

Translation problems: imperfect or preterite?

Although the English form 'used to...' is almost always translated by an imperfect tense in Spanish, sometimes, out of context, it is very difficult to know if we have to use an imperfect or a preterite when we translate from Spanish into English. Some of the following examples may help you in your future translations:

Hablaba francés (imperfect). He used to speak French.

Me **habló** en francés (preterite). He spoke to me in French.

Cuando **estaba** en Italia (imperfect). When I was in Italy. (Continuous)

Cuando **estuve** en Italia (preterite) When I visited Italy. (One time)

Cuando él **estaba** enfermo no podía trabajar (imperfect). During the time he was ill, he was not able to work.

Estuvo muy enfermo (preterite). He was very ill (and got better).

José no **encontraba** al profesor (imperfect). José (for a continuous time) was not able to find the teacher.

José no **encontró** al profesor (preterite). José couldn't find the teacher.

El coche **era** barato (imperfect). The car was a cheap car. (Poor quality)

El coche **fue** barato (preterite), The car was a bargain. (At the time)

Yo iba a comer (imperfect). I was going to eat.

Fui a comer (preterite). I went to eat.
