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Title:

**Acquisition of English Optional Infinitives by Iranian EFL learners**

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**IN THE NAME OF GOD**  
**THE COMPASSIONATE**  
**THE MERCIFUL**

کلیه حقوق مادی و معنوی، ابتکارات و نوآوری های مربوط به این پایان نامه / رساله متعلق به دانشگاه یزد است و هرگونه استفاده از نتایج تحقیقات و مطالعات برای تولید دانش فنی، ثبت اختراع، ثبت اثر بدیع هنری، همچنین چاپ و تکثیر، نسخه برداری، ترجمه و اقتباس و ارائه مقاله در سمینارها و مجلات علمی از این پایان نامه / رساله منوط به موافقت کتبی دانشگاه یزد می باشد.

*To my beloved parents*

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## **Abstract**

Optional Infinitive (OI) stage proposed by Wexler in early 1990s introduced a period in early language acquisition process through which finite and non-finite forms co-occur in similar contexts. Later, properties of OI stage, initially proposed for L1 acquisition, were observed in the products of L2 learners and many studies were carried out to numerate its properties. OI stage properties shared between L1, L2, and cross linguistics data mainly consist of optional application of infinitives, subject-verb agreement, and tense markers. Hence, this paper discusses the acquisition of OI stage features by Persian lower and upper intermediate EFL learners through the application of comprehension and production tasks. The present research was carried out to investigate how different the two proficiency levels of Persian EFL learners pass through this stage. It further aimed at exploring the effect of learners' L1 on the productions of OI features which were mainly neglected by other studies. Moreover, it attempted to apply its results to Truncation and Unique Checking Constraint as two major models proposed to explain OI features through a critical view. To this end, 60 Persian learners of English, i.e., 30 lower intermediate and 30 upper intermediate participated in the translation and grammaticality judgment tests. To investigate English OI features, tasks were designed in a way to focus on infinitives, subject pronouns, and tense markers within two subcategories of infinitive-*to* and bare infinitives. Results of the mixed between-within ANOVA revealed OI features in the production of Persian lower and upper intermediate learners indicating that they were at the OI stage. The results further indicated that L1 transferred positively in the acquisition of infinitive-*to* verbs, subject nominative case and tense markers, while it had negative transfer in the application and comprehension of bare infinitives,

accusatives, and subject-verb agreement. Additionally, a significant effect was found for proficiency level in the production task which advocated Wexler's (1994) maturational hypothesis. Finally, in the acquisition of OI features, the data obtained by comparing the mean scores of infinitive marker *to*, subject pronouns, and tense markers lent support to the UCC model partially.

**Key words:** English Optional Infinitives, Nominative case, Tense marker, UCC hypothesis (Unique Checking Constraint), Truncation theory.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 Preliminaries

Natural language learning initiates at an early age in normal human beings when children start to acquire their mother tongue. They need to arrive at a linguistic system which accounts for the received input, allowing the L1 acquirer to produce and understand the language spoken in the environment. Universal Grammar (UG) was proposed by Chomsky (1965) as a part of an innate biologically endowed language faculty to explain L1 linguistic system based on the linguistic experience. Following the Innateness Hypothesis, every human being possesses an innate mechanism which forms L1 grammar on the basis of their linguistic experience (Chomsky, 1972). While human children take the responsibility in parameter setting and lexical learning, through exposure to sufficient linguistic input they can acquire any natural language (Radford, 2005). This can account for the rapid and uniform process of L1 language acquisition that has been investigated by many researchers.

But the question is whether the linguistic system of second language learners follows the same universal principles that govern first language learning or not. In early 1970s, researchers such as Nemser (1971) and Selinker (1972) introduced the concept of *interlanguage* to refer to non-native grammars. By investigating errors during the L2 learning process, they found that learners' mistakes are not only non-random but also rule-governed and systematic. Such experiments suggested a complex and systematic linguistic system for the second language as well as first language. So the original interlanguage hypothesis claims that the underlying grammars of L2 learners are constrained by UG principles since they exhibit properties of natural languages.



On the other hand, unlike the systematic nature of first and second language learning, they are different in their acquisition process, as Towell and Hawkins (1994) indicated second language learning process is affected by L1 conscious and unconscious transfer leading to variability and incompleteness. While White (2003) brought forth some debates over L1 and access to UG in constructing learners' interlanguage, Joo (2003) numerated some learnability factors such as proficiency level and instruction. Advocates of Critical Period Hypothesis (Johnson and Newport, 1998; Long, 1990) concluded that native-like competence is not achievable for L2 learners. Furthermore, the extremist Bley-Vroman (1989) who proposed no access to UG after puberty age rejected any associated learning mechanism available to adults. Many researchers have explored the nature of second language acquisition; on the one hand some researchers showed that adult interlanguage grammar fail to account for principles and parameters of UG (Clahsen & Hong, 1995; Neeleman & Weerman, 1997 among others), on the other hand, there are studies based on existence of UG constraints in the interlanguage (e.g., Schwartz & Sprouse 1994, 1996; White 1989, 2000). But what is inevitable is the fact that L2 acquisition occurs through L1 parameter resetting and this inevitably causes a divergence from the native grammar even if the productions be based on UG parameters.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem**

While learning a second language, learners are required to acquire its grammatical system within which the verb phrase application plays a crucial role, since verbs contain Tense and Agreement (in some languages), the optional application of verbs

can effect application of tense markers, subject-verb agreement or both of them, consequently.

*Non-Finite verbs* or *Infinitival forms* in English are basic, dictionary forms of verbs which can happen with (e.g., She needs *to study* hard) or without (e.g., She must *study* hard) the particle *to*. There are three varieties of infinitives in English; the *full infinitive* (or *to-infinitive*), the *bare infinitive* (the stem of verb without *to*) and the *split infinitive* (when a single adverb inserts between the stem of the verb and the particle *to*) which can take the role of subject, object or both of them simultaneously. All these forms exist in Persian, except the split infinitives since infinitive marker in Persian attaches to the verb stem and cannot be separated. Additionally, in Persian bare infinitives happen in rare cases and in specific contexts (i.e., with future auxiliary) as indicated in example (1), in which the stem of verb (خرید) [buy] is used after the auxiliary (خواه) [will].

(1) Persian: خواهم خرید /xahæmxæri:d/

English: I will buy

The Optional Infinitive (OI) research territory is replete with practical and longitudinal studies in L1 and L2 proposed to tackle OI features by introducing a kind of framework. Among syntactic models introduced since the discovery of OI stage, three models have survived till today, each with its own merits and demerits. Rizzi (1993) observed that Optional infinitives occur mostly in subordinate clauses while finite verbs happen in both main and subordinate contexts. He proposed that subordinate infinitive clauses took their tense interpretation from an Anaphoric Tense identified sentence-internally. He took a hierarchical view on language acquisition in which CP is the full form of all utterances, when a stage below CP is

produced its head is selected as the root of the clause and all stages above this root will necessarily be truncated. In the use of infinitives, the root is selected in the VP, saying that all nodes above VP for instance TP or AgrP should be omitted and thus should not be present in the productions of learners. This model which is known as Truncation model can successfully explain misuse of clitics, weak pronouns and auxiliaries in optional infinitive stage since they occupy a stage higher than the VP which is assumed not to be acquired yet at OI stage. It also can explain nonexistence of OI in pro-drop languages, as in all languages infinitive verb must raise to TP and AgrP to check tense and subject-verb agreement, but in the pro-drop languages since there is no anaphoric tense sentence internally, the Constraint on the identification of Anaphoric Tense is violated and thus no infinitives occur. On one hand, this model has some demerits in explaining subject presence in negative sentences since in NegP as the root of the clause, the specifier of NegP can be a possible site for subject to raise. On the other hand simultaneous use of nominative and accusative subjects in OI sentences cannot be explained because in OI stage where finite and non-finite verbs are used optionally, it is supposed that Tense is not acquired yet and learners' products should be truncated at the VP, thus, no application of nominative or accusative cases is possible. Moreover Wh-structures are not possible according to Truncation model since in OI stage no CP is available to give site to Wh-to land and thus no possibility for EPP to happen.

Agreement/Tense Omission Model (ATOM) proposed by Schütze and Wexler (1996) and Schütze (2003) based its foundations on optional underspecification of either tense or agreement to explain optionality. In this model the use of non-Nominative subjects as well as optional infinitives in child English non-finite

constructions are explained successfully. Schütze and Wexler proposed that NOM case is assigned by Agr not Tense, which is when Agr is met, NOM is assigned whether Tense is acquired or not, while the accusative form is used when Agr is not assigned. They could explain the frequent use of accusative cases as the subjects of root verbs at OI stage by proposing that accusatives are the default case form of language in which wherever there is no structural case position, the accusative forms are used. But this model cannot explain how, why and where the DP subject moves and from where it receives case. It also has problems explaining the optionality in choosing to omit T or Agr and to explain why some languages do not have OI stage.

Unique Checking Constraint (UCC) model proposed by Wexler (1998) claims a position for subject initially in the VP. Having an interpretable D-feature, the subject should raise to check finiteness for TP and AgrP with uninterpretable D-feature, but this model assumes that the interpretable D-feature of subject can only be checked against one functional category and at least one of these two categories (i.e., Agr or T) can be checked by subject.

In general, these three models try to explain properties of the OI stage and investigate how optional infinitives take place within the syntactic structures of language in the early stages of acquisition. Having their own merits and demerits they share a hierarchical view on language structures, none of which could advocate OI stage features thoroughly. Furthermore, as it is known optional infinitives in any first language acquisition terminate in a full attainment of verbs, tense markers, subject pronouns, and subject-verb agreements, but in L2 it is still a matter of question which needs further investigation.