

**TRADITIONAL VS. MODERN
METHODS IN
TEACHING THE CONTINUOUS
ASPECT IN ENGLISH**

STUDY BY LOREDANA IVAN



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STUDY

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Introduction

The Continuous aspect in English has always been a problem especially for young learners who try to understand a sentence by translating it into their language word for word. With Romanian students who learn English as a foreign language this problem occurs not only when they have to deal with the formation of the continuous tenses (e.g. 2, 3, 4 words instead of 2) but also when they have to deal with sudden or durative activities or states (e.g. *She left./She was leaving* or *She is silly/She is being silly*). Moreover, they seem to have a hard time understanding the difference between **the continuous** versus **the progressive**, two terms used in various English grammar books to denote the same grammatical structures. We will use the term continuous because we choose the side of those grammarians who claim that both continuous and progressive aspect of a verb refer to the same concept and mark events and actions for continuity or progression during a certain period of time or marked

up to a particular time or event. However, their meaning becomes clear when we resort to analyzing the actions that the verbs express such as in the following sentences:

e.g. It *is getting* dark.

The dog *is running*.

In the first sentence it is clear that the action is in progress because it takes time for the light to turn into darkness. It is a growing process. On the other hand, this continues over a period of time and it is clear that this is no sudden process. In the second sentence it is true that the focus lays on the continuity of the action the dog is performing but “running” can be progressive for it starts at a point and it ends at another.

Thus, I believe that both progressiveness and continuity of an action is a continuous progress of someone’s doing something to achieve something. I also believe that the merging of these two terms is what makes the continuous aspect a whole. So, in order to use the Continuous/Progressive Aspect we need to consider both the syntactic and the lexical features of the verb, as well as the interaction between them.

STUDY

This study was applied to seventh graders that I have been teaching since they started learning English in the third grade. Their level of English is quite the same and they have been studying the same course books. The only difference is that for a month I have approached teaching them the same things by using communicative activities with twelve students and traditional methods and activities with twelve others. I named them 12 A and 12 B. I consider the experiment a success due to the outcomes it provided.

I thought of ways of combining the Present Progressive, Past Progressive and Future Progressive so that students can perceive the links between those three tenses. One of the best ways of explaining the Future Progressive and Past Progressive is to say that they are just like the Present Progressive but shifted in time. Getting them to practice the tenses together in order to show that they have grasped their usage was the best part.

Modern Teaching- Communicative Approach

Considering Scrivener who emphasizes, that “*the monologue may provide useful exposure to one way of using language, but it isn’t sufficient to justify regular lessons of this kind*”¹, we understand it is important for students to participate and interact during the lesson and to learn grammar in context by elicitation and personalization.

The following activities aim for students to practice the Continuous Aspect in English with a view to learning the language effortlessly in contexts. The teacher is a guide and a mere observer. He/ She does not interfere in students’ learning but when it is absolutely necessary.

- **Chain Truths**

Students are supposed to say one true Present Progressive sentence, one true Future Progressive sentence and one true Past Progressive sentence about their partner. All three sentences must be true to get one

¹ Scrivener, Jim: *Learning Teaching*. Oxford: Macmillan, 2005, p. 123

point. This can be played with the same verb and/or noun used in all three sentences, or with no restrictions on the language used. This is easy with sentences about school and school subjects because they find themselves in real life situations, e.g. “*You are studying English now*”, “*You were studying Geography at this time yesterday*” and “*You will be studying Physics at this time tomorrow*” .

- **Setting the Scene**

Students imagine themselves being in a particular situation and to work together to describe the scene with sentences like “*The sky is overcast. The wind is blowing*” and “*People on decks are throwing water overboard.*” Then the teacher introduces a sudden occurrence such as a huge wave getting near while showing them some cards as tips for the story. Now, they are asked to retell the story so far with the Past Progressive to set the scene and then continue the story with suitable past tenses. This activity can be done with the Future Progressive by asking them to plan a Hitchcock plot.

- **Things-In-Common Time Machine**

Students are supposed to find “-ing” sentences that are true about both of them but with different tenses. For example, if they say “*I’m enjoying this class*” and their partner says “*to be honest, I’m not, but I was enjoying the class we had yesterday*” or “*I’m not, but I will be enjoying the next*”, they get a point

- **. Good Excuses**

One student asks another to do something for them or do something together. The other person takes a piece of paper and makes an excuse using those words (e.g. “house cleaning”) and a future tense. As in real life, it is politest if excuses are in the Future Progressive (because the excuse sounds unavoidable), with the Present Progressive being a good second choice, “going to” being not too polite, and “will” and “might” being a bit and very rude respectively. If they choose a tense for their excuse that sounds silly like “*I will be dusting the furniture at exactly that time*”, their partner should ask “*How do you know?*” and if they can’t explain they get no points. If they choose the right tense they get a number of points based

on the scale above (five points for Future Progressive, four points for Present Progressive, etc.).

- **Find the Gap**

A similar game to the one above can be played by speaking in pairs. Students write out their own schedules for the next seven days or are given different Student A and Student B one-week diary pages that are already quite full. They have to find times when they are both free for a few things that are long lasting such as a football match or a movie.

- **My Exciting Life**

Students try to outdo each other boasting about their exciting schedules with sentences like “I’m going to Shakira’s house for a party tonight”. Students can also play the opposite game of trying to make their future arrangements sound like more of a pain with sentences like “I’m taking two tests next week” and “I’m going home tomorrow morning and so have to pack everything tonight”.

- **Mimes**

Give students a list of Present Progressive sentences that they can mime to their partners for them to guess, e.g. “You are reading.” You can add the Present Simple to this by choosing actions that some people do every day (e.g. “You are reading a newspaper article” and “You are frowning”) and asking them to go on to discuss how often they do those things and why. This is more interesting if it is a topic that is linked to cultural differences, e.g. manners.

- **Postcards**

Ask students to imagine that they are writing a postcard while they are on the beach or outside a café. They should naturally use the Present Progressive to describe what is happening at the moment they are writing (e.g. “*The sun is shining*” or “*My sister and I are drinking a cold lime and soda at the hotel bar.*”) and the Present Simple for their daily routine while on holiday (e.g. “*I spend most of the day scuba diving*” or “*I have breakfast in the same restaurant every morning*”), but you could also specifically ask them to stick to those tenses.

Alternatively, you could give them sentence stems that should get them using those two tenses, e.g. “*All around me...*” or “*In the evenings...*” You can then get students to read other people’s postcards and then ask them to write those a reply in which to tell them how they are spending their time.

- **Past Progressive Accusations**

Students are given a list of strange actions and ask their partners to come up with innocent reasons why they were doing those things, e.g. “When I saw you, you were painting over your windows. Why were you doing that?” “I was turning my whole house into a big flag to celebrate Independence Day”. It is important that they say the “*When I saw you...*” part each time, to make the use of the Past Progressive realistic.

- **Perfect Challenge**

Students try to find things that they have done more of or have been doing for longer than their partner (i.e. things where the number in their answer is bigger than their partner’s) by asking and answering questions,

e.g. “How long **have you been wearing** that t-shirt you have on now?”, or “How long **have you been studying** English?”

Traditional Teaching Methods and Activities

Traditionally, classroom settings are teacher-centred where the teacher often talks in front of the students instead of encouraging them to interact, ask questions or make them understand the lesson thoroughly. Traditional teaching methods are restricted to some degree. Most classes involve rote learning, where students depend on memorization without having a complete understanding of the subject. Just by passing the tests, consisting of descriptions, matching and other forms of indicators are all that matter to complete the curriculum. Long lectures and dictations, memorization and little interaction in the classroom often leave students less attentive and less engaged. Moreover, students in a traditional class have little opportunity to interact with their classmates or their teacher.

- **Lectures and Direct Instruction**

The teacher dictates the definition and the rules of formation of *Present, Past and Future Progressive* which students memorize and then asks the students questions to check whether they have learned them.

This is an important aspect of traditional methodology in Tharp's statement that in language teaching the essential issue was "*rules to be memorized, grammatical text analysis, and literal translation*".²

- **Listening and Observation**

The teacher talks to the students about the subject matter and expect them to learn everything through the lectures held in the classroom.

- **Grammar – Translation Method.**

The principle of this approach, according to Broughton, "*produced a teaching method which selected the major grammar rules with their exceptions and taught*

² Tharp, James B: "*Modern Foreign Languages.*" *Review of Educational Research.* Vol.2, Number1, Feb 1932, p. 355

*them in a certain sequence*³ ”.He specifies the most typical features of this method which are: “*its rules, its examples, its paradigms...and related exercises.*” The general pattern for the teaching of grammar is to give some rules using a lot of technical terminology, talk about the exceptions to the rules, ask students to solve some exercises that are often mechanical and monotonous and this is the end of the teaching of grammar.

Students are asked to translate a text or sets of sentences from Romanian into English in which to use the *Present, Past and Future Progressive* forms of the verbs. Or, they are asked to give the Romanian version of a text or set of sentences.

³ Broughton, Geoffrey, et al. *Teaching English as a Foreign Language*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge, 1994, p.56

Pros and Cons

A few observations were made while working differently with the two groups. There was one problem that occurred when one of the students who spoke on behalf of the students in group 12 A told me that they were confused about the use of some state verbs in the Progressive. At first, I had the urge to explain it to them again but then, I realized that the best way to make myself clear on that was to bring in some authentic material and so I told my student not to worry and that I was going to do something about it during the next class. I, then, thought of the nature of material I was going to use and I decided students should visualize and hear native speakers use such verbs in authentic contexts and the next time I brought in an extract from an episode of a series I was watching at the time not to shock but to make them remember the scene when they came across such verbs. There they used “*forget*” in the following context:

Husband: “E. and D. wanted to know if we were free on Thursday. I told them we were.”

Wife (baffled): “You told them we were free on Thursday night?”

Husband: “I checked the calendar. We don’t have plans. Clearly *I’m forgetting* something. Could you forego that accusatory look and just tell me what it is?”

Wife (slaps the husband): Thursday is the 18th. ...
(Tape script Devious Maids.S01E05)

After they watched the whole scene I was amazed to hear one of the students say: “*The date must be very important and he has forgotten it*” and another student added:” *He didn’t forget it. He just didn’t know that Thursday would be the 18th* . Now I barged in and asked them why he used “*I’m forgetting*” and not *I have forgotten* and the students agreed that for a moment, the husband forgot something that meant a great deal for both of them. So, it was the students who elicited the answer by themselves. They considered the activity mind blowing and they suggested we had more such activities.

While group 12 A considered the activities enjoyable and engaging and they had no problems expressing themselves in English freely, they even used such cleft sentences as ...*so what I’m saying is that..., All*

I'm saying here is that...., What we are doing is...., Remember when we were talking about..., I'm thinking maybe....., group 12 B were always complaining about how stressful, boring and mind consuming those activities were. The latter group even found the activities restrictive and pointless. *"This is getting complicated! I'm never going to learn those definitions by heart"*, said one of the students in group 12 B. *"Besides, what good will it do to me?"*, he continued. Another student complained that if he wanted to use the dictionary to do translations he could do it at home. Anyhow, they got used to the routine of the English class and complied with any instructions I gave them. This did not come to me as a surprise, though. I had expected to hear all kinds of opinions about the difficulty of grammar and of the uselessness of grammatical explanations. This is what traditional teaching methods do to students, they make grammar seem hard and goals unreachable. Traditional teachers believe that learning grammar is the only best way of learning a language, no matter the means but students think otherwise and what teachers should consider before setting goals for themselves to achieve with their students is anticipate

their students' learning needs. And what they need is to be motivated to learn and use the target language to communicate.

In his book *The ELT Curriculum*, Ronald V. White highlights the consequences of learning a language in the grammar-governed way. He reminds us that traditional methodology does not present the language as a means of communication. This approach of teaching conceives “language (as) a body of esteemed information to be learned, with emphasis on intellectual rigor”⁴. To put it in a nutshell, language is learned by memorizing rules and focuses on knowledge of grammar and vocabulary outside context. It is supposed that as long as a person knows rules and lexis they are able to understand and speak a foreign language. These teacher-based methods are the most counterproductive. The non-existence of oral communication and cooperation between teachers and their students or among students as long as in the written language is taught makes these methods fall short of

⁴ White, Ronald V. *The ELT Curriculum*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1988, p. 88

appreciation from the part of both students and modern teachers.

After a month of experimenting with the Continuous aspect of the Present, Past and Future Tenses all 24 students took the following test and I was surprised to see the difference in scores between the two groups.

Test

Grade: 6th A

Level: Pre-Intermediate

Number of students: 24

**Total score: 90 points (plus 10 points granted
for completion of all tasks)**

I. Check your grammar: decide whether the following statements are **true** or **false** – present continuous

(30 points)

1. We use the present continuous for temporary situations.

True

False

2. We often use the present continuous for things happening right now.

True

False

3. We can use the present continuous for future arrangements.

True

False

4. We can use the present continuous with all verbs.

True False

5. Some verbs – for talking about emotions, thinking, the senses, etc. – cannot be used in the continuous form.

True False

6. Sometimes the spelling of the infinitive form changes when we add -ing.

True False

II. Write the words to fill the gaps. Put the verb in brackets in the correct form.

(40 points)

1. I'm really busy – I _____
(study) for the exam.

2. Right now we _____
(ride) camels!

3. They said they _____
(have) a great time.

4. Daisy _____ (study) for an hour when she decided to take a break.

5. What _____ (you do) at the moment?

6. I'm so late! They _____ (wait) for me in the café for half an hour.

7. _____ (Oliver work) hard?

8. We have decided to meet tonight. We.....(meet) tonight.

III. Find the mistakes in these sentences and make the necessary corrections. **(20 points)**

1. Mom carried a basket full of apples when she went outside.

.....
.....

2. I'm liking this album a lot.

.....
.....

3. She sending a message to Billie.

.....
.....

4. She's knowing All very well.

.....
.....

5. What are you thinking about the film?

.....
.....

Key:

1.....
...6 sentences x 5 points = 30 points

1 T, 2 T, 3 T, 4 F, 5 T, 6 T

2.....
...8 sentences x 5 points = 40 points

1. am studying 2. are riding 3. are having 4. Had been studying 5. Are you doing 6. Have been waiting 7. Is Oliver working 8. are meeting

3. 1. was carrying 2. like 3. is sending 4. knows
5. do you think

The Results of the Test

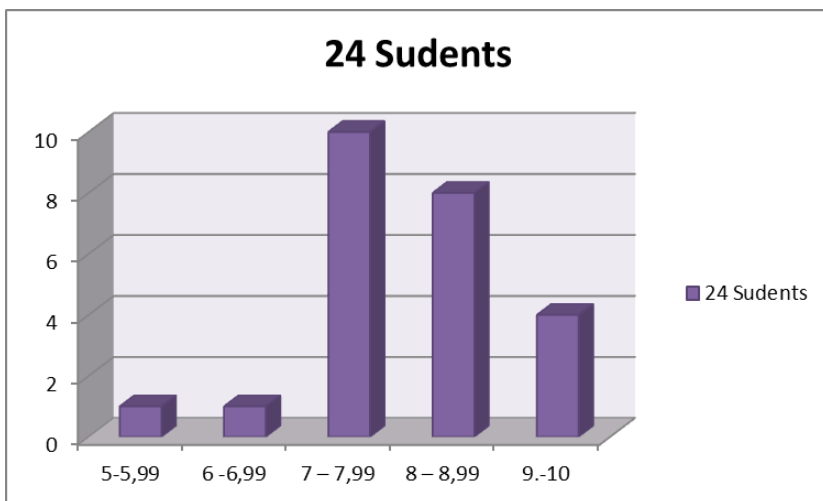
Grades	1	2	3	4	5- 5,99	6 - 6,99	7 – 7,99	8 – 8,99	9 - 10
Number of Students	-	-	-	-	1	1	10	8	4

A number of 24 students of pre-intermediate level took the test above, which was designed to evaluate students' acquisition of the Continuous Aspect of The Tenses in The Indicative that they have been practicing with throughout the semester, with focus on the Present Continuous verb form as they are intermediate learners.

The grades in the table above are satisfactory as they indicate that most students have acquired the target language since 20 students have scored above 70 points. Graph 1 below makes us get a better understanding of

their accomplishments; most students scored between 70 and 80 points which tells us that they had difficulties solving some of the tasks presented in the test.

- **Graph 1**

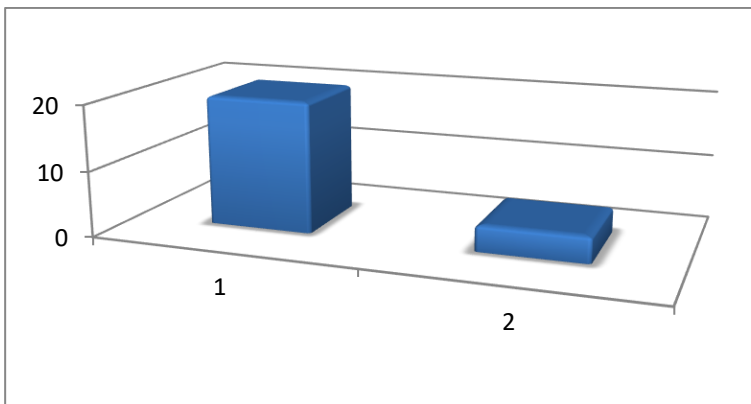


Focus on Errors – Observations

- As shown in **Graph 2** most students were able to complete exercise 1 but some students found both

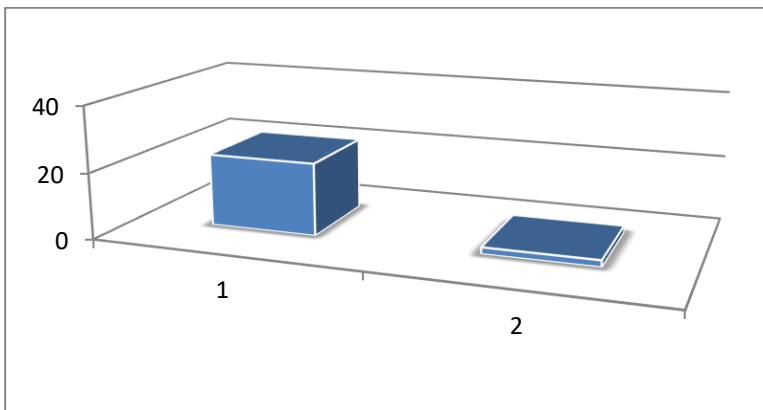
statements 4 which said that *we can use the present continuous with all verbs* and 5 which said that *some verbs – for talking about emotions, thinking, the senses, etc. – cannot be used in the continuous form* true which was surprising since the sentences were in the same register; the verbs mentioned in sentence 5 are part of all verbs mentioned in 4. When I asked them why they made such a mistake they blamed it on lack of attention.

- **Graph 2** (representation of correct completion of exercise 1)



- **Graph 3** indicates that most students were able to complete exercise 2 but some students used *I study* instead of *I am studying*, *they have* instead of *they were having* a great time, *Daisy was studying* instead of *Daisy had been studying* and *they are waiting* instead of *they have been waiting*.

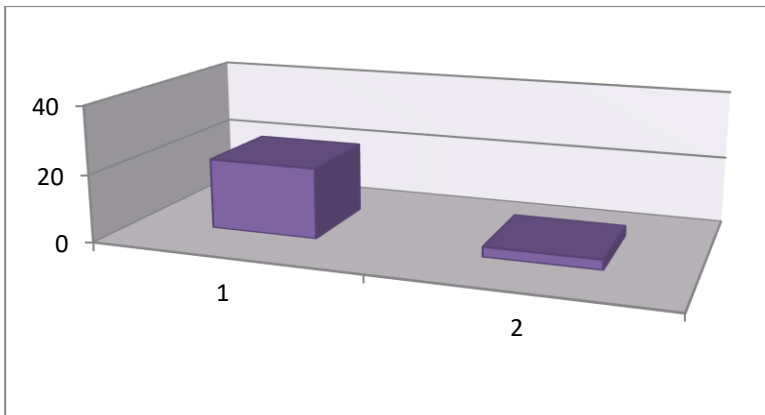
Graph 3 (representation of correct completion of exercise 2)



- **Graph 4** shows that most students have completed the task well but very few made mistakes. One of the mistakes they made was that they used *sends*

instead of *is sending* which means that they have noticed something was wrong with the verb but they ruled out *is sending* and used the simple form of the verbs and, they replaced what with *how* in question 5 instead of using the present simple form of the verb, a mistake that is made due to students' tendency to translate from Romanian into English.

- **Graph 4** (representation of correct completion of exercise 3)



Conclusions

Following the mistakes that they made and the reasons why those mistakes were made I can conclude that

some students show little interest in learning language as far as the Aspect is concerned. They only see this as one more problem to tackle and they do not see the point in learning more than The Present, The Past and The Future Tenses in the Simple Aspect. So, it is rather a problem of attitude than one of grammar difficulty. In order to raise their interest and show them how important it is to speak a language like a native speaker I will bring recordings and videos of songs and stories to compare and contrast language and then, I will ask them to do some creative writing exercises on those recordings and stories in which they will use grammar accurately without even knowing they are doing it.

This paper has focused on teaching The Continuous Aspect of Tenses, a problematic grammar structure that teachers cannot disregard. Even though students begin learning these structures extensively at a very early age, they are still unable to produce grammatically correct sentences. Some of them develop a sort of indifference towards using the continuous instead of the simple form of the verb while others seem to have a hard time differentiating between them. In either case

the teacher has to intervene and use purposeful teaching to try to complete the development of linguistic competence in students.

The teaching study in the paper is meant to uncover a hard truth that traditional teachers will always disregard; grammar can no longer be regarded as a structure based on formal activity taught for its own sake, where the teacher dictates rules, talks about exceptions and asks students to solve monotonous and boring exercises. Teaching a foreign language now is student-based, not teacher-based and has the student perform activities that help him/her elicit and practice the language as a whole, not parts of it so as the student develops the communicative aspect of language. The role of the teacher is to skilfully solve the learners' language problems, to successfully reach his/her aims and objectives to make students learn the language either consciously or subconsciously.

The test study in the paper shows that the students involved made similar mistakes. These errors can occur either as a result of some misinterpretations of the teacher or, most commonly, of the mother tongue interference

with the new language because learners of a foreign language build the new language on the language they were born with. By using contrastive analysis (comparing the learner's mother tongue with the target language) the teacher would be able to predict the difficulties a learner would encounter and so concentrate on them and avoid them. But because of an extensive use of such a strategy such endeavour might be seen by the students as too analytical and they might lose interest in the language itself. Errors represent the natural outcome of learning and some of them can be avoided but others cannot as not all students acquire knowledge and perfect skills in the same way. It is the teachers' job to pick the right materials and sources to reach to every student's level of understanding and learning a language and whenever errors appear to carefully plan strategies to remedy them.

The paper does not attempt to exhaust all the problems raised by teaching of the Progressive Aspect in English, but it offers a wide range of ideas and exercises that can be used in teaching it in a relaxing and pleasant way which targets and motivates the development of

students' creative writing, critical thinking and communication skills by cooperation and interaction.

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