

Grammar Guru XV

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An English teacher spent a lot of time correcting grammatical errors in her students' written work. She wasn't sure how much impact she was having until one day, when she sat at her desk rubbing her temples, a student asked, "What's the matter, madam?"

"Tense," she replied, describing her emotional status.

After a slight pause, the student tried again, "What was the matter? What will be the matter? What has been the matter? What might have been the matter?"

I hope the teacher was quite pleased with the unexpected turn of events. Tense in English has always troubled teachers as well as learners. The Indian learners are far from perfect in the use of the Perfect tense. This might be due to the fact that there is no exact equivalent to this form in our languages. They could also be confused because the verb **have** is used in five different ways in English, as outlined by Michael Swan:

- (i) as an auxiliary verb in the Present Perfect tense: e.g., *I have come to bury Caesar, not to praise him.*
- (ii) to talk about actions and experiences in an informal style: e.g., *Have a good time.*
- (iii) to talk about states, possessions, relationship, illnesses, characteristics of people, and things: e.g., *I have promises to keep.*
- (iv) with a causative meaning: e.g., *He had*

us laughing all through the meal.

- (v) **have (got) to** is used in the sense of obligation: e.g., *I have (got) to go now.*

Here's a story to exemplify uses (i) & (ii):

Doctor: I'm afraid I've got some bad news and some very bad news for you.

Patient: What's the bad news?

Doctor: You only have twenty-four hours to live.

Patient: And the very bad news?

Doctor: I should have told you yesterday.

The following quote illustrates the use of **have** in the sense of obligation:

To be happy with a husband, you have to understand him a little and love him a lot. To be happy with a wife, you have to love her a lot, and not try to understand her at all!

The Present Perfect tense is difficult for us because it is a combination of the Past and the Present. We are confused as to when we should use it and often avoid using it or use it incorrectly. The major contexts for using the Present Perfect form are as follows:

- (i) to talk about experiences: e.g., *I have never enjoyed grammar classes.*
- (ii) To refer to an action which started in the past and continues up to the present: e.g., *How long have you been married?*
- (iii) To talk about past actions which have

an effect on the present: e.g., *I have lost my keys. I can't enter my flat.*

- (iv) To refer to actions which happened at an unknown time in the past: e.g., *Have you completed your assignment?*

Here are two poems to inspire your creativity and also help you practise the Present Perfect tense:

A. *Have you ever had a monkey for a pet?*

Have you ever dressed up as Santa?

Have you ever skated on snow?

I haven't, but I think I'd like to.

B. *Have you ever stayed awake all night?*

Have you ever seen a ghost?

Have you ever been a teacher?

I haven't, and I don't think I'd like to.

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[Editor's Note: *This is part of a series of articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author for permitting us to publish those articles in our journal.]*

Journal of Technology for ELT

The Journal of Technology for ELT is an open-access research journal for teachers of English. It is published four times a year by the English Language Teachers' Association of India (**ELTAI**). It aims to promote serious discussion and sharing of experiences on the use of technological tools and resources for teaching and learning English effectively, either in an online mode or through blended learning modules. The emphasis is on application and judicious use of technology for the purpose rather than on mere descriptions of the tools and devices available for use globally.

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