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Back to the Future. Deciphering nonexistent tenses.



Method: Task-Based Language Teaching (the focus is on *process* rather than product)
Level: Upper-Intermediate
Time: 45 minutes

Overview

The aim of this lesson is to use the transcription of a specific scene from the popular American sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* (TBBT), in order to practice and improve Ss' knowledge about the tenses.

Teaching aids

- TV set or projector with a laptop and loudspeakers.
- Episode 5 of season 8 of TBBT (timeline of the specific scene: 08:00 → 10:00).
- Photocopies of the transcription of the scene (without highlighted tenses).
- Some empty sheets of paper.
- (optional: a trailer of the popular trilogy *Back to the Future*).

Objectives for the students

The Ss should be able to decipher the nonexistent tenses used by the characters of the TV Show.

Overview of the scene

The 2 minute scene contains a discussion about the popular movie *Back to the Future*. The characters are trying to resolve what seems to be a time-paradox of the storyline. Two of the main characters (Leonard and Sheldon) are explaining their solutions for the paradox to their friends (Rajesh and Howard). Sheldon stops Leonard by pointing out that they will need to use "unconventional" tenses in order to speak with correct grammar. The tenses they construct sound logical, however, they do not exist in English. The use of these "unconventional" tenses creates a high degree of humorous load in the scene.

Transcription of the scene with the nonexistent tenses highlighted

Sheldon: Is "placed" right?

Leonard: What do you mean?

Sheldon: Is "placed" the right tense for something that would have happened in the future of a past that was affected by something from the future?

Leonard: **Had will have placed?**

Sheldon: That's my boy.

Leonard: Okay, so, it wasn't until his 21st birthday that Biff **had will have placed** his first bet and made his millions. That's when he altered the timeline.

Sheldon: Yeah, but **he had will haven't placed it!**

Leonard: What?!

Sheldon: Unlike Hot Tub Time Machine, this couldn't be more simple. When Biff gets the almanac in 1955, the alternate future he creates isn't the one in which Marty and Doc Brown ever use the time machine to travel to 2015. Therefore, in the new timeline, Marty and Doc never brought the time machine...

Leonard: W-Wait. Is "brought" right?

Sheldon: Marty and Doc never **had have had brought**?

Leonard: I don't know. You did it to me.

Sheldon: Oh, I'm going with it. Marty and Doc never **had have had brought** the time machine to 2015. That means 2015 Biff could also not **had have had brought** the almanac to 1955 Biff. Therefore, the timeline in which 1955 Biff gets the almanac is also the timeline in which 1955 Biff never gets the almanac. And not just "never gets." **Never have, never hasn't, never had have hasn't.**

Activity

The T groups the students into teams of 3-4. Each team is given a copy of the transcription and one sheet of empty paper. The T plays the selected scene (with English subtitles) for the Ss. Then s/he instructs the students to skim the transcription and highlight any tense

structures they find strange/unknown. The T then asks the Ss to pay close attention to the next playback while also following the transcription with the highlighted structures. Then s/he makes sure that the structures the Ss highlighted are the "correct" (nonexistent) ones. The tasks for the students are the following:

- First they need to draw a timeline (similar to what the main characters did in the scene) and indicate the events of the movie in the scene (*Back to the Future*) roughly in chronological order. The point is to have a timeline clearly showing the past, the present and the future.

- Next they need to list the brief definitions (using their own words) of the simple and perfect aspects of past, present and future tenses (6 tenses).

- The next task is to come up with an explanation for how and why Sheldon constructed the nonexistent tenses.

After the Ss are done with the tasks, the groups present their own explanations. Since the possible combination of the simple and perfect aspect tenses is limited, probably each group will have similar explanations for the nonexistent tenses:

Examples:

"had will have placed" – the combination of past simple/perfect and future perfect.

"had have had brought" – the combination of past perfect and present perfect.

After each group presented their explanations, the T initiates a class discussion which should lead to a consensus on the nonexistent tenses (optional: the T might provide his/her own explanations).

"The focus is on *process* rather than product."