

The Correct Use of Passive Voice in Report Writing By Somali SPACE Students in UTM

^aMassoumeh Hajizadeh Rivandi 1, ^bSulia Masturina Che Razali, ^bNurhayati Husin, ^bRazifa Mohd Razlan, ^bNur Hafizah Rabi'ah Husin, ^bNurul Amilin Razawi

^aFaculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia (UTM), 81310 UTM Skudai, Johor Bahru, Malaysia

^bFaculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi Mara (UiTM)

Abstract

This study investigated the use of English passive voice by 20 intermediate Somali learners. They were given a report about pictures and the characters by using passive voice. They were then asked to write an essay about 100 words on a picture given to them. Findings revealed that 7 out of 20 learners used this structure in their writing and among them only 3 learners could use the correct form. Generally it was indicated that most of them have problems using the passive voice in their writing. Although they were studying at intermediate level, they were considered as beginners in using the passive voice correctly in writing. This paper has suggested some strategies that could be employed by the teachers in classroom to help students appreciate the correct usage of passive voice in writing as well as speaking

Keyword: Passive voice, writing, Somali

1. Introduction

In instructional texts dealing with academic writing, the meanings, functions and uses of various English tenses and voice are not addressed with any degree of detail. Nor are these important features of academic prose usually or prominently connected to the production of academic writing and the contexts appropriate for them. The reason for this important omission in writing instruction may lie in the traditional separation between the teaching of writing and the teaching of grammar, and the subsequent integration and connection is thus implicitly relegated to language learners themselves, without instructional guidance or teaching. (Celce-Murcia, 1998; Celce-Murcia and Olshtain, 2000; Hinkel, 2002a; Jordan, 1997). In a study done by Eli Hinkel (2004), the results of the study demonstrate that even after many years of L2 learning and use, advanced NNS students may have difficulty with the conventionalized uses of tenses, aspects and the passive voice in written academic discourse. It is concluded that some students are still unable to use passive structure in their writing. This indicates the teaching strategies used by teachers so far have not been effective. In this paper, we would like to see the usage of passive voice in some of our students' essays and then propose some teaching strategies that could be used to teach them the passive voice structure.

¹ Corresponding Author, Tel.: +60-12-687-5534
E-mail address: shaghayegh7922@gmail.com

2. Literature review

As many ESL and EFL teachers know from experience, teaching the meanings, uses, and functions of the passive voice represents one of the thorniest problems in L2 grammar instruction, and speakers of many L1s appear to have difficulty with passive constructions. However, the use of passive structures is common in academic writing (Talmy, 1988), and advanced learners are often expected to produce written texts that utilize passive forms. Because learners often do not use passive verb phrases in correct forms, much of the L2 instruction associated with the passive voice includes the derivation of passive structures from active. For example, *The average American seeks independence. ... Independence is sought by the average American.* (Steer and Carlisi, 1998, p. 263). A vast majority of grammar textbooks includes a chapter on the meanings, forms, and uses of the passive voice and most L2 learners at intermediate and higher levels of proficiency have studied the derivation of passive structures and worked through the exercises. Nonetheless, when it comes to L2 production in speaking or writing, many learners even at advanced levels often do not form passive constructions correctly and do not use it in appropriate contexts. A study using Intelligent Tutoring System (computer assisted tutoring system) which comprises a Passive Voice Tutor done by Virvou, Maras and Tsiriga (2000) has resulted in identifying common student mistakes when using passive voice structure. These mistakes have been classified into seven broad categories of error that may be recognized by the system (Virvou and Maras 1999b). These errors are associated with the conversion of passive into active voice and vice versa. The categories of error are accidental slips, spelling mistakes, conversion mistakes, irregular verb mistakes, noun mistakes, verb tense mistakes and singular/plural mistakes. Each category of error (apart from accidental slips) may also be associated with a variety of explanations about the possible cause of the mistake. Explanations have been based on identified strategies that learners may use in order to simplify the task of learning a second language which are the Language Transfer of Interference and Overgeneralization of the Target Language Rules (Richards 1974).

3. Methodology

20 learners who all were from Sumali were selected. The sample was chosen from the same country to assure the correctness of the results since it is believed that mother tongue also affects the results of the study. They were students taking Intensive English Course in UTM in intermediate level. All of them sit for an essay in one day about half an hour. To check how many learners use the structure of passive voice in their writing, they were given a picture to write a report about that picture and the character inside by using passive voice. They were supposed to write an essay about 100 words on a picture given to them already. They were free to use enough form of passive voice in their writing. Because they were in intermediate level, they were supposed to know the passive voice structure already but for just reminding them of this structure they were taught concisely and briefly about the passive voice before the exam.

4. Results and discussions

The essays were assessed and the result was surprising. Just 7 out of 20 had used the passive voice in their writing. This result is summarized in Figure 1 below:

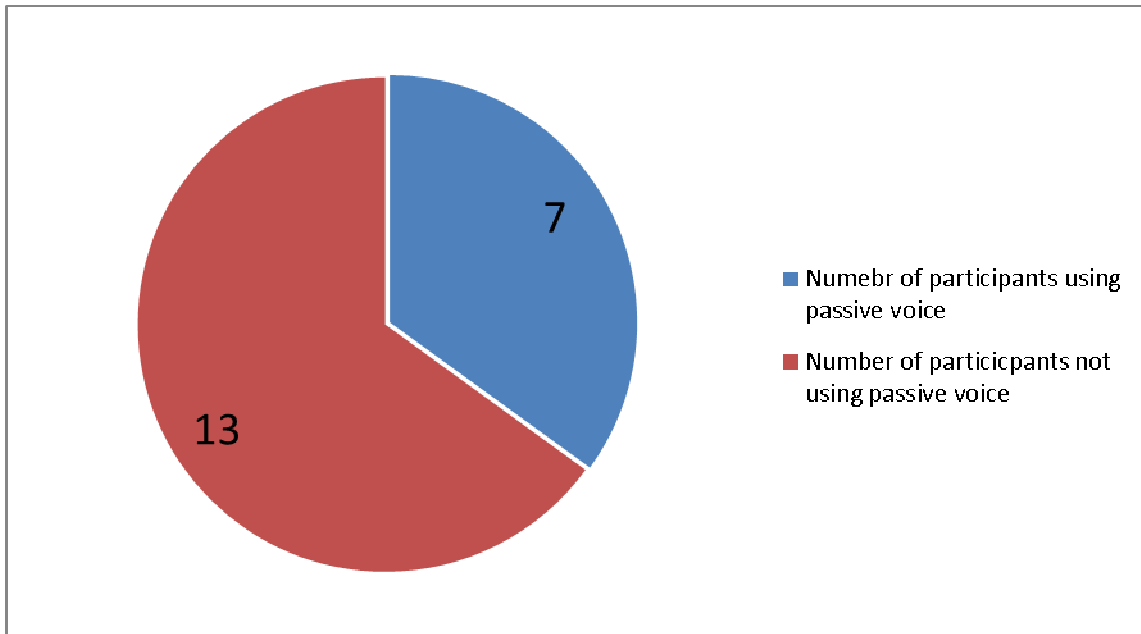


Figure 1: Distribution of the usage of passive structure among the students

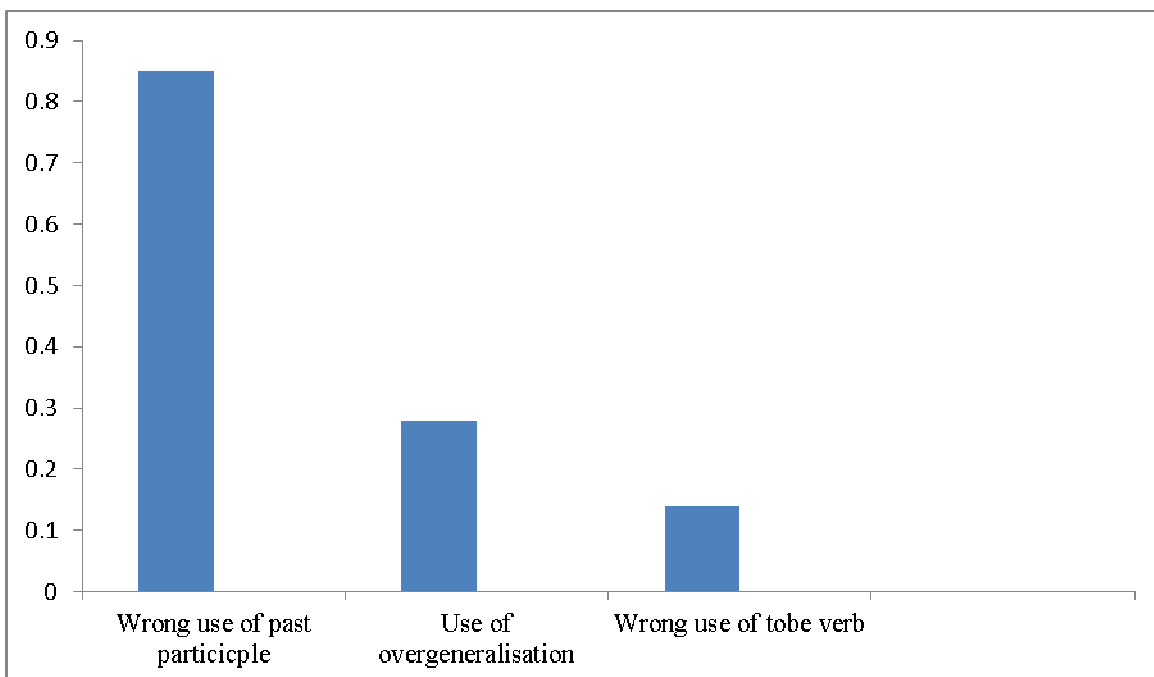


Figure 2: Number of students and the types of incorrect usage of passive structure

Figure 2 shows the three main types of incorrect usage of passive structure that was done by the participants. The major mistake that the students made is using the wrong past participle which was made by seven of them, followed by overgeneralization factor which was done by three of the students, and lastly, two of the participants failed to use the correct form of to-be verb. The first learner, learner A used the passive voice 4 times with the correct order of

passive structure. But still there was a problem with using the past participle. He had used the form of past participle ending in ((en)) for all verbs in the passive voice. It can be related to Contrastive Analysis that the third version of which is called moderate version which based on Oller and Ziahosseiny (1970). It is said that, similarities can make problems in the languages. Such problems are called as intralingual errors like overgeneralisation. Such errors come from the language itself. In this example the learner A used the form of the verb in past participle ending to ((en)) for all verbs in passive voice. So it can be concluded that he overgeneralised the rule of adding ((en)) to the end of some verbs for making past participle to all verbs. For example in one sentence he used ((The fruit was eaten by his dog.)). Then in another sentence he wrote ((The wall was painten by the man))* .From the aspect of moving the subject to the end and putting the object to the beginning of the sentence in passive structure he did all correctly. Student B used passive voice just once. ((The house was bainting* be the man))* . The first mistake that he made is the incorrect spelling of *bianting* instead of painting. It shows that this student cannot distinguish the minimal pairs like p sound and b sound. Another mistake is that although he was able to observe the order of a passive structure as object+Tobe verb +past participle+by+ subject but still he made a mistake in changing the correct form of the verb into past participle in passive voice. Instead of writing ((was painted)) he wrote ((was baitaning))* .It seems that he still has problem with changing the form of verb to past participle when using passive structure. There was also another mistake made by him that is misspelling the word ((by)) for adding the actor of the sentence to the end of the sentence as ((be)). Such mistakes and also the frequency of using the passive voice in this writing shows that the learner has not learnt the passive voice structure yet completely and need to be taught more or even more explicitly to be able to appreciate passivization. Learner C also had the same problem like the learner B. He just used the structure of passive voice one time. ((The house was buld by two man))* . Again he misused the form of the past participle and because of not knowing this rule that the verbs should be changed to past participle while being used in passive voice, he just used the simple form of the verb without any changing in the form of which, again it can be assumed that this learner also does not know the grammatical rule of passive voice. Maybe it was only based on chance that he used the passive structure once in his writing. Student D used the structure under study several times correctly. For example ((The house is being painted by one of them)) or ((Flowers are being watered by one woman)). These sentences show that clearly this learner has learnt the passive structure and is able to use this structure in his writing. It should be mentioned also that not only has he used the correct form of passive structure but also surprisingly he knows the more complex structure of passive present continuous. For example the original sentence was ((One of them is painting the house)) and he just transformed the active sentence which is in present continuous tense to passive voice ((The house is being painted by one of them)) in passive present continuous tense. Learner E used the correct form of passive verb whether from the point of view of word order in passive voice or from the aspect of subject verb agreement and also from the view of tense. The only mistake that he made is that he could not transform the correct form of the verb into past participle in the verb of ((rebuild)) since he, instead of writing ((is rebuilt)), wrote wrongly ((is rebuild*)). It can also be inferred that like learner A he overgeneralised the rule of adding ((ed)) to the end of regular verbs to make the past participle form. He used this rule wrongly even for irregular verbs like rebuild the form of past participle of which is ((rebuilt)) not ((rebulided))* . So, intralingual errors also can easily affect the process of learning of a second language learner. In the process of evaluating the learners' writing based on the frequency of using passive voice, we encountered an interesting point. Learner F used passive voice once in his writing with the correct word order that is necessary in passive structure but there was a new mistake made by this learner. He used the verb in past participle form without using the ((To be)) verb along with. The sentence is ((the house painted and repair or renewed by

men's))* .If we ignore the other grammatical mistakes that he made like incorrect use of ((men's))* instead of correct form ((men))we can assume that this learner also has not fully comprehended the passive structure. Again the last learner among those who used the passive voice structure used this structure just once and to some extent wrongly. The sentence is ((the house is painting by the man))* .He observed all the rules that are essential in changing the active sentences into passive sentences except the correct use of past participle of the verb. He was unable to change the form of the main verb to passive form and instead of writing ((is being painted)) wrote ((is painting))* .The percentage of participants who made mistakes using passive voice has been shown in the bar chart. As it was mentioned before, the participants were from the country where they share the same mother tongue in order to get the more appropriate results. When they were asked if they had the same structure of active and passive voice in their first language they confirmed that there is a structure of active and passive voice in their first language. The student translates the sentence “*the house is painted by Ali*” to show the structure in their mother tongue.

A: The house is painted by Ali.

B: Ali paints the house.

A.a: Gurigawaxaranjiyeeye Ali.

Lit: House is painted by Ali.

B.b: Ali aayaranjiyeeyeguriga.

Lit: Ali s paint house.

As seen in these examples, the examinees also have the structure of passive voice in their first language. ((waxaranjiyeey)) that is translated ((is painted)) in English .The word order of the moving the object of the active sentence to the beginning of the passive sentence also follows the same rules of English passive structure. From the aspect of passive voice of the verb also they have ((waxaranjiyeey)) replacing with ((is painted)). When they were asked to say the three parts of a verb form they answered as follows:

Paint:ranjipainted:ranjiyeypainted:ranjiyeey

This example was about the regular verb forms .About the irregular ones they also gave an example:

Eat: cuno ate: cuneey eaten: cunteeyay

So it is obvious that in Somali language also there are two types of verbs (regular and irregular). According to Chomsky (1956) the languages share some features that are common in all, called as principles and some features that are different from one language to another language, called as parameters. So it can be seen that in Somali language also the passive voice structure is used like that one which is used in English. Furthermore, they have the same rules for three forms of verbs like simple past or past participle. Therefore it can be deduced that although they have the same rules for active and passive voice in their own language, they still are unable to comprehend the structure of passive to be able to use in their writing. Even having the same structures in both first and target languages could not affect efficiently in their kind of using the passive voice since just 7 out of 20 students used the passive voice in their writing and worse some of them just used this structure just once or twice in their writing that

it can be concluded that perhaps they used it just by chance or because of the immediate effect of explicit teaching about passive sentences that they received before sitting for writing section. Just 2 or 3 of them used the structure more than two times that can show that they learnt the structure well or even they already were familiar with this grammatical rule. As it can be understood sometimes the meaning of the original sentence will change after transforming to passive structure. The learners of second language like native speakers first have the active sentence in their competence which is counted as deep structure then after some changes in the deep structure by applying transformational rules, moving some parts of sentences and changing the position of the words in the sentence, the deep structure changes to surface structure, the one that is produced by speakers. Based on the textual metafunction the sentences can be analyzed by two elements theme and rheme. Halliday (1985) defines the theme as the most left constituent of a sentence and the rest is called as rheme. In declarative sentences if the subject of the sentence is in the position of theme, that theme is called unmarked theme, while if the theme of a sentence is not the subject of the sentence it will be called marked theme. So in passive sentences usually although the position of the object and subject will change but still the theme is the unmarked one. We noticed that all of those participants who were able to use passive structure used the unmarked ones just like native speakers when they acquire their mother tongue since it is believed that unmarked structures are easier to learn than marked ones. It seems that learning the unmarked structures is easier than marked ones. Furthermore, they could move the position of subject and object appropriately but still the problem that they encountered was the inability to change the form of the main verb into passive voice or they did not know the form of past participle.

5. Implications for teaching

5.1. Teaching Strategies and Techniques

Based on the analysis done on the students essay writing, it is concluded that the students are beginners in writing passive voice sentences. More surprisingly, most of them are not able to produce any passive sentences. This indicates a strong need to focus on the teaching of passive voice to this group of students. There are a lot of grammar teaching strategies that teachers have employed in classroom, such as charts, using realia, maps and drawings. However, these strategies must be conducted within activities which are suitable with the learners' level of proficiency. This particular group of students are beginners with passive structure, thus, the strategies that we have chosen are a set of activities that can be used to teach them in long term teaching. Below are some activities that could be employed to introduce them to the passive structure and gradually, the strategies will be meant to strengthen and test the students' knowledge of passive voice structure.

5.2 Flash cards

The flash cards should not be hard to understand as it will influence the students' anxiety level and their affective filter in case the target includes the young learners. Affective filter comprises the psychological state of the learner, such as motivation, needs, attitude and emotional state (Krashen, 1982). Therefore, the students would acquire the most in the state where he is motivated, has high confidence level, and low anxiety level during learning. Teachers could use these flash cards in various approaches in the classroom, for instance, *playing games* with the students would be a fun start for them to be introduced to this structure.

5.3 *Discrete point exercises and quizzes*

After being introduced to passive structure, the students should be able to answer some discrete point's quizzes and exercises to strengthen their knowledge.

5.4 *Classroom Games*

At this stage of learning, the students should be able to understand and use passive voice structure to some extent. Hence, teachers could employ other higher level teaching strategies to stimulate the students to practice the usage of passive structure. Games are one of the techniques that can be implemented even in university classroom. Classroom games not only liven up the context but also serve as an effective way to improve English language skills as well as the students' confidence at the same time. The heightened sensation or natural high that comes from competing, laughing and encouraging each other, makes students more receptive to further learning and retention (Tefl Spin, 2008).

5.5 *Integrating skills for one targeted area (passive voice)*

Another teaching technique and strategy that would extend the usage of passive voice is through integrating at least two skills in one lesson. This kind of lesson would further enhance the students' knowledge of the usage of passive voice in context. For instance, by often repeating the passive voice in various guises the students become comfortable with the use of the passive and can then go on to actually employ the passive voice in speaking.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this group of students is considered as beginners in using passive structure. Therefore, some teaching strategies have been suggested that could be employed in the language classes in order to enhance the level of proficiency of students in using passive structure. These strategies include using flash cards, discrete point quizzes, games and integrated skills classroom.

References

- Cam Lirette, ESL passive flashcards and worksheets. Retrieved April, 2, 2009, from http://bogglesworldesl.com/passive_voice_flashcards.htm
- Eli Hinkel, (2004) Tense, aspect and the passive voice in L1 and L2 academic texts
Language Teaching Research, Vol. 8, No. 1, 5-29
- ESL passive voice grammar quiz, Retrived April, 2, 2009, from <http://www.ESLgo.com>
- Halliday,M.(1985).An introduction to functional grammar .British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
- Krashen, S. (1982) *Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition*.New York. Pergamon Press.
- Lesson plan: Integrating Target Structure, Retrieved April 3, 2009, from www.about.comPerlmutter,D.and Postal,P.1977.Toward a universal characterization of passivization. In Proceedings of the Third Annual Meeting of the Berkely Linguistics Society, pp.157-189.
- Oller,J&Ziahosseiny,S.(1970).The contrastive analysis hypothesis and spelling errors. Language Learning, 20,183-189.

Richards, J. C. (1974). *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*, London: Longman (Reprinted in 1984).

Tefl-classroom-games-and-activities, Retrieved April, 3, 2009, from <http://www.teflspin.com/2008/03/tefl-classroom-games-and-activities.html>

Virvou, M. & Maras, D. (1999a). An intelligent multimedia tutor for English as a second language. In Collis, B. & Oliver, R. (Eds.) *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 99, World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications*, Vol. 2, Charlottesville, VA: AACE, 928-932.

Virvou, M. & Maras, D. (1999b). Error Diagnosis in an English Tutor. In Bullinger, H.-J. & Ziegler, J. (Eds.) *Human-Computer Interaction: Communication, Cooperation, and Application Design, Proceedings of the 8th International Conference on Human-Computer Interaction – HCI International '99*, Vol. 2, Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 657-661.

Virvou, M., Tsiriga, V. & Maras, D. (2000). Evaluation of an ITS for the Passive Voice of the English Language Using the CIAO! Framework. In Bourdeau J. & Heller R. (Eds.) *Proceedings of ED-MEDIA 2000, World Conference on Education Multimedia and Educational Telecommunications*, Charlottesville, VA: AACE, 1722-1723.