5 The infinitive in the writing of Czech advanced students of English

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Abstract

This paper sums up partial results of a long-term project aimed at determining specific needs in teaching advanced English students at the Institute of Foreign Languages of the Faculty of Education, Palacký University, where both authors have been teaching for more than 15 years. In our advanced English students, we have long observed a tendency to make quantitative mistakes, that is to use certain English language structures with a remarkably different frequency than the frequency typical for texts composed by English native speakers. Through a series of quantitative analyses of our students' texts in comparison with authentic English texts, we have been trying to identify the areas of major quantitative discrepancies, which, in turn, helps us make our teaching to advanced students more focussed and effective. The present contribution maps the theoretical background of the functions and usage of various forms of the English infinitive, and comments on the frequency of usage of various forms and syntactic positions of the infinitive in authentic English texts and in texts produced by our 3rd year Bachelor students in the written part of their final English language examination.

Keywords: advanced students of English, infinitive, writing.

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1.   Introduction

The present quantitative research into the incidence and usage of the infinitive in texts written by Czech advanced students of English is a part of our long-term project dating from 2013. The project aims at understanding and determining the needs of advanced English learners who study at Palacký University to become English language teachers. Through a series of quantitative analyses, i.e. comparing frequencies of selected linguistic features in native and non-native English texts, we aspire to obtain specific and detailed information about which features to target in our pedagogical intervention in teaching both the theory of English linguistics and practical English language usage.

In our initial analysis, which focussed on syntactic complexity in formal writing (Kořínková & Válková, 2013), we found out that Czech advanced students of English and English native speakers used dependent nominal, relative, and adverbial clauses with similar frequency, and only moderate differences were found in their distribution (i.e. relative clauses were slightly more common in authentic English texts while nominal clauses were slightly more common in the texts written by Czech learners). Greater differences were, however, identified in the incidence of structural varieties of dependent clauses, where Czech students preferred the finite varieties over the non-finite ones. In the case of infinitive clauses, the differences were the most remarkable (i.e. native speakers produced almost twice as many of them in various syntactic positions than our Czech students). Different usage of the infinitive was also reported by other researchers who compared Czech or Slovak speakers (both Slavic languages) of English with native speakers (e.g. Hornová, 2015; Kozáčiková, 2015).

Hornová (2015) analysed a learner corpus of spoken English comprising speech acts by 110 students of the first year of Teaching English as a Foreign Language programmes at three Czech universities whose level of English, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (henceforth CEFR), was determined as B2. She reports that the infinitive, together with the other non-finite verb forms in English, was used by Czech students with lower

frequency than by native speakers. She compared the results of her quantitative analysis with corpus data introduced in Biber et al. (1999) and concluded that for the Czech learners, the usage of non-finite verb forms was more appropriate in the nominal syntactic functions whereas their usage in complex noun or adjective phrases proved to be more challenging. The outcomes, according to Hornová (2015), prove that Czech students whose knowledge of English reaches the B2 level have not yet managed the correct usage of the non-finite verb forms, including the infinitive.

Kozáčiková (2015) analysed dependent to-infinitive clauses in selected papers in an international scientific journal *Topics in Linguistics*. Her comparative study shows both similarities and differences in the usage of to-infinitive in articles written by non-native (Slovak) authors and those written by native speakers. Although the author does not explicitly state the level of English of the non-native authors, it can be deduced that due to the fact that they were university teachers and researchers, their level would most probably reach C1 or C2 level, i.e. very close to that of native English speakers. The results of the study show that the number of to-infinitive clauses in native speakers' texts was more than twice higher than in non-native speakers' texts. What was similar was the fact that nominal clauses were the most common and adverbial the least common to-infinitive clauses in both corpora. The author explains the reason for different frequency of the usage of sentence condensation by means of the infinitive in the structural syntactic differences between the two languages.

All the above-mentioned results lead us to our present, more detailed analysis of the incidence of the infinitive as one of the language means that serve the language economy. Moreover, we also resolved to focus on the infinitives following modal verbs or their periphrastic forms in order to find out whether our target group students are also able to formally express the grammatical categories connected with the infinitive (i.e. aspect and voice) or whether their active usage of the infinitive is reduced to its basic form as reported by Hornová (2015), who stated that "[n]o complex form of the infinitive (showing aspect or voice) is used in the whole corpus" (p. 51). For this purpose we decided to analyse a written corpus of Czech advanced English students' texts and also to

test the students' ability to use correct simple and also complex forms of the infinitive in a relevant language context (see supplementary material[3]).

2.   Literature review

2.1.   The infinitive in English and Czech

The infinitive belongs to one of the non-finite verb forms together with the present and past participles and the gerund. The English infinitive can be related to the present or past and it can also express the grammatical categories of aspect and voice. Table 1 offers the overview of various forms of the infinitive as introduced by Dušková (2012, p. 267).

Table 1.   Forms of the English infinitive

infinitive	present	past
active – simple	to write	to have written
active – progressive	to be writing	to have been writing
passive	to be written	to have been written

The active form of the infinitive, as the author states, is more common than the passive. The passive is common in academic prose with *can* or *could* to express possibility, and in combination with *must* or *should*, collective obligation is expressed (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2006, p. 183). The present form usually relates the infinitive to the action expressed by the finite verb (e.g. *I am sorry to trouble you*). The past infinitive form expresses the action which happened before the one expressed by the finite verb (e.g. *He is likely to have left*). According to Biber et al. (2006), modal verbs (usually *must* or *should*) combined with the past infinitive express obligation or logical necessity. The combination of modal verbs *may* and *might* with the past infinitive can express a certain degree of doubt about past events or situations. The progressive infinitive stresses the action in progress (e.g. *She seems to be enjoying herself,* or *he appeared to have been*

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3. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/azc1zca0lnwme4nozgxprnr62mj55zay

continually borrowing money). In conversation (fictional dialogue), progressive infinitives combine with *will* or obligation modals. The modal verb *shall*, which is rather rare, when used, usually occurs with the progressive infinitive.

Various forms of infinitives can be a part of complex verb forms (e.g. after modal verbs) or they can function as a structural variety of the dependent clause types. Due to the fact that "non-finite clauses lack tense markers and modal auxiliaries and frequently lack a subject and subordinating conjunction, they are valuable as a means of syntactic compression" (Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, p. 286), also known as sentence condensation. As for dependent clause types, the infinitive can condense nominal, relative, as well as adverbial clauses.

There is a wide range of syntactic positions that can be expressed by infinitive clauses. The classification by Biber et al. (2006, p. 259) covers the following (note: the examples of English sentences are from the *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, either 1999 or 2006 version).

2.1.1. Infinitive as subject

- Subject. *Artificial pearls before real swine were cast by these jet-set preachers.* **To have thought this** *made him more cheerful.*

- Extraposed subject. *It's difficult* **to maintain a friendship**.

According to the corpus findings, subject infinitive clauses (i.e. before the main verb) are relatively rare. In comparison with other registers, they are more common in academic prose. Extraposed infinitive clauses occur in most written registers, they should be regarded as the unmarked choice in comparison with subject clauses (Biber et al., 1999, p. 725). The choice between subject and extraposed subject clauses can be influenced by several factors: register, information structure, grammatical complexity, and personal style. Czech students are familiar with both structures in their mother tongue although the frequency of usage in comparison with English may be different. Czech subject infinitive clauses are rather formal both in the position before the main verb or

when extraposed, so their occurrence is not frequent. The following examples of Czech infinitive clauses are taken from the grammar book *Česká mluvnice 2* (Komárek & Petr, 1986, p. 147): *Organizovat je nad jeho síly* or its extraposed version *Je nad jeho síly organizovat.*

It should be also noted here that unlike in English, the condensation by the infinitive of subordinate clauses (not only subject clauses) in Czech is possible almost singularly in situations when the subject of the subordinate clause is the same as the subject of the main clause. Thus we can transform *Pavel se snažil, aby (on sám) přišel včas do školy* into *Pavel se snažil přijít včas do školy.* The sentence *Pavel se snažil, aby děti přišly včas do školy*, however, does not allow for such condensation (Hlavsa, Grepl, & Daneš, 1987, p. 231).

2.1.2.   *Infinitive as subject predicative*

- *My goal now is* **to look to the future**.

Infinitive clauses functioning as subject predicative (in more traditional terminology, e.g. Greenbaum & Quirk, 1990, this position is referred to as subject complement) are relatively common in written registers. They are used to frame a series of points in a discussion (e.g. *The first step in any such calculation is to write the equation for the reaction*), they are often used to specify the nouns *aim*, *objective*, *plan*, *goal*, *purpose*, *strategy*, *task*, or *idea*, and finally they can introduce a method or way of doing something.

In Czech, the structure can be the same with the verb *to be* used in these sentences (e.g. the translation of the sample sentence: *Mým cílem je podívat se na budoucnost*). However, these structures, especially with other copular verbs like *seem* and *appear* would be more frequently used in Czech with finite subordinate clauses (Hornová, 2015, p. 50).

2.1.3.   *Infinitive as direct object*

- *He upset you very much, and I hate* **to see that**.

In the position of direct object both bare and to-infinitive clauses can be used. Bare infinitive clauses are, however, restricted to the usage of a few verbs of perception and modality, thus they are much less common than to-clauses. With to-infinitive clauses, the simple pattern verb + to-clause is the most common (e.g. *I didn't claim to be an authority*), on the other hand the pattern verb + *for* NP + to-clause is rare (e.g. *She waited for the little antelope to protest*). Infinitive clauses are used after reporting verbs (*ask*, *tell*), verbs of cognitive states (*consider*, *respect*), perception (*see*, *hear*), desire (*hope*, *wish*, *like*), decision or intention (*decide*, *plan*), effort (*try*, *fail*), or modality (*let*, *help*). Although with different frequency in different registers, the most typical verbs followed by infinitive clauses, according to the corpus findings, are *want*, *try*, *seem*, *begin*, and *like* (Biber et al., 1999, p. 711).

In Czech, the object can be expressed by the infinitive too: e.g. *Viděl svítit hvězdu* (Komárek & Petr, 1986, p. 148). Infinitive objects usually follow verbs expressing mental activities, e.g. *Bratr toužil stát se letcem* (Komárek & Petr, 1986, p. 149), verbs with modal or phase meaning, e.g. *Je nutno celou věc promyslit. Začal psát svou knihu.* (Komárek & Petr, 1986, p. 149).

2.1.4. Infinitive as object predicative

- *Some of these issues dropped out of Marx's later works because he considered them* **to have been satisfactorily dealt with**.

Object predicative, also known as object complement, is used in sentences in which the main verb is complex transitive. Such verbs can be cognition verbs (e.g. *assume*, *believe*, *consider*, *understand*), verbs of intention, desire, or decision (e.g. *choose*, *expect*, *like*, *need*, *prefer*, *want*, *wish*), and verbs of discovery (e.g. *find*). In comparison with transitive or intransitive verbs, complex transitive verbs are less frequent.

Unlike all preceding structures which have similar equivalents in Czech, object predicative expressed by the infinitive is not mentioned in the Czech grammar book so we can expect this structure to be rather avoided by Czech students.

2.1.5. *Infinitive as adverbial*

- *A little group of people had gathered by Mrs. Millings* **to watch the police activities on the foreshore.**

In comparison with prepositional phrases and adverbs, which are the most common syntactic realisation of adverbials, non-finite clauses (together with finite clauses, noun phrases, and adverb phrases) are relatively rare. It is necessary to say that different semantic categories of adverbials are not associated equally with the above-mentioned syntactic forms. According to the corpus findings (Biber et al., 1999, p. 787), non-finite clauses (including infinitive clauses) are connected with contingency adverbials (i.e. *cause*, *reason*, *purpose*, *concession*, *condition*, and *result*).

The usage of the infinitive in Czech adverbial clauses is connected with the meanings of purpose, e.g. *Byl jsem v Praze navštívit sestru* (Komárek & Petr, 1986, p. 150), and comparison, e.g. *Byla to lehčí práce než skládat z lodí pytle*. According to Hornová (2015), "[i]n Czech both finite and non-finite purpose clauses can be used, finite ones prevailing" (p. 51).

2.1.6. *Infinitive as noun complement*

- *They say that failure* **to take precautions against injuring others** *is negligent.*

Unlike postmodifying clauses, which can occur with almost any head noun, noun complement clauses (or appositive clauses) are connected with a closed set of head nouns and they are rare in conversation. On the other hand, to-infinitive noun complement clauses are particularly common in the news. The head nouns taking to-clauses usually represent human goals, opportunities, or actions (e.g. *chance, attempt*, *effort*, *ability*, *opportunity*, *decision*, *plan*, or *bid*).

In Czech, the meaning of apposition can be also expressed by the infinitive, e.g. *Nezbude mi nic jiného než odejít.* Its usage, however, is restricted by the finite verb of the main clauses which must allow for such construction.

2.1.7.   Infinitive as noun postmodifier

- *It is a callous thing* **to do**.

The overwhelming majority of relative clauses condensed by the infinitive do not have a subject expressed by a for-phrase. An example of a sentence with the expressed subject can be *That´ll be the worst thing for us to do* (Biber et al., 2006, p. 294). There are a few nouns with general meanings which are particularly common in these structures, e.g. *time*, *thing*, *way*, *place(s)*, *stuff*, *a lot.* The frequency of these nouns depends on the register (Biber et al., 1999, p. 633).

In Czech it is usually nouns expressing some volitional or intellectual activities that are followed by the infinitive (e.g. *přání*, *úmysl*, *odvaha*, *nadání*, *možnost*) so although this structure is restricted in the usage, Czech speakers are familiar with it.

2.1.8.   Infinitive as part of an adjective phrase

- *I think the old man's a bit afraid* **to go into hospital**.

Adjectives followed by infinitive clauses include those which express certainty, willingness, emotion or stance, ease or difficulty, and evaluation. There is one adjective which is very common in Biber et al.'s (2006) corpus, i.e. *(un)likely*, those which are moderately common include *(un)able*, *determined*, *difficult*, *due*, *easy*, *free*, *glad*, *hard*, *ready*, *used*, and *(un)willing* (pp. 335-336).

In Czech, some adjectives can be also followed by the infinitive (e.g. *I´m ready to start. Jsem připraven začít*). The majority, however, would be followed by finite subordinate clauses (*I´m sorry to hear that. Mrzí mě, že to slyším*).

We can conclude this section by stating that Czech students know all the syntactic positions of the infinitive (with the exception of the object predicative) from their mother tongue, although the frequency of their occurrence is not described by the grammar books as identical.

2.2.   The CEFR and English Profile

Relating foreign language students' knowledge of various linguistic features to the reference levels described by the Council of Europe (2001) is of high importance for researchers, curriculum designers, teachers, and also language testers. The CEFR levels together with illustrative descriptors can be used for the organisation of both teaching and learning of any language, which makes the CEFR neutral with respect to the language being taught and learnt. Placing the knowledge of specific grammatical features, such as the infinitive, is then rather intuitive as the descriptions are not detailed enough to help us make decisions about the particular level(s) at which its different forms and syntactic functions should be taught and learnt.

According to the CEFR, for the realisation of communicative intentions, learners use their general capacities together with a more specifically language-related communicative competence. This communicative competence comprises linguistic competences, sociolinguistic competences, and pragmatic competences. The grammatical competence, which is one of the linguistic competences, is defined by the Council of Europe (2001) as "the ability to understand and express meaning by producing and recognising well-formed phrases and sentences in accordance with these principles" (p. 113). In terms of grammatical accuracy, at B2 level language users are expected to show a relatively high degree of grammatical control and they do not make mistakes which lead to misunderstanding. At C1 level users consistently maintain a high degree of grammatical accuracy; errors are rare and difficult to spot (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 114). These descriptions, although rather general, can suggest that at B2 and C1 levels learners of English should be able to use the infinitive expressing the grammatical categories of aspect and voice in various syntactic functions. The preceding B1 level associates the grammatical knowledge with routinised patterns and noticeable mother tongue influence, which suggests that simple forms of the infinitive in most syntactic patterns would be associated with this level.

In comparison with the CEFR, *The English Profile Programme* (henceforth EP) is a more specific document available for reference. Its main aim is to describe

(but not prescribe) what learners can do with the language at each of the levels described by the CEFR, thus we can also refer to it as the CEFR for English. The EP does not capture all language features that a learner can use at a certain level but focusses on those which distinguish each level from adjacent higher and lower levels (EnglishProfile, 2011, p. 6). This criterial features concept is based on the idea that there are certain linguistic properties characteristic and indicative at each level. The researchers who compiled EP had utilised *The Cambridge Learner Corpus*, which is a large collection of exam scripts written by students who had taken the Cambridge English to Speakers of Other Languages exams around the world. Two types of criterial features were considered in the corpus: correct linguistic properties (i.e. those acquired at a certain level persisting at higher levels), and incorrect properties or errors (occurring at a certain level with a characteristic frequency). Their analysis resulted in the list of key features for each CEFR level. In terms of the infinitive and its usage, simple patterns with the infinitive are typical for A2 a B1 levels, e.g. *I want to buy a coat., ...something to eat, The train station is easy to find* (EnglishProfile, 2011, p. 11). As learners progress through the levels, they acquire more complex structures. At B2 level it is for example a sentence pattern introduced by *It* and followed by an infinitive phrase, e.g. *It would be helpful to work in your group as well* (EnglishProfile, 2011, p. 14), at C1 level other more complex structures with infinitival clauses are acquired, e.g. *The internet is a valuable tool, which can be proved to be the most important aspect in the learning process* (EnglishProfile, 2011, p. 15). The EP is also available online and its internet version gives more details about the respective levels in terms of possible search according to chosen categories, e.g. passives, modality, etc. Thus we learn that it is the level B2 where learners use complex forms of infinitives after modal verbs e.g. *I don't remember how I lost it, it might have been stolen. My composition was ready to be printed and I was searching for a piece of paper.* At this level, as already mentioned above, learners can also use the infinitive in subject or object extraposition, e.g. *It is best to spend your time in the countryside. This shyness makes it hard for me to speak in public, or even to go out with my friends as often as I should* (EnglishProfile, 2015).

Our expectation, based on all above-mentioned information, was that our research group of students at C1 level should have mastered the active usage

of infinitive for the purpose of sentence condensation in nominal, relative, and adverbial dependent clauses. At the same time they should be able to produce correct forms of the infinitive (e.g. the past, progressive, or passive infinitive) in complex verb phrases, when stimulated by a relevant grammatical context.

3.   Data analysis

3.1.   Quantitative analysis of native speakers' and Czech advanced students' English texts

To determine potential quantitative differences in the usage of various forms of the infinitive in the syntactic positions listed in the previous section as identified by Biber et al. (2006), we assembled a corpus of 65 texts, 35 written by Czech advanced learners of English and 30 by native English speakers. The Czech learners were 3rd year students of the Bachelor study programme *English with Focus on Education* at The Faculty of Education, Palacký University, Olomouc. The expected level of their English, as reflected in the design of their curriculum, was C1 according to the CEFR. The students produced the texts in response to the writing task of their final language examination according to the given specifications related to the genre and length of the required output. The time allocated to complete the task was sufficient for them to plan their writing and edit the final result according to their best capacity. The native English corpus included sample texts taken from the writing sections of advanced English course books commonly used for teaching at universities in the Czech Republic and sample texts displayed on the Internet on various web pages focussed on developing advanced writing skills.

All texts in our corpus were formal reports or proposals between 250 and 350 words long. The formal style of writing was selected because it naturally opens the chance to use the infinitive more frequently than in less formal styles. Furthermore, both proposals and reports generally contain a high number of modal verbs, which are always followed by some form of the infinitive. The texts were analysed manually, the occurrence of various structural forms of the

infinitive in selected syntactic positions was counted and compared between the Czech Students' texts (henceforth CS) and Native Speakers' texts (henceforth NS). Table 2 introduces the basic data concerning our corpus and the general incidence of the infinitive. As we can observe, the overall occurrence of infinitives was found to be higher in the CS texts, which was rather surprising since it contradicts both our own previous findings as well as the finding by Kozáčiková (2015, see Introduction).

Table 2. General incidence of infinitive in NS and CS texts

	NS	CS
number of texts	30	35
number of words	8,025	8,713
number of infinitives/1,000 words of text	53.5	65.2

3.1.1. Structural forms of the infinitive

As stated above, there are six basic forms of the English infinitive, with the simple infinitive being the most frequent one, and according to the CEFR and the EP, both simple and complex forms of the infinitive should be acquired already at the B2 level. According to the profile of their study programme, our students should have proceeded from B2 on the higher level of C1 some two years ago, and we were therefore interested to find out whether and to what extent this might be reflected in the frequency of other than simple forms of the infinitive in their texts. Table 3 below compares the frequency of occurrence of all six structural forms of the infinitive in the NS and CS texts.

Table 3. Occurrence of simple and complex forms of the infinitive in the NS and CS texts

infinitive	present		past	
	NS	CS	NS	CS
active – simple	85.8%	94.5%	1.8 %	0
active – progressive	0.2%	0	0	0
passive	12%	5.5%	0.2%	0

It is evident that the frequency of the complex forms of the infinitive is remarkably lower in the CS texts. It seems that even at their advanced level of English, our students still heavily rely on the basic easiest form. Out of the six listed forms, they actively produced only two different most commonly used forms of the infinitive (simple active and simple passive), while the native writers used five different forms in total, although the incidence of the complex ones was, with the exception of the passive present infinitive, rare.

3.1.2. Syntactic position of the infinitive

By the syntactic position of the infinitive we mean its placement among the other sentence elements in the given sentence structure. Generally, most infinitives tend to occur as parts of complex verb forms following a modal verb (Biber et al., 2006). In our analysis, this was confirmed in both NS and CS texts, as indicated in Table 4 below. In the CS texts, however, the number of infinitives following a modal verb proved to be only slightly higher than the number of infinitives not following a modal verb. Other syntactic positions, where the infinitive does not follow a modal verb, are listed according to their calculated frequency in the NS texts.

Table 4. Syntactic position of the infinitive in NS and CS texts/1,000 words

infinitive	NS	CS
following a modal verb	31.7	35
other syntactic position	21.8	30.2
– adverbial	6	8.3
– object	5.5	7.7
– noun postmodification	4	2.9
– subject predication	3	6.7
– part of adjective phrase	1.9	0.8
– subject extraposition	1.1	3.7
– object predication	0.3	0
– subject	0	0.1

In both groups of texts, infinitive adverbial and object clauses proved to be the most commonly used ones. This is again in contrast with the conclusions drawn by Kozáčiková (2015), in whose corpus of native and non-native academic texts

adverbial infinitive clauses were the least frequent ones. It can be observed that Czech advanced students of English tend to use infinitives more frequently in all listed positions apart from noun and adjective postmodification, and object predication. The reasons for this may vary with respect to the individual syntactic positions and include generally lower repertory of syntactic structures, a possible quantitative transfer from the Czech language, and also direct negative transfer resulting in grammatical mistakes. For example, the high frequency of the adverbial infinitive clauses might be explained by the genres of the texts. Almost all of these clauses fall into the grammatical category of the adverbial clause of purpose, which is a basic common structure to use in a proposal and the recommendation section of a report (and also the only adverbial infinitive clause actively used in Czech (see above). The higher frequency of infinitives used in subject extraposition and subject predication might have been caused by the transfer from the students' mother tongue as both structures are relatively common in formal Czech texts. The negative transfer might also have caused the lower frequency of infinitives in noun and adjective postmodification because these structures are fairly restricted in usage in the Czech language. Another reason for lower incidence of the infinitive in the noun postmodification might be the fact that the Czech language relies more on verbal expression and so the frequency of noun phrases tends to be generally lower. This could be supported by the data obtained in our previous research, where the incidence of noun phrases in texts written by native English speakers was found to be 18 percent higher than in the writing of Czech advanced students of English (Válková & Kořínková, 2015).

Grammatical mistakes seem to be the main cause of the higher frequency of infinitives in the position of the direct object. In fact, if we counted only the grammatically correct infinitives in this syntactic position, their frequency in the CS texts would be even somewhat lower than in the NS texts (4.9/1,000 words of text). This shows that even at an advanced level of English language proficiency some students still have not been able to internalise certain verb patterns typical for English but different in their mother tongue. The most troublesome verbs in this respect proved to be the verbs *suggest*, *recommend*, and *propose*, which were commonly and incorrectly followed by the infinitive structure in the CS texts (e.g. *I suggest to make new plans*, *I propose to hire more staff*, *I recommend to build more parking places*).

3.2. Grammar test

As the quantitative analysis of our students' writing showed that they rarely used the infinitive in other than its simple active form, we decided to find out whether they are actually familiar with the complex forms enough to be able to produce them when guided by a relevant language context.

A short grammar test was devised, based on an adapted version of a fill-in exercise from a course book of practical English morphology by Hardošová (2009). The test comprised ten sentences with 13 blanks to be filled with appropriate forms of the infinitive (see supplementary material[4]). The answer key provided by the course book was consulted with two British English and two American English speakers to clarify the possibility of any alternative answers. The test was administered to 70 students of the 2nd and 3rd year of the Bachelor study programme *English with Focus on Education* at The Faculty of Education, Palacký University, Olomouc. The ability to produce some of the infinitival forms was tested in more than one sentence to see to what extent its formation and usage might be influenced by the syntactic position and general lexical context of the sentence. All answers given for each blank were recorded in the form of a table as illustrated by the example below (Table 5). Although the students were clearly instructed to fill in only relevant forms of the infinitive of the given word, other structures, both grammatically correct and incorrect, were occasionally supplied as well.

Table 5. Answers supplied for Sentence 1 of the grammar test

Sentence 1: You´d better _____ (see) a doctor, you might _____ (break) your finger.					
blank 1	**2nd year**	**3rd year**	**blank 2**	**2nd year**	**3rd year**
see	33	23	have broken	26	26
go to see	1	2	broke	4	3
go see	0	1	break	6	2
to see	1	2	have broke	0	2
saw	1	1			
seen	0	3			
seeing	0	1			

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4. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/azc1zca0lnwme4nozgxprnr62mj55zay

We were rather surprised to find out that there was virtually no difference in the number of correct answers between the two groups of students, which seems to suggest that in this area of English grammar there is little progress between the second and the final third year of students' studies. In some cases, the group of 2nd year students was even slightly more successful than their older colleagues. Overall, the percentage of correct infinitive forms in the former group was 58.8% and in the latter group 59.1%, which does not seem to be a very positive result. The following table lists the percentage of correctly supplied forms of different structural varieties of the infinitive (Table 6). The infinitives are presented in their immediate language context and the index number following each structure indicates the number of the blank in the test (see supplementary material[5]).

Table 6. Percentage of correct answers with respect to structural forms of infinitive

infinitive	present			past		
	structure	2nd year	3rd year	structure	2nd year	3rd year
active – simple	Can't *find*[10]	100%	100%	appears *to have lost*[8]	25%	42%
	vehicle *to meet*[5]	80%	65%	might *have broken*[2]	69%	76%
	make him *turn*[7]	69%	67%	should *have won*[3]	64%	73%
	had better *see*[1]	94%	70%			
active – progressive	seem *to be working*[11]	61%	76%	pretended *to have been painting*[9]	28%	21%
	happen *to be riding*[6]	22%	21%			
passive	expected *to be invited*[4]	78%	82%	must *have been read*[12]	64%	67%
				sorry *to have had to cancel*[13]	11%	9%

It is evident that the ability to use appropriate simple and complex forms of the infinitive does, indeed, depend on more factors than just being able to form the structure itself. Clearly, students were more successful when dealing with a form of infinitive which does have a direct equivalent in their mother tongue and which is presented in a familiar and common lexical context (e.g. compare

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5. https://research-publishing.box.com/s/azc1zca0lnwme4nozgxprnr62mj55zay

the answers for can't *find*[10] and vehicle *to meet*[5], or expected *to be invited*[4] and sorry *to have had to cancel*[13]. Still, the results clearly support the findings of our quantitative analysis asserting that for our advanced English students, the simple active and present passive forms of the infinitive are the least problematic ones, whereas the progressive forms (both present and past) are the most challenging and avoided ones.

4.   Discussion and conclusions

Contrary to our expectations and the results of some previous comparative studies of native and non-native English writing, a noticeably higher incidence of infinitives was observed in the texts produced by the advanced Czech students than in those authored by native English speakers. Some possible reasons for this have been mentioned above and include limited varieties in sentence structure, quantitative transfers from students' mother tongue (preference for structures commonly used in Czech), and qualitative negative transfers leading to grammatical mistakes. The first and the second mentioned reasons might also be reflected in the more common occurrence of modal verbs in the CS texts. It is interesting to note that while their frequency was only slightly higher in the CS reports (24 and 28 modals per 1,000 words of text in the NS and CS writing respectively), it was remarkably higher in proposals (38 vs. 48 modals per 1,000 words of text). This probably suggests that Czech students tend to use less varied structures in the language function of proposing ideas, relying on basic modal verbs, especially *would* and *should*.

A higher proportion of simple infinitives was found, both in students' original writing and in their answers to the administered grammar test. This suggests that even though the students should have reached the advanced level of C1 and should have mastered even the complex and less frequently used grammatical forms, in reality it is not so. Especially the progressive forms of the infinitive did not prove to have been either formally mastered or appropriately used in a relevant linguistic context.

Although this area of English grammar might seem a marginal one, it still contributes to the students' general capacity to effectively express precise ideas when composing English texts, especially formal ones. Since our students are future English teachers, we believe that they should confidently master the system of the English language in as many details as possible. Advanced students of English will benefit both from more focussed exposure to various forms and syntactic positions of infinitives as well as from more extensive practice in their usage. This could entail guided study of authentic English texts, contrasting them with texts written by non-native speakers, practice in reformulation, etc. Activities to help our students broaden and fine-tune their repertory of actively used structures have yet to be designed and tested. We believe that it would be more reasonable and relevant to focus on problematic areas than the usual presentation and practice sequence. The problematic areas should include not only the infinitive but also other linguistic features we have studied so far, i.e. syntactic complexity, coordination and subordination of nominal, relative, and adverbial clauses, non-finite verb forms in subordinate clauses, complex noun phrases, personal pronouns, and the usage of the comma.

There is no agreement among researchers whether the teaching of grammar is worthwhile if the aim is the improvement of the quality and accuracy of written texts. In our experience, at higher levels of language teaching and learning, the linguistic component is less stressed than sociolinguistic and pragmatic components. We believe that more attention paid to the linguistic component and targeted instruction may result in substantial changes in the syntactic and morphological variety of texts written by our students.

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