

A POSSIBLE ORDER OF TEACHING ENGLISH TENSES IN PRIMARY SCHOOL

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The aim of this paper is to suggest a possible order of teaching English tenses in Croatian primary schools. After a short introduction in which we explain why such an order might be needed in the Croatian context, and after a brief look at possible foundations in scientific research, we review grammar teaching from the methodological aspect and discuss the notion of pedagogical grammar. We also bring a summary of grammar content provided in the current primary and secondary school curricula. In the main part of the paper, we analyse the tenses in terms of complexity and communicative potential and suggest an order of teaching. In the end, we offer suggestions to teachers and textbook authors regarding the presentation and teaching of grammar content in primary school.

Key words: *teaching grammar, English tenses, teaching order, curriculum development, frequency-based grammar teaching, primary school*

Introduction

As part of the ongoing education reform in Croatia, a new curriculum for teaching English as a foreign language in primary and secondary school is being developed. Unlike the current curricula (*Nastavni programi za gimnazije*, 1994; *Okvirni nastavni programi općeobrazovnih predmeta u srednjim školama*, 1997; *Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu*, 2006), it is not content-oriented. Rather, it is based on learning outcomes, without much focus on grammar points or key vocabulary. The focus of the new curriculum is on what students can do at the end of a certain level, and this surely is a good thing. It gives

teachers the freedom to design unique ways for students to achieve the set outcomes. However, we must also acknowledge that textbooks are at the core of teaching in Croatia, which is not necessarily good. This means that teachers more often than not teach according to the textbook, not the curriculum, and take for granted that what is in the textbook needs to be taught and learnt. This would not be such a problem if the textbooks were in line with the curriculum, but this, unfortunately, is not always the case. Even if the teacher decides to work “outside” the textbook, this might become a problem. This is because the content in textbooks is intertwined, which means that, for example, a tense is not taught separately from vocabulary because it is embedded into a text of a certain topic (and indeed, this is how it should be presented). Choosing not to do a text because it contains grammar that the teacher finds irrelevant or inappropriate for some reason, means students could be left without key vocabulary, or even key structures, needed in further lessons. Recognizing that teachers perhaps lack the time to work “outside” the textbook, and recognizing that it will take time for teachers to transition from content-oriented to outcome-based curriculum, in this paper we offer a possible order of teaching English tenses as a reference point to be either accepted or challenged by practitioners and researchers.

We must point out that suggesting an order of teaching English tenses does not mean that we regard language acquisition as a linear process. Rather, with the proposed list we emphasize the need to focus on what is important in class and to advocate a functional approach to teaching grammar. So, for example, if a textbook covers several tenses in year 6, the teacher might consult the list offered here to see which of those is really key for learners of the given age and in the given context, and decide which tense to focus on.

So far, researchers have not been able to scientifically pinpoint the age of the EFL learner when a certain grammar point could or should be acquired (there have been attempts, e.g. Dulay and Burt’s 1974 morpheme order studies). This might even be impossible since learners differ according to their first languages, learning context (SLA of FLA), teaching hours, and other individual differences (see Dörnyei, 2005). We know that according to Processability Theory (Pienemann, 2007) there is a hierarchy that learners follow in language acquisition – they can deal only with those linguistic forms that the language processor can handle at a certain stage of development. Lightbown and Spada

(2006, 160) call it the “teach what is teachable” position. We can further relate the position to DeKeyser (2005) who recognizes three factors that determine the level of difficulty of a given grammar rule: complexity of form, complexity of meaning, and complexity of the form-meaning relationship. We should, of course, bear in mind that what grammarians and researchers find complex is not necessarily what learners perceive as being complex. Krashen (2003), for example, believes that the order of acquisition in L1 is not based on the simple–complex distinction. Krashen does, however, recognize that the order of teaching in L2 does not necessarily reflect the order of acquisition in L1. Lightbown and Spada (2006, 177) point out that there is “no strong evidence that teaching according to the developmental sequences is necessary or even desirable”, but they also note that putting sequence into focus may help teachers set realistic expectations. It is safe to say that what is structurally simpler and has a clearer form-meaning relationship is easier to acquire than something that is the opposite, at least for foreign language learners. Taking any other conclusion from previous research on the order of acquisition as the basis of our proposal might not be valid, especially because we are unaware that such research has been carried out in the Croatian context, i.e. with Croatian as a first language in mind. Lightbown and Spada (2006, 164) recognize the importance of the first language in the matter and note that the “type of input and first language influence can interact with learners’ developmental readiness in complex ways”. Although the great Yugoslav Serbo-Croatian – English contrastive project (for an overview see Filipović, 1975) brought forth various suggestions for teaching (i.e. “pedagogical materials”), it did not result in a suggested order of teaching English tenses to Croatian speakers. Since we cannot base our choice and order of tenses on research carried out in Croatia, we have to look to the current curricula, to Croatian and English grammars, and to the findings of corpus-based research of grammar use. At the same time, we need to take into account the status of grammar (and grammar teaching) in the prevailing communicative approach in teaching English. Finally, we are also guided in our reasoning by our belief that grammar content should be reduced in primary school, especially when compared to what is prescribed in the current curricula and what is present in the textbooks in use in Croatia.

Before discussing a possible order of teaching tenses, in the following part of the paper, we review grammar teaching from the methodological aspect, and we take a brief look at the current curricula.

1. Teaching grammar

Grammar in Croatian schools should be taught. This consensus is reflected in the current primary school curriculum (*Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu*, 2006) and the somewhat outdated secondary school curricula (*Nastavni programi za gimnazije*, 1994; *Okvirni nastavni programi općeobrazovnih predmeta u srednjim školama*, 1997). The necessity of teaching grammar is reflected in many theoretical and practical resources regarding English language teaching methodology (e.g. Cameron, 2001; Cowan, 2008; Larsen-Freeman, 2001; Nunan, 1999; Pinter, 2006). Given the fact that our students have limited time to learn the language (2 classes per week from year 1 to year 4, 3 classes per week from year 5 to year 8, and from 2 to 4 classes per week in secondary school), it would not be reasonable to disregard grammar in English classes (Vilke, 2001). However, that does not mean that grammar should be taught in such a way that requires students to memorize and recite rules, as was done in the early days of widespread English language teaching, especially during the years of the Grammar-Translation Method (Sironić-Bonefačić, 1999). For example, students today should not be made to “know” that present continuous is “formed by using the Present Tense Indefinite of the verb *to be* and the Present Participle of the verb required” (Filipović, 1978, 90). As Widdowson (1991, 96) notes, “traditional teaching has tended to dissociate grammar from context and to deal in isolated sentences”. We now know that grammar should be taught implicitly, especially at the early stages of learning (Vilke, 1999), and that some form of explicit learning can start to take place in the year 4 or year 5 of primary schools (with 10-year-old or 11-year-old students), at least in the Croatian context. Regardless of age, grammar should always be taught in context. It is grammar that relates language to context, and the result of this alliance is meaning, or communication (Widdowson, 1991). Vilke (2001, 14) proposes six conditions for teaching grammar to children up to 11 years of age: 1) that it should be taught via functional categories, 2) that we should select which categories to teach, 3) that terminology should be extremely limited, 4) that grammatical mistakes should be tolerated, 5) that native language should be used as an asset, and 6) that sociocultural categories should be contrasted. To clarify on 1) and 2), the first condition means that we should focus on the meaning, and not the form of the grammar point (Pinter, 2006), and the second one refers to the fact that not everything

in terms of grammar content is relevant for young children. We highlight the former and the latter as the guiding principles in this paper.

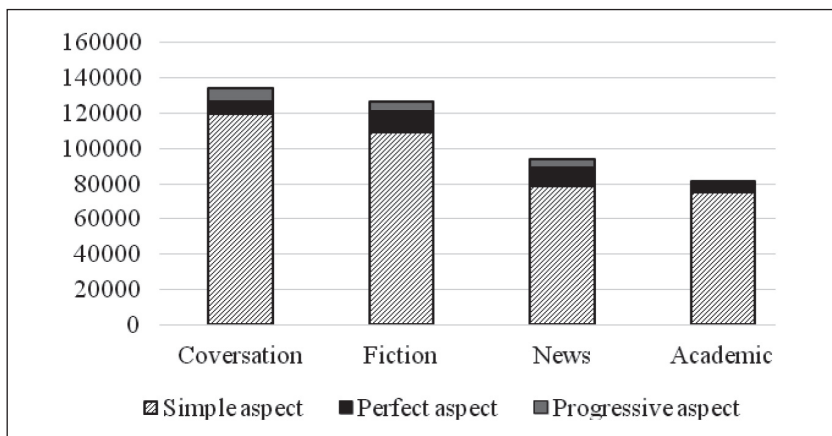
In the past 20 years, the issue of implicit vs explicit teaching has evolved from an either-or matter to an attitude that both approaches are needed for the successful teaching and learning of a foreign language (Bagarić, 2003; Cowan, 2008). Whereas the Grammar-Translation Method was all about explicitness, and the ensuing Natural Approach motivated by Krashen's ideas in the 1980s (Krashen and Terrell, 1983) was all about implicitness, today's take on the matter leaves room for both. Implicit teaching and learning develop students' language awareness at the level of noticing, which is a platform for higher levels of awareness, or understanding (Bagarić, 2003). This approach, which takes into account the progression from implicit towards explicit teaching, is reflected in the current primary school curriculum (*Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu*, 2006). Based on her research of Croatian students' perception of the complexity of grammar rules in English (and German), Bagarić (2004) concludes that implicit and explicit teaching should be combined in foreign language classes. She highlights the importance of determining which grammar rules are simple, and which are complex. As a side note, we will mention here that Bagarić's (2004) findings indicate that indirect speech, past simple in contrast with present perfect, if-clauses and passive voice are at the top of the list of complex grammar rules for Croatian students (based on the sample of 135 secondary school students with 6 to 7 years of experience of learning English). Based on several studies by different researchers, Lightbown and Spada (2006, 175) conclude that "form-focused instruction and corrective feedback within communicative and content-based second and foreign language programmes can help learners improve their knowledge and use of particular grammatical features".

Sironić-Bonefačić (1999) emphasizes the importance of pedagogical grammar in formal learning contexts. Such grammar is based on the presentation of grammar items that is appropriate to students' age and communicative needs. It, of course, takes into account the nature of learning at school, the number of teaching hours, limited language contact, and so on. One of its key features is recycling, which we find crucial in teaching grammar. Therefore, a tense might be implicitly introduced in one year, dealt with more explicitly in another, and then recycled in the following, expanding its uses and contrasting it with other tenses. Jarvis and Pavlenko (2008, 218) point out the importance

of continuous recycling and distributed learning and call for teachers and textbook authors to think of the ways to “present the same topics several times, in different format and on different levels, in order to aid distributed learning and to offer students multiple opportunities to master conceptually complex issues”. We believe that the above-mentioned principles of pedagogical grammar are key for teaching grammar, and we hope that the suggested order of teaching English tenses will be interpreted with these principles in mind.

Finally, what should be taken into account when designing pedagogical grammar, that is, when planning what grammar points to teach and when to teach them, are the findings of corpus-based research of grammar use (Biber and Reppen, 2002). For teachers and textbook authors, the best source of such information up to date is the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English* (Biber *et al.*, 2007) that was first published in 1999. Although it is not the only corpus-based grammar (see Quirk *et al.*, 1985), it is the only one that offers its readers insight into statistical data regarding the frequency of a given grammar point (across four registers: conversation, fiction, news and academic). For the purpose of this paper, it is interesting to observe data in Figure 1 on the frequency of simple, perfect and progressive aspect in the four registers. As can be seen in the bar chart below, the simple aspect is far more frequent than the perfect and the progressive aspect. This should certainly be borne in mind when teaching English.

Figure 1. Frequency of simple, perfect and progressive aspect in four registers per million words (based on Biber *et al.*, 1999, Figure 6.2)



We find another set of interesting data in Kennedy (1998), who summarizes the results of corpus analysis of English language use from three researchers (Table 1). As can be seen, present simple and past simple take up from 70.9% to 86.6% of finite verb forms, depending on the corpus. When the data is combined, the two simple tenses are followed by present perfect, present continuous, past perfect and past continuous, in order of frequency. According to Kennedy (1998), the results of these manual analyses of relatively small corpora received support from the computer analysis of the *Brown Corpus* by Francis and Kučera (1982).

Table 1. Relative frequencies of use of finite verb forms
(based on Kennedy, 1998, Table 3.15)

Verb forms	Ota (1963)		George (1963a)		Joos (1964)
	Spoken US English (%)	Written US English (%)	UK English plays (scripted speech) (%)	Written UK English (%)	Written UK English (%)
Present simple	64.4	26.4	67.6	38.4	39.6
Past simple	18.3	58.5	14.4	48.2	31.3
Present perfect	4.8	2.7	5.3	3.1	4.0
Present continuous	5.4	0.9	4.4	1.4	2.2
Past perfect	0.4	3.4	0.9	4.1	2.0
Past continuous	0.9	1.1	0.4	1.4	2.2
Present perfect continuous	0.5	0.1	0.6	0.1	0.2
Past perfect continuous	0.01	0.2	–	0.1	0.1
All other verb forms	5.3	6.6	6.4	3.2	18.4

Data shown in Figure 1 and Table 1 helps us to put things into perspective when it comes to teaching grammar – we can see what is really important from a communicative point of view. In this way we are able to focus on teaching our primary school students to become proficient in using the most common verb forms, instead of going for quantity and requiring students to master as many tenses as possible, without

them actually being apt at any of them. However, as Conrad (2000, 556) warns us, “[f]requency data alone cannot dictate pedagogy.”

2. Grammar in the current curricula

What grammar content should be taught in Croatian primary and secondary schools according to the current curricula? Table 2 shows the year of primary and secondary school in which an item of grammar is introduced as a learning goal at the level of use. It should be noted that there are other grammar points, such as adverbs, word order, etc., listed in the curricula, but we have not included all of them in the table. We did, however, include some other complex grammar points, such as passive voice, conditional, etc. to indicate the volume of grammar content and progression. It should also be noted that the items of grammar listed in the table appear sometimes year after year in the curricula because they are sometimes first introduced at the level of recognition, then use, and then they are recycled and contrasted. Here, we have chosen to show only when they are required for the first time *at the level of use*. The curriculum for primary school (*Nastavni plan i program za osnovnu školu*, 2006) refers to students learning English from year 1, as this is the most common case (Državni zavod za statistiku Republike Hrvatske, 2015). The reason why Table 2 starts with year 5 is that the curriculum states that it is then that the teaching of grammar starts to be explicit. The curricula for the secondary school (*Nastavni programi za gimnazije*, 1994; *Okvirni nastavni programi općeobrazovnih predmeta u srednjim školama*, 1997) originally referred to students in their 5th or 6th year of learning English (when starting secondary school), as these documents had been created before the introduction of mandatory foreign language learning from year 1 of primary school in 2003 (Buljan Culej, 2012). However, since the curricula are still used, they actually apply to students in their 6th or 9th year of learning English. Clearly, there is not a unique secondary school curriculum, so we included the curriculum for the 4-year general programme (Croatian: *gimnazija*) and 4-year and 3-year vocational programme (Croatian: *strukovna škola*). The reason why we included secondary school curricula in this paper, which deals with primary school, is because we wanted to show the extent and progression of grammar content taught to Croatian students from year 1 of primary school to year 3 or 4 of secondary school.

Table 2. Selected grammar content in current primary and secondary school curricula

level	year	grammar		
primary	5	– present simple – present continuous – past simple (limited to “a few most frequent verbs”, p. 92)		
	6	– be going to – future simple – past simple		
	7	– present continuous for future events – past continuous – present perfect		
	8	– passive voice with present simple, future simple, past simple		
level	year	<i>4-year general program</i>	<i>4-year vocational program</i>	<i>3-year vocational program</i>
secondary	1	– present perfect continuous – conditional 1, 2 – relative clauses	– present perfect continuous	
	2	– future perfect simple – subjunctive	– future perfect simple	– present perfect continuous
	3	– conditional 3	– conditional 1, 2	– conditional 1, 2
	4	– causative have	– conditional 3 – relative clauses – causative have	not applicable

After a short review of the principles of teaching grammar and a look at the current curricula, in the following part of the paper we discuss a possible order of teaching English tenses in Croatian primary schools. Our choice and order of tenses is based on the following tenets: a) not every grammar point is (equally) relevant for primary school learners, b) learner’s communicative needs are important, and c) simple structures should be taught before complex structures. To clarify on the latter: we do not believe that exposing learners to a variety of tenses throughout a year is an issue; however, we would argue that the teaching of tenses (in a more formal way) should be based on the progression

from simpler towards more complex structures. Let us then look at the proposed progression.

3. What, when, and why

At the beginning of this part of the paper, we must note that although we acknowledge the difference between tense and aspect, and we point to it at times in the description of the tenses/aspects, we use “tense” throughout this paper to cover both categories.

We know that teaching a foreign language to young learners should start with their immediate surroundings and the present moment because of their cognitive abilities and attention span (Patekar, 2014). That means it makes more sense to start learning a present tense before a past tense or a way of expressing future. The most common tense is present simple (Gačić, 2009). *Present simple* or simple present is, clearly, a present tense. Most often, we use it to “talk about permanent situations, or about things that happen regularly or all the time” (Swan, 2005, 448). We can also use it to talk about the future (e.g. *The plane arrives at 3.00 pm.*). It can also refer to past events when used as historic present (Carter and McCarthy, 2010), especially in storytelling (e.g. *On Christmas Eve, he decides to go downstairs, and he sneaks right past his parents...*), or news headlines. However, when we start teaching it in the lower years, the focus is always on permanent situations or things that happen regularly. To express this meaning in Croatian, we use *prezent* (present), which can also express past and future events (Silić and Pranjković, 2007). But, we also use *prezent* to talk about something happening right now (Silić and Pranjković, 2007), which is covered in English by another present tense – *present continuous* (or present progressive). The latter is used to talk about “temporary actions and situations that are going on now or ‘around now’” (Swan, 2005, 451). Present continuous can also be used to talk about repeated events (e.g. *I’m doing a whole lot of cleaning these days.*), developments and changes (e.g. *He’s getting cockier every day.*), in storytelling, and for future events. Again, when first taught explicitly to students, it is its

function for talking about the moment that is emphasized. To help students differentiate between the two tenses, when they are contrasted after they had been taught, teachers usually try to draw students' attention to time adjuncts. For example, present simple is used with *every day*, *on Fridays*, *in summer*, *on weekends*, *usually*, *rarely*, etc., and present continuous is used with *now* and *at the moment*. Sometimes, time is not indicated, but implied (e.g. *Look! The bus is coming!*), so teachers need to draw students' attention to the (actual or possible) context of the sentence.

The question is, which of the two tenses should children start learning first? Needless to say, children will be exposed to both of them from year 1. Young learners first learn about their classroom, toys, pets, family, food, home, and so on. They also pick up classroom language such as *listen*, *open the book*, *clean the board*, *show me the notebook*, and these instructions are formed in imperative. They use present simple, but mostly of the verb *be*, for example, when they introduce themselves or someone (e.g. *My name is Luka. This is my sister.*) or talk about what their favourite colour is. They also use the present simple form of the verbs *have* and *like*, which are tied to their immediate world of possession and attitude. On the other hand, they use present continuous to describe what someone is doing, for example, when playing mime (e.g. *She is jumping! He is riding a bike!*) or describing a picture in a book. They also use present continuous to describe what someone is wearing. Content, then, does not leave us with an unequivocal answer to the question of which of the two tenses to teach first.

If we look at the morphological and structural variability of the two tenses in Table 3, it is difficult to say at first hand which of the two is "simpler". For example, when using present simple, students should pay attention to 3rd person singular in affirmative, negative, and interrogative sentences. On the other hand, when using present continuous, students need to take note of the auxiliary verb *be* in its three forms that vary according to person and number (*am*, *are*, *is*). Some variations are only important in writing, such as adding *e* to words ending in *-ch* or *-sh* in present simple (e.g. *watches*, *brushes*), or dropping *e* in present continuous (e.g. *smile* – *smiling*, *leave* – *leaving*).

Table 3. Comparison of the morphological and structural variability of present simple and present continuous

	present simple	present continuous
affirmative	– eat – eats (adding <i>s</i> in 3 rd person singular) – watches (adding <i>e</i>) – cries (changing <i>y</i> to <i>i</i> and adding <i>e</i>)	– am eating – are eating – is eating – running (doubling the consonant) – smiling (dropping <i>e</i>)
negative	– do not (don't) eat – does not (doesn't) eat (dropping <i>s</i>)	– am not (I'm not) eating – is not (isn't) eating – are not (aren't) eating
interrogative	– Do...? – Does...?	– Am...? – Are...? – Is...?

When it comes to questions, in present continuous students can work with what they have in the affirmative sentence by reordering words to form the interrogative. This is not the case in present simple where students are required to use the auxiliary *do* in one of its two forms (*do* and *does*). In addition, students need to remember that the main verb in the interrogative or negative form in the 3rd person singular does not have an *-s*. In Croatian present tense, which we said covers the meanings of both present simple and present continuous, it is possible to make questions in two ways. As we can see in Table 4, the common, but nonstandard way to make a question is to use two auxiliary particles *da* and *li* in front of the SVO structure that remains intact, just as in English. This is frowned upon by proof-readers and prescriptive linguists (see Frančić, Hudeček and Mihaljević, 2006) who opt for the more formal way of using *li* between the verb and the subject. The non-standard interrogative form in Croatian is thus structurally similar to both present simple and present continuous.

Table 4. Forming questions in Croatian present tense and in present simple and present continuous

affirmative	interrogative	
Filip igra nogomet.	<i>Da li</i> Filip igra nogomet? (nonstandard, but common)	<i>Igra li</i> Filip nogomet? (standard)
Phillip plays football.	<i>Does</i> Phillip play football?	–
Phillip is playing football.	<i>Is</i> Phillip playing football?	–

So far, it seems that comparing the two English tenses to each other and to the Croatian present tense does not provide an easy answer to the question of which tense to start teaching first. What might help is to look at the grammatical category of number. Children start by talking about themselves (1st person singular) and then talk about the other person, animal, or thing (3rd person singular). After that, they use plural to refer to themselves as part of a group (*we*) and then to talk about other groups (*you, they*). By the time children reach year 4, they can differentiate among *I, you, he, she, it, we* and *they*, but this does not mean they do not have problems using pronouns. For that reason, it may make sense to start with the tense with less variability in terms of number, and that is – present simple. In present simple, learners need to pay attention only to third person singular. In year 4 the system of pronouns will settle in, students will learn how to use present simple, and this will open the doors to teaching present continuous in year 5. In addition, when using present simple, students need to “add” only one thing to the verb, and that is *-s* in 3rd person singular. In present continuous, they “add” auxiliary verbs in three different forms in front of the verb, and *-ing* to the verb. The decision to start with present simple instead of present continuous is also supported by the findings of corpus research that clearly show that the simple aspect is far more frequent than the progressive aspect (see Figure 1 and Table 1). If we believe that what is structurally simpler is easier to learn, then teachers should start teaching present simple in year 4 and move to present continuous in year 5, when they should also contrast the two tenses in terms of their use, after present continuous has settled in.

What tense should be taught in year 6? Having spent two years exploring two present tenses, we believe that in year 6 students are ready to move to past simple – and future simple. Children’s cognitive abilities at the age of 11 or 12 certainly allow them to talk about past events, such as what they did last weekend, or to think about what they will do in the near future. Learning to talk about the past and the future certainly increases students’ abilities to express themselves in a foreign language. *Past simple* is a versatile, but simple tense. It is used “for many kinds of past events: short, quickly finished actions and happenings, longer situations, and repeated events” (Swan, 2005, 394). Its reference to definite past time is commonly indicated by “definite time adjuncts and definite time adverbial clauses” (Carter and McCarthy, 2010, 609), such as *yesterday, last weekend, five minutes ago, when we were young,*

etc. There are cases when definite past time is simply implied by the context, such as shared knowledge (e.g. *Frida Kahlo painted 55 self-portraits.*). Past simple corresponds to the Croatian *perfekt* (perfect), the most common of the four past tenses (Silić and Pranjko, 2007). In contrast to English past simple, *perfekt* requires an auxiliary verb *be* (in its present form). Unlike the present tenses mentioned before, past simple does not show variability according to number or person. It does, however, require students to pay attention when writing, in cases such as *stopped* or *cried*, where certain changes need to be made prior to adding *-ed*. Another thing students need to be careful about are irregular verbs that have their own past forms, such as *buy – bought, fly – flew, understand – understood*, etc. Finally, when making questions or negative sentences, students have one form of the auxiliary to work with – *did* – and they need to remember to “put” the verb back into the present tense. Overall, there are fewer things to worry about than when using present simple or continuous. For that reason, and because of their more developed cognitive abilities, we find it reasonable for students to explore another tense in year 6. We believe that should be future tense.

Future tense is not actually a tense *per se* as there are no inflections to express future time (Carter and McCarthy, 2010; Greenbaum and Quirk, 1998). Instead, we use modal auxiliaries *will* and *shall* together with the infinitive to “give information about the future” or to “talk about possible future events which are not already decided or obviously on the way” (Swan, 2005, 186) (e.g. *I’ll have a baby tiger one day.*). It should be noted that *shall* is unusual in American English “in most situations” (Swan, 2005, 187). Using *will* is certainly the most common way to express future, in contrast not only to *shall* but to other ways of expressing future as well (Carter and McCarthy, 2010; Gačić, 2009; Greenbaum and Quirk, 1998). In Croatian, we use either *futur prvi* (future first) or *futur drugi* (future second) to express future time, but it is the former that we can relate to the meaning of the English future tense. The structure of Croatian future tense is similar to the English structure as it, too, requires an auxiliary verb with the infinitive. This similarity, however, is superficial because the rather free word order in Croatian allows for the auxiliary to come after the verb, which is clearly not the case in English (Patekar, 2013). Nonetheless, that should not be a problem for Croatian learners since future tense is structurally simple. Obviously, future tense does not show any variability on the main verb,

and the auxiliary only changes in British English from *will* to *shall* in 1st person singular and plural. Making negative sentences or questions is equally simple. For that reason, we believe it would not be too taxing for the students to learn about another way to talk about future, especially when they need to express concrete plans – by using *be going to*. The structure *be going to* + infinitive is actually a present tense (Swan, 2005). It is used when we want to talk about “future actions and events that have some *present reality*” (Swan, 2005, 188, emphasis in original). This means that what we are talking about has already been decided, it is starting to happen, or we can see it coming (e.g. *We are going to visit the zoo on Saturday.*). The structure *be going to* is very common in spoken and informal contexts (Carter and McCarthy, 2010; Swan, 2005). The structure requires students to be well acquainted with present continuous in terms of variability of the auxiliary verb *be* and with the ways of forming negative sentences and questions. This could make it more demanding for students to use it properly. Another reason is that in Croatian the difference between the two future tenses is not based on the issue of certainty or evidence to whether something will happen or is going to happen, but on the issue of absolute and relative future (Silić and Pranjković, 2007). We believe that teachers should therefore not insist on zealously contrasting *will* and *be going to*, especially as there are cases where both are equally acceptable (Carter and McCarthy, 2010).

Although the progression from present simple to present continuous might invoke the introduction of past continuous after past simple, we believe that should not be the case. In year 7, students should turn their attention to present perfect simple. We can find support for this choice in the work of Mirjana Vilke (2000). *Present perfect simple* is primarily used when we want to say that “a finished action or event is connected with the present in some way” (Swan, 2005, 438) (e.g. *I’ve always cared for you deeply.*). It is also used when announcing news regarding recent events (e.g. *The leaders have decided to call off the summit.*), or when referring to events that occur repeatedly (e.g. *She has influenced many young researchers.*). In American English, recent events are usually reported in past simple (Greenbaum and Quirk, 1998) (e.g. *We just won a trip to New York!*). Present perfect seems to be quite a challenge to Croatian speakers of English (Žic Fuchs, 2009). This is because the Croatian language does not offer an entirely corresponding way of connecting a past event to the present, or rather, does not find such a con-

nection relevant. Nevertheless, its communicative potential to convey information about one's experience that is still relevant at the moment of speaking is what encourages us to suggest teachers and students to focus on present perfect simple in year 7. By learning to use present perfect, students are able to talk about, for example, how many countries they have visited, ask someone if they have ever danced in the rain, talk about things they have never done, and so on. This aspect requires them to learn the past participle form of irregular verbs, but other than that, present perfect is not structurally challenging, especially since the negative and interrogative forms do not require any changes to the verb. To make questions and negative sentences, students just need to learn to rearrange the order of words or insert *not*. The biggest challenge is, of course, conceptual. Present perfect can perhaps best be contrasted with past simple by focusing on time adjuncts, whether indicated (e.g. *since, for, so far, recently, in my life, to date, up till now* with present perfect, *yesterday, last week, two months ago, on Monday, the other day* with past simple) or implied. We should, however, bear in mind that some time adjuncts, such as *already, once, this morning, before, recently, today* can be used with both tenses (Carter and McCarthy, 2010).

Up to this point, students have mastered two present tenses, two ways of expressing the future, and two past tenses. (Considering that in this paper we explore the teaching of tenses in primary school, we categorised present perfect as a past tense; we are, however, well aware that present perfect is not a tense, let alone purely a past one.) By year 8, students have become well versed in present continuous and past simple and are therefore ready to focus on past continuous. *Past continuous* (or past progressive) is used when we want to say that "something was in progress (going on) around a particular past time" (Swan, 2005, 422) (e.g. *Yesterday at 5 o'clock I was working out in the living room.*). Past continuous is often used with past simple. In such cases, past continuous refers to a longer action, and past simple to a shorter action or event that interrupts it or happens in the middle of the former (e.g. *He was petting the dog when the cat scratched him.*). Since both past simple and past continuous refer to finished past events, the main difference to be highlighted is that past continuous "suggests that the events may be seen more as background or of secondary importance, or their temporary nature may be more emphasised" (Carter and McCarthy, 2010, 612). In Croatian, *perfekt* is used to express the meanings of past simple and past continuous. The only difference is that for past simple, we use

the perfective aspect of the verb in *perfekt* (e.g. *they waved* – Cro. *mahnuli su*), and the imperfective aspect for past continuous (e.g. *they were waving* – Cro. *mahali su*). This perhaps makes it easier for the teacher to explain the difference between the two, as Croatian learners certainly have the concept of two “kinds” of past – one for events that occurred, and one for actions that lasted for some time. Nevertheless, we believe that past continuous might be the most structurally challenging tense to primary school students, and perhaps the least needed for their communicative needs.

With past continuous we round up our suggestion of the order of teaching English tenses from year 4 to year 8 in Croatian primary schools. Table 5 below gives a clear overview of the suggested order.

Table 5. Suggested order of teaching English tenses

level	year	tense
primary	4	– present simple
	5	– present continuous
	6	– past simple – will/be going to
	7	– present perfect
	8	– past continuous

Conclusion

If the table above seems scant, we should not forget that there is more grammar content that students are required to learn, but that we have not mentioned in this paper due to its scope. The purpose of the list of suggested tenses is to encourage teachers and textbook authors to avoid focusing on several tenses a year, overburdening in that way students who also need to acquire additional grammar content such as articles, adverbs, pronouns, passive voice, conditional sentences, relative clauses, gerund, etc. We believe that each year teachers should focus on one tense and selected grammar content, and then in the following years recycle that tense through use in different contexts and for different purposes (when possible). This does not mean that students should not be exposed to several tenses at once. On the contrary, teaching materials

should reflect the language of the real world as much as possible, and such language is rarely expressed in a single tense. What we would like to see is teachers and textbook authors thinking about what students really need at a certain level. Does a 12-year-old need past continuous for his or her communicative needs? How many tenses (or structures) does a student need to know after eight years of learning English at school? It seems that we as teachers are often too focused on grammar, perhaps because we have not quite embraced the communicative approach, or because we cling to the way we were taught grammar. A lot of teachers teach according to the textbook, not reflecting on the necessity of teaching something at a certain level. Textbook authors, on the other hand, do not always adhere to the curriculum, and they rarely provide opportunities for recycling grammar and vocabulary. The latter, we believe, happens because it takes a lot of creativity, if not ingenuity, to design a textbook series that contains lessons in which a grammar point can be recycled or used in a different way, and that can offer something new at the same time.

We believe that by year 8 students should be able to talk about present, past, and future events, and that they should be able to indicate that an action is or was going on for some time in the present or the past. It is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss what other grammar content should be required in primary school, but whatever it is, the choice should be based on students' communicative needs, the Croatian teaching and learning context, and the results of corpus-based research of grammar use.

Finally, we must emphasize once again that we do not regard foreign language learning a linear process, nor do we think that students should master English grammar by gradual accumulation. Grammar should be taught in a way that combines implicit and explicit teaching and learning, and it should be taught in context and always with use in mind. Recycling of grammar (and vocabulary) is a must. But more important than all of this is a reflective teacher who can approach the textbook (and the curriculum) critically, and who is able to select appropriate teaching materials and activities. Rather than providing a definitive list of tenses and appropriate years when those tenses should be taught, our intention was to motivate practitioners to think about the context (available teaching hours, learners' native language, learners' communicative needs) in which they select grammar content and teach

grammar. We also hope that this paper will motivate researchers to explore the issue further.

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MOGUĆI REDOSLIJED POUČAVANJA ENGLSKIH GLAGOLSKIH VREMENA U OSNOVNOJ ŠKOLI

Jakob Patekar

U ovome se radu predlaže mogući redosljed poučavanja engleskih glagolskih vremena u hrvatskim osnovnim školama. Nakon kraćega pregleda u kojemu objašnjavamo zašto bi takav redosljed mogao biti potreban u hrvatskome kontekstu te nakon kratkoga osvrtu na utemeljenje takvoga redosljeda u znanstvenim istraživanjima, u radu sagledavamo poučavanje gramatike s aspekta metodike nastave engleskoga jezika te raspravljamo o pojmu pedagoške gramatike. Donosimo i prikaz gramatičkoga sadržaja u trenutnim nastavnim programima za osnovnu školu i srednje škole. U glavnome dijelu rada potom analiziramo glagolska vremena u pogledu njihove složenosti i komunikacijskoga potencijala te predlažemo redosljed njihova poučavanja. Na kraju, predlažemo smjernice za učitelje i autore udžbenika u vezi s predstavljanjem i poučavanjem gramatičkih sadržaja u osnovnoj školi.

Ključne riječi: poučavanje gramatike, glagolska vremena, redosljed poučavanja, razvoj kurikula, poučavanje gramatike temeljeno na učestalosti, osnovna škola