

Hablando de gramática

por Señor Conner

John Conner is the author of the popular language series BREAKING THE SPANISH BARRIER. Each month he will feature a grammatical topic of interest to our readers. Have ideas of topics you would like to see covered? E-mail Señor Conner at john@tobreak.com. You can also visit his website: www.tobreak.com.

El pretérito y el imperfecto

Choosing between the **preterite** and the **imperfect** can sometimes feel a little daunting to a non-native speaker! Sometimes, either choice would make perfect sense – it just depends what one wants to emphasize.

If you are describing a COMPLETED action – one with a clear beginning or ending point or one that went on for a specific amount of time – stick to the **preterite**.

If, on the other hand, you are describing an action that is NOT COMPLETE, or if you are DESCRIBING something or someone, or if you are TELLING TIME in the past, or if you are relating HABITUAL actions, use the **imperfect**.

In the following sentences, you will find examples of both the preterite and imperfect. In the parentheses following each sentence, an explanation is offered for the choice of tense.

Examples: Luis Miguel sólo **cantó** por media hora.
(cantó – preterite – clear ending point)
Luis Miguel only sang for a half an hour.

Vi la película The Greatest Game seis veces durante las vacaciones.
(Vi – preterite – completed action ... it's a countable number of times as opposed to a habit!)
I saw the movie The Greatest Game six times during vacation.

Yo **leía** mi revista mientras mi novio **leía** su libro.
(Leía/leía – imperfect – two ongoing actions)
I was reading my magazine while my boyfriend was reading his book.

Mi abuelita siempre me **hacía** una torta de chocolate para mi cumpleaños.
(hacía – imperfect – habitual action)
My grandmother always used to make me a chocolate cake for my birthday.

Eran las cinco y media cuando Juanes **comenzó** a cantar.
(Eran – imperfect – telling time; comenzó – preterite – completed action .. Juanes did, in fact, BEGIN to sing .. the beginning is completed!)
It was five-thirty when Juanes began to sing.

Speaking of Grammar

by John Conner

Examples continued...

Pedro Martínez **estaba** frustrado cuando el reportero lo **insultó**.
(estaba – imperfect – description; insultó – preterite – completed action)
Pedro Martínez was frustrated when the reporter insulted him.

Escuchábamos la nueva canción de Shakira, Obtener un sí, cuando **sonó** el teléfono.
(Escuchábamos – imperfect – action in progress; sonó – preterite – completed action)
We were listening to the new Shakira song, Obtener un sí, when the phone rang.

Prueba de repaso

Choose between the preterite and the imperfect in the following sentences. Think carefully - is the action described in the sentence complete? Is there a clear ending point? If so, use the preterite. If not, go with the imperfect!

- A) ¡Qué suerte! Anoche tú _____ a Loretta Sánchez, la Congresista de California. (conocer)
- B) Mi novio _____ la aspiradora en casa cuando de repente _____ la alarma de incendios. (pasar/sonar)
- C) La puerta _____ cerrada con llave ... y por desgracia, yo no _____ abrirla. (estar/poder)
- D) _____ las cinco de la mañana cuando mi compañero de cuarto me _____. (Ser/despertar)
- E) Yo no _____ a qué hora comenzaba la fiesta, y por eso, _____ tarde. (saber/llegar)
- F) Lorenzo y yo sólo _____ en Caracas por una semana este verano a causa de las lluvias. (estar)
- G) Cameron Díaz _____ que siempre _____ en Justin Timberlake cuando _____ a otros lugares. (admitir/pensar/viajar)
- H) Esta tarde _____ a mi amiga María Sandoval a la fiesta, pero ella _____ ocupada y _____ que no. (invitar/estar/decir)
- I) El cielo _____ azul y todos _____ muy sorprendidos cuando de repente _____ a llover. (estar/quedarse/comenzar)

ANSWERS: A) conociste B) pasaba/sonó C) estaba/puede D) Era/despertó E) sabía/llegué F) estuvimos G) admitió/pensaba/viajaba H) invitó/estaba/dijo I) estaba/se quedaron/comenzó