**LESSON PLAN: Impersonal subjects in business essays and formal business writing**

*The lesson plan below comes from the ‘Being objective: key grammar items’ section of my Udemy course, Teaching Grammar for Business Essays. Other topics in the course include cautious language, defining language, passives, noun phrases, relative clauses, verb clauses, cohesion, linkers, conditionals, cause and effect language, comparison language, and signposting.*

**Teacher’s Notes**

In formal English, writers sometimes begin their sentences with the impersonal subjects ‘it’ and ‘there.’ These are also called ‘dummy,’ ‘empty’ or ‘preparatory’ subjects, and tend to give an objective tone to your writing.

**LESSON PLAN**

1. The concept of impersonal subjects

2. It + passive verb + that … (e.g. It is estimated that …)

3. It + be + adjective + to + infinitive … (e.g. It is important to decide …)

4. It + be + adjective + that …. (e.g. It is clear that …)

5. Using ‘there’ as an impersonal subject

6. Impersonal nouns such as ‘research’ or ‘report’

7. Revision

**1. The concept of impersonal subjects**

One way to start is to contrast the use of impersonal subjects with other uses of ‘it’ and ‘there,’ so that students can see the difference.

Put the following four sentences up, get your class into groups, and ask them: what do *it* and *there* actually refer to in these sentences?

1. Trying to define an organisation’s destination, and what it will mean when it gets **there**, is a productive activity for any management team.

2. **It** is important that the general public understands how corporate governance works.

3. **There** is a well-established method for calculating an ‘economic order quantity’ (EOQ) so as to minimize holding costs.

4. Online advertising is a relatively new phenomenon; in many ways, **it** is a medium that is still evolving.

Here are the answers:

1. … and what it means when it gets **there**, is a productive activity …

*🡪 The adverb ‘there’ refers to ‘destination’*

2. Gregson (2011) explains why **it** is important that …

*🡪 ‘It’ doesn’t actually refer to anything in particular*

3. **There** is a well-established method for …

*🡪 Again, ‘There’ doesn’t refer to anything in particular*

4. Online advertising is a relatively new phenomenon; in many ways, **it** is …

*🡪 The pronoun ‘it’ refers to ‘online advertising’*

From these examples, it’s possible to see why confusion can arise: although the impersonal subject ‘there’ is followed by a noun phrase, and the impersonal subject ‘it’ is followed by an adjective or past participle and a clause (as I’ll explore later), ‘it’ as a pronoun may also be followed by a noun phrase, as it is in the last sentence.

Anyway, explain to your students after they have done this exercise, that you will be looking at *it* and *there* as they are used in sentences 2. and 3. as ‘impersonal’ subjects: useful elements of an objective tone.

2. It + passive verb + that … (e.g. It is estimated that …)

**Teacher’s note**: I also cover the use of ‘It + passive verb + that …’ in my free lesson plan on ‘Cautious or ‘hedging’ language in essays and formal business writing.’

Here are the seven most common phrases that use this structure.

The first three all suggest that the argument may not be compelling:

It can/could be argued that …

It has been argued/suggested that …

It is (or has been) claimed/said that …

The next four have slightly different meanings:

It is believed/thought that … *(suggests a more compelling argument)*

It is (widely) accepted + that … *(suggests the most compelling argument)*

It is reported that … *(often used in reference to published reports)*

It is estimated that … *(often used with statistics)*

Now take three statements and ask students to introduce each one with an appropriate phrase from the seven above:

1. 80% of urban Chinese households have invested in equity.

2. A fall in unemployment boosts consumer confidence in the economy.

3. Internet retailing is still in its infancy.

The answers are a matter of opinion, but I would suggest that ‘estimated’ would suit the first; that there is a compelling argument in the second; and perhaps a weaker, or more contentious argument in the third. So:

1. **It is accepted that** a fall in unemployment boosts consumer confidence in the economy.

2. **It is estimated that** 80% of urban Chinese households have invested in equity.

3. **It could be argued that** internet retailing is still in its infancy.

**3. It + be + adjective + to + infinitive … (e.g. It is important to decide …)**

Show your students this gapped example sentence, and ask them for ideas to complete it. The writer’s use of the word ‘even’ will rule out some of the options:

It is \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ to make accurate global economic predictions, even for the next few months ahead.

Here are some good options:

*not easy/difficult/not possible/impossible*

Now explain that there is a group of adjectives that are used repeatedly in this structure. Either show them the list, or try to elicit it from the class:

(not) easy, difficult

(not) possible, impossible

important, essential, necessary

interesting, (not) unusual

Explain that the verb ‘be’ in this structure may be hedged or made ‘cautious’:

It ***may*** *not be* possible to design a comprehensive plan for organizational change.

…and that the structure is frequently ‘extended’ to include an indirect object. An effective way to make this second point is to show students this gapped sentence and ask them to complete it:

It may not be possible **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** *a company* to design a comprehensive plan for organizational change.

The answer is ‘for,’ and you could ask the class in pairs to remodel these two sentences along the same lines:

Busy senior managers must define exactly how much authority they plan to delegate.

(use *essential*)

The holder of a new job should define its priorities as soon as possible. (use *important*)

Here are the answers:

**It is essential for** **busy senior managers** **to** define exactly how much authority they plan to delegate.

**It is important for the holder of a new job to** define its priorities as soon as possible.

At this point in the lesson, you might like to try the following activity to allow your students to practise this structure more freely.

Show the class the following table, and ask them groups to use it to create meaningful sentences about the areas of business they are studying or writing about in the workplace, choosing one adjective and then one noun.

(not) easy, difficult companies/organizations, CEOs,

**It**  (not) possible, impossible **for** (new) managers, senior managers, **to…**

important, essential, necessary staff, new/junior members of staff,

interesting, (not) unusual customers, consumers, the public,

an HR department, an interview panel

Encourage them to use hedging language, as I discussed before, where appropriate, such as:

It may/might be… *(difficult* etc.*)*

It is normally/often/sometimes… *(difficult* etc.*)*

Afterwards, students can read out some of their group’s sentences, and you may decide to write a few up as either as good examples of the structure, or to provoke discussion.

**4. It + be + adjective + that ….** (e.g. It is clear that …)

Show your students an example …

**It is clear that** very demanding clients take up more than their fair share of a senior manager’s time.

… and explain or elicit the group of adjectives that are commonly used in this structure:

clear, obvious

certain, true, evident

probable, likely, unlikely

(not) surprising, fortunate

Now ask the class in pairs to remodel these two sentences along the same lines:

A number of factors probably contributed to the success of the advertising campaign.

(use *likely*)

Fento plc did not take legal action to protect their brand, which was surprising. (use *surprising* at the beginning)

Here are the answers:

**It is likely that** a number of factors contributed to the success of the advertising campaign.

**It was surprising that** Fento plc did not take legal action to protect their brand.

It’s useful, by the way, to see a past tense in the second example, but present tenses are much more common.

**5. Using ‘there’ as an impersonal subject**

Like ‘It,’ it doesn’t really mean anything. It simply says that something exists. But it’s a very common way of introducing new information in the form of a noun phrase.

Show your students this example, which is likely to come at the beginning of a paragraph:

**There** is a well-established method *(noun phrase)* for calculating an ‘economic order quantity’ (EOQ) so as to minimize holding costs. This method, which was first developed by F.W. Harris in 1913, has since been refined over the years.

Now give your class some practice.

Form your students into groups or pairs, and get them to remodel these sentences, using ‘there.’ It may require a bit of thinking. You may produce alternative answers to mine.

1. Organizations should be concerned about stress for three main reasons.

*(Use ‘There’ at the beginning and ‘why’ later on)*

2. Price wars can destroy companies, but they can be avoided in several ways.

*(Use ‘there’ in the second part of the sentence.*)

3. Different views will probably exist within an organization on how to make change happen.

*(Use ‘There’ and ‘likely’ at the beginning)*

Here are the answers:

1. **There** are three main reasons **why** organizations should be concerned about stress.

2. Price wars can destroy companies, but **there** are several ways to avoid them.

3. **There** are **likely** to be different views within an organization on how to make change happen.

As mentioned, this structure is normally used to introduce new information, so it might be interesting, if you have time, to ask your class in groups to write a second and even a third sentence to follow the example sentences that you’ve just seen.

And a possible research activity would be to ask students to search or scan some of the texts or articles that they are currently reading and bring in examples of ‘it’ and ‘there’ as impersonal subjects.

**6. Impersonal nouns such as ‘research’ or ‘report’**

In place of ‘it’ or ‘there,’ students can also use impersonal nouns, as in this example:

**The report explains** how ‘business complexity’ can affect small as well as large companies.

Words that are frequently used in this way include:

analysis, article, data, essay, evidence, report, research, statistics, studies

Here are few examples of sentence-openers in this style, which your students are probably familiar with:

**This essay** will examine how …

**This report** has evaluated the arguments for …

**Statistics** indicate that …

**Studies** have shown that …

**The data/evidence** suggests that …

**This analysis** demonstrates that …

**7. Revision**

A short revision exercise for your students.

**1. Fill the gaps either with ‘it’ or ‘there’.**

a) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ may be difficult to define a ‘quality product,’ but \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is little doubt that it is seen as something worth aiming for.

b) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ may be a number of reasons why companies seek to manage quality, but \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ is important to remember that such a search is an ongoing rather than a finite activity.

**2. Rewrite these sentences by using the words in brackets near the beginning, making any changes that are necessary.**

a) **(important)** Managers should make a distinction between a need for change that stems from an external threat, and one that results from an opportunity to do things in a different way.

b) **(not unusual)** Manufacturing companies often fail because they hesitate to commit the necessary resources at the right time.

*Answers:*

1.

a) It may be difficult to define a ‘quality product,’ but there is little doubt that it is seen as something worth aiming for.

b) There may be a number of reasons why companies seek to manage quality, but it is important to remember that such a search is an ongoing rather than a finite activity.

2.

a) It is important for managers to make a distinction between a need for change that stems from an external threat, and one that results from the opportunity to do things in a different way.

b) It is not unusual for manufacturing companies to fail because they hesitate to commit the necessary resources at the right time.

*END*

This plan has been adapted from my online course, Teaching Grammar for Business Essays:

<https://www.udemy.com/course/teaching-grammar-for-business-essays/?src=sac&kw=teaching+grammar+for+busi>