

TALC6 2004 – SIXTH INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON *TEACHING AND LANGUAGE CORPORA*

ABSTRACT FORM

TITLE:	A need for better descriptions: Teaching the truth about progressives		
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ABSTRACT (Maximum 500 words.)

The paper starts from the assumption that learners ought to be presented with language as it really is and that they deserve to be taught the truth about the language they have chosen to study. This truth, I argue, can be found in large corpora which capture the language of thousands of expert language users.

I look at the true facts about one particular language construction, a construction that is known to be a constant source of problems for learners, even on an advanced level: the English progressive, i.e. a form of TO BE + the present participle of a verb (e.g. *'re giving* in "you're not giving me what I want"). Important in this context is the question whether learners have problems with the appropriate use of progressives because progressives as such are more difficult to use than other items, or because their use is inadequately described in their coursebooks. In other words, the question is "What came first, the language problem or the faulty description?"

If we want to determine the truth about progressives and discover how competent speakers of English use these forms, a thorough analysis of large amounts of language data is absolutely necessary. To tackle the "What came first...?" issue and to find out more about the presentation of progressives in teaching materials, a systematic account of the language of coursebooks must be the next step. The findings of both analyses then have to be compared to see in what way the language taught at schools differs from the language used in real communicative situations.

The present paper takes a closer look at corpora and coursebooks (i.e. at 'real English' and 'school English') and presents some central findings from a large-scale comparative study on the use of progressive forms of high-frequency English verbs (100 types and more than 10,000 tokens) in huge collections of spoken British English (the 10 million word spoken part of the British National Corpus and the 20 million word spoken British component of the Bank of English) and in a small corpus of spoken-type texts from two best-selling German EFL textbook series. The analysis focuses on a wide range of contextual and functional features. I hope to illustrate how comparative corpus-driven work can (i) help discover true facts about the language, (ii) highlight differences between 'school English' and 'real English', and (iii) contribute to improving existing descriptions of language, particularly for a pedagogical context.

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