



Pragmatics and Grammar: A Contextual Analysis of the Auxiliary Verb “Be” with the Present  
Participle and the Past Participle

Drs. Supardi, MPd

UPT - Language Centre

University of Jember

Abstract

In both English Grammar Course books and TOEFL Preparation Course books, it is frequently explained that the auxiliary verb *be* can be followed by either the *present participle* or the *past participle*. Though it is grammatically possible to put these two forms of participle after *be*, in a sentence only one of them is appropriate or accepted. This possibility of having the two participles (present and past) after the verb ‘be’ can of course make the EFL (English as a Foreign Language) students, especially the beginners, feel confused. It would be difficult for them to make appropriate choices when they are completing some exercises from English grammar books

or doing grammar and structure section of TOEFL examination. As a result, they could make a mistake. Hence, it is not enough for the EFL learners to have only grammatical knowledge, but it is also necessary for them to know *pragmatics*. To emphasize the importance of pragmatics for EFL learners, this paper analyzes the grammatical construction of the verb *be* followed by either the *present participle* or the *past participle*. Such analysis provides a solid understanding of how pragmatics is important for the EFL learners in the context of using the participles appropriately. The paper explores the grammatical construction of the verb forms after the verb *be*. It also analyzes the relationship between pragmatics and grammar.

*Keywords: pragmatics, context, present participle, past participle, EFL learner*

## Introduction

For a number of years, many studies have focused on the pragmatic development of the foreign language learners. Rintell (1979) and Walters (1979) addressed their discussion to pragmatic awareness of directive speech acts such as requests and suggestions and Scarcella (1979) was concerned with the development of pragmatic and discourse competence in cross-section of using English politeness strategies. Moreover, Olshtain (1983) and Scarcella (1983) explored pragmatic transfer. In term of pragmatic knowledge acquisition, Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) proposed two factors that could attribute to the difference of pragmatic competence between the foreign language learners and the native speakers. These studies addressing the learners' development of pragmatics can of course lead to further studies on pragmatics.

Although many studies have focused on the pragmatic development of foreign language learners, this study is certainly different from the previous studies. Most of the previous studies were concerned with the pragmatic competence or awareness of the language used in conversation. They usually analysed the implied meaning of what the speakers mean in their

utterances. Unlike the previous studies, this study explores the need of pragmatics for the EFL learners when they encounter the possibility offered by English grammatical construction, e.g. the possibility of verb forms after the auxiliary verb *be*.

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) frequently provides some possibilities that can make the learners confused. In term of word meaning, Supardi (2009) explains a word of English has more than one meaning. From this sense, it is possible for EFL learners to choose one of the meanings of a word. To clarify his explanation, he then describes the word *sentence* which has two functions with possible meanings. As a noun, it has two meanings. In Indonesian language it means *kalimat* (a set of words expressing a statement, a question or an order, usually containing a subject and a verb) and *hukuman* (the punishment given by a court). In addition, as a verb, it means *menghukum* (to say officially in court that a person convicted of crime is to receive a particular punishment).

Because of the possibility of different meanings offered by the word *sentence* above, it will certainly be difficult for the learners of English as a Foreign Language, especially law students of Jember University, to get the appropriate meaning of the word *sentence* when they use their English for speaking, reading, writing, and listening. For this fact, it is not enough for EFL learners to have only the knowledge of semantics (meaning), but they also need the knowledge of *pragmatics*. With the knowledge of *pragmatics*, they can certainly choose one of the meanings of the word *sentence* appropriately.

In addition, *pragmatics* does not only connect to word meaning but also to grammar. Concerning the relationship between these two language components, Deppermann (2011) proposes such questions as “which pragmatic factors have an impact on grammar?, which role do

pragmatic factors play in defining grammatical structures?, which role do pragmatic uses and contexts play in the acquisition of knowledge about grammar?, etc”. This relationship of the two language components is also discussed by Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) on their study of ESL and EFL learners’ pragmatic and grammatical awareness.

This quite recent study attempts to explore the grammatical construction of the auxiliary verb *be* which provides two possible verb forms that can follow it. For this study, a contextual analysis is undertaken on the grammatical construction of the verb *be* followed by either the *present participle* or the *past participle*. Such analysis provides a solid understanding of how pragmatics becomes important for the EFL learners in order to use one of the participle forms appropriately. This study explores the grammatical construction of the verb forms after the verb *be*, definition of pragmatics and the relationship between pragmatics and grammar.

#### Grammatical Construction of Verb Forms after Be

In both English Grammar Course books and TOEFL Preparation Course books, it is frequently noted that the auxiliary verb *be* can be followed by two forms of the verbs such as *present participle* and *past participle* (Frank, 1972, p. 94 and Phillips, 1996, p. 109). In this form of grammatical construction, both Frank and Phillips explain that the *present participle* constitutes the verbs in the *ing*-form. After the auxiliary verb *be*, this form of the verb is used in the progressive or continuous forms of the tenses. In this tense form, the sentence is in the active form of the tenses. On the other hand, the *past participle* constitutes the third form of the verb. After the auxiliary verb *be*, it is used in the passive forms of the tenses. The grammatical construction of *present participle* and *past participle* after the auxiliary verb *be* can be illustrated in the formula mentioned in the following table.

Table 1: Verb Forms after Verb Be

No.	Forms of Be	Verb Forms after Be	Examples
1.	am/is/are	Present Participle (ing-form)	- The ship <i>is leaving</i> to Mexico now.
	was/were		- She <i>was studying</i> all the textbooks all night long.
	will be		- He <i>will be playing</i> football tomorrow.
	have/has been		- I <i>have been waiting</i> for one hour.
	etc.		
2.	am/is/are	Past Participle (third form)	- Dinner <i>is served</i> from 6:00 to 8:00.
	was/were		- The pie <i>was cut</i> into six equal pieces.
	will be		- You <i>will be given</i> a reading assignment in English.
	have/has been		- The bill <i>has been paid</i> by Jane.
	etc.		

The formula of grammatical construction, mentioned in the table above, can of course provide the EFL learners with the possible choices --- to use either *present participle* or *past participle*. They usually find this form of grammatical construction when they are completing grammar exercises as mentioned in the following table.

Table 2: Example of Grammar Exercise on Present Participle or Past Participle after Be

Instruction: <i>Put the verbs in the brackets of the following sentences into the correct form (present participle or past participle).</i>
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1. The sick children are (take) to see a doctor.
  2. Your name will be (list) in the new directory.
  3. Today the teacher is (allow) the students to leave class a few minutes early.
  4. We may be (take) a vacation next week.
  5. The office door is (lock) in the evening.
  6. Ahmad is (bring) some drinks to the party.
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This form of grammar exercise or test can certainly offer the EFL learners the formula that can be used after the verb *be* which is either a *present participle* or a *past participle*. In addition, the possibility of using the two participles can make the EFL learners feel confused and it would be difficult for them to choose one of them appropriately. As a consequence, they can make mistakes when they are completing the above exercises. For example, they may rewrite or complete the four sentences in the above table as shown below.

Table 3: Possible Answers for Grammar Exercise by EFL Learners

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*Instruction: Put the verbs in the brackets of the following sentences into the correct form (present participle or past participle).*

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1. The sick children **are taking** to see a doctor.
2. Your name **will be listing** in the new directory.
3. Today the teacher **is allowed** the students to leave class a few minutes early.
4. We may **be taken** a vacation next week.
5. The office door **is locking** in the evening
6. Ahmad **is brought** some drinks to the party.

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According to the formula of the grammatical construction of the verb *be*, the six sentences, written by the EFL learners in table 3 above, are grammatically correct. However, their meanings

are not acceptable. The EFL learners have made mistake because of the formula guiding the usage of the *present participle* or the *past participle* after the verb *be*.

Based on the above fact, the EFL learners can possibly make mistakes in such situations. It is therefore necessary for the EFL teachers to introduce them to *pragmatics*. The following sections will discuss what pragmatics and context mean and how pragmatics affects grammatical construction.

#### Defining Pragmatics and Context

Pragmatics, a subfield of Linguistics, developed in the late 1970s and was initially introduced by Charles Morris in 1938. Morris (1938, pp. 6-7) introduced this term when he proposed his theory of signs, known as semiotics, consisting of syntactics, semantics, and pragmatics.

Since its introduction by Morris up to the present time, pragmatics has been defined in various ways by many scholars (Leech, 1983; Levinson, 1983; Mey, 1993; Rose & Kasper; 2001; Stalnaker, 1972; and Yule, 2006). Though these scholars define pragmatics differently, they all address their attention to what the speakers or writers mean. For this reason, pragmatics can be defined as “the study of meaning” (Griffith, 2006, p. 1) or “the study of the use of context to make inferences about meaning” (Fasold 1990, p. 119).

Pragmatics offers various areas of study. In one of his chapters, on pragmatics, Yule (2006, pp 112-119) discusses such different areas as invisible meaning, context, deixis, reference, inference, anaphora, presupposition, speech acts, direct and indirect speech acts, politeness, and negative and positive face. Scholars like Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) have performed their studies on speech acts which introduce three acts, a locutionary act, an illocutionary act and a

perlocutionary act. Following Austin and Searle, Billmeyer (1990), Cohen and Olshtain (1993), Bouton (1994), and Tateyama (2001) have investigated some specific pragmatic aspects focused on such speech acts as comprehension of implicature, complimenting, apologising, and requests. Different from those scholars who focus their studies on speech acts, Grice (1975) has explored why interlocutors can successfully converse with one another in a conversation. Brown & Levinson (1978) and Leech (1983) were concerned with politeness.

Context is one of the topics that pragmatics addresses (Yule, 2006). This fact indicates that context is an important element in pragmatics to get a meaning of what the speakers or writers mean. From this point of view, it is therefore important to understand what the context means. Like the term pragmatics, definition of context varies according to the type of study. In the study of communication, it is understood as “an extensive and multidimensional concept, which includes social, cognitive, cultural, linguistic, physical, and other non-linguistic context” (Mercer, 2000; Milosky, 1992; Prutting, 1982; and Sperber & Wilson, 1995). From this definition, it is clear enough that context in communication is not just linguistic information that surrounds an utterance. Though context includes much information, it does not mean that linguistic information that surrounds an utterance or a sentence is not important. Because linguistic information is one of the information that can determine the context, this information has to be taken into consideration. For this reason, context can be defined as “the surroundings, in the widest sense, that enable the participants in the communication process to interact, and that make the linguistic expressions of their interaction intelligible” (Mey, 1993, p. 38).

#### The Relationship between Pragmatics and Grammar

To discuss the relationship between pragmatics and grammar, it is necessary to consider the statement by Ariel (2008, p.2). She states that grammar and pragmatics always go together. You can't have one without the other for effective communication. To understand this relationship between pragmatics and grammar, let us pay attention to the constraint faced by the EFL learners when they encounter the possibility to choose or use the *present participle* or the *past participle* after the auxiliary verb *be*. Because of the possibility offered by this grammatical construction, the EFL learners can find it difficult or feel confused to choose or use one of the two participles appropriately when they are completing the grammar exercise (see table 2).

Because it is possible for the EFL learners to use either the *present participle* or the *past participle* after the auxiliary verb *be*, based on the grammatical construction (see table 1), they may rewrite or complete the grammar exercise in table 2 into the sentences mentioned in table 3.

According to the grammatical construction of the verb *be* (see table 1), the four sentences written by the EFL learners in the table 3, are correct. Though they are grammatically correct, in practice they are in fact incorrect or not accepted (unacceptable). In other words, when the sentences are used in either speaking or writing, the hearers or readers cannot accept the meaning of the sentences or do not understand what those sentences mean. From this fact, *pragmatic knowledge* for the EFL learners has a vital role in defining whether the *present participle* or the *past participle* is put after the auxiliary verb *be*.

Pragmatics, as defined in the previous section, can provide knowledge for the EFL learners to identify how the four sentences in table 2 must be constructed into table 4 below. They can do this by paying their attention to the linguistic information reflected in the form of words or phrases that surround the sentences.

Let us take one of the sentences from table 3 for analysis. In the sentence “*Your name will be listing in the new directory*”, for example, the EFL learners write this sentence in this grammatical construction because they are influenced by the grammatical knowledge they have learned before that the auxiliary verb *be* can be followed by either *present participle* or *past participle* (see table 1). Though the sentence is grammatically correct, it is in fact incorrect or unacceptable. For this, they have to pay their better attention to the phrase *your name* which functions as the subject of the sentence. This phrase will certainly lead the EFL learners to determine to use one of the participles, *present participle* or *past participle* after the form of the verb *be* (will be). With this phrase, the sentence needs the *past participle* **not** the *present participle* because the phrase *your name*, as the subject, cannot perform the action of the verb *are listing* as the active form of the verb which comes after the auxiliary verb *be*. As a result, if this sentence is filled with the ing-verb, *listing*, it becomes unacceptable.

Finally, the six sentences in table 3 must be written into the acceptably correct forms as mentioned in the following table.

Table 4: Acceptably Correct Answers

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Instruction: *Put the verb in the brackets of the following sentences into the correct form (present participle or past participle).*

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1. The sick children **are taken** to see a doctor.
  2. Your name **will be listed** in the new directory.
  3. Today the teacher **is allowing** the students to leave class a few minutes early.
  4. We **may be taking** a vacation next week
  5. The office door **is locked** in the evening
  6. Ahmad **is bringing** some drinks to the party.
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#### Implication for Teaching Pragmatics

From the contextual analysis of the auxiliary verb *be* with the *present participle* and the *past participle* in the previous section, it is implied that it is not enough for the EFL learners to have only grammar knowledge, but it is also necessary for them to have *pragmatics knowledge*. As a consequence, it is certainly important for the EFL teachers to teach *pragmatics* implicitly to their students. For this reason, this paper proposes a way to develop the EFL learners' pragmatic awareness of using the acceptably correct grammatical construction of the verb forms after the verb *be*.

To perform this way, for example, while the EFL teachers are explaining the use of the *present participle* and the *past participle* and defining them into the acceptably correct construction' they may ask their EFL students to translate the unacceptable sentences using the *present participle* and the *past participle* into their L-1. With this way, the EFL students will be able to recognize the context of the sentences and lead them to identify that the sentences are not acceptable since they do not have meaning. Finally, the EFL students can use and put both the *present participle* and the *past participle* appropriately.

## Conclusion

When learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), the learners frequently encounter some possibilities that can confuse them or it can be difficult for them to choose one of those possibilities appropriately. In term of grammatical construction, for instance, they can find the grammatical construction indicating that the auxiliary verb *be* can be followed by either *present participle* or *past participle*. When completing the grammar exercise or examination with the instruction *Put the verb in the bracket into the correct form* of the sentence *The sick children are (take) to see a doctor*, the EFL learners, based on the grammatical construction above (verb *be* + *present participle* or *past participle*), they may rewrite this sentence into *The sick children are **taking** to see a doctor*. Although they think that the sentence is correct according to the grammatical construction of the auxiliary verb *be* above, the sentence is in fact incorrect or not accepted (unacceptable) because it does not have meaning. From this point, it is therefore not enough for the EFL learners to have and for the EFL teacher to teach only the knowledge of grammar, but it is also necessary for them to have and to teach the knowledge of *pragmatics*.

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