

Grammatically Speaking

by Michelle Jackson

How to Teach the Dummy Pronoun “It”

Sometimes the most interesting aspects of a language come in the smallest form. The English word *it* presents one of these fascinations. *It* can function as a typical pronoun. (E.g., I bought a new bike. It is blue.) In the example sentence, we use *it* to replace the noun *bike*. However, *it* can also function as an expletive or dummy pronoun. A dummy pronoun, unlike the pronoun in the example sentence above, does not replace a noun. It functions as a place holder to maintain the required subject, verb, object (SVO) structure. Some examples of *it* as a dummy pronoun occur when we describe weather (It is going to snow), distance (It is 2 miles to the metro station), time (It is 4 o'clock), or value judgments (It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved as all).

English has a robust use of the dummy pronoun because it is a nonpronoun dropping (non-pro-drop) language. We do not drop the pronoun in favor of maintaining the SVO structure. However, other pro-drop languages, such as Chinese, Turkish, Spanish, and Portuguese do not consistently require pronouns that can be inferred from contextual cues. Other null-subject languages that do not require a subject, such as Modern Greek and Arabic, do not require pronouns at all. Because the dummy pronoun does not necessarily occur in their mother tongues, students often fail to use it. Additionally, because the dummy pronoun carries no semantic information, it can pose a challenge to the instructor charged with its explanation.

Materials Required

- The attached exercise (one copy per student)
- Paper and writing utensils for all students
- Chalkboard, whiteboard and appropriate utensils

Timing: 25 minutes

Step 1

Explain to students that English requires SVO structure. To maintain that structure there are dummy pronouns that fill the subject space in a sentence. (3 minutes)

Step 2

Provide students with examples from above regarding how dummy pronouns are used to describe weather, distance, time, and value judgments. (5 minutes)

Step 3

Provide students with the sample sentences on the Dummy Pronouns Worksheet. Note they are missing dummy pronouns. In pairs, students must add in the dummy pronouns and classify whether the sentence describes weather, distance, time, or a value judgment. (7 minutes)

Step 4

Have pairs of students form groups of four to compare and confirm answers. (5 minutes)

Step 5

Review the exercise as a whole class. (5 minutes)

Optional Extension

Once students have practiced adding dummy pronouns to premade sentences, you could require them to write their own either individually or in groups.

Happy teaching,
Michelle

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