



RESEARCH PAPER

The Acquisition of English Infinitives by Undergraduate Students in  
Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

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ABSTRACT

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The current study investigates the acquisition of English infinitives by the undergraduate students of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan. The main objectives of this research study were to explore whether the undergraduate students had acquired English infinitives or not. The study also investigated whether the learners could identify infinitives according to their function or position in English sentences. A hundred students were selected through convenience sampling from twenty districts, five from each district, studying in different universities and postgraduate colleges in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. The data was collected through a proficiency test specially designed for the purpose. The test results reveal that the students, by and large, had acquired all kinds of infinitives.

Introduction

Language development occurs in all normal children irrespective of ethnicity or intelligence (Akmajian, Richard, Ann, & Robert, 2004). Apart from the mother tongue, acquisition of a second language itself is undoubtedly a complex process, where learners naturally have to commit uncountable errors (Hendrickson, 2000). The same is inevitable for learning a second language (Cadling, 2001; Olasehinde, 2002) or for acquiring a second language in native speakers' environment (Singhal, 2010), which is relatively easy in early ages (Penfield & Roberts, 2014). Second language learning is affected by many other disciplines, and most of the studies suggest an important role of the frequency of input (Kartal, & Sarigul, (2017). However, some studies suggest a negative relationship between the effects of frequency and language proficiency (Diependaele et al., 2013). Given the scope of the English language in today's globalized world, acquisition of this *de facto* global *lingua franca* is essential for any community or educated community. At least lack of proficiency in the language is either because of no focus on the functional side of the language (Mueen, 1992),

irresponsibility of academic set-up (Ahmad, Ahmad, Bukhari & Bukhari, 2011), students' lack of innate or cognitive abilities (Westwood, 2006) perceptual impairment (Farkota, 2005) learning disabilities and memory deficiencies or poor motivation (Kershner, 2000).

In traditional descriptions of English, the Infinitive is a basic form of a verb. For example, write, read, cook, eat, etc. It may be used with or without the constituent part 'to' and may serve as an adjective, adverb, or noun. The Infinitive may be defined as a verb that may stand alone or be preceded by the particle 'to'. Hartmann & Stroke (1972) refer to the same as 'first infinitive' and 'second infinitive' respectively. Eastwood (1994) explains the concept of Infinitive as comprising 'to' and a verb in a simple form. Valeika, & Buitkien (2006) term Infinitive as a form of the verb, which is a process in general not restricted to a person, number, tense, and mood. According to Stowell (1982), Martin (1996) views, "there are two types of infinitival complements inflected and uninflected infinitives that are the presence and absence of infinitival tense correlates with different syntactic structures or properties.

An infinitive is a part of a verb that will deprive the learner of writing or speaking accurate English if not understood. Infinitive clauses have silent pronouns of category PRO where no auxiliary verbs are allowed (Heil, & López, 2020). Thus infinitives though lacking morphological features like features for tense, do have a tense operator (Mazurkewich, 2012). English infinitives can occur in three different constructions:

1. The subject of a sentence
2. A verb complement
3. A complement of objects

(Schwartz, & Causarano, 2007)

### **Different Types of Infinitive**

The Infinitive may be classified into the following three kinds (Klammer, 2007).

- Bare-infinitive
- Full-infinitive
- Split-infinitive

Bare-infinitive is the Infinitive without 'to', which is also called a root word. Bare Infinitive is also used after causative verbs like (let, have, make, hear, and watch). It can also be used after why. An infinitive used with the word 'to' or 'to+' is called full-infinitive. It may also function as a noun, an adjective, and an adverb in a sentence.

The choice between the 'to' Infinitive and the bare Infinitive has been either lexically or structurally conditioned. There are four forms of full-infinitive

- The perfect Infinitive.
- The perfect continuous Infinitive.
- The continuous Infinitive.
- The active and passive Infinitive.

The perfect Infinitive is in the form of 'to +have + past participle'. After model verbs, perfect infinitives are usually marked by *to* or *for to*, respectively. The Perfect Continuous Infinitive (*to have been+ verb+ ing*) expresses a continuing but completed action. The Continuous Infinitive (*to be +verb + ing*) is used to express a continuing activity after a verb or Auxiliary verb, which the Infinitive follows. Most verbs have an active infinitive form. They may be with *to* or without *to* (Comrie, 2008). In such a case, its structure is 'to be + 3<sup>rd</sup> form of the verb'. Definition of the passive voice is rather difficult to establish. Instead, we can operate with several typical criteria or properties, which separately or together can define the passive voice in different languages (Comrie 2008). The passive voice is defined as an agent demoting process. It is particularly common after auxiliary verbs.

In split-infinitive, adverb or adverbial phrases occur between 'to' and the 'verb', e.g., *carefully walking, seriously playing, boldly speaking*, etc. It may be used in the following manner (Klammer et al., 2010). When 'to' is used in the next part of a sentence to avoid repetition of the Infinitive, it is called anaphoric 'to' (Yesperson, 1962). In other languages such as Spanish, French, Latin, and even in our vernacular languages like Urdu and Pashto, the infinitives are in usage. However, in these languages, it is used as a single word. For example, in Spanish, 'morir' is used (as Infinitive) for 'to die'; in French, 'manger' for 'to eat'; in Latin, 'portare' for 'to carry', etc. Schulte (2007) states that infinitival Marker 'to' be similar to German marker 'zu'. Certain languages have no infinitive forms at all. These include some American, Australian, and African languages, which do not have direct equivalents to infinitives and, instead, finite verb forms are used.

### **Literature Review**

According to Kitikanan (2011), Grammarians and language teachers consider the infinitive and gerund complements' structures difficult (Syafii, 2010) and even unteachable to the non-native speakers. Krashen (1985), however, shows some flexibility on the score when he says that the learners need extensive input for acquiring English as a second language.

Previous works have focused on different aspects of English infinitives, for example, the historical development of infinitives (Fischer, 1995; Calle-Martín &

Miranda-García, 2009; Simon, 2015), types of infinitive construction (Fischer, 1995; Perales-Escudero's, 2010), infinitives in different varieties of English (Calle-Martín & Romero-Barranco, 2014), corpus-based studies (Biber, 2006; Simon-Vandenberg & Aijmer, 2007) and typological perspectives (Kersting, 2012). In first language acquisition, the Infinitives are omitted by learners like auxiliaries (Lardiere, 2007). They are treated like auxiliaries but appear in a later stage in learning/acquisition. It is assumed that frequency and other environmental and cognitive factors are not sufficient for acquiring English infinitives; thus, a domain-specific linguistic faculty is suggested (Heil, & López, 2020). TO-infinitive development and TO-particle omissions were examined at the sentence structure level and the matrix verb level. Overall, significant growth in TO-infinitive knowledge occurred during the preschool period. TO-Infinitive use increased across the preschool years, particularly with the WH/OBJ structure. Children also increased their use of matrix verbs, specifically in the NULL/OBJ and NP/OBJ-2SUB structures. Overall, TO-particle omission errors significantly decreased across this time frame, but errors persisted with the matrix verb going in the NULL/OBJ structure (Kersting, 2012). Second language learners of English often confuse infinitives with other constructions like gerund (Schwartz, & Causarano, 2007), where another nonfinite form of the verb is used.

The issue further complicates when second language learners sometimes use nonfinite forms of the verb instead of finite verb and vice versa (Wexler, 1994). Therefore, analyzing nonfinite elements as such infinitives reveal new aspects of grammar and interaction. To acknowledge the fact that infinitives, albeit prototypically participating in the coding of dependent events, can also be used outside the finite verb's context (Laura, 2008). There are structural factors (mainly of a semantic nature) that determine the Infinitive form in verbal complementation. It has been generally recognized that grammatical function plays an important role here. Still, it does not explain the variation in Infinitive marking when the infinitive functions as a verbal complement. According to Fischer (1995), the choice of marker here is lexically determined (and therefore syntactically arbitrary).

The students committing errors in using Infinitive and causes for the same and their possible impacts on the students was explored by Safi (2006), highlighting the problems because of the possible confusion of infinitives with other forms like *gerund* (ing form), which is also used with verb (Raimes, 1998). Learning gerund complements preceded the verb complements. The *bare Infinitive* is acquired before *Infinitive*, which is in turn acquired before *gerund complement* (Shirahata, 1991; Bryant, 1984). Nonfinite verbs in English do not change tense according to the subject, but in some languages like Chinese, however, neither grammatical tense nor inflected forms are used; they are mostly in the bare form of verbs and some with aspectual markers. Subject or object are used with a series of bare verbs that can be differentiated by their lexical cues (Klein, & Hendriks, 2000; Tang, 2019). The mismatch between infinitives

in L1 and L2 sometimes poses additional difficulty (Slabakova, 2015). The same reinforces the notion that bilinguals operate on a continuum regarding discourse mode (Wilson, & Dumont, 2014).

### **Material and Methods**

The survey design for the study is descriptive, which requires a quantitative approach to analyzing the data. The descriptive survey design was the most suitable design for the present study. Ball and Rahilly (1999), as quoted by Li (2004), believe that practicing a descriptive approach provides a quantitative record of infinitives. And, for shaping quantitative records, the test was designed and conducted to ascertain the relevant data more reliably and scientifically.

The samples were selected from the BS students of Universities and colleges of the selected districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. The proficiency test was arranged for students. One part of the test was about infinitives, and the other was about their functions. The data was collected from those subjects who were willing to participate. The students were contacted in their respective campuses. The answer sheets were checked through a manual process. The correct and incorrect responses were marked. The percentages of correct and incorrect responses were noted and analyzed for individual uses and functions of infinitives.

### **Results of English Infinitives**

As highlighted and discussed in the preceding paragraphs, the results of all kinds of infinitives have been combined in the following table:

**Table 1**  
**Showing results of English infinitives**

<b>Kind of Infinitives</b>	<b>Number of students participated in the test.</b>	<b>Correct Responses</b>	<b>Incorrect Responses</b>
Bare Infinitive	100	82	18
Split-infinitive	100	90	10
Full-infinitive	100	92	08
Percentage	100	88%	12%

The table envisages the overall responses as 100 percent while correct and incorrect responses as 88 percent and 12 percent, respectively. In English in the province's educational institutions, infinitives form part of the syllabus and are taught to the students below degree level. The students, by and large, acquire the same. Nominal ratios of 12 percent of the students have not acquired the same. The same is, however, attributed to the students' incapability more than to any loophole in the teaching technique staff or the school management. To cover up the deficiency, while management of the educational institutions and their teaching staff need to intensify

their efforts, even more, the students should leave no stone unturned in learning this important ingredient of English grammar before their stepping-in to the degree classes.

### Results of Functions of Infinitives

Individual results concerning the usage of infinitives concerning their functions have been given in the preceding paragraphs of the chapter. However, it appears advisable to consolidate those results to have a glimpse of the same on the one hand and analyze the same on the other. Of course, the exercise will let the readers glance over a comparatively clearer and transparent picture of the issue under study.

**Table 2**  
**Showing combine results the paper about functions of Infinitives**

Functions of English Infinitives	Correct responses	Incorrect responses
After Causative verb.	25%	75%
As a subject.	88%	12%
As direct object.	83%	17%
As subject compliment.	25%	75%
As adjective.	36%	64%
As Adverb.	31%	69%
As Perfect Infinitive.	56%	44%
As perfect continuous inf.	19%	81%
As Continuous Infinitive.	23%	77%
As active and passive inf.	77%	23%
After Model verb.	16%	84%
Anaphoric 'to'.	46%	54%
Overall percentage	44%	56%

The results of the second paper that covered functions of the Infinitive, as the above table reflects 44% correct responses in the test, means that the teachers have taught functions of the infinitives to the students. However, the teaching methodology is not devoid of defects and flaws owing to which majority of the students did fail to acquire what they have been taught.

### Discussion of the Results

The results, as tabulated in the previous section, speak volumes of the issues under investigation. There is no denying that in the educational institutions in the province, all kinds of English infinitives have been taught to the undergraduate level students as part and parcel of their academic syllabus. The students have acquired all types of English infinitives - bare-infinitive, full-infinitive, and split-infinitive, which

they can identify in sentences. 88% correct responses in respect of identifying all types of infinitives and 92% and 90% correct responses in case of full-infinitive and split-infinitives, respectively, testifies this fact. Here, it is pertinent to point out that both full Infinitive and split-infinitive are comparatively easy to understand, contributing to such a high response. The meager 12% of the students have had incorrect responses, and in the case of bare-infinitive too, 18% of students had incorrect responses.

In identifying English infinitives according to their functions and position in the sentences, the situation is grim. Merely 44 percent of students have had correct responses viz-a-viz 56 percent incorrect responses. This means that majority of the students in the educational institutions in the province can't find themselves in a position to identify English Infinitive according to its functions and position in the sentences. There is a peculiar problem in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well. The dwellers here find no matching words for English infinitives in their respective first language (L1), and thus the students find themselves in a bit of trouble comprehending the infinitives.

Research studies conducted on learning difficulties of students by Kershner (2000), Farkota (2005), and Westwood (2006) attribute the learning difficulties of the students to lack of innate or cognitive abilities, perceptual impairment, and learning disabilities, deficiencies in memory or poor motivation. Students' learning difficulties are reported to be directly related to the nature of the curriculum or methods of teaching in colleges or universities.

In some instances, the students acquire English infinitives but still don't find themselves able to identify the same, especially those occurring after model verbs in the sentences. It is only due to the weak background of their knowledge and less exposure to English grammar. Lockheed and Komenan (1989) observed that "school characteristics have a greater effect on students' achievements. Hence there is a need to find out the school factors affecting the learning of students". This study was conducted to investigate the factors affecting the learning of English of secondary school students in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province has, beyond doubt, got peculiar circumstances concerning the students-teachers relationship. There is always an interaction gap between the two. Thus, the students can rarely get a chance to discuss their problems whatsoever in the learning process with their respective teachers. And this is what Light (2004) has supported too. His findings revealed that minimization of the class had good impact on learning by the students. In small-size classes, the teacher knows each student and thus monitors their learning achievements. However, another researcher Hoxby (2000) doesn't agree with this viewpoint and holds that class size doesn't cause any significant effect on students' achievements.

**Conclusion**

This study focused on the acquisition of the English infinitives by undergraduate level students in the province. The study envisages that the undergraduate level students here have, no doubt, acquired English infinitives but can hardly identify the same according to its function and position in the sentences. Despite having studied English as a mandatory subject, their hesitation in the identification process is a shortcoming that it can't be accepted at any cost. However, it is reiterated that it is mainly lack of adequate access of the students at the secondary and higher secondary level to English grammar that is responsible for such weakness on their part. It is pertinent to mention here that English grammar, beyond any doubt, is considered a *sine qua non* for learning English *lingua franca*. To be even more precise, without English grammar, acquiring English can't be imagined even.

Apart from the grammar inadequacy syndrome; among other things, the loopholes in the English teaching technique and methodology form another factor responsible for their performance. Therefore, special emphasis has been laid on overcoming the problems to improve and intensify the learning capability of the undergraduate level students towards acquiring the infinitives and their proper usage according to its functions and position. For this purpose, special measures have been recommended for taking cognizance of by the concerned authorities of the government in province of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in Pakistan.



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