# PASSIVIZATION PROBLEMS IN THE PERFORMANCE OF KURDISH EFL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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**Abstract**

This study deals with the problems of passivization that third year students of English departments at the college level face. It is an attempt to identify the difficult areas and suggest remedial steps to overcome them.

The population of the study is third year college students of the English departments of College of Languages and College of Basic Education at Salahaddin university-Erbil. A test ,which covers the whole tenses of English language, is administered to the sample of the population to find out to what extent the college students face difficulties in both recognition and production of passive sentences.

The results show that the college students face difficulties in recognizing and producing passive sentences, and the students' errors are due to the factors of interlanguage, intralanguage and context of learning.

**Keywords: Passivization , EFL , recognition & production errors**

## 1. Introduction

Passivization is problematic for the EFL students because almost all the tenses of English have passive construction which means students have to know at least eight different ways of changing sentences from the passive to the active and this requires at least three to four operations. The students' use of the passive voice is crucial because the use of passive sentences is the most noticeable and powerful phenomenon in scientific and technical writing (Crystal, 1988, p.88).It is hypothesized that students come across difficulties in recognizing and producing passive sentences. Since there is lack of research in this area, this study is conducted to find out the reasons of students' errors and suggest acceptable solutions.

The study is limited to third-year college students in the departments of English of the College of Basic Education and College Languages at the University of Salahaddin for the academic year 2012-2013. This study deals with only students' errors at the recognition and production levels of passivization in English.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Voice and Passive in English Language

Brinton(2000,p.117) explains that voice is an indication of whether the subject is performing action of the verb or being something (active voice) or whether the subject is being affected by the action or being acted upon (passive voice).While the active is expressed by the simple forms of the verb, the passive is expressed periphrastically. Therefore, verbs are generally either active or passive in voice. This is shown in the following two examples:

(1) *John carefully searched the room.*

(2) *The room was (carefully) searched (by John).* Quirk *et al* (1972, P.50)

In sentence (1), the subject (John) is the person who did the action expressed by the verb (searched), and what he did to the object (the room). In sentence (2), the subject (the room) is the goal of the action –it is 'acted upon', and thus it is passive.

Crystal (2003, p.495) defines voice as " a category used in the grammatical description of sentence or clause structure, primarily with reference to verbs, to express the way sentences may alter the relationship between the subject and object of a verb without changing the meaning of a sentence". So, voice is a grammatical category that describes or defines a sentence or a clause structure with regard to its verb, in other words, the voice decides whether the sentence is active or passive.

Regarding Passive, Crystal (2003, p.339) states that passive is "a term in grammatical analysis of voice, referring to a sentence, clause or verb form where the grammatical subject is typically the recipient or 'goal' of the action denoted by the verb".

Wang (2010, P.456) distinguishes active-passive sentences at two grammatical levels: the verb phrase and the clause. In the verb phrase, the difference between the two voice categories is that the passive adds a form of the auxiliary and the past participle of the main verb.

At the clause level, passivization involves rearrangement of two clause elements and one addition. (A) The active subject becomes the passive agent, (B) the active object becomes the passive subject, and (C) the preposition "by" is placed before the agent. The prepositional agent phrase of passive sentences is an optional sentence element.

It can be summarized that voice is a grammatical indicator of a sentence showing that whether the subject has performed an action or been acted upon. If the subject performed an action, the voice would be active, but if the subject was acted upon, then the voice would be passive.

## 2.2 Types of Passive

Passive types, also termed as passive classes (Quirk et al, 1972, P.171) and passive gradience (Palmer, 1982, p.85), include verbal passives, lexical passives, mixed passives and pseudo-passives.

### 2.2.1 Verbal Passives

Verbal passives refer to the ordinary passive transformation and are defined as "agentive passives that involve expressed agent and without expressed agent" (Wang ,2010, P.456).This means that this type of passive has an agent expressed through "by" or through an instrument by using "with" and sometimes it is without expressed agent. Eastwood (1994, p.133) states that an agent is not expressed because the agent may not be new information or the agent may not  be relevant to the message, or sometimes we do not know the identity of the agent and sometimes we do not mention the agent because we do not want to . For example:

*(3)  The car has been repaired by Ali.*
*(4)  The window was broken with a stone.*
*(5)  Hiroshima and Nagasaki were bombed in 1945.*

In both *(3) and (4),* the passives are verbal and agentive and the agentives are expressed by "by" and "with". In sentence *(5)* the agent is not mentioned because this is not new information.

One can say the verbal passive expresses an event and has a corresponding active voice. Verbal passive is usually agentive and the agent is expressed through *"by, with"* or sometimes it is not expressed at all.

### 2.2.2 Adjectival Passives

Huddleston and Pullum (2005, p.246) explain that adjectival passive describes a state which can be differentiated from verbal passive that shows an event.

*(6a) Her leg was broken.*
*(6b) She was using crutches because her leg was broken.*

The first example *(33a)* is an adjectival passive because it denotes a state. The word *"broken"* in sentence (33a) can be replaced by an Adj such as *"sore"* (ibid).The second example  (33b) is a verbal passive because it shows an event, her leg may have been broken in a hockey accident or football match.

Adjectival passive is the passive participle of typically transitive verb functioning as an adjective (Trask, 1993, p. 7).

Palmer (1987, p. 85) states that the adjectival and lexical properties of passive can be found out through the test of adjectival function in which such type of passive occur in the following situations:

1-In attributive position (in a noun phrase before a noun);

*(7) They could not start the project because of the complicated problem.*

2-In a predicative position after verbs other than *"be"*, *e.g. "seem, become"*.

*(8) The problem seems complicated.*

3-With intensifiers such as *"very, rather, etc"*.

   *(9) The problem is very complicated.*

4-Coordinated with a true adj.

   *(10) The problem is difficult and complicated.*

   Close (1975, p.86) explains that many participial adjectives that act like passive, which cannot be preceded by *"very"*, can be modified by other intensifiers such as*;" much, well, badly, completely, highly, greatly"*. For example:

 *(11) Her performance was* ⎰ well / completely / greatly ⎱ *admired.*

   Close (ibid) state that *ed*-participles acting as adjectival passive may sometimes be followed by prepositions other than *"by"*.

*(12a) I am very annoyed with him.*

*(12b) I am very interested in chess.*

 *(12c) I am very surprised at you.*

   Radford (1988, p.433) explains that verbal passives involve an NP movement, whereas adjectival passive does not allow NP movement. For example:

*(13a) Marconi invented the radio.*

*(13b) The radio was invented by Marconi.*

*(14a) We were unimpressed by his efforts.*

*(14b) *His efforts unimpressed us.*

   It can be summarized that adjectival passive participles never trigger NP movement while verbal passives do. What this means in more concrete terms is that in an adjectival passive such as:

*(15) Her reply was unexpected.*

   The NP "her reply" is the sentence subject at all stages of derivation, and does not originate in post verbal Object position (ibid, p.435). Therefore you could say:

*(16a) The film was boring.*

*(16b) I was bored by the film.*

*(17a) The book was interesting.*

*(17b) I was interested in the book.*

*But* you cannot say:

*(18a) The film bored me.*

*(18b)The book interested me.*

**2.2.3 Mixed Passives**

   Mixed passives are passive constructions that have both adjectival and verbal properties. These sorts of passives have verbal properties because they have active corresponding analogies"; in other words, the mixed passives have expressed agents (Crystal, 2003, p.337). For example:

*(19a) He was embarrassed by his sister's behavior.*

*(19b) His sister's behavior embarrassed him.*

   They have adjectival features at the same time, because the past participle of the passive sentence can be modified by "quite, rather, very, more", and the auxiliary "be" can be replaced by a lexical copular verb such as "feel *or* seem" (Quirk *et al*.1985, p.168). For example:

*(20a) He feels embarrassed by his sister's behavior.*

*(20b) He seemed very embarrassed by his sister's behavior.*

   Palmer (1987, p.87) explains that the agents of the mixed passives can be expressed by other prepositions like *"about, at, in"* besides *"by, with"*. For example:

*(21a) The accident worried them.*

*(21b)  They were worried about the accident.*

*(21c) Her behavior surprised me.*

*(21d) I was surprised at her behavior.*

*(21e) You disappoint him.*

*(21f) He is disappointed in you.*

## 2.2.4 Pseudo Passives

Pseudo passive is a label sometimes applied to a passive construction in which the verb is intransitive and the subject is the underlying object of a preposition (Trask, 1993, p.224). For example:

*(22) This bed was slept in by George Washington.*

Palmer (1974, pp.92-93) as cited in Al-Salihi (2009, p.41) state that sentences which are active in structure, but passive in meaning are considered as pseudo passive. For example:

*(23a) Washing machines are selling well.*

*(23b) Messages transmit rapidly by satellite.*

Teschner and Evans (2007, p. 101) explain that if transitive verbs are used in a construction where no object can be added, then such verbs are indeed being used intransitively and the verbs must be viewed as intransitives in these particular constructions. Therefore, the verbs used in pseudo-passive are superficially transitive verbs normally, but they behave and work like intransitives, so they are regarded as intransitive verbs.

## 3. Data Collection Methodology

## 3.1 The Population of the Study

The population of the current study is the third year college students of both the English departments of the colleges of Languages and Basic Education at Salahaddin University. The whole number of population is 164 students: 71 students in the English Department of the College of Basic Education and 93 students in the English Department of the College of Languages.

## 3.2 The Sample of the Study

To achieve the purposes of the current study, 118 third year college students have been randomly chosen from both the English departments of both the Colleges of Languages and Basic Education at Salahaddin University as a sample to take the final test for the current study. Thirty students from both of the departments mentioned above have been chosen to take the pilot test as well. Third year college students have been chosen for this study because they are supposed to be familiar and acquainted with the use of the passive voice .

**Table 1**

*Selection of Sample*

| The Tests | Colleges | The Participants | Total |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Pilot Test** | Languages | 15 | |
| | Basic Education | 15 | 30 |
| **Final Test** | Languages | 63 | 118 |
| | Basic Education | 55 | |

## 3.3 The Construction of the Test

Heaton (1988: 5) describes tests as a means of assessing the students'

performance in the language. The tests are intended to demonstrate the precise areas of difficulty encountered by the individual students to be identified and analyzed. The test consists of two levels: recognition and production. Both of recognition and production tests are considered the most common types of objective tests used to recognize and produce correct forms of language (ibid, p. 34).

Multiple-choice technique is used in the recognition level to assess the ability of the learners to show the extent to which they can recognize the essential parts of passive sentences (Heaton, 1988, p.27).

The recognition test is designed to elicit receptive knowledge and the production test is set to get productive knowledge regarding passivization in the target language.

**3.3.1 The Recognition Level of the Test**

The recognition level of the test consists of 24 items and it is in the form of multiple choices. The items require the students to identify and choose the correct passive verb, the suitable operator of the passive sentence or the right passive verb with the operator. The test covers all the tenses of the English language except the present perfect continuous and past perfect continuous which cannot be passivized (Hewings, 1999, p.242). Thirteen items of the test deals with choosing the right tenses of the passive, in other words, the students are asked to choose the right operator, the correct passive verb with the operator or the right passive verb. Six items are about the forms of the operator that test the students' abilities to choose the right operator depending on the singular and plural forms of the objects. Two items are about negative forms of passive in which the subjects are required to choose the negative operator with the passive verb. Two items deal with positive forms of passive. One item is about passive voice with *"get"*. (See appendix 5)

**3.3.2 The production Level of the Test**

The production level of the test has 25 items. The subjects are asked to change the sentences from active into passive. Twenty one items are about tenses in which positive, negative and interrogative cases of each tense are given. These items test the subjects' abilities to produce the positive, negative and interrogative forms of passive as well as choosing the right form of the operators. One item is about passive voice with verb *"say"*. Another item deals with passive voice with *"auxiliary + have"*. The last two items are about phrasal verbs with separable and inseparable particles.

**4.Data Analysis and Discussion of the Results**

The data has been analyzed statistically according to the students' responses in the final tests. The data analysis is essential to obtain the aims and the hypotheses of the study. The percentage of students' correct and incorrect answers is calculated and then the incorrect answers are categorized.

The most problematic items in the categories (i.e. the items in the recognition level whose percentage of error is 40% and more, and items in the production level error percentage is 60% and more) are tabulated and analyzed, and finally their errors are attributed to their probable sources.

**4.1 The Students' Performance at the Recognition level**

The students' performance is computed in terms of the percentage of correct and incorrect answers for the purpose of assessing the sample at the recognition level. The results show that the average error percentage is 34.75 %   at the recognition level.

**4.2 The Students' Performance at the Production level**

The students' performance is analyzed in terms of the percentage of correct and incorrect answers for each item in production  level. The average error percentage is 70.68 %.

**4.3 The Students' Overall Performance**

The first aim of this research is to find out the problematic areas of difficulty in the students' performance of recognizing and producing passive sentences. To achieve that aim the students' correct and incorrect answers are found.

The percentage of the students' overall performance in recognizing and producing passive sentences is computed in order to verify the first hypothesis of this study which is: *college students fail to master the recognition and production of passive sentences*. Table 12 below shows the results of the statistical analyses.

**Table 2**

*The Percentage of the Students' Overall Performance in both Recognition and Production levels*

| The Tests | Per. of Incorrect Answers | Per. of Correct Answers |
|---|---|---|
| **The Recognition level** | 34.75 % | 65.25 % |
| **The Production level** | 70.68 % | 29.32 % |
| **Total** | 52.72 % | 47.28 % |

The table shows that the total percentage of incorrect answers in both the recognition and production level is 52.72 percent which validates the first hypothesis of this study: *college students fail to master the recognition and production of passive sentences.*

**4.4 Recognition versus Production level**

The sample's performance at both recognition and production levels has been analyzed in order to achieve the second aim of the research: *assessing the students' performance at both recognition and production levels.*

The results of both recognition and production levels have been compared so as to find out and test the second hypothesis of this study: *college students encounter more difficulty at the production level than at the recognition one.* The comparison is shown in the following table

**Table 3**

*Summary Statistics of Correct Answers at both Recognition and Production Levels*

| Test Levels | Mean | St. Deviation | Result |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Recognition** | 15.69 | 4.633 | Significant |
| **Production** | 7.52 | 7.264 | Significant |

The mean or average of the recognition level is 15.65 which is greater than the mean of the production level which is 7.52. The difference between the two levels is significant. Hence, the results verify the second hypothesis.

**4.5 Analysis and Discussion of the Most Problematic Errors in Each Category**

The most problematic errors are identified according to the error percentage of each category in the final test. Then the most probable factors behind the errors are elucidated so as to achieve the third aim of this study which is: *Analyzing the problematic areas of difficulty and finding out the factors behind the problems.*

Brown (2000, p. 221-5) attributes the sources of errors to a number of factors such as interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer and context of learning. Thus, the researcher, like Brown (2000), attributes the causes of the sample's errors to those mentioned factors.

**4.5.1 Errors at the Recognition Level**

The errors which are observed by the researcher to be discussed are those items whose error percentage is 40% and more. These items are 2, 5, 6, 9, 10, 12, 13, 17 and 24. They are analyzed and discussed according to categories, namely: operator+ passive verb, operator, regular passive verb, irregular passive verb and "get"+ passive verb.

**4.5.1.1 Operator + Passive Verb**

Two items fall into this category which are 2 and 24 in which the error percentage of item 2 is 59% and item 24 is 70%. The percentage of incorrect options is found out and shown in the following tables. Then the sources of errors are attributed to their probable factors.

**Item 2 in the Recognition Level of the Final Test:**

*The children--------against measles by the doctors next week.*

   *(a. will vaccinate,    b. will have vaccinated,   c. will be vaccinating, d. will be vaccinated)*

**Table 4**
*Percentage of the Incorrect Options-Item 2 of the Recognition level*

| Incorrect Options | A | B | C |
|---|---|---|---|
| Percentage | 39 % | 20 % | 40.98 % |

The table shows that most of the errors were made in both options (A and C) which contain active verbs. The errors are attributed to the context of learning and intralingual factor: lack of knowledge by the students because the students did not know that the pattern of passive voice in the future simple tense is "will be +past participle", that is why they could not distinguish between the passive verb and the active verbs and there is intralingual factor because the students have over-generalized the pattern of "will be + Verb+ing" of the future continuous tense.

**4.5.2 Overall Sources of Errors in the Recognition Level**

The overall sources of errors in the recognition level show that students have made errors due to the factors of context of learning and intralingual. Context of learning represents 53 % of the errors which includes hyper-correction, faulty rules given by teachers, inefficient teaching and lack of information by the students. Intralingual factor involves the over-generalization of rules of the target language. The intralingual factor makes up 47 % of the errors.

**4.5.3 Errors at the Production Level**

The errors which are found out by the researcher to be discussed are those items whose error percentage is 60% and more. These are items (7, 10, 13, 22, 23, 5, 8, 11, 14, 20, 3, 6, 9, 12, 15, 18, 21, 24 and 25). They are analyzed and discussed according to categories which are: affirmative, negative, and interrogative forms of passive and the passive of phrasal verbs.

**4.5.3.1 Affirmative Forms of Passive**

Five items are under this category which are (items: 7, 10, 13, 22 and 23) in which the error percentage of item 7 is 81%, item 10 is 76%, item 13 is 61%, item 22 is 93% and item 23 is 74%. The percentage of incorrect options is found out and shown in the following tables. Then the sources of errors are attributed to their probable factors.

**Item 7 at the Production Level of the Final Test**:
*The government is demolishing many slums to make way for new buildings*.

**Table 5**

*Percentage of the Incorrect Answers-Item 7 of the Production level*

| | Incorrect Answers | Percentage |
|---|---|---|
| 1- | Many slums are demolished | 31 % |
| 2- | Many slums are demolishing | 15 % |
| 3- | Many slums is being demolished | 12 % |
| 4- | The slums is demolishing | 7 % |
| 5- | Many slums is demolished | 7 % |
| 6- | Miscellaneous Errors | 28 % |

The errors in this item are due to the intralingual factors and the context of learning. There is intralingual factor (1, 2 and 4) because the students have over-generalized the pattern of passive voice in the present simple *"object+is/are +p.p."* and the pattern of present continuous *"subject+is/are +verb ing."*. There is context of learning (3 and 5): inefficient teaching because the students made mistakes in using the right form of *"be"* because they were probably taught by their teachers: *use the given form of "be"* in the sentence.

**4.5.4.5 Overall Sources of Errors in the Production Level**

The overall sources of errors in the recognition level show that students have committed errors due to the factors of interlingual, intralingual, and context of learning. Context of learning represents 45 % of the errors which includes hyper-correction, faulty rules given by teachers, inefficient teaching and lack of information by the students. Intralingual factor which represents 20% includes the over-generalization of rules of the target language.

Interlingual errors make up 18% of the errors that involves using the Kurdish pattern of passivization and applying it into the English language**.**

**5.Conclusions:**

The following conclusions can be drawn in the light of the study findings:

-the results show that the students still face problems in recognition and production levels of passivization. The students' percentage of overall correct answers in the final test is %47.28.

-The test results show that the students do better in recognition level (i.e, the percentage of incorrect answers is %34.75) than the production level (i.e. the percentage of incorrect answers is %70.68).This is a good indicator that the students' receptive knowledge is better than their productive knowledge.

-The great difference between the recognition level and the production level show that there is a problem with the teaching methods of grammar which focuses on delivering knowledge rather than creative knowledge. The students did not have a good practicing context to practice and produce passive sentences.

-The percentage of incorrect answers in each category at the recognition level shows that the students face problems in recognizing the essential parts of a passive sentence. Most of the errors were made in the categories of "operator + passive verb" (i.e. error percentage of this category is %43) and "passive verb" (i.e. error percentage of this category is %42).This shows that students are not well-informed regarding the essential parts of passive sentences. This is due to the context of learning: inefficient teaching and lack of practice of the passive patterns of sentences.

-The percentage of incorrect answers at the production level (i.e. error percentage of incorrect answers is %70.68) shows the students are in real trouble in producing passive sentence. This indicates that the students do very badly in producing passive sentences in the form of affirmative, negative, interrogative and passive voice of the phrasal verbs.

-The analyses of the students' sources of errors show that the students commit errors in passivization due to the interlingual factor, intralingual factor and the context of learning. First, there is an interlingual factor (makes up %9 of errors in both levels) in the students' mistakes because the students have depended on the Kurdish pattern of passivization in producing English passive sentences. Secondly, intralingual factor (makes up %33.5) of errors in both levels: this factor has made the students over-generalize some rules of the target language regardless of the tense of the sentences. The last factor is the context of learning (makes up %49 of errors) which includes inefficient teaching, faulty rules given by teachers, lack of knowledge and practice by the students.

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