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Identifying Students' Difficulties in Understanding Gerund in Paragraph

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify the difficulties experienced by university students in understanding gerunds within English paragraphs. Gerund, a grammatical form consisting of a verb with the suffix -ing functioning as a noun, is often misunderstood by Indonesian EFL learners due to its surface similarity to present participles and other -ing forms. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in an English language course at a university level. The interview instrument consisted of 21 questions covering students' background knowledge of gerunds, specific difficulties encountered, contributing factors, learning experiences, and suggestions for improvement. The findings revealed that students primarily struggle with distinguishing gerunds from present participles, recognizing gerunds in syntactic positions (subject, object, complement), and applying correct gerund usage in paragraph writing. Factors such as limited prior grammar instruction, low reading frequency, and L1 (Bahasa Indonesia) interference were identified as key contributors to these difficulties. The study recommends context-based teaching methods and extensive reading exposure as effective strategies to improve students' understanding of gerunds.

Keywords: gerund, EFL learners, grammatical difficulties, paragraph comprehension, qualitative research

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan yang dialami mahasiswa dalam memahami gerund di dalam paragraf bahasa Inggris. Gerund merupakan bentuk gramatikal yang terbentuk dari kata kerja dengan akhiran -ing yang berfungsi sebagai kata benda, dan sering kali disalahpahami oleh pelajar EFL Indonesia karena kemiripan bentuknya dengan present participle dan bentuk -ing lainnya. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif

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kualitatif. Data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan mahasiswa yang mengikuti mata kuliah bahasa Inggris di tingkat perguruan tinggi. Instrumen wawancara terdiri dari 21 pertanyaan yang mencakup pengetahuan awal mahasiswa tentang gerund, kesulitan spesifik yang dihadapi, faktorfaktor penyebab, pengalaman belajar, serta saran perbaikan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa terutama mengalami kesulitan dalam membedakan gerund dari present participle, mengenali gerund dalam berbagai posisi sintaksis (subjek, objek, pelengkap), serta menerapkan penggunaan gerund yang tepat dalam penulisan paragraf. Faktor-faktor seperti keterbatasan pengajaran tata bahasa sebelumnya, rendahnya frekuensi membaca, dan interferensi bahasa pertama (Bahasa Indonesia) teridentifikasi sebagai penyebab utama kesulitan tersebut. Penelitian ini merekomendasikan metode pengajaran berbasis konteks dan pembiasaan membaca ekstensif sebagai strategi efektif untuk meningkatkan pemahaman mahasiswa terhadap gerund.

Kata Kunci: gerund, pelajar EFL, kesulitan gramatikal, pemahaman paragraf, penelitian kualitatif

INTRODUCTION

Grammar is one of the fundamental components of language learning that requires particular attention in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Among the many grammatical forms in English, the gerund presents a unique challenge for learners, particularly those whose native language does not employ a similar structure. A gerund is formed by adding the suffix -ing to a base verb, allowing it to function as a noun within a sentence. It can occupy various syntactic positions, including subject, object, and complement, which adds to its complexity.

Indonesian EFL learners frequently encounter difficulties with gerunds because of the morphological and syntactic differences between English and Bahasa Indonesia. In Bahasa Indonesia, there is no exact equivalent to the gerund; therefore, learners often rely on direct translation strategies that lead to errors in gerund usage and recognition. Furthermore, the visual similarity between gerunds and present participles both using the -ing suffix creates additional confusion that hinders accurate comprehension.

Despite the importance of gerunds in English paragraph construction, research specifically focusing on students' difficulties with this grammatical form within paragraph-level texts remains limited in the Indonesian EFL context. Understanding the nature and sources of these difficulties is essential for educators seeking to design more effective grammar instruction.

This study, therefore, aims to investigate the types and causes of difficulties that university students face in understanding gerunds in English paragraphs. The research questions guiding this study are: (1) What difficulties do students encounter in understanding gerunds in English paragraphs? (2) What factors contribute to these difficulties? (3) What instructional strategies do students suggest to overcome these challenges?

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definition and Function of Gerund

A gerund is defined as a verb form ending in -ing that functions as a noun in a sentence (Quirk et al., 1985). Unlike infinitives or bare verbs, gerunds retain certain verb-like properties such as the ability to take objects and adverbial mod ifierswhile simultaneously fulfilling nominal roles. Swan (2005) categorizes gerunds into four primary syntactic functions: as the subject of a sentence (e.g., "Swimming is healthy"), as the object of a verb (e.g., "She enjoys reading"), as the object of a preposition (e.g., "He is good at cooking"), and as a subject complement (e.g., "Her hobby is painting").

The distinction between gerunds and present participles is particularly significant for language learners. Although both share the -ing suffix, their grammatical roles differ considerably: present participles function as adjectives or as part of progressive verb phrases, whereas gerunds function exclusively as nouns. This distinction, if not clearly understood, leads to systematic errors in both comprehension and production.

2. Common Difficulties in Gerund Acquisition

Research on EFL grammar acquisition has documented several recurring difficulties related to gerunds. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) note that one of the most common errors involves the interchangeable use of gerunds and infinitives, as some verbs may be followed by either form (e.g., "like to swim" vs. "like swimming"), while others strictly require one form (e.g., "avoid + gerund" but not "avoid + infinitive").

Studies conducted in Asian EFL contexts have found that learners consistently struggle with gerund recognition in paragraph-level texts, where the -ing form may appear in various roles and must be interpreted within broader syntactic and semantic contexts (Liu, 2008; Hinkel, 2004).

The lack of contextual cues in isolated grammar exercises, as opposed to authentic paragraph reading, further compounds these difficulties.

3. The Role of L1 Interference

Interference from the learner's first language (L1) is widely acknowledged as a significant factor in second language grammar errors (Odlin, 1989). In the case of Indonesian learners, the absence of a gerund equivalent in Bahasa Indonesia means that students cannot rely on crosslinguistic transfer as a learning strategy. Instead, they must construct entirely new grammatical schemas, which requires explicit instruction and extensive exposure to English texts.

Furthermore, Indonesian sentence structures differ markedly from English in terms of verb nominalization processes, making it difficult for learners to intuitively grasp the dual nature of gerunds as both verb-derived forms and nominal constituents.

RESEARCH METHOD

1. Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive research design to explore students' subjective experiences and perceptions regarding their difficulties with gerunds. Qualitative research is appropriate when the goal is to understand complex phenomena from the participants' perspectives, allowing for in-depth exploration of contextual factors that quantitative approaches may not capture (Creswell, 2014).

2> Participants

Participants were selected using purposive sampling from students enrolled in an English grammar course at a state university in Indonesia. A total of ten students participated in the study, comprising a mix of students from different semesters and with varying English proficiency levels. Purposive sampling was chosen to ensure that participants had sufficient exposure to English grammar instruction, including the topic of gerunds.

3. Data Collection Instrument

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview protocol consisting of 21 questions organized into six thematic sections: (A) Opening Questions, (B) Knowledge of Gerunds, (C) Experienced Difficulties, (D) Contributing Factors, (E) Learning Experiences, and (F) Hopes and Suggestions. The interview questions were developed based on a review of the relevant literature and validated by two English education experts. The complete interview guide is presented in the appendix of this article.

Interviews were conducted in a relaxed, conversational manner to reduce participant anxiety and elicit authentic responses. Each interview was audio-recorded with the participant's consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

4. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This involved six stages: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. The analysis was conducted iteratively to ensure that themes accurately reflected the patterns present in the data. Member checking was conducted to enhance the credibility of the findings.

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

The following table presents the complete semi-structured interview guide used in this study to elicit information about students' understanding of and difficulties with gerunds in English paragraphs.

No.	Interview Question
Section A: Opening Questions	
1.	How long have you been studying English?
2.	How do you feel about the English course this semester?
3.	In your opinion, is English difficult or easy to learn? Why?
Section B: Knowledge of Gerund	
4.	Have you ever heard the term 'gerund' before? Where did you encounter it?

5.	What do you know about gerunds? Please explain in your own words.
6.	Can you give an example of a sentence containing a gerund?
7.	What do you think is the difference between a gerund and a present participle?
Section C: Experienced Difficulties	
8.	What is the most difficult part when you study gerunds? Why?
9.	Do you find it difficult to distinguish a gerund from a regular verb in a paragraph?
10.	When reading an English paragraph, can you immediately identify which word is a gerund? Please explain.
11.	Do you often make mistakes when using gerunds in sentences? Can you give an example?
12.	Is it easier for you to understand gerunds as subjects, objects, or complements in a sentence?
Section D: Contributing Factors	
13.	Do you feel that your grammar lessons in high school adequately prepared you to understand gerunds?
14.	How often do you read English texts or paragraphs outside of class?
15.	Has your lecturer's teaching method helped you understand gerunds so far? Why or why not?
16.	Does Bahasa Indonesia or your regional language influence the way you understand gerunds?
Section E: Learning Experiences	
17.	What strategies do you use to understand gerunds when studying independently?
18.	Have you ever looked for references about gerunds on the internet or in books on your own?
19.	Which is easier for you—understanding gerunds through teacher explanation or through reading examples directly in a text?
Section F: Hopes and Suggestions	

20.	In your opinion, what type of learning method is most effective for understanding gerunds?
21.	What would you ask your lecturer to do to help you understand gerunds better in the future?

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

1. Students' Prior Knowledge of Gerunds

The interview data revealed that the majority of participants had limited formal exposure to gerunds prior to their university-level English course. Most students reported encountering the term "gerund" for the first time in their current course, with only a minority recalling brief encounters during high school grammar lessons. When asked to define gerunds in their own words, most students provided vague descriptions such as "a verb ending in -ing" without articulating the nominal function that distinguishes gerunds from other -ing forms.

This finding is consistent with studies by Liu (2008) and Hinkel (2004), which indicate that EFL learners in Asian contexts frequently lack a clear conceptual framework for gerunds. The tendency to classify gerunds solely on morphological grounds (i.e., the -ing suffix) rather than syntactic function reflects an incomplete grammatical schema that predisposes learners to systematic errors.

2. Types of Difficulties Experienced

Thematic analysis of the interview data identified three primary categories of difficulty. First, the majority of participants reported significant challenges in distinguishing gerunds from present participles. Students articulated confusion arising from the identical surface form of the two structures, noting that contextual disambiguation required a level of syntactic awareness that they had not fully developed.

Second, participants experienced difficulty identifying gerunds in different syntactic positions within paragraphs. While some students indicated that recognizing gerunds as objects (e.g., "She enjoys swimming") was relatively straightforward, gerunds functioning as subjects (e.g., "Swimming is healthy") or complements (e.g., "Her favorite activity is reading") were considerably harder to identify, particularly in longer, more complex paragraphs.

Third, students reported frequent errors in gerund usage during writing tasks, particularly in selecting whether to use a gerund or an infinitive after specific verbs. This finding corroborates Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman's (1999) observation that the gerund-infinitive distinction represents one of the most persistent challenges for EFL learners.

3. Contributing Factors

Four major factors contributing to students' difficulties emerged from the data. The first was inadequate grammar instruction at the secondary school level. Most participants described their high school grammar lessons as focused primarily on tense forms and simple sentence construction, with limited attention given to more complex structures such as gerunds.

The second contributing factor was limited exposure to authentic English texts outside the classroom. The majority of participants reported reading English paragraphs infrequently outside of course requirements, reducing the contextual reinforcement necessary for implicit grammar acquisition.

The third factor was L1 interference. Participants consistently noted that they attempted to translate English structures into Bahasa Indonesia when encountering unfamiliar forms, a strategy that proved ineffective given the absence of a gerund equivalent in their native language. This interference was most pronounced when participants encountered gerunds functioning as subjects, a construction that lacks a direct parallel in Indonesian syntax.

The fourth factor was the perceived inadequacy of current instructional methods. Several participants indicated that grammar instruction in their courses relied heavily on decontextualized exercises, which did not provide sufficient opportunity to observe gerunds functioning naturally within paragraph-level discourse.

4. Students' Suggestions for Improvement

When asked about preferred instructional approaches, participants consistently emphasized the value of contextual learning methods. Specifically, students expressed a strong preference for encountering gerunds within authentic English paragraphs rather than in isolated sentence exercises. Several participants also suggested the use of collaborative activities such as peer discussion and group analysis of texts containing gerunds, which they believed would facilitate deeper understanding through interactive engagement.

Additionally, participants requested clearer explanations of the distinctions between gerunds and other -ing forms, with explicit guidance on identifying syntactic function as the primary criterion for classification. A minority of participants expressed interest in supplementary digital resources, such as online exercises and video explanations, as self-directed learning tools.

CONCLUSION

This study identified three primary types of difficulties that university students experience in understanding gerunds in English paragraphs: confusion between gerunds and present participles, difficulty recognizing gerunds in various syntactic positions, and errors in gerund selection during writing. These difficulties were found to be influenced by inadequate prior grammar instruction, limited authentic reading exposure, L1 interference from Bahasa Indonesia, and decontextualized teaching methods.

The findings suggest that effective gerund instruction should move beyond isolated sentence-level exercises toward paragraph-based, contextual approaches that allow students to observe and analyze gerund functions within authentic discourse. Teachers are encouraged to design activities that explicitly contrast gerunds with present participles and infinitives, and to incorporate extensive reading practices that expose students to a variety of gerund uses in naturalistic contexts.

Future research should investigate the effectiveness of specific instructional interventions such as text-based grammar instruction and collaborative analysis tasks in improving students' gerund comprehension and production. Additionally, longitudinal studies tracking students' gerund acquisition over the course of an academic year would provide valuable insights into the developmental trajectory of this grammatical form in Indonesian EFL learners.

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