

HELPING B1+ LEARNERS TO USE PASSIVE VOICE IN THE CONTEXT OF NEWSPAPER ARTICLES

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1. Introduction

The focus of this publication is to *help B1+ learners to use* passive voice in the context of news stories.

My current learners express a desire to improve English skills for work, presentations, public speaking, advertising. Understanding my learners needs the selected grammar structure is specific as it does a better job of presenting an idea in professional settings Thornbury (1999: 90) emphasizes the fact, that language is context-sensitive and becomes fully intelligible only when it is placed in its context.

Furthermore, passive voice is less common grammar structure than active voice. Learners often avoid it or struggle to use it or unable to fully grasp the differences between active and passive. As Lewis puts it, in most teaching, they are presented as different ways of saying the same thing (Lewis 1986:132). It happens because in many FL classrooms passive voice is taught on rule-based way, clarification of the form and meaning of it based on the prescriptive grammar rules.

Based on what has already been mentioned, the main reasons are the following:

to emphasize on when and where to use passive. As Parrot (2007:287) says we need to encourage learners both to notice and understand when and why we choose them.

to emphasize the importance of the doer of the action and fulfils other discourse functions across registers such as news. (Biber1999:166) .

2. Analysis

2.1 Meaning & Use

2.1.1 Active Voice Use vs Passive Voice Use

,Voice’ – a grammatical feature of 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).

In active voice, the subject of the sentence does the action in the verb.	In passive voice, the subject is acted upon by the verb.
The boy hit the ball. The ball was hit. (“truncated” passive voice, which leaves it to the reader to figure out who hit the ball)	The ball was hit by the batter. (the real subject of the verb, the batter, comes after the verb)

Passive voice belongs to the category of special focus constructions (Larsen-Freeman & Celce-Murcia 2015:660). They are used to ‘emphasize a particular piece of information’ (Richards & Schmidt 2002:75).



2.2.2 Reasons for using passive voice

The passive and active give two different windows onto the same event but they are not simply identically-meaning alternatives. When we choose to use the passive it is because we have a specific reasons (Scrivener 2010: 246):

- to put emphasis on the action rather than the agent, often for dramatic effect;
- when the agent is obvious, unknown or unimportant;
- to eliminate redundancy.

Swan (1993:457) explains that, the choice between active and passive construction often depends on what has been said. We normally prefer to begin a sentence with information that is already known. We tend to put new information later in the sentence. (I saw a great movie last night. It was directed by).

I completely agree with M. Parrot (Parrot 2001: 333), who recommends *to focus on context* use passive structures in order help learners to develop a feeling for when using them. (to describe processes; in various formal (often academic) styles of discourse; to introduce evidence, argument, or opinion; to describe procedure in formally reporting scientific experiments; to avoid the implication of personal involvement or responsibility; with certain verbs when the person who did the action is generally unimportant).

2.2 Form

2.2.1 Tense formation

The passive voice in English is formed in the following way: **the appropriate form of the verb ‘to be’ + past participle**. In passive form, the object of an active sentence becomes the subject of a passive sentence. The main verb needs to be changed to its past participle form, and the auxiliary verb “be” needs to be changed to its appropriate form (Cowan, 2008).

2.2.2 Most common passive structures

Passive	structures	Example
Present Simple Passive	Subject + am/is/are + past participle	Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision
Present Perfect Passive	Subject +have/has+ past participle	The full result has just been revealed
Past Simple Passive	Subject +was/were + past participle	Malta was overtaken by Ukraine

Passive voice can be presented in affirmative or positive sentence, negative sentence and interrogative sentences.

2.2.3 Other ways to express passive

1) the passive voice with modal auxiliaries

To make a passive voice with modal auxiliaries (can, may, might, should, ought) the following formula is used:

Subject + modal auxiliary + be + past participle

The article must be written in time

2) using by + the agent

To include the doer in a passive sentence we use by. The doer of the action is known as the agent.

Subject + be + past participle + by + agent

A peace accord was signed by both leaders.



3) passive forms with reporting verbs

To make a passive voice with reporting verbs (say ,expect ,know, believe, claim, consider ,think) the following structure is used

Subject + passive reporting verb + to-infinitive

It is thought (that)... / It is said (that)...

It is said here that tea is better for health than coffee

2. Phonology

2.3.1 Weak form of auxiliary verbs in passive

Weak and strong pronunciation of some auxiliary verbs in passive. Auxiliary verbs are pronounced with weak forms so they are difficult to hear.

Examples:	Weak form used in passive voice	Strong form
Malta was overtaken by Ukraine	/wəz/	/wɒz/
The full result has just been revealed	/həz/	/hæz/
Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision	/z/ or /s/	/ɪz/

2.3.2. Sentence stress

Sentence stress is one of the important aspects of pronunciation of passive voice.

To stress the thing done more than the doer of it.

Sentence stress

Malta was overtaken by Ukraine

The full result has just been revealed

Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision

3. Issues

3.1 Meaning and use

3.1.1. Clarification difficulties

overpassivisation —————> avoidance

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 (Parrot 2001:295)

transformation —————> usage

Even if learners with a good command of English (Parrot 2001:295) they may confuse when and how to use passive. The reason is that even if they have a perfect knowledge of the passive form as a result of transformation exercises; they have lack knowledge of contexts where to use it.

Based on mentioned above issues the clarification of the meaning may not make any sense as if it is more rule-based and due to the absence of context. In other words, learners cannot clarify the meaning and see connections between the doer/agent and the receiver/patient. As in, 'Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.', they may think that 'Rock' is 'the doer/agent'.

3.2 Form

Learners often **omit using auxiliary verbs**, as in their L1(eg. Turkish) they do not have auxiliaries (Swan & Smith, 2001). This causes particular confusion when the structure involved the use of a regular verb, as the meaning changed completely: “Rock generally underrepresented at Eurovision.” refers to the past, not the present.

3.3 Pronunciation

3.3.1 Weak form of auxiliary verbs in passive

Learners may fail to hear auxiliary in a passive sentence due to weak pronunciation, hence lack of comprehension. They tend to separate words and pronounce each syllable individually, and have difficulty noticing the weak forms of auxiliary verbs’. Without constant practice and consciousness raising, students fail to **noticing weak forms of auxiliary verbs**

and use them. For example, , Rock generally is underrepresented at Eurovision” they may not distinguish passive voice due to weak pronunciation of ,is’ and may think that ,Rock’ is the doer/agent. Also, past participle form of the verb underrepresented with past –ed ending may be pronounced inaccurately (e.g. //ʌndərəpreɪ'zɛntəd/ pleɪəd/ instead of /ʌndərəpreɪ'zɛntɪd/), affecting negatively on understanding meaning .

4. Suggestions for teaching

4.1 Meaning and use

News Guided Discovery (APPENDIX 2)

Aim: To help learners understand the reasons for using passive in context

Procedure:

Students read a story for contextualisation. Teacher concept-checks (APPENDIX 1).

Teacher introduces a Guided Discovery activity, which students complete in pairs (APPENDIX 2).

Guided Discovery activity is followed by controlled practice and free practice, where students work in groups writing news story, where they have to produce usage passive voice structures and share their stories in pairs.

Comentary: Meaning and contextualisation are essential, and the communicative approach proposes a procedure that goes from guided to freer activities (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). It also helps achieve better coherence. This exercise is necessary for students to see that we in fact use passive in the context of newspaper article. Then a guided discovery activity and concept checking questions designed to guide learners into understanding and checking (Thornbury, 2017) the concept of passive, the counterfactual present, past, the perfect aspects. This works well for such complex concepts because it engages students’ critical thinking skills, allowing them to make inferences and reach understanding more deeply. In this case, I would rather focus on the number of elements and their implications for meaning. If done right, this provides a solid framework for output, aimed at providing scaffolding opportunities to use the language communicatively. The potential problem for learners may be if they preferred more teacher-centred style.

4.2 Form

Complete the sentences (Intermediate and above) (APPENDIX 4)

Aim: To raise awareness of passive structure and help students recognise auxiliary verbs’ function and position

Procedure: Each student is given to complete the sentences with the correct grammar structure (passive or active). Then they listen to the speaker and check their answers. Students



focus on the form and structure and the auxiliaries and try to identify and discuss how they differ from active structures. Covering auxiliaries and asking CCQs helps learners see that even when a sentence is correct, meaning can vary.

Commentary: Doing awareness raising activities helps students reconsider their choices when writing or speaking in English. Also, it may aid their comprehension because raising their awareness of agentless passive sentences and clarify auxiliary verbs' function and position may help them realize, recognize and comprehend the information given in written and spoken texts. By doing this exercise, students will identify auxiliaries the learners will see that even when a sentence is correct, meaning can vary. (Thornbury, 1999). This causes particular confusion when the structure is involved using regular verb, as the meaning can be changed completely. The potential problem for learners to be not aware with the irregular verbs and that affecting grammatical accuracy. their L1 interference.

4.3 Pronunciation

Can you hear? (Intermediate and above) (APPENDIX 3)

Aim: To help learners recognise the weak form of notice the weak forms of auxiliary Hewings (2004:96).

Procedure:

Worksheet: pairs of sentences (a) in passive form (He is observed every month) and (b) one in active (He observes every month). Each pair features whether the sentences are active or passive and clarify the weak and a strong form (both underlined)

Feedback: learners read out (a) sentences (all strong forms) and the teachers reads out (b) sentences, ensuring weak forms are unstressed. Learners repeat chorally and individually.

Feedback: board answers with words omitted (auxiliary), have learners call out missing words.

Commentary: By doing this exercise, students will identify differences, so they can analyse them and ultimately produce them. This drilling “combines receptive awareness and productive skill” (Kelly, 2000; 75) so it helps learners notice and produce the weak forms. It is based on the assumption that learners benefit from doing things for themselves rather than being told (Scrivener 1994:4). One disadvantage might be that learners struggle linguistically to formulate rules, so having them boarded with some words omitted will provide scaffolding.

5. Conclusion

My research indicates that in order to overcome the complexity of the target structure to be able to use it, learners need firstly to be confident of its meaning and use, form and pronunciation , secondly, not to be overwhelmed by using passive structures outside the class. Implementing personalised, relevant and meaningful tasks to engage learners' desire for self-expression and provides authentic and stimulating contexts for employing the structures, giving them a reason to implement into free practice. Directing learners to pay attention to form and grammatical features increases the likelihood of them being able to employ passive outside the classroom. (Thornbury 1999:24).



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- How do we use passives like 'her sister was given the car'?* Michael Swan Practical English Usage <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q9P3oQFD8Xw>

Appendices

APPENDIX 1

<https://eurovisionary.com/full-eurovision-2021-result-semi-finals-won-by-malta-and-switzerland-croatia-and-denmark-almost-reached-the-final/>

Full Eurovision 2021 result: Semi-finals won by Malta and Switzerland – Croatia and Denmark almost reached the final

👍 78 | 🐦 Tweet

Charlotte Jensen and Wouter van Vliet / 23rd May 2021 at 01:23 / Eurovision Song Contest



Gjon's Tears, Switzerland, Second Rehearsal

It's time to crunch the numbers and dig further down into the result of the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest. The full result has just been revealed, and it shows quite some interesting details about the two semi-finals.

At the two semi-finals taking place earlier this week, the qualifiers were announced in random order. The interesting details such as who had won them, who had been close to making it, and the difference between jury and televoting, that wasn't revealed until the end of the 2021 Eurovision Song Contest final.

First semi-final

- Malta won the first semi-final, but was overtaken by Ukraine – who came in second place – in the final
- A margin of only 5 points caused Norway (115 points) to qualify for the final over Croatia (110 points)
- Ireland landed a bottom placement, still with 16 points more than the United Kingdom received in the final

Second semi-final

- Switzerland won the second semi-final, and was only beaten by two Big 5 countries in the final
- Iceland came in second, the same number of places behind Switzerland as in the final (1)
- Albania on 10th position beat Denmark on 11th by 23 points
- Latvia came in last with 14 points



See also

Insieme: 1992 – 30 years ago today Toto Cutugno and Italy won Eurovision

Grand Final

- The top 10 contains the same number of acts from semi-final 1 as from semi-final 2 (both 4)
- A whopping four countries received 0 points from the televotes: Spain, Germany, host country The Netherlands and the United Kingdom
- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision – this year we have two rock songs in the top 10!

What? Who? Where? When? Why? How?

<https://eurovisionary.com/full-eurovision-2021-result-semi-finals-won-by-malta-and-switzerland-croatia-and-denmark-almost-reached-the-final/>



APPENDIX 2

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1JYNBqXOHbE-tp0LbngSJPbyoaZF4EW26UBTzBbUM5vQ/edit>

Guided Discovery

Read the following statements, discuss with your groupmates and complete it.

Name *

Краткий ответ

1. The agent(doer) of an action is known in :

- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.

2. The agent(doer) of an action is unknown in:

- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.

3. The importance of done action is shown in :

- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.

4. The unimportant , obvious result of an action is shown in :

- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.

5. The past action is described in :

- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.



6. The important, surprising, unexpected info is added as characteristic feature of done action in:

- Malta was overtaken by Ukraine.
- The full result has just been revealed.
- Rock is generally underrepresented at Eurovision.

APPENDIX 3

Can you hear?

Pairs of sentences

A	B
1. <i>I <u>am loved</u> by people.</i> 2. <i>This room <u>is used</u> by anybody.</i> 3. <i>Computer game <u>was played</u> by somebody yesterday</i> 4. <i><u>Air is polluted</u></i>	1. <i>I <u>loved</u> by people.</i> 2. <i>This <u>room</u> used by anybody.</i> 3. <i>Computer game <u>played</u> by somebody yesterday</i> 4. <i><u>Air polluted</u></i>

APPENDIX 4

Material taken from Navigate B1+ Coursebook, Oxford Publishing, 2017,

8a Complete the sentences with the correct form (passive or active) of the verbs in brackets.

- 1 Ali Ganjavian noticed that people who _____ (travel) a lot often get very tired.
- 2 The Ostrich Pillow _____ (invent) to help long-distance travellers.
- 3 It's a kind of hat that _____ (pull) over the head in order to take a nap.
- 4 So far, over \$195,000 _____ (pledge) by its backers.
- 5 In the first three months of production, Ganjavian's company _____ (ship) five thousand pillows to fifty-two countries.

b 10.1))) Listen and check your answers.

PRONUNCIATION passives

9a 10.2))) Listen to sentences 1–5 in exercise 8a again. Mark the main stress. Which is stronger, the main verb or the auxiliary verb?

b 10.2))) Listen again and repeat.

