The use of the progressive in Swedish and German advanced learner English – a corpus-based study[1]

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1 Introduction

With the advent of corpora documenting learner English, a new and interesting field of research has been opened. There are many aspects of English grammar and discourse that can fruitfully be explored in learner corpora in order to shed light on both practical and theoretical questions with applications in the teaching of English at advanced levels. One such area is the progressive.

The progressive is a feature of English grammar that is difficult to handle for non-native speakers, both teachers and students (see eg Mindt 1997). One consequence is that the progressive is claimed to be used too often and in the wrong places by Swedes and Norwegians (see Swan and Smith 1987:25; Johansson and Lysvåg 1987:158, who all believe that a possible reason is overemphasis of this feature in textbooks and teaching). The question of what this overuse looks like has not yet been fully answered. Are particular functions of the progressive used more often than in Standard English, or do learners extend the use of the progressive to new, unidiomatic constructions? Can an investigation of learner use show whether there is a need for new, more pedagogical explanations of the functions of the progressive?

Another question concerns the influence of students' native language. Does the absence of aspect-marking verb forms in students' own language result in the same problems in their use of the progressive in English, regardless of native language? The main aim of this investigation is to answer these questions about non-native speakers' use of the progressive.

1.1 Primary material

The primary material for our investigation of non-native use of the progressive consists of two samples of advanced learners' essays: a sample of argumentative essays from the German part of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), totalling 78,856 words, and another sample with comparable Swedish student essays from the Uppsala Student English corpus (USE), containing 79,562 words (for more information about ICLE, see Granger 1998, and about USE, see Axelsson 2000). We have adopted Lorenz's (1999:10) definition of advanced students: 'learners who are *generally expected* to have mastered the basic rules and regularities of the language they are learning'. Lorenz's definition of the students contributing to the German component of ICLE (henceforth under the label of GICLE) is applicable to the USE students as well. They are advanced enough to meet the formal requirements for entry into certain post-secondary English courses, but they may in practice not be up to the expected levels of proficiency and understanding of the language. The texts in GICLE were written by 20–25-year-old students of English at the University of Augsburg and produced in the framework of writing classes for future teachers of English. Some were written at home and some under exam conditions. Examples of topics are 'A defence of marriage', 'Argue the case for or against a speed limit on German motorways' and 'Should cars be banned from the city centre?' (Lorenz 1999:14). All the essays in the USE corpus were written by first-term students of English at Uppsala (both future teachers and others, the majority of the same age as the Augsburg students) and produced at home with access to secondary material. The essays were not graded but intended as writing exercises to be discussed with a tutor. In these discussions, aspects of language as well as content and structure are taken up. The task is to argue for or against some given statement concerning commonly debated social and political issues, such as 'Monarchy has no place in a democratic country like Sweden', 'Everybody should become a vegetarian' or 'Capital punishment should be abolished'. The students are also allowed to come up with a similar statement of their own, but, even so, the task is quite narrowly defined. In a lecture where the task is handed out, the characteristics of an argumentative essay are explained and exemplified.

The format of the sampled essays in GICLE appears not to have been strictly defined, as the length of these essays varies from 250 to 650 words. The Swedish essays are much more homogeneous, varying very little in length, with an average of 750 words and differences of plus/minus 100 words. A consequence of this difference is that the material contains a larger number of German students' essays than of Swedish ones (see Table 1).

It can be claimed that argumentative texts are not ideal for analysing the progressive, since the progressive is sensitive to register variation. In Biber et al's (1999:462) overview of four genres, the progressive is shown to be most frequently found in conversation and fiction and least frequently in academic texts. Thus the nature of the topic and other extra-linguistic factors influence the frequency in native English as well as in learner English. This is demonstrated in another study of learners' progressives carried out by a third-term student in Uppsala (Blomberg 2001). Blomberg studied the use of the progressive in literature essays written by the same group of students as those who wrote the argumentative essays discussed in this study. It turned out that the normalised frequency of the progressive was more than twice as high in the literature essays as in the argumentative essays (6.4 per 1,000 words vs 2.9 per 1,000 words). Blomberg's explanation for these findings was that many students devoted a great deal of space to concrete descriptions of settings and characters in the novels they were discussing. She also found some tokens of the progressive in quotations from the novels. These results show that the choice of fairly homogeneous, comparable texts is essential in order for relevant comparisons to be made. We judged our two samples of argumentative essays to be similar enough in content and genre for a comparative study. But, even though all the essays were produced with the aim of representing 'argumentative' prose, there is, of course, always a risk that students understand and deal with their (various) topics in different ways, something which might have influenced the frequency of the progressive and the way in which it is used.

1.2 Functions of the progressive

In a standard grammar for Swedish university students, Svartvik and Sager (1977), the account of the use of the progressive is quite detailed (1977:82–88). In addition to the basic meaning of something temporarily in progress, many subsidiary meanings are described, such as 'limited duration', with or without an accompanying time adverbial, also including repetition of momentary verbs, such as *hit, knock* and *tap*. Further, we find rules about 'ongoing change', with certain verbs like *change*, *grow* etc or other expressions indicating a process of change (*more and more*, *gradually*), about action in progress both before and after a certain point in time, and about incomplete action, with telic verbs. Other rules describe the progressive used in transitional processes, with verbs like *arrive*, *die*, *sink* and in expressions of personal attitude. Reference to the future is also mentioned, with or without *will*. Finally, it is mentioned that, with some verbs of bodily sensation, little meaning difference is perceived between the simple and the progressive form. To further clarify usage, the basic characteris-

tics of the simple form are contrasted with those of the progressive. We also find verbs with stative meanings discussed and many examples of how the 'same' verbs can acquire different meanings and fit in different contexts depending on which aspect is chosen.

From a practical, learning/teaching perspective, Svartvik and Sager's is a very extensive and clear account for a learners' grammar, but at the same time we must admit that the information is very complex and difficult to grasp. The different points seem disparate and loosely connected. They may also give the impression of being mutually exclusive (even though nothing is said to that effect). Many students prefer to interpret rules as discrete and absolute, getting confused by notions of overlapping constructions (see Mindt 1997). Sometimes the grammar rules even seem contradictory (as when one meaning of the progressive is claimed to be something 'incomplete, unfinished' and another is 'limited duration' with a beginning and an end). It is understandable if the typical student desperately looks for some more general principle to guide her[2] in her difficult choice between (what most students perceive as) 'right' and 'wrong'. In Johansson and Lysvåg (1987) (also Hasselgård, Johansson and Lysvåg 1998) students get a different type of explanation. Johansson and Lysvåg (1987:156f) depart from two contrasting pairs of examples, (1)–(4):

(1) Peter **is living** in London

(2) Peter **lives** in London

(3) Tom is being polite

(4) Tom **is polite**

The speaker choosing (1) and (3), they say, might be commenting on 'Peter's present whereabouts' and suggesting that 'Tom is not generally polite', but the speaker of (2) and (4) 'does not misrepresent the facts in using the simple form'. They continue: 'We see thus that the progressive is the marked form both formally (since it has the *–ing* specification) and semantically (since it has narrower temporal implications than the simple form). Against this background it should be clear that it is sometimes impossible to claim that a particular use of the progressive, or the non-progressive for that matter, is incorrect'. Further on (1987 160–161) they continue their discussion of the 'basic contrast' between the progressive and the simple form and attempt a 'general explanation':

> Whereas the simple form is used to describe what the speaker thinks are characteristic and permanent properties of persons and things, the progressive is used to report on the observable and changeable behaviour of people and on evidence and manifestations of changeable properties of things.
>
> From this follows […] that if speakers feel unwilling to commit themselves to saying that a particular feature is a permanent property of something or somebody (and thus use the simple form) they will be content to report on the behaviour or evidence temporarily in manifestation (and use the progressive).

We have dwelt at some length on these learners' grammars because we are interested in pedagogical ways of explaining the use of the progressive. The less complex the explanations are, the more likely it ought to be that students understand them and have some practical use for them. It seems to us that the classic model (basically the same in Leech 1971; Svartvik and Sager 1977; Quirk et al 1985, and many other grammars following these authorities) is unnecessarily detailed for most students (as will be shown in our discussion of results below) and, at the same time, too limited.

Most advanced students do not consciously ponder the choice of aspect when they are writing. Instead they use their intuition, producing constructions that 'feel right' to them. Quite often this method is successful but it also results in constructions that are difficult to judge. The fact that even native-speaker use of the progressive or non-progressive sometimes 'seems to go counter to rules offered in previous studies' (Ljung 1980:5) indicates that we cannot simply discard these constructions as 'incorrect' English. Examples (5a) from the USE corpus and (5b) from GICLE illustrate our point:

(5a)   One argument you often hear from people who **are advocating** death penalty is that it is much cheaper to execute a criminal than to keep him or her in prison for life. USE 175.a2 257[3]

(5b)   The first point for me is the abuse of cars. Everybody **is driving** everywhere with his car. ICLE-GE-AUG-0095.1[4]

As indicated by the use of the generic noun *people*, the proposition in (5a) contains a general observation about an argument used by people in favour of capital punishment. Still, the relative clause postmodifying *people* contains the progressive *are advocating* instead of the simple *advocate*, which would rather be expected when a permanent characteristic is discussed. Here the progressive is acceptable[5], because (as described in Johansson and Lysvåg 1987) it has the

effect of demonstrating that the writer is only referring to the external evidence she has concerning these people's attitudes, not to their permanent opinions. In (5b) the situation is similar. In both examples we could interpret the progressive form of the verb as expressing the student's negative attitude.[6]

2 Results

2.1 Quantitative data

Two types of frequency measures were used: normalised frequency per 1,000 words and relative frequency of progressive in relation to simple verb forms. The latter type of frequency was calculated only for present-tense forms. The number of present-tense simple forms was calculated from the tags provided by the Brill Tagger which had previously been run on the first term of USE-essays (see Berglund and Prütz 1999) and which was repeated on the sample of GICLE essays for this purpose.

Table 1 presents the quantative findings from the German and Swedish samples of argumentative essays:

Table 1: Number of essays, words, and progressives in the German (GICLE) and Swedish (USE) argumentative essays

	Essays	Words	Progressives	Progressives/ essay	Progressives/ 1,000 words
GICLE	192	78,856	287	1.5	3.64
USE	106	79,562	230	2.2	2.89

The GICLE sample contains the larger number of essays, namely 192 containing 78,856 words altogether, ie an average of 411 words per essay. As mentioned above, the individual essays vary in length between 250 and 650 words. Only 91/192 (less than 50 per cent) of all essays in GICLE contain any progressives at all. The frequency of the progressive per 1,000 words turned out to be 3.64, to be compared to the USE sample with 2.89. This sample consists of 106 essays of altogether 79,562 words; ie each essay contains an average of 750 words and 2.2 progressives. The majority of the essays, 87/106 or 82 per cent, contain one or more progressives, ranging from one to eleven in the same essay.

These findings can be compared to those of Virtanen (1997:301, 303), also in argumentative essays from the ICLE corpus, where the occurrence of progres-

sives per 1,000 words was found to be 2.86 in essays by Swedish students–very close to the USE findings, 3.11 for Finland-Swedish students' essays[7] and 2.28 for Finnish students (see Table 2). Virtanen's conclusion was that this variation is conditioned by the students' mother tongue. Unlike this study, Virtanen also had access to both American and British native-speaker argumentative essays. The corresponding frequencies for these were 4.56 progressives per 1,000 words for the American students and 2.00 for the British students (see Table 2). It is interesting that the normalized frequency of progressives used by the two groups of Swedish learners living in Sweden is identical. The Swedish learners in ICLE are students at another Swedish university (Lund). They are also students at a more advanced level, namely the third term of full-time studies of English, as opposed to the first term for the USE students. The value 2.9 is also very close to that of the Finland-Swedish learners (3.1), who also have Swedish as their mother tongue. The frequency of the progressives in the German learners' writing is slightly higher (3.6) and that of the Finnish learners slightly lower (2.3). On the other hand, the American and British students exhibit a much greater difference, with the values 4.6 and 2.0, respectively.[8] Thus we find all the learner values in the middle ground compared to the British and American students, which makes it difficult to draw any conclusions.

Table 2: Frequencies of the progressive in GICLE, USE and other corpora of student English (from Virtanen 1997:301, 303)

	Progressives	N of words	Progr./1,000 words
GICLE German learners	287	78,856	3.6
USE Swedish learners	230	79,562	2.9
ICLE Swedish learners	289	100,863	2.9
Finland-Swedish learners	172	55,332	3.1
Finnish learners	274	119,919	2.3
American students	250	54,777	4.6
British students	38	19,037	2.0

The *Longman Grammar*'s Figure 6.4 (Biber et al 1999:462) makes it possible to compare the GICLE and USE results to those in professional native-English writing as represented in different registers in the *Longman Corpus* (see Table 4). To make our figures comparable to those in *Longman Corpus* we counted

only the present and past tense instances (as shown in Table 3, these tenses account for the great majority of our examples, in GICLE 95 per cent and in USE a little less, 89 per cent). In GICLE, 3.5 past and present tense progressives per 1,000 words were found, and in USE 2.6. The text types where the normalized frequency of the progressive was closest to ours in the *Longman Corpus* were news, with about 4.5 present and past progressives per 1,000 words, and academic prose, with about 1.5. These figures show that, in quantitative terms, the learners in GICLE and USE do not deviate to a great extent from professional native use of the progressive. It is interesting that the normalized frequencies for the text category 'news' and for the essays produced by the American students are quite close (4.5 and 4.6), as are the frequencies for academic texts and British students' texts (2.0 and 1.5). We know that the progressive is more frequent in informal genres (cf Mair and Hundt 1995), and so we may assume that the language produced by the American students is much more informal than that in the British students' essays. The foreign learners choose a middle register or are less decided as to the choice of register. Frequencies ranging within the scope of normal native register variation can hardly be indications of 'overuse'.

Table 3: Distribution of progressives in GICLE and USE across the verbal paradigm

	Present active	Present passive	Past	Present perfect	Modals	Infinitive	Total
GICLE	174	4	95	7	7		287
USE	176	15	14	15	7	3	230

Table 4: Frequencies of the present and past progressive in GICLE, USE and two text types in the *Longman Corpus* (from Biber et al 1999:462)

	Progressives	N of words	Progr./1,000 words
German learners	273	78,856	3.5
USE Swedish learners	215	79,562	2.6
Longman News	—	—	≈4.5
Longman Academic	—	—	≈1.5

Instead of counting the number of progressives per a certain number of words, the relative frequency of occurrence in comparison with the non-progressive verb forms can be calculated – on a tagged corpus. For the purpose of comparison between the German and Swedish learners this was also done. As mentioned, both samples were tagged with the Brill tagger, trained on the BNC sampler, which made it possible to count the number of finite verb forms. For the sake of simplicity, only present-tense progressives (ie *am, are, is + -ing*) were included in this count. As shown in Table 3, 95 per cent (the German sample) and 89 per cent (the Swedish sample) of the progressives occur in the present tense, active and passive voice. The results of this calculation are shown in Table 5:

Table 5: Distribution of simple verb forms and progressives in the present tense in GICLE[9] and USE1[10]

	Simple present	Present progressive	Total	Percentage progressive
GICLE	4177	178	4355	4.1
USE	5313	191	5504	3.5

A chi-square test of the distribution shown in Table 5 yielded a value of 2.57, a little below the ten per cent significance level, which means that there is somewhat more than a ten per cent risk that this distribution is due to chance. Assuming that the values are not entirely coincidental, even if the differences between them may be, we can compare our results of 4.1 and 3.5 per cent with the often-quoted statement about English from Quirk et al (1985:198): 'A count of a large number of verb constructions has indicated that less than 5 per cent of verb phrases are progressive, whereas more than 95 per cent are non-progressive.'. Seen in this light, the German and Swedish learners' frequencies of the progressive do not deviate from Standard English. We can also compare them with the results of an investigation of learner English presented in an article by Johansson and Stavestrand (1987), which indicate that the alleged overuse of the progressive might be a feature of the English of less advanced learners than ours. They arrived at the ratio of 7.2 per cent in essays written by Norwegian students who were fifteen and sixteen years of age and had studied English for six years. As they point out, this ratio is rather high compared to the ratio found by Ota (1963), 2.3 per cent, in his investigation of American English (see also Kennedy

1998:122–130, where an overview of earlier quantitative large-scale corpus studies of tense and aspect in English is provided).

Not only the approximate distributions of progressive and non-progressive forms are interesting in our comparisons but also the types of lexical verbs, and the types of adjective and noun complements occurring in progressive constructions. As Biber et al point out (1999:472), the classic dichotomy of dynamic and stative verbs does not really hold at a closer look. As they put it, 'it turns out that both dynamic and stative verbs are included among the most common verbs in the progressive – and that both dynamic and stative verbs are included among the verbs that very rarely take the progressive'. In this context, it is interesting to see if our students, like those in Virtanen's study (1997:305), tend to use a fairly small number of verbs in the progressive. For this purpose, the type/token ratios were calculated in the same way as in Virtanen, with the assumption that a low type/token ratio will correspond to a small number of verb types used (see Table 6; all rows except the first two from Virtanen). The type/token ratios for both the German and the Swedish students are lower than the ones for the learner groups studied by Virtanen, which indicates that the former groups repeat a smaller number of words more often than the latter. The lower ratio for the GICLE corpus may be a possible indicator of greater uncertainty about the use of the progressive among German learners than among the others. The higher ratios from Virtanen's study could indicate a higher level of language proficiency among these more advanced students or native speakers. The fact that the American students achieve a lower ratio than the Finland-Swedish learners is interesting and hints at other factors than mere language proficiency at play here, however. A hypothesis is that the repetition of a limited number of verbs indicates greater informality.

Table 6: Verbs in the progressive in GICLE, USE and in Virtanen 1997: Types and tokens[11]

Corpus	Types	Tokens	Type/token ratio
GICLE German learners	99	287	34.5
USE Swedish learners	108	230	47.0
Finland-Swedish learners	108	172	62.8
Finnish learners	138	274	50.4
American students	133	250	53.2
British students	29	38	76.3

The most common verbs used in the progressive by the USE students are *do*, *get*, *go [on], talk, work*, *take* and *use* and by the GICLE students *get*, *sit*, *talk*, *watch*, go *[on, down], look [at, for, forward to]*.[12] We recognize most of these verbs from Virtanen (1997:306) as being frequent to various degrees in the other learner corpora as well (see Table 7 for detailed frequencies).

Table 7: The most common verbs in the progressive (at least seven instances in one group of students) in GICLE, USE and in Virtanen 1997[13]

	GICLE	USE	Finnish	Finland-Swedish	American
become			9	7	8
do		18	19	9	10
get	11	13	15		
go		8	6	7	
happen			7		
live			7	5	
look		8			6
sit	10				
take		7			
talk	10	8		7	
try			7		11
use		7	5		5
watch	9		5	5	
work		8	9	5	

Three verbs were used seven times or more by one group only (*happen* by the Finnish students, *sit* by the GICLE group and *take* by the USE students). As regards the remaining verbs, they are all among the most common in more than one group. A look in Biber et al (1999:471f) tells us that *talk* occurs over 50 per cent of the time in the progressive (in conversation and/or fiction), and that *go, work* and *take* belong to a group of forty verbs that occur in the progressive more than ten times per million words in the *Longman Corpus*. Thus it is clear that the non-native learners have picked up typical verbs often used in the progressive in Standard English.

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2.2 Qualitative analysis

In the qualitative analysis, our first plan was to categorise the different aspectual and other functions of the progressives represented in the data. This plan had to be abandoned, since there were so many examples where no definite answer could be found. Firstly, it was not clear what the intended meaning was – what the student actually wanted to express. Secondly, functions of the progressive can overlap, which made categorisation difficult. We are not the only ones finding such a categorisation difficult. According to Smith (forthcoming) 'few corpus-based studies have attempted to quantify cases of the progressive by meaning types' other than semantic classes of verbs. Instead, since our focus is on pedagogical issues and students' problems in handling the progressive, we decided to determine to what extent our learners use the non-progressive and the progressive in non-native ways. In reaching these decisions, we relied on our own experience as teachers but also asked advice from our native English-speaking colleagues.

2.2.1 Non-progressives

Neither German nor Swedish has a grammatical means of expressing progressive aspect, so it would be natural to hypothesize that learners with German or Swedish as their first language neglect to use the progressive (instead of overusing it, as has been claimed). For this reason, we decided to read closely a small part of our respective corpora and search for non-progressives that should rather have been progressives. Since the GICLE essays are shorter than the USE ones and we wanted our samples to be equally long, our selections consisted of 24 essays randomly chosen from GICLE and 16 from USE, each selection containing about 12,000 words.

As in the previous quantitative analysis of the ratio of progressive versus non-progressive forms, we checked only present tense constructions, which constitute the majority of progressive constructions in the data. We scrutinized non-progressive present tense finite verb phrases in the sampled essays were scrutinized to see if we could find any cases where a progressive would have been a better choice. Hardly any such examples were found. (6) is an example from USE. The writer is discussing the situation of wolves in Sweden today:

(6a)   Man is not one of the wolf's natural preys, and since the wolf is very shy and naturally afraid of the human being it is very unusual with attacks. The wolf will not even come close unless he is forced in some way. This has been shown many times. For example when someone approaches the place where a wolf pack **feeds** on its pray. USE 214.a2 284

The non-progressive *feeds* suggests a habitual, more or less permanent feeding-place, and focuses on the place rather than the event. The progressive *is feeding* would have been a better choice to describe the activity going on – as a temporal frame for the approach of a human being. Another way of expressing the relationship would be in terms of background and foreground.

Apart from example (6a), the only results of our close readings in search of inappropriate non-progressives were a couple of cases where both the non-progressive and the progressive seemed possible, eg (6b):

(6b)   Imagine yourself to be in Maximilianstraße on a hot and close afternoon in July. The street is full of cars, lorries and buses which **pollute** the air with their exhaust fumes. The disgusting odour of petrol **lingers** in the air and there's not even a gentle breeze. ICLE-GE-AUG-0033.2

2.2.2 Progressives

All the learner progressives (in the entire text material, not just the sub-samples discussed above) were classified in three groups, 'regular', 'ambiguous', and 'incorrect'.

Whenever an instance of the progressive was used in accordance with the three main meaning components described in Quirk et al (1985:198) – duration, limited duration, incompleteness – matched with a suitable situation, it was referred to the category 'regular'. Two other uses of the progressive (Quirk et al 1985:210) were also considered 'regular', namely to refer to the future – with or without the auxiliary *will* or *shall* – and to express attitude (with adverbs such as *always*, *constantly*). Thus, the label 'regular' should be understood to cover the examples that were easy to identify as typical, grammatical use of the progressive.

Remaining progressives were classified as either 'ambiguous' or 'incorrect'. The 'ambiguous' instances are those that could not be interpreted as aspectual and that triggered differing acceptability judgements from our native-speaker informants (see note 5). However, the unanimous opinions of these informants also made us accept as 'regular' some instances not clearly defined as such with our criteria. The 'incorrect' category consists of the cases that were unanimously pronounced wrong. Many of the 'ambiguous' examples turned out to be those that – sometimes with a stretch of the imagination – could be interpreted as choices by writers who were 'unwilling to commit themselves to saying that a particular feature is a permanent property' (Johansson and Lysvåg 1987:160). The category is labelled 'ambiguous', since we find it very difficult to classify

these instances which could be interpreted in more than one way. An example was shown in (5) above; another is given in (7):

(7)   If you did a summery of these factors I have told you about concerning how boys and especially the girls **are acting** in school … USE 192.a2 601[14]

Example (7) is taken from an essay arguing that girls do not get the same amount of attention from teachers at school as boys do, here discussing the consequences and visible signs of this state of affairs. The student is writing about (what she claims is) a permanent situation at school (as can be seen in *boys*, without the definite article[15]), but the effect achieved through the use of the progressive is that she reports her own real-life observations. An example such as (7) will be put in the 'ambiguous' category, more instances of which will be discussed below.

   The category of 'incorrect' usage contains examples that defied interpretation and that we and our native-speaker referees had to declare 'wrong', such as (8):

(8)   Do understand, that many times old people are just **being old**, which necessarily do not mean that they are incapable of taking care of themselves and that full-time devotion is needed. USE 125.a2 522

In (8), the context makes it clear that the writer is discussing an objectively verifiable state, and that it is not an interpretation. It can be assumed that she was trying to express that she knows old people have lived many years but that there are degrees of 'oldness' and that many old people live and behave as if they were not old. Using the progressive, however, rather conveys the meaning that old people are not really old; they are just pretending.

   To sum up our approach, we proceed in two steps: Firstly, we determine which examples of the progressive are 'regular' and which are 'ambiguous' or 'incorrect'. The examples in the 'ambiguous' category are then closely analysed, one example at a time, to determine if it is possible to make sense of the use of the progressive in a given context.

   Table 8 gives an idea of the distribution of the progressives across the categories 'regular', 'ambiguous' and 'incorrect' – even if we do not dare to claim that our categorisation could be replicated with an identical result:

Table 8: Distribution of learner progressives across 'regular', 'ambiguous' and 'incorrect' usage in GICLE and USE

	Regular	Ambiguous	Incorrect	Total
GICLE	265 (92.3%)	15 (5.3%)	7 (2.4%)	287
USE	198 (86.0%)	25 (11.0%)	7 (3.0%)	230

The analysis of the respective data was conducted by each author and her native English-speaking informants separately and then difficult borderline cases were discussed via e-mail. With over 500 examples, we could not discuss more than a minor share of the problem cases in detail and so had to trust our own judgements and those of our native speakers. Thus, the discrepancy as regards the distribution across regular and ambiguous instances could be partly due to communication difficulties resulting in different interpretations, different procedures, and different instructions to the informants.[16]

2.2.2.1 'Regular' usage
The large majority of our learners' progressives represent 'regular' usage (see Table 8). The majority of the 'regular' instances coincide with what Rydén (1997) calls 'action-focussed', aspectual situations, where the progressive is a marker of time-specific, ongoing action. Examples (9) – (14) show learners' use of this type of progressive:

(9) The Monarch is part of and in a way a symbol for the class society which is **advancing** rapidly. He does not have to prove that he has any kind of qualifications at all. USE 237.a2 298

(10) It has been a long, strenuous day and a big pile of dirty washing **is waiting** for me at home. ICLE-GE-AUG-0108.1

(11) The environment **is changing** at a rate that **is slipping** from our control. USE 222.a2 56, 62

(12) Now her husband **is repairing** the car again. ICLE-GE-AUG-0027.1

(13) For the whole century, big corporations **have been dumping** toxic waste in the oceans. USE 222.a2 494

(14) In Landsberg the town-council and the association of shop-owners **have been arguing** about keeping out the cars of the town centre for years. ICLE-GE-AUG-0011.1

In all these examples, the non-progressive would change the meaning. In a teaching situation these cases are relatively easy to explain and to understand.

In other examples, also categorised as 'regular', the progressives lend more personal feeling and involvement to the situation, for instance in (15) and (16) with the progressive of *feel*. Example (17) with the verb *wonder* expresses a mental activity similar to (18) with *ask myself*. According to Biber et al (1999: 472), both *feel* and *wonder* are among the verbs that occur frequently with the progressive aspect (more than ten times per million words).

(15)   There is always someone to talk to, if **you're feeling** lonely you can just go to the kitchen and if there's nobody there right at the moment, they will soon come. USE 157.a2 197

(16)   That'll do whatever you tell him to do. That'll always be there if **you're feeling** sad and lonely. ICLE-GE-AUG-0056.1

(17)   What I **am wondering** is if everyone knows why it is good for us, the actual reasons for this fitness frenzy. USE 215.a2 54

(18)   The question I **am asking** myself is what about the rest of the world? USE 195.a2 537

In (19) and (20) we see the progressive with the meta-textual function of commenting on the students' own writing. As we know, this is a common construction with verbs of communication in written language of this type, but the non-progressive also occurs. In (21) the future progressive is used to refer to the imminent future in some kind of inner monologue.

(19)   In this essay I **will be discussing** the need for an active Swedish national defence. USE 227.a2 14

(20)   The "elderly" I **will be referring** to in this essay, are old people that are no longer able to look after themselves. USE 136.a2 11

(21)   When I sat there, still chewing my pie I noticed that it was already six o'clock, the shops **will be closing** in about five minutes and I still didn't have any present but I did spent 25 DM for a menue which didn't satisfy me at all. ICLE-GE-AUG-0097.1

2.2.2.2 'Ambiguous' usage
About ten per cent of the USE progressives and five per cent of the GICLE progressives (see Table 8) were categorised as 'ambiguous' – the choice between the progressive and the simple form could be discussed[17]. Often the non-pro-

gressive seemed a better choice, even though with less personal commitment or less emphasis on temporality. Quite a few instances in this category could be regarded as emphasising the writer's attitude (see Rydén 1987). Thus, the progressive in (22) could be seen as expressing the writer's feelings about 'affecting our environment badly'. The neutral choice by a more fact-oriented writer would be the non-progressive. Similar usage is shown in (23):

(22)   This should tell us something. More people are buying products that are not **affecting** our environment badly, so if the environment is important to us, the creatures living in it should be just as important. USE 185.a2 511

(23)   Second, alcohol is a matter that concerns the entire society and not only the person who is **consuming** it. USE 161.a2 349

In (23) the progressive makes an odd impression, since it renders the meaning of limited duration and temporariness, which goes less well with the mention of society's concern. As the writers are not native users of English, it is often difficult to draw a line between 'ambiguous' and 'incorrect'. Our policy has been not to judge any tokens of the progressive 'incorrect', unless given a unanimous verdict of 'wrong' from all our native-speaker referees. We will end the list of 'ambiguous' examples with four progressives in (24) and (25), all from the same USE essay, describing the writer's negative, involved attitude to mobile phones:

(24)   Medical examinations have also shown that people are injured by the radiation that mobile phones are **emitting**. People are **loosing**[18] their hair around the area where they're **holding** the phone and all kinds of other injuries are also connected to the use of mobile phones. USE 219.a2 367

(25)   It is not enough that we, who don't have mobile phones, have to put up with embarrassing situations like the one mentioned and the disturbing noise they're **making**. USE 219.a2 264

The impossible decision we have to make when judging these progressives is whether we are talking about typical characteristics of mobile phones and of people who use (are using?) them, in which case the simple forms *emit, lose, hold* and *make* would be more appropriate, or if we can see these progressives as instances of attitudinal use. There is no doubt that the progressives add immediacy and expressiveness to this very subjective, emotional piece of writing.

2.2.2.3 'Incorrect' usage

Seven instances in either corpus sample – GICLE 2.4 per cent and USE three per cent – were found to be 'incorrect'. One example was given in (8). In (26) the verb phrase *is being executed* conjures up a gruesome picture of a hopefully momentary event, and in (27) the progressive does not go very well with the adverbial *at every opportunity they get*:

(26)   A convicted felony usually sit a long time in prison before he or she is **being executed.** USE 111.a2 319

(27)   Even if it is a bad habit, like smoking in the middle of the night or people who **are talking badly** about other people at every opportunity they get. ICLE-GE-AUG-0016.3

3 Discussion of results

As will have become evident to our readers, we encountered several difficulties in the course of our work, such as the comparability of our respective corpus materials and the near-impossibility of categorising the functions, and judging the acceptability of the students' progressives in a consistent way. In the discussion that follows we will take up such difficulties, since they are important when our results are considered. They may also be of interest to others attempting investigations of the use of the progressive.

3.1 Corpus comparability

The label 'argumentative' essays appeared to be some guarantee that we would have similar enough texts in content and general approach to make them comparable. In several respects, however, our data seem to indicate that there are considerable differences, some of which may have an impact on the results.

The most important difference, which has been described earlier (see *Primary material*), is the difference in length and circumstances under which the essays were produced. The Swedish students received very detailed instructions about the number of words, the nature of the topic, and the structure of the essay. The German students had more definite topics but wrote shorter essays. They were also encouraged to make their essays concrete and narrative in character (Lorenz, oral communication).

The quantitative results indicate that the differences in content matter and general approach to the task may have linguistic consequences. A noteworthy linguistic difference is seen in the distribution of tenses (shown in Table 3). In the German texts we find 33 per cent past progressives, in the Swedish ones

only six per cent. This use of tense might be a consequence of more narrative text in the German corpus.

The tense discrepancy naturally affects the number of finite present tense simple verb forms (German 4,177, Swedish 5,313; see Table 5). One difference is seen in present tense forms of BE (*is* and *are*) (not including those used as progressive auxiliaries). There are 1,426 such forms in the German texts and 2,261 in the Swedish texts (see notes 9 and 10). At this point, we cannot say what lies behind this difference. A probable explanation is that the Swedish texts contain more impersonal constructions, with a higher number of noun phrases (which would follow from the typical topics and a strict argumentative approach) and that the German essays contain more personal accounts with narrative elements, expressed more as verb phrases. If this is so, the higher ratios of progressives would be natural.

3.2 Quantitative and qualitative results

Our results indicate that there may be a tendency toward a slight overuse of the progressive in German and Swedish students' argumentative essays, but it is not of great proportions. Nor are the differences between the German and the Swedish students conspicuous. The German learners show a slightly higher normalized frequency (3.6 vs 2.9), a somewhat higher ratio of the progressive versus simple form (4.1 vs 3.5) and a lower type/token ratio, indicating that they probably use a more limited range of verbs in the progressive (34.5 vs 47.0). The results in the study by Johansson and Stavestrand (1987) of Norwegian school children (whose essays showed a progressive/simple-form ratio of 7.2) would seem to indicate that a higher such ratio correlates with a lower level of proficiency. Thus, the results might indicate that the German students are a little less proficient in their use of the progressive in English, perhaps in English generally, than are the Swedish students.

The comparison of the qualitative analyses is even more difficult to interpret. The main reason is that the categorisation of the German and the Swedish learner progressives, respectively, into the three groups of 'regular', 'ambiguous' and 'incorrect' was made by different persons and thus might be slightly different for the two groups of students, in spite of our efforts to collaborate. Judging the acceptability of the progressive in learner English is no easy task either for experienced non-native teachers such as ourselves or even for teachers who are native speakers of English. The difficulty was exacerbated by the fact that learner English is irregular in many other respects than just the use of the progressive. The native speakers at Uppsala found the task extremely demanding and time-consuming. They complained that the students' various other

errors often confused the issue, and that, even if the examples were idiomatic in other respects, it was extremely difficult to reach a decision and not change it the next time they looked at the same example or a parallel one. The more examples they were shown, the more tolerant (or exhausted) they became. One of them was very reluctant to criticise the use of the progressive in any examples except a very small number, most of which coincided with those labelled 'incorrect'.

These difficulties made us realise that we could have tried a more comprehensive informant survey to get more statistically reliable data (for ideas about how such a survey could be conducted, see de Mönnink 2000:42–50).

3.3 Learning environment

The possible differences in proficiency level between the German and the Swedish students suggested by our results could be due to their respective learning environments. The German students are part of a society speaking one of the large European languages, a society where English is heard and used much less than in Sweden, where the influence from English through the media and popular culture is pervasive. An important difference between the two cultures is the treatment of English-speaking films. In Germany, these films are dubbed, whereas in Sweden practically only children's films are dubbed. Many young people in Sweden speak English daily or use frequent 'chunks' of English in exchanges with their peers (see Sharp 2001). There are even ordinary upper secondary schools where all teaching is conducted in English, either because there are guest students or immigrants who do not know enough Swedish or in an attempt to internationalise the Swedish educational system.

As for the teaching of English at the higher levels of school, many Swedish students claim not to have learnt much grammar after the age of about fifteen. It also seems that conditions vary very much between different schools and between different teachers. In German schools, formal grammar has a much stronger position and, as a consequence, German students are more focused on grammatical rules.

On the whole, our results indicate that both German and Swedish students have a good sense for when to use the progressive and the non-progressive. When interrogated about rules, however, most students have very vague ideas about the difference between the progressive and the non-progressive.[19] Most often they say that the progressive has something to do with events 'going on' but nothing more definite. Choosing between the two forms when they are writing is another matter. In such tasks they often make the appropriate choice even if they cannot explain why. An explanation for the many 'ambiguous' instances produced by the Swedish students can be that, in situations where they can

choose between an informal and a more formal expression, they are inclined to opt for the informal variant that they are more familiar with. The fact that they are used to hearing and using the progressive in colloquial, informal language may thus be a contributing factor in their choice of verb form in writing. This line of reasoning fits in with recent studies showing that the progressive is on the increase in newspapers because of the ongoing colloquialisation of media language (Mair and Hundt 1995). If we assume that the Swedish students are less familiar with the formal rules for the use of the progressive and at the same time choose to express themselves in an informal colloquial register, their larger number of ambiguous uses could be partly explained.

4 Concluding remarks

The German and the Swedish samples of argumentative learner English used in this study of the progressive were shown to differ in some important respects. We can conclude that our results must be interpreted with caution, especially the to do with quantify differences. At the same time, the quantitative data from another study of learner progressives (Virtanen 1997) indicate no great deviation from learners with other nationalities in ICLE. The Swedish learners in USE and the other learners in the Swedish part of the ICLE project showed identical normalized frequencies. Still, we do not want to draw any far-reaching conclusions from our comparisons between German and Swedish students.

In analysis of nativeness in the use of the progressive, however, we reached some interesting results. One of our aims was to describe what the hypothesised overuse of the progressive looked like. The overuse proved to be very small and perhaps even questionable in quantitative terms. There is no doubt, however, that both the German and the Swedish learners use the progressive in non-native ways. This lack of nativeness does not mean that a great number of instances were found to be 'incorrect'. In only about three per cent of the instances did the native-speaker informants accept only the simple form. Instead, a number of instances were found to be what we call 'ambiguous'. Often these instances were such where the progressive form could have the effect of making the situation seem more immediate, subjective and focussed on a concrete situation. We assumed that the conventional choice by an advanced user of English (native or non-native) would rather have been the simple form. A formal characteristic of many of the sentences containing progressives was inconsistency as regards the choice of aspect in other verb phrases. The result was semantic tension in the sentence, which the reader automatically tried to resolve through interpretation of the progressive. Thus, most of these sentences are not judged to be 'incor-

rect', but only 'ambiguous'. Sometimes they even pass scrutiny and get the label 'regular'. As our students are young, they may even be influenced by new or extended uses of the progressive. Smith (forthcoming) hints that the progressive is 'moving on', as he puts it in his heading. He hypothesises that the increase seen over the last thirty years, particularly of the present progressive, may be due to, among other things, a rise in subjective (interpretative) uses of the progressive (see Mair and Hundt 1995, about the increase of the progressive).

Our discussions in this study have shown that there is a need for updated, clearer descriptions of the use of the progressive, not least for non-native learners (and teachers) of English. Many learners' grammars fail to make it clear that, in addition to the well-known aspectual functions, there are many other possible reasons for using the progressive. They also fail to explain that often both forms may be used. There is a need for more corpus-based research on the progressive in present-day usage, for theoretical as well as practical reasons.

Notes

1. This paper is based on a presentation given 30 March, 2001, at The Corpus Linguistics 2001 conference at Lancaster University, UK. The study is part of a collaborative project between the departments of English at Chemnitz University of Technology and Uppsala University.
2. To avoid clumsy formulations, such as *s/he*, *his and her*, the pronoun *she* is consistently used here to refer to students of both sexes, as the large majority of our students are women.
3. The code is the abbreviation for: Uppsala Student English, the individual number of the student, the A (= first) term of studies, essay no. 2 and lastly, the consecutive number of the word in this essay represented by the *ing*-form (as given by WordSmithTools).
4. The code is the abbreviation for: International Corpus of Learner English-German English-Augsburg. Essay number 95, file 1.
5. The acceptability has been judged not only by ourselves. Four of our British and American colleagues in Uppsala and three in Chemnitz served as a panel reporting on their spontaneous reactions to the students' progressives.
6. The acceptability may also be due to a perceived effect of vividness. As pointed out by our Uppsala colleague Erik Smitterberg, who is currently finishing his doctoral thesis on the use of the progressive, the effect of the progressive in these two examples is to place the reader *in medias res*. A parallel interpretation also drawn to our attention by him is that the progressive suggests that the behaviour in question may change (cf Stubbs

1996:216). We are grateful to Erik Smitterberg for reading our manuscript and giving valuable suggestions.

7. Finland-Swedish students live in Finland but have Swedish as their first language.

8. It should be noted that the corpus of British students' argumentative essays is rather small compared to the others, which might have influenced the results. Another factor of importance is the choice of topic, which was limited for this group (see further Virtanen 1997).

9. Detailed frequencies: 1,426 simple present tense forms of BE (excluding the auxiliaries of the progressive constructions); present tense lexical *have* 284, *has* 89; present tense lexical verbs with Ø ending 1,452, present tense lexical verbs with *–s* ending 775, present tense *do* 32, *does nine*.

10. Detailed frequencies: 2,261 simple present tense forms of BE (excluding the auxiliaries of the progressive constructions); present tense lexical *have* 307, *has* 119; present tense lexical verbs with Ø ending 1,590, present tense lexical verbs with *–s* ending 729, present tense *do* 227, *does* 80.

11. Virtanen does not comment on her way of counting the type/token ratio, but it must be assumed that the ratios are multiplied by 100. To match her values, we have adopted the same mode of presentation.

12. Grammaticalized *be going to* to express the future has not been included among the GICLE and USE progressives of *go*.

13. Virtanen (1997:306) does not give any data on the Swedish ICLE students; the only information about the British students is that their fixed topic makes them use *become* in the progressive more than other verbs (altogether five instances).

14. There are formal errors in many examples. These have not been corrected, especially since they often give clues to the analysis.

15. The confusing use of the Ø article with *boys* and the definite article with *girls* is typical of Swedish learner usage. In Swedish, the definite form of plural countable nouns can be used in generic as well as specific sense.

16. Each author is ultimately responsible for the quantification and categorisation of her respective data.

17. As mentioned above, the borderline between the 'regular' and 'ambiguous' categories was sometimes not clear, as we had to accept the judgements of our informants who declared 'regular' some instances that did not fit with our criteria. These difficulties demonstrate that it is often possible to use both the progressive and the non-progressive without misrepresenting the facts of the situation (cf Johansson and Lysvåg 1987:156f discussed at the beginning of the present study).

18. The intended verb here must be *losing* (a common spelling mistake).
19. Hahn interviewed a group of German teachers of English about their aware-
    ness of the functions of the progressive. The results showed that even the
    teachers had a very limited knowledge of the range of functions apart from
    the 'ongoing' function. For preliminary results, see Hahn (2000).

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