

participles plus plus plus

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A TOUGH DAY

Dennis Yeung

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Warning: some sentences in this book are incredibly long, so if you are in the habit of reading a sentence in one breath, you risk suffocation.

It is tough to teach students 'participles' and I really don't want to teach English grammar in form of something like formula, so I made an attempt to teach 'participles' by telling them a story purposefully written with 'participles plus plus plus'.

One of my teachers told me that the word 'participle' is quite useless and she is right, I believe. So long as readers discover that certain sentence patterns repeat over and over again in this book and they do understand how to use them, that's all right.

This book is somehow spoilt by the repeated use of 'participles' and the presence of lengthy sentences, which probably bore most readers. Well, maybe this defect can serve an unexpected purpose, i.e. strengthening the impression that the days of being a teacher are tough and sometimes boring.

The days of being a teacher are tough and that day was particularly tough for him.

Being a teacher is a tough job

Teachers are likely to grow old, weak, and gloomy much faster than other educators like subject inspectors of Education Department, subject co-ordinators in Exam. Authorities, and course-book writers because teachers are faced with many pressures day in day out, in small rooms, in which the nervous look on their faces and every tiny little bit of their gestures are exposed to the, very often, unfriendly appraisal of the students. However, despite the fact that they could be incompetent in many ways, they are supposed to be the one who 'manages' the class. There is no way for them to avoid any stress arising in the class because the game's rules require teachers to be present in a specific place - the classroom, at a specific time - the lesson, no matter what happens. The experience of struggling for an hour or so with no break in the midst of stress and strain in a small confined place in which the sources of pressures are just a foot or two from them, repeats over and over again.

Kind of rush in the morning

Rising early, an English teacher quickly got dressed and washed himself before hurrying to take the cheapest mode of transportation so as to make sure that he wouldn't be labelled as the 'regularly-late

teacher' and his signature in the sign-in-and-sign-out book wouldn't be highlighted red. Being lucky with the traffic conditions of the day, he was able to have a quick bite of what he called breakfast (just a loaf of bread or what) before he had to finish the marking of a large pile of exercise books on which he had already spent a dozen of hours and which had to be distributed to the students later that day.

Thinking over an ugly sentence and looking for a sensible way to mark with marking codes, some of which probably only the teachers and principal could understand, he was stopped by a student who came and told him that he had forgotten to bring his exercise book and begged him not to send him over to detention class. Giving the forgetful student a good 'lecture', he suddenly remembered that he had to prepare something for the first period. After reluctantly allowing the kid to leave, he rapidly did the cutting and sticking and then raced to the Xerox room and timidly asked the one who was making photocopies if she could let him jump in.

Stage fright

Feeling a little relieved as he narrowly finished the necessary jobs before the first class began, he suddenly recalled that he had to make some announcements in the morning assembly for the club he was in charge of. Not having enough time to tidy up his thoughts, he

had to run up the stand and spoke to the whole school about something 'important'. Being terribly nervous (though he was speaking before classes every day), he made the announcements in bits and pieces which were anything but organised. Having made some careless mistakes, he was not sure whether there was anyone who understood his message all right. Stepping down the stand, he felt as though everybody were laughing at him. Feeling bad, he didn't want to chat with anyone, but when he realized that he had to stand in front of a class in just a few minutes, his heart sank. Hoping that no colleagues would come to speak to him about what had just happened, he hurriedly gathered everything required and got ready to go up to the classroom where another battle would begin.

Problem students! Forget it.

Holding two or three course-books on top of a pile of exercise books in his left hand; carrying a stack of question papers for listening exercises under his left arm; and bringing along a 'portable' bulky cassette recorder in his right hand, he moved with heavy steps up the stairs. Walking past a couple of 'problem' students fooling around at the corners of staircases, he pretended that he didn't see them because he had no resources, i.e. time and energy, to confront them. Worrying that some other more responsible teachers would appear out of

nowhere and handle these deviant acts, he tried to walk a little bit faster so as to avoid the possible embarrassment so caused.

Toilet trick

Approaching the 'pressure room', he saw an ill-motivated boy stealing out of the classroom and making his way to the toilet. Understanding that this was obviously breaching the school regulations and that other classmates would doubt his efficacy in controlling students' behaviour if the deviant case was unchallenged, he shouted to stop the kid. The kid explained with talented pretence on his face (which was worthy of an Academy Award) that he had an urgent call of nature. Thinking that it was quite unreasonable to force him back to the classroom when he was really in need of using the bathroom, the teacher was about to give him permission to go until he suddenly remembered that in the last staff meeting the disciplinary master reminded them not to allow students to go to toilet in between classes, especially those regularly expressing such a need. Upon hearing the noise 'please, please, please', he found it very difficult to say 'no'. Hoping that there would be no disciplinary teachers around to detect what was happening, he told the kid to make it fast.

Good-morning-class routine

Walking well inside the classroom, the teacher was beginning to feel that the class was not yet ready for a lesson. With everything put on the teacher's desk, he stood straight, facing the class, and waited. He preferred to abolish the good-morning-class routine rather than hear the feeble and most unrespectful greeting of 'Good morning Sir!', but the school said it was a precious tradition worthy of keeping. Sluggishly and reluctantly the students rose a little with the upper parts of their bodies bent terribly forward, supported by both hands on the desks, and with their bottoms just an inch or two above the chairs. They rose at their own chosen moments and the whole process, which normally should take ten seconds at most, took thirty seconds or so to finish. Waiting for the teacher's greeting of 'Good morning Class!' which was the sign to show the teacher's satisfaction over the so-called salutation of the class, some gossiped; some whispered; some laughed at 'something'; some looked out of the windows; some purposefully looked away from him to show disrespect; some yawned; and even some were still keeping their buttocks tightly stuck with the chairs. Believing that making a slight concession was acceptable and would not spoil his good 'name' of 'capable teacher' who was commanding respect and fear from most students, he said the three words 'Good

morning Class' to end the whole process unpleasant to both the teacher and the kids.

Whose job was that?

Before everything, he had to tidy up the mess on the teacher's desk - scattered newspapers, two or three badly folded and crushed extra handouts of other subjects, one or two broken pencils or pens with no more ink, paper clips, textbooks of unknown owners, unwanted pieces of paper, and even some tiny bits of chalk-ends. No one seemed to appreciate what he had done despite the fact that it should be the students' responsibility to clean up the mess. Knowing that it was no use lecturing to a group of people whose hearts had long been hardened, he chose not to say anything about this kind of things.

Anything but motivated

Understanding that the teaching progress of this class was falling much behind schedule and that the exam. was approaching, he quickly told the class to turn their books to the right page in order to start teaching. It was, however, at least a minute later when it seemed that everybody had got to that page (actually he doubted it). Though he tried the best he could to explain the points that the textbook

brought up, he knew most of the listeners were at a loss. Knowing that it was the right time he should ask a question (as taught in teacher-training courses), he cleared his throat and asked a question. Trying to call somebody to give an answer, he looked around but found that nobody showed a tiny little bit of eagerness to answer the question. Avoiding eye-contact with him or burying their heads in the pool of students, most of them 'said' by their gestures, 'Don't call my name; don't call my name!' Having called upon somebody at random to answer the question, he waited. (nowadays an easy question may appear to be of paramount difficulty to many students) What seemed to be an intolerably long time had passed but the student made all kinds of utterances except the answer. Wondering if repeating the question in Cantonese would help him get the answer, he stole a quick look out of the classroom to see if Mr. Principal was around and then quickly repeated the question in Cantonese. Feeling a bit relieved that he had not been caught breaking the noble rule for English teachers (actually, like other English teachers, he always did), he waited for positive responses but in vain. Getting more and more impatient, he chose to answer the question himself and told the student to sit down.

Being caught incompetent

Feeling a bit frustrated, he went on with the lesson. Noticing that someone sitting at the back by the window panes next to the corridor was peeking at something, probably a comic, below the desk, he thought he had to do something about it. Telling himself that this student was not listening anyway and that it would be a waste of time dealing with such irregularities, he hesitated to take action. Right at this very moment, out of nowhere appeared the principal, standing by the window panes, just a foot or two from the back of that misbehaving 'guy'. Obviously he saw everything. Holding a clip-board in his left hand and a ball-pen in his right, he stared straight at the one still enjoying the comic. Knowing what the principal expected him to do, he walked close to the 'deviant' who had been too absorbed in the book to notice what had been going on. Having confiscated the comic and told the boy to see him after class, he walked back to the teacher's desk. Realising that he had just been 'caught' being careless in supervising students, he started to worry about his promotion prospect.

A battle was over but

The class, still having traces of sympathy, was quiet momentarily as they realized that the teacher was just having a hard

time. Gazing at the desk for a few moments and knowing not what to do next, he did not say anything. Understanding that he should be the one to break the silence, he was about to say something but the recess bell came on. Being aware of the start of recess time, most of the students had their books and stationery thrown well inside the lower shelves of the tables. Being in get-set positions, they all looked up to the teacher and listened for the word 'dismissed' or 'stand'. Having said the necessary words to end the lesson, he collected everything, large and small, the heaviest of which was the bulky cassette recorder which he did not have time to use as planned and had to be carried all the way back to the staff room, once again with no real achievement. He dragged towards the classroom exit only to find that he was blocked by a heap of students rushing out of the narrow doorway.

Stopped by an 'angel'

Successfully pulling his feet out of the classroom did not mean that he could make his way to the staff room in no time. Walking down the corridor, he heard from behind a nice sweet voice which was almost the only thing that could please him. He turned around and saw his comforting 'angel' - a hard-working, sensible, responsible, and lovely girl from another class. Holding in her hand a textbook opened to a page on which many parts were underlined and lots of Chinese

interpretations were written, she timidly asked if he could spare her a few minutes because she had a couple of questions to ask him. Feeling glad that here on earth he could still find such a nice and lovely student who was truly motivated to learn, he said, 'Sure,' though he was terribly tired after the classroom struggles. Having spent a few minutes explaining to her some delicate parts of the textbook which, he always thought, was poorly written, he started to feel that he had to make it fast because the call of nature was coming on. Noticing that there was a little impatience on the teacher's face, the clever girl said she got it and thanked him twice for his kindness before she left. Feeling a bit satisfied that he had done something meaningful, he turned round and went on with his 'journey'.

Oh, no! My recess

Upon reaching the end of the corridor, he took a right turn only to find that the staircases were still crowded with students flocking to the canteen on the ground floor to fill their stomachs. Stuck between students who were chatting, laughing, arguing, playing, or even pulling and pushing, he descended the stairs at an incredibly low speed which could be compared to that of a funeral procession. Reaching the ground floor, he headed straight for the staff toilet instead of the staff room so as to save time though it was terribly inconvenient for him to do so

because he had no free hands to open the door. Having finished all the toilet routines, he was happy that he could get back to the classroom to take a rest but his 'dream' was shattered by the ringing of the bell that signalled the termination of recess time.

No time to scold him

Wondering why the recess was so much shortened, he suddenly recalled that the naughty kid whose comic had been confiscated might be waiting for him at the staff room. Rushing back to his own table to collect the stuff for another class, he really saw the student standing impatiently at the doorway of the staff room. Realizing that he had not much time giving him a long lecture, he told the child to come again later that day. But when hearing some rude remarks from that student who was then filled with hostility for being turned away after waiting for the whole recess, he wanted to give him a hard scolding right away. Noticing that almost all the teachers had moved out of the staff room and worrying that he would be caught again being late for a class, he quickly gathered everything and went. He was in such a mood when he went up again for another tiring battle.

Extra duty

The whole morning was tightly packed with only one 'originally' free period in the middle which, unluckily, was 'exploited' by the extra duty of substituting for an absent teacher who suffered from a disease that was not serious enough for the permission of a sick leave for three consecutive days which was the minimum requirement for hiring an external temporary teacher so as to free internal school teachers from substitution duties related to that particular teacher on sick-leave.

Thank God it's lunch time

The long-awaited lunch time finally came. Feeling exhausted after all the regular work and extra duty (supervising a class with nothing special to do is especially tough), he was not sure whether he wanted to take a nap or have a bite of lunch. Knowing that irregular eating habit would do him no good, he got on his feet and went to the school canteen to buy a bowl of instant noodles 'enriched' with a few fish-balls and several pieces of pig-skin. Though he was told, time and again, that instant noodles were carcinogenic (cancer-inducing), he took them almost every other day because he always felt too tired to walk a distance to 'enjoy' something which might be just a little better.

Neither did he want to bring to school his own lunch box which normally had to wait for as long as 20 minutes to be heated with the micro-wave oven on which a row of lunch boxes were always seen at the start of lunch time.

Not even a little sleep

Feeling a little pleased that he only had one more period to teach in the afternoon, he was ready for a little sleep. He cleared a small part of the table which had been stuffed chaotically with several textbooks, two to three piles of exercise books being marked, scattered school circulars, remains of miscellaneous handouts, and a number of files of teaching notes some of which measured up to two inches thick. Having got some space in the middle of the mess just enough for placing his fore-arms, he bent over the table, resting his fore-head on his right arm placed on top of the left. He wished he were hard-hearted enough to put up a Do-Not-Disturb notice right above his head but he was not. He quickly fell asleep and began to snore but one of the cruellest things that had ever happened to anyone here on earth, happened to him - he was woken up by an unfriendly voice of a most inconsiderate student (the comic peeper) who yelled out 'Sir' at just a few-inch distance from his right ear, fearing that his voice was not sharp enough to give the soundly sleeping teacher a big jump.

Too much hostility

With his eyes half-opened, he slowly turned his head which was still resting on his arms, to the right and saw over his right shoulder part of a boy's uniform with folds, stains, dirty marks, and even smells which allowed him to recognise who the boy was without taking a look at his face. He then sat straight against the back of the chair, took a deep breath, put on his glasses, backed his chair a few inches, turned his body to the right, and looked up to the boy right on his face which was filled with too much hostility for any kinds of fruitful communication. For a few seconds he did not know what to say. They kept staring at each other, with no constructive thoughts or positive emotions coming up on their mind. With their throats inflated with fury, eyes blazing with anger, and lips trembling with the impetus of using mean and abusive words, they were more than ready to start a war of words.

Quick-fix solution

Suddenly realising that losing temper would not make things get better and that he was not in the right mood to talk things over with that little 'monster', he simply filled in a form and sent him over to detention class which was still a useful practice for fed-up teachers

to 'dump' cases though this was actually more a punishment to those teachers supervising detention classes than students being kept in detention classes. He was also one of those teachers who always complained about having to take up the duty of supervising a detention class but now he used it. Anyway, he really knew, when he came to his senses, that repeatedly sending 'regular deviants' to detention class would either produce in them a be-smart-and-won't-get-caught attitude or make them generate a hostile indifference to the punishment, instead of bringing about true repentance, which though could happen one in a million as a result of 'miracles' rather than threatening from the penalty.

His own fault

Still having thirty minutes to rest before the only remaining class of the day, he felt a bit relaxed but as he looked up and saw the face of the nice-looking panel head who signalled to remind him of something important which he seemed to have no idea, he was not that 'optimistic'. He was then told that an English panel meeting was going to start in five minutes' time as informed in an English-panel circular passed around all English teachers for collecting their signatures which were 'supposed' to be symbols of confirmation that they had read and understood the circular. Unfortunately, he was one of the many who

scanned without true comprehension; signed without true reading. So, no one was to blame for his being unprepared for the meeting except himself but he sometimes wondered if there would be an optimum number of circulars to be read in a day and an optimum number of words contained in a circular, beyond which cases of 'signing without true comprehension' by those already-much-too-busy teachers would be more likely to occur.

Be cooperative

When he almost got to the door of the staff canteen where the meeting would take place, he noticed that he had forgotten to bring along with him pen and paper, essential instruments for attending meetings, but he did not bother going back for them because he knew it would not make a difference. The meeting started punctually as scheduled though a couple of just-arriving teachers were still catching their breaths and trying to redirect their mind from the thoughts of other business to the chairlady who was then, as demanded by higher authorities, making different kinds of announcements seasoned with some pseudo-discussion, some of which the panelists either already knew, or did not take an interest in knowing, or did not really need to know. The teachers were extremely quiet as they were hearing or, for some, pretended that they were hearing, which was actually worthy of

commendation for it showed they were mature enough to see the value of being cooperative as a virtue, putting aside the concern of right-or-wrong, good-or-bad, fair-or-unfair, etc., and withholding fatigue expressions despite tiredness.

There being no other business

Very soon it came to the last part of the meeting, i.e. any other business, which was a golden opportunity for open discussion over matters concerning English teaching but, as usual, no one expected any other members to say anything because firstly many duties were waiting for them downstairs in the staff room; secondly, nobody wanted to give a hard time to the adorable chairlady (nice responsible English panel head is rare nowadays); lastly, they all were smart enough to understand that neither the chairlady nor the collective will of the panelists were capable of changing some obviously inappropriate practices which had been there for ages. As nobody said anything, it was assumed that no big problems were 'attacking' the English panel (the assumption was, of course, invalid) and the meeting was then adjourned.

Hardship of a different kind

The bell for the afternoon session rang a few seconds after he took a seat, so he went up for the last battle which should not be that tough because that particular class was the best in that particular form and the frequency of misbehaviour was acceptable. However, as his personal loudspeaker was not working properly and as there were the non-stop ear-drumming bangs coming from the new construction site located just a few hundred feet from the side-wall of the school on which the classroom's windows were located, he almost lost his voice towards the end of the class as a result of vocal cord being over-used during the thirty-minute continuous lecturing aimed at bettering the academic performance of that class to make up for the grade-point 'loss' at public examinations brought about by the the performance of other not-so-good classes.

Deadline

Having taken a few minutes' break in the staff room at the beginning of the next 'free' period, he was now ready to summon up the remains of his physical and mental strength to complete the last tough job of the day - setting or tailoring the examination question papers before five o'clock which was the deadline for turning in the

drafts to the panel head if the papers were to be typed by the office staff who would be glad, of course, to hear that he failed to meet the deadline. After struggling for an hour or so with a few reference books whose copy-right was being infringed, two to three bottles of glue, a pair of scissors, two cutters, a roll of adhesive tape, a correction pen that was almost dry, a stapler fully fed with staples, two felt pens and many pieces of F4 paper on which many cuttings of Xeroxed materials were mounted, he started to panic as it was already four forty-five but the work seemed still far off from its finish. The deadline was coming close and he was becoming a nervous wreck as if it were a matter of life-and-death as the word 'deadline' suggested.

The last blow

Seeing that it was impossible to meet the five-o'clock deadline, he finally decided to give up the hope of being exempted from typing the question papers himself. After all, he had already got used to giving up privileges and taking up extra duties, which were counted as 'loss' by many but as 'gain' by a few, sometimes including him, who believed that no pain, no gain. He, however, was totally unaware of the coming of the last blow of the day he had to take before leaving school, a place where pressures abound.

A senior colleague came around and wanted to have a chat with him. She told him straight that though she repeated several times before the principal that he was the most suitable person to be promoted to a certain senior post, Mr. Principal rejected the proposal on grounds that did not seem directly relevant to the requirements necessary for the successful discharge of duties related to the post. It was not the first time he had been disappointed to hear such news but he still felt sad. Seeing that his heart obviously sank after hearing the bad news, his colleague was at a loss for words. 'Don't be disappointed; keep up your good effort' were the few words that the kind-hearted lady softly spoke in his ear as she gently patted his shoulders before she left.

'Sing your way home'

Putting in his briefcase a few composition exercise books which he 'wished' he could mark in the middle of the night after seeing his kids to bed and before going to sleep, he felt like crying for there was a rush of emotions deep down inside him as he pictured himself as a complete loser roaming all alone in the street, with clouds above him and drizzle around him. He was in such a mood when he went to take a bus home. Sitting at a corner on the upper deck of the bus, he tried to relax himself. Not long after the bus started to move forward, he felt a

deep sense of peace coming all over him and surprisingly he found himself singing in his heart a song which he had sung a few times with his christian students in morning prayer meetings:

Sing your way home,

at the close of the day.

Sing your way home,

drive the shadows away.

Smile every mile, for wherever you roam.

It will brighten your road;

it will lighten your load,

if you sing your way home.

Maybe you don't believe it - he was then fast asleep in sweet comfort as if heavenly angels were around. What amazing grace! It reminded me of a few verses from the Bible, Psalm 127:1-2:

Except the LORD build the house,

they labour in vain that built it;

except the LORD keep the city,

The watchman waketh but in vain.

It is vain for you to rise up early,

to sit up late,

to eat the bread of sorrows:

for so he giveth his beloved sleep.

In his sleep he made a dream - he saw an eagle flying high in the sky. Taking a closer look, he found that it was not 'flying' but sleeping. With eyes softly closed and with wings stretching wide apart, the light eagle glided upward and onward by the rush of mighty force from below. As the eagle relaxed to recover his strength, miles flew by.

As he was dreaming, a flow of mysterious life force was running through every part of his whole body, driving away the shadows of sorrows, anger, frustration and despair, and rendering him strength and a renewed mind.

END OF STORY

Teachers, learn to relax and recover in the close of a tough day if you want to survive in this profession. May God be with you always!

Kids, be a bit nicer to your teachers!