

Common Errors of Using Gerundial and Infinitival Forms in EFL Learners' Writing

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Abstract

This research focused on the common errors that EFL learners included in their writing. The frequent errors that the study focused on were at the micro level, specifically the structures that related to gerund and infinitive forms. The participants were selected from the English language department at one of the Saudi universities. They were undergraduates and passed the *English Grammar 1* course in the program and were ready for the *English Grammar 2* course. In this study, the participants passed through two phases. In the first phase, they wrote one paragraph individually in the midterm examination. In the following phase, they chose their group and wrote a paragraph during class time. In both phases, students received clear instruction including the topic, the grammatical rules, and the minimum number of sentences. The only difference was that students were allowed to discuss for ten minutes before writing their paragraphs in the second phase. To analyze the data, common errors were identified and classified from writing as groups and individual writing based on gerunds and infinitives. Then, the comparison between common errors was employed to understand learners' written production when working individually and in groups. The results indicated that learners easily used infinitives better than gerunds. Learners also overused specific words to ensure that they used gerund and infinitive in the correct form. Finally, the same common errors were found and identified in their individual writing and as groups.

Keywords: common errors, gerund, infinitive

1. Introduction

In English, there are two types of skills, which are productive including writing and speaking and receptive including listening and reading (Ratnaningsih & Azizah, 2019). Regarding those skills, grammar should be tightly integrated because "grammar is a set of finite rules by which we can construct infinite sentences" (Nur, 2020, p. 8). In grammar classes, the implantation of teaching linguistic aspects could be instructed by applying focus on form or focus on formS; both types are beneficial and helpful in developing the learning process (Spada & Lightbown, 2008).

Focus on form draws learners' attention to learn linguistic structure through focusing on both form and intended meaning while communicating with others (Spada & Lightbown). Even if English teachers prefer focus on form during teaching grammar, the large number of students could be problematic and force teachers to only focus on linguistic rules (Sun & Zhang, 2021). However, focus on formS refers to "...equated with the traditional teaching of discrete points of grammar in separate lessons" (Sheen, 2002, p. 303). In focus on formS, teachers are more centered, and students are passive because the main focus is on teaching and explaining the rules (Uysal & Bardakci, 2014).

There was a serious and intense criticism of focus on formS because of the lack of the opportunity to interact and use the language in meaningful contexts (Valeo & Spada, 2016). Although the focus on formS has different weaknesses, this type helps learners notice the functions of linguistic forms and raise their awareness of the target rules (Azizpour & Alavinia, 2021). In other words, the focus on formS helps beginner learners, who do not have knowledge of the target language, to understand the linguistic aspects in a direct way to be able to use them in their production (Shintani, 2015). Grammar teachers who still prefer to directly teach the rules, provide helpful exercises to learners, such as writing sentences. Writing helps learners practice and use different linguistic aspects. Through writing sentences, teachers have a chance to ensure learners' assimilation of the linguistic forms by

finding common errors.

In the research domain, there are plenty of studies including (Abduallah, Azmi, Hassan, Atek, & Jusoh, 2021; Nodoushan & Ali, 2018; Ahamed, 2017; Maruma, 2017) investigated different linguistic aspects, such as subject-verb agreement, adverb clauses, articles, tenses, and so on. In the Saudi context, most studies analyzed the most frequent errors in different types of writing made by students, such as articles, tenses, and adjectives (Rahman, 2021; Altameemy & Daradkeh, 2019; Morgan, 2018; Hafiz, Omar, & Sher, 2018); whereas, small studies conducted, in the Saudi context, on gerund and infinitive forms. The forms of gerund and infinitive do not exist in the Arabic language, which is the participants' first language. This might lead learners to encounter the difficulty in fully understanding the forms of gerund and infinitive and struggle to use them in their production (Schwartz & Causarano, 2007). In fact, the contrastive analysis may lead to error analysis because it "claim[s] language interference between the mother tongue and the target language [which] is the most significant source of errors..." (Altameemy & Daradkeh, 2019, p. 178). In this research, the investigation was on learners' common errors in their writing focusing only on using gerund and infinitive forms. Therefore, this study seeks to answer the following research questions:

Q1. What types of errors related to gerundial and infinitival forms were identified in EFL learners' writing?

Q2. What are the frequent rules of gerund and infinitive that EFL learners used in their writing?

2. Literature Review

2.1 English Structural Verbal Complement

Learning how to write in English has different ways; writing English in general differs from writing for specific purposes (Likaj, 2015). General writing in English usually focuses on grammatical structures and how to deliver the message understandably. Learners who try to write accurately fall into different types of errors, such as word choice, spellings, phrases, verb forms, tenses...etc. (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Phan, 2021). One of the aspects that learners struggle with is where they should use words such as verbs and nouns; thus, learners should learn how to use words in a proper place of a sentence to deliver the intended meaning (Rauf & Saeed, 2021).

There is another aspect that learners always struggle to use in their production, which is gerund and infinitive forms. Infinitival and gerundial aspects are considered "...lexically based. That is, the main verb of the sentence determines which type of complement is permitted after it" (Keawchaum & Pongpaioj, 2017, p. 35). In English, there are three basic rules of gerund and infinitive forms, which are: (a) common verbs preceding only gerunds as example 1 in table 1 below, (b) common verbs preceding only infinitive verbs as example 2, and (c) common verbs preceding both gerund and infinitive forms as example 3; those common verbs might not change the meaning or sometimes it might affect the meaning of the sentences (Azar, Kock, & Hagen, 2009). Besides the common verbs that could precede gerund, learners should understand the functions of gerund as "[subject], object, complements, preposition object..." (Unggul & Gulö, 2017, p. 1). In other words, learners should be aware of the functions of both gerund and infinitive to be able to use them properly.

Table 1. Examples of common verbs preceding gerund and infinitive

	Grammatical Rules	Examples
1	common verbs preceding only gerunds	enjoy, stop, avoid...etc.
2	common verbs preceding only infinitive	decide, plan, ask...etc.
3	common verbs preceding both gerund and infinitive forms	begin, like, start...etc.

2.2 Error Analysis

Error analysis was used as a theoretical approach to frame this study, which was published by Corder (1974). Corder employed five stages of error analysis; the main focus of this study was on EFL students' errors to apply those steps, which are: (a) having samples of EFL writing, (b) finding their common errors, (c) describing their errors, (d) providing an explanation, and (e) assessing errors. To analyze learners' errors in writing, it is better to take into consideration the types of errors including micro or macro skills. The main focus of the macro level is on the general ideas, supported details, and intended meaning in a text; whereas, the micro skill is more intensive and covers other areas including word levels and sentence levels (Mantra & Widiastui, 2019). Both macro and micro levels play important roles in students' writing development, but the preference is to focus only on one level because when learners receive feedback related to both levels, they ignore one of them in revision and editing processes (Alnasser & Alyousef, 2015).

In analyzing errors, researchers have different types of angles that they could look through, such as the effectiveness of teaching methods, learners' perspectives of their errors, the feedback on learners' errors, and learners' cognitive abilities in English acquisition (Nguyen, Nguyen, & Phan, 2021). Error analysis helps find explanations and reasons behind learners' errors to determine the solutions and ways of teaching that contribute to developing learners' writing (Alhaisoni, Gaudel, & Alzuoud, 2017). There are many reasons for EFL learners' errors including the numerous structural rules, the complexity of the rules, or the new rules that they do not have in their first language (Uibu & Liver, 2015). Also, error analysis has several principal reasons including helping learners to have instructors' feedback and understanding learners' second language knowledge (Phoocharoensil et al., 2016).

3. Research Methodology

This study employed qualitative research in which error analysis was applied; the research was designed to build upon the common errors of students' writing to lead to a full understanding of the case. The sample of the participants was taken from the English language department of one of the Saudi universities that located in the middle of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). The author used her *English grammar 2* course to apply her study; there were two classes of this course. Both classes were undergraduates who were from the second level of the program. All students passed the *English Grammar 1* course in the program and were ready for the *Grammar 2* course. Both classes were taught the same structural rules of gerund and infinitive for five weeks. The number of students was large; they were around 60 students in each class. To conduct this study, the participants went through two phases in writing a paragraph. Students were asked to write because they "...need to feel that they will be able to relevantly use the information they have assimilated in the classroom by applying it..." (Dragomir & Niculescu, 2021, p. 121).

The first phase was the midterm examination where they were asked to write a paragraph. One group was asked to write about Ramadan, which was one of the holy months for Muslims. The second group was asked to write about Eid, which was one of the Muslims' holidays. Both groups should use infinitival and gerundial aspects in their writing. In this phase, all students were expected to be prepared for their exam, and they did not have any idea about the topic or the grammatical rules that they should use during the exam. That means all students wrote a paragraph individually in this phase. Before the first phase, the lecturer applied different activities to help the students understand and be able to distinguish between gerund and infinitive forms.

The second phase was writing one or more paragraphs as groups by discussing with other members of the group. The students have been asked to discuss and write without using their textbooks. This phase was at the end of the semester; it was in the final lecture of the semester. The students were free to choose their group members, and they can use only English/Arabic or both during the discussion. The groups had 10 minutes to discuss and 30 minutes to write their paragraphs.

In this study, students were exposed to the aspect of infinitives with to, such as to eat, to go, to buy...etc. it referred to infinitive as "...the verb form that is not inflected" (Abdullah & Hameed, 2019, p. 440). Whereas, gerund is defined as "a syntactic term which is composed of the base form plus the suffix '-ing'" (Abdullah & Hameed, 2019, p. 501). In other words, the gerund form means adding '-ing' to the verb to change it to a noun. Grammar textbooks usually focus on rules, and those materials have "some lacks that need to manage, adapted, and improved by teachers" (Kurniawan, 2022, p. 40). In this study, the textbook was only focused on the structures, but the lecturer tried to integrate writing to investigate students' comprehension through their production.

To analyze the data, I initially selected the sample randomly from both groups. The number of the chosen groups was six. The main focus was only on the common errors made by students related to gerund and infinitive forms; other common errors related to other grammatical structures have been ignored. All common errors were identified and classified in tables. The same way occurred for the individual writing, which identified the common errors of gerund and infinitive forms. Then, the comparison was employed to deeply investigate students' common errors that they made in both phases. Students' written performance helps to ensure their understanding and readiness of using the learned structural rules.

For ethical considerations, the participants were informed that their identification in the current study would be anonymous. To make sure that the results came from the participants, the author focused only on gerund and infinitive forms of their writing. While analyzing students' writing, the author relied only on the linguistic structures that the students learned during the lectures. To double check, the researcher used two phases and compared their writing by looking at their written paragraphs in the first and second phases.

4. Results

Q1. What types of errors related to gerundial and infinitival forms were identified in EFL learners' writing?

4.1 Collection of Samples of Learners' Common Errors as Groups

To examine EFL learners' understanding of gerund and infinitive forms, the most frequent errors that learners kept making were identified. Table 2 presented several examples of learners' incorrect usage of gerunds.

Table 2. Examples of learners' errors in group writing

Examples	Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Functions
1	We go to shopping	We go shopping	Using Go+ V-ing (if the speaker talks about activities)
2	Taking care of you help and have enough sleep is important	Taking care of yourself is important	Using gerund as a subject
3	The snow was covering all the places	-----	Using gerund instead of past progressive
4	Dancing with our dear friend at the party.	-----	Writing a complete sentence

The results showed learners' failed attempts to use gerund forms. Example 1 in table 2 showed how learners tried to use one of the rules that they learned during the classes, which was using gerunds after the verb *go* in case of learners would like to express and talk about activities, such as go hiking. Learners added *to* before the gerund form, such as *go to shopping* instead of *go shopping*. Another common error that made by some groups was using gerunds as progressive tenses. For example, one group kept using past progressive from the beginning of the paragraph until the end without using even one example of gerunds appropriately. This indicated that they still could not differentiate between the progressive tenses and gerund form. The full paragraph of the group who applied gerund as the past progressive was shown in excerpt 1 as follows:

Last year, I traveled to Tabuk and many events happened. One of them was when the snow started to fall. Then, me and my family decided to go to a place where the snow was covering all the places. Before we arrive, the drivers were driving slowly because the snow was covering all the roads. When we arrived, the view was magnificent so much that we felt like our breath were taken. We were freezing but we were enjoying.

4.2 Collection of Samples of Learners' Common Errors as Individual Writing

To examine individual learners' common errors, the focus was on the errors that made in the midterm examination. The data revealed that learners tried to focus on the requirement in the examination, which was using gerundial and infinitival aspects by writing about *Ramadan*.

Table 3. Examples of common errors in individual writing

Examples	Incorrect Form	Correct Form	Functions
1	I <u>am cooking</u> my favorite dishes and my family's favorite food.	-----	Present progressive not gerund
2	I <u>enjoyed to eating</u> .	I enjoyed eating.	Using enjoy+ gerund form
3	We were <u>enjoy about going</u> the mosque.	We enjoy going to the mosque.	Using enjoy+ gerund form
4	We <u>enjoy of playing</u>	We enjoy playing	Using enjoy+ gerund form
5	I want reading	I like reading/ I want to read	Using like + gerund or Using want + infinitive

In individual writing, most learners used gerund form as progressive tenses as shown in example 1 table 3. The second error was that some students added prepositions including *about*, *of*, and *to* after the verb *enjoy* as shown in examples 2, 3, and 4 in table 3. It seemed that learners knew that *enjoy* was one of the common verbs that precede gerund, but they still need time to use it accurately. In example 5, some students understood that gerund is a noun, such as *reading*, but they failed to use it properly. The data, in individual writing, showed that most learners' errors were related to gerund complement; they had an issue mastering and using gerunds accurately.

Q2. What are the frequent rules of gerund and infinitive that EFL learners used in their writing?

4.3 Collection of Samples of Frequent Gerund and Infinitive Functions Made by Groups

In groups, the data indicated that most learners preferred writing short sentences and avoided using complex ones. Although students were working in groups, they wrote short paragraphs from 8 to 10 sentences or less. It seemed that their focus was how to apply gerunds and infinitives accurately in their writing by adhering to specific rules related to those concepts. Regardless of any other errors, in the following table, there are examples of the accurate usage of gerund and infinitive forms produced by learners as shown below:

Table 4. Samples of proper usage of gerund and infinitive functions written by groups

Groups	Gerund	Infinitive
1	We <u>enjoy traveling</u> to new places.	We always remember <u>to take</u> a souvenir from the city we visited.
2	<u>Having a vacation</u> means you have free time to do anything you want.	To enjoy your vacation make sure <u>to go</u> with a group <u>to have</u> activities with.
3	We will <u>go fishing</u> at 6:00 o'clock.	I am <u>happy to say</u> that
4	People <u>enjoy celebrating</u> holidays.	For some people, they <u>like to travel</u> around, where others like to stay in towns.
5	We <u>go watching</u> a movie at the cinema.	I and my friend plan <u>to go</u> to Riyadh in the morning.
6	We <u>enjoyed going</u> to the beach and having a good time with our family.	My mother <u>asked me to buy</u> some food for my little brother.

To use gerund form, the data reflected the common ways that students applied in their writing as groups. First, most students used the verb *enjoy* to produce gerund sentences as shown in table 4. Second, students stuck to the verb *go* to make sure that their performance of using gerunds was in an appropriate way. Third, learners used gerund as a subject, which was one of the rules that students felt confident to ensure that they wrote accurately.

For using infinitives, it seemed that students knew the form of infinitives, and they used it properly to deliver the intended meaning. Most groups stuck with specific rules that were presented in their textbook to make sure that they produced proper sentences as shown in table 4. First, they used the form of verb +pronouns +infinitive verb such as *asked me to buy*. Second, some groups used *like* with infinitive, such as *like to travel* and *like to spend*. Also, they mostly used infinitive verbs after adjectives, such as *I am happy to say*.

One of the common verbs that learners used to produce accurate infinitive form was *decide*. However, some groups tried to overuse the verb *decide* in many sentences to avoid making mistakes like excerpt 1 below:

At the summer vacation, me and my family decided to go to Makkah. On the road suddenly my dad decided to stop to help the old man. When my dad was helping the old man, me and my little brother went out of the car to watch the camels. After the long road, we ended up arriving to Makkah. Before going to the hotel, we decided to have dinner. The thing I love most about Makkah is having Omrah and enjoying my family's company.

Another groups tried to stick mostly with specific grammatical rules of gerund and infinitive. Excerpt 2 below indicated how much this group tried to be careful to use gerund and infinitive rules accurately by overusing gerund and infinitive as matrix subjects:

Having a vacation means you have free time to do anything you want, like traveling. To travel you have to prepare many things, like booking flights and hotels and so on. To enjoy your vacation make sure to go with a group to have activities with. And make sure to have schedule so you do not have to waste your time thinking where to go. Taking care of you help and have enough sleep is important so you do not ruin your vacation. Spending your money you feel better, but also you have to be wise where to spend your money. Finally, remember that vacation helps forget life's stresses and have fun.

It seemed that using infinitive was easier for students because they properly used infinitive sentences more than gerund form. The example above reflected that this group used infinitive verbs accurately more than gerund forms although their attempts to use gerund in several sentences.

4.4 Collection of Samples of Frequent Gerund and Infinitive Functions Made by Individuals

In individual writing, most learners preferred to overuse several structural rules of gerund, such as using gerund as a subject as shown in example 1 in table 5 below. They also memorized specific common verbs that precede gerunds such as *go* and *enjoy*. However, several students rarely tried to use other rules that they learned, such as using prepositions with gerunds. Example 4 showed how a learner tried to use prepositions with gerunds, such as *I think about traveling*; she used think about+ gerund form *traveling*. Obviously, some students successfully used

parallel structure while properly using gerunds as in example 5 in table 5. The following table presented individual learners' examples:

Table 5. Correct sentences of using gerund form written by individuals

	Gerund	Grammatical Structural
1	<u>Fasting</u> is healthy.	Using gerund as a subject
2	We <u>go watching</u> TV.	Using gerund in specific expression: go+gerund form (talking about activities)
3	We <u>enjoyed playing</u> with him.	Using common verbs that followed by gerund form: enjoy+ gerund form
4	I <u>think about traveling</u> to Jeddah.	Using gerund form as the object of preposition
5	We <u>go walking and doing</u> exercise.	Parallel by Using gerund in specific expression: go+gerund form (talking about activities)

As learners have been asked to use gerunds in their individual writing, they also have been asked to use infinitive forms at the same time. Most students used adjectives followed by infinitive verbs *adjective +to with the infinitive verb* to ensure producing proper form as shown in example 1 in table 6. Also, there are common verbs such as *like*, *hate*, and *begin* that can be used with both forms gerund and infinitive without changing the meaning; but most students preferred to use the infinitive form more than gerund. Rarely, students used infinitive of purpose in order to+ infinitive verb, such as *I wake up early in order to prepare ourselves*. Regardless the other grammatical errors, the student used properly and confidently the infinitival aspect in the produced sentences. The following table presented further examples of individual learners' writing:

Table 6. Correct sentences of using infinitive form written by individuals

	Infinitive	Grammatical Structural
1	I <u>am happy to have</u> this month.	Using adjective+ to with infinitive verb
2	We <u>decided to call</u> our family.	Using common verbs that followed by infinitive verbs: decide+ to with infinitive verb
3	We <u>ask my mother to taste</u> the dishes that we have made.	Using common verbs that followed by nouns and infinitive verbs: verbs+nouns+infinitive verbs
4	I <u>like to be</u> with my family	Using common verbs that followed by gerund or infinitive without changing the meaning

In conclusion, the comparison between learners' individual writing and as groups indicated that learners made the same errors in both phases. First, the data revealed that students used gerund form inaccurately more than infinitive form. Also, students stuck only to specific rules and common verbs in their individual and group writing. Their usage of several verbs indicated that their preference was producing accurate sentences more than taking a risk to try other verbs that precede gerund and infinitive. In other words, there was no difference between students' writing individually and their writing as groups. Even the discussion that occurred in the second phase had no impact on their writing.

5. Discussion

The data presented major concerns regarding EFL learners' implantation of gerund and infinitive rules on their writing. First, they wrote short sentences in both phases. This is consistent with Long (2020) who stated that "EFL students might rely on shorter sentence structures and simplified syntax" (p. 443). Second, students were confused because of their trials to use both gerund and infinitive forms and hardly "...remembering which verb triggers which construction may simply be overwhelming for [them]" (Schwartz & Causarano, 2007, p. 53). Third, students cared about their grades; this led students to overuse several common verbs without paying much attention to other linguistic aspects that might affect the intended meaning. Sticking with specific common verbs might let learners stay in their comfort zone without taking the risk to use other verbs in their production.

Further, the data indicated that the utility of gerund forms is one of the complicated aspects of the English language compared to infinitive forms. This result is consistent with Keawchaum and Pongpaioj (2017) who assured that Thai learners learned and applied infinitive verbs properly before using gerund accurately. Although students were exposed to different common verbs that precede both infinitive and gerund, students still were not able to use them confidently and accurately. This result is consistent with Abdullah and Hameed's (2019) results who found that EFL students "...are unaware of how to make a distinction between the types of the infinitival and gerundial

constructions” (p. 508).

6. Conclusion, Limitation, and Recommendations

This research investigated the common errors produced by undergraduate students. They wrote a paragraph individually in the first phase and then worked as groups in the following phase. The findings have not shown any differences in students’ errors in their writing neither as groups nor individually. In both cases, learners tried to write accurate sentences by focusing only on specific common verbs that precede gerunds and infinitives such as decide, like, go, and enjoy. They did not take the courage to use other verbs that were listed in their textbook because their purpose was to achieve high grades in the midterm examination.

Based on the results, the author recommended English teachers teach gerund and infinitive forms separately to avoid confusion among EFL learners. Also, teachers and lecturers should integrate English skills, specifically writing skills in grammar courses. Teachers should provide feedback and more explanation to learners to identify their errors. Also, learners need to analyze more texts, as an activity in classrooms, to expose and notice the proper usage of the grammatical rules in different contexts. According to Nguyen, Nguyen, and Phan (2021), the problem is that the lack of spending real time practicing writing in classrooms hinders learners’ achievement of writing development. The author also further recommended using real projects and activities more than artificial tasks for developing students’ implementation and understating gerund and infinitive forms. For further research, researchers can integrate interview sessions to understand students’ perceptions toward learning gerund and infinitive forms. However, the limitation of this study that needs to be considered as all participants of this study were chosen only from the female section; thus, strong claims cannot be made from the results. Consequently, it is better to conduct further research studies on male and female students to be able to generalize the results of the research.

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