

An overview of nonreferential *IT* and *THERE*

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What must a teacher know about nonreferential *it* and *there* in order to teach the topic to ESL/EFL students? This topic is often a difficult one for ELLs because of its “common occurrence” in English and the dissimilarity to many languages such as Spanish, Italian (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 443) and Persian (Farsani, Tavakoli, & Moinzadeh, 2012, p. 46). Similarly, it may be a challenging language topic for teachers because of the variety of names used to refer to the same idea: nonreferential, expletive, dummy, empty, existential, and ambient are all terms that were encountered during this paper’s research. No matter which name researchers use, corpus-based studies have found that nonreferential *it* and *there* are indeed common: “Usually between a quarter and a half of *it* instances are non-referential,” which should be contextualized with the finding that *it* accounts for “about 1% of tokens in text” (Bergsma, Dekang, & Goebel, 2008, p. 10).

This paper is an examination of the nonreferential use of *it* and *there*, based on Chapter 23 “Nonreferential *it* and *there* as subjects” from Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) *The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher’s Course*. Because this reference is the base for this paper, its preferred term of “nonreferential” was chosen to be the primary term used to discuss the concept. Though the topic is broad, because both *it* and *there* were included in Chapter 23, this paper will address both. In addition to information based on *The Grammar Book*, written for ESL/EFL teachers, other sources ranging from corpus-based research studies to context-specific pedagogical articles to theoretical article examinations will also be used to explore this topic. This paper focuses on the need for teachers to thoroughly understand the functions, form, and meanings of *it* and *there* as nonreferential subjects. Specifically, teachers should know how to distinguish between nonreferential and referential *it* and nonreferential and

deictic *there*, be aware that the same topic has several different names which may affect resource-gathering, and understand the inconsistency of nonreferential *there* agreement practices.

Defining nonreferential *it* and *there*

When considering this topic, an ESL/EFL teacher must first know what is meant by nonreferential *it* and *there*, and how they differ in function from referential *it* and deictic *there*.

A classic example of nonreferential *it* is presented by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999):

1. It's raining. (What is the *it* that is raining? What does *it* refer to?) (p. 443)

These questions illustrate the difference between nonreferential *it* and its function as a pronoun:

2. Do you know where the remote control is?

It's on the couch. (What is on the couch? The remote control.)

Because there is no answer to what *it* is referring to in example 1) *It's raining*, this function is said to be "nonreferential" because *it* is not referring to anything. Because *it* is referring to something in example 2) (the remote control), it's a referential pronoun. Similarly, nonreferential *there* is presented in the following example:

3. There's a lot of noise here. (Where is *there*? What does *there* refer to?)

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 443)

This can be compared to *there* functioning deictically (locatively):

4. A: Do you know where the remote control is?

B: It's over *there*, on the couch. (Where is there? On the couch.)

From these examples, it is apparent that the difference between nonreferential *it* and *there* and their other functions is significant.

Some research suggests that nonreferential *there* and deictic *there* share a form by no “mere coincidence” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 450). The authors argue that deictic *there* “is a core meaning, while the meaning of nonreferential *there* is an extension of it” (1999, p. 450). In this case, the authors explain that deictic *there* functions as a designation of a location of something in “physical space”, while “nonreferential *there* designates a mental space in which some entity is to be located” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 450). While this theory may help to explain why the two types of *there* share the same form, this distinction is not very helpful to teachers because the concept of “physical” versus “mental” space is abstract, and may be especially difficult to communicate to low proficiency learners.

Other studies that share similar findings with Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) but are more clearly articulated for teachers are Lakoff (1987), and the more contemporary Breivik and Martinez-Insua (2008). The latter researchers explain that it is a “common view that *there*₁ [nonreferential] originated as *there*₂ [deictic]” (Breivik & Martinez-Insua, 2008, p. 352). Using data from Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish, they built upon Breivik and Swan’s (2000) hypothesis that this separation in function and meaning occurred due to grammaticalization, or when a lexical word or phrase over time develops grammatical properties. According to this hypothesis, this separation occurred before the Old English time period.

Breivik and Martinez-Insua’s study may be helpful for teachers in several ways. First, their studies of Scandinavian languages found that these languages also have “an existential

particle that is formally identical with a locative adverb” (Breivik & Martinez-Insua, 2008, p. 352) This means that, while we know understanding nonreferentials is difficult for first language Spanish, Italian, and Persian speakers, this understanding may be easier for Scandinavian first language speakers. Another reason this study may be valuable for teachers is because it explains the difference between deictic and nonreferential *there* in a simple, clear way. The authors state that sufficient general knowledge needed for distinguishing between the two is to know that nonreferential *there* “functions as a subject-position holder”, while deictic *there* is in “paradigmatic contrast with the proximal adverb *here*” (Breivik & Martinez-Insua, 2008, p. 351). In other words, one can test what type of *there* is being used in a sentence by attempting to replace *there* with *here*. If this is possible, it’s deictic. If it is not, or forces the sentence into a deictic meaning, then it’s nonreferential:

5. The hyena is over *there* [deictic], behind the tree.

The hyena is over **here**, behind the tree.

There [nonreferential] are hyenas in my backyard.

***Here** are hyenas in my backyard. (Changes the meaning to deictic.)

(adapted from Breivik & Martinez-Insua, 2008, p. 351)

This test is something teachers should know because it is a simple way to help emphasize to students the difference between the two types of *there*.

Understanding the various names for nonreferential *it* and *there*

In order to further explore the functions of nonreferential *it* and *there*, it is valuable to consider the multitude of names for these items. Langacker (1991) explains the rationale for using the term “dummy” is because “speakers have no clear conception for its referent” (p.

377). Meanwhile, Bolinger (1977) refers specifically to nonreferential *there* as “existential *there*” because, by the act of requiring that “dummy” subject to be present in a sentence, *there* has a location somewhere which is being introduced into consciousness. He also explains that “ambient *it*” is so-called because the meaning is taken from the ambience (or context) of the sentence, such as:

6. It is 6:30.

7. It is not far to Portland. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 445)

In the case of 6), the answer to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) general question, “What is *it*?” is that *it* is *the time*. With 7), “What is *it*?” is *the distance*. In this way, the versatility of nonreferential *it* and the influence that context has is apparent. Some researchers, however, feel that terms such as “dummy” and “empty” are inaccurate. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), for example, explain that using the term “dummy subject” is ignoring “the fact that it does serve a function other than simply filling the subject slot” (p. 450). They explain that if the “dummy subject” definition held true, then there should be no difference in use between sentences like these:

8. There is a pen on the table.

9. A pen is on the table. (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 450)

Though students may be oblivious to the fact there is a difference between these sentences, teachers should be aware that they do in fact differ. In a corpus study of British English, Breivik (1981) found that 9) is the marked form. It should be noted that Breivik (1981) distinguishes nonreferential *there* and deictic *there* by labeling them *there*₁ and *there*₂, respectively. Breivik

uses the following examples from his study to demonstrate the different uses of nonreferential *there* as compared with *be*.

10. An account book is on the table.

*There*₁ is an account book on the table. (Breivik, 1981, p. 9)

He explains that, while these two sentences are “fully synonymous” in terms of expressing “the same cognitive content,” they differ in use because a) is marked:

Such sentences are extremely rare in both spoken and written English, though they do occur in certain contexts (i.e. stage directions); by contrast, b) represents the unmarked version. (Breivik, 1981, p. 9)

Breivik’s (1981) work shows that nonreferentials can function as more than just “dummy” or “empty” placeholders. He hypothesized that *there*₁ could be a device for “presenting new information,” functioning “as a point of departure from which the utterance may be developed...” (Breivik, 1981, p. 10). In other words, nonreferential *there* may function as a cue for the listener that new information is being introduced. In this view, nonreferential *there* has a distinct grammatical function, other than merely an “empty” placeholder. Specifically, Breivik (1981) found that nonreferential *there* functions syntactically as a subject noun phrase, including subject raising and subject-auxiliary inversion. He argues that “the syntactic properties of *There*₁ make a strong case for regarding it as an NP” (p. 7).

Sasaki (1991), another researcher involved in the debate of how to refer to nonreferential *it* and *there*, explains that the term ‘existential *there*’ “implies that something exists somewhere” (p. 158), but that this is inaccurate. She explains by pointing out that often nonreferential *there* sentences cannot be paraphrased with *exist*:

11. There is a big orange tree in front of my house.

*Exists a big orange tree in front of my house. (Sasaki, 1991, p. 157)

Thus, Sasaki (1991) claims it is more accurate to refer to this as 'nonreferential *there*', because there is no referent at all. As teachers, it is important to be aware of the controversy surrounding the terms for the same linguistic pattern. This said, because *nonreferential* is perhaps the most descriptively straightforward, it may be the easiest for advanced students to understand.

Another difficulty in distinguishing nonreferential *it* and *there* from their more well-known functions may be because there is no difference in form at the word level. In other words, *it* and *there* are not changed morphologically from one use to the other. On a sentence level, nonreferential *it* functions as the subject of the sentence (Breivik, 1981). While referential *it* may also function as the subject, the form may be interchanged with a noun phrase. This is not the case for nonreferential *it*. For example:

12. Referential:

It ran out of the house.

What ran out of the house?

The cat ran out of the house.

13. Nonreferential:

It is a sunny day.

?What is a sunny day?

The question test is a useful test for teachers to know. By using it, we can see the question in 13 is nonsensical because there is no referent, thus clearly demonstrating the difference between referential and nonreferential *it*.

Teachers should already know that “nonimperative sentences require a subject in English” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 445). However, sometimes there is no semantic subject in declarative or interrogative sentences. Because of this, nonreferential *it* fulfills the need for a subject. It is, in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) words, “grammatically necessary but lexically vague,” by which they mean that the meaning of ‘ambient’ *it* “derives from the rest of the sentence” (p. 445). Researchers such as Bolinger (1977) found that nonreferential *it* is quite common in expressions of time, distance, weather, and the environment, thus inviting the term “ambient”. For example:

14. It’s late.

It’s Tuesday.

Isn’t it nice out this afternoon?

It’s pleasant in California.

(Bolinger, 1977, p. 78, 79, 81)

Based on early work such as Bolinger’s (1977), linguists “conclude[d] that the nonreferential *it* takes its meaning from the ambience/environment in which it occurs,” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 446). For example, in answer to the question test, Bolinger (1977) might respond *What is late? The time* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 445). However, this view is limited, as seen from Breivik’s (1981) work. Most unhelpfully for pedagogical purposes, some claim that the meaning of nonreferential *it* “is too unspecific to articulate” (Langacker, 1991, p. 377) or refer to it as “a linguistic chameleon” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999,

p. 446). In the interest of comprehensible input, it may be best for teachers to discuss with their students the types of sentences in which *it* characteristically occurs, such as in units focusing on weather or time.

Comparing nonreferential and referential *it* and *there*

Nonreferential *there* and deictic *there* differ phonologically. While deictic *there*, which teachers should know is used locatively, is emphasized by bearing stress, nonreferential *there* remains unstressed (Rando & Napoli, 1978; Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). Also, syntactically, nonreferential *there* acts as the subject of the sentence or clause, while deictic *there* does not. For example:

15. Nonreferential: *There* is a little boy who looks after the sheep.

Deictic: *THERE* is the little boy who looks after the sheep.

(Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 447)

Although nonreferential *there* may distinguish itself from deictic *there* phonologically, the same cannot be said of nonreferential *it* and pronoun *it*, which share the same written form and pronunciation. In terms of agreement, nonreferential *it* is third person singular, which therefore takes a third person singular verb, “usually *be*” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 445).

Teachers should note that nonreferential *there* and *it* are similar in that the most common verb that follows them is *be* (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). However, unlike nonreferential *it*, nonreferential *there* can be followed by either a singular or plural verb form, “depending on the form of the noun phrase following the *be*” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 447). For example:

16. There is a long line for the restroom.

There are long lines for both restrooms.

As previously mentioned, *it* and *there* also have different grammatical rules of agreement, with *it* standardly being followed by a singular verb (*it is/it takes/it gives*), and *there* followed by either singular or plural (*there is/are*). Interestingly, though Breivik (1981) found that nonreferential *there* functions as a noun phrase, he also found that this is not followed strictly in all dialects, especially in spoken English. From corpus data, he noted the common occurrence of using singular 's with a plural antecedent noun:

17. There's two men here.

There's no toys on Christmas morning.

There's so many of them.

(adapted from Breivik, 1981, p. 15)

Breivik (1981) hypothesized that nonreferential *there's* has developed over time: "It is not unreasonable to assume that the signal function of *there*₁ has developed from its syntactic function... [into] a presentative formula" (p. 16). If a dialectal formula is the cause, this may explain the absence of standard rules of subject verb agreement. Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) offer a phonological explanation for this fusion: "...due to the awkwardness of articulating two consecutive weak syllables with final /r/ sounds...the speakers choose the singular form of the verb..." (p. 448). An illustration of this is:

There're problems here.

There's problems here.

/ð^rər/

/ð^rz/

Celce-Murcia and Hudson (1981) found that the most common form of nonreferential *there* is *there's*, regardless of the number of the antecedent noun phrase. They therefore claim

that it is “unrealistic” for teachers to make their students follow “traditional” subject-verb agreement rules in spoken English. They explain that this is because “many native speakers of English ignore” them (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 448). However, the same could be said of a lot of ‘traditional’ grammar versus spoken grammar, which does not mean we should stop expecting formal grammar from our students. Instead, teachers should be aware of the empirical findings of register, and use their course objectives and context to inform their teaching.

Nonreferential *it* and *there* are both difficult concepts for many students, especially those whose first languages “do not require a surface subject the way English does” (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999, p. 444). In addition to first language interference, there may be many other reasons for these difficulties, including distinguishing between nonreferential and pronoun *it* and nonreferential and deictic *there*, the absence of one clear-cut search term for the same idea, and the inconsistency of nonreferential *there* agreement practices. However, teachers who understand these challenges have a good foundation to help guide their students, no matter their L1, successfully through the form, function, and meaning of nonreferential *it* and *there* usage.

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