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Teaching the Progressive Aspect to Various Age Groups

Cristina Bacanu, “Saint Silvestru” Middle School, Bucharest

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Abstract:

The focus of this article is on techniques of teaching the Progressive aspect in general and the Progressive aspect of the present tense in particular to students from elementary to upper intermediate levels, together with ways of creating motivation and using modern technology in the classroom. The paraphernalia that the teacher uses, ranging from realia, pictures, mime and gestures through time lines and concept questions all the way to grid filling, information gap activities and free speech samples, is ultimately conducive to the appropriate acquirement of the progressive aspect.

1. Teaching various age groups

There are marked differences among learners, both in terms of their age and level of study and in terms of different individual abilities, previous knowledge and preferences. The latter can be dealt with through various techniques which suit different learning styles, a mixture of student groupings, graded tasks etc., but it is the more general differences in age and level of study that this article is dedicated to.

Age and level of competency are generally related in school. Teenagers (and young adults) are usually at the intermediate level. According to Harmer (2007), one of the greatest differences between adolescents and young children is that these older children have developed a greater capacity for abstract thought as they have grown up. “In other words, their intellects are kicking in, and they can talk about more abstract ideas, teasing out concepts in a way that younger children find difficult. Many adolescents readily understand and accept the need for learning of a more intellectual type.” At their best, adolescent students have a great capacity for learning, enormous potential for creative thought and a passionate commitment to things which interest them. Adolescence is bound up with a search for identity and a need for self-esteem,

which is often the result of the students' position within their peer group rather than being the consequence of teacher approval.

One of the aspects that the teacher needs to keep in mind when dealing with upper intermediate students is that success is less obvious at this level. Upper intermediate students have already achieved a lot, but they are less likely to be able to recognise an almost daily progress. On the contrary, it may sometimes seem to them that they don't improve that much or that fast anymore. "We often call this the plateau effect, and the teacher has to make strenuous attempts to show students what they still need to learn without being discouraging." (Harmer, 2007, p. 18) The teacher should help foster intrinsic motivation in the students; this could be achieved through the teacher's methods, the activities that the students take part in, or the students' perception of their success or failure. The teacher needs to help the students set clear goals for themselves so that they have something to measure their achievement by.

When progress is more difficult to perceive, it is vital that students feel that their class is *serious* and *fun*, at the same time. Teachers should not mistake 'serious' for 'dull', though: according to Oxenden (2001), serious teaching is well-planned, well-organised, systematic and focused and this is what teaching ought to be at every level; dull teaching, on the other hand, is boring, unengaging and dry. For some reason, when they move beyond intermediate level, some teachers abandon the lively, dynamic, interactive methodology that they used at the lower levels and acquire an 'advanced' teaching style and use teaching materials which are fundamentally dull. The teacher should not forget that, just because the students are older and (hopefully) wiser, they have not suddenly turned into drier, highly intellectual people who now want their teacher and their classes to change from dynamic to deadly dull; they still need to be entertained in order to achieve more effortlessly. The teacher should bring back the element of fun.

Even grammar exercises do not have to be boring. Higher level grammar exercises need to be serious, i.e. focused and effective, but they can be made just as fun and interactive as those designed for lower levels. One way to achieve this is by turning any straightforward 'put-the-verb-into-the-correct-tense' type of exercise into an information gap activity. Thus, instead of being asked to fill in the gaps with the right form of the verb, the students may be allowed to take turns to guess each other's sentences; their partner helps them by giving feedback and clues, which turns into a co-operative, not competitive activity. For example, one student says (or mimes) "I'm

tired" and his partner (or the class) has to guess what he/she has been doing. It is much more fun and effective than a traditional exercise because students are engaged by the guessing element and will usually produce several instances of the grammatical structure in question (in this case, present perfect continuous), before they guess their partners' answers. In conclusion, all teaching should be *serious* (well-organised and professional), whatever the level, but students everywhere, whether they are beginners or advanced, respond better and learn better when they are involved, challenged and entertained, i.e. when their classes are *fun*.

2. Teaching the Progressive Aspect

At the upper intermediate level, most students are familiar with the opposition [+/- progressive] associated with the various verb tenses. What needs to be done at this stage is for the structures to be reinforced, the perspective changed and finer details added. For instance, at the elementary level, students learn that the phrase "I'm going to school" expresses an action in progress at the moment of speaking. At higher levels, teachers sometimes use the same example, to the raised eyebrows and incredulous expression on their students' faces: "Not that again!" Later, when the students see the number of contexts that the given structure fits in (see examples <1> to <7> below) and work out the various meanings that each context bestows, they realize what the teacher was aiming for while cleverly engaging their attention in the process:

(1) "Why are you in a hurry?"
"*I'm going to school*." (action in progress at the moment of speaking)

(2) I'm always in a hurry when *I'm going to school*. (repetition of events of limited duration)

(3) *I'm going to school* at 9 tomorrow. (arrangement)

(4) This week *I'm going to school* by bus. (temporary situation)

(5) I'll be thinking of you when *I'm going to school* tomorrow. (as a replacement of future continuous in time clauses)

(6) I'll let you know if *I'm going to school* tomorrow. (as a replacement of future continuous in conditional clauses)

(7) "What happened to your leg?"

"I'll tell you. So, *I'm going to school* the other day as I normally do at this hour and, as usual, I'm not paying attention to the road ahead of me. Suddenly, I feel the sharpest pain shooting up my leg..." (for background details, in narratives, to increase the dramatic effect)

Likewise, the students learn at first that present perfect simple is perfectly capable of expressing an action which started in the past and continues up to the present, in examples such as "I've studied English for five years", only to learn later that there is a better tool to show continuity with actions, namely the present perfect progressive, and that present perfect simple is better suited for states, e. g. "I've known Tom for two years." Or, that state verbs do not belong with the progressive but, when they are employed as actions, they can put the progressive to good use: "The Smiths are having an argument". Therefore, at more advanced stages, learning is no longer a simple process of language acquisition; it becomes a process of constant refining of the language through comparing seemingly contradictory linguistic aspects and challenging previous knowledge.

The reason why the progressive aspect needs constant revisiting lies in its complexity. Thus, at the elementary level, students are not equipped to understand the dynamics of the tense-aspect-modality continuum in its entirety, nor does the length of the lessons allow for such an attempt to be made; only fragmented aspects of this trichotomy can be presented to the learners at a time, in the form of teaching the progressive aspect of the various grammatical tenses. Nevertheless, in order for the learners to get as accurate a picture of the progressive aspect as possible, every time a new tense is taught it should be put into perspective, insisting on the idea that the general meaning of the progressive stays the same regardless of the tense, i. e. an action in progress at a given moment in time, be it present, past or future. For example, when teaching the past progressive or the future progressive, they need to be put in relation with the present progressive in order for the students to identify a pattern. Thus, the teacher can ask the students to produce sentences about different activities that they may be/ have been doing "now", "at this time yesterday" and/or "at this time tomorrow"; or, to point out the differences between 'now' and 'then' in terms of what is/was going on at these times.

3. Teaching the Present Progressive

At the elementary level, the teacher can elicit the form of the present progressive from examples; it should not be very difficult even for elementary students to work out the general rules of producing sentences in the present progressive, since they are familiar with the present forms of the verb ‘to be’, as well as the -ing forms of some familiar activity verbs, such as ‘reading’, ‘playing’ etc. Teaching the rules of spelling variation may prove a little trickier, but the teacher can use a mixture of colour codes, diagrams, flashcards or any other equally imaginative devices in order to make the explanations very visual and therefore more easily remembered (even a pair of scissors can help the understanding of how the final ‘e’ is dropped when adding -ing).

One way to introduce the meaning of the present progressive would be through presenting the students with pictures (or drawings) of two different people in two different contexts speaking on the phone to each other; the teacher will elicit or model some sentences they are supposedly saying to each other to describe what is happening in their respective locations. This is probably the most natural context for the present progressive, a situation in which a person can describe activities in progress without sounding unnatural; another possibility would be to write a personal letter with an enclosed photo, in which to describe the photo in detail, introducing the unknown people. Such situations provide a better reason for using the present progressive than just performing the action in front of the students. Ideas like the one when the teacher or some students perform different activities and verbalize their performance (“I’m opening the door. I’m speaking English. I’m listening to the teacher” etc.) may seem an obvious way of demonstrating the ‘now’ meaning of the present progressive, but they don’t really teach how the present progressive is used. In everyday life, we hardly ever tell someone else in the same location what we are doing at that moment; in fact, if we did, it would sound awkward. Such distinctions between ‘meaning’ (telling students that the present progressive refers to ‘now’) and ‘use’ (telling students that we use it when the other person can’t see what we are doing) are necessary. Offering examples of use can be more valuable than generalised statements about meaning.

After the presentation stage, the teacher can engage the students in a variety of activities in order to practice the newly acquired form and meaning: asking what different students are doing behind the teacher’s back; miming actions written on cue

cards; spotting people out of the window doing different activities and describing the activities to the class in a guessing game; picture dictation; storyboarding - students draw sketchy comics and describe them to their partners.

Concept questions are a very effective means of enforcing meaning. For example, the concept questions for a sentence like “Tom’s playing on the computer” might be: Is Tom working on the computer now? (*No.*) Did he start playing before now? (*Yes.*) When will he finish? *(Sometime after now.)* (The teacher should also make sure that the teaching language is not more difficult than the notion being taught.) Using time lines is another effective technique for teaching meaning, with the moment “now” represented as a cross on the time line and the activity in progress as a segment beginning before and ending after the representation of “now”.

The teacher should also watch out for a number of problems that the students might encounter, among which Scrivener (2010) mentions: omission of the auxiliary verb or of the *-ing* ending; using the present progressive with stative verbs that normally take the present simple; incorrect uses of the apostrophes etc. In such instances, Yule (1998) recommends, among other types of activities, error correction exercises; still, one objection to this type of exercise would be: why show the students the mistakes beforehand and not try to prevent them instead, by emphasizing the importance of using the ending and the auxiliary verb in the formation of correct present progressive utterances? While this activity may have the anticipated effect on some bright students, eager to act as teachers in spotting and correcting the mistakes, other more visual and less abstract thinking students may be left with the wrong sentence imprinted on their retina, due to the lingering effect that the supposedly correct teacher writings usually have on the students’ minds. Later on in the book, Yule reconsiders his advice and addresses the “teachers who do not want to give their students examples with incorrect forms” (ibid., p. 75), recommending as an alternative a matching-questions-to-answers type of exercise. Regardless of the type of exercise, students should also be encouraged not only to provide the correct answers, but to talk about how they chose their answers; then, in groups, they may also be willing to create similar exercises for the other groups to complete.

For the teaching of questions and negatives, the teacher can use most of the techniques mentioned for the affirmative, only this time eliciting correct interrogative and negative sentences; for example, when one student mimes an activity, instead of having students guess the activity, the teacher can require them to ask questions: “Are

you raking the leaves?" etc. Also, 'spot the differences' can be turned into a very useful type of information gap activity, if the students work in pairs and, keeping their respective pictures secret, ask questions about what different people are doing in each picture.

For the introduction of the present progressive with future meaning, the teacher can elicit or model some convincing (or amusing) excuses involving previous arrangements to a number of pre-discussed invitations; the students can then play the game in pairs or groups. A way of practicing the structure is to write down some definite arrangements for the following week and inform the group about their and their partner's arrangements; in order to make the activity even more communicative, they can leave some empty boxes in their diary and try to make new arrangements with a partner or in a group by agreeing to or turning down other people's invitations - and fill in the boxes or rearrange things when necessary. Another variant would be for the students to take famous identities and take the game to a new level. The concept questions in the case of the present progressive with future meaning can follow the pattern: "Is X *Verb*-ing now?" (*No*.) "Will X *Verb* in the future?" (*Yes*.) "When will X *Verb*?" (*At* …) "Does X have an arrangement to *Verb*?" or "Has X arranged to *Verb*?" (*Yes*.)

At the upper intermediate level, the students are already familiar with the present progressive, so the techniques mentioned above can be used for reinforcement. Also, new subtleties of meaning will be added at this stage; for example, the difference in meaning that some stative verbs acquire when used in the progressive aspect, regardless of the tense. One way to get the students to understand this is by asking them to fill in a grid with the right verbs related to the senses in the simple or the progressive aspect:

1. Involuntary perceptions	*2. Permanent properties*	*3. Voluntary actions*
I … green trees.	The green trees … lovely.	I … at the green trees.
I … birds sing.	The bird song … delightful.	I … to the bird song.
I … heavily-scented roses.	The roses … wonderful.	I … the roses.

I … silk on my skin.	Silk … soft on my skin.	I … the silk to check if it's soft.
I … sugar in my coffee.	My coffee … sweet.	I … my coffee to make sure it's not too sweet.

The teacher will elicit the observation that the verbs in columns 1 and 2 are *stative* verbs (or states) and the verbs in column 3 are *dynamic* verbs (or actions); in most cases, they are the same verb, but with different meanings. The teacher may also enlarge upon the topic by drawing the students' attention to the fact that verbs denoting permanent properties (column 2) are followed by adjectives and not adverbs, since they are used copulatively. Finally, the teacher will elicit the rule that *only dynamic verbs or the dynamic meanings of stative verbs can be used in the continuous/progressive aspect, because they are voluntary actions which have a purpose and a limited duration*.

e. g. I'm looking at the green trees.

I'm smelling the roses.

Similarly, the emotional overtone acquired by the progressive when used with adverbs of frequency such as always and continually, which the students will later discover in the use of the present perfect progressive ("The dog has been chewing on my shoes!"), can be taught to dramatic effect in the form of jokes or anecdotes; the students can take turns to complain about their partners' (or anyone else's, for that matter!) allegedly annoying habits: "You are always shouting into my ear!"

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Biodata:

Cristina Bacanu has been a teacher of English for over 25 years, a methodologist and mentoring beginner teachers for over 7 years, she has trained students to take part in

the English Olympiad and other school contests and she has been a member of the Central Committee for organizing the National English Olympiad for 4 years.