



# Acquisition of English Auxiliary Stranding Constructions by Persian EFL Learners

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## ABSTRACT

English verb phrase ellipsis (VPE) is among the constructions posing learnability problems for Persian learners of English. Just like English, v-stranding VPE in Persian requires (a) the presence of an overt, tense inflecting head, and (b) the satisfaction of an antecedence condition that enforces identity of the target and phrases. Regarding auxiliary stranding in English, the auxiliary be, unlike have, is not allowed to strand, because -ing carrying an aspectual interpretable feature cannot be deleted unless the progressive interpretation is recoverable. This study investigated whether Persian EFL learners could acquire the verb phrase ellipsis in general and the difference between be and have stranding constructions in particular. To this end, 60 intermediate and advanced English as a foreign language (EFL) participants and 10 native speakers of English completed an acceptability judgment task and a translation task. The results proved the Persian EFL learners' ability in the acquisition of the syntactic and discursual properties of VPE constructions, confirming the role of first language (L1) cross-linguistic influence. On the other hand, the intermediate EFL learners' comprehension and production of the auxiliary stranding constructions were inconsistent, confirming the Interpretability Hypothesis. The theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

**Keywords:** Auxiliary; Stranding; Ellipsis; Interpretability Hypothesis; Verb-phrase ellipsis.

## 1. Introduction

One of the basic assumptions in SLA, according to Gass and Selinker (2008), is that learners create a system known as interlanguage (IL). Based on the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic aspects of the first and the second language, the EFL learners develop their ILs differently at different stages. The acquisition of verbs as the core element of any proposition and their associated syntactic and semantic properties has shed light on the processes of language learning. Verbal ellipsis constructions are among the properties linked with the verbs and their relevant arguments.

Ellipsis constructions are defined as the structures in which a word or words from a sentence are elided deliberately while the meaning can be understood without them. Such constructions may pose learnability problems for the learners of a second language. Different types of ellipsis can happen by deleting words

belonging to different parts of speech in the sentences of a language based on the syntactic and semantic properties of that language.

## 2. Literature Review

One type of ellipsis constructions is verb phrase ellipsis (VPE henceforth) constructions in which the verb phrase (VP henceforth) in a sentence is deleted with its complements while the entire meaning can be understood relying on the other components. VPE occurs in both Persian and English.

Verb phrase ellipsis in English is defined as a process in which a non-finite verb phrase has been left out. VPE in English is introduced by an auxiliary (1 (a)) or by the infinitive particle *to* (1 (b)).

1 (a) I will buy the book if Mary will.

(b) Sam wants to eat and Fred wants to as well.

Hawkins et al. (2012) state that English VPE is subject to both syntactic (clause internal in 2 (a)) and discourse (clause external in 3 (a)) constraints.

2 (a) Jack wrote Jill a letter. Mary [<sub>T</sub> [<sub>V</sub> did]] \_\_\_ too.

In this structure, the elided material is immediately c-commanded by a T with V features but in 2(b) below the elided material is c-commanded by V not by T.

2 (b) Jack wrote Jill a letter. \*Mary [<sub>T</sub>e] [<sub>V</sub> write + [<sub>T</sub> past]] \_\_\_ too.

Regarding the second constraint, Hawkins et al. (2012) explain that “the meaning of every unpronounced morpheme must be recoverable from overtly pronounced morphemes in the preceding discourse”(p.3). So, the meaning of deleted progressive *ing* in 3 (b) cannot be recovered from the preceding discourse, in contrast to 3 (a).

3 (a) Jack wrote Jill a letter. Mary will \_\_\_\_\_ too.

-ed [write Jill a letter]                      write Jill a letter

\* (b) Jack wrote Jill a letter. Mary was \_\_\_\_\_ too.

-ed [write Jill a letter]                      -ing write Jill a letter

(Hawkins et al., 2012, p.3)

### 2.1. Verb Phrase Ellipsis in Persian

Ellipsis in Persian is defined as the deletion process of an element or elements of a sentence while the meaning is recovered explicitly by the antecedent that is identical in form and meaning to the elided material or implicitly by the antecedent that is derived from the overall meaning of the discourse. Hence, the most important characteristic of these structures in Persian is the need for implicit or explicit antecedent and the reason for constructing such structures is to prevent repetition of the words or phrases in a text. According to Kavoosinejad (1997), there are different types of ellipsis based on the type of the deleted phrase in Persian including (a) Noun Phrase Ellipsis (NPE), (b) VPE, and (c) Ellipsis in sentence.

VPE in Persian refers to the deletion of a part or parts of a VP.

4 (a) Mitavani az dustanat beguyi?

Can-PRES.2SG. from friends-POSS PRO 2SG talk-PRES.2SG

Can you talk about your friends?

Na Nemitavanam [ az ~~dustanam~~ beguyam].

No NEG.Can.PRES.1SG [from friends-PROSPRO.2SG talk.PRES.2SG]

No, I can't [ talk about my friends].

(b) Mixahi beravi ya bemanam?

Like.PRES.2SG leave.PRES.2SG or stay.PRES.2SG?

Do you like to leave or stay?

(Mixaham)-bemanam.

Like.PRES.1SG stay.PRES.1SG

I like to stay. (p.11)

In 4 (a), the main verb and its dependent which is the prepositional phrase is omitted. This type of VPE in Persian is named lexical ellipsis but in 4 (b) the main verb remains so it is named operator ellipsis.

As elaborated upon by Toosavarani (2007), VPE in Persian is of four types: sluicing, potential verb phrase ellipsis, stripping, and v-stranding VPE. In sluicing, the finite VP after the *wh*-particle “*kei*” (when) is omitted while its meaning can be grasped by referring to its antecedent in the main clause (5).

5. Ali mixahad dars bexanad vali nemidanad kei.

Ali want.PRES.3SG lessons study.PRES.3SG but NEG.know.PRES.3SG when

[*darsbexanad*]. [~~Lessons-study.PRES.3SG~~]

Ali wants to study but does not know when [~~to-study~~].

The second type of VPE is potential VPE. In this type of ellipsis, the auxiliary remains while the main VP is omitted and the adverb “*ham*” which is correspondent to “*too*” in English is added to the target clause (6).

6. Mina mitavanad qaza bepazad va Maryam ham mitavanad.

Mina can.PRES.3SG food cook.PRES.3SG and Maryam too can.PRES.3SG

[*qazabepazad*]. [~~food-cook.PRES.3SG~~].

Mina can cook and Maryam can [~~cook~~] too.

The third type of VPE in Persian is stripping which occurs in coordinate structures. In these structures, the VP is stripped in the target clause while it leaves one remnant that is “*na*” which is correspondent to “*not*” in English (7).

7. Reza aamadvali Ahmad na [*aamad*].

Reza come.PAST but Ahmad NEG.[~~come.PAST~~].

Reza came but Ahmad did not [~~come~~].

V-stranding VPE is the fourth type of ellipsis. In this type of structure, part of a complex predicate goes missing. Following Folli, Harley, and Karimi’s (2005) analysis of Farsi complex predicates, Toosavarani (2007) treats the light verb of the complex predicate as an overt V head. In this type of ellipsis, then, it is the complement of V, the bracketed part in (8), which is omitted.

8. Sohraab pira-hana-ro otu nazad vali Rostam [*pirahana-ro-otu*] zad.

Sohrab Shirt.PL.OBJ iron NEG.hit.PAST.3SG but Rostam [~~Shirt.PL.OBJ iron~~].

hit.PAST.3SG

Sohrab didn’t iron the shirts, but Rostam did [~~iron the shirts~~] (p.2).

## 2.2. A Contrastive Analysis of English and Persian VPE Constructions

The first point worthy of note is that in Persian, VPE targets a constituent smaller than VP. In v-stranding VPE, as noted by Toosavarani (2007), the VP complement is elided rather than the whole VP. Thus, v-stranding VPE can be considered as the deletion process of the non-verbal element phrase, which contains the internal arguments of a complex predicate, while such a process does not exist in English.

It is generally the light verb that determines whether there is a need for an external argument or not in Persian complex predicates (9a and b). The light verb *zad* ‘hit’ in 9(a) selects an external argument, Rostam, while *xord* ‘ate’ in 9(b) does not.

9 (a) Rostam Sohrabo laqad zad.

Rostam Sohrab.OBJ hit.PAST.3SG

Rostam kicked Sohrab.

(b) Sohrab laqad xord.

Sohrab.OBJ kick eat.PAST.3SG.

Sohrab was kicked. (Toosavarani, 2007, p.4)

As was mentioned in section 2.1, English VPE is subject to both syntactic and discourse-based constraints. In other words, VPE must be licensed by a T with V-feature and the elided material must be identical with a discourse antecedent. In this respect Toosavarani (2007) shows that v-stranding VPE does not differ significantly in its licensing requirements with English VPE. Just like English VPE, V-stranding VPE requires (a) the presence of an overt, tense inflecting head (Zagona 1982, Lobeck 1995 as cited in Toosavarani, 2007), and (b) the satisfaction of an antecedence condition that enforces identity of the target and phrases.

For the other three main types of Verb Phrase Ellipsis; sluicing, potential VPE, and stripping, we can also identify corresponding structures in English.

*Sluicing*

10 (a) Ali mixahad dars bexanad vali nemidanad kei [~~darsbexanad~~].

Ali want.PRES.3SG lessons study.PRES.3SG but NEG.know.PRES.3SG  
when [~~Lessons–study.PRES.3SG~~].

(b) Ali wants to study but does not know when [~~to study~~].

In 10 (a) it is the finite VP which is elided after the wh-particle and the meaning can be understood by referring to its antecedent in the main clause which itself is finite too. In 10 (b) the process is the same as the Persian structure while both the elided phrase and its antecedent are non-finite.

*Potential verb phrase ellipsis*

11 (a) Mina mitavanadqazabepazadvaMaryam hammitavanad [~~qazabepazad~~].

Mina can.PRES.3SG food cook.PRES.3SG and Maryam too can.PRES.3SG  
[~~food cook.PRES.3SG~~].

(b) Mina can cook and Maryam can [~~cook~~] too.

In both 11 (a) and 11 (b) it is the finite VP that is elided while the meaning can be gleaned from the antecedents. In these examples, the words “ham” and “too” are correspondent adverbs.

*Stripping*

12 (a) Reza aamad vali Ahmad na [~~aamad~~].

Reza come.PAST but Ahmad NEG.[~~come.PAST~~].

(b) Reza came but Ahmad did not [~~come~~].

In 12 (a) the VP is elided and the negative particle remains. The process is the same in 12(b) while in this structure the negative particle is attached to auxiliary “do” + “past tense feature”.

A construction type that is translated to “hamintor” in Persian is a type of tag in English (13).

13 (a) Rose is a student, so am I.

(b) John can play the piano so can Mary.

(c) Kate works full time, so do I.

In such structures while “so” is placed at the beginning of the target clause the verb phrase is elided and the tense inflecting head remains in the form of a modal or an auxiliary followed by the subject. In the Persian equivalent “so” is translated to “ham hamintor”.

### 2.3. Interpretability Hypothesis

The SLA literature has faced numerous cases of proficient second language (L2) learners who diverge significantly from the native speakers despite the large amount of L2 input they are provided with. This can be related to the issue of variability. Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou (2007) state that “variability (Tsimpli, 2005) or optionality (Sorace, 1993, 2000, 2005) refers to the (in)

consistent behavior of the learners in the target second language (L2), which is contrasted with the performance of the native speaker" (p. 2). They also assert that the issue of optionality leads to the models that argue for partial accessibility of the universal grammar (UG). These models state that both UG and L1 properties affect L2 development directly or indirectly. Furthermore, "the role of narrow syntax and the two interfaces, phonetic form and logical form, had given rise to alternative accounts of L2 variability" (p.3). According to Collinge (2002), LF (Logical Form) refers to "the aspects of semantic representation that are strictly determined by grammar, abstracted from other cognitive systems. PF (Phonetic Form), on the other hand, is a representation of the sound of a sentence derived from its surface structure" (p.70).

According to Tsimpli and Dimitrakopoulou (2007), there are four possible combinations of features in terms of their interpretability at each interface:

1. LF interpretable /PF uninterpretable features
2. LF uninterpretable/ PF interpretable features
3. LF interpretable/PF interpretable
4. LF uninterpretable/PF uninterpretable (p. 8)

According to the "Interpretability Hypothesis" those aspects of the language that contain uninterpretable features and are not activated in the L1 grammar will be difficult for the adult L2 learners to acquire. One example is the case of the progressive suffix 'ing' and participle suffix 'en' which is explained and illustrated in section 2.5.

#### 2.4. *Be and Have Stranding VPE Constructions*

Given the above and as explained by Al-Thubaiti (2009), *be* is not allowed to strand in English VPE (a) because 'ing', that is the progressive suffix carrying an aspectual interpretable feature cannot be deleted unless the progressive interpretation is recoverable. However, 'have' can strand and (b) because the participle suffix 'en' carries an uninterpretable feature which is semantically irrelevant, and thus, must be deleted at LF. Another difference between 'have' and 'be' is that the perfect meaning is in 'have' not 'en' while the progressive meaning is in 'ing' rather than 'be'.

Persian is a language in which the progressive and perfective aspects are both LF and PF interpretable. This can create a potential learnability problem as Persian learners have to move from an interpretable feature to an uninterpretable one in English.

Furthermore, in Persian, *v-* stranding VPE happens as correspondent to auxiliary stranding constructions and this construction works in both strict (14 (a) and 15 (a)) and partial (14 (b) and 15 (b)) identity conditions. Thus, in this language there is not any difference between *v-*stranding VPE constructions containing progressive (14 (a) and (b)) and perfective aspects (15 (a) and (b)).

14 (a) Mina darad dars mixanad va Maryam ham darad dars mixanad.

Mina PROG lesson study.PRES.S and Maryam too PROG lesson study.PRES.SG

Mina is studying and Maryam is studying too.

(b) Mina dars mixanad va Maryam ham darad dars mixanad.

Mina lesson study.PRES.SG and Maryam too PROG lesson study.PRES.SG:

\*Mina studies and Maryam is too.

15 (a) Mina dars xandeh ast va Maryam ham dars xandeh ast.

Mina lesson study.PERFCT.3SG and Maryam too lesson study.PERFCT

Mina has studied and Maryam has studied too.

(b) Mina dars mixanad va Maryam ham dars xandeh ast.

Mina lesson study.PRES.SG and Maryam too lesson study.PERFCT:

Mina studies and Maryam has studied too.

### 3. Method

The present study attempted to investigate the following hypotheses:

1. Persian EFL learners cannot acquire the subtle difference between the auxiliaries 'be' and 'have' when stranded as a result of verb elision in ellipsis constructions.
2. First language has no influence on the acquisition of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions by Persian EFL learners.
3. Language proficiency has no effect on the acquisition of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions by Persian EFL learners.

#### 3.1 Participants

The participants of this study included male and female EFL learners studying at Yazd University, Iran. The students were studying English language and literature at BA level and English Teaching (TEFL) at MA level.

Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered to 50 MA and 50 BA students. This test is to help the teachers and course administrators to quickly decide about the students' proficiency level. It uses multiple choice items to assess the students on reading, and structure, including grammar and vocabulary. The 60 participants of this study were randomly selected among those who took Oxford Quick Placement Test. The selected students' proficiency scores ranged from 29 to 60. Those who obtained scores from 28 to 47 were classified as the intermediate EFL learners, and those who obtained scores from 48 to 60 were assigned into the advanced group. The age range of the subjects varied from twenty to thirty. Ten other native participants were also included for the sake of comparison and control. Among them, one was an American native speaker of English and 9 were Indian speakers who had acquired English as their first language. The following table summarizes the information about the participants of the study.

Table 1. *A Profile of the Participants' Information*

Proficiency level	Number	Score range	Age range	Educational status
Intermediate	30	28-47	20-30	MA and BA
Advanced	30	48-60	20-30	MA and BA

#### 3.2. Tasks

In order to gather the required data, two tasks were given to the participants: 1. The translation task, and 2. The acceptability judgment task.

##### ***The Translation Task***

The Translation Task was given to the participants to measure their production of the 'be' and 'have' stranding structures. 14 items were chosen for the Translation Task. Among other constructions, the Translation Task included 4 Persian complex sentences including VPE. It is worth noting that all the items utilized in the Translation Task were sentences. This test generally comprised simple sentences used in every day conversations (See Appendix I).

##### ***Acceptability Judgment Task***

The Acceptability Judgment Task was administered to assess the participants' comprehension of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions. The overall number of the items in this test was 40. Ten percent of the items included were taken from Al-Thubaiti (2009). The items were designed on the basis of the Likert scale (fully acceptable, acceptable, neither acceptable nor unacceptable, unacceptable, or fully unacceptable). Out of these 40 items, 25 were distracters, and 15 items tested the participants' acquisition of be and have stranding structures (See Appendix II).

#### 3.3. Procedure

After the administration of Oxford Quick Placement Test to 100 MA and BA students of Yazd

University, 60 participants were selected in line with the criterion mentioned in the instrument section.

The two main tasks were administered in two separate sessions with a one-week interval. After taking the Oxford Quick Placement Test, the Translation Task was administered to measure the selected participants' production of the VPE constructions. The subjects were given adequate time to translate 12 Persian sentences containing VPE into English. Clear instructions were given in the test paper. The potential problem in this regard was that the participants might translate the Persian sentences into English in a variety of different options making the process of data analysis difficult. After a one-week interval, the Acceptability Judgment Test was administered to the participants to gauge their comprehension of the VPE constructions. Adequate time was given to the participants and the instructions were provided in the test paper along with an example for more clarity.

#### 4. Results

To analyze the participants' responses to the tasks, the following procedures were applied:

In the case of Translation Test, the participants' responses were coded for data analysis as follows: (0) for incorrect, (1) for correct, (2) for the use of main verbs instead of auxiliaries, (3) for the use of "so", and (4) for the use of "neither" or "either". In order to determine the extent to which each of these constructions was used by the participants in translating the Persian sentences, the variables were recoded. For the acceptability judgment task, the participants' incorrect responses were coded as (0) and their correct responses as (1).

For the statistical analyses, two one-way between groups ANOVAs were conducted to compare the performance of the three groups of participants on each of the two categories of the VPE constructions in acceptability judgment task ('be' stranding and 'have' stranding). A mixed between-within groups ANOVA was used to analyze the participants' production of 'be' stranding and 'have' stranding constructions. Two independent samples T-tests were conducted to compare the intermediate and advanced groups' translation of each group of the auxiliary stranding constructions and two paired-samples T-tests were carried out to compare their perception and production on each category of the auxiliary stranding constructions. The p value was considered to be .05 through the analysis of the data in accordance with the norms of the field.

##### 4.1. Results of Translation Task

In the following sections, the descriptive and inferential statistics of each of the two groups of auxiliary stranding constructions produced by the intermediate and advanced groups are presented.

##### ***Be Stranding Construction***

Table 2 offers the descriptive statistics for 'be' stranding constructions. The advanced learners were more accurate in producing 'be' stranding constructions than the intermediates (Mean difference=0.15). Although the advanced group outperformed the intermediates, they did not fully acquire this syntactic property.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Be Stranding Construction*

Proficiency level	N	Mean	SD
Intermediate	30	.58	.43
Advanced	30	.73	.43

To investigate whether the two groups of participants' production of 'be' stranding constructions was significantly different from each other, an independent samples t-test was conducted, the results of which are presented in the following table.

Table 3. Independent Samples T-test for Be Stranding Construction

	Levene's test		t	df	Sig (2 tailed)	Mean difference
	F	Sig				
Be stranding	.09	.76	-1.34	58	.18	-.15

There was not a significant difference in producing 'be' stranding constructions for advanced ( $M = .73$ ,  $SD = .43$ ) and intermediate learners ( $M = .58$ ,  $SD = .43$ ;  $t(58) = -1.34$ ,  $p = .18$ ).

Table 4 shows the participants' performance regarding the comprehension of 'be' stranding constructions. The advanced group was more accurate (Mean=0.7) than the intermediate group (Mean=0.58) while the advanced and the native group performed almost the same regarding this context.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Judgment of Be Stranding Constructions

Proficiency level	Intermediate	Advanced	Native
	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)
Be stranding	.58(.24)	.70 (.25)	.70 (.17)

Table 5 shows the mean difference of the three pairs of the participants' comprehension of 'be' stranding construction. A one way between-groups analysis of variance was conducted to explore the impact of proficiency level of participants on their comprehension of be stranding construction. There was not a statistically significant difference at the  $p > 0.05$  level in their comprehension for the three groups:  $F(2, 67) = 2.42$ ,  $p = 0.09$ . However, the intermediate group's performance was lower than the other two groups.

Table 5. Pair wise Comparison of the Participants' Judging Be Stranding Construction

Proficiency(I)	Proficiency(J)	Mean difference	Sig.
Intermediate	Advanced	-.13	.10
Intermediate	Native	-.12	.33
Advanced	Native	.003	.99

### **Have Stranding Construction**

Table 6 shows the descriptive statistics of the use of different forms in producing have stranding constructions.

Table 6. Descriptive Statistics of Have Stranding Construction

Proficiency level	Correct	Incorrect	Use of main verb	Use of so	Use of either	Total correct
Intermediate						
(S.D)	.07(.17)	.73(.39)	.08(.19)	.02(.09)	.10(.20)	.27(.39)
Advanced						
(S.D)	.17(.27)	.35(.42)	.23(.25)	0(0)	.25(.25)	.65(.42)

Table 6 shows that the intermediate group of participants produced more incorrect forms in translating have stranding constructions than correct forms (Mean difference= 0.46). Among the correct forms produced, the use of "either" had the highest mean. On the other hand, the advanced group produced more correct forms than the incorrect forms (Mean difference=0.30). The advanced group also used sentences containing "either" more than the other correct forms that could be used in translating have stranding constructions. Therefore, the advanced learners were more accurate in producing have stranding construction (Mean difference=0.38).

An independent sample t-test was conducted to compare the production of have stranding

construction for intermediate and advanced groups. There was a significant difference in the performance for intermediate learners ( $M=0.27$ ,  $SD=0.38$ ) and advanced learners,  $M=0.65$ ,  $SD=0.41$ ;  $t(58) = -3.38$ ,  $p=0.001$ . The magnitude of the difference in the means (Mean difference= $0.38$ , 95% CI:  $-0.59$  to  $-0.17$ ) was large (eta squared= $0.16$ ).

Table 7. Independent Samples T-test on Have Stranding Construction

	Levene's test		t	Df	Sig (2-tailed)	Mean difference
	F	Sig				
Have stranding	.59	.44	-3.68	58	.001	-.38

The descriptive statistics, as displayed in Table 8, showed that the native group performed most accurately compared to the other two groups in comprehending have stranding constructions (Mean= $.51$ ). The advanced and intermediate group performed almost the same in this context (intermediate= $.38$  and advanced= $.4$ ).

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics of the Participants' Judgment of Have Stranding Construction

Proficiency level	Intermediate Mean (SD)	Advanced Mean (SD)	Native Mean (SD)
Have stranding	.38(.21)	.40(.24)	.51(.21)

A one-way between groups ANOVA was conducted to explore the impact of proficiency level on the comprehension of have stranding constructions. There was not a statistically significant difference at the  $p>0.05$  level in their comprehension for the three groups:  $F(2, 67) = 1.3$ ,  $p=0.28$ . However, the performance of the native group was slightly better compared to the other two groups in this context.

#### 4.2. Comparison of Be and Have Stranding Constructions

The comparison of the means in 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions revealed that the subjects' performance was more target-like in 'be' stranding construction.

A mixed between-within-subjects analysis of variance was conducted to assess the effect of the 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions on the participants' translation of VPE constructions across the two proficiency groups. Preliminary analyses were performed to ensure no violation of the assumption of homogeneity of variances. The Sig. value in the Box's Test of Equality of Covariance Matrices was also checked to be larger than  $.001$ . The results showed that there was a significant main effect for context (be and have stranding constructions) [Wilks' Lambda= $.88$ ,  $F_{(1, 58)} = 7.61$ ,  $p=0.008$ ] and the effect size was moderate (Eta squared= $.11$ ). There was no significant interaction effect for context and proficiency level [Wilks' Lambda= $.95$ ,  $F_{(1, 58)} = 2.59$ ,  $p=0.113$ ]. However, there was a significant difference between the two groups in the production task regarding this context [ $F_{(1, 58)} = 11$ ,  $p=0.002$ ]. The effect size was large (Eta squared= $.16$ ). Table 9 and Figure 1 show the results.

Table 9. Mixed between-within ANOVA for Be and Have Stranding Constructions

	Wilks' Lambda	F	df	Error df	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Context	.88	7.6	1	58	.008	.11
Proficiency		11	1		.002	.16
Proficiency and context	.95	2.59	1	58	.11	.04

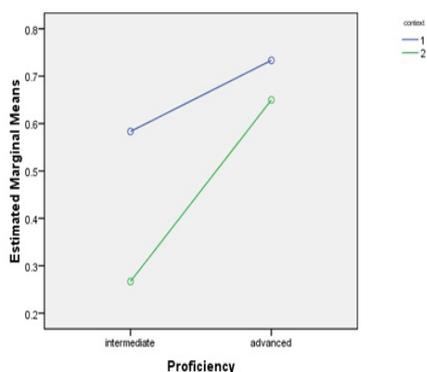


Figure 1. Comparison of the participants' production of be and have stranding constructions

### 4.3. Comparison of the Participants' Production and Comprehension

To compare the intermediate and advanced groups' performance on the two tasks, paired-samples t- tests were conducted. Table 10 shows the results.

Table 10 . Paired Samples T-test for Production and Comprehension of the Auxiliary Stranding Constructions

Level	context	Mean difference	SD	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Intermediate	Be stranding	.001	.44	.02	29	.98
Advanced	Be stranding	.02	.52	.26	29	.79
Intermediate	Have stranding	-.11	.46	-1.33	29	.19
Advanced	Have stranding	.45	.08	2.98	29	.006

Table 10 shows that the two groups' production and comprehension of be stranding constructions were not significantly different from each other. Moreover, the advanced group's production was significantly better than its comprehension in have stranding (Mean difference=0.45). Thus, it can be concluded that the production of have stranding construction was easier for the advanced learners than its comprehension. On the other hand, the intermediate group's comprehension of have stranding was better than their production (Mean difference=0.11) though the mean values were not significantly different across the two contexts.

### 5. Discussion and Conclusion

As explained by Al-Thubaiti (2009), 'be' is not allowed to strand in English VPE because 'ing' that is, the progressive suffix carrying an aspectual interpretable feature, cannot be deleted unless the progressive interpretation is recoverable. However, 'have' can strand as the participle suffix 'en' carries an uninterpretable feature which is semantically irrelevant, and thus, must be deleted at LF. Another difference between 'have' and 'be' is that the perfect meaning is in 'have' not 'en' while the progressive meaning is in 'ing' rather than 'be'.

Persian is a language in which the progressive and perfective aspects are both LF and PF interpretable. Furthermore, in Persian, v- stranding VPE happens as correspondent to auxiliary stranding constructions and this construction works in both strict and partial identity conditions. Thus, in this language there is not any difference between v-stranding VPE constructions containing

progressive and perfective aspects.

The results obtained from the examination of Persian EFL learners' performance on 'be' and 'have' stranding VPE constructions in English revealed that there was a significant main effect for the context in producing the VPE constructions containing 'be' and 'have' stranding. The descriptive statistics showed that in both intermediate and advanced groups the participants produced be stranding constructions (.58 & .73 respectively) more accurately than 'have' stranding constructions (.26 and .65 respectively). Considering between-subjects effects, there was a significant difference between the intermediate and advanced EFL learners in producing these constructions and the t- tests conducted for the two constructions separately showed that this significant difference was pertinent to the performance of the participants in 'have' rather than 'be' stranding constructions.

The participants' performance on the acceptability judgment task also showed that although they comprehended 'be' stranding constructions (intermediate = .58, advanced = .70, native = .70) better than 'have' stranding ones (intermediate = .38, advanced = .40, native = .51), the difference between their performances was not significant. How can one account for the low performance of the native speaker group on 'have' stranding construction ( $M = 0.51$ )? This may refer to the fact that the native speakers of English prefer to refer the perfective elided VP to an antecedent identical in tense just similar to the way they perform on the 'be' stranding constructions. They judge 'have' stranding constructions in partial identity conditions as informal statements (so marking them as unacceptable in the acceptability judgment task) and in strict identity conditions as formal ones. One further account for the low performance of the natives can be attributed to the fact that the majority of the native speakers participating in the study did not belong to the inner circle of English native speakers.

So the first null hypothesis can be confirmed proving that the Persian EFL learners cannot distinguish between 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions. Actually, they use the same grammatical rules for producing both of them. Comparing the participants' acquisition of these two groups of VPE constructions, it reveals an asymmetry between the two groups' comprehension and production of the constructions in the case of have stranding in which their production outweighed their comprehension. The general results can also be attributed to the lack of adequate exposure to such constructions in their L2.

Thus, it can be concluded that the results of the current study regarding the Persian EFL learners' acquisition of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions are consistent with "Interpretability Hypothesis" in that acquisition of uninterpretable features causes problems in second language acquisition even at the advanced levels of proficiency. The participants in this study adopted a strategy in tackling auxiliary stranding in English in which both 'be' and 'have' stranding are possible in strict identity conditions. Although the advanced learners in the present study outperformed the intermediates, they could not acquire 'en' as an affix carrying an uninterpretable feature. They indeed could not reset the feature interpretability in their L1 grammar. Also, they may associate perfectiveness to affix 'en' not to the auxiliary 'have'. As a result, their interlanguage representation can render 'have' stranding construction as unacceptable.

In their acquisition of the difference between 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions, the learners transferred the idea of feature interpretability from their L1. Thus, they did not consider 'en' as an affix carrying uninterpretable perfective feature and mostly judged 'have' stranding VPE impossible in partial identity conditions. Thus, the second null hypothesis is rejected confirming the inhibitive role of first language on the Persian EFL learners, acquisition of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions.

The results of the study are in line with Al-Thubaiti (2009) regarding her investigation of the Arabic English learners' acquisition of the subtle difference between 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions. She argues that the L2 learners reject 'have' stranding constructions in partial identity conditions because the participle *en* is not considered an uninterpretable feature in their grammar. She further states that the L2 learners "do not seem to associate the perfect meaning with auxiliary have; otherwise, they would have accepted perfect have stranding given that the meaning is recoverable from the stranded auxiliary " (p. 199). The same interpretation can be suggested for

the Persian EFL learners' acquisition of 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions in English.

Regarding the effect of proficiency on the participants' acquisition of the subtle difference between 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions, the intermediate group's production was significantly different from that of the advanced group in general. In particular, the participants' production was significantly different regarding have but not be stranding constructions. In their comprehension, the three groups' performance was not significantly different in any of the contexts.

What was mentioned above refers to the fact that as the language proficiency of the EFL learners increases, their ability in producing but not comprehending 'be' and 'have' stranding constructions may increase. Hence, the third hypothesis is rejected confirming that language proficiency has a significant effect on the acquisition of VPE constructions by Persian EFL learners.

The EFL practitioners can use the results of this study to predict and remove the learning problems Persian EFL learners face through the process of learning English as a foreign language. They may provide the EFL learners with a number of purposeful exercises emphasizing the syntactic and discursal properties of VPE constructions, specifically the auxiliary stranding VPE in English. This study also urges the SLA theorists to focus on a contrastive analysis of auxiliary stranding constructions across languages.

The results of the present study, regarding the effect of proficiency level and the way auxiliary stranding constructions are produced in the first and the second languages of the learners show that more research is needed to be conducted on the acquisition of such constructions concerning the effect of age and instructional environment on the acquisition of such constructions. Research can also be conducted on the acquisition of other ellipsis constructions in which other auxiliaries are used by L2 learners.

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## Appendix I

### A Sample of Translation Task

Please translate the following sentences to English.

۱. ماری اکنون دارد مادرش را ملاقات می کند؛ اما سارا نمی کند.
۲. ما اکنون داریم روشی جدید را آموزش می دهیم؛ اما آنها نمی دهند.
۳. دیانا و سارا سه روز در هفته به خرید می روند؛ اما من اخیراً نرفته ام.
۴. او سالهاست که کتاب جدیدی تخریده است؛ من هم تخریده ام.

## Appendix II

### A Sample of Acceptability Judgment Task

A. Please read the following sentences and decide whether they are fully acceptable, acceptable, unacceptable, or fully unacceptable. If you are not sure, choose the option “neither acceptable nor unacceptable”. Look at the following example.

	Fully unaccept- able	unacceptable	Neither accept- able nor unac- ceptable	acceptable	Fully ac- ceptable
1 The music was a hybrid of western pop and the traditional folk song.					•

1. John is watching TV, but Mary isn't yet.
2. They asked me to fix the roof, and I'll do it as soon as possible.
3. Andrew is writing a letter, but Kim isn't yet.
4. The man I spoke to was very friendly.
5. He's reading the book the name of which I can never remember.
6. I play ping-pong every weekend, but Scott hasn't since he's got sick.
7. Mike does his homework, but Tom isn't yet.
8. He helped the woman whose car had broken down.
9. I've finished the book that you lent me.
10. The man who came in was the boss.