An Investigation into Errors in the English Passive Voice

Bui Thi Loc

Ho Chi Minh City, Viet Nam

ABSTRACT: Passive sentences, an important part of every English language teaching grammar syllabus, occur quite frequently in English and cause difficulties to the English learners in Vietnam because of the variety of structures and the complicated meaning in context. The results of the test show that the learners made errors in structures of complex passive, passive with Get and Have, and in progressive aspect. More significantly, the students made a lot of errors in meaning and use. The results from the test and the interview reveal that the causes of errors are: 1) **the effects of teaching or context of learning** (the students have not been taught the English passive voice at discourse level and the students lack of practice using the English passive in communication, the students are not introduced about Get passive and Have passive properly enough); 2) **the interlingual transfer ;** 3) **learning strategies.**

Key words: error, discourse level, interference, context, learning strategy

I. INTRODUCTION

Grammar has always played a crucial role in language teaching and learning. Language teachers and specialists are of the view that grammar can help first, second and foreign language learners develop linguistic competence. Grammar affects students' performance in all four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Littlewood (1994) mentioned that communication through correct grammar could help learners make a wider and more creative range of meaning choices. Thus he added that "through the grammatical system of language, then communication can become increasingly independent of its setting."

The passive sentences, an important part of every English language teaching grammar syllabus, present difficulty to many Vietnamese learners, especially students at the NAPA-HCM city. Although they have learned the passive voice since they were at secondary school, they still have difficulty using them. As Celce-Murcia claims "the English passive is a problem for non- English speakers, mainly with regard to usage. Even though ESL/EFL students can easily learn to form the passive, they have problems learning when to use it." And she explains some reasons for this "For most English learners, however, the passive will occur more frequently in English than in the learners' native language and there will be a wider variety of passive sentence types in English than in their own language."

Although there are several studies on the errors in the English passive voice, the findings are about errors in constructions and in the translation from the Vietnamese into English or vice versa. In fact, during the teaching process and observation the researcher realized that the students misused the voice or avoided using the passive voice in situations that it should be used. Besides, they had problem with other types of passive such as complex passive, get-passive and causative passive. Therefore, in order to have a thorough and particular insight into the problems that students face and how far towards the goal is the knowledge acquired, the researcher decided that there should be an in-depth analysis of errors in the English passive voice.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1. CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

According to Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D.(1983:226) there are four formally distinct kinds of passive sentences in English:

1. Simple passives with BE… EN*
    Mary was hit by John.
    Grapes are grown in that valley.
2. Simple passives with GET…EN
    Barry got invited to the party.
    John got hurt in the accident.
3. Complex passives with BE…EN

It is rumored that he will get the job.
That he will get the job has been decided .
John is thought to be intelligent,etc.
4.   Complex passives with HAVE …NP…EN
Hal has his car stolen last week.
Alice had her purse snatched while shopping downtown.

Parrott,M. (2000) divides passive constructions into two kinds: standard passive constructions and causative passive constructions.

We form standard passive consructions with a form of **be** (e.g. *is, has been, is going to be*) or **get** (e.g.*gets, got, will get*) followed by the past participle of the main verb.
The whole house was / got flooded.

In causative constructions, we use a form of **have** or **get** followed by an object and then the past participle of the main verb.
We had / got the whole house renovated.

1.2. Passives with GET

Susan Kesner(2003:224) states that GET commonly replaces BE in informal conversation. GET passives are often more dynamic and emotional than BE passives. Sentences with GET passives are usually about people rather than objects and especially about situations that people cannot control.

And as Celce-Murcia(1983:226) points out the BE passive is formal or neutral whereas the GET passive is colloquial and perhaps also suggests the emotional involvement of the speaker. The GET passive is more limited than the BE passive in that it can only be used with verbs denoting actions and processes, not states. This, of course, characterizes the fundamental difference between the two,i.e., GET emphasizes process while BE reports a state.

Carter et al (2000) suggests that GET passives are very common in spoken English, are likely to be used without an agent and are most often used when the speaker considers a situation adverse or problematic.

Parrott (2000) points out that we also choose Get to suggest :
•   that the action is unexpected, involuntary or possibly unwelcome. (*e.g: when he picked up the phone we got cut off.)*
•   an achievement based on something that has been built up beforehand .*(e.g,. She got elected.)*
•   an achievement in the face of difficulty.(e.g ,. *I finally got admitted to hospital.)*

1.3. Pseudo-passives with HAVE or GET

Pseudo –passives are formed with have / get + an object + past participle of the verb.

Pseudo –passives are common in informal English. They also have subjects which have things done for them, to them or which happen to them. Pseudo passives with **have** are normally used when somebody does something for you or when you arrange a service , usually by an expert or professional(Carter,R.2000:101).

According to Carter,R. and Mc Carthy,M.(2006), The **have** -pseudo-passive most typically enables a person affected by an action or event to be made the grammatical subject, thereby making that person the starting point for the message:
They had their keys stolen.
He had his window smashed.
The meaning may be causative or non- causative:
I don't mind paying to go to the dentist or to have my eyes checked
(causative: I make it happen)
My friend round the corner recently had his video stolen.
(non-causative: it was not his intention or aim)

2. MEANING AND USE OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

The English passive is a problem for non- English speakers. Mainly with regard to usage. Even though ESL/EFL students can easily learn to form the passive, they have problems learning when to use it (Celce-Murcia, M. and Larsen Freeman, D. :1983: 221). In order to come to a thorough understanding the use of the English passive, some linguists give out some guidelines that help us to clear our confusion.
Susan Kesner(2003) provides some reasons for using the passive voice:
•   Use the passive when the receiver or result of an action is more important than the agent. The passive is often used in descriptions of results or processes involving things rather than people.
•   Agentless passives are used when the agent is unimportant, unknown,or obvious.
•   The agentless passive is used to avoid very general subjects such as people, someone, we, one, and impersonal you and they. The passive often sounds more indirect or impersonal.

• Sometimes the agentless passive is used to avoid taking responsibility for an action or to avoid blaming another person.e.g., A boss speaking to his employees: *A serious error was made in the payroll*. (The boss deliberately doesn't say who made the error.)

• Passive are often used without agents if the agent is unimportant, unknown, or obvious. However, the agent is necessary when it is surprising or unexpected.e.g.,*The mail has been delivered* <u>*by an*</u> <u>*experimental robot*</u> (The agent is surprising.). *We were given six pages of homework* <u>*by a substitute teacher*</u>.(The agent is unexpected.)

• An agent is used to provide additional or new information.e.g., *You will be notified about the exam date* <u>*by e-mail*</u>.

• An agent is used to complete the meaning of the sentence or to add important information-especially a proper noun, such as the name of an author, artist, composer, inventor, or designer.e.g.,*Washington, D.C. was designed by Pierre L'Enfant.*

• Academic discourse, such as textbooks and other factual materials, tends to focus on objects, processes,and results. Such materials try to present an objective and impersonal perspective to convey a sense of authority. To express this tone, writers often use passive expressions with it-subjects (e.g., It is expected that) as well as other passive constructions.e.g., It is generally agreed that people can learn something much more rapidly the second time.

• In public discourse, such as newspaper headlines, public announcements, and signs, the passive is used to convey an objective or impersonal tone. The passive often sounds more formal, factual, or authoritative. E.g., *Over 100 People Injured by Aftershocks.*(Newspaper Headlines) or *Passengers are requested to remain seated.*(Announcement on an Airplane)

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman(1983:228) also provide us some guidelines concerning when to use the passive :

The passive is often used:

▪ When the agent is redundant,i.e., easy to supply, and therefore not expressed.e.g.:*Oranges are grown in California.*

▪ When the writer wants to emphasize the receiver or result of the action.e.g.: *Six people were killed by the tornado*.

▪ When the writer wants to make a statement sound objective without revealing the source of information.e.g.: *It is assumed/believed that he will announce his candidacy soon.*

▪ When the writer wants to be tactful or evasive by not mentioning the agent or when he or she cannot or will not identify the agent.e.g.: *Based on the total figure, it appears that an error was made in the budget.*

▪ When the writer wishes to retain the same grammatical subject in successive clauses, even though the function of the noun phrase changes from agent to theme.e.g.:*George Foreman beat Joe Frazier, but he was beaten by Muhammad Ali.*

▪ When the passive is more appropriate than the active (usually in complex sentences).e.g.: *The results of this second language learning experiment tend to confirm the hypothesis that students learn in distinctively different ways as was suggested by Bogen, Paivio, Cohen and Witkin.*(In this context the passive is more appropriate than the active,since the hypothesis, which is the theme and also the NP of primary importance, can be fully stated before the writer mentions the source authors (i.e.,agents), who are of secondary importance here.

▪ When the theme is given information and the agent is new information.e.g*.: What a lovely scarf !*
Thank you. It was given to me by Pam.

Besides, many linguistists such as Parrott,M.(2000), Carter,R. et al (2006), Azar (1981),Jacobs(1993) give us the same 'Rules of thumb' as the above- mentioned rules which focus on particular contexts of use and particular verbs.

To sum up, with all these complications, there is no surprise that the passive voice presents difficulty for non-native speakers. While we usually do need to give learners plenty of practice in forming passive constructions correctly, we also need to encourage learners both to notice and understand when and why we choose them, and how often we use them. We also need to encourage them to use the constructions in appropriate contexts themselves.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Research design

In order to prove into the errors in the English passive and the causes of these errors, a survey research using a grammar proficiency test and interviews are employed in this study. The research is conducted using descriptive method. It is claimed by Seliger and Shohamy(1989) that descriptive research involves a collection of techniques used to specify, delineate, or describe naturally occurring phenomena without experimental manipulation.

2. Instruments

A self-designed test was carried out to find out the most common errors in the English passive. The test was the main instrument consisting of three parts with 52 questions. The test employed different kinds of test including judgement test, multiple choice, translation, error identification and transform.

After the data was collected and computed and errors were classified , interviews were conducted with the hope that some sources of errors would be revealed.

3.Subjects

 The target subjects of the study consisted of 106 randomly selected third-year students from three classes of National Academy of Politics and Public administration- HCM city in the hope that the sample will be representative of the population and the researcher may generalize results to a population.

IV. RESULTS

The results from the test revealed that students could perform more than half of the number of the questions in the test (X=6823; SD= .10072; Min=.38; Max=.85). This suggests that around 32% of the students had problems with the passive voice. Table 4.1 and table 4.2 show us the facts.

One-Sample Statistics

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
MEAN	106	.6823	.10072	.00978

One-Sample Test

	Test Value = .50					
					95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
	t	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Lower	Upper
MEAN	18.637	105	.000	.1823	.1629	.2017

Table 4.1: *Results from one sample t-test*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Range	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MEAN	106	.46	.38	.85	.6823	.10072
Valid N (listwise)	106					

Table 4.2: *Descriptive statistics of the test*

- **What are the common types of errors found? To what extend do students have problems with the form of the passive voice? The meaning and use of the passive voice?**
- **What are the common errors found?**

The statistics indicates that the subject students had problems with the meaning and use of the passive voice(X=.5451; Min=.28; Max=.83; SD=.11034). About 45% of students made errors in the meaning and use. Most of the students performed well in the form of the passive. The results are illustrated in Table 4.3 as follows:

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
FORM	106	.30	.97	.7560	.12426
MEANING AND USE	106	.28	.83	.5451	.11034
Valid N (listwise)	106				

Table 4.3: *Table of errors in form, meaning and use*

To what extend do students have problems with the meaning and use of the English passive voice?

In order to have a particular look into the errors in meaning and use of the English passive voice, errors in the meaning and use are taken into considered and categorized into categories according to the meaning and use of the passive voice as follows: errors in respect of focus, errors in passive with agent, errors in agentless passive, errors in respect of objectivity, and errors in respect of verbs. The second pie chart and Table 4.4 will illustrate types of error in meaning and use.

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MEANFOCU	106	.00	1.00	.5445	.17201
AGENTLES	106	.00	1.00	.3443	.30365
MEANAGEN	106	.00	1.00	.7075	.27488
OBJECTIV	106	.00	1.00	.4811	.38374
MEANVERB	106	.00	1.00	.6226	.21790
Valid N (listwise)	106				

Table 4.4: *Error types in the meaning and use of the English passive*

(Note: MEANFOCU: mean of respect of focus; AGENTLES: mean of agentless passive; MEANAGEN: mean of passive with agent; OBJECTIV: mean of respect of objectivity; MEANVERB: mean of respect of verbs)

- **To what extend do the students have problems with form of the English passive voice?**

In general, the students performed well in form of the passive (X=.7560; Min=30; Max=97; SD= .12426). However, the statistics shows that the correct answers are too heterogeneous or spread out . Most of students could easily form simple passive sentences with to be, nevertheless, many of them had problems with complex passive (M=.6761; SD=.33949), passives with Have(M=.3679;SD=.37354) and passives with Get(M=.1321;SD=.27862). The results are shown in table 4.5.

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
PROASPEC	106	.00	1.00	.7170	.35869
COMPLEXP	106	.00	1.00	.6761	.33949
HAVEPASS	106	.00	1.00	.3679	.37354
GETPASSI	106	.00	1.00	.1321	.27862
Valid N (listwise)	106				

Table 4.5: *Errors in form of the English passive*
(Note: PROASPEC = progressive aspect; COMPLEXP=complex passive; HAVEPASS = Have-passive; GETPASSI = Get-passive)

V. DISCUSSION

From the results, it was found that students made more errors related to the meaning and use of the passive voice than those related to the form of the passive voice. Some possible interpretations may be put forward as follows:

First, inadequate instruction can be a factor that accounts for the students' lack of knowledge of the passive voice which were the main cause of errors found. Inadequate instruction (e,g. Some guidelines in using the passive voice; some types of passive voice were not taught) may explain why many students did not know when and why to use the passive voice in many situations as well as some complicated forms of the passive voice such as Get-passive, Have-passive, complex passive. If the students were better instructed , they would use the passive voice more efficiently.

Parrott (2000) claims that for most learners, knowing when to use passive constructions is the greatest problem. And they often don't use them where they would be appropriate. In addition, errors in choosing the wrong auxiliary verb, choosing the wrong verb, leaving out auxiliary verbs and errors in word order in causative constructions are mentioned by Parrott (2000). According to him, learners sometimes mix up *be, been, being* as in: *Our house is be renovated* or *Their documents haven't being accepted.*

Also, learners sometimes try to construct a passive form of no- object verbs. For instance, *he was died in 1963*. In 'causative' constructions, *have* or *get* is typically put right after past participle. For example: *I am going to have cut my hair this afternoon* or *She got mended her suitcase.*

Second, the input process might not be long enough for the material taught to be activated in the long-term memory. This may explain why there was a lack of retention as confirmed by the students in this study. Moreover, the time restraint can be a factor that hinders teachers from providing activities for practicing the passive voice. If more practice is done, more retention will be attained.

Third, language interference might be a contributory factor to the errors in this study. From the results, it is proved that the habit of translating sentences with "bị /được" into English leads to the tendency to treat any sentences containing these words as passive (e,g. I was got good marks for English or They were accidented by car last week). Language interference, however, cannot be fully expressed through these examples. It affects the learners in many aspects such as the habits of using the active voice instead of the passive voice, the absence of some types of the passive in Vietnamese etc…Swan and Smith (1987) point out that it is characteristic of Vietnamese learners of English that they avoid using passive forms, and it is sometimes hard to convince them that English passives entail no special difficulties. They also tend to equate Vietnamese '**do**' with the English word '**by'**, which they are, in consequence, liable to misuse.

Fourth, exaggeration of the complexity of the passive can lead to the sacrifice of important issues related to the use of the passive voice. Half of the teachers claimed that the complication of the passive voice confused the students. Therefore, they just introduced simple passive with to be to the students. Besides, they focused on forms more than on the functions of the passive voice.

In conclusion, the results of the test and the interviews reveal some common errors in the English passive voice of the students at NAPA and some possible causes of these errors as well as the views of the teachers and students on the errors found. Generally, the errors are due to the effect of teaching and the language interference because the main cause of errors is the students' inadequate knowledge of the passive voice and the habit of using active sentences. And as far as the teachers' and students' views are concerned, there is a consensus of opinion on the problems that the students encounter and on the causes. Besides, the modest relationship between the students' linguistic competence and the errors in the passive voice shows that able students still have problems in the passive voice.

REFERENCE

[1]. Azar, Betty Schrampfer (1989): *Understanding and Using English Grammar*. Longman.
[2]. Bland, Susan Kesner(2003): Grammar Sense 3. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
[3]. Bygate, M.; Tonkyn, A. and William, E. (1994): *Grammar and The Language Teacher*. Prentice Hall.
[4]. Brown, J.D. (2001): *Using Surveys in Language Programs*. Cambridge: CUP
[5]. Brown, J.D. (2005): *Testing in Language Programs*. Mc Graw-Hill Education.
[6]. Brown, H.D (2000): *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*. Longman: Pearson Education.
[7]. Carter, R. and Mc Carthy, M. (2006) : *Cambridge Grammar of English*. Cambridge: CUP.
[8]. Carter, R.; Hughes, R. and Michael (2000): *Exploring Grammar In Context*. Cambridge: CUP.
[9]. Celce – Murcia, M. and Larsen-Freeman, D.(1983): *The Grammar Book: An ESL/ EFL Teacher's Course.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House.
[10]. Celce-Murcia, M. and Olshtain, E. (2000): *Discourse and Context in Language Teaching*. Cambridge: CUP
[11]. Ellis, Rod (1997): *Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP
[12]. Ellis, Rod (1985): *Understanding Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: OUP
[13]. Finch, G. (2000): *Linguistic Terms and Concepts*. London: Macmillan Press Ltd.
[14]. Jacobs, R.A. (1993): *English Syntax: A Grammar For English Language Professionals*. First News
[15]. Parrott, M. (2000): *Grammar For English Teacher*. Cambridge : CUP
[16]. Richards, J. C. (1974-1994): *Error Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language Acquisition*. Longman: Longman Group Ltd.
[17]. Sandra, N. E. (2005): *Grammar In Context 3*. Thomson Heinle
[18]. Swan, M. and Smith, B. (1987): Learner English. Cambridge: CUP
[19]. Seliger, H.W and Shohamy, E. (1989): Second Language Research Methods. Oxford: OUP