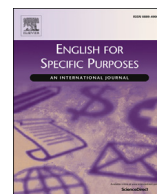


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A functional classification of the introductory *it* pattern: Investigating academic writing by non-native-speaker and native-speaker students



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ABSTRACT

The introductory *it* pattern, as in *it is important to remember the differences*, is a functionally diverse pattern of great importance to academic discourse. However, previous studies have found that using the pattern in an expert-like manner can prove challenging in particular for non-native-speaker students. The present study develops a functional classification in order to investigate what factors may affect the differences in use of the pattern across different groups of students. It maps out the functional distribution of the pattern across three parameters: academic discipline, native-speaker status (non-native-speaker vs. native-speaker students) and level of achievement (lower-graded vs. higher-graded NNS student texts). The study uses data from three corpora of student writing: ALEC, BAWE and MICUSP. The results show that there were differences across all three parameters, suggesting that these variables are all important to take into account in studies of this kind. For example, the non-native-speaker students exhibited an uneven command of the subtleties of the pattern, leading to problems with certain functional categories, such as *attitude markers* (e.g. *it is surprising that*) and *hedges* (e.g. *it seems that*), which indicates that this would be a fruitful area to focus on in second language instruction.

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1. Introduction

While the objective presentation of findings remains an integral part of academic writing, successfully arguing for claims is also of great importance. One pattern that is frequently used for these functions is the introductory *it* pattern, which encompasses two subjects: an introductory *it* and a clausal subject (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985:1391). The observational and stance marking functions are exemplified in (1) and (2) respectively; the former is used to make affectively neutral statements and the latter is used to express the writer's affective attitude.

(1) [...] *it* has been found *that incidental vocabulary acquisition is also applicable* [...]. (ALEC_LING.054)¹

(2) [...] *it* is important to note *that this is not the complete or whole definition* [...]. (MICUSP_LIT.004.1)

The importance of the introductory *it* pattern in academic discourse has been stressed in previous research (e.g. Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Thompson, 2009), which suggests that it is an important pattern for students to master. However, the pattern

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¹ In all examples, italics have been used to mark both the introductory *it* and the clausal subject.

has been found to be problematic for non-native speakers of English, as they have been reported, for example, to overuse the pattern to make forceful claims (Hewings & Hewings, 2002).

The aim of the present study is to develop a more easily replicable functional classification for the introductory *it* pattern and to use that classification to map out the functions the pattern performs in written academic discourse by native-speaker and non-native-speaker students. In addition to the variable of native-speaker status, two other under-investigated variables will also be explored: academic discipline (linguistics vs. literature) and level of achievement (higher-graded vs. lower-graded student papers). There are two main reasons why linguistics and literature make for an interesting pair of disciplines to study. First, these disciplines have distinct expository conventions (for example, linguistics is more empirically driven). Second, despite their differences, linguistics and literature are typically placed in the same language department in a European context. The same students thus study both disciplines, which means that these students have to learn how to adhere to the conventions of each discipline as needed – a task with which they often need help. Previous research has in fact found differences in how the introductory *it* pattern is used in these two disciplines, with the pattern being especially frequent in linguistics papers (Peacock, 2011:82).

In investigating the potential influence of all three of these variables, the study aspires to capture more of the heterogeneity of academic discourse and, thereby, to shed light on the uses of the introductory *it* pattern and the mechanisms that underlie the similarities and differences across the investigated groups.

Many previous studies have investigated the functions of the introductory *it* pattern (e.g. Groom, 2005; Herriman, 2000; Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Römer, 2009). However, most of these studies have limited the analysis to instances which include an adjective phrase (e.g. *it is interesting that*) or which have an interpersonal function (i.e. that are used to mark stance). Since previous research (Larsson, forthcoming) has found that excluding all other instances results in a large proportion of relevant data being discarded, the question arises what a functional analysis would look like with the full range of instances of the introductory *it* pattern included.

The three variables mentioned above (discipline, native-speaker status and level of achievement) can be expected to have an effect on the distribution of functions; the variables will be addressed in turn below. Disciplinary differences with regard to the frequency of use of the pattern by published expert writers have been noted by Groom (2005), Peacock (2011) and, for NS students, Thompson (2009); however, very little attention has been paid to investigating potential differences of this type in NNS student writing. In Larsson (forthcoming), a syntactic analysis of the pattern in NNS and NS student writing was carried out, and clear differences between linguistics and literature were found, such as the linguistics students' more frequent use of the SV_{pass} type (e.g. *it has been found that*) to comment on empirical findings. However, to the best of my knowledge, no studies have looked at whether the functions of the pattern vary across disciplines in NNS writing.

Furthermore, a few functional differences have been noted by studies investigating the use of the pattern across native-speaker status, comparing non-native-speaker (NNS) data to native-speaker (NS) student and/or expert data. For example, NNS students have been found to use fewer introductory *it* hedges (e.g. *it appears that*) than NS expert writers (Hewings & Hewings, 2002:374). A tendency for NNS students to overuse the pattern to make strong claims has also been noted (e.g. Hewings & Hewings, 2002:374; Römer, 2009:156–157). Despite these differences and other minor disparities, Römer (2009:158–159) concluded that NS status does not seem to be a major factor of importance. However, the material used for Römer's (2009) study did not allow for comparison of NNS and NS writing by students who are at similar levels of achievement. Since the material used for the present study can be used in this kind of comparison, it makes it possible to further explore the potential influence of NS status on the use of the pattern.

In the only other study that I am aware of that has investigated level of achievement in relation to the introductory *it* pattern, it was found that the relative frequency of its syntactic types (e.g. SVC: *it is possible that* or SV: *it seems that*) differs across levels of achievement (Larsson, forthcoming; see Quirk et al., 1985:1392 for an overview of the syntactic types). The lower-graded texts exhibited a strong preference for the most frequent syntactic type across all corpora, SVC, which could suggest a reliance on *lexico-grammatical teddy bears* (Larsson, forthcoming, from Hasselgren's, 1994, use of *lexical teddy bears*).

In sum, the present study develops a functional classification and uses that classification to investigate what differences and similarities can be found with regard to the functional distribution of the introductory *it* pattern across (i) academic disciplines, (ii) NS status² and (iii) levels of achievement. The present functional classification scheme differs from previous models in that it uses a feature assigning system, as will be further explained in section 2.2.3. Based on previous research (Hewings & Hewings, 2002), it is hypothesized that the NNS students will underuse hedges and overuse the pattern to make strong claims compared to the NS students. Moreover, based on previous research (Larsson, forthcoming), it can be expected that there will be disciplinary differences and differences across levels of achievement also for the functions of the pattern.

2. Material and method

2.1. Material

The study uses data from *the Advanced Learner English Corpus (ALEC)*, a recently compiled corpus of NNS student writing that, in contrast to many other corpora of this kind, allows for investigation across levels of achievement. The study also

² The term *NS status* is henceforth used to refer to comparisons made between (high-achieving) NNS and NS students.

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