Errors in the Use of English Passive Constructions

Dr. Mohammed Selman Mansour
Dept. of English, Faculty of
Arts, Fateh University

Introduction

This paper is concerned with errors committed by third year university students (English Dept.) in the use of English passive verbal constructions. The writer has noticed, throughout his teaching experience, that students make various errors in the use of this verbal form in writing as well as in speaking. But for the purpose of an accurate and dependable analysis, the treatment in this paper is confined to the investigation of the written medium through which the test has been devised.

The purpose behind identifying errors in this area is twofold. First, errors committed in this respect can give us a clear idea of the students' achievement with regard to the verbal construction, subject to investigation, i.e., how much the testees have learned of the syllabus (Davies, 1977: 45). Second, the identification of errors will be a very essential element in suggesting any remedial work that aims at improving the students' language proficiency in this area of grammar (Corder, 1973: 265). It will also shed light on the nature and properties of the

approximative system or the interlanguage that the students have created in the process of second language acquisition (Ellis, 1996: 47).[1]

Due to a variety of reasons, Arab learners of English commit frequent errors in the formation and use of English passive constructions. This is not unexpected if we take into account the great differences between Arabic and English in both aspects of this area. There is no similarity in the verbal forms of the two languages, while passivizat-ion in English is achieved by syntactic and morphological devices, i.e., the use of the auxiliary 'be' and the suffixation of the main verb with the 'ed'-morpheme, Arabic achieves passivization by morphological devices; a change in the internal vowel pattern of the verb. Yet, the formal difference does not end here. Arabic verbal constructions do not exhibit the formal complexity that their English counterparts do. As such, one cannot say that there is a formal equivalence between the Arabic constructions, formed mainly from the verb, and the use of the copula 'yakun' (be) and the possible inclusion of the perfective 'qad' in preverbal position, on one hand, and the English constructions (the result of the interaction of tense, the progressive and the perfective aspect, and the modals) on the other hand. Nor can we find a one-to-one correspondence in the functions of the verbal constructions of the two languages.

Although the writer does not adhere to the traditional contrastive analysis hypothe-sis that differences between L1 and L2 equal difficulty

---

. The term 'approximative system' was first used by Nemser (1971), while Selinker [1] (1972) was the first to use the term' interlanguage'. Both are the same and used to refer to the type of language produced by a foreign language learner in the process of learning. It is the learner's own invention since it is different from both the native language and the target language (see Richards, 1993:186).

(Lado, 1957), he does believe that such dissimilarities as those obtaining between Arabic and English can be a source for difficulty in learning English. It is predicted that the area under investigation will be an area in which learners of English will commit more errors than usual due to the likelihood of the development of an interlanguage system which is different from both L1 and L2 (Richards, 1993:186). It is also predicted that such errors will arise due to the method of presentation and teaching of this verbal construction in the learners' syllabus.

Error and its Source

An error arising from the process of learning a foreign language is defined as "a deviation from the realization rules of the target language" (Corder, 1974:122-126) i.e., what rules has the learner broken, substituted or disregarded. Errors of the types mentioned above stem from various sources:

a. Those exerted by the learner's native language, through their similarity to the forms of the mother tongue, are called transfer errors or interlingual errors.

b. Those committed due to the overgeneralization of the rules of the target language. Learners, here, fail to discover the precise set of categories and structures to which a certain rule applies. Such errors are called overgeneralization or analogical errors. They are also called interlingual errors since they stem from faulty or partial learning of the target language (Richards, 1993: 182).

c. Teaching-induced errors are those arising from the methods or material used in teaching. Such errors are more difficult to identify since they require very close study of the materials and teaching techniques to which the learner has been exposed (Corder, 1973: 288-9).

The Test

An objective test has been designed to assess the students' achievement in this area of grammar that covers the use of English Passive constructions. The test was given to sixty third year students. The subjects of the test were randomly chosen (ten from each group).

Before proceeding to the detailed description of the test, it is pertinent to make the following remarks:

a. The objective written test, used in this study, has been adopted as a result of the writer's conviction that such type of test is the most effective tool of measurement, identification and analysis of errors committed by students in their attempt to produce the passive verbal construction. It can provide the researcher with the data needed for a dependable analysis, a case which an oral test cannot, due to the limitation of the options from which the testees are asked to choose the one they believe to be the correct form.

b. The adoption of this test type will naturally limit the investigation to recognition, rather than production error. The writer suspects that the results will be different if the testees were asked to produce these verbal constructions by employing other test types such as composition or translation, or by providing the verbal base forms and asking them to give the appropriate verbal constructions.

c. The present test could be described as a diagnostic achievement test since "diagnostic tests are also achievement tests"(Lado, 1961:369).

Description of Test Items

The test consists of fourteen items in which the verbal phrase (verb and auxiliary) has been left out. Each test item is followed by four options from which the testees are asked to choose what they believe to be the correct form. Each test item represents (as is shown in table 1) one of the following passive patterns:

Table: 1
Patterns of the Items Used in the Test

1. Present simple tense	(is+ p.p)
2. Past simple tense	(was + p.p)
3. Present continuous tense	(is + being +p.p)
4. Past continuous tense	(were + being + p.p)
5. Present perfect tense	(has + been + p.p)
6. Past perfect tense	(had + been + p.p)
7. Future simple	(will + be + p.p)
8. Future conditional	(should + be + p.p)
9. Future perfect conditional	(may + have + been + p.p)
10. Future perfect conditional	(would + have + been +p.p)
11. Perfect infinitive	(to + have + been + p.p)
12. Present infinitive	(to + be + p.p)
13. Passive gerund	(being + p.p)
14. Passive gerund	(having + been + p.p)

Items (1-10), as table 1 shows, represent finite constructions, while items (11-14) represent non-finite constructions. It is necessary to mention that these patterns do not represent the totality of the possible passive patterns in English. Some possible patterns were excluded due to their rarity in actual usage (Quirk et al, 1972:73).

The four options following each sentence (stem) consist of one formally correct passive construction and three inappropriate forms. The distractors represent the following types of errors:

1. One distractor represents the active counterpart of the appropriate passive construction.

2. The second distractor represents the appropriate passive construction but with the passive 'be' missing. The presence of 'be' is one of the two things that distinguish the English passive constructions from their active counterparts. The choice of this distractor will signal the error of not associating 'be' with passive constructions. This might be attributed to transfer from Arabic in which passivisation processes do not entail the insertion of such an element. The negligence of this auxiliary is a common phenomenon in the writing of Arab learners of English.

3. The third distractor represents a correct passive construction except for the use of the base form of the verb instead of its past participle form. This checks the associa-tion of the p.p form with the passive construction in the learners' interlanguage system. The use of the p.p form is the second thing (together with the passive 'be') which distinguishes the passive from the active constructions in English.

Characteristics of the Test

The test conducted in this study could be described as:

Reliable since its scores are stable. It is an objective multiple-choice test in whichdifferent scorers are bound to give the same marks when scoring it (Harris, 1969:14)

Valid with regard to content. It has been designed to test a specific area (the use of passive constructions). Practical in terms of time, administration and scoring. Half an hour was devoted to answering the fourteen items. Clear instructions have helped to perform the test quickly and easily. As for scoring, the test was easy and quick to score simply because it is an objective test.

Analysis of Errors

The test has revealed a great deal of variation in error frequency. This is seen in table 2 which shows the percentage of erroneous responses in each item in relation to the total number of responses.

Table: 2

Percentage of Erroneous Responses

Item No.	No. of Erroneous Responses	Error Percentage
1	10	16.7
2	14	23.3
3	20	33.3
4	38	63.3
5	16	26.7
6	26	43.3
7	26	43.3
8	20	33.3
9	28	46.4
10	40	66.7
11	32	53.3
12	32	53.3
13	44	73.3
14	56	93.3

The table above shows that items representing finite constructions (tems 1-10 , with the exception of items 4 and 10) generally draw less erroneous responses than the items that represent non-finite constructions (items 11-14)[1]. The percentage of erroneous responses exceeds 50% in only two of the finite constructions, i.e, 4 and 10.

---

[1] . To have a clear idea of the test items, see Appendix Apresentation of finite constructions, and the seemingly delayed presentation of the non-finite constructions in the syllabus.

On the other hand, the erroneous responses exceed the correct responses in all items representing non-finite constructions.

It is apparent that students have made fewer mistakes with finite verbal constructions than with non-finite constructions, and this may be attributed to their familiarity with the first form more than with the second. The finite constructions have been presented much earlier than the non-finite ones, so it is not so much the teaching strategy, rather it is the syllabus design which is responsible for the earlier

The Active Counterpart

This distractor draws a varying number of erroneous responses in different items of the test. Yet, a quick survey of those responses throughout the test shows that the number of testees who have chosen it generally exceeds the number of those who have chosen the other distractors. This is clear in items (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), (12) and (14). The only exception to this can be noticed in the items which contain distractors that represent ill-formed items (7, 8, 10). Those draw similar or higher number of responses.

One can hypothesize that the strength of this distractor lies in its 'positive force' in the sense that it constitutes a 'well-formed' construction. This choice indicates that the testees do make a distinction between well-formed and ill-formed constructions, although they do not choose the correct passive alternative; this partly explains the choice of this alternative. Yet, a second, and equally strong reason for the choice of this distractor, may be the familiarity of the testees with it. They not only have a greater exposure to the active constructions, but they also have been

introduced to them earlier. The teaching of active constructions precedes the teaching of the passive ones in our schools. It has been found that a previously learned pattern affects a pattern that is learned later (Richards and Sampson, 1971:204-19).

This carry-over is prominent in the "not so frequently used" passive progressive constructions (present and past). The active counterparts of these constructions are some of the first introduced verbal constructions in the syllabus. This is clear in item (3) which represents the passive present progressive verbal construction. Alternatives (3a) draws two thirds of the responses, while the correct alternative (3.c) is chosen only by eight testees. The same thing can be said about item (4) which represents the passive past progressive construction. The use of the active counterpart (present progressive) could be attributed to the factor of overgeneralization (interlingual errors) through the connection between the tense and the time expressions 'now' and 'last'. In item (4) the active counterpart (4.d) has drawn (20) responses while the correct passive form has drawn (22) responses out of (60).

The same thing can be said about the higher number of responses that this distractor draws in the simple non-finite constructions (items 12 and 13). This seems to be a very strong structured association between 'to' and the base form of the verb, i.e., the active infinitive in the approximative or interlanguage system developed by some of the testees. Likewise, the association between the verb 'like' and a following 'ing-form' is also strong. This strong association is, of course, the result of earlier teaching

of this pattern and the reinforcement of it through drilling and or exposure in the teaching material.

The choice of another distractor in some other items may be attributed to the so-called simplification strategy (Selinker, 1974:40). This could be at work in verbal constructions that consist of a large number of elements as is the case in items (9 and 10) in which the passive construction consists of four elements, whereas the active counterpart consists of three elements.

The last thing that can be noted here is the remarkable rise in the choice of this distractor where the active construction represents the passive without 'be' ; what has been termed as overlapping distractors. This is the case with passive constructions of the perfective aspect; items 5,6,9,10,11 and14. It seems that such constructions do not only have the positive force of being well-formed, and hence will be chosen by those who may not distinguish between the active and the passive, but they also represent numerically less complex structures, three instead of four elements, and will thus be chosen by some sort of application of the above-mentioned simplification strategy.

The Passive Form with the Omission of "Be"

This distractor has been included in the test to check the association between the auxiliary 'be' and passivization. As was said before, one of the two things that distinguish the passive constructions from their active counterparts is the use of the auxiliary 'be'; the second being the use of the past participle form of the verb. There-fore, it is one

of the two things that has to be learned by the learner when studying th 'passive voice'.

The choice of this distractor may therefore check whether pssivizatio in the learner's system of L2 includes the use of the auxiliary 'be' or not Why this 'be' is not part of the passivization process might have come as result if the absence of a correspondent for it in Arabic passive constructions. It could also be the result of the learners' attitude to simplify structures. The addition of 'be' would increase the number o elements in the verbal phrase to four elements in perfect modals as is seer in items (9) and (10).

Apparently, this association of the 'be' with the passive is not part of the system of some learners. This is evident in the number of erroneous choices made with this distractor. Even in items (1) and (2), which represent structures that the testees are most familiar with, some choices of this distractor are drawn (1.a and 2.c). In items (3) and (4) the progressive present and past distractors have drawn six responses and eight responses respectively.

As for the items representing perfect passives (items 5, 6,9,10 and 14), the omission of 'be' results in a grammatical form, i.e., the active counterpart of the passive construction. As was mentioned earlier, this seems to have some sort of a positive force and would thus be chosen not only by those to whom the passive is not strongly associated with the presence of 'be' , but also by those who are influenced by their earlier learning of the perfect active constructions (Richards and Sampson,1974: 14).

The non-association of the passive construction with 'be' seems to be so prevalent that this distractor still draws some responses in simple modal constructions-alternatives (7.a) and (8.c) in items 7 and 8, and in simple non-finite constructions-alternatives (12.b) and (13.a) in items 12 and 13.

The Passive Construction with Base Verbal Form

This distractor reveals the strength of the association of the past participle form of the verb with passive constructions in the learners' approximative system. As was mentioned before, the change in the form of the lexical verb, together with the insertion of the auxiliary 'be' constitute the two features that distinguish the passive constructions from their active counterparts in English. The earlier introduction of the active verbal construction might cause a carry-over of those patterns into passive constructions with the consequence of not using the p.p form in such constructions by some learners. This is similar to the negligence of the auxiliary 'be' in the choice of the preceding distractor.

Choices of this distractor vary in frequency in the different items of the test. But the fact that the choice has been made is an indicative of the significance of the problem of associating the past participle form with passive constructions on the part of the learners. Even in those constructions which are thought to be well-mastered, such as the simple present and past, it is noted that this distractor draws responses (see 1.c and 2.a).Yet, the choice of this distractor in these two items may have come not from the disassociation of the p.p-form with passive constructions, as much the faulty formation of active verbal phrases. For

many learners, (1.c) and (2.a) represent the active present and past simpl
verbal constructions. Thus, the choice of this distractor represents
double error, the tendency to use the active construction instead of th
passive construction, and the inappropriate formation of the activ
construction.

Another evidence for the existence of this non-association of the pas
participle form with passive constructions in the learners' interlanguage
even at this 'fairly' advanced stage of learning English, can be noticed ir
the large number of responses this distractor has drawn in general (3.d
4.c, 7.b, 8.b, 12.d, 13.c and 14.d). But, it should be noted here that in two
of these items, (7) and (8), the choice of this distractor is motivated by
another reason. In these two items, the choice of (7.b) and (8.b) by some
of the testees is prompted by the fact that these constructions represent
fossilized forms of 'modal' and base form of the verbs. It seems that 'will
be' and 'shall be' and other similar phrases are taken by some learners as
unified lexical items. As such, they would be followed by the base form of
the verb in accordance with the general rules of modal verbs in English.

However, the perfect tenses (present, past and modal) represented in
items (5, 6,9,10 and11) seem to form an exception. In these items, this
distractor does not draw as many responses as it does in others. This
should not mean that the learners' association of the past participle form
and passive construction is exceptionally strong in these items. Rather, the
reason seems to lie in the fact that the past participle form is strongly
associated with the perfect tenses in the learners' approximative or
interlanguage system. Thus, the occurrence of 'have' constitutes a stimulus

for the choice of the past participle form rather than the base form. Alternative (14.d) representing this distractor draws six responses. No definite explanation can be given as to why this is so, except the unfamiliarity of the testees with the construction in general. However, this distractor still draws the least number of responses compared to (14.a):16 and (14.b):28.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been twofold. First; it aims at determining those passive forms which university students still feel uneasy about and unfamiliar with. Second, it tries to investigate and assess the students' mastery of the properties that distinguish the passive constructions from other verbal constructions-say the active constructions-and to see if we could arrive at any significant generalizations that may characterize their learning of this area of the syntax of English. This can be deduced from the types of errors they have committed, which reflect the various factors influencing their mastery of the forms.

As for the first aim, the paper has confirmed the time-honoured principle that the more and longer exposure a learner has to a certain construction; the better he is at it and subsequently, the lesser error he makes in using it. The finite passive constructions which our testees have been taught and exposed to since their early years of learning English generally draw less errors than the non-finite forms to which the testees have had relatively less exposure and which have been taught much later than the first. The striking exception in this tendency is the progressive passives (in item 3 and 4). A closer look at the syllabus and at the general

use of these constructions in written English (which our students are mainly exposed to) shows that this violation is only apparent. Our university students have not had as much exposure to these passive constructions as they have had to other constructions. In addition, the active counterparts are the most frequently used verbal constructions in English.

Turning to the second aim, the writer has noticed that the errors committed by the testees may be attributed to a variety of reasons. There are a number of factors that determine what approximative system learners have developed and consequently what sort of errors they commit.

As for transfer from L1 (Arabic), it should only be considered from a general point of view, rather than causing the development of an approximative system of a specific property. In other words, the writer does not think that transfer from Arabic is responsible for one specific error. This is because the processes of passivization in the two languages are so different as not to warrant any transfer of a given feature from Arabic into English. Transfer in its specific terms obtains between comparable structures (Corder, 1979:130). Rather, we may notice the influence of L1 transfer at the more general level of structure simplification. As was mentioned above, Arabic verbal constructions are simpler than their English counterparts and passivization in Arabic does not add any more structure as it does in English. Thus, testees have developed, to some extent their simplification strategy; their own interlanguage. This would be realized in the choice of distractors which

contain simpler structures: the active counterpart distractor and the distractor which contains passive constructions without the auxiliary 'be'.

The learning strategy is also responsible for the carry-over of the earlier structures as witnessed in the errors committed by choosing the active constructions instead of the passive ones. Moreover, this strategy is apparent in fossilized structures that testees tended to choose.

To end with, it is important to state here that the results of this study have indicated only general tendencies. This is only expected from a paper of a limited scope. Obviously, for the determination of the specific role of each of the factors and the characterization of the properties influencing the interlanguage system of the learners, we shall have to wait for much detailed studies. This remains a compelling task for further research.

Appendix A: The Test

Choose the correct alternative.

1. English…………..............all over the world.
    a. spoken   b. speaks   c. is speak   d. is spoken

2. A letter………………...to the editor.
    a. was write   b .was written   c. written   d. wrote

3. The new drug……………..………at the lab now.
    a. is testing   b. being tested   c. is being tested   d. is being test

4. Meetings …………………….regularly last month.
    a. being held   b. were being held   c. were being hold   d. were holding

5. This team……………..……….repeatedly for the last three years.
    a. has beaten   b. beaten   c. has been beaten   d. has been beat

6. I …………………..a camera on my birthday last Tuesday.

a. had been given   b. had given   c. had been give   d. given

7. This play ……………………….in a few months time.

   a. will forgotten   b. will be forget   c. will be forgotten   d. will forget

8. My advice …………………… more seriously.

   a. should take   b. should be take   c. should taken   d. should be taken

9. The pens…………………..by someone.

     a. may be steal   b. may have been steal   c. may have stolen

     d. may have been stolen

10. Everything……………………… if they had worked harder.

   a. would have been finish   b. would have been finished

   c. would be finish   d. would have finished

11. A stone seems to…………………….at the window.

     a. have thrown   b. have been throw   c. have been thrown   d. throwi

12. The watch needs to…………………….because it does not work.

   a. be repaired   b. repaired   c. repair   d. be repair

13. I do not like ………………….while 1 am giving my lecture.

  a. interrupted   b. being interrupted   c. being interrupt   d. interrupting

14. She did not mind…………………….by the police.

   a. have questioned   b. questioned   c. having been questioned

    d .having been question

Appendix : B

Item Analysis of Students' Responses

No. of Responses

Item No.	Option a	Option b	Option c	Option d	No. of Errors
1	2	6	2	50	10
2	4	46	6	4	14
3	20	--	8	12	20
4	8	22	12	18	36
5	8	--	44	8	16
6	34	18	8	6	26
7	6	10	34	10	26
8	8	8	4	40	20
9	16	--	32	12	28
10	4	20	24	6	40
11	10	2	28	20	32
12	28	2	20	10	32
13	12	16	12	20	44
14	16	28	4	12	56

مـسـتـخـلـص

تتناول هذه المقالة الأخطـاء التي يرتكبها طلبة ألسنه الثالثة في قسم اللغة الانجليزية في استعمال المبني للمجهول في اللغة الانجليزية. حيث لاحظ الباحث، ومن خلال تدريسه لمادة "الكتابة الابداعيه"، بان الطلبة يرتكبوا اخطاءا متنوعة في هذا المجال كلاما وكتابة .ولكن بهدف التحليل الدقيق والمعتمد فقد تم التركيز على الجانب الكتابي من خلال الاختبار الذي تصميمه لهذا الغرض.

إن الهدف المنشود من تحليل الأخطـاء هو ثنائي الطبيعة.فهو يهدف في المقام الأول إلى تزويد الباحث بفكرة واضحة عن مستوى أداء ألطلبه في هذا الجانب ومدى ما تعلموه من المنهاج الدراسي. إن تحديد نوعية الأخطاء يمثل عنصرا هاما في إمكانية اقتراح آليات مناسبة لمعالجة هذه الأخطاء ،والذي يهدف بالمحصلة إلى تحسين مستوى الطلبة في هذه الناحية الهامة من التراكيب الفعلية في اللغة الانجليزية . إن هذا الكشف للأخطاء يسلط الضوء على ألطريقه التقريبية أو اللغة الخاصة التي ابتكرها ألطلبه في تعاملهم مع هذا التركيب الفعلي ،وهى بالتأكيد طريقه مختلفة عن النظام السائد في اللغة العربية والأنجليزيه على حد سواء.

ولا يخفى علينا بـأن ألطلبه العرب الدارسين للأنجليزيه يرتكبوا أخطاء كثيرة في هذا الجانب، وهو أمر متوقع نظرا للاختلافات الكبيرة بين طبيعة التركيب الفعلي في العربية والانجليزية ــ فالمعروف إن المبنى للمجهول في الأنجليزيه يتحقق عن طريق آليات تركيبيه وصرفيه ـ من خلال استعمال الفعل المساعد زائدا التصريف الثالث للفعل ،وكذلك زمن وصيغة الاستمرارية واستكمال الحدث. أما في

العربية فالأمر مقتصر على إحداث تغيرات في الفعل الرئيسي نفسه من خلال حركة الضمه على أوله، مع احتمال استخدام فعل الكينونة "يكون" والأداة "قد" لتحقيق الغرض ذاته.

ويجب التنويه هنا بأن الكاتب لا يدعم فرضية التحليل المقارن بين اللغتين كسبب رئيسي يعزى إلى ارتكاب هذه الأخطاء، ولكن يعتقد بأن مثل هذه الاختلافات التركيبية والصرفية قد تشكل سببا في هذه المشكلة بالأضافه إلى أسباب أخرى أهمها طريقة عرض وتدريس المادة اللغوية في المناهج التعليمية.

References

Corder ,S. P.(1973). Introducing Applied Linguistics Harmsworth :Penguin
    Books , Inc.

Corder , S.P.(1979. Error Analysis in Allen & Corder(eds.): Techniques in
Applied Linguistics ,Vol.3. London: Oxford Univ. Press.

Davies ,A.(1977).The Construction of Language Tests, in Allen &Davies
(eds.)Testing and Experimental Methods .The Edinburgh Course in Applied
Linguistics; Vol.4.Lomdon:Oxford Univ. Press.

Ellis ,Rod (1996).Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Oxford :
 University Press.

Klein ,Wolfgang (1995).Second Language Acquisition .Cambridge:
Cambridge   University .press.

Lado , Robert (1961).Language Testing: The Construction and Use of
Foreign   Language Tests .London :Longmans ,Green and Co. Ltd.

Quirk, et al.(1972).A Grammar of Contemporary English .London
:Longman Group   Limited.

Richards, Jack C.& Sampson ,Gloria P.(1974). The Study of Learner

English .In Jack   ,C. Richards(eds.).Error Analysis :Perspectives of Second

Language.Acquisition .London :Longman Group Limited.

Richards, Jack C. et al.(1993).Dictionary of Language Teaching and

Applied Linguistics .Longman Group UK Limited(3rd.impression).

Selinker ,Larry(1977) .Interlanguage .In Jack C. Richards (eds.).Error

Analysis: Perspectives on Second Language

Acquisition .London: Longman Group Limited