

## **Problems Encountered by Students at al-Amal Secondary School in Using Passive Voice in Written English**

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**Abstract:** *The present paper entitled "Problems Encountered by Students at al-Amal Secondary School in Using Passive Voice in Written English". It's conducted to investigate and analyze the errors encountered by some al-Amal Secondary School students at third year at English Specialization in Aljmeil, Libya, in using passive voice in written English, in order to find out the main causes behind the errors committed, which may affect their learning of English. The results of the study show that most Secondary School students at al-Amal, in Aljmeil, encounter difficulties and committee errors in using passive voice in written English, these difficulties were systematic errors such as interference of the Mother tongue, over-generalization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesised*

**Key words:** *passive voice, EFL, written English, Libyan EFL Learning*

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### **I. Introduction**

The term "voice," as a linguistic category, indicates the relationship between the subject of a sentence and its verb. In English, there are two voices, namely; active and passive. Palmer (1980:190)

If the subject of a sentence performs the action of the verb, the verb is said to be in the "active voice"; for example: I stopped. I bathed.

On the other hand, if the subject is acted upon by the verb, the verb is said to be in the "passive voice." There are two ways of casting a verb in the passive voice in English so as to cause the subject to be acted upon by its verb: The first and foremost way is by using a form of the verb to be and the "past participle" of the lexical verb: The window was broken.

Past participle refers to the form of the verb which usually ends with -ed, -ne and -en: stopped, gone, written plus all 3<sup>rd</sup> column of the irregular verbs. I was stopped. = (Someone stopped me.) I was bathed. = (Someone bathed me.). The second, and less common way is by using a form of the verb 'to get' and the past participle of the verb: I got stopped. (= Someone stopped me.)

This second variant is often called the "get-passive." It is used in less formal situations, and its use is restricted to a small number of verbs such as: get killed, get stuck, get hurt, get burned, get shot, get arrested, get paid. Quirk et al (1992) define the passive as: "..... a grammatical category which makes it possible to view the action of a sentence in two ways, without change in the facts reported". Huddleston (1998) considers an active/passive pair as having the same propositional meaning. The only difference between them in this area could be in the level of the manifestation: "..... an active / passive pair ..... have the same propositional meaning, because under certain more or less complex circumstances there may be differences with respect to this area of meaning". (ibid)

Thus Huddleston (1998) considers voice as a system which produces some sort of differences in the role of the meaning played by the subject: "' voice', as a general linguistic term, is applied to systems yielding such variation in the semantic role associated with the subject".

According to Crystal, (1997), passive constructions have been defined vis – avis active constructions and thus regarded as a deviation from the syntactic norm. Syntactically they may differ from actives in word, case marking, verbal morphology and in the appearance of some additional word or particle. Eckersley, (1960) stresses the fact that passive and active sentences are not one pair: "..... it should be emphasized here, that contrary to popular opinion, the form of the verb employed in the resultative " as well as stative " construction, i.e. the perfect participle, is not derived from active transitive verbs, but rather from verb roots not marked for voice".

He goes on to support his opinion by stating: "..... We can note that the prepositional phrase introduced by the preposition "BY" can be added to a stative construction without necessary adding a dynamic feature to the cognitive structure". To support the above view Anderson(1998) gives the following example: The town is surrounded by a forest .

He argues that the above sentence is purely static; it doesn't express an event of surrounding and the resulting state, but only the resulting state.

From personal point of view, which has developed out of my four years experience as a teacher of EFL and a teaching assistant of EFL, EFL teacher's practices in Libya schools are far from teaching strategies. Rather, EFL teachers spend the time devoted with instructing the students in how to change active constructions into the passive and vice versa, and involving the grammatical rules required for this change.

Because of this huge gap between the world's rapid movement toward teaching skills and strategies and the reality of teaching instructions in Libya, because of this thought, and according to my experience as an EFL teacher, I think most second language learners at Libyan University Schools encounter problems in learning English passive voice. A lot of researchers and teachers have tried to discover possible methods to help students understand the English grammatical rules successfully. There are many factors which affect the proficiency of a second language grammar. Some of these factors are text types, school and social environments, students' intelligence, learning motivation, teaching methods, learning strategies, some systematic errors and so on. I believe that some systematic errors such as (interference of the Mother tongue, over-generalization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesised) are the most important factors.

Therefore, I am conducting this study to To show the difficulties and problems encountered by some Libyan students in using passive voice in written English, To identify the source of difficulties committed by the participants, and also To present some recommendations and remedies for teacher to get rid of the main difficulties faced by the learners. And to do so, I will use Tests to find out students' mastery to use the passive voice in writing. Moreover, these tests will be used to determine the difficulties which the students face. And English language teachers will be given questionnaires to find out what they could contribute to this problem.

#### **Aims of the study**

- To show the difficulties and problems encountered by some Libyan students in using passive voice in written English.
- To identify the source of difficulties committed by the participants.
- To present some recommendations and remedies for teacher to get rid of the main difficulties faced by the learners.

#### **Hypothesis of the study**

- Libyan students commit errors when they change active sentences to passive.
- Most errors are related to tense and omission of -ed from past participle.
- Most of the students can't distinguish the object from the other parts of the sentence.
- Teachers are mainly concerned with instructing the students in how to change active constructions into the passive and vice versa, and involving the grammatical rules required for this change.

#### **Methodology of the study**

##### **Sample:**

The subjects of this study are Arabic native speakers. English is their major in secondary school. They are third year students at Alamal school. The number of students included in this study is (50). Choice of this level is based on the assumption that the students have been exposed to the use of passive voice through the previous years of study in the Secondary school. Twelve teachers from the same school were the test conducted will be given a questionnaire.

##### **Procedure:**

Data collection for this research involved two techniques; tests for students and a questionnaire for teachers. The reason behind using these techniques is to obtain both reliability and validity in the collected research data. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) state that "many sources of data are better in a study than a single source, because multiple sources lead to a fuller understanding of the phenomena you are studying". Therefore, two sources of data collection, namely tests and questionnaires were adopted in order to obtain a greater level of validity.

##### **Students' Test:**

In this study, students were handed an achievement test that includes three sets of questions. The time devoted to answer this test was two hours. The first set of questions includes (20) items. It is a multiple choice test. Students were asked to underline the right answer out of three choices. This test is to identify the learner's errors in using tense while they are forming passive sentences. The second set of questions includes (10) items. In this set, students were asked to underline the object. This test is to examine students' ability to extract the object from the other parts of the sentence.

The final set of questions includes (10) items, consisting of two parts, each part consist of five items. The first part contains five sentences and students were asked to change these sentences into passive, on the other hand,

the other part contains passive voice sentences and students were asked to change these sentences into active. This test is to examine students' performance in forming active and passive sentences.

#### **Teachers' questionnaire:**

A Questionnaire has been used in this study to serve as a research tool in eliciting supplementary source data. Twelve copies of the questionnaire were distributed in self-addressed envelopes many of which were completed on the spot, while the rest were sent back to the researcher. Teachers' questionnaire contained fourteen questions. All these questions focus on the major points related to passive voice. The questions fall into two types: yes / no questions and questions which require comments from teachers. The choice of questions were based on or related to the researcher's experience in the teaching field, as well as the researcher's familiarities with the curriculum of third year students. The teachers' questionnaire was distributed to twelve teachers in both sexes in the same school where the students' test was conducted. Teachers' answers have been given a special number. The main objectives of the teachers' questionnaire were to show the teachers' point of view regarding the ability of students in learning and understanding passive voice as well as to show to what extent teachers focus on passive voice during their teaching at third year stage at the specialized secondary school. Moreover, teachers were asked to give their comments about the main problems they face in teaching passive voice at third year stage. Teachers were requested to read every question and then answer it as spontaneously as possible. Discussion and results of the questionnaire are provided later.

#### **Identifications of Errors:**

Interference from the mother tongue is clearly a major source of difficulty in second language learning. Many errors, however, derive from the strategies employed by the learner in language acquisition, and from the mutual interference of items within the target language. There are other sources of errors as identified by Richard (1974:174-76) these include: (1). Intralingual transfer (over-generalization) (2). Ignorance of rule restrictions (3). Incomplete application of rules. (4). False concepts hypothesized.

#### **Intralingual transfer ( over-generalization )**

Intralingual transfer refers to the learners' use of prior knowledge of the target language itself in the process of learning the L2. when learners progress in the L2, their previous experience or linguistic knowledge begins to involve structures within the L2 itself. Ellis (1996) e.g. goed, taked, speaked, hitted.

#### **Ignorance of Rule Restrictions**

This refers to generalization or transfer , since the learner is making use of a previously acquired rule in a new situation where they ignore the restrictions of that rule. It is failure to observe the restrictions of existing structures, that is, the application of rules to contexts where they do not apply. E.g. This is not fit to drink it. Richard (1974)

#### **Incomplete application of rules:**

This is related to the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of the rules required to produce acceptable utterances. E.g. the students, response (it cost one dollar. For the teacher's question How much does it cost?). Richard (1974)

#### **False concepts hypothesized:**

This type of errors is considered as an intralingual error in which learners can not distinguish between the correct items and the incorrect ones. It is a class of developmental error which derive from faulty comprehension of distinctions in the target language. e.g. He is speaks French. Richard (1974)

#### **Data analysis :**

The aim of data analysis is to discuss errors made by some Alamal Alakhder Secondary school students, in Aljmeil, in using passive voice in written English, and find out whether these errors can be attributed to the learners' lack of knowledge, ignorance of grammar rules and interference of the mother tongue or other causes.

#### **The results of the Students' test**

The following table shows the results of the first set of questions (the multiple choice). These results were arranged in one table containing the right responses as well as the wrong responses, and the percentage of the right answers and the wrong answers were calculated for each item (see table 1).

**Table 1:** shows the results of students relating to tense

| No | The items  | Correct answers | Percent | Incorrect answers | Percent |
|----|--|-----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|
| 1. | The bus (was stopped-is stopped-stopped) by us                     | 40              | 80%     | 10                | 20%     |
| 2. | Blue shoes(wear-are worn-were worn) by us.                         | 32              | 64%     | 18                | 36%     |
| 3. | The car (was washed-is being washed-is washed) by my father.       | 14              | 28%     | 36                | 72 %    |
| 4. | A new computer (was bought-is being bought-will be bought) by Ali. | 06              | 12 %    | 44                | 88 %    |
| 5. | The question ( is being –can be-could be) answered by me.          | 40              | 80 %    | 10                | 20 %    |
| 6. | I (was hit – hit – hitted ) by some body                           | 20              | 40 %    | 30                | 60 %    |
| 7. | The guitar (is played-was being played-is being played) by her.    | 33              | 66 %    | 17                | 34 %    |
| 8. | The key ( had been-have been-has been) lost by us.                 | 17              | 34 %    | 33                | 66 %    |
| 9. | A song ( is sung-was sung-is being sung) by her.                   | 44              | 88 %    | 06                | 12 %    |
| 10 | The door (was opened-is opened-opened) by him.                     | 40              | 80 %    | 10                | 20 %    |

The above table shows the results of the students' performance with reference to the use of the correct tense. Items (1),(fit to drink it. Richard (1974) Incomplete application of rules: This is related to the occurrence of structures whose deviancy represents the degree of development of to be create less learning problems, whereas sentences that have progressive and perfect forms of the verb to be create more learning problems in learning passive voice as in items (3),(4),(6),(7),and (8). The following table illustrates the results of the second set of the test. The correct answers were calculated as well as the incorrect answers. The results were also arranged in a table containing the percentage for each item(see table2)

**Table 2:** Shows the result of students relating to parts of the sentence.

| No | The items                   | Correct answers | Percentage | Incorrect answers | Percentages | Per No answer |
|----|-----------------------------|-----------------|------------|-------------------|-------------|---------------|
| 1. | I draw a picture            | 45              | 90 %       | 5                 | 10 %        | -             |
| 2. | Ali broke the window        | 41              | 81 %       | 9                 | 19 %        | -             |
| 3. | We might play cards         | 26              | 52 %       | 24                | 48 %        | -             |
| 4. | They have a nice house      | 00              | 00 %       | 49                | 98%         | 2%            |
| 5. | I have eaten a hamburger    | 39              | 78 %       | 11                | 22 %        | -             |
| 6. | We are not playing football | 41              | 82 %       | 9                 | 18 %        | -             |
| 7. | He must fill in the form    | 42              | 84 %       | 8                 | 16 %        | -             |
| 8. | She gave her sister the car | 35              | 70 %       | 15                | 30 %        | -             |
| 9. | My shoes don't fit me       | 00              | 00 %       | 48                | 96%         | 4%            |
| 10 | She was watching the film   | 40              | 80 %       | 10                | 20 %        | -             |

This question was related to the parts of the sentence in order to determine students' ability to distinguish between different parts of the sentence. The table above shows the results of the students' performance in doing so.

The results of the students' answers in items (1) and (2) show that students faced less difficulties to distinguish between the subject, the verb, and the object.

The following table shows the results of the first part of the third set of questions. In this question, students were asked to change five sentences from active voice to passive. The correct answers were calculated as well as the incorrect answers. The results were also arranged in a table containing the percentage for each item. ( see table 3-A)

**Table 3 – A:** Shows the results of students relating to active voice.

| No | The sentences                         | Correct answers | Percent | Incorrect answers | Percent | Per No answer |
|----|---------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------------|
| 1. | Libya produces oil                    | 14              | 28 %    | 36                | 72 %    | -             |
| 2. | Many people burn Coal in their houses | 12              | 24 %    | 37                | 74 %    | 2 %           |
| 3. | Ali plays Tennis                      | 11              | 22 %    | 36                | 72 %    | 6 %           |
| 4. | Ahmed broke the window                | 31              | 62 %    | 18                | 36 %    | 2 %           |
| 5. | Asma wrote a letter to me             | 6               | 12 %    | 43                | 86 %    | 2 %           |

The following table illustrates the results of the second part of the third set of the test. Students were asked to change five sentences from passive to active. The correct answers and incorrect answers were calculated, and the results also were arranged in a table including the percentage for each item. ( see table 3-B )

**Table 3-B:** shows the results of students relating to passive voice.

| No. | The sentences                        | Correct answers | Percent | Incorrect answers | Percent | Per No answer |
|-----|--------------------------------------|-----------------|---------|-------------------|---------|---------------|
| 1.  | The door is opened by him            | 37              | 74 %    | 13                | 26 %    | -             |
| 2.  | The car is being washed by my father | 30              | 30 %    | 20                | 70 %    | -             |
| 3.  | The bill has been paid by my father  | 23              | 20 %    | 22                | 70 %    | 10 %          |
| 4.  | The window was opened by Amina       | 15              | 30 %    | 34                | 68 %    | 2 %           |
| 5.  | A song was sung by her               | 20              | 40 %    | 29                | 58 %    | 2 %           |

**The results of the teachers' questionnaire**

**In question one**, teachers were asked about the period of teaching English. Eight teachers (66.6%) answered that they had been teaching English for one to three years, four teachers (33.3%) answered that they had the experience of teaching English more than seven years.

**In question two**, teachers were asked if they have been trained in teaching grammar, the majority of teachers (83%) answered that they have been in a training programme, only one teacher answered that she hadn't been in such programme.

**Question three**, teachers were asked which area they concentrate on in teaching grammar i.e.(form-use-or both). A high number of teachers (92%) answered that they focus on both(form and use) while there is only one teacher who said she focuses on form in teaching grammar.

**Question four**, teachers were asked if the course they deal with include passive voice or not. All teachers said yes.

**Question five** was concerned with whether teachers include passive voice in all class lessons or not. Nine teachers (75%) answered that they focus on passive voice during the class lessons, but three teachers(25%) answered that they are not sure if they do focus or not.

**In question six**, teachers were asked if students understand the meaning of passive voice or not. Four teachers (33.3%) answered that some students can easily understand the meaning of passive voice, while eight teachers (66.6%) answered that students can't understand the meaning of passive voice very easily.

**In question seven**, teachers were asked whether the grammatical structure of passive voice is easy for the students or not. Four teachers (33.3%) answered that learning the grammatical structure of passive voice for the students is quit easy, while eight teachers (66.6%) gave negative answer i.e. learning the grammatical structure for students is difficult.

**Question eight** was concerned with whether the students find difficulties to change passive voice sentences to active or not. Most teachers (83.3%) answered that all third year students face a great difficulties to change sentences from active to passive, while two teachers answered that their students don't encounter any difficulties in doing such exercise. In this question teachers were also asked to support their answers with their own comments:

- one teacher said that students do not know the rule of forming verb to be in all tenses.
- Learning tenses was mentioned by five teachers to be the cause of students' difficulties to change passive sentences to active.
- Another teacher answered that students lack the knowledge about the grammar of English language.
- Two teachers said that it is difficult for students to distinguish between parts of speech.
- One teacher said that students have difficulties in learning and memorizing the past participle of verbs.

**Question nine** was concerned with the students' ability to distinguish the object from the other parts of the sentence. Eight teachers (66.6%) answered that most students can't distinguish the object from the other parts of the sentence, three teachers(25%) answered that their students were able to distinguish the object from parts of sentence. One teacher gave no answer.

**In question ten**, teachers were asked if they teach their students how to form passive voice and in what way?. The result was completely positive, all teachers (100%) answered that they teach their students passive voice, and give the same steps to form it. The passive of an active tense is formed by putting the verb to be into the same tense as the active verb and add the past participle of the active verb and the subject of the active verb becomes the agent of the passive verb:

Subject + finite verb of to be + past participle.

**In Question eleven**, teachers were asked about the method they see appropriate for teaching grammar. Eight teachers (66.6%) answered that they depend on Grammar Translation Method in teaching grammar, while two teachers answered that they use communicative approach in teaching grammar, and two teachers gave no answer.

**Question twelve**, teachers were asked if the knowledge of passive voice in Arabic help your students to understand the meaning of passive voice or not. Eight teachers (66.6%) answered that the knowledge of passive voice in the mother tongue helps our students to learn passive voice in English, while two teachers answered negatively and the other two teachers gave no answer.

**Question thirteen** was concerned about whether students encounter problems in using passive voice in writing or not. The result was completely positive i.e. all teachers (100%) answered that all students encounter problems in using passive voice in written English.

**Question fourteen** was concerned with the way teachers follow to teach passive voice in the classroom. The result was different from teacher to teacher. Eight teachers (66.6%) answered that they give the main steps followed to change active sentences to passive i.e. the object of the active sentence becomes the subject of the passive sentence, the finite form of the verb is changed (to be + p.p) and the subject of the active sentence becomes the object of the passive sentence. Teachers' mother tongue (Arabic) is also used in the class room to explain the same steps and to give alternative example in Arabic. Two teachers (16.6%) answered that they give some details about parts of speech and memorize some verbs in the infinitive and some verbs in the third column of irregular verb, as well as the main steps followed to change active sentences to passive. Two teachers (16.6%) gave no comments on the way they use to teach passive voice in the classroom.

## **II. Discussion**

### **The analysis of the students' errors**

According to the results obtained and the analysis of these results, it can be said that some students still encounter some difficulties and committee errors in using passive voice in written English.

These difficulties are attributed to different causes such as: intralingual transfer (over-generalization), ignorance of grammar rules, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized.

The first major source of errors committed by students is over-generalization, and the second major source of errors is ignorance of rule restrictions,

### **The Results of the teachers' questionnaire:**

From the analysis of the teachers' questionnaire, the following results are arrived at:

The majority of teachers (66.6%) answered that learning the grammatical structure of passive voice is very difficult for their students. The same percentage i.e.( 66.6%) said that Arabic Language plays a positive role in teaching passive voice. 75% of the teachers focus on passive voice and its meaning during the book topics. While the majority of teachers said that students can not understand the meaning of passive voice very easily. 85% of the teachers answered that all 3<sup>rd</sup> year students face great difficulties to change sentences from active to passive and vice versa. Eight teachers (66.6%) are still dependant on Grammar Translation Method in teaching grammar.

The results of the teachers' questionnaire confirm that most Secondary school students at Alamal alakhder, in Aljmeil, commit errors and face difficulties in learning and understanding the meaning of passive voice in written English.

## **III. Conclusion**

This study shows that most Secondary School students at al-Amal, in Aljmeil, encounter difficulties and committee errors in using passive voice in written English, these difficulties were systematic errors such as interference of the Mother tongue, over-generalization, ignorance of rule restriction, incomplete application of rules and false concept hypothesized. Besides the systematic errors, there are other errors, they are the slips of the tongue or pen caused purely by psychological conditions, such as intense excitement, or physiological factors such as tiredness, these errors are not mentioned in this study.

## **Recommendations**

On the basis of this study, the following recommendations should be taken into consideration:

1. Teachers of English should provide students with a list of sentences of both forms (active and passive), and ask students to classify these sentences to active and passive.

2. They should also teach their students all forms of verb to be i.e. (all tenses).
3. Teachers should provide a list of verbs in present, past and past participle forms and ask students to memorize them.
4. Teachers should help students notice the difference between parts of the sentence.
5. Students should be exposed to many exercises to overcome their difficulties.

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