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# *The progressive aspect of English verbs: teaching and learning for Italian learners*

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*Alla mia famiglia.*

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## Introduction

The aim of this dissertation is to present and discuss the English verb phrase, in particular its progressive aspect and corresponding forms taking into account how it is taught and learnt by Italian learners, who may struggle in their acquisition process of English as a second language. In this regard, the present work tries to offer some solutions.

The first chapter analyses the English verb phrase in relation to its two categories: tense and aspect. Firstly, it is explained how present and past tenses can provide exceptions about their use. In order to dispel popular misconceptions about tense and aspect, a general overview of their differences is given. In this regard, Damian Williams (2021) offers a particular vision of these concepts and suggests to consider present and past tenses in a different way, in order to better understand the language and to use it in a more conscious and accurate way. These concepts have been discussed together with some helpful examples. Secondly, this chapter will focus on the progressive aspect of the English verb phrase, in accordance with an analysis of its functions and uses in the language. More in detail, the several different progressive forms have been presented, examining their structures and role inside the English sentence along with some examples.

The second chapter concentrates on the teaching and learning of English grammar, considering it as a second language. The first part presents an overview of different theories and principles about the acquisition of second languages and each of them has been presented in accordance with some general statements which find theoretical and empirical support from recent research. The second part of the chapter will explore the Italian scenario of the language acquisition, focusing on the Glottomatetic Cycle, a work made by Professor Michele Daloiso and his research group ELICom. Then, as subparagraphs, the three stages of this model have been presented, which are ‘focus’, ‘internalization’, and ‘use’. Furthermore, another subparagraph faces the three big groups of learning variables which affect the Glottomatetic Cycle, i.e., the learner, the context, and the language.

The last part of this chapter deals with some past and present approaches regarding the teaching of grammar. Particularly, three of them which have strongly marked language teaching in the XX century will be presented: the formalist approach, the structural approach, and the communicative approach, which is based on the constructivism learning theory. This section will explore their differences and the ideas underlying them. Additionally, the *Processing Instruction* grammar approach suggested by VanPatten will be investigated together with its stages, in order to improve the grammar competence of foreign language learners.

The third and last chapter of this dissertation covers the acquisition of the progressive aspect for Italian learners. The first part is characterized by a brief introduction which clarifies the connection between the constructivist approach and the teaching of aspect. In the second place, some notions related to the topic of aspect will be given, for instance, its subcategories of perfective and imperfective and how progressive and imperfective can be distinguished. The third part, instead, will explore the chapter's core in much greater detail, i.e., theoretical assumptions for the language acquisition process will be addressed. In this regard, a theoretical framework will be necessary considered along with five possible hypotheses which should be taken into account while comparing L1 and FL. The chapter will later deal with the difficulties of teaching and learning the English progressive for Italian learners, since it is one of the most critical issues of the English verb phrase. Through this assumption, some practical comparative cases between the two languages will be provided, focusing on potential problems which may arise during the acquisition process of the English progressive. Finally, the last paragraph will try to offer some solutions to the problems previously discussed, both supported by the analysis of bibliography research and by personal consideration.



## 1. The English verb phrase

This first chapter explores the English verb phrase in relation to the critical issue of tense and aspect. Firstly, it is described how present and past tense can provide exceptions about the use of tenses through some examples. Secondly, definitions of tense and aspect have been given to clarify that they are not the same thing, as often thought. The second paragraph of the first chapter continues with a digression about the progressive form in general, its functions, and finally it analyses the several forms of the progressive aspect in the English verb phrase.

### 1.1. Tense vs. Aspect

Water boils at 100° grades C°.

I worked as a waitress from 2000 to 2010.

My train leaves at 5:00 pm.

I wish you were more polite.

These examples show that the general assumption according to which present tense refers to the present and past tense refers to the past is not always true and that there are exceptions. Michael Lewis (1986: 22) states: “Advice and classroom hints are one thing, grammar rules are another. Rules cannot be given which include words like *sometimes*, *in certain circumstances*, *might mean*, etc.”.

We could talk about exceptions that are actually part of a wider rule about the use of tenses. In order to have a better understanding, a closer analysis of tense and aspect needs to be carried out. Although they are often labelled as the same thing in grammar course books (e.g. present continuous tense or future perfect tense), tense and aspect are not the same thing. According to Michael Lewis (1986: 50), tense is defined as involving “a morphological change in the base form of the verb. A verb form which is made with an auxiliary is not, in this technical meaning, a ‘tense’.” Tense locates a situation in relation to some other time (such as speech time); therefore, it is a category that signifies temporal deixis.

On the other hand, aspect is not concerned with relating a situation with some other time (i.e., it is nondeictic), but rather characterizes “different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation” (Comrie in Shirai and Andersen 1995: 743).<sup>1</sup>

Hence, there are two tenses in English, the present and the past tense, while further meaning and interpretations to these tenses can be added through the use of aspect. Rather than talking about present and past in English, Damian Williams (2021)<sup>2</sup> suggests referring in terms of distance: “what we refer to as ‘past’ in English is better thought of as ‘remote’. Likewise, what we consider the ‘present’ is better thought of in terms of ‘close’.” Following this distinction, we can consider the three factors of time, reality, and register when we decide which tense to use in English. In particular, the ‘close’ aspect implies the present time, a level of reality and an informal register. ‘The closer’ someone is to me socially, the more ‘present’ tense I use. Conversely, the ‘remote’ aspect involves a time in the past, a level of unreality and a more formal register. Let us consider, for instance, these examples taken by Damian William’s article.

Remote		Close
When I was a boy, I walked to school.	Time	I go to work by bus.
I wish you were more polite.	Reality	You’re not very polite.
Could you possibly open the window, please?	Register	Can you open the window?

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<sup>1</sup> Comrie’s definition of aspect can be found in *The Acquisition of Tense-Aspect Morphology: A Prototype Account*. Language, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> Damian William is an ELT author, teacher trainer and speaker who noted it in *Tense vs Aspect*. Collins, 2021.

Not only is the choice between tense and aspect influenced by how the events are viewed, but also by how people want them to be viewed. In this regard, Damian Williams (2021) states: “Aspect allows the speaker to interpret the events being described and express how they view them”. The use of present simple in newspaper headlines, for instance, sounds more immediate and therefore more newsworthy instead of the use of past simple, which would be expected since the event occurred in the past.

The importance of the distinction between tense and aspect may help learners, especially at a higher level, have a more accurate and critical understanding of the language they use. At a lower level, instead, the traditional grammar books do not seem to be aware of these concepts. Thornbury (2010)<sup>3</sup> describes the traditional grammar lessons as ‘Grammar McNuggets’, meaning that grammar is artificially organized into chunks just for the aim of teaching. The process of ‘McDonaldization’ has removed grammar from other aspects of language, such as vocabulary and phonology, making it inauthentic, just like the authentic chicken has been removed from its skin and bones to produce the Chicken McNuggets.

## 1.2. The progressive forms

As explained at the beginning of this chapter, the English grammar distinguishes between the tense and the aspect of a sentence. Aspect is related to the status of the action, in regard to its ‘internal temporal constituency’. It predominantly signals the ongoingness and the incompleteness of the action, although it may also express the beginning, repetition, or conclusion. The aspects of a sentence can be classified into simple, perfect, and progressive. According to the study conducted by Lea Meriläinen (2017: 763), the progressive in standardized English has different functions; the primary one is aspectual: it describes an activity in progress, usually limited in time and often incomplete. Another function is non-aspectual, which can be divided into two types: futurate and subjective use. The former indicates progressive form used with a future reference, i.e., “He is coming back tomorrow” (Leech et al. 2009: 133); the latter is used in expressive or attitudinal functions, i.e., “I imagine you are always battling in school” (Leech et al. 2009: 134).

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<sup>3</sup> This idea can be found in *G is for Grammar McNuggets*. An A-Z of ELT: Scott Thornbury’s Blog, 2010.

Besides these uses, the progressive form also includes non-standard extended uses (stative verbs and habitual contexts) that can be found across geographically distant varieties of English, i.e., “I’m liking this” and “I am often playing computer games on Saturday and Sunday” (Mesthrie & Bhatt in Meriläinen 2017: 763).

This dissertation will analyse the progressive forms in the English language, which are the present progressive, past progressive, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive and progressive *will (shall)* future.

The present progressive restricts the meaning of the verb to ‘what is happening now’, ‘simultaneity’. It often corresponds to the Italian *stare + gerundio* structure and it is structured as follows: *be + -ing* form of the main verb. As for the verb *be*, the negative form adds *not*, while the interrogative one inverts subject and verb.

“I am working”                      “I am not working”

“Are you working?”              “Are you not working?”

The past progressive indicates the duration of a non-habit action, activity, process or event. The structure of the past progressive corresponds to the one of the present progressive, that is: past tense of *be + -ing* form of the main verb.

“I was waiting”                      “I was not waiting”

“Were you waiting?”              “Were you not waiting?”

The present perfect progressive is formed with the *-ing* form of the verb added to the present perfect of *be*: *have been + -ing* form of the main verb.

“I have been working”              “I have not been working”

“Have you been working?”      “Have you not been working”

There are two kinds of present perfect with progressive aspect: indefinite or resultative past and up-to-now duration. Progressive aspect with the resultative present perfect indicates past activities, actions or events of presumably some duration in a *relatively recent past*, but *not lasting up to the present moment*, the effects of which are still apparent, or have some residual importance (Falinski 2008: 129):

“Who has been sleeping in my bed?”

“Who has been eating my meal?”

On the other hand, progressive aspect as up-to-now duration indicates habitual actions and events stretching in a continuum from the past up to the present:

“It has been snowing all day”

“Scientists have been conducting research on cancer for the past forty years”

Up-to-now duration of the present perfect progressive is typically expressed by the use of adverbials, as ‘for’ and ‘since’. ‘For’ indicates the period of time from some point in the past up to the moment of speaking:

“I have been here for 2 hours”

‘Since’ indicates the point in time at which the period began:

“She has been looking for you since this morning”

The past perfect progressive indicates actions, events or states which existed before the time indicated by the past tense to which it is linked, either in an undefined past, or stretching up to that time, i.e., either ‘resultative’ or ‘up to now’. It is formed with the past tense *had been* + *-ing* form of the main verb.

“She had been doing it”      “She had not been doing it”

“Had she been doing it?”      “Had she not been doing it?”

The past perfect progressive, and the past perfect in general, are typically used to report a direct speech expressed with past tense and present perfect, i.e.,

“I have been working” becomes “He said that he had been working”

Finally, the future progressive has a literal temporal meaning and an extended meaning, in which interpersonal relationships, and the pragmatic of discourse, come strongly into play. It is formed by adding the participial *-ing* form of the main lexical verb to the auxiliary verb phrase *will (shall) be*.

Future progressive with a literal meaning is used for actions or processes in progress in the future. The progressive aspect creates, as always with progressive aspect, a time frame:

“The children will already be sleeping when you come back”

On the other hand, future progressive with an extended meaning makes the speaker’s commitment neutral, as a matter of fact, whereas simple *will* expresses a more volitional meaning:

“I won’t see my students tomorrow” (a refusal?)

“I won’t be seeing my students tomorrow” (circumstances compel)

To conclude, the aim of this chapter was, first of all, to analyse and distinguish the two categories of the English verb phrase, tense and aspect, in order to reflect on the importance of their difference. Secondly, the chapter has focused on the progressive aspect in general and all its forms, providing their structures and some examples. The next chapter will deal with how English grammar is taught and learned as a second language.



## 2. English as a second language: teaching and learning grammar

The second chapter focuses on the teaching and learning of English grammar. However, before entering the issue, a general overview about several different theories of how second languages are learned have been analysed, in accordance with some general statements about second language development. Furthermore, the chapter describes the Italian research by Professor Michele Daloiso and ELICom Group about the Glottomatetic Cycle. The last section of the chapter is concerned with past and present grammar approaches, leading to the suggestion of a model which can be useful to improve the grammar learning of L $\neq$ 1 learners.

### 2.1. Theories and acquisition principles

The theories provided in the second chapter of this dissertation are the following: Acculturation/Pidginization Theory, Interlanguage Theory, the Monitor Model, and Discourse Theory. The first three have been discussed by McLaughlin and Barry (1987: 8)<sup>4</sup>, while the last one has been analysed by Ellis and Rod (1986: 259). The aim of these theoretical assumptions is to reflect on how second languages are learned.

The Acculturation/Pidginization Theory was proposed in 1978 by John Schumann. This theory posits that the acquisition of a second language is part of an acculturation process which is influenced by the social distance created between the home and the foreign cultures. According to Schumann (in Schulz 1991: 18), the effort that language learners put into communicating with speakers of the TL<sup>5</sup> depends on social and psychological variables, for instance the perceived social equality between the L1 and L2 groups, the similarity between the native and the TL cultures, positive attitudes towards each other, and an expectation by the L2 learner to stay in the TL area for an extended period. The reason why the Acculturation Theory is also called 'Pidginization' is explained by the fact that learners will have difficulties in language development. Therefore, the language will stay 'pidginized', i.e., it will fossilize in reduced and simplified forms.

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<sup>4</sup> For a deeper and more detailed analysis of the theories see *Theories of Second-Language Learning*. London: Arnold, 1987.

<sup>5</sup> This abbreviation stands for 'Target Language', which is the language into which a text, document, or speech is translated.

This mainly occurs when the social and psychological distance is great, which is when the motivation is missing or when the attitude towards the TL and its speakers is low.

The Acculturation/Pidginization Theory finds support in Horwitz's second principle of language acquisition (1986: 686). In particular, this principle agrees with the fact that the efficiency of the acquisition process is influenced by the degree of students' involvement with the input data, which depends on many factors, e.g. affective variables, personality traits, conceptual level, the interest of the material, and the comprehensibility of the material. As a consequence, the student's motivation and attitude toward the TL play a decisive role in the second language acquisition process: if the motivation and the attitude of learners is high and strong, their language acquisition process will be successful. On the other hand, students with poor motivation and negative attitude will close themselves off and the language will stay fossilized.

Another relevant theory for the acquisition process of a second language is the so-called Interlanguage Theory credited to Larry Selinker<sup>6</sup>. He introduced the concept of interlanguage in the 1972 and defined it "as a separate linguistic system constructed by the learner as the result of five central cognitive processes: language transfer from the mother tongue, transfer of training resulting from special features of instruction, second language learning strategies, second language communication strategies, and overgeneralization of the rules of the target language" (Selinker in Schulz 1991: 19). This theory holds that interlanguage reflects systematic patterns of error and communication strategies, which will disappear if the learner receives sufficient appropriate input. Moreover, interlanguage forms can be found in pidgin languages, where speakers fossilize at a relatively early stage of interlanguage process since they lack the motivation or do not receive sufficient input. This is the reason why this theory finds, in some ways, support in the Acculturation/Pidginization Theory discussed above.

Both Interlanguage Theory and Horwitz's fourth principle (1986: 687) share the same idea. The tenet here involved maintains that TL errors are a natural part of the language development process.

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<sup>6</sup> Larry Selinker is a professor of linguistics at the University of Michigan and former director of the university's English Language Institute. His most well-known contribution is the concept of interlanguage.

Contrary to what teachers claim, studies have shown that second language learners produce a systematic and incorrect version of the TL called interlanguage, just as Selinker affirms. Furthermore, the errors found in the learner interlanguage do not seem to be correlated to the learner's native language. For instance, parallel studies about learners from different linguistic backgrounds have shown that during the acquisition process of some grammatical morphemes, students tend to follow a similar sequence. Nevertheless, the findings of these studies seem to contrast with what has been said so far. Indeed, they state that the native language of the students is involved when they make errors, especially when the structure of the TL is different from the one of the SL<sup>7</sup>.

The most well-known theory about the second language acquisition is the Monitor Model, proposed by the linguist Stephen Krashen in 1970s and 1980s. This model is made up of five hypotheses, which attempt to give an explanation for L2 acquisition. The tenets are: the Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis, the Natural Order Hypothesis, the Input Hypothesis, the Monitor Hypothesis, and the Affective Filter Hypothesis. The Acquisition/Learning Hypothesis describes two processes that are able to help adult or adolescent language learners in developing language fluency. One is Acquisition, which occurs during natural interactions, the other is Learning, which needs conscious thought and steps in through formal instruction. Krashen's second main principle is the Natural Order Hypothesis, which takes inspiration from Selinker's Interlanguage Theory. This hypothesis holds that the acquisition of grammatical structures of the L2 does not take place in the same order in which they are taught, rather in a predictable order. Then Krashen elaborated the Input Hypothesis which, according to his words, refers to the belief that "humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input'..." (Krashen in Schulz 1991: 21). In other words, this hypothesis implies two side effects: speaking is a result of acquisition and not its cause and if input is understood, the necessary grammar is automatically provided. The fourth tenet is the Monitor Hypothesis, which maintains that formal learning can work as a monitor or editor for the learner's output, as long as the time is enough, interaction is based more on form than on meaning and the learner has a good knowledge of the rule.

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<sup>7</sup> SL stands for "Source Language", which is the language being translated from, usually the learner's native language.

Finally, the last hypothesis of the Monitor Model is the Affective Filter Hypothesis. It is based on an interaction between the learner and the environment, which depends on affective factors (e.g. anxiety, self-confidence, etc.) and controls the input to which the learner is exposed as well as the input converted into intake by the learner.

The concept expressed by this theory is also analysed by Horwitz's fifth principle (1986: 688). What Krashen defines as 'monitor', that is, the student's store of conscious grammatical knowledge, is believed by Horwitz to allow for only minimal production of language. In other words, human memory is limited, therefore students can only consciously correct a minimum of their errors. According to Krashen (in Horwitz 1986: 688), students must have access to the monitor during free speech activities, in order to avoid at least making errors in those structures they already master. Indeed, a study conducted by Krashen et al.<sup>8</sup> has shown how students tend to make more mistakes when they find themselves under time pressure, i.e., they have little time to use the monitor.

The last theory discussed in this chapter is the Discourse Theory conceptualised by Evelyn Hatch in 1978 and analysed by Ellis and Rod (1986: 259)<sup>9</sup>. It maintains that the competence of learners in a second language is the result of an active participation in communicative interaction and not only of a simple assimilation of input. According to Ellis (1986: 259): "The development of the formal linguistic devices for realizing basic language function grows out of the interpersonal use to which language is put". Hatch proposed three main principles for her theory (in Schulz 1991: 20): SLA<sup>10</sup> follows a "natural" route in syntactical development, native speakers adjust their speech in order to negotiate meaning with non-native speakers, and the conversational strategies used to negotiate meaning influence the rate and route of SLA in a number of ways.

Horwitz's third principle (1986: 687) gives further evidence to this theory. He agrees with the fact that merely immersing children in language is not sufficient to develop communicative competence.

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<sup>8</sup> The study was concerned about the comparison of students' performances on timed and untimed written tasks (Krashen, Butler, Birnbaum, and Robertson 1978).

<sup>9</sup> An exhaustive analysis of the Discourse Theory is provided in Chapter 6 of *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986.

<sup>10</sup>This acronym means "Second Language Acquisition".

It is fundamental that learners actively experience with pressures and feedback of natural conversation interactions. Only in this way can they increase their ability to communicate and develop true speaking fluency. This principle is also supported by studies which have shown how the presence of vertical structures in the speech of second language learners allows students to build an utterance through conversational turns.

## 2.2. The Glottomatetic Cycle

In the scenario of language acquisition, it is worth mentioning the work made by Michele Daloiso and his research Group ELICom, in particular what they call ‘Ciclo Glottomatetico’ (Glottomatetic Cycle)<sup>11</sup>. Although the research specifically refers to learners with special linguistic needs (in Italian ‘Bisogni Linguistici Specifici’ – BiLS), the theoretical approaches suggested can be extended to all language learners. This idea is supported, from a scientific point of view, by the ICF model (International Classification of Functioning, Disability and Health), which represents an important transition from the bio-medical vision of disability to the bio-psychosocial vision. According to this theory, a person is seen not only from one single point of view, i.e., his difficulties, but in a wider bio-psychosocial perspective. Therefore, everybody can experience at any time of their lives some kind of difficulties in their language learning due to unfavourable interactions between individual and environmental factors.

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<sup>11</sup> The term refers to the language learning process.

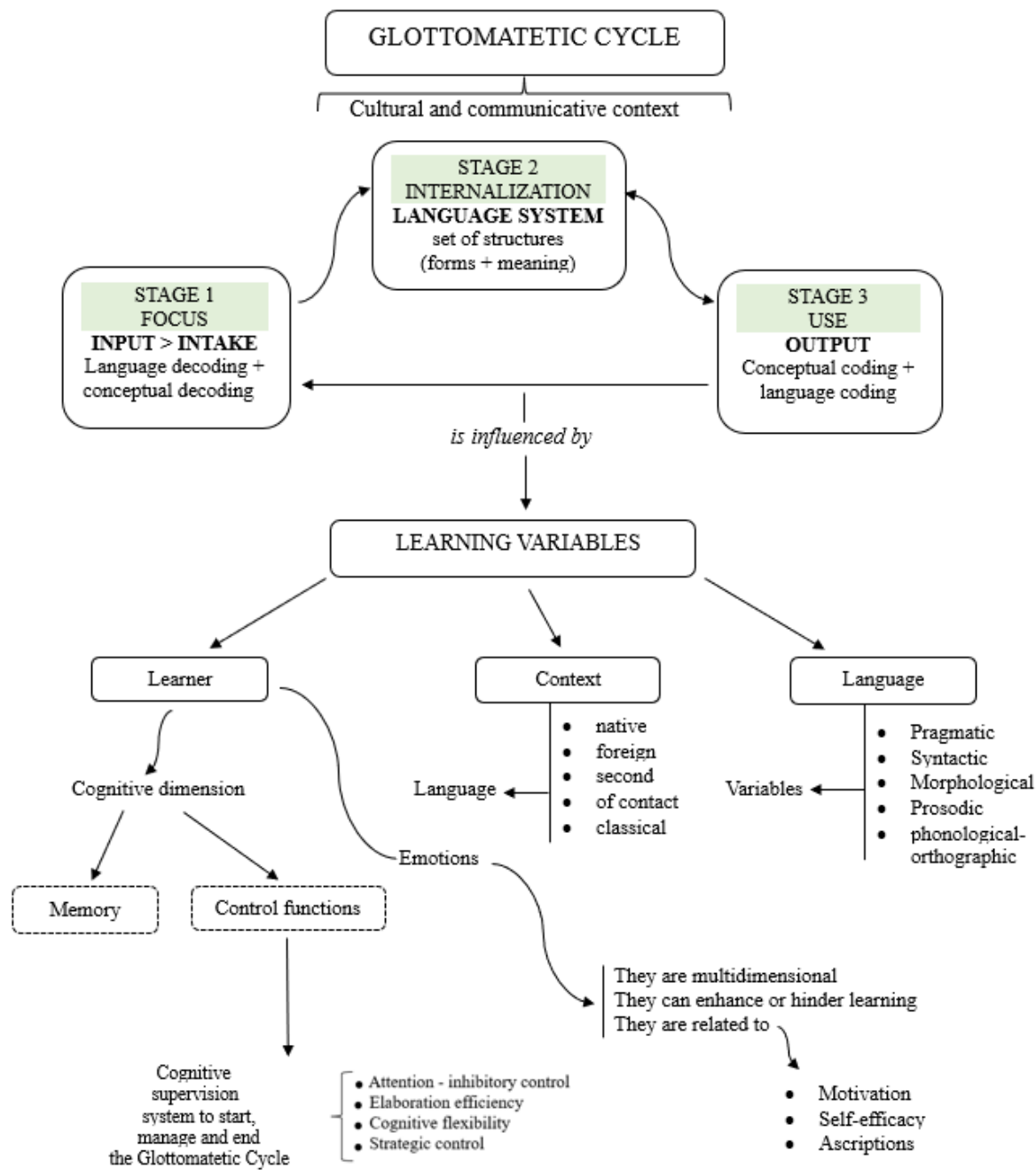


Figure 1. The Glottomatetic Cycle <sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> This is an English translation of the original figure in Italian that can be found in *Le difficoltà di apprendimento delle lingue a scuola*. Erickson, 2023 (p.47).

It is a model based on *linguistic processing*, i.e., how the human mind elaborates the linguistic input in real time, in order to understand, internalise, and use it (Krashen, Swain in Daloiso and ELICom Group 2023: 52). This cycle is the result of the cognitive development which leads to language learning. Before starting to analyse the different stages of the Glottomatetic Cycle, it is important to underline that the linguistic development must not be considered as a linear sequence from a starting point to a final one. As a matter of fact, the process of language learning is much more complex and implies recurring reorganizations of our knowledge. As a consequence, the model is meant to be like an uninterrupted learning cycle, as it is shown by the arrows in the map. When learning a new language, a specific cultural and communicative context is needed – a context with other people (usually adults or other learners) who supports the learning process, either intentionally or incidentally.

In order to get new language knowledge and to communicate, the three following stages are fundamental: stage 1 ‘focus’, stage 2 ‘internalisation’, and stage 3 ‘use’.

#### 2.2.1. From Input to Intake

According to the ‘focus’ stage, in his language learning process, the learner is exposed to several linguistic inputs, some of which are already familiar, while others are unknown. If the learner listens to the new linguistic input several times and realizes that there is something new in it, he focuses his attention on what he does not know. In this way, the input is converted into intake, i.e., it undergoes a sort of first processing, both in its form and in its meaning. In their research, Daloiso and ELICom Group (2023) give examples about a foreign student who is learning Italian. In this study, examples for Italian students learning English as L2 are suggested. Let us imagine an Italian learner who has already mastered the use of present simple in English. During his use of the language, he receives a new input referring to the present continuous and discovers the recurring suffix *-ing* used to talk about ongoing present actions. At this point, the input has become intake: the learner has not learnt the present continuous yet, but he is preparing to its learning.

### 2.2.2. The concept of Interlanguage

The Internalization phase does not merely consist in memorization. At the beginning, the learner performances will contain mistakes which should not be considered as such, rather “as the attempt of the learner to produce the linguistic structure of the target language” (Selinker in Daloiso and ELICom Group 2023: 54). This is what is meant by the concept of Interlanguage, which has been discussed in the previous paragraph. Let us continue to refer to our Italian student. After having already mastered the use and the form of the past simple in English, now he is facing a new input when talking about past actions: the present perfect. It can be noticed that its internalisation will require several steps. First of all, the learner will progressively acquire the links between its conceptual meaning and the forms. He will gradually have to rearrange his knowledge of the past simple, which he will use increasingly less to talk about past actions but in an unfinished time. However, he may overlap the two language structures and make some errors since the very meaning of interlanguage implies a network of language structures, which is always influenced whenever a new input is introduced.

### 2.2.3. The Output phase

While assimilating the new structure, the learner begins to use it in his performances. By doing so, he starts from what he wants to express (conceptual encoding) and then he chooses the most suitable structure for the context and his goals (linguistic encoding). In other words, his mental process is opposite to the focus step. The output phase must not be considered as the end-point of the learning cycle, rather as either an opportunity to reinforce the acquisition through positive feedback, or as an opportunity to provide a new input, thus starting a new learning cycle. These two possible outcomes can only happen thanks to the interaction with communicative partners (adults or classmates). To conclude the examples concerning our Italian learner, in his interactions with the teacher, he may receive a new input, using, for instance, the same structure of the present perfect, but with a different meaning that is still unknown to him: the progressive aspect of the present perfect.

#### 2.2.4. The variables of the Glottomatetic Cycle

Besides being affected by a specific cultural and communicative context characterised by the three above mentioned stages, the Glottomatetic Cycle is influenced by three big groups of variables: the learner, the context, and the language. As for the elements related to the learner, both the biological and the psychological sides must be taken into consideration. The former concerns the body functions, i.e., sight, hearing, and the phonatory system (voice and speech). For instance, due to the incomplete development of their phonatory organs, children have difficulties in reproducing some sounds. On the other hand, elderly people may have problems with their listening skills due to the gradual loss of their aural abilities. The latter deals with the learners' emotions and how they use the positive ones and control the negative ones (e.g. anxiety). Depending on how they recognize their emotions as well as the emotions of the others, how they perceive themselves and how sensitive they are, self-regulation can be promoted, and motivation can be fostered.

With reference to the context, the factors analysed by Daloiso and ELICom Group (2023) include mother tongue (L1), foreign languages, second language (L2), 'contact language'<sup>13</sup>, and ancient languages. For the aim of the present dissertation, a particular mention goes to the context of foreign languages. The main environment in which English is learnt as foreign language is the school, where the different methods and strategies used by specialized language teachers interact in a significant way with the neurobiological features of learners, providing different results, levels of motivation, and attitudes. Even the methodological approaches used in the school can affect the way a student learns a foreign language: a communication-oriented approach will have different results in the students' performances from those of a grammar-oriented approach. Finally, also the knowledge of the characteristics of both known and unknown languages can be useful, according to Daloiso and his team (2023), in the learning language process. They include pragmatic, syntactic, morphological, prosodic, phonological, and orthographic variables. The more the learner is aware of these language features, the better he will be able to face and overcome eventual difficulties in learning language.

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<sup>13</sup> According to Vedovelli (in Dalosio 2023: 68), the 'contact language' (*lingua di contatto*) is a type of L2 learning involved in a migration context.

### 2.3. Teaching grammar: past and present approaches

The teaching of grammar has always been a hotly debated topic when learning a language in general, and L<sub>2</sub> in particular. On the one hand, it is related to negative aspects, like abstraction, comprehension difficulties, memorization, boredom, and, in extreme cases, even frustration. On the other hand, grammar is acknowledged as playing an important, necessary role in the process of language learning. Throughout history, there have been several approaches for the teaching of languages. This dissertation will deal with three of them which, according to Paola Celentin (in Daloiso and ELICom Group 2023: 160), have strongly characterized language teaching in the XX century and can be traced in today's grammar and language textbooks. In this regard, Carl Blyth states that “largely unchanged for decades, the presentation of grammar in foreign language textbooks and classrooms continues to be based on an outdated combination of behaviourism, structuralist linguistics, and versions of audiolingualism and cognitive-code theory” (1997: 51).

The first one is the formalist approach, which is mainly based on translation and dictation. Moreover, grammar is concentrated on “linguistic form with explicit instruction in grammar rules at the level of individual, decontextualized sentences, accompanied by some drill of learned forms” (Connor in Blyth 1997: 52). Finally, since this approach mainly uses the verbal code and the written form, it may represent an obstacle for the inclusion of students with special needs. The structural approach, based on behaviourism, focuses on repetition and pattern drills. The input here is only oral (i.e., short dialogues to be mechanically repeated), the linguistic patterns are strongly repetitive and structured, and drills are prescriptive and decontextualized. Although this approach aims at avoiding errors and building language habits, little attention is given to the previous language habits of the learners, in particular the ones related to their L1. VanPatten claims that “the most serious problem for traditional approaches to grammar is the ‘mismatch’ between theory and practice, between the important role attributed to input in current theory and the lack of input in current practice” (in Blyth 1997: 52). These two traditional, teacher-centred approaches have been replaced by a more student-centred approach, which considers language as an instrument to get in touch with the others in order to reach communicative goals.

This is what is commonly called the communicative approach, based on the learning theory of constructivism, which, in its turn, is closely associated with the work of well-known psychologists like Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky, Jerome Bruner, and Howard Gardner. This comprehension-based approach is characterized by a ‘focus on meaning’, rather than a ‘focus on form’ from the previous approaches: the oral input is contextualized, emphasis is given to the use of language rather than to its grammar accuracy, and the learner develops a communicative competence. Even though this approach is less strict than the two previous ones, Paola Celentin (in Daloiso and ELICom Group 2023: 162) points out some drawbacks of the communicative approach, especially related to learners with linguistic special needs: a sort of communicative ‘pressure’, since the learner is required from the beginning to produce communicative acts. Moreover, the lack of explicit grammar teaching may lead the student to learn the expressions by heart.

Interestingly, in his article, Carl Blyth (1997) poses the question of *how* to teach grammar rather than *whether* to teach it. Those who are in favour or against grammar teaching consider it as a “monolithic and homogeneous phenomenon” (Blyth 1997: 53). On the other hand, an approach which considers the dynamic relationship between grammar and the mind should be considered according to Blyth. Likewise, Rutherford calls for a process-oriented conceptualization of grammar – grammar as “a mental strategy for the processing of discourse” (in Blyth 1997: 53). In order to improve the grammar competence of the foreign language learner, the *Processing Instruction* (PI) suggested by VanPatten in 1993 can be useful. It is an approach to grammar instruction that combines a traditional focus on form with comprehensible input, so that learners are encouraged to make better form-meaning connections. PI involves two stages: the presentation phase and the practice phase. In the first stage, the target grammar structure is explained and, at the same time, explicit information on incorrect strategies of input processing is given to guarantee a more successful learning. The second stage deals with the practice of the input in a controlled situation in order to provide an efficient and accurate processing. As a matter of fact, the activities of structured input in the practice phase are aimed at strengthening the relationship between form and meaning. For this reason, they can be considered as activities based on thought, and therefore they can be related to the first stage of ‘focus’ of the Glottomatetic Cycle.

Similarly to the activities of structured input, VanPatten suggests also the activities of structured output, whose aim is to offer the learner the opportunity to choose a specific language structure to give a precise meaning. Both the activities of structured input and output represent the starting and end point of grammar learning processes. Unlike the traditional approach of grammar teaching, in which the explicit grammar instruction is immediately followed by a production phase and is based only on form, in the modern approach, suggested by Daloiso (2018 in Daloiso and ELICom Group 2023: 301), input and output are respectively divided into two phases: meaning on one side and form on the other. They should not be considered as independent of one another, rather as the two sides of the same coin. The model suggested by Daloiso (2018) is called ‘focus on construction’ and can be better understood with the help of the following figure.

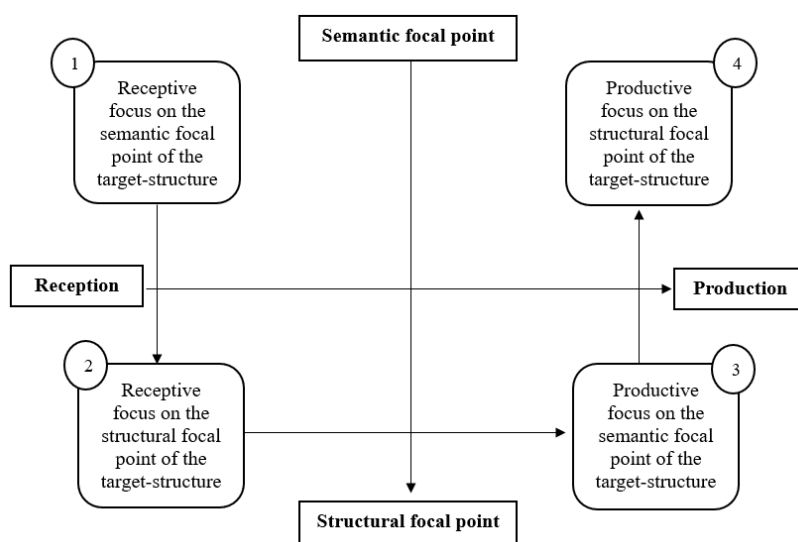


Figure 2. The model of ‘focus on construction’<sup>14</sup>

In conclusion, the second chapter has presented an overview of some second language teaching and acquisition theories, including the noteworthy Italian model of the Glottomatetic Cycle. As for grammar, some traditional approaches have been discussed, followed by more modern ones, like the constructivist approach and the ‘Processing Instruction’. The following chapter will examine the teaching and acquisition of the progressive aspect for Italian learners and will try to provide some solutions to potential problems which may arise during the acquisition process.

<sup>14</sup> This is an English translation of the original figure in Italian that can be found in *Le difficoltà di apprendimento delle lingue a scuola*. Erickson, 2023 (p.301).



### **3. The acquisition of the progressive aspect for Italian learners**

The third and last chapter is concerned with the progressive aspect, in particular its teaching for Italian learners. It starts considering the constructivist approach mentioned previously as the most suitable method to teach aspect. The second paragraph defines progressive as the third element of a threefold categorization of aspect, together with perfective and imperfective. The following section focuses on the acquisition of the progressive aspect for Italian learners, with special regard to several different problems which may occur during the learning process. Lastly, some solutions are offered to try to help Italian learners, encouraging a better use of the English grammar and consequently of the progressive aspect.

#### **3.1. The constructivist approach for the teaching of aspect**

Among the language theories and approaches analysed in the previous chapter, the constructivism approach is undoubtedly the one which can promote the development of an innovative grammar teaching, with specific reference to aspect. In his article, Carl Blyth claims that “the challenge for any pedagogical grammar of aspect is to capture a speaker’s underlying conceptual knowledge of events or situations in a rule whose usage is clear, simple, and highly predictable” (1997: 58). This is the core of the cognitive-functional approach, according to which linguistic knowledge is not considered as formal, abstract, and modular, rather as the reflection of human consciousness. This leads to the existence of the three following premises: languages are systems primarily used for communications; linguistic forms are best studied in terms of their semantic and pragmatic functions; actual language use consists of multipositional speech whose organization is guided by discourse principles (Blyth 1997: 58). In order to teach aspect, the form/meaning correlations of a language must be taken into account. The aim of the present study is to go beyond the exclusive memorization and practices of specific grammar rules in order to focus on the mental process underlying their acquisition.

### 3.2. Aspect: perfective, imperfective, and progressive subcategories

Before dealing with the core of this dissertation, that is the teaching and learning of the progressive aspect, it may be relevant to start this section with the analysis of other issues related to it. As already mentioned in the first chapter, the use of the aspect depends on the speaker's subjectivity. Namely, if the speaker focuses on the time boundaries of a sentence, he is describing the situation from the outside; if the speaker does not take into account the beginning and the end of an action, he describes it from the inside. In the first case, we can talk about a perfective aspect, while in the second case about an imperfective aspect. As far as the progressive is concerned, Raimondo Murgia (2014: 11) refers to the subjectivity of the progressive, since speakers carry their emotions and attitudes. Moreover, the subjective element is also related to democratization because the speaker can decide to be polite or not. Basing on these assumptions about subjectivity, Murgia (2014: 11) claims that progressive is one of the three subcategories of aspect, together with perfective and imperfective.

Since both progressive and imperfective are concerned with the speaker's subjectivity, both of them can be confused. However, in this regard, Murgia (2014: 38) states that "if it is true that imperfectivity may contain progressivity, it is not true that progressivity always contains imperfectivity". Murgia (2014: 41) himself helps to clarify the difference between the progressive and imperfective: "the former refers to the development of the events at a specific point in time whilst the latter refers to a larger segment of the event with particular emphasis upon the indeterminacy about its conclusive phase".

1a) "Paul is reading a book".

1b) "Paul reads a book".

Sentence 1a) focuses on the action of reading which coincides with the speech time. On the other hand, 1b) is simply concerned with the conclusion of the act of reading.

### 3.3. Theoretical assumptions for the language acquisition process

Despite the fact that English belongs to the Germanic group, it shares some features with Romance languages, resulting from several contacts with French culture during some phases of its history and also from a direct influence of Latin exerted during the centuries of the Roman invasion. In particular, Bertinetto (2000: 2) reports that “the English progressive was shaped by the Romance model”. Nevertheless, Italian speakers learning English, and in particular the progressive aspect, may find some difficulties because of the discrepancies between the two languages. In order to show and analyse how the English and Italian languages use the progressive aspect, a theoretical framework is needed. In this regard, the above-mentioned work by Raimondo Murgia (2014) is here helpful to our aim. Contrastive analysis (CA) seems to be among the most useful way to compare the outcomes of native and foreign languages. However, the influence of cognitive psychology in the second language acquisition should not be neglected, since learners carry their language habits from their native language to the foreign one, as well as their world perspective. This is what Von Humboldt (in Murgia 2014: 13) calls ‘*Weltansicht*’. In particular, according to his study, Murgia (2014: 14) reports that the English speakers “see the situation from an internal perspective, thus defocusing the boundaries of events, whereas the latter [the Italian speakers] take an external perspective”.

When comparing Italian L1 and English FL, the following five possible hypotheses must be considered according to Murgia (2014: 17):

- a. L1 has a module<sup>15</sup> and FL an equivalent one.
- b. L1 has a module but FL has no equivalent.
- c. FL has a module but L1 has no equivalent.
- d. FL has a module and L1 has two or more equivalents.
- e. L1 has two or more modules and FL has one equivalent.

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<sup>15</sup> Murgia (2014: 18) replaces the term ‘*rule*’ with the term ‘*module*’ to refer to the verb inflection that carries the aspectual feature [+progressive].

With exception of case a., all the others should be carefully considered by teachers, in order to avoid negative transfer by their students. At the same time, however, teachers should try to get their students to avoid translating word for word in case a.

In order to get a wider theoretical framework to our study, error analysis (EA) as well as translation, as suggested by Murgia (2014) must be considered. Talking about error analysis, the difference between errors and mistakes has to be clarified: errors are related to competence, while mistakes to performance. Moreover, the latter may happen under certain situations, like fatigue, fear, anxiety, and other internal or external factors. Mistakes occur by accident and are not repeated. Communication is not hindered by mistakes, which can be seen as small deviations from the linguistic code. On the other hand, errors are related to knowledge and their occurrence may signal a not complete metalinguistic awareness. As far as translation is concerned, it has a significant role in the process of foreign language learning, yet it is important to underline that it is never meant as word for word translation. As a matter of fact, the notion of equivalence must replace that of translation, in the sense that “the balance between form and content of the source text yields the same effect in the target text” (Murgia 2014: 22). The concept of equivalence is best described by the concept of mediation. It has developed from the socio-constructive approach, it has been recognized as one of the 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and it has been introduced in the CEFR Companion Volume<sup>16</sup> of 2020. In its proper meaning, mediation is not only a process of translation and interpreting texts, but above all, a socio-cultural competence through which the student makes the information accessible to other students who may not have access to it. When analysing how the progressive is used in Italian L1 and English FL, the use of translation/mediation helps the learner to ‘get into the mood’ of the language, be it source or target language in order not to betray its original meaning.

The present dissertation is based only on contrastive analysis and translation, since it starts from a personal experience as foreign language learner and tries to make it general for the majority of the Italian learners.

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<sup>16</sup> The acronym CEFR stands for “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” and it is an international standard for describing language ability published in 2001. The CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR-CV) is an extension of the original one with updated and new illustrative descriptor scales levels as well as descriptor scales for new areas, including the mediation.

### 3.4. Progressive in practice

This study starts from the assumption that it is not easy to teach and learn the English progressive aspect for the Italian learners. In this section some cases are described and analysed following the five hypotheses<sup>17</sup> listed by Murgia (2014: 17). In order to consider the examples that will follow, the distinction between retention and equivalence must be done. Namely, by retention, either the presence or the absence of the progressive aspect both in the source and in the target text is meant. However, retention does not always imply equivalence, since there can be some cases in which the presence of the progressive in one language can correspond to the absence of the progressive in the other language and the other way round. Let us consider some examples in order to detect and predict difficulties in learning the progressive system in English:

- 1a. Maria adesso legge.
- 1b. Maria reads right now.
- 1c. Maria adesso sta leggendo.
- 1d. Maria is reading now.

A potential outcome of translation by Italian native speakers can be the equivalent but inadequate sentence in 1b., instead of the correct version of 1d. In this case, L1 has two modules and the FL has only one equivalent.

- 2a. I'm leaving for London on Thursday.
- 2b. Parto per Londra giovedì.
- 2c. Partirò per Londra giovedì.
- 2d. Sto partento per Londra giovedì.

The Italian equivalent of the English progressive in 2a. is the use of the simple present in 2b, even if the specific temporal indication makes the sentence future. At the same time, however, the Italian speaker can also use the future verb form as in 2c. Also in this case, a potential outcome of translation by Italian native speakers can be the equivalent but inadequate sentence 2d. Here, FL has one module and L1 has two equivalents.

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<sup>17</sup> The list can be found at page 24 of the present dissertation.

A particular case that may cause problems in Italian native speakers is the emphatic function of the progressive, which adds intensity and vividness especially in combination with adverbs such as always.

3a. Si lamentano sempre!.

3b. They are always complaining!.

3c. They always complain!

Even if both in English and in Italian the above sentences in 3a. and 3b. convey the speaker's irritation, L1 uses the simple present, whereas FL uses the progressive. The eventual translation in 3c. may be influenced by the habitual element of the adverb, since the default rule learnt by the Italian native speakers says that habits in English are expressed by the simple present and learners tend to believe that "one rule applies for one meaning only" (Murgia 2014:96). In this case, FL has a module but L1 has no equivalent.

Another disagreement between Italian and English is produced by the presence of progressive with the perfective aspect.

4a. The baby has been sleeping for three hours.

4b. Il bambino dorme da tre ore.

4c. Il bambino sta dormendo per tre ore.

While the English language expresses both the progressive and the perfective aspect, the Italian translation keeps the perfective aspect but replaces the progressive with the present simple. The translation with the progressive in 4c. is both ungrammatical and also inadequate because the boundaries of the perfective are lost. Here, FL has one module but L1 has no equivalent.

The combination progressive + modal is undoubtedly a problematic issue for Italian speakers since it is allowed in English but not in Italian.

- 5. Quiet! Someone may be listening.
- 6. The road is wet. It must have been raining.

In the two sentences above, the translation into Italian either retains the modal but lacks the progressive or it keeps the progressive but dismisses the modal.

- 5a. Zitti! Qualcuno potrebbe ascoltarci.
- 5b. Zitti! Qualcuno sta ascoltando.
- 6a. La strada è bagnata. Deve aver piovuto.
- 6b. La strada è bagnata. Stava piovendo.

These particular examples confirm what Murgia claims, i.e., “the conveyance of translation equivalence is the result of the interplay between loss and compensation” (2014: 77). With the structure progressive + modal, FL has a module and L1 has no equivalent.

The last difficult combination that Italian learners may encounter in learning the English progressive is the one between progressive aspect and passive voice.

- 7. My car is being serviced.
- 8. The meat has been being cooked for two hours.

In the Italian translation of the two sentences above, either the passive was preserved without the progressive or the use of the progressive is preserved at the expense of the passive.

- 7a. La mia macchina è in fase di manutenzione.
- 7b. Stanno riparando la mia macchina.
- 8a. La carne è in cottura da due ore.
- 8b. La carne sta cuocendo da due ore.

Presumably, the Italian learners may keep both the passive and the progressive, the combination of which in Italian produces ungrammatical sentences:

7c. La mia macchina sta venendo riparata.

8c. La carne sta venendo cotta da due ore.

The comparison so far of the two languages concerning the progressive aspect has pointed out some inadequacies of both English and Italian translations. Specifically, the translations do not convey the equivalence in terms of progressive aspect, in particular when it is combined with modal and passive verbs. To conclude this section concerning difficulties related to the learning of aspect and to widen the issue, Carl Blyth (1997) talks about obstacles, especially related both to text books and teacher education programs. The first one is concerned with the confusion between tense and aspect. In his article, Blyth cites Garrett according to whom “the verb forms imperfect and present perfect are said to represent different tenses, but in fact they distinguish aspect” (Garrett in Blyth 1997: 54). As regards teacher education programs, “despite years of traditional grammar instruction, TAs<sup>18</sup> are often unable to give succinct and coherent explanations of aspect because they lack an understanding of its discourse basis” (Fox in Blyth 1997: 56).

### 3.5. Teaching and learning strategies

After trying to predict and detect potential difficulties in the use of the English progressive by Italian learners, some teaching and learning strategies are presented, in order to improve both their knowledge and competences. As a premise, it is worth stating that, although the following suggestions are referred to the teaching and learning of grammar in general, they can also be extended to the specific topic of progressive aspect. Let us consider some findings from the bibliography research made for the writing of the present dissertation. The main source, in this regard, is the article by Elaine K. Horwitz (1986), who suggests some teaching practices after considering language acquisition principles<sup>19</sup>. These prominent practices, taken from literature, will be integrated with some examples taken from the personal experience made during the years of secondary and high school.

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<sup>18</sup> By this abbreviation, Blyth (1997: 51) means graduate teaching assistants.

<sup>19</sup> They have been discussed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

The first group of teaching practices covers the student's involvement with the linguistic input, namely it is referred to the student's interest and motivation, as well as the promotion by the teacher of a supportive, nonthreatening classroom atmosphere. "By creating a supportive atmosphere and supplying interesting and comprehensible materials, the teacher can do much to weaken the affective filter" (Horwitz 1986: 686). Motivation is a key point in the field of foreign language learning and teaching, and it can either enhance or hinder the learning process, as underlined by Daloiso in his study of the Glottomatetic cycle.

Another group involves the communicative aspect of the foreign language. As supported by the corresponding approach of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), the primary aim of using a language is to communicate with a purpose, be it receive information or create relationships. In CLT, meaning is more important than grammar. As a direct consequence, the suggestion for a good teaching practice is to develop the teaching and learning process in a less controlled way that goes from the use of the language, i.e., through listening, reading, and speaking skills to a later conscious and more explicit teaching of grammar. In this regard, Murgia (2014: 25) talks about the difference between acquisition and learning; the former as the term referred to native language acquired naturally and in an uncontrolled way; the latter as the term referred to the foreign language, whose study is based on a more conscious process. When considering the school or the academic environment, the foreign language study is mainly based on learning rather than acquisition. Consequently, the use of the language is, in most cases, subordinate to grammar and the learning process develops from grammar to use.

Basing on the communicative use of the language, the role of grammar should be limited only to a later stage and based on a metalingual reflection. However, this kind of explanation of grammar is not always possible, especially if we refer to lower level of the school system, e.g. primary, secondary, and the first years of high school. In this case, the use of images to represent a grammar concept plays a significant role, since they become functional to understand the meaning of a grammar structure.

In this regard, in order to give the students a clear understanding of the progressive aspect in the English language, teachers should present it through visual aids, like timelines, dotted lines, or wavy lines. Moreover, the presentation of the new grammar structure should always be within a communicative context, be it a short dialogue or an example situation, ideally illustrated. At higher school system, i.e., academic environment, the explanation of grammar structures can be done through the presentation of a variety of oral or written texts, ranging from literature, blogs, political speeches, scripts of plays, scientific articles, as suggested by Murgia (2014) in his Teaching Unit of the progressive.

One last but not least suggested practice is referred to errors. According to the Interlanguage theory, foreign language errors are natural in the learning process since they are part of a first, 'incorrect' version of the student's target language, called Interlanguage. Horwitz (1986: 688) states that "teachers should expect that students will make errors" and that they "should not expect either overt or covert error correction to have strong impact on the correctness of learner target-language speech". On the other hand, as far as mistakes are concerned, they should be expected by teachers when students make them during spontaneous communication about what they already know.

All the teaching practices which have been suggested so far find evidence in my personal learning experience. My intrinsic motivation for foreign languages has helped me in the choice of both high school and university course of study, as well as in the choice of the theme of the present dissertation. Despite some positive experiences of foreign language lessons focused on speaking and listening skills, the majority of them were unfortunately mainly based on grammar teaching, in particular through an explicit explanation of a rule followed by its applications in the form of mechanical drills. Finally, the issue concerning the management of errors/mistakes represent the most critical element in the process of language learning in the Italian school system. Among the aims of a good language learning process, grammar accuracy is undoubtedly one of them but not the only one. In most cases, sadly, although the student's performance is positive in terms of fluency, pronunciation, and use of an appropriate vocabulary, teachers tend to stress firstly the mistakes and also the assessment is strongly affected by them.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion to this dissertation, it can be noticed how the English verb phrase is characterized by highly complex and critical structures, such as the one of the progressive aspect. Learning to master them plays a significant role in the acquisition process and may help students to become more aware of the language they use.

Through an in-depth examination of tense and aspect in the first chapter, the dissertation has highlighted the diversity of these structures in English, with a special focus on the one of the progressive aspect. By investigating the theoretical frameworks and practical approaches involved in the context of second language acquisition, this work has tried to point out some key aspects and to offer potential solutions for improving the teaching and learning process. The dissertation also analysed relevant approaches to grammar teaching in order to improve learners' competence in complex structures like the progressive aspect.

What I can certainly draw from this work is that overcoming challenges and difficulties is not impossible if appropriate teaching and learning strategies are employed. The choice for the topic of this dissertation was dictated by my personal experience but also difficulties as a student of English and by my desire to deepen the topic also considering my university career. In conclusion, the aim of this dissertation is to provide a comprehensive analysis of the English verb phrase, with particular reference to the progressive aspect, and to explore some strategies both to teachers and students, in order to make the teaching and learning process of English more effective.



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## Italian summary

Il presente elaborato ha lo scopo di presentare il sintagma verbale inglese, in particolare l'aspetto progressivo e le relative forme verbali. Questo argomento viene trattato nel dettaglio in relazione al suo insegnamento e apprendimento per gli studenti italiani, presentando diversi approcci e teorie e mettendo in risalto difficoltà e problematiche che potrebbero verificarsi nella sua resa in un'altra lingua. A questo proposito, il presente lavoro cerca di offrire delle soluzioni capaci di aiutare gli apprendenti italiani a fare un uso consapevole e corretto della forma progressiva inglese.

Nel primo capitolo viene presentata un'analisi del sintagma verbale inglese in relazione a due delle sue categorie, ovvero il tempo e l'aspetto, che sono spesso però erroneamente considerati come la stessa cosa. Questi due concetti vengono quindi qui definiti in modo chiaro e univoco: il tempo individua una situazione in relazione ad un altro tempo, quindi è una categoria che indica una deissi temporale; l'aspetto, invece, caratterizza diversi modi di vedere la componente temporale all'interno di una situazione. La scelta tra tempo e aspetto è influenzata non solo da come vengono visti gli eventi, ma anche da come le persone vogliono che gli eventi vengano visti. È inoltre fondamentale chiarire questi concetti affinché gli studenti possano, ad un livello elevato della loro istruzione, usare la lingua in modo più accurato. Successivamente, vengono presentate nel dettaglio le diverse forme verbali dell'aspetto progressivo, ovvero il present progressive, past progressive, present perfect progressive, past perfect progressive and progressive *will (shall) future*.

Il secondo capitolo è invece incentrato sull'insegnamento e sull'apprendimento della grammatica inglese, ma prima di addentrarsi in questo tema è necessario fornire una panoramica generale di alcune teorie sull'acquisizione della seconda lingua. Tra quelle affrontate, la teoria del *Monitor Model* del linguista Stephen Krashen è sicuramente quella più conosciuta per quanto riguarda il processo di acquisizione della seconda lingua. Questa teoria è composta da cinque principi e si basa sull'idea che gli studenti dovrebbero avere accesso al loro bagaglio di conoscenze grammaticali durante le conversazioni, in modo tale da evitare di fare errori almeno in quelle strutture che già padroneggiano.

A sostegno di questa teoria, Krashen ha dimostrato tramite uno studio, condotto con altri colleghi, che gli studenti tendono a commettere più errori quando si trovano sotto pressione e quindi quando hanno meno tempo a disposizione per sfruttare le loro conoscenze grammaticali.

Per quanto riguarda il processo di acquisizione linguistica, degno di nota è sicuramente lo studio condotto dal Professore Michele Daloiso insieme al gruppo di ricerca ELICom. Nel panorama italiano, il loro lavoro, rappresentato dal Ciclo Glottomatetico, ricopre un ruolo fondamentale e riguarda non solo gli studenti con Bisogni Linguistici Specifici, bensì può essere esteso a tutti gli apprendenti linguistici. Questa idea è sostenuta, a livello scientifico, dal modello ICF, il quale afferma che l'individuo deve essere considerato non solo dal punto di vista delle sue difficoltà, ma da una prospettiva bio-psicosociale molto più ampia. Si continua, poi, con un'analisi del Ciclo Glottomatetico, in particolare dei suoi tre stadi (il focus, l'internalizzazione e l'uso) e delle variabili dell'apprendimento che lo influenzano (l'apprendente, il contesto e la lingua). Con il termine Ciclo Glottomatetico si intende il processo di acquisizione linguistica, ovvero come la mente umana elabora l'input linguistico in tempo reale al fine di capirlo, internalizzarlo e usarlo. Una caratteristica fondamentale di questo modello è rappresentata dal fatto che richiede continue riorganizzazioni delle conoscenze e, di conseguenza, non termina mai. Pertanto, è necessario intendere questo modello come un ciclo di apprendimento ininterrotto, all'interno del quale altre persone possono supportare il processo linguistico, sia in modo intenzionale che non. Al fine di comprendere meglio i tre stadi del Ciclo Glottomatetico, è stato preso in esame, come esempio, il caso di uno studente italiano che sta apprendendo l'inglese come seconda lingua, in particolare alcune strutture verbali come il progressivo.

Dopo aver fornito una panoramica generale di alcune teorie sull'acquisizione della seconda lingua, il capitolo prende in analisi alcuni approcci, passati e presenti, riguardanti l'insegnamento della grammatica e che portano alla proposta di un modello che può essere utile a migliorare l'apprendimento della grammatica da parte di uno studente di L $\neq$ 1.

Partendo dal presupposto che l'insegnamento della grammatica è sempre stato un argomento molto dibattuto quando si impara una lingua in generale, e la L $\neq$ 1 in particolare, nel corso della storia sono stati formulati diversi approcci a tal proposito.

Il presente elaborato ne prende in considerazione tre che, secondo Paola Celentin, hanno fortemente caratterizzato l'insegnamento delle lingue nel XX secolo e se ne può trovare traccia nei libri di grammatica e di lingua di oggi. Tra questi troviamo l'approccio formalistico, l'approccio strutturale e l'approccio comunicativo. Mentre i primi due sono approcci tradizionali e maggiormente incentrati sull'insegnante, l'approccio comunicativo, che li ha sostituiti, considera la lingua come uno strumento per entrare in contatto con gli altri al fine di raggiungere obiettivi comunicativi. L'approccio formalistico, infatti, si basa principalmente sulla traduzione e sul dettato e di conseguenza potrebbe rappresentare un ostacolo per gli studenti con bisogni speciali. Anche l'approccio strutturale, nonostante cerchi di evitare errori e di costruire abitudini linguistiche, presenta alcune carenze, come ad esempio la poca attenzione prestata alle abitudini linguistiche relative alla lingua madre dell'apprendente. A tal proposito, VanPatten afferma che la maggior problematica di questi approcci tradizionali risiede proprio nella mancata corrispondenza tra teoria e pratica. L'approccio comunicativo, invece, è centrato maggiormente sullo studente e si basa sulla teoria dell'apprendimento del costruttivismo. Questo approccio è caratterizzato da un focus sul significato piuttosto che da un focus sulla forma, in altre parole l'input orale viene contestualizzato, viene data enfasi sull'uso della lingua invece che sull'accuratezza grammaticale e infine lo studente sviluppa una competenza comunicativa.

Successivamente, il capitolo prende in considerazione il *Processing Instruction*, ovvero un approccio all'insegnamento della grammatica suggerito da VanPatten che combina un'attenzione tradizionale alla forma con input comprensibili, in modo che gli studenti siano incoraggiati a creare migliori connessioni forma-significato. Da questo modello si passa poi ad un approccio ancora più moderno suggerito da Michele Daloiso nel 2018, che prende il nome di Focus sulla costruzione e prevede da una parte la ricezione e dall'altra la produzione. Questi due fenomeni non sono però da considerarsi indipendenti, bensì come due lati della stessa medaglia.

Nel terzo capitolo, infine, viene esaminato l'insegnamento dell'aspetto progressivo agli apprendenti italiani. Come prima cosa è importante spiegare come l'approccio costruttivista sia il metodo migliore, tra le diverse teorie ed approcci analizzati, per favorire lo sviluppo dell'insegnamento di una grammatica innovativa, con particolare attenzione all'aspetto. A tal fine, deve essere presa in considerazione la relazione tra forma e significato di una lingua, affinché ci si possa focalizzare sul processo mentale che si trova alla base dell'acquisizione delle regole grammaticali. Successivamente, il capitolo prende brevemente in analisi alcuni aspetti correlati all'aspetto, in particolare le sue sottocategorizzazioni della perfettività, imperfettività e del progressivo. Dopo aver precedentemente appurato, nel primo capitolo, che l'uso dell'aspetto dipende dalla soggettività del parlante, è necessario stabilire se la situazione viene descritta dall'esterno, e quindi si parla di aspetto perfettivo, o se il parlante descrive la situazione dall'interno, e quindi abbiamo un aspetto imperfettivo. Tuttavia, l'elemento soggettivo può essere allargato anche al concetto di progressivo, in quanto il parlante porta con sé le sue emozioni e la sua attitudine. Murgia afferma, quindi, che il progressivo è una delle tre sotto categorie dell'aspetto, insieme alla perfettività e all'imperfettività. Dopo aver fornito queste nozioni, il capitolo si concentra sul paragone tra inglese e italiano relativamente all'uso dell'aspetto progressivo. Le discrepanze tra le due lingue possono infatti portare gli apprendenti italiani a riscontrare delle difficoltà quando si trovano ad imparare la lingua inglese, e in particolare l'aspetto progressivo. A questo proposito, è necessario tenere a mente un quadro teorico ben definito all'interno del quale si colloca l'analisi contrastiva proposta da Murgia. Grazie a questa analisi è possibile paragonare il modo in cui la lingua inglese ed italiana fanno uso del progressivo e i relativi esiti di questo utilizzo. Per questo approccio è necessario tenere in considerazione cinque ipotesi che possono aiutare ad evitare rese scorrette o traduzioni letterali da parte degli studenti. In merito a questo tema, è possibile infatti che gli apprendenti commettano errori o traducano parola per parola, cosa che invece non dovrebbe avvenire nel momento in cui si sostituisce il concetto di traduzione con quello di equivalenza. Quest'ultimo aspetto va di pari passo con quello della mediazione, riconosciuta come una delle competenze di questo secolo e introdotta nel Volume Complementare del Quadro Comune Europeo di riferimento per le lingue (QCER), che aggiorna la versione del 2001.

Il capitolo procede poi col presentare diversi casi in cui viene messo a confronto l'uso del progressivo in italiano e in inglese, tenendo a mente i concetti di conservazione e di equivalenza, soffermandosi in particolar modo su alcune problematiche che potrebbero verificarsi. Nello specifico, sono stati analizzati i casi dell'uso del present progressive, del progressivo con valore di futuro, casi in cui la forma progressiva viene usata con funzione enfatica, l'uso del progressivo con il present perfect, la combinazione progressivo + modale e infine la combinazione progressivo + forma passiva. In seguito a questa analisi è possibile notare come il paragone tra le due lingue faccia sorgere delle difficoltà importanti, soprattutto nelle ultime due costruzioni presentate. Infine, ricopre una fondamentale importanza tentare di offrire agli studenti italiani delle possibili strategie didattiche, al fine di garantire un migliore utilizzo del progressivo inglese. Queste possono essere raggruppate in quattro macro categorie, nello specifico troviamo quelle che riguardano il coinvolgimento dello studente con l'input linguistico, quelle che coprono l'aspetto comunicativo della lingua straniera, altre che prevedono l'uso di figure e linee per spiegare le strutture grammaticali e infine una categoria che riguarda gli errori che gli apprendenti di una lingua straniera fanno e che dovrebbero essere considerati come un elemento naturale che caratterizza il processo di apprendimento. Nella mia esperienza personale ho avuto modo di ritrovarmi in queste strategie sopra suggerite, ad esempio, il mio forte interesse verso le lingue straniere è stato fondamentale nella scelta della scuola superiore e della facoltà universitaria, così come nella scelta dell'argomento per questa tesi. Meno felice è stato invece il modo in cui gli insegnanti hanno, nel corso soprattutto della mia istruzione secondaria, presentato la lingua straniera. La maggior parte delle lezioni prevedeva uno schema meccanico e ripetitivo, caratterizzato cioè dall'insegnamento nozionistico della grammatica inglese seguito poi da frasi o esercizi dove bisognava applicare la regola imparata. Infine, un altro aspetto problematico che ho riscontrato nel corso della mia istruzione è stato il modo in cui gli insegnanti concepivano l'errore, in quanto quest'ultimo veniva fortemente evidenziato e fatto notare come prima cosa, nonostante magari ci fosse una buona pronuncia o un livello lessicale elevato.



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