It-extraposition constructions in Italian EFL academic writing: A longitudinal study based on the Italian component of the LONGDALE project

Erik Castello
University of Padua

Abstract

This paper explores the use of *it*-extraposition constructions in a longitudinal database of texts written by Italian undergraduate language students as part of the LONGDALE project. The first part of the study investigates the types of patterns produced by the learners and the types of constituents they extraposed. The analysis reveals that the use of the "it (mod) be V-ed" pattern and of extraposed that-clauses increases over the years, while that of the "it (mod) be (adv) adj" pattern and of extraposed to-clauses decreases. The second part focuses on the learners' erroneous or non-standard uses of these constructions, e.g. the incorrect extraposition of noun phrases, and seeks to find explanations for them, also using inferential statistics.

Keywords: *it*-extraposition constructions, learner language, longitudinal study, EFL academic writing.

1. Introduction

It-extraposition constructions have been researched extensively in various fields, including Corpus Linguistics (e.g. Kaltenböck 2000 and 2003; Hewings & Hewings 2002; Groom 2005; Thompson 2009), Learner Corpus

Research (e.g. Römer 2009; Callies 2009; Hasselgård 2009; Herriman & Boström Aronsson 2009; Larsson 2016), and corpus-based research aiming at providing fine-grained descriptions of lexico-grammatical patterns for English Language Teaching (e.g. Francis, Hunston, & Manning 1996: 518-551; 1998: 480-518). These constructions are of the utmost importance in written academic English, as they allow writers to objectively and impersonally make statements (e.g. *It is widely known that English has become a "Lingua Franca"*) or express opinions (e.g. *It is quite clear that the teacher should interact with all the students*). However, they can pose a series of challenges to EFL learners (e.g. Hinkel 2013), which are worth exploring, as they can persist also at an advanced level of linguistic proficiency, at least in the case of Italian learners (e.g. Castello 2015). Learner corpus research conducted on this phenomenon has been mainly based on cross-sectional data, while longitudinal investigations are less common. This paper sets out to explore the use of *it*-extraposition constructions in texts written by two cohorts of Italian undergraduate language students, each collected over a period of two academic years, from year 1 to year 2 and from year 2 to year 3 respectively. This dataset, which is part of the Italian component of the Longitudinal Database of Learner English (LONGDALE-IT), is compared to a sub-corpus of the Italian component of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE) (Granger *et al*. 2002) and to the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS). Section 2 provides an overview of *it*-extraposition constructions and research conducted on them, Sections 3 explores their complexity in terms of their syntactic, discourse and textual features, and Section 4 reviews previous learner corpus research in the field. Section 5 introduces the corpora investigated in this study, while Section 6 illustrates and discusses the main results. Finally, the conclusions outline some implications of the findings for language teaching and for future research on the topic.

2.   *It*-extraposition constructions and academic writing

In this study the term *it*-extraposition constructions is used to indicate clauses containing "the formal or anticipatory subject [*it*] and the extraposed, postponed, logical or notional subject," which takes the form of an extraposed embedded clause (Kaltenböck 2003: 236).[1] Various other labels have been

1 The distinction drawn in this study between ranking and embedded clauses is based on Halliday (2004). In a nutshell, while ranking clauses are paratactically or hypotactically related clauses acting at the clause level, embedded clauses function as constituents within the structure of a phrase, mainly as post-modifiers in noun phrases or as a particular type of nominalisation (Halliday 2004: 426).

used to refer to these constructions and to the linguistic phenomena underlying them, including subject extraposition (e.g. Biber *et al.* 1999), anticipatory *it* (Hewings & Hewings 2002) and the introductory *it* pattern (e.g. Groom 2005; Römer 2009).

The types of clauses which can be extraposed are *that*-clauses, *wh*-clauses, *to*-clauses and *for/to*-clauses. *Ing*-clauses, also called "gerund-participials," are generally particularly resistant to extraposition, and even more so are noun phrases, which share similarities with right-dislocation (Kaltenböck 2003: 247). However, noun phrases taking the form '*the* … N + relative clause' (e.g. it's extraordinary *the amount of beer he puts away*) represent borderline cases of extraposition (Ward, Birner & Huddleston 2002: 1407-1408), that is in certain contexts their use is acceptable. Kaltenböck (2000: 158, cited in Callies 2009: 49), in a study based on the ICE-GB corpus, found that *that*-clauses and *to*-clauses are the most recurrent types of extraposed clauses, *wh*-clauses are used almost equally frequently in pre- and post-predicate position, while *ing*-clauses, as expected, are mainly used in pre-predicate position.[2] The felicity of the use of *it*-extraposition constructions depends on contextual factors, including sentence position, information status, syntactic weight and processing constraints (Ward *et al.* 2002: 1404-1406; Callies 2009: 47 48). Generally speaking, they enable writers to place all the pieces of new information in these clauses at the end of the sentence (Ward *et al.* 2002: 1403). They also help speakers/writers produce, process and comprehend texts more easily (Biber *et al.* 1999: 677).

Francis *et al.* (1996: 518-551) offer a detailed description of the "pattern groups" as well as of the variety of lexico-grammatical patterns in which introductory *it* as subject (and also introductory *it* as object) falls. Among them are the groups "*it* V adj clause," "*it* V clause," "*it* V n clause," "*it* V prep clause" and "*it be* V-*ed* clause," which are illustrated by examples 1 to 5 respectively (taken from Francis *et al.* 1996: 518ff.):

(1) It is difficult to see in the dark.

(2) It seems certain that elections will go ahead.

(3) It is a shame that the press ignored these events.

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2 The International Corpus of English: the British Component. http://www.ucl.ac.uk/english-usage/projects/ice-gb/ (last accessed on 21 June, 2017).

(4)   It is to our credit that people are now healthier.

(5)   It is estimated that a hundred of people have now died.

It is apparent that part of the meaning of each of these extracts is conveyed by an adjective (*difficult* in 1), a noun phrase (*a shame* in 3), a prepositional phrase (*to our credit* in 4), a verb phrase (*is estimated* in 5), or by both a verb and an adjective (*seems certain* in 2). New information is then to be found in extraposed embedded clauses (e.g. *to see in the dark* in 1). It can also be noticed that the verb *estimate* used in the fifth pattern is used in the passive voice, while *seem* in the second pattern is used in the active voice.

In academic writing, *it*-extraposition constructions are used as a means of "depersonalis[ing] text and creat[ing] an impression of the writer's distance and objectivity" (Hinkel 2013: 10). They may also be employed as hedging devices, markers of attitude, emphatics, as well as to express general reference or specific reference (attribution) to a given source (Hewings & Hewings 2002: 370-372). Studies on student academic writing have revealed that the rhetorical functions of *it*-extraposition constructions are likely to vary across year of study as well as across disciplines. Hewings & Hewings (2001), for instance, found that the first-year students in their study mainly hedged their claims, while the third-year students often emphasised them in their writing, thus expressing their critical voice more strongly and convincingly. Furthermore, while astronomy and history students showed the tendency to use a larger number of hedges, geography and science students frequently used emphatics.

Other studies on academic writing have investigated semantic, pragmatic and rhetorical variations across sub-patterns, and revealed differences even between cognate patterns. For instance, research has shown that "*it* V adj that" and "*it* V adj to-inf" differ in various respects. To be precise, in the case of the former pattern the writer makes judgments about the proposition following *that*, while "in the case of the latter it is not only the process that is evaluated but also the agent of the process" (Thompson 2009: 66). Subsequent research has shown that the use of these two patterns varies according to a variety of parameters, including discipline (e.g. history and literary criticism) (Groom 2005), subject (engineering vs. history), type of assignment (e.g. reports vs. essays), year of study (Thompson 2009), and L1 vs. L2 writing (Römer 2009; Larsson 2016). Finally, variation has also been attested among instances of the same pattern, due to the presence (versus absence) of such additional linguistic

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features as adverbs (e.g. *It is* thus *natural to talk about it)*, modal verbs (e.g. *It* would *be wrong to see them as cynical*), negation (e.g. *It does* not *matter what kind of accent you have*) and past tense (e.g. *It* was *necessary to select participants*) (Groom 2005; Larsson 2016).

3. The complexity of *it*-extraposition constructions and EFL writing

It-extraposition constructions are especially relevant to the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), enabling as they do apprentice writers and EFL learners to manifest themselves skillfully in their texts, build an identity through their writing, and ultimately develop a successful academic persona (e.g. Thompson 2009; Larsson 2016).

These constructions are, however, syntactically complex, and present an area of difficulty for academic EFL writers (Hinkel 2013: 10). This holds especially true for learners whose mother tongue permits empty subjects, that is languages that are positively marked for the (supposed) "null subject" or "pro-drop" parameter (e.g. Spanish and Italian), as shown by research on second language acquisition (e.g. Larsen-Freeman & Long 1991: 232-235). These languages are often also characterized by "free inversion," free word order and the use of "postverbal" subjects mainly serving the purpose of focalizing the subject (Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2010: 476-479). Furthermore, Italian allows the use of passive *si* constructions and of impersonal *si* constructions. An example of the former is "*Si lodano i bambini diligenti*" (English: *Diligent children are praised*) (Salvi & Vanelli 2004: 72), while "*Si dice che pioverà*" (English: *It is said/They say/Somebody says that it will rain*) exemplifies the latter (D'Alessandro 2007: 1).

In a study of both the Spanish and the Italian components of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE)[3] (Granger *et al*. 2002; see Section 5 below), Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2008) found that in both Italian and Spanish EFL writing "ungrammatical *it*-insertions" are the most frequent constructions with postverbal subjects following an "unaccusative" verb (e.g. *to exist, live, begin, develop, emerge, occur*). This phenomenon, which is exemplified by the clause **It still live some farmers who have field and farmhouses* (Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2008: 107), is arguably related to the erroneous extraposition of noun phrases by Italian learners, such as **It is also necessary your help* or **It has been built a new hotel*, as observed among others by Castello

3 https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/icle.html (last accessed on 21 June, 2017).

(2015: 190). These infelicitous uses of postverbal subjects in EFL writing cannot be accounted for solely by the input to which learners are exposed and by L1 transfer. As suggested by Lozano & Mendikoetxea (2010: 493-494), "integrating different types of knowledge at the interfaces" appropriately can also pose major challenges. To be precise, while producing texts, knowledge about the lexical and syntactic features of verbs and verb patterns should be "interfaced" with the requirements or "principles" imposed by discourse and by processing factors. Notably, it is the "end-focus" or information principle − the interplay between given and new information − that should be interfaced with the "principle of end-weight" − the tendency to place long and complex elements towards the end of the clause (Lozano & Mendikoetxea 2010: 478-480). They do indeed reinforce each other, in that both heavy constituents and constituents expressing new information tend to be used post-verbally (Biber *et al.* 1999: 896-898).

4. *It*-extraposition constructions and Learner Corpus Research

With the advent of learner corpora − i.e. "electronic collections of foreign or second language learner texts assembled according to explicit criteria" (Granger 2009: 14) − it has been possible to systematically investigate lexical, lexico-grammatical as well as syntactic and discourse features of the language produced by large populations of language learners. Among these features are *it*-extraposition constructions.

Herriman & Boström Aronsson (2009: 109-110), for instance, find that interpersonal metaphors expressing dynamic modality (e.g. *it is possible/easy/ difficult that/to* …) and metaphors expressing evaluations (e.g. *it is nice/clear that/to* …) are more than twice and three times as frequent respectively in the Swedish sub-corpus as in the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS) (see also Section 5 below).[4] Callies (2009: 199) points out the higher frequency of *it*-extraposition constructions in the German component of ICLE than in LOCNESS. He also notices that the German learners use a larger number of extraposed *to*-clauses than the native speakers (61.3% vs. 39.9%) and, to a lesser extent, of *wh*-clauses as well (3.5% vs. 1.1%). Römer (2009: 152) also discusses the preference for *to*-infinitive clauses in the German component of ICLE, which she ascribes to L1 interference. She

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4 Centre for English Corpus Linguistics (CECL), Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium, https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/locness.html (last accessed on 21 June, 2017).

also observes that at times the learners use these constructions to express strong emotions and personal opinions using adjectives such as *amazing* and *ridiculous* (Römer 2009: 156). Research on ICLE has also found that *it*-extraposition constructions are overused in the Norwegian and Italian components (Hasselgård 2009: 128-130; Prat Zagrebelsky 2004: 100-101). To be precise, in the Italian component the patterns "*it* V adj *that* clause" and "it *be* V-*ed that* clause" are used more frequently than in LOCNESS.

Research conducted on the Cambridge Learner Corpus (CLC) − a collection "of approximately 45 million words of learner data taken from Cambridge English examination scripts at CEFR levels A1-C2" (Hawkins & Filipović 2012: 40) − has identified a set of "correct linguistic properties of English that have been acquired as transitional features at different CEFR levels and that generally persist at higher levels" (Hawkins & Filipović 2012: 112). One of these features is *it*-extraposition (Hawkins & Filipović 2012: 118-120; 148-149).

Research on the CLC has informed the compilation of the English Grammar Profile (EGP), a free online resource which allows its users to "see how learners develop competence in grammatical form and meaning, as well as pragmatic appropriateness, as they move up the CEFR levels."[5] The online interface of the EGP can be searched for grammatical super- and sub-categories (e.g. "Modality"; "adjectives"), grammatical forms and uses (e.g. "IT" + "BE" + "IMPORTANT" + CLAUSE), CEFR levels, can-do statements and examples of use. By performing a number of searches on the EGP, it has been possible to check for the CEFR level at which a given category and grammatical form related to *it*-extraposition constructions comes up in the learner data. On the basis of the output of the searches, the Table presented in the Appendix was compiled, which represents an attempt to outline the order in which the patterns involving *it*-extraposition constructions are used in learner written English. As can be seen, learners generally start using the patterns "*it be* adj clause" and "*it be* adj *for* n *to*-inf" from level B1 of the CEFR. Besides these patterns, at B2 level they also use the "*it* V clause" pattern, which contains verbs other than *be* (e.g. *seem*), as well as "V *it* adj clause," that is introductory *it* as object. Finally, at C1 level they also make use of the pattern "it *be* V-*ed* clause."

To sum up, intermediate/advanced EFL learners with various L1 backgrounds tend to overuse *it*-extraposition constructions. They start to employ some

5 http://www.englishprofile.org/english-grammar-profile (last accessed on 21 June, 2017).

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patterns at level B1 of the CEFR and display additional ones as they progress to C1 level. As hinted in Section 3, however, Italian learners, even those at an intermediate or advanced level of proficiency, could meet a series of challenges in their attempts to use these constructions and might end up producing non-standard or unacceptable ones.

5.   Data, methods and research hypotheses

The main datasets under scrutiny in this study consist of two longitudinal learner corpora, i.e. *LONGa* and *LONGb*, which have been compiled as part of the Longitudinal Database of Learner English (LONGDALE), an international project which was launched by the University of Louvain, Belgium, in 2008.[6] The aim of the project is to collect a large longitudinal database consisting of data from learners from various mother tongue backgrounds over a period of usually three years.

The first longitudinal corpus is composed of two sub-corpora, *LONGa1y* and *LONGa2y*, and contains texts written by 138 Italian undergraduate students of Linguistic and Cultural Mediation at the University of Padua (Italy), who attended the first-year English language course in 2013-2014 and the second-year course in 2014-2015. At the end of both courses the students were asked to write a 450/500-word text in response to the same prompt, i.e. their views on standard and non-standard English, native-likeness and their expectations of their level of English by the end of the course. The second longitudinal corpus (*LONGb*) contains texts produced by 73 Italian learners from another cohort of undergraduate students of the same degree course at the same university, who attended the second-year English language course in 2012-2013 and the third-year course in the following academic year. *LONGb2y*, the first sub-corpus in *LONGb,* consists of 700-word reading reports about the topic of eco-tourism written as an assignment during the second year, while LONGb3y contains 400-word argumentative essays on the role of Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC) in language learning written in the third year as an assignment involving some background readings. Broadly speaking, the target CEFR levels for productive skills at the end of the first, second and third years were B1+, B2 and C1 respectively. Unfortunately, it was not possible to assess the exact level of proficiency of each candidate with a standardised test on the occasion of the data collections. The achievement of the expected level could thus not be established precisely. During the second-

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6 https://uclouvain.be/en/research-institutes/ilc/cecl/longdale.html (last accessed on 21 June, 2017).

year English course, both cohorts of students were given feedback on their texts, focusing in particular on contrastive lexico-grammatical phenomena, such as the structure of English noun phrases, *it*-extraposition constructions and conjunctive adjuncts. The aim was to make the learners think critically about the strengths and weaknesses of their written production.

A third corpus of learner data that was used in this study was a sub-corpus of the Italian component of the International Corpus of Learner English (ICLE), *ICLE_IT*. ICLE contains argumentative essays written by learners of English from several mother tongue backgrounds, whose "proficiency level ranges from higher intermediate to advanced" (Granger *et al.* 2002: 14). The 180 texts selected were all written by students at the University of Turin (Italy), and provided additional data that turned out to be valuable for the part of the study discussed in Section 6.2.

The methodology adopted in this study is Contrastive Interlanguage Analysis (CIA), whereby the learner language represented in *LONGa, LONGb* and *ICLE_IT* "is analyzed in its own right either cross-sectionally or longitudinally" (Granger 2009: 18), and subsequently compared to "native-speaker" data. The native-speaker corpus chosen for comparison is a selection of 45 essays from the American component of the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS), i.e. *LOCN_AM*, and 33 essays from the British component. i.e. *LOCN_BR*. The topic of the essays in the former corpus is "Great inventions and discoveries of the 20th century and their impact on people's lives," while that of the latter is "A single Europe: A loss of sovereignty for Britain." For most of the investigations, the American and the British sub-corpora were treated as one and labelled *LOCN_AB*. The distinction between the two varieties is possibly relevant to the discussion in Section 6.2. It must be noted that while the essays in LOCNESS were written by native-speaker non-professional writers and thus represent the same type of language produced by the EFL learners under similar conditions, "the ideal case in a study such as this would be to use both native-speaker student essays and professional texts as standard of comparison" (Ädel 2006: 207). Unfortunately, for this study such comparisons could not be drawn.

Relevant data about each one of the sub-corpora investigated in this study is summarised in Table 1.

CORPORA	Texts	Tokens	Types	Sentences	Av. sentence length	*it*-extrap. constr. (‰)
LONGa1y	138	43,392	2,324	1,585	27.38	4.79
LONGa2y	138	64,494	3,307	2,574	25.00	6.43
LONGb2y	73	51,598	3,470	2,132	24.20	1.78
LONGb3y	73	29,567	2,155	1,155	25.60	6.22
ICLE_IT	180	107,204	6,364	4,184	25.62	4.66
LOCN_AM	45	16,444	2,929	880	19.00	2.00
LOCN_BR	33	18,955	2,709	818	23.00	3.05
LOCN_AB	78	35,399	4,547	1,698	20.80	2.54

Table 1. Overall statistics on number of texts, tokens, types, sentences, average sentence length and percentages of it-*extraposition constructions in the corpora (per thousand words).*

The analysis involved the study of all the instances of *it*-extraposition constructions in the corpora, which were retrieved by means of the corpus query system *The Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff *et al*. 2004).[7] All instances of the following patterns were extracted and manually inspected using *Microsoft Excel:* "it + is| was| has been," "it + modal verb," "it's," "it seems| appears| follows| emerged," as well as "is| was + Verb| Adjective| Adverb," "is not| was not + Verb| Adjective| Adverb," "isn't| wasn't + Verb| Adjective| Adverb." The statistical tests were performed using the *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences* (SPSS) for Windows, version 22, and the *Log-likelihood and effect size calculator.*[8]

The general hypothesis driving this study is that the cohorts of Italian learners investigated in this study tend to overuse *it*-extraposition constructions. However, while they tend to overuse some patterns, they underuse others, especially in their first two years at university, that is when their proficiency is supposed to be lower. It is also hypothesised that they make mistakes in the use of these constructions, including the extraposition of noun phrases and/or the omission of anticipatory *it* when it would be necessary. Not only are these erroneous uses assumed to be due to L1 interference, lack of input

and/or carelessness, but also to the learners' difficulty in co-deploying *it*-extraposition constructions with other lexical, syntactic and discourse features of written academic English during text production.

6.   Results and discussion

As can be seen from Table 1, all but one of the learner sub-corpora (i.e. *LONGb2y*) contain a larger number of *it*-extraposition constructions than the native corpora. This peculiar feature of *LONGb2y* can, however, be explained by the fact that it consists of reading reports and not of argumentative essays, which is the case of all the other corpora. Generally speaking, reading reports are expected to differ from essays, mainly because their aim is to describe and summarise information from external sources rather than critically argue in favour of or against a given topic. Leaving out *LONGb2y,* an increasing trend can be noticed in the use of *it*-extraposition constructions from 4.79% in *LONGa1y* (first year) to 6.43% in *LONGa2y* (second year), which then only slightly decreases to 6.22% in *LONGb3y* (third year).

Section 6.1 investigates the use of *it*-extraposition constructions across the sub-corpora, while Section 6.2 explores the Italian learners' most recurrent mistakes in the way they employ these constructions.

6.1.   The use of *it*-extraposition constructions across the sub-corpora

Figure 1 and Table 2 provide a quantitative overview of the use of patterns with introductory *it* as Subject used by the non-native and native students across the sub-corpora. Some of them can optionally contain a modal verb and/or an adverb, while others present erroneous features which are marked with an asterisk. It can be seen that in the first year (*LONGa1y*), students overwhelmingly use the pattern "*it* (mod) V (adv) adj" and its inaccurate version "**is* (adv) adj" (93.75%), and that the same cohort employs them less frequently (86.26%) in the texts that they wrote in the second year (those in *LONGa2y*). It can also be noticed that the percentages of use of these two patterns further decrease in *LONGb2y* (65.22%) and even more so in *LONGb3y* (55.98%). Finally, the percentages in *ICLE_IT* and *LOCN_AB* are 74% and 58.62% respectively. The two patterns are exemplified by extracts (6) and (7):

(6)   For a language learner it is almost impossible to completely master a second language. (*LONGa2y*)

(7) I think *is absolutely possible being able to speak a language like a native speaker. (*LONGa1y*)

It is interesting to mention in passing that in (6) the adverb "almost" hedges the assertion objectively expressed by the *it*-extraposition construction. By contrast, in extract (7) "absolutely" emphasises the possibility to achieve native-speaker linguistic competence. Furthermore, this latter adverb is preceded by *I think,* a marker of subjective modality.

Although much less frequent than the previous patterns, "*it* (mod) *be* n/prep," exemplified by extracts (8) and (9), performs a similar function:

(8) Perhaps it would be a good think if people would learn it at the beginning of the process. (*LONGa2y*)

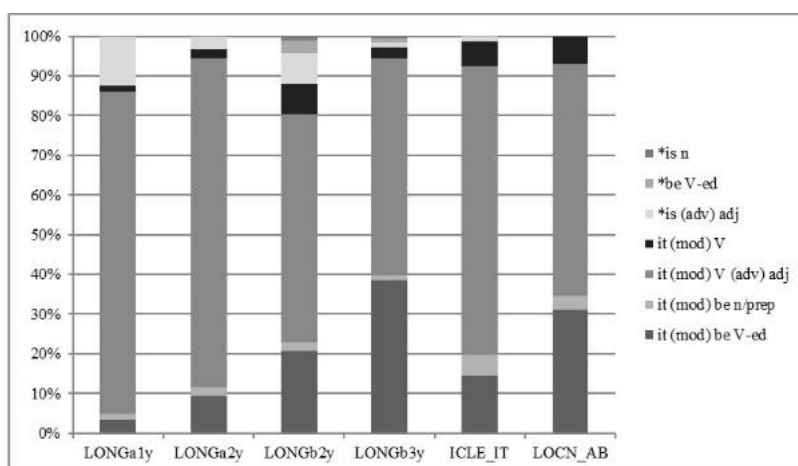(9) It is up to Britain therefore to accept this fact. (*LOCN_BR*)

Figure 1. Patterns with introductory it as subject across the corpora (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

	LONG-a1y	LONG-a2y	LONG-b2y	LONG-b3y	ICLE_IT	LOCN_AB
it (mod) V (adv) adj	81.25	82.89	57.61	54.89	72.80	58.62
*is (adv) adj	12.50	3.37	7.61	1.09	1.20	0.00
it (mod) *be* V-*ed*	3.37	9.40	20.65	38.59	14.40	31.03
*be V-*ed*	0.00	0.00	3.26	1.09	0.20	0.00
it (mod) *be* n/prep	1.44	2.17	2.17	1.09	5.20	3.45
it (mod) V	1.44	2.17	7.61	2.72	6.20	6.90
*is n	0.00	0.00	1.09	0.54	0.00	0.00

Table 2. Patterns with introductory it as subject across the corpora (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

In contrast, an almost opposite trend can be noticed for the patterns "*it* (mod) *be* V-ed" and its incorrect variant "**be* V-ed," which are hardly present in *LONGa1y* (3.37%) and only slightly more frequent in *LONGa2y* (9.4%). They are considerably more recurrent in *LONGb2y* (23.91%) and even more so in *LONGb3y* (39.68%). It should then be noticed that *LOCN_AB* exhibits fewer instances of these patterns than *LONGb3y,* while *ICLE_IT* is once again characterised by an intermediate value (14.6%). Examples (10) and (11) respectively illustrate "*it* (mod) be V-*ed*" and "**be* V-*ed*":

(10) As just mentioned above, it can be claimed that going abroad is a successful way to know and get in touch with foreign cultures. (*LONGb3y*)

(11) To solve this problem *was developed a pilot assessment tool known as Assessment of Intercultural Competence. (*LONGb3y*)

It must be noticed that the few instances of the pattern "**be* V-ed" in the data do not contain either the anticipatory *it* or an extraposed clause. However, as they share similarities with some erroneous uses of the pattern "*it* (mod) *be* V-ed," exemplified by (12), they were included in the analysis.

(12) *It is also organized the rehabilitation of the wild bears, which have become the symbol of ... (*LONGb2y*)

Both patterns are discussed in Section 6.2.

As suggested by the findings reviewed in Section 4, *it*-extraposition constructions taking the form of the pattern "*it* (mod) *be* V-ed" are generally attested at higher levels of proficiency (i.e. tentatively from C1 level). They involve the use of the passive voice and can be optionally followed by specific references to the relevant literature. The fact that the native data contains a high percentage of occurrences of this pattern (31.03%) supports the claim that this is a feature of advanced academic writing. It also suggests that over the years the Padua students tend to progress towards the native norm represented by *LOCN_AB*.

Example (13) illustrates the pattern "*it* (mod) V," which is characterized by the use of verbs other than *be (seem, appear, happen)* (see Section 4):

(13) Moreover it seems that the endangered areas are more frequently run by foreign tourism companies … (*LONGb2y*)

The data shows an increase in the percentage of use from *LONGa1y* (1.44%) to *LONGa2y* (2.17%). Also, a high peak characterizes the value for *LONGb2y* (7.61%), which is followed by a fall to 2.72% in *LONGb3y*. Finally, the figure for *ICLE_IT* (6.2%) is very close to that for *LOCN_AB* (6.9%).

The last pattern to mention is "**is* n," exemplified by extract (14). It will be investigated in some detail in Section 6.2 together with the other two infelicitous patterns encountered so far, namely "**is* (adv) adj" and "**be* V-ed."

(14) Since these kinds of abilities are abstract, for teachers *is not an easy work to assess these skills. (*LONGb3y*)

To complete the exploration of *it*-extraposition constructions in the sub-corpora, in the remaining part of this Section an analysis will be carried out of the types of constituents that are extraposed. Figure 2 and Table 3 represent the fluctuations in the typologies of extraposed constituents across the sub-corpora (non-standard uses are indicated by a question mark and wrong ones with an asterisk). As can be seen, *to*-clauses are the most recurrent extraposed constituent type in the data. The only exception

is *LONGb3y,* in which it is *that*-clauses that are extraposed the most (44.02% vs. 42.93%). With reference to the longitudinal sub-corpora only, a downward trend can be observed in the use of *to*-clauses, while an upward trend characterises *that*-clauses*.* The percentages for *LONGb3y*, *ICLE_IT* and *LOCN_AB* are, by contrast, almost equally split between the two clause types.
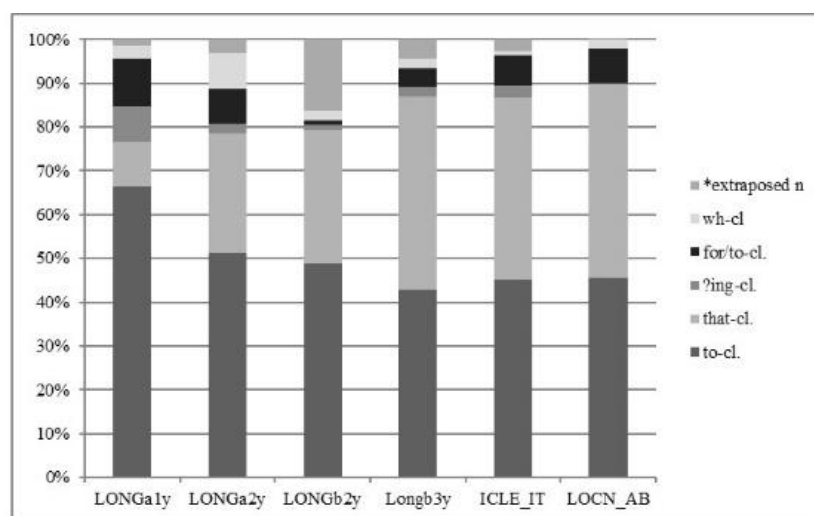

Figure 2. Types of extraposed constituents across the sub-corpora (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

	LONG-a1y	LONG-a2y	LONG-b2y	LONG-b3y	ICLE_IT	LOCN_AB
to-cl.	66.35	51.33	48.91	42.93	45.00	45.56
that-cl.	10.10	27.23	30.43	44.02	41.60	44.44
for/to-cl.	11.06	7.95	1.09	4.35	7.00	7.78
wh-cl	2.88	8.19	2.17	2.17	1.00	2.22
?ing-cl.	8.17	2.17	1.09	2.17	2.80	0.00
*extraposed n	1.44	3.13	16.3	4.35	2.60	0.00

Table 3. Types of extraposed constituents across the sub-corpora (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

A more in-depth and comprehensive investigation of the data has revealed that in *LONGa1y* the learners often use *to*-clauses after the "*it* (mod) V (adv) adj" pattern, thus producing the pattern "*it* (mod) V (adv) adj + *to*-clause" in 62.98% of the cases. As can be seen from example (6) above, not only does this pattern enable writers to evaluate an action (e.g. *it is possible to*)*,* but at the same time to also comment on a process (e.g. *master a language, achieve native-like competence, pronounce an English word*). Conversely, the patterns "*it* (mod) be V-*ed* + *that*-clause" and "*it* (mod) V (adv) adj + *that*-clause" are used "to make judgments upon the necessity, the value, the likelihood or other of a proposition" (Thompson 2009: 66; see also Section 2), such as in example (10) above and in example (15) below:

> (15) It is clear that assessing ICC could lead to improvements in the
>   acquisition of ICC itself (*LONGb3y*).

The extraposition of *that*- and *to*-clauses in the learner data (*LONGb3y* and *ICLE_IT*) is very close to that in the native data, which again can be partly due to the types of texts the students were asked to write.

The extraposition of *for/to*- and *wh*-clauses in the learner data appears to be rather erratic, while the native dataset shows intermediate values for both. Extracts (16) and (17) exemplify these two typologies of extraposed constituents, which occur most often in *LONGa1y* and *LONGa2y* respectively:

> (16) It is necessary for learners to have a foundation to work on.
>   (*LONGa1y*)

> (17) It is debatable whether language learners can achieve native-like
>   competence. (*LONGa2y*)

In evaluating incorrect or at least debatable uses of *it*-extraposition constructions, it is important to consider that the native data does not contain any instance of *ing*-clauses in extraposed position while the learner data does (see example 7 above), which supports the claim made in Section 2 about their borderline status. It can then be seen that the number of extraposed *ing*-clauses falls rather dramatically from *LONGa1y* (see example 7 above) to *LONGa2y*, and basically levels off in the other sub-corpora.

Predictably, noun phrases are never extraposed in the native sub-corpus, whereas the instances of their extraposition fluctuate remarkably in the learner data. An example is provided by extract (18):

(18) It should also be obligatory *a standard set of guidelines and a formal system of accreditation. (*LONGb2y*)

An analysis of the factors which are likely to bring about the extraposition of noun phrases as well as other erroneous patterns is conducted in Section 6.2.

6.2.   Erroneous uses of it-extraposition constructions

	LONG-a1y	LONG-a2y	LONG-b2y	LONG-b3y	ICLE_IT
is (adv) adj	12.5	3.37	7.61	1.09	1.2
be V-*ed*	0.00	0.00	3.26	1.09	0.2
*extraposed n	1.44	3.13	16.3	4.35	2.6
is n	0.00	0.00	1.09	0.54	0.00
*omission of *to/that*	2.40	0.96	0.00	1.63	0.00

Table 4. Erroneous patterns with it-extraposition constructions across the sub-corpora (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

The frequencies of use of the erroneous patterns encountered in Section 6.1 are summarized in Table 4. These patterns are: "**is* (adv) adj" (see example 7 above); **be* V-ed (see example 11 above); *extraposed n (see examples 12 and 18 above); **is* n (see example 14 above). The Table also provides information about another type of mistake related to the use of *it*-extraposition constructions, namely the omission of *to* or *that* from the extraposed embedded clauses, as illustrated by example (19):

(19) But it is important *have a good knowledge of grammar if you want do that. (*LONGa1y*)

A glance at Table 4 suggests that overall the number of infelicitous choices made by the learners decreases over time. In order to check whether and to what extent the differences are statistically significant, the values were

compared using the *Log-Likelihood calculator* (LL) (see Section 5). It turned out that the only statistically significant decrease is the one between the use of "**is* (adv) adj" in *LONGa1y* and in *LONGa2y* (LL = -11.80, p < 0.001), which clearly suggests that the learners have improved on this aspect over the two years. By contrast, in the other cases such a claim cannot be made with equal confidence.

These types of mistakes can, at least partly, be attributed to L1 interference. To be precise, while the omission of anticipatory *it* in *it*-extraposition constructions (e.g. **is not impossible for language learners to achieve this level*) can be explained with reference to the fact that Italian is positively marked for the "null subject" or "pro-drop" parameter, the extraposition of noun phrases is likely to be triggered by the differences between English and Italian in terms of word order, freedom of inversion (e.g. **It should also be obligatory a standard set of guidelines …*; **It was developed a pilot assessment tool …*) or by both (e.g. **should also be obligatory a standard set of guidelines …*; **was developed a pilot assessment tool*). Finally, word order problems such as in **(It) was developed a pilot assessment tool* can be explained as instances of inappropriate rendering in English of Italian passive *si* constructions, e.g. "*Si è sviluppato uno strumento valutativo pilota*" (see Section 3).

At the end of Section 4 the hypothesis was also put forward that another reason why Italian learners often happen to extrapose noun phrases in their writing is their difficulty in interfacing the syntactic requirements of *it*-extraposition constructions with other features of academic English. The most notable of these features are the passive voice, long and complex noun phrases (which are likely to provide new information) and long and intricate sentences. In order to explore this further hypothesis, let us consider extracts (20) and (21):

(20) In order to protect the environment it was elaborated a strategy called Ecological Restoration, that consists in restoring affected lands and resources; it is increasingly being practised by lodge owners in their private properties, by indigenous communities in communal lands and by governments in national parks. (*LONGb2y*)

(21) It is relevant the opportunity that teachers give to us to learn basic grammar tools, even though this is not enough for an English learner student [sic]. (*LONGa1y*)

It can be noticed that extract (20) contains the pattern "*it* (mod) *be* V-*ed*" and extract (21) the pattern "*it* (mod) V (adv) adj." That is, extract (20) is characterised by the use of the passive voice ("was elaborated"), while extract (21) is not. Furthermore, extract (20) consists of a longer and more "intricate" sentence than extract (21). Finally, in both a noun phrase is extraposed and is post-modified by one or more embedded clauses. Even though, as seen in Section 2, extraposed phrases taking the form "*the* … N + relative clause" could be acceptable in some contexts, the *it*-extraposition constructions in extracts (20) and (21) appear to be inappropriate. A more suitable version for the former extract would indeed arguably involve the avoidance of *it*-extraposition, such as in (22):

> (22) In order to protect the environment a strategy was elaborated called Ecological Restoration, which consists in restoring affected lands and resources; …

The latter extract could, conversely, be rephrased as, for instance, (23) or (24):

> (23) The opportunity that teachers give to us to learn basic grammar tools is relevant, …

> (24) It is relevant that teachers give us the opportunity us to learn basic grammar tools, …

It can thus be hypothesised that the Italian learners are tricked into producing *it*-extraposition constructions such as the one in extract (20) because of the concurrent use of *it*-extraposition, the passive voice and of noun phrases post-modified by embedded clauses in long and intricate sentences. Conversely, they mistakenly write constructions such as (21) mainly because of the length and complexity of the extraposed noun phrases.

With a view to exploring this hypothesis, the 52 cases of constructions with extraposed noun phrases in the corpora were divided into two groups: those associated with the "*it* (mod) *be* (adv) adj" pattern and those occurring in the "*it* (mod) *be* V-*ed*" pattern (including the related "**be* V-*ed*" pattern and the three instances of "*it* (mod) V"). Figure 3 shows the distribution of these two groups. It can be seen that in all the corpora but in *LONGa2y* the extraposition of noun phrases is more frequently associated with the latter group, which tentatively supports the claim that constructions involving the use of the

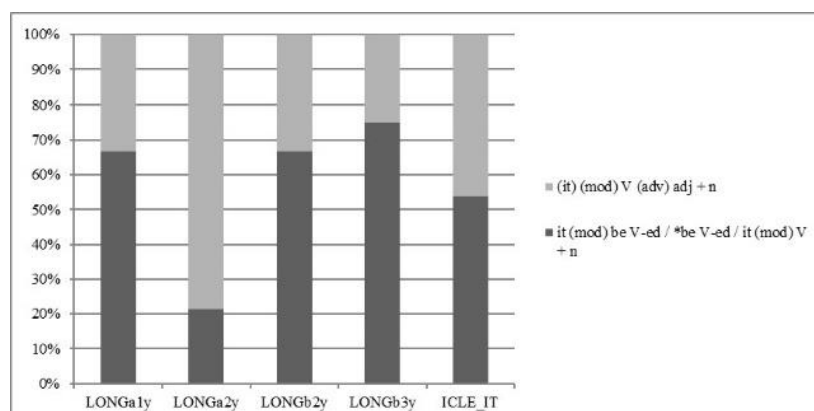passive voice or of verbs other than *be* are more prone to mistake than the other.

Figure 3. Distribution of the patterns followed by extraposed noun phrases (the values are given as percentages of the total number of patterns with introductory it as subject).

Subsequently, the instances of *it*-extraposition constructions containing extraposed noun phrases in the learner corpora were lumped together and investigated irrespectively of the sub-corpus they belong to. Their complexity was determined by counting the number of words they consist of (i.e. "length of noun phrases") and by checking for the use of embedded clauses as post-modifiers. The intricacy of the sentences in which they occur was quantified both in terms of the total number of words (i.e. "length of sentences") and of the number of ranking clauses per sentence (i.e. "ranking clauses/sentence"). Figure 4 shows the dispersion of these three variables, according to the patterns they occur in. As can be seen, "sentence length" presents a wider distribution as well as a higher median (the vertical bar inside the boxes) for "*it* (mod) *be* V-*ed* / **be* V-*ed* / *it* (mod) V" than for "*it* (mod) *be* (adv) adj," while the other variables do not appear to differ greatly. The Mann-Whitney U test (the non-parametric equivalent of an independent samples t-test) was then performed, in order to check for the statistical significance of the differences between the variables. It turned out that the difference between the values for "sentence length" in the two groups is statistically significant (t = -2.519; Sig. (2-tailed) = .012), while the differences between the values for the other two variables are not.
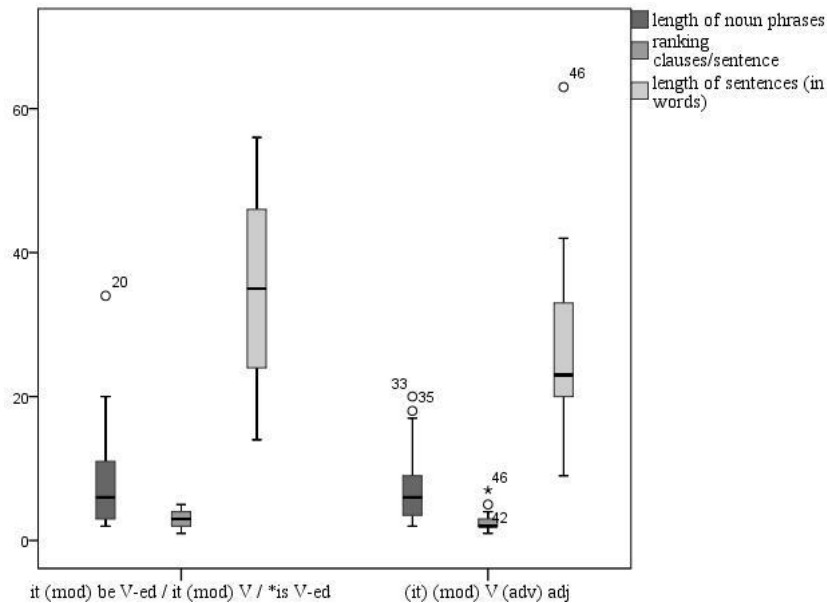
Figure 4. Dispersion of the values for the variables "length of noun phrases," "ranking clauses/sentence" and "length of sentences" according to the patterns they occur in: "it (mod) be V-ed / *be V-ed / it (mod) V + n" or "(it) (mod) V (adv) adj + n."

About a third of the extraposed noun phrases contain embedded clauses. To be precise, 40% of the noun phrases in the "*it* (mod) *be* V-*ed* / *be V-*ed* / *it* (mod) V" group contains post-modifying clauses, while only 24% of the noun phrases in "*it* (mod) *be* (adv) adj" do. The fact that the majority of extraposed noun phrases are not post-modified by embedded clauses leads to the tentative conclusion that their presence cannot be taken as a major explanation for the extraposition of noun phrases in either of the groups of patterns, while sentence length can.

As for sentence length, a closer look at the values for average sentence length in the sub-corpora in Table 1 above confirms the hypothesis that this variable is likely to be one of the main factors that bring about the extraposition of noun phrases in the data. The learners do indeed appear to consistently produce longer sentences than the native writers (24.20 to 27.28 words per

sentence on average) and thus increase their chances to make mistakes. In this respect, it should however be noticed that the American students produce much shorter sentences (19 words per sentence) than the British students (23 words per sentence), which hints at possible different academic styles and writing traditions in the two varieties of English.

7.   Conclusions

The investigation conducted in this paper into the use of *it*-extraposition constructions in the longitudinal sub-corpora has revealed that the number of instances of both the "*it* (mod) *be* V-*ed*" pattern and of extraposed *that*-clauses increases over the years, while that of the pattern "*it* (mod) *be* (adv) adj" and of extraposed *to*-clauses decreases. Overall, this trend is in line with the findings of previous research reviewed in Section 4 and can be interpreted as a progression of the Italian learners' writing towards the norm represented by the native sub-corpora. Generally speaking, the data about the use of *it*-extraposition constructions in *LONGb3y* and *ICLE_IT* are closer to those in *LOCN_AM* and *LOCN_BR*, which can be mainly explained by the similarities between the essays the students were asked to write and possibly also by the learners' higher proficiency.

The learners tend to use *it*-extraposition constructions more frequently than the native speakers, which confirms previous findings, and, albeit in varying degrees, they happen to make mistakes in the use of these constructions throughout the three years of their undergraduate study. The frequency of the erroneous pattern "**is* (adv) adj" and the omission of *to* or *that* decrease from *LONGa1y* to *LONGa2y*, that is from year 1 to year 2, and the omission of *it* in "**be* V-*ed*" drops from *LONGb2y* to *LONGb3y*, that is from year 2 to year 3. By contrast, the trends in the frequency of use of extraposed *ing*-clauses and extraposed noun phrases are erratic. The extraposition of noun phrases, in particular, appears to be a rather challenging and articulated phenomenon, which is likely to be due to L1 interference as well as to a combination of syntactic and discourse factors, notably the concurrent use of the passive voice and of noun phrases, optionally post-modified by embedded clauses, in long and intricate sentences. Further research on these aspects is needed, though, as the requirements of information focus, end-weight and the tendency towards high pre- and post-modification and nominalization in English contrast remarkably with those in Italian, and are highly likely to play an important role. Further studies should also take into consideration the exact proficiency

level of the students at the time of data collection, as this information would help interpret the results more precisely.

These findings have implications for language teaching. Although *it*-extraposition constructions do undoubtedly represent a useful and appropriate resource to make impersonal and objective statements in academic writing, they should not be overused. As suggested by the findings, their excessive use in long and intricate sentences is indeed likely to trick even advanced EFL learners into making non-standard or unacceptable choices. Italian learners should be made aware of these issues, yet caution should be exercised in giving them indications as to how long and intricate their sentences should be, as the British and the American data explored in this study differ in this respect. The findings also seem to suggest that mastering the features of academic English individually might not be enough at intermediate and higher levels of proficiency. Learners should in fact learn to appropriately and successfully combine them in their written academic production. As stated by previous research and as confirmed by this study, using *it*-extraposition correctly does not only involve knowledge about English syntax, but also about the discourse and textual features of academic writing, which might differ from those that learners would adopt in their mother tongue. Teaching materials targeted at (Italian) learners at advanced levels of proficiency should then focus on the combination and interplay of features of academic writing rather than on individual ones at a time. They should also focus on the different ways in which native speakers convey information in their discourse and on how they organise their texts, which at times could involve avoiding *it*-extraposition constructions.

The investigation of the trends in the uses of *it*-extraposition constructions in learner language could be taken up in future research and explored using other longitudinal datasets of Italian EFL learner writing. As suggested by Hasko (2013: 6), aspects which should be analysed and reported in investigations of longitudinal learner corpora are "instructional context specifications, i.e., a curricular framework, pedagogical foci alongside their pedagogical treatment, tasks, assessment, textbook or material details." This type of context-dependent and learner-centred data would provide important insights into the learners' "developmental trajectory" as well as into "intra- and inter-learner variability" Hasko (2013: 7). Corpora, preferably longitudinal ones, made up of texts written by learners from various L1 backgrounds would also be valuable, as they would enable researchers to explore L1-specific aspects and distinguish them from potentially universal ones. Comparisons with various

types of other corpora also have the potential to be extremely revealing: e.g. a control corpus of professional writing; a corpus of texts written by native students and elicited in the same way and under the same conditions as the learner texts; a corpus of academic texts (e.g. essays, reports) written by Italian students in Italian. Various other aspects of *it*-extraposition constructions could be the object of future analyses, including the lexical elements that occur in these constructions, e.g. adjectives, nouns and verbs, as well as the effects of the use of features such as modal verbs and negation (e.g. Larsson 2016). Finally, further investigations would benefit from a variety of methods and data other than corpus-based ones, including elicitation tasks, interviews with the learners/writers, think-aloud techniques, and the analysis of learner performance in tests.

Acknowledgments

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Appendix : Order of appearance of *it*-extraposition constructions by CEFR level according to the Cambridge Grammar Profile Online. It includes can-do statements, super- and sub-categories and examples selected from the online interface.

CEFR LEVEL **Can-do statements**	Categories	Examples
B1 ● Can use 'it' + 'be' + 'important' + ('that') clause. ● Can use 'it' + 'be' + adjective + 'to' + infinitive, to make an assertion more or less direct. ● Can use 'it' + 'be' + adjective + 'for' + object + 'to' + infinitive.	FORM/USE: 'IT' + 'BE' + ADJECTIVE + INFINITIVE, HEDGING (Modality and Emphasis) FORM: 'IT' + 'BE' + 'IMPORTANT' + CLAUSE (Modality) FORM: (SUBJECT) USING 'IT' TO INTRODUCE (Pronouns) FORM: 'IT' + 'BE' + ADJECTIVE + 'FOR' + OBJECT + INFINITIVE (Modality)	*But sometimes it's essential to do what your parents want you to do.* *It's important that you eat healthy food.* *It is best to spend your time in the countryside.* *It is important for everyone to attend this meeting.*

| B2
● Can use 'it' + linking verb + adjective + ('that') clause as a focusing device.
● Can use 'it' + linking verb + adjective + ('that') clause to make an assertion less direct.
● Can use 'it' as an object with 'make' to introduce something the speaker or writer is going to refer to. | FORM/USE: 'IT' + LINKING VERB + ADJECTIVES + CLAUSE, HEDGING (Modality)
FORM/USE: 'IT' + LINKING VERB + ADJECTIVES + ('THAT') CLAUSE (Modality and Focus)

FORM: 'IT' + LINKING VERB + ADJECTIVES + CLAUSE (Modality)
FORM: (OBJECT) USING 'IT' TO INTRODUCE (Pronouns)

FORM: (SUBJECT) EMPTY 'IT' (Pronouns: subject /object) | *It is likely that by reading books we will learn some new words and phrases …*
It seems clear to me that swimming is good for the whole body.

It appears that there was an error with the older computer system.

This shyness makes it hard for me to speak in public … |
| C1
● Can use 'it' with the passive voice where the subject is unknown or unimportant, often in formal contexts. | FORM/USE: (SUBJECT) 'IT' + PASSIVE (Pronouns) | *It is hoped that this report will help the club to improve and meet the needs of the whole school.*

Firstly it was highlighted that so many people take advantage of the park, but our survey clearly contradicts this view. |