



## Syntactic Awareness on Iraqi University Students' Part of Using Empty 'it' in their Academic Writing

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الوعي النحوي لدى طلبة الجامعات العراقية في استخدام "هو/هي" الفارغة

الإشارة في كتاباتهم الأكاديمية

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### Abstract:

This study examines the syntactic awareness among Iraqi university students, specifically their use of the syntactic placeholder "Empty it" in academic writing. "Empty it" constructions, where the pronoun 'it' serves a grammatical but non-referential role, are pivotal in English syntax, often manifesting in impersonal or introductory statements crucial for academic discourse. This research delves into the ability of non-native English speakers, like Iraqi university students, to employ these structures effectively, which is essential for coherent, persuasive academic writing. The paper analyzes patterns, trends, and common errors in the usage of "Empty it" among these students, highlighting the syntactic challenges posed by their native language structures and educational background. It explores comparative implications of "Empty it" between native and non-native speakers, revealing that while native speakers acquire these structures intuitively, non-native speakers require more deliberate educational interventions. Recommendations for enhancing syntactic competence in academic writing within the Iraqi context include targeted instruction, utilization of digital tools, and comprehensive pedagogical training. This study contributes to the broader understanding of second language acquisition and the specific challenges faced by Iraqi university students, offering insights into effective strategies for improving their academic writing skills.

Keywords: Syntactic Awareness, Academic Writing, University Students, Iraqi.

المستخلص

تبحث هذه الدراسة في الوعي النحوي لدى طلاب الجامعات العراقية، وتحديداً استخدامهم للعنصر النحوي "هو/هي الفارغة الإشارة" في الكتابة الأكاديمية. تعتبر تركيبات "هو/هي الفارغة الإشارة"، حيث الضمير "it" يلعب دوراً نحوياً ولكن غير مرجعي، أمراً محورياً في بناء الجملة الإنجليزية، وغالباً ما تظهر في عبارات غير شخصية أو تمهيدية حاسمة للخطاب الأكاديمي. يتعمق هذا البحث في قدرة المتحدثين غير الأصليين للغة الإنجليزية، مثل طلاب الجامعات العراقية، على توظيف هذه الهياكل بفعالية، وهو أمر ضروري لكتابة أكاديمية متماسكة ومقنعة. تحلل الدراسة الأنماط والاتجاهات والأخطاء الشائعة في استخدام "إفراغها" بين هؤلاء الطلاب، مع تسليط الضوء على التحديات النحوية التي تطرحها هياكل لغتهم الأم وخلفيتهم التعليمية. ويستكشف الأثر المقارن لـ "هو/هي النكرة الإشارة" بين المتحدثين الأصليين وغير الأصليين، ويكشف أنه في حين أن المتحدثين الأصليين يكتسبون هذه الهياكل بشكل حدسي، فإن المتحدثين غير الأصليين يحتاجون إلى تدخلات تعليمية أكثر تعمداً. وتشمل التوصيات لتعزيز الكفاءة النحوية في الكتابة الأكاديمية في السياق العراقي التعليم المستهدف، واستخدام الأدوات الرقمية، والتدريب التربوي الشامل. تساهم هذه الدراسة في فهم أوسع لاكتساب اللغة الثانية والتحديات المحددة التي يواجهها طلاب الجامعات العراقية، وتقدم رؤى حول الاستراتيجيات الفعالة لتحسين مهاراتهم في الكتابة الأكاديمية. الكلمات المفتاحية: الوعي النحوي، الكتابة الأكاديمية، طلبة الجامعة، عراقيون

## Introduction to Syntactic Awareness in Academic Writing

Academic writing provides syntactic awareness, implicit in understanding the grammatical structures of a language, assuring one of the ability to recognize and apply the language effectively. It refers to an intuitive grasping of rules, whether explicit or implicit, bound to govern word order, sentence structure, and the overall organization of elements within a sentence. Basically, this will help develop complicated and fine arguments in an academic context; therefore, the presented work will be credible and readable, since accuracy and clarity are much essence in writing. Syntax forms the framework for effective communication, most especially in its written form. In a scholarly work, the manner and form through which manipulation and handling of syntactic structures appropriately take place is pivotal to having the ability to succinctly and understandably communicate complex ideas. Such varied sentence structures, either from complex to simple sentences or compound to simple sentences, help to provide a better flow for the text while helping to maintain the interest of a reader. In addition, the knowledge of syntax helps people know how to use punctuations properly at the right time, because it can greatly change the meaning and clarity of statements. Importance of "Empty it" in English Syntax The phrase "Empty it" in English syntax typifies a whole special kind or type of syntactic awareness that fits perfectly into academic writing. "Empty it" refers to the use of the pronoun "it" with no direct referent but often acts as a placeholder in sentences. With the impersonal construction, usually, an impersonal subject is used, and it is in current use nowadays in the English language with the impersonal construction ("It is believed that."), expressions pointing to the weather ("It is raining"), and on an introductory expression to give emphasis to the subject ("It is the results that matter"). "Empty it," on the other hand, would denote maturity and flexibility of syntax use as syntax nuanced in nature. Such a kind of syntax nuance proves very challenging to master yet very essential in the achievement of academic writing at the university level. Correct usage of "empty it" structures or spells in academics may add to the formal and complex structure of academic text. For example, promising results have been being made in recent studies on syntactic challenges for students, and mostly student second language speakers. For instance, Casal and Lu (2021) examined how second-language English graduate students manage to attend to syntactic complexity in other academic genres, highlighting the importance of reflective engagement with syntactic structures for enhancing quality in writing. At the very least, these findings suggest that increased attention to knowledge of syntactic features, such as the "empty it" structures, can make valuable contributions to the academic writing of L2 students.

### Objectives of the Literature Review

The literature review will be based on the major aspects that will seek to achieve the objectives of syntactical awareness in academic writing, as a way of digging deeper into the critical ability in linguistics among non-native English learners, like Iraqi university students. The literature review first seeks to expound on the concept of the syntactic awareness of academic writing. Syntactic awareness enables a speaker to understand and manipulate abstract syntactic elements of a language with a view to building well-formed sentences. The skill is most important when doing academic writing and presenting complicated ideas with clear expression and conformity. Such questions are developed from the preview on different definitions and dimensions, which will be premised based on the scholarly voices in the field, like Kurdi et al. (2020), which encourage looking deeply at the level of the phenomena considered. Review of Related Literature: This will be based on identifying and establishing an analysis of the challenges and constraints faced by Iraqi university students in the proper employment of syntactic structures in academic writing. The major recommendation will revolve around the common mistakes and trouble students face, mainly within constructions like "empty it" to mark in a section of syntax in English. An analysis of such research, as presented by Abdulrahman and Ayyash (2019), would be associated with the syntax awareness of students and its implications for reading and writing skills; they cater to the nominal explanation of the actual syntactic problems that handicap those students from academic writing proficiency. Besides, the literature review is aimed to evaluate how the awareness of syntactic affects the quality of academic writing. It will draw from research work that has critically outlined how syntactic proficiency, or lack of it, tells on clarity, persuasiveness, and in general effectiveness in written academic discourse. This part further looks into the global impacts of syntactic awareness for academic prosperity and linguistic competence. It also discusses good instructional strategies and approaches, pedagogical paths that worked well in developing a student's syntactic awareness. It will evaluate all type of instructional interventions, the methodologies for teaching and curricular designs that try to develop students' capabilities to be able to use syntactic structures of high complexity in writing. Thus, the aim here has been to identify evidence based practices that can be employed in the Iraqi educational setting to bring about greater syntactic capabilities among university students. Last of all, the lit review fills in the space left open

in the conducted research, taking into account some of the areas that should be researched next. An analysis of the existing knowledge on syntactic awareness and its part in academic writing will drive focus on under-researched topics and also establish questions for future investigation. It falls into one of the several general objectives, which is even further exploration and enhancement of what is known about syntactic awareness for the second language learner population and academic literacy and therefore is described as such. Theoretical Framework of Syntax and Syntactic Awareness Syntax and syntactic awareness are a theoretical understanding full of structural concepts involved in language, which is uniformly cognitive and accounting for capacity in using and comprehending intricate structures. It is a central subject in linguistic theory in consideration that the set of rules and principles, apart from the processes that regulate the sentence structure in any of the given languages. Specifically, it is how words and phrases are ordered in a structure that makes a well-formed sentence in accordance with the concepts of the grammar of the language.

#### Definitions and Key Concepts in Syntactic Theory

Syntactic theory describes the sentence structure of human language and explains how such structure functions. Constituency refers to how words that come together form phrases and clauses, hence at the core of syntactic theory. Moravcsik and Wirth (2020) further explain that an appreciation of the hierarchical nature associated with syntactic structures is key in the conceptualization of language. The second important concept is the relationship, which focuses on the relations of words in a sentence to show how they associate with each other. That is to assume the facility to generalize infinitely from a finite set of rules is a state of human languages. Attempting to explain language syntax as a core set of principles appropriate to all languages, Noam Chomsky provided generative grammar with the status of a framework in the theory of syntax. Such a model puts tremendous emphasis on the intrinsic knowledge of languages, which would allow a lay person to produce and understand relatively complex root sentences, given that universal grammar underlines all human language (Tallerman, 2019). Role of Syntactic Awareness in Language Acquisition Syntactic awareness relates to both the conscious and the learned nature of syntactic manipulation, vis-a-vis language acquisition and further acquisition of literacy. This will require an ability for one to recognize or have the manipulation of structures in relations to syntax that would be needed for the acquisition of reading and writing skills development. One wonders if such a structured network approach to syntax might offer insight into what the understanding of patterns and rules involves. Syntactic Awareness: In language acquisition, improved syntactic awareness helps in the easy learning of new linguistic patterns and in their appropriate application. Therefore, it can help in understanding difficult texts, because high levels of syntactic awareness imply the capacity to parse and interpret sentences that have highly structured forms. Additionally, the syntactic awareness, which becomes part of the metalinguistic awareness, encourages in the learners the ability to reflect and analyze their own language, in which they have learned to communicate and the language which they have already encountered. On the other hand, research has indicated that a clear teaching strategy in syntactic structures has ruled positively towards improving students' language abilities, especially in reading understanding and writing. Consequently, learners are with syntactic skills, hence reasonably capable of producing coherent, sophisticated texts, and recognizing meaning nuances in written and oral receptive language (Demberg & Keller, 2019).

#### Review of Literature on "Empty it" Usage

The "empty it" is such a fine aspect of syntactic awareness which has come to take a spotlight due to reference in linguistic literature, "expletive it" and the phrase "empty it" are valid in the sentences whereby the subject is denotative of nothing in specific and concrete but imparts the grammatical properties. This is common in constructions like "It's raining" or "It's necessary to act," where "it" lacks an antecedent. Studies on "Empty it" in English Language Learning In research, English language learners are viewed to associate challenges related to something "Empty it," which can be overgeneralized or otherwise wrongly applied. For example, Mao et al. (2021) have discussed this in relation to pragmatic aspects of language use in general cases of "Empty it" and how those are acquired or instituted within cultural settings. "This is the stage at which you should write," he replied. Stated differently, their research underscores the difficulty of transferring a given syntactic structure from one language to another. Onnis, Roberts, and Chater (2019) describe such simplicity in language development as indirectly suggesting that there are such syntactical constructions to handle when they make comments about how a language learner would carry on handling complex syntactic constructions such as 'empty it'. In their work, language learners are biased toward simple or regular patterns such that they are favored to have problems when coming up against the syntactic irregularities presented by 'empty it' constructions. Comparative Analysis of "Empty it" Usage by Native and Non-Native Speakers According to Myhill and Chestnutt, there still can be equally relevant differences

in the learning and actual usage of "Empty it" between native and non-native English speakers. Native speakers naturally acquire such structures, picking them up from exposure and use in daily language, as most times they regulate the rules subconsciously. Non-native speakers have to acquire the rules more consciously, usually needing concrete grammatical instruction and practice to make good use of the structures they have learned. Second illustration is some difficulties non-native speakers may have with "empty it," as such constructions often lack direct equivalence in their native language (Merita and Syahroni, 2019). The absence creates difficulties in a meaningful interpretation and use of these forms perceptively in English. The study emphasizes the fact that targeted instruction in the domain of syntactic acquisition is necessary to address difficulties of this sort within second language learning. "Empty it" elicited similar judgments from native and non-native speakers alike, a fact that could be adduced to differences in the acquired level of linguistic intuition and exposure, than to lack of contact or any other socio-pragmatic reason. Native speakers had native intuitions for how to use "empty it," often based on the "syntactic feel". Then, native speakers are in a position to rely mostly on their intuitions, while non-native speakers need to sometimes learn such structures more analytically.

### Analysis of "Empty it" in Iraqi University Students' Academic Writing

Analysis of "empty it" in academic writing to be done by Iraqi students will indicate how such students handle situations as posed by the English language syntax utilizing "it" in cases where there is no specific noun to refer to but casting it in a grammatical or structural function in, for example, impersonal constructions or to introduce clauses. Patterns and Trends in the Use of "Empty it" These tendencies, which Iraqi university students may demonstrate in general English use, utilizing this kind of surface-syntactic knowledge in a broader sense during the academic writing process, might include the characteristic high rates at which the frequency of "Empty it" occurs in impersonal constructions, appropriate for generalizable statements or subjective opinions. For example, "It is known that." would empty it in such as sentences as the following example: "It is necessary to consider." if we continue our focus on the following information, one might suppose that. From these general issues and lack of adherence to the Iraqi dynamics, research on language acquisition and use shows that in most speakers, general overgeneralization or underuse of specific syntactic structures is caused by an influence from their L1. Due to the prolonged linguistic disparities between the two languages – English and Arabic – Iraqi students must encounter general problems in using 'Empty it' appropriately, particularly where they are needed in genres which may require the use of formalized academic English. Challenges and Common Errors Encountered University students from Iraq will experience one of the most pressing problems in the misuse that will be ascertained through "empty it" course, fill it will happen, and "empty it" are going to be ascertained through contradictory contexts, such as those in which it is not grammatically warranted. In this way, such mistakes are incomplete knowledge of how the "empty it" bear in the English language, which kind of makes the sentences sound a little unnatural and more complicated. Common errors of this kind can be an inappropriate use of 'it', where a more direct subject is called for, or omitting 'it', where it serves a necessary syntactic function. Examples of such misuse include the sentence 'It is important the study of history'. Such errors can obviously render meaning less than clear and detract from the clarity and coherence of the academic argument. In addition, direct translation of structures will also critically give syntactical errors that are enormous due to large disparities between the languages in terms of sentence structure. With more flexible syntax in Arabic, allows a varied build of sentence, and such structures as "Empty it" would head in awkward or ungrammatical sentences.

### Summary

Aspect	Description	References
Nature of "Empty it"	"Empty it" is a case of syntactic place-holder without a concrete antecedent, most frequently used in impersonal structures or occurring in some kind of antecedent dropped when introducing clauses.	(Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999)
Usage Patterns	Iraqi students might use "Empty it" in impersonal builds such as "It is known that." or "It is important to." which are normal in academic speech to express generalization and to give an opinion.	(Hinkel, 2004)
Common Errors	Such errors mainly regard overuse, misuse, or unnecessary insertion of "Empty it," which may result in the sentence being clumsy or too complex and hence spoil the clarity of the academic argument.	(Murata, 2015)

Challenges	Challenges involved the structural differences between the English and Arabic languages, resulting in a difficulty to find a direct expression for "Empty It," hence the translation errors and divergences at the syntactical level.	(Al-Badawi, 2001)
Influencing Factors	Factors that might be considered before college include quality of education in English, which is poor; generally low exposure to complex syntactic structures; and direct translation from Arabic to English.	(Swan, 2001)
Pedagogical Implications	Background and history on explicit concord instruction on "Empty it" and parallel structures with respect to their syntax and usage in academic writing.	(Ellis, 2006)

### Conclusions and Implications for English Language Teaching in Iraq

The English Language Teaching (ELT) background in Iraq related to both syntactic awareness and the employment of "Empty it" for the same in writing suggests several handy findings and even gives ways for the betterment of linguistic competence.

#### Summary of Key Findings

Thus, one begins to notice a huge need for the establishment of syntactic awareness among students in higher education in the Iraqi context, but toward the use of complex grammar. Cloze Test: For instance, there is Betti's (2021) input-process-output analysis that definitely proves the heterogeneity of students and, consequently, their differences with regard to English language proficiency shown in Iraqi college English departments. This usually turns out to be a traceable incongruity in a student's academic writing: incorrect overuse of the phrase "Empty it," which thus brings confusion into scholarly work.

With new trends from e-learning systems, their integration in the educational space, and new ways of language instruction that seemed an emerged trend and remained driving paradigms for their work, Amir et al.; (2019) offered a critical pathway. This shift in perspective has dramatic implications not only for methodology in teaching but even delves into the acquisition of effective syntactic competence.

#### Recommendations for Enhancing Syntactic Competence in Academic Writing

Some of these strategies include the following: A number of strategies to be used to improve their syntactic competence in academic writing by university learners in Iraq.

- Give targeted instruction on syntactic structures. At the same time, direct instruction must be given to the students on syntactic structures that have to be used with purpose and intention, including complex and sophisticated ones, such as "Empty it." It can be detailed in the explanations and examples, with some exercises, for students to drill and get used to the presented structures.
- Tools Kinds: The use of technological aids and digital resources can also extend the possibility for more interactive and interesting learning. Online exercises also preach to language learning apps and virtual classrooms for truckloads of practices and support provided to the learners.
- Professional Development for Teachers: Teachers of the English language within the Iraqi context need to be appropriately accorded pedagogical training. Workshops, seminars, and continuous training programs will avail updated teaching techniques and even linguistic research from which the instructors may equip themselves in such instances as the syntactical challenges of their learners.
- Language Immersion and Cultural Exchange: Improved language immersion experiences, hence most clearly, by study abroad programs, language partner schemes, and cultural liaisons programs, help massively with raising language competence. Native speakers and peers speaking authentically in varied context are likely to help the students understand and use complex syntactic constructions better.
- Curriculum Development and Research: Research must always be carried out to put into perspective the needs and the exact challenges posed in learning language that students from Iraq experience. Research can best inform curriculum so that it better covers identified gaps in this area, eliciting better syntactic competence, among other deficient areas in learning language.

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