

# Teaching the Irregular Verbs

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“Why you never come for my house?” “I come yesterday, you no there.” “Why you no tell me you come yesterday?” I no know you go out.” It is no accident that wherever pidgin English is spoken the verbs are the most simplified; nor is it an accident that the more sophisticated (but inadequately instructed) will use forms like “I didn’t went”, or, as a Nigerian soldier said to me once when I overshot a road-block: “Aha, so you doesn’t want to stop!”

For the teacher who is used to using English and who has long ago mastered the verb system, it is hard to imagine the confusion and bewilderment of the learner. He learns: ‘I opened’, as the Past Tense of ‘open’; he naturally writes ‘Did you opened’; he is told that it is wrong, it should be ‘Did you open’; so, in growing confusion, he writes ‘open’ for the Past Tense the next time. He comes to the irregular verbs: he learns ‘went’ for the Past of ‘go’; on the analogy of ‘I opened – I have opened’, he naturally writes: ‘I have went’. It is wrong, so he thinks “Ah, irregular verbs are different;” then he comes up against ‘teach – taught – taught’; despair – they are the same! Why isn’t English more like Malay??

## Teaching the Tenses – 3 Tasks

What then can the teacher do to help his pupils sort out all this confusion? As with any teaching problem, his first task is to analyse the nature of the problem itself. Only then can he think clearly about how to present the items, and how to make sure his pupils learn them thoroughly.

In teaching the English tenses, one can identify three main tasks:

- a) To teach the pupils how to form the tenses (to be + -ing; add -ed; did + base form of verb; etc. etc.).
- b) To teach their meaning, i.e. when to use each tense.
- c) To teach the irregular Simple Past and Past Participle forms.

The first two tasks go very much together. The forms are taught as the tenses come in the syllabus. Again, each tense has different meanings; for example, the Present Continuous can refer to an action going on at the Present time (e.g. “What is Ali doing?” “Oh, he’s cleaning his bicycle.”); or it can also refer to the future (“When are you leaving?” “Oh, not till next year.”). These meanings

are of course introduced in different items in the syllabus. Both these tasks (a) and (b) take a long time and plenty of practice and revision; it takes a long time, for example, for pupils to develop a sure feeling as to whether to use the Simple Past or the Present Perfect. But both tasks are straight-forward in that the pupil is merely required to master a principle and apply it.

The third task, however, is more difficult. The pupil needs to learn over a hundred individual irregular verbs. The syllabus may introduce ‘Irregular Past Tenses’ and ‘Irregular Present Perfect’ tenses as individual items; this will not suggest to any teacher that he should introduce all the irregular past tenses forms at once. If however, the syllabus or, as is often the case the textbook, makes no further mention of them, and the teacher is conscientiously following the syllabus and the text, they may be overlooked completely. This means that some will be learnt through constant exposure, some will only be met with occasionally, and confusion and bewilderment will again result. The only alternative is for the teacher and the textbook writer to follow a system to ensure that the most important irregular verbs are gradually introduced, learnt, and constantly revised.

## Groupings of Irregular Verbs

Before going on to suggest a system, we need to look more closely at how the irregular verbs in English work. Perhaps the most useful grouping of the irregular forms is that given in Pittman’s ‘Teaching Structural English’ (Jacaranda/Federal Publications edition: pp 67 – 70). He follows the usual practice of listing the three forms of each verb, which he calls A, B and C. A is the base form (give); B is the Simple Past (gave); C is the Past Participle (given). He then divides the irregular verbs into three main groups:

- Group 1: A, B and C the same: e.g. cut – cut – cut; hurt – hurt – hurt.
- Group 2: B and C the same: e.g. send – sent – sent; sting – stung – stung.
- Group 3: B and C different: e.g. be – was – been; drive – drove – driven.

The only verb in this group where A and C are the same are ‘come’ and ‘run’.

He further groups the verbs in sub-groupings according to how they form B and C. For example, (send, sent, sent; burn, burnt, burnt) follow more or less the same system. Again, (swim, swam, swum; ring rang, rung) etc. also follow the same system. But it is questionable whether there is any value in introducing verbs of one sub-group together; it might help if we could be sure that the children would remember afterwards which sub-group a verb belonged to! (Any reader who is interested in these sub-groupings might look at the pages of the book mentioned above.)

### Learning Tasks

It may be helpful to list in general terms the main ideas the pupil needs to grasp, in the order in which (in the new primary syllabus) he is faced with them.

1. Simple Past:
  - i) *Regular Verbs* take '-ed' in the Affirmative only. Did + base form (A) is used in the Interrogative and Negative.
  - ii) *Irregular Verbs*: These do not add '-ed' in the Affirmative. The Simple Past (B) of each irregular verb must be learnt individually. (It is important that the pupil should fully grasp this fact). Group 2 and 3 verbs should be introduced before Group 1.
2. Present Perfect:
  - i) *Regular Verbs*: Have/has + -ed (like Simple Past).
  - ii) *Irregular Verbs*: Have + Past Participle (C). The Past Participle is sometimes the same as the Simple Past, sometimes different. Each Past Participle must be learnt individually. The Group 2 verbs are most similar to the Regular verbs, and might therefore be shown first (a few examples, not the whole list!) After that, Group 3 may be dealt with, and only then Group 1, which must be the most confusing.

### A System for Teaching the Irregular Verbs

The teacher must first make sure that he has presented the points listed under 'Learning Tasks' in such a way that his pupils have more or less grasped the main points, and will not be baffled by coming across verbs with A, B, and C the same, verbs with B and C the same, and verbs with B and C different. In presenting these ideas, he will of course have introduced a few verbs of each type, and practised them. But what about the remaining verbs in each group? Surely they cannot all be taught at once before going on to the next item? Of course not: we

must go on then to the next syllabus item: but we must make sure we have some way of seeing that the irregular verbs are eventually learnt.

Some people would suggest that it is sufficient just to make sure the irregular verbs are learnt as they occur. Others might suggest that pupils should be made to learn so many a week until they have all been learnt. In deciding whether to follow either of these methods, we must think how we actually learn the forms. Sometimes we pick them up almost without effort from frequent use: words like 'went', 'told' and so on are bound to occur frequently. Sometimes we learn them by rote: 'swim – swam – swum', 'teach – taught – taught', and so on.

Some people think that learning them by rote is unnatural and does not help pupils to actually use them. My own experience, as a learner as well as a teacher, would suggest that it has its uses. For example, although I have used German a lot, I sometimes find that the correct form does not come to mind immediately: in those cases I am often helped by saying to myself, for example, 'schwimmen – schwamm - geschwommen'.

I have no doubt that, for most learners, the best method is a combination: frequent exposure to the forms in reading and other activities, frequent situational practice, and some rote learning of familiar verbs to back it up.

But the teacher still needs a system to make sure that the most important irregular verbs are covered. The task may be spread over several years. In the primary syllabus, the Word Lists give some irregular verbs in List A (Standards 1 and 2), some in List B (roughly Standards 3 and 4), and some in List C (roughly Standards 5 and 6). Since the Standard 1 & 2 syllabus does not include Simple Past and Present Perfect, the List A verbs would need to be spread out over Standards 3 and 4, together with the List B verbs, and revised in Standards 5 and 6, when the List C verbs are taught. (Of course, if the teacher finds that his pupils need a certain irregular verb, he can introduce it, even if it is not in the Word Lists for that class.)

The procedure might then be as follows:

1. Teach the three forms of each irregular verb as it occurs (e.g. in reading passages, exercises, drills, etc.)
2. Make sure that verbs learnt recur regularly in drills, exercises, guided compositions, etc., and introduce new ones a few at a time.
3. Keep a check-list, ticking these verbs which have been introduced.

4. Pupils may also have a check-list, either in their text-book, in duplicated form, or in their notebooks. A wall-chart may also be used. If it is in the text-book or duplicated, they should tick off each verb as it is introduced, and revise them for periodic tests, or quizzes, where the pupils question each other -- a team game, like a spelling bee. With a wall-chart, verbs may either be ticked as they are introduced or added when they occur. (N.B. The verbs *may* be listed in their groups, but it is probably better to mix them up, e.g. in alphabetical order; if they are listed in groups, the pupil cannot test himself, as he knows how the verb works from the group in which it occurs.)

5. Make sure that regular revision is given. Often these tenses may be combined with other items (e.g. countables and uncountables with 'some' and 'any', 'both' and 'all', and so on) for revision purposes.

Finally, remember that the Past Participle occurs in other verb-forms besides the Present Perfect, e.g. Past Perfect, Passive forms and several others. Each time one of these tenses is introduced, it is a good idea to focus pupils' attention of the fact that it is the Past Participle of the verb which is being used. It will also be a good opportunity for revising some of those verbs already introduced.