

How to Differentiate Between the Present Perfect and Simple Past Tenses

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When learning English, Vietnamese speakers often make grammatical errors related to tenses, especially when it comes to choosing between the simple past and present perfect tenses. For example, when translating a Vietnamese sentence that contains "*đã*" or "*rồi*" into English, learners often translate it using the simple past tense of the verb. This is correct when the action in the sentence is situated within a defined past time frame. However, when there is no specific time frame, these indicators can convey various meanings depending on the grammatical structure and context of the sentence.

To help learners use these two verb tenses more effectively, we will compare their usage. Consider the following examples:

1. a. John **arrived** yesterday.
 b. John **has arrived**.
 c. They **went away**, but I think they're back at home now.
 d. They've **gone away**. They'll be back on Friday.

Similar to other tenses, both the simple past tense in sentences (1a, 1c) and the present perfect tense – as used by Cao Xuân Hạo (1998) – in sentences (1b, 1d) position an action in relation to a specific reference point, conveying the idea of something happening before. However, the interpretation of this idea can vary. According to Reichenbach (1947), while the simple past tense specifies that an action took place before the reference time (R/E relationship is not clear, as long as E is separated from S), the present perfect tense is determined by the relative position of the reference points, meaning that R is separated from E and coincides with S: $E < R, S$. Therefore, in example (1a), the action of John's arrival (E) is located within the reference point (R) of yesterday, and this action is entirely in the past, unrelated to the speech time (S). Similarly, in sentence (1c), the action of them going away occurred and ended at some point in the past, entirely unrelated to the speech time, as it is positioned before the reference point of now when they've come back. In contrast, in (1b), the action of John's arrival is positioned before the reference point of now and coincides with the speech time, but it leaves a result in the present. This means that John's arrival happened at some point before the current reference

point, but it informs us that at the reference point or speech time, John is still here. Similarly, in (1d), the action of them going away is positioned in relation to the reference point of Friday, and this reference point is in the future, meaning this action leads to a result, at least currently present at the speech time, that they are not at home.

Another distinction between the simple past tense and the present perfect tense is their compatibility with specific time adverbs. While the simple past tense can easily combine with time adverbs like yesterday, last month, or in 2000, the present perfect tense is entirely incompatible with these adverbs. On the other hand, there are time adverbs like "since" that can only be used with the present perfect tense and cannot combine with the simple past tense. However, some time adverbs can be used with multiple verb tenses. In these cases, learners must determine the specific context to use the correct verb tense. Let's compare the following sentences:

2. a. I **didn't see** Anna in her office this morning.
 b. I **haven't seen** Anna in her office this morning.
3. a. Tom **worked** in a bank for ten years, but now he has been unemployed.
 b. Tom works in a bank. He **has worked** there for ten years.
4. a. Anna **did** a course in French last year.
 b. Anna **has done** a course in French for the last year.

In sentences (2a, 2b), both contain the time adverb "this morning," but they use different verb tenses. In (2a), the simple past tense is used because the reference time this morning has ended, and it is no longer the morning, so the action is situated in the past before the speech time. In (2b), the reference time "this morning" is still the morning and includes the speech time, so the present perfect tense is used. The same logic applies to the pairs of sentences (3a, 3b) and (4a, 4b).

In the case of sentences (4a, 4b), Vietnamese learners of English often make mistakes. Since both sentences contain the time adverb "last year," learners tend to lean towards using the simple past tense. However, this is only correct for (4a) because the reference time last year is also the time when the action took place, and it has ended before the speech time now. In (4b), the presence of the adverb "for the last year" conveys the idea of a continuous action for the entire year, and it might have just ended right before the speech time. In this case, the present perfect tense should be used.

In conclusion, from this comparison, it is clear that using the correct verb tense is straightforward when the time frame of the action is clearly defined in the past or present. However, without these defined time frames, determining which verb tense to use can be challenging for Vietnamese learners of English, as Vietnamese lacks the specific verb tense features of English. In such cases, accurately choosing the appropriate verb tense depends on various factors, including grammatical elements (time frame, type of action, meaning of "đã" and "rồi"), contextual communication factors, and semantics.

References:

Vietnamese

- 1 Cao Xuân Hạo (1998) “Về ý nghĩa “thì” và “thể” trong tiếng Việt”, *Ngôn ngữ* (5), 1-32.
- 2 Cao Xuân Hạo (1998) *Tiếng Việt – Một số vấn đề ngữ âm, ngữ pháp, ngữ nghĩa*, Nxb Giáo dục, Tp. HCM.
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English

- 1 Reichenbach, H. (1947) *Elements of Symbolic Logic*, McMillan.