

Extension exercises

Chapter 15: The past | Comments

Exploring English

Responses to these questions will depend on what the person you interview says. The person is likely to use a mixture of present perfect and past simple forms, as well as others (for example, past perfect, *used to* or *would*). It should be possible to work out why the speaker has chosen the different tenses in most instances, even where these appear to contradict the ‘rules old thumb’ we sometimes teach. Probably, there will also be instances where alternative choices could be made without making much change to meaning or emphasis.

Course materials

Precise responses to these questions will depend on the materials you choose.

Materials vary quite a lot in how they explain tenses. Some try to provide an overall general rule (for example, ‘the present perfect is used for a completed event within an unfinished period of time’) while others divide the uses up more into separate ‘sub-rules’ (for example, ‘the present perfect is used in cases where there is present evidence of the action as in *she has broken her leg*’). Some materials give potentially misleading explanations (such as ‘the present perfect is used to describe recent events’). Materials do not always distinguish between when we use the present perfect to describe past events, and when we use it to describe events that continue until or into the present.

Materials vary in the kinds of texts and practice activities they provide. At lower levels, texts are usually specially written or are very much adapted. This is because, in reality, we are often very subjective about time when we choose between tenses, and so it is difficult to find real texts and conversations where the way we use tenses consistently follows the rules of thumb we want our learners to grasp and use.

In general, materials produced in Britain pay a great deal of attention to differences between the past simple and present perfect. People sometimes argue that far too much attention is paid to this distinction. They argue that mistakes rarely lead to a breakdown in communication – the context usually makes it clear what feature of past time is under consideration.