

## **Secret Agents and Innocent Patients: The Mysteries of the English Passive Voice and its Use (and Misuse) in EFL Writing in Japan**

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Though generally under-utilised in spoken English, the passive voice plays a crucial role in formal, written English (Biber et al., 1999). An understanding of how the passive voice operates in English writing is therefore a vital skill for EFL learners in secondary and higher education so that they may be able to both understand and produce fluent and accurate formal English writing. Using samples of Japanese high school learners' writing, this paper sought to shed light on why many Japanese EFL learners struggle to produce accurate passive constructions in English writing. The paper begins by examining how the passive voice is used in English, focusing on core passive forms, "pseudo-passives" (Balcom, 2001), agency, and transitivity. Conveying a sense of objectivity (such as through the use of agentless passives) is also highlighted as a crucial feature of the use of the passive voice in formal, written English. Comparing the use of the passive voice in Japanese to its use in English reveals some structural and functional similarities, although there are some syntactic differences – particularly in relation to verb conjugation. The role of transitivity is also a key point of difference between the two languages. Unlike in Japanese, intransitive verbs cannot be passivised in English. Japanese EFL learners are often able to produce fluent, accurate passive structures in English, especially when the agent and patient are clearly identified. However, many Japanese EFL learners struggle with agentless passives in English – whereas in Japanese agents are almost always specified (Watanabe et al., 1991), the agent is often omitted in written English. This can lead to L1 transfer, the (incorrect) iteration and fossilisation of novel passive constructions. Increasing Japanese EFL learners' exposure to different varieties of English passive constructions is suggested as a potential means of remedying this problem. In addition, focusing on correct passive structure form (through explicit instruction and spoken/written corrective feedback) during in-class written production may also prove to be effective.

**Keywords:** English passive voice, Japanese passive voice, EFL writing

## 1 Introduction

For most native English speakers, deciding when and how to use the passive voice is an intuitive exercise. Numerous L1 studies demonstrate that simple passive constructions are comprehensible by the age of four or five (Dabrowska & Street, 2006; Maratsos et al., 1985; Pinker et al., 1987). However, given its range of forms and syntactical complexity, it is perhaps not surprising that even some native English speakers struggle with the correct use of some passive forms. Indeed, Dabrowska and Street's (2006) study showed that a group of university-educated non-native English speakers outperformed a group of non-graduate native English speakers in relation to comprehension of irregular passive constructions.

Given the findings in the Dabrowska & Street (2006) study about some native-speakers' difficulties with the passive voice, it is perhaps little wonder that its use by non-native English language learners often causes problems, especially in written English. As Hinkel (2004) points out, English as a foreign language (EFL) learners often choose to avoid the complexities of the passive voice when writing in English and, consequently, their writing may sometimes seem overly simplistic. Increasingly in Japan, both secondary school and university students are expected to produce academic or pseudo-academic quality short- and long-form written English. Accordingly, given the importance of the passive voice in formal, written English (in relation to expressing opinions, hedging, drawing conclusions, and so on), these students ought to have a good grasp of English passive structures in order to thrive in their current and future studies.

This paper begins with an overview of the use of the passive form in English, including the archetypal *be* + *-ed* participle, and then turns to briefly look at the so-called pseudo-passives and the role of the agent phrase in passive constructions. From there, aspects of the *be* + *-ed* participle will be examined in more detail, specifically in relation to the considerations that underpin the use of the passive form in written English. The writer then explores how passive constructions are formed in Japanese, highlighting some of the key differences between how the passive voice is used in English. Finally, the writer provides an overview of the learning environment which provides the context for this study, before addressing specific learning challenges among some Japanese learners in relation to the use of the passive voice in English writing.

Considering that the focus of this paper is on the use of the passive voice in written English, less formal uses of the passive voice – such as the *get* + *-ed* participle – will only be touched upon briefly (see Carter & McCarthy, 1999 and Collins, 1996 for a review of the *get* + *-ed* participle). The notion of pseudo-passivity is also an area of vast scope (see Balcom, 2001 and Ju, 2000) which will only receive brief consideration here; the focus will instead centre on core written passive structures.

## 2 The Use of the Passive Voice in English

### 2.1 The passive syntax

The active voice is the most common form of expression in English, and is usually adopted where the ‘agent’ – or doer – of the action is the focal point. Consider the following active sentence:

- Mike kissed Lucy.

Here, “Mike” is the subject of the sentence, as well as the agent performing the action. However, passive clauses adopt a different syntactic structure which, as Huddleston and Pullum (2002) point out, places the grammatical subject in the position of ‘patient’, or the recipient of the action (p. 1427). So, rearranging the above sentence into a passive sentence, we get:

- Lucy was kissed by Mike.

This active-passive dynamic can be represented using Quirk et al.’s (1985) formula:

**Active:** Noun phrase 1 + active verb phrase + noun phrase 2

**Passive:** Noun phrase 2 + passive verb phrase + (*by* noun phrase 1)<sup>1</sup>

Of course, it is worth noting that the above analysis covers what Huddleston (1984) refers to as the “basic”, finite form of the passive construction (p. 438). This form is typically realised using the *be* + *-ed* participle passive form, which will be discussed further below. However, non-finite clauses can also be couched in the passive form:

- Kumi was happy *to be offered* the job at the large game company.
- *Being exposed to* radiation gave him superhuman powers.

### 2.2 The be-passive

The *be*-passive is the most common form of the passive voice in English. The *be*-passive occurs in a variety of different tense and aspect combinations in English, and as Eastwood (1994) notes, the auxiliary *be* takes the same tense as the main verb in the active form. Thus:

- **Active:** Neymar *scored* the winning goal. [Past simple form of *score*]
- **Passive:** The winning goal *was scored* by Neymar. [Past simple form

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<sup>1</sup> The *by* agent phrase is often omitted – see below.

of *be* + passive participle *score*]

In addition to the present simple and past simple forms, the *be* + *-ed* participle also commonly occurs in perfect, progressive and future aspects:

- Their proposal *is being considered*. [Present progressive + passive participle]
- He *had been left behind* by his friends.<sup>2</sup> [Past perfect + passive participle]
- The damaged building *will be demolished*. [Future form of *be* + passive participle]

### 2.3 The *get*-passive

Like the *be*-passive, the *get*-passive is also used in a range of forms, although, as Quirk et al. (1985) highlight, it “is avoided in formal style, and even in informal English it is far less frequent than the *be*-passive” (p. 161). Given that the focus of this paper is on the use of the passive voice in formal, written English, the use and scope of the *get*-passive will not be explored in detail. However, it is worth noting that in spoken English, *get* is often used in place of *be* in passive sentences. So a sentence such as “she was arrested last night” could be phrased less formally as “she got arrested last night”.

### 2.4 Pseudo-passives

Many grammar texts refer to a “passive gradient”, with many seemingly passive sentence structures being, as Quirk et al. (1985) state, “increasingly remote from the ‘ideal’ passive [the *be* + *-ed* participle], which can be placed in direct correspondence with a unique active counterpart” (p. 167). Of particular note here are sentences which, although seemingly passive in structure, can be read as a passive verb phrase or an adjectival complement phrase. Consider the following example:

- The audience was excited.

This sentence could be considered a passive structure – for instance, an agent phrase could be added to confirm its passivity (“The audience was excited by the guitarist’s virtuoso performance”). However, in the absence of a *by* agent phrase, it is perhaps more likely to view this sentence as a verb + adjective complement structure.

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<sup>2</sup> Phrasal or prepositional verbs can also take the passive form.

## 2.5 The agent phrase

If the agent is specifically referred to in a passive sentence, the agent is normally introduced using the preposition *by*. However, other prepositions are sometimes used in passive structures, especially, as Carter and McCarthy (2006) note, when the subject in the active sentence is not the “true active agent” (p. 798). For example:

- The washing instructions are shown *on* the label.

In the active equivalent for the above sentence (“The label shows the washing instructions”), the true agent is in fact the clothing manufacturer, not the label itself.

The above sentence is also an example of an agentless passive, which are the most common form of passive sentences. Indeed, Swan (1995) and Quirk et al. (1985) point out that agents are only specifically mentioned in about 20 percent of passive sentences. These agentless passives are especially common in academic and formal writing, where it is often the process (rather than the agent) that is the focus of the sentence, or where the agent is understood from the context.

## 2.6 Verbs which cannot be used in the passive form

One of the key features of the use of the passive voice in English is that intransitive verbs cannot be used in the passive form because they lack an object which would be the subject in a passive sentence (Palmer, 1994; Quirk et al., 1985; Swan, 1995). Moreover, there are a number of active verbs which do not usually occur in the passive construction. Most of these verbs are ‘stative’ verbs, such as *exist*, *seem*, *resemble*, *have* (as in ‘to possess something’) and *lack*. Thus, the stative *have* in the following active sentence does not have a passive equivalent:

- He *has* a signed copy of ‘The Hobbit’ (but not “A signed copy of ‘The Hobbit’ *is had* by him”).

Nevertheless, and perhaps to the consternation of some EFL learners, some state verbs can take the passive form – so *love*, *hate*, *consider* (as in ‘to think of’), *need*, *want*, and *believe* can all take a passive form. For example:

- He *is considered* a hero by many people.

### 3 The Passive Voice in Written Contexts

Turning now to look at how the passive voice is used in written English, numerous authors have commented on the prevalence of the passive voice – particularly agentless passive structures – in written discourse (Biber et al., 1999; Crystal, 2003; Dabrowska & Street, 2006; Eastwood, 1994; Swan, 1995; Wanner, 2009). Indeed, Biber et al. (1999) point out that the percentage of passive verbs in conversation is only 2%; whereas this figure jumps to 25% in academic writing (p. 476). This underscores the importance of the passive voice in academic writing, despite some authors claiming that use of the passive voice is declining, particularly in North America (Wanner, 2009).

The reason for such a gulf in usage of the passive between written and spoken English may be best explained by what Eastwood (1994) refers to as the “impersonal style” of academic writing (p. 133). In academic and scientific contexts in particular, writers often try to explain a process, a trend or a finding in an objective or detached way; and the passive voice is a convenient (and often an expected) means of achieving this. Accordingly, it is common to see sentences like the following in formal writing:

- Tongue rolling *is controlled* by a single gene. [Describing a scientific process]
- Martin Luther King Junior *was assassinated* in Memphis, Tennessee. [Describing an historical event]
- Less money *is being spent* on luxury items during the economic recession. [Discussing a social trend or pattern]

Although all of the above passive sentences can be recast into active sentences, doing so in a formal, written context risks seeming overly personal. Consider the last sentence above: if we substitute the passive structure “Less money is being spent” for the active structure “We are spending”, the sentence arguably loses a sense of objectivity. However, as Carter and McCarthy (2006) highlight, although processes and patterns are often described in the passive voice in academic writing, writers will often employ the active voice when evaluating or offering their own view on the process or pattern being described.

A further point to note about the use of the passive voice in formal writing is the prevalence of the agentless passive construction, as can be seen in the last two example sentences above (the agent phrases “by James Earl Ray” and “by people” are omitted). Huddleston and Pullum (2002) label these agentless constructions as “short passives” (p. 1428), and posit that they “give the writing a more objective flavour than is found in texts with first person references” (p. 1446). Maintaining objectivity is one of a variety of reasons for omitting agents in written discourse. Another reason is that the

writer may not want to explicitly mention the agent. So, in the Martin Luther King sentence above, perhaps the writer does not wish to glorify Martin Luther King's killer; or maybe the writer suspects that other unknown conspirators were involved. One further reason for omitting the agent – particularly in written contexts – is that knowledge of the agent is assumed from the context (as is shown in the last sample sentence above, where we assume that the reader knows that money is spent *by people*).

These aspects of the passive voice in formal, written English (particularly considerations regarding agentless passives) are often troublesome for EFL learners. In that regard, the final section of this paper will address some particular problems that Japanese EFL learners have with passive constructions in English. However, before doing so, it is perhaps appropriate to provide some context by looking at how the passive voice is used in Japanese in order to gauge similarities and differences with the English passive voice.

#### 4 The Passive Voice in Japanese

The core function of the Japanese passive structure correlates with the English passive structure in that, in contrast with the active structure, it places emphasis on the receiver of the action rather than on the agent. However, whereas in English the passive verb form is typically indicated by the addition of the modal *be* before the participial verb, in Japanese the verb itself is conjugated to take a passive form. This is done by adding the *reru* suffix (*reta* in the past tense) to the negative verb stem. So, for the verb *shikaru* (“scold”), which takes the negative form *shikaranai* (“not scold”), we get the negative stem *shikara*, to which we add *reru* to make the passive form. The following sentences illustrate the active-passive dynamic in Japanese:

- **Active:** Sato-sensei wa Goro wo *shikareta*  
 (“Mr Sato *scolded* Goro.”)
- **Passive:** Goro wa Sato-sensei ni *shikarareta*.  
 (“Goro *was scolded* by Mr Sato.”)

The agent (Mr Sato) is marked in the passive form by the particle *ni* (“by”), although agency can also be indicated by the particles *kara* (“from”) and *ni yotte* (“through”). However, as Maynard (2009) points out, these last two structures are less common, and *ni yotte* is normally only used in written form. These Japanese forms parallel the way in which agency is indicated in English passive structures.

However, there are two key areas in which the Japanese passive voice differs from its English counterpart. The first difference is that intransitive verbs are able to be passivised in some situations in Japanese (unlike in

English, where, as was noted earlier, intransitive verbs do not have a passive form). So, in Japanese, there is what Watanabe et al. (1991) refer to as an “adversity passive”, where an intransitive verb is used passively to show that the subject of the passive sentence has been adversely affected by some event (p. 119). For example:

- Chris wa kodomotachi ni nakareta.  
 (“Chris was cried at by the children.”)

Clearly, the above English translation is ungrammatical, because the intransitive verb *cry* cannot take a passive form. Perhaps we could say “Chris was upset by the children’s crying”, which, although grammatical, is perhaps a little awkward.

The second key point of divergence is that Japanese passive sentences are almost always agentive (Chino, 2000; Watanabe et al., 1991). This may stem from the notion of affectedness which underpins most Japanese passive constructions, and the associated inclination to highlight the agent which brings about that affectedness. This is a key difference, and may well lead to inter-language transfer from the L1 to the target language by Japanese EFL learners and, as Balcom (2001) notes, potential fossilisation of defective English passive forms.

Having explored the key differences between the use of the passive voice in English and its use in Japanese, the writer now turns to examine how these differences play out in a specific learning context in Japan.

## **5 Research Context and Methodology**

### **5.1 The learners**

The students whose writing was the subject of this study are final-year high school students (aged 17-18) studying an EFL writing course at a high-level public high school in Japan. The students have been studying English formally for at least six years, and their English levels range from upper-intermediate to advanced level. Most learners’ primary motivation for learning English is instrumental – passing university entrance examinations, of which English reading and writing are the core components.

### **5.2 The classroom context**

The English writing classes that are focus of this study comprise classes taught solely by Japanese teachers of English (JTEs) and team-teaching classes taught by a JTE and a native-English speaker teacher (NEST). Students participate in one of each class type per week. For the JTE-only classes, the JTEs primarily teach in the learners’ L1, although most JTEs do

code-switch between the L1 and L2 to some extent. In team-taught classes, instruction is given in English, with some Japanese translation and explanation from either or both the JTE and NEST. Outside the classroom, there are limited opportunities for exposure to English for most students within the school. However, some students who have participated in overseas exchanges to Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom maintain contact with native-English speakers in those countries via social media and email.

### **5.3 The textbook**

The textbook used in the EFL writing classes under consideration here is *Write to the Point* (Takeshita, 2011), which is a Japanese Ministry of Education-approved high school English writing textbook. The textbook features 18 core lessons and two supplementary essay writing lessons, and it focusses on written grammatical patterns and rhetorical devices, L1-L2 translation, and essay writing.

### **5.4 The writing samples**

Representative samples of student writing were collected from a selection of the team-taught classes for analysis. The writing tasks that formed the basis of the samples were L1-L2 translation exercises (consisting of roughly one or two paragraphs of translated text) which were intended to prepare students for the translation component of the National Center Test for University Admissions. After the samples were collected, the writer analysed the samples for instances of the use of the English passive voice.

In light of the results of the analysis of these writing samples, the next section looks at some of the key problems that the learners exhibited in relation to using the English passive voice. Furthermore, the writer will also briefly explore how such problems with using the English passive voice can be addressed in the EFL writing classroom.

## **6 Obstacles to Japanese EFL Learners' Acquisition of the English Passive Voice**

The English passive voice is generally introduced at junior high school level in Japan, and most Japanese students are familiar with it and are able to use it by the time they reach high school. This is especially so for the core *be + -ed* passive that was discussed previously. Indeed, correctly forming this archetypal passive structure is generally not a major problem for most Japanese EFL students, despite the non-existence of an equivalent modal *be* in Japanese (Oshita, 2000; Watanabe et al., 1991). However, getting to grips with transitivity and also agentless passive constructions represent two of the

key stumbling blocks for Japanese EFL learners when trying to produce passive structures in written English. This was particularly evident in some of the writing samples that were examined in this study.

As noted above, most Japanese students can easily understand and produce *be + -ed* passive phrases, especially where there is an obvious (and expressly stated) agent. Thus, in a translation exercise about damage caused by a typhoon, most students more or less correctly produced the following (or a similar) agentive passive sentence:

- Around three-fifths of the apple crop was damaged by the typhoon.

This is perhaps not surprising, given most students' grasp of the *be + -ed* passive, and also given what Maratsos et al. (1985) call the high level of "semantic transitivity" (pp. 188-189) in this sentence: there is a clear sense of transitive movement from agent (the typhoon) to patient (the apple crop). However, agentless passive structures tend to be more troublesome for many Japanese learners. This is particularly so in regard to the use of passive reporting verbs (*estimate, predict, consider*, and so on) in formal English writing, where there is no real sense of action moving from agent to patient. The following example from one of the translation samples in this study illustrates the difficulty that many Japanese learners have with correctly using reporting verbs in passive constructions:

- It is estimated by a report that ^ world population will double by the end of twenty-one century.

Leaving aside the incorrect omissions of the definite article *the* (marked by ^), as well as the grammatically incorrect noun phrase *twenty-one century*, the passive verb phrase ("It is estimated by a report") is grammatical. Yet most native English speakers would omit the agentive phrase *by a report*. This is perhaps indicative of some transfer from the L1 (Japanese) of the tendency to iterate the agent in passive constructions. Indeed, this tendency is perhaps even more pronounced where there is some notion of affectedness in the passive construction.

This affectedness construct could also be a factor in EFL students producing what Balcom (2001) refers to as "novel passives" (p. 7). Thus, the following type of incorrect passive construction (produced by one of the students in this study) is common among Japanese learners:

- The nuclear accident was happened in Fukushima.

Because *happen* is an intransitive verb, it cannot be passivised in English. However, given that there is some sense of affectedness in this sentence (people in Fukushima and throughout Japan were affected by the

nuclear accident), it is likely that students are transferring this function from their L1 to produce such incorrect English passive structures.

Although there are no quick fixes for these problems, increased exposure to common passive and non-passive verb forms in English is suggested as a sensible starting point (Dabrowska & Street, 2006; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Lee, 2007; Tono, 2004; Wang, 2010). In addition, a stricter focus on form (perhaps through explicit modelling and through spoken and/or written corrective feedback) during in-class writing activities may also help to address these and other issues connected to Japanese learners' use of the passive voice in English.

## **7 Conclusion**

Although most Japanese EFL learners are familiar with the English passive voice, its complexity (particularly in relation to transitivity and the role of the agent) continues to cause problems, even for high-level learners. The primacy of the agent in the Japanese passive voice, combined with the notion of affectedness of the patient, may explain why many students produce defective or unnatural sounding passive constructions in written English. Teachers have an important role to play here, firstly in acknowledging the potential for transfer from the L1, and secondly in addressing the issue directly in class. This is especially so given that, as Hinkel (2004) notes, most EFL writing textbooks give little detailed guidance to EFL learners about how to use the passive voice (which is true of the textbook used in the EFL writing class under consideration here).

The passive voice features heavily in academic and formal writing, and thus EFL learners who wish to produce high quality English writing need to understand its various forms and functions. Perhaps further research is required into the effects of language transfer by Japanese EFL learners in relation to the English passive voice in order to assist in this process. However, it seems clear that Japanese EFL students are likely to benefit from increased exposure to and sustained, explicit teaching of the English passive. Doing so may help them to attain short-term goals, such as entry into a top university or passing a university-level academic English writing course. And looking further ahead (for those so inclined), it may well help to equip Japanese EFL learners with some of the necessary tools for producing academic quality English prose in their future careers.

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