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Exploring and Analysing the Difficulties When Learning and Teaching the
Present Tense and the Present Progressive Aspect to Swedish Pupils

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Abstract

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Purpose: To explore the difficulties when learning the English present tense and the present progressive aspect and get information about the common errors made by Swedish learners of different grades.

Method: A quantitative study of 41 pupils' knowledge and use of the present tense and the present progressive aspect in a *fill-in-the-blank* test and thereafter, an error analysis of pupils' collected data.

Material: 6th grade and 9th grade pupils' responses to test questions

Main results: The results showed that older learners managed to answer correctly more than younger learners. At the same time, tense and aspect errors are a problematic area for both classes. However, the comprehension of how the rule works needs to be acquired by pupils and the rule must be used many times in their own communication to be automated.

Key words: Present, tense, progressive, error analysis, Standard English

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1. Introduction

If you are learning English, there is no way of avoiding grammar. Today, we know that pupils do not acquire everything teachers try to teach and if the subject is not interesting enough for them, their acquisition of information decreases even more. I believe that grammar can be taught in an interesting way, but to be able to do that, we have to know problematic areas and take the learners' perspective into account. If grammar is complicated and difficult, pupils may give up after a while.

English is a compulsory subject and it is taught in every school in Sweden. It is important that pupils get the chance to hear about the similarities and differences in the grammar of the Swedish and English languages. However, in my experience, grammar is a nightmare for most pupils, and they usually ask the teacher why they should learn grammar. The answer is that the rules of grammar help us to improve our communicative competence. It will also enhance our understanding of how to convey and transfer our messages, interpret and receive others' messages correctly (Köhlmyr 2010:5).

The distinction between the present progressive and the simple present in English should be studied carefully, since the wrong usage of the features changes the meaning of what the speaker intends to say. In Swedish, the present progressive can be expressed, but a corresponding grammatical form does not exist, thus the English present progressive can be difficult to teach to Swedes. Even though the present progressive form does not exist in the Swedish language, its important communicative role in English must be acquired by Swedish learners of English. However, not having progressive verb forms in Swedish, Scandinavian learners tend to generalise the use of "simple" tense or overuse the progressive forms (Smith & Swan 2011:31).

1.1. Aims

The aim of the study is to explore difficulties related to learning the English **present tense** and the **present progressive aspect** and what can be more emphasized by teachers in the classroom. In addition, common errors made by young Swedish learners are analysed and discussed. While I do not claim that my analysis will suit every learner, this study is intended as a tool for pupils and teachers.

2. Method and Material

Since the main purpose of my study is to get information about the common errors made by Swedish learners while learning the present tense and the present progressive aspect and

thereafter analyse some selected problems, it was important for me to be realistic about what could be tested and what results could be expected of the pupils at different stages of learning.

In the research process, some questions were answered by a 6th grade class and a 9th grade class in a secondary school. After the 6th grade, pupils are educated by different teachers for different subjects and therefore, pupils in 6th grade and 9th grade have also different teachers in English.

The main idea with the present study is to compare the comprehension of the present tense and present progressive aspect by these two groups. Therefore, it seemed to me that a *fill-in-the-blank* test with common verbs would give reasonably reliable, usable results.

While preparing the sample, it was important to choose simple words that pupils understand and prepare the questions with a clear structure. Understanding the questions and answering incorrectly is much more significant than making errors because of the misunderstanding of the words. In order to avoid such errors, the instruction and example sentences used in the sample were simple. Since the line between the present tense and the present progressive aspect can be difficult to distinguish, there need to be adverbials and other clause elements to facilitate pupil's choices.

In total, 41 pupils, whereof 25 pupils from the 6th class, worked with the questions regarding verb tense and aspect in 15-20 minutes. In the sample, 20 different questions which might be problematic for Swedish learners were included. The learners were expected to fill the blanks by choosing either the present tense or the present aspect form of the verbs that were written in non-finite form next to the sentences within parentheses (see Appendix 1). They completed the sentences in the correct form by concentrating on the sentence structure and time relations but also by looking at the verbs and adverbials in the sentences. However, there are some hedges in the sample that might confuse learners but facilitate the understanding of what might be problematic in one's learning of the present tense and aspect. This anonymous test made by the pupils can help in the analysis what the underlying reasons might be for a learner when making errors/mistakes. Moreover, the collected data may reveal whether the pupils make similar mistakes at different levels of learning. What are the most common errors made by the 6th grade and the 9th grade and why?

3. Background

In this section some grammar concepts which are important for the present investigation are explained in 3.1. Moving on, in sections 3.2. and 3.3. the present tense and the present progressive aspect are explained and examples presented. Thereafter some essential

explanations such as *error*, *mistake* and *error analysis in second language acquisition* are discussed in section 3.4.

3.1. Tense and aspect

The term **tense** refers to the time relations by using a form of a verb. The way of referring when an action takes place usually happens by changing the verb endings, through inflections (Crystal 1991:76). Some grammarians suggest that there are two tenses, present and past, and others claim that there are three (present, past and future). The reason for the first claim is that in English a future verb form ending does not exist. The auxiliaries *shall* and *will* and the non-finite verb form are used to create the future form (Crystal 1991:76-77 & Köhlmyr 2010:54).

Another important term in this study is **aspect**. In order to explain different aspects, the following examples can be considered:

- 1) I *am/was studying* at the University of Gothenburg.
- 2) She *has/had studied* at the University of Gothenburg.

By looking at these two sentences one can see if the action, event or process has begun, is in progress, or if it has ended (Köhlmyr 2010:54). The first sentence is an example of the progressive aspect, and the second example is an example of the perfective aspect. In English, one cannot combine two tenses (*have go/ had went*) but two aspects can be combined along with tense (*have been going / had been going*) (Köhlmyr 2010:54).

Students of English learn about different time relations and verb forms in school, such as: *Present, Past, Present perfect, Past perfect, Future, Future perfect, Future in the past* (Köhlmyr 2010:54).

The present study focuses on the present tense and also on the present progressive aspect.

3.2. Simple Present

What is the simple present tense? What are the similarities and differences between the Swedish and English present tense? How and when does one use this tense?

If the simple present is required, one has to know what the number/person of the subject is. Depending on those variables, the inflectional system of the verb may take various forms. In modern Swedish, the number and person of the subject do not trigger verb inflections, the verb remains constant. In comparison, in English, the *-s /-es* inflection has to be added to the

verb stem if the subject is in third person singular (with the exception of only two verbs, BE and HAVE). All other person and number forms (i.e. 1st, 2nd singular and 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person plurals) are combined with the finite form of the verb without inflection in the present tense.

Consider now the following comparison between Swedish and English verbs in positive declaratives in the present tense:

<u>Swedish</u>	<u>English</u>
Jag älskar	I love
Du älskar	You love
Han/Hon/Den/Det älskar	He/She/It loves
Vi älskar	We love
Ni älskar	You love
De älskar	They love

By looking at the comparison a well-known pattern can be seen. When the pronouns *I, you, we* and *they* are used, the finite form of the word, **love**, does not change and is used without an ending. The addition of the *-s /-es* follows the relevant spelling and pronunciation rules (Köhlmyr 2010:55).

In the following pages, the negatives are also described to discuss whether the errors/mistakes are made depending on the distance concord¹ or tense. The negated auxiliary verbs can be problematic if the subject consists of several words. A confusion of which auxiliary verb to use can be seen by the learners because of the length of the subject. Though such cases may be explained by so-called distance concord, the error/mistake can also be a regular tense error and thus I do not make use of this distinction.

In the present study, inverted question forms are also examined since they can be problematic for Swedish learners for the reason that the auxiliary verbs are used before the subject in English in such interrogative sentences. Therefore, one must anticipate the subject, auxiliary verb and the main verb and tense at the same time before forming the question. As a result of that, plus factors such as the the length of or different types of subject nouns (for instance collective nouns), such cases can cause problem for learners when choosing the correct tense form and the correct auxiliary verb.

When indicating the positive declaratives (affirmatives), the *-s* or *-es* inflection is usually added to the main verb if the subject is in the third person singular. When the clauses are negated with *not* and lack an auxiliary verb, negatives can normally be formed by adding

¹ Distance error can be made when there is a lack of agreement between the subject and the predicate because of several words between them.

the auxiliary verbs, *do* or *does*, depending on the number or tense of the subject. The auxiliary verbs in the negatives are placed before the main verb (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:101).

If there is no auxiliary verb to form questions, *do* or *does* in the simple present is necessarily used (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:101). When creating questions, the auxiliary verb *do/does* in simple present is placed before the subject. The main verb “be” is an exception since the pattern is unlike the other verbs. An auxiliary verb for negatives and questions is not used for the main verb “be”.

Table 1: The basic usage of the simple present tense (source: English club, online)

	Subject	Auxiliary verb	Main verb	
Affirmative	I, you, we, they		love	tea.
(+)	he, she, it		loves	tea.
Negative statement (-)	I, you, we, they	do + not	love	tea.
	he, she, it	does + not	love	tea.
Interrogative (?)	Do / do (not)	I, you, we, they	love	tea?
	Does / does (not)	he, she, it	love	tea?

Notice in Table 2 how the main verb “be” is used in simple present tense.

Table 2: The use of the main verb “be” in positive declaratives and negative in the simple present tense (source: English club, online)

	Subject	Main verb		Swedish translation
(+)	I	am	Swedish.	Jag är svensk.
	You, we, they	are	Swedish.	Du, vi, de är svensk(ar).
	He, she, it	is	Swedish.	Han, hon, det är svensk(t).
(-)	I	am	not lazy.	Jag är inte lat.
	You, we, they	are	not lazy.	Du, vi, de är inte lat(a).
	He, she, it	is	not lazy.	Han, hon, den, det är inte lat.

(?)	Am	I	tall?	Är jag lång?
	Are	you, we, they	tall?	Är du, vi, de långa?
	Is	he, she, it	tall?	Är han, hon, den, det lång(t)?

Table 3: The use of the main verb “be” in questions in the simple present tense (source: English club, online)

When is the present tense used?

There are six different uses of the present tense whereof three refer to the present time and three refer to other time relations (Crystal 1991:78).

- i) **The state present:** is used when expressing proverbs, sayings, eternal truths and formulating laws of nature. e.g. *Sarah and Juliet like chemistry.*
- ii) **The habitual present:** is used to express repeated or habitual actions. Adverbs of frequency e.g. always, sometimes, often are usually accompanied with the habitual present. e.g. *Jane always reads the newspaper.*
- iii) **The instantaneous present:** is used for quick completed actions, for instance sport commentaries and it is also used in demonstrations. e.g. *The midfielder passes the ball to Christiano. He shoots...*
- iv) **The historic present:** is used when the present tense refers to a narration that happened in the past. e.g. *In Othello, Shakespeare creates a drama of a marriage.*
- v) **Dramatic immediacy:** is used when a dramatic touch is desirable in imaginative writing. e.g. *The old woman looks outside and leaves the house.*
- vi) **Present referring to the future:** is used when the present tense refers to a narration that will happen in the future. It can be used in conditional and temporal clauses and fixed plans. *If I come to Italy, I will contact you.*

In general, both Swedish and English use the simple present tense in the same way but there are also some differences (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:74-75). For instance:

- ❖ In English, the simple present can be used whereas in Swedish the simple past tense is used (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:74-75).

It is delicious.

Det var gott.

- ❖ In certain expressions the present tense is used in English and the perfect form used in Swedish (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:74-75).

I forget his girlfriend's name. Jag har glömt hans flickväns namn.

3.3. Present Progressive

By combining a present form of **be** and the present participle *-ing* we make up the ongoing form of the present tense. This form normally occurs only with **event** or **dynamic** verbs. These verbs refer to actions, processes and events (e.g. *get, eat, give*). In contrast, verbs that are not used in the progressive form are called **state** verbs. These verbs refer to states that do not change (e.g. *contain, love, own*). State verbs often denote feelings, opinions, thoughts, needs etc (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:86-87). Event verbs can typically be constructed with the progressive aspect, whereas the state verbs are normally unlikely to do that.

The speaker has to choose if the event verb needs to be in the present tense or present progressive. If the verb takes the progressive form, it typically indicates that the action, process or event is not complete (Köhlmyr 2010:62).

On the other hand, some state verbs like *think, taste, look* can also be used in progressive form because of their different meanings (Köhlmyr 2010:62). Consider the following examples:

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1) <i>I think that she is a good friend. (state)</i> | <i>This soup tastes delicious. (state)</i> |
| <i>I am thinking of you all the time. (event)</i> | <i>My brother is tasting the soup. (event)</i> |

When is the present progressive aspect used?

Many non-native speakers are not certain about when to use the present progressive aspect. As a result of that, they can overuse this form which can cause misunderstanding while communicating. Using the progressive aspect correctly enhances the understanding of how to convey and also transfer the messages correctly during a conversation. There are five different uses of the present progressive aspect (see Murphy 2004:2 & Fronko 2011:21-22).

- To indicate that something is or is not happening at the moment of speaking. E.g. *I am having a shower right now.*

- ii) To indicate longer actions that are in progress. E.g. *Tina is searching for the meaning of life.*
- iii) To indicate that the action is irritating or shocking. To express that the action happens repeatedly the adverbs such as *always* and *constantly* are usually used. E.g. *The teacher is always complaining!*
- v) To clarify that changes are taking place around now. With verbs such as *get, change, become, improve etc.* the present progressive form is used, e.g. *The world is changing too fast.*
- iv) To express that the action will take place in periods around now. Time adverbials such as *today, this year etc.* are usually combined with the present progressive aspect, e.g. *David is working this week.*

3.4. Error Analysis

As a first point of discussion it should be noted that it is not always a simple matter to distinguish between the terms **error** and **mistake**. There are different theories and ideas about the distinction between them and the ways in which the terms should be used.

We can now refine the definition error as being an instance of language that is unintentionally deviant and is not self-correctable by its author. A mistake is either intentionally or unintentionally deviant and self-correctable. (James 1998:78)

The explanation made by James may facilitate the understanding of the distinction but it is still difficult to know whether the learner has made a mistake or an error. More research needs to be done in order to get more detailed results to determine if the learner makes the same mistake/error every time, or if he/she has just been negligent. It is also worth knowing if the learner is capable of noticing that something is wrong and, at the same time, is unable to write the correct answer (James 1998:79).

One way to follow the learning process is to test pupils on their linguistic development. By collecting and analysing the samples of writing from two Swedish classes, their comprehension of different time relations can be measured. However, finding the best method of collecting data is challenging. Learners should be able to reflect on their comprehension of input while answering the sample questions (Ellis & Barkhuizen 2005:21).

Grammar errors are traditionally divided into two groups, morphology and syntax errors. While studying present tense and present progressive aspect, one is necessarily dealing with verb morphology. Verb morphology errors are common while learning different time relations since

the inflexional system usually differs depending on tense, person and number. For instance, it is a common error among young learners, even among adults, to forget to add an *-s* or *-es* to the main verb if the subject is in the third person singular. A general observation that Shaughnessy made on the relationship between subject and verb in 1977 showed that such concord errors were further reduced if the verb was syllabic when the *-es* was added. Therefore, it is more frequent that learners put the *-es* on correctly, for instance, with a verb like *match* rather than with a verb like *play*, where the *-s* is usually omitted because the character of the verb is not syllabic. The error is both morphological and grammatical (James 1998:155).

4. Results and Discussion

In this section, the results are presented by first focusing on the actual errors made by pupils and then the possible reasons for the errors/mistakes are discussed.

4.1. Test Results

By measuring and comparing the results of pupils at different level of language acquisition, we get an overview of the two classes. The data is provided by the samples of two different classes and tables are used to illustrate the results of the test. The collected data was analysed in order to identify the various errors and detect the areas of weaknesses and strengths Students answers were examined and awarded points based on the following system: if the question is answered completely correctly, pupils receive 1 point. If the correct tense was chosen but there was still a concord error, 0.5 points were given. Also, 0.5 points could be obtained if the auxiliary verbs “am, is, are” were omitted by learners, but the correct *-ing* ending was added to the main verb.

Table 4: The results from the data provided by Swedish learners at two different levels

	Errors/mistakes out of 20 questions (average)	Per cent (average)
6th grade	11.6/20	59.7%
9th grade	8.8/20	44.0%

As seen in Table 4, there is a distinction between the two age groups. The average of errors or mistakes showed that almost 60% of the questions were not answered correctly by the 6th grade pupils whereas 56% of the questions were correctly answered by the 9th grade pupils.

The answers were corrected according to the rules of so-called Standard English. As mentioned above, the response of pupils is counted as a correct answer when tense/aspect is

used correctly without omitting the auxiliary verbs. In some cases, even though there were spelling errors made by pupils, the answers were counted as correct answers since the wrong spelling depended on the pupils being careless.

However, there might be many reasons for being ambitious when choosing between the present tense and the present progressive aspect. In following pages, some common errors as well as the most successful answers by both classes are analysed and the possible reasons are discussed.

4.2. Pupils' Most Common Errors/Mistakes in Writing Comprehension

Most common errors/mistakes that were made by the 6th grade were in connection to the following sentences:

2) How often **do** you **go** on facebook?

In this question, the auxiliary “do” or “does” should be used before the subject. Consider some answers given by the young learners:

- ❖ *How often **is*** you **go** on facebook?*
- ❖ *How often **going*** you **go** on facebook?*
- ❖ *How often **are*** you **go** on facebook?*
- ❖ *How often **go*** you **goes*** on facebook?*

Since the auxiliary verbs *do* and *does* have no corresponding form in Swedish, it may be the case that pupils choose other alternatives in place of them to form the questions. The word order for questions in both languages is formed differently. A partial inversion, i.e. a changed order (v=auxiliary S= subject V=main verb), is used in English whereas a full inversion is used to form questions in Swedish (V= main verb S=subject) (Köhlmyr 2010:100).

How often do you go on facebook?

v S V

Hur ofta går du in på facebook?

V S

3) *She is working hard today.*

Using the present progressive aspect does not have to mean that the action is happening at the time of speaking, it can also indicate periods around now. When reading this sentence the time adverbial *today*, which is a period around now, should facilitate the answer for the learners. However, concord errors were also as common as tense/aspect errors since the verbs are not affected by the person/number of the noun and are constant in Swedish. As a result of that, another auxiliary verb, namely *are* can be used after third person singular since “är” is used for all the pronouns in Swedish. Moreover, in Swedish the present progressive aspect is expressed in a different way, without using the auxiliary verbs *am, is, are*, therefore, in this sentence *is* was omitted by many learners as well.

The other answers given by the pupils were: *working, work, is work, worked*

4) *We cannot go out right now. It is raining very hard.*

This sentence is another example when the present progressive is used to express that something is happening *right now*, rather than all the time. The time adverbial *right now* points out that the experiencers cannot go out now because of the rain at the moment; It indicates that it is raining at the moment of speaking. A large group of pupils were aware of the fact that the present progressive should be used in this context, but they neglected the use of the auxiliary verb *is*. It might depend on the Swedish translation *Det regnar* which could be literally translated as *It raining* by the learners.

The most common errors/mistakes that were made by the sixteen pupils from the 9th grade were in different sentences. Consider the errors/mistakes in the following sentences:

5) *She tastes the soup.*

Only 4 pupils filled in the blank with the right concord and tense. Most pupils preferred the progressive rather than the present tense. The reason for this choice might be the several meanings of the verb “taste” which can both mean “avsmaka” and “smaka” in Swedish (Köhlmyr 2010:62). In order to facilitate the distinction between these two meanings and help the learners see a pattern, there were two questions in the test.

The soup tastes wonderful. (taste=smaka)

She is tasting the soup. (taste=avsmaka)

There were also pupils who used the past tense instead. This answer shows that the pupils were aware of the fact that the present tense should not be used in this context. However, their first choice was not the progressive but the past tense, which is almost used in the same way as it is in Swedish. The other answers given by the pupils were: *tasting, did taste, taste, is taste*. The answer shows that the pupils do not know what present tense actually means.

6) *Julia is not working this week because she is ill.*

Only 4 pupils answered correctly. In the periods around 'now' (i.e. the moment of speaking), usually expressed with the help of time adverbials, (in this case with by time adverbial *this week*), the present progressive should be used. The present progressive can be used for a limited period of time, e.g. this year (Eastwood & Mackin 1982:12) which can be problematic since the present progressive tends to be taught as Swedish *nutid* (literally "now time"). *This week* might be seen as a long period by the pupils and therefore, the present tense was preferred.

The other answers given by the pupils were: *are not working, won't work* (which could, by the way, be counted as a correct answer in another context), *didn't work, worked* etc.

3) *They have had a serious argument. They are not speaking to each other.*

The correct form of the verb was used by 5 pupils. The perfective aspect *have had* is written in the past perfect, and it automatically affects the pupil's choice. Many of them chose the imperfect form of the verb *speak*. Past perfect and past tense are usually used in the same context. The present tense was also preferred by some of the learners. Some pupils might have thought that the anger between these people is steady, which means that they stopped speaking to each other after the quarrel and they will never talk to each other anymore. The lack of communication can be seen as a habitual action, the present tense was the first choice. The other answers given by the pupils were: *don't speak, spoke, speaking* etc.

4.3. Sentences with the most successful responses

The questions where were answered correctly by the most students (29 pupils) were the following three sentences (given here as examples 6, 7 and 8):

7) Where **do** you **come** from?

The most important reason for filling this sentence with the correct tense/aspect is that depending on the context, one can use the present tense as well as the present progressive aspect, which was not considered by me while preparing the test. For instance, if one wants to learn where a person comes from, then the person should use the present tense form but when, for instance, two people argue and one of them wants to know the reason. The question can be formed by using the present progressive aspect: *Where is all anger coming from?* Both the present tense and the present progressive aspect were counted as correct answers. Most of the pupils preferred Sentences with the most successful responses the present tense.

The second reason can be that the *-es-*less auxiliary *do* is used for other pronouns as well, such as *I, we, you* and *they*, which may have become the pupils' first choice over time. The third reason can be that the second person singular "you" does not contribute to a change in the main verb.

The second most correctly answered sentence by the 6th grade pupils was:

8) I usually **play** football.

Usually, which refers to a constant practice, indicates that the action is habitual (Collins English Dictionary). The word *usually* can change the whole construction of the sentence because of this meaning. If the meaning is not known by learners, the preference of present progressive can be comprehensible thus the wrong interpretation of time relations can be caused by not knowing the meaning of *usually*.

The third most correctly answered sentence by the 9th grade pupils was:

9) How often **do** you **go** on facebook?

With the frequency adverb "*often*" a question about habitual action is asked. Most pupils were aware of using the present tense for habitual and repeated actions. This rule is usually taught at a very early stage of the second language acquisition. To discuss something that happens regularly, the present tense is typically used (Smitherberg 2007:71). Similarly, the present tense is also used to show how often something happens, mostly with the adverbs of frequency such as, *often, usually, seldom, rarely, never* etc.

4.4. Comparisons

Concord, tense/aspect errors and the omitting of the auxiliary verbs (*am, is, are*) were done by pupils from both classes, despite the different level of grammar knowledge. A comparison between two classes by separating the most common errors into categories is shown in Figure 1.

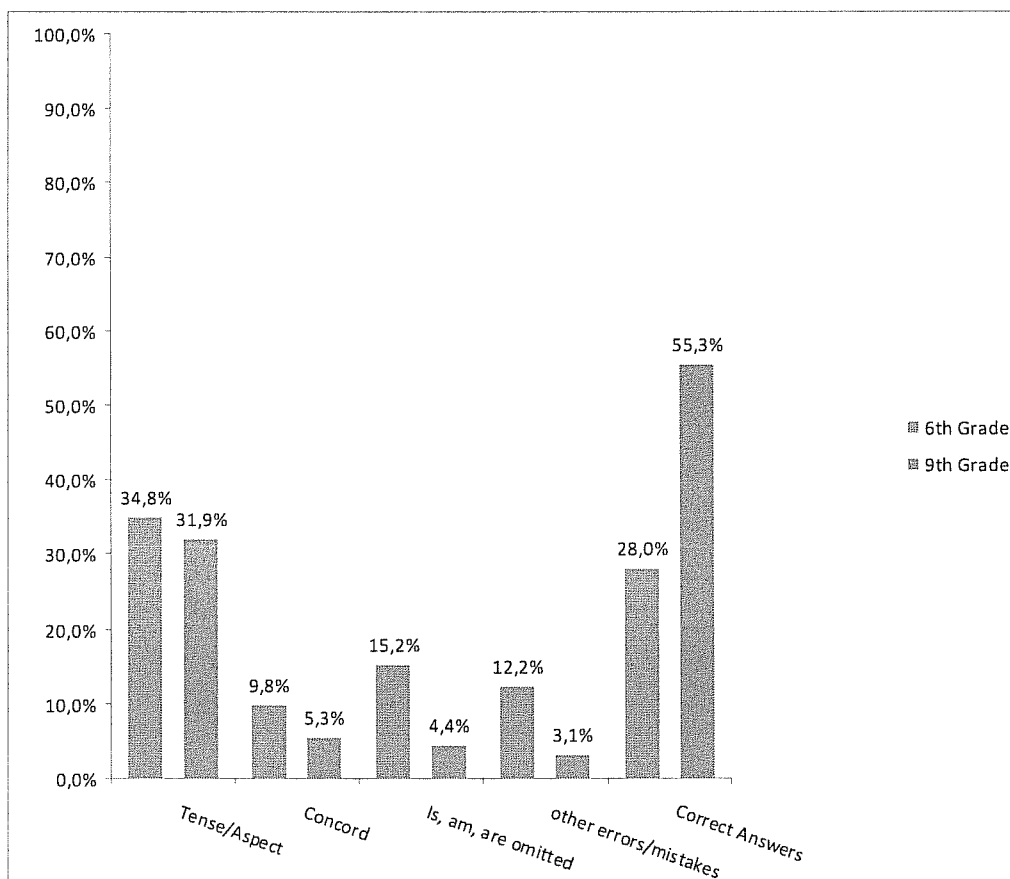


Figure 1: Comparison between two classes

By looking carefully at the diagram, one can see similarities as well as some important differences. The results of Tense/Aspect errors made by both younger and older learners, show that both groups are almost as good at answering the questions correctly as regards tense and aspect. On the other hand, 9th grade pupils were better at answering correctly by choosing the correct tense/aspect or adding the auxiliary verbs.

Tense and aspect errors are common among the pupils of both groups. There is only a small difference, namely 2.9 per cent between the two grades. However, even though the results of making tense and aspect errors by two age groups are almost similar, the errors/mistakes that the 6th grade pupils and the 9th grade pupils made belonged to different sentences.

Although the pronouns *he, she, it* or singular nouns which could be replaced with the third person singular were used in the sample, the pupils managed to answer correctly. However, concord errors were made almost twice as much by the younger pupils than the older pupils. Pupils usually get used to the rule of the third person singular at a higher level of second language acquisition.

As seen in Figure 1, omitting the auxiliary verbs *am, is, are* is more frequent by younger learners. As mentioned earlier, one can understand this reaction when comparing the English present progressive with relevant Swedish forms. Through time, the learners usually get used to the grammar rules and the language structure.

“Other errors and mistakes” include answers that are difficult to classify, for instance uninterruptable spelling errors, blank responses, invalid/irrelevant answers, etc. If the pupil fills in one of the blanks correctly and misses the other one in the same question, it is still classified as a wrong answer. Consider some of the invalid questions that were classified as other errors/mistakes:

- a) *How often going* you go on facebook?*
- b) *How often is* you go on facebook?*
- c) *Is your French get* better?*

However, in some cases both tense and aspect are counted as a correct answer since they could both be used in the present tense and in the present progressive which was not considered by me in the beginning of the present study. For instance, *children **are shouting** all the time* and *children **shout** all the time* are both correct depending on the context.

9th grade pupils were better at forming questions by using *do* or *does*. It requires both time and many opportunities to try out the rules before they are anchored and automated. Older pupils have probably had more time and opportunities to acquire the question rules of English (Tornberg 2009:145).

In the pie diagrams below the errors made by both 6th and 9th grade pupils are divided into four main categories.

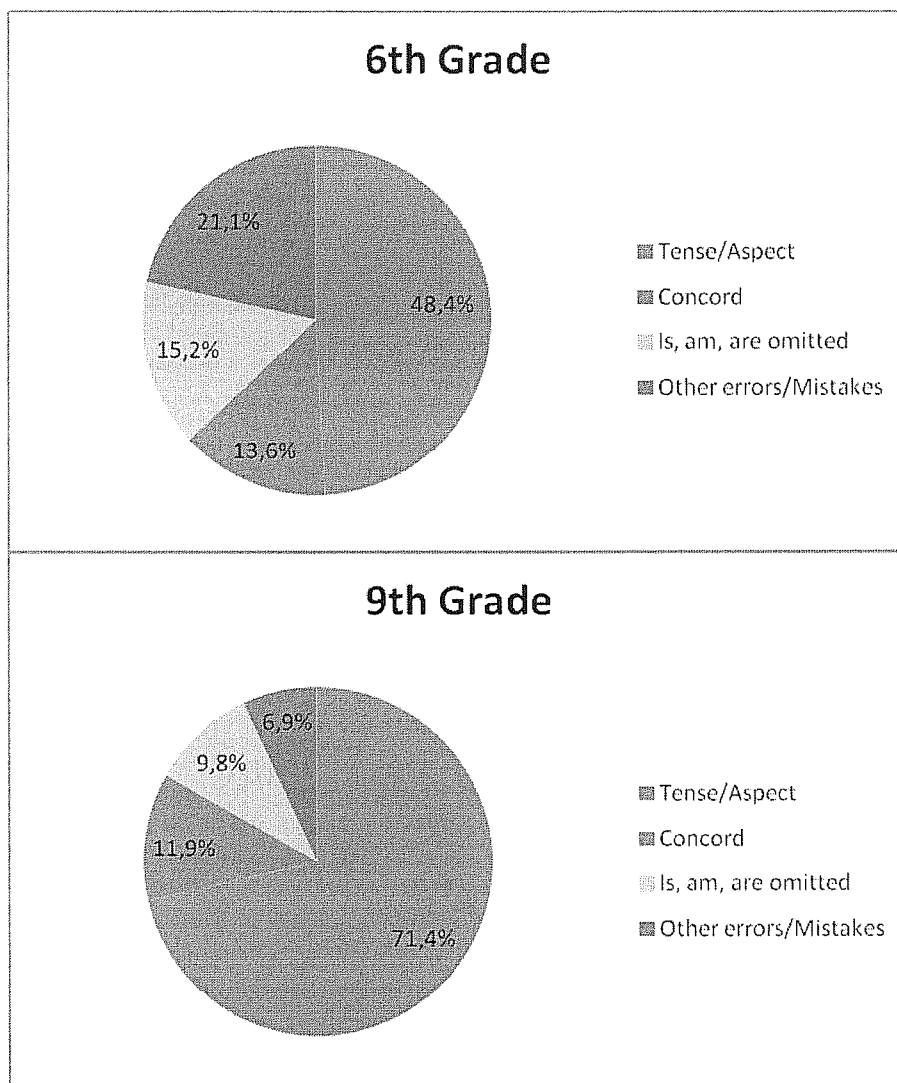


Figure 2: Different errors made by Swedish pupils of English at two different levels

Figure 2 shows the classification of different types of errors made by Swedish learners of English. For the younger pupils tense/aspect errors comprise only 48.4 per cent of the errors whereas by older learners the number of tense or aspect errors increases to as much as 71.4 per cent. The reason for the difference is the tendency for making other kinds of errors by younger learners.

The results for concord errors show that younger pupils are better at applying the basic rules of concord of English. Developing a command of concord can be difficult for Swedish learners and it is not always easy to know the underlying reasons for a concord error. For instance, *Polisen hittar honom inte* can be translated as *The police **doesn't** find him*. In this example, the probable reason is that “police” is a plural noun in English whereas it is a singular noun in Swedish (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:86-87). However, the possible reasons for other type

of concord errors are not as simple to comprehend. Even though some pupils may have good explanations for making such errors, it is not counted as a correct answer, since there is a lack of agreement between the subject and the predicate.

The results show that the omission of the auxiliary verbs *am, is, are* was made more often by younger learners. The third most common error for both 6th grade pupils with 15.2% and for the 9th grade pupils with 9.8% is the error of omitting the auxiliary verbs. On the other hand, the fourth most common error that was made differs for both classes. It is seen in Figure 2 that concord errors were mainly reduced by the 6th grade with 13%, whereas other errors among all types of errors were made less often by the 9th grade pupils.

Pupils usually have difficulties with the time adverbials in general. For them, the time relations are generally not simple even in their mother tongue. The meaning of the term “present” is still abstract; therefore, many answers given by pupils were wrong in both tense and aspect.

4.5. The Sequence

The present study indicates that the errors that are made at the earlier stage of learning do not disappear automatically if the learner does not comprehend what he/she does wrong. However, there is a special sequence which the learners have to follow if the knowledge of language rules and language structure are to be acquired. The sequence below shows how declarative knowledge converts to “procedural” knowledge (Tornberg 2009:144-146).

- I. A problematization of a grammatical rule:** The learners have to be mature enough (language development wise) to embrace the rule.
- II. Consciousness-raising:** The learners have to understand consciously how the rule works.
- III. Communicative activities in which the rule must be used:** The learners must have a need for the rule many times in their own communication to automate the rule.
- IV. Production of interlanguage:** In the end, the rule becomes a part of one’s own language.
- V. Procedural knowledge:** The learners’ ability to apply their knowledge of language in language use. They can use the rule unconsciously in communication now.

To sum up, if the second or third part is skipped, then the rules cannot become a part of learner’s own language. Some pupils might not adopt the rule in the 6th grade but in the 9th grade, they might be mature enough to embrace it. The pupils may have grasped the rule in the 6th grade, but only begin to understand it consciously later, by seeing, hearing and using it in context.

5. Final Comments

5.1. How important is correct English according to the norms of so-called Standard English?

Since the focus of the present study is on errors in terms of the rules of Standard one could ask if the types of mistakes discussed in this study are serious enough for concern considering the ever increasing role of non-standard English and global English.

Speaking English properly has many advantages in such a global world. It increases our chances for getting good jobs and working internationally. We also give a good impression if we use a more correct grammar to those whom we are speaking to and signal our position in society. Furthermore, English dominates the business world, technology and science and worldwide English is spoken by approx. 350 million native speakers. Since there are many varieties of English, the complexity of how the correct language should be and the usage of the language can be confusing. Therefore, there are standard Englishes with prescriptive rules that show us how the language is used on television, in newspapers, on radio and codified in written texts (Ljung & Ohlander 1992:12-14). Standard English is considered to have a higher value than non-standard languages, since the media encourages high standards of written and spoken language.

There are many Englishes and though Standard English usually stands out as being supported by the rules of prescriptive grammar, this does not mean that it is the 'best' variety of English. There is nothing better about Standard English, its status is just a result of power. One might compare it to an A4-paper which is actually not better than an A3-paper considering its form.

"I refer to those occasions where it seems that the learners (the NNS) know foreign languages better than the native speakers they are talking to. This frequently happens, and the native speakers are the ones who assert (unashamedly too) that the foreigners' English is 'better', and that the Incompleteness lies with the native speakers, not with the learners." (James 1998:63)

While teaching English the word "wrong" has to be used carefully since many dialects use an intimate local variety that signals solidarity and they can function differently in comparison with standard languages. Standard English can be seen as a tool that shows people, who want to learn English, a way that they can gradually follow to reach the goal. There has to be a standard language to not be confused by all different varieties of English while learning and teaching grammar but another important issue has also to be considered. There are non-standard Englishes that do not use the present tense and present aspect in the same way as it is used in

standard Englishes. Different Englishes may also affect teaching and learning English in Sweden. Some “errors” may occur when pupils hear other non-standard dialects of English outside the school.

5.2. Brief Conclusion

Swedish learners usually have difficulties while distinguishing the present tense and the present progressive aspect which is formed by an auxiliary verb, a main verb and the **predicative –ing**. The progressive aspect is mainly used for something that is happening at or around the moment of speaking, indicating that the action or event is ongoing and is not completed yet. In English, there are some verbs which are normally not used in the progressive aspect. The versatile present tense, however, indicates not only the present but also actions or events that happen regularly in a time frame which overlaps between different time relations like the present, past and future (Barkho 2010:10).

The collected data, which was provided by the samples that a 6th grade and a 9th grade classes made, showed that despite the age differences, learners could not avoid some basic errors. On average, 11.6 questions out of 20 by the younger pupils, and 8.8 questions out of 20 by the older pupils were incorrectly answered. The results showed that tense and concord errors were most frequent errors for both classes whereas concord errors by 6th grade and the omitting of *am*, *is*, *are* by the 9th grade were less frequent.

Each question has its own difficulties and the difficulty level for each pupil is diverse. Some questions are more difficult to correct because in some dialects the answers that are given might be applied in real communicative situations or some answers might have some convincing explanations. Therefore, the teachers should be careful while claiming that the answer is wrong and tell the learners some of the differences between Standard English and other dialects.

Tense and aspect errors are problematic areas for both classes. The main reason for making such errors is that there is not a corresponding form of present progressive in Swedish. Pupils need to distinguish those two time relations in English. As a consequence of that, they usually generalize the present tense or overuse the present progressive. Another reason can be the abstract grammar terms which can be confusing for the learners at that stage of grammar learning. Time adverbials such as *this year*, *this month* etc. can also be problematic since for the periods around now the present progressive aspect is used in English. However, there are also many different uses of both the present tense and the present aspect which can cause confusion by learners.

The comprehension of how the rule works needs to be acquired by pupils and the rule must be used many times in their own communication to be automated. The results showed that older learners managed to answer correctly more than younger learners thus indicating that time and practice help learners improve their acquisition of grammar rules.

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Appendix 1²

Present tense (I do) or Present progressive (I am doing)?

Fill in the blanks with the correct form. Choose either the **present tense** (vanlig presens) or the **present progressive** (pågående presens).

*P.S. Do not forget to use **-ing** when using the present continuous!*

Good luck!

1. The weather _____ very cold. (get)
2. Joe _____ tea every day. (drink)
3. She _____ hard today. (work)
4. The company my father works for _____ so well this year. (work)
5. _____ your French _____ better? (get)
6. The soup _____ wonderful. (taste)
7. She _____ the soup. (taste)
8. We cannot go out right now. It _____ very hard. (rain)
9. My brother is on holiday in Italy and he _____ a great time. (have)
10. I usually _____ football. (play)
11. I _____ up at 7 o'clock every morning. (go)
12. I _____ you this book. (recommend)
13. How often _____ you _____ on facebook? (go)
14. She _____ French because she wants to work in France. (learn)
15. The world _____ all the time. (change)
16. Where _____ you _____ from? (come)
17. Julia _____ this week because she is ill. (work)
18. They have had a serious argument. They _____ to each other. (speak)
19. I _____ with my friends at the moment. (chat)
20. Children _____ all the time. (shout)

² This appendix is made with the help of the book "English Grammar in Use" by Raymond Murphy