

## TEACHING PASSIVE CONSTRUCTIONS TO GYMNASIUM PUPILS

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**Abstract:** Articolul este un studiu în baza mai multor opinii a unor savanți notorii referitor la diateza pasivă, principiile și caracteristicile formării și aplicării acesteia. Cercetarea prezintă numeroasele cazuri de utilizare a construcțiilor passive în limba engleză, timpurile gramaticale utilizate și schimbările ce țin de topica propozițiilor.

Articolul scoate în evidență dificultățile cu care se confruntă profesorii și elevii în procesul de predare / învățare (asimilare) a diatezei passive și modalități efective de predare pentru facilitarea și consolidarea acestei teme gramaticale la orele de limbă engleză în ciclul gimnazial.

**Key Words:** the passive voice, passive constructions, a complex grammatical issue, important characteristics, a two-member opposition, syntactical relations, variations in word order.

It is known that studying the grammatical component of the English language is always a very long and painstaking work, because students shouldn't only learn the rules but also prove their understanding of a certain grammatical issue through a number of practical activities.

In the process of studying foreign languages learners always pay special attention to linguistic phenomena that are different in their native

language and in the target language. That's why such phenomena present great interest to them, maybe because they cause more difficulties. The category of voice is one of the most essential grammatical phenomena that should interest all Romanian and Russian learners of English; as it is a universal extra-linguistic category, which is differently expressed in various languages.

Linguistic literature proves that language learners have always paid great attention to the study of such a complex grammatical issue as the passive voice, the principles and features of its formation and application. On the one hand the frequency of using passive constructions in everyday life is extremely high, but on the other hand, much harm has been done by teaching the passive voice as if it were merely another way of expressing a sentence in the active voice.

It is obvious that the passive voice has an important and special place in the language; most sentences that are good in the active voice may sound grotesque curiosities if changed into the passive voice, that's why it is necessary to point out the most important characteristics and the ways it is used in speech. Scholars consider that many sentences fall more naturally into a passive form. Thus, I. Gordon and E. Krylova (1980), affirm that the agent with by is seldom used in English and, in their opinions, most sentences needing it belong rightfully to the active voice and they do not recommend putting them into a passive voice even as an academic exercise. That means that language learners should be very careful not to overdo when dealing with the passive constructions.

The category of voice is based on a two-member opposition does / is done; doing / being done; to do / to be done etc., and, it means that the passive voice is a component of the category of voice in general. The first step in describing the passive voice in English is to mention the use of intransitive verbs here. And we can state that this very fact makes English richer in passive constructions than any other languages. Besides, it is stated that many phraseological units are used in English in passive constructions, too. The interdependence of the voice on the transition of the verb is clearly seen when the passive voice is formed from the so-called direct transitive verbs and also from the verbs which are able to combine only with the prepositional objects. After a thorough analysis of a great number of linguistic sources we see that very often linguists speak

about "the passive without an agent" meaning the passive constructions where the agent is not indicated: *The library was built in 1975. The boy was seen in the yard.* Yet, the fact that the agent is not shown here does not mean there is no agent at all. The agent does exist but it is not expressed in such examples for the simple reason that it is not important. It must be remarked that the category of voice also shows the links between morphology and syntax. Being a morphological category, voice also manifests syntactical relations. Thus, the voice opposites of finites indicate whether the subject of the sentence denotes the doer or the recipient of the action (*She asked/she was asked*).

It is worth mentioning that there are many debates concerning the use of the passive constructions. Thus, some language educators and people with a good level of language proficiency believe that it is necessary to use the passive voice only in extreme cases, and it is better to avoid using it at all (especially in written language), so as not to overburden the sentence. It can be said that this statement is largely true. Indeed, if the active voice can be used in a statement, then it is better to use this opportunity and not resort to the use of a passive construction.

Yet, the question that arises is when should we apply the Passive Voice in a sentence?

The passive voice is applied when we need to put emphasis on the action that is taking place. At the same time, we do not know who performs this action, or it is not important for the reader, because the reader is interested in the situation itself, not in the doer of the action. In order to prove it, R. Batstone (1995), offers one clear example: *My watch was stolen.* He explains here that we do not know who exactly stole the watch and the focus is on the fact that the watch was stolen.

I. Gordon and E. Krylova (1971), consider that there are several cases for this. In their opinion we can use it when we know the action, but do not know the person who performs it. For example: *My computer was stolen last week.* And, if the subject performing the action is unimportant to the listener, passive constructions should be used, too, as in the example: *The work will be completed in three days.* Another possibility to apply these passive structures is when we can learn about the subject performing the action from the context. For example: *Our neighbor was fined in the street.* And, of course, it should be used when we are more

interested in the process of the action than in who performs it (*news, instructions and announcements*), for example: *The International Spring Symposium will be held next year*. And, they claim that it is appropriate to resort to the use of the passive voice if we are interested in the process of preparation or instructions for creating something as well as in official statements and scientific papers: *The liquid is brought to a boil*. Finally, the above mentioned scholars (1971), consider that, as a rule, the passive voice occurs when the performer of the action is irrelevant, and the result of the action and the action itself interests us more than the one who performed it.

Concerning the tense forms used in the passive voice R. Huddleston and R. Pullum (2002) support the idea that the Past Simple Passive is used to *describe historical events*, when the action itself (*historical event, discovery*) is more important than the doer of the action. Past Continuous is used to state that an action was in progress at a certain moment in the past and Present Perfect is applied when transmitting news, if the performer of the action is unimportant, unknown, or, on the contrary, clear from the context. Past Perfect will show a past action, preceding another past action and Future Simple describes an action that will occur in the future. And he concludes that often passive forms of future tenses are used in promises and reassurances.

It is believed that many English language learners encounter great difficulties working with the passive constructions. Although there are similar forms in Romanian/Russian, for example: *The results of the contest will be announced tomorrow* or, *The project was submitted yesterday*, we know that the use of these grammatical constructions in a foreign language often causes difficulties. It is certain that in our native language, we operate with various forms unconsciously, using our innate sense of intuition. Fortunately, considering the English passive voice, we can also remark specific cases and suggest suitable forms of learning. But, first of all, it is necessary to figure out what this structure represents. Thus, H. Stephen (2004) claims that if in the active voice a subject is expressed by the word somebody, then it is better to use a passive construction, and, if it does not matter who performed the action or the subject can be represented by an unspecified group of individuals.

Reading the following sentence- *An earthquake is measured on the Richter scale*, we can suppose that seismologists measure the strength of earthquakes on the Richter scale, but in this situation it does not matter who measures it, but the very fact of measurement is important. Further the linguist states that when passing official information, for example, in the news as for example: *The criminal was caught yesterday*, the passive voice form is more appropriate to be used since its use gives the item of news officially. The same can be said about the case dealing with the dissemination of unofficial information, that is gossip. The scholar affirms that using passive constructions in these situations helps to get a better offer in terms of tact and delicacy, without embarrassing the people who have shared this data: *I was told*. In addition, the use of this construction is common among children who do not want to admit their misconduct and prefer to use forms like- *All candies have been eaten* instead of *I have eaten all candies*. And finally, it is appropriate to use the passive voice in the texts of business, political, scientific and technical content such as business letters, reports, instructions, articles, etc.

E. Gordon (1971) claims that the greatest difficulties for students are the tense forms and the use of the passive voice. Therefore language educators should first of all acquaint pupils with the expression of the passive voice in imperfective verbs by attaching postfixes of the passive structure. Further, teachers can show that similar changes occur in both Romanian and Russian passive constructions, thus, drawing pupils' attention to the variations of the word order in the same structures in both the native and the target languages.

According to linguistic literature in English, passive constructions are much more common than in Romanian and Russian. Thus, teachers should acquaint pupils with other ways of expressing the English passive voice in Romanian / Russian. Unlike English, in Romanian and Russian, indefinite-personal constructions are appropriate, corresponding to English passive constructions, unless the person performing the action is indicated.

According to G. Richards and Th. Rodgers (1993) in order to correctly and accurately explain the passive voice to pupils, it is

necessary first of all to provide a reliable explanation with clear and colorful examples, as well as to find an individual approach to each student. It is necessary that the teacher should fully interest all students and personally push them to study the passive voice. An equally important aspect is the fact that, in essence, the passive voice is a very unusual and difficult topic for the majority of schoolchildren. It is desirable to use a huge amount of visual materials and handouts, it is necessary to constantly work out new activities, invent tasks, making them interesting and exciting for pupils. The teacher must be creative enough as to constantly introduce new ideas and methods into the teaching process making the English lessons engaging and effective that will actively involve the class in the activities of the lesson and fully meet pupils' requirements. It is obvious that the task of a modern teacher is to thoroughly plan his activities during the lesson in order to provide his/ her students with interesting and entertaining explanation of any topics that may seem ambiguous and difficult at first sight.

The success of teaching/ learning process depends on both pupils and teachers. Yet, it is up to the teacher to bring his great contribution to the qualitative assimilation of the material and only thanks to him/her, students can easily explore any, even the most uninteresting and complex topic. So, language educators consider that it is often necessary to miss the difficult and incomprehensible rules in order not to cause negative emotions among students concerning a particular topic. Omitting numerous and complicated rules, an experienced teacher would choose another way. It is certain that a good teacher should use less theory and more practice in studying the passive voice.

According to J. Harmer (1995), it is necessary to thoroughly explain to the students what the passive voice is and when exactly it should be used. It is also necessary to give an explanation of how the passive voice changes and, through numerous examples, show the differences between the constructions in the passive and the active voice. The material should definitely be clear and understandable so that students can easily use the active voice in their everyday speech while passive constructions, on the contrary, can be for students the very first aid in making up complex and beautiful developed or extended sentences. It is evident that this can be the first reason to avoid

repetition and monotony. The teacher should use an example to show a lot of advantages and positive reasons that will help students independently and easily use the passive voice in their written and oral speech.

As for the lesson itself, first of all, it must be consistently and clearly constructed. The teacher must use a clear and smooth introduction of the new topic and, containing numerous examples, he / she should explain the essence of the passive voice, what is the difference between the active and the passive voice. Of course, all this should be clearly shown through the use of new and interesting handouts. A very effective part in planning a lesson will be fixing the rules with the help of high-quality video material that will ease students' understanding of the new grammar issue. In order to do this, the teacher should make his/her lesson very interesting, engaging and entertaining containing a variety of games and assignments. Thus, conducting the lesson in the form of a game will help students consolidate the new material easily.

In conclusion it should be remarked that from the point of view of the didactic aspect, the passive voice is a very important as well as a challenging issue that requires great attention. The study of the passive voice requires tremendous effort from both teachers and students. Therefore the material should be clearly explained to the students in order to make it easy for them to understand and remember what a passive construction is, when and how it should be used in speech or writing.

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