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The use of English stative verbs in the progressive aspect: Changes and recommendations for English grammar teaching

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ABSTRACT

The present paper was to discuss how the use of the progressive forms with stative verbs has changed in present-day English and discuss what the teachers should do to deal with this issue in English grammar teaching. The discussion of the paper was based on theoretical framework of progressive aspect and stative verbs. Data collected from three corpus-informed grammar textbooks show that there has been being a change in grammatical usage, specifically in the use of the progressive form with stative verbs. In particular, traditional views support the limitation of the use of the progressive form with stative verbs, while present-day English ones prove that many stative verbs can be used in progressive form. Through the discussion, the writer of the present paper finally suggested two pedagogical implications for teaching English progressive aspect.

Key words: *progressive aspect, stative verbs, present-day English*

1. Introduction

Grammar is a compulsory and indispensable part in teaching English language in all schools throughout the country, Vietnam. In high schools, the grammatical forms are mostly taught to students so that they can successfully do their tests, such as General National Examination. At universities and colleges, English grammar is also learned carefully by non-English-major and English-major students for the purpose of passing the mid-term or final tests. Moreover, grammatical knowledge is also necessary for many other students to pass TOFEL and IELTS to get the tickets to study abroad. To do

the tests well, all these learners have the same way of learning grammar that is completing the exercises in their English text-books and grammar books which were written traditionally. As a matter of consequence, English teaching has been long time fit with teaching traditional grammar. For those reasons, when having more chances to communicate with English-native speakers or read breaking news on the Internet, many of the teachers and students are surprised with some changes in present-day English, specifically, in the use of stative verbs in the progressive form. For example, *I'm liking your new jacket*. Traditionally, stative verb *like* has been described as incompatible with the progressive, because it generally signifies passively experienced and unending states. This has raised a considerable challenge towards the use of stative verbs in the progressive form. In other words, all language teachers, learners and users may hesitate about whether or not they can use the progressive form with English stative verbs. Therefore, in the hope of providing teachers and students with a closer look into the changes in the use of progressive forms with stative verbs and draw out some helpful principles for teaching, the writer of the paper discusses how the use of the progressive forms with stative verbs has changed in present-day English based on theoretical framework of progressive aspect and stative verbs and then suggests some pedagogical implications for teaching English progressive aspect.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Progressive aspect

Progressive is represented by periphrastically encoded aspectual forms 'be + ing', so the understanding of progressive is considered in the relation with the concepts of *progressive aspect*. According to Leech and his colleagues (2009), progressive aspect has limited duration as its primary meaning and the happening is not necessarily complete. Moreover, in a semantic viewpoint, progressive aspect is used to describe activities or events that are in progress at particular time; usually for a limited duration (Biber et al., 1999). One consideration made by Comrie (1976) is that the term *aspect* is not referring to time, but it is a way to look at the verb context. Therefore, the progressive form is used to denote an action in progress or state of events, e.g., *He's eating breakfast*. Moreover, meanings of the progressive are not limited to only these usages. Progressive aspect also expresses habituality and future action, e.g., *He's having a meeting this afternoon* (Schubert, 2002; Jóhannsdóttir, 2011).

2.2. Stative verbs

Stative verbs are defined as the verbs that generally describe a state or quality (Schubert, 2002). Scheffer (1975) reveals that stative verbs may denote a mental or psychological state and a physical state, but sometimes they are also regarded as private

(state) since it is only the speaker who is aware of the state or activity s/he expresses. According to Bland (1988), stative verbs are stable and lack shift or variation. In this sense, they refer to constant states and they are durative over time (Downing & Locke, 2006). Stative verbs such as *possess*, *know*, *understand*, *love*, and *want* are claimed to resist the progressive because they denote static situations and lack internal structure as there are no stages progressing to an end (Bland, 1988; Schubert, 2002). Thus, stativity of stative verbs contradicts the one of action verbs (Comrie, 1976). In other words, stative verbs taking progressive aspect are argued to be ungrammatical (Kroeger, 2005).

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopted a summative approach to qualitative content analysis. Through this research method, the data is subjectively interpreted via the systematic identification and classification process. Based on this method, the functions of stative verbs were determined based on the information provided in textbooks related to the progressive use. The sample of the study consisted of three corpus-informed grammar textbooks designed for English language learners and teachers, which was explained in the following section.

3.2. Corpus

For the purposes of the study, three electronic copies of grammar textbooks written for teaching and learning English grammar were chosen in a corpus. Specifically, the parts analyzed within the scope of the study were the sections where the progressive aspect/construction/verbs, stative verbs, the present/past/ future progressive, past/present/perfect continuous tenses were explained.

TABLE 1. English grammar textbooks

Textbooks	Author	Publication Year	Publisher
Essential Grammar in Use (3 rd edition)	Raymond Murphy	2007	Cambridge University Press
English Grammar in Use (5 th edition)	Raymond Murphy	2019	Cambridge University Press
Advanced Grammar in Use (3 rd edition)	Martin Hewings	2013	Cambridge University Press

The English corpus-informed textbooks (see Table 1) for this study were carefully selected based on the following criteria: the type of textbook, the inclusion of examples taken from native English corpus, the year of publication, major publishing companies with wider accessibility for use and difficulty level. These textbooks include examples or items in exercises which were taken from the corpus of language in use that represent how English native speakers actually write and talk. The textbooks were selected among

the contemporary textbooks written between 2007 and 2019. In addition, they were selected specifically from a major publishing company, Cambridge University Press, since these publications were among the top-selling books and used as a source by millions of language learners and teachers in various parts of the world. Considering the world-wide access to these textbooks by many people, it is important to highlight whether or how the textbooks differ in the treatment of the progressive use of stative verbs.

3.3. Analysis procedure

Data collection and analysis procedure were carried out in two phases.

In the first phase, each corpus-informed textbook was read thoroughly to get an in-depth understanding of the progressive form and stative verbs. Example sentences containing stative verbs that are in the progressive form are highlighted and picked out for the analytic purpose.

In the second phase, the example sentences (found in the first phase) are analyzed on the basis of theoretical framework in order to examine whether or not there is a change in the use of the progressive form with stative verbs.

4. The Changes in the Use of the Progressive Form with Stative Verbs

4.1. The progressive form with stative verbs in traditional views

Based on the definitions of progressive aspect and stative verbs (as discussed in section 2), more or less English teachers, learners and users come to a conclusion that it is impossible to use stative verbs in the progressive form. This is a definite fact because Hornby (1949, as cited in Kabakchiev, 2000, p.163) asserted that “the essence of the progressive tenses is the element of incompleteness”. Through his notion, it infers that *see*, *believe*, and *hear* do not have the element of incompleteness, so they are use-limited in the progressive tenses. As a strong support for Hornby’s notion, Hittle (1968, as cited in Kabakchiev, 2000) distinguished between states and actions, in which this writer restricts the possibility of using the progressive action, and assumes that states take the non-progressive (simple) form.

In addition to these authors’ views, there are many other view-points supporting for the limited use of stative verbs in the progressive form. That means, the progressive form with stative verbs has been considered as exceptional and infrequent. The unacceptability of progressive statives is caused by the semantics of stative verbs and the independence of the context in which these verbs occur (Comrie, 1981). In fact, until now such traditional views are widely mentioned; for example, Beare (2009) asserts that the most important difference between two types of verbs in English is the

stative verbs which cannot be used in progressive tenses, and the action verbs can be. To see more clearly, let us take a look at the following examples:

(1) *I believe you now.* (not *I'm believing you now.*) (Hewings, 2013, p.2)

(2) *I'm hungry. I want something to eat.* (not *I'm wanting*) (Murphy, 2019, p.8)

It can be claimed that there is no incompleteness in the stative verbs *believe* in the extract (1) and *want* in (2). In other words, verbs *believe* and *want* cannot be used to denote actions in progress. Hence, according to the traditional views, all cases of using progressive forms with stative verbs are considered as ungrammatical and exceptional.

4.2. Progressive form with stative verbs in present-day English

Despite the fact that stative verbs are limited in the use of progressive forms, certain stative verbs are claimed to occur increasingly with the progressive aspect in certain exceptional cases in spoken language (e.g., Comrie, 1976; Quirk et al., 1985; Bland, 1988; Schubert, 2002). This can be easily understood because languages change all the time. In fact, there are plenty of studies such as Vet (1994), Kakiemek (1997), and Smiecinska (2002), investigating into the new attitudes towards using progressive and language development. The corpus called *Diachronic Corpus of Present-Day English* has been as an important source for many studies on the recent changes in the grammar and usage of present-day English (Aarts, Close & Wallis, 2009).

Different from the view by Espunya (1999) as we have discussed above, Kakiemek (1997) revealed that when analyzed in a full context, the stative verbs no longer constitute a homogenous group. Grounded in this writer's analysis on the corpus of several British and American contemporary novels, detective stories, scientific texts and popular dailies and weeklies, the sentences like "*I am adoring it or he was hearing her flat wistful voice*" are not at infrequent. This seems to be a circular step for possibility to use stative or dynamic verbs in progressive forms, depending on contexts. According to Leech et al. (2009) concluded that there is a strong tendency among the young native speakers accepting the progressive statives in appropriate contexts. The writer also mentions that the factor of context is not only the one, but the speaker and the semantic stativity of the verb also affect the choice of such progressive forms. Especially, the writer draws out that when this kind of verbs is used in progressive forms, no matter how a context, for many native speakers, 42% of this kind of verbs imposes the form of the grammatical construction in which it appears. Example:

(3) *John is acting like an English man.*

The behavioral meaning in the extract (3) has a characteristic of being temporary and progressive. The shift to a dynamic interpretation in the above sentence is a result of a decision about the acceptability of progressive and of an added specification in the semantic function (Briton, 1998, as cited in Vet, 1994).

Furthermore, the use of progressive forms with stative verbs is said to have better effect on expressing the speaker's meaning in a particular context. Hence, such grammatical constructions are usually used in the progressive form instead of the non-progressive form by the speaker. Because the stative verbs have attitudinal and emotional meaning, constructions with progressive statives give more strength to the predication and are more intense, emotional and vivid than the simple. Among these verbs, the stative verb *be* is common in progressive forms. It is usually used with a predicative noun, adjective or past participle (Bland, 1988). Example:

(4) *I can't understand why he's **being** so selfish. He isn't usually like that.* (Murphy, 2019, p.8)

The extract (4) conveys temporary behaviors by focusing on the behavior as a change through which the speaker gives his personal view point and attitude, these constructions are called *being* type and frequently appears in spoken English (Bland, 1988). Specifically, in the extract (4), *he's **being** so selfish* means *he's behaving selfishly now*.

In addition to *be*, there are many other stative verbs such as *have, contain, feel, hope, guess and wonder* that are found in the progressive. The verb *feel* is normally used in both progressive and non-progressive without significant difference in meaning. Three verbs *hope, wonder and guess* (synonym to *suppose, think, and imagine*) mainly express 'tentativeness' or 'thoughtfulness'. Example:

(5) *Nicky **is thinking** of giving up her job.* (Murphy, 2019, p.8)

In the extract (5), the stative verb *think* refers to the speaker's consideration. As interpreted, *Nicky **is thinking** of giving up her job* means *She **is considering** it*.

(6) *I'm **regretting** my decision to give her the job.* (Hewings, 2013, p.2)

Similarly, the progressive form of stative verb *regret* in the extract (6) is to emphasize that *I started to be aware that it was a wrong decision*.

Through the analysis above, a conclusion can be drawn that stative verbs are increasingly used beyond traditional grammatical framework. In other words, these days, stative verbs are more likely to be used in the progressive form. This demonstrates that there has been being a change in grammatical usage, specifically in the use of the progressive form with stative verbs.

5. Recommendations for Teaching

From what has been discussed so far in this paper, it can be concluded that being aware of the change in the use of the progressive form with stative verbs plays an important role in learning and teaching grammar as a whole and English progressive aspect in

particular. Therefore, based on the analysis as presented in section 4, the writer suggests some pedagogical implications for teaching English progressive aspect. However, as a reminder to teachers, learners' background should be taken into consideration when teaching them the use of the progressive form of stative verbs.

First, teachers assist the learners in thinking or guessing rather than keeping themselves in the framework of traditional framework. This means that, in teaching English progressive form, teachers need to assist the learners in arriving at the speaker's meaning in a particular context because the stative verbs have attitudinal and emotional meaning. Let's take the extract (4) *I can't understand why he's **being** so selfish. He isn't usually like that* as an example. In order to agree that the use of the progressive form in this sentence is correct, we need to focus on the speaker's personal view point and attitude towards the person he/she is describing. Specifically, in this expression, the speaker wants to mean *he's **behaving** selfishly now*.

Second, since the progressive form of stative verbs may vary in different contexts, teachers should provide the learners with the analysis of context. To do this, the teachers should make a comparison. As an illustration, let's compare two following sentences:

(4) *I can't understand why he's **being** so selfish. He isn't usually like that.* (Murphy, 2019, p.8)

(7) *He never thinks about other people. He's very selfish.* (Murphy, 2019, p.8)

In taking context into consideration, it can be said that in the extract (4), the speaker uses *be* in the progressive form to express his/her curiosity about why the person he/she is describing *is behaving selfishly now*, whereas *be* the extract (7) is used in the simple form to express the speaker's conclusion about the personality of the person he/she is talking about.

All in all, two pedagogical implications as given above are expected to make English grammar teaching more interesting, to support teachers in developing language capability in learners, and moreover, to assist the learners in remembering the usage and meanings of the progressive form of stative verbs more easily.

6. Conclusion

The paper has presented the changes in the use of the progressive form with stative verbs. In particular, traditional views support the limitation of the use of the progressive form with stative verbs, while present-day English ones prove that many stative verbs can be used in progressive form. Through the discussion, the writer of the present paper finally made some suggestions for future English grammar teaching based on theoretical framework of progressive aspect and stative verbs and the writer's teaching experience. However, the paper has a rather big limitation, that is, there is not enough illustrations

from reality of teaching progressive forms with stative verbs, so the suggestions in this paper can be little subjective. That is the reason why the writer hopes to have further studies on this subject in near future.

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