

Lesson Ten

What was happening?

Aims

The aims of this lesson are to enable you to

- use the imperfect tense: (how you say what was happening)
- revise Module One

Context

This is the last lesson in Module One. At the end of it, you will find **TMA B**: this will cover the whole of Module One. As before, you send your Assignment to your Tutor, and you will receive it back fully marked, plus a Key.

The Imperfect Tense

We are now going to look at the *Past Descriptive Tense* which is called the *Imperfect*.



This not a very difficult tense to recognize as it is usually clearly distinguished by the following forms:
was + the verb + ing

Examples

I was walking; I was speaking, I was driving
I was in the habit of, I was accustomed to,
I used to + the Verb: these are all *Imperfects*

Examples

- i) I was in the habit of **visiting** my friends (Please note verb + ing)
- ii) Were you accustomed to listen to this type of music?
- iii) We used to go abroad more often

n.b. But please note that what looks like the Past Tense (simple) can also be

Imperfect depending on the situation

This is more difficult because although the verb looks like the Past Tense (single Action,) its meaning can be quite different; you have to examine the sentence carefully... More details of this are given below.

Examples

We **went** every year to Mallorca (Imperfect)

The car **bumped** into me (single action), as I **came** out of the side turning (Imperfect)

The Meaning and Purpose of the Imperfect

To understand fully the Imperfect, you have to understand its real meaning which is incomplete, as opposed to *Perfect* which means complete... e.g. a perfect specimen is a complete specimen...

So if the past action is incomplete in the sense of *repeated*, *continuous*, or *descriptive*, the tense will be *imperfect*, regardless of the words used. Often the *imperfect* is easy to recognize as the verb form is clear, but there are times when it is more difficult if it takes the form of a single word. In that sort of situation, it is only the context that can make clear the tense (See the examples...)

The purpose of the *Imperfect* is basically to set the scene. It is a background tense that says what used to happen, what was happening, but does not advance the action of any narrative.

The other main past tenses, whether the *Past Simple* or the *Present Perfect*, do advance the action, telling the story, and describing what happened. Here are some examples to show how the *Imperfect* and the *Past Simple* are used. There will be an Activity on this, but not till the end of this Lesson. The first Activity will be revision, based on Lesson One...

The sun was shining, (Imperfect descriptive) when Elizabeth woke up (Past Simple)

Every evening Peter went (Imperfect, repeated action) to his music lesson

I knew (imperfect past state) that he was wrong (past state)*

We used to go (imperfect) to the pictures, but the expense stopped (Past simple, narrative) us in the end

* Past state means there was nothing actually happening; the verb is still...

e.g. The ground was covered with snow
I believed he would come

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