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3ed Lecture

The past continuous tense

BY

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Yesterday, while I was trying to study for my exam, my child was sitting on my textbook, my phone was buzzing non-stop with random notifications, and my neighbor was singing loudly in the shower. Meanwhile, my coffee was getting cold, and my brain was slowly melting from the chaos. By the time I realized, I was just staring at the wall, wondering how I ever thought I’d get anything done!

**Lecture: Understanding the Past Continuous Tense**

**Introduction:**

The **past continuous tense** (also called the **past progressive tense**) is used to describe actions that were happening at a specific time in the past. It focuses on the duration of the action, rather than its completion. In this lecture, we will explore its structure, uses, and common mistakes students make when using it.

**1. Structure of the Past Continuous Tense:**

The past continuous tense is formed using:

* **Subject** + **was/were** + **verb (present participle)** (verb ending in **-ing**).

**Examples:**

* **I was reading** a book when the phone rang.
* **They were playing** football at 4 PM yesterday.

Let’s break this down:

* **Subject**: I / They
* **Was/Were**: I (was) / They (were) – depending on the subject
* **Verb + ing**: reading / playing

**Affirmative sentences:**

* **He was watching** TV when I called.
* **They were studying** for the exam last night.

**Negative sentences:**

To make negative sentences, add **"not"** after **was/were**:

* **I was not (wasn't) sleeping** when you knocked.
* **They were not (weren't) listening** to the teacher.

**Questions:**

In questions, reverse the subject and the auxiliary verb (**was/were**):

* **Was she reading** a book when you entered?
* **Were they playing** football at the park?

**2. Uses of the Past Continuous Tense:**

The past continuous tense is useful for describing ongoing actions that were happening at a specific time in the past, often in relation to another event. Let’s go over its main uses:

**A. Actions happening at a specific time in the past:**

This tense is used to talk about something that was happening at a particular time in the past.

* **At 8 PM last night, I was cooking** dinner.
* **What were you doing** at 10 AM yesterday?

**B. Interrupted actions:**

It is commonly used to describe a longer action that was interrupted by a shorter action in the past (often expressed with the past simple).

* **She was reading** when the doorbell rang.
  + The longer action (was reading) is interrupted by the shorter action (doorbell rang).
* **We were watching a movie** when the lights went out.

**C. Parallel actions:**

It can describe two or more actions happening simultaneously in the past.

* **I was cooking** while **he was cleaning** the house.
* **They were playing football** and **we were watching**.

**D. Background descriptions in storytelling:**

Writers often use the past continuous to set the scene in a story, providing a backdrop for a series of events.

* **The wind was blowing**, and the sky was darkening as the storm approached.
* **People were walking** in the streets when the accident happened.

**3. Time Expressions Used with the Past Continuous:**

Certain time expressions often accompany the past continuous tense to provide context:

* **At 3 PM yesterday**, I was working on my project.
* **While** I was studying, my phone rang.
* **When** the teacher arrived, we were talking.
* **All evening**, they were playing video games.

**Important Note**: "While" is commonly used to show simultaneous actions, while "when" typically introduces a shorter action that interrupts the longer one.

**4. Differences Between Past Simple and Past Continuous:**

The past simple and the past continuous are often used together, but they serve different functions. Let’s clarify the differences:

* **Past Simple**: Describes completed actions in the past.
  + **I studied** all night. (action is complete)
  + **She arrived** at 6 PM.
* **Past Continuous**: Describes ongoing actions at a certain point in the past.
  + **I was studying** when you called. (action was ongoing)
  + **She was arriving** when I left. (ongoing process of arrival)

**5. Common Mistakes to Avoid:**

Students sometimes make mistakes when using the past continuous tense. Here are some common pitfalls and how to avoid them:

**A. Mixing up "was" and "were":**

* Incorrect: **They was playing** football.
* Correct: **They were playing** football.

**Tip**: Use "was" with singular subjects (I, he, she, it) and "were" with plural subjects (you, we, they).

**B. Using the wrong form of the verb:**

* Incorrect: **She was read a book**.
* Correct: **She was reading a book**.

**Tip**: Always add **-ing** to the main verb in the past continuous tense.

**C. Forgetting to use the past simple for shorter actions:**

* Incorrect: **I was walking to the store when I was seeing him.**
* Correct: **I was walking to the store when I saw him.**

**Tip**: Use the past continuous for the longer action (walking) and the past simple for the shorter, interrupting action (saw).