

THE VALUES OF THE PRESENT CONTINUOUS AND THEIR RELEVANCE IN TEACHING ENGLISH TO ENGINEERS

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Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to see how the values of the English present continuous tense apply in engineering texts. Examples will be drawn from the book *Strategic Planning for Water* by Hugh Howes. The paper will seek what values of the Present Continuous are most often encountered in a scientific and technical texts and what issues Engineering students should be made aware of.

Keywords: ESP, Present Continuous, values, scientific and technical texts.

1. Teaching English for Engineers: ESP

According to Lorenzo (2005), teaching English for ESP students should take context into account for grammatical structures as well as the students' interests:

“ESP students are usually adults who already have some acquaintance with English and are learning the language in order to communicate a set of professional skills and to perform particular job-related functions. An ESP program is therefore built on an assessment of purposes and needs and the functions for which English is required.

ESP concentrates more on language in context than on teaching grammar and language structures. [...] The ESP focal point is that English is not taught as a subject separated from the students' real world (or wishes); instead, it is integrated into a subject matter area important to the learners.”

One of the questions Engineering students ask when it comes to the study of English as a foreign language is about how much what they are studying in the English classes is connected to the other subject matters they are studying related to their future jobs. Next to the study of grammar issues, special attention should be given to gaining students' interest by using situations they can encounter in the everyday reality of their future jobs. Otherwise, they may wonder what is the use of learning abstract grammatical rules they can later easily forget.

The present paper shows how examples of the values of the Present Continuous can be drawn from a scientific technical book, *Strategic Planning for Water* by Hugh Howes. The values can be found in grammars by Michael Vince, Martin Hewings, Thomson and Martinet, and Georgiana Galateanu. The purpose of this paper is to show that Engineering students need to be made aware of how to adapt the use of the Present Continuous values to scientific and technical books they deal with in their research. At the same time, this paper wishes to draw attention to a tense less studied by research papers in scientific and technical writings. Usually the focus is on Present Simple and Past Simple, Past Simple being used to report “innovative findings in a scientific paper” (Gledhill 2009: 66).

2. The Values of the Present Continuous

The Present Continuous, as Michael Vince claims, “generally refers to actions which are in progress at the moment” (2010: 1). It refers to “an action happening now” (2010: 1). However, this explanation may not always work. At some point, especially in scientific and technical writings, students may feel that they need to know more about the use of the Present Continuous. For instance, why should they not use a Present Simple in sentences like the following:

(1) London’s sewerage infrastructure is overloaded now. It is taking up to four times the load for which it was designed. (Howes 2008: 47)

(2) A transformation of the area is now taking place (Howes 2008: 132).

The moment “now” referred to in the above sentences is not really or not necessarily the moment of speech or not just the moment of speech. It is “an action in progress”, a “temporary action” (Vince 2010: 2). The Present Simple is supposed to be indefinite, ranging well over the moment now so that is why it is not used here. At the same time, these sentences do not refer to one brief moment and this is why students can feel confused. In the first example, the author contrasts what the respective infrastructure was meant for and what is in fact going on with it. In the second example, the author underlines that we deal with a work in progress.

A sentence like the one below can also raise problems and make students feel that they need in-depth explanations:

(3) At the same time the population is growing, becoming more ethnically diverse and providing new cultures and a different range of skills (Howes 2008: 43)

This sentence fits the explanation of a “repeated action” and of “an action in progress” as expressed by Michael Vince (2010: 2). However, it does not happen just for one brief moment in time. The writer of the scientific and technical text wanted to underline what was happening and to be expressive.

Current directions in research are expressed using the value of Present Continuous as “action in progress”:

(4) The Environment Agency **is currently examining** the role that Town and Country Planning and other Local Authority functions could play in river basin planning (Howes 2008: 99).

(5) The philosophy behind this process **is now moving away** from the traditional method of responding to the demands of individual local requirements for the upgrading and renewal of local assets towards a strategic appraisal of the needs of entire catchments in anticipation of the holistic treatment of water management required by the Water Framework Directive (Howes 2008: 14).

These sentences refer to fresh research currently being carried out. The Present Continuous has an expressivity value in this scientific and technical text. Howes underlines the idea that these are the most recent trends in research and that they are part of current concerns and thus need special attention. They should be our priority, Howes implies by the use of the Present Continuous.

“An action generally in progress but not necessarily happening at the moment of speaking” is expressed in the following sentences:

(6) Similarly on waste water, Victorian sewers **are carrying** volumes of waste water that they were never designed to carry (Howes 2008: 4).

(7) Demands for clean water **are now beginning** to exceed supplies, particularly in southern and eastern parts of the UK (Howes 2008: 2).

These sentences sound dramatic, raising awareness of the readers about a danger approaching. Something that should not be happening is going on. And it keeps going on.

A repeated action is suggested in each of the following sentences:

(8) The Thames Barrier provides a vital defence for central London against the risk of tidal flooding but the sinking of the South East means that its efficacy **is being diminished** (Howes 2008: 50).

(9) The impact of rising sea level will be particularly marked in the South East, where the land is sinking relative to the sea (Howes 2008: 68).

The diminishing and sinking are progressive actions caused by a phenomenon of repetition. These actions are out of control, because they are caused by nature and because human actions are not enough or inefficient.

A correspondent of the value “complaints about annoying habits” is noticeable in the following sentence:

(10) London **is already feeling** the effects of climate change. It is particularly vulnerable to flooding, subsidence, overheating and to water supply shortfalls (Howes 2008: 51).

It is not exactly an annoying habit but rather a means of expressivity to show that the situation is really serious and to draw the readers’ attention to it and make them aware of the dangers.

The use “with verbs describing change and development” (Vince 2010: 2) is illustrated in the following:

(11) It is, therefore, **becoming** clear that progress towards sustainable water management will require lifestyle changes (Howes 2008: 4).

(12) The Environment Agency **is currently updating** these maps with hydraulic and hydrological surveying (Howes 2008: 19)

The writer uses the Present Continuous to show the idea that current research is under development and progress. Such research is willing to change life conditions for the better and improve working strategies.

The use of the Present Continuous “to express pre-arranged future actions” finds its correspondent in expressing intentions for future research:

(13) Flooding is an issue and sustainable drainage systems are being proposed to minimise this risk (Howes 2008: 59).

(14) However, the increasing pressures on the environment, combined with a reluctance by successive panels at Examinations in Public to require infrastructure to be provide in advance of development, are posing real questions about how far improvements to the environment can be expected to continue (Howes 2008: 64).

Howes implies that these ideas for research are scheduled to be developed and continued in the future.

3. Conclusions

The parallels made in this paper with respect to the interpretations of the values of the Present Continuous using the descriptions of grammarians for everyday English usage with technical and scientific English usage show that Engineering students can benefit from these classification by adapting the examples with texts relevant to them. On the one hand, students will see the relevance of studying these values and they will find it easier to see them applied on a text useful for their future jobs as researchers. On the other hand, the present paper has shown that the usage of the Present Continuous is as important in a scientific and technical writing as in any other type of writing.

Some problems can come from sentences which have several shades of meaning which make them fit under several classifications of the Present Continuous values. For instance, sentences (6), (7), (8), and (9) can also be classified like sentence (10) under a category similar to the value of annoying habits. In this case, however, we can say that we deal with a dangerous habit which is progressing and somehow needs to be stopped and we need to become aware of this. The switch in tense has this effect of expressivity. The same effect would not have been achieved by the use of the Present Simple. The scientific and technical text makes use of little means to impress readers or, better put, different means from those of literary texts. Scientific and technical texts leave figures of speech aside. The use of tenses becomes an efficient means of expressivity.

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