

## Revisiting Gerunds and Present Participles: A Structured Literature Review of English -ing Forms

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### ABSTRACT

The English -ing form has long challenged grammatical description because it appears in structures that function nominally, verbally, and adjectivally. In pedagogical grammar, this multifunctionality is commonly simplified through the distinction between gerunds and present participles. However, previous studies have shown that such a binary explanation often fails to account for the syntactic, semantic, and discourse-based variability of -ing constructions in authentic language use. Despite this, theoretical discussions of grammatical variation and pedagogical studies of learner difficulty have often remained disconnected. This study aimed to synthesize scholarship on gerunds and present participles, evaluate the analytical usefulness of the traditional distinction, and identify implications for grammar teaching in EFL/ESL contexts. The study employed a structured literature review design informed by systematic searching, screening, eligibility checking, and synthesis procedures. The data consisted of secondary sources, primarily peer-reviewed journal articles, supplemented by selected scholarly books and book chapters. Data were collected from Google Scholar, institutional repositories, and journal publisher platforms using keywords related to gerunds, present participles, -ing forms, and learner difficulties. The selected studies were analyzed through directed qualitative content analysis by coding and grouping findings into recurring categories such as syntactic function, semantic role, formal distribution, overlap, and pedagogical implications. The findings indicate that the distinction between gerunds and present participles remains analytically useful, but it should not be treated as a rigid binary category. Instead, -ing forms are better understood through distributional and contextual analysis. The review also shows that learners frequently struggle with these forms, suggesting the need for more contextualized, corpus-informed, and function-based grammar instruction.

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### Introduction

The English -ing form has long posed a descriptive challenge because the same morphology appears in structures that function nominally, verbally, and adjectivally. In pedagogical grammar, this multifunctionality is commonly simplified through the

distinction between gerund and present participle, a rule that is practical for classroom use but not always sufficient for explaining authentic usage (De Smet & Heyvaert, 2011). More recent linguistic work suggests that the interpretation of -ing forms depends not only on surface morphology but also on syntactic position, semantic construal, and the construction in which the form occurs (Duffley, 2000; Heyvaert et al., 2019).

Research on English gerunds has shown that these forms do not behave as a uniform category. Corpus-based analyses indicate that nominal and verbal gerunds differ in aspectual and referential tendencies, yet the boundary between them is gradient rather than absolute (Fonteyn et al., 2015). Likewise, studies of non-finite complementation demonstrate that gerund-participle constructions can encode variable temporal and control relations depending on the governing verb, which further weakens rigid binary explanations of -ing forms (Duffley & Arseneau, 2012; Duffley, 2000).

This descriptive complexity is also visible in EFL learning contexts. In Indonesia, Wael et al. (2024) reported that university students still showed very poor ability to distinguish present participles from gerunds, while Nuzirwan et al. (2019) found errors across all tested gerund types, with the highest proportion occurring in gerunds used as direct objects of certain verbs. These findings suggest that learners often struggle not merely because they forget rules, but because the formal similarity of -ing constructions obscures differences in function and meaning.

In summary, these studies indicate a persistent gap between simplified classroom explanations and the multifunctional behavior of -ing forms described in contemporary linguistic research. However, theoretical discussions of semantic and syntactic variation are often separated from pedagogical studies of learner difficulty, making it harder to see how grammatical description, authentic usage, and classroom practice can inform one another. This literature review therefore seeks to synthesize scholarship on gerunds and present participles, evaluate how far the traditional distinction remains analytically useful, and identify pedagogical implications for grammar teaching in EFL/ESL contexts.

## Method

This study employed a structured literature review design to synthesize conceptual and empirical scholarship on the distinction between gerunds and present participles in English grammar. A literature review was appropriate because the study aimed to consolidate dispersed findings, identify recurring patterns, and clarify unresolved issues within an established body of linguistic scholarship (Snyder, 2019). To strengthen transparency, the review was conducted through systematic searching, screening, eligibility checking, and synthesis procedures. The reporting process was also informed by the PRISMA 2020 framework to make the stages of identification, selection, and inclusion more explicit (Page et al., 2021).

The data consisted entirely of secondary sources discussing English -ing forms, particularly gerunds, present participles, and related non-finite constructions. The corpus primarily included peer-reviewed journal articles, while scholarly books and book chapters were consulted selectively to clarify foundational grammatical concepts

when necessary. The sources were retrieved through Google Scholar, institutional repositories, and journal publisher platforms. Priority was given to scholarly and traceable publications with complete bibliographic information, clear authorship, and direct relevance to the research focus.

Clear inclusion and exclusion criteria were established to maintain the relevance and rigor of the review. Studies were included when they: (1) were published in English between 2015 and 2025; (2) focused explicitly on gerunds, present participles, -ing forms, or closely related syntactic and semantic issues; and (3) provided conceptual, descriptive, or empirical discussion relevant to distinguishing the two forms. Earlier seminal works were retained only when they were necessary to explain foundational grammatical concepts. Studies were excluded if they were duplicate records, non-scholarly web materials, opinion pieces, classroom blogs, or publications lacking sufficient bibliographic reliability. The use of explicit eligibility criteria was important for reducing selection bias and improving review transparency (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The data collection process was carried out in several stages. First, the researcher formulated keyword combinations such as “gerund,” “present participle,” “-ing forms,” “non-finite verb forms,” “gerund vs present participle,” and “learner difficulties in -ing forms.” Second, titles and abstracts were screened to remove irrelevant publications. Third, the full texts of potentially relevant studies were read to determine whether they met the eligibility criteria and contributed meaningfully to the review objectives. Finally, the reference lists of selected studies were examined to identify additional relevant sources through backward citation searching. This multi-stage procedure followed established guidance for rigorous literature reviews (Xiao & Watson, 2019).

The selected documents were analyzed using directed qualitative content analysis. This approach was appropriate because the review was guided by prior grammatical categories and aimed to examine how previous studies conceptualized and differentiated gerunds and present participles (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). Following the procedures of qualitative content analysis, the analysis moved through the stages of preparation, organization, and reporting. During the preparation stage, each text was read repeatedly to establish familiarity with its arguments and terminology. During the organization stage, relevant excerpts were coded and grouped into recurring categories, such as syntactic function, semantic role, formal distribution, areas of overlap, and pedagogical implications. During the reporting stage, the coded categories were compared across sources to identify convergent perspectives, divergent interpretations, and unresolved debates. Because the dataset consisted of published documents, the analysis also drew on the principles of document analysis, which treat texts as contextualized sources of evidence rather than neutral containers of information. To enhance analytic transparency, the synthesis followed the processes of decontextualization, recontextualization, categorization, and compilation.

The trustworthiness of the review was strengthened through several strategies. First, only scholarly and traceable publications were retained in the final dataset. Second, the study applied consistent search terms and explicit eligibility criteria throughout the review process. Third, the researcher documented the screening and coding procedures to maintain analytic consistency and provide a transparent audit trail.

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Fourth, the emerging categories were repeatedly checked against the original texts to ensure that the interpretations remained grounded in the reviewed documents. These procedures are consistent with recommendations for transparent literature reviews and trustworthy qualitative content analysis.

## Results

The reviewed literature consistently indicates that English -ing forms cannot be adequately described through a rigid one-to-one distinction between gerunds and present participles. Instead, the evidence shows that their classification is shaped by distribution, syntactic environment, and discourse function. In a corpus-based study of contemporary English fiction, Šimůnková (2018) found that when -ing forms function as adverbials, present participles occur more frequently than gerunds. This finding is important because it demonstrates that formally identical -ing constructions do not behave uniformly in actual usage. The reviewed studies therefore suggest that the distinction between gerunds and present participles remains descriptively useful, but only when it is grounded in authentic language data rather than in simplified rule-based explanations.

A second major finding concerns the hybrid grammatical status of -ing forms. The literature shows that gerunds, in particular, often combine nominal and verbal properties, making them resistant to categorical treatment as pure nouns. Jufrizal and Refnita (2021) argue that English gerunds display both nominalization and verbalization, and that they may carry the internal properties of a verb phrase while being distributed like noun phrases in sentences. This interpretation is compatible with Lowe's (2020) discussion of mixed projections, which emphasizes that some structures display properties of more than one syntactic category and therefore require analysis based on distributional behavior rather than on fixed lexical labels alone. Taken together, these studies indicate that the relationship between gerunds and present participles is better understood as a case of grammatical overlap and category interaction than as a fully discrete binary opposition.

The reviewed literature also reveals that the distinction remains pedagogically difficult for EFL learners. In an Indonesian university context, Akib and Ohorella (2019) found that students' ability to use gerund and present participle constructions was poor and linked this difficulty partly to the shared -ing form and limited functional understanding. Similarly, Puspitasari and Pambayun (2023) reported that students' ability to distinguish gerunds from present participles was still below expectation. Related evidence from Irawan & Syafi'I (2021) further shows that learners frequently make errors in present participle use, with misformation emerging as the most common error type. Across these studies, learner difficulty does not appear to stem merely from insufficient memorization, but from the interaction of formal similarity, functional ambiguity, and inadequate exposure to contextualized usage.

## Discussion

The findings suggest that traditional grammar explanations often oversimplify the behavior of English -ing forms. Treating gerunds as nouns and present participles as

adjectives or verb forms may be useful as an introductory pedagogical shortcut, but such a binary explanation underrepresents the structural flexibility documented in corpus-based and syntactic research. The corpus evidence presented by Šimůnková (2018) is especially important because it shows that adverbial -ing constructions pattern more strongly with participial functions in real texts, which means that textbook descriptions need to be tested against authentic usage. In this respect, the reviewed literature supports a more descriptive and usage-based orientation to English grammar analysis.

At the same time, the literature does not support abandoning the distinction altogether. Rather, it suggests that the distinction should be reformulated through distributional and contextual criteria. Lowe's (2020) distributionalist perspective is particularly useful here because it explains why mixed-category structures cannot be identified reliably through semantic labels alone. Likewise, Jufrizal and Refnita (2021) show that gerunds may behave simultaneously like nouns and verbs, which confirms that the issue lies not in whether categories exist, but in how category boundaries are diagnosed. A more accurate framework, therefore, is one that preserves the analytical distinction between gerunds and present participles while recognizing that actual instances may show gradient or overlapping properties depending on syntactic position and discourse context.

These findings also carry important pedagogical implications. Because learners struggle with -ing forms when instruction is limited to decontextualized definitions, grammar teaching should incorporate contextualized examples, register-sensitive explanation, and corpus-informed materials. This recommendation is supported by Rodríguez-Fuentes and Swatek (2022), who found that both learner groups improved in grammatical construction knowledge, but that the effect was larger for the corpus-informed materials group. In the Indonesian context, Oktavianti et al. (2023) likewise found that students responded positively to corpus-informed grammar materials because such materials helped them notice register-specific and frequency-based information that is often absent from traditional grammar presentation. Therefore, these studies suggest that effective instruction on gerunds and present participles should move beyond memorized formulae toward guided analysis of authentic language patterns.

Finally, the reviewed literature indicates that future research should integrate formal grammar, corpus linguistics, and EFL pedagogy more systematically. Much of the existing work either focuses on the theoretical status of -ing forms or documents learner difficulty, but relatively few studies connect both concerns within a single research design. More cross-register corpus studies, learner-corpus analyses, and classroom-based investigations are therefore needed to clarify how -ing forms operate across authentic discourse contexts and how these patterns can be translated into more effective grammar instruction. Such work would strengthen both the descriptive adequacy and the pedagogical relevance of research on gerunds and present participles.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review concludes that the distinction between gerunds and present participles remains analytically meaningful, but it cannot be treated as a rigid binary category. The reviewed studies show that English -ing forms are better understood

through their syntactic distribution, semantic role, and discourse context, since many instances display overlapping nominal and verbal properties. The findings also indicate that this grammatical complexity has clear pedagogical consequences, especially in EFL settings where learners often struggle to differentiate the two forms because of their formal similarity and insufficient exposure to contextualized usage. Accordingly, the study implies that grammar instruction should move beyond simplified rule memorization and instead incorporate authentic examples, corpus-informed explanation, and function-based analysis so that learners can interpret -ing forms more accurately in real discourse.

At the same time, this study has several limitations. As a structured literature review, it relied exclusively on secondary sources and therefore did not generate primary empirical evidence from classroom observation, learner corpora, or experimental teaching practice. In addition, the review was limited to traceable English-language publications within a defined publication range, which means that some relevant studies outside these boundaries may not have been captured. Future research should therefore examine gerunds and present participles through cross-register corpus analysis, learner-corpus investigation, and classroom-based intervention studies to clarify how these forms function in authentic language use and how they can be taught more effectively. Further studies are also recommended to explore how corpus-informed and context-sensitive instruction can improve learners' grammatical awareness and reduce persistent confusion surrounding English -ing constructions.

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