

# Information Packaging Constructions in Academic Writing: Observed Patterns in Vietnamese EFL Learners' Cause-Effect Essays

Kim Ngan Trinh\*, Phuong Dzung Pho



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code and download this article

## ABSTRACT

Writing an academic essay is challenging for novice, second-language writers. While grammar is often held as one typical problem, the specific way in which information is strategically presented to ensure cohesion and the emphasizing effect should also be made visible to language learners. This study examines the use of information packaging constructions by first-year university EFL students in their academic essays. This was conducted by adapting an error analysis model in analyzing both the appropriate and inappropriate cases of clefts, inversions, fronting, passives, existential-*there*, and extrapositions in 46 essays. The results show that syntactic errors are relatively infrequent while inappropriate uses are reflective of learners' unawareness of information flow or violation of the end-focus/end-weight principles. The study also identified more specific or emerging patterns, delineating certain structures that may be classified as typologically distant to learners, and suggest certain challenges that learners have with each of the six information packaging constructions. This research underscores the need for targeted pedagogical interventions that emphasize the pragmatic functions and the actual syntactic realization of those functions. By highlighting the interplay between syntax and information packaging, this study provides valuable insights for educators aiming to improve learners' academic writing proficiency.

**Key words:** information packaging, non-canonical, cause-effect essays, academic writing

## INTRODUCTION

English academic texts are often characterized by their complexity, which comes from several factors such as heavy nominalizations and high density of content words<sup>1</sup>. Another aspect of this complexity is how information is structured and presented. In academic writing (AW), to persuade readers, the syntactic management of information has become a primary concern, especially for non-native language users, who may show less grammar adaptability<sup>2</sup>. According to Awagu<sup>3</sup>, second-language authors may face challenges in ensuring the four features of scholarly language, i.e., objectivity, clarity, critical analysis, and authorial presence, due to potential limitations in grammar and diction. Though there is not a one-size-fits-all framework for how one should write in their intellectual community, knowing when to place a focus on the conveyed information is one crucial factor for readability.

In Vietnam, research has underscored the challenges writers face in creating coherent essays. First language (L1) transfer consistently contributed to writing problems, manifesting in issues such as having an

unclearly stated thesis statement or delaying topic introductions in paragraphs<sup>4</sup>. Other challenges often arise from a lack of coherence in idea development, insufficient planning, and an overemphasis on the local grammatical accuracy at the expense of global aspects of the text<sup>5</sup>. According to Rowley-Jolivet and Carter-Thomas<sup>2</sup>, these global aspects encompass organization, style, flow, and vocabulary use, as well as the effective development of themes. In terms of grammar variety, Tran<sup>5</sup> found that English majors demonstrated errors and avoidance of inversions, a non-canonical structure, in AW due to limited materials and practice. Sharing similar concern and building on his previous work on information structure at both the sentential and discourse levels, Huynh<sup>4</sup> emphasizes the crucial role of meta-knowledge of English information structure in enhancing the written communicative ability.

Noncanonical constructions, which deviate from the conventional sentence structure, are often employed in exerting information packaging, which “and serves as a point of connection between the information presented in the current utterance and the prior context.” (6, p.122). These constructions allow speakers to deliver information according to their needs

University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM, Vietnam

### Correspondence

Kim Ngan Trinh, University of Social Sciences and Humanities, VNU-HCM, Vietnam

Email: trinkimngan@hcmussh.edu.vn

### History

- Received: 04-02-2025
- Revised: 20-08-2025
- Accepted: 07-05-2026
- Published Online: x

DOI : x



### Copyright

© VNUHCM Press. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.



**Cite this article :** Trinh K N, Pho P D. **Information Packaging Constructions in Academic Writing: Observed Patterns in Vietnamese EFL Learners' Cause-Effect Essays.** *Sci. Tech. Dev. J. - Soc. Sci. Hum.* 2026; 10(2):xxxx-xxxx.

or motivations. By utilizing these uncommon sentence structures, writers have the ability to emphasize certain information while downplaying others<sup>7</sup>. In this research, we aim to understand how students employ certain patterns of noncanonical constructions in their academic essays to manage the ways in which they intentionally package information in a sentence. To ensure comprehensive reflection, these constructions are reviewed in terms of their pragmatic functions, paying close attention to the contextual constraints to decide if the use is felicitous (appropriate) or infelicitous (inappropriate).

To fulfill the research aims, the following research questions are proposed:

(1) *How do first-year English learners use information packaging constructions in their cause-effect essays?*

(2) *What are the specific appropriate and inappropriate uses of these constructions?*

Cause-effect essays, where the goal is to establish a logical connection between events and phenomena, demand careful attention to how information is presented. Our research focuses on cause-effect essays due to their high relevance to students who study General English or English for Academic Purposes<sup>8</sup>. As an initial phase of a broader project examining information packaging constructions across essay genres, this research provides an overview of patterns of use and informs pedagogical practices in an AW course with similar, typical settings. Furthermore, it contributes to the literature by offering a nuanced interpretation of pragmatic functions of these constructions.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Conceptualizing information packaging

According to Lambrecht, information structure is a complex concept with no formal definition. Relevant concepts related to information are Given-New, Focus, Topic-Comment, etc.<sup>9</sup>, or Focus, Topic and Contrast<sup>10</sup>. Halliday (1967, cited in<sup>9</sup>) adopts the theme-rheme framework, where “theme” represents given information (or Topic) and “rheme” conveys new information (or Comment). According to Khalil<sup>11</sup>, even though the definition of Topic is far from being a settled issue, topic is in some sense already given or shared by the speaker and addressee, or writers and readers. He also notes that Topic and Comment do not always coincide with Given and New, as pragmatic information is conveyed through various non-canonical syntactic devices such as passives, clefts, fronting, existential *there* that essentially alter canonical sentence structures.

In essence, Halliday’s (1967, cited in<sup>9</sup>) systemic functional grammar (SFG) views information structure as an internal linguistic system. According to this perspective, choices in text and meaning are made based on the readers’ assumed knowledge, and grammatical elements function to construct information flow. Meanwhile, pragmatic analysis emphasizes context, with a strong focus on communicative purpose, as the key factor influencing how information is structured and interpreted.

Chafe<sup>12</sup> defined information structure as the speaker’s choices in expressing a message, essentially synonymous with the “information packaging” concept. It distinguishes between the core “information” – the new propositional content – and its “packaging,” which refers to the syntactic properties. Packaging is less about the message’s content and more about how it is presented, with syntactic structures being the tools for these choices, taking into consideration the context and the mental state of interlocutors (in writing, the writer and the reader). Similarly, Kroeger<sup>10</sup> proposes that the nature of information packaging is to manage the common ground, that is, the mutual understanding between the sender and the receiver of the message. This packaging, explored by Vallduví and Engdahl<sup>13</sup>, is pragmatic, aligning linguistic choices with context. Studies by Carlson et al.<sup>14</sup> and Ward and Birner<sup>6</sup> further highlight the impact of information focus and non-canonical grammar constructions on communicative efficiency. As these studies suggest, the use of specific sentence constructions demonstrates the “focus” in a sentence, which serves to reinforce the shared understanding between sender and receiver.

In the discussion of information structure/information packaging, “Focus” remains a somewhat elusive concept, despite its centrality<sup>15</sup>. Krifka<sup>16</sup>, departing from the concept of common ground (CG), defined focus as “the presence of alternatives that are relevant for the interpretation of linguistic expressions” (p. 248), outlining the pragmatic functions such as answering questions, correcting, confirming, and highlighting parallels. Meanwhile, Kroeger<sup>10</sup> outlines three distinct types of focus on the basis of sentence structure. *Constituent* focus pinpoints a single word or phrase as the most important element. *Predicate* focus, in contrast, highlights the entire predicate, or everything excluding the topic phrase, without relying on overt markers such as special word order. Finally, *sentence* focus presents the entire sentence as new information, for example, often characterized by a non-pronominal subject. According to Kroeger<sup>10</sup>, most sentences

will have a focus than can be identified through the classic *question-answer congruence test*. For example, the focus of the sentence “It was *King Seijong* who invented the Korean alphabet” is detected through the answer to the question “Who invented the Korean alphabet?”

According to Krifka<sup>16</sup>, focus structures achieve emphasis by strategically relocating elements from their typical order within a sentence. Altiner<sup>17</sup> examined non-canonical structures such as fronting and clefts, highlighting the constituent movement in the sentence structure. It is the constituent focus that has been frequently employed in studying non-canonical structures. The current study treats non-canonical constructions as a way of establishing focus, thus forming information packaging/information structure in a sentence. Based on previous literature, the following operational definition is generated and applied to the current study:

*Information packaging*, for the purpose of this research, refers to the strategic use of non-canonical constructions such as passives, clefts, fronting, existential “there” to manage the presentation of information within a sentence or discourse. This management involves manipulating the **focus** of information to serve particular pragmatic functions and facilitate the shared understanding and communicative efficiency between the writer and the reader.

## Non-canonical constructions as means of packaging information

### Locating non-canonical constructions

Adapted from Ward and Birner’s<sup>6</sup> and Nguyen’s<sup>18</sup> research, the present study chose to include a collection of non-canonical constructions and refer to them as information packaging constructions.

In general, each information packaging construction varies in structure according to the placing of the focused constituent. Specifically, according to Ward and Birner’s<sup>6</sup>, fronting is considered “preposing” as a constituent is moved to sentential-initial position to create focus. Meanwhile, existential-*there* places the focused constituent in the sentential-final position and is thus referred to as post-posing. Passives and inversions are considered “argument-reversal” as involves the switching positions of two constituents in a sentence, which leads to a more nuanced information status.

In Nguyen’s<sup>18</sup> study, non-canonical constructions are mentioned as a typical representation of information packaging in the written form. Non-canonical constructions are often marked and highly contextually

dependent<sup>19</sup>. In the context of the university where the research was based, Nguyen<sup>18</sup> chose to examine 5 non-canonical constructions, also referred to as information packaging constructions, that were taught in class, namely subject-dependent inversion, cleft, passive, existential-*there*, and extrapositive constructions.

Resonating with these two previous studies, the present study chose to focus on similar information packaging constructions. The sub-types are further delineated based on the syntactic descriptions proposed by Cowan<sup>20</sup> and Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup>. Table 1 provides sub-types and simplified examples for the non-canonical version of these information packaging constructions.

In Table 1, the italic parts illustrate the syntactic structure of each sub-type of information packaging constructions. To assess whether these constructions are appropriately or inappropriately employed in written discourse, it is important to delineate their pragmatic functions and constraints. The code for each sub-type was proposed for later mentions and analysis.

## Pragmatic functions and constraints

Pragmatic functions, as described by Mozejko<sup>22</sup>, manifest from discourse principles like “given-new information (or end-focus)” and “end-weight,” where the placement of information is dictated by its familiarity and complexity to enhance comprehension. Cowan<sup>20</sup>, Blake<sup>23</sup>, and Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup> argue that the end-focus principle governs constituent movements in information packaging constructions, which are driven by the given-new contract. For instance, fronting allows a speaker to move a known element to the sentence-initial position, establishing a clear link with the preceding discourse and setting the stage for the introduction of new information. Ward and Birner (6), explained the correlation between the two principles as not coincidental as information that has been evoked can be identified in a short phrase (for instance, a pronoun); meanwhile, “brand-new information requires a sufficiently long or complex linguistic structure to construct an appropriate discourse referent” (p. 3). According to Ward and Birner<sup>6</sup>, there are both absolute and relative constraints for the non-canonical syntax. For instance, while non-canonical constructions that displace a single constituent like existential-*there* has absolute constraints (i.e., the new information in end-focus position), the transposition of arguments in passives and inversions imposes relative constraints (i.e. the new information and the focus may be in different positions in the sentence).

**Table 1: Information Packaging Constructions [Source: Authors, adapted from the similar categories proposed by (21), (20), (18), and (6), with examples taken from (20)]**

Information packaging constructions	Sub-types	Code	Examples
Cleft	it-cleft	C1	It was a small convertible that he bought.
	wh-cleft	C2	What he bought was a small convertible.
	reversed wh-cleft	C3	A small convertible is what he bought.
Existential-	bare existential	T1	Once upon a time, there lived an ancient mariner.
	extended existential	T2	There are several possibilities that we haven't considered.
Inversion	lexical inversions	I1	Never have I witnessed such a stunning upset.
	stylistic inversions	I2	Were I to live another 50 years, I would be 95.
	information packaging	I3	The committee members argued about the bill. At issue was section 405, which appeared to be an attempt to weaken the Controlled Substances Act. (avoiding long subject)
Passive	long (agentive)	P1	Agassi beat Sampras, but he was later beaten by a young man from Singapore who ranked 102 in the world.
	short (agentless)	P2	Diagnostic tests are used to identify students' strengths and weaknesses.
Fronting	fronted phrases	F1	Across the plains they galloped. (fronted prepositional phrases)
	fronted (reduced) clauses	F2	That he knows the answer I don't doubt. (fronted that-complement)
Extraposition	that-clause	E1	That he managed to get his degree is truly remarkable.
	infinitive clauses	E2	For John to ignore her advice would be foolish.
	interrogative clause	E3	How he plans to do that is not clear.
	gerund clauses	E4	Writing good poetry requires as much practice as talent.

In the present study, “constraint” is treated as a general term that refers to the inherent properties of a sentence that defines it as a coherent unit of communication, through which pragmatic functions are further specified. Constraints can be absolute or relative, varying across different non-canonical constructions<sup>6</sup>. At the discourse level, Huynh<sup>24</sup> focuses on pragmatic constraints, outlining “Evidentiality,” “Mutuality,” and “Textuality.” These constraints, respectively, illustrate how communicators tailor their utterances based on perceived certainty, shared knowledge, and the need for textual coherence to create clear connections between clauses and sentences.

Specifically, a crucial pragmatic function of information packaging construction is emphasis. By deviating from the standard or unmarked constructions, writer can highlight specific elements and catch readers' attention. This is particularly evident in cleft sentences, which allow for the focused presentation of a single

piece of information. Similarly, inversions can emphasize a particular element by placing it in an unusual position.

The following part discusses the pragmatic constraints and outlines in tables the functions assigned to the information packaging constructions in the present study.

**Describing the information packaging constructions**

**Clefts**

The *wh*-clause in *wh*-clefts and the *that*-clause in *it*-clefts present old/given information, often relying on the preceding context. Specifically, the relative clause in an *it*-cleft must incorporate information that is already within the addressee's awareness<sup>25</sup>. Except for the reversed *wh*-clefts, the focused elements are placed at the sentence-initial positions<sup>17,26</sup>.

The various pragmatic functions of clefts were generated from studies by Altiner<sup>17</sup>, Cowan<sup>20</sup>, Jarad<sup>26</sup>, and Phan<sup>7</sup>. Clefts serve a variety of pragmatic functions, including emphasizing information, managing discourse flow, and shaping the reader's interpretation through highlighting focus and presuppositions (see Table 2).

Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup> mentioned that it-clefts are mostly used for the or focus or maintain cohesion rather than to provide a backdrop for new information. Besides, in İrgin's<sup>27</sup> study, language learners reported difficulties with using clefts as these constructions are referred to as typologically distant (i.e., context of application is quite different from L1) compared to Turkish, their L1.

#### **Existential-there**

According to Jiang and Hyland<sup>28</sup>, the existential-there postpose the noun phrase towards the end of the sentence and presents new information. Similarly, Cowan<sup>20</sup> and Ward and Birner<sup>6</sup> indicate that the sentences with non-referential there can introduce new information into an ongoing written discourse. The following pragmatic functions are thus proposed in Table 3.

Cowan<sup>20</sup> suggests topics can be broadened. Journalists often use this technique in the second paragraph to shift the discussion's focus.

#### **Inversions**

Birner<sup>29</sup> posits that the typical information packaging construction in discourse involves preposing familiar (old) information and postposing novel (new) information, as observed in inversions where familiar elements precede less familiar ones. In conditional inversions, or stylistic inversion, the subject has to be a definite noun phrase as the conditional inversions provide given information. The interesting phenomenon is that the new information is still placed at the end of the sentence while the condition received the emphasis<sup>30</sup>. The pragmatic functions of inversions are presented in Table 4.

According to Cowan<sup>20</sup>, writers often employ inversion to introduce new topics, usually to begin a paragraph. Cowan<sup>20</sup> also propose that the immediate observer effect, especially when successive inversions are used, is becoming more common in newspaper writing.

#### **Passives**

Verheijen et al.<sup>31</sup> describe passivization allows the direct, indirect, or prepositional object of an active clause to be encoded as subject and hence fulfill the

given-new principle and discourse linker pragmatic functions. Regarding the information status, Langaker (1987, as cited in<sup>21</sup>) indicated that the more definite the subject is, the more acceptable the sentence in the passive form as the noun phrase in the subject usually presents given information. Additionally, adapted from Phan<sup>7</sup> and Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup>, the following pragmatic functions are assigned to the use of long and short passives (see Table 5).

Regarding the use of passives, Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup> passives are highly present in journalism and science research language. For instance, writers use passive in the discussion part of a research paper as the structure helps with making generalizations. Another pattern is that short passives are claimed to be more common in academic writing, which was discovered by Nguyen<sup>18</sup> and Birner<sup>29</sup>.

**Fronting** According to Cowan<sup>20</sup> and Huynh<sup>19</sup>, the fronted element is emphasized, bringing attention to the topic of the sentence. This is referred to as topicalizing, the process in which the topic/theme is pushed to the sentence-initial position to direct readers' attention to it. Table 6 delineates the common pragmatic functions of frontings.

According to Cowan<sup>20</sup>, fronted reduced relative clauses are frequently used in introducing topics, especially in newspaper articles. The reduced relative clauses are used to highlight a serious problem that will be elaborated on later in the sentence or the article.

**Extrapositions** Regarding the syntactic construction, extraposition structures contain an it-clause and an extraposed clause. The it-clauses could be followed by *that*-clause, infinitive, and interrogative clauses, but only infrequently to gerund clauses<sup>20</sup>. Cowan<sup>20</sup>, proposes that extrapositions are much more frequent than subject clauses as they are used to move heavy clauses to the end, in keeping with the end-weight principle. Hewings and Hewings<sup>32</sup> proposed the following metadiscourse functions for when the it-clauses are employed (see Table 7).

It is found in Hewings and Hewings'<sup>32</sup> research that this type of information packaging constructions are less used in hedging compared to other categories. Most of the time, extrapositions are used to mark writer's attitude towards the content, emphasize writer's certainty, and propose a judgement, which are also frequent features of academic prose.

**Table 2: Pragmatic Functions of Clefts [Source: Authors, adapted from Altiner<sup>17</sup>, Cowan<sup>20</sup>, Jarad<sup>26</sup>, and Phan<sup>7</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions
it-clefts	Emphasizing Contradict Argue a point in persuasive writing Establish a topic
wh-clefts	Resume a topic Present the gist or sum up what have been written in the preceding text Contradict something said and present an alternative Interpretation
reversed wh-clefts	Sum up what have been written in the preceding text

**Table 3: Pragmatic Functions of Existential-there [Source: Authors, adapted from Cowan<sup>20</sup>, Jiang and Hyland<sup>28</sup>, and Ward and Birner<sup>6</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions
bare existential there	Delay the introduction of new information, allow the addressee to prepare for something that is about to be introduced
extended existential there	To enumerate To summarize information

**Table 4: Pragmatic Functions of Inversions [Source: Authors, adapted from Birner<sup>29</sup> and Kim<sup>30</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions
lexical inversion	To achieve dramatic effect
stylistic inversion	To emphasize the condition
information packaging	Avoiding long subjects Emphasizing a related point Shifting topic Immediate observer-effect

**Table 5: Pragmatic Functions of Passives [Source: Authors, adapted from Celce-Murcia et al.<sup>21</sup> and Phan<sup>7</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions
long passive (agentive passive)	Highlight the agent/ complex agent with several modifiers Maintain the same subject in the discourse à promote thematic coherence
short passive (agentless passive)	Highlight another sentence

**Table 6: Pragmatic Functions of Frontings [Source: Authors, adapted from Cowan<sup>20</sup> and Huynh<sup>19</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions (Cowan, 2008)
fronted phrases	Emphasize an element Introduce a topic or topic shift
fronted (reduced) clauses	Emphasize a contrast

**Table 7: Pragmatic Functions for Extrapositions gerund clauses [Source: Authors, adapted from Hewings and Hewings<sup>32</sup>]**

Sub-types	Pragmatic Functions
that-clause	hedges (it is likely, it would certainly appear)
infinitive clauses	attitude markers (it is important, it is interesting) emphatics (it is evident, it is apparent)
interrogative clauses	attribution (it is estimated that, it has been proposed)
gerund clauses	

### Relevant studies in the ELT context

studies on information structure/information packaging in AW in the ELT context often focus on syntactic and pragmatic aspects. Researchers have investigated how learners construct their arguments, focusing on the relationship between topic and comment given and new information and the thematic progression.

In particular, Birner<sup>29</sup> investigated English inversions in written language and proposed that future research should pay more attention to marked syntactic constructions and cross-linguistic comparisons to see if there will always be a link between subjecthood and discourse familiarity. Following that path, Van Vuuren's<sup>33</sup> hypothesized that Dutch learners of English would exhibit a tendency to overuse clause-initial adverbials in their writing due to differences in how information status is structured in Dutch and English. This hypothesis was supported by his analysis of a longitudinal corpus, which revealed that Dutch learners indeed overused clause-initial adverbials, particularly those indicating place and addition, compared to native English speakers. Despite a general improvement in their English writing over a three-year period, the influence of L1 transfer on their use of adverbials remained evident.

In Vietnam, Nguyen<sup>18</sup> focused on the non-canonical structures, including passives, clefts, extraposition, existential-there, and inversions. Nguyen<sup>18</sup> did not mention fronting as a non-canonical structure in her study as it was not a structure taught in the syllabus. This author considers that these are key tools for managing information flow and achieving desired communicative effects in language. The study offers valuable pedagogical implications, emphasizing the need to integrate pragmatic principles into language instruction and encourage the use of authentic materials and discourse analysis. Explicit instructions on the concepts of discourse-old and discourse-new information, coupled with opportunities for guided error correction, can significantly enhance learner awareness and facilitate the development of accurate and effective communication. In a similar vein, research conducted by Huynh<sup>19,24</sup> and Phan<sup>7</sup> also contributes to the study of non-canonical structures by linking them to the discussion of information structure and information packaging.

However, besides the previously mentioned studies, there is a dearth of research conducted in Vietnam that specifically analyzes their felicitous and infelicitous use alongside corresponding pragmatic functions. McNally suggests that an over-reliance on ab-

stract terms like “topic” and “focus” can be counterproductive, especially when one only decides an appropriate use based on the new-given constraint. Instead, he advocates for a case-by-case analysis of how specific linguistic forms convey information. This aligns well with the present study, which necessitates a more in-depth analysis of information packaging constructions produced in learners' essays to examine if there are any emergent pragmatic functions or any systemic inappropriate use specific to the group of EFL Vietnamese learners.

## METHODS

### Research design

As the study aimed to classify the inappropriate use of information packaging constructions besides the appropriate ones, we adapted Gass and Selinker<sup>34,35</sup> error analysis procedure: instead of only examining errors, we focused on all attempts of using non-canonical grammar constructions. The steps of analysis are presented in Table 8.

In short, the current study employs a quantitative data analysis approach to record the frequency of how information packaging structures are used in students' essays. Meanwhile, the qualitative approach was employed during the coding of pragmatic functions of these non-canonical constructions (from *Step 5*) to discover if the result pose any emerging patterns of both appropriate and inappropriate use.

### Data collection and categorization

#### *Step 1: Collecting data*

The data were collected from a course named Academic Writing C1 in the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature of the University of Social Sciences and Humanities, Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City. The course was taught to students in the second semester of their first year in the academic year of 2023-2024. There were two classes of Academic Writing in that semester, and they were both taught by one of the researchers. The students were all at B2 level. The target proficiency level after finishing the course is C1 (CEFR).

According to the course syllabus, the cause-effect essay is the first genre of essays that the students learn in the course ( see Appendix A). After the students were instructed how to write cause-effects essays, they were asked to complete an assignment (see Appendix ). Given that cause-effect essays may address causes exclusively, effects exclusively, or a combination of both, students were permitted to select a topic from the assignment list and compose a 500-700-word essay. Due to lack of time in class, the assignment was

**Table 8: Steps in Analyzing the Information Packaging Constructions [Source: Authors]**

Steps	Gass and Selinker <sup>34</sup>	Adapted procedure for the current study
1	Collect data	Collect data: students' cause-effect essays
2	Identify errors	Identify information packaging constructions according to the subtypes of the 6 categories
3	Classify errors	Classify information packaging constructions as appropriate and inappropriate based on the pragmatic functions/constraints
4	Quantify errors	Quantify the subtypes as well as the appropriate and inappropriate use of each category
5	Analyze source	Identify patterns of appropriate and inappropriate use of each construction (this part is qualitative in nature)
6	Remediate	Offer alternatives for the inappropriate case.

set as homework. Since the purpose of the assignment were to simulate real-life experience of writing and to provide students with opportunity to practice writing and receive formative feedback from the lecturer and peers, the students were encouraged to write on their own. They were asked to submit their essay on Google Classroom so the lecturer could make use of the plagiarism checker on this platform.

A total of 46 cause-effect essays were collected from the two classes. Adhering to the coursebook's and syllabus's definition of this genre, the essays could be focusing either cause, effect and both cause and effect. The collected essays include 25 cause essays, 18 effect essays, and 3 cause-effect essays with a relatively balanced choice of both cause and effect strands. Since the aim of the study was to analyze the use of information packaging constructions, not organization of essays, the topic that students chose would not affect our study.

*Step 2: Identifying information packaging constructions*

After the essays were collected, we first removed the students' names from the essays and coded them CE1 to CE46 to keep them anonymous. Both researchers read each essay carefully and coded the information packaging constructions using the codes as specified in the analysis framework in Section 2. The codings were cross-checked by the two researchers of this study.

*Step 3: Classifying information packaging constructions*

Once we located an information packaging construction, we would employ the question-answer congruence test to detect the focus in the sentence. The context surrounding the sentence was examined to check whether the use of the construction reflects the pragmatic functions and textual constraints as outlined in

Section 2.2. By investigating its use in the whole sentence as well as in the whole essay, we were able to classify each instance as 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate'.

**Data analysis**

After the data were coded, we followed the following steps:

*Step 4: Quantifying information packaging constructions*

The numbers of appropriate/inappropriate instances in each category of non-canonical constructions were counted and recorded.

*Step 5: Analyzing both appropriate and inappropriate use*

A qualitative analysis was conducted to examine the observed pragmatic functions of these constructions, both appropriate and inappropriate ones. The aim is to observe if the constructions reflect the pragmatic functions that have been reviewed and if there are any other emerging patterns of use in students' essays.

*Step 6: Offering alternatives for the inappropriate use*

Finally, we proposed alternative constructions to remediate the instances of certain typical inappropriate usage.

The frequency of information packaging constructions used across the collected essays provide the answer to the first research question. Meanwhile, the second research question was addressed by conducting a qualitative analysis of patterns in both the appropriate and inappropriate use of various information packaging constructions, supported by a discussion of typical examples.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### An overview of students’ choice of information packaging constructions

The analysis of the 46 essays yielded 352 instances of information packaging constructions in total. The distribution of the six categories is illustrated in Figure 1.

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most commonly used category was passives with 141 instances, accounting for 40% of all the information packaging constructions used in the essays. Interestingly, extra-positions were also frequently found, with 82 instances, taking up more than 23% of the information packaging constructions. Two relatively common categories used were frontings (49 instances, 13.92%) and existential *there* (48, 13.64%). Clefts and inversions were rarely used, with only 14 and 18 instances among the 352 instances found in the corpus. The prevalence of passives and extra-positions, coupled with the less frequent use of clefts and inversions, suggests that first-year English learners rely on simpler information packaging strategies in their cause-effect essays, which may potentially limit their way of managing information flow and emphasis.

Among the 352 instances of information structure identified in the essays, 301 (85.56%) were used appropriately, whereas 51 instances (14.44%) were inappropriate. This ratio, however, was not the same across the categories, as presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2 shows that although the last four categories (namely frontings, passives, existential *there*, and extra-positions) were the most commonly used information packaging construction, the inappropriate use was only around 10% to 13%. In contrast, clefts and inversions saw more than one-third of the attempts inappropriately used. This quite resonates what Irigin<sup>27</sup> proposed as difficulties cause by the typologically distant constructions.

Indeed, the percentage from Figure 2 also suggests that first-year English learners demonstrate a better grasp of simpler information packaging devices, evidenced by the lower error rates in frontings, passives, existential ‘there,’ and extra-positions. In Nguyen’s<sup>18</sup> study, while clefts were still frequently used, inversion constructions were not detected. While the inversions were found in this study, its high percentage of inappropriate use further reaffirms the possibility of learners having difficulties with employing inversions in writing essays. This is considered significant because both clefts and inversions encompass a range of subtypes and serve diverse pragmatic functions, which are valuable tools for effectively constructing cause-effect arguments.

To more fully understand the use of each category, we investigated the use of their sub-categories and analyzed emergent patterns of both appropriate and inappropriate use.

### Patterns of information packaging constructions

#### Passives

The passive structure was the most commonly used among the six categories. Of the two subtypes, the agentless passive (P2) is far more frequently used than The agentive passive (P1), with 79% of the former versus 21% of the latter (see Table 9).

**Table 9: The Use of Passive Structures in Students’ Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate		Inappropriate		Total	
		%		%		%
<b>P1</b>	23	79.31%	6	20.69%	29	21%
<b>P2</b>	99	88.39%	13	11.61%	112	79%
<b>Total</b>	122	86.52%	19	13.48%	141	100%

As can be seen in Table 9, although P2 was more commonly used, only 11.61% of the instances were misused. The proportion of inappropriate use of P1 was nearly double (20.69%). While students demonstrated a clear preference for P2 constructions in their cause-effect essays, they exhibited a significantly higher rate of inappropriate use with P1, suggesting a need for targeted instruction on the effective application of longer passive structures in AW.

#### Appropriate use

A closer look reveals that, in appropriate examples of P1, students often place the factors or the cause in the grammatical agent position. In the following examples from the data, the agent is underlined>. [Specifically, Example (1) is noted [P1, CE42], which illustrates that it is an agentive passive and is extracted from the cause-effect essay number 42]:

(1) Firstly, health issues are believed to be brought about by procrastination, both mentally and physically. [P1, CE42]

(2) According to McLean Hospital (2022), procrastination is caused by many reasons such as the lure of social media, laziness, fears and so on. [P1, CE31]

Passive constructions also demonstrate their role in maintaining coherence. In the following examples, passives are used in defining and non-defining relative clauses to avoid changing of subjects:

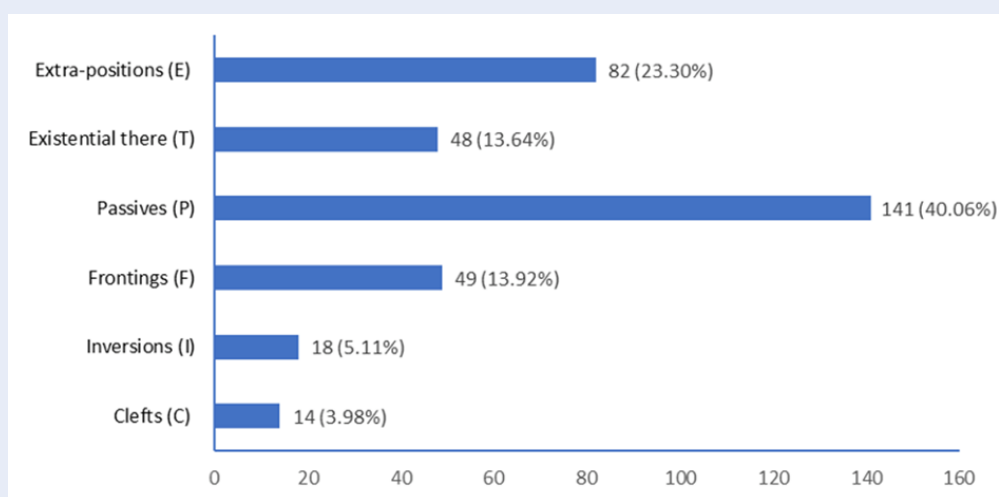


Figure 1: Frequencies of Information Packaging Constructions Used in Students' Essays [Source: Authors]

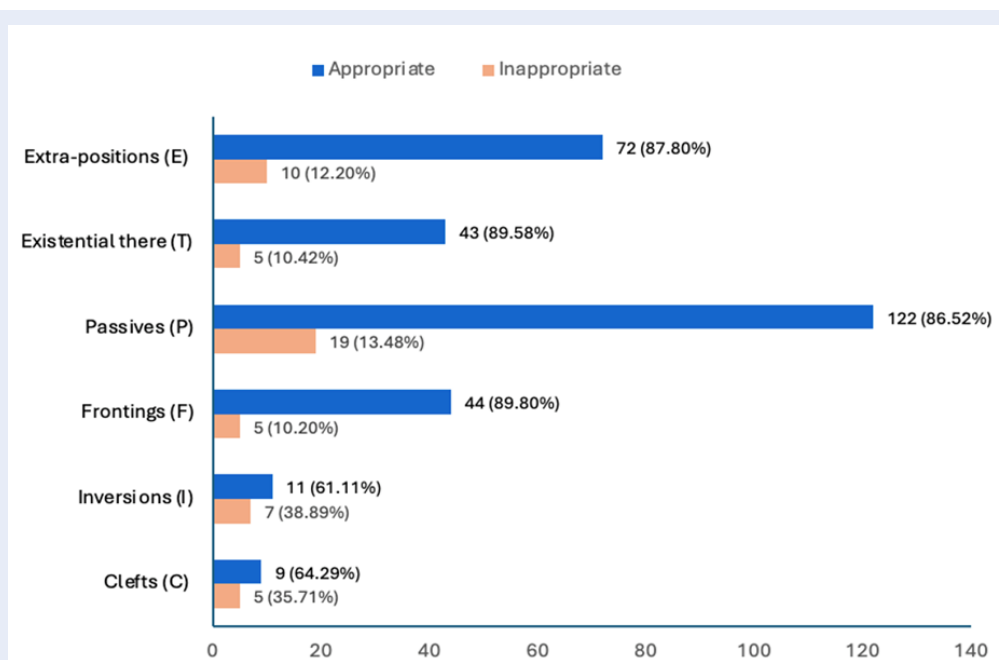


Figure 2: The Use of Each Group of Information Packaging Constructions in Students' Essays [Source: Authors]

(1) For example, the film Avatar 2 by director James Cameron, which was ranked first among visual films, reached a whopping amount of 2,36 billion dollars in worldwide revenue. [P2, CE32]

(2) The other reason for the approach that should also be pondered is the minds of the artists themselves. [P2, CE22]

Passive reporting verbs as a commonly used pattern. The *that*-clause that follows also introduces the new information, which is often the cause or conse-

quences. This can also be classified as a kind of extra-position construction.

(1) It is commonly believed that heroes are considered idealized humans who have superpowers to save the world and be honored by millions of people. [P2, CE34]

(2) Lastly, it is widely assumed that such a postponement might negatively affect social relationships. [P2, CE42]

(3) It is believed that young people nowadays seem to experience higher levels of stress. [P2, CE20]

**Inappropriate use**

Examples of inappropriate use of passive structures mostly concerns the unnecessary use in maintaining a smooth flow of information.

(1) “In conclusion, superhero movies are undeniably a well-known genre that consists of countless movies by many companies for many different heroes and is indulged by everyone for the three main reasons: the entertainment it provides, the spectacular superpowers that everyone wants, and the sacred figure that people have created for them.” [P1, CE45]

(2) Three main factors may be used to explain this phenomenon: (1) digital effects, (2) some connection with the characters, and (3) uplifting messages. [P2, CE34]

In Example (8), the use of the passive verb form in “is indulged by everyone” is wrong and difficult to process. The verb “indulge” can be viewed as an ergative verb and is not often used in the passive structure. Meanwhile, it also seems that the writer did not want to have an “unjustified change of subject” like Celce-Murcia et al suggested<sup>21</sup>. A revised version may contain noun phrases and reduced passive form may look like this: “*In summary, the enduring popularity of superhero films stems from their entertainment value, the allure of superpowers, and the sacred figures they represent.*”

In Example (9), the passive form is less direct and less concise than its active counterpart: “*To explain this phenomenon, we can use three main factors.*” The passive construction in this case adds unnecessary complexity.

In general, besides diction, the awkward use of passive constructions also reflects the lack of idea organization at the sentential level.

**Inversions**

As mentioned above, another category of information structure which also saw a high proportion of inappropriate use was inversions (see Table 10).

As revealed in Table 10, among the subtypes of inversion, I1 (lexical inversion) and I3 (information packaging) were used more frequently than I2 (stylistic inversion). However, one-third of I1 and more than half of I3 were used inappropriately. The inverted element where the focus is placed is underlined in each example.

**Appropriate use:**

**Table 10: The Use of Inversion Structures in Students’ Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate	Inappropriate	Total		
				%	%
<b>I1</b>	7	3	10	70.00%	30.00%
<b>I2</b>	1	0	1	100.00%	0.00%
<b>I3</b>	3	4	7	42.86%	57.14%
<b>Total</b>	11	7	18	61.11%	38.89%

(1) Only then can you commit more to your goals, overcome obstacles, and start making more accomplishments for yourselves. [I1, CE01]

(2) Not only does procrastination impede routine processes from running as smoothly as intended, but it also causes people to lose passion for working hard to fulfill their commitments. (I1, CE30)

(3) For instance, should we have a crucial project which needs to be well-repaired, we can use “procrastinated time” to draw the outlines thoroughly [I2, CE38]

(4) One important step is to recognize and address the underlying causes of procrastination, whether they be anxiety, fear, perfectionism, or burnout. [I3, CE23]

(5) One of the great illustrations for this is Batman. [I3, CE03]

The findings reveal that a variety of inversions are used. The appropriate use of I1 in Examples 10 and 11 reflects learners’ organization of focus and ideas within the sentence. The use of I2 (Example 12) was intended for giving suggestion or call for action, which could also be considered a typical idea used in a cause-effect essay.

**Inappropriate use:**

Typical examples from the corpus are given below.

(1) Due to the procrastinators’ lack of sleep, not only they can easily lose their train of thought, their concentration on a specific aspect of their lives, also tend to be scattered and forgetful. [I1, CE33]

(2) From my perspective, escapism, hope-inspiring and great sound, visual effects are some aspects explaining why this genre easily attracts viewers. [I3, CE2]

Example<sup>15</sup> demonstrates an incorrect use of the “not only... but also” construction, which requires subject-verb inversion after “not only.” In this case, the underlined clause should be corrected to “*not only can they easily lose their train of thought.*” This inversion is crucial for maintaining the parallel structure and ensuring the correct placement of the subject.

In Example 16, the intended focus is on the aspects that explain the superhero movies’ popularity. However, by placing these aspects at the beginning of the sentence, the writer disrupts the natural flow of information and makes the sentence less clear and concise. These examples highlight challenges learners face in mastering both syntactic rules and discourse-level considerations. As Birner<sup>29</sup> notes, the use of inversions requires understanding the interplay between given and new information, a complexity that often proves difficult for learners to navigate. The errors in Examples 15 and 16 demonstrate that even when learners attempt to employ complex syntactic structures or manipulate information flow, their output often deviates from natural discourse patterns, underscoring the necessity for explicit instruction on the relationship between syntax, information packaging.

**Clefts**

Table 11 shows the appropriate and inappropriate use of the cleft structures in the students’ essays. We can see a contrast between the use of C1 (*it*-clefts) and C3 (reverse *wh*-clefts), with two-thirds of C1 used appropriately and two-thirds of C3 used inappropriately. This pattern suggests that while students have some familiarity with more typical cleft structures, they struggle with the complexity and application of reverse *wh*-clefts in cause-effect essays.

**Table 11: The Use of Cleft Structures in Students’ Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate		Inappropriate		Total	
		%		%		%
<b>C1</b>	6	66.67%	3	33.33%	9	64.29%
<b>C2</b>	2	100.00%	0	0.00%	2	14.29%
<b>C3</b>	1	33.33%	2	66.67%	3	21.43%
<b>Tot:</b>	9	64.29%	5	35.71%	14	100%

**Appropriate use:**

The learners were able to maintain cohesion in the essay by integrating the use of pronoun in *it*-cleft and reversed *wh*-cleft constructions.

(1) Escapism is the tendency to seek distraction and relief from unpleasant realities, especially by seeking entertainment or engaging in fantasy. This is what superhero movies always bring to viewers; for instance, Captain America - a powerful, flexible, gentle, and mature hero or Captain Marvel who is considered overpowered compared to others. [C3, CE02]

(2) And it is **this** long-term kind of procrastination that is much less visible and much less talked about than the short-term deadline-based kind. [C1, CE24] Another notable pattern is that the *wh*-cleft (C2) is purposefully used to highlight a reason or provide justification. The *wh*-clefts in Examples 19 and 20 effectively focus readers’ attention on the specific factor, making the argument stronger. The examples also illustrate the use of clefts to connect ideas and maintain the smooth flow of information.

(3) What those people don’t know is that this harsh situation is becoming a serious problem for many people. [C2, CE10]

(4) More than anything, what justifies the admiration of superheroes” is the way they handle the entire scope of life as a human and still end up making the altruistic choices for which they are known.” [C2, CE03]

**Inappropriate use:**

Examples of inappropriate use of C1 and C3 are given below.

(1) Perhaps **it’s the ability of superhero movies to transport viewers to a world of fantasy and escapism.** [C1, CE26]

(2) Secondly, it should be concerned that the film industry has been pouring huge amounts of money into one aspect of movies, the effects. Far more than anything you can name, visual effects are **what to be invested most in.** Almost everyone watches superhero movies due to their CGI (computer generated imagery) instead of their plots. [C3, CE2]

In Example 21, the sentence is incomplete as the *that*-clause following the focused element (the ability of superhero movies) is missing. A revised version may look like this:

*Perhaps it is the ability of superhero movies to transport viewers to a world of fantasy and escapism that makes them so popular.*

In Example 22, the reverse *wh*-cleft “what to be invested most in” is awkwardly placed within the sentence. It interrupts the flow of ideas and does not effectively emphasize the intended focus, which is “visual effects”. A revised version may use *it*-cleft: “*Far more than anything else you can name, it is visual effects that deserve the most investment.*”

It is evident that learners may encounter syntactic challenges when utilizing relative clauses within *it*-cleft constructions. According to Gundel<sup>25</sup>, the relative clause in an *it*-cleft must incorporate information that is already within the addressee’s awareness. This emphasizes the importance of learners being cognizant of the given-new contract when employing these structures in writing their essays.

### Fronting

The information structure category that was the least misused was fronting. However, within this category, a quarter of F2 (fronted clauses) instances were misused, while only more than 7% of F1 (fronted phrases) were used inappropriately (see Table 12).

**Table 12: The Use of Fronting Structures in Students’ Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate		Inappropriate		Total	
		%		%		%
F1	38	92.68%	3	7.32%	41	83.67%
F2	6	75.00%	2	25.00%	8	16.33%
Tot	44	89.80%	5	10.20%	49	100%

Although fronting was generally employed with high accuracy, the notable discrepancy in error rates between fronted phrases (F1) and fronted clauses (F2), with F2 exhibiting a quarter of instances misused, underscores the students’ relative difficulty in managing the complexity of fronted clauses within cause-effect arguments

#### Appropriate use:

In most appropriate examples, fronting serves to establish the context (24, 25, 26), condition (27) or motivation for the main clause that follows (23). In the following examples, frontings are also used to organize information and make the relationship between ideas clearer. The examples also demonstrate a variety of elements that can be fronted, including infinitive phrases (23), prepositional phrases (24), subordinate clauses (25, 26), and conditional clauses (27). The fronted elements are underlined.

(1) To keep pace with current trends, many teenagers are even willing to spend money on unnecessary things. [F1, CE02]

(2) But for employees cooperating with their teammates, it would be impossible for other macro procedures to go on smoothly. [F1, CE08]

(3) Whether it is an academic assignment, a professional report, or a creative endeavor, the lack of time and attention to detail due to procrastination can diminish the overall quality of the final product. [F2, CE43]

(4) Whether it is the Avengers fighting against Thanos - an outer-space threat whose aim is to enforce extermination upon innocent people, or Wonder Woman leaving her motherland to join in a war, these are perspectives that have no possibility to take place in real life. [CE19, F2]

(5) If not addressed, such failure to assess the situations properly can result in poor performance, or worse, more failures. [CE29, F2]

#### Inappropriate use:

Examples of misuse of fronting structures are given below:

(1) Thanks to companies like Marvel and DC, who have taken superheroes from comic books to the forefront of mainstream pop culture, superhero stories are now firmly positioned among the highest grossing film franchises worldwide. [F1, CE3]

(2) Researching on a younger sample, nearly half of college students postpone their decisions in a consistent and problematic manner. [F2, CE5]

Example (28) carries quite a lengthy introductory phrase. While fronting can be used for emphasis, in this case, the long introductory phrase disrupts the natural flow of information and violates the end weight principle. Marvel and DC were not previously mentioned in that same paragraph, which happens to be the introduction of the essay. In this revised version, the explanatory clause is placed towards the end of the sentence: “*Superhero stories are now firmly positioned among the highest grossing film franchises worldwide, thanks to companies like Marvel and DC, who have successfully brought these characters from comic books to the forefront of mainstream pop culture.*”

In Example (29), the introductory phrase “*Researching on a younger sample*” is posed as a dangling modifier. Also, in this case, the focused element should be on the number of students, not how the research was carried out. A canonical sentence structure would be more favorable in this case: “*Research conducted on a younger sample revealed that nearly half of college students postpone their decisions in a consistent and problematic manner.*”

#### Existential-there

As can be seen in Table 13, T2 (extended existential) was more frequently misused than T1 (bare existential), with 14.29% of the former versus only 5% of the latter. While students generally demonstrated proficiency in using existential-there constructions, the significantly higher rate of inappropriate use for T2 compared T1 indicates a greater difficulty with the more complex T2 in cause-effect essays.

#### Appropriate use

In the examples of appropriate use, there-be is followed by an indefinite noun phrase, which present new information. In Example (30), the existential-there structure is used to introduce background information. Meanwhile, in Examples (31) and (32), the

**Table 13: The Use of Existential-*there* Structures in Students' Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate		Inappropriate		Total	
		%		%		%
<b>T1</b>	19	95.00%	1	5.00%	20	41.67%
<b>T2</b>	24	85.71%	4	14.29%	28	58.33%
<b>Tot:</b>	43	89.58%	5	10.42%	48	100%

structure is used to introduce the main points that are going to be developed in subsequent sentences. This resonates with Cowan's (2008) indication that this information construction is used to broaden the topic or to enumerate specific points presented afterwards. The post-posed element of focus is underlined in each example.

- (1) There is only one day left before your assignment meets its deadline; however, you still have not started to tackle it. [T2, CE21]
- (2) There are several reasons why people procrastinate, including lack of motivation and poor time management. [T2, CE04]
- (3) In addition to the personal consequences of procrastination, there are also significant professional ramifications. ([T1, CE23]

**Inappropriate use**

Examples of inappropriate use of existential *there* structures are underlined below:

- (1) Of the top ten highest-grossing movies up to now, there are four superhero ones. [T1, CE2]
- (2) There are many reasons behind such a lazy procrastination trend which results in different negative effects. [T2, CE10]

In Example (33), the idea "highest-grossing movies" should be placed in the end-focus position. Similarly, as "reasons" is the focused piece of information, Example (34) can be revised as in "Such a lazy procrastination trend, which results in different negative effects, has many underlying reasons." In the case of extended existential 'there' constructions (T2) as seen in Example (34), the inclusion of a relative clause as a post-modifier can potentially lead to ambiguity and syntactic complexity.

**Extra-positions**

As shown in Table 14, among the four sub-categories, E2 (infinitive clause) was the most commonly used (accounting for 65.85%), followed by E1 (that-clause) with 29.27% of the extra-position structures used by the students. There were three attempts of E4 (gerund clauses); two of which, however, were misused.

**Table 14: The Use of Extraposition Structures in Students' Essays [Source: Authors]**

	Appropriate		Inappropriate		Total	
		%		%		%
<b>E1</b>	22	91.67%	2	8.33%	24	29.27%
<b>E2</b>	48	88.89%	6	11.11%	54	65.85%
<b>E3</b>	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	1	1.22%
<b>E4</b>	1	33.33%	2	66.67%	3	3.66%
<b>Tot</b>	72	87.80%	10	12.20%	82	100%

**Appropriate use**

Among the 72 attempts of appropriate use, most conforms to the end-focus and only few employed multiple embeddings in their sentences (Example 35). Examples (35) and (36) effectively use extraposition to emphasize the information placed at the end of the sentence.

- (1) In addition, poor time management can make it difficult to estimate how long the tasks will take, leading people to overestimate their ability to complete the tasks within the given timeframe. [E2, CE04]
- (2) Also, it can hardly be denied that social trends such as the "diet culture" and the "anti-aging culture" open up ample opportunities for chastising and mocking physical features among the masses. [E1, CE40]

Both examples illustrate the depersonalized claims that can either serve as a hedging device or reflect the pragmatic function of attribution as Hewings and Hewings (2002) suggested.

**Inappropriate use**

In Example (37), too many constituents are placed towards the sentence-final position, which may affect information processing. This is not necessarily wrong due to the choice of structure but concerns more with the inclusion of information. As for Example (38), the core problem is that the 'to-infinitive phrase' (the focused element) is placed too far from the "it is" structure, leading to the sentence being excessively long and convoluted.

- (1) It is important to provide individuals with the necessary support and resources to address their negative body image and to challenge societal norms that perpetuate unrealistic beauty standards. [E2, CE27]
- (2) It is important for people to understand the negative effects of procrastination and make conscious efforts to overcome this behaviour in order to achieve success, both personally and professionally [E2, CE23]

Example (39) sees a similar problem as stated with Example (38) where the lengthy prepositional phrase "by

providing...strategies” makes the sentence difficult to follow.

(1) It is also the duty of local authorities by providing access to mental health resources, creating a supportive environment, and promoting healthy coping strategies to help young people to overcome the challenges they may be facing. [E2, CE20]

Example (40) is particularly problematic as both “that-clause” and “to-infinitive” are included, making the sentence convoluted and hard to process.

(1) Moreover, academically speaking, when it comes to projects, it has been too often that I procrastinate and waste all the prior given time until the very last minute, to be pressured enough by the deadlines to manage to finish them on time (or even late by a few minutes sometimes). [CE1, E1]

All in all, the primary constraint that is frequently violated among extraposition constructions is the readability of the sentence. More direct, simpler structures should be employed, along with the consideration for including only necessary information. The constituents, both the extraposed subject and the “it is” part, should be kept reasonably close together.

## CONCLUSION

The research aimed to describe how first-year EFL learners in the context of Vietnam use information packaging constructions in their academic cause-effect essays and to assess the appropriate and inappropriate use of these constructions. The findings reveal that while learners demonstrate awareness of these information packaging constructions, their implementation often deviates from the standard syntactic construction or violates the constraints, usually the new-given contract (e.g., fronting). Both research questions were addressed, delineating the frequency of the use non-canonical constructions and the specific patterns through both appropriate and inappropriate cases.

The novelty of the study lies in its specific focus on the pragmatic functions of information packaging constructions within the context of a specific genre of academic writing, a genre demanding rigorous demonstration of logical connections. By examining the sentence structures alongside their information packaging properties, recurring patterns of both appropriate and inappropriate use are detected. This insight is expected to be useful for Vietnamese learners and for language teachers who are working with L1 Vietnamese learners. The only feature that is relevant to L1 transfer here is spotted in the case of fronting and extraposition constructions where learners tend to insert lengthy constituents or pack too many chunks of

information, which eventually affect readability. This quite resonates with the case of Dutch learners in van Vuuren’s<sup>33</sup> study.

These findings suggest that there are certain information packaging constructions that could be classified as typologically distant, as İrgin<sup>27</sup> suggested, based on the frequency of use. In the scope of this study, frontings, inversions, and clefts could be classified as highly typologically distant and may need further attention when it comes to developing learner’s meta-cognitive awareness of such structures in the academic writing course.

The limitations of this study may lie in the inherent bias in compiling the pragmatic functions used in decoding the appropriate and inappropriate patterns. This has been intentionally reduced by the qualitative analysis of certain emerging patterns through the 40 examples in Section 4. Ultimately, this research serves as a stepping stone towards developing more further research to focus on specific difficulties with the use of information packaging constructions in specific genres of essays. By delineating challenges across different categories, teachers can enable the learners to arrive at clearer and more successful academic writing production.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City) under the grant TC2024-02.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

AW: Academic writing  
CE: cause-effect  
EFL: English as a foreign language  
ELT: English language teaching  
L1: First language

## COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

## AUTHORS’ CONTRIBUTIONS

Kim Ngan Trinh wrote the original draft, processed data, and revised the paper. Phuong Dzung Pho wrote part of the paper, processed data, revised the research design and edited the paper. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

## APPENDIX A. THE ACADEMIC WRITING COURSE CONTENTS AND SCHEDULE

The course contents and schedule was part of the Academic Writing C1 Syllabus (see Table A1).

**Table 15: The course contents and schedule of the Academic Writing C1 Syllabus [Source: Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature, the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (Viet Nam National University Ho Chi Minh City)]**

Ses- sions	Course contents
1, 2 & 3	Course Introduction Paragraph Structure Unity and Coherence Supporting Details: Facts, Quotations, and Statistics
4	Paraphrase and Summary
5	Using Original Sources
6	Reviewing the Essay Structure
7 & 8	The Writing Process
9	Cause-Effect Essay
10	Comparison Essay
11	Reaction Essay
12	Argumentative Essay
13 & 14	The Research Paper
15	Revision

## APPENDIX B. CAUSE AND EFFECT ESSAY ASSIGNMENT

Write a 500 to 700-word essay on one of the following topics:

- (1) Why do audiences love superhero movies? (Cause Essay)
- (2) What are the consequences of procrastination? (Effect Essay)
- (3) Write a cause-essay explaining your feelings (proud or embarrassed or both) about specific aspects of your academic and lifestyle habits as an undergraduate. Give reasons for your feelings. (Cause-Effect Essay)

### REFERENCES

1. E V, A M. Academic writing: intercultural and textual issues. (Pragmatics & beyond 0922-842X). 2010;.
2. Rowley-Jolivet E, Carter-Thomas S. Genre awareness and rhetorical appropriacy: manipulation of information structure by NS and NNS scientists in the international conference setting. English for Specific Purposes. 2005;24(1):41–64. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.esp.2003.09.003>.
3. Awagu I. Language in academic writing: Features and topical issues. GLOBALK; 2021.
4. Huynh TA. Vietnamese university students' writing problems in terms of the factors relating to their meta-knowledge of English information structure. VNU J Foreign Stud. 2024;40(6):171–91. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.63023/2525-2445/jfs.ulis.5268>.
5. Tran TY. Enhancing the use of inversion structures in academic writing for English majors at Thai Nguyen University of Education. Tạp Chí Khoa Học Ngôn Ngữ Và Văn Hóa. 2018;2(2):234–42.
6. Ward G, Birner BJ. Discourse and information structure. Wiley; 2005. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470753460>.

7. Phan DA, undefined Thu Phan Dang Anh. Exploring English information packaging constructions in written and spoken language. J Knowl Learn Sci Technol. 2023;2(2):68–74. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.60087/jkfst.vol2.n2.p.74>.
8. Moreno AI. Matching theoretical descriptions of discourse and practical applications to teaching: the case of causal metatext. English for Specific Purposes. 2003;22(3):265–95. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(02\)00021-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(02)00021-2).
9. Lambrecht K. Topic, focus, and the mental representations of discourse referents. Cambridge University Press; 1994.
10. Kroeger P. Basic concepts in information structure: Topic, focus, and contrast. 2017;11(1):1–12.
11. Khalil A. Syntactic devices for marking information structure in English and Arabic. Int J Arab-Engl Stud. 2000;1(1):133–56. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.33806/ijaes2000.1.1.6>.
12. Chafe W. Givenness, contrastiveness, definiteness, subjects, topics and point of view; 1976.
13. Vallduvi E, Engdahl E. The linguistic realization of information packaging. Linguistics. 1996;51:19–20. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ling-2013-0041>.
14. Carlson K, Dickey MW, Frazier L, Clifton C. Information structure expectations in sentence comprehension. The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology : QJEP. 2009;62(1):114–39. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1080/17470210701880171>.
15. Abduljawad S. The syntax-pragmatics interface in L2: Aspects of information structure teaching and learning in a Saudi ESL context. The University of Salford; 2020.
16. Krifka M. Basic notions of information structure. Acta Linguistica Hungarica. 2008;55(3–4):243–76. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1556/ALing.55.2008.3-4.2>.
17. Altiner C. Teaching of focus structures in English. Journal of Education and Training Studies. 2018;6:69. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v6i11a.3802>.
18. Nguyen N. English information packaging constructions in Vietnamese students' essays [PhD Thesis]. 2013;.
19. Huynh TA. Fundamental sentential level issues of English information structure. VNU J Foreign Stud. 2014;29(4):45–62.

20. Cowan R. The teacher's grammar of English with answers: A course book and reference guide. Cambridge University Press; 2008.
21. Celce-Murcia M, Larsen-Freeman D, Williams HA. The grammar book: An ESL/EFL teacher's course. MA: Newbury House Rowley; 2016.
22. zejko ZPM. Manipulating the structure of information in advanced written discourse of multilingual students of English. *Acta Philol.* 2011;40:83–94.
23. Blake J. Incorporating information structure in the EAP curriculum. University of ElectroCommunications; 2015.
24. Huynh TA. Fundamental issues of English information structure at discourse level. *VNU J Foreign Stud.* 2013;29(1):102–21.
25. Gundel JK. 'Shared knowledge' and topicality. *Journal of Pragmatics.* 1985;9(1):83–107. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166\(85\)90049-9](https://doi.org/10.1016/0378-2166(85)90049-9).
26. Jarad NI. A corpus-based study of the pragmatic and syntactic functions of cleft constructions in newspaper editorials. *Int J Arab-Engl Stud.* 2013;14(1):155–80.
27. İrgin P. International Online Journal of Education and Teaching (IOJET). 2013;1(1):70–80. Available from: <http://iojet.org/index.php/IOJET/article/view/10/43>. 2013.
28. Jiang F, Hyland K. "There are significant differences...": The secret life of existential there in academic writing. *Lingua.* 2020;233(102758). Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lingua.2019.102758>.
29. Birner BJ. Information status and word order: an analysis of English inversion. *Language.* 1994;70(2):233–59. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.2307/415828>.
30. Kim JB. English Cleft Constructions: Corpus Findings and Theoretical Implications. *Stud Gener Gramm.* 2007;17(2):99. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.15860/sigg.17.2.200705.99>.
31. Verheijen L, Los B, De Haan P. Information structure: The final hurdle?: The development of syntactic structures in (very) advanced Dutch EFL writing. *Dutch J Appl Linguist.* 2013;2(1):92–107. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1075/dujal.2.1.09ver>.
32. Hewings M, Hewings A. . "It is interesting to note that...": a comparative study of anticipatory 'it' in student and published writing. *English for Specific Purposes.* 2002;21(4):367–83. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906\(01\)00016-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0889-4906(01)00016-3).
33. Van Vuuren S. Information structural transfer in advanced Dutch EFL writing: A cross-linguistic longitudinal study. *Linguistics in the Netherlands.* 2013;30:173–87. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1075/avt.30.13van>.
34. Gass SM, Selinker L. Second language acquisition: An introductory course. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2008. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203932841>.
35. McNally L. On the linguistic encoding of information packaging instructions. Brill; 1998. Available from: [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004373167\\_007](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004373167_007).

# Cấu trúc thông tin trong bài viết học thuật: các kiểu cấu trúc quan sát được trong bài luận về nguyên nhân-kết quả của người học ngoại ngữ là tiếng Anh

Trịnh Kim Ngân\*, Phó Phương Dung



Use your smartphone to scan this QR code and download this article

## TÓM TẮT

Việc viết một bài luận học thuật thường là thách thức đối với những người mới bắt đầu học viết, đặc biệt khi tiếng Anh là một ngôn ngữ thứ hai. Trong khi ngữ pháp thường được xem là một vấn đề điển hình, thì chúng ta cũng nên nhìn nhận và chú ý nhiều hơn đến cách mà thông tin được giới thiệu, theo một chiến lược nhất định để đảm bảo tính gắn kết và tạo hiệu ứng nhấn mạnh. Bài viết này xem xét cách sử dụng các cấu trúc đóng gói thông tin của sinh viên năm nhất chuyên ngành tiếng Anh trong các bài luận. Nghiên cứu được thực hiện bằng cách áp dụng có chỉnh sửa mô hình phân tích lỗi trong 46 bài luận nguyên nhân-kết quả cho việc phân tích cả những trường hợp sử dụng hợp lý và chưa hợp lý của các cấu trúc không chuẩn tắc như câu chẻ, đảo ngữ, đảo chủ ngữ đứng trước, thể bị động, cấu trúc existential-*there*, và cấu trúc ngoại vị. Kết quả cho thấy lỗi cú pháp xảy ra tương đối ít, trong khi việc sử dụng không phù hợp các cấu trúc nói trên phản ánh việc người dùng chưa nhận thức rõ các nguyên tắc như trọng hậu hay nhấn mạnh thông tin ở cuối câu. Nghiên cứu cũng xác định các kiểu cấu trúc cụ thể mà người học sử dụng, đưa ra mô tả về những kiểu hình cấu trúc được xem là khá xa lạ với người học, và suy luận về các thách thức mà người học có thể gặp phải ở mỗi kiểu hình cấu trúc đóng gói thông tin. Từ đó, nghiên cứu nhấn mạnh sự cần thiết của việc giảng dạy các chức năng ngữ dụng của các cấu trúc đóng gói thông tin. Bằng cách làm rõ hơn về cú pháp và cấu trúc đóng gói thông tin, nghiên cứu cung cấp thêm thông tin cho các nhà giáo dục và người dạy, góp phần vào mục tiêu cải thiện năng lực viết học thuật cho người học tiếng Anh.

**Từ khóa:** đóng gói thông tin, cấu trúc không chuẩn tắc, bài luận nguyên nhân-kết quả

Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn, ĐHQG-HCM, Việt Nam

## Liên hệ

Trịnh Kim Ngân, Trường Đại học Khoa học Xã hội và Nhân văn, ĐHQG-HCM, Việt Nam

Email: trinkimngan@hcmussh.edu.vn

## Lịch sử

- Ngày nhận: 04-02-2025
- Ngày sửa đổi: 20-08-2025
- Ngày chấp nhận: 07-05-2026
- Ngày đăng:

DOI: x



## Bản quyền

© ĐHQG Tp.HCM. Đây là bài báo công bố mở được phát hành theo các điều khoản của the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International license.



**Trích dẫn bài báo này:** Ngân T K, Dung P P. Cấu trúc thông tin trong bài viết học thuật: các kiểu cấu trúc quan sát được trong bài luận về nguyên nhân-kết quả của người học ngoại ngữ là tiếng Anh. *Sci. Tech. Dev. J. - Soc. Sci. Hum.* 2026; 10(2):xxxx-xxxx.