

## Grammar Guru 12

V Saraswathi

Do you get tense about tenses in English? All of us do, mainly because we confuse *time* and *tense*. We assume that the present tense refers to what happens at present, but it is not always so. The English language often cheats us. Further, we are not sure how many tenses there are in English. Traditional grammarians say there are three tenses: Past, Present, and Future. Modern linguists assert that there are only two tenses: Past and Non-Past. Do you know which is the most favourite tense of Indian speakers of English? The present continuous tense, also known as the present progressive.

In his ‘**Very Indian Poem in Indian English**’, Nissim Ezekiel satirises our predilection for this tense form:

*Other day I'm reading in newspaper*

*(Everyday I'm reading Times of India*

*To improve my English language)*

*How one goonda fellow*

*Throw stone at Indira Behn*

*Must be student unrest fellow,*

*I'm thinking.*

When should we use the Present Progressive?

✓ For actions happening at the moment of speaking: *I'm writing Grammar Guru now.*

✓ For fixed plans in the near future: *They are leaving for New York tomorrow.*

✓ For actions happening around the moment of speaking (longer duration): *My friend is preparing for his exams.*

✓ For referring to trends: *Most people are using computers to listen to music.*

✓ For repeated actions irritating to the speaker: *Mano is always coming late.*

When should you **not** use the Present Progressive?

✓ With verbs of perception: *hear, see, smell, etc.*

✓ With verbs expressing feeling: *love, hate, wish, like, etc.*

✓ With verbs denoting possession: *have, own, belong, possess, keep, etc.*

✓ With verbs describing mental activity: *think, feel, know, forget, remember, mean, suppose, etc.*

Here are some examples from Indian English, where native speakers would have preferred the Simple Present tense instead of the Present Progressive:

✓ *Punctuation is A1, I am telling you.*

✓ *Everywhere, as far as I am seeing, there are lights.*

✓ *I am not knowing where to start.*

✓ *What other items are you having?*

✓ *We are staying in Chennai since 1989.*

Michel Swan identifies three contexts where

the Present Progressive is used:

1. For telling stories, Present Simple for the events and Progressive for the background: *There's the Scotsman, you see, and he's walking through the jungle.*
2. In commentaries, Simple present for quicker actions and Progressive for longer actions and situations: *Oxford are pulling slightly ahead of Cambridge now. They're rowing with a beautiful rhythm.*
3. For instructions and demonstrations: *While the butter is melting, I break the eggs into the bowl.*

Let's close with one more instance of the Present Progressive:

*That man has been fiddling around for an hour, wasting his time.*

*How do you know?*

*I've been watching him!*

**Dr. V. Saraswathi**, (Formerly) Professor of English (ELT), University of Madras.

**[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.]**

### ***The ELT Practitioner***

***(The journal that values classroom practices over theories)***

**The ELT Practitioner**, started in 2014 (<https://sites.google.com/view/theeltpractitioner/home>), is an **online journal** published by the English Language Teachers' Association of India (**ELTAI**). It is a **quarterly** journal – January-March, April-June, July-September, and October-December: – brought out every year. It aims at providing opportunities for English teaching practitioners in schools and colleges, especially school teachers, to share their actual classroom practices with their fellow teachers across the country and across the world.

The journal invites articles – two-to-four-page descriptions of real time classroom practices relating to the teaching and learning of English at any level of education. These descriptions may articulate briefly the assumptions of the teachers underlying the activities/practices reported, or mention very briefly the theoretical underpinnings. The journal does not expect elaborate discussions of ELT theories; in fact, it discourages such theoretical discussions in the articles submitted to the journal for publication.

This means that teachers at any level of education are encouraged to write about any experience of classroom teaching that has proved to be effective in the classroom. The focus is on the **practitioner and classroom practices**.

Submissions to the journal are invited from teachers throughout the year and they may be sent to: **indiaeltai@gmail.com** with copy (Cc) to the editor Dr. Harleen Kaur at: **kaurharleen030@gmail.com**.

***Use this golden opportunity to share your classroom practices as a teacher of English with others in the profession and benefit from their feedback.***