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Practice with preterite and imperfect

We use cookies to improve your experience on our site. By pressing ACCEPT, you agree to our use of cookies to process your personal data to personalize your experience. We all know that getting our Spanish students to understand preterite vs. imperfect is extremely tricky. In previous posts, I shared how to teach preterite conjugations and my simple 5 question system for how to choose preterite or imperfect. This post will share my favorite preterite vs. imperfect activities for practicing and solidifying these two tenses.Students describe what their life was like when they were younger with photos of themselves (or during a certain time period - ex. in the 1980's). If students are doing presentations, videos, or slide shows, ask them to use artifacts (objects to represent what they liked in the past) to make the presentation more interesting.Each day post the memo on your door or put it up on the screen when students come into class. Here are a few of my favorites:Abuela knitting her spaghetti (hice)Zombie therapy (dije)Grumpy Cat (me divertí, fue)Great natural practice using the past tense. Learn more about how to set this up in Spanish Speaking Activities for Mondays.Split the students into pairs or groups of 3. Person A asks, "¿Qué hiciste ayer?" and Person B says what they did. Then Person A has to act out what Person B said they did.Example:Person A: "¿Qué hiciste ayer?"Person B: "Me cepillé los dientes."A: (with pretensions to brush teeth)B: "¿Qué hiciste ayer?"A: (still brushing his teeth), has to think of something he did and respond. "Caminé mi perro."B: (while walking the dog) asks, "¿Qué hiciste ayer?"This continues for as long as possible. When one student can't think of another answer, the other student wins. After they are used to the format, add some variations.Variations:1. Encourage your students to say silly sentences. Ex. I washed my belly button, ate my homework, sang my favorite song in Spanish, etc.2. Use different time frames: anoche, esta mañana, a las tres, la semana pasada, etc. (See next page for ideas). This is a great time to review "hace". Hace tres horas, hace dos días.3. Create longer sentences. Ex. I brushed my teeth because I ate lots of garlic. . . . while I drove my car to school. . . . and painted my toenails green.Students work in partners to ask if certain cooking activities have been completed or not. ¿Ya cortaste las cebollas? No, todavía no OR Sí, ya las corté. (If not completed the other partner says, ¡Hazlo ahora!) To incorporate the imperfect, have students answer, "No, todavía no. Cortaba las cebollas cuando . . . me interrumpiste, soné el teléfono, me corté con el cuchillo, etc."Preterite Speaking ActivityPreterite ActivityStudents choose a Spanish-speaking country that they'd like to visit and write a postcard describing a few of the cultural things to do in that country of city, what they did, what the weather was like, etc. Have them write a draft that you correct before they put their final copy on the postcard. They can find photos online to make the postcard or illustrate it themselves. They write 2 questions based on the info. from their postcard and then students walk around the room reading the postcards to find the answers.Students write all the preterite or imperfect verbs. You may want to have students watch the video for homework. Pause the video to discuss why the verb is preterite or imperfect. I like to use La leyenda del espantapájaros for this activity.These unique flashcards are great for learning how to use the preterite in the context of sentences.CAR, GAR, ZAR VerbsCheck out the preterite trifold flashcards: preterite AR verbs, preterite ER verbs, preterite IR verbs, CAR, GAR, ZAR verbs.Start with a sentence like: Era una noche oscura y espantosa. . . . Put students in small groups to write the next sentence together. Then each group reads their sentence and the class decides which one to choose. OR have the whole class write the story together. Help them expand their simple sentences to create more complex sentences. Ask clarifying questions to get students to add more details.Ex. Before: A monster jumped out. After: A green, hairy monster with six eyes jumped out of the closet where Lydia used to keep all her old, broken toys.Examples of clarifying questions: What did the monster look like? How many eyes did he have? What was the closet like? What was in the closet?Students identify all the preterite vs. imperfect verbs and then discuss the meaning of the song and why the specific verb tenses were used.Eres mi tesoroLa historia de JuanThere are tons of sites with great preterite vs. imperfect activities. Here are a few helpful ones:Studyspanish.comBarbara Kucson Nelsonclark.eduSelect a funny photo as a writing or speaking prompt. In small groups, students create a back story about what happened to cause this event?Pick an illustration with lots going on. Students have 5 minutes to write as much as they can about the photo.Grab your Simple 5 Question System for Choosing Preterite vs. Imperfect in the World Language Cafe Free Resource Library. Access the library to snag this and 25+ other forever-free resources!JOIN THE FREE RESOURCE LIBRARY!Preterite vs. Imperfect Activities (worksheets, videos, game cards to go with the activities listed in this post)Full Unit for the Preterite - Everything you need to teach the preterite from start to finish!Preterite vs. Imperfect Powerpoint - Explains the formation of both tenses and includes practice stories.Mega Bundle - Everything you need to teach both tenses from start to finish! Games, videos, songs, quizzes, tests, homework, internet practice, and so much more. Hope these preterite vs. imperfect activities help to spice up your Spanish classes! Is there an activity that you do in class that your students love for these tricky tenses? Let me know in the comments.Happy Teaching!-SherrySherry Sebasta With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Learn More With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Learn More Welcome to our grammar lesson on the topic of Preterite Vs. Imperfect in Spanish. Choosing between these 2 past tenses is usually a challenge for Spanish learners. In this lesson you will learn to choose between them, and to mix them sentences and paragraphs. We will practice the topic with several exercises. A sentence that mixes the Imperfect and the Preterite For clarity, we will associate the color orange with Preterite, and green with Imperfect. Note: We also have a separate lesson for each tense, where we explain their conjugations and provide more examples: The Spanish Preterite The Spanish Imperfect Preterite vs Imperfect - The difference We use both Preterite and Imperfect to talk about the past, but in different ways. In general... The Preterite is the tense for main actions. It answers the question: "What happened?". The Imperfect is the tense for background information. It answers the question: "What was going on?". So basically the Imperfect sets the stage for the action, and the Preterite narrates the action. Let's study the uses of each tense separately. Uses of the Preterite As we said, the Preterite is the tense for main actions. It answers the question: "What happened?". That's the basic idea. Also, there are some specific cases where we always choose the Preterite over the Imperfect. For example: actions that happened a stated number of times actions with a stated duration a chain of events, one after another verbs for beginnings and endings ("empezar, terminar..."), tend to be in Preterite and not Imperfect. Examples: Juan compró una lavadora ayer Juan bought a washing machine yesterday. (this answers the question "What happened?")El año pasado estuve enfermo dos veces.Last year I was sick twice. (number of times is stated, so we can confidently choose the Preterite) Viví diez años en Perú.I lived in Peru for ten years. (duration is stated, so we can confidently choose the Preterite) Ayer, Laura se levantó a las siete de la mañana. Luego se duchó, desayunó, se vistió y fue a hacer la compra.Yesterday, Laura got up at seven in the morning. Then she took a shower, ate breakfast, got dressed, and went shopping. (a chain of events one after another, so we can confidently choose the Preterite) La película empezó a las diez.The movie started at ten o'clock. (expresses a beginning or ending, so it is likely in Preterite and not Imperfect) Uses of the Imperfect The Imperfect is the tense for background information. It answers the question: "What was going on?". Typical cases where we use it are: descriptions of people (physical or psychological), things and places ongoing situations and habitual actions in the past (without stating an exact number of times) time frames: date, time, age... Examples: Nuestra casa era grande y tenía tres plantas.Our house was big and had three floors. (description) Cuando yo era niño, mi padre trabajaba en una fábrica. Todos los días volvía tarde a casa.When I was a child, my father worked in a factory. Every day he would come home late. (ongoing situation, habitual actions without stating an exact number of times) Era el año 2005 cuando...It was 2005 when... (time frame: date) Cuando yo tenía 20 años...When I was 20 years old... (time frame: age) Preterite and Imperfect in the same sentence If a sentence expresses 2 actions that happened at the same time, but one took longer than the other, the longer action tends to be in Imperfect, because it is considered "background information". The shorter action tends to be in Preterite. We can understand it better with the following graph: "Yesterday there was good weather, so I went out". The ongoing, longer action in Imperfect Tense. The main shorter action in Preterite. Examples: Ayer hacía buen tiempo y por eso salí.Yesterday there was good weather, so I went out. El otro día, vi a una mujer que jugaba con su hijo.The other day, I saw a woman who was playing with her son. Practice Now that we know the theory, let's practice choosing between the Spanish Preterite and the Imperfect with some exercises. Exercise 1: Choose Preterite or Imperfect In the following sentences, try to guess if the verb should be in Preterite (orange) or Imperfect (green). Click on the grey spaces to see the solutions, and then read the analysis where we explain the reason for every choice. 1) Yo fui al parque ayer.I went to the park yesterday.2) Los españoles descubrieron América en 1492.The Spaniards discovered America in 1492.3) De niño, jugaba a videojuegos todos los días.As a kid, I used to play video games every day.4) Mi abuelo era siempre divertido.My grandfather was always fun.5) Nosotros comimos y luego fuimos a la playa.We ate and then went to the beach.6) Él vivió primero en Dinamarca y después en España.First he lived in Denmark and then in Spain.7) Tú trabajaste 25 años en la compañía.You worked at the company for 25 years.8) Ella se casó dos veces.She married twice. Analysis of each sentence 1) This sentence simply expresses what happened → Preterite 2) Again, something happened → Preterite 3) Habitual action without stating an exact number of times → Imperfect 4) Description of a person → Imperfect 5) A chain of events, one after another → both verbs 6) Another chain of events. Each event might have taken years, but the sentence is still a chain of events one after another → Preterite 7) Stated duration, so here we can be very confident → Preterite. 8) Stated number of times, so again very confidently we choose... → Preterite Exercise 2: Preterite and Imperfect in the same sentence Each of these sentences includes two verbs, one in Preterite and one in Imperfect. Try to guess the tenses, then read our analysis: 1) Yo paseaba por el parque cuando vi a mis amigos.I was walking in the park when I saw my friends.2) Compré un reloj porque lo necesitaba.I bought a watch because I needed it.3) Cuando estábamos en la playa, vimos a Roberto.When we were on the beach, we saw Roberto.4) ¿Notaste que la habitación estaba vacía?Did you notice the room was empty?5) Conoci a un hombre que vivía en la jungla.I met a man who was living in the jungle. Analysis 1) "Walking in the park" and "seeing my friends" both happened at the same time. But walking took longer, so we consider it background information. In other words: What was going on? I was walking. What happened? I saw my friends. → was walking = Imperfect, saw = Preterite 2) "Buying the watch" and "needing it" both happened at the same time. But needing it took longer, so we consider it background information. → bought = Preterite, needed = Imperfect 3) "Being on the beach" took longer than "seeing Roberto" → wore = Imperfect, saw = Preterite 4) "The room being empty" is longer than "noticing it" → notice = Preterite, was = Imperfect 5) At this point, you don't even need the explanation → met = Preterite, was living = Imperfect Exercise 3: A story Finally, here is a paragraph that constantly mixes Preterite and Imperfect. Try to guess the tenses and then read our analysis: La princesa Isabel era (1) rubia y muy guapa. Vivía (2) en un gran castillo. Pero tenía (3) 25 años y aún no tenía (4) un esposo. Un día, un príncipe llegó (5) desde un reino lejano. Era (6) un poco feo, pero también simpático y divertido. Invitó (7) a la princesa a pasar el día con él, y ella aceptó (8). Montaron (9) a caballo, navegaron (10) por un lago y se hicieron (11) regalos. Por la noche, mientras miraban (12) las estrellas, él le preguntó (13) si quería (14) casarse con él. La princesa dijo (15) que no, y el príncipe regresó (16) a su reino. Princess Isabel was (1) blonde and very pretty. She lived (2) in a big castle. But she was (3) 25 years old and still didn't have (4) a husband. One day a prince arrived (5) from a faraway kingdom. He was (6) a bit ugly, but also nice and funny. He invited (7) the princess to spend the day with him, and she accepted (8). They rode (9) horses, sailed (10) on a lake and gave (11) each other presents. At night, as they were looking (12) at the stars, he asked (13) her if she wanted (14) to marry him. The princess said (15) no and the prince returned (16) to his kingdom. Analysis 1) Description of her looks → Imperfect 2) Ongoing situation in the past, background information: where she was living when the story begins → Imperfect 3) Time frame: age → Imperfect 4) More background info, what was going on in her life: she didn't have a husband → Imperfect 5) A prince arrived. A main action that happened → Preterite 6) Description of his looks → Imperfect 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) A chain of events, one after another → Preterite 12) Background info for other actions. It takes place at the same time, but is longer than those other actions → Imperfect 13 and 14) This one is a bit tricky. If we consider these two actions, him asking is the shorter one. Her wanting (or not wanting) is, in comparison, longer: her feelings about him at the time → 13 is Preterite and 14 is Imperfect. 15 and 16) A chain of events one after another → Preterite With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Learn More How good is your Spanish? Find out with Lingolia's free grammar test. The Preterite Tense Preterite vs. Imperfect Quizzes Preterite vs imperfect is one of the most challenging topics for many Spanish learners. For that reason, in this preterite vs imperfect quiz, you'll find 15 sentences that must be conjugated either to the preterite or the imperfect tense. Heads-up: since translating can make your task more difficult, this quiz will not contain any translations. Instead, check the time markers and the message that each sentence is trying to convey and, based on that, choose the right tense. If you need some practice first, take the easy preterite vs imperfect quiz here. If you need to go over the uses or conjugations, you can check my article on the differences between preterite and imperfect. Question Answer Given Correct Answer Juan (cumplir) _____ años la semana pasada. Colleen y Samantha (ir) _____ a un país diferente cada año. Cuando llegué, (ser) _____ la una de la tarde. Julio, ¿ya (hacer) _____ la tarea? El jueves pasado Kelly (traer) _____ a su bebé. El año pasado (hacer) _____ mucho calor. Cuando éramos niños no (hacer) _____ tanto calor. Ese sábado Tony (ir) _____ al cine con sus amigos. El cine (estar) _____ en el centro. Yo (tener) _____ quince años cuando te conocí. Antes, mis hermanos y yo (comer) _____ muchos dulces. ¿Cuánto tiempo (vivir) _____ Carlos y Karen en Madrid? Martha y Janeatte (empezar) _____ a trabajar aquí en 1990. Lee me (decir) _____ que (estar) _____ muy cansada. Alice y Peter se (parecer) _____ mucho cuando eran niños. With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Learn More With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Learn More With over 10 years of experience, HSA is where your goals merge with our teachers' passion: to improve your Spanish fluency. Custom-tailored to fit your needs, you choose your program, schedule, favorite teachers, pace of learning, and more. Please send comments or report errors by clicking here.© 1997-2025 Study Languages, LLC. All Rights Reserved. A while ago, we ran a survey among Spanish learners to see what topics were the hardest to learn in Spanish. Past tenses ranked #3. For most people, the struggle with past tenses comes down to knowing when to use preterite vs imperfect. Preterite and imperfect are fundamental when talking about the past. But, since they're used to express different information, you must know when to use each of these tenses. So, in this article, you'll find all the key information to grasp the difference between preterite and imperfect in Spanish and learning when to use each tense. The topics we'll cover include: In addition to examples, I'll make sure to add everyday situations where you must use each of these tenses What Is the Difference Between Preterite and Imperfect in Spanish? Both the preterite and imperfect are past tenses, but they express different aspects of the past. The imperfect describes recurring actions, events with no clear start or end, or how things or people used to be. The preterite is specific and definite. It expresses when an action occurred or the number of occurrences. Okay, that's the sum of it. Now, let's break this down into further detail. The preterite in Spanish focuses on: Actions that were completed in the past. Past events that occurred at a specific moment in the past. Sequences of completed past actions. This tense is closed and specific. In other words, it's clear that such actions are over. Additionally, most of the time, we know when they were completed. On the other hand, the imperfect tense focuses on two main things: past actions that occurred repeatedly (over extended periods of time) and providing background information about the past. So, the imperfect is commonly used to: Describe people, places, or circumstances in the pastTalk about past habits and routinesTell time Say people's ageDescribe past actions that occurred simultaneously To see these rules in action, compare and contrast the difference between these example phrases using the preterite and imperfect tenses. Preterite ExamplesImperfect ExamplesAyer fuimos a visitar a mis abuelos.Yesterday, we went to visit my grandparents.Cada sábado íbamos a visitar a mis papás.Each Saturday we went to visit my parents.Fuimos a esquiar.We went skiing.Solíamos ir mucho al cine.We used to go to the movies a lot.Cristóbal Colón descubrió América en 1492.Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492.Sus barcos eran La Niña, La Pinta y La Santa María.His ships were the Nina, the Pinta and the Santa María.Tip: Use this analogy. If preterite and imperfect were used in a movie, the preterite tense will focus on telling you exactly what happened and when. For instance, you'd use this tense to say that Christopher Columbus discovered America in 1492. On the other hand, the imperfect would help you provide background information about that action. In this case, it would help you describe how the trip was, among other details. In Spanish, you need both tenses to provide a complete picture of the past. Check this passage of Ricote de Oro. Example of preterite vs imperfect Let's use some examples to see the difference between these tenses. Do NOT rely too much on translation because these tenses are usually translated the same. Instead, check how the remaining information affects the meaning of the sentences: Preterite Bruno cantó en el cumpleaños de Sara.Bruno sang at Sara's birthday party. Imperfect Bruno cantaba en el bar todos los domingos.Bruno sang at the pub every Sunday. In example #1, the singing occurred once at a specific time (Sara's birthday). Bruno was probably singing happy birthday to you. However, by using cantar in the imperfect tense and todos los domingos, I'm communicating that singing was a recurring action for Bruno. It wasn't a one-time occurrence on a specific date or event. That's why it's imperfect. Preterite and Imperfect Conjugations Another difference between imperfect and preterite is the way they're conjugated. Here are the charts with the regular verb endings for these tenses: Imperfect tense Subject-AR Verbs-ER / IR VerbsYo-aba-Tú-abas-íasEl / Ella / Usted-aba-íasNosotros-ábamos-Vosotros-abais-áisEllos / Ellas / Ustedes-aban-ían Preterite tense Subject-AR Verbs-ER / IR VerbsYo-é-Tú-aste-isteEl / Ella / Usted-é-íNosotros-amos-imosVosotros-asteis-isteisEllos / Ellas / Ustedes-aron-ieron Here is a graphic showing the examples for the verbs cantar, beber, and vivir conjugated to the preterite and imperfect tenses. When it comes to conjugations, the imperfect tense is easy to learn because it only has three irregular verbs. On the other hand, the preterite has many stem-changing verbs along with highly irregular verbs. If you want to dig deeper into the irregular verbs in preterite, you can dive deeper into it with this section I wrote about preterite conjugations. Trigger Words for Preterite and Imperfect Time markers are expressions that help you communicate when something happens. Time markers are commonly known as "trigger words" because they trigger a tense, in this case, either imperfect or preterite. Keep in mind that trigger words are not mandatory, but when you hear, read, write or say one of them, they'll help you identify the tense in which to conjugate the verb. Below there are two lists with trigger words exclusive for each one of these tenses: Preterite trigger words: Ayer - YesterdayAntier - The day before yesterdayYa - AlreadyEl año pasado - Last yearEl mes pasado - Last monthLa semana pasada - Last weekEl [día de la semana] pasado - Last [day of the week]Face - AgoEn + [año] - In + [year]Esta semana - This week Anoche - Last nightHoy en la mañana - This morning Esta mañana - This morning Imperfect Trigger Words Antes - BeforeA menudo - OftenA veces - SometimesCasi nunca - Hardly everCasi siempre - Almost alwaysCada año - Every yearDe vez en cuando - From time to time En ese entonces - Back thenEn ese tiempo - Back thenMientras - While Rara vez - Rarely Todas las mañanas - Every morning Todos los años - Every year/Todos los días - Every day Take Note: Notice how the preterite trigger words or phrases are used to describe specific points in time while the imperfect triggers are either describing recurring events or talk about the past in general terms, without further specification. Lily se casó el año pasado.Lily got married last year. En ese entonces, no había electricidad.Back then, there was no electricity. Mis hermanos y yo jugábamos todos los días.My brother and I played every day. Because they both refer to the past, some time markers can be suitable for preterite and imperfect. If this is the case, you must ask yourself what you want to communicate. Examples of contextual time markers that can be used for both tenses are: Ese día - That dayEse año - That yearCuando - When En + [año] - In + [year]Nunca - NeverSiempre - Always Cuando éramos niños, comíamos muchos dulces.When we were kids, we ate a lot of candies. Ya se habían ido cuando llegué.They were gone when I arrived. As the example above shows, the preterite and imperfect often work together in the same sentence. One provides some background information, and the other communicates the main action. Tricks to Determine When to Use Preterite vs Imperfect The trick to using preterite or imperfect is to determine what you want to communicate when referring to the past. Is it something that happened frequently in the past or generally over a long period of time? Is it something that just happened once or at a specific time? In the table below, you'll find common situations that people talk about in the past. For each scenario, I've marked its corresponding tense. You can use this as your cheat sheet until you get comfortable with these tenses. SituationPreterite or Imperfect?Telling time in the pastImperfectSaying ageImperfectSaying what you did over the weekendPreteriteSharing a memoryPreteriteSharing memories of past routines, activities, or traditionsImperfectDescribing the weather over a long period of timeImperfectDescribing the weather on a specific datePreteriteSaying when you or someone celebrated something (e.g. got married, graduated or had a birthday)PreteriteTalking about your past habits or routinesImperfectReferring to actions that occurred a specific number of timesPreteriteTalking about actions that began or lasted a specific amount of timePreteriteDescribing past feelingsImperfectDescribing how people or places used to beImperfectTalking about a sequence of completed actionsPreteriteTalking about actions that overlapped or occurred simultaneouslyImperfectProviding background or context about the pastImperfect Talking about location in the pastImperfect Take Note: While the trigger words are an excellent way to know when to use one tense over the other, alone they'll get you 90% of the way. Use these situations as contextual prompts for when to use either the preterite or imperfect tense everytime. Practice: Imperfect and Preterite Quizzes Hands down, the best way to master preterite vs imperfect is by practicing! Here you have some quizzes so you can practice. Instead, pay attention to other parts of the sentence and the message they're conveying. If you're new to the differences between imperfect and preterite and would like to test the waters, you can start by taking this easy preterite vs imperfect quiz. If you're ready to take your practice to the next level, you should take this advanced quiz where you'll have to choose between preterite and imperfect to complete the sentences. Download the Preterite vs Imperfect Cheat sheets Download a copy of the cheat sheets for Preterite vs Imperfect in Spanish to study later! Download Cheat Sheets PDF