

A Comparative Study of Introductory 'it' in Research Articles Across Eight Disciplines

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Abstract

This paper describes an analysis of introductory 'it' plus that-clause and to-clause complementation, structures said to be particularly important in academic English, in 288 research articles (RAs) across eight disciplines. We also examined NS/NNS differences as it has been asserted that NS use more and a greater variety of collocations, and that collocation is difficult for NNS. Previous research into history and literary criticism suggests that the patterns have several different functions. However, little or no research seems to have investigated other disciplines, or NS/NNS differences.

We investigated a 1.6 million-word corpus of 288 RAs across eight disciplines – Physics, Biology, Chemistry, Environmental Science, Business, Language and Linguistics, Law, and Public and Social Administration. We first individually examined all 6,008 occurrences of 'it', and recorded all forms of the target patterns. The frequency of all forms was then checked. Finally, the function of each occurrence was individually checked.

Results indicate that that-clauses evaluate propositions, while to-clauses evaluate the difficulty or necessity of procedures. 110 different forms were found: the most common were 'it is possible that', 'it is possible to', and 'it is important to'. A number of statistically significant interdisciplinary and also NS/NNS differences were found in the form and frequency of the patterns, including clear differences between sciences and non-sciences. The highest proportions appeared in Law, and the lowest in Biology.

Conclusions are that the patterns revealed are accepted within disciplines as recognized ways to evaluate propositions and procedures, and that the disciplinary differences found inform us about disciplinary norms. The results help us understand scientific expression and the RA and there are also implications for EAP, with the need to teach research writers discipline-specific research writing. NNS may be less aware of certain genre conventions, and may need help to join the discourse communities of international research.

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