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MALAYSIAN ESL LEARNERS' USE OF PROGRESSIVES BASED ON SEMANTIC DOMAINS

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ABSTRACT

Studies over the last few decades have shown that the use of the progressives has been on the rise. This study exhibits the results of a study on the semantic domains of progressives found among Year 5, Form 1 and Form 4 Malaysian ESL learners' written and verbal outputs based on the English of Malaysian School Students (EMAS) corpus. The objective of this research is to examine if the progressives used are limited to only certain semantic domains. The results showed that progressives used covered five out of the seven semantic domains, hence shown the expansion of progressives in domains that usually they do not occur. The findings have useful effects inferences for English language teachers in teaching the progressives based on real-life usage. Syllabus designers might want to explore more productive methods to introduce progressives into the curriculum while material developers would like to create useful sources in supporting language teachers' struggles in teaching progressives.

Keywords: corpus linguistics, progressives, semantic domains, verbs, ESL/EFL learners

INTRODUCTION

The progressive is being recognized with a variety of terms. It is also identified as the expanded form, expanded tense, the continuous tense, the temporary aspect, the periphrastic form, and the progressive aspect (Romer, 2005). Progressives are constructed using the form TO BE + the present participle of a verb, for example, *was walking*. The use of progressive in the either the spoken and written form signify that the event being described is happening at a given time. However, the meaning of the action can be further categorized based in its semantic domains.

Many researchers have differently classified the semantic domains of English Language verbs. Vendler (1967) has classified them into four classes; activities, accomplishment, achievements and states. He then classified these classes in relation to progressives' use. He found that only activity and accomplishment verbs classes could be used in constructing progressives while state and achievement verbs classes are used for non-progressive forms.

However in 1985, Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik, produced 11 distinct varieties in categorizing verbs. Progressives are used in eight of

the varieties as they are known as the dynamic verbs; going-ons (e.g. *is snowing*), activities (e.g. *was drinking*), processes (e.g. *are growing*), accomplishments (e.g. *has been winning*), momentary events (e.g. *is sneezing*), momentary acts (e.g *are nodding*), transitional events (e.g. *were catching*) and transitional acts(e.g. *is beginning*). The remaining three varieties, qualities (e.g. *to be tall*), states (e.g. *to love*) and stance (e.g. *to stand*) are known as stative verbs. It is believed that stative verbs are not used in constructing progressives. Nevertheless, with the progression of the English Language in recent decades, it has been found that many stative verbs have been used to construct progressives (Elsness, 1994). In a study carried out by Hundt (2004), it was found where once progressives were confined only to animated or agentive subjects have now extended to inanimate and non-agentive subjects in the Modern English. Her study explains one of the many reasons for the increase of using progressives over the years as the restrictions on the conditions of constructing progressives have become relaxed (Hundt, 2004).

Biber, Leech and Conrad (1999) outlined seven semantic domains for all grammar forms including the progressives. The domains are activity (e.g. *draw*), communication (e.g. *shout*), mental processing (e.g. *consider*), causation (e.g. *force*), occurrence (e.g. *happen*), existence and relationship (e.g. *appear*), aspectual (e.g. *continue*). Smith (2002) analysed the semantic domains, using Biber et. al. (1999) categorization, of the present progressives and found that even though the activity domain has decreased, the communication and mental domains have increased. He claimed that the increase in communication and mental domains may be due to the increase of interpretative uses of the progressive, particularly in the spoken form. Similarly, Collins (2008) study using the International Corpus of English (ICE) against Biber et.al (1999) semantic domains, found that the even though the activity domain is being used the most, the communication and mental domains have shown increased in usage from the last few decades.

Based on the above discussion, the English Language progressives convey more than just continuous and non-stativity situations. Romer (2005) believes that either the language learners have expanded the usage of progressives or the teaching materials that are being utilized in the language classroom no longer correspond with how native speakers use progressives. It is therefore imperative to investigate if such circumstances transpire in the Malaysia ESL environment.

METHOD

Population and Sampling

This study investigated the semantic domains used in the present progressive, past progressive, present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive by Malaysian ESL learners based on the EMAS corpus. There were three written pieces and two verbal outputs of Year 5 (11 year old), Form 1 (13 year old) and Form 4 (16 year old) ESL learners in the EMAS corpus (Arshad et al., 2002). Only two essays and one verbal output for all three levels were used in this study. The first essay, a 'Picture-Based' essay (Appendix A), was carried out in schools under the supervision of the researchers from the EMAS corpus. 'The Happiest Day of My Life' (Appendix B), the second essay, was written under the observation of the school teachers. The third essay was not chosen because it was taken from students' homework of any essay topic. Hence, there may be an inclination that the third essay might have been coached by the students' teachers or parents. Therefore, the researchers decided not to use it. The first verbal output consisted of interviews with ESL learners. The second verbal output consisted of the ESL learners' verbal narration of the first written essay (Picture-Based). Since the interview output has both the interview and the verbal narration, the researchers chose to use only the interview output. Table 1 clarifies the number of written and verbal files that were used in this study. A total of 1,932 files (383,146 words) was extricated from the EMAS corpus to investigate the use of progressives in terms of their semantic domains among Malaysian ESL learners.

Table 1: ***Number of files according to level and tasks***

Level	Written		Oral	Total
	Happiest Day	Picture Essay	Interview & Verbal Essay	
Year 5	270	294	70	634
Form 1	219	301	70	590
Form 4	157	264	73	494
Total	646	859	213	1,718

(Adapted from Arshad et. al., 2002)

Detailed Analysis of Data

Biber et. al., (1999) taxonomy of verb domains for the semantic categories were used in this study. The verbs used in constructing the present progressive, past progressive, present perfect progressive and past perfect progressive were grouped into the seven domains:

(a) activity (denoting actions and events controlled by a volitional agent, e.g. run, draw, take),
(b) communication (e.g. speak, advise),
(c) mental processing (e.g. consider, hear, regret),
(d) causation (e.g. enable, make, force),
(e) occurrence (reporting events of non-volitional activity, e.g. happen, become),
(f) existence and relationship (e.g. copulas such as be, seem and appear) and
(g) aspectual verbs (e.g. begin, continue).

When there are verbs that appear in context which seemed to belong to more than one domain, the researchers fitted them under the most applicable one. In order to avoid biasness, an independent coder was employed.

FINDINGS

Year 5

Year 5 learners used only five out of the seven-class taxonomy of semantic domains when constructing progressives. The facilitation and aspectual domains were not found at all.

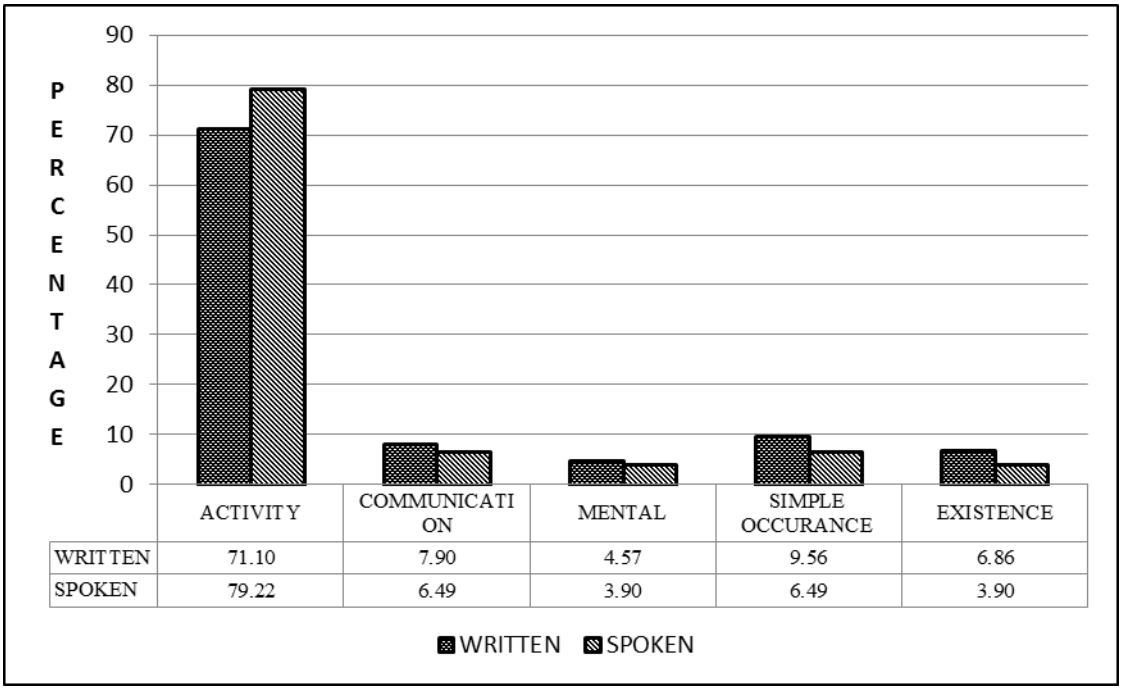


Figure 1 Semantic verb domains of progressives in Year 5 written and spoken registers

Figure 1 showed that the activity domain had the highest usage in both the written and spoken register. However, they were used more in the spoken register by 8.12%. The verbs *fish*, *pluck*, *pick* and *go* were the most frequently used as progressives. The following are examples from the written and spoken registers.

(a) The[y] saw Rahimah and her sister Aini was *plucking* the flower. (SKABJ-P-s5-(19))

(b) ''Oh, What am I *going* to do?'' I [s]aid. (SRMP-P-s5-(19))

(c) They were *picking* some flowers to plant their garden. (SKAC-P-s5-(10))

Simple occurrence verbs were the second highest in the both registers even though communication verbs shared the same frequency in the spoken register. *Have* and *get* were the most frequent verbs used as progressives in the written register while *drown* was the most used in the spoken register. Below are several examples:

(d) Eventhough I'm having my bicycle for almost two years but I'm still *ma[i]ntaining* my bicycle in a good condissoin. (SRBL-H-s5-(30))

(e) I thought that she was *getting* fatter. (SKAC-H-s5 (23))

(f) We were *having* a tough time packing the things. (SRMP-H-s5-(02))

(g) Yes ehh you can save people sometimes when they are *drowning*. (SRBL-I-s5-(02))

Communication verbs were the next most used verbs. The written registers had a marginally higher percentage of usage compared to the spoken register. The most used verbs were *shout* and *call*. For instance:

(h) The other girl was *shouting* for help.(SRBL-I-s5-(24))

(i) She is *calling* for help. (SKWH-P-s5-(09))

In the existence domain, the written register had a higher percentage than the spoken register. The most frequent verb was *stand* in the written register such as in sentence (j). No repeated verb(s) were found in the spoken register.

(j) One of girls was *standing* at the very edge of a lily pond. (SRBL-P-s5-(09))

The mental verbs were the least used in both the written and spoken registers. The frequency of mental verbs was similar to existence verbs in the spoken register. *Look* in the written register and *study* in the spoken register were the most used, as shown below:

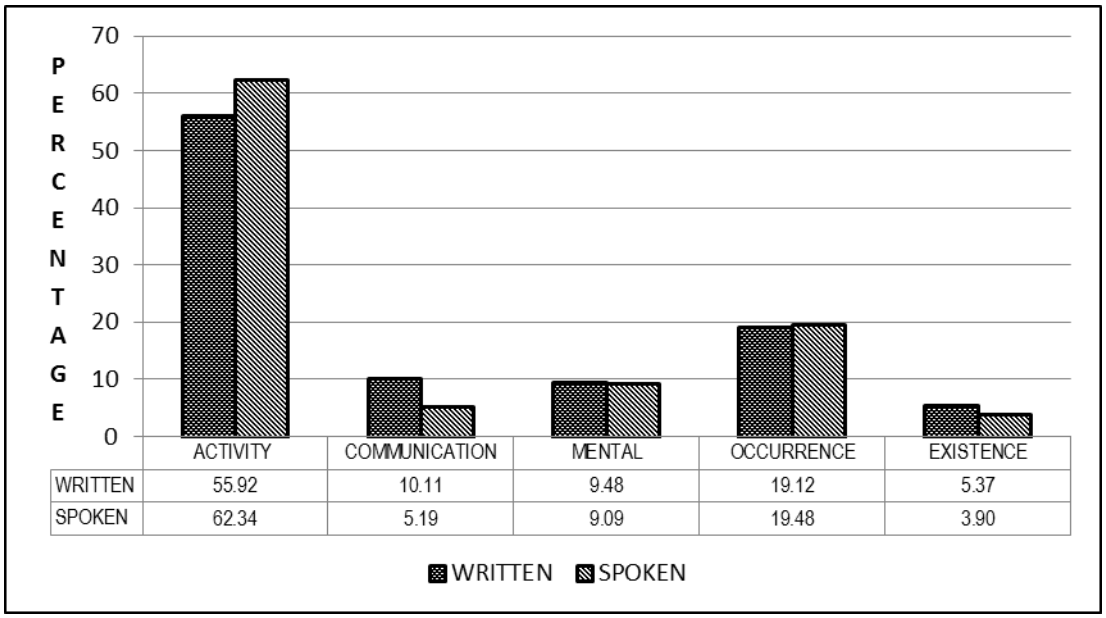
(k) Three boy is *looking*. (SKWH-P-s5-(15))

(l) Many of my friends were already in front of the notice board and they were *looking* at their results for the U.P.S.R. (SRBL-H-s5-(15))

(m) My name is Willie Chan and I am *sudying* in SK Batu Lanchang. (SRBL-I-s5-(29))

Form 1

Form 1 learners, similar to the Year 5 learners, used only five out of the seven-class taxonomy of semantic domains in the written and spoken registers. Activity domain was used the most in both registers, as shown in Figure 2. However, the spoken register exceeds the written register.



	ACTIVITY	COMMUNICATION	MENTAL	OCCURRENCE	EXISTENCE
WRITTEN	55.92	10.11	9.48	19.12	5.37
SPOKEN	62.34	5.19	9.09	19.48	3.90

Figure 2 Semantic verb domains of progressives in Form 1 written and spoken registers

Form 1 learners used verbs such as *pluck*, *pick*, *go* and *walk* the most in the written register, while *pluck* and *go* were found in the spoken register. For instance:

(a) One day, Sarimah and Mei ling was *plucking* some flowers near a river. (SMHK-P-f1-(07))

(b) In their way to the river, they saw two girls who were *picking* the flowers by the river's bank. (SMART-P-f1-(18))

(c) While we were *walking* along the river to find a place for fishing, we saw two girls were *picking* flowers. (SMART-P-f1-(01))

(d) One day I and my friends Paul were *going* for fish around the lake. (SMART-I-f1-(19))

Occurrence verbs were the next most used in the written (19.09%) and spoken (19.48%) registers. Form 1 learners used the verb *drown* the most in both the written and spoken register, for example:

(e) So, I was *drowning* and drank the lake water. (SMPM-P-f1-(15))

(f) They quickly go to the girl and helped and saved the girl who's drowning. (SMHK-I-f1-(02))

The third most frequent verbs used were the communication verbs in the written register but in the spoken register they were the fourth. *Shout*, *scream* and *talk* were used the most in constructing progressives in this domain such as:

(g) Then, Aye knew swimming so he jump into the water to help the girl is *screaming* in the water. (SMTI-P-f1-(03))

(h) When I heard what they are *talking* about, I was very excited and I ran to the staffroom to see my results. (SMART-H-f1-(10))

(i) Suddenly a group of guys walking by the stream heard that Marcia and Hui Mei was *shouting* for help so one of the guys from the group quickly ran and dived into the river and saved Hui Mei. (SMHK-I-f1-(12))

Look, *find*, *plan* were common verbs in the mental verbs domain found in the written register while *study* was most used in the spoken register among the Form 1, for example:

(j) A group of boys that were *planning* to be fishing by the stream heard them shouted for help. (SMHK-P-f1-(12))

(k) I was *looking* for a word in the dictionary when I heark Browny, my dog bark. (SMTA-H-f1-(06))

(l) One day, I, Zawawi and Afiq are *planning* to go fishing at a river near our house. (SMTI-P-f1-(06))

(m) They are *studying* at Sek. Men K Munsh Abdullah. (SMMA-I-f1-(25))

Form 1 learners used existence verbs more in the written register than in the spoken register. The most frequent verbs were *have*, *stand*, *wait* and *sit*:

(n) While they were *having* fun picking and choosing the flower suddenly, Linda tripped down into the river because the mud beside the river was slippery when she was trying to picked the flower. (SMART-P-f1-(48))

(o) And then, but Ahmad who are *standing* without talking. (SMART-I-f1-(23))

(p) This is the time that I'm *waiting* for. (SMIS-H-f1-(02))

(q) When reached the school compound, I saw a lot of students my age were *sitting* in the class. (SMART-H-f1-(45))

Form 4

Figure 3 demonstrates the semantic domains used by Form 4 learners. These learners, too, used only five semantic domains in their written and spoken registers.

The activity verbs once again triumphed in both registers. The spoken register had a higher percentage than the written register, just as found among the Year 5 and Form 1 learners. There is a difference of 19.64% between the two registers which was the highest distinction between these two registers compared to the earlier two levels. The activity verbs used most frequently were *pluck*, *walk*, *go*, *pick* as the following list exemplifies them.

(a) When we reach that place we saw two girls are *plucking* flowers at the lake. (SAM-P-f4-(01))

(b) As I was *walking* up, my sister said, "You're *going* to like it". (SMTA-H-f4-(24))

(c) But until then, I'm *going* to email them. (SMART-I-f4-(03))

(d) The girls are *picking* up some flowers on the river side. (SAM-P-f4-(04))

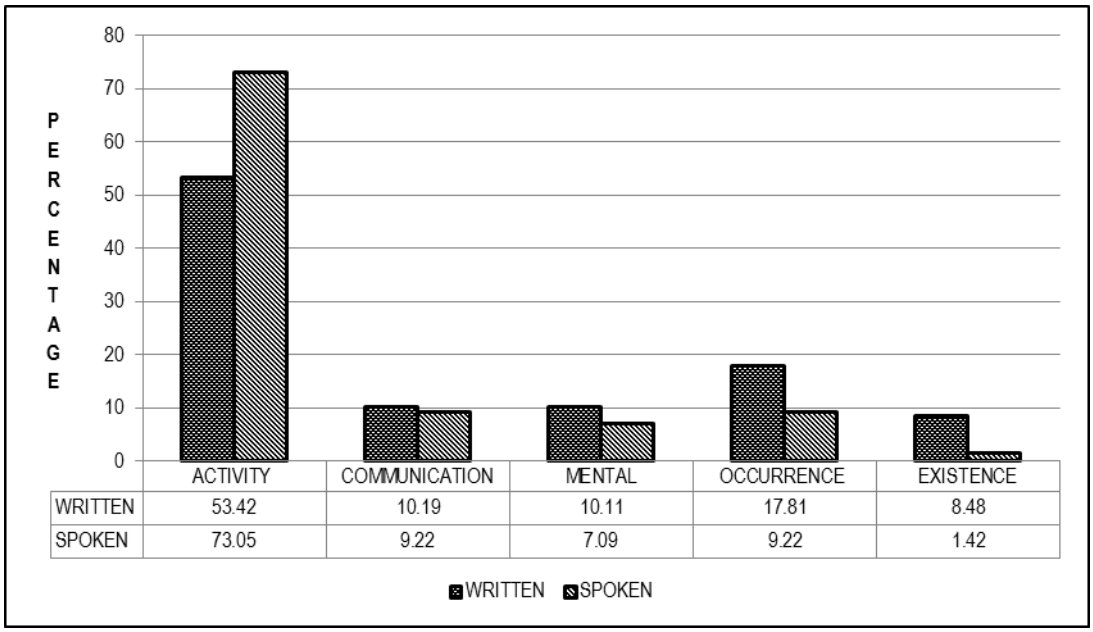


Figure 3. Semantic verb domains of progressives in Form 4 written and spoken registers

Occurrence verbs were the second most frequent verbs used in the written register. However this spot was mutually shared by the occurrence and communication verbs in the spoken register. The most frequent occurrence verbs used were *drown* and *struggle*:

(e) "Please help me Margaret. I'm *drowning*. I do not know how to swim" cried Mei Suan. (SMART-P-f4-(30)

(f) Among three of us, Ah Seng is the bravest person and he learnt how to rescue person in the water before, so he jumped into the river to rescue the girl, who was keep *struggling* and *drowning* without wasting any precious time. (SMTA-P-f4-(21))

Communication verbs was the third most used verbs among the Form 4 learners. *Talk* and *shout* were the most frequent used in this domain, for example:

(g) Both of them were *shouting* for help. (SMSAB-P-f4-(11))

(h) They were *talking* about their holiday experiance and the school homeworks. (SMSAB-P-f4-(14))

The most common verbs used in the mental verbs domain were *plan*, *enjoy*, and *look* such as shown below:

(i) They were *planning* to fish beside the river. (SMSAB-P-f4-13))

(j) While walking, we were *enjoying* the beautiful scenery along the rivers. (SMSAB-P-f4-(04))

(k) Ah, it as a beautiful bright sunny morning and I was *looking* forward to my outing with my friend, Charlene. (SMTA-P-f4-(16))

Existence verbs were used more frequently in the written register than the spoken register by a difference of 7.06%. *Wait* and *stand* were the two most frequent verbs used in this domain, such as:

(l) Jimmy was *waiting* for his friends at his home as they have planned to go for a fishing ride at Tasik Kemubi. (SMART-P-f4-(06))

(m) And then after that we saw two girls was *standing* by the river. (SMTA-I-f4-(21))

DISCUSSION

The three educational levels used the activity verbs domain when using progressives. However the percentages of usage dropped as the levels increased. When learners progressed to a higher educational level, they tend to employ more varied verbs which fit into other semantic domains. The existence verbs, for instance, were used 6.86% in the written form in Year 5 and by Form 4, these increased to 8.48%.

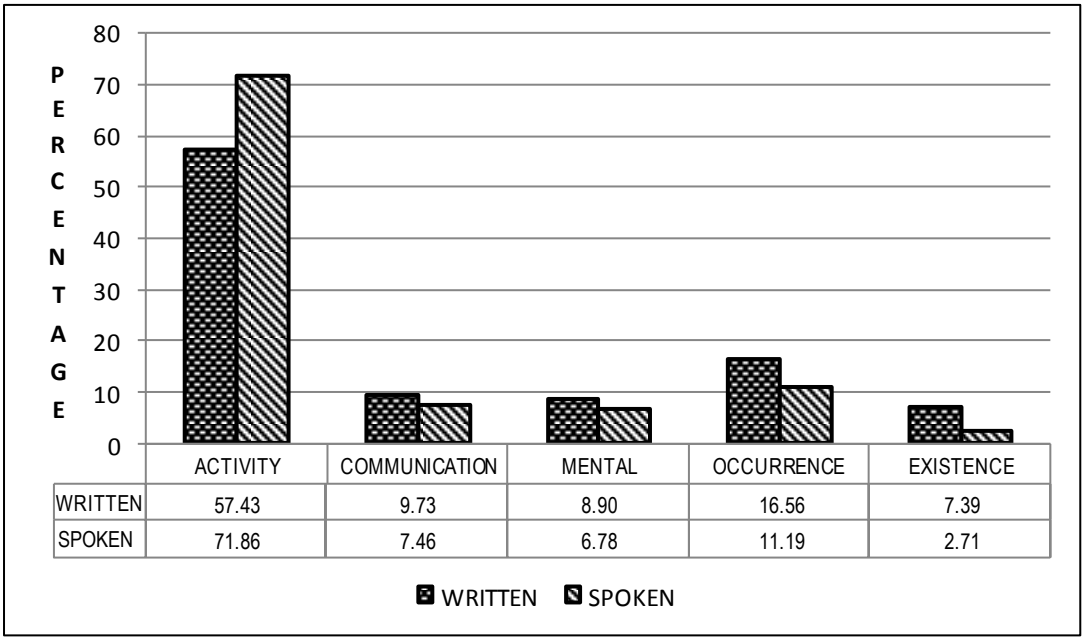


Figure 4 Overall distribution of semantic verb domains of progressives in written and spoken registers among the three educational levels.

Figure 4 exhibits the overall distribution of verbs in their semantic domains of the three educational levels. The spoken register topped the written register only in the activity verbs domain while the written register outshined the spoken register in the other four semantic domains. A difference of 14.43% occurred between the written and spoken register in the activity verbs domain. Meanwhile, in the other domains there was a difference of 2.12% - 5.37% between the two registers.

These findings was compared to Smith's (2002) findings of the active form of present progressives in FLOB, Biber et. al's (1999) figures on progressives and non-progressives of common lexical verbs, Collins' (2008) nine parallel corpora of four inner circle and five outer circle Englishes and Collins' (2008) South East Asia (SEA) corpus.

Table 2: Frequencies of semantic domains in other studies compared to EMAS corpus

Semantic Domains	Smith (2002)	Biber et. al. (1999)	Collins (2008)	Collins (2008) SEA	EMAS (2014)
Activity	55.4%	49%	47.5%	50.5%	58.94%
Communication	13.4%	13%	16.9%	14 %	9.49%
Mental	26.5%	19%	12.9%	14.9%	8.67%
Causative	2.7%	4%	11.1%	0.6%	0
Occurrence	19.7%	5%	9.1%	10.3%	16%
Existence	4.6%	8%	1.1%	8.7%	6.9%
Aspectual	2.1%	3%	1.0%	0.9%	0

Table 2 clearly shows that the most frequent semantic domain in the progressives is the activity verbs. All studies show that the mental verbs are the next most used semantic domains except in EMAS corpus, the occurrence verbs have the second highest frequency. The tasks in EMAS corpus that required learners to write or speak narratively may have contributed to such findings. Even though EMAS corpus did not indicate any causative and aspectual domains verbs in construction of progressives, the aspectual domain in the four studies shows the lowest frequency, while the causative domain is low in frequency in Biber et.al's (1999), Smith's (2002) and Collins' (2008) SEA studies.

Table 3: Semantic verb domains of progressives in written and spoken registers between two studies

Semantic Domains	Collins (2008)		EMAS (2014)	
	Written	Spoken	Written	Spoken
Activity	44.7%	48.7%	57.43%	71.86%
Communication	13.1%	18.6%	9.73%	7.46%
Mental	14.2%	12.3%	8.9%	6.78%
Occurrence	16.2%	8.9%	16.56%	11.19%
Existence	8.3%	9.5%	7.39%	2.71%
Causative	1.6%	0.9%	0%	0%
Aspectual	1.6%	0.7%	0%	0%

Table 3 displays the semantic verb domains in written and spoken registers based on Collins' (2008) and EMAS corpus. Both the written and spoken registers show the activity verbs were used most frequently. However, but both studies also show that the activity verbs were used more in the spoken register than the written register. Interestingly, the occurrence and existence verbs in the written register of Collins' (2008) study correspond rather closely that of the written progressives in EMAS corpus. There is no indication of causative and aspectual verbs in EMAS corpus but the findings in Collins (2008) itself show a very low frequency in both these domains.

CONCLUSION

The findings show that the progressives' semantic functions of only explaining an on-going present activity and discussing future plans no longer hold true. Smith (2002) believes that the progressive is still going through an expansion from its classic domain of use with the usual activity verbs. This is due to diminishing the limitations on certain verb classes that formerly were enormously robust to the progressives, mainly the stative verbs. The expansion of colloquialization into the written language has amplified the progressive meanings to embrace mental and communications verbs (Smith 2002, Collins, 2008). There are other semantic functions that the progressives can now convey. Hence, ESL learners need to be exposed to them in the language classroom.

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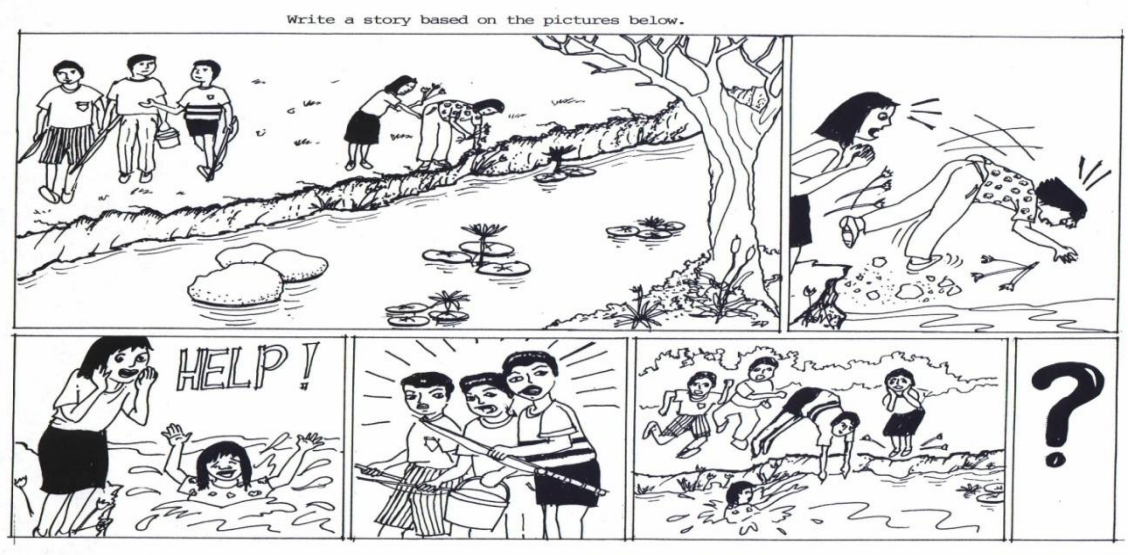
Appendix A

Picture Series Stimulus for the Picture-Based Essay EMAS corpus (Arshad et. al., 2002)



Appendix B

SAM-H-F1-01 (taken from EMAS corpus (Arshad et.al. 2002))

The happiest day of my life is school holiday. On that day, I and my family go to grandfather's house. I also will meet my cousin from Selangor, Sabah and Kelantan. My grandfather will bring me to the jungle.

We likes to eat fruits in the jungle. Like rambutan, ciku and langsat. We return home in the evening. After take a bath, I played football with my cousins.

We stopped playing when we were tired. At night, my grandmother cooked many foods for her grandchildren. I and my cousins ate very fast.

After eat, we went to the bedrooms. Before sleep, we watched the scary movies. When the movies ends, we sleep.