

## Present perfect

Jon Tappenden  
DipTrans IoLET  
legal & commercial translator, English language trainer

The English **present perfect** structure causes English language learners particular problems, due among other things to its misleading similarity to past tenses in other languages.

The present perfect is a way of describing the way we feel or our experiences in a present context. The **present element** is important to remember even if we make reference to the past. Another element of the present perfect is **emotion**. The **present element** and the **emotion** are more apparent when we contrast the present perfect with the past simple. Consider these examples:

***I have been to Graceland twice.***

***I went to Graceland twice.***

One of these sentences attaches emotion and experience to the visit to Graceland, with no reference to time, and the other is a factual account and describes **a situation confined to the past**.

Note that while there does not have to be a past time reference in the second, it is natural to insert one:

***I went to Graceland twice while I was in the US.***

In the sentence ***I have been to Graceland twice*** the context is the present. Try to think of reasons why someone would say this using this structure. They are talking about the current state of their experience.

The question ***have you ever been to Graceland?*** Is a question about someone's **current experience** and knowledge regarding Graceland. To give a factual account, a native speaker would not say

***I have been to Graceland twice while I was in the US***

(this is a grammatical error) but they might say

***I went to Graceland twice while I was in the US*** (situation confined to the past)

or

***I have been to Graceland twice since I have been in the US*** (current status)

Other present contexts:

Warning:

***Be careful, it's slippery because I have just washed the floor.***

***Don't sit on that bench, it has just been painted.***

Present evidence:

***You look tired. Yes, I have been working all day.***

In this example, the continuous form **emphasises the duration**, and thus the emotional perspective of the length of the day.

Here is another example of this:

***I have been working here for twenty years*** (and I still haven't achieved.....)

Complaint:

***I have been waiting for you for half an hour. Where have you been?***

***I have been queuing here for half an hour and I'm still no closer to the checkout.***

Commenting/making an observation. Here again, the **observation** and the **emotion** are important, and reference to time is secondary:

***I have lived here all my life and I never knew that statue was there.***

***I have loved you since I first set eyes on you.***

A romantic context involves emotion, and hence the present perfect is more suitable than the past simple, which sounds like a factual account:

***I loved you when I first set eyes on you.*** This expresses less emotion, and even sounds like a description of a situation confined to the past, precisely because of the **choice of past simple** over the present perfect.

Jon Tappenden