

Grammar-Teaching Games (Part II)

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INTRODUCTION

This article discusses an effective way of teaching passive voice construction. We have often been taught the passive by contrasting an active sentence with its passive counterpart. Leech and Svartvik (1975 : 258) explain how to construct passive sentences as follows :

To change an active clause into a passive clause,

- a* replace the active verb phrase by the matching passive one
- b* make the object of the active clause the subject of the passive clause
- c* make the subject of the active clause the agent of the passive clause. The agent is the noun phrase which occurs after the preposition *by* in the passive clause.

Recently, the above method does not seem to be popular among teachers or students because this explanation is too mechanical and boring. Besides, it refers mainly to the form, not the meaning, of the passive. Of course, the explanation of the meaning will be added at some point. It is also often pointed out that the passive sentence, transformed from its active form, does not have the same meaning.

Because of the reasons above and others, the teaching method of the passive voice seems to be changing. Firstly, we must examine what the passive is and what its features are. Secondly, various ways of teaching the passive form will be discussed with special reference to language-teaching games.

SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE PASSIVE VOICE

A. Semantic Differences of Active and Passive Sentences

As has already been mentioned, active sentences and their passive counterparts do not have the same meaning. Therefore, it is not always advisable to teach the passive by referring to its active counterpart, although it will work in some cases. It may be better to teach the passive as it is, which seems to be the method recommended by many scholars and teachers these days. It will be a matter of course that beginners do not necessarily need to know the minute difference of meaning of an active sentence and its passive counterpart, but the

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teacher should. Otherwise, the teacher may make a mistake in teaching the passive.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983 : 224) quote the following examples :

Everyone in the room speaks two languages. (i. e., any two languages per person)

Two languages are spoken by everyone in the room. (i. e., two specific languages that everybody speaks) Chomsky (1965)

Few people read many books. (i. e., There are few people in this world who read lots of books.)

Many books are read by few people. (i. e., There are many books that are read by very few people.) Lakoff (1968)

Quirk et al. (1972 : 807) observe that “a shift of meaning may accompany shift of voice in verb phrases containing auxiliaries that have more than one meaning, *eg* : *shall*, *will*, and *can*”, and cite examples.

John cannot do it

It cannot be done (by John)

They state that *can* in the first sentence would normally be interpreted as expressing ability, while the second possibility. They also show the following examples, where *can* retains the same meaning.

John can't be taught ('He is unable to learn')

He can't teach John ('He is unable to teach John')

Let's quote some more examples from Quirk et al. (1985 : 165–166).

Every schoolboy *knows* one joke at least. [1]

—One joke at least *is known* by every schoolboy. [2]

They point out that “whereas [1] favours the reading ‘Each schoolboy knows at least some joke or other’, [2] favours the reading ‘There is one particular joke which is known to every schoolboy.’”

Every one of them must be reprimanded.

[‘Every one of them is to blame’]

—You must reprimand every one of them.

[‘It’s your duty to do so’]

Why wouldn’t Miranda ride the grey mare?

[‘Why did Miranda refuse?’]

—Why wouldn’t the grey mare be ridden by Miranda?

[‘Why did the mare refuse?’]

So it is very careless to automatically change an active sentence into its passive form without paying attention to the change of meaning.

B. Agentless Passives

According to Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983 : 225), about 85 percent of passive sentences that occur in speech and writing do not have an explicit agent. Similarly, Quirk et al. (1972 : 807) state that ‘approximately four out of five English passive sentences have no expressed (surface) agent.’ The agent is often left out when it is unknown, irrelevant, redundant or unnecessary. Therefore change of voice from passive to active is sometimes difficult.

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983 : 225) quote Shintani (1979), which categorizes cases where agents are overtly expressed in passive sentences occurring in written and spoken discourse.

- 1 . The agent is a proper name designating an artist, inventor, discoverer, innovator, etc., who is too important to omit in the context, e. g. :

The Mona Lisa was painted by *da Vinci*.

- 2 . The agent is an indefinite noun phrase, i. e., new information, and is retained to provide the listener or reader with the new information, e. g. :

While Jill was walking down the street, her purse was snatched by *a young man*.

- 3 . The agent is an inanimate noun phrase which is retained because it is unexpected ; i. e., we expect agents to be animate, and almost all omitted agents get reconstructed as animate nouns, e. g. :

All the lights and appliances in the Albertson household are switched on and off daily by $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \textit{an} \\ \textit{this} \end{array} \right\}$ *electrical device*.

These facts above show the agentless passive is the norm when it has not been emphasized enough.

C. Verb Constraints

If we mechanically change active sentences into passive sentences, we often make a mistake. Some verbs do not occur in the passive.

They have a nice house. (But not : **A nice house is had*...)

I was having a bath. (But not : **A bath was being had*...)

My shoes don't fit me. (But not : **I'm not fitted by my shoes.*)

Sylvia resembles a Greek goddess. (But not : **A Greek goddess is resembled by Sylvia.*)

Your mother lacks tact. (But not : **Tact is lacked*...) (Swan, 1980, passive 464)

Roger weighs 200 pounds.

*200 pounds was weighed by Roger. (Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman, 1983 : 224)

The auditorium *holds* 5000 people. (Quirk et al., 1972 : 803)

Swan adds that most of the transitive verbs, which cannot be used in the passive, are 'stative' verbs.

Conversely, there are some verbs which are not compatible with the active voice (e.g. be born, be rumored, etc.)

D. BE passive and GET passive

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983 : 227) state that the GET passive is frequently used in colloquial English. We need to introduce the construction to the learners, as they mention, but it will be better to introduce it at the intermediate level, not at the beginning level.

The GET passive is fairly frequent in colloquial English, yet it is hardly ever mentioned or taught in ESL/EFL texts ; therefore, the ESL/EFL teacher needs to be particularly sensitive to this construction and to present it to his or her students as appropriate.

The foregoing authors also explain differences between the two constructions. Their fundamental difference is that "GET emphasizes process while BE reports a state" (p.226).

E. Cases Where the Passive Is Used

As a learner of English it is very important to know when the passive is used. To obtain the knowledge, we should expose ourselves to a great amount of English and develop a feeling for the passive. Here are some rules about when the passive is often used postulated by Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1983 : 228–229) (Only main points quoted). Teachers must understand these rules and utilize them when they teach this construction.

1. When the agent is redundant, i. e., easy to supply, and therefore not expressed.
2. When the writer wants to emphasize the receiver or result of the action.
3. When the writer wants to make a statement sound objective without revealing the source of information.
4. 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.
5. 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.

- 6 . When the passive is more appropriate than the active (usually in complex sentences).
- 7 . When the theme is given information and the agent is new information.

Summarizing this chapter, the following should be noted. Firstly, it may be problematic to show the active and passive constructions of the same S+V+O sentence, but recognizing the relationship between the subject and the object of the sentence (e. g., their forms and positions in both constructions) is very important. From this standpoint the often-used diagram called *Tasukigake* will be helpful in helping students understand a passive construction.

Secondly, if we convert an active sentence into a passive, we often end the passive with 'by + agent.' As pointed out above, passives with 'by + agent' do not appear frequently in real life situations. In spite of that fact, it is necessary to teach the form. It is important to understand who does an act as well as who or what receives the act. The notion of by whom or by what a certain deed was performed is an indispensable component of a passive sentence despite the infrequency of its appearance. The problem is that we sometimes place too much emphasis on passives with 'by + agent.' We need to teach the construction, but should not concentrate our energies on it.

Thirdly, teachers should pay attention to the verbs which do not occur in the passive. Learners at an advanced level should also have some knowledge about verb constraints.

Fourthly, if time is available, it will be desirable to teach the get-passive, because the construction often occurs in colloquial English.

Finally, it should be mentioned that we tend to teach the passive, using isolated sentences, i. e., without putting the sentence in a context. What type of passive is used depends largely on the context. Students must recognize the relationship between the passive and its preceding or following sentences. In other words, students should learn why a passive sentence is used in a certain position in a string of sentences.

EXAMPLES OF GAMES FOR TEACHING THE PASSIVE CONSTRUCTION

We need to introduce the passive by using various types of passive sentences, including those with the 'by + agent' phrase. Their question types and the past forms should also be taught. After the introduction phase, we can proceed to the following exercises. These can be done orally or in writing.

A . < Example 1 >

Directions : Looking at the world map, make as many passive sentences as possible, telling us what language is spoken in what country. The time limit is 5 minutes. The typical sentences used will be '...is (are) spoken in...' or '...is (are) used in...'

- 1 . The group or individual who makes the most correct sentences wins.

2. The teacher may introduce the names of countries and languages adequate for the learners' level.
3. The teacher can ask a group or an individual 'What is spoken in such and such a country?' orally. The one who answers the most correct sentences wins.

B. <Example 2 >

store	open	closed
butcher's	10 : 00	6 : 00
baker's	7 : 00	8 : 00
grocer's	7 : 30	7 : 00
tailor's	10 : 00	6 : 30
department store	10 : 00	6 : 00
stationer's	9 : 00	7 : 30

Directions : Looking at the schedule, make as many sentences as possible according to the format. Answer what is sold there, too.

Model Format : The butcher's is open at 10 : 00. It is closed at 6 : 00. Meat is sold there.

- The group or individual who makes the most sentences wins.

C. <Example 3 >

Directions : You are going to introduce a famous building (e. g., Osaka Castle, Narita International Airport, Tokyo Dorm, our school, etc.) to us, according to the format below.

- The teacher may give a group or an individual necessary information written on a card. The teacher may ask questions like : What would you like to introduce? / Where is it situated? / When was it built? / By whom was it built? / By whom is (was) it used?, etc. If we use a picture of the building, it will motivate the students.

A student answers :

I would like to introduce _____.

It is (situated/located) in _____.

It was built in _____.

It was built by _____.

(Some other sentences introducing the characteristics of the building.)

- The most excellent guide wins.

(Cf. Oda and Higuchi, 1987 : 118)

D. <Example 4 >

This is quoted from Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988 : 140-141).

At the end of one class session, the teacher distributes three-by-five index cards and asks each student to write down his name and the name of the town or nearest large city where he was born. During the next class session, students form groups of four or five, and each group receives one sheet that contains a list of the names of all class members and another that contains a list of all the places where the class members were born. Each group should select a secretary to keep track of the information.

The teacher should allow about ten minutes for the groups to record the birthplace next to the name of every student on the list. Students should guess if they are not sure. Before the exercise, the teacher should provide a model group conversation such as the following:

S1 : I was born in Lima.

S2 : I'll put that down. Where were you born?

S3 : I was born near Havana. Where was Li born? Shanghai or Taipei?

S4 : I don't know. I know José was born in Monterrey.

S5 : Li was born in Taipei.

The group with the largest number of correct matches wins.

If most students were born in the same town, the teacher can use their dates of birth instead of the places of birth. Both pieces of information require use of the past tense of *to be born*.

This game seems to arouse interest in students, but if it gives students a chance to use various types of expressions besides the 'to be born' pattern, the game will be much more useful.

<Example 1> will be more exciting, if we adopt the technique used in this game. The teacher gives each group or student a sheet that contains a list of the names of countries and a sheet that contains a list of the names of languages. Then the teacher asks the students to make the sentence '...is spoken in...', matching the names of countries and those of languages.

E. <Example 5 >

This is an exercise in which students combine sentence heads and their corresponding sentence bodies. Let's quote Rinvolucrí's idea (1984 : 9-12).

GRAMMAR : Present simple passive

LEVEL : Upper-intermediate

TIME : 15 minutes

MATERIALS : One copy per three students of both the sentence bodies and the sentence heads

In class

- 1 . Organise your class in threes and tell them they are going to compete in finding appropriate 'heads' for 14 'headless' sentences. Give out the sentence bodies. Set them a 7 minute time limit. Tell them to write in the sentence beginnings they think are correct.
- 2 . When time is up pick one person from each triad and give them the sentence heads. Ask them to go back to a triad that is not their own and score that group's sentences.
- 3 . Ask the scorers to tell their scores to the class and adjudicate on any points of doubt.

Note

This is a type of exercise in which the student is internalising the target structure, in this case the passive, by silently reading it, mumbling it, reading it aloud and thinking about it. This kind of exercise facilitates production of the structure at a later stage in the learning process.

Some of the examples of sentence bodies and sentence heads:

Sentence bodies

.....is played by two or four people, often on grass.

.....is enjoyed in countries that used to be directly oppressed by Britain.

.....a man may not be hit below the belt.

Sentence heads

Tennis.../ Cricket.../ In boxing...

It seems that this is not very exciting. This type of exercise is often found in traditional written tests.

F . <Example 6 >

Another example by Rinvoluceri (1984 : 35-37) :

Find who

GRAMMAR : Past simple active/passive

LEVEL : Lower-intermediate

TIME : 20 minutes

MATERIALS : One completion sheet per student

In class

- 1 . Go through any vocabulary from the completion sheet that the group may find hard.
- 2 . Give each student a completion sheet. Tell them the object of the game is to find people in the group who had done to them or did the various things on the completion sheet. So

student A might ask student B 'Were you conceived in December?' If B says 'yes', then A can write down B's name on his or her sheet next to :

.....was conceived in December

3 . Tell the students that the winner is the person who gets *most names soonest*.

.....

Completion sheet : Past simple active and passive (You need 1 per student.)

Name(s) Find a person who...

.....was born in June

.....liked carrots as a child

.....was sent to kindergarten at the age of 2

.....was an only child

.....was forced to eat fish

.....was given a bike at the age of 6

(The present author picked out some of the example sentences shown by Rinvoluceri.)

If a class size is big, this game will be difficult to administer, because students cannot walk around the classroom at will and have a hard time finding the correct person. On the other hand, students may say 'Yes', although he or she didn't like carrots. So, teachers have to be careful in preparing the sentences. If well performed, this will be a good exercise for asking and answering questions with the emphasis on simple active and passive voices.

G . < Example 7 >

This is a very game-like game. Many students will find this example by Lee (1979 : 20) challenging and exciting, although the structure practiced is pretty complicated and a large vocabulary will be necessary.

What has been done? Everybody takes a quick look round the classroom, noticing where various objects are. One group goes outside and certain objects are quickly moved. The group outside returns and each member of it says what has happened, e. g. *The table has been turned round. The flowers have been taken away. The blackboard has been moved to the other side of the table. Paul and John have changed places. Lola has taken off her ring. The two pictures have been changed over*, etc. If it is not clear who has made the change, the passive will be used.

If the teacher selects one pattern, e. g. '...is removed' and if what is removed is limited to the objects whose English names the students know, then this game will be easy to play.

CONCLUSION

It was quite difficult to find exercises with elements of games interesting enough to motivate learners. Besides, the types of passive sentences practiced by the examples above are quite limited. We ourselves need to devise new games. But if we further modify some of the examples above, they may work more effectively.

The way of using passives in a context will be practiced using a blank-filling type exercise, requiring students to fill in various forms of 'be+p.p.' or to convert an active sentence into a passive.

Teachers ourselves are required to be imaginative and creative in devising interesting and effective exercises.

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