ON VOICE IN ENGLISH:
AN AWARENESS RAISING ATTEMPT ON PASSIVE VOICE

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Abstract:

Passive voice is commonly preferred in certain genres such as academic essays and news reports, despite the current trends promoting active voice, it is essential for learners to be fully aware of the meaning, use and form of passive voice to better communicate. This study aims to explore ways to help English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners notice and revise voice in English and raise their awareness of when and how to use active and passive voice to convey meaning in their written and spoken work. The study focuses on a different approach to be taken to teach voice in English, which might help students become more aware of the use of passive voice. The issues related to the use of passive voice are derived from the work of EFL learners who failed to make sensible decisions about when and how to use passive voice partly because the differences between their mother tongue and English and because they were not aware of the fact that active and passive voice would not alternate all the time.

Keywords: English language teaching, passive voice, test-teach-test, voice in English

1. Introduction

Passive voice is one of the language elements English language learners especially in a English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting have difficulty with. This might stem from various reasons and some might be context and domain specific, yet it is obvious that this eventually affects their performance negatively in terms of language variety and accuracy as well as comprehension. As suggested in the relevant literature, there is a need to help students notice and understand why and when we need passive voice instead of putting emphasis on the form ("to be + past participle" structure) and ask

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them to apply this to any tense, which hinders the internalization of passive voice use, and leads to the perception that is a discrete item to be tested on exams.

2. Analysis

In English, all sentences uttered by its speakers are either active or passive, which is called "voice" – a grammatical feature pertaining to who or what serves as the subject in the clause. In other words, it answers the question whether the subject does the action or receives the action (Carter, R. & McCarthy, M, 2006; Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D., 1999).

2.1 Form
Passive sentences are formed by keeping the same word order in active sentences (SVO) and adding passive morphology in auxiliary, which is "to be+past participle". In active sentences, the doer/agent of the action is in the subject position while in a passive sentence the recipient/patient is there. There, the doer/agent is marked with the preposition "by"

Active: [Garth Davis]   [directed]   [the movie *Lion*].
             S   V   O
        The doer   *action*   *the recipient*

Passive: [The movie *Lion*] [was directed] [by Garth Davis].
                S   V   O
        The recipient   *action*   *the doer*

It is also possible to use passive voice with different tenses and aspects by having the passive morphology with auxiliary. A representative sample of common combinations in two tenses (present and past) and three aspects (simple, continuous and perfect) as well as modality is illustrated below:

Affirmative			
S+	am/is/are are/is being was/were being was/were have been/has been may/can/could etc be am/is/are going to be	+past participle	(+by *Noun Phrase)* (+Object)

Although sentences with any tense may be made passive, passive with Present Perfect Continuous-Future Continuous-Future Perfect Continuous- Past Perfect Continuous is uncommon because of having two forms of "be", which sounds confusing and awkward as in *"Children have been being monitored by teachers on duty."* (Cowan, R. 2008; Biber, D. et al, 1999; Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D., 1999).

In passive sentences, negativity is achieved by adding "NOT". Questions are formed by inverting auxiliary and subject as done in active voice:

Examples:

(-)   *Mamma Mia!* has <u>not</u> been performed in 40 countries.

(-)   *La La Land* may <u>not</u> be given the Academy Award.

(?)   *Is the criminal going to be arrested?*

(?)   *How many countries have you been to so far?*

In English, transitive verbs, which can take an object, are normally used in passive unlike intransitive verbs. However, some verbs like *be born, be deemed, be located etc* are used only in passive. If a verb takes a direct and indirect object, both may be used in passive: *"Ms Smith was given presents by her students."* Or *"Presents were given to Ms Smith by her students."* Also, instead of "be", "get" and "have" are used as in *get promoted, get married, get fired etc.*

2.2 Use and Meaning

Passive voice is more common in writing than speaking, and people make choices either consciously or unconsciously to use passive voice depending on context, meaning or lexis. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) put it *"using the passive allows speakers to make a kind of figure/ground reversal."*

Passive is used when:

- the doer/agent of the action is irrelevant, unimportant, unknown or obvious
  "The first Stonehenge was built around 3000 BC."
  "Cotton is grown in Çukurova."
- talking about a general truth
  "Rules are to be broken (by whomever, whenever)."
- the emphasis on the recipient
  "Penicillin was discovered by A. Fleming."
- being vague about who is responsible
  "Mistakes have been made. Others will be blamed."
- writing research articles, lab report, academic essays, news reports, instructions etc
  "Analytical studies were conducted to examine the relationship between the two methods."

The doer/agent in a passive sentence is included when

- information is new and important : "*John Lennon was murdered by Mark Chapman."*
- s/he is a famous person: *"The award was given by the President."*
- s/he has caused harm or annoyance to the recipient: *"The vase was broken by your child."* (Cowan, R, 2008; Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D., 1999)

Passive voice is common in academic writing where results are more important than researchers. It also helps maintain a neutral/impersonal tone, leaving out pronouns like "I" and "we", which may require more cognitive processing to get the meaning. As Elliot suggests "… [passive voice] allows the writer to put the important concepts, ideas, findings, principles and conclusions first. …" rather than scientists working on them (Sainani, K. et al, 2015; Celce-Murcia, M. & Larsen-Freeman, D., 1999). Recently, however, the tendency to encourage passive voice has swung the other way to make things more reader/listener friendly and "livelier and persuasive" (Cereio, C., 2013; Coffin, C. et al, 2009). Also, it is a way to emphasize author responsibility, increase readability and avoid ambiguity (Sainani, K et al, 2015). It may be concluded that use active or passive voice is a matter of style and depends on many other factors, such as context, purpose, theme and personal style/preferences, which determines the appropriacy of passive voice.

2.3 Pronunciation

In English pronunciation, weak forms of certain words are common, and knowing them aids comprehension (Kelly, G, 2000). In passive sentences, auxiliary verbs like *has, is, have, am* and *was* are pronounced weak, but at times, speakers may want to use the strong form as illustrated below.

Table 1: Weak and strong pronunciation of some auxiliary verbs in English

Examples:	Weak form	Strong form
The politician <u>was</u> attacked by an unknown person at the meeting.	/wəz/	/wɒz/
Isabel Caro <u>has</u> been hospitalized several times.	/həz/	/hæz/
It <u>is</u> considered rude to speak loudly in public places.	/z/ or /s/	/ɪz/
I <u>am</u> usually told stories about ghosts.	/əm/	/æm/
We <u>have</u> been given a long speech at the reception.	/həv/ or /əv/	/hæv/

3. Learner Issues

In different context, learner face similar difficulties in learning and using passive voice in English, yet some might be context specific. Here, the issues mentions are mostly experienced by Turkish speakers of English.

3.1 Issues related to form

A.   Overpassivisation: As passive is usually considered a variant of active voice, students have the fallacy that all active sentences may be used in passive. Therefore, they apply passive construction to all active sentences without considering whether the verb is transitive or intransitive and end up with awkward sentences (Parrott, M., 2000). This is a problem for Turkish students because passivisation of transitive verbs in Turkish and English is similar; yet, Turkish allows passivisation in some intransitive verbs as well (Kurtoğlu,Ö, 2010; Abushihab,I, 2014).

> e.g.
>
> *Artık kampüse tramwayla mı gidilecek?*
>
> **Will it be gone to the campus by tram from now on?*

B.   Incorrect use of irregular verbs: Turkish does not have irregular verbs unlike English and voice is indicated by adding some suffixes like "-ı, -ın, -ıl" to active verbs. However, as past participle is needed to form a passive sentence, students may produce erroneous passive sentences by having the present or past form of a verb as in the following example:

> e.g.
>
> **The book is write by Orhan Pamuk.*

In her study, Bergen (1999) states that wrong verb from and active/passive voice in auxiliary are the first two most frequent errors at Pre-intermediate level, and the fourth common one for advance level learners (Başöz, 2011). Purnama (2014) also provides similar samples from another context in Bali to illustrate the incorrect use of past participle.

C.   Overuse of *by* phrase: *By* phrase is used to mention the doer/agent in a passive sentence if it is important or necessary for the meaning. However, students may overuse *by* phrase even if it is unknown, unnecessary or vague for a sentence.

> *I am loved by people.*
>
> *This room is not used by anybody.*
>
> *My book was stolen by somebody yesterday.*

These are the issues commonly experienced when teaching passive voice in a Turkish context. As Endley (2010) suggests *Passive Voice* might be considered something formulaic.

3.2 Issues related to use and meaning

Building on the issues mentioned above, failure in clarifying why active is preferred to passive or vice versa leads to issues related to use and meaning. This might stem from putting the emphasis on construction rather than on the use that passive is used to draw attention to the recipient/patient from the doer/agent (Endley, M, 2000). Similarly,

students may be suggested to use passive in their essays, so they may have a tendency to overuse passive in order to sound impersonal and more 'scientific'. However, research suggests that passive is found less than active voice in academic papers (29.5%), while it is more common in admission essay (56.4%) (Wordvice, 2016 Annual Report). In other words, students do not make deliberate choices in an attempt to be more reader friendly and engaging. Also, when reading or listening, they do not notice passive voice and cannot comprehend the meaning and see connections between the doer/agent and the receiver/patient. As in "*Air is polluted in İstanbul.*", they may think that "air" is "the doer/agent".

3.3 Issues related to pronunciation

When listening, students may fail to hear auxiliary in a passive sentence due to weak pronunciation, hence lack of comprehension. This may stem from ignoring the sections on pronunciation, weak/strong from, intonation, stress and connected speech in recent textbooks to help learners achieve intelligibility. As Celce-Murcia et al (2010) state, affective factors may play a role in neglecting pronunciation. In many institutions, the textbooks followed lead students to better pronunciation, but due to different teaching/learning styles and perceptions, students may not receive the same training on pronunciation. Without constant practice and consciousness raising, students fail to recognize and use them. For example, "*Participants are provided with the booklets.*" they may not distinguish passive voice due to weak pronunciation of "are" and may think that "participants" are the doer/agent. Also, past participle of some verbs like *write, drive, break* (e.g. /raɪtən/ instead of /ˈrɪtən /)**;** and past *–ed* ending may be pronounced inaccurately (e.g. /pleɪəd/ instead of /pleɪd/**)**, affecting their intelligibility negatively.

4. Suggestions for Teaching

The issues mentioned above may be overcome by adopting different teaching styles and bringing activities that raise students' awareness of the use of passive voice. Below are some teaching suggestions that might give other English language teachers ideas about how to make students more aware of passive voice.

    Activity 1

    Aim: To raise their awareness of transitive/intransitive verbs to prevent overpassivisation.

    Procedure: In small groups, students decide on which sentences may be used in passive, hence to be bid (appendix 1). Teacher conducts the auction (in a fun way). After all sentences are sold, students vote on which sentences can be used in passive. Teacher

gives the key and they find out who has lost more money on incorrect sentences. Then, in their groups students come up with the rule.

Evaluation: Raising students' awareness on transitive & intransitive verbs may be a way to prevent overpassivisation. Considering passive voice as a variant of active leads the misconception that all active sentences may be inverted into passive sentences. Therefore, students may consider passive voice as a formula to apply to any sentence in any situation. In this activity, working in groups, making decisions together and asking the question "Can I rewrite this sentence in passive voice?" to seek an answer may help them be aware of the fact that not all verbs take objects, hence cannot be used in passive.

Activity 2

Aim: To draw students' attention to past participle form of verbs and help improve their pronunciation

Procedure: Students work in pairs and to make sentences (appendix 2). Teacher monitors avoiding direct help. When they finish, teacher elicits passive construction from students and draws attention to past participle by giving an example. Pairs check each other's sentences with teacher's guidance. Two pairs work together to make a rap song from these sentences. Teacher will provide the phonetic description of verbs if needed (appendix 3).

Evaluation: Doing this activity will help students distinguish past simple from past participle, which is usually found confusing. Doing this activity without much help at the beginning will probably lead to some mistakes, and by peer correcting students will be cognitively involved, which aids retention. Also, making a rap song out of their sentences will draw attention to pronunciation, hence improved pronunciation. Through this activity, students will both have fun and feel challenged. Also, through repetition of sentences in their song, they will become more fluent and accurate in pronouncing passive sentences.

Activity 3

Aim: To raise their awareness on when to use a *by* phrase

Procedure: Students rewrite the sentences in passive in the given handout. Answers are checked without any comments on *by* phrase. Students are then asked to work in small groups to discuss if *by* phrase is essential for each sentence considering the questions provided.

Evaluation: Doing awareness raising activities helps students reconsider their choices when writing or speaking in English. In the case of *by* phrase, such activities may also be enlightening for those who think that passive is something formulaic as Endley (2010) points out. This may prevent students from feeling "incomplete" because of not having a *by* phrase in their sentences. Also, it may aid their comprehension

because raising their awareness of agentless passive sentences and when to use an agent may help them realize, recognize and comprehend the information given in written and spoken texts. It also helps achieve better coherence by eliminating unnecessary elements in their writing.

Activity 4

Aim: To help them realize passive voice in listening

Procedure: Students listen to video clips without watching (Appendix 5). After listening, they try to write down the sentences they hear. For further practice, teacher introduces them the website "vocscreen" (appendix 5).

Evaluation: Although this is sentence-based and very short, it may be considered a dictogloss activity. By doing so, teacher may check their use of passive voice and whether they can hear and express it in their sentences. Watching the scenes afterwards with subtitles also helps students realize the auxiliaries and how they are pronounced. The follow-up activity also leads them to practice outside classroom, which promotes autonomy as well.

5. Conclusion

Thinking about and searching for learner problems and possible solutions are essential for language teachers to reconsider their teaching and question their way of dealing with passive in the classroom. By reflecting on their own teaching, they can better help students make genuine choices in using English, meaning and use should be emphasized more than the form. Students should be helped notice and renotice by revisiting passive voice and building upon it in a spiral way as Bruner (1977) suggested long ago.

Appendix 1: Sentence Auction

Decide which of the following sentences may be used in Passive. You have 1000 Euro to spend. Only buy the sentences which can be used in Passive with your money (if you can)!

(The picture is taken from http://www.northiowaauctions.com/home.html)

	Yes	No
1. This soup smells delicious!		
2. At last the police officer caught the criminal.		
3. My cat died because of tuberculosis.		
4. Our website do not offer a printed catalogue any more.		
5. Two reporters from Daily News uncovered the scandal.		
6. The students arrived at the classroom door, huffing and puffing, just on time.		
7. My daughter gave me a little box on my birthday.		
8. In summers, July lies in the sun to get a tan.		
9. The ugly smell disappeared thanks to the new spray.		
10. It's raining cats and dogs outside.		

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Appendix 2

Choose two words from list A and B. Make ten logical and meaningful sentences using these two words and the past passive voice. Feel free to use extra words to make your sentence better.

the cookies	the lion	scholarship	tourists
cheese	a new novel	academy awards	students
a big restaurant	car		

give	play	sell	eat	attack	open
publish					
keep	tell	take			

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

6. _____

7. _____

8. _____

9. _____

10. _____

Below is the link to the rhythm for the rap song:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LC80yXANzKQ

Appendix 3

Phonetic descriptions of the verbs given in the activity.

/ˈgɪvən/

/ˈoʊpənd/

/pleɪd/

/ˈpʌblɪʃt/

/soʊld/

/kɛpt/

/ˈiːtn/

/toʊld/

/əˈtækt/

/ˈteɪkən/

Appendix 4

A. Change the sentences into passive.

1. Computers control all the lights in the company's headquarters.

    _____

2. The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) gave the 89th Academy Awards on February 26, 2017.

    _____

3. Voters in the US elected Trump as the president.

    _____

4. People speak French and English in Quebec.

    _____

5. A man with a mask and a gun robbed the bank in our neighborhood.

    _____

6. Researchers conducted the study to explore the effects of social media on children.

    _____

7. Marc Chagall painted *the Fiddler on the Roof.*

_____

B. Decide whether *by* phrase is necessary or not. Consider the following questions when making your decisions.

- Is the doer unknown, unimportant or obvious? Why?
- Is the doer important to mention? Why?

Discuss your answers in groups.

Appendix 5

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycxcgYUtGvE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dzeI93MszMk&t=27s

* The videos to be tailored for classroom use.

https://www.voscreen.com/

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