Present Perfect vs Past Simple: Teaching Decision Guide

A quick-reference decision guide to help you and your learners choose between the present perfect and the past simple. Use it to plan concept-checking questions and to diagnose common errors.

Choose PAST SIMPLE when

- The time is finished and specified (yesterday, in 2010, last week).
- You are narrating a sequence of completed past events.
- Time markers: yesterday, ago, last, in + past year, when.

Choose PRESENT PERFECT when

- The time is unfinished or unspecified, or the result matters now.
- Life experience up to now (Have you ever...?).
- Time markers: for, since, already, yet, just, ever, never, so far.

Concept-checking questions (CCQs)

- Is the action finished? Do we know exactly when?
- Is the time period still continuing?
- Does the past event affect the situation now?

Common learner errors to watch for

- Using present perfect with a finished time marker (*I have seen him yesterday).
- Overusing past simple for recent news with present relevance.
- Confusing 'for' (duration) and 'since' (starting point).