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## Information Structure: The final hurdle?

### The development of syntactic structures in (very) advanced Dutch EFL writing

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#### Abstract

Although texts produced by (very) advanced Dutch learners of English as a foreign language (EFL) may be perfectly grammatical, they often feel distinctly non-native. Dutch, as a verb-second language, makes separate positions available for discourse linking and aboutness-topics. Although the English sentences of these advanced learners conform to the Subject-Verb-Object order of English, the pre-subject adverbial position in English is made to perform the information-structural function of the verb-second discourse-linking position, producing texts that are perceived as non-native, without being ungrammatical. A side-effect of this L1 interference is the underuse of special focusing constructions in English, like the stressed-focus *it*-cleft. This paper investigates the progress of Dutch writers towards a more native-like use of the pre-subject position and the *it*-cleft in a longitudinal corpus of 137 writings of Dutch university students of English. We conclude that information-structural differences present the final hurdle for advanced Dutch EFL writers.

Key words: foreign language learning (EFL); writing; syntax; progress; L1 interference; information structure (IS); English; Dutch

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Previous Studies

This study investigates the progress of Dutch learners of English as a foreign language. Although English and Dutch are typologically closely related languages, their cross-linguistic differences can lead to interference of Dutch in EFL acquisition. L1 interference is particularly salient in the L2 production of beginning and intermediate EFL learners, but our study demonstrates that the written English of advanced EFL learners may also show L1 interference, albeit more in a subtle manner – at the level of information structure (IS) rather than that of grammatical correctness and syntactic complexity, the level that tends to be the focus of the few studies of L1 interference of advanced learners (e.g. Callies 2009; Verheijen 2011). A striking example is (1):

- (1) From your objective or relevance and (time and) place the research question is derived (not the other way around). (Krämer 2012)

The Dutch writer of (1) uses the English pre-subject position for information that would be expected to be positioned at the end in English (end-focus), as it is the “point” of the sentence. In Dutch, such information may also be positioned in the multifunctional first position—multifunctional in the sense that it can be occupied by a constituent regardless of its syntactic function (subject, object, or adverbial) and its information-structural function (given or new, marked or unmarked themes).

Information structure as a level of linguistic description was first identified by Halliday (1985). It guides the organisation and distribution of information over a sentence, determining (i) which information is expressed and (ii) how this information is put into a specific lexical or syntactic form (Carroll & Lambert 2003:267). IS interacts with nearly all linguistic levels, such as syntax, morphology, prosody, semantics, and pragmatics, in language-specific ways. This makes information structure management problematic even for advanced learners (Callies 2009:2).

The focus of this study is L1 interference in IS, and the progress that can be made here by learners, based on the evidence of a longitudinal corpus.

## 1.2 Typically Dutch Features and Features Typical of Advanced English

Because even advanced foreign language learners may transfer their L1 preferences for certain syntactic structures over other structures to their L2, typical information-structural features of Dutch may still crop up as interference hindering the acquisition of English. When EFL learners develop more advanced syntax, they may come to use structures typical of advanced English, revealing a more complete acquisition of English IS. There are a number of features that may be typically Dutch or typically English.

### 1.2.1 Typically Dutch Features

Unlike English, Dutch is a verb-second language. Verb-second is not just a syntactic word order operation: the verb originally moved to mark off two information-structural domains, one for focus and one for given information (Los & Dreschler 2012; Los 2012). The first position in Dutch is a derived position earmarked for these IS statuses rather than for a particular syntactic function. Dutch EFL learners not only have to unlearn moving the finite verb into second position, which the author of (1) has achieved, but also to unlearn using the English pre-subject adverbial position for unmarked discourse links – and this is where (1) shows L1 interference.

A similar case is presented in (2), from Hannay and Keizer (1993); the translation given is the one they recommend:

- (2) En daarmee was de tragedie van Bergkamp compleet  
 and with.that was the tragedy of Bergkamp complete  
 ‘And that made Bergkamp’s tragedy complete’ (Hannay & Keizer 1993)

Note that (2) could have been translated more literally: *And with that, Bergkamp’s tragedy was complete* is syntactically possible (“grammatical”), but awkward for information-structural reasons, as the pre-subject adverbial is more prominent in the translation than it is in the original text. It is an unmarked theme in Dutch, but a marked theme in English. To convey old information as an unmarked theme, English requires a subject (e.g. Downing & Locke 1995 following Halliday 1985). In (3), the adverbial in Dutch again constitutes a link with the preceding discourse, probably with greater information-structural prominence than in (2):

(3) Hier heeft Andy Cole zijn eerste hattrick gescoord

here has Andy Cole his first hat-trick scored

‘Here, Andy Cole scored his first hat-trick’

‘This is where Andy Cole scored his first hat-trick’ (Hannay & Keizer 1993)

Although the more literal translation *Here, Andy Cole scored his first hat-trick* is syntactically possible, Dutch learners are warned against such a direct translation of their verb-second-Topicalized adverbials, especially with adverbials of place, and the recommended translation uses a reverse *wh*-cleft, which allows the deictic link to be encoded by a subject, and the place-adverbial element in predicate-focus position (for predicate focus, see Lambrecht 1994).

Although the advice to encode linking elements as subjects in English is sound, the differences between Dutch and English information structure go deeper. In English, the subject has to perform double duty: it expresses the aboutness-topic (in a narrative, the protagonist) and unmarked links. Dutch has a dedicated position for linking—the first constituent—which is not tied to any particular function: adverbials are fine. This leaves the subject free to be “reserved” for the aboutness-topic. Having a dedicated position for linking leads Dutch writers to do a lot more linking in Dutch, and, by interference from Dutch, in English, than native English writers. This ties in with recent crosslinguistic findings reported in Carroll and Lambert (2003), Von Stutterheim and Carroll (2005), and Von Stutterheim and Roßdeutscher (2005) between German/English contrasts at the level of macrostructural planning (deciding what to say and how to say

it). As these contrasts depend on grammatical structures available in those languages, particularly the presence or absence of a verb-second syntax, they may well be relevant to the excessive linking—compared to English—we find in Dutch.

Carroll and Lambert (2003), for instance, asked speakers to describe a picture depicting an old town centre. English speakers set “the picture” as a global topic at the highest level in their first utterance: *This is a picture of a busy square*. The next utterances go on to describe various features of the scene by means of existentials in subject position: *there is a square with a fountain*. The German speakers, in contrast, divide the picture into spatial regions and describe the various features (the new information) in relation to these spatial regions: *vorne im Bild ist eine Strasse* ‘at the front of the picture is a street’, *auf den linken Seite ist eine Apotheke* ‘on the left hand side is a chemist’ (Carroll & Lambert 2003:269). Eighteen out of twenty German informants select this type of coding. The remaining two selected the existential option (*es gibt ein x* ‘there is an x’).

Extending Carroll and Lambert’s use of the terms global and local, we could say that place tends to be anchored globally in English but locally in German, and, possibly, in Dutch. We will refer to these adverbials in first position that refer back to the immediately preceding discourse as “local anchors.” The expectation is that Dutch writers export this type of macroplanning into their written English, even at advanced levels.

### 1.2.2 Features Typical of Advanced English

Our corpus of essays by Dutch learners of English as a foreign language (EFL essays) as well as our control corpus of essays by native speakers of English (NSE essays) belongs to the register of academic writing. This means that avoiding L1 interference is not enough, as the academic register has a number of linguistic features of its own which have to be acquired. One of these is the frequent use of the passive voice (Elbow 1991). Passives increase impersonality and objectivity, decreasing the need for first person pronouns (Sanders 1998:169; Ward, Birner & Huddleston 2002:1446), and are a feature of academic texts (Biber 1988). Clefts, too, are a feature of academic texts, particularly *it*-clefts (Biber et al. 1999:961–962).

### 1.2.3 Syntactic Features Possibly Marking Progress in Dutch EFL Writing

Possible structures that could turn out to point to progress in EFL writing, based on macro-structural and IS contrasts between Dutch and English and features of English academic style, are summarized in Table 1, which presents an overview of the syntactic features explored in this study. The features typical of advanced English will be discussed in section 3.1, the typically Dutch features in section 3.2.

Table 1. *Possible Markers of Progress in Dutch EFL Writing*

Features typical of advanced English	Typically Dutch features
Cleft constructions	Discourse linking with clause-initial adverbials
Passive clauses	Clause-initial pronominal adverbials
Passive Exceptional Case Marking constructions	Restrictive focus particles

Note that the distinction between typically Dutch and typically English is a simplification in that passives and clefts to some extent also resolve IS issues in English that do not occur in Dutch because of the verb-second syntax of that language; cf. the recommended translation of (3) and also the discussion of clefts and focus-marking particles below. The present study assesses whether these features differ significantly between Dutch EFL and native English writers, and whether they can be used to identify progress in EFL writing.

## 2. Methodology

We investigated a corpus of 137 EFL essays, written by one year's cohort of Dutch students of English Language and Culture at Radboud University Nijmegen. These essays were expository prose texts composed for different courses and at various stages in their curriculum, thus representing different stages in the students' writing development, but they all belonged to the "advanced learner variety" (Callies 2009:1): these students had received six to eight years of EFL instruction before entering university. Our longitudinal study included five essays per student at most: three written assignments from the students' first university year (2009–2010) and two from their second year (2010–2011) – henceforth referred to as y1t1, y1t2, y1t3, y2t1, and y2t2. Initially, the cohort consisted of 80 students, 55 females and 25 males, with ages ranging from 18 to 21. We excluded the 7 students whose L1 was not Dutch, but rather German (4), Finnish (1), Russian (1), or Chinese (1), so all texts in our EFL corpus were written by native speakers of Dutch. The number of EFL writings available to us

gradually decreased from y1t1 up to y2t2, as students started to fall behind in their course work or dropped out of their studies altogether. This means that we were confronted with selective loss of participants, which made the application of statistical tests problematic, if not impossible. Details of the EFL corpus can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2. *Composition of the Corpus of Advanced Dutch EFL Writings*

Essays	Date of composition	Text type	No. of essays	Total no. of words	Mean no. of words/essay	Range of no. of words	
						min.	max.
y1t1	Sept. 2009	descriptive	57	24,678	433	180	872
y1t2	Dec. 2009 / Jan. 2010	informative	22	15,996	727	560	1,237
y1t3	June/July 2010	informative	26	23,934	921	469	1,418
y2t1	Sept. 2010	argumentative	19	4,884	257	160	526
y2t2	Dec. 2010 / Jan. 2011	argumentative	13	9,852	758	533	1,790
Totals			137	79,344	579	160	1,790

As progress in foreign language acquisition is measured as “the degree to which a language learner’s interlanguage aligns with the target language” (Larsen-Freeman 2006:592), the data of the Dutch EFL learners were compared to a control group of native speakers of English, in our case texts by British and American native speakers from the Louvain Corpus of Native English Essays (LOCNESS), all of which were written by university students, comparable in age and educational development with the Dutch experimental group. We restricted the control data to a sample of 20 writings, so that it was similar in size to the largest set of EFL writings: 27,254 for the NSE essays and 24,678 for the largest set of EFL essays.<sup>1</sup> Table 3 presents details of the NSE

<sup>1</sup> Although the limited number of texts may make the NSE corpus somewhat sensitive to individual style, we chose to use full texts rather than text excerpts for the following reasons: as Springer (2012) notes, it © Los, B., Verheijen, L., & de Haan, P. (2013). Information Structure: The final hurdle?: The development of syntactic structures in (very) advanced Dutch EFL writing. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2, 92-107doi: 10.1075/dujal.2.1.09ver

corpus.

Table 3. *Composition of the Selected Writings from the NSE Corpus*

Essays	Date of composition	Text type	No. of essays	Total no. of words	Mean no. of words/essay	Range of no. of words	
						min.	max.
ESEE (British)	unknown	argumentative	10	5,903	590	470	880
ESME (British)	1991	informative	5	15,077	3,015	1,942	3,670
ICLE (American)	1995	argumentative	5	6,274	1,255	964	1,622
Totals			20	27,254	1,363	470	3,670

## 2.1 Data Analysis

We determined the frequency rate of each feature per set of texts (six sets in total) by automatically tagging the EFL and NSE corpora with CST's Part-Of-Speech tagger<sup>2</sup> and manually checking and post-editing the tagged output (see Verheijen 2011 for details). To control for influences of differing text lengths, the frequency rates were normalised per 10,000 words. The normalised frequency rates of the EFL group at different points in time were compared to those of the native-speaker control group to establish the EFL learners' syntactic progression, so that we could see whether the syntactic structures in the EFL writings exhibited a development corresponding to the Dutch students' increased proficiency in English. The nature of our data does not allow

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has become increasingly common for modern corpora to use entire texts instead of equally-sized text samples, both because of technological possibilities (i.e. "increased storage and processing potential") and for theoretical reasons ("many lexico-grammatical features are not distributed evenly throughout a text") (56–57). Moreover, all salient individual preferences of native speakers have been noted (see footnotes 3 and 5).

<sup>2</sup> This tagger was created at the University of Copenhagen and is an adapted version of the widely used Brill tagger (1992).

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us to go beyond establishing development trends.

### 3. Features Characterising Syntactic Progress in Dutch EFL Writings

#### 3.1 Features Typical of Advanced English

##### 3.1.1 Cleft Constructions

There are three types of cleft constructions, exemplified in (4)–(6): (i) *it*-clefts, (ii) pseudo-clefts, and (iii) reverse *wh*-clefts (or reversed pseudo-clefts). These sentences also show that it is possible to incorporate a restrictive focus particle into a cleft.

- (4) It is (especially) the American culture that I find interesting.
- (5) What I (especially) find interesting is the American culture.
- (6) The American culture is what I (especially) find interesting.

Cleft sentences fulfil information-structural needs that in Dutch are fulfilled by the multifunctional first position (as in (2) and (3)) which generally does not require further marking. They are markers of register in English: Biber et al. (1999:961) show that the stressed-focus *it*-cleft is closely associated with formal written styles, whereas the pseudo-cleft and the reversed pseudo-cleft are more characteristic of colloquial speech. This would imply that, as our EFL students became more advanced, they should only have exhibited an increase in their use of *it*-clefts, on two counts: as a loss of L1

interference and as the acquisition of the English formal register.

Despite slight decreases from y1t1 to y1t2 and from y1t3 to y2t1, *it*-clefts showed an overall increase in use (although the EFL students did not reach the frequency rate of the NSE students<sup>3</sup>); basic *wh*-clefts first fluctuated at very low rates until they wholly disappeared from the EFL writings in y2t1 and y2t2; and reverse *wh*-clefts also fluctuated with no clear development. This means that only *it*-clefts are useful in assessing syntactic development in advanced EFL learners, and not clefts in general. Cleft constructions containing restrictive focus particles (as shown in (4)–(6)) turned out to have very low frequency rates in both the EFL texts and in the NSE texts, so they cannot be used as markers of syntactic development in advanced EFL writing.

<<Insert Figure 1 about here>>

### 3.1.2 Passive Clauses

Passivization allows the direct, indirect, or prepositional object of an active clause to be encoded as subject and hence become aboutness-topic and/or discourse linker. As passives are an important strategy for creating subjects and subjects are the only way to encode unmarked themes or links in English, we hypothesized that they might be markers of advanced EFL writing. Handbooks on translation often recommend an English passive where Dutch uses the impersonal pronoun *men* (Lemmens & Parr

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<sup>3</sup> What is somewhat problematic is that 12 out of the 32 *it*-clefts in the NSE writings occur in the text of a single student, who apparently has a fondness for using *it*-clefts. If we left out this one student's production of *it*-clefts from our counts, the rate of *it*-clefts for the NSE writings would be 7.4, which is still considerably higher than the rate for the final set of EFL writings.

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1995:275; Sanders 1998:172–173). Los (2002, 2005) argues that this is because English generic uses of *one* or *people* introduce interlocutors into the discourse, unlike *men*, witness the difference in truth conditions of (7a–b):

- (7) a. Physical pain is often inflicted upon children.  
 b. One often inflicts physical pain upon children. (Siewierska 1984:243)

In contrast to English *one*, Dutch *men* is a contentless, discursively inert NP whose function is purely to express the thematic role of agent; it does not refer. It typically sits in the inconspicuous lower subject position, with a linker as the first constituent, in the position made available by verb-second syntax:

- (8) Engels is zo handig, dat spreekt men in zoveel landen.  
 English is so handy, that speaks one in so many countries.

In English, the indefinite pronoun would have to appear clause-initially, forcing *it*, the link to the previous discourse, in object position, which is not an ideal place for old information; this problem can be remedied by a passive as in (10).

- (9) ... they speak it in so many countries. (y1t1, RAD0932)  
 (10) ... it is spoken in so many countries.

The rate of the passive can be expected to be higher in advanced EFL writing on two

counts: (i) reduced L1 interference (fewer *ones* on the model of Dutch *men*) and (ii) the acquisition of a more formal style in English.

In analysing this feature, we included all types of passives – *be*-passives, *get*-passives, bare/postnominal passives, *by*-passives, and agentless passives. The Dutch EFL students' writings exhibited an overall increase in passives towards the NSE target (except for a small decrease from y1t3 to y2t1)<sup>4</sup>, which suggests that they are a good feature for determining progression in syntax in advanced EFL learners' writings.

<<Insert Figure 2 about here>>

### 3.1.3 Passive Exceptional Case Marking Constructions

The double duty of subjects in English may explain why English has a number of crosslinguistically-rare passives, one of which is the passive Exceptional Case Marking (ECM) construction, exemplified in (11), with its active ECM counterpart in (12):

(11) ... everyone was believed to be a little part of the entire world. (y1t2, RAD0935)

(12) ... they believe everyone to be a little part of the entire world.

The passive construction in (11) does a similar job as (12): the lack of semantic content of *everyone* does not make it an ideal option to fill an object position, which it would do

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<sup>4</sup> This may be due to the fact that the y2t1 (as well as y1t1) texts were in-class writing assignments about student life, whereas the other sets of texts were take-home papers on topics of a more complex nature (e.g. literature). The former can be hypothesized to invite a more personal writing style, with less use of the passive voice, than the latter.

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in (12).

A passive ECM construction can be used to achieve topic continuity in the textual discourse. It is not available in Dutch (Hannay & Keizer 1993:77), but then, Dutch, as a verb-second language, has no need for it:

(13) a. Volgens hen zijn alle mensen een onderdeelje van de hele wereld.

According to them are all people a part of the entire world.

b. Alle mensen zijn volgens hen een onderdeelje van de hele wereld.

All people are according to them a part of the entire world.

The first position is multifunctional, both syntactically—it may host an adverbial as in (13a)—and information-structurally, as the information status of the first constituent is unimportant: although the position is “dedicated” to unmarked linking (*volgens hen* in (13a)), it is not restricted to linking expressions. Note further that Dutch, like German, but unlike English, has a spacious position for adverbials on the right edge of the VP, which is where *volgens hen* is positioned in (13b) – a marked position in English, but not in Dutch (no intonational pauses).

The information-packaging function of the ECM in English is further demonstrated by the fact that many verbs (*say, rumour, allege*, etc. – see Postal 1974) only allow the passive construction, not its active counterpart.

The use of passive ECM can be expected to increase for advanced Dutch EFL writers, again for two reasons: (i) decrease of L1 interference (fewer occurrences of *according to X* in pre-subject position) and (ii) the acquisition of the construction as a

feature of the formal written register in English.

We found an overall increase towards native speaker norms for passive ECM constructions (except for an unexpected decrease from y2t1 to y2t2), while none were found at all in the first set of EFL compositions (yet their use does not come near that of the native speakers<sup>5</sup>). The frequency rate of 0 for y1t1 is a clear indication that passive ECM constructions are a feature typical of very advanced English, which advanced Dutch EFL learners gradually incorporate into their English writings. This feature, then, is a marker of syntactic advancement in advanced EFL writings.

<<Insert Figure 3 about here>>

## 3.2 Typically Dutch Features

### 3.2.1 Discourse Linking with Clause-initial Adverbials

Another possible marker of syntactic development in Dutch EFL writing is clause-initial, pre-subject adverbials, which are used in Dutch for local anchoring, as we saw in examples (2), (3), and (13). Dutch writers striving to enhance the cohesiveness of their Dutch texts naturally resort to adverbial links, given that verb-second syntax provides a dedicated position for “local anchors,” links to the previous discourse. Example (14) shows a pre-subject adverbial (*During the story*) as a local anchor:

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<sup>5</sup> As with *it*-clefts, there is great individual variation. 21 (of which 17 with *seen*) of the 34 passive ECMs found in the NSE sample occur in the work of a single student. Were we to leave out these 17 in our counts, the frequency rate of the NSE writings would be 6.2, which is much more similar to the ultimate rate of the EFL writings (6.1), while the rate for the y2t1 texts (8.2) even exceeds it.

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(14) During the story the narrator repeatedly tries to convince the reader that he is not mad. (y1t2, RAD0961)

If *the story* is already established by the time of utterance of (14) as the global topic, we would not expect to find it embedded in a pre-subject adverbial phrase in an English text, although it is a natural thing to do for Dutch speakers.

Despite some fluctuations in the frequency rates of such clause-initial adverbials (excluding sentence connectors and adverbial clauses), an overall pattern of decrease was found in the EFL texts, making them more and more similar to the NSE texts in their use of clause-initial adverbials, which means that this feature is useful in determining the syntactic development of advanced Dutch EFL writing.

<<Insert Figure 4 about here>>

We noted earlier that there is a subcategory of local anchors: pronominal adverbs, like *daarmee* lit. ‘with that’ in (2), a combination of an R-pronoun (*daar* ‘there’ or *hier* ‘here’), an explicitly deictic element referring to an entity in the immediately preceding discourse, and a postposition. L1 interference from Dutch is particularly clear here, because prepositional phrases containing referential elements in pre-subject position in English become increasingly rare in the course of Early Modern English (Los 2012); there is not a single instance in our NSE corpus. Our EFL corpus, however, contains a number of instances like (15):

(15) Because of this I have already had to write billions of essays and articles (y1t1, RAD0964)

English would prefer a reverse *wh*-cleft with the pronominal adverbial converted into a subject, such as *This/That is what/when/where/why/how ...*: ‘This is why I had to write billions of essays’ (see also the recommended translation of (3)). The frequency rates in the EFL essays of prepositional phrases containing referential elements in pre-subject position show a steady decrease, which means that this feature, too, is a good marker of progress in advanced English.

<<Insert Figure 5 about here>>

### 3.2.2 Restrictive Focus Particles

A final possible feature indicating syntactic development in Dutch EFL writing is the use of restrictive focus particles. Restrictive focus particles “restrict the application of the utterance ... to the part focused” (Tottie 1986:98). Examples are the following:

(16) I find especially the American culture very interesting (y1t1, RAD0947)

(17) ... especially mugs can be easy broken. (y2t1, RAD0909)

The multi-functionality of the first position in a verb-second language like Dutch means that it is open to constituents of any information-structural status, whereas focusing in English has to match with particular positions – predicate-focus, preferably; cf. rewriting (16) as *I find the American culture especially interesting* or a cleft: *What I find especially interesting is the American culture*. Subjects in English are syntactic positions earmarked for constituents of a particular information-structural status: given information, unmarked themes, which makes the position also incompatible with focus particles, which explains the infelicity of (17).

The restrictive focus particles we studied include exclusives (*alone, exactly, exclusively, just, merely, only, precisely, simply*) and particularizers (*at least, especially, in particular, largely, mainly, mostly, particularly, primarily*).<sup>6</sup> The EFL writings show high rates initially, then a dramatic decrease to below NSE levels, and finally a steady increase reaching NSE levels. This peculiar development is due to the idiosyncratic behaviour of individual particles. The decrease after y1t1 can largely be attributed to a drop in *just* and *at least*, and to a lesser extent *especially*; the subsequent increase is mostly the result of a rise in *only*. The eventual alignment with NSE levels is due to *just* and *only*—by far the most frequently used restrictive focus particles—approximately reaching NSE levels, so our EFL students show definite progress here. A revealing graph here is the one of sentence-initial restrictive focus particles as in (17), whose erratic frequency rates confirm our hypothesis that adjusting to non-verb-second information structure can present quite a hurdle even for advanced Dutch EFL writers.

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<sup>6</sup> The restrictive focus particles *purely, chiefly, and practically* were not found in the EFL or NSE texts. © Los, B., Verheijen, L., & de Haan, P. (2013). Information Structure: The final hurdle?: The development of syntactic structures in (very) advanced Dutch EFL writing. *Dutch Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 2, 92-107doi: 10.1075/dujal.2.1.09ver

<<Insert Figure 6 about here>>

#### 4. Conclusions and Implications for EFL Teaching

Table 4 updates the features identified earlier as possible markers of progress in EFL writing in Table 1:

Table 4. *Markers of Progress in Dutch EFL Writing*

Features typical of advanced English	Typically Dutch features
<i>It</i> -cleft constructions	Discourse linking with clause-initial adverbials
Passive clauses	Clause-initial pronominal adverbials
Passive Exceptional Case Marking Constructions	Restrictive focus particles

Even though the nature of our data has not allowed us to perform statistical tests of significance, our findings have clearly shown development trends. These findings have pedagogical implications for the development of EFL learning materials and syllabi in that this information can be explicitly taught, as can the different systems of information structure and syntax mapping in Dutch and English that accounts for these markers. We are currently collecting written data from new cohorts of students, preventing selective loss by ensuring that all keep contributing texts to the collection throughout their BA studies. This will enable us to confirm statistically the trends we have established.

The analysis of the differences in syntactic structures between the writings of Dutch EFL learners and native speakers of English may ultimately “guide language teaching and learning and help learners over the barrier of academic style” (Shaw & Liu

1998:227). The results of this study may help fine-tuning the existing criteria of the Council of Europe's Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Composing grammatically correct texts is not enough to identify level C2 ('Mastery'). Including information structure notions in the framework would make the CEFR an even more helpful tool in foreign language teaching, assessment, and learning.

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