

Communicating in the Face of Racism: Infinitive v. Gerund Verbal Complements in English

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Abstract

As COVID-19 continues to spread across the country, Asian Americans and Asian immigrants have experienced an increase in racist attacks. This paper presents a lesson plan that is intended to help English as a Second Language (ESL) learners of East Asian origin communicate in the face of racial discrimination. In addition to outlining this teaching technique, the article provides a linguistic analysis of the lesson plan's grammatical focus: the distinction between infinitive and gerund verbal complements. The author argues that the Bolinger Principle, a theory that articulates the reasoning behind this distinction, provides an effective and meaning-informed teaching strategy for teaching infinitives and gerunds. The purpose of the article is to offer guidance for teachers who may wish to use this form-focused technique in their own classrooms.

Keywords

ESL, racism, Asian immigrants, infinitive complements, gerund complements, Bolinger Principle

Background

COVID-19 has laid bare the deep systemic inequities that pervade our society. As illustrated through the Black Lives Matter movement, language shapes how we perceive and confront social justice issues (Avineri et al., 2018). In the wake of the global pandemic, Asian Americans and Asian immigrants have reported a surge in racist attacks and hate crimes in the United States (Nawaz, 2020; Ruiz et al., 2020). Remarks referring to COVID-19 as the “Chinese virus” and the “kung flu” are often seen as examples of attempts to normalize anti-Asian xenophobia (Kambhampaty, 2020, para. 2). Therefore, it is important to support this particular group of ESL learners in the face of bigotry. The featured lesson plan is designed to help ESL students of Asian descent learn how to communicate in response to racial discrimination.

The grammatical focus of the lesson is the distinction between infinitive and gerunds. This nuance tends to confound ESL/EFL learners, especially from East Asian countries, who may choose the incorrect form due to cross-linguistic influence from their native languages (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016, p. 679). It is thus essential that ESL/EFL teachers fully comprehend the difference in order to explain it to students and address any related errors. While infinitives and gerunds can be used in several ways, this paper will focus solely on examples containing verbal complements. According to Bolinger (1968), verbs that express unrealized possibilities generally go with infinitives, whereas verbs that refer to actual events tend to collocate with gerunds (p. 127). In this paper, I posit that this idea known as the Bolinger Principle provides an effective teaching strategy for identifying verbs that take infinitives and those that require gerunds. First, I will

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present the target teaching context and articulate a rationale for the lesson plan. In the subsequent linguistic analysis, I will discuss operational definitions of complements, infinitive complements, and gerund complements, and describe how to draw learners' attention to those forms and their meanings. The purpose of this article is to provide guidance for instructors who may wish to implement this technique in their respective teaching contexts.

Description of the Teaching Context

This lesson plan was designed for adult students taking an ESL Customer Service class at the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), a center that offers resources and programs for immigrants and their families in the Boston Chinatown community. Most BCNC members come from Chinese-speaking regions (e.g. Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), but the center welcomes immigrants of any nationality. All students taking this class wish to improve their English proficiency so they can increase their chances of landing jobs in customer service and succeeding in the workplace. The lesson plan has been written so that it can be delivered in person or online. More details on the context are provided in Appendix A.

The grammatical focus of this lesson is particularly relevant for Chinese English language learners, as they often find it hard to differentiate between infinitives and gerunds. Based on a corpus-based study of Chinese college students (Xia, 2012), the most common error was using an infinitive without the *to* and in places where a gerund should be used. These types of errors may result from negative cross-linguistic transfer, as Chinese verbs do not alter in form when used as a verbal complement. It is thus imperative that ESL students at BCNC learn the difference between infinitives and gerunds, which poses challenges for many native Chinese speakers.

Lesson Plan Rationale and Guidelines

The lesson takes a learner-centered approach to instructional design, which “prioritizes the uniqueness of every learner” (Cornelius-White & Harbaugh, 2010, p. xv). While planning the lesson, I adopted a “pedagogy of particularity,” which means that language instruction should be customized to a specific group of learners (Kumaravadevelu, 2001, p. 538). The grammar focus is the difference between infinitives and gerunds, a source of confusion for many Chinese English language learners. The lesson objectives demonstrate an awareness of students' motivations for learning English as well as the real-life challenges they currently face because they are Asian. At the beginning of the lesson, learners share their own definitions of racism and discuss how racist attitudes might emerge due to COVID-19. Then, they read excerpts from an article on Asian Americans' experiences of racism in the wake of the pandemic (Kambhampaty, 2020). The use of an authentic text helps the instructor abide by the principle of learner-centered instruction, as it is representative of reading material that students would encounter in real life and would be interested in exploring (Brown & Lee, 2015, p. 410). The article sheds light on a relevant and timely topic that pertains not only to their learning goals, but also their identities as immigrants of Asian descent.

Catered to learners' interests, the lesson aims to help students grasp the main ideas of an article on racism and understand the difference between infinitive and gerund complements (see Appendix A for all lesson objectives). In order to measure students' progress towards achieving the learning outcomes, the lesson design features several means of assessment. During the first “through” phase, students discuss the article in a jigsaw activity, an information gap task that allows them to process key details from the reading (Pica, 2008, p. 529). Based on example sentences from the text, they identify a pattern for using infinitives and gerunds and then compare their hypotheses with their classmates. This task thus adheres to the focus-on-form approach,

which draws learners' attention to linguistic elements as they arise in meaning-based lessons (Ellis, 2008; Long, 1991). Collectively, the class determines a pattern, which ideally should describe the Bolinger Principle: Gerunds generally describe actions that are real and actually happen, while infinitives generally describe unfulfilled or completed outcomes (Bolinger, 1968). Their performance in the subsequent activity should indicate whether they were able to apply the pattern in context.

The second "through" phase is focused on developing effective communication strategies against racial slurs and discrimination. In groups, learners will reflect upon a given scenario that they may encounter in daily life or in the workplace, such as a passerby who yells at them "Go back to China!" or a client who refuses their service due to their race. Through these discussions, they will determine how they would want to convey those messages. When they report on their decision, their classmates give them feedback on their proposed solution. They also answer questions from their teacher and peers that elicit the use of infinitives and gerunds (e.g., "What did you decide *to* do?" or "What should you avoid *doing* in this situation?"). During this activity, the teacher should take note of any errors that should be addressed. At the conclusion of the lesson, students complete exit tickets, which not only serve as a means of self-assessment, but also indicate to the teacher how much learning has transpired (Frey & Fisher, 2011, p. 46).

Linguistic Analysis: Complements

The meaning of complements is implied in the word itself: they complete a given expression. According to Larsen-Freeman et al. (2016), complements can be defined as, "constituents needed to complete the meaning of a verb, an adjective, or sometimes a noun" (p. 679). Verbal complements include the following broad categories: *that*-clauses, infinitive complements, and gerund complements (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016). Examples of each complement type are provided below:

That-clause: *Tsui responded **that** he was Chinese American.*

Infinitive: *She stopped **to** adjust her mask.*

Gerund: *I avoided **taking** the bus or the subway.*

All examples in the linguistic analysis are taken from Kambhampaty (2020), the article on racism featured in the lesson. While the term complement is not mentioned in the lesson, it is important for students to understand how infinitives and gerunds complete the meaning of a verb. For instance, if the sentence *I avoided taking the bus or subway* were rewritten as *I avoided*, it would be considered incomplete. The next two sections will define and illustrate the grammatical functions of infinitive and gerund complements.

Infinitive Complements

Infinitives are non-finite; in other words, they are not limited by tense, person, or number (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016). They are the base form of a verb; they can be bare infinitives (e.g. *read*) or *to*-infinitives (e.g. *to read*). Infinitive complements can be considered clauses in that they possess both a subject and a verb (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016, p. 685): *Her images inspire people to at least acknowledge their experiences*. Within the infinitive complement, the subject is *people* and the verb is *acknowledge*. During the first "through" phase of the lesson, students examine sentences that use what Larsen-Freeman et al. (2016) classify as *attempt* and *advise* subtypes of infinitive complements (p. 684). The *attempt*-type verbs are intransitive and do not have objects

(e.g., *We try to look at the larger picture*). In contrast, *advise*-type verbs are transitive and require objects when they appear with infinitives (e.g., *Older family members told her not to involve herself in “Black-white battles”*). The *advise*-type can also be characterized as “manipulative” verbs, such as “ask, make, tell, order,” which tend to take infinitive complements (Los, 2015, p. 3). The agent of the main verb “manipulates the behavior” of the object so that it performs the complement verb (Givón, 1980, p. 3). By looking at the examples above, students will observe that infinitive complements are often used to describe the outcome of an action.

Gerund Complements

Similar to infinitives, gerund complements are tenseless clauses that complete the main verb. Gerunds derive from verbs and end in *-ing* (e.g., *reading*). The *-ing* of a gerund is “an affix that attaches itself to a verb stem” (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016, p. 689). Gerund complements are considered clauses, because they possess an identifiable subject and a verb: *I avoided taking the bus or the subway*. In this example sentence, which appears in the first “through” phase of the lesson, it is understood that the subject of the complement is also I. Gerund complements share characteristics of noun phrases that can serve as subjects and objects of sentences (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016). In the sample sentence, *taking the bus or the subway* is the direct object of the main verb *avoid*. This statement can be confirmed by the possibility of pseudo-clefting: *What I avoided was taking the bus or the subway*. As Duffley (2000) explains, the gerund “evokes the whole of the event’s interiority” (p. 225). In other words, the gerund refers to the entirety of an event, and not just some part of it.

The Bolinger Principle: Infinitive v. Gerund Complements

In this section, I will expand upon these definitions of the infinitive and gerund complements by introducing the Bolinger Principle. This theory has been an important resource for language researchers and teachers alike, as it has been cited in previously published works on complementation (Duffley, 2000, 2006; Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016; Rudanko, 2010; Vawser, 1988; Yidi, 1997) and has been used as a meaning-informed strategy to teach intermediate and advanced ESL/EFL learners the difference between infinitives and gerunds. According to Bolinger (1968), the distinction between infinitive and gerund complements is not arbitrary, for the complement types “contrast in meaning” (p. 122). Verbs such as *command, expect, hope, struggle*, etc. express “unrealized possibilities” and tend to take infinitive complements (Bolinger, 1968, p. 127). In other words, these verbs denote potential or unfulfilled outcomes, as in, *The U.S. struggles to combat a global pandemic*. Verbs such as *appreciate, defend, deny, enjoy, keep*, etc., refer to “actualities or possibilities conceived as actualities” and usually require gerunds (Bolinger, 1968, p. 127). These verbs trigger actions in the complement that are real and vivid (Larsen-Freeman et al., 2016, p. 693), as in, *The man kept coming closer and closer to Tsui*. In the lesson plan, students will find a pattern for using these forms based on sentences that contain either infinitive or gerund complements. However, teachers should keep in mind verbs that collocate with both complement types as well as the distinction between these complements with respect to time and subject control (see Appendix B). While the theory has its limitations, it alleviates the cognitive load of learners in that they do not have to memorize which verbs go with which complement type. In short, the Bolinger Principle supplies teachers with a meaning-informed reason for clarifying the difference between these two complements and thus enables instructors to plan lessons that keep meaning in focus.

Conclusion

Designed for immigrant ESL students at the BCNC, the lesson plan aims to equip English language learners with communication strategies for combatting racism. While the lesson plan was developed for a specific audience, it can be adapted to suit the needs of any adult learning population. The accompanying linguistic analysis explains the difference between gerund and infinitive verbal complements and highlights the merits of the Bolinger Principle as a teaching strategy. Hopefully, readers will find this paper a useful guide for planning a form-focused lesson that addresses racial tensions of our time.

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Appendix A: Lesson Plan Outline

Setting: Boston Chinatown Neighborhood Center (BCNC), a community center that offers resources and programs to immigrants and immigrant families. A majority of BCNC members are from Chinese-speaking regions (e.g. Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong), but the center is open to all immigrants from around the world. This lesson is designed for an ESL Customer Service class, which the BCNC offers for free to any members of the Boston Chinatown community.

Learner Background Information:

- *Class size:* Each time this class is offered, the class size varies, but the size is usually small, about 10 students.
- *Age:* There is a wide range. Learners may be in their mid-twenties to late fifties. The average age varies by class, and BCNC does not offer any statistics, but based on an educated guess, the average age is about early forties.
- *ESL context:* Many students come from China (usually Mainland), but not all learners have the same L1. There is a wide range of proficiency levels (novice-high to intermediate-mid), which are determined by the proficiency test BCNC administers to entering students. Learners all read and write simple sentences in their L1. They all understand simple sentence structure. With respect to the average number of years learning English, the BCNC does not report statistics on their website, but the range can be from a few months to a few years of formal schooling.

Time: 90 minutes

Materials and Equipment:

- “I Will Not Stand Silent” article from *Time* magazine (Kambhampaty, 2020)
- Computer
- Whiteboard and markers (if in person)
- Projector (if in person), PowerPoint slide
- Internet connection, Zoom meeting room (if online)

Objectives:

Learners will be able to:

- Grasp the main ideas of a text about racist incidents, by discussing them and reporting on them with their peers.
- Articulate their opinions on racism and racist incidents, by discussing real-life events with their peers.
- Identify verbs that take on infinitive and verbs that take on gerunds by comparing example sentences with infinitives and gerunds.
- Identify a pattern for the use of infinitives and gerunds, first by writing the pattern individually and then comparing their hypotheses together as a class.
- Develop effective communication strategies against racial slurs and discrimination, by discussing them in groups.
- Report on these strategies by presenting them to the class and answering questions that elicit the infinitive and gerund forms.

Lesson Plan:

(1) “*Into*” phase: *Defining racism* (10–15 mins.)

- Check in with learners to see how they are doing and invite them to share any news, orally or in the chat if the lesson is on Zoom.

- Trigger warning: Warn students that this lesson will focus on a sensitive topic: racism. Remind students that this is a safe space, where we can support one another and engage bravely and empathetically with challenging material.
- Ask learners: “What does racism mean to you?” Learners are invited to write their ideas on the whiteboard (physical or virtual). Offer assistance if learners are stuck or need help finding the words.
- Ask learners: “What racist attitudes might people have during the pandemic? Give a specific example.” Learners share orally their responses to this question.

(2) “Through” phase: *Reading about experiences of racism* (20–30 mins.)

- For this jigsaw reading activity, learners read a brief excerpt of the article from *Time Magazine* “[I will not stand silent: 10 Asian Americans reflect on racism during the pandemic and the need for equality.](#)” Learners are divided into groups or breakout rooms based on the section they read. For example, group A reads about Justin Tsui’s story, group B reads about Jilleen Liao’s and so on. Within each group, learners discuss what happened in their assigned story. They will answer the following questions:

- What happened to [insert name of Asian American who is telling the story]?
- How is this incident racist?
- How did s/he feel or react to this incident?

Circle among groups/breakout rooms and listen to their conversations. Offer assistance as needed if learners do not understand certain words or phrases in the text.

- In the second phase of the jigsaw reading activity, learners change groups so that within each group, each learner will have read a different section of the article. Learners report to classmates what happened in their respective stories. When it is their turn to listen, learners are encouraged to ask their peers questions about their stories. Circle among groups/breakout rooms and listen to their conversations. Offer assistance as needed.
- Come back together as a group. Ask learners what they think about these incidents and whether they have had similar experiences. Model and provide useful phrases for expressing opinions (e.g., “I think that . . .”, “In my opinion, . . .”, or “I agree/disagree with . . .”). Learners share their thoughts in response.
- Draw learners’ attention to the following sentences or phrases, which are taken from the article:
 - The U.S. struggles **to** combat a global pandemic.
 - We try **to** look at the larger picture.
 - The man kept **coming** closer and closer to Tsui.
 - Choi felt that he needed **to** speak up.
 - I avoided **taking** the bus or the subway.

Ask learners these questions based on the example sentences:

- Which verbs in bold are followed by *to* + *infinitive*?
- Which verbs in bold are followed by the *-ing* form?

- Ask learners to come up with a pattern for using gerund and infinitive forms, first by writing it down individually. Then, learners compare their hypotheses with one another. Collectively, we identify a pattern for using gerund and infinitive forms. The pattern may look something like this: “Gerunds generally describe actions that are real and actually happen, while infinitives generally describe unfulfilled or completed outcomes.”

(3) “Through” phase: *How do you communicate in response to racial slurs and discrimination?* (20–25 mins.)

- Learners are divided into groups or breakout rooms. Each group is given one of the following scenarios, which are inspired by true events, as reported on [Stop AAPI Hate Reporting Center](#):
 - As you are walking in the street, someone yells at you: “Go back to China!”
 - A client refuses to be serviced by you, because you are Asian.
 - Someone throws a glass bottle at you and calls you “you f—king chink!”

- You overhear a coworker say that the increase in COVID-19 cases is due to residents in Chinatown.

Each group will consider the following: What means of communication can you use to communicate these messages? What would you like to say or write? Let students know about Stop AAPI Hate, a website for reporting hate crimes.

- In groups or breakout rooms, learners will brainstorm, by discussing with each other and taking notes, what is the most effective way to communicate the message. Circle between groups and offer guidance if learners are unsure or stuck.
- As a whole class, each group will answer the following questions that elicit the use of infinitive and gerund complements:
 - What is the scenario?
 - What did you decide *to* do? Why?
 - What should you remember *to* do in this situation?
 - What should you avoid *doing* in this situation?

While each group is reporting to the class, pay close attention to their discourse to see if they are using the infinitive and gerund forms correctly, and take note of any errors that should be addressed. With learners' permission, audio record their reports.

When it is not their turn, the other groups should listen attentively so that they can give feedback afterwards (What do you think of the solution? What are other factors to consider?).

(4) “*Beyond*” phase: *Exit ticket* (5–10 mins.)

- Ask students what we learned in class today and how they will use what we learned in the future. Students can choose their preferred means of communication for the exit ticket (e.g. say verbally to teacher, write an email, type in the chat).
- For homework, they will write their own reflection on a racist incident that they have witnessed or experienced. They will also listen to the audio recordings of their reports, and identify and transcribe all the infinitive and gerund forms.

Appendix B: Nuances and Limitations of the Bolinger Principle Verbs That Take Both Infinitives and Gerunds

While the lesson does not include verbs that take both infinitive and gerund complements, it is important to note that, in cases of overlap, a clear difference in meaning is often implied:

*I forgot to pay the bills.*¹

I forgot paying the bills.

In the sentence with the infinitive, the bills were not paid due to forgetfulness, whereas in the sentence with the gerund, the person paid the bills but forgot about it afterwards. However, Larsen-Freeman et al. (2016) acknowledge that the Bolinger Principle only partially explains the difference in meaning for verbs that collocate with both complement types (p. 694).

The Temporal Distinction: Infinitive vs. Gerund Complements

Based on the Bolinger Principle, it is tempting to define the distinction between infinitive and gerund complements in terms of time. This distinction can be ambiguous, since neither complement type is marked by tense. According to Larsen-Freeman et al. (2016), verbs that take gerunds encode actions in the complement that are “ongoing in the present or completed in the past,” whereas verbs that take infinitives “encode future projections” (p. 693). However, as Duffley (2000, 2006) points out, this distinction is not so clear-cut. Scholars have often interpreted the gerund as simultaneous with the verb that it complements (Wierzbicka, 1988). Duffley (2000) questions this interpretation and argues that the gerund is “capable of evoking an event that is temporally before, after, or contemporaneous” with respect to the main verb (p. 223). In the sentence, *I remember working with him on it*, the gerund refers to a past action. The gerund complement can also allude to future or potential events, as in, *I am considering working with him on it*. In the sentence, *I am enjoying working with him*, the gerund complement happens at the same time as the main verb *enjoy*. Duffley (2000) explains that it is “the lexical content of the [main verb] that implies whether the *-ing*’s event is prior, contemporaneous or subsequent” relative to the principal action (p. 229). For the example of *I remember working with him on it*, the meaning of the main verb *remember* suggests that *working with him* occurred in the past. It is thus important to evaluate on a case-by-case basis the timeframe of the gerund complement with respect to the main verb.

By contrast, infinitive complements refer to the end goal or result of the main verb. As Bolinger (1968) asserts, infinitives often signify hypotheses or future possibilities. According to Duffley (2000), the preposition *to* implies movement leading to a terminus; the notion of movement here is understood in terms of time (p. 234). In the example sentence, *The bystander threatened to report the incident*, the action of reporting the incident is a step that the bystander has threatened to take. However, a complete view of infinitive complements should consider examples such as the following: *He then proceeded to cut in front of her*. This sentence implies the realization of the infinitive’s event. The infinitive complement can still be interpreted as a future event relative to the main verb. Thus, infinitive complements allude to outcomes of the principal action, whether they be unfulfilled or realized.

Subject Control: Infinitive vs. Gerund Complements

The distinction between infinitive and gerund complements can also be analyzed through the lens of subject control. As explained in the definitions section, both complement types are considered clauses, because they have an identifiable subject and a verb. Identifying the noun phrase that governs an infinitive or a gerund complement is known as the concept of subject control (Duffley, 2000, 2006). According to Duffley (2000), the subject of the main verb and that of the infinitive complement are always the same, whereas the gerund complement can either refer to the subject of the sentence or to a different entity. In the sentence, *Schools stopped offering in-person classes this year*, it is understood that schools are the subject of both the main verb *stop* and the gerund complement. However, in the sentence, *The governor recommends wearing*

¹ These examples were found in the *Corpus of Contemporary American English* (Davies, 2008–).

masks in public, it is implied that the recommended act of wearing masks is to be carried out by everyone in the state, not just the governor. Similar to timeframes, the known subject of a gerund complement depends on the meaning of the verb. While the analysis of Duffley (2000) on gerund complements is accurate, his assertion on infinitive complements and subject control does not apply to all cases. Contrary to his findings, the infinitive complement does not always imply co-referentiality with the subject of the sentence. Based on an earlier example, *Older family members told her not to involve herself in “black-white battles,”* it is older family members who impart advice and it is she who may involve herself in “black-white battles.” When helping learners distinguish between infinitive and gerund complements, teachers should consider the question of subject control, which adds another layer of nuance to a complex grammatical concept.