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An Analysis of the Problems in the Use of English Participles by Undergraduate Students at Hazara University Mansehra

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Abstract: *The current study aimed at finding out the problems faced by undergraduate students in learning English present, past and perfect participles in Hazara University Mansehra. A descriptive survey design was used to collect data from a sample of hundred students through a non-randomly convenience sampling technique. For answering the questions and achieving objectives, the researchers used a proficiency test. The test comprised morphological and syntactic items about participles in the form of translation, voices and blanks. The collected data was analyzed statistically through SPSS 17.0 version. The analysis revealed that the problems mostly encountered in the English participles were in terms of morphological, functional and syntactical problems in the use of English participles learning particularly present, past and perfect participles. The higher percentage of errors suggests that students should be trained in the use and practice of English participles to learn their correct use.*

Key Words: English, Participles, Undergraduate, Problems, Tense, Formation, Voice

Introduction

Despite the main focus that is allocated on the pursuit of higher education, the students in the universities find it difficult to grasp the basic tenets of the English language with respect to the correct use of grammar i.e., verbs and their forms while forming a sentence. It is quite evident in the universities that students are increasingly finding it difficult to identify the correct usage of the verbs i.e., present, past and perfect which is considered to be one of the constituents of English Parts of Speech (Skerrett, 2015). One of the main reasons that is identified for this persistent problem is the

unpredictable association that the present participle possesses with respect to the context used. Like other language essentials, vocabulary and grammatical structure is also necessary for language learners. According to Alqahtani (2015), vocabulary items are a treasure of words in mind through which we can communicate effectively. Words are divided into different classes, differentiated on the basis of lexical properties of words but some of these properties (either morphological or grammatical) are shared. For example, a participle can be a verb, which is a derivative of a non-finite verb, or share properties with adjectives, adverbs and nouns. The term

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participle is generally restricted to non-finite forms of a verb rather than the infinitive; in English, it is often classified into present and past forms, or into -ing and -ed forms (Crystal, 1992). The verb in English shows actions, processes or events along with showing tense, aspect and mood. English verbs can be classified in several ways. Among them, there are transitive and intransitive verbs, finite and infinite verbs, and regular and irregular verbs. A participle is a non-finite form of a verb instead of an infinitive. In the English language, generally, we have two participles: One is present and the other one is past participle. The present participle is mostly formed from the basic form of the verb (Huddleston, 2005). The participle is that form of the verb which also functions as an adjective. It is also verbal-adjective, e.g., *I heard Aslam singing a song*. The word 'singing' is verbal-adjective. A participle is a verb form that looks like a verb but does not function as the verb in a sentence. A participle usually acts as an adjective to modify a noun or pronoun (Gu, 2020). Thompson and Martinet (1986) explain that the present participle has the same form as a gerund (e.g., *He likes reading books*) ending -ing form. A present participle works like a verb and adjective (e.g., *Look at the reading boy*), and mostly ends in -ing form. A participle can be constituted as a form of verb, more specifically as a non-finite verb along with it, it also shares the characteristics with its counterparts in grammar i.e., adjectives, adverbs, along with pronouns. With respect to the present participle, it is prominently denoted by -ing form and is also mentioned as active participle, imperfect participle, or progressive participle appropriately. Students counter difficulties in using present participle because present participle has the capability to perform similar grammatical functions as its appropriate counterparts i.e. nouns as well as adjectives and is considered crucial to develop a better understanding of present participle (Shagal, 2017). It is due to its consideration of being one of the bases of an integrative understanding with respect to English grammar appropriately which makes it difficult for students to construct a proper sentence without identifying

the main difference between a present participle and its respective mentioned counterparts in grammar (Alhaysony, 2017). We can use the present participle verb -ing for different functions (Duffely, 2006). Similarly, the past participle is the form of a word which commonly ends with -ne, -ed, and -en as written, gone, or stopped including all 3rd columns of the irregular verbs. The past participle is used for a structure of perfect tenses and for passive voices possessing the characteristic of not having a constant ending, along with mirroring the characteristics of the usual verb past tense and is denoted by -ed (Kauschke et al., 2017).

Purpose of the Study

Pakistani students commit errors in different aspects of language. A great emphasis has been given to students' grammatically acceptable written communication, mostly in the educational context, which relies on written examinations to evaluate students' academic success. But it is difficult for students to write grammatically accurate sentences. Most Pakistani students have fewer problems in simple structures of English but the frequency of errors increases with the increase of complexity of construction. In addition, they are considered to have command over English especially, in their written skills showing error-free writing. However, in the majority of circumstances, particularly in free assessments, they fail short of this standard. According to different investigations, it is concluded that most of the Pakistani students cannot express themselves in English. Among other grammatical problems, most undergraduate students misuse participles and they do not know the correct use of these grammatical items (Carstairs, 2017). The students face considerable challenges in terms of adhering to the grammatical morphemes of the respective language (Plag, 2018). Since very little has been done in this area and since our students encounter great difficulties in handling the participle, so, the present study tried to fill the gap by analyzing students' problems in learning English participles. English is a second

language for students and because of little provision made for the teaching of participles in the school time table; it is therefore difficult for the students to make effective use of participles in their written works. There is an overlap in the verb which poses a problem to learners of English as a second language. The present form of the verb ends in -ing and ed as the past form for regular verbs. The current research is being conducted to serve the purpose of recognizing the key issues that are prevalent in the grammatical participles that are faced by the undergraduate students of Hazara University. Moreover, this research investigation allocates its focus on the basic structure of the mentioned grammatical morphemes which the students regularly encounter as a hindrance in forming their structure in the English language appropriately.

Literature Review

English as a global language within the educational set-up has been accepted across the globe (Lambani, 2015) influencing the medium of instruction in educational institutes (Tshotsho, Mumbembe, & Cekiso., 2015). English was accepted by many nations and colonies around the globe as a result of the inventions and interventions of Britain (Mohammed, 2016). That is why, English being a second has always been challenging for students in the global context. There have always been challenges faced by L2 learners of English in Pakistan (Akram & Mehmood, 2007) affecting their competence in expressing themselves in English (Amadi, 2018) either in the form of learning or acquisition of the target language (Alves & Oliveira, 2014) identifying setting and environment of the target language as very crucial factors (Castello, 2015) to make sure the fluency of language (Dong & Ren, 2013). Therefore, learners have varying degrees of second language abilities (Ghezlou & Biria, 2017; Khan & Khan, 2016) demand favourable learning environment to the learners (Ahmed, 2015; Nguyen & Terry, 2017) and learners should be encouraged to learn English language at every level (Akay,

Butuner, & Arikan, 2015) to make sure their contribution in nation-building with the help of a global language (Shah, Othman, & Senom, 2017; Thirusanku & Yunus, 2014).

Second language learning is affected by many factors which could be social (Al-Mahrooqi & Al-Aghbari, 2015) or psychological (Ali, 2015) in nature affecting target language learning (Bintoro, 2016) even at the university level (Khalifa, 2015). As a result, the students have a fear of using the target language (Abdelrashman, 2016) or completing any task in the target language (Adam, 2020) increasing their sense of failure and guilt, resulting in an emotional state of anxiety and fear (Singh, Singh, Razak, & Ravinthar, 2017) further aggravated by personality characteristics and individual abilities (Ratnawati, 2018). However, if students have a higher level of personal language abilities and a better grasp of language knowledge, the learning effect can be improved and the negative impact of language anxiety can be suppressed (Sriboonruang & Prasongsook, 2017). In daily learning, even testing can also easily cause learners to have language anxiety (Ibrahim & Yusuf, 2018) which can be reduced if the interaction and emotional communication between teachers and students are harmonious (Sahab, 2019). To Ghina, Joni and Fitriana (2020), the language teacher must allow the construction of an efficient and grounded educational practice, through a coherent approach, is necessary that there is the development and applied competence allied to a theoretical competence articulate an effective action of learning and teaching within the classroom languages. It is of utmost importance that still in the process of initial training, teachers have the opportunity to improve all skills globally so that they can perform an efficient, dynamic and consistent teaching practice and the issues associated with teaching can be mitigated in the desired manner (Din & Ghani, 2019).

The unique grammatical units of English like participles are very difficult for learners. They use wrong construction, use gerund wrongly and fail to utilize the perfective aspect

of the participle. Most undergraduates are poorly prepared before entering university; as a result, they seldom use participle and seem to try to avoid using them. Most of the students who attempted to use participles always made errors (Amadi, 2018). Akib (2018) examined that, students faced difficulties in differentiating gerund and present participle; the students were not sure about differentiating present participle and gerund because of the same form of them e.g. –ing ending. The students did not know the correct use of present participle and gerund. English participles were found confusing for ESL learners even at the university level (Hsu & Hsueh, 2018). Therefore, any type of teaching method which can emphasize the repetition of English participles is highly recommended. For the current investigation, the literature review was organized based on theoretical and empirical frameworks comprising participle problems encountered by undergraduate students of English language learning in general. Among these notable persistent problems are misrepresentation through a new set of boxes corresponding to the sounds of English, teachers' incompetence, conservatism as regards the method of teaching by some teachers, ignorance about the students' background, dangling modifiers, misplaced participles, numerous variations of English and poor attitude of both the teachers and the students to academic work. Furthermore, learners also faced problems in differentiating gerunds from present participle and their correct usage. However, the teaching and learning of the English participle can be improved if we strictly observe: The teachers should update their knowledge periodically and teach in situations. They should also be mindful of the student background, written exercises on various topics should be given regularly to the students which are followed by remedial work.

Research Methodology

A descriptive survey design was selected for the present study which helped in bridging the gap between the specific research topic and the

execution of the research study (Myers, Well & Lorch, 2013). The purpose of using a survey descriptive design was to offer a numeric or quantitative description of opinions, attitudes or trends among students in the target population of the university (Nassaji, 2015). This helped researchers to present credible findings to suggest possible alternatives and solutions to mitigate the barriers (Wilson & Fox, 2013). Moreover, a quantitative research plan was a pre-determined design based on objective data sets and exact quantitative measurements (Ryan, 2018). This quantitative study also added to a better understanding of the complicated reality and its implications for actions in this specific situation (Mazhar, Anjum, Anwar & Khan, 2021). Moreover, the advantage of using the quantitative method was that it provided objective results which were supported and communicated easily by the use of statistics and numerical figures (Bell, Bryman & Harley, 2018). The population selected for the study comprised all enrolled undergraduate students of Hazara University, Mansehra. From the target population, the researchers selected a hundred students from the five departments (English, political science, sociology, Urdu and Education) of the University. Twenty students were selected from each department through a non-random convenient sampling technique. An English language proficiency test being the most valid instrument for data collection was used in the study. The test was designed from high and higher secondary-level textbooks of English to make the participants form a homogeneous group because all the participants had studied these textbooks during their studies. The test covered all essential aspects of English participles. It included different uses, translations and formation of participles. It had many types of questions about participles to confirm the level of knowledge of the students about these participles. The test contained questions like multiple choices, selecting the best option and filling in the blanks. Before collecting the data, a pilot study was conducted on ten students who were not involved in the current research. All the participants were found out consistent

in their responses confirming the validity and reliability of the instrument used. While conducting this inquiry, all ethical factors were taken into account. Furthermore, the current study adhered to the procedures and criteria for getting permission (where necessary) when gathering primary data (Suri, 2020) and sources were cited. Each type of problem was identified and calculated through the percentage and frequency of errors in the use of the participles by using the formula $P = \frac{f}{n} \times 100$. The P stand for percentage, f for frequency of errors and n for number of total errors. After collecting the required data, the researchers analyzed it by using statistical procedures. The data were analyzed for the identification of the problems after thorough and careful checking. The problems were then categorized into different types i.e. miss-formation and miss-ordering. Lastly, obtained data was interpreted and explained systematically according to the types of errors in the use of English participles.

Data Analysis

The problems in the use of English participles were analyzed to provide a comprehensive account of hurdles in terms of their types and proportions (frequency and percentage) in these participles for undergraduate students at Hazara University Mansehra, Pakistan. The participle errors were categorized with respect to their types and subtypes by using Surface Strategy Taxonomy, that categorizes errors into four major types; omission, addition, miss-formation and miss-ordering as displayed and explained for each item or question in the given table.

Table 1

Overall Results of the Test

Questions Asked about	Correct Responses%	Incorrect Responses%
Identification of Present Participle	70	30
Uses of Present Participle	44	56
Functions of Present Participles in the Sentences	28	72
Identification of Past Participle	27	73

Questions Asked about	Correct Responses%	Incorrect Responses%
Difference between Gerund and Present Participle	40	60
Uses of Present Participle, Past Participle or Perfect Participles	40	60
Formation of English Participles	36	54

The above table shows that when the participants were asked about the identification of present participles in different questions, most of the students could correctly identify English present participles. They recognized this from the verb ending with -ing. Among the participants, seventy per cent of respondents answered correctly while thirty per cent responded incorrectly. So, the results suggest that undergraduate students most students know about the concept of the present participle in English apart from other uses, like gerund, progressive and adjective etc. But when the same students were asked about different uses of present participles in other questions, the responses of most of the students were incorrect. The correct responses this time were only forty-four per cent while fifty-six per cent could not identify the correct uses of present participle. The students were unable to use the present participle in the correct order. It was also observed that the majority of the students did not know the various functions of the present participle. Among them, twenty-eight per cent of students answered correctly when they were asked about various functions of English participles while seventy-two correctly replied. According to the results at hand, the students' understudy committed errors and did not know the different functions of the participle. The present participle has the same form as the gerund. It is formed by adding -ing to the verb base form. As we know a participle can be a verb which can function as an adjective or verb. Present participle or the -ing form of the verb has some other functions when used in a sentence. Present participle can be used as a verb in continuous tense and as an adjective after the linking verb. As a verb in continuous tenses, the present participle can function in present continuous, present perfect continuous, past continuous, past perfect

continuous and future continuous tenses. But students did not know these uses of the said grammatical constituent.

When the students were asked about past participle, the majority of the student did not know this concept at all and as a result, they had problems in learning and using past participle. The correct percentage of students' responses (27%) and the percentage of incorrect responses (73%) show that students found past participle difficult even at the undergraduate level. As we know that past participle is mostly formed by adding -ed or other bound morphemes to the base form of the verb, the students found it difficult. From the results, the researchers suggest that the students face problems in learning and using past participle. Even if when the students knew the structure of past tense, they did not know the word past participle; students traditionally used 1st, the 2nd and 3rd forms of verbs in their traditional functional grammar learning. Any discussion of participles must begin by distinguishing -ing participle from gerund. The same morphological form of gerund and present participle confuses students to identify the subject and the verb of a sentence. The -ing participles and gerunds have different forms as well as different functions. "One of the best ways of distinguishing -ing participle and gerunds is to remember that gerunds function as a noun, whereas -ing participles function as an adjective" (Celce-Murcia, Larsen-Freeman, & Williams, 1983, p. 447). So, an -ing form of a verb that can replace a noun is a gerund. The students' responses were very low with respect to correct answers. Forty per cent of students replied with correct answers while sixty per cent replied with incorrect answers when they were asked about differentiating participles from a gerund. The students were unable to distinguish between present participles from gerunds.

The ability of the students for using English present, past or perfect participle was also measured. The overall performances of the students showed that most of the students did not know the correct usage of the verb forms e.g., present, past and perfect participle. Only

forty per cent of students provided the correct response while sixty per cent of students could not reply correctly. The past participle is most often used when forming the perfect forms of tenses. The past participle is being used for voicing aspects e.g., active and passive voice and for making the speech more formal. Basically, in the past tense, a tense form of the verb (a second form of the verb) is used while the past participle is a non-tensed form of the verb which is used for past and present perfect tenses. We need an auxiliary verb, such as "have" or "had." Because of this, the past participle is commonly used as a compound verb. The term *perfect participle* doesn't refer to a unique third type of participle, but a grammatical phrase formed by combining the word *having* with a past participle. Perfect participles are used to indicate that one event happened before another. Most of the students made errors in the use of present participle and perfect participle. The students were found very weak in the syntactic and functional aspects of English participle. The students were asked to use different words as participles and only thirty-six per cent of students could correctly form English participles while sixty-four per cent could not form correct participles in English. The main purpose was to find out to test students' ability in the use of participles in different situations. The results showed that students could not use English participles appropriately. Most of the students made sentences that did not make any sense. Syntactic errors could involve organizing words and phrases that do not make sense. i.e., how a sentence is worded and structured, which can easily be misconstrued (Yule, 2019). Even seemingly minor syntax errors can dramatically change the meaning of phrases or sentences. Some common syntax problems may be caused due to inappropriate comma usage or using sentence fragments instead of complete sentences. The results as a whole suggest that students had substantial problems in learning and using English participles.

Discussion

Problems identification and error examination

is mainly one of the essential topics along with other major topics in the field of second language acquisition and learning studies. The current study was also conducted on problems faced by undergraduate students at Hazara University Mansehra. The results revealed that students of said University faced problems in the use of English participles. The students who attempted to use participles always made errors (Amadi, [2018](#)). Further, the research findings of this study have highlighted that undergraduate students face many issues in learning participles. Most of the participants answered the questions about English participle just by guessing. Respondents were confused in selecting whether to use -ing or -ed and what their function was. Past studies have also revealed that educational institutions in rural and undeveloped areas affect students' learning abilities because of the old educational interventions. The developed countries are indeed focusing on advanced interventions and the educational institutes make strict policies so that the issues of the students could be resolved in the least time. The results of the study have shown that the respondents were not satisfied and have highlighted that the major issues in learning English participles are the least knowledge about their concepts. English participles were found confusing for ESL learners even at the university level (Hsu & Hsueh, [2018](#)). In addition, it has been observed that the students were facing issues in understanding the use of English participles. Sentence structuring and grammatical errors in their work were the issues that were marked in the majority of the responses. The appropriate use of grammar for sentence formation is considered important. The process of identifying the morphological problems among the students in terms of English participles, such as past, present, and perfect participle learning can help to overcome students' issues. This study has provided a better understanding of the English participle learning difficulties faced by undergraduate students with a review of the current curriculum to improve the students' capabilities. The history of the English language and its international acquisition process within educational institutes induces a

global transformation by which English is used as the most common language in educational institutes. The students faced syntactical and morphological problems in the use of present participles in English. The majority of the students had difficulty in acquiring absolute construction, the perfective aspect of the participle, and the compound structure of gerund and had some trouble in discriminating the usage of participles from that of the infinitive (Akib, [2018](#)). From the high error frequencies and the types of errors they committed, it is evident that the grammatical system of English students is not yet stabilized. Similarly, the English unique grammatical units were very difficult for students to learn. They used the wrong construction with the wrong use of gerund and they also failed to utilize the perfective aspect of the participle (Cao, [2013](#)). They used the wrong construction with the wrong use of gerund. They also failed to utilize the perfective aspect of the participle. Further, the use of participle as a predictive dangling participle and adverbial were easy for students but they were incapacitated in the use of gerunds, participles as complement and participles as an attribute (Akib, [2018](#)).

Conclusion

The focus of the present study was to recognize and discover the type of problems (morphological, syntactical, and functional) in the learning and use of English participles of the undergraduates at Hazara University, Mansehra. Through the analysis of the data collected, a conclusion can be drawn that the English participle, as a unique English grammatical item, is a very difficult grammatical item for university students to acquire and their knowledge of participles is incomplete. Major types of errors committed by undergraduates are overlooking the logical subject of participles, wrong use of absolute construction, wrong use of gerunds, and failure in the use of the perfective aspect of the participle. The researchers analyzed them from the frequency of errors made by the learners in the language proficiency test. The results of the collected data revealed that the students of Hazara University Mansehra had difficulty in

learning English participles and their proficiency in the use of English participles is far from satisfactory. In this regard, the morphological problems in learning English participles were analysed. Most of the students gave incorrect answers to the question. Students did not know how to form sentences to use present participles with the helping verb such as 'is to show what. Further, it is concluded that undergraduate students of the university are facing syntactical and morphological problems in the use of English participles. They did not know where to use English participles and what kind of functions English participles perform. The researchers also concluded that most of the undergraduate students were unable to use present participle in the correct order i.e., present, past and perfect participle and with different functions i.e., as a verb in continuous and perfect continuous tenses, an adjective and an adverb. The students did not know the correct uses of the said grammatical constituent. Another analogical problem happened when learners had acquired the rules of the targeted language, but they were unable to apply the errors accordingly into the correct formations and categories. The errors could be teaching-induced errors, committed when learners made errors due induced teaching process. These problems may also be caused by the strategies and materials used by the teachers that can steer the students in committing errors. Another kind of difficulty that students came across in knowing the -ing participle and -ed participle was concerned with the knowledge and meaning. The students did not know the rules to transform the -ing and -ed participles.

The students got only limited knowledge in their classrooms which did not help them a lot in the correct use of participle. Similarly, the English unique grammatical units were very difficult for students to learn. They used the wrong construction with the wrong use of gerund and they also failed to utilize the perfective aspect of the participle. As a result, the findings revealed that they had a limited understanding of how to use and apply the

rules governing the use of English participles. They lacked an understanding of participle forms, particularly for proper tense and agreement; instead, they replaced one wrong form for another, demonstrating their inability to employ the correct form of the participles. Likewise, they were unable to determine what kind of form can be used to employ. And as a result, they made a variety of errors while utilizing English participles. Similarly, lack of practice in English grammar and a lot of exceptions in the rules of grammar caused them to misuse the participles in their writings. English present participle verb -ing is one of the hindrances to the form of participle for students. On the basis of elicited information about their performance in the use of English participles, it can be concluded that English has distinctive grammatical units; these units are very difficult for undergraduate students to learn and acquire, and their information about English participles is incomplete. The problems that undergraduate students faced in learning participles comparatively were in absolute construction, dangling participle, the perfective component of participles as an adverbial, past participle of the intransitive verbs, and the gerunds compound. They also had a few issues in discerning the participles usage from that of the infinitive. Undergraduate students faced difficulties in differentiating gerund and present participle. The students were not sure about differentiating present participle and gerund having the same form. The current study concludes that students faced problems in the learning of English participle. These problems were morphological (formation of new words with -ing, -ed, -en, -t), and syntactical (writing correct sentences or translation of sentences) in nature. The problems were also found in grammatical categories like voicing (active and passive). These problems were also found to be functional in nature. In light of the findings of the present study, the study concludes that students even at higher levels should be trained in the correct use of English participle to help them understand the correct use of such constructions.

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