

Infinitive and Gerund Complements of Verbs

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Abstract

Some verbs require only infinitive complements while others require only gerund complements; some verbs allow both complements. When verbs allow both complements, there is a subtle difference EFL/ESL learners might feel confused about. Even some EFL/ESL teachers might think these two sentences mean the same: *I like to finish work before 5:00* vs. *I like finishing work before 5:00*. This paper explored infinitive and gerund complements in terms of pragmatic usage as well as aspectual and semantic options. An understanding of this topic provides nonnative ESL/EFL teachers who have no intuition about English with in-depth knowledge of infinitive and gerund complements.

Keywords: gerund, infinitive, complement

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Complements of Verbs

Complements refer to elements that grammatically complete another (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 319) and clausal complements include an assumed or an overt subject and verbal elements (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.629). The scope of this paper will be circumscribed to clausal complements which are used as objects of verbs and these complements can be categorized according to each form as follows (p.629):

1. Full clausal that: complements with tensed verbs

Do you know that bats have regional accents, too?

2. Tenseless subjunctive complements

Her father insisted that Emilie go to a Korean school.

3. Infinitives

I want to keep a really unusual pet such as a fox.

4. Gerunds

Many people all around the world also enjoy listening to Korean songs these days.

5. Subject-participle constructions

When you see a celebrity walking down the street, let me know it.

Since these five types of clausal complements tend to be combined with certain verbs, EFL/ESL students might feel the grammar of clausal complements hard to learn. Above all, gerunds and infinitives seem to be very confusing to learners. Some verbs require only infinitive complements while others only gerund complements, and some verbs allow both complements. When verbs allow both complements, there are delicate shades of meaning which nonnative speakers might not identify clearly. Therefore, infinitive and gerund complements of verbs will

be discussed in this paper in terms of form and semantic aspects focusing on contrastive features of each. The purpose of this paper is to provide teachers with in-depth knowledge of infinitive and gerund complements. It is worthwhile for teachers because gerunds and infinitives are very common confusing types of complements and advanced EFL/ESL students need to be taught more substantial and in-depth linguistic knowledge.

Verbs Taking Infinitive Complements

Infinitives, as the name suggests, are not finite and they do not carry tense (Berk, 1999, p.237). The form of an infinitive is *to* + the base form of a verb such as *to play, to eat or to swim*, etc. or bare-stem infinitive such as *play, eat or swim*. Namely, infinitives refers to non-finite verbal phrases and in terms of function, they function “In the range of NPs, modifiers or complements” (Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 319). In this paper, infinitives used as objects of verbs will be dealt with and there are five sub-types according to the verb as follows (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.634):

1. *believe* type: It includes verbs such as *believe, imagine, find, know, and think*, etc. that take complements that may have object-pronoun subjects (p.635).
I believed him to be a good doctor.
2. *advise* type: It includes verbs such as *allow, cause, force and permit*, etc. that have real objects in the main clauses and the remainder of the infinitive is regarded as a complement to this object with an empty subject position called PRO whose identity is identical to that object (p.637).
My doctor advised me to go home.
3. *attempt* type: It includes verbs such as *attempt, tend, begin or decide*, etc. that have complements controlled by the main clause subject not by the object of the

main clause and the subject of the main clause controls the identity of the missing infinitival subject called PRO (p.638).

People attempt to break Guinness World Record.

4. *want* type: It includes verbs such as *expect, hope, arrange, desire, hope, help* or *intend*, etc. that have complements permitting the option of either the subject or object of the main clause. In the latter case, the object is overtly expressed and some of the subjects of the infinitives may be introduced with *for* called *for-comp* (complementizer) (p.640).

The agent arranged (for us) to live near the office.

5. *let* type: It includes verbs such as *have, make, feel, hear* or *watch* that have complements of bare-stem infinitive, where the usual *to* is either optional or obligatory absent (p.641).

He helped us (to) support the bushfire victims.

He let me know the truth.

Verbs Taking Gerund Complements

The form of a gerund is the base form of a verb + *ing*. A gerund is a non-finite verbal phrase and it functions “In the range of NPs”(Delahunty & Garvey, 2010, p. 319). That’s why gerunds are sometimes called the *-ing* complements and they seem to have the characteristics of nouns that can function as subjects and objects of sentences as NPs usually do within a sentence (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.642). In this paper gerunds used as objects of verbs will be discussed. Verbs that take gerunds as objectives include *dislike, prefer, admit, appreciate, avoid, continue, deny, enjoy, or finish*, etc.

At first, I stayed away from the bees to avoid getting stung.

Furthermore, we need to be careful not to get confused with progressive aspect. Though the form of gerunds and progressive aspect is the same, the progressive denotes that an activity is ongoing. On top of that, there is another additional *-ing* complement, which is called a “subject-participle complement” (Celce -Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.644). Verbs taking subject-participle complements are *feel, hear, observe, see* or *watch*.

I like studying at CSU. (gerund)

I'm studying zoology at CSU. (progressive)

I saw him breaking the window. (subject-participle)

Infinitive Complements versus Gerund Complements

Some verbs require only infinitive complements while others require only gerund complements. In addition, some verbs allow both complements. When verbs allow both complements, there is a subtle difference EFL/ESL learners might feel confused with such as *I like dancing* vs. *I like to dance*. However, there are cases where the difference is substantial like *I remembered to send him a birthday gift* vs. *I remembered sending him a birthday gift*. When either a gerund or an infinitive can be used as complements of same verbs, there is difference or no difference in meaning. EFL/ESL learners might discern the different meaning of the sentences using the verb *remember* relatively easily, while they might feel hard to tell the difference of the sentences using the verb *like*. Some native speakers might feel hard to explain the difference between *I like dancing* and *I like to dance*. Therefore, this paper will deal with what features of gerunds and infinitives make the different meanings focused on infinitive and gerund complements governed by the same verb. Biber (1999) says that “The specific meaning difference between infinitives and gerunds depends on the particular controlling verb” (p.757). The particular controlling verbs in this paper will be confined to *like, star, try, remember*, and

forget.

(a) *I like dancing*

(b) *I like to dance.*

According to some grammar textbooks such as *Understanding and using English grammar* (Azar. & Hagen, 2009, p. 317) or *The essentials of English* (Hogue, 2003, p. 139), it is said that the verbs such as *begin, start, continue, like, love*, etc. may be followed by either an infinitive or a gerund with little or no difference in meaning. Hogue(2003) says that “Either a gerund or an infinitive can be the direct object after these verbs with no difference in meaning” (p.139). Namely, EFL/ESL learners using these textbooks regard the two sentences (a) and (b) as the same, though they are not the exactly same and it will be discussed in the following section.

Many grammarians have tried to define the distinction between infinitives and gerunds. For example, some try to define the difference in terms of “temporality” (Duffley, 2004, p.359) or “referentiality”(p.361) but there are some authors who have different ideas about these two forms. It seems hard to define the meaning of infinitives and gerunds with one simple aspect and we need to consider many aspects of infinitives and gerunds. Here are the differences of these two complements which are conceptualized by many researchers until now.

The Meaning of Infinitives

Generally, many researchers insist that infinitives imply unfulfillment and future. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999, p.648) say that “Verbs taking infinitives encode actions future unfulfilled projections rather than past or present accomplishments in the complement”.

Sue wanted to talk to Sam. (≠ Sue talked to Sam.)

Bolinger (as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.648) points out that

infinitives imply to some extent “hypothetical, future, unfulfilled”. Biber (1999) argues that “Infinitival complement clauses are commonly used to report intentions, desires, efforts, perceptual states, and various other general actions” (p.693) and the general meaning of infinitives is “ more hypothetical or potential than the meaning of the corresponding gerunds with the same verb” (p.757). Similarly, Berk, (1999) says that “Direct infinitive clauses usually refer to an event that has not yet occurred or to a nonrealized event”(p.253).

She wants to be a teacher. (She is not a teacher now.)

Interestingly, Givon (as cited in Murcia & Freeman, 1999, p. 646) argues that infinitive complements are “ more integrated ” to their main clause and an agent in the main clause shows a more close connection with the occurrence of the infinitive complement clause.

Sue wanted Sam to win the game. (Sue had an interest in Sam’s win.)

The Meaning of Gerunds

It is believed that the gerunds generally imply fulfillment and reality. Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman (1999) say that actions in the gerund complement can be encoded “vivid, real, ongoing in the present or completed in the past”(p.648).

Sue enjoys talking with Lisa. (= Sue succeeds in talking with Lisa.)

Duffley (2006) argues that gerunds as direct object of another verb imply that events in the gerund complements are occurring at the same time “with that of the main predicate” in (c) or imply that events are “done with at the time corresponding to the main verb” in(d) (p.15):

(c) *Sue was enjoying dancing with him.*

(d) *Sue remembers sending Lisa a present.*

Gerunds denote that events are “real, vivid, fulfilled” according to Bolinger (as cited in Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p.648). Berk (1999) argues that “Gerunds often signal

an actual event” (p.254).

Sue enjoyed playing tennis with Lisa. (Gerund *playing* denotes that they actually played tennis.)

Remember, Forget and Try

The difference in cases such as *remember*, *forget* or *try* is more substantial and striking. In the case of gerund complements, they usually denote that the subject of the main clause completed or fulfilled an action, whereas in the case of infinitive complements, they usually denote future unfulfilled action of the subject of the main clause (Murcia &Freeman, 1999, pp.648-649).

He forgot to call his parents. (He didn't call his parents because of his forgetfulness.)

He forgot calling his parent. (He didn't remember that he had called his parents.

“Calling his parents” actually happened.)

He remembered to buy a gift. (He did not forget that he had to buy a gift.)

He remembered buying a gift. (He bought a gift, and he remembered that he had bought it.)

I tried to open the door, but I had no key. (I attempted to open the door, but no opening occurred.)

I tried opening the door, but it was still hot. (At least I opened the door.)

Biber (1999) says that infinitives followed by *remember* describe “an event that has not actually occurred” and typically present “a directive or potential compliance with some expected action” but, gerunds followed by *remember* usually describe “an event that has actually occurred” (p.758).

You've got to remember to lock the door. (Directives)

I must remember to tell her about the meeting. (Potential compliance)

I just remember giving it to someone. (“Giving” has actually occurred.)

In a similar way, Palmer and Dixon (as cited in Duffley, 2006) explain the difference between *try+ ing* and *try +infinitive* as follows (p.53):

He tried pushing the desk. (The action “pushing” was performed.)

He tried to push the desk. (His attempt to push the desk may or may not have been successful.)

He tried standing upside down. (Standing upside down was actually done by him.)

He tried to stand upside down. (Standing upside down was not realized.)

Givon (as cited in Duffley, 2006) has observed that the gerund “complement event was successfully performed, although it didn’t achieve the desired effect”, while the infinitive complement event was not performed in spite of the attempt (p.53). Hamawand (2004) argues that the choice between infinitives and gerunds should be “determined by semantic opposition and pragmatic inference” (p.452). He explains the difference in terms of “temporal reference” (p.452). According to him infinitives describe “a situation which is later in time in relation to the main predicate”, while gerunds indicate “a situation which is either prior or similar in time in relation to the main predicate” (p.452). Based on the temporal reference, we can infer that “the success of the complement event is not guaranteed” with infinitives, but with the gerunds “it is guaranteed” (p.452). It is believed that the difference seems to be more distinctive with or without the existence of *but* (p.453).

(e) *He tried to open the door.* (Despite his effort to perform the action of opening, he failed.)

(f) *He tried to open the door, but he refrained soon.* (As evidence of inference of

(e), (e) allows the use of *but* in (f).

(g) *He tried opening the door.* (He performed the action of opening, but in vain.)

(h)* *He tried opening the door, but he refrained soon.* (As evidence of inference of

(g), (g) does not allow the use of *but* in (h).

Biber (1999) explains the major difference between two complements followed by *try* is that “Gerunds usually propose a general solution to a problem, while infinitives usually present a specific action that a person attempts to do” (p.758).

You ought to try resting now.

I would say you might try saying more politely.

He tried to deceive me.

I try to be a good English teacher.

Berk (1999) explains the distinct semantic differences in terms of time sequences (p.253).

I remembered calling you. (Calling precedes remembering.)

I remembered to call you. (Remembering precedes calling.)

I Like to Play Tennis versus I Like Playing Tennis

Like is treated as one of the verbs which show no difference in meaning when it goes with gerunds or infinitives. However, the sentences that have the complements of infinitives and gerunds with the verb *like* do not mean exactly the same thing. Rudanko (1989) argues that “Gerund complements call for some preliminary observations”(p. 37). The implied subject of the infinitive in (j) is necessarily the same as that of the main clause, while in (i) this need is not necessary. Quirk et al.(as cited Rudanko, 1989) note that gerund complements in (i) is ambiguous, saying that (i) can be paraphrased either that “I like it when I play tennis” or “I like it when people in general play tennis” (p37).

(i) *I like playing tennis.*

(j) *I like to play tennis.*

Duffley (2004) explains the difference in terms of semantic notions such as “desire” or “enjoyment” (p.363). If *like* denotes “‘want’, ‘desire’, ‘intend’ or ‘go out of one’s way’”, *like* takes an infinitive “whether the desire is fulfilled” as in (k) or “unfulfilled as in the construction with *would*” (l) (p.363). On the other hand, if *like* represents “enjoyment”, *like* generally takes gerunds and “the enjoyment is actual” (o). (p.363).

(k) *Sarah likes to eat pizza.*

(l) *Sarah would like to eat pizza.*

(m) *Sarah likes to eat pizza but her parents don’t often allow it.* (Compared to (k),

(m) implies enjoyment of an event that only occurs occasionally)

(o) *Sarah likes eating pizza.*

Kempson & Quirk (as cited in Duffely, 2004) distinguish the meaning in regards to “fulfillment” (gerunds) and “non-fulfillment” (infinitive) to the verb *like* (p.364).

I like to visit my aunt.

I like visiting my aunt.

? *I like to visit my aunt last Wednesday.*

**I’d like visiting my aunt.* (The conditional *would like* doesn’t match with gerunds with fulfillment.)

Hamawand (2004) says that we can compare the different meaning in terms of infrequency versus frequency (p.453). According to him, infinitives are associated with infrequency because infinitives give “the impression that the event is repeated occasionally or rarely and in a different fashion. That is why infinitives correspond more closely to the idea of conditional actions”

(p.453). On the other hand, gerunds are used to express frequency since gerunds give “the impression that the event is repeated regularly or often and in a similar fashion” (p.453).

- (p) *Mary likes to eat alone.*
- (q) *Mary occasionally likes to eat alone.*
- (r) *Mary likes having eating alone.*
- (s) *Mary always likes eating alone.*

When we use infinitives like (p), it is believed that the act of eating alone occurs rarely or conditionally. So (p) allows adverbs of low frequency (occasionally), as in (q). In contrast, when we use gerunds like (r), it is believed that the act of eating alone occurs habitually, as part of her daily life. So (r) permits adverbs of high frequency (always), as in (s).

She Started to Cry versus She Started Crying

Hamawand (2004) explains the difference of infinitive and gerund complements in regard to “premeditation versus instantaneity” (p.454). According to him, infinitives are used to describe “deliberate” purposes and some degree of planning “in advance” of acting (p.454). Contrarily, gerunds are used to describe “instantaneous events” happening “accidentally” and the subject “appears less determinative” compared to the subject of infinitive complements (p.454).

- (t) *Mary started to laugh.*
- (u) *Mary started to laugh intentionally.*
- (v) * *Mary started to laugh unexpectedly.*
- (w) *Mary started laughing.*
- (x) *Mary started laughing unexpectedly.*
- (y) * *Mary started laughing intentionally.*

The infinitive *to laugh* in (t) represents that she laughs intentionally, deliberately and

consciously. That's why the infinitive *to cry* goes well with intentional adverbs as in (u) and does not match with the adverb *unexpectedly* in (v). In contrast, the gerund *laughing* in (w) represents her unintentional and accidental action which is beyond her control. So the gerund *laughing* goes well with the adverbial *unexpectedly* as in (x) and does not match with *intentionally* in (y).

Biber (1999) argues that infinitives with *start* can indicate “an intention to begin an action” (p. 759), though the intended action does not occur. On the contrary, gerunds with *start* generally indicate that “the event in question has truly begun to happen” (p.759).

Mary started to speak out, and then she shrugged.

Mary started to ask her daughter what her homework was, but she went out of the room.

When did we start using paper bills?

Mary came to my room and started laughing.

Implication for Teaching Infinitive and Gerund Complements

It is believed that it is hard to cover and teach every detailed difference for infinitive and gerund complements. However, teachers need to present what is believed to be fairly uncontroversial analyses of infinitive and gerund complement types though EFL/ESL students might feel it too hard to master infinitive and gerund complement pairs that exist in English. Above all, teachers should give explanations of not only syntactic differences but also the semantic differences derived from the distinctive features of infinitives and gerunds. In regard to how to teach it, we should let students practice them repeatedly in a meaningful context in an inductive way which can lead them to meaningful usage rather than rote learning the verb lists of which verbs take which complements.

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