

Making English Grammar Meaningful and Useful

Mini Lesson #7

Before Tenses: They are not Perfect

The **purpose** of this lesson is to analyze 3 tenses in English which use **HAVE** as a **Helping Verb**.

English uses the verb **HAVE** as a Helping Verb in several ways. The most common use is when **HAVE** is the primary helping verb of the verb tense as illustrated in the following three sentences.

The student **will have finished** their projects before the next class.

The students **have finished** their projects.

The students **had finished** their projects before they took the test.

All three of these sentences give the meaning of finishing **Before** a certain time. In the first sentence, presumably “**the next class**” will happen sometime in the future, and the sentence gives the idea that the work on the projects will be completed **Before** that time. The second sentence gives the idea that the work on the project was done **Before now**. The sentence does not contain the word ‘now’ but that meaning is clearly conveyed. The third sentence gives the idea that “**they took the test**” sometime in the past, and the work on the projects happened **Before** then. The key idea expressed by the tenses of these 3 sentences is **Before**. So it is appropriate to name these tenses the **Before Tenses**. Furthermore, we can name the first sentence the **Future Before Tense**, the second sentence the **Present Before Tense**, and the third sentence the **Past Before Tense**.

The term usually used to refer to these tenses in traditional, grammatical terminology is **Perfect**. The first sentence is the **Future Perfect Tense**. The second sentence is the **Present Perfect Tense**. The third sentence is the **Past Perfect Tense**. The word ‘perfect’ is used to denote an action that is completed as opposed to an action that is on-going or hypothetical. However, the word does not describe the meaning of the tense when contrasted with other tenses. Moreover, other tenses can be used for actions that are completed. Furthermore, the tenses can be used to refer to actions that are on-going up to a particular time and may even continue beyond that time. The two following sentence illustrate this difference.

They **have lived** in that house for 5 years.

They **lived** in that house for 5 years.

In the first sentence, the period of time refers to the 5 years leading up to now, and the sentence does not indicate that they are going to move, although it is possible. In the second sentence, the idea is implied that they no longer live in that house and it is not clear when they left the house. Referring to tenses that use **HAVE** as the primary **Helping Verb** as the **Before Tenses** is consistent with the meanings of these tenses. Referring to them as the **Perfect Tenses** is grammatically correct, but it is not helpful to understand their meaning.

The **Present Before Tense** is used very frequently by native speakers. It can describe an event that may have happened once, before now, when the actual time of the event is indefinite or unimportant. This is illustrated in this sentence:

Oh! I **have read** that book. It's very interesting.

The tense can be used to describe repeated actions that happened sometime before the present as illustrated in this example:

Oh! I **have driven** there many times.

The tense is very frequently used to refer to a period of time leading up to the present. In these situations the words 'since' or 'for' are used to denote the time as illustrated in these sentences:

Oh! He **has taught** there **for** 8 years.

Oh! She **has taught** there **since** 2005.

ELLs find **Before Tenses** difficult to learn and use. One problem for them seems to be the vagueness of the temporal meanings of these tenses. A second problem may be the use of **HAVE** as a Helping Verb, particularly when it is reduced and contracted, as is often the case in native English speech. Associating the **Helping Verb HAVE** with the meaning of **Before** will make these tenses more recognizable and salient.