

Difficulties faced by the ESL Learners in using English Passive Voice in Written Communication: A study based on the Students of NAITA, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the difficulties faced by English as a Second Language (ESL) learners of National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), Trincomalee in using passive voice in written communication. This study focused on passive constructions, written communication, and difficulties faced by the learners in using the passive voice in writing. In this study, 35 ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee were selected as a sample population and two quantitative instruments: writing test and questionnaire were used to collect primary data. The findings of the data analysis of the writing test show that several students (82%) had used only active voice in the test although their writing was perfect. Further, the findings of the data analysis of the questionnaire show that most of the students (34%) like grammar but they face difficulties in learning passive voice and in using it in their writing. Lack of training in writing practice is one of the major reasons for finding difficulties in using passive voice in writing. This problem can be overcome when grammar is taught inductively, and more emphasis is given to four skills. Moreover, the ESL curriculum and activities should be designed based on the application of grammar in verbal communication.

Keywords: English as a Second Language, NAITA, passive voice, written communication

1. Introduction

Grammar of a language seems a significant component to improve the accuracy in both written and oral communication and to overcome the errors made by the speakers. In particular, learning English grammar is significant for second/foreign language speakers. In this sense, with regard to English Language, passive construction is an important part of English grammar, widely used in formal and academic writing. Palmer (1980) defines the term 'voice' as a linguistic category, which indicates the relationship between the subject of a sentence and its verb. In English, there are two voices, namely, active and passive which are used in verbal communication, especially in the formal context. However, although the English as a Second Language

(ESL)/English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners possess sufficient grammatical knowledge, they encounter difficulties in using the grammar in their oral and written communication.

Therefore, most of the learners commit mistakes and errors in both writing and speaking. As a result, learning English grammar seems failure for ESL and EFL learners. Using passive voice, reported speech, conditional clauses, etc. in the appropriate place in writing has been a challenge for most of the learners. In Sri Lanka, many students are sent for private English classes from grade 3. Moreover, they learn English from grade 3 to 13 as a compulsory subject at school. However, the outcome of most of the learners has been lower. They are very poor in writing and speaking although they possess very good grammatical knowledge.

NAITA is one of the vocational training institutions in Sri Lanka which functions under the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training. It offers a number of vocational training courses for the students who have done their G.C.E (Ordinary Level) and G.C.E (Advanced Level) studies. NAITA, Trincomalee is one of the branches in Sri Lanka. According to the curriculum of NAITA, there are three courses, namely: Information Communication Technology Technician (ICTT), Computer Graphic Designer (CGD), and Computer Hardware Technician (CHT), and English Language is a separate compulsory subject. In the teaching/learning process, it was observed that many students of NAITA, Trincomalee encounter difficulties in using English passive voice in written communication even though they have sufficient grammatical knowledge and the ability to convert active sentences of all tenses into passive voice. Therefore, this study was conducted to investigate the difficulties faced by ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee.

1.1 Statement of the problem

Grammar is one of the major components of the ESL curriculum of NAITA. With regard to teaching grammar, the students easily pick-up grammatical knowledge since they are adult learners. However, using the grammar in appropriate place has been a challenge for most of the learners. They find difficulties in using passive sentences in their writing. They are able to convert active voice sentences into passive voice sentences correctly. Despite this, application of passive voice in written communication is still problematic for most of the students.

1.2 Objectives of the Study

- To identify the difficulties the ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee encounter in using passive sentences in their writing
- To explore the reasons for finding difficulties in using passive voice in written communication
- To suggest suitable remedies and recommendations to overcome the difficulties in using passive voice in written communication and to improve the ability of using passive sentences in writing.

1.3 Hypotheses of the Study

- Most of the ESL learners of NAITA face difficulties in using English passive voice in their writing activities.
- Lack of writing practice is one of the main reasons for finding difficulties to use passive voice in writing.

1.4 Limitations of the Study

Grammar is one of the components of the English language which seems a vast area and there are a number of problems in English grammar to be investigated. To carry out research, the area should be narrow, and the

problem should be concise. Therefore, the passive voice was selected in this study to limit the area. Using passive voice in written communication has been a problem for most of the ESL learners in Sri Lanka. NAITA, Trincomalee was selected to carry out this research. There are over 100 students studying at NAITA, Trincomalee. To limit this study, 35 students were randomly selected for data collection.

1.5 Significance of the study

This study will be significant for the ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee to overcome the difficulties they encounter in using passive sentences in their writing as well as to improve the ability of using passive voice in written communication. Further, this study will be significant to the ESL teachers of NAITA to use the necessary remedies and recommendations to facilitate their teaching process. Especially, this study will be beneficial for the ESL curriculum designers of NAITA and other curriculum designers to bring a practical change in teaching grammar. Also, this study will be significant for all ESL/EFL learners and teachers around the globe.

2. Literature Survey

In this part, relevant sources were collected from materials such as books, research studies, journals, etc. There are a number of local and international previous studies that are related to the current study because passive voice is a significant part of English grammar, and most of the ESL/EFL learners encounter difficulties in learning passive voice and using it in verbal communication. Therefore, it has been a crucial title to be studied to find the necessary remedies to overcome the difficulties faced by the learners in the passive voice.

2.1 Passive Voice

Passive voice is a grammatical construction in which a head noun functioning as the subject of a sentence, clause, or verb is affected by the action of a verb or being acted by the verb (Choomthong, 2011; Crystal, 2008). Therefore, the noun functioning as the grammatical subject is typically the recipient of the action denoted by the verb rather than the agent. Likewise, in another study, Azar (1989) states that in passive voice, the object of an active verb becomes the subject of the passive verb. In active voice the subject is the doer, while in the passive voice the subject receives the action. In addition, only transitive verbs are used in the passive. As they explained above, when an active voice sentence in any tense is converted into a passive voice sentence, the object of the active voice sentence should become as a subject and the verb should be used in past participle form. However, most of the learners, face difficulties in learning passive voice. In this sense, Dullay et al (1982) point out that in learning passive voice, a few problems occur due to miss formation of passive verb, active order but passive form, absent or wrong position before agent and passive order but active form. Therefore, teaching passive voice to ESL/EFL learners has been a challenge for teachers. In a related study, Hinkel (2002) says that many ESL/EFL teachers are well aware from their teaching experience that teaching the meaning, uses and functions of the passive voice seems one of the significant problems in the L2 grammar instruction and most of the L1 speakers encounter difficulty with passive construction.

2.2 Review of Other Relevant Studies

Several previous research studies had been conducted regarding the difficulties faced by ESL/EFL learners in learning passive voice and in using passive voice in written communication. In this current study, the aim was to investigate the difficulties faced by ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee. As the previous studies are

reviewed, most Secondary School students at al-Amal encounter difficulties and make errors in using passive voice in written English (Elmadwi, 2015). Further, it has been brought out that these difficulties were systematic errors such as interference of the mother tongue, over-generalization, ignorance of grammar rule, incomplete application of rules, and false concept hypothesized (ibid). These errors are common for ESL and EFL learners around the globe. Likewise, in a similar study carried out at Sudan University of Science and Technology (SUST), the findings of the study show that the students are still struggling in mastering writing skills as general. By investigating and analyzing the errors made by the chemical students at faculty of Sciences at SUST in writing lab report in passive voice form, it was clearly identified that even university students still face challenges in error free writing (Abualzain, 2019). In another research, Hinkel (2004) argues that the usage of passive forms is common in academic writing and formal writing. It is expected to produce written texts. However, the learners often do not use passive verb phrases in correct forms in their writing.

Moreover, in several studies, the aim was to identify the difficulties in learning passive voice. Amadi (2018) points out that the difficulties are associated more with the morpho-syntactic features of the passive verb group. To overcome these problems, the students should get different learning strategies such as affective, cognitive and memory strategies. Likewise, Fawzah (2017) concludes his study that most of the students made some errors or faced difficulties in changing active voice into passive voice in simple present tense and simple past tense. Therefore, several studies had been carried out with regard to the difficulties encountered by ESL/EFL learners in learning passive voice and in using passive voice in written communication.

3. Methodology

This research was conducted with the aim of investigating the difficulties encountered by ESL learners of NAITA, Trincomalee. The total population of this study focuses on 100 students. They were from the courses: ICTT, CGD, and CHT of NAITA, Trincomalee. Out of them, 35 students were randomly selected as sample population for collecting primary data. In this study, two research instruments were used for data collection, which were a writing test, and a questionnaire, as well the data collection method was quantitative. The writing test was conducted among the participants, which was used to identify the difficulties the learners encounter in using passive voice in their writing. The test consisted of three questions: notice writing, advertisement writing, and memo writing. The questionnaire, on the other hand, was used to collect opinions regarding background information, learners' interest in learning English, their English language proficiency, grammatical knowledge, and challenges in using passive voice in writing. Later, the collected data were statistically analyzed

4. Findings and Discussion

In this study, a writing test and a questionnaire were the research instruments which were selected based on the problem of this study. After collecting relevant data among the participants, the data were statistically analyzed in systematic method. According to the analysis of the data, the results of the findings are shown below.

4.1 Finding and Discussion about the Writing Test

The findings of the analysis of the writing test show that out of 35 participants, 29 of the participants (82%) had used only active voice in the test. However, their writing was perfect and 10 of them (34.5%) had done

the test without making any grammatical mistakes and errors. Despite, they did not use even a single sentence in passive voice although there were several appropriate situations to use passive voice. 6 of the participants (18%) on the other hand had used passive voice in appropriate places. They had mostly used modal passive voice. For instance: “will be held”, “will be given”, “should be sent”, “can be submitted”, “must be sent”, “would be provided”, “will be rejected”, “will be increased” and “is going to be held”. At the same time, 29 of the participants had used only active sentences in these situations because they did not have sufficient knowledge of using passive voice in appropriate places in their writing. 3 of the participants (10%) had mistakenly written, “*They have been organized by the function” instead of writing “The function has been organized by them”. The following graph shows participants’ use of passive voice in the writing test.

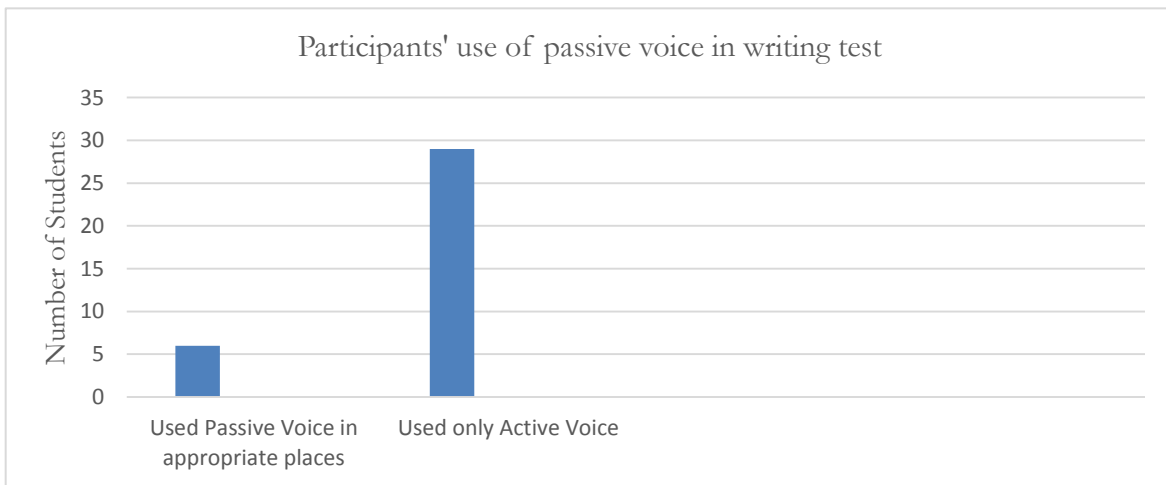


Figure 1

4.2 Finding and Discussion about the Questionnaire

The findings of the analysis of the questionnaire show that with regard to participants’ preference for components of English, they were asked which of the following components of English they like the most. Out of 35 participants, 11 of the participants (34%) opted ‘grammar’, 6 of the participants (18%) opted ‘pronunciation’, 10 of the participants (28%) opted ‘reading’ and 8 of the participants (22%) opted ‘writing’. According to these findings, many students like to learn grammar. However, their aim of learning grammar seems to improve only the grammatical knowledge, not using them in their writing and speaking. It was observed in classroom teaching that most of the students are interested to learn grammar and improve their grammatical knowledge, but they do not have the ability to use the grammar in their writing. For instance, they are good in ‘English Tense’. They are well aware of the formulation of each tense and its usage. But they are unable to use them in appropriate situation in their writing and speaking. Similarly, the findings of this study show that 82% of the participants used only active sentences in the writing test. They did not use even a single sentence in passive voice. The following graph shows participants’ preference for components of English.

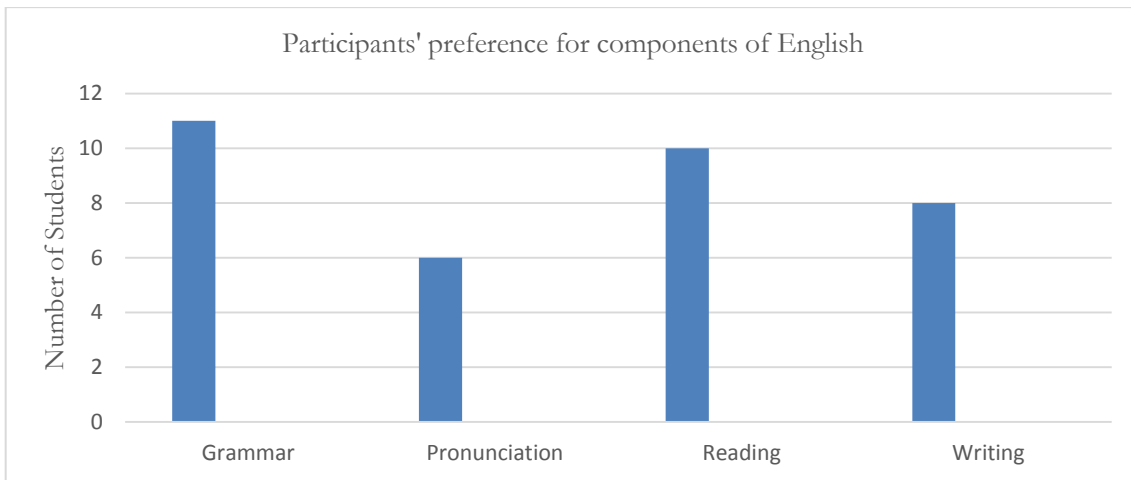


Figure 2

Likewise, the participants were asked about the learning difficulties in grammar. according to their responses, the findings show that out of 35 participants, 3 of the participants (8%) find difficulties in learning 'sentence', 5 of the participants (14%) find difficulties in learning 'word classes', 12 of the participants (34%) find difficulties in using 'tense' and 15 of the participants (44%) find difficulties in learning 'active and passive voice'. Although most of the participants like to learn grammar than the other components of English, learning the structure, rule, conversation, and the use passive voice seems difficult for them. According to the findings about learning difficulties, 44% of the participants find difficulties in learning passive voice. As a result, they face difficulties in using passive voice in their writing. The following graph shows the areas of grammar in which participants find learning difficulties.

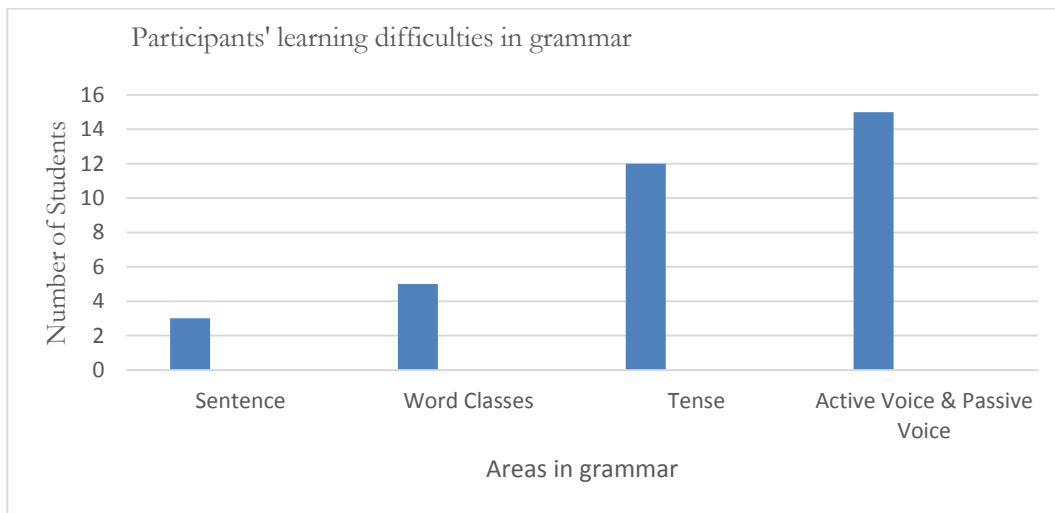


Figure 3

Further, rest of the questions and statements in the questionnaire were based on the response yes-no, agree and disagree. The following table shows the questions and statements in the questionnaire and participants' percentage for response to the questions and statements.

Table 1

No	Questions and statements in the questionnaire	Participants' response in percentage (%)			
		Yes	No	Agree	Disagree
01	Are you interested in learning English?	40%	60%		
02	Is learning grammar important to develop the accuracy in writing and speaking?	100%			
03	Do you find difficulties in using English passive voice in your writing?	77%	23%		
04	Are you able to convert all types of active sentences into passive voice?	71.5%	28.5%		
05	Do most of the students get confused with present, past, and future perfect tense in active voice and present, past, and future perfect tense in passive voice?	86%	14%		
06	Lack of writing practice is one of the main reasons for finding difficulties in using passive voice in writing.			80%	20%
07	Students are not trained in ESL classes to apply passive voice in writing activities.			63%	37%
08	Teachers should create the environment to use the knowledge of grammar in both written and oral communications.			88%	12%

5. Conclusion

This study was carried out with the aim of investigating the difficulties faced by ESL learners of NAITA in using passive voice in written communication. Based on the problem of this study, two quantitative research instruments such as writing test and questionnaire were used to collect data. According to the data analysis, the findings of the writing test show that numerous participants (82%) had used only active voice in all the contexts in the test. Although some of the participants (34.5%) were good in writing, they did not use even a single sentence in passive voice. Similarly, regarding participants' preference for components of English, the findings of the questionnaire show that maximum number of participants (34%) like to learn grammar whereas minimum number of participants like to learn pronunciation. Moreover, regarding learning difficulties in grammar, the findings show that many participants (44%) find difficulties and problems in learning active and passive voice.

Further, 77% of the participants find difficulties in using passive voice in their writing although most of the participants (71.5%) are able to convert active voice sentence into passive voice sentence. according to the response to the question regarding getting confused with present, past, and future perfect tense in active voice and present, past, and future perfect tense in passive voice, 86% of the participants get confused with perfect tense in active voice and perfect tense in passive voice. Students are not trained in ESL/EFL classes how to apply grammar appropriately in writing and lack of writing practice in ESL/EFL classes are the major cause for finding difficulties in using passive voice in writing. In this study, 80% of the participants agreed that lack of writing practice was the main reason for their difficulties to use passive voice in writing. Along

with 88% of the participants agreed that teachers should create the environment to use the knowledge of grammar in both written and oral communications.

These difficulties and problems can be overcome when grammar is taught in inductive method and more focus is given for language skills like listening, speaking, reading, and writing. ESL/EFL teachers should train the students to use passive voice in verbal communication. ESL curriculum designers should consider this issue and when they design the curriculum, English textbooks for secondary education and NAITA should be designed based on application of grammar in both written and oral communication. Activities should be based on application of grammar in writing and speaking, not based on merely 'fill in the blanks' and converting sentences. Therefore, the difficulties in using passive voice can be overcome and the ESL learners in Sri Lanka can improve the ability of using passive voice in written communication.

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Acknowledgement

First of all, we would like to thank Almighty Allah for giving this opportunity to publish our research paper in 'KALAM' - International Research Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. We also thank the editorial board of 'KALAM' - International Research Journal of the Faculty of Arts and Culture, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, for giving an opportunity to submit our paper in its journal. Further, on this pleasant moment, we are so glad to thank our parents and spouse for their continuous positive motivation and guidance for all the academic performances. Moreover, we are pleased to express our heartfelt thanking to the staff and students of NAITA, Trincomalee, Sri Lanka for their contributions and assistance until the end of this research.