

Mistake #8 Using “了(le)” to indicate past tense for all verbs

Chinese is very loosely structured around tense. The easiest way to indicate tense is to use a time marker. For example, to say “I will go to China tomorrow”, you can simply say “I tomorrow go to China.” Adding “tomorrow” makes the sentence future tense. If you want to say “I watched a movie yesterday”, you can simply say “I yesterday watch a movie”. “Yesterday” makes the sentence past tense.

There’s another way of expressing completion of an action, and that is to use the particle “了(le)”. There are two things you need to remember regarding the usage of “了(le)” :

1. “了(le)” is NOT equivalent to past tense. In other words, don’t treat “了(le)” as the suffix “-ed” as in “danced”, “used”, etc. “了(le)” emphasizes that the action has been completed and can be used in any tense.
2. Since only action verbs can be marked as complete, “了(le)” can only be used with action verbs to indicate past tense. Remember, you CANNOT use “了(le)” to indicate past tense for adjectival verbs and stative verbs. For adjectival verbs or stative verbs, you need to use a past time marker, such as “before or previously – 以前 (yǐ qián)” to indicate the past.

The following is the table of common adjectival verbs, stative verbs and action verbs.

Adjectival Verbs (functioning as verbs in Chinese)		Stative Verbs (showing a state, not an action, the way things ARE)		Action Verbs (relating to a process instead of a state)	
English	Pinyin	English	Pinyin	English	Pinyin
Good	hǎo	To be	shì	To read	kàn (shū)
Pretty	piào liang	To have	yǒu	To watch	kàn
Handsome	shuài	To like	xǐ huān	To cook	zuò (fàn)
Adorable	kě ài	To think / to feel (expressing an opinion)	jué de	To dance	tiào (wǔ)
Smart	cōng míng	To know	zhī dào	To sing	chàng (gē)
Early	zǎo	To understand	míng bái	To go	qù
Late	wǎn	To feel (physical or emotional)	gǎn jué	To sleep	shuì (jiào)
Tall/high	gāo	To love	ài	To return to	huí

Common Chinese Mistakes Made by English Speakers

Big	dà	To want	yào	To buy	mǎi
Small	xiǎo	To want to (do something)	xiǎng	To say	shuō

The following table summarizes how to indicate past tense for adjectival verbs, stative verbs and action verbs.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Adjectival verbs – Adding a past time marker “previously or before”		
She was beautiful. (lit. She before beautiful.)	tā yǐ qián hěn piào liang 。	她以前很漂亮。
I was lazy. (lit. I before lazy.)	wǒ yǐ qián hěn lǎn 。	我以前很懶。 我以前很懶。
Stative verbs - Adding a past time marker “previously or before”		
I was a teacher before. (lit. I before am teacher.)	wǒ yǐ qián shì lǎo shī 。	我以前是老師。 我以前是老師。
I had lots of money. (lit. I before have lots of money.)	wǒ yǐ qián yǒu hěn duō qián 。	我以前有很多錢。 我以前有很多錢。
Action verbs – “Adding le”		
I ate three hamburgers.	wǒ chī le sān ge hàn bǎo bāo 。	我吃了三個漢堡包。 我吃了三個漢堡包。
He went home.	tā huí jiā le 。	他回家了。
I bought lots of stuff.	wǒ mǎi le hěn duō dōng xi 。	我買了很多東西。 我買了很多東西。

3. If a stative verb or adjectival verb is followed by “了(le)”, the meaning is “change of status” rather than “completeness of an action” .

Examples

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Adjectival verbs		
She is no longer beautiful. (lit. She not beautiful le.)	tā bú piào liang le 。	她不漂亮了。
I am tired now. (lit. I tired le.)	wǒ lèi le 。	我累了。

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Stative verbs		
I don' t love you any more. (I don' t love you le.)	wǒ bú ài nǐ le 。	我不爱你了。 我不愛你了。
She is a mother now. (lit. She is mother le.)	tā shì mā mǔ le 。	她是妈妈了。 她是媽媽了。
Now I understand. (lit. I understand le.)	wǒ míng bái le 。	我明白了。