2. Tense and Aspect in (Con)Text

Kathleen Bardovi-Harlig

Abstract
This paper demonstrates how authentic texts can be exploited by teachers for the teaching of tense and aspect in English. Research in second language acquisition shows that learners master tense/aspect forms relatively quickly, but that they have much greater difficulty in establishing the form-meaning-use associations exhibited by the target language. Thus, the use of authentic texts in teaching tense and aspect is not only a means of contextualizing grammar, but is essential in helping learners relate form to meaning and use. This chapter presents a brief analysis of tense and aspect use in three texts: a narrative, a description, and a news report. Following each text, activities are presented which are designed to increase a learner’s awareness of meaning, use, or distribution of tense and aspect. The activities are intended to supplement traditional grammatical instruction in tense/aspect and can be used with a variety of teaching methods.

This chapter is entitled “Tense and Aspect in (Con)Text” because the best context for teaching tense and aspect is text. By text, I mean reasonably authentic connected discourse of any type (narrative, expository, conversational) and any source (radio, television, film, newspapers, novels, stories, reports of various types, and texts for children as well as adults). Studies of the acquisition of what textbooks call tense (which I will call tense and aspect) suggest that the use of texts as input is not only methodologically desirable, but acquisitionally necessary. This chapter will exemplify some uses of four tense/aspect forms which express events related to past time in different ways: the simple past, pluperfect, past progressive, and present perfect. Texts illustrate the relationship of form (the tense/aspect inflections) to meaning and use, and the contrast between the meanings associated with tense/aspect forms.

Background
English marks both tense, the location of an event in time (Comrie, 1985), and grammatical aspect, ways of viewing the make-up of a situation (Comrie, 1976). John sings (present) and John sang (past) show a difference in tense. John sang (simple past) and John was singing (past progressive) are both past, but show a
contrast in grammatical aspect. The present perfect, *John has sung*, has been labelled both a tense and an aspect, and is known as a 'phase' by some British linguists. The pluperfect, *John had sung*, is called a relative tense because it takes its point of reference from another tense—the time reference established by the simple past. (This is known as "past in the past" pedagogically.) Whatever its best description, it is clear that the meaning of present perfect is not primarily a present tense equivalent of the past perfect (hence the use of *pluperfect* rather than *past perfect*).

Learners apparently have more difficulty with the meaning and use of tenses/aspect inflections than with the form (Bardovi-Harlig, 1992). In fact, Bardovi-Harlig and Bofman (1989) found that learners made 7.5 times more errors in tense/aspect use than in form. Situating the use of tense/aspect inflections is difficult for learners. One way is to use texts for comprehension and to highlight form-meaning-use associations, which provides communicative input lacking in traditional presentations of tense/aspect.

One might object that texts are long and diffuse and that any number of isolated examples can be lined up in less time and space. However, the use of text is ultimately efficient. First, it presents a realistic portrait of the distribution of tense/aspect forms. (This is true of any form or rule that is being highlighted for learners.) Second, using texts presents tenses used in meaningful communication. Third, the use of texts shows how tenses contribute to the building of discourse, including where certain tenses are located, and how they function in different genres of text. Fourth, texts demonstrate the relation of tense/aspect forms to each other and the contrast between them.

**Text as context**

This section examines two complete texts and an excerpt. For each text I will discuss the distribution of tense/aspect forms and present activities to increase learners' awareness of form-meaning-use associations. (For a discussion of form-meaning-use in grammar, see Larsen-Freeman, 1991). The use of text is meant to supplement more traditional presentations of tense/aspect. However, I leave type of presentation up to the individual instructor (see Ellis, 1993; Sharwood Smith, 1991). Neither the texts nor the activities cover the full range of meanings and uses associated with the tense/aspect forms; rather these are meant to serve as examples of what can be done in the classroom.

Finally, I recommend using complete texts. This maximizes the context for
meaning and use, respects the text as a communicative unit, and brings other advantages of comprehensible input. To this end, the first activities with a text should relate to its meaning, although these are not provided here.

The following texts aired on All Things Considered on National Public Radio.¹

Text 1. Narrative

All Things Considered 10/6/89

Larry Massett: Through a friend of ours we came across the story of a man who lives in Washington and who's become something of a saint in the eyes of many of the homeless. His name is Michael Kerwin and his story begins 10 years ago.

1 Kerwin: I was walking one night. It was bitterly cold, around Christmas 1978, and I was walking. I think I was walking down to the river just to clear my head or to go for a walk. I love to walk. There was a man on the heating vent across the street from the State Department at 21st and E which was only a block from my apartment, and he called out to me. He said he wanted a buck to buy something to eat. I was very irritated with him for calling out after me. I didn't want to be bothered and I didn't believe him either. I thought, "well he just wants to get something to drink;" and I thought to myself, "well I'll fix him. I'll go and get him something to eat and that way he'll be frustrated and angry and didn't get what he wanted but at least I'll give him what he asked for." So I went up to my apartment, got him a bowl of soup, got him a sandwich and a cup of tea, and brought it down. I set it down and walked away. I continued my walk, didn't say a word to him, and didn't acknowledge his thanks. I never saw that man again, but I went home that night and I just thought: "well, you know that made me feel pretty good. That's the least I can do. That's all it takes to make me feel good and to think well you know here I'm helping the human being. I can do that. I mean what effort did that take." So I went home, and the next night I went out again with the same type of meal (I think a little bit more but the same type of meal). I just set it down on the heating vent where other people were, and I walked away. They thought I was a little bit crazy bringing out this food and setting it down, but I did. I simply went back to my apartment
and that was the end of it. But I kept doing that, and I kept doing it
night after night after night and eventually got to know some of these
people because I was consistent. I went down there.
One of them said to me one time "what is this, kind of a project?
Is this a homework assignment or something?" I said, "No." I said,
"I just feel I want to do it." Another night. One of the guys down
there was so angry with my doing this. I had taken a gallon jug down
of hot split pea soup. It was a cold night, and he took the jar of hot
split pea soup and broke it over my head. He was so angry. He said,
"You're bringing food out to the dogs. You're setting it down here and
walking away." I said "Sir, you're exactly right." I said, "I'm
embarrassed by what I'm doing, and I'm afraid. I don't know how else
to do it." That guy really opened my eyes to the fact that I was being
very insensitive, very unfriendly. I really shouldn't have done it at all
if that was going to be the way I was doing it.
So the following night I came down. I set the food down. I purpose-
fully sat there for a while with some of the people and talked to them,
and all of this was fine. I think they were waiting for me to stop doing
it. They were waiting to see how long I was going to keep this up.
Secondly I think they were beginning to enjoy the visits and the food,
and I was getting to know some of them. For me this was a very very big
barrier that was being broken because I had always resented them or
looked through them or been annoyed by them or their condition, and I
had never really encountered any of them on a personal basis.
Everything was fine until about three months after I'd begun. A man
asked to come up to my apartment and to shower and shave. I said,
"Absolutely not." I said, "I live in a dorm." I said, "You know, it's
it's graduate housing." I said, "We are not allowed to have people in—
just strangers off the street." He was dirty. He smelled, and he was a
little bit inebriated. I said, "No." I said, "I can bring the food out
but I can't have any people up there." I didn't want to, and I was
d embarrassed if I had been seen with him. Nobody was aware of what I was
doing. Nobody in the dorm or anybody else was aware that I was taking
this food down, and that's the way I wanted it. So that was fine, but he
persisted for three days after that. Finally I said, "All right, Glenn."
I said, "Come up to the apartment." But I said, "You've got to leave as
soon as you have your shower and shave.” So it was fine. I took him up, and he went into the bathroom. I went into the kitchen. I was washing some dishes, and I came back into the living room about twenty minutes later. There he was in the chair fast asleep. He had come out and he had gone into the chair. Right away—because he was so tired—he had gone to sleep. I had given him some clean clothes and he had put those on. So he looked fine. He looked a lot better than he did on the grates.

He slept. He slept all night there, and the next morning I went to work because I was working too. I debated whether to leave him there, and I said, “well you know he’s certainly sober because he hadn’t brought any liquor in.” He looked very clean and he looked very wholesome. I thought, “well you know, I’ll just let him stay here during the day and when I come home for lunch you know I’ll see what the circumstances are.” I came home, and he had made lunch. He had straightened the apartment out and he was listening to the Ring Cycle of Richard Wagner on the stereo. Of course that endeared me to him because I liked what he was listening to--Lowengren. He was wonderful, and it was good to come home to that. It was good to come home to somebody that had taken the time and the effort to do that. He filled in a very real sense a void in my life. I wasn’t married. I wasn’t doing anything really but going to school and going to work, and it felt kind of good to come home to something like that. I really identified with him.

He didn’t leave for 30 days. When people found out that he was up there, that he was doing fine, that he was safe, and that he was clothed and well fed, a lot of people on the grates asked to come up. I had 15 people in my room by the end of that winter. We were fine, and then one Saturday morning a young man came up. He was 24 years old. He came up and asked if he could shower and shave in the apartment. I said, “Yes.” I had never seen him before and he went in to the bathroom. After about an hour he didn’t come out. We went in there, and he was dead in the tub. He had died of drugs and alcohol.

Of course, I had never been around anyone that had died—certainly not in my own home. I got on my phone and called my mother. I said, “What am I supposed to do? Here is this man dead in the tub.” I said, “You know I have all these guys in the apartment.” She said, “Well you
97 have to call 911.” This made sense, but I hadn’t thought of it. I called
98 911, and I was not ready for the response. All of a sudden these fire
99 engines came racing down the street. The rescue squad came down the
100 street. The homicide detectives came in the door. The university
101 officials came in the door and the coroner. I was not ready for anything
102 like that. They just took one look at this apartment with all these
103 people and this man, and finally it dawned on the university where these
104 people were coming from. They knew people were coming into the building
105 because the students were telling them, but they couldn’t figure out
106 where they were going once they got in and who was letting them in
107 because I had given them all a key. So now they knew. They said not only
108 did I have to get rid of these people but I had to leave.

Larry Massett: Now ten years later Michael Kerwin runs a house for homeless
people in downtown Washington D.C. and a farm outside of the city. At any given
moment he is on his own supporting 30 or 40 people.²

Activities
Narratives lend themselves to demonstrating the chronological order conveyed by
a sequence of past tense verbs, the contrast between simple past and other past tense
verb forms, and the role that tense plays in discourse structure.

Chronological Order
Narratives illustrate the sequentiality associated with the simple past. In lines
(12-14), for example, the order of the verbs reflects chronological order. In lines
75-76, the events are not presented in order (hence the use of pluperfect), and one
event was sequential with another indicated by the past progressive. Learners
who have difficulty identifying chronological order independently benefit from
focussed questions such as “In lines 75-76, did Kerwin see the man cleaning the
apartment?” and “Did Kerwin hear the music playing?”

Contrast
The first step in contrast is to direct the learner’s attention to different forms of the
same verb. This step is important because learners often associate one verb with one
inflection (Bardovi-Harlig & Reynolds, 1995). There are four verbs in this
narrative which occur in both the simple past and past progressive.
The next step contrasts the meaning and use of simple past and past progressive. The choice of inflection relates to “point of view.” If the event is viewed as a whole or single point, simple past is used. If the event is viewed as filling an interval or period of time, the past progressive is used. Compare the use of walked away (13) and was walking (1).

This comparison can be made throughout the text with different verbs.

**Expanding meaning**

The meaning of past progressive that learners encounter earliest is its progressive, simultaneous meaning as in was walking (1) and was listening (line 76). Lines 104-106 illustrate the use of past progressive for repeated activities (its iterative function). The simultaneous use is illustrated on the left, the iterative use on the right. Note that both uses fill an interval.
was they

listening • I came came & went came & went came & went

home • • • • • • • •

they were coming and going

Learners can use this scheme to distinguish the two uses of progressive. Learners can also paraphrase the iterative passages using simple past and adverbials such as again and again, over and over, or regularly.

Text structure
Tense/aspect also contributes to the structure of narratives. The simple past tense carries the main story line, or foreground. Foreground events occur in chronological order (what happened first is reported first, in other words). In contrast, other tense/aspect forms populate the background. The background provides information which elaborates or evaluates events in the foreground. The background is not in chronological order and can be used to set the scene or to make comments about events in the foreground, or to predict future events. These diverse functions result in the use of diverse tense/aspect forms. Simple past also occurs in the background. The important point is that the other forms generally do not occur in the foreground.

The following illustrates how this works in Kerwin's narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foreground</th>
<th>Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I was walking one night. It was bitterly cold, around Christmas 1978, and I was walking. I think I was walking down to the river just to clear my head or to go</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. and he called out to me

2. I thought, "well he just wants to get something to drink;" and I thought to myself, "..."

3. So I went up to my apartment,
4. got him a bowl of soup, got him a sandwich and a cup of tea, and
5. brought it down.
6. I set it down and
7. walked away. I
8. continued my walk
[several lines deleted]
9. and the next morning I went to work

10. I came home

for a walk. I love to walk.
There was a man on the heating vent across the street from State Department at 21st and E which was only a block from my apartment,
[this is what he called:]
He said he wanted a buck to buy something to eat.

I was very irritated with him for calling out after me. I didn't want to be bothered and I didn't believe him either.

because I was working too.

and he had made lunch.
He had straightened the apartment out and he was listening to the Ring Cycle

In this narrative we see only simple past in the foreground, but in the background we find simple past (he said, I was), simple present (I love to walk), past progressive
(I was walking, he was listening), and pluperfect (He had straightened the apartment).

The concept of narrative structure can be used to help learners identify the main story line, to make form/function links, and naturally, to illustrate the distribution of tense/aspect. (Identifying the foreground also results in the identification of chronological order.) For production tasks, learners could be asked to write down just the main points of a story (one they have read, viewed on video, or created). Once this is done, details, explanations, and scenes can be added. Although this is an artificial way to construct text, as a consciousness-raising exercise, it illustrates the function of tense/aspect forms in narratives.

**Text 2. Description**

Daniel Pinkwater's commentary on smoking is a different type of text from Kerwin's narrative; consequently it shows different tense/aspect use. This description of the author's childhood as the justification for his smoking cigars is a text illustrating the use of habitual past, an area that is problematic for learners.

*All Things Considered*, October 24, 1994

Linda Wertheimer, Host: Sigmund Freud once said, 'Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar.' Not so, says commentator Daniel Pinkwater.

1 Pinkwater: Here is the first joke I ever heard. 'Hey son, you like
2 music?' I would deliver the correct response stifling giggles. 'Yes, I
3 like music.' 'Well, here's a band.' Whereupon I would be presented with a
4 paper ring printed in gold and gaudy colors, bearing the legend 'El
5 Producto' or 'Garcia y Vega'. All my uncles and my father knew this
6 joke. They never got tired of it. Neither did I.
7 When the men folk gathered, they would savor cigars in Candella
8 wrappers and drink whiskey out of tiny glasses with gold rims, leaning
9 back in their chairs or on the dining room table, luxuriating after a
10 family meal. They might play a spirited game of pinochle while I lolled
11 on the carpet in the living room with the other children, admiring our
12 cigar bands and listening to Fibber McGee and Molly, The Shadow, or
13 The First Nighter on the big floor model radio.
14 The aunts and my mother would knit, chat and shout good natured
comments back and forth with the card players. These men had survived the hardships and privations of the immigrant experience, worked hard, and now were able to sit at a bought-and-paid for table in the bosom of their family, survey their achievements, enjoy a hand of cards, a good cigar, a glass of Schnapps, and maybe a piece of fruit. The rewards of citizenship in the democracy. At some point, as the evening wore on, invariably one uncle or another would stretch and hook his thumbs in his waistband and sigh, ‘Ah, America.’

With so many of my happy childhood memories fragrant with cigar smoke, and my little personal treasures redolent of Havana for being kept in cigar boxes, it was inevitable that I would turn to the leaf when the time came. That time came only this year. I had stunk up my environs with pipes for most of my adult life and some time ago I quit. I thought I was perhaps puffing a bit too much and anticipating possible trouble, I boxed up my beloved Briars, tossed out the last of the Balkan Sobranie mixture and went cold turkey.

Kicking was no problem for a starker like myself. After buying out the candy counter and consuming every sort of mint, caramel, sour ball and chewing gum for a week, the nicotine devil was out of my body. Of course, I was unable to work, sleep or think for weeks and weeks. I growled at my wife, was plagued by morbid thoughts and spent hours drumming with my fingers on the desk top and staring into space, but I was not going to go back to the pipe. I had sworn off and a swear is a swear.

Fortune decreed that a brochure should arrive in the mail. It was from a discount cigar company. There were pictures of the various products, remarkably the same. A cylinder around one end. How do you take a good picture of a cigar? It’s a cigar. But the copy - the copy was hypnotic. All about Honduran and Jamaican and Dominican leaf, and creamy brown wrappers of Connecticut shade grown. Maduro cigars, black as coffee, green Claros, and all sorts of cigars just as good as Cuban, or grown from seeds smuggled out of Cuba or made by cigar makers who’d learned their trade in Havana. And these things were rare and expensive. I never knew there were cigars that go for $8 or $9 a smoke.

I swore off pipes, I didn’t swear anything about cigars. Besides, I read somewhere that while pipes are less threatening to health than
cigarettes, cigars are less dangerous yet. They’re practically good for you. Yes, I phoned in an order for a bundle of generic Hoyo de Montereys just like the internationally respected brand at half the price.

The cigars arrived and I’ve been smoking one or two each evening. I wasn’t sure I liked them at first, but now I’m sure.

My hand is steady, my eye is clear. I am able to work again. I don’t have desperate thoughts. So what if when I come into my office in the morning, it smells like old Jewish men have been playing cards there all night. So what if I have to gargle mouthwash before I can kiss my wife. So what if besides looking like my father, I now smell like him, too. I am myself again and I did not go back to that vile pipe smoking habit.

Activities

Habitual past

In this text teachers can exploit the use of would to indicate habitual activities in the past with questions such as:

What in the first paragraph [lines 1-6] indicates the joke was told over and over?

What did the men in the family do whenever the family got together? What did the women do? How do you know that they usually or always did this?

Next, learners can rewrite portions of the text using other markers of past habituality (such as adverbs plus simple past, or even used to + verb). To compare the use of would for past habitual action with repeated action during a limited period, compare lines 102-108 in Text 1 to the use of would in Text 2.

Temporal Orientation

Because Text 2 is not a narrative, it cannot be analyzed for background-foreground as in Text 1. Neither is the activity on chronological ordering possible. Instead, learners can chart the orientation of the text relative to the time of speaking. Learners group events into “Now/Always” which hold true while the speaker is speaking (present tenses), “After” which will hold true at some time after the speaker finishes (simple present, present progressive, be going to and modal
futures), and two “Before” columns which relate states and events before the timing of speaking (“Before” using past and “Before that” using pluperfect.) There are no instances of future in this text, so the following example uses only three columns.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Before That</th>
<th>Before</th>
<th>Now/Always</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>men would savor</td>
<td>cigars (7)</td>
<td>Cigars are less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>aunts would knit (14)</td>
<td>men had survived (15)</td>
<td>dangerous (51)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A swear is a swear (37-38)</td>
<td></td>
<td>I now smell like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>my father (60)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Text 3. News Report (Interview)

All Things Considered, May 1, 1995

Robert Siegel: And does the fact there’s a new drawing mean that there are more and more people whom they're talking to who - who saw Timothy McVeigh with this man? Is that what’s happening?

1 Wade Goodwyn: It’s hard to say where they’ve gotten this new drawing
2 from. FBI agent Kennedy said they’ve gotten over 13,000 phone calls
3 regarding John Doe number two, and they’ve got seven million pieces of
4 information they’re working on. He talked about this - some high-tech
5 gadgetry they have called the ‘rapid start automated case support
6 system,’ which is a database of over 30-million bits of information that
7 they are using to correlate all of the evidence they’ve been gathering,
8 but it doesn’t seem to be a whole lot to go on. There are two new pieces
9 of information that we’ve heard today. One is that FBI agents have
10 cordoned off portions of a state park in Kansas, outside of Junction
11 City. They have sent divers into a lake and are combing through the
12 woods. They believe that the bomb may have been assembled in this state
13 park. They have found a large fuel spill on the ground…
This report aired less than two weeks after the bombing of the Oklahoma City Federal Building during the search for the second suspect. This text provides examples of the "hot news" present perfect (the use of the present perfect to report events which have just happened). This interview is a model of other texts that instructors might use rather than a text for direct use in the classroom, because the hot news present perfect has value only in the context of the time in which it is written.

**Activities**
To illustrate this use, the instructor could bring in a current news report. To compare past tense and present perfect, the teacher could bring in coverage of the same event several days later and compare the difference in tense use. (Newspapers, for example, will rerun stories as background to explain ongoing coverage of major events). The old story will be written primarily in simple past. Once the learners come to view the difference between the use of present perfect and past, they can prepare their own news stories and/or provide temporal perspective on once-current reports which have "gotten cold."

**Conclusion**
The use of texts as context for the study of tense and aspect offers learners (and teachers) the opportunity to discover form-meaning-use associations that are not always apparent in traditional presentations. For example, ordering exercises demonstrate that

1) a past tense series typically reflects the sequence of events;
2) pluperfect does not reflect chronological order;
3) past progressive reflects simultaneity or scene setting; and,
4) a present perfect series reflects unordered but recent events.

I have presented examples of activities which increase learner awareness of form-meaning-use associations. Some teachers may wish to follow these with production activities. As learners create their own texts, the benefits of working with texts for recognition are extended. Learners negotiate meaning as they build a text as well as when they read one. Beyond the benefits to the study of tense/aspect, texts convey meaning, and every encounter with meaning provides an authentic experience in language use. Moreover, the use of text provides continued
input to learners on a variety of target-language features, an opportunity for learning no teacher can afford to ignore.

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Notes:
1. The first was transcribed at Indiana University; the others were available on line from Nexis/Lexis.
2. Copyright permission was generously granted by Larry Massett.
3. In addition to chronological order, Dry (1983) argues that a second textual criterion for evaluating the foreground is information value; the information communicated in the foreground clause must be new rather than given. It is for this reason that this instance of said is in the background; as a reiteration of called, it is given information and cannot be placed in chronological order with respect to called. For a fuller discussion of narrative analysis, see Bardovi-Harlig (1995), Dry (1983), and Hopper (1979).