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The Use of ‘Impersonal It’ by English as a Second Language Learners

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ESL learners in Sri Lanka find it difficult to write English sentences due to syntactic differences between their mother tongue and the target language. It is noticeable that the English sentences start mostly with the grammatical subject while the Sinhalese expressions do not. The demand of grammatical subject and the use of ‘impersonal it’ in writing sentences in English are focused in this study. Specifically, the study is based on the use of ‘impersonal it’ as a Subject by Sinhalese speaking ESL learners who live in their bilingual backgrounds. The research is aimed at calculating the frequencies of the usage of sentence patterns with ‘impersonal it’ used by the target population of Sri Lankan ESL learners who speak Sinhalese as their mother tongue. As the sample of study a group of fifty ESL learners in Grade ten, in the age of fifteen have been used. Behavior of the particular language unit produced in English sentences by the sample has been closely observed through a diagnostic test which had three questions: picture based writing, rearranging words to make sentences with ‘impersonal it’ and free writing on the given picture. The data obtained from the responses to the test items was analysed considering the two aspects: frequency and accuracy of use. The study involves interpreting the use of ‘impersonal it’ in terms of popularity. Further, the strengths and weaknesses of the ESL learners in the use of particular patterns have been found. The difficulties faced by the respondents in using ‘impersonal it’ as the subject were examined. The findings reflected the general tendencies explicit in the choice of sentence patterns with ‘impersonal it’ in relation to particular functions and situations. Among many academic studies done in the country ‘impersonal it’ has rarely been a topic of discussion. Therefore, the findings of the study will expand the scope of awareness of syntactic features of Sri Lankan ESL learners.

Key words: accuracy, ESL learners, frequency, impersonal ‘it’, the subject