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## HELPING LOWER-LEVEL EFL LEARNERS USE PARTICIPIAL ADJECTIVES IN ENGLISH

*In the classroom, it takes learners some time and exposure to learn to use and understand participial adjectives accurately. The purpose of the present paper is to identify the reasons behind the lower learners' errors in their use and form of participial adjectives. The paper provides an overview of the research on the use of participial adjectives and based on the teacher's classroom experience looks into the possible extralinguistic and linguistic challenges that English language learners can experience in their use of participial adjectives particularly in the initial stages of language learning. The paper proposes to address these challenges through a range of effective strategies and practical approaches.*

**Key words:** *EFL, participial/participle adjectives, lower-level learners, classroom research.*

JEL: D83, I23

**Introduction:** In our perception of the world, events and people, we tend to ascribe different qualities to this or that thing, situation or experience. We do this mostly by referring to adjectives. Adjectives are usually engaging for learners and the rules underlying them are straightforward. However, as a teacher of English to non-native speakers, I have frequently watched my students make mistakes when using participle adjectives, referred to as *participial adjectives* by some researchers<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Parrott M., *Grammar for English Language Teachers*, 2nd edition, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010, p. 52.

Research has shown that some morphemes and structures are generally acquired in a common order and that this order is similar for non-native learners of English.<sup>2</sup> When learners first start using the language, they use it initially to describe the things and people surrounding them and only later to talk about their own states and feelings. For example, when studying English, they learn the *-ing* form first due to the Present Continuous Tense and therefore use this form more frequently.

The present study seeks to help English language teachers identify the possible causes of errors that learners make when using participial adjectives and provide possible teaching solutions based on research and my own classroom experience.

**Literature Review:** The term *participial adjectives* was suggested by Huddleston and Pullum<sup>3</sup> and later supported by S. Thornbury<sup>4</sup> to mark the distinction between participle forms of verbs and adjectives.

Accordingly, Thornbury distinguishes the following types of participial adjectives:

- a) Qualitative adjectives that can be qualified with *very*, e.g. an excited student;
- b) Classifying adjectives which cannot normally be qualified with *very*, e.g. a submitted assignment, the setting sun;
- c) Compound adjectives formed by adding a verb participle to a noun, e.g. a time-consuming assignment.

Most grammarians describe the *-ing* adjectives as having an active or progressive meaning, and the *-ed* adjectives as having a completed or passive meaning<sup>5</sup>. Others explain the difference by pointing out that *-ing* adjectives are causal and describe the effect of something or somebody, whereas the *-ed* adjectives are indicative of a person's feelings or reactions.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the disagreement over the generally accepted definition, it can be stated that the *-ing* form is used when people talk about the source of the emotion and who or what causes it, e.g. a *depressing effect* and the *-ed* form denotes who or what is affected by it, e.g. a *stressed student*. We can use some participial adjectives with intensifiers (*very*, *extremely*) and downtoners (*quite*, *rather*)<sup>7</sup>, e.g. a *very interesting film*, a *rather annoying man*. However, with those participial adjectives which are indicative of extreme qualities, like *starving*, *terrified*, we tend to use intensifiers that emphasize the extreme or absolute nature of adjectives, e.g. *utterly terrified look*, *entirely wasted time*.

<sup>2</sup> Lightbown P., Spada N., How Languages are Learned. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> Huddleston R.D., Pullum G.K., The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language, Cambridge, CUP, 2002, p. 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> Thornbury S., About Language, Tasks for Teachers of English, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.110.

<sup>5</sup> Birch B.M., English Grammar Pedagogy: A Global Perspective, New York, Routledge, 2014, p. 182, Swan M., Practical English Usage, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 403.

<sup>6</sup> Penston T., A Concise Grammar for English Language Teachers, TP Publications, 2005, p. 50, Yule G., Explaining English Grammar, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> A word or phrase that makes the meaning of another word or phrase less strong.

In English, participial adjectives are mostly made by adding suffixes *-ed* or *-ing* to the base form of the verb, e.g. *fascinating*, *charmed*. The *-ed* suffix enjoys a range of morphological variations with irregular verbs and therefore is sometimes referred to as the *-en* participle, e.g. *frozen meat*, *broken arm*. Most present participles in English derive their forms from verbs.

Participles can also occur compounded with an adverb, an adjective, a noun, or a preposition. These compound structures with participles are common before nouns, e.g. *a Delta-qualified teacher*.<sup>8</sup>

It is also interesting to note that a few verbs denoting feelings can form ***-ed* adjectives but can't form *-ing* adjectives**, i.e. we can say *delighted*, *scared* but not *delighting*, *scaring*.<sup>9</sup>

In English syntax, participial adjectives typically precede the noun they modify. However, when the *-ed* participle is followed by an agent phrase or by other prepositional construction, the *-ed* participle takes a post-nominal position, as in phrases *a workshop hosted by a trainer*, *books published by Longman*.<sup>10</sup>

As participial adjectives in most cases indicate the speaker's or the writer's disposition towards people, things and or events, in a string of adjectives they occupy an initial position as in phrases *a terrifying young man* or *a frustrated rock star*.

In a sentence, there are two usual positions for participial adjectives, before a noun in a noun phrase, as in the sentence “That was an embarrassing situation”, and after a noun as in the sentence “The situation was embarrassing”. In the latter case, participial adjectives are used predicatively and use a complement verb to link it to the noun or pronoun they modify. When used predicatively, adjectives express the main clause and cannot be omitted.

**Research Methodology:** The primary purpose of the study was to identify the types of errors the learners make in their production of participial adjectives and to delve deep into the reasons behind these errors to be able to construct simple but effective teaching solutions. The method used in the study was that of qualitative research building a series of classroom experiments that I did with non-native lower-level learners majoring as part of their Fundamental English course.

Data collection methods used in research include classroom observations not only in my home institution but also in other language schools and educational institutions, as well as the administration of questionnaires and interviews for learners to identify how they learn best and what can possibly motivate them to improve their language accuracy in a certain language area. The number of respondents was 23 and out of them about 20 were driven by instrumental and integrative motivation. Most of them were learning English in quest of better employment, education or simply for migration purposes. Almost all of them expected to sit for an international exam like BEC Preliminary or BEC Vantage at this or that stage of their language education. These types of high-

<sup>8</sup> Swan M., *Practical English Usage*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 405.

<sup>9</sup> We say *delightful*, *scary* instead.

<sup>10</sup> Noonan M., *A Course in English Grammar*, Wisconsin, University of Wisconsin, 1994, p. 172.

stakes exams often comprise personalised tasks, such as “Talk about an exciting event you planned”, or “Describe a meeting which made you feel bored.” In this respect, it seemed essential that learners have an appropriate range of vocabulary to be able to use participial adjectives to complete this type of tasks during an exam.

When planning the proposed activities, I also considered the learning preferences of the learners. For example, in the questionnaire they completed, the learners mentioned that they preferred communicative activities to individual ones, hence when planning my lessons with them I often staged pairwork and groupwork as primary interaction patterns. The research took about three months to complete.

**Analysis and Findings:** Based on my classroom experience, I have identified one extralinguistic and four linguistic factors that can cause learners to make errors when using participial adjectives.

The extralinguistic factor is related to the phenomenon, known as concept interface. Back in the 1940s, psychologists began seeing interference between related concepts as one of the major causes of forgetting things.<sup>11</sup> The inability to retain two interrelated items was explained by the fact that learners could not memorize two concept-related items, which they had to store in memory at the same time. For instance, *contracting vs contracted*.

The linguistic factors that cause learners to make errors in their use of participial adjectives are as follows:

1. Learners can often use the *-ing* form of the adjective (*depressing*) when they actually mean the *-ed* form (*depressed*). According to a research done in this field, the frequency of errors in accurate use and production of *-ed* endings is higher than in *-ing* endings.<sup>12</sup> (Yule, 2009: 6) This cannot only impede communication with other speakers but can be considered one of these stigmatizing errors that can embarrass the learners themselves, especially when they produce sentences like *I am boring and depressing*, instead of *I am bored and depressed*.

2. More advanced learners of English often find it hard to differentiate between the verbal and adjectival use of participles. For instance, they might get confused when asked to tell the grammatical difference between this pair of sentences:

- a) The disappointed fans left the stadium.
- b) I was disappointed by the news.

3. **The phoneme velar nasal /ŋ / in the final position of participial adjectives** does not occur in all the languages. It can be found in languages like Armenian, French or Persian but it is not inherent in Slavic languages like Russian, Bulgarian, Ukrainian.<sup>13</sup>

My local teaching context hosts mostly Armenian speakers, who tend to stress the *-ing* ending in participial adjectives. This feature does not impede with

<sup>11</sup> Nation P., Learning Vocabulary in Lexical Sets: Dangers and Guidelines.

<sup>12</sup> Yule G., Explaining English Grammar, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ladefoged P., Vowels and Consonants: An Introduction to the Sounds of Languages 1. Chichester, Blackwell, 2005, p. 164.

overall comprehension and communication, but makes the learners sound a bit robotic and unnatural.

4. Finally, at lower level, learners might mispronounce the ending /id/ after /t/ and /d/ thus **mispronouncing the final sound in the word ‘contracted’ as /td/** instead of the correct /tɪd/.

Below I have provided the solutions addressing each of the identified problems.

**Thornbury believes that the inductive route is the way one’s native language is learned.** Hence, learning becomes memorable when language regularities and patterns become evident for learners through exposure to language input.<sup>14</sup> To help the learners retain the difference between *-ed* and *-ing* forms of participial adjectives, I would suggest teaching participial adjectives in a split lesson, where the teacher presents *-ing* and *-ed* participial adjectives in two subsequent lessons.

Using this technique has been helpful in establishing a smoother transition from the form and meaning of participial adjectives to another form and meaning and help weaker learners retain the target language better. This is especially good for mixed ability groups and can help the teacher meet the needs of weak learners.

Encouraging the learners to notice the target language is another technique. This can be done by showing the learners a number of photos and asking them to match the photos featuring people experiencing or evoking a range of feelings with respective adjectives.

This practice is especially engaging for learners with visual learning style, as it helps them recognise the language pattern presented through a picture, i.e. visual learners can integrate visual information with the language pattern. At the same time, the activity addresses the needs of kinaesthetic learners, as they can benefit from matching the images with words. As part of my classroom teaching, to help auditory learners recognize *-ing* and *-ed* adjectives, I dictate them some participial adjectives and then play some segments from music tracks after each segment asking the learners to look at the list and decide what type of music it is (depressing) or how it makes them feel (depressed). I believe this activity addresses auditory learners best, as music can help them internalize the target language by having them associate their auditory experience with a specific language item.

When it comes to dealing with pronunciation challenges that my learners experience with participial adjectives in the classroom, I have noticed that I should integrate awareness-raising activities into my teaching, followed by practice / production activities to get them to notice through examples and then practise.

In his book *Sound Foundation*, Adrian Underhill suggests encouraging learners to say three sounds, bilabial /m/, alveolar /n/ and velar /ŋ/ **in sequence** for them to be able to notice the backward shift and identify the voiced velar

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<sup>14</sup> Thornbury S., *How to Teach Grammar*, Harlow, England, Pearson Education, 1999, p. 49.

**nasal /ŋ/**.<sup>15</sup> Besides discrimination activities and drilling, which seem obvious for encouraging the learners address the mispronunciation of *-ed* and *-ing* in participial adjectives, I suggest playing a feeling game, during which the learners try to convey different feelings and meanings to sentences by varying their voice pitch and their peers try to guess how they feel, e.g. *excited, interested, bored*.

Finally, learners can develop their skills in forming and using participial adjectives accurately through a discrimination exercise, which requires that the learners choose between the *-ing* or *-ed* form of adjectives or transformation practice, where the target sentences comprise only the root of the participial adjectives and the learners have to deduce from the context whether they should supply an *-ed* or *-ing* ending. These types of activities encourage learners to focus both on the form and the meaning of the word.

The following production activity has been designed to show how the teacher can integrate the use of participial adjectives into such creative and low-key task, as, for example, designing menus, writing and sharing recipes or working on social media profiles.

Based on a model, learners design a menu for restaurant guests. In the menu, they identify which types of food are eaten raw or cooked, hence building and using such participial adjectives as *boiled, baked, grilled, etc.* The teacher tells the learners they should try to make the dishes as tempting for the guests as possible. Upon the completion of the activity, the teacher posts the menus around classroom and arranges gallery feedback for the learners to decide on the best menu.

The same activity can be adapted for learners in other formats, e.g. asking learners to make a social network user profile or a profile for a dating website, etc. This activity helps the learners use the target language with their own personalised information and it helps them produce the target language in a familiar and engaging context. Learners should be able to form and use participial adjectives comfortably and relate them to the appropriate context. The advantage of this kind of activities is that they encourage the learners to focus on both the form and the meaning of the target language by analysing the target language and not just supplying the correct form randomly.

To help the learners identify between verbal and adjectival forms of **participial adjectives**, Gupta suggests using the word ‘very’ with the participle. If it applies, then we deal with an adjectival participle, otherwise it is verbal. Let us consider the difference between the aforementioned pair of sentences:

- a) The disappointed fans left the stadium. (This is an adjectival participle, as we can say very disappointed).
- b) I was disappointed by the news (verbal, as we cannot say very disappointed).<sup>16</sup>

**Conclusions:** Errors in participial adjectives might not only impede communication but may also cause embarrassment to the learners, making them lose face in their future interactions. At the same time, adjectives are a high frequency language, as learners often use them in their description of the world,

<sup>15</sup> Underhill A., Sound Foundation, Oxford, Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2004, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup> Gupta S.M., Current English Grammar and Usage, Delhi, PHI Learning Public Limited, 2013, p.17.



events and people. It is essential that learners know how to use adjectives **expressing people's feelings, emotions accurately, as they help the learners to** use the language not for mere description but for evaluation as well.

The present study shares the teaching strategies and practical tasks that can help English language teachers support lower-level learners in their correct use of participial adjectives. My teaching experience and classroom-based observations show that lower-level learners tend to experience challenges with the accurate use and form of participial adjectives for a number of linguistic and extralinguistic reasons, which may include concept interface, confusion over verbal and adjectival use of participles, challenging pronunciation of velar nasal /ŋ / **in the final** position of participial adjectives and the mispronunciation of the ending /id/ after /t/ and /d/.

**The teaching suggestions addressing the learners' challenges in the paper** range from awareness-raising activities to teaching the target language in chunks, noticing, discrimination tasks and production activities that encourage **the learners' use of the target language.**

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**ԼՈՒՍՅԱ ՏԵՐ-ՍԱՐԳՍՅԱՆ***ՀՊՏՀ լեզուների ամբիոնի դոցենտ*

**Ինչպես օժանդակել անգլերենի նախնական մակարդակ ունեցող ուսանողներին՝ կապարելագործելու դերբայակերպ ածականների կիրառումը անգլերենում.**– Հոդվածը ներկայացնում է, թե դերբայակերպ ածականների թեմային անդրադարձը, լեզվի նախնական ուսումնասիրության փուլում, ինչպիսի լեզվական և արտալեզվական խնդիրներ կարող է առաջացնել անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու ուսումնասիրողների շրջանում: Որպես հիմք ընդունելով դասավանդման փորձը և այս ոլորտում կատարված հետազոտությունները՝ հեղինակը հանդես է գալիս մի շարք մեթոդաբանական առաջարկություններով, որոնց կիրառումը անգլերեն ուսումնասիրողներին կօժանդակի՝ դասավանդման գործընթացում խոսքում ճիշտ կիրառելու դերբայակերպ ածականները:

**Հիմնաբառեր.** *անգլերենը որպես օտար լեզու, դերբայակերպ ածականներ, լեզվի նախնական մակարդակ ունեցող ուսանողներ, դասավանդման փորձ*

JEL: D83, I23

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**Помощь студентам с базовым знанием английского языка в употреблении причастных прилагательных в английском.**–

Целью данной статьи является освещение проблем, связанных с ошибками студентов при употреблении форм причастных прилагательных. Исследование представляет обзор литературы, касающейся использования причастных прилагательных. Рассматриваются возможные лингвистические и экстралингвистические проблемы, с которыми могут столкнуться студенты, изучающие английский язык при использовании причастных прилагательных, особенно на начальных этапах обучения языку. На основе преподавательского опыта предлагается ряд эффективных и практических подходов для решения данной задачи.

**Ключевые слова:** *английский как иностранный язык, причастные прилагательные, студенты с базовым знанием английского языка, преподавательское исследование.*

JEL: D83, I23