

Looking at 'looking' – Functions and Contexts of Progressives in Spoken English and 'School' English

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The English progressive (also 'continuous' or 'expanded form') is known to present a significant problem for language learners. As there is no comparable grammatical aspectual category in their native language, German-speaking learners of English tend to be particularly confused and error-prone when it comes to deciding for either a simple or a progressive tense form and often use progressives in inappropriate contexts.

The purpose of the present paper is to explore the use of progressive aspect in large collections of spoken British English (the 10 million word spoken part of the British National Corpus and the 20 million word spoken subsection of the Bank of English, 'brspok') and in a small electronic corpus of spoken-type texts taken from German EFL textbooks. The starting point for this data-driven analysis is an examination of the 100 most frequent present participle forms in spoken British English. As a concrete example, the results of a detailed analysis of one of these participles, the lexical item 'looking', its different meanings and semantic and syntactic contexts, will be presented.

The investigation will focus on the differences observed between English as it is used in natural communicative situations and the type of English pupils are confronted with in a foreign language teaching context. On the basis of these findings suggestions for a possible improvement of teaching materials will be made. It will thus be shown that analyses like the one reported on in this paper can provide linguists, teachers, and textbook writers with valuable insights and that corpus-informed comparisons of real native-speaker English and so-called 'school' English may help us achieve a greater degree of naturalness or authenticity in English language teaching.