

Section 6 passives

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A few languages form passives in the same way as English, with the equivalent of *be* plus past participle. For many students, however, the structure is likely to be difficult, and can cause occasional problems even at advanced level. A common cause of confusion is the fact that both parts of the passive (*be* and the past participle) are also used in active structures.

Compare:

was eating (active)

was eaten (passive)

has **eaten** (active)

This can lead to mistakes:

**These cars are making in Japan.*

**My brother questioned by the police.*

**I was studied French at school.*

Transformation exercises There is a traditional kind of exercise in which students have to transform sentences from the active to the passive (e.g. *I ask* > *I am asked* or *Peter invited us* > *We were invited by Peter*). We don't think this activity is very useful. Native speakers of English don't produce passive sentences by starting with the active equivalents (any more than they produce actives by starting with passives). Actives and passives are independent structures, used in different kinds of situation for different reasons. (And note that only about 20% of English passives have expressed agents with 'by ...'.) We feel it is better to practise the formation and use of passives directly in appropriate contexts.

Those languages that have a structure similar to the English passive may not use it in exactly the same way. The equivalent of 'English is spoken', for example, may be something like 'One speaks English', or a reflexive structure similar to 'English speaks itself'. So students may not find it natural to use the passive in some situations:

**The administrative structure has completely reorganised itself.*

The distinction between active and passive meanings is not always clear-cut (for example, is *suffering* something that you do or something that is done to you?). Not all languages draw the dividing lines in the same place, so it is not always obvious to students whether a particular idea should be expressed with an active or a passive verb.

**The coastline is slowly being sunk into the sea.*

Note that the common mistake **I am born* for *I was born* may be a blend of two confusions. The mother-tongue equivalent in, for example, French, is an active present perfect structure – *je suis né* – meaning effectively 'I have come into the world'. Since with this verb French uses the word for *be*, not the word for *have*, as a perfect auxiliary, the English word-for-word equivalent is 'I am born'.

Perfect progressive passives (e.g. *How long has she been being treated for depression?*) are possible but unusual.

The structures dealt with on page 79 may cause continuing problems. Other languages do not generally put prepositions at the ends of clauses. Similarly, in other languages two-object verbs like *give* or *send* do not usually form passives with the recipient as subject (*Joe was given a gold watch*). So students may tend to confuse or avoid these structures.

The CD-ROM has exercises to help students perceive unstressed auxiliaries and verb endings in passives, and to pronounce passives with correct rhythm.

possible further activities

Basic practice If students need further practice on forming basic passive structures, this can be combined with vocabulary expansion. Some suggestions:

Products Individually or in groups, students write sentences about where things are made/grown/found. ('Computers are made in Japan, the US, Korea, and ...' 'Rice is grown in India and ...' 'Diamonds are found/mined in South Africa.') See who can make ten or more sentences. You can teach some useful vocabulary, including the English names of countries.

Materials You can do a similar exercise revising the names of materials. ('Furniture is made of wood, metal or plastic.') Note the difference between *made of* and *made from* in cases like *This table is made of wood / Paper is made from wood.*

Translations Get each student to tell you what something is called in another language. ('This [pointing to her head] is called *Kopf* in German.')

Languages Students say what languages are spoken in different countries, learning the names of some languages at the same time. (Make sure they use 'is spoken' in their sentences.)

Spelling Students can practise spelling their own (or each other's) names, using the English names of the letters. ('My name is spelt *d, a, n, a.*' 'I think your name is spelt ...') Look out for confusions between the English names of *e* and *a*, *i* and *e*, *a* and *r*, and *g* and *j*.

Future fame Get students to say which currently famous people they think will be remembered/forgotten in ten, twenty, fifty or a hundred years. Who will always be remembered / never be forgotten? ('The Beatles will be forgotten in twenty years.' 'Leonardo da Vinci will always be remembered.')

Return visit Tell students to imagine that they return to their home town after twenty years away. A lot of things have been done. Can they imagine three or more? ('A new hospital has been built.' 'A statue of me has been put up in the town centre.') Help with vocabulary.

Split sentences: various passives Write out some passive sentences on cards; then cut them into three parts, shuffle them, and give one to each student. Students have to walk round saying (not showing) what is on their cards, and trying to form groups of three to make possible sentences. Some suggestions:

These shoes | were made | in Italy.

This book | was written | 100 years ago.

Our new house | will be finished | next year.

My passport | was stolen | while I was on holiday.

We | have all been invited | to a party.

English and French | are spoken | in Canada.

Football | is played | by two teams of 11 players.

This room | has not been cleaned | for a very long time.

Things that need to be done Tell students to imagine that they have just bought or been given an old house that has been empty for years. How many things can they think of that need to be done? Help with vocabulary. Some useful words: *repair, clean, paint, replace, install, connect, tidy up*. Can they think of any things that need to be done in their home, school, classroom, town?

Pronunciation Write up pairs of words like the following. Students say whether they are pronounced the same or aren't pronounced the same. (Make sure they say 'are pronounced' in their answers.)

her/hair (*different*) her/hear (*different*) here/hear (*same*) hair/hear (*different*)

were/where (*different*) were/wear (*different*) wear/we're (*different*)

there/their (*same*) there/they're (*same*) write/right (*same*) walk/work (*different*)

want/won't (*different*) would/wood (*same*) hour/our (*same*)

Key to the pronunciation:

her /hɜ:/ hair /heə/ hear, here /hɪə/

were /wɜ:/ where, wear /weə/ we're /wɪə/

there, their, they're /ðeə/ write, right /raɪt/

walk /wɔ:k/ work /wɜ:k/

want /wɒnt/ won't /wɒnt/
would, wood /wʊd/ hour, our /aʊə/

Prepositional verbs Ask students which of the following they like or dislike most:

being spoken to by strangers
being looked at
being talked about
being taken care of
being laughed at
being smiled at
being shouted at
being sung to

They should use the structure in their answers.

Two-object verbs Get students to say what they were given for their last birthday, or for some special occasion (e.g. Christmas). ('I was given socks by three different people.') Or get students to complete one or more of these sentences:

I'd like to be given ...
I was once promised ..., but ...
I've often been told that ...

Unsuitable gifts Get students to write one or more sentences on this pattern (starting with the recipient, not the gift):

... should not be given ...
(‘Horses should not be given hamburgers.’ ‘Children should not be given guns.’)

Internet Get students to look for interesting sentences on the internet including the words “must never be” (+ past participle).

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language notes

Grammars often give over-simple rules for the choice between active and passive. One of the most important reasons is topic-maintenance: keeping the same person or thing in focus through a stretch of text. This may mean changing from active to passive and back again in order to get the right subject for each verb.

possible further activities

Frequency of passives Divide students into several groups. Tell each group to look at a different type of writing (between lessons), to note the relative frequency of passives and actives, and to report back to the class. Possible types of writing to analyse:

News reports
Novels
Letters and emails
Sports reports
TV or theatre reviews
Song lyrics
Science/technology reports
Instruction manuals

Reasons for using passives Ask students to study a long news report and to find all the passives. What different reasons can they find for the choice of passives?

Writing a news report Get students to write an imaginary news report similar to the one on page 80, using similar grammar and vocabulary. They should write about one of the two following topics, or a similar one of their choice:

A grandmother who was caught riding a motorbike at 120 mph (190 kph) through Central London at 2 a.m.

A schoolboy who stole a bus and drove it (with its passengers) right across London.

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language notes

The structures dealt with on these pages will be most useful to students who are aiming at a good level of formal written English.

possible further activities

Internet (1) Ask students to find five or more interesting sentences on the internet beginning “For many years it was believed”.

Internet (2) Ask students to look for interesting sentences containing the following expressions:

“is known to be” “is believed to be” “is said to have”
“is thought to have” “is understood to be”