

The Present Progressive: A Difficult Aspect to Learn, Evidence from the Moroccan EFL Classroom

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Abstract

The present progressive is one of the structures that create immense problems to foreign learners of English in general and Moroccan ones in particular. These learners fail to use this aspect appropriately in discourse due to a difficulty in internalising its real meaning. Our survey shows that these English as a foreign language (EFL) learners associate the present progressive with only one context of use- the one referring to actions/ events happening around *NOW* or at the moment of speaking. Students generally fail to go beyond this focal meaning. They tend to ignore the other contexts where the present progressive can be used. Along with this complexity/ plurality of meaning, the problem could be attributed to some deficiencies in the learning and the teaching enterprises as well. This paper draws both students' and practitioners' attention to a number of facts related to the learning/ teaching of this aspect. The study provides a detailed description of the different functions/ uses of the present progressive with examples. Moreover, it highlights the situations / contexts that are more problematic to students on the basis of our test's results. Most importantly, the findings show that the conventional traditional grammar course has many limitations. Therefore, there is an urgent need for an alternative course or method of teaching that is capable of helping students become more proficient in the use of tense and aspect in general.

Key words: aspect, learning, present progressive, teaching, tense

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Introduction

Learning a second/ foreign language involves learning its grammar. This latter has been always considered as the focal element in any language program. If the objective is to help learners become accurate in language use, grammar should be taught regardless of the approach adopted. As language users, we have a pretty good ear for what sounds correct and what sounds wrong. In our communication, we usually drop an eye upon vocabulary mistakes. However, grammatical errors are usually hard to tolerate. Such errors communicate some information about how far is the learner in the learning process.

While learning grammar, learners make a lot of errors. Like children acquiring their mother tongue (MT), non-native learners go through certain stages and developmental orders during the process of learning a target language (TL). Learners' production varies from one developmental stage to another. During these stages, learners make series of systematic errors because their knowledge about the TL is incomplete. Studies have shown that errors also occur due to transfer from learners' MT. Transfer can be a big problem if the learner's native language is too distinct from the TL. In this respect, Arab learners, in general, encounter a number of difficulties while dealing with the grammar of English since there are huge dissimilarities between Arabic and English.

Tense and aspect are two grammatical components that Arab learners in general find difficult to learn. The difficulty basically stems from the fact that Standard Arabic and English are two different languages. Hence, they consist of two distinct tense-aspect systems. English, on one hand, has a lot of tense and aspect classes. Arabic, on the other hand, consists of just two aspects: the perfect called 'al madi' /الماضي/ and the imperfect called 'al modarie' /المضارع/. The former refers to complete actions "what we did", and the latter refers to incomplete ones "what we do". Yet, language distance is not the only cause for the difficulty learners face. Undoubtedly, the problem is also due to a number of deficiencies in the learning and the teaching enterprises.

Studies have also shown that Arab learners are in favour of the simple aspects such as the simple present and the simple past (Bouras, 2006). This has always been taken as evidence for transfer. Arab learners mark temporal situations in English under a strong influence of the Arabic aspectual classes (the perfect and the imperfect). The tendency to use the simple aspects should be also seen as an instance of overuse and avoidance strategies. Students overuse the simple aspects because they find them easy to use. They often substitute difficult structures of the TL by easy/simple ones.

Based on our experience in teaching grammar for a respectful number of years, Moroccan EFL university students were observed to have serious difficulties in learning the present progressive. As said before, these learners limit their use of the present progressive just to one context of use- the one that describes actions or events taking place at the moment of speaking or around *NOW*. Students tend to ignore the other meanings / contexts of use for the present progressive. This fact is confirmed by our test's results.

1. Literature review

Various are the studies in literature that have exhaustively tackled the tense-aspect system of English: Bardovi-Harlig, 1992 , 1994 , 1998, and 2000; Salaberry, 1999, 2000a, and 2000b; Andersen & Shirai, 1995; Shirai, 1991 and 2007; Robison, 1990 and 1995; Ayon & Salaberry, 2008; and Collins, 2002. Those studies have drawn a clear distinction between tense and aspect as two confusing but related concepts in the study of temporal structure. They also shed light on the lexical aspect hypothesis developed by the functionalist school. Much has been said, in this respect, about the English verb and verb classes and how the semantic meaning inherent in verbs determines our use of aspect.

1.1. Tense, aspect and the lexical aspect hypothesis

Tense has been generally defined as the grammatical representation of time in language. Jarvie (1993) says "the word tense is from Latin *tempus* 'time' and it is used to show the time when the action of the verb takes place" (p. 37). Jarvie argues that actions or events occur in time sequence and when we refer to them by the means of language we use tenses. Similarly, Downing and Locke (1992) claim that "tense primarily involves visualising events as points in a sequence, preceding or following a central point which is usually the present moment" (p. 30). Literature shows that English consists of two tenses: present and past. Future is not regarded a tense since there is no one specific verb form strongly associated with future time. Future is expressed by the use of auxiliaries namely auxiliaries *be* and *have*. This view was adopted by old grammarians and even by contemporary researchers such as Lewis (1986).

Unlike tense, aspect is not a deictic category. It does not have a direct link with time as being present or past (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 188). Instead, it sees the event from the inside and tries to provide a temporal interpretation of that event on the basis of tenses. Comrie (1976) explains that “Aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (p. 3). It is concerned with localising event situations in a time scale with regard to their completion or incompleteness. Aspect, in its broader sense, divides into perfective and imperfective. The progressive is regarded as a subdivision of the imperfective.

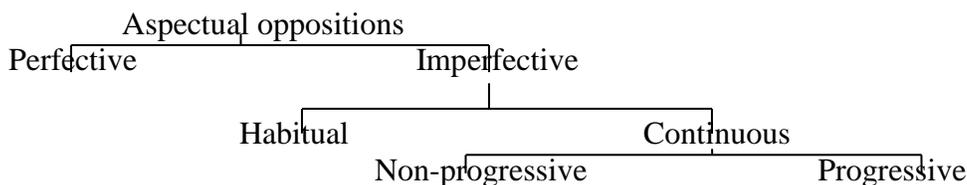


Figure 1, Classification of aspectual oppositions (Comrie, 1976, p. 25)

The lexical aspect hypothesis put forward by the functionalists encouraged linguists to investigate the nature and the meaning of the English verbs as well as the relation these verbs have with aspect. Studies have shown that learners mark tense and aspect under a strong influence of lexical classes of verbs. In this regard, two verb classifications have been widely accepted and adopted by a vast number of researchers: Vendler (1957) and Comrie (1976). Vendler, for example, claims that the English verb falls within the four categories listed below:

States: verbs refer to unchanging conditions with a non-temporal reference statement: be, want, have, love, own (the farm), believe (in ghosts)...etc

Activities: verbs refer to processes, on-going actions with no inherent beginning or end point: play, walk, breathe, run, laugh, sleep, push (a cart), laugh, eat (cherries)...etc

Accomplishments: verbs involve limited duration (last for a period of time) with an inherent end-point: run (a mile), paint (a house), build (a bridge), write (a letter), walk (to the lake), read a book,...etc

Achievements: verbs which are non-durative, but they have an inherent end-point: finish, realise, arrive, reach (the peak / the top), break (a stick/ a cup), notice (something), define a (parameter)...etc.

1.2. The meaning and use of the present progressive

The present progressive is one of the most complex aspects of the present tense of English since it is applied in different contexts of use. This aspect is marked by the use of auxiliary *be* in the present + the /ing/ marker attached to the verb as in ‘*he is reading, they are watching TV*’. Leech and Svartvik (2013) claim that “the verbs which most typically take the progressive aspect are verbs denoting ACTIVITIES (walk, read, drink, write, work, etc) or PROCESSES (change, grow, widen, improve, etc)” (p. 52). As an aspect of the present tense, it basically refers to a temporary activity in progress. This activity must be incomplete in nature. The action, in this respect, stretches into the past and into the future; in the sense that no information about the beginning or the end is given (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 209).

The present progressive is also perceived as describing actions or events happening around the moment of speaking (occurring at the time of the utterance). The action, in this sense, is seen as turning around the moment NOW. This latter can refer to the actual now ‘means at the time being’ as in *John is washing his car now*. It can also refer to a longer action happening around now. NOW in this context can mean this second, today, this month, this year, or even this century as in *She is studying to become an engineer*.

Within durativity, the present progressive is also used to describe a changing, growing, and developing situation. The action in this situation is on-going as in *Your English is improving*. It is important to note that the present progressive is also applied when the change or the growth of a situation happens in a slow manner (slowly changing situations). This is what Binnick (2006) calls a change of intensity (p. 250). The present progressive is used, especially if this change is positive as in *They are believing in God more and more* (p. 250).

Apart from durativity, the progressive expresses a habitual meaning as well. Comrie (1976) states that “the English progressive can refer to a habitual situation that holds for a relatively limited period.” These habits are temporary in nature; they are not lasting for long as in *You are smoking too much (these days)!* The present progressive is also used to describe annoying habits. Lewis (1986) claims that the progressive can express the speaker’s surprise or annoyance at the unexpectedly high frequency of the event (p. 97) as in *You are always losing your keys!* This aspect is also used to refer to actions happening before or after a given time as in ‘*At eight o’clock we are usually having breakfast*’. It is also used to indicate repetition and irritation usually accompanied by the use of some words such as *always* and *constantly* as in *they are always complaining*. Additionally, this aspect can be used to describe actions or events that happen again and again with no change as indicated by *I like him because he is always laughing*. The examples above all show that the progressive has a habitual meaning as well.

The present progressive is also used in English with a future reference when indicating future arrangements or plans. In this regard, the present progressive is expressed by means of verbs denoting movement from one place/condition to another. Leech and Svartvik (2013) point out “the present progressive is used for future events resulting from a present plan, programme, or arrangement” (p. 55). In this use, the present progressive must be accompanied with some future time signals that indicate future time such as *tomorrow, next week, next month ...etc* as in *Mary is going to a new school next term*.

Last but not least, the present progressive is also commonly used to refer to new states or current trends as in *More and more people are becoming vegetarian*. Most of the time, expressions such as *these days* and *nowadays* are associated with this use.

In short, the present progressive, as we have seen, is an aspect that is characterized by plurality of meaning and complexity of use that foreign learners of English need to be aware of so as to function effectively in discourse.

2. Methodology

A group of semester 1 students at the faculty of Arts at Ibn Tofail University- Kenitra, Morocco, was randomly selected to be the subject of the present study. The group consists of 80 students including 35 males and 45 females. All students are Moroccan and they come from different regions of Kenitra city. They are of an Arab and Amazigh background. They all went through the same educational system before majoring in English at university. They are A2 level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages.

To evaluate their proficiency in the use of the present progressive in particular, the subjects sat for a tense-based test. They were given the test directly after they have finished reviewing and practicing all tenses/ aspects of English with their teacher in the grammar course. The test consists of 10 situations in the form of dialogues and e-mails. It aims to test students’ awareness of the different meanings and contexts of use of the present progressive.

As for data analysis, the quantitative methodology is adopted. Students’ answers are transformed into frequencies and percentages. In other words, the answers are listed on a table that provides information about how frequent each aspect is used. The frequencies are also turned into percentages for easy interpretation.

3. Data analysis

As stated from the very beginning, the present progressive is one of the aspects that Moroccan EFL university students really find hard to learn. At the first glance, this claim might sound a little bit shocking to some practitioners who just believe the opposite. The present study disproves all the false assumptions about the learning of this aspect. More precisely, it provides concrete evidence supported by quantitative data that Moroccan EFL learners usually fail to apply this aspect appropriately in the required contexts.

Generally speaking, the subjects in this paper failed to hit the target in most, if not all, of the test’s situations. Students’ answers are also inconsistent. That is, they sometimes succeed in applying the present progressive in one context, but they fail to do so in another. This suggests that this aspect has not yet fully learned.

Our test’s results also reveal other important facts about Moroccan learners of English. First, students, in many occasions, used the present simple instead of the present progressive. This confusion between the two aspects comes as a result of the interference of their L1 or Standard Arabic. Zhiri (2014) claims that Moroccan university students, as most of Arab learners of English, tend to consider the Arabic imperfect as an equivalent to both the English present simple and present progressive aspects (p. 293). Second, and most importantly, these learners had difficulty to function appropriately at the discourse level. Evidence for this can be taken from students’ failure to recognise that the present progressive is required in all the test’s situations as well as from their failure to maintain the same aspect in the same utterance. For more details about our claims, let us analyse some of the test’s situations.

Situation 1

A: I haven’t seen John lately.
 B: Well. He is busy these days. He(work) on his project. He has to submit it by the end of this month.
 A: Oh! I see.

Table 1, Students’ answers for situation 1

Tenses / aspects	Freq.	%
Simple present	11	13.75%
Present progressive	46	57.5%
Simple past	7	8.75%
Past progressive	2	2.5%
Past perfect progressive	2	2.5%
Wrong form	10	12.5%
No answer	2	2.5%

Observing the frequencies for situation 1 above, we notice that more than half of students have successfully come up with the correct answer (the present progressive). A situation such as 1 does not usually create big problems to students. The majority find it easy to use the present progressive for temporary activities in progress either at the moment of speaking or around *NOW*. To check the validity of this claim, let us consider the results for another similar situation.

Situation 2

A: What(you / do) Anna?
 B: I(look for) some important documents. I can’t find them!
 A: What do you need them for?
 B: For the bank loan, you know.

Table 2, Students’ answers for situation 2

Tenses /aspects	Slot 1		Slot 2	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Simple present	19	23.75%	7	8.75%

Present progressive	43	53.75%	52	65%
Simple past	2	2.5%	1	1.25%
Wrong form	14	17.5%	18	22.5%
No answer	2	2.5%	2	2.5%

Situation 2 reveals a number of facts. Most importantly, the results for this situation echo those of the preceding one. Yet, it is worth noticing that a significant proportion of students opted for the simple present instead of the present progressive in answer slot 1 as indicated by 23.75% of total answers. Strikingly, this confusion between the simple and the progressive aspects is not really significant in answer slot 2. This could be attributed to the fact that interrogative sentences are usually difficult to construct than affirmative ones. Additionally, students of lower proficiency level usually put questions in simple forms (using the simple present). Since they have not mastered language yet at this level, students pay less attention to the temporal constituency of the question.

Another striking fact that is worth considering related to situation 2 above is that students' answers are inconsistent. For example, the percentage of success as far the use of the present progressive is concerned is higher in answer slot 2 (65%) than in answer slot 1 (53.75%). The frequencies in answer slot 1 suggest something about the difficulty students find in maintaining the same aspect in discourse. This claim is confirmed by the results of situation 3 below.

Situation 3

Hello Mum!

I'm in Beijing now. I..... (stay) at a very traditional Chinese hotel. Beijing is an over-populated city, but it is very fascinating. I.....(enjoy) myself a lot. I (visit) a lot of wonderful places and I..... (make) some new friends here. Chinese people are kind and helpful. Recently, Lee, my Chinese friend, invited me to dinner among her family. I tried the Chinese Chicken Chow Mein for the first time. It's a very delicious recipe. I wish you were here with me.

Table 3, Students' answers for situation 3

Tenses / aspects	Slot 1		Slot 2		Slot 3		Slot 4	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Simple present	5	6.25%	26	32.5%	8	10%	13	16.25%
Present progressive	40	50%	19	23.75%	2	2.5%	7	8.75%
Present perfect	1	1.25%	1	1.25%	1	1.25%	1	1.25%
Simple past	3	3.75%	11	13.75%	48	60%	41	51.25%
Past perfect	2	2.5%	0	0%	1	1.25%	0	0%
Simple future	4	5%	2	2.5%	3	3.75%	5	6.25%
Wrong form	17	21.25%	12	15%	6	7.5%	5	6.25%
No answer	8	10%	9	11.25%	11	13.75%	8	10%

As it is clearly illustrated in table 3, the frequencies or percentages for situation 3 are totally inconsistent as far as the use of the present progressive is concerned. The percentage varies in the four answer slots. This is a strong evidence for the fact that these learners usually encounter immense difficulties in maintaining the same aspect in discourse due to the failure of understanding the whole context. Students usually use the present progressive correctly for temporary activities just when they are given separate individual sentences that contain some time signals. Students are mere product of the traditional method of teaching that focuses on the teaching of form and structures out of context.

The results of this situation also show that a lot of students use the simple present in answer slot 1 (32.5% of total answers) and, strikingly, the simple past in answer slots 3 and 4 as indicated respectively by 60% and 51.25% of total answers. This is in fact a strong evidence for transfer from Standard Arabic. We feel the influence of the Arabic perfect and imperfect classes on students' answers. Students interpret the action in terms of its completion or incompleteness. If it is complete, it is the past. If it is incomplete, then it is the present. In fact, this is how the system works in Standard Arabic. Because they have not yet grasped the real meaning of the progressive, students failed to understand that the speaker in situation 3 above is telling her mother about the different actions she is taking at this period of time she is spending in Beijing. Students could have predicted from the context that the visit is still taking place. Thus, all actions are in progress (they are incomplete as the visit has not reached an end).

On the basis of our discussion above, one can conclude to the fact that students can, to some extent, think about / use the present progressive when the matter involves temporary actions taking place at the moment of speaking or around NOW. Yet, maintaining the same aspect in discourse as well as formulating questions by the means of the present progressive are really difficult to achieve. For more details about the other problems students have with this aspect, let us consider the situations below.

Situation 4

A: I'm Tom's mother. Do you remember me?
B: Yes, of course.
A: I came just to ask you about Tom. I'd like to know whether he has progressed or not.
B: Sure. Tom(get) better at playing the piano. Don't worry. He is a good learner.

Table 4, Students' answers for situation 4

Tenses/ aspects	Freq. %	Freq.
Simple present	8	10%
Present progressive	14	17.5%
Present perfect	10	12.5%
Simple past	30	37.5%
Past perfect	2	2.5%
Wrong form	10	12.5%
No answer	6	7.5%

As indicated by the results, this context of use (the present progressive for slowly changing situations) is very problematic to students. Only 17.5% of students could recognise the use of the present progressive in situation 4. Strikingly, the majority of students looked at the action as complete (finished). That is why; 37.5% of them opted for the simple past. Students failed again to understand the context. They could not grasp that the act of learning how to play the piano is ongoing and that Tom needs more time to be a good piano player. There is no indication about the completion/ end of the action.

Another context which is also problematic to Moroccan learners is the use of the present progressive for habitual meaning. The results for situations 5 and 6 below show this fact. Each of these situations consists of two answer slots. Hence, they give us the opportunity to compare between the present progressive for temporary activities and the present progressive for temporary and irritating /annoying habits. Let us analyse each in turn.

Situation 5

A: I can't really stand tobacco smoke.
 B: Yeah. That's Jim. He (smoke) on the terrace.
 A: I thought he doesn't smoke!
 B: No. He smokes from time to time, but he(smoke) a lot these days.

Table 5, Students' answers for situation 5

Tenses / aspects	Slot 1		Slot 2	
	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Simple present	27	33.75%	34	42.5%
Present progressive	32	40%	11	13.75%
Present perfect	0	0%	4	5%
Simple past	2	2.5%	12	15%
Past progressive	4	5%	2	2.5%
Past perfect	1	1.25%	0	0%
Wrong form	10	12.5%	15	18.75%
No answer	4	5%	2	2.5%

Situation 5 clearly illustrates that the percentage of success for answer slot 1 (temporary activity) is higher than in answer slot 2 (temporary habit) as indicated respectively by 40 % versus only 13.75% of total answers. This suggests that students have more problems with the habitual meaning of the present progressive. Students usually use the simple present when a habit is involved. For this reason, 42.5% of students opted for the simple present in answer slot 2. The use of the simple present may also be attributed to the influence of the word *smokes* in the utterance. Regardless of the existence of the phrase *these days* which is always associated with the present progressive, students failed to hit the target. More evidence for this association students make between the simple present and the habitual meaning can be taken from situation 6 below.

Situation 6

A: Are you on the train?
 B: Well! I (still / wait) at the station. I missed the 5 o'clock train.
 A: No! You (always / miss) your train!!
 B: Well, I tried to be on time, but I arrived 5 minutes late.

Table 6, Students' answers for situation 6

Tenses/ aspects	Slot 1	Slot 2
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	Freq.	%	Freq.	%
Simple present	2	2.5%	33	41.25%
Present progressive	41	51.25%	9	11.25%
Present perfect	2	2.5%	2	2.5%
Simple past	2	2.5%	9	11.25%
Past progressive	1	1.25%	0	0%
Past perfect	0	0%	3	3.75%
Simple future	0	0%	1	1.25%
Wrong form	25	31.25%	14	17.5%
No answer	7	8.75%	9	11.25%

As a matter of fact, the results of this situation echo the ones in situation 5 above. Once again, students failed to refer to an irritating / annoying habit by the means of the present progressive as it is the case in answer slot 2. In this slot, 41.25% of students used the simple present under a strong influence of the word *always* which they usually associate with the simple form. The use of the simple present here is acceptable, but natives usually favour the present progressive when the habit is annoying or irritating. Thus, associating the habitual meaning with the present progressive is really beyond students' awareness.

Using the present progressive for future arrangements (future actions that result from a present plan) is very challenging to Moroccan learners of English. The results of situation 7 below show students' ignorance of this context of use.

Situation 7

A: Wow. It's very cold in here.

B: Yes, it is. It is going to get even colder in December.

A: Really? Lucky I am. I.....(visit) some friends in Dubai next December.

B: Good for you. The weather is cool there.

Table 7. Students' answers for situation 7

Tenses /aspects	Freq.	%
Present progressive	3	3.75%
Simple past	3	3.75%
Past perfect progressive	1	1.25%
Simple future	56	70%
Future perfect	4	5%
Wrong form	9	11.25%

No answer	4	5%
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As it was expected, the answers for situation 7 above are marked by the use of the simple future (70 % of total answers) instead of the present progressive. Very few students could apply the present progressive in the future context as indicated by the low percentage of answers (3.75%). This is a strong evidence that such use is really beyond students' recognition. It is also an indication of their failure to grasp the real meaning of the progressive aspect. Students are failed to internalise that the plan is in the present and it is ongoing/ still valid till the moment of fulfilment in the future. Generally speaking, students' language is characterised by simplicity. The subjects tend to associate the simple future with any situation that involves future.

Conclusion

We have tried, throughout the present paper, to show that the progressive aspect of the present tense is difficult to learn by foreign learners of English such as Moroccan university students. This conclusion has been drawn on the basis of our test's results. This test has revealed that there is a problem at the learning level. We can clearly deduce from the results that the subjects do not adopt appropriate learning strategies that can help them grasp the real meaning of the progressive. Additionally, the results also suggest that the problem exists even at the teaching level. The conventional traditional grammar course which is based on deduction and decontextualisation has a lot of limitations. It does not really help students learn the tense- aspect system of English effectively. Most importantly, it does not respond to their needs.

Based on class observation, we have always noticed that some teachers give less importance to the semantic component of grammatical structures. They focus on the teaching of form more than meaning. Due to one reason or another, some teachers do not even provide their students with the necessary information. For instance, some teachers do not focus in their teaching on the varied contexts of use of the present progressive. Some teachers lead their students to associate the present progressive with only one context of use as it is the case with situations happening around *NOW* or at the moment of speaking. We believe, in fact, that students' failure to master this aspect originates mainly from this problem. Students become victims of this single context of use effect. Students are usually inexperienced, especially at the early stages of learning, to be aware that an aspect such as the present progressive is characterised by plurality of meaning and complexity of use.

On the light of all things discussed in this paper, it is obvious that there is an urgent need for a new method / new innovative grammar course that is capable of helping learners improve their use of tense and aspect in particular. There is also a need for a new authentic comprehensive material that provides learners with the necessary knowledge and skills to function better at the discourse level.

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