

Role of Progressive Aspect in the Definitions of Stative and Dynamic Verb

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Abstract

This experimental study aims to find out reasons behind scanty knowledge of stative and its dynamic counterpart among the EFL learners. Firstly, it is focused on to what extent the definitions of stative and dynamic posted in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, which the college students studying at secondary and tertiary level in Pakistan put to good use, are debunked by the clauses, incorporated therein, inclusive of 'progressive tense'; and resultant impact on learners' understanding of these two types of main verb. Secondly, it stipulates how the exclusion of impetuous clauses and expansion in the requisite details of pertinent terms can produce proliferated results. Finally, results were reached through the data collected via a language proficiency test and two handouts: the one wielded as control parameter and the other designed as experimental intervention. The study culminated in that certain modifications in the definitions of *ibid.* verbs seem prerequisite to successful learning.

Keywords: definition, statives, progressive tense, incomprehensibility, EFL learners

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Introduction

In Pakistan, English is learnt as a second or foreign language. The problem with the ESL/EFL learners is that they are poor in recognizing the stative verb and dynamic verb within or without context; the evidence is corroborated by the study conducted by Imran et al. (2016, p. 121). Graver is the fact that the teachers also face the same problem. Evidence that the teachers working in schools and colleges have lack of knowledge about stative and dynamic and consequently find it difficult to explain the difference between subject and agent comes from the work, reported in 2017, of Imran and Mamuna which emphasizes that stative and dynamic, as theta role assigners, make the description of the subject and agent possible through projection. It means that there exists lack of understanding of stative and dynamic among the teachers as well as learners in Pakistan. Hence, the present study aims to look for the factors which contribute to the lack of understanding of these two types of main verb among the learners.

For the most often, in EFL classrooms, language learning depends on learning of grammar which shapes different constructions; and the dictionaries which help comprehend definitions and the meanings of words. But the matter comes to a head when definitions appear ambiguous and as such, thwart the way to learn the rules of grammar and prove the crux of the matter.

It stands to reason that two types of verb i.e. dynamic and stative find their way into almost each and every sentence construction in English. Traditional grammars clearly divide them on the ground that the former can appear in progressive form while the latter cannot. Taking this division into account, the researchers have driven a coach and horses through the definition and true nature of stative verb inasmuch as one group of researchers accepts progressive stative whereas the other rejects it. This is one reason. Secondly, modern English grammar books are either silent or overlap each other on the conundrum of the use of statives in progressive aspect and thus, share the weight of lack of understanding among the learners. However, the matter in hand is that the way Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), which is frequently used by the college students, exhibits *Stative* and *Dynamic* seems to have the gravity of setting these definitions ambiguous rather debunked, resulting in lack of understanding among the ESL/EFL learners.

Therefore, in pursue to explore reasons behind scanty ratio of understanding of main verb among the EFL learners, this experimental study hypothesizes that the division of state verb and dynamic verb, in OALD, on the basis of 'progressive marker *-ing*' may have adverse effect on the proper understanding of main verb among the learners and that, the removal of impetuous clauses 'inclusive of the progressive tense' from the definitions of the both and the inclusion of detailed description of such terms as have been incorporated therein with insufficient explanation may produce proliferated results.

Literature Review

English main verbs are divided into stative verbs and dynamic verbs. There are as many different definitions of these two types of verb as are the grammars and the researchers. Smith (1991) is of the view that dynamic verbs involve change, activity

and role of agent whereas the states denote the occurrence of an event with no end point. Huddleston & Pullum (2002) and Leech (2004) have divided the stative verbs into four different classes i.e. perception, cognition, being and stance. Imran et al. (2016) defined the stative verbs as representing events which befall spontaneously. It is important that the variety in the definitions of both kinds of main verb is not a guide rather a cause of ambiguity.

The Progressive and the Stative verbs

A general distinction is made between stative verb and dynamic verb on the ground that the former cannot be used in progressive aspect (**the eyes are winking*) while the latter can appear in progressive form (*she is playing the football*). This division has launched the researchers on the chain of being contrary to one another and the resultant controversy has added to ambiguity in the true nature and function of stative verb and dynamic verb.

Progressive Statives among the Researchers

Kakietek's (1997) findings on the corpus of British and American novels, detective stories, scientific texts and popular dailies and weeklies and those in Smiecinska's (2002) survey conducted among the native speakers in USA, showed that statives can be used in progressive form in appropriate contexts. Romer (2005) goes in line with his predecessors and reports that progressive statives are more common in spoken form than in written form of English as in '*I was just wondering how you'd be paid*'. Later on, Debopam Das (2010) challenged the traditional grammars with his argument that non progressive verbs i.e. statives are not at all forbidden to occur in progressive aspect.

Nevertheless, the conclusion drawn by Imran et al. (2017) went contrary to those reported above and revealed that EFL learners in Pakistan accepted the progressive statives in particular linguistic contexts in their academic writing due to the aloofness from the grammatical rules (p. 72) but those competent in grammar rejected plainly the so called use of progressive aspect with states in any context. Similarly, Mohammad Falhasiri et al. (2012) conducted a study among EFL learners studying at Iran Language Institute and concluded that the participants did not accept stative verbs in *ing* form. Payne (2011) also regarded such constructions as have stative verbs in progressive form a logical contradiction. Before him, Leech (2004) put forward a division of stative verbs according to the functions they perform in different linguistic contexts but nowhere did he concede their use in progressive aspect.

Progressive Statives in English Grammar Books

Grammar books propound rules for changing the form of words and joining them into sentences. But it has become a matter of record that modern English Grammars do not offer hard and fast rules regarding the use of stative verb in the progressive aspect and that, multidimensional exceptions attached to progressive statives contribute to snatch their easy comprehension.

Chapter 8 of 'Oxford Guide to English Grammar' (OGEG) by John Eastwood reads that dynamic verbs can be used in progressive form but statives are not normally

continuous. The word *normally* is all confusing otherwise; the rule had been straight forward. Add to this, matters come to a head when it allows statives in progressive form under certain conditions and happen to exhibit *love, cost, enjoy, like and expect*, in examples cited therein, used in progressive form which some dictionaries do not permit at all. Such conditions disrupt the clear boundary between stative and dynamic and thwart easy recognition.

Chapter 9 of ‘Longman English Grammar Practice’ by L.G. Alexander emphasizes that a state has no beginning and no end and therefore is not normally used in progressive aspect. Unlike OGE, it includes *love* in the category of stative verbs and plainly rejects their use in progressive aspect.

In Pakistan, college students studying from intermediate to master’s level put ‘High School English Grammar & Composition’ by Wren & Martin to good use and the teachers use this book for self-study and for supplementary grammar activities in the class rooms. It is important to note that this book reads little on dynamic verb and almost nothing on stative verb in its chapter on verb. However, in chapter 25, dealing with present continuous tense, it propounds a list of thirty eight verbs, without labeling them ‘*Statives*’, of which use in progressive aspect on the account of their meaning it emphatically denies. It is particularly interesting that the list includes *love*, but at the same time the cited examples in different chapters of this book bear *love + ing* frequently.

Stative and Dynamic in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary

In Pakistan, the students at college level make the most of Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD) as Ivana Ivančič (2017) reports that A.S Hornsby (1940) has compiled it especially for EFL learners. Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 8th edition reads the definitions of stative and dynamic in the following words one after the other;

(of verbs) describing a state rather than an action. Stative verbs (for example *be, seem, understand, like, own*) are not usually used in the progressive tenses.

(of verbs) describing an action rather than a state. Dynamic verbs (for example *eat, grow, knock, die*) can be used in the progressive tenses.

It is evident from both the definitions that the conundrum of progressive aspect establishes the division between stative verb and dynamic verb which may have adverse effects on the identification of both the verbs among the EFL learners.

To check the role of clauses inclusive of progressive aspect in the definitions of stative and dynamic posted in Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary (OALD), and so, to get at the technique the EFL learners adopt to recognize *ibid.* verbs and resultant effect on their identification among the EFL learners, an experimental study was carried out among the young learners in Pakistan. Following is the detailed report of the study.

Research Methodology

In this experimental study, a language proficiency test (LPT) and two handouts were wielded, to investigate the reliability of the definitions of dynamic verb and stative verb posted in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD), 8th edition, among the EFL (English as a foreign language) learners of intermediate and master's level studying at state run colleges of district Vehari, the province of Punjab, Pakistan.

Participants

In total, eighty seven 17-22-year-old EFL learners (Urdu-speaking individuals who learn English as a second language) studying at Govt. Colleges for women and Govt. Postgraduate Colleges situated in district Vehari, the province of Punjab, Pakistan participated in the study. They were divided into 61 males and 26 females. They were 77 science students of intermediate level and 10 students from M.A. (English Language and Literature) class. The students of intermediate had passed their Part-I exam with distinction (achieved more than 70% marks) and had spent seven months, September to March, of their study in intermediate part-II (near the end of academic session). The participants were able to put OALD to good use however; their understanding of stative verb and dynamic verb was, presumably, not up to the mark.

Research Tools

In order to find out whether the definitions of stative and dynamic produced better results inclusively or exclusively (= the concept of progressive tense), a language proficiency test (LPT) and two handouts were used to collect the required data from the EFL learners who participated from scratch.

Language Proficiency Test

The test comprised 15 sentence items with dichotomous options scattered in two rows. Each sentence contained a bold typeface to represent either stative verb or dynamic verb; and an underlined word or phrase to represent either subject or agent. Five words (*burn, run, roll, pump and go*) were carefully chosen keeping in view their flexibility to fall in both the types of verb i.e. stative and dynamic. Each one of the five words formed alternately a cluster of three sentences. In each cluster, sentences were arranged in such a deliberately contrived ordered manner that each sentence containing dynamic verb was guarded by two sentences containing stative verb in progressive form.

The implication was that all dynamic verbs were used in simple form and statives were used in progressive form deliberately, picked out from the examples cited in OALD, in order to test the participants' contemplation of progressive aspect in choosing the dynamic verbs and vice versa. Two terms *subject* and *agent* were added, as constants, on account of their relationship with *stative* and *dynamic* respectively, the evidence of this relationship is corroborated by the study conducted by Imran and Mamuna (2017: 258).

Two options i.e., a) stative verb b) dynamic verb in the 1st row and two options i.e., a) subject b) agent in the 2nd row appeared against each sentence item and the

participants were asked: (1) to focus on the bold typeface in order to choose the correct option from the 1st row; (2) and to focus on the underlined words and phrases to choose the correct option from the 2nd row.

Handouts

The data was collected in two phases. In the first phase, the language proficiency test along with a handout designed as control parameter was distributed among the participants in the presence of their teacher. The participants were asked to peruse the handout before approaching the LPT. A fortnight after the first phase, same LPT along with another handout, designed as experimental intervention, was distributed a second time among the same sample with *ibid.* instructions and facilities. However, to facilitate their understanding, they were allowed to consult a dictionary or with their teacher for possible meanings of the words used in the handouts.

Control Parameter

To avoid inconvenience of the distribution of any number of dictionaries among the participants, a handout was designed in which definitions of four items (dynamic, stative, subject and agent) culled from OALD, 8th edition were listed according to their lemma category (See Appendix B). It is important to note that OALD sees the difference between stative and dynamic in terms of progressive aspect. The participants were asked to consult the handout on a hand-held when approaching the LPT and the motive was to test the effect of definitions on their performance.

Experimental Intervention

The researchers compiled a list of four items e.g., dynamic, stative, subject and agent in a second handout in which the definitions of two terms *subject* and *agent* were listed exactly the same as were in the control parameter i.e. copied directly from OALD, 8th edition and pasted without bringing any change in them however, the definitions of *dynamic* and *stative*, posted in OALD, 8th edition, were listed with the following modifications.

1. The following sentences (a & b) were excluded from the definitions of dynamic verb and stative verb on the ground that both of these pertain to the controversial conundrum of the use of stative/dynamic verb in progressive form, and that the EFL learners may be prevented from concentrating solely on progressive aspect in recognizing dynamic verb.
 - a. *Dynamic verbs (for example eat, grow, knock, die) can be used in the progressive tenses.*
 - b. *Stative verbs (for example be, seem, understand, like, own) are not usually used in the progressive tenses.*
2. OALD in ‘stative’ and ‘dynamic’ has left two terms *state* and *action* unexplained contained therein. Accordingly, the details about *Stative* and *Dynamic* (a & b) were expanded as in (c & d) respectively and therein seems to lie the key to their recognition.

- a. *Describing an action rather than a state. (stative)*
- b. *Describing a state rather than an action. (dynamic)*
- c. *A stative verb represents the events that befall spontaneously. The subject does not transit its action through the verb onto the object rather; it is the subject which receives the action of the verb.*
- d. *A Dynamic verb represents the event which occurs when a subject transits its action (behavior) through the verb onto the object (for example read, grow, beat, pluck etc.).*

Results

The responses to the language proficiency test, comprising on 15 sentences distributed among (N=77) participants, were analyzed via descriptive statistics. The analysis focused on the percentage of incorrect answers of option (a) and (b) in the 1st row appearing against five sentences (2, 5, 8, 11 & 14) and the rest of the numbers of the sentences to get at the participants' approach of reliance on the progressive tense in recognizing the bold typefaces as stative verb and dynamic verb respectively. In addition, the analysis also focused on the percentage of correct answers of the options (b) and (a) appearing against the former number of sentences and the latter number of sentences to determine the EFL learners' ability to understand dynamic and stative verb in the 1st row; and agent and subject in the 2nd row respectively. However, the results of incorrect answers of the options appearing in the 2nd row were not entertained for the involvement of the constant. Nevertheless, the ratio of the outcome of experimental intervention to control parameter served to find out whether the former is more or less efficient in producing proliferated results. The quantitative results of the language proficiency test are displayed in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1. Average ratings of correct/incorrect answers through control parameter

Category	Correct	%	Incorrect	%
Stative verb	134	17%	636	83%
Dynamic verb	100	26%	285	74%
Subject	354	46%	416	54%
Agent	123	32%	262	68%
Total	711	30%	1599	70%

Table 1 illustrates the impact of the way the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines stative verb, dynamic verb, subject and agent on their identification among the participants. It follows from the data that after perusing the definitions of *ibid.* items posted in the OALD, the EFL learners failed to identify them inasmuch as almost in all the four categories the average percentage of incorrect answers outstripped that of correct answers with over double margin. Add to this, the average percentage of incorrect answers of the first two categories reveal that they relied primarily on the clauses, which betrayed them to failure, inclusive of the concept of progressive aspect in recognizing the statives and dynamic verbs. Overall, the EFL learners' identification of stative, dynamic, subject and agent was not up to scratch.

Table 2. Average ratings of correct/incorrect answers through experimental intervention

Category	Correct	%	Incorrect	%
Stative verb	460	60%	310	40%
Dynamic verb	275	71%	110	29%
Subject	391	51%	379	49%
Agent	144	37%	241	63%
Total	1270	55%	1040	45%

Table 2 shows the effect of the modified definitions of first two categories on the performance of the participants. The empirical data reveals that the modifications brought to the existing definitions have capacity to ameliorate the understanding of the stative and dynamic verb among the EFL learners inasmuch as the percentage of incorrect answers experienced a significant decrease as a direct result of the removal of the clauses, pertaining to the concept of progressive aspect, from the definitions of both the verbs and expansion in the details of the relevant terms. However, it is evident from the ratio of the outcome of experimental intervention to that of control parameter that the former is more efficient than the latter. Overall, the EFL learners' understanding of the stative and dynamic verb (variable) increased significantly while that of subject and agent (constant) remained almost steady.

Discussion

Overall, the empirical evidence supports the hypothesis that the definitions of stative verb and dynamic verb posted in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (OALD) are debunked by the clauses, incorporated therein, inclusive of progressive tense which arguably accounts for lack of understanding of these verbs among the EFL learners and that the definitions, exclusive of the concept of progressive aspect, of both these types of main verb can produce proliferated results. The data also reveals that both the definitions exclusive of progressive aspect are over three times more efficient than those inclusive of continuous tense. The temptation is to note that the EFL learners had scanty knowledge about the stative verb, dynamic verb, subject and agent.

First off, the statistical analysis shows that after a candid perusal of the definitions posted in OALD, the participants failed to identify the statives and dynamic verbs, the evidence is corroborated by the average ratings of correct answers of the former and the latter being paltry 17% and 26% respectively in table 1. The implication is that the definitions of both the verbs are obscured by the inadequately supplemented information in them that is, each of two definitions comprises on a phrase and a sentence one after the other: the former dealing with the nature of the term e.g. *state* or *action* and that with insufficient details, and the latter pertaining to its use in progressive aspect which ensues a conundrum.

Firstly, the first phrase in each of the two definitions is incomprehensible for their being too brief to get across. The matter of fact is that the phrase '*describing a state rather than an action*' incorporated in the definition of *stative* and that '*describing an action rather than a state*' in *dynamic* see the difference between both the types of verb in terms of comparison (= between state and action) which ultimately promises a deliberate shift to the definitions of *state* and *action*. It is interesting that OALD is completely silent on these two appellations (*state* and *action*) as regards their use in

grammar inasmuch as it does not elaborate when a verb demonstrates a state and when an action.

Secondly, the second improvised sentence '*dynamic verbs can be used in the progressive tenses*' in the definition of *dynamic* though promulgates a clear cut concept yet proves error-prone in that the EFL learners place over reliance on '*progressive tense*' and thereby happen to confuse even the stative + *ing* with dynamic verb, thus making the progressive marker '*ing*' an identifier of all dynamics, resulting in evoking ambiguity about the true nature of *dynamics* as well as *statives*. The evidence is corresponded by the finds in table 1 which illustrates the piled percentage of the incorrect answers of stative and dynamic as 83% and 74% respectively.

Thirdly, working with the sentence '*stative verbs are not usually used in the progressive tenses*' in the definition of *stative* in OALD makes the EFL learners more prone to error, that is, the use of the word '*usually*' incorporated therein evokes ambiguity since the learner is left uncertain of when and where a stative can be used in progressive aspect, which arguably accounts for lack of understanding of not only stative verb but also of dynamic verb in their being connected with progressive aspect. Larsen Freeman et al. (2002) came out with same results in their find that for ESL/EFL learners, one of the most difficult areas to master is English verb tense-aspect system because the students tend to overextend the present progressive and use it where the simple present was to be preferred (e.g., **I am knowing that*).

Hence, hampered by insufficient details in the phrase (first half of definition), the participants of this study had no choice but to rely completely on the sentence (second half of definition) in the definition of *stative* in OALD which made the participants confuse all verbs, including statives, +*ing* (verbs plus *ing*) with dynamic verbs which ultimately left a potential repercussion on the identification of its dynamic counterpart, hence the EFL learners confused all verbs, including dynamic, -*ing* (verbs minus *ing*) with stative verbs. Nevertheless, their failure was marked by their over inculcation on the progressive tense in identifying the statives and dynamics.

Perhaps more important is the fact that, since the participants attached utmost significance to the presence of continuous tense in identifying the dynamic verbs and resultantly happened to consider all verbs -*ing* as statives, there was an implication behind the EFL learners' over consideration of the progressive aspect in identifying both the verbs that the definitions posted in Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary had adverse effect on the understanding of both these types of main verb among the EFL learners. These findings go in line with the conclusion drawn by Ebrahimpourtaher (2015: 991) who conducted a study in Iran and reported that the most problematic aspect of learning English for the intermediate EFL learners is learning grammar.

Finally, on one hand, the definition of stative verb ends with the words that *these are not usually used in the progressive tenses* but on the other, OALD exhibits a number of such sentences (used as examples in support of different definitions) as contain unusual progressive statives. It is important that contradiction in the use of statives in progressive form continues beyond the artifice of both the definitions in OALD.

However, we can expect quite different rather better results if the same experiment is tried among the native speakers. This limitation of present study seems to coincide the results drawn by Smiecinska (2002) that the native speakers have a strong tendency of using the statives in progressive aspect, therefore, it seems unlikely of their being driven away by the continuous tense broached in the definitions.

Conclusion

It must be said, in view of the data, that Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary sees the difference between dynamic and stative verb in that the former can be used in progressive form whereas the latter variably hesitates. However, the use of statives in progressive tense is a matter of controversy among the researchers, modern grammars and dictionaries. The EFL learners make frequent use of ibid dictionary and, by making '*ing*' an identifier of all dynamics, they tend to confuse all verbs plus *ing* with dynamics and others minus *ing* with statives. Hence, progressive tense cannot be a reliable parameter, for its being a conundrum, of dividing statives from dynamic verbs.

Therefore, the clauses which stand responsible for the division of *statives* from the *dynamics* on the basis of progressive aspect prove impetuous and are a cause of failure in comprehending and learning the true nature of main verb. The removal of such clauses from both the definitions can produce proliferated results.

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