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Description in L2 Narration: The Use of Progressive and Narrative Competence

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This study examines patterns of narrative discourse by intermediate- and advanced-level learners of English, focusing on their use of progressive. The study observes various examples of progressive occurrences to address how learners encode the background information by relating it to the functions of progressive. Analysis of L2 English narrative data by Korean ESL/EFL learners revealed that these learners use progressive to indicate various discourse functions, including scene-setting, description of an element, temporal framing, simultaneous action, and intensification. The more advanced group displayed a greater diversity in the use of progressive than the less advanced group, suggesting that the transition to advanced level of proficiency involves an increase in the range of functions of progressive use as well as an increase in the amount of progressive use. Following detailed analysis of the functions of the progressive, pedagogical implications are offered. The study argues that L2 curricular should incorporate activities that promote L2 narrative skill development, particularly how to use progressive for description in narration, which are critical for assessment purposes and for interaction with target language speakers.

[L2 narrative/description/form-function analysis in SLA/English progressive/L2 competence]

I. INTRODUCTION

It is through narratives that we share our direct or indirect experiences with others. Narratives are texts in which "the speaker relates a series of real or fictive events in the order in which they took place" (Dahl, 1985, p. 116). Telling a good narrative is often an important skill for people when presenting themselves and interacting with others. Thus, for adult second language (L2) learners who want to become meaningful individuals in

their L2 community, constructing a good narrative that has discourse features of the target language and culture should be one of the necessary skills to develop.

Telling or writing a coherent narrative in L2 is a crucial yet complex skill to develop, given that even learners who can make grammatically correct sentences are not always successful in relating multiple events at the discourse level. L2 narrative competence refers to L2 users' ability to interpret, construct, and perform personal and fictional narratives similarly to native speakers of the target language (Pavlenko, 2002). As Pavlenko (2002) mentioned, it is important to note that the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines underscore narration and description as essential features of advanced language proficiency. Since description and narration are two interrelated components of the L2 competence, description in narration is the focus of the current study. To be able to provide a lengthy and coherent narration, it is necessary to have good control of aspect and to provide appropriate description, situating the narrative within appropriate temporal frames.

This study focuses exclusively on the morphosyntactic level of narrative competence, particularly tense-aspect switches which involve the alternation between foreground events and background information. Tense and aspect is one of the various components of narratives which play an important role in creating and maintaining the coherence of the discourse (Berman, 1995). Narrative structure at the discourse level—grounding—has an important influence on the distribution of tense and aspect morphology. For example, imperfective or progressive is used in backgrounded clauses (Dahl & Velupillai, 2005; Hopper, 1979; Hopper & Thompson, 1980). L2 acquisition research, especially research on L2 English has also argued that and learners' use of progressive is limited to the background (Bardovi-Harlig, 1995, 2000).

Recognizing that narrative background is where the linguistic category of aspect, the progressive in English in particular, can easily be observed, the current study aims to investigate how exactly and for what functions L2 learners of English use the progressive aspect in narratives. The study starts with a review of the relevant literature on temporal and aspectual morphology in narrative discourse, focusing on the progressive aspect.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Narrative Background and the Progressive

A narrative is "one method of recapitulating past experience by matching a verbal sequence of clauses to the sequence of events which actually occurred" (Labov & Waletzky, 1967, p. 20). In narratives, all available sets of grammatical devices including

tense, aspect, and subordination are integrated (Berman & Slobin, 1994). According to the form-function analysis of narratives (e.g., Berman & Slobin, 1994), two types of narrative clauses are identified: foreground and background. The foreground clauses are composed of events belonging to the main storyline of the discourse. The background clauses, on the other hand, contain supportive materials that usually comment on the events of the main storyline. For example, in a sentence "While the man was talking on the phone, the girl started to run", the *while*-clause is classified as background, and the main clause is classified as foreground. The background has multiple functions for supporting the foreground. Functions of background include scene setting, description, explanation, and evaluation (Dry, 1983; Hopper, 1979; Hopper & Thompson, 1980). In particular, the scene setting function of background coincides with the orientation element in Labov's (1972) model of a narrative, which includes six parts (i.e., abstract, orientation, complicating action, evaluation, resolution, and coda). For Labov, orientation gives information about the time, place, characters, and their activity or the situation in what will follow.

According to Hopper (1979), the distinction between foreground and background information is quite universal, and the different functions of the two narrative structures play a significant role in the use of linguistic forms. Importantly, Hopper found the universal distinction of foreground and background in terms of the use of temporal and aspectual markers. In many languages, simple past tense or perfective morphology is dominantly used in foregrounded clauses, while imperfective or progressive is used in backgrounded clauses (Dry, 1983; Hopper, 1979; Hopper & Thompson, 1980).

The relation between backgrounded clauses and imperfective or progressive aspect has been well-established in the literature. Specifically, the use of progressive in background clauses is associated with descriptions of scenery and natural phenomena, subordinate events which are repeated (Hopper, 1979; Labov, 1972; Silva-Corvalan, 1983). For example, in narratives by native speakers of English, Labov (1972) found many past progressive clauses were used in the orientation part of narratives when "sketching the kind of thing that was going on before the first event of the narrative occurred or during the entire episode" (p. 364). Silva-Corvalan (1983) also observed that imperfective including progressive was mainly used to describe the places, persons, things to orient the listener and reader.

The reason why progressive is specialized for background comes from the semantics of progressive. With the progressive aspect, a situation is viewed from the inside as potentially ongoing or in progress at certain point (Comrie, 1976). That is, progressive is used to indicate a continuous meaning. With the continuous meaning, progressive can be used to provide a temporal frame for a punctual event or to describe activities which are viewed as occurring simultaneously with the main events. For example, the past progressive is used to signal a background situation overlapping with a foreground event

whereas simple past forms would often express the events as a sequence (e.g., Aksu-Koç & von Stutterheim, 1994).

This section has presented an overview of the characteristics of narrative discourse, putting an emphasis on the relation between background and progressive. The following section will provide a selected review of L2 research on temporal and aspectual morphology in narrative discourse in English and other languages.

2. L2 Narratives and the Acquisition of Tense and Aspect

The form-function analysis (Berman & Slobin, 1994) which considers how linguistic forms are used in narratives has been successfully applied to L2 narrative research, particularly in the acquisition of tense and aspect morphology (Andersen & Shirai, 1994; Bardovi-Harlig, 1995, 2000). In second language acquisition, Bardovi-Harlig (1995) proposed the Discourse Hypothesis, according to which narrative structure influences the distribution of tense-aspect morphology in interlanguage development. The Discourse Hypothesis predicts that the past verbal morphology will mainly be used in the foreground as the skeletal part of the discourse, whereas other various verbal morphology will be used in the background in L2 narratives.

Bardovi-Harlig (1995, 1998) analyzed oral and written narratives by L2 English learners using a silent movie *Modern Times,* which was used as stimulus in other L2 narrative studies (e.g., Dietrich, Klein, & Noyau, 1995). She found that the past was predominantly used in the foreground whereas the progressive occurred mostly in the background in L2 narratives, confirming the Discourse Hypothesis. Based on the results, Bardovi-Harlig (1995, 1998) argued that the development of the interlanguage temporal and aspectual system is shaped by the discourse functions of tense-aspect morphology and the communicative need to distinguish main storyline from background.

The analyses of learner narratives from various L1-L2 pairs have tested the predication of the Discourse Hypothesis (e.g., Bardovi-Harlig, 1995, 1998 on L2 English; Camajoan, 2005 on L2 Catalan; López-Ortega, 2000 on L2 Spanish; Kim, 2010 on L2 Korean). The main findings from L2 research can be summarized as following. First, learners use verbal morphology to distinguish foreground from background in narratives. Second, background is where a variety of tense-aspect forms emerges at the early stage of acquisition. Thus, learner narratives are important in investigations of the second language acquisition of temporal and aspectual system.

In addition to the body of studies focusing on how narrative structure influences learners' use of tense and aspect morphology, another body of studies of L2 narratives to date have demonstrated that learners show appropriate narrative structure in target language stories

when the narrative structures of the L1 and L2 are similar (Berman, 1995; Rintell, 1990). Another important finding is that skilled narratives are characterized by appropriate lexical, discursive, and register choices. Less competent narratives lack elaboration, evaluation, or figurative language (Ordóñez, 2004; Pavlenko, 2002; Pavlenko & Jarvis, 2002; Rintell, 1999).

Thus far, theoretical background of the current study connected to the relation between progressive and functions of narrative discourse have been reviewed. Also, discourse-level studies which have focused on how narrative structure influences L2 learners' use of tense and aspect morphology have discussed. To date, it is well-established in L2 acquisition literature that learners switch tense and aspect to indicate two narrative structures, namely foreground and background.

However, regarding the discourse functions of progressives in learner narratives, the previous studies have limitations. For example, few studies have examined what kind of functions of the progressive aspect L2 learners use in narratives and what effects are generated by such use of progressive. The present study, therefore, attempts to complement the previous literature by examining detailed functions of progressives used in English learners' narratives by providing detailed examples of learner production.

This study aims to identify different use and functions of English progressive in Korean ESL/EFL learners' narratives and to examine the patterns of development based on proficiency levels. This study poses the following research questions:

1) How do learners employ different discourse functions of progressive in narratives?
2) Are there any systemic differences among learners of different proficiency levels? What would be proficiency-induced patterns in using different discourse functions of the progressive?

To answer these research questions, I extracted all progressive forms occurred in learner narratives, considering that narrative background is where narration and description meet through the progressive aspect in English and examined what effects the progressives bring about.

III. METHODS

1. Participants and Data Collection

All participants in this study were recruited from student population at a university in America. Twenty-four learner participants from Korean L1 background were enrolled in

English Language courses, which provide an eight-week session of academic English for matriculated students whose native language is not English. Their mean age was 22.8 years old (age range: 19-27). The participants were 14 males and 10 females, and their academic majors varied.

To measure relative proficiency among the learners, a cloze test on English language proficiency was administered. Participants read a passage on "Man and His Progress" (from Brown, 1980) which contained 50 blanks, with every 7th word deleted. They were asked to guess the English word for each blank and fill out as many blanks as possible within time limit. Based on the results of this cloze test, the learner participants from Korean L1 background were divided into two groups. The mean test score of the learners was 18.38 (*SD* = 6.18), dividing them into a higher proficiency group and a lower proficiency group. A two-tailed paired samples *t*-test revealed that the two groups differed significantly from each other, $t(11) = 7.04$, $p < .001$. The detailed results of the cloze test are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1

Descriptive Statistics on the Cloze Test Score of L2 Learners

Proficiency Group	*M*	Range	*SD*
Low (n=12)	13.58	8-17	2.81
High (n=12)	23.17	19-36	4.69

Note. SD = Standard deviations.

All the participants also filled out a general language background questionnaire. The main task for data elicitation was a film retell task. For a film retell task, a seven-minute excerpt from a silent film *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 1936) was used to elicit self-constructed narratives. After watching the film excerpt twice, the participants took up to 30 minutes to write their retell.

2. Analysis Procedure

Among approaches used in analyzing a narrative, form-function analysis was used to investigate how learners use progressive forms to express discourse functions and to encode temporal relations. The analysis of progressive use in each retell followed a three-step procedure. First, based on the L1 and L2 narrative literature (e.g., Aksu-Koç & von Stutterheim, 1994; Labov, 1972), five discourse functions that the progressive morphology can serve in narratives were identified. This classification process was consulted by one native speaking instructor of the English program. After the five discourse functions were identified, all progressive forms, which include bare progressive, present progressive, and

past progressive were extracted in learner narratives. Then, each progressive form was classified into one of the five categories of progressive functions, but those which did not quite belong to any of the five categories were classified into "others."

The five discourse functions identified for the analysis of learner narratives were as follows:

1) Scene-setting: This function is used in the beginning of a narrative or a new scene. The use of the progressive has the effect of a literary device that sets the stage at the beginning of a new scene.
2) Description: This function is used when providing a detailed description of a character's action and appearance, or other elements in the scene. This category includes descriptions occurred in the middle of narrative other than in the orientation or scene-setting element mentioned above.
3) Temporal framing: This function is used for background information which temporally overlaps with events marked with the past/perfective form in the foreground.
4) Simultaneous actions by a single character: This function is used when one character performs more than one action at the same time within a given temporal frame
5) Intensification of an action (repeated action): Certain aspects of an action can be highlighted by use of progressive, usually by depicting the action as happening repeatedly over time.

It should be noted that the current study was not subject to statistical analysis because the main purpose of the study is to observe various patterns and examples of progressive use. The study analyzed learner narrative data produced through a film retell to observe how learners employ the English progressive in the past-time context and how they encode the background information by relating it to the discourse functions of progressive.

IV. RESULTS

The High group produced 40 cases of progressive forms and the Low group produced 16 cases of progressive forms. All the 56 progressives were classified into different functions as mentioned in the data analysis section. In all narrative data, no progressive morphology was found in the foreground. In other words, the progressive forms occurred dominantly in the background, suggesting that the discourse structure has a strong influence on the distribution of the progressive morphology in Korean learners' narratives,

as documented in the literature. The function types and the number of progressives that belong to each function are summarized in Table 2.

TABLE 2
Frequency of Progressive Use across Function Types

Functions	Low Group	High Group
Scene-setting	7	10
Description of an element	5	12
Temporal framing	2	6
Simultaneous action	0	4
Intensification (repeated action)	1	3
Others	1	5
Total	16	40

All twelve learners in the High Group produced at least one case of progressive whereas four learners in the Low Group did not produced any form of progressive. Although the detailed production patterns were somewhat different between the two groups, both the Low Group and the High Group learners used progressive forms to express various functions, as presented in Table 2. Of all the progressives, the most frequently used functions were scene-setting and description, followed by temporal framing function. In what follows, representative examples from various learners are provided to demonstrate where progressives occurred for which functions. Note that grammatical mistakes, misuse of vocabulary or expressions, spelling errors were not corrected to preserve the originality of L2 learner production data. For example, bare progressives without *be*-verbs or progressives with wrong *be*-verb forms, which can be considered ungrammatical (e.g., When the truck were moving, she jumped to the police to escape.) were included in the analysis because these are the examples of learners' attempts to use progressive.

First, 15 out of 24 learner narratives began with scene setting where progressive forms were used at the beginning of a retell. As reported as a common function of progressive in narrative discourse, the learners also used the progressive aspect to establish a scene, especially at the beginning of an episode. The past progressive forms (*was/were +-ing*) were found robustly in scene-setting description as illustrated in excerpt (1).

(1) An excerpt from a High-group learner narrative

> The girl was walking alone and she was hungry. She found a bakery and she wished she could buy some bread to eat. She saw the guy at bakery was carrying bread from truck to store. She stole a loaf of bread.

Provided below are other examples illustrating the scene setting function (italics added). At the end of each example, the participant's code number and his/her proficiency group are provided in the parenthesis.

(2) A homeless woman *was walking down* the street. She was hungry. (K09, High)
(3) In the beginning, a lonely girl *was walking* in the street. She was dirty and *finding* something to eat. (K12, Low)

For the second function, "description of an element", the following excerpts from narrative data illustrate learners' attempt to provide detailed descriptions of a male protagonist or other subsidiary character. In these cases, progressives were often used in a relative clause.

(4) Then the homeless lady hit with a gentle man who *was walking*. (K24, Low)
(5) She crashed to some guy *walking* on the street. (K03, High)
(6) The policeman arrested Chaplin who *was holding* that loaf of bread in his hand. (K08, High)
(7) …and gave some snacks for some kids who *were just walking* down the street. (K16, Low)
(8) The man hit the police with the stick that police *was holding* on, and escaped with tat girl. (K06, High)

Next, progressives were used to provide a temporal frame for a punctual event. Upon closely examining the learner data, it seemed that this temporal framing function should be further divided into three subtypes. The first and most dominant type was to provide the time frame for a given event without interrupting the main action, as in examples (9) and (10).

(9) So when the truck was moving, she jumped to the police to escape. (K18, Low)
(10) While the policeman was talking on the phone, Chaplin asked for cigarette in a store. (K05, High)

In the above examples, the progressive sentences provide some background context when non-intrusive action occurs. These contrast with the next type in examples (11) and (12), subordinate clauses coded by a *while*- or *when*-clause provided a context for when interruption occurs. The perfective form in this case shifts the focus away from the situation marked with the progressive and thus caused interruption. The use of progressive in this case directs the focus to the interruptive event:

(11) When fighting with the police, a traffic accident happened. (K10, High)
(12) She ran to the door when the man was comforting her (K11, High)

Lastly, overlapping actions by multiple participants at the same time can be classified into the category of temporal framing. This pertains to a context in which multiple participants involved in a scene are engaged in actions that overlap in the same time frame (Aksu-Koç &von Stutterheim, 1994). In examples provided in (13), (14), and (15), the progressive was primarily used to signal the relatively stable event.

(13) When the owner and policeman was arguing, Chaplin picked up the cigar again. (K06, High)
(14) And when the police was checking the mailbox, he take a newspaper and cigar from a shop (K07, High)
(15) While he was talking on the phone, Chaplin reached his head to the cigar shop next to the restaurant. (K14, High)

Progressives were used for the fourth function, "simultaneous actions by a single character." In this case, one protagonist performs more than one action at the same time within a given temporal frame, as in (16).

(16) …(he) pulled the cigar out again, when continuing talking to the owner. (K15, High)

The fifth function is "Intensification of actions." The use of progressive here highlights certain aspects of an action as in (17) and (18).

(17) The girl took the man with her. They were *running and running* for a long time. (K17, High)
(18) The girl and the guy are shown to be happy and *smiling* and *laughing* each other. (K13, Low)

In (17), the use of progressive conveys the notion that the action of *running* was being repeated, and thus highlights the action of the two characters. Similarly, in (18), the action of *smiling* and *laughing* depicts this action of the two main characters as happening repeatedly over time.

All five functions discussed thus far coincide with the continuous meaning that is inherent in the progressive semantics and these functions were used by both groups of learners. The results from the more advanced group (i.e., the High Group) showed robust

use of progressive for the first three functions, scene-setting, description, and temporal framing. However, there were other cases of progressive use that could not easily be categorized into any of the five functions: Five progressives from the High group and one progressive from the Low group. It seems to be important to differentiate those functions from the five functions because each reflects learners' conceptualization of a given situation in a subtle and sophisticated manner and demonstrates why they chose to use the progressive rather than the simple past in certain scenes. The first case was illustrated in the three examples below, where achievements (Vendler, 1967) were used with progressive (e.g., *get up, fall, fall in love*) only in the High group.

(19) When he was getting up, the girl ran (K15, High)
(20) The man, the girl and the policeman fell in the car and the rest of people were falling in the car, too. (K20, High)
(21) They were falling in love and he proposed to her live together. (K12, Low)

The combination of achievement predicates and progressive has an effect of slowing down a punctual event, which allows us to have a prolonged view of an ongoing event. For example, "*he was getting up"* in (19) seems to vividly explain a scene where the male protagonist was slowly recovering from a hit on his head. Another example in (20), "*people were falling*" also successfully recounted a scene where people in a police car fell - one by one. These are examples of figurative use of progressives.

Another case that did not quite exactly belong to any of the five functions were observed when learners used verbs of perception such as *see* and *notice* as in (22), (23), and (24).

(22) Someone saw that the lady was stealing bread (K01, Low)
(23) She saw the guy at bakery was carrying bread from truck to store (K11, High).
(24) Then the policeman noticed what he was doing (K08, High)

These examples allow learners to share with their reader what a character in the story happened to witness from his or her point of view. This kind of examples were used to somewhat formally report to the reader an event that happened further in the past. This "witnessing function" is specific enough to be separated from other functions used in the data.

Based on the detailed examination of the actual learner production data, we need to add other function types as in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3
Frequency of Progressive Use across with Function Types (Revised)

Functions	Low Group	High Group
Scene-setting	7	10
Description of an element	5	12
Temporal framing	2	6
Simultaneous action	0	4
Intensification (repeated action)	1	3
Slowing down the action	0	3
Witnessing	1	2
Total	16	40

In Table 3, the functions were classified in a finer way than before. Some of the functions categorized here might not be completely different from each other, given that they all share the core meaning of progressive. However, a different category name to each function was assigned because subtle nuances of language can be invaluable in analyzing learner data, which in turn can provide pedagogical implications.

V. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study examined patterns of narrative discourse by intermediate- and advanced-level Korean learners, focusing on their use of progressive. The study observed various examples of progressive occurrences to reveal how learners encode the background information by relating it to the functions of progressive. Two research questions were addressed. The first research question was “How do learners employ different discourse functions of progressive in narratives? And the second research question was “Are there any systemic differences among learners of different proficiency levels? What would be proficiency-induced patterns in using different discourse functions of the progressive?

The first research question was answered by classifying all progressive occurrences into fine-grained categories of different functions. The analysis revealed that Korean learners of English used progressive to indicate various discourse functions, such as scene-setting, description of an element, temporal framing, simultaneous action, intensification, witnessing, and slowing down the action. The results confirmed that learners in this study used the progressive to indicate the background information, as progressive has been reported to serve well in the background of narrative discourse. The more advanced group displayed a greater diversity in the use of progressive than the less advanced group, which needs further discussion.

There were some noticeable differences in the pattern of use between the two proficiency groups. First, higher-level learners produced much more progressives than lower level learners (50 cases vs. 16 cases). Furthermore, the higher-level learners exhibited good control of progressive aspect morphology to create textual cohesiveness, situating their narratives within appropriate temporal frames. Second, the higher-level learners used progressive for more diverse functions than the lower-level learners. Compared to lower-lever learners who used progressive for limited functions such as scene setting, description, and temporal framing, higher-level learners' use of progressive forms seemed to be sophisticated in such a way that their narratives sounded more figurative and elaborative.

Therefore, L2 English narrative data by Korean learners suggest that the transition from intermediate to advanced level of proficiency involves an increase in the range of functions of progressive use as well as an increase in the amount of progressive use. Such findings of this study are applicable to pedagogy because learners' use of progressives can serve as one of the crucial touchstones to consider when fostering advanced L2 competence. Narrative competence implies that learners should exhibit competence of more than just making grammatically correct sentences. Furthermore, as language teachers, we need to consider this important factor when designing classroom activities and measuring L2 competence on the functional level.

Classroom activities should be planned in a way that the progressive aspect is presented and practiced in meaningful contexts and a film retell task employed in this study can be used for the activity. For example, the students view a silent film together in class and write a film retell individually. Then, the students in groups identify the progressive forms used, then discuss the reasons why they used them rather than using other forms. This type of consciousness-raising activities can offer learners opportunities to ponder on the various functions of progressive in the context of lengthy discourse. The classroom teacher should provide a necessary support to help them notice various discourse function of the progressive.

This study examined the patterns of Korean ESL learners' use of the progressive and proficiency-based differences in the use of various functions of progressive. Pedagogical implications were also provided from the acquisition research. Emphasizing the importance of understanding discourse function of the English progressive in narratives, I have argued that L2 curricular should incorporate activities to promote L2 narrative skills that are essential for interaction with target language speakers. It is clear that the progressive is an excellent case to showcase how discourse might help learners acquire a grammatical element and its functions more fully. Thus, more attention to development of narrative skills, especially the ability to describe in narration, is needed to help students make the transition from intermediate to advanced level. For future research,

data from more participants should be analyzed, and triangulation in analysis should be included to strengthen the claim made in this paper as well as to discuss variables other than proficiency.

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Examples in: English

Applicable Language: English

Applicable Levels: Tertiary, secondary

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