Journal of English for Academic Purposes 22 (2016) 64–79

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of English for Academic Purposes

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jeap

The introductory *it* pattern: Variability explored in learner and expert writing

Tove Larsson

Department of English, Uppsala University, Box 256, 75105 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 26 September 2015
Received in revised form 22 December 2015
Accepted 22 January 2016
Available online 11 February 2016

Keywords:
The introductory *it* pattern
Variability
Expert writing
L2 writing
Academic discourse
Corpus-based research

ABSTRACT

The introductory *it* pattern, as in *it is interesting to note the changes made*, is a versatile pattern of great importance to academic writers. However, very little attention has been paid to its syntactic and lexical variability. The present study investigates the degree of variability of the pattern with regard to its syntactic and lexical make-up in expert and apprentice learner writing, and whether the variability and/or frequency of particular realizations found in expert writing has an effect on the use of the pattern in learner writing. The study uses data from the *Advanced Learner English Corpus* (ALEC) and the *Louvain Corpus of Research Articles* (LOCRA). The results show that the pattern is relatively invariable overall, as certain high-frequency realizations account for the bulk of the tokens in both corpora. With some noteworthy exceptions, the learners use the pattern similarly to the experts, which suggests that the learners generally are proficient users of the pattern. However, the ***it* V ADJ to-inf** subpattern, possibly due to its particularly high token frequency in the expert data, was significantly overused by the learners, as was its most frequent realization ***it* V POSSIBLE to-inf**; there thus seems to be a frequency effect in play.
© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Due to its wide array of uses, the introductory *it* pattern, as in *it is interesting to note the way rhetorical choices vary*, can be considered to be of great importance to academic writers. The uses of this pattern, which is made up of a non-referential introductory *it*, a predicate and a clausal subject (cf. Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985:1391), range from stance marking to information structure management (Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999:661, 677). However, while much research on the use of the pattern in academic writing has focused on its various functions (e.g. Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Römer, 2009), very little attention has been paid to its syntactic and lexical variability; the pattern has thus not yet been described in its full complexity.

In light of this, the aim of the present study is twofold. Firstly, the study aims to investigate the degree to which the make-up of the introductory *it* pattern is fixed or variable in academic writing by expert writers and learner writers. This is done through an exploration of the pattern's syntactic structure and of its most salient lexical items, as outlined below. Secondly, the study investigates whether the variability and/or the frequency of particular realizations found in expert writing are matched in learner writing, in order to further explore the learner difficulties reported in previous research on the pattern (e.g. Hewings & Hewings, 2002; Larsson, forthcoming).

E-mail address: tove.larsson@engelska.uu.se.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jeap.2016.01.007
1475-1585/© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

Variability is here treated as a lexico-syntactic rather than a semantic variable. It is viewed as a cline with invariable items, such as fixed expressions, representing one end of the scale, and highly variable items which have many different alternative realizations representing the opposite end of the scale. Interestingly, the introductory *it* pattern has members that can be found at either end of the continuum, as will be demonstrated in section 3. The study starts out from what is, to the best of my knowledge, the most fine-grained syntactic classification of the introductory *it* pattern there is, namely that of the COBUILD grammars (Francis, Hunston, & Manning, 1996, 1998) and introduces the terms *subpattern* and *predicate lemma*.

Subpatterns denote a set of instances of the introductory *it* pattern that share a syntactic make-up; for example, the ***it* V that** subpattern encompasses all tokens that have this basic structure, with *that* representing a *that*-clause. Another subpattern is shown (in bold) and illustrated using a corpus examples in (1). A list of the abbreviations used in the COBUILD grammars can be found in Appendix A.

(1) ***it* V ADJ to-inf**:
[…] *it* is important *to examine different aspects of vocabulary learning.* (LOCRA_018-04)[1]

The term *predicate lemma* is used to denote the lexical item within the predicate of the introductory *it* pattern that carries the most semantic content. Example (1) above can be used to illustrate this. In addition to the two subjects (*it* and *to examine* […] *learning*) there are two lexical items: *is* and *important*. Whereas *is* is arguably semantically neutral by comparison (cf. Quirk et al., 1985:1174), *important* plays a key role for the purpose of use of the pattern. *Important* is therefore considered the predicate lemma of this token. More details are given in Section 2.2.3.

Variability is investigated here from three different perspectives. It is measured using (i) the type-token ratio of predicate lemmas by subpatterns, (ii) the relative frequency of the different predicate lemmas for each subpattern and (iii) the presence of features such as negation and modal verbs inside the introductory *it* pattern. Taken together, the three perspectives offer valuable and complementary information. While type-token ratios provide an important overview, relative frequencies provide more detailed information about the pattern-internal distribution of the predicate lemmas. The additional features explored in the third stage are features that are not accounted for in the COBUILD classification, but which are, due to their frequency, nonetheless likely to provide important insights into the degree of variability of the introductory *it* pattern that would otherwise have been overlooked.

For the second part of the study, which investigates whether the degree of variability and/or token frequency in expert writing appears to have an effect on the use of the pattern in learner writing, the expert writing is viewed as being representative of the input of academic writing that learner writers receive. In usage-based models of L1 and L2 language acquisition, input is considered to play an important role for language acquisition and processing (Ellis, 2013:369). While there are, of course, many determinants of learning that interact, the role of input *frequency* has been emphasized (e.g. Ellis, 2002, 2013; Ellis, O'Donnell, & Römer, 2013; Hasher & Zacks, 1984). Ellis (2013:368) states that "[f]requency promotes learning and entrenchment". That is, very frequent linguistic items are easily accessed and are more likely to be learned, which should mean that learners are more likely to produce these linguistic items than other, less frequent ones; this hypothesis will be tested in the present study. Similarly, previous research on the introductory *it* pattern has shown that learners have a tendency to make use of a limited set of high-frequency realizations and use those very frequently, a tendency that has been referred to as *lexicogrammatical teddy bears* (Larsson, forthcoming, from Hasselgren's (1994:256) term *lexical teddy bears*). It could furthermore be expected that subpatterns that exhibit a low degree of variability, and which thereby are more fixed, are more likely to be used by the learners, as these would be perceived as more salient (cf. Ellis, 2013:376); this is another hypothesis that will be tested in the present study. The research questions used to guide the analysis are as follows:

- What is the degree of variability (as operationalized in the present study) of the different subpatterns of the introductory *it* pattern in the expert data and the learner data?
- If we use the expert data as a standard for comparison, do token frequency and/or the varying degree of variability of the subpatterns have an effect on the learners' use of the introductory *it* pattern?

Based on previous research (e.g. Ellis, 2013), it is expected that high-frequency, invariable subpatterns found in the expert data will be found even more commonly in the learner data, as the more frequent and regular the input, the more likely it is that learners will use these subpatterns frequently in their own production.

1.1. Previous research on the introductory it pattern and variability

The introductory *it* pattern is highly versatile and has been found to be particularly frequent in academic discourse (Biber et al., 1999:674, 722). The different functions of the pattern have been thoroughly investigated across disciplines (e.g. Biber et al., 1999; Groom, 2005; Larsson, forthcoming; Peacock, 2011) and in learner vs. expert data (e.g. Hewings &

[1] The text ID for each corpus example is made up of the name of the corpus (cf. Section 2.1) and the.article/student anonymization code; italics has been added to all examples.

Download English Version:

https://daneshyari.com/en/article/360142

Download Persian Version:

https://daneshyari.com/article/360142

Daneshyari.com