

## Speaking exams – tenses by Stephen Jones

<b>Age:</b>	Teenagers/Adults
<b>Level:</b>	Upper-intermediate–Advanced
<b>Time:</b>	1–2 hours
<b>Objectives:</b>	To be better prepared to use a range of tenses in responses to exam questions, with a particular focus on IELTS speaking part 2; to be better able to construct high-scoring answers in exam-style questions
<b>Key skills:</b>	Speaking, listening
<b>Materials:</b>	One copy of the anecdote (either your own or the one provided) per student; one copy of the example questions per pair of students; one copy of the peer feedback sheet (optional); one copy of grammar exercises focused on past perfect (simple and continuous), past continuous, past simple, present perfect (simple and continuous) per student (optional)

### Preparation

If you decide to use your own anecdote rather than the one provided, you'll need to prepare this before the lesson. It can either be written down and read 'live' or pre-recorded (it can be read by you or by a colleague if you want your students to hear different accents). Whichever method of delivery you choose, students will need a transcript.

You may want to review the tenses presented in this lesson with your class (see step 4). If so, you will need to source and make copies of relevant grammar exercises prior to the lesson.

Make copies of the peer feedback sheet if your class are likely to be hesitant about offering feedback on each other's performance during the production stage of the lesson (see step 7).

**Note:** This lesson can be adapted for lower levels by using fewer tenses.

### Procedure

- (5 mins) Read out the example anecdote (or play the recording if you've made one). You can use your own anecdote or the one supplied with this lesson. The question and answer are in the style of IELTS speaking part 2.
- (5 mins) After listening to the anecdote once, learners should briefly discuss why it was a good example of an exam response. Suggested answers are that:
  - it answered the question (this is crucial!);
  - it was fluent, coherent and the pronunciation was easy to understand;
  - it used a variety of appropriate vocabulary;
  - it used a variety of grammatical structures accurately.

If students don't identify these points, highlight them by reading or playing the audio a second time.

**Note:** These criteria reflect the IELTS speaking descriptors. Tell the students that you will be focusing on the use of tenses today.

- (10 mins) Cut up and give out transcripts of the anecdote, one per student. In pairs or small groups, the learners should work together to identify the tenses used by the speaker. Hold whole-class feedback to ensure everyone has correctly identified the tenses (see key below).
- (5 mins) Ask the learners to divide the tenses into:
  - those used to give background information;
  - those used to describe main events;
  - those used to talk about the impact of the main events on the present.

### Key:

**Prompt:** Tell me about one of the biggest changes that you have made in your life.

**Answer:** One of the biggest changes in my life was when I switched [**main event – past simple**] career. I had been working [**background info –**

## Speaking exams – tenses by Stephen Jones

**past perfect continuous**] for an engineering company for ten years when I decided I needed **[main events – past simple]** a change. I was thinking **[background info – past continuous]** about becoming a PE teacher but finally tried **[what interrupted previous info – past simple]** English language teaching. After I got my certificate, I searched the internet for jobs **[both major events – both past simple; past perfect could be used for first event]**. A school in Japan offered **[major event – past simple]** me a good contract and so I left **[main event – past simple]** America to live in Yokohama. Now, I've been teaching **[current situation connected to past with time expression – present perfect continuous]** for eight years and enjoy **[present situation – present simple]** every single day.

- (15–60 minutes) Use this opportunity to review the usage, form and pronunciation of the tenses used. You could do this on the board yourself or use grammar exercises from your favourite reference book. Wherever possible, try to use a book that compares and contrasts the tenses.
- (10 mins) Hand out the example IELTS part 2 style questions or use any past exam questions your institution has. (If you don't have access to other past exam questions, you may wish to cut each set of eight questions in half and hand out the first four for this exercise, saving the second four for the next activity.) Learners should work in pairs to co-construct a 'best answer' to the question of their choice, using the structure highlighted in the sample answer (background information, main events, impact on present if relevant). They should plan their answer, write it down and, if possible, record it.

- (20 mins) Finally, to give the learners more practice with this technique, you could conduct a mock exam in pairs, using either the second set of speaking prompts or other past exam questions. Monitor carefully for use of the target language and encourage your learners to give each other feedback. If you are working in an educational context in which this is not commonly done and your students are hesitant to constructively criticize each other, you may have to give guidance. The peer feedback sheet will help you.

Try to make the production part of this lesson a regular feature of exam lessons and your learners should find using the varied tenses more natural.

### Optional extension

In the same or another lesson, the learners could explore the lexis used in the example response, paying particular attention to collocations (e.g. *offer a contract*, *switch career*).

## Speaking exams – tenses by Stephen Jones

**Prompt:** Tell me about one of the biggest changes that you have made in your life.

**Answer:** One of the biggest changes in my life was when I switched career. I had been working for an engineering company for ten years when I decided I needed a change. I was thinking about becoming a PE teacher but finally tried English language teaching. After I got my certificate, I searched the internet for jobs. A school in Japan offered me a good contract and so I left America to live in Yokohama. Now, I've been teaching for eight years and enjoy every single day.



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- Tell me about an interesting journey you've been on.
- Tell me about a powerful childhood memory.
- Describe a historical place you know well.
- Describe the most extreme weather event you have experienced.
- Talk about a time when you learnt an important new skill.
- Tell me about your most stressful day ever at work or school.
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### Example

tenses I heard	number of times heard	used appropriately?
present perfect	II	First time, yes. Second time, no: 'I have been there in 2008.'
past continuous	III	Twice, yes. Once, no: 'I was liking my old flat very much.'

tenses I heard	number of times heard	used appropriately?
past perfect simple		
past perfect continuous		
past continuous		
past simple		
present perfect simple		
present perfect continuous		
present simple		
present continuous		