

Grammatically Speaking

by Michelle Jackson

How to Teach the Simple Past Tense

This is my favorite time of year as the last burger is thrown on a Labor Day grill, flip-flops make their final squish around the pool, and the scent of sunscreen fades from the finger tips. As we wave “goodbye” to the heat of summer here in the United States, the coolness of fall awaits us. I usher in the start of the semester: the smell of crisp notebooks, the sound of chalk on the blackboard, and the gentle hum of students in small groups. The first day occupies a unique space in the semester when energy is at its height. This short clip of time can provide a foundation you can build upon throughout the semester.

While there are several effective ways to spend this time, I prefer to use an interactive activity such as “two truths and a lie.” My reasoning for using such an activity is three-fold. First, a well-structured interactive activity allows for students to get to know the instructor and each other. This helps foster a classroom community that is essential to learning. Second, having a student-centered activity sets expectations for the semester: Rather than *tell* students what is required to succeed in class, *show* them what a typical class will be like. In my case, a typical class involves a great deal of partner and group work, idea sharing, and problem solving. Third, an activity such as this one allows you to establish a welcoming classroom environment in which students feel comfortable enough to participate. The following activity is appropriate for an intermediate level course in which students need to review the simple past.

Materials Required

- Post-it notes
- Paper and writing utensils for all students
- An accessible place to display Post-its (e.g., a chalkboard or whiteboard)

Timing: 25 minutes

Step 1

Remind students that several verbs in the simple past end with “-ed.” Tell them we are going to play a game that uses this tense. (2 minutes)

Step 2

Explain that students will write three statements about their summer vacation. Two of the statements will be true, and one will be false. These statements will be shared with their classmates who must determine which one is false. For example, you could write three statements on the board about your own vacation:

- This summer I **visited** my family in England.
- I **walked** 3 miles every morning.
- I **surprised** my girlfriend with a ring.

Of course, you will tailor the above sentences with personal details. Have students guess which statement is false. The game is made more interesting if the factual statements are grandiose and might be mistaken as lies. (5 minutes)

Step 3

Have students brainstorm two activities they did over the summer and one lie. Have them anonymously write down their three statements on Post-it notes. Be sure to write your own as well. When finished, tell students to display their Post-its on the chalkboard. (5 minutes)

Step 4

Tell students they will do a “verb check,” which ensures that the verbs on the Post-its have been conjugated in the simple present tense. Have students grab a writing utensil and form a line. The line will walk in front of the board, reading the Post-its. The goal is to read for grammar only. If anyone sees a verb that is not conjugated correctly, he or she can correct the verb directly on the Post-it. (5 minutes)

Step 5

After the verb check, tell students to collect their personal Post-its and find a partner. Each student will read his or her three statements while the partner attempts to guess the lie. This step can repeat for multiple rounds. (3 minutes)

Step 6

Ask the class if any of their peers had three interesting sentences. These peers can share their statements while the class guesses which one is false. (5 minutes)

Optional Extension

After repeating Step 5, you could have students interview their partner to learn more about his or her interesting summer. Students could then write the information from the mini-interview into a paragraph using the past tense. This activity sets the tone and the pace for the rest of the semester while allowing time for teachers and students to get to know each other. It incorporates writing and speaking and provides opportunities for students to focus on both grammar and content. Here’s to the start of another semester!

Happy teaching,
Michelle

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