

### **Week 3: Cautious Language ('hedging') and Verb Aspect**

**Task 1: Make the text below more academically respectable by adding appropriate cautious language. As you will see from the first section, which has already been done for you, you also need to make a number of changes to the style in which the original text has been written.**

Let's now talk about the data in Figure 1. First and foremost, it's crystal clear that students don't have many opportunities to speak English outside the classroom. You can tell this because all the means are under 3.00. Clearly, PolyU students don't have any need to speak to parents, etc. in English. This is undoubtedly because their family members are Cantonese speakers. Obviously, there's no point in speaking English when everyone can speak Cantonese. As you can see, PolyU students never speak to their grandparents in English. This is not surprising because, as we all know, old people in Hong Kong can't speak English. That's because the education system wasn't very good in the past. You can see, though, that there are a few situations (overseas holidays and so on) where students do get a golden opportunity to use their English, even though this is not often. In a nutshell, then, the data in Figure 1 prove that PolyU students don't speak English much outside the classroom.

**Source:** <http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/CiLL/eap/hedging.htm>

**Revised version:** On the evidence of the findings presented in Figure 1, it would appear that tertiary students in Hong Kong generally have few opportunities to speak in English outside the classroom...

## **Verb Aspect**

The **time** of an activity or state is denoted by means of **tense**. On the other hand, verb **aspect** relates to considerations such as the **completion or lack of completion of events or states** described by the verb.

An event or state of affairs which is/was/will be **in progress, or continuing**, necessitates the use of the **progressive aspect**; **events or states taking place during a period leading up to a specified time** are marked by the use of the **perfect aspect**. Thus, the verb can be marked for both tense and aspect. Sounds complicated? It's not really.

### **Examples**

*House prices constantly **rise** and **fall*** - the (general) simple present tense, zero aspect, (i.e. neither progression nor completion of the activity is marked).

*The economy **is recovering** in certain parts of the world* - the simple present tense (marked by the present tense of the auxiliary verb 'be') combined with the progressive aspect, which tells us that the recovery is ongoing, i.e. going on now.

**Task 2: Identify and name the verb forms in the following sentences, and discuss their functions with one or two other students. In other words, precisely what meanings are conveyed by the use of the various verb forms?**

- a. House prices have fallen for the eleventh month in a row.*
- b. House prices have been falling since last September.*
- c. House prices were rising at the end of 2007.*
- d. By the end of 2008, house prices had fallen by approximately 12%.*
- e. When house prices started falling they had been rising for about 13 years.*
- f. By the end of 2009, it is predicted house prices will have fallen by about 20%.*
- g. By the end of 2009, it is predicted house prices will have been falling for over two years.*
- f. By the end of 2010, it is believed by many that house prices will be rising again.*

**Tip: The use of the progressive and perfect aspect is common in conversation and spoken discourse and it is, therefore, important that you can use them well. However, in academic writing, only a small fraction (around 8%) of all verb phrases are used with the perfect aspect, and the progressive aspect is employed with even fewer verbs. A combination of the perfect and progressive aspects (e.g. *have/had been rising*) accounts for approximately 0.5% of all verbal tense and aspect markers.**

**In other words, if in doubt it may be best to avoid perfect and progressive aspect!**

## A common error

A common type of error with the usage of progressive aspect occurs when writers add *-ing* to what are normally non-progressive verbs. These include verbs such as *appear, associate, concern, conclude, correlate, include, initiate, prefer, realize* and *seem*.

**Task 3: Correct the text below, which is extracted from a student paper on how to educate the public about recycling, replacing progressive with simple tenses where appropriate. Be careful, it's not as straightforward as it first seems!**

This essay is concerning the studies that have shown a sharp decline in the number of recycling plants in the New York area and other U.S. cities. Those people who listen to the news are hearing about the high cost of recycling that makes it too expensive for the industry to continue collecting metal and paper. The news quote recycling plant operators and operators who are depending on recycling for their jobs and who are complaining that there is simply not enough material to recycle for them to earn a living and that operating too many plants is costing too much. So, the plant owners propose to close down some of their collection centers and reduce recycling. However, the plant owners and news media are dealing with this problem totally incorrectly. They need to educate the public to recycle more instead of closing down plants that will lead to the public recycling less.

**Source:** Hinkel, E. (2004). Teaching Academic ESL Writing. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

**Task 4: Complete the following sentences by selecting the most suitable tense/aspect.**

- a. Home ownership..... (rise) steadily for fifty years and is now at a record high.
- b. GM ..... (stand for) genetically modified.
- c. Last year the police ..... (record) a record number of crimes.
- d. When she died in 1986 she ..... (write) over 50 books.
- e. By 2050, average temperatures ..... (be) at least two degrees higher.
- f. At the moment, the bank ..... (consider) a merger proposal from Barclays.
- g. When the market crashed, the company ..... (build) three hotels in Asia.
- h. Lee (1992) ..... (dispute) Sakamoto's theory.
- i. In the last six years, inflation ..... (fall) sharply in Europe.
- j. By the time we reach(ed) Texas we ..... (drive x2) for 15 hours.

**Supplementary/Homework Task 1: Read the text below and select the most suitable tense/aspect (inc. passives) for each verb in brackets.**

For a long time gardeners ..... (suspect) that using green fingers is just as effective a talking softly to plants to encourage growth. In 2007, scientists ..... (develop) a robot that strokes young plants to make them grow stronger and faster. However, after recent research ..... (confirm) that plants need the human touch, scientists at Greenwich University ..... (develop) the stroking machine they call 'Dr Green'.

Dr Green ..... (display) at the last Chelsea Flower Show, where it ..... (demonstrate) the technique of brushing the tips of young plants to produce stronger specimens, David Carey, who is leading the research, ..... (say) that the machine could avoid the use of chemicals.

Currently, Dr Green ..... (test) on a large scale by a commercial grower. Stroking plants once a day ..... (make) them 30% stronger, which is what you want before you plant them out. When another kind of plant was stroked once a week, it ..... (develop) increased insect resistance. The research team ..... (hope) that a cheap version of Dr Green ..... (available) to amateur gardeners by 2013.

**Supplementary/Homework Task 2: Identify verb forms and hedging devices in the authentic text below. Do you understand why they have been used?**

Quantitatively, NS and NNS students appeared to use more or less the same request strategies. However, when the data was examined qualitatively, it emerged that the two groups used the strategies differently and also preferred different types of politeness devices. This Biesenbach-Lucas attributes to a number of factors, all of which are associated with the NNSs' incomplete command of various linguistic practices and conventions. Whilst it may be true, as proposed by the hyperpersonal model (Duthler, 2006 drawing on Walther, 1996), that email as a medium enables the writer to focus and thus have greater control over the planning, composing, editing and delivery of their messages, including the appropriate use of direct/indirect strategies and politeness devices, this can only be of relevance if writers "have the flexible linguistic means at their disposal and know which linguistic structures and politeness devices to use Biesenbach-Lucas, 2007, p14). In other words, the potential advantages of email, assuming these are a reality, cannot compensate for the NNS's language 'deficit'.