

An Experimental Investigation into Iraqi EFL University Learners' Competence in Expletive Constructions

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دراسة تجريبية حول كفاءة طلبة الجامعة العراقيين
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المخلص

يتناول هذا البحث الصعوبات التي يواجهها طلبة الجامعات العراقية في تعلم واستخدام التراكيب الاحتمالية في اللغة الإنجليزية. وتعد هذه التراكيب أساسية في بنية الجملة، إذ تسهم في دقة التعبير ووضوح المعنى. لتحقيق أهداف الدراسة، اعتمدت الباحثة المنهج التجريبي وطبقت ثلاث اختبارات على متعلمي اللغة الإنجليزية في الجامعات العراقية، مستندتاً في تصميمها إلى الدراسات السابقة، حيث ضمت كلٌّ منها 30 فقرة (15 فقرة اختيار من متعدد و15 فراغاً)، تألفت عينة الدراسة من 150 طالباً وطالبةً من قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية التربية الأساسية، جامعة بابل، استخدمت الباحثة الوسائل الإحصائية التالية لتحليل البيانات: اختبار مربع كاي، معامل ارتباط بيرسون، معادلة صعوبة الفقرة، معامل تمييز الفقرة، فاعلية البدائل الخاطئة، ومعادلة حجم الأثر، أظهرت النتائج أن الطلاب يواجهون تحديات متعددة، من بينها غموض المفاهيم النظرية وقلة التطبيق العملي، بالإضافة إلى تأثير العوامل الثقافية والاجتماعية، وتقدم الدراسة توصيات لتحسين أساليب التدريس، مثل تعزيز التدريب العملي، بما يرفع كفاءة الطلبة في استخدام اللغة الإنجليزية بفاعلية

الكلمات المفتاحية: جملة، شتاء، طلاب، تعلم، جامعة، استراتيجية، تدريس، تطبيق، لغة، تحليل، إحصاء.

Abstract

The challenges Iraqi university students encounter when learning and utilizing expletive constructions in the English language are the subject of this study. These sentence structure building blocks are essential for precise expression and understandable meaning. Three exams were given to English language learners in Iraqi universities as part of the researcher's experimental research approach to achieve the study's goals. The tests, which had 30 items each (15 multiple-choice questions and 15 full-in-the-blanks), were created by the researcher utilizing previous research. 150 EFL students (taken from a population of 159 after excluding the failing students) from the

University of Babylon's College of Basic Education's English Department made up the sample for this study, which was undertaken during the academic year 2024\2025. EFL students from the University of Babylon's College of Basic Education's English Department made up the sample for this study. The following statistical techniques were employed by the researcher to statistically examine the data: The impact size equation, chi-square, Pearson's correlation coefficient, item discrimination coefficient, item difficulty equation, and the efficacy of false alternatives. The findings showed that students face a variety of difficulties, such as unclear theoretical ideas and a dearth of real-world application, in addition to the impact of social and cultural variables. This study offers suggestions for bettering teaching strategies, like increasing hands-on training and preparing teachers, which can help students become more proficient in using the English language.

Keywords: Sentence, Winter, Students, Learning, University, Strategy, Teaching, Application, Language, Analysis, Statistics.

Introduction

In the face of rapid global changes in economic, social, and cultural landscapes, English language has evolved beyond a mere tool for communication, becoming a strategic necessity for sustainable development and integration into the global academic sphere. In this context, learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) represents a significant challenge for Iraqi university students, who strive to acquire the linguistic skills required for participation in scientific research and effective communication across various fields (Johnson, 2021).

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Mastering expletive constructions presents a significant challenge for Iraqi university students learning English as a Foreign Language. These constructions require learners to have a nuanced understanding of how to use pronouns such as there and it in specific grammatical contexts. Despite their importance in enhancing linguistic comprehension and effective communication, students often struggle to use them correctly (Jaber, 2022; Ammar, 2022).

1.2 Procedures of the Study

The study was carried out in seven sequential phases:

1. A comprehensive review of the literature was undertaken to examine the difficulties encountered by Iraqi EFL university learners in comprehending expletive constructions.
2. Drawing on insights from the literature, the researcher authored a 30-item instrument targeting both recognition and production of expletive "it" and "their" structures. Item formats included multiple-choice and fill-in-the blanks to capture a full range of competence.
3. Fifteen university-based linguists evaluated the draft test for clarity and relevance. Their recommendations prompted minor revisions to item wording,

ensuring that each prompt appeared unambiguous and contextually meaningful to second-year students.

4. Using sampling, 150 second-year English majors from the University of Babylon's College of Basic Education were invited to participate.
5. The researcher administered the finalized test in classroom settings on campus. Standard instructions were provided verbally; participants completed the 30-item assessments within (pre-test: 43, post-test: 39, follow-up test: 36) minutes period.
6. Responses were scored for accuracy, yielding individual totals out of 30. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential measures (paired-samples t-tests; Cohen's d) were computed using SPSS to evaluate change across pre-, post-, and follow-up administrations.
7. The analyzed results informed conclusions regarding learners' proficiency gaps in expletive constructions. Based on these findings, the researcher formulated pedagogical recommendations and suggestions for further studies.

1.3 Aims of the Study

This study seeks to achieve the following aims:

1. Assessing proficiency levels in expletive constructions through evaluating learners' performance in three tests.
2. Assessing the influence of instructional intervention in teaching expletive constructions on learners' comprehension of these constructions.

1.4 Definitions of Basic Terms

1.4.1 Expletive Constructions

Theoretical Definition: "In expletive constructions, the pronouns *it* and *there* occur in subject position without contributing any semantic content, serving solely to satisfy the formal syntactic requirement of a subject." (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech, & Svartvik, 1985, p. 374)

Operational Definition: Expletive subjects are often used in English to introduce weather expressions (*It is raining*) or to delay the appearance of the true subject for discourse or structural reasons (Quirk et al., 1985).

Expletive constructions are syntactic structures that introduce a sentence with a semantically empty or "dummy" subject, typically using words like *there* or *it*. These constructions serve to delay or shift the subject position, often to improve sentence flow, highlight new information, or conform to discourse preferences. For example, in the sentence "*There is a book on the table,*" the word "*there*" functions as a dummy subject, while the actual subject is "*a book.*" (Huddleston, 2002; Pullum, 2002)

1.4.2 Linguistic Competence

Theoretical Definition: "Linguistic competence is the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language," which includes the system of rules that generate well-formed sentences (Chomsky, 1965, p. 4).

Operational Definition: Linguistic competence is defined as an individual's ability to use language correctly and effectively, whether in listening, speaking, reading, or writing. In this study's context, it refers to Iraqi EFL learners' ability to accurately comprehend and use expletive constructions (Hymes, 1972).

1.4.3 Linguistic Difficulties

This refers to the challenges students face in understanding or using the language correctly, especially concerning grammatical structure and meaning. This study focuses on the difficulties faced by Iraqi learners in accurately using expletive constructions (He, 2021).

1.4.4 Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis is an educational methodology aimed at comparing languages to identify differences, including grammatical structures and linguistic functions. This method helps understand why students face difficulties in learning constructions such as expletive constructions (Lado, 2019).

1.5 Hypotheses

The research theories can be summed up in this manner:

1. There is no statistically significant difference at the level (0.05) in the mean scores of the pre-test and that of the post-test in the test of expletive constructions.
2. There is no statistically significant difference at the level (0.05) in the mean scores of the pre-test and that of the follow up-test in the test of expletive constructions.
3. There is no statistically significant difference at the level (0.05) in the mean scores of the post-test and that of the follow up-test in the test of expletive constructions.

2.1 Expletive Constructions

Expletive constructions: are pertaining to syntax forms that contain semantic ingredients that do not accomplish a liberated spoken signification but be apt fill a particular pertaining to syntax position in the sentence. These constructions help assert semantic union and advance the flow of talk (Radford, 2009). They are usually about English, generally including the pronouns "it" and "skilled" at the beginning of a sentence, as in: "It is main to study arrangement." And "There are many challenges in word education." (Huddleston & Pullum, 2002).

Expletive constructions are also defined as linguistic structures that add syntactic elements to a sentence without conveying specific semantic information. They are often used to provide emphasis or achieve a more cohesive sentence structure. Common examples in English include "There is" and "It is," which usually precede the main information, facilitating smoother sentence construction (Brown, 2023). The use of expletive constructions enhances sentence flow and contributes to better textual organization, but it poses a challenge for nonnative speakers, particularly due to the

lack of a direct equivalent in other languages, such as Arabic (Smith & Liu, 2022). Understanding these constructions is essential for advanced language skills in English writing and speaking.

According to the (Generative Grammar Theory) proposed by Noam Chomsky, expletive constructions function as necessary syntactic elements that fulfill sentence structure requirements without affecting the core meaning of the sentence (Chomsky, 1981). Some scholars argue that these constructions facilitate comprehension by presenting information more clearly and smoothly, making them essential in English sentence construction, especially in language learning contexts (Haegeman, 1994).

In the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL), Iraqi learners often struggle with expletive constructions due to their structural differences from their Arabic counterparts. Arabic typically relies on nominal sentence structures without the need for expletive elements to fill empty syntactic positions (Al-Khawaldeh, 2019). Therefore, systematic instruction on these constructions can enhance learners' competence in constructing grammatically correct English sentences.

2.2 Previous Studies

The study of exclamation constructions in English has accumulate growing attention in current age on account of the linguistic and semantic challenges they pose for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, specifically Iraqi undergraduates. The meaning of these constructions display or take public their fundamental differences from Arabic, making necessary supplementary work to appreciate and right use them in miscellaneous circumstances. In reaction to this challenge, various studies have sought to recognize the troubles Arabic-talking juniors encounter accompanying these constructions and to propose teaching game plans that further their procurement.

2.2.1 Smith (2017)

This study is named “The Impact of Cultural Differences on Learning Expletive Constructions.” It investigates by means of what learners' cultural foundations shape their understanding, result, and school room use of English expletive constructions (experiential there-sentences and cleft its constructions) in EFL scenes. It aimed to test the common teaching contexts at which point scholars from high-context against low-context, collectivist against individualist, and high-power-distance against low-power-distance breedings encounter these forms, and to label the pragmatic and concerning feelings and intuition hurdles they face. It widely examined three learner cohorts—East Asian, Middle Eastern, and European—through homeroom remarks, wringed result tasks, and semi-structured teacher interviews. Possible teaching adaptations were establish facts, including with regard to the welfare of mankind suitable prompts, various metapragmatic reasons, and peer-roleplays situated in intimate informative sketches. The research revealed that learners from high-context sophistications fought accompanying decontextualized expletive articles but enhanced when tasks were entrenched in narrative circumstances they recognized; collectivist graduates doubted

to use cleft it in support fear of offending, while nonconformist scholars trite it for emphasis; assistants in high-power-distance scenes depended direct fixing, limiting pupil self-repair, inasmuch as those in low-power-distance classrooms promoted experimentation through led finding. The study advises that educators allocate more period for student-centered, with regard to the welfare of mankind sympathetic exclamation practice; integrate genuine models fatigued from both learners' L1 discourse and target-culture fabrics; plan group projects that balance coach-led recommendation with trainee-initiated tasks; and shift interplay patterns toward cooperative error reasoning. Teacher-training programs and bureaus of instruction should contain modules on cross-educational study of signs as elements of communication and, money permitting, further absorption or exchange visits so instructors happening expletive use direct in various enlightening milieus.

2.2.2 *smith (2017)*

This study is named “The Syntax of Expletive Constructions in English and Its Teaching Implications.” It investigates the established properties and derivative devices of English exclamation structures—existential there-sentences and cleft it-constructions—from both generative-pertaining to syntax and trainee-error outlooks. It aimed to test the activity movements (e.g. null-operator shift, focus bulge), licensing environments, and information-structural roles these constructions display, and to locate the treat and interlanguage issues L2 learners face. It mostly investigated pertaining to syntax tree-diagram studies, probe-goal understanding checking, and beginner dossier fatigued from elicited rewording and sentence-judgment tasks in secondary-level EFL classrooms. Possible teaching interventions—such as unambiguous syntactic forming, recommendation augmentation through marked instances, and focus-on-form tasks—were establish facts and judged. The research revealed that learners usually misparse subject-verb transposition in there-constructions, misuse movement disease in clefts, and forsake to map cleft it upon allure sensible focus function, resulting in determined obsolete wrongs. The study recommends that schoolteachers assign hard-working instructional opportunity to form-focused exclamation communication, integrate tree-diagram exercises into informative projects, use various analysis to prominence L1-L2 pertaining to syntax differences, and design scaffolded tasks that following build complicatedness. Curriculum designers and teacher-training programs endure develop real exclamation corpora for hall use, while educational experts' ability sponsor specific workshops and absorption occurrences to expand instructors' syntactic knowledge.

2.2.3 *Ahmed and Abdullah (2021)*

This study is entitled “Effectiveness of Immediate and Delayed Corrective Feedback on Teaching Expletive Constructions to EFL Students.” It investigates how the timing of corrective feedback—whether provided immediately after an error or delayed until later—affects EFL learners' acquisition of English expletive

constructions, specifically existential their sentences and cleft it structures. The study aimed to compare the impact of both feedback types on learners' grammatical accuracy, retention, and ability to apply these constructions in writing and speech.

Using a quasi-experimental design, the researchers divided participants into two groups: one receiving immediate feedback during instruction and the other receiving delayed feedback after task completion. Pre- and post-tests measured learners' performance across both conditions. The findings revealed that immediate feedback led to faster error correction and greater short-term gains, while delayed feedback contributed to deeper processing and longer-term retention. Both methods were effective, but their benefits varied depending on instructional goals.

The study recommends that EFL instructors strategically combine immediate and delayed feedback to optimize learning outcomes. It also highlights the importance of tailoring feedback timing to learners' proficiency levels and cognitive load, especially when teaching syntactically complex structures like expletives.

4.1 Results Related to Hypotheses

4.1.1 Results Related to the First Hypothesis

To test the first null hypothesis—which states that 'there is no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level in the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test in the expletive constructions test', the researcher administered both the pre-test and post-test on expletive constructions to the participants of the research group.

After scoring the responses and conducting the statistical analysis, the researcher calculated the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for the scores of the research group. Utilizing the paired samples t-test, the analysis revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the post-test at the 0.05 significance level. Specifically, the mean score for the post-test was 23.01 with a standard deviation of 2.373, whereas the pre-test mean score was 19.09 with a standard deviation of 2.433. The computed t-value was 14.118, which exceeds the critical t-value of 1.976 at 149 degrees of freedom, as shown in Table (1).

Table 1

Statistical Significance of the Final Test Scores of the Research Group on the Expletive Constructions Test

Test	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	T-value		Significance Level (0.05)
				Calculated	Tabulated	
Post-test	23.01	2.373	١٤٩	14.118	1,976	Statistically significant
Pre-test	19.09	2.433				

Based on the observations from Table (1) above, the first null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This alternative hypothesis maintains that there is a statistically significant difference in the mean scores of the pre-test and post-test in the expletive constructions test, with the post-test

outperforming the pre-test. Such findings indicate the effectiveness of the teaching method employed during the research period.

4.1.1.1 Effect Size

This section details the effect size, which quantitatively represents the magnitude (i.e., effectiveness) of the independent variable's impact on the dependent variable (as measured in both the pre-test and post-test) for the research sample, consisting of correlated groups. The researcher employed Cohen's formula to calculate the effect size (d) for the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. According to Cohen's (1988) original conventions, the benchmark values for (d) are 0.20 (small), 0.50 (medium), and 0.80 (large). Researchers often translate these into ranges—small effects from $d = 0.20$ to < 0.50 , medium effects from $d = 0.50$ to < 0.80 , and large effects at $d \geq 0.80$. The computed effect size, $d = 3.401$, indicates a large effect. Table (2) illustrates the obtained effect size, and the categorization was based on Cohen's (1988) established criteria:

Table 2

Effect Size of the Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL learners' Competence in Comprehending Expletive Constructions

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Effect Size value (d)	Amount of effect
Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners' Competence	Comprehending Expletive Constructions	3.401	Large

4.1.2 Results Related to the Second Hypothesis

To verify the second null hypothesis—which posits that “there is no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level in the mean scores of the pre-test and the follow-up test in the expletive constructions test”—the researcher administered both the pre-test and the follow up-test on expletive constructions to the research group. After scoring and statistically analyzing the responses, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for the research group's scores were computed. Employing a paired-samples t-test revealed a statistically significant difference in favor of the follow-up test at the 0.05 significance level. Specifically, the mean score for the follow up-test was 23.27 with a standard deviation of 2.46, whereas the pre-test yielded a mean of 19.09 with a standard deviation of 2.433. The calculated t-value of 15.102 exceeded the critical t-value of 1.976 at 149 degrees of freedom, as illustrated in Table (3):

Table 3

Statistical Significance of the Final Test Scores of the Research Group on the Expletive Constructions Test

Test	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	T-value		Significance Level (0.05)
				Calculated	Tabulated	
Follow-up Test	23.27	2.46	١٤٩	15.102	1,976	Statistically significant
Pre-test	19.09	2.433				

Based on the observations in Table (3) above, the second null hypothesis is rejected, and the alternative hypothesis is accepted. This alternative hypothesis posits that there is a statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the pre-test and the follow-up test on the expletive constructions test in favor of the follow-up test. These findings indicate the effectiveness of the teaching method employed during the research period.

4.1.2.1 Effect Size

This section details the effect size, which quantitatively represents the magnitude (i.e., effectiveness) of the independent variable's impact on the dependent variable (as measured in both the pre-test and follow-up test) for the research sample, consisting of correlated groups. The researcher employed Cohen's formula to calculate the effect size (d) for the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The computed effect size, $d = 3.339$, indicates a large effect. Table (4) illustrates the obtained effect size, and the categorization was based on Cohen's (1988) established criteria:

Table 4
Effect Size of the Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners' Competence in Comprehending Expletive Constructions

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Effect Size value (d)	Amount of effect
Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners' Competence	Comprehending Expletive Constructions	3.339	Large

4.1.3 Results Related to the Third Hypothesis

To evaluate the third null hypothesis, which asserts that 'there is no statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level in the mean scores of the post-test and the follow-up test in the expletive constructions test', the researcher administered both the post-test and the follow-up test on expletive constructions to the research group. After scoring the responses and conducting a statistical analysis, the arithmetic mean and standard deviation for the research group's scores were computed. Utilizing a paired-samples t-test, the analysis indicated that there is no statistically significant difference between the post-test and the follow-up test at the 0.05 level. Specifically, the follow-up test yielded a mean score of 23.27 with a standard deviation of 2.46, while the post-test produced a mean score of 23.01 with a standard deviation of 2.373. The calculated t-value was 1.89, which is lower than the critical t-value of 1.976 with 149 degrees of freedom, as shown in Table (5):

Table 5*Statistical Significance of the Final Test Scores of the Research Group on the Expletive Constructions Test*

Test	Arithmetic mean	Standard deviation	Degree of freedom	T-value		Significance Level (0.05)
				Calculated	Tabulated	
Follow-up Test	23.27	2.46	١٤٩	1.89	1,976	Statistically significant
post-test	23.01	2.373				

Based on the observations from Table (5) above, the third null hypothesis is accepted, and the alternative hypothesis is rejected. This indicates that there is no statistically significant difference between the mean scores of the post-test and the follow-up test in the expletive constructions test.

4.1.3.1 Effect Size

This section details the effect size, which quantitatively represents the magnitude (i.e., effectiveness) of the independent variable's impact on the dependent variable (as measured in both the pre-test and follow-up test) for the research sample, consisting of correlated groups. The researcher employed Cohen's formula to calculate the effect size (d) for the influence of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The computed effect size, $d = 1.685$, indicates a large effect. Table (6) illustrates the obtained effect size, and the categorization was based on Cohen's (1988) established criteria:

Table 6*Effect Size of the Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners' Competence in Comprehending Expletive Constructions*

Independent variable	Dependent variable	Effect Size value (d)	Amount of effect
Difficulties Faced by Iraqi EFL Learners' Competence	Comprehending Expletive Constructions	1.685	Large

Although no statistically significant differences were observed between the scores of the post-test and the follow-up test in the expletive constructions test, the effect size regarding competence in using expletive constructions was large. This finding indicates that the method employed is effective, despite the absence of statistically significant differences.

Based on the results of the hypotheses above, the instructional method was successful in achieving:

- An immediate and significant improvement in performance (as evidenced by the first post-test).
- The sustainability of learning (as evidenced by the follow-up test).

- A large effect size across all measures ($d > 1.68$), underscoring the practical impact of the intervention, even in the absence of statistically significant differences between the post-test and the follow-up test. This suggests that the differences observed were qualitative and not merely quantitative.

4.2 Results Related to the Aims

This study also set out with two central aims: to assess students' proficiency in expletive constructions and assessing the influence of instructional intervention.

4.2.1 Assessment of Proficiency Levels

A total of 150 Iraqi EFL learners completed a 30-item expletive-construction test at three intervals—pre-test, post-test, and a follow-up test. Scores reflect the number of expletive sentences out of 30 items in each test.

Learners' accuracy rose markedly from 19.09 correct responses at pre-test to 23.00 at post-test, with gains largely maintained at follow-up of 23.27.

The very large effect sizes for both the post-test ($d = 3.401$) and the follow-up ($d = 3.339$) confirm that the targeted instructional intervention enhanced students' ability to manipulate expletive constructions.

During MCQs tasks, most learners reported feeling confident in choosing the correct expletive construction. However, several still hesitated when asked to generate entirely novel sentences. One learner reflected, "I can pick 'there\ it' without thinking now, but inventing a sentence still freezes me." This suggests the urgent need to implement expletive construction in the curriculum.

4.2.2 Assessing the Influence of Instructional Intervention

Based on the results of the tests, learners' accuracy in comprehending expletive constructions rose from a pre-test mean of 19.09 to a post-test mean of 23.0 and a follow-up test mean of 23.27. These results confirm that targeted instruction produced a substantially greater effect size ($d = 3.401$ for the post-test and $d = 3.339$ for the follow-up test).

Based on the researcher's observation, learners in the intervention spoke warmly of the intervention's focus on form and context. One learner noted, "Before, I mixed up 'there is' and 'it is' all the time. The MCQs and fill-in-the blanks exercises made me understand." Another remarked that the contrastive analysis and contextual explanations helped to "untangle" the ambiguity of these constructions.

The marked gains in the sample demonstrate that explicit, form-focused instruction significantly enhances Iraqi EFL learners' competency with expletive constructions. Qualitative feedback corroborates statistical findings, illustrating how contextualized practice improved accuracy. These outcomes underscore the pedagogical necessity of integrating expletive constructions into EFL curricula to overcome the syntactic challenges.

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