ESL: Verb Use

I. Make subjects and verbs agree in number and person.

In the present tense, verbs agree with their subjects in number (singular or plural) and in person (first, second, or third). The ending –s (or –es) is added to a verb if its subject is third person singular or a subject in singular number; otherwise the verb takes no ending.

× Incorrect: Eggs comes from hens.

☺ Correct: Eggs come from hens.

II. Choose the right form of irregular verbs.

× Incorrect: Yesterday we seen an UFO.

☺ Correct: Yesterday we saw an UFO.

× Incorrect: By Friday, the stock market had fell two hundred points.

☺ Correct: By Friday, the stock market had fallen two hundred points.

Note: Except for the verb BE, all main verbs in English have five forms:

Base form: Usually I (walk, ride.)

Past form: Yesterday I (walked, rode.)

Past participle: I have (walked, ridden) many times before.

Present participle: I am (walking, riding) right now.

-s form: He/she/it (walks, rides) regularly.
For regular verbs, the past-tense and participle forms end with –ed or –d: walked. Irregular verbs are formed differently: rode, ridden.

The past-tense form always occurs alone, without any helping verb. It is used to express an action that occurred entirely in the past.

The past participle forms the perfect tenses with has, have, had and the passive voice with be, am, is, are, was, were, being, or been.

III. Use appropriate verb endings.

Use –s or –es on present-tense verbs that have third person singular subjects.

× Incorrect: The dirt floors requires continual sweeping.

☺ Correct: The dirt floors require continual sweeping.

× Incorrect: Metal expand when heated.

☺ Correct: Metal expands when heated.

When the subject of a sentence is third-person singular, its verb takes an –s or –es ending in the present tense. All singular nouns (such as child), the pronouns (he, she, it), and in definite pronouns (such as everyone) are third-person singular.

Rules for adding –s or –es to the verbs:

a. In most cases, add –s to the end of the verbs.
work—works
feel—feels

b. Add –es to verbs with endings like ch, sh, s, x, o.

    teach—teaches
    fetch—fetches
    wash—washes
    wish—wishes
    guess—guesses
    miss—misses
    fax—faxes
    fix—fixes

c. As for the verbs that end with consonant y, change the y to i and add–es.

    cry—cries
    fry—fries
    reply—replies

Do not add the –s ending to the verb if the subject is not third-person singular.

IV. Use –ed endings on regular verbs.

    × Last summer my counselor advise me to ask my family for help.
    ○ Last summer my counselor advised me to ask my family for help.

We use an –ed or –d ending to express the past tense of regular verbs. The past tense is used when the action occurred entirely in the past.

    × Robin has ask me to go to California with her.
    ○ Robin has asked me to go to California with her. (‘Has asked’ is present perfect tense, ie, ‘have’ or ‘has’ followed by a past participle).

    × You are invite to give us a talk in English.
You are invited to give us a talk in English. (‘Are invited’ is in the passive voice, ie, a form of the verb ‘to be’ followed by a past participle).

All aerobics classes end in a cool-down period to stretch tighten muscles. (‘Tightened’ is a participle used as an adjective to modify the noun ‘muscles’).

V. Choose the appropriate verb tense.

Tense indicate the time of an action in relation to the time of the speaking or writing about that action. The simple present tense is used primarily for actions occurring at the time of the speaking or for actions occurring regularly.

He always goes to school by bus.

Scientific facts, truths, and other objective existence are all stated in the present.

The boiling point of water is 100 degrees Celsius.
The simple past tense is used for actions completed in the past.

Her grandma died ten years ago.
The simple future tense is used for actions that will occur in the future.

She will come tonight.
The phrase “be going to” also means actions that will occur in the future.

We are going to have a meeting this afternoon.

More complex time relations are indicated by the perfect tenses. A verb in one of the perfect tenses expresses an action that was or will be completed at the time of another action.
Everyone has spoken by the time I arrive.

Everyone had spoken by the time I arrived.

The progressive forms consist of ‘be’ followed by a present participle.

She is singing while others are dancing.

The progressive forms are not normally used with mental activity verbs such as believe, know, and think.

VI. **Keep verb tenses consistent.**

Consistent verb tenses clearly establish the time of the actions being described. When a passage begins in one tense and then shifts without warning and for no reason to another, readers are confused.

× There was no way I could fight the current. Just as I was losing hope, a stranger jumps off a passing boat and swims towards me.

© There was no way I could fight the current. Just as I was losing hope, a stranger jumped off a boat and swam toward me.

VII. **Avoid inappropriate uses of the passive voice.**

In the active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action; in the passive voice, the subject receives the action.

Active: Ann caught the fly ball.

Passive: The fly ball was caught by Ann.
The passive voice is appropriate if you wish to emphasize the receiver of the action or to minimize the importance of the actor.

Details of the contract haven’t been made public.

In a great deal of scientific writing, the passive voice properly emphasizes the experiment or process being described, not the researcher.

The solution was heated to the boiling point and reduced in volume by 50 percent.