A Cultural Exploration behind Teaching Participles in English

Chung-Hsien Hsu and Chen-hua Hsueh

Abstract—**Participle learning in English seems still to confuse the college students whose first language is Chinese (or Mandarin). The School English Standard Test (SEST) for spring term in 2015 at a university of technology in central Taiwan indicates a lower percentage of correction in answering participle-adjective questions, comparing to the other grammars in English learning.**

In order to explore about what difficulties that college students have encountered in learning participles, the authors designed a quiz with eight sets of English present and past participle questions, along with Chinese translations to test 636 in-school college students. The findings show some participles in the quiz, such as boring/bore, were not correctly or clearly used in sentences. In particular, the percentage of incorrect use of boring/bored is significantly higher than the correct one, even most of the participants are at intermediate or higher intermediate of English level.

Many previous studies have focused on the inquisition of participles in teaching; however few studies have discussed why learners still fail to correctly use them after learning English for a certain period of time. This study, according to the results of this designed quiz, attempts to explore the possible factors leading to the results as well as provides the analyses for English instructors or public school English teachers to more effectively improve their teaching in English participles.

Index Terms—**Chinese learning, cultural difference, language teaching, participle grammar.**

I   INTRODUCTION

The results of School English Standard Test (SEST) for spring term in 2015 surprised the teachers in the language center at a technology university in Taiwan (See Appendix A). The correct answer selection on participle-adjective part reveals lower percentage in comparison with the other grammar part. And particularly, the percentages of correct answer from elementary and intermediate students are close. (See Figure 1 for details.)

Fig. 1. Students' performance of present participle in SEST

The results are confusing the teachers in language center. Therefore, the authors conducted a study to find out the factors which might have affected students' learning in English participles. Eight sets of questions with English and Chinese translations and the extra two questions for qualitative analysis (Quiz of English Participles: QEP) (See

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Appendix B) are given to 636 college students including intermediate and higher intermediate students.

The findings of this study reveal the gaps between languages usually originate from the cultural consideration behind languages difference. In this study, the researchers mainly find two of the frequently used participle-adjectives, bored / boring, and tired / tiring, show significant influences from Chinese after data analysis. Almost all of the participants do not correctly apply bored or boring in appropriate situations. In contrast, the participants make the least mistakes on using tired or tiring.

In addition, English learning has been able to happen everywhere nowadays. Media and the Internet might have replaced the roles which have traditionally played by means of language tape recorders, radios with language programs listened by learners at some certain times, or CD players. Most students in non-native contexts can globally and easily get online and acquire access to English learning resources, such as YouTube or various websites. They can watch various shows, films, news, sports channels or documentaries anytime and anywhere. However, this study finds that non-native language learners might be affected negatively if the resource of learning gives the incorrect language knowledge or information.

II   THEORY & LITERATURE REVIEW

Linguistics theories (Chomsky, 1975; Pinker, 1994; Baker, 2001) have proposed the language learning must have tightly connected to culture; however, the truth regarding to culture and language, which have researched or found by linguists, might be still rough and limited because there are so many languages and cultures in the world [1]-[3]. Baker (2001) stated the important relationship between language and culture in his book, *The Atoms of Language: The Mind's Hidden Rules of Grammar*:

"Language is intimately tied to culture, and the question of the commensurability of languages is related to the question of the commensurability of cultures. Many scholars and many ordinary people believe intuitively that much of our higher thought processes as well as our culture is intertwined with our language. Just what these interrelationships are is very difficult to tease apart, there is no doubt that much of our conscious thought and cultural knowledge is framed in the medium of Language" (17) [3]. Kramsch (2000) also defines the close relationship between language and culture in her book.

"Culture is the product of socially and historically situated discourse communities that are to a large content imagined

communities, created and shaped by language" (10) [4]. "Cultural meaning is created through the actions and interactions of speakers in social contexts" (25) [4]. English grammar acquisition in a non-native social context is a complicated and internalized process. The previous studies have broadened the scope of English grammar study; however, the research on how to facilitate ESL learners, particularly for college students, to internalize their explicit grammatical knowledge into their grammatical competence in non-native context is still limited. In accordance with the study regarding of Chinese cultural exploration behind the learning of English passive voice (Hsueh & Hsu, 2015), the affected impression from the words or phrases of Chinese translation is naturally employed in English learning [5]. The established complex impression in Chinese different from English syntax likely leads to grammatical mistakes in English learning (Hsueh & Hsu, 2015) [5].

In fact, the expectation for non-native students' full fluency and competence in English is impossible to fulfill (Sun, 2014) [6]. It's because there are still potential or even unknown factors related to culture, environment or traditions in first language which might affect English as second language (ESL) students' English learning.

As to English participle learning, Cao (2013) discusses about that English proficiency does not seem to be a factor which determines the correct use of the participles. English participle learning involves voice, aspect, the transformed part of speech and the like. Otherwise, Cao also mentions that dangling participles are more extreme and evident examples accounting for the complication of learning participles [7]. Cao thinks dangling participles originate from the error of grammar; however, many dangling constructions have already been viewed as fixed structures without restriction of the subject in main clause. For instance, it is commonly found in English writing, such as Considering…, Judging from…, According to…, and Generally speaking, so on (Cao, 2013) [7]. Therefore, for non-native learners, learning of English participles might have existed more other potential difficulties than those which from their own culture influence.

Grammar teaching must be associated with ESL instructors' teaching. Some ESL instructors emphasize English grammar is the basis of English proficiency (Wang, 2010) [8]. In contrast, some others insist on creating context for target language learning, instead of focusing on grammar learning (Gao, 1997; He, 2013; Zhang & Fan &Du, 2013) [9]-[11]. Both groups of instructors pay their attention to different directions of teaching; however, they both are concerned about how to help ESL learners narrow the gap between their grammatical knowledge and grammatical competence to make more practical and effective communication in English.

III METHOD

Following the similar study (Hsueh & Hsu, 2015) regarding to figure out college students' grammar learning difficulties, this current research is to investigate and perceive the possible factors which have affected the college students' English grammar learning in participles. According to the statistics from the regular test launched by the Language Center of the technology university every academic school year (See Appendix A), the outcome of the test in 2015 indicated that higher English level test takers made the close ratio of mistake as the lower levels in answering the questions related to English participle. To search for the reasons accounted for the outcome, the authors conducted a research design composed of a set of grammar questions and one qualitative question.

A Research Design

This quiz in this study is composed of eight sets of English sentences and two qualitative research questions (QEP). Each of the eight questions includes one Chinese sentence and two English translations with present and past participles. The subjects need to finish the quiz in about three minutes. 636 in-school students at a technology university in a central part of Taiwan took part in this study. The participants' English levels had been sorted by taking a regular school comprehensive English proficiency test from intermediate level to higher intermediate one after they registered to enter the college. In addition, two simple qualitative questions are added to QEP in order to further understand how they have learned about English participles. This study featured a mixed research instruments which adopted partial qualitative research questions and simple percentage distribution revealing the analysis results.

B Research Questions

The authors design eight sets of sentences as questions (QEP) and two extra qualitative questions to examine and understand what difficulties the students have faced in learning English participles. These sentences utilize several present and past participles, such as interested / interesting, scared / scaring, surprised / surprising, and bored / boring, frequently showing in most of the assigned textbooks or daily conversation (See Appendix B). After selecting the sentences, the participants need to respond whether English participle grammar is difficult to them. If the answer is yes, they are required to answer a further question as to what difficulties in learning English participle they have encountered. In the last question, Q10, three options are provided in this question to select: (1) I am not clear about English Participles. (2) I am used to sensing English participles through Chinese. (3) Others. All of the ten questions referring to English participle are designed on purpose to investigate how cultural awareness behind Chinese language has been perceived and has influenced students' English participle grammar learning.

C Data Collection

636 subjects from two English levels, intermediate level and higher intermediate ones, were randomly invited to answer the set of questions designed for this study. 596 out of them answered the qualitative research questions by printed copies in person, during their regular English class time. Data collection was completed in about four weeks.

IV RESULTS

The results of this study indicate some particular points very different from the results of previous researches related

to English grammar learning field. According to the findings from this study, the data analysis indicates that the ratios of correct sentence selection and incorrect ones on Question 1, 3, 8 are similar. (the participles used in Q1: interested / interesting; Q3: worried / worrying; Q8: excited / exciting) The correct checks are higher than 400, while the incorrect checks are lower than 200. There are clearer differences in Q4 and Q6. Most of the subjects made correct checks. 471 correct checks and 156 incorrect ones show in Q4; 522 correct checks show in Q6, compared to 106 incorrect ones. (Q4: surprised / surprising; Q6: tired / tiring) There are fewer differences between the correct checks and the incorrect checks in Q2 and Q7. (Q2: scared / scaring; Q7: confused / confusing) However, the only ratio in Q5 is opposite to the rest of questions. In Q5, the correct sentence selection is significantly lower than the incorrect one, 267:362. (Q5: bored / boring) This is a special finding various from the other ones. In addition, the gap of ration between the sentences in Q6 might explain something that needs searching out.

The qualitative questions, Q9 & Q10, provided perspectives as to the difficulties the participants have faced. 212 checked on Yes-box, but 384 checked on No-box. 138 selected the first difficulty, 243 selected the second difficulty and 48 gave a check on the third one. 31 participants skipped the Yes / No boxes, and gave a check on the second difficulty.

TABLE I: THE RESULT OF QEP

*No.	participles used	Number of correct check	Number of incorrect check
1	interested / interesting	448	181
2	scared / scaring	374	256
3	worried / worrying	441	187
4	surprised / surprising	471	156
5	**bored / boring**	**267**	**362**
6	tired / tiring	522	106
7	confused / confusing	394	233
8	excited / exciting	456	173

Note: 1: *No.: number of questions
2: The total number of participants is about 636.

A   The Findings with Significant Differences

First, the Figure 1 shows that most of the participants selected the correct sentences among the ten questions. Almost more than 400 students can give the correct checks on eight out of the ten questions. However, the finding in Question five (Q5) is significantly different from the others. The sentences in Q5 are designed to examine whether the students can correctly use the two participles, bored and boring. The finding reveals the incorrect checks are more than the correct ones. In another word, 362 students considered the sentence, "I am boring." as a correct expression. With this significant difference, here is a reasonable confusion about the special finding: why did these test takers consider the rest of the past participles in QEP as appropriate adjectives of describing people's emotions, while they choose "boring" (present participle) to express how people feel? There might be two observable reasons related to the translation of Chinese, likely to support the finding.

B   Data Analysis

(1) Comparing to the other nine sets of sentences with participles, the authors found that the English participles, including present and past ones, specifically correspond to Chinese translation. For example, the definition of "interested" in Chinese is "感興趣的," and "interesting" means "有趣的" in Q1; in Q2, "scared" in Chinese is "感到恐懼的," and "scaring" means "令人震驚的." The rest of the examples, except the participles in Q5, are corresponding to and translated into different definitions in Chinese.

By contrast with the other participles in QEP, the participles in Q5, bored or boring, can, in general, only be translated and corresponded to the same definition in Chinese: "無聊的." In Chinese language, people or everything in our daily life could be described by the adjective, "無聊的." Being bored or being boring are intuitively no difference to be used in Chinese context. It might be one of the most possible reasons explaining why Chinese students have paid less attention to distinguish the different use between the two adjective participles, boring and bored, in English.

(2) However, the other confusion following the first data analysis is why these participants chose "boring" instead of "bored" as the appropriate answer to the question if bored or boring can only be translated and corresponded to the same definition in Chinese: "無聊的." The authors invited two of the instructors whose students had attained the study to ask their students in class about why most of them selected boring instead of bored. The two instructors reported that almost all of the students answered they have been used to speaking "boring" but not "bored" because boring is heard very often in our social context in daily life. They do not even need to check if boring is correctly used or not and that is why there is no doubt about selecting boring as the most possible option.

In terms of these participants' responses, the authors consider proposing another assumption that frequently used English words or phrases might have influenced students' participle learning currently. In order to find out whether the inference could be close to the truth, the authors are going to conduct another miner test. But it will not be discussed in this study.

(3) Compared to the rest of questions, the answers from Q6 showed the lowest percentage of mistake. The result indicates that only one sixth of the test takers did not have clear ideas about the participles, tired / tiring. In fact, as the authors mention, one of the most possible reasons refers to the translations which correspond to each individual Chinese connotation. "Tired" goes to the meaning in Chinese, "疲累的" (feeling fatigued), whereas, "tiring" goes to "厭煩的" or "累人的" (being fed up with / being tired of).

(4) In addition, through observation and talk with the students on Chinese campus, "tiring" can be spoken or applied to English conversation practice in a low rate. For example, if we try to start a dialogue with a student on campus, we usually greet them "How are you doing?" The student may respond in "fine / OK, but tired." They may keep

the followings "I am tired because…; or … makes me tired." Therefore, it can be simply assumed that students are not familiar with using "tiring" because, first, they might have less need of using it in daily life, and second, if they say "I am tired of doing….," interestingly, this sentence with "tired" also express they might have fed up with doing something recently. The two factors have been observed and reported by two ESL instructors who have helped collect data for this study. The observation and greeting on purpose might likely explain the results showing in Q6.

(5) In addition, the findings of the qualitative study reveal the potential difficulties that the learners have had. 384 out of 596 report no problem with English participle grammar; however, the number does not account for possibly actual situations because the finding from Q5 might have explained the reasons why the learners with higher intermediate English level can still give a right check on the incorrect sentence, "I am boring." even after more than six or seven years of English grammar learning (from grade 7 to grade 12, at least). That is, some of the learners feel competent in using participles, but in fact, they are not that good at this grammar. To some extent, the students' language learning might have been unconsciously affected by their mother tongue, Chinese, addition to the lack of clear knowledge or enough practice in English participle grammar.

138 learners have very limited knowledge about English participles. 243 learners could not decide which type of participles (V-ing or V-ed) can be chosen to express in an appropriate situation. 48 of them report individual learning experiences, but most of their comments only address the trouble similar to the first difficulty in the quiz.

Moreover, 243 participants give a check on the second difficulty, include (1) some skip the Yes-No-boxes, (2) some also give a check on the first difficulty, and (3) some are still not confident enough to employ other participles which are not selected to show in this quiz, in spite of having given a check on No-box. The third finding also matches the data analysis above and in Q5. In another word, most the Chinese ESL learners or instructors might have paid less attention to the cultural differences behind Chinese and English.

V CONCLUSION & SUGGESTION

A Conclusion

This research tries to find out the possible or relevant reasons why English participle is still confusing to Chinese ESL learners in a university in Taiwan. In accordance with the results from collecting and analyzing the data in this study, the researchers can conclude two specific factors and one presumption of fact related to cultural context leading English participle learning to less accuracy in using some participles. These factors regarding cultures include correspondence of translation and language difference (V-ed / V-ing). The presumption according to the findings is regarding technology or media.

B Correspondence of Translation

As the results reveal that Chinese students have learned English participles in the way of corresponding English participles to their Chinese translation. For Chinese students learning English participles, there are no problems with corresponding the translations in Chinese to each English participle. However, if the participles do not follow the principle, the wrong use of the participles will appear. In Q5, the sentences with bored and boring share the same Chinese translation, under the potential influence of language culture, so the confusion of distinguishing the difference between the two English participles might lead the learners to make a wrong selection. The correspondence of translation has actually hindered the participants with Chinese as the first language in learning English participles.

C Language Difference

According to the data analysis from qualitative research in this study, correctly using the present participles (V-ing) or past participles (V-ed) is not easy for non-native students whose mother tongue is Chinese / Mandarin. It is because, in Chinese language culture, there is no specifically different cognition between V-ing, which expresses the meaning of an on-going event itself or actual activity, and V-ed, which signals the meaning of a resultant state or a state resulting from the activity (Huffman, 1989) [12]. In another word, these non-native students have to try to remember to distinguish the meanings behind the participles, V-ing and V-ed, as well as correctly use when speaking and writing. It might be challenging for them to figure out and transfer two languages at the same time. In addition, the forms of participles, V-ing and V-ed, could be actually applied in communication fluently only after the learners have had enough practice.

D Presumption Regarding Technology or Media

Being surrounded by media or commercials might have also influenced ESL Taiwanese students' language learning because their learning has been widely depending on electric devises or media nowadays. Tons of information and knowledge through technology or media are going around language learners' daily life. The commercial slogans or advertisement are usually repeated through media or the other electric devises over and over around our life. The repetition may have formed a very deep impression or a memory installed into their brains. For example, the popular slogan advertised by McDonald's Fast Food, "I'm loving it!" seems to become "normal and correct English" for the public. English native speakers know it is an incorrect sentence but just a business commercial gimmick. However, ESL learners are exposed in such a context surrounded by media from the west and Chinese culture, English grammar teaching and learning would be harder for them than before.

E Suggestions

This research focusing on English participle grammar would provide more practical and useful information, including cultural understanding and difference of language, to ESL instructors, particularly, who teach non-native learners with Chinese as mother tongue.

First, the authors suggest that in order to help students be able to clearly apply "be bored with / be boring to" in their conversation, Chinese ESL instructors might need actively to practice the sentence patterns with learners repeatedly and

constantly till the latter can use the sentence patterns correctly. Second, although some Chinese ESL instructors emphasize English grammar is the top in English learning, and some others insist that creating a real social context can effectively help students' communication in English (Wang, 2010; Gao, 1997; He 2013), along with the present influence from advertisement through technology and media, anytime or anywhere, Chinese ESL learners might have encountered much more challenges in competence of language [8]-[10]. Therefore, Chinese ESL instructors also need to pay attention to the change of current social context with advanced technology because the relationship between language learning and life is close. Still, repetition of sentences with correct grammar remains the major task in ESL classes. Teachers can also explain the cultural difference between two languages so that students can be impressed with the difference between English participles and their counterpart words in Chinese. In addition, any type of teaching methods which can emphasize the repetition of English participle are highly recommended. No ESL instructors would like to see their efforts for learners in the English classroom might be potentially ruined by the incorrect sentences through technology or media.

APPENDIX A

Results of Student English Standard Test (SEST) in 2015: The Percentage of Correct Answers

Grammar/ Level	Elementary	Basic	Intermediate	High-intermediate
Continuous	28.5%	39.1%	40.9%	46.9%
Conjunctions	25.2%	49.6%	73.0%	81.5%
Quantifier	19.5%	27.3%	47.0%	72.0%
Passive voice	7.3%	17.5%	37.0%	65.4%
Present Participle	**20.3%**	**17.9%**	**22.3%**	**37.6%**
Suggest	19.5%	31.1%	37.6%	41.1%
Superlative	27.6%	39.8%	60.6%	84.0%
Present Perfect	32.5%	44.7%	59.0%	73.0%
Conditional	28.5%	41.5%	55.6%	66.4%
Relative clauses	25.2%	42.3%	61.0%	76.4%
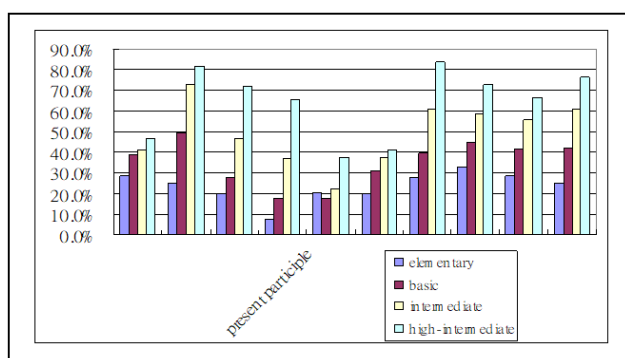
APPENDIX B

Quiz for English Participles

英語分詞形容詞測試調查問卷

請根據中文挑出其英文翻譯。謝謝！

Please select the English translation for each Chinese sentence. Thank you.

1.我對線上遊戲很有興趣。

_____ I am interested in online games.

_____ I am interesting in online games.

2. 巴黎恐怖攻擊很令人震驚。

_____ The terrorist attack in Paris is scaring.

_____ The terrorist attack in Paris is scared.

3. 我擔心會被當。

_____ I am worried that I would fail.

_____ I am worrying that I would fail.

4. 我很驚訝你記得我的生日。

_____ I am surprised that you remember my birthday.

_____ I am surprising that you remember my birthday.

5. 室友都回家了，我好無聊噢!

_____ All the roommates went back home; I am boring.

_____ All the roommates went back home; I am bored.

6. 這申請流程很累人。

_____ The application procedure is so tiring.

_____ The application procedure is so tired.

7. 電影的結局很讓人困惑。

_____ The ending of the movie is confusing.

_____ The ending of the movie is confused.

8. 他中獎了，超興奮的。

_____ He was excited about winning the lottery.

_____ He was exciting about winning the lottery.

9. 你認為以上的句子（英文中的分詞）很難嗎? (請勾選) □是 □否

Are these English sentences with participles difficult for you? Yes ___ No ___

10. 如果是，難在哪裡? (請勾選) □被動句型不清楚 □要先思考中文 □其他

If your answer is yes, please select the reasons as follows: (More than one answer is allowed.)

_____ I am not quite clear about English participles.

_____ I am used to sensing English participles through Chinese.

_____ Other reasons

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