PhD revisited: INGlish English

The progressive construction in learner narratives

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ABSTRACT  This chapter presents a doctoral study (Wold, 2017) that investigated L1 Norwegian learners’ use of the English progressive aspect (BE + V-ing). While the construction is consistently overused, results indicate that Norwegian learners to some extent are sensitive to which verb meanings are most compatible with the progressive. The chapter discusses how such learner usage could be addressed by Norwegian teachers.

KEYWORDS  progressive construction | Aspect Hypothesis | tense and aspect | learner development

1. The chapter presents the overall results of a doctoral study (Wold, 2017) from the University of Bergen, focusing specifically on its practical implications for the teaching of English in Norway. The doctoral thesis in its entirety – with theoretical, methodological, and empirical details – can be found here: http://bora.uib.no/handle/1956/16798

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INTRODUCTION

The study presented in this chapter looked at how L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English use the progressive construction: a form of the auxiliary verb BE + V-ing, as in *The boy is sleeping*. This usage is both investigated across age groups (ages 11 and 15), in order to gain a developmental perspective, and in comparison with same-age native speakers of English, to see how the learners’ usage differs from target language usage.

There are several reasons for choosing this particular construction. First, several studies have shown that the -ing ending is among the first grammatical features to be acquired by both L1 and L2 learners of English (e.g. Brown, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974), which suggests that it is easy to learn and use. However, to be used as the progressive aspect, the -ing form must be paired with auxiliary BE, which many learners fail to do. For example, a learner might use only -ing and say *The boy sleeping*, rather than *The boy is sleeping*, with the obligatory auxiliary. One important part of the study was therefore to find to what extent the use of -ing and the use of BE are connected in learner language. In other words, at what stage of development do the learners use the progressive as a construction with both elements in place? Second, it is a construction that does not exist as an obligatory grammatical feature in Norwegian. The L2 learners must therefore learn to both understand and use a grammatical distinction they do not have to pay attention to in their L1. This study sought to gain insight into how such an understanding develops. Third, many English teachers have informally observed that L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English *overuse* the progressive, or at least the -ing form (cf. Johansson & Lysvåg, 1987, p. 158), who speculate that this may be attributed to too much emphasis on this form in teaching materials. This overuse had not been properly investigated before, and similar reports of overuse only seemed to come from studies involving L1 speakers of Germanic languages (e.g. Axelsson & Hahn, 2001; Housen, 2002b; Kellerman, 1997). The question was therefore whether the reported overuse could be found in a systematic study and whether Norwegian learners’ use of the progressive displayed patterns that could shed light on their understanding of the construction.

In addition, the study aimed to look at whether Norwegian learners followed the same path of development as learners with other language backgrounds, or whether their usage was influenced by their first language. All of this is knowledge that is useful to Norwegian teachers when they guide their pupils in the learning process: The primary focus of English instruction in Norway is on *communication*, and in order to achieve communicative competence, there is a need to ensure some level of grammatical accuracy.
In order to gain the desired information, the study asked the following primary research questions:

How do L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English go from learning the -ing form to learning the progressive construction? Specifically, how do the usage patterns of L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English develop as compared to those of L1 speakers of English?

To answer these questions, the usage patterns were investigated in terms of form, frequency, and semantic contexts.

THEORY

According to the theoretical framework called Cognitive Linguistics (see e.g. Croft & Cruse, 2004; Goldberg, 1995; Langacker, 1987, 1991, 1999, 2001, 2008, 2009; Radden & Dirven, 2007), all elements of language – including grammar – are meaningful and thus contribute to fulfilling our communicative needs. Grammar is seen as a set of conceptual tools that we use to convey meaning precisely. However, different languages make use of different grammatical features. As first-language users, we automatically choose to express meaning in a way that matches the grammar we have at our disposal in our first language. This is what Slobin (1996) calls thinking for speaking; a form of habitual thought patterns. Such habitual patterns are difficult to change. Thus, when L2 learners encounter a grammatical construction they are not familiar with in their L1, they will often first try to adapt its meaning and use to match an L1 structure, rather than pay attention to different meaning nuances in L2 usage. This is called the One-to-One Principle (Andersen, 1984).

Another theory that aims to explain the acquisition of verbal coding, and which this study largely draws on, is the Aspect Hypothesis (see e.g. Bardovi-Harlig, 1999, 2000; Collins, 2002, 2004; Housen, 1995, 2002a, 2002b; Robison, 1990, 1995; Rocca, 2002, 2007; Rohde, 1996; Shirai, 2007; Shirai & Andersen, 1995; Shirai & Salaberry, 2002). Studies have found that the semantic content, i.e. the meaning, of the lexical verb (phrase) is associated with certain verb endings. In most of these studies, researchers distinguish between four semantic categories:

1. Activities: dynamic verb phrases with duration and no clear end point, e.g. run, talk, breathe
2. Accomplishments: dynamic verb phrases with duration and a natural end point, e.g. eat an apple, fall down, paint a picture
3. Achievements: dynamic verb phrases with little or no duration, e.g. notice, die, stop
4. **States**: stative verb phrases with duration and no natural end point, e.g. *love, exist, know*

The Aspect Hypothesis (AH) is based on the trend shown in several studies that both L1 and L2 learners distinguish clearly between these categories – collectively termed *lexical aspect* – in their initial distribution of verbal coding[^2]. The hypothesis is articulated as follows by Shirai & Andersen (1995) and applies to L2 learners as well:

1. Children first use past (or perfective) marking predominantly with achievement and accomplishment verbs, eventually extending their use to activity and finally to stative verbs.
2. In languages that have progressive aspect, children first use progressive marking mostly with activity verbs, then extending it to accomplishment and achievement verbs.
3. Children do not incorrectly overextend progressive markings to stative verbs.

(1995, p. 745)

In light of this hypothesis, the present study aimed to investigate the distribution of progressives by lexical aspect, to see if any overuse was random and systematic.

The early stages of the learners’ use of an unfamiliar structure are part of their developing *interlanguage* (Selinker, 1972), which is a functioning language system distinct from both the L1 and the L2. Learners go through various stages of interlanguage on their path towards an L1-like use of the target language – which they may or may not ever reach. In most cases they do not, however, and it is important to recognize that each learner has an idiosyncratic language system that is not just a flawed version of the target language; it is therefore worthy of study in its own right, in order to find out which patterns emerge and at what stage. Not least, it is useful to know whether the patterns are particular to individual learners or representative of entire learner groups. In the latter case, teachers may make use of such insights to tailor their instruction to the learners’ needs.

**REVIEW**

While one must not lose sight of the fact that learner language is a large system, it is beyond the scope of any study to outline the full system of any learner group.

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[^2]: I use the term “verbal coding” to encompass both morphological endings and periphrastic constructions. The progressive is in fact an example of both, with its auxiliary BE and -ing ending.
The present study is limited to the systematic use of English verbal coding in learner texts, centered on the progressive construction. Many have already looked at how such verbal coding is acquired and tried to find reasons for the patterns that emerge. As mentioned in the introduction, the -ing form is among the first that learners use productively. Goldschneider and DeKeyser (2005) suggest that stable and phonologically salient, or noticeable, forms such as -ing are learned earlier than forms that are variable and often phonologically reduced. This would also account for the fact that auxiliary BE – which has forms such as am, is, are, was, were, etc. – is more difficult to handle, and learned later.

The most relevant findings for the purposes of this study were those investigating the Aspect Hypothesis. To my knowledge, all AH studies have revealed the same trends: that learners overwhelmingly prefer to use the progressive with activity verbs, such as run, eat, work. They also find that prototypical state verbs such as be, love, need are not used with the progressive in learner language. However, some studies have also shown differences on a more detailed level. Rohde (1996) for example, registered unexpected use of achievement progressives, with verbs such as find and win, and Rocca (2002, 2007) found that L1 Italian learners of English used the progressive in ways that could be linked to the Italian imperfective aspect. Therefore another aim was to see whether Norwegian learners differed from English L2 learners with other L1s. Any such information on Norwegian learner usage would inform teachers on what type of learner behavior and development to expect, and consequently help them adapt their teaching to learners’ needs.

Housen (2002b) also found that the initial use of the progressive was often as a default verb form, rather than as a clear expression of tense/aspect meaning. Housen calls this stage pre-functional (2002b, p. 156). As Norwegian does not have a grammatical form corresponding to the English progressive, it is not unlikely that learners initially perceive -ing as a tense form instead.

Related to the Aspect Hypothesis is the discourse hypothesis (Bardovi-Harlig, 1998), which assigns the progressive a backgrounding, descriptive role in narratives, whereas the simple tense is used to present sequential events and drive the narrative forward. We also find that the progressive is used with different frequencies in different genres, and more often in spoken than in written text (see e.g. Smith, 2002). With a focus on oral communication in the first years of learning English in Norwegian schools, oral-language conventions may be carried over to written texts before appropriate genre awareness is developed.

3. Prototypical examples of a category are the ones that best fit its definition; others may partly fit the criteria of several categories and therefore be harder to place, e.g. agree or remember in the case of states.
METHODOLOGY

In order to gain information about learner usage and development of the English progressive aspect, formally expressed as the construction BE + V-ing, over time, the project was designed as a quasilongitudinal, or apparent time, study. Although the primary focus was on Norwegian learners, it was the aim of this investigation to add to the knowledge of both L1 and L2 development as regards this construction, so L1 usage was also investigated.

SAMPLE

Learner data was selected from two different age groups, which were sufficiently similar to extrapolate to a learner group’s linguistic development from one point in time to another. Their usage was compared to that of same-age L1 speakers. Data was collected from 165 informants. Of these, 89 were L1 Norwegian learners of L2 English; 45 from the 6th grade (age 10 or 11) and 44 from late 10th grade or early 11th grade (age 15 or 16). The remaining 76 were L1 speakers of English from the United States; 38 aged 10 or 11, and 38 aged 14–16. All informant groups were gender balanced. In the Norwegian groups, there were only informants who reported that Norwegian (and to a limited degree English) was their only language used outside school, as well as parents’/guardians’ first language. Similarly, in the L1 English groups, there were only informants who stated that they, as well as their closest relations, were monolingual speakers of English. This was to ensure that the use of other languages would not influence the results of the study, as all language knowledge may lead to cross-linguistic influence (cf. Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008). The informants that listed influence from other languages than L1/L2 English or L1 Norwegian, or extensive use of L2 English outside school, were not included in the study.

RESEARCH DESIGN

In this study, written material was chosen as the object of study and the texts were limited to the narrative genre. For the purpose of comparison, the study relied on a method used in several previous studies of learner language (e.g. Berman & Slobin, 1987; Cadierno, 2004): the elicitation of “frog stories”, based on the picture book *Frog, where are you?* (Mayer, 1969). All the informants were asked to write their narratives based on the pictures in the same picture book. In addition to easy comparison with other studies, this would ensure similar stories and vocabulary, so differences in use of the progressive could not be attributed to great variations in genre or lexicon. Figure 6.1 below shows an excerpt from the book; pictures 18 and 19.
The data was collected by means of a website specifically designed for this purpose by AKSIS\(^4\). It consisted of three parts: First, an introduction with instructions on how to proceed. Among other things, the informants were asked to look at all the pictures of the story before starting to write, not to worry about spelling, and to ask their teacher for vocabulary items (dictionaries were not allowed). To ensure understanding, the instructions were given in Norwegian for the Norwegian L2 learners. A parallel site in English was designed for the L1 informants, with slightly different instructions, reflecting their monolingual backgrounds. The second part was a page where they filled in background information, including language background. The third part was a page with a text window, miniatures of all the pictures in the story, and a larger, single picture which would come up as any of the miniatures were clicked on; this would be the one they were writing about at any given time. When the story was written, each informant would click on “send” and the story and background data would reach AKSIS immediately.

The stories were subsequently sorted according to the background variables: age, gender, and language background. Some of the written texts were also removed due to, among other things, lack of background information, technical problems, or problems with the test conditions. Of the total, 165 met the criteria for the study. These texts gave a total word count of 55,706. On average, texts written by Norwegian 11-year-olds counted 210 words, whereas texts written by same-age Americans averaged 370 words. As for the 15-year-olds, the word count gap was much smaller: the Norwegian average was 380 and the American one 408.

\(^4\) A University-owned research company, which specializes in language technology. See http://www.aksis.uib.no/ I am infinitely grateful to Knut Hofland for all his input and technical support.
The study distinguished between extralinguistic variables, which were used to group learners and interpret variation in light of learner backgrounds, and linguistic variables, which were used to account for systematic differences based on the interplay between language structures. In addition to the factors age, gender and L1, the texts written by the Norwegian informants were grouped according to proficiency level by experienced assessors who work on producing the national tests in English. The levels used were the ones defined by the Council of Europe (2001). The written learner texts ranged from the lowest level (A1) to upper intermediate (B2); the latter only one text. The majority were at levels A2 or B1.

As for the linguistic variables, all verb phrases were extracted and marked for both verbal coding and lexical aspect in an Excel spread sheet. The main variable, the dependent one, was called PROGRESSIVE and referred to whether or not the verb phrase was a progressive construction: the variants were labeled 1) PROG, which included all instances of the -ing form in contexts where one would expect a finite verb, whether or not auxiliary BE was used, and 2) NON, which included all other verb phrases in the same type of context. In this way, all finite verb phrases were included, whether or not verbal coding was attempted.

The other linguistic variables, the independent ones, which were thought to influence the distribution of the variants of PROGRESSIVE, were, first, TENSE, which included the variants PAST, PRESENT, and BASE – the latter was used for instances with no overt tense marking where this was required (3rd person singular), as the least proficient learners often have not learned to use tense forms appropriately. The second independent variable was LEXICAL ASPECT (cf. the review section), with the variants ACT (activity), ACC (accomplishment), ACH (achievement), and STA (state). A third variable, ING, was also included, as the initial search for progressives in the data set revealed that a large number of -ing forms were used in other constructions than the progressive. These instances were counted and labeled ING, and the question was whether there was any correlation between the number of ING and the number of progressives in a text.

STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

The bulk of the analysis was carried out by means of descriptive statistics, presented by means of tables, charts and diagrams. The descriptive analysis was supported by a test of statistical significance, by means of a multivariate regression analysis. This is a statistical analysis with the great advantage that the effect of
several different variables can be compared and measured. It is then possible to single out the factors that have the most impact on the dependent variable.

RESULTS

The total number of finite verb phrase tokens in the data set, all groups included, was 6891. Of these, around 80% were in the nonprogressive and around 20% in the progressive. However, the progressives were far from evenly distributed among the groups, as seen in table 6.1 below.

TABLE 6.1. Distribution of finite verb forms: All informant groups; group scores.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>NON</th>
<th>PROG</th>
<th>Total N</th>
<th>NON</th>
<th>PROG</th>
<th>Total N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (100%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (%)</td>
<td>N (100%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>2384 (72.8)</td>
<td>891 (27.2)</td>
<td>3275</td>
<td>NS</td>
<td>3071 (84.9)</td>
<td>545 (15.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>804 (61.7)</td>
<td>499 (38.3)</td>
<td>1303</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1475 (84.2)</td>
<td>277 (15.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>327 (57.5)</td>
<td>242 (42.5)</td>
<td>569</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>544 (79.5)</td>
<td>140 (20.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>477 (65.0)</td>
<td>257 (35.0)</td>
<td>734</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>931 (87.2)</td>
<td>137 (12.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>1580 (80.1)</td>
<td>392 (19.9)</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1596 (85.6)</td>
<td>268 (14.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>769 (84.2)</td>
<td>144 (15.8)</td>
<td>913</td>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>763 (83.5)</td>
<td>151 (16.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>811 (76.6)</td>
<td>248 (23.4)</td>
<td>1059</td>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>833 (87.7)</td>
<td>117 (12.3)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The rows in the table show results for both Norwegian (N: left) and native-speaker (NS: right) informants in both raw numbers and percentages; each divided first into age groups and then gender. The columns show numbers and percentages for the nonprogressive (NON) and the progressive (PROG).

With a 27% group score, the Norwegian informants’ use of progressives was 12 percentage points higher than that of the native speakers (15%). The initial observation was therefore that these Norwegian learners clearly overuse the progressive compared to their L1 peers. In addition, there were clear age differences within the Norwegian group of informants: The progressive was used twice as frequently in the youngest group as in the oldest one (38% vs. 20%). And while the 15-year-olds displayed usage that was closer in frequency to the American groups (both around 15%), it was still around five percentage points higher than these, where the age difference was minimal. At this stage, the L2 Norwegian overuse seemed confirmed. There were also gender differences that were hard to explain, as boys used the progressive more than girls, except in the group of Norwegian 15-year-
olds. However, these differences were later found not to be statistically significant, which means that they are most likely due to random selection.

INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

While group scores can reveal important tendencies, it is also useful to know whether individual learners typically display the same type of behavior or have different approaches to learning a grammatical structure; as noted in the theory section, grammatical structures are seen as conceptual tools, and as language learners we try to match structures and concepts. In an L2 context, the concepts may be either existing ones from L1 or new ones we try to understand in the L2. Similar behavior might therefore be an indication that the L1 background influences the understanding and use of an L2 item (see e.g. Jarvis, 2000).

Individual differences were considered in light of L1, age and proficiency level; gender is not included here, due to lack of statistical significance. The box plots in figure 6.2 below show differences between proficiency levels, as well as between L1 and L2, in both age groups. The L1 groups are labeled “Ø” for “zero level”. We see that there was a great spread in the frequencies of the progressive in the L2 texts.

![Figure 6.2](image)

**FIGURE 6.2.** Distribution of grammatical aspect in percentages: all ages and proficiency levels. The horizontal line in each box shows the median.
The native-speaker groups are labeled “Ø” for “zero level” and the B1/B2 group is labeled “B”.

The informants at the lowest proficiency level, A1, had roughly the same median (the black lines in the middle of the plots) as the same-age learners at level A2 (around 45%), but the box shows a greater concentration around the median in the
latter group. These groups had an even spread from zero use of the progressive to close to 90%; such results indicated that the learners did *not* have a common understanding of the use of the progressive. By comparison, the older learners at level A2 had both a lower median (34%) and a more even spread in the lower frequencies. The greatest contrast, however, was between levels A2 and B5 – the latter with only a 10% median; in terms of frequency alone, this learner group was virtually indistinguishable from the native speakers. The B-level learners and the native speakers had frequencies mostly concentrated around the median, as seen by the smaller boxes – this behavior indicated a shared understanding of the progressive within the groups that was not seen in the low-proficiency L2 groups. This is the first indication that overall proficiency is necessary to understand the use of the progressive (at least in terms of frequency); learning about the form in isolation does not enable the learners to use the construction appropriately in a text. This seems to require both practice and comprehension.

### TENSE

One of the hypotheses of the study was that the use of the progressive would correlate with tense forms; the progressive would mainly be used with a present tense inflection of auxiliary BE, e.g. *He is running*, or with no auxiliary at all, e.g. *He running*, and only rarely in the past tense, e.g. *He was running*. As seen in figure 6.3 below, this turned out to be the case in all groups – the L2 proficiency groups and the American age groups (NS11 and NS15) – and particularly in the least proficient ones.

The bar chart shows the percentage of progressives, out of the total number of tokens in each of the tense categories, in each group. We see that the ratio of past progressives was consistently low\(^5\), and while the use of progressives was generally lower in the more proficient groups, it was clearly more used with the present tense or without the auxiliary. A striking result is that at age 15, the L2 learners at the B level had results that resembled those of same-age native speakers (NS15) in this respect as well.

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5. As there was only one text assessed to be at level B2, it was grouped with the B1 texts and all just called B.

6. The results for the A1 group are skewed by one text consistently in the past tense; the others hardly used past tense forms.
In addition to percentages of each tense category, the study showed that -ing was by far the most used form of verbal coding at the lowest proficiency levels. At level A1, in particular, the past tense was hardly used and base forms were almost twice as frequent as the present tense. In other words, the study revealed that the youngest and least proficient L2 learners very often used aspect, i.e. the -ing form, instead of, rather than in addition to, tense forms. An example is given in (1) below (verb phrases in bold):

1 The ole *coms* after the boy and he *running* opp to the wook and *hold* he in the stic and say “help help!”. And he *looft* my upp in the air and *running* to the stuups (Norwegian 11-year-old)

In this short passage, only one verb (*coms*) is marked for tense. The others are either not coded at all or marked with the -ing ending, which here clearly functions as a finite verb. With both age and proficiency, correct tense coding – both past and present – is used more and more consistently, both in the progressive and in the nonprogressive. At the same time, the frequency of the progressive goes down, and is similar to native-speaker frequencies at the B level. It should be noted here

7. Note, however, that this is a formal interpretation, which does not necessarily tell us anything about how the learners understand the meaning of these forms.
that level B1 is not particularly high; there are still many errors in the texts. However, they seem to be characterized by an overall mastery of the English verbal system.

LEXICAL ASPECT

The next variable that was predicted to influence the choice of verb form was lexical aspect; the idea that learners perceive verbal coding as connected to the lexical meaning of the verb phrase. Numerous studies have shown that this is the case, and the learners in this study largely followed the same pattern, particularly with the preference for activity verb phrases with the progressive (or bare -ing form). For this variable, it was hypothesized that both the L1 and L2 informants would show results in line with the Aspect Hypothesis, as outlined in the theory section above. In particular, it was predicted that progressives would mainly be used with activity verb phrases (ACT) such as run, eat, look.

![Figure 6.4](image)

**Figure 6.4.** Percent progressives of each lexical aspect category (activities, accomplishments, achievements and states) in each of the groups: CEFR levels A1, A2 (split into ages 11 and 15) and B (B1 and B2 grouped together), as well as native speakers (NS) in both age groups.

Figure 6.4 above shows that the Aspect Hypothesis was supported by the results from this study; all groups used progressives to a much larger extent with ACT than with any of the other categories. An example is seen in (2) below:
2 the owl flying over the boy (Norwegian 11-year-old).

However, the Aspect Hypothesis predicted an increase of use in the other categories with greater proficiency, and also that low-proficiency learners would not use state progressives at all. To the contrary, the ratio of progressives went down with proficiency in all the categories, and the preference for progressives with activities was clearer in the most proficient groups. However, the learners in the study also used the progressive in contexts where it was not predicted to occur; while achievement progressives are certainly possible in English, they are less likely, and were often used unidiomatically in this study, as in (3) below:

3 a boy finding a dog in the water. (Norwegian 11-year-old)

Moreover, the Aspect Hypothesis claims that learners do not overextend the progressive to state verb phrases (Shirai & Andersen, 1995, p. 745), but several counterexamples were found in this study, as in (4) and (5) below:

4 The boy is having a frog in a box on the floor. (Norwegian 15-year-old)

5 The [frog] is liking the other frog. (Norwegian 11-year-old)

Even if the hypothesis is restricted to only prototypical states, as Housen (2002b, p. 165) thinks it should, these examples were in violation of the hypothesis. In addition, the clearest distinctions between the lexical aspect categories were found in the native-speaker and B-level groups, who were the most proficient ones overall. These findings further support the suggestion that the progressive and -ing may first be seen as a tense form, or at least as a very generalized verbal marker. On the other hand, all groups showed results that were broadly in line with the Aspect Hypothesis, indicating that there are several factors at play. Not least, the statistical tests revealed that learners who had the highest frequencies of the progressive also had the highest frequencies of activity verb phrases in their texts. These verb phrases are often intransitive (e.g. the boy running) and lack the complexity often found in accomplishments or achievements, which often describe an end point in some detail, e.g. But dei was runing away from the bis. (level A1); The boy climb upp of the wather with has dog. (level A2). Among several reasons why the progressive is overused, we may therefore add that the progressive is more compatible with less complex language. Overall, these results indicated a more indiscriminate overuse of the progressive in the earlier stages of learning.
Once again, however, we may note that the B-level learners group with the native speakers rather than with the other L2 learners.

THE -ING FORM (ING)

Finally, the study looked at the extent to which the -ing form was used in other functions than as a finite verb (with or without auxiliary BE). An example of such a function is found in (6) below, in an adverbial clause:

6 But on the way up, a big owl hit’s him while flying. (Norwegian 15-year-old)

| TABLE 6.2. Use of non-finite ING by nationality, age, and proficiency level. |
|-----------------|---|---|---|---|
|                | Level | Total | N  | Mean | Range |
| N11            | A1  | 0/12  | –  | –    | –     |
|                | A2  | 10    | 8/33| 1,25 | 1–3   |
|                | B1  | 3     | 1/1 | –    | 3     |
| N15            | A1  | 0/1   | –  | –    | –     |
|                | A2  | 27    | 12/18| 2,25 | 1–5   |
|                | B1  | 170   | 24/24| 7,1  | 1–26  |
|                | B2  | 10    | 1/1 | –    | 10    |
| NS11           | –   | 233   | 34/38| 6,9  | 1–28  |
| NS15           | –   | 207   | 37/38| 5,6  | 1–19  |

While there was no correlation – positive or negative – between the frequency of the progressive and the frequency of -ing in non-finite contexts, it was clear that the use of ING increased with both age and proficiency, as seen in table 6.2 above. The development of ING was also parallel to the increased use of tense forms. It seems that when the progressive is more firmly established as a construction, BE + V-ing, (e.g. *The boy is looking at a frog*) rather than -ing seen as a finite form in its own right (e.g. *The boy looking at a frog*), the learners realize more and more that the form can have other uses as well. Or it may be the other way round; that the more they come across -ing in other contexts, the more they realize that auxiliary BE is necessary to form the progressive. This point merits more research, but the findings from this study indicate that the development of tense forms and ING is connected. Either way, it was evident that L2 learners at level B mastered
the use of tense, aspect and ING, to a far greater extent than the less proficient learners. At levels A1 there was little use of tense and no use of ING, while we saw a larger proportion of both of these features at level A2, and more so in 15-year-olds than in 11-year-olds.

STATISTICAL SIGNIFICANCE
While descriptive statistics gave revealing results, statistical tests were necessary to find whether the correlations were random or likely to be due to influence from the independent variables. The multivariate regression analyses showed that gender was not a statistically significant factor (p = .734), but age and L1 background clearly distinguished the informants’ frequency of the progressive (p = .000). However, this was only before the linguistic variables were considered: when all the variables were added, the only factor that reliably predicted use of the progressive was presence of activity verb phrases in a text (p = .000). With an effect size of .461, this variable accounts for 46% of the variation in the use of the progressive, and thus has great explanatory power. The only other factor that contributed greatly was proficiency level: A separate multivariate regression analysis showed that proficiency level accounted for around 27% of the variation in the use of the progressive. Moreover, the greatest distinction was between levels A1 and A2 on the one hand, and level B and native speakers on the other; these results were all highly significant (p = .000). In other words, when Norwegian learners reach a certain general level of English, overuse of the progressive no longer seems to be any reason for concern.

DISCUSSION: CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ENGLISH DIDACTICS FIELD
In the doctoral project presented in this chapter, learner data was analyzed in order to gain an understanding of how Norwegian L2 learners develop a verbal system in the target language, English, with the progressive construction as a focal point. In addition to the background variables L1, age, gender and proficiency level, the use of the progressive aspect was seen in light of the learners’ use of tense, lexical aspect and the use of -ing in other constructions. This section discusses the empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions of the study, and how findings from the project may inform pedagogical practice in Norwegian schools.
EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The results presented above showed that the L2 learners in the study overused the progressive considerably compared to the same-age L1 users; the study thus confirmed the claim made in Johansson and Lysvåg (1987, p. 158). However, the overuse is far from static. The proportion of progressives (or bare -ing forms, as is often the case) goes down somewhat with age, but the greatest difference is between proficiency levels A2 and B1: In terms of frequency alone, the latter group performed on roughly the same level as the native speakers. In addition, the study saw a correlation between the learners’ use of the progressive and their use of tense and lexical aspect. A parallel development was also shown between the mastery of the progressive construction and the use of -ing in other contexts. In all these respects, the Norwegian learners’ usage was similar to that of native speakers, once they reached CEFR proficiency level B1 or higher.

While the L1 speakers’ (and the B-level learners’) frequency of the progressive was lower than that of the low-proficiency L2 learners, it was still higher than in most large adult corpora known to the present author (see e.g. Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999, p. 460ff; Smith, 2002). However, this may be due to the nature of the task, as the frequencies resembled those found in adult native-speaker Frog stories (Berman & Slobin, 1994, p. 138). In fact, it is also worth mentioning that the youngest L2 learners in this study had frequencies of the progressive that matched those of native-speaker three-year-olds (ibid.). This finding at least superficially indicated a similar development of this construction in Norwegian learners as in American native speakers. Indeed, when Norwegian learners reach a certain level (B1 or higher) their use of the progressive is similar to that of native speakers and seems to be connected with overall good writing skills.

The development found in the study presented here is similar to that found in other studies of both native-speaker and L2-learner language, where the -ing form is among the first forms acquired, before past or present tense inflections, or auxiliary BE. This indicates a natural process that learners go through, with initial use of -ing before other forms of verbal coding are added and balance out the frequencies. Moreover, since Norwegian is a tensed language, it is possible that -ing is first seen as a tense form rather than as part of a grammatical construction that expresses aspectual meaning.
METODOLOGICAL AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

While the use of the progressive has already been studied in many different learner groups, as well as in light of the Aspect Hypothesis, the most important methodological contribution of this study is its thorough use of complex statistical analysis. A range of linguistic and extralinguistic factors that could potentially influence the use of the progressive were selected, and through a multiple regression analysis, it was found which ones had the greatest explanatory power: The frequency of the progressive was most strongly correlated with the frequency of activity verb phrases – more so than with the informants’ status as first or second language speaker. This method is an improvement over previous studies that have looked at such factors separately or not applied statistical significance tests at all.

As for theoretical contributions, the study found that while a positive correlation between activities and the progressive was confirmed, there is no indication that learners avoid state progressives (e.g. He is liking it.) entirely: such a negative correlation was not statistically significant. In addition, this is, to my knowledge, the first study to thoroughly distinguish between the progressive and other uses of the -ing form and to trace the connection between such uses and their developmental stages. Teachers should be aware of the difference between the various constructions and expect other uses of the -ing form only after learners master the full progressive construction, BE + -ing.

IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH AS L2

When teaching English verb forms, it is useful for Norwegian teachers to know how learner language develops compared to native-speaker usage. The doctoral study presented here provides useful information in that respect and may also guide teachers in choosing which elements to emphasize. One thing that is evident is that the learners were far from reluctant to use the progressive/-ing – quite the contrary. The challenge for teachers is rather to help their learners automatize the appropriate use of other verb forms, especially when they produce written texts. This transition can be difficult for learners, as the emphasis is on oral language in the first years of training and writing receives more focus later on. In particular, it should be emphasized that the simple tense is more used in both narratives and factual texts, whereas the progressive rather belongs to oral language.

The implication of all this is that -ing alone is not a form that needs extensive focus and practice; instead, learners could practice tense forms more and be made aware that -ing needs auxiliary BE to express tense in the progressive construction.
While teachers may choose to practice verb forms based on what learners typically struggle with, it must also be emphasized that the learners in the present study seemingly followed a path of development common to both L1 and L2 learners. The consequence of this finding is that teachers should not expect learners to master one stage before the previous one. If they initially use the -ing form without the auxiliary, this should be seen as a step of development, rather than a great mistake. At this stage the teacher may intervene to speed up the process and focus on the use of auxiliary BE. One way to do this might be to have the learners ask and answer yes-no questions based on situations they see in pictures or film clips and stress that they should use BE, for example **Is the boy eating? – No, he is not eating, he is running.** As for the all-too-frequent use of the progressive, this ought not to be a focus in itself, as frequencies seem to go down when learners increase their overall proficiency, including the mastery of other verbal coding.

Another important factor is lexical aspect – the meaning of the verb phrases used with the progressive: Until learners have learned to use more accomplishment and achievement verb phrases, it is likely that they will continue to overuse the progressive. These verb phrase types are often combined with the sort of complex contexts – including past time expression – that low-proficiency learners are unlikely to master, whereas typical activity phrases express more simple and immediate actions. Teachers may therefore want to help their learners produce more complex sentences, with clause elements that describe goals, directions, circumstances, etc., as well as more vocabulary. In short, until other elements connected to the complex English verbal system are mastered, the progressive (or just -ing) is likely to be the default form, as it is salient, stable, and easy to use. This means that part of the role of the teacher could be to promote genre awareness, rather than just focus on grammatical forms in isolation.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH**

Although the study presented in this chapter has provided some answers to the issues it sought to explore, other questions have been raised during the process and given cause for further investigation. We have seen that these Norwegian L2 learners at the beginning of their 6th year of schooling were well aware of the -ing form and used it freely in what may or may not be understood as a progressive construction (with or without auxiliary BE). First, what we have not learned is exactly when this form first emerged and in which contexts, and the development was not traced in individual learners. Second, information about the type and amount of L2 input, inside the classroom and out, was not available. The role of
the learning context was thus one of the missing parts of the puzzle. An answer to such questions calls for a true longitudinal study where learner production, both written and oral, is collected regularly, along with information about teaching materials and the learners’ access to English outside the classroom. Such information could fruitfully include the types of lexical verbs used with the various verb constructions in the material, both written and spoken, to which learners are exposed. This could provide explanations as to how and why learners at the same age and with the same amount of schooling arrive at different levels of proficiency, particularly in a group such as N15, where the difference between the proficiency groups was so great in the construction investigated in this study.

There was also quite a large gap between the two age groups in this study, in which time the use of -ing in other constructions than the progressive went from minimal to widespread. A longitudinal study would be able to pinpoint the stage where non-finite uses of -ing emerge in individual learners.

The suggestion that -ing is initially seen as a tense form should also be explored further. This study did not compare the learners’ L1 and L2 production, but in subsequent studies, Norwegian learners’ use of tense should also be investigated in texts written in their L1. This would reveal whether their narratives rely on the present tense in Norwegian as well, or if their L2 performance is merely a consequence of a lack of formal mastery of all parts of the English verbal system.

REFERENCES


