

## USING THE ROD TENSE SYSTEM (RTS) TO EXPLAIN ENGLISH VERB TENSES TO DEAF STUDENTS

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Twenty-six years ago, as a new teacher of English to Deaf students, I quickly became aware of my students' difficulty remembering when to use and how to form verb tenses. I began to search for a method to teach verbs in a way that would be both meaningful and easily retainable. As a result, I sought interactive and visually-oriented activities and materials.

One method that worked well for me was Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way (Gattegno, 1972, 1976). His activities with Cuisinaire Rods helped my students understand the use and meaning of verb tenses, but they were not as useful in helping my students retain the correct form of the tenses. Being deaf, my students could not unconsciously assimilate an audiologically-based linguistic pattern and reproduce its structure. They needed a visual model to help them grasp the patterns of the verb parts and their syntactic positions.

I decided that the colors and manipulability of the Cuisinaire Rods could be used in a different way to teach my students how to form the verb tenses. I could use the different colors of the rods to represent different parts of the verb tenses and to show what each part represents. As a result, I developed the Rod Tense System illustrated in the chart below.

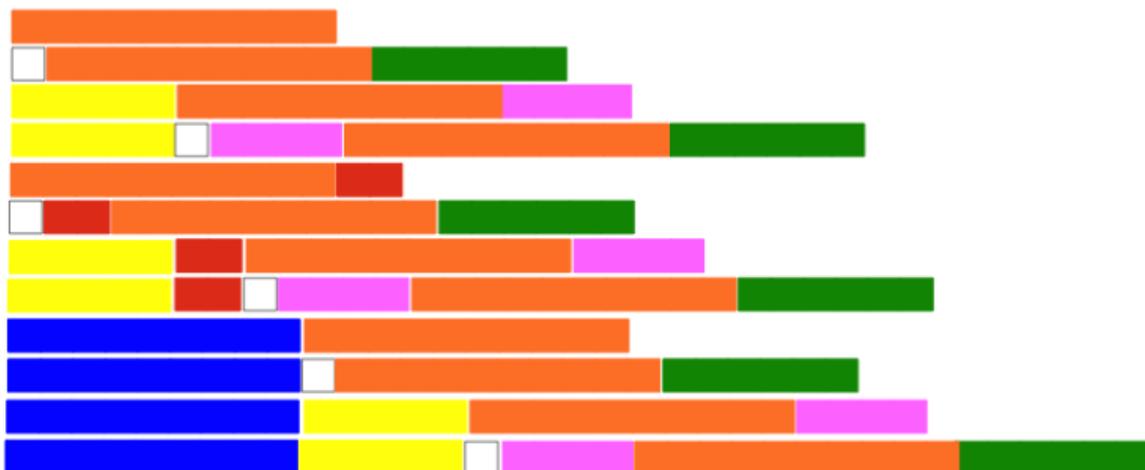


Fig. 1 The original Rod Tense Chart

Using this chart, my students could see that the constant in every tense is the orange rod, which represents the main verb. If a red rod is included, they also know that the verb occurred in the past, and if a blue rod is included, they know the verb will occur in the future. If neither a red nor a blue rod is included, they know the verb occurs in the present. The other patterns that become evident are that the white and green rods go together and the yellow and purple rods go together. The white represents the BE verb and the green represents -ING, while the yellow represents HAVE and the purple represents the past participle ending (usually -EN or -ED). The present, past and future each have the same four patterns available: simple (only the orange rod and the tense marker--no extra rod, a red rod, or a blue rod), progressive (the orange rod and tense marker with the white and

green rods), perfect (the orange rod with the yellow and purple rods), and perfect progressive (the orange rod with the tense marker, white, green, yellow, and purple rods all together). The chart below shows the rods with the parts written in:

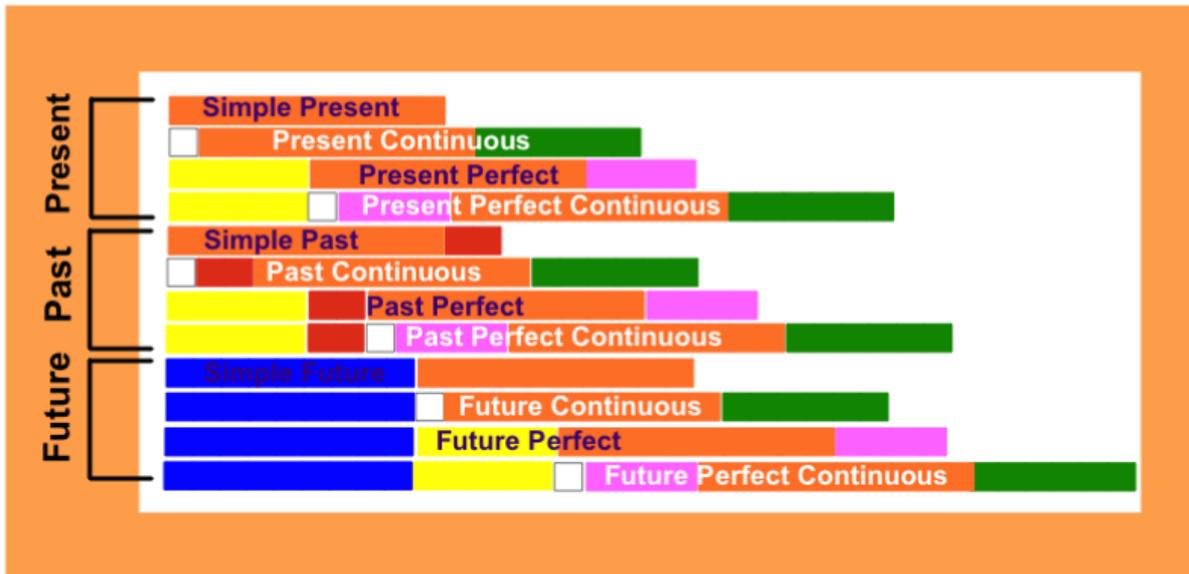


Fig. 2 The RTS chart with the verb tenses labelled

And here is an example with the verb WALK to demonstrate how the chart works:

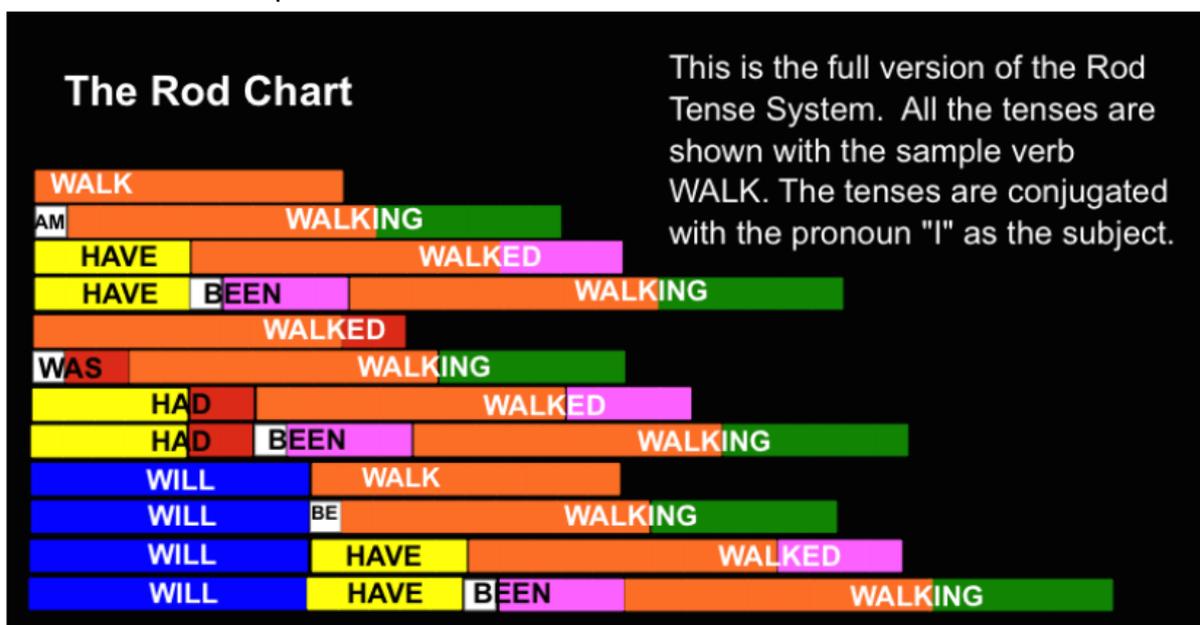


Fig. 3 The RTS chart demonstrated with the verb WALK

My approach in using the chart was to teach the verb tenses in their usual place in the curriculum, but to always introduce them with colored rods and use the colors as reinforcement. If a student was working on the present continuous, for example, and wrote a sentence such as: "I am walk." I would use the colors or numbers of the rods in my correction, saying, "Do you remember the three colors of the rods for present continuous? Which two colors do you have? Which did you forget?" or "What are the three colors you need for present continuous? Do you have all of them?" This approach worked well because it allowed the student to figure out the missing part on their own. Also, when writing sentences or paragraphs of expressive writing, I would have the students go back

and underline the verb parts with the correct colors so that they could find their verb errors independently in the editing process.

As the focus of my Rod Tense System is solely on form, it does not address the important factors of meaning and use as prescribed in the graphic below and explained at length by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999). Over time, I did develop many lessons that addressed meaning and use along with reinforcing form with the Rod system, but that was not my original intent. I did, however, end up developing both a workbook and a webpage (<http://therodtensesystem.wikispaces.com>) with lesson plans and ideas to help others who wanted a more complete system for teaching verbs. My belief, though, is that the Rods work well with any book or approach that teaches verbs, as it is just added into the lesson when form is taught.

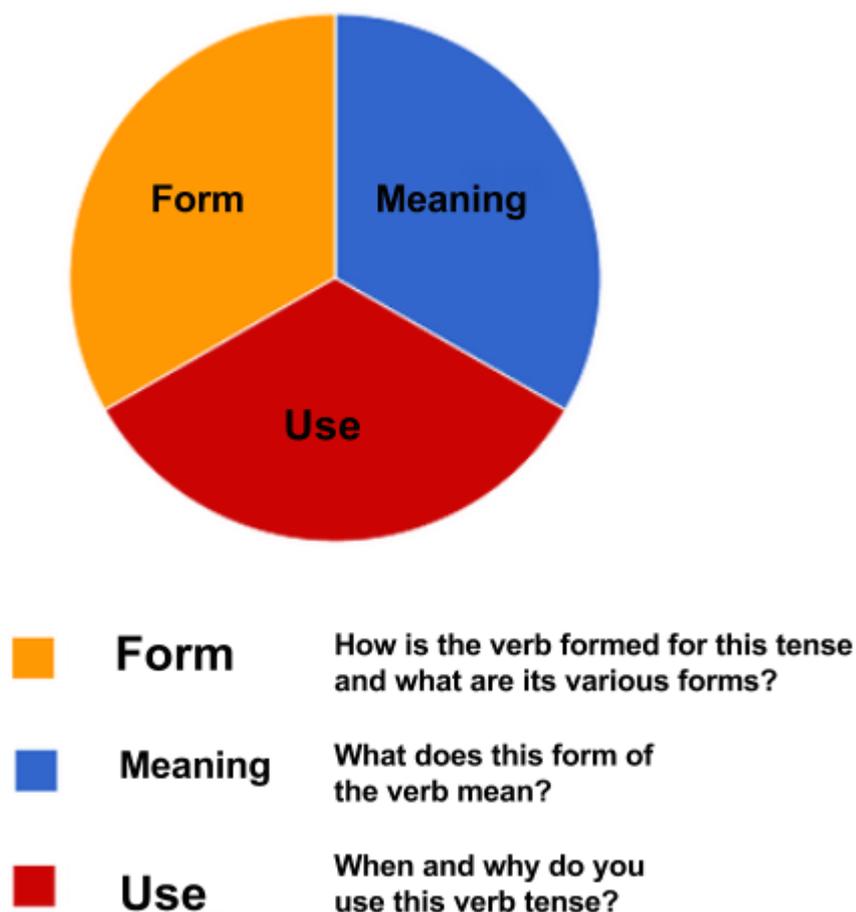


Fig. 4 Form, Meaning, and Use chart as adapted by Fields

After twelve years of teaching the RTS, I began to think about enhancing the system with stories that would help the students remember the form and reason for the tenses better. I developed characters to represent each Rod and stories that explained their behaviors and why they had the “friends” (the other rods that they worked with) that they did. The characters I developed are shown below:



Fig 5. The RTS characters

The characters are (in order from left to right):

1. Mr. Orange, who represents the main verb
2. DOg who is Mr. Orange's pet and helps him create interrogative and negative forms in the simple past and simple present (there's a story to explain why)
3. INGrid Green and BEatrice White, who are always needed when a progressive form is used
4. HAVEHAS and ENED who are the "perfect" couple and work together when a perfect form is needed.
5. WILL, who is focused on his future in baseball and is used in all four of the past tense forms.
6. Red ED who is old and likes to talk about the past by adding his name (ED) to the end of verbs, or who reminds us to use irregular forms.

The basic tenets of the stories are:

1. Mr. Orange (the orange rod character) likes to move a lot and can do any action: jump, run, swim, etc., but he also can stay still and: be, have, see, think, dream, etc. He does not know how to talk about anything except his habits (using Simple Present tense) and has to meet all of the other characters to learn how to form the other tenses.
2. Mr. Orange has a pet snake (which becomes the letter S in the story). When he is by himself or with you, he is comfortable, so he doesn't use it. When he sees many people, he is too shy to use it. However, when he sees just one person (Mary, John, He, She, It), he feels mischievous and takes out his snake and throws it at them to scare them. That is why there is an S added to the verb when the verb requires just one person and the orange rod.
3. DOg is Mr. Orange's pet. Mr. Orange calls him when he needs to form a negative or interrogative sentence. In general, when there is no other colored rod to the left of the orange rod, Mr. Orange will need the help of DOg. DOg is not represented by a rod. He is just a character. He helps Mr. Orange form DO/DOES and DID.
4. Mrs. Ingrid Green represents the green rod and has an adopted daughter, Beatrice White (the white rod). BE is from another culture where they have a tradition of secret names, so BE uses different names with different people (e.g. she is ARE with **you**, IS with **he, she, and it**, and AM when she talks to or about herself). When she is with her grandpa (Red ED), she has other secret names (WAS and WERE). Ingrid and BE can never be separated, so any time you use one, you must use the other.

5. HAVEHAS and ENED are the couple that is used for the perfect form of verbs. They must always be together. HAVEHAS represents the yellow rod and takes the form of HAVE or HAS or (if he is with Red ED) HAD. ENED represents the purple rod and reminds students to use the past participle ending of the verb, which is usually EN or ED in this form, although there is a list of irregular forms.
6. WILL does not change and is always used in the future tense forms. WILL is a young baseball player focused on his hopes for a professional career. He represents the blue rod.
7. Red ED is the grandfather figure. He represents the red rod. He loves the past and always tells stories that refer to the past. He has wild hair because, although regular forms join the Red ED club and use his name to form the past by adding -ED to verbs, other forms are "wild" and have irregular spellings.
8. Each tense has a story that explains how the characters meet and why they work together.

Once I began using the stories with my students, their retention of the forms improved and they understood the reason for using each tense better. To help you get a sense of how the stories use the characters, the character story for the future perfect progressive (which uses many of the characters together) is included below:

### **Havehas and Ened's Wedding Day:**

Havehas and Ened are walking on the beach. They are enjoying the sunshine and thinking about their wedding plans. They have been dating for over ten years, and are finally taking the big step into marriage.

Suddenly, Ingrid Green, Beatrice White, and Mr. Orange come into view.

"Hey look," says Havehas, "Here come Mr. Orange, Ingrid, and BE."

"Hi guys!" says Mrs. Green. "What are you two up to?"

"We are thinking about our wedding," answers Havehas. "We want to get married here on the beach."

"Congratulations!" Ingrid replies. "When will the wedding be?"

"Next summer!" answers Ened.

"We have so much to do before then!" Havehas adds.

"Hey! Look who else is here!" says Mrs. Green. "Hi, WILL!"

"Hi everybody! Did I hear you talking about the future? Can I join in? You know I love the future!" WILL states.

"I have a great idea!" Ingrid White comments. "Let's put all of our names together. We can talk about what will have been happening by the time you get married next summer."

"By next summer," Havehas smiles, "I will have been holding Ened's hand for 11 years! Ha! Ha! Just kidding. We let go sometimes."

"You're so funny, Havehas!" laughs Ened. "Seriously, though, by next summer we will have been preparing for our wedding for 9 months"

"I bet you also will have been making your guest list," WILL adds.

"Yes. But don't worry. I already know that you four will be invited," Ened tells them.

"Great! Because by the time I go shopping next month," Ingrid predicts, "I will have already been thinking about what to wear for a long time."

"By the time our wedding day comes," Havehas tells them, "I will have been planning my vows for a long time."

"Me too! I'm sure I will have been writing and rewriting them several times," Ened agrees.

Ingrid Green adds, "You will have been doing so much more than that. You will have been choosing flowers, bridesmaids, groomsmen, food, and much more!"

"That's overwhelming! And talking about food makes me hungry. Who wants to go get some food?" WILL asks.

"Me!" they all respond.

"Great! Let's go!" WILL encourages them.

They all head off the beach for the local restaurant.

The use of stories such as these are light-hearted and somewhat silly; but, using them with good humor and respect for the students' intelligence, they can be helpful for any age of student. The stories act as a sort of lens into the inner-workings of the verb part and their purposes without seeming dry or over-analytical. The characters can be used for dramatic reenactments of the verbs, for further story-telling, and for reminding the students of the reasons for using specific morphemes in creating their verbs. I have made short animations of the characters acting out their stories to make them more visual and easy to remember.

Overall, the difficulty of remembering and correctly using the English verb tense system can be overcome by the use of memory and explanatory aids such as the RTS. The use of color, rod size and number, and characters all provide teachers with a multitude of approaches for enhancing verb learning, and adding a little more fun and humor into the classroom. I am hopeful that the system will prove helpful to many more deaf students of English in the future.

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