

## A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF STUDENTS' ABILITY TO DISTINGUISH GERUNDS AND PARTICIPLES IN ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

Grammar is a fundamental component of language learning because it helps learners construct sentences accurately and meaningfully. Among the grammatical aspects of English, gerunds and participles are often considered challenging due to their similar –ing forms but different grammatical functions. This study aims to analyze students' ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles in English sentences. The data source of this research was students of the English Education Program, and the data were collected through a grammar test focusing on the identification and grammatical functional of gerunds and participles. The research was conducted among the 2022 class of English Education students at FKIP Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin Solok, in the 2024/2025 academic year. The study applied a descriptive quantitative design involving 12 students, who served as both the population and sample. Data were collected through a 40-item multiple-choice test developed based on Yule's (2019) indicators. The instrument achieved a Content Validity Ratio (CVR) of 1.00 and an Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) of 0.988, indicating excellent validity and reliability. The results revealed that students' ability in using gerunds was fair (70.83%), their ability in using participle was poor (54.86%), and their overall ability to distinguish both forms was fair (64.58%). The findings indicate that students' ability to distinguish gerunds and participles is at a moderate to low level, with many students experiencing difficulties in identifying grammatical functions due to confusion between form and function of –ing constructions.

**Keywords:** descriptive study, gerund, grammar, participle, students' ability

### 1. INTRODUCTION

English plays an important role in academic and professional contexts. However, in many EFL settings, particularly in Indonesian universities, students still experience difficulties in

constructing grammatically accurate sentences despite having sufficient vocabulary knowledge. This problem is frequently observed in classroom activities, academic writing, and grammar assessments, where learners often confuse similar grammatical

forms, especially gerunds and participles. Previous studies have reported that EFL learners demonstrate low to moderate ability in distinguishing between gerunds and participles due to their identical –ing forms but different grammatical functions (Wael et al., 2024; Ulfah et al., 2024).

Based on this issue, English Education students were selected as the participants of this study because they are expected to possess adequate grammatical competence to support their future roles as English teachers. The focus on gerunds and participles is considered significant because these non-finite verb forms frequently appear in academic texts and everyday communication, yet they remain challenging for learners to master. Therefore, this study is conducted to provide empirical evidence of the students' difficulties and to contribute to the improvement of grammar instruction in EFL contexts.

Grammar instruction has long been recognized as a fundamental component in second and foreign language learning. Research in applied linguistics suggests that grammatical knowledge supports learners in achieving both accuracy and fluency in language use (Brown, 2007; Harmer, 2007). Moreover, grammar equips learners with structural awareness that helps them interpret meaning accurately and construct effective sentences across diverse communicative contexts (Larsen-Freeman, 2021; Richards & Bohlke, 2023).

From a theoretical perspective, grammar is a core component of

linguistic competence. Andilab and Amante (2024) argue that grammatical competence refers to learners' internalized understanding of linguistic rules—encompassing morphology, syntax, and sentence structure—which enables them to accurately produce and comprehend sentences, highlighting that competence involves not only rule recognition but also the ability to apply these rules in language contexts. This competence is fundamental for second or foreign language learners, as it forms the basis for accurate language use.

In addition, grammar should not be viewed merely as a set of prescriptive rules but as a functional system that conveys meaning in context. Ulfiana, Sunra, and Fauzan. (2024) demonstrate that adopting a functional grammar perspective, grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), supports learners' understanding of how grammatical forms operate as meaning-making resources within social and situational contexts, reinforcing the importance of understanding grammar based on its communicative roles rather than solely its surface structures.

In line with these perspectives, Niculescu and Dragomir (2025) argue that grammar should be understood as a dynamic, functional resource for making meaning rather than a static set of rules, emphasizing the concept of “grammaring” as the active use of grammatical structures in real communicative contexts. Similarly, R

Kord, Samavati,, Okati, and Samavati. (2025) found that EFL learners who received grammar instruction embedded in meaningful communicative tasks and real-life activities demonstrated significantly greater improvement in grammatical accuracy and the ability to apply form–meaning relationships than those taught with decontextualized rule drills, highlighting the importance of contextualized input and practice for effective grammar learning.

Among the various elements of English grammar, gerunds and participles are two non-finite verb forms that often create confusion for learners because they share the same –ing ending but differ in grammatical function and syntactic role (Swan, 2022; Larsen-Freeman, 2021). Although both forms share the –ing ending, they differ in grammatical function and role. A gerund acts as a noun, while a participle functions as an adjective or part of a verb phrase. For example, in the sentences Reading is fun and The girl reading a book smiled, the word reading has the same form but serves different purposes. This similarity in form but difference in grammatical function frequently causes learners to make errors in identifying and using gerunds and participles accurately, which may lead to misunderstanding sentence meaning (Swan, 2022; Wael et al., 2024).

Supporting this view, Azar and Hagen (2017) state that learners frequently experience difficulties in distinguishing gerunds and participles because these forms can appear in similar syntactic positions. Learners often rely on morphological

appearance rather than grammatical function, which leads to misinterpretation and grammatical errors. This issue is particularly evident in reduced clauses and modifier structures, where participles function adjectivally and are easily mistaken for gerunds.

The complexity of gerunds and participles has been widely discussed in English grammar references. Swan (2005) notes that –ing forms often cause confusion because they can function as nouns, adjectives, or parts of verb phrases depending on syntactic position. Larsen-Freeman (2021) explains that learners need a clear understanding of clause structure and modification patterns in order to accurately interpret participial constructions in English sentences.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learning, these grammatical challenges are often intensified. Syarfuni, Sarmadan, and Verawati (2024) report that many EFL learners continue to struggle when grammar instruction emphasizes memorization of isolated rules rather than functional understanding and contextual use, which limits their ability to apply grammatical knowledge accurately in authentic communication and daily language practices. Furthermore, Jandildinov and Yersultanova (2023) argue that effective grammar instruction for EFL learners should be contextualized within meaningful discourse, enabling learners to observe how grammatical forms function in authentic language

use rather than as isolated rules. Without sufficient exposure to authentic language use, students may struggle to distinguish grammatical forms that share similar structures.

In the Indonesian EFL context, learners consistently perceive English grammar as difficult yet essential to learn and master, indicating that grammatical mastery remains one of the most challenging areas for students in higher education (Komara & Tiarsiwi, 2021). Observations and preliminary discussions with students of the English Education Department at FKIP UMMY Solok revealed that many students still experience difficulties when distinguishing between gerunds and participles. They tend to identify all –ing forms as gerunds, even in cases where those forms function as adjectives or components of verb phrases. This issue indicates limited awareness of grammatical function and sentence structure, which affects students' accuracy in constructing meaningful sentences.

According to Peng and Barrot (2023), English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners often demonstrate persistent difficulties in achieving grammatical accuracy in their writing, a challenge that may be linked to limited exposure to authentic language input and form-focused practice in EFL classrooms. Research by Zhang (2015) shows that grammatical errors related to verb forms are among the most common issues in EFL learners' writing. This finding reinforces the importance of focused grammatical instruction that emphasizes function and usage rather than memorization.

Considering these challenges, it becomes necessary to examine students' actual ability to recognize and

differentiate gerunds and participles in context. By describing their level of understanding and the types of difficulties they face, this study aims to provide valuable insight into students' grammatical competence. The findings are expected to serve as a reference for lecturers in designing more effective grammar instruction, focusing on contextual and functional use rather than rote memorization. Through this approach, grammar learning can become more meaningful and applicable to real communication, helping students bridge the gap between grammatical knowledge and language use.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Grammar knowledge is fundamental for successful English language acquisition, particularly in mastering advanced grammatical structures. Larsen-Freeman (2021) emphasizes that grammatical competence involves understanding the relationship between form, meaning, and use, which enables learners to produce accurate and meaningful language. She argues that grammar instruction should go beyond rule memorization and instead focus on how grammatical structures function in real communicative contexts. Similarly, Richards and Bohlke (2023) contend that grammar teaching which prioritizes functional understanding helps learners internalize patterns and apply them more flexibly in authentic language use.

In the domain of non-finite verb forms, gerunds, or -ing forms functioning as nouns, play a significant role in sentence structure. Ulfah, Muth'im, and Febriyanti (2024) report that EFL learners frequently experience

difficulties in using gerunds correctly due to limited awareness of their nominal functions within sentences. Their study reveals that although gerunds share similar forms with present participles, learners often fail to recognize their grammatical roles, especially when gerunds function as objects or complements. These findings indicate the need for explicit grammar instruction focusing on functional roles rather than surface forms.

Participles, on the other hand, are non-finite verb forms that function mainly as modifiers or components of verb phrases. Wael, Akib, and Ermawati (2024) found that students demonstrate low ability in distinguishing present participles from gerunds, particularly when participles appear in complex sentence structures such as reduced relative clauses. Their findings suggest that learners tend to rely on morphological similarity instead of syntactic function, which leads to frequent misinterpretation of participial constructions in English sentences.

The distinction between gerunds and participles remains a persistent challenge in EFL contexts due to their identical *-ing* forms but different grammatical functions. Swan (2022) explains that learners often misinterpret *-ing* constructions because they focus on form rather than analyzing syntactic roles within sentence contexts. According to Swan, gerunds function as noun equivalents, whereas participles serve adjectival or verb-related functions, and failure to recognize this distinction results in recurring grammatical errors. Therefore, effective grammar instruction should emphasize functional analysis and contextual

usage to help learners accurately differentiate between gerunds and participles and improve overall grammatical competence.

### 3. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a descriptive quantitative design, as its main purpose was to describe and explain the students' ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles in English sentences. According to Sugiyono (2019), descriptive research aims to provide a systematic, factual, and accurate description of a phenomenon without manipulating the research variables. The quantitative approach was used to present the results in numerical and percentage forms, which objectively represent the students' levels of ability. This method was considered appropriate because the study did not test a hypothesis, but rather focused on presenting a clear description of the participants' grammatical competence. Descriptive quantitative research is commonly used in language education studies to provide objective representations of learners' linguistic abilities and performance levels (Sugiyono, 2019; Ellis, 2006).

The population of this research consisted of all students of the English Education Program, Class of 2022, at the Faculty of Teacher Training and Education (FKIP), Universitas Mahaputra Muhammad Yamin (UMMY) Solok, during the 2024/2025 academic year. The total number of students was 12. Since the population size was relatively small, the researcher applied

a total sampling technique, which means that every member of the population was included as a sample. This approach ensured that the data represented the entire population accurately and avoided sampling bias.

The main instrument used in this research was a 40-item multiple-choice test, developed based on Yule's (2019) theory of gerunds and participles. The test was designed to measure three main aspects of students' grammatical competence:

1. Identification – the ability to recognize gerunds and participles in sentences.
2. Usage – the ability to apply gerunds and participles correctly according to grammatical rules.
3. Distinction – the ability to differentiate between gerunds and participles in various sentence contexts.

Each indicator consisted of four questions, resulting in a total of forty items covering all the assessed aspects. To ensure the quality of the instrument, validity and reliability tests were conducted. The content validity was measured through expert judgment involving three English lecturers. The validity calculation applied Lawshe's (1975) Content Validity Ratio (CVR) formula, and the results showed a CVR score of 1.00, which means all items were considered essential and valid.

The reliability of the instrument was tested using the Intraclass Correlation Coefficient (ICC) method, following the guideline of Koo and Li (2016). The result showed an ICC value of 0.988, which indicates an extremely high level of reliability. Therefore, the instrument was considered both valid

and reliable for measuring students' ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles.

Data were collected through the administration of a written multiple-choice test. The test was given to all 12 participants under controlled classroom conditions. Each student was given approximately 40 minutes to answer all forty questions. The test aimed to determine how well the students could identify, use, and differentiate –ing forms functioning as gerunds or participles in various English sentences. After the test, all answer sheets were collected and scored manually based on an answer key that had been verified according to Yule's (2019) theoretical indicators. The students' scores were then recorded and tabulated for analysis.

The data obtained from the test were analyzed using descriptive statistical analysis. This method was used to calculate the students' mean scores, percentages, and ability categories in each assessed aspect. The percentage of achievement for each student was calculated using the following formula:

$$NP = \frac{R}{SM} \times 100$$

Notes:

NP = Percentage value obtained by students

R = Total raw scores achieved by students

SM = Maximum score (100)

The students' ability levels were classified based on Purwanto's (2014) assessment criteria as follows:

**Table 1.** Criteria of Students' Ability

Percentage Score	Category
86-100 %	Excellent
76-85 %	Good
60-75 %	Fair
55-59 %	Poor
<54 %	Very poor

The results were presented in tables and described narratively to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' grammatical performance. These findings served as the foundation for further discussion on the students' strengths and weaknesses in distinguishing between gerunds and participles

## 4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

### 4.1 Result

The findings show that the students' general ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles was fair, with an overall mean score of 64.58%. This result indicates that the students demonstrated a moderate understanding of the topic but still experienced considerable confusion in identifying grammatical functions of –ing forms. The details of the results are presented as follows.

#### 4.1.1 Students' Ability in Using Gerunds

The average score of the students' performance in using gerunds was 70.83%, which is categorized as fair. The majority of students could correctly identify gerunds when functioning as the subject (Reading is interesting), object (He enjoys reading novels), or complement (Her favorite activity is swimming). However, some students made errors in recognizing

gerunds that followed prepositions or specific verbs that require –ing forms. For instance, they often replaced gerunds with infinitives in sentences like She suggested to go instead of She suggested going. These results indicate that although students understood the basic use of gerunds, they struggled to apply them accurately across varied grammatical contexts.

#### 4.1.2 Students' Ability in Using Participles

The students' ability in using participles was lower, with an average score of 54.86%, which falls under the poor category. Many students were unable to identify participles functioning as adjectives or as parts of verb phrases. For example, in the sentence The man driving the car is my uncle, some students interpreted driving as a gerund rather than a participle modifying man. Similarly, past participles such as broken, tired, and written were frequently misunderstood as past verbs. This finding suggests that students were not yet able to differentiate the syntactic role of participles, particularly in complex or reduced clause structures.

#### 4.1.3 Students' Ability to Distinguish Between Gerunds and Participles

The combined results from all test sections show that the students' overall ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles was fair, with a mean percentage of 64.58%. Although some students could identify both forms correctly when used in clear grammatical contexts, they often became confused when both appeared in similar syntactic positions. For instance, they failed to recognize the functional difference between Smoking is dangerous (gerund) and The man smoking is my friend (participle). This

consistent confusion indicates that students' understanding of –ing forms was mostly based on surface features rather than on sentence function and meaning.

#### 4.2 Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that the students of the English Education Program at FKIP UMMY Solok have a moderate level of grammatical awareness regarding the use of gerunds and participles, indicating that many of them are still uncertain about how these forms function within sentence structures. The data indicate that their understanding of gerunds is stronger than that of participles, suggesting that students find it easier to recognize gerunds in familiar patterns but struggle when grammatical forms require deeper structural analysis. This imbalance is consistent with findings from previous research conducted by Wael, Akib, and Ermawati (2024), who stated that EFL learners often find participles more complex because they serve multiple grammatical roles and depend on sentence structure, which can confuse learners who lack strong syntactic awareness.

These findings align with previous studies indicating that learners generally demonstrate stronger performance in recognizing gerunds than participles, as gerunds often appear in predictable positions while participles require understanding their relationship with other sentence elements. In this study, students particularly struggled when participles functioned as modifiers or appeared in passive and perfect constructions, showing that they had difficulty identifying how these forms relate to other elements in a sentence. Similar

patterns were reported in EFL grammar studies, where participles were found to be more challenging due to their multifunctional roles in sentence structure (Wael et al., 2024).

The students' errors mainly stem from morphological similarity, where both gerunds and present participles end in –ing, which often leads learners to assume they have the same function. Because of this similarity, students tend to rely on form rather than function when analyzing sentences, causing frequent misclassification of gerunds and participles. Yule (2019) emphasizes that the identification of grammatical function requires syntactic awareness rather than mere recognition of word endings, a skill that many students in this study had not yet fully developed. The results of this study confirm this view, showing that most students misclassified words due to a lack of understanding of how –ing forms operate within clauses.

The tendency to rely on surface forms rather than syntactic function has also been identified by Thornbury (1999) and Swan (2005), who argue that learners often misinterpret grammatical structures when instruction does not emphasize functional analysis, a condition that may contribute to students' continued difficulty in distinguishing gerunds and participles accurately.

Another factor that may have influenced the results is students' limited exposure to authentic English contexts. Grammar instruction in many classrooms still focuses on memorization and isolated sentence drills rather than contextualized use. As a result, students can recall definitions but fail to apply grammar rules when

interpreting real sentences. This supports the argument by Azar and Hagen (2017) that grammar should be taught in a communicative and meaningful way to help learners internalize structures naturally.

Based on these findings, it can be concluded that although students have a foundational understanding of gerunds, their understanding of participles and the distinction between the two forms is still limited. To address this issue, grammar teaching should integrate contextual exercises, comparative sentence analysis, and text-based learning that encourage learners to observe the functional use of –ing forms. Such approaches can help students shift from rote learning toward deeper grammatical awareness and improve their accuracy in both writing and speaking.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that the students of the English Education Program at FKIP UMMY Solok showed a moderate ability to distinguish between gerunds and participles in English sentences. The findings revealed that students generally performed better in recognizing gerunds than participles, yet they still encountered confusion because both forms share the same morphological ending. This difficulty indicates that students often rely on form rather than grammatical function when analyzing –ing words. Limited understanding of sentence structure and a lack of contextual practice also contributed to their misinterpretation of these forms in actual usage.

Therefore, lecturers are encouraged to apply contextual and comparative teaching methods that emphasize real examples and sentence analysis to enhance students' grammatical comprehension. Students should also practice more through reading, writing, and reflection to deepen their awareness of how gerunds and participles function in context. Future researchers are encouraged to explore similar topics with broader perspectives to gain more comprehensive insights into students' grammatical development. This pedagogical implication is consistent with recommendations from Richards and Renandya (2002), Harmer (2007), and Ur (2012), who emphasize the importance of contextualized grammar teaching to enhance learners' grammatical awareness and communicative competence.

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