The present perfect simple may describe something which is repeated or extended, but this is not necessarily the case.

*Your wife **has rung**.* (She may have rung just once, and only briefly.)

When we use the present perfect continuous, we understand that the event is repeated or extended.

*Your wife **has been ringing**.*

The present perfect simple focuses more on the completed result and the present perfect continuous more on the activity itself. The following may describe the same 'recently stopped activity'.

*I**'ve painted** the room.* (and so I have a sense of having achieved or accomplished something)

*I**'ve been painting** the room.* (and that's why I'm covered in paint)

Because of the recentness of events described by the present perfect continuous, we don't use it to describe general biographical, historical or circumstantial detail.

Summary of key differences between these two tenses to express past meaning.

	Present perfect	
	Continuous	Simple
Finished events	✓	✓
Events located in an unfinished period of time		✓
Events which may be part of general biographical, historical or circumstantial detail		✓
Events which have only very recently finished	✓	(✓)
Events which took place over an extended period of time	✓	(✓)

Typical difficulties for learners

Comprehension

Misunderstanding rarely results from uncertainty about the differences between these tenses, or between these tenses and past tenses. However, the following can cause difficulty.

How long …?

The expression *how long* includes no explicit reference to time, and learners may fail to understand this question:

How long have you been living here?

We often compress all the syllables before and after *long* in normal, casual speech (/ˌlɒvbɪlɪv'hɪə/), and this can make it even more difficult for learners to understand the question.

Present and present perfect tenses

They may also confuse the meaning of the present perfect and the present tense in questions beginning *How long …?* or in sentences including a phrase beginning … *for*.

*How long **have you been (waiting)** here for?* *How long **are you (waiting)** here for?*

*I **have been (staying)** here for a week.* *I **am (staying)** here for a week.*

Speaking and writing

It takes a long time and a lot of exposure to English for many learners to be clear when to use the present perfect and when to use the present or past simple. Even when they are clear, they may continue to make mistakes under the pressure to communicate.

Some learners find choosing between the tenses difficult because their own language doesn't make this kind of distinction. Speakers of some European languages may be misled by the fact that their own languages have tenses which are similar in form, but which are used quite differently.

Choosing between present and present perfect

It is very common for learners to use the present simple or continuous instead of the present perfect with *How long …?, for* and *since*.

**I am waiting for you since 6.00.* **I stay in London since Saturday.*

Many learners find this use instinctively logical and 'correct', and continue making this kind of mistake long after they have learned the correct rule.

This problem can lead to serious misunderstanding when the present continuous is used with *How long …?* or *for …* in place of the present perfect continuous, because the sentences may be structurally correct, but express something the learner doesn't intend. Learners may say the following, meaning 'until now', but people may understand that *two weeks* is the total length of the stay.

We're staying in London for two weeks.

How long …?

Because the expression *how long* includes no explicit reference to time, learners may adapt it to make it more explicit.

**How long time have you been living here?*

They may also use a present tense in place of the present perfect:

**How long are you living here?*

They may also avoid questions with *How long …?* altogether, opting for a simpler but less idiomatic form such as *When did you start living here?*

For and *since*

Learners often confuse these two prepositions.

Many learners are instinctively reluctant to construct sentences which finish with time adverbials beginning *for* or *since*. They often 'invent' introductory phrases to convey the information about time. The following learners have created hybrid structures mixing elements of their respective first languages (French and Chinese) with elements of English grammar.

**It is six years I haven't smoked.* **There's so long we don't see each other.*

The (*first/second,* etc.) *time*

Learners may choose a tense that they consider more logical than the normal present perfect.

(*)It is the first time I am travelling by plane.

Native speakers also vary the tenses after *the first time*, but teachers may choose to treat this as a mistake so that their learners become familiar with the 'standard' form (which some examinations may demand).

Over-use of present perfect forms

Learners may pay so much attention to choosing the present perfect instead of the present when they use expressions beginning with *for, since* or *How long …?*, that they begin to over-associate the present perfect with these expressions and use this tense even when it is not appropriate.

**I have been living there for a long time when the war started.* (instead of *I had been living*)

Mistakes of this kind may go unnoticed when the time (e.g. *when the war started*) is not specified, and this can lead to serious misunderstanding. For example, if a retired person says the following, people will understand that they are still working.

**I have been working as a police inspector for many years.*

Choosing between past simple and present perfect simple

The most noticeable mistakes are often those in which learners use the present perfect simple in place of the past simple.

**Has she been there last year?*

**When I was 9 we have moved to a large house.*

Learners also sometimes use the past simple in place of the present perfect simple. This is generally considered incorrect in British English although it is correct in American English.

(*)I already did it. *(*)Did you have dinner yet?*

Choosing between past simple and present perfect continuous

Learners may also use the past simple in place of the present perfect continuous, for example using the following to express irritation.

**You drank!* (instead of *You've been drinking!*)

**I waited for you!* (instead of *I've been waiting for you!*)

This use of the past simple can conceal or confuse the speaker's intention since the meanings of the two tense forms are significantly different.

Simplification

Under the pressure of on-the-spot communication, learners may leave words out or simplify grammar. For example, they may use the word order of a statement rather than the more complicated word order of a question. This happens frequently in all question forms, particularly after question words (*what, when,* etc.), perhaps because these already show that the sentence is a question. It also happens particularly in negative questions (see the second example below), perhaps because they include so many grammatical elements (tense, question form and negative).

**What you have brought us?* **Why you haven't done it?*

Learners whose first language indicates questions only by punctuation or intonation are especially likely to make mistakes like this.

Learners sometimes simplify grammar in affirmative sentences as well as in questions. They may leave out an auxiliary verb in contexts where they should use two together.

**He has living there.*

Regular and irregular forms

Learners need to learn irregular past and past participle forms as items of vocabulary. They may be inclined to use regular forms when they should use irregular ones.

Typical examples are:

**I've speaked about it.* **Have they took the rubbish away?*

They may also use present forms instead of past participles.

**The most understanding person I have meet.*