

## Effective Games for Teaching and Learning the Simple Past Tense

### Những trò chơi hiệu quả để dạy và học thì quá khứ đơn

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**Tóm tắt:** Việc dạy và học ngữ pháp tiếng Anh một cách hiệu quả không phải là điều dễ dàng đối với cả người dạy và người học, đặc biệt là khi học các thì tiếng Anh. Thì quá khứ đơn là một trong những thì được sử dụng nhiều bởi người bản xứ nhưng người học ở Việt Nam thường hay mắc lỗi khi sử dụng thì này. Người học có thể gặp nhiều khó khăn khác nhau từ việc hiểu lý thuyết cho đến việc áp dụng chúng trong những ngữ cảnh nhất định điều này có thể làm người học mất động lực khi học ngữ pháp. Hơn nữa, việc làm nhiều bài tập ngữ pháp có thể gây ra sự nhàm chán cho người học. Vì vậy, giáo viên nên sử dụng các trò chơi hiệu quả để dạy các thì tiếng Anh một cách sinh động hơn và cũng như giúp việc học ngữ pháp trở nên thú vị hơn.

**Từ khóa:** *Dạy tiếng Anh; Học tiếng Anh; Thì quá khứ đơn; Trò chơi hiệu quả*

**Abstract:** Teaching and learning English grammar effectively is not easy for both teachers and learners, especially when learning English tenses. The simple past tense is one of the tenses used a lot by native speakers, but Vietnamese learners often make mistakes when using this tense. Learners may encounter many different difficulties from understanding theories to applying them in certain contexts, which can make learners lose motivation when learning grammar. Furthermore, doing many exercises can cause boredom for students. Therefore, teachers should use effective games to teach English tenses more vividly and also make learning grammar more interesting.

**Keywords:** *Effective games; Learning English; Simple past tense; Teaching English Grammar*

## 1. Introduction

Grammar is one of the three language aspects in learning English. It is necessary for English learners to master it even though it is not easy to understand and practice. Especially with English tenses, learning them can become an extremely difficult problem for learners whose native language does not have as many tenses as English. Moreover, focusing solely on grammar does not seem to be interesting to most English learners [1]. They can easily feel bored or exhausted with grammar exercises and theories. Therefore, English teachers need to have more exciting and effective ways to teach English tenses. Through activities or games, learners can enjoy learning grammar and applying them to specific contexts. There are 12 tenses in English. One of the most used tenses is the simple past tense. It is often used to express actions that began and ended in the past. It is also used to describe the age, feelings, height, weight, size of someone or something in the past. To use this tense correctly, learners need to practice a lot. However, learners easily get bored when they have to do too many exercises. They need more interesting and practical grammar learning activities, so teachers have to create or adapt effective activities and games to teach grammar vividly.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Definition of grammar

There have been many ways to define the word 'grammar' over the years. Ur [2, p. 4] defines grammar as the use of language. Meanwhile, Swan [3, p. xvi] argues that grammar is the rules that tell how different words can be used to express different meanings. However, both share the same view that grammar is the way words are combined into a sentence. In addition, Brown [4, p. 362]

defines grammar as a system of rules that govern the arrangement and relationship of words in a sentence.

### 2.2. Definition of tense

The meaning of tense is related to time, so there are many definitions based on time to define the tense of a word. According to the Cambridge dictionary, "tense is a form of a verb that indicates the time when an action occurs" [5]. In other words, it is the use of verb forms to express information about time [6, p.124]. Lingga [7, p. 188] suggests that tenses are used to express the time and degree of completion of an event.

### 2.3. Uses of the Simple Past Tense

The simple past tense has many different functions. MacFarlane [8] divides the uses of the Simple Past Tense into two groups, the verb "to be" and other verbs.

With the verb "be", it can be used for states including age, description, height, weight, feelings, distance, size, price, and time [10].

The examples in this section are provided by the author to illustrate the usage of the simple past tense as outlined by MacFarlane [8].

**Table 1.** Example of the usage of the simple past tense

State	Example
Age	James <b>wasn't</b> 17. He <b>was</b> 18.
Description	Jane <b>was</b> beautiful with long black hair.
Height	She <b>was</b> only 1 meter 20 when she was 8.
Weight	He <b>was</b> 150 pounds last year.
Feelings	She <b>was</b> very happy on her 18 <sup>th</sup> birthday.
Distance	They <b>were</b> 1 kilometer away from the beach.
Size	The old bedroom <b>was</b> four meters by three.

Price	This watch <b>was</b> one thousand dollars in 2023.
Time	It <b>was</b> five past ten then.

- She **visited** Paris last month.
- He **didn't go** to school yesterday.
- She **was born** in 1990.

## 2.4. Forms of the simple past tense

The forms of the simple past tense are also divided into two groups, one group of the main verb is “to be” and one group is the remaining verbs.

With other verbs, they can be used to express actions that began and ended in the past [8].

**Table 2.** The forms of simple past tense

+To be

Statements		
I/ he/she/it	was (not)	from the US.
We/you/they	were (not)	at home.
Yes/No questions		
Was	I/he/she/it	from the US?
Were	We/you/they	at home?
Wh-questions		
Who	was	He/she/it?
Where	were	We/you/they?

+ Other verbs

Statements		
I/he/she/it/ we/you/they	did not	went. go.
Yes/No questions		
Did	I/we/you/they /he/she/it	go?
Wh-questions		
Where	did	I/he/she/it/ we/you/they/ go?

## 2.5. The effectiveness of using games in teaching and learning the past simple tense

In recent years, there have been many studies on the effectiveness of applying games to teaching and learning grammar, especially teaching tenses in English. The results of studies applying games to teaching and Learning the past simple tense has shown the significant effectiveness of this method.

From the research results, Albab [9] concluded that there was an improvement in scores after students were taught using the Snake & Ladder game. This game helped students

actively participate in discussing the past simple tense because there was interaction and communication while they are playing the game. Snake & Ladder was a new game for teaching and learning the past simple tense. Therefore, students were very interested in learning grammar, especially the past simple tense. This game can help students easily correct errors and find out some common errors when using the past simple tense. It also can be used to practice language in various skills – listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

The research results by Anugerah et al. [10] proved that using the game Build-a-sentence cubes was effective in teaching the simple past tense to students. This game significantly increased students' ability to master the simple past tense. It facilitated students to understand grammatically correct sentence structures. In addition, students also learned to distinguish and understand the structures of the simple past tense. Moreover, students not only wrote grammatically correct sentence structures but also were able to change declarative sentences into interrogative sentences, present into past, and affirmative sentences into negative sentences.

Guterres and Soares [11] concluded that teaching the simple past tense through the Dice game could make students feel more interested, relaxed, and happy in the teaching and learning process. From the results of the test, it can be seen that the students' ability to use the simple past tense was improved and enhanced. The positive results of this study are a convincing evidence for English teachers to apply this method in teaching grammar.

Based on the results of the study on the effectiveness of Domino Card in teaching the simple past tense, Nugraha and Hadi [12] concluded that Domino Card had a positive effect on helping students master grammar, especially the simple past tense. Although this study was conducted online and used the Whatsapp application to collect data, the study went well. The students' first impression of playing Domino Card using whatsapp was very confusing. However, after the researcher showed the students a video tutorial on how to play the game, the students played the game with great interest.

Recent research results by Mutohhar et al. [13] also showed the effectiveness of the Tic-Tac-Toe game in learning the simple past tense. This game could improve students' ability to master the simple past tense. At the same time, it also helped students to be more active and enjoy the learning process. This can be seen through the level of students' participation in this activity. In addition, students' progress can be clearly seen through the results of student assessment.

From the results of the above studies, it can be seen that the effectiveness of applying games to teaching and learning the simple past tense is very high. This is a reliable basis for teachers to apply different games to teaching English tenses as well as other grammar knowledge, thereby helping students learn grammar more vividly and effectively.

### **3. Effective activities to teach the simple past tense**

#### **3.1 Snakes & Ladders**

Snakes & Ladders is a popular game for children in many countries around the world [9, 14, 15]. It is easy to make from basic materials and can be adapted to suit many learning situations. This game has also been applied to learning English grammar, especially the simple past tense.

To play this game, teachers need to prepare: 1 dice and 1 board (A4 paper) Snakes & Ladders for each group. How to play: 1) each student will take turns rolling the dice to move on the board with the number rolled out, 2) students read the sentence in the box they go to, 3) students need to change the verb in the sentence to the past form, if they change it wrong or do not know, they have to go back to the previous box, 4) the winning student is the one who reaches the "finish" box first. Teachers

can change the content of the boxes on the board to suit their different teaching purposes.

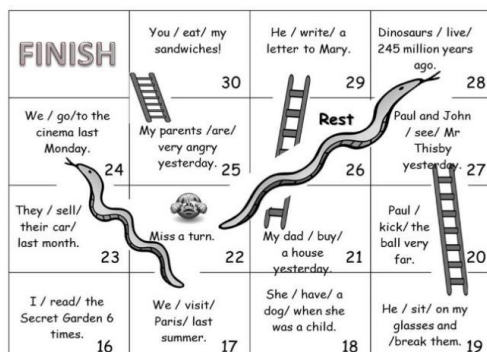


Figure 1. Snakes & Ladders game [16]

### 3.2. Domino cards

Domino cards is a simple and fun game to reinforce the past tense of verbs for students. Domino is a competitive game. All students participating in this game must compete with each other to win the game. This game can be played by 4 students.

How to play dominoes: 1) put all the dominoes face down and then, 2) deal all the cards equally to all players, 3) the first player puts 1 card in the middle of the table, 4) play continues clockwise. The next player needs to choose 1 of his cards to match 1 card in the middle of the table. If there is no card to play, the player can say skip, 5) the first person to play the last domino is the winner, and 6) The player with the most dominoes is the loser.

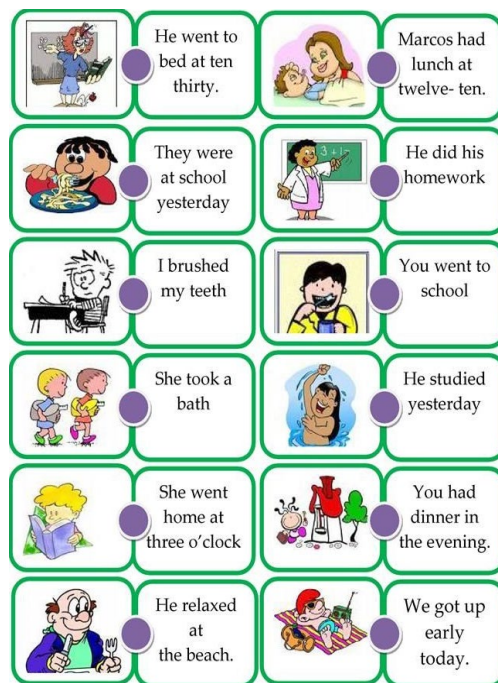


Figure 2. Domino game [17]

### 3.3. Dice

This Dice game is great for small groups to practice the past simple tense effectively. Students always feel happy and full of enthusiasm when practicing reading, writing and grammar skills through this game [11, 18] Moreover, this game can be used as a daily exercise or even an informal test.

The Dice game can be played in many different ways – 1) roll the dice and read the past form of the verbs in the row indicated by the dice (rolling the dice gets 1 point corresponding to reading the horizontal row 1), 2) similarly, roll the dice and write the past form of the verb in the row indicated by the dice on the board, 3) roll the dice and make a sentence with a verb in the row indicated by the dice.

Roll and read the verb - past tense -ed

	ask	blink	buzz	chew	cook
	cross	destroy	enjoy	fail	finish
	fix	growl	help	jump	kick
	kiss	laugh	listen	live	look
	miss	need	open	offer	phone
	play	roll	scratch	scream	show

Figure 3. Dice game [19]

### 3.4. Build-a-sentence cubes

Build-a-sentence cubes is a word game where students create sentences by rotating cubes. The cubes contain the subject, verb, and object needed to form a complete sentence. With this game, students can explore English grammar, develop fluency in speaking sentences, and learn to pronounce high-frequency words.

Students can make a variety of sentences just by rotating the cubes. In addition, they can also change statements into questions, present into past, affirmative into negative, and so on. It is essential to teach students to form sentences correctly, especially those that they find difficult to say. Therefore, they will learn how to form sentences easily and in a fun way through cubes.

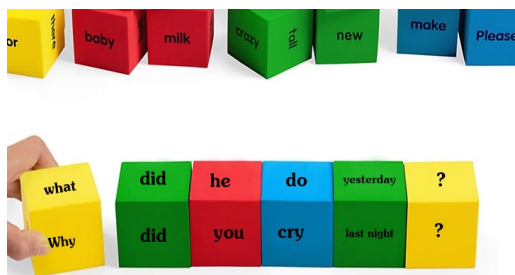


Figure 4. Build-a-sentence cubes game [20]

### 3.5. Tic-tac-toe

Tic Tac Toe is a fun and simple game. It can be used to review a variety of grammar forms, including irregular verb

forms in the past simple tense [13, 21]. To play the game, 1) two teams of 1-4 players are required, one team plays the role of X and the other team plays the role of O, 2) teams take turns choosing a square and writing a sentence using the chosen word in the correct form of the past simple tense verb. If the sentence is correct, the team puts an X or O in the square. If the sentence is incorrect, the square continues to be played, 3) the first team to connect three consecutive Xs or Os – horizontally, vertically or diagonally – wins the game. If the game ends in a tie, have a quick question ready to determine the winner.

Say the past forms of the verbs below		
<b>BREAK</b>	<b>SAY</b>	<b>GO</b>
<b>RUN</b>	<b>TAKE</b>	<b>GET</b>
<b>MAKE</b>	<b>BUY</b>	<b>GIVE</b>

Figure 5. Tic-tac-toe game

## 4. Conclusion

In general, activities or games are very useful tools for teachers of English grammar. They can motivate learners to practice grammar more and be more effective in participating in activities. Grammar lessons will be more interesting and meaningful if teachers can make use of good activities and games. The activities suggested are easy to do without much preparation and can be changed or adjusted to suit other teaching and learning purposes.

However, there are some certain limitations when using game to teach grammar or the simple past tense.

Firstly, with some games it is not easy for every learner to involve in the game actively. The stronger learners are often the primary players while the weaker learners are just the viewers. Moreover, teachers have to spend more time and are able to use searching engines when they want to adjust the games to adapt their different needs. Last but not least, the age of learners should be considered when teachers chose a game to conduct. The content and difficulty of the game must correspond to each age group of learners.

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