" (I eat/I am eating).

Past Tense (Tenses masa lampau): The past tense is used to talk about actions or events that have already happened in the past. To indicate the past tense, time expressions such as "kemarin" (yesterday) or "dulu" (in the past) are often used. For example, "Dia pergi kemarin" (He/she went yesterday).

Future Tense (Tenses masa depan): The future tense is used to express actions or events that will happen in the future. Time expressions such as "besok" (tomorrow) or "nanti" (later) are commonly used to indicate the future tense. For example, "Saya akan pergi besok" (I will go tomorrow).

It's important to note that while Indonesian has these basic tenses, the language relies heavily on context and time expressions to convey the intended meaning of the verb. Additionally, there are other ways to express time, such as using adverbs or specific verbs that indicate a particular time frame.

How Many Tenses do We Have in English?

English possesses a concise set of 16 tenses that can be comprehensively learned by focusing on two fundamental categories: the present and the past. These two basic tenses serve as the building blocks for understanding and mastering the broader range of tenses in the English language. The present tense encompasses forms such as simple present, present continuous, present perfect, and present perfect continuous, which convey actions or states occurring in the present time. Similarly, the past tense includes simple past, past continuous, past perfect, and past perfect continuous, indicating actions or states that took place in the past. By grasping the foundations of these two categories, learners gain a solid understanding of verb tense usage and structure, providing them with a strong foundation to explore

and grasp the remaining tenses. This approach facilitates a systematic and organized learning process, allowing learners to navigate and confidently utilize the complete set of 16 tenses in English.

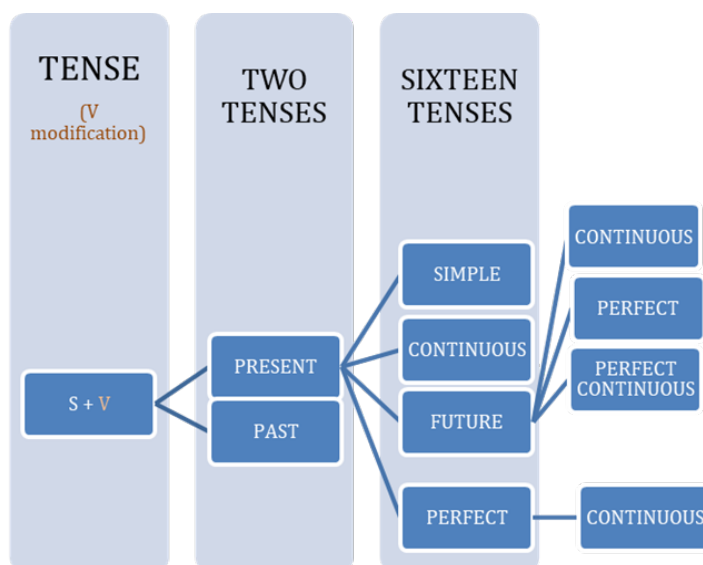


Figure 3. The concept of learning sixteen tenses by two tenses.

TWO TENSES Schema

After providing an argument that supports the existence of twelve or sixteen tenses, the next focus is to an alternative perspective on describing and teaching English grammar tenses. This alternative viewpoint suggests that there are only two tenses, each with its own form: a present form and a past form. Yule (2009) offers compelling examples that reinforce the notion of a distinct two-tense approach to English grammar instruction. Depraetere and Salkie (2015) further advocate this concept by asserting that auxiliary verbs such as "will" and "have" do not constitute part of tense, and that English tenses can be simply distinguished as either past or present. While this approach has primarily been embraced by linguists and academics who advocate prescriptive grammar, it forms the basis of the

research presented in this paper. It is important to note that our intention is not to compare different methodologies or assert the superiority of one over the others. Instead, we aim to present research that demonstrates the viability of teaching English grammar tenses using a two-tense approach, focusing solely on past and present. This alternative approach has the potential to significantly streamline the teaching and learning of English grammar tenses for both educators and learners."

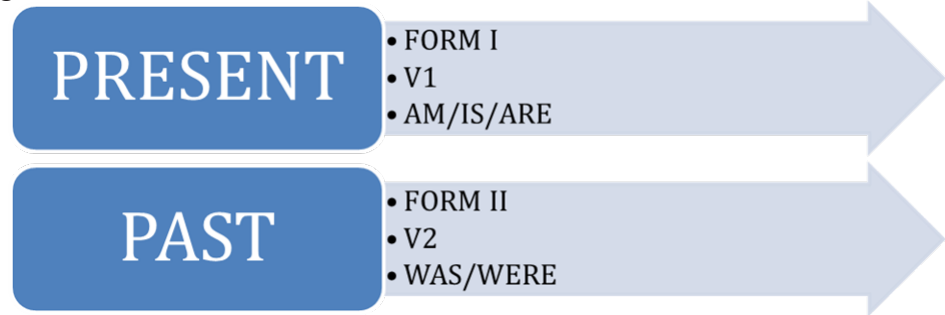


Figure 4. The concept of two categories of tense.

Sixteen Tenses

The distinct names of all sixteen tenses are taken from Ferikoğlu (2018) in his research entitled A systematic design of time-aspect graphic system for visualizing English tenses. Amidst the ongoing debates surrounding the categorization and enumeration of tenses, extensive linguistic analysis and consensus point towards the definitive conclusion that the English language encompasses a total of sixteen tenses. This consensus arises from the comprehensive examination of temporal relationships expressed through verb forms and structures. These sixteen tenses encompass various combinations of present, past, and future forms, including simple, continuous, perfect, and perfect continuous aspects. By acknowledging the scholarly consensus on this matter, English language learners and linguists can confidently approach the study and understanding of English verb tenses, ensuring accurate and effective communication in a range of temporal contexts.

Table 1. The total number of English tenses.

| Simple | | | Present | S + V1 | Lisa studies English. |
|------------|------------|------------|--------------------------|---|---|
| | | | Past | S + V2 | Lisa studied English. |
| Continuous | | | Present | S + am/is/are + Ving | Lisa is studying English. |
| | | | Past | S + was/were + Ving | Lisa was studying English. |
| Future | | | Present | S + will + V1 | Lisa will study English. |
| | | | Past | S + would + V1 | Lisa would study English. |
| Future | Continuous | Present | S + will be + Ving | Lisa will be studying English. | |
| | | Past | S + would be + Ving | Lisa would be studying English. | |
| Future | Perfect | Present | S + will have + V3 | Lisa will have studied English. | |
| | | Past | S + would have + V3 | Lisa would have studied English. | |
| Future | Perfect | Continuous | Present | S + will have been + Ving | Lisa will have been studying English |
| | | | Past | S + would have been + Ving | Lisa would have been studying English. |
| Perfect | | | Present | S + has/have + V3 | Lisa has studied English. |
| | | | Past | S + had + V3 | Lisa had studied English. |
| Perfect | Continuous | Present | S + has/have been + Ving | Lisa has been studying English. | |
| | | Past | S + had been + Ving | Lisa had been studying English. | |

E. Conclusion

Understanding and differentiating the sixteen English tenses can be challenging for students, including college students. The complexities of verb changes and modifications in English are often identified as one of the main obstacles in learning, particularly as this concept of verb form changes is not explicitly present in Indonesian language resources. To facilitate a more accessible comprehension of the sixteen tenses, this article proposes a learning design using a constructivist approach. By presenting the concept of verb changes in a hierarchical, comprehensive, simple, and engaging manner, it aims to enhance students' understanding of the tenses. The article focuses on the classification of two primary tenses, namely present and past, as a foundation for explaining all the English tenses. By grasping the concepts of present and past tenses and understanding the basic requirements for constructing a sentence, such as subject and predicate, students can navigate the intricacies of tenses more effectively.

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