

## INVESTIGATION INTO PROBLEMS OF GERUNDS AMONG ESL STUDENTS OF ENGLISH

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### ABSTRACT

Gerunds, which are verbs functioning as nouns, often pose significant challenges for English language learners. This paper explores the specific difficulties faced by 200 level students of English at the University of Jos, particularly focusing on their understanding, interpretation, and correct usage of gerunds. The research identifies both cognitive and linguistic obstacles that contribute to these challenges, employing qualitative methodologies to gather data from students and educators. Findings reveal common misconceptions, such as conflating gerunds with present participles or misunderstanding their syntactic roles within sentences. The study also highlights the impact of instructional strategies and curriculum design on students' mastery of gerunds. This research aims to provide insights into pedagogical approaches that can enhance the comprehension and application of gerunds among students, ultimately contributing to their overall language proficiency. Recommendations are made for tailored instructional methods that emphasize the functional aspects of gerunds, engage students in active learning, and incorporate multimedia resources. It is anticipated that with improved understanding and practice, students will demonstrate greater efficacy in their use of gerunds, thereby facilitating better communication skills in English.

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**Keywords:** Communication, challenges, English, gerunds, sentences.

### INTRODUCTION

The study of gerunds in the English language serves as a critical area of focus for both educators and learners, as it encapsulates essential aspects of grammar, structure, and nuanced meaning. As a linguistic feature that straddles the realms of both verbs and nouns, gerunds often create complexities for learners, particularly in the context of non-native speakers. Students of English at the University of Jos, particularly those in the 200 level—face unique challenges in mastering this grammatical element, which can hinder their overall proficiency in English. Gerunds are formed by

adding the suffix '-ing' to the base form of a verb, transforming it into a noun-like entity. For instance, the word 'running' in the sentence "Running is my favorite hobby" serves as a gerund. While the concept may seem straightforward, students often grapple with various aspects of gerund usage, including their integration into sentences, differentiation from present participles, and recognition of their grammatical roles. Misunderstandings in these areas can affect written and spoken communication, leading students to produce sentences that do not adhere to standard conventions, which, in turn, can erode their confidence in utilizing the English language. The importance of mastering gerunds cannot be overstated, as they play a significant role in both spoken and written discourse, enriching language by allowing for a greater level of expression. Moreover, a firm grasp of gerunds can enhance students' comprehension of complex text, thereby improving their overall academic performance. However, it is imperative to recognize the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by students, which can stem from a variety of factors including previous educational experiences, instructional methods, and the inherent complexities of the English language itself. This paper aims to investigate the problems associated with the understanding and use of gerunds among 200 level students of English at the University of Jos. By employing a qualitative research methodology, the study seeks to identify the specific areas of difficulty that students encounter, explore the reasons behind these challenges, and propose potential solutions to address these issues. Furthermore, the study reviews relevant literature on language acquisition and gerund usage, thereby situating the findings within the broader context of linguistic studies. Through this comprehensive exploration, the goal is to contribute valuable insights that can inform pedagogical practices, ultimately fostering improved language development for students. The concept of gerunds has been extensively studied in the fields of linguistics and language education. A review of the existing literature reveals significant insights into the complexities surrounding gerunds, particularly from the perspectives of grammar, language acquisition, and pedagogy. Gerunds serve distinct grammatical functions and exist at the crossroads of verb and noun categories, often perplexing learners. According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), the dual nature of gerunds—functioning as both verbs and nouns—can create confusion for students. Research shows that many learners struggle to differentiate between gerunds and present participles, with the two forms often exhibiting similar morphological characteristics. This ambiguity can lead to incorrect usage, as students may inadvertently treat gerunds as

ordinary verbs or overlook their noun-like qualities. Language acquisition theories also provide valuable insights into the learning obstacles related to gerunds. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1982) emphasizes the importance of comprehensible input in language acquisition, suggesting that students may not fully grasp gerunds if they are not presented in contextually rich and meaningful ways. This aligns with findings from studies conducted by Sharwood Smith (1986), which indicate that learners benefit from exposure to authentic language use that integrates gerunds in varied contexts. The pedagogical approaches employed in teaching gerunds play a critical role in student comprehension. A variety of instructional strategies, including explicit grammar instruction, interactive activities, and multimedia resources, have been found to enhance learning outcomes. Research conducted by Razi et al. (2016) emphasizes the effectiveness of task-based learning in improving students' grasp of gerunds by engaging them in practical language use. Moreover, cultural and contextual factors may influence students' understanding of gerunds. For learners from varying linguistic backgrounds, the absence of equivalent structures in their first language can further complicate their acquisition of gerunds. Studies by Ellis (1999) highlight the importance of addressing these cross-linguistic differences to facilitate more effective learning experiences. In summary, the existing literature showcases the multifaceted challenges associated with gerunds, shedding light on the need for informed instructional practices tailored to address these issues.

This paper seeks to build on this body of work by investigating the specific challenges faced by 200 level students of English at the University of Jos and proposing actionable pedagogical strategies to enhance their understanding and use of gerunds. To effectively analyze the challenges of gerund usage among 200 level students of English at the University of Jos, it is essential to ground the study in relevant theoretical frameworks that illuminate the complexities of language acquisition and grammar instruction. The theoretical frameworks explored in this section include the Input Hypothesis, Interactionist Theory, and the Universal Grammar Theory.

1. Input Hypothesis: Proposed by Stephen Krashen, the Input Hypothesis posits that language learners acquire language best when they are exposed to comprehensible input slightly beyond their current proficiency level. This theory emphasizes the importance of providing learners with meaningful and context-rich language input, facilitating

engagement with grammatical forms in practical settings. The implications for teaching gerunds suggest that students should encounter these forms in diverse contexts—both written and oral—to ensure adequate exposure and understanding.

2. **Interactionist Theory:** Interactionist theories, championed by researchers such as Long (1983), stress the significance of interactive communication and negotiation of meaning in language acquisition. These theories suggest that language learning is enhanced through social interaction, wherein learners engage with peers and instructors to clarify and negotiate understanding of complex grammatical structures. In the context of teaching gerunds, fostering a collaborative learning environment can empower students to practice and apply their knowledge, ultimately reinforcing their understanding.

3. **Universal Grammar Theory:** Proposed by Noam Chomsky, the Universal Grammar Theory posits that all human languages share a common structural foundation. This theory implies that certain linguistic principles and structures are innate to all humans, providing a cognitive framework for understanding language. The existence of gerunds as a shared feature across many languages suggests that while students may struggle with specific forms, there may also be cognitive predispositions that facilitate their understanding of gerunds in English. By employing these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to comprehensively investigate the challenges faced by 200 level students of English at the University of Jos in mastering gerunds. These theories not only inform our understanding of language acquisition challenges but also provide insights into effective instructional strategies that can be employed to bridge gaps in student understanding.

## **METHODS**

The research methodology employed in this study is centered on a qualitative approach, which is instrumental in exploring and understanding the nuanced challenges faced by 200 level students of English at the University of Jos regarding gerund usage. This section outlines the research design, participant selection, data collection methods, and analytical framework utilized in the study.

1. **Research Design:** A qualitative research design was selected for this study, as it allows for an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions,

experiences, and challenges related to gerunds. This approach is particularly useful in educational research, where understanding contextual factors and individual experiences can provide valuable insights into the learning process.

2. Participant Selection: The study involved a purposeful sampling method, selecting the 200 level students of English programme at the University of Jos. A total of 30 students participated in the study, ensuring a diverse representation of backgrounds, language proficiency levels, and prior educational experiences. The selection process aimed to include students who had encountered challenges with gerunds, thus enriching the data collected.

3. Data Collection Methods: Multiple data collection methods were employed to gather comprehensive information on students' experiences and challenges. These methods included:

a. Semi-Structured Interviews: Individual interviews were conducted with each student to gather personal insights into their difficulties with gerunds. Interview questions focused on students' perceptions of gerunds, specific challenges faced during writing and speaking, and their experiences with instructional methods.

b. Focus Group Discussions: Focus groups were organized to facilitate discussions among students regarding their collective experiences with gerunds. This format encouraged interaction and provided deeper insights into common challenges faced by the group.

c. Observations: Classroom observations were conducted during gerund instruction to assess instructional strategies utilized by teachers and the student engagement level during lessons. This observational data offered additional context to better understand the learning environment.

4. Data Analysis: The data gathered through interviews, focus group discussions, and observations were analyzed using thematic analysis, which involves identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns or themes within qualitative data. Themes related to students' perceptions, experiences, and challenges with gerunds were codified and categorized, providing a structured understanding of the findings.

5. Ethical Considerations: Ethical considerations were paramount throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, ensuring that they understood the purpose of the study and

their right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity and confidentiality were upheld by assigning pseudonyms to participants and securely storing data.

## **RESULTS**

The findings of this study present a detailed analysis of the challenges faced by 200 level students of English at the University of Jos concerning gerund usage. The qualitative data collected from interviews, focus group discussions, and classroom observations provide a rich tapestry of student experiences and perceptions, revealing several key themes.

1. **Misunderstanding the Concept of Gerunds:** One of the prevalent issues identified among participants was a fundamental misunderstanding of what gerunds are and how they function within a sentence. Many students conflated gerunds with present participles, leading to confusion in usage. For instance, several students expressed difficulty distinguishing between sentences like "I enjoy swimming" and "I am swimming," indicating a lack of clarity in recognizing the noun-like role of gerunds.
2. **Syntactic Challenges:** Participants noted challenges related to the syntactic placement of gerunds within sentences. Many students struggled with using gerunds as objects of verbs or as subjects, leading to awkward sentence constructions. For example, a common error observed was the tendency to use bare infinitives instead of gerunds, as in "I want go swimming" instead of "I want to go swimming."
3. **Limited Exposure to Authentic Usage:** The data revealed that many students felt they lacked sufficient exposure to authentic language use involving gerunds. Several participants indicated that their textbooks offered limited examples, which did not adequately represent the variety of contexts in which gerunds might be used. This lack of exposure affected their ability to grasp the nuances of gerund usage.
4. **Impact of Instructional Methods:** The study identified a correlation between instructional methods and student understanding of gerunds. Participants reported that traditional grammar-focused instruction did not resonate with their learning needs. In contrast, students who experienced task-based instruction, where they were engaged in meaningful communication activities, reported greater confidence and understanding in using gerunds.

5. Emotional Factors and Language Anxiety: Another significant finding was the emotional challenges that students faced while learning gerunds. Many participants expressed feelings of frustration and anxiety, particularly when attempting to use gerunds in speaking exercises. This emotional aspect often hindered their willingness to practice and experiment with gerunds, reinforcing their difficulties.

6. Peer Interaction and Collaborative Learning: Focus groups highlighted the benefits of peer interaction in addressing challenges with gerunds. Students who engaged in collaborative learning activities reported enhanced confidence and understanding, as they could share experiences and support each other in their learning process. The findings emphasize a multifaceted understanding of the challenges associated with gerunds, underscoring the need for tailored instructional approaches that address both cognitive and emotional factors in language learning.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion encapsulates the implications and interpretations of the findings, situating them within the broader context of language acquisition theories and pedagogical practices. By analyzing the identified challenges related to gerund usage, this section aims to provide actionable recommendations for educators and curriculum designers.

1. Misunderstandings and Syntactic Challenges: The misunderstanding of gerunds among students reflects broader issues in grammatical instruction and language acquisition. The confusion between gerunds and present participles indicates a need for clear differentiation between verb forms in teaching contexts. It is crucial for instructors to emphasize the dichotomy between gerunds as noun-like entities and participles as verbs. Interactive exercises that require students to categorize verbs into gerunds and participles may enhance their understanding, along with practical sentence construction tasks.

2. Authentic Exposure and Contextual Learning: The limited exposure to authentic gerund usage points to a significant gap in the curriculum. Instructors should prioritize the integration of real-life examples, multimedia resources, and authentic texts to provide context-rich experiences when teaching gerunds. Task-based learning, which includes role-playing scenarios and project-based assignments that necessitate the use of gerunds, can create engagement and facilitate deeper understanding.

3. **Tailored Instructional Approaches:** The correlation between instructional methods and student success underscores the importance of adapting teaching strategies to accommodate diverse learning styles. Integrating a variety of pedagogical methods, including experiential learning, collaborative projects, and technology-enhanced learning, can help address individual needs. Educators should consider formative assessment practices to gauge student understanding regularly and adjust instruction accordingly.

4. **Addressing Emotional Challenges:** The emotional factors impacting students' performance in using gerunds signal the need for a supportive learning environment. Educators should foster a positive classroom atmosphere where mistakes are embraced as learning opportunities. Encouraging peer feedback and group discussions can also reduce anxiety and build confidence.

5. **Peer Interaction and Collaborative Learning:** The insights from focus groups reveal the benefits of peer interaction in the learning process. Implementing collaborative learning environments through group activities or peer tutoring can facilitate shared understanding and promote exploration of gerunds in a less intimidating context. Workshops centered on cooperative learning exercises may enhance engagement and mastery of gerunds. The discussion emphasizes the necessity of a comprehensive and integrated approach to teaching gerunds, which not only addresses grammatical complexities but also acknowledges the emotional and social aspects of language learning.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study has sought to investigate the problems associated with gerunds among 200 level students of English at the University of Jos, revealing significant insights into the complexities these learners face. The research findings underscore the necessity of reevaluating current instructional strategies and designing more effective pedagogical methods tailored to address these challenges. In essence, the misunderstandings surrounding gerunds, stemming from their dual functions as both verbs and nouns, have led to syntactic challenges in student writing and speaking. The limited exposure to authentic usage and context-rich instruction has further exacerbated these issues. Additionally, the emotional factors influencing language anxiety highlight the importance of creating a supportive learning environment where students feel empowered to practice and experiment with their language skills. By employing the recommended strategies—such



as fostering authentic exposure to gerunds, utilizing diverse instructional approaches, addressing emotional challenges, and promoting peer interactions—educators can enhance students' understanding and confidence in using gerunds. These improvements have the potential to positively influence overall language proficiency, equipping students with the necessary skills to effectively communicate in English. Future research should delve deeper into exploring the long-term effects of enhanced instructional strategies on gerund mastery and language acquisition as a whole. By continuously refining pedagogical practices and remaining responsive to students' needs, educators can contribute to the development of proficient and confident English speakers.

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