

Preterite and Imperfect -- Transcript

Context

Hola y buenos días. It's a great thing when you start learning past tenses in another language because, all of a sudden, you can talk about important stuff like what you did last night or what happened over the weekend. You can even get in some cool arguments with your significant other over how each of you remember your first date – you know, who wore what and said what.

As you've figured out by now, we predominantly use two tenses in Spanish to talk about the past – *el pretérito* and *el imperfecto*. In this lesson, we're going to cover the basic uses of each so that you can keep them straight and become comfortable with using them.

Information

1. Let's begin by talking about the preterite tense.
 - a. The preterite, or *el pretérito*, is the tense we use when we want to talk about completed actions in the past. *Escribí la composición. Escuchamos el CD. Fui a Madrid.* In a very literal sense, when you get to the period in each of these sentences, the action is over. In fact, that's a good rule of thumb for the preterite tense. If the action doesn't keep going beyond the period, use *el pretérito*.
 - b. We also use the preterite tense to express the idea of an interrupting action. For example, if I say "I was talking on the phone when she entered," the second verb, "entered," is the interruption and has to be in the preterite. *Hablaba por teléfono cuando entró ella.*
2. That's easy enough, right. Use *el pretérito* for completed or interrupting actions. In reality, *el imperfecto* is just as easy. There are five specific instances or purposes for the imperfect tense.
3.
 - a. Continuing actions in the past – *Nosotros bailábamos a la música* (We were dancing to the music [the action continues after the period].)
 - b. Physical or emotional descriptions in the past – *La casa era vieja* (The house was old). *Me sentía loco* (I felt crazy).
 - c. Habitual or repeated actions in the past – *Visitábamos a nuestros abuelos cada verano* (We used to visit our grandparents every summer).
 - d. Telling time in the past – *Eran las tres.*

- e. Expressing age in the past – Yo tenía catorce años.
4. When we're talking about the preterite and imperfect it's also helpful to remember there are often "cue" words that can give you a hint as to which tense you need to use.
- a. For example, words or phrases that indicate specific times or time frames often kick off the preterite as it is about completed or limited actions. Here are some words or phrases that fall into that category.

ayer (yesterday)
anteayer (the day before yesterday)
anoche (last night)
en ese momento (at that moment)
entonces (then)
esta mañana (this morning)
esta tarde (this afternoon)
la semana pasada (last week)
el mes pasado (last month)
el año pasado (last year)
hace dos días, años (two days, years ago)
ayer por la mañana (yesterday morning)
ayer por la tarde (yesterday afternoon)

- b. Words that generally indicate the need for the imperfect express habit or repetition, or a vague time frame. These words or phrases include:

a menudo (often)
a veces (sometimes)
cada día (every day)
cada semana (every week)
cada mes (every month)
cada año (every year)
con frecuencia (frequently)
muchas veces (many times)
nunca (never)
siempre (always)
todas las semanas (every week)
todos los días (every day)
todo el tiempo (all the time)

5. Okay, are you ready for some quick practice? I'll read a sentence in English and you tell me whether or not I should use the preterite or imperfect tense.
- a. The professor spoke for thirty minutes. (preterite)

- b. John brought his book to class every day. (imperfect)
- c. We left the building at three in the afternoon. (preterite)
- d. Her eyes were angry and the wind was blowing fiercely. (imperfect)

Review – Things to Remember

Well, if you got all those right, you're in good shape. Just remember, we use the preterite for completed actions in the past and we look for specific time frames or time-limiting phrases. We use the imperfect for continuing actions, habitual or repeated actions, and for physical or emotional descriptions in the past.