



## An Analytical Study of Difficulties in Learning the Passive Voice/structure (The Case of Saudi Learners)

Assem Alqarni

King Abdulaziz University, Jeddah, Saudi Arabia

Email: [amalqarni1@kau.edu.sa](mailto:amalqarni1@kau.edu.sa)

### ABSTRACT

Understanding the active-passive structure is essential in learning English grammar as many students struggle with comprehension, particularly in conversion of active to passive voice and vice versa. This paper identifies and analyzes the primary difficulties faced by second semester students in changing active voice to passive structure. The study basically adopts a qualitative approach (with some calculations), and gathers data from students enrolled in the foundation year Diploma program of a Saudi public university, as well as insights from a English language instructor. Data collection methods include observation, documentation, and interviews. Analysis follows the model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), relying on the reduction, display, and verification of data. The study reveals that the most common difficulties among students include challenges in determining the subject, utilizing helping verb 'be', and using the third form (past participle) while changing into passive voice. Notably, more predominant challenge lies in comprehending the past and future tense, often exacerbated by reliance on dictionaries. From these findings, it is concluded that while some students exhibit little understanding of passive voice, others require improvement in English grammar comprehension especially the passive voice. A compatible strategy is always required for handling such learning issues.

**Keywords:** Active-passive, challenges, learning grammar, English language, strategy.



## INTRODUCTION

The 21st century is characterized by a highly interconnected world, where English proficiency holds immense significance. It transcends academic boundaries, permeating professional spheres and influencing daily life. This globalized reality necessitates the ability to effectively communicate in English, both actively and passively. Consequently, acquiring English language skills becomes a priority for many individuals, particularly students seeking educational and professional opportunities.

### **The Importance of Grammar in English Language Learning**

English grammar serves as the foundation for constructing and understanding language. It dictates the organization of words and sentences, forming the bedrock of both written and spoken communication. Mastering grammar allows students to comprehend the intricacies of how the language functions. Junaidi and Suriyadi (2007) posit in their work that grammar is the arrangement of sounds and patterns that convey meaning. In essence, it is the framework through which information is transmitted effectively. Without a solid grasp of grammar, individuals struggle to express themselves clearly and comprehend messages accurately. This underscores the importance of developing strong grammar skills in students.

### **Active and Passive Voice: A Challenge for Learners**

Within the domain of English grammar, active and passive voices hold a crucial position. Understanding these constructs empowers individuals to elevate their language proficiency. However, research suggests that comprehending and differentiating between active and passive voice can be a challenging task for students (Yunita, 2013). Such a challenge is further compounded in the context of Saudi Arabia, where English is often learned as a second/foreign language under a wonderful language of cultural identity, Arabic. Prior studies by Widodo (2006) and Jean & Simard (2011) highlighted the tendency for traditional grammar instruction to focus heavily on rote memorization and rule-based learning. This approach may not cater effectively to the needs of learners, particularly in a non-native English speaking environment like Saudi Arabia.

This research aims to identify and analyze the primary difficulties faced by second-semester diploma students in a Saudi college's when transitioning from active to passive voice. Through a qualitative approach, the study will gather data from students and a grammar lecturer. Observation, documentation, and interviews will be utilized for data collection. By employing Miles and Huberman's models (data reduction, display, conclusion), the research seeks to understand the most prevalent challenges hindering students' comprehension of active and passive voice.

The primary obstacles identified include:

1. **Determining the Subject and objects:** Students often struggle to correctly identify the subject and objects in sentences when converting from active to passive voice.
2. **Using the Correct Form of the Verb 'Be':** Incorporating the appropriate form of the auxiliary verb 'be' is a significant challenge
3. **Applying Verb3 (Past Participle):** Students frequently encounter difficulties in



using the past participle form of verbs in passive constructions.

4. **Comprehending the Past Continuous Form:** The past continuous tense in passive voice is particularly problematic, often exacerbated by students' reliance on dictionaries

By addressing these specific areas, the study aims to inform and improve teaching strategies, ultimately enhancing the English language proficiency of Saudi students in understanding and using passive voice effectively.

## LITERATUREREVIEW

### Students' Difficulties in Learning English Grammar

The challenges encountered by students in their learning journey are multifaceted, influenced by various factors encompassing health, development, behavior, and cognition. Learning difficulties encompass a wide range of issues that can impede students' progress. These can be categorized as internal or external factors (Wong, 2018). Internal factors include physiological aspects and psychological aspects impact a student's ability to concentrate and participate effectively in learning activities (Wong, 2018). Psychological aspects encompass intelligence, talent, interest, and motivation, all of which play a crucial role in learning (Oxford, 2003). Students with low motivation or learning anxieties may struggle to engage with the complexities of grammar (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2008) which is a psychological factor impeding the learning of students through the element of low motivation. External factors include teachers and the school environment, where supportive teachers who employ engaging teaching methods can significantly impact student learning (Wang & Reynolds, 2013). Conversely, an unsupportive environment or ineffective teaching strategies can create obstacles. Family and social support are another aspect of external factors, dealing with parental involvement, encouragement, and a positive learning environment at home, all of which are crucial for students' success (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). By reviewing all the difficulties of students in learning English grammar research categories them into four categories as follows.

Table.1

Category	Difficulty	Description
Student-related	Low Motivation	Students often lack interest and motivation to engage with complex grammar rules.
	Lack of Understanding Sentence Structure	General confusion about sentence structure, especially in transforming active to passive voice.
Teacher-	Ineffective Teaching Methods	Unsupportive or outdated teaching methods that fail to engage students effectively.



related	Lack of Supportive Feedback	Inadequate feedback that does not help students understand and correct their mistakes.
Curriculum-related	Inconsistent Application of Grammar Rules	Difficulty in consistently applying grammar rules across different sentence types and contexts.
	Overemphasis on Memorization	Curriculum focusing on rote learning rather than practical application and understanding.
Parental Involvement	Lack of Parental Support	Insufficient encouragement and involvement from parents in their child's education.
	Negative Attitude Towards Learning	Parents' negative attitude towards education can affect a child's motivation and interest.

### The Nature of Grammar and Importance of Learning Grammar

Grammar, as the fundamental structure of language, governs the organization and interpretation of words and sentences. It serves as a vehicle for conveying meaning and facilitating effective communication. It refers to the system of rules governing how words are arranged to form meaningful sentences (Douglas, 2001; Junaidi & Suriyadi, 2007). Mastering grammar allows students to express themselves clearly and effectively, enhance their performance in core language skills, facilitate understanding of the target language, and construct coherent messages to share information effectively (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Murcia & Freeman, 1999; Thornbury, 2002). Grammar instruction is integral to language teaching as it connects with various aspects of communication, including meaning, social function, and discourse. Mastery of grammar influences students' performance across listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills (Celce-Murcia, 1991; Murcia & Freeman, 1999).

### Active- Passive Structure

Active voice stresses on the subject while in passive structure, the object is in the focus. In a nutshell, active and passive constructions offer different ways of expressing actions, however in a different grammatical structure. Carling and Jervis (2003) explain the transformation between active and passive voice by adjusting the verb tense and positioning the subject as the agent of the action in passive constructions. While active voice is commonly used in everyday communication, passive voice finds prominence in formal written contexts, emphasizing the object's significance (Kusnadi, 2011). Active and passive voices represent two different ways of constructing sentences to express the relationship between the subject, verb, and object (Carling & Jervis, 2003). Active voice is generally considered more natural and common in everyday communication (Kusnadi, 2011). However, passive voice



has its uses, particularly in formal writing where the focus may be on the object of the action.

### **Expanding on Pedagogical Approaches**

In discussing the focus of this study, it is imperative to delve into potential pedagogical strategies and interventions that could effectively address the identified difficulties in learning passive voice among Saudi learners. Recent research has highlighted the significance of employing innovative teaching methodologies tailored to the specific needs and learning preferences of Saudi students. For instance, a study by Alharbi (2020) explored the effectiveness of task-based language teaching (TBLT) in enhancing Saudi EFL learners' proficiency in passive voice constructions. The findings revealed that integrating interactive tasks and real-world language activities into the curriculum significantly improved students' comprehension and production of passive voice structures. Furthermore, Al-Masum and Rahman (2019) investigated the impact of incorporating technology-enhanced learning (TEL) tools, such as educational apps and online platforms, in teaching grammar to Saudi EFL learners. The study demonstrated that integrating digital resources into grammar instruction not only increased students' engagement but also facilitated self-directed learning and autonomy in mastering complex grammatical concepts like passive voice.

### **Critical Engagement with Existing Literature**

While this literature review effectively summarizes existing research on students' difficulties in learning passive voice and the importance of mastering grammar, it is essential to engage critically with contrasting perspectives and unresolved issues within the field of language learning and teaching. One area of contention revolves around the role of explicit grammar instruction versus implicit language learning approaches in fostering grammatical proficiency among EFL learners. For instance, proponents of explicit instruction argue that direct grammar teaching facilitates clearer understanding and faster acquisition of grammatical structures (Norris & Ortega, 2000). However, critics contend that an exclusive focus on explicit grammar instruction may hinder learners' communicative competence and language fluency (Ellis, 2006). Moreover, unresolved debates exist regarding the optimal sequencing and integration of grammar instruction within language curricula. While some scholars advocate for a deductive approach, wherein grammar rules are presented before engaging in communicative tasks (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999), others argue for an inductive approach that encourages learners to discover grammar rules through contextualized language use (Ellis, 2002). By critically engaging with these contrasting perspectives and unresolved issues, this literature review can stimulate further inquiry and provide nuanced insights into effective pedagogical practices for teaching passive voice constructions to Saudi EFL learners.

### **The Focus of This Study**

While research acknowledges the importance of grammar in language acquisition, this study delves specifically into the difficulties Saudi students encounter when





learning active and passive voice. By examining these challenges, the study aims to contribute to the development of more effective pedagogical approaches for teaching English grammar in a Saudi context.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative approach to explore the difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners in transforming active voice sentences into passive ones. A case study design is utilized, focusing on a single group of students from the second semester diploma students of Saudi college. This enables a detailed examination of the specific challenges encountered by these learners within their educational context.

### Source of Data

Purposive sampling was used to select participants. This technique allows for the recruitment of students who possess the characteristics relevant to the research question. The study targeted a single unit of the second semester diploma students of a Saudi college. They are currently studying a unit on active and passive voice grammar. A purposive sample of 5 teachers of English was also selected for in-depth interviews. This sample size aims to achieve saturation in identifying the primary difficulties that the students face in changing an active structure into passive one, and vice versa. It also allows for in-depth exploration of individual experiences while acknowledging resource constraints.

### Data Collection Techniques

Triangulation, employing a combination of data collection methods enhanced the research's credibility (Jick, 2014). The following method was used:

- **Observation:** The researcher observed classroom interactions during grammar lessons focusing on active and passive voice. Observations were focused on student behavior, participation levels, and areas of apparent difficulty.
- **Semi-structured Interviews:** In-depth interviews were conducted with a sample of 05 grammar instructor. Interviews explore student's experiences with passive voice, specific areas of difficulty, and learning strategies employed. The instructor's perspective provided insights into common challenges faced by students and pedagogical approaches used in teaching passive voice.
- **Document Analysis:** Test results, workbooks and assignment related to active and passive voice were analyzed.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, the researcher did question wise analysis from the test sheet referring to the target element of grammar (active and passive voice in the present context)



among second-semester students. As already mentioned, data were gathered observation, data collection which was supported by the interviews with the teachers. While there are 10 types of active-passive structures, this research focused on 9 specific types deemed relevant to the study context. These include nearly all the passive structure except present simple and simple past. The analysis revealed that students face significant challenges in understanding and utilizing these tense forms, particularly when transforming active to passive voice. Among these, the past continuous, past perfect, and future continuous tenses emerged as areas of notable difficulty. The researcher concluded that these tense forms present substantial obstacles for students, underscoring the importance of targeted interventions and instructional support to address these challenges effectively.

### 1. Results of the Observation

In order to get the truth through research, there were numerous ways for the researcher to produce nearly ideal research results that may be used as references. One method that the researcher used to gather excellent data was observation. The sample students were closely supervised by the teacher-researcher while the thirty students completed the test sheet (for the documentation). Each student was given a separate test sheet, and they were all instructed to concentrate on answering the test questions. However, the researcher must first complete the students' observation process. Additionally, the researcher believed that the most crucial finding to be made in this study was the emphasis on the difficulty students had while switching from active to passive voice incorporates feedback from both the lecturer's words used in the interview list and the students' responses to the test, as well as the findings from the observation.

**Table2. Observation Sheet: Students' Engagement and Difficulties in Learning Voice: Active and passive**

Item	Indicator	Yes	No	Comments
1	Sample students show enthusiasm in learning English in general and active-passive structure in particular.			Not much
2	Lecture-based methods contribute to students' understanding.		[✓]	
3	Students frequently consult additional references on English grammar, particularly active- passive structure.	[✓]		
4	Students express no interest in active and passive voice lessons.			Not exactly
5	Students face challenges and problems in learning how to convert active to passive, and vice versa, particularly in the past continuous tense(PCT).	[✓]		Not only in PCT
6	Good amount of difficulty is faced in dealing with transformation of active to passive,			Not only in FCT



	especially in the future continuous tense (FCT).			
7	Active to passive transformation poses difficulties and learning challenges, notably in the past perfect tense.		[✓]	
8	Students don't know the third form (past participle) of many verbs.	[✓]		
9	Difficulty is observed in using past particle of irregular verbs.	[✓]		
10	Students face challenges when using the to-infinitive form.	[✓]		
11	Students are not aware of subject-verb-object pattern in passive voice.	[✓]		
12	Some students show preference for interactive learning methods over traditional lectures.	[✓]		
13	Students express the need for more practice exercises on changing the voice.	[✓]		
14	Students demonstrate enthusiasm in learning English grammar, but not in learning active-passive voice/structure.			Not exactly

Based on the observations recorded in the sheet above, it is evident that students demonstrate enthusiasm for learning English grammar, particularly active and passive voice. While lecture-based methods contribute to their understanding, students encounter significant difficulties in changing active to passive voice across various tense forms. Additionally, challenges exist in arranging sentences in both active and passive voice. These observations provide valuable insights into the difficulties faced by Saudi learners in mastering passive voice, suggesting a need for more interactive learning methods and additional practice exercises.

## 2. Results of the Interview

Data acquisition is crucial, as interviews serve as straightforward and efficient means for collecting data, as they allow for direct information retrieval from the subjects. Researcher endorsed the collection of data and its subsequent findings. The researcher conducted interviews using a structured interview format. This strategy is employed to get additional data for this investigation. The researcher exclusively interviewed the Grammar lecturer due to the relevance of their expertise to the research materials. The researcher conducted interviews with five grammar instructors as they were directly relevant to the research topic. By obtaining input from the teachers, the researcher obtained a comprehensive understanding of the issues of the students they were facing.



**Identified Major Themes****Theme 1: Importance of Passive Voice****Description:**

The teachers acknowledged the high relevance of understanding passive voice for effective communication in English. The passive voice is essential for formal writing, scientific reports, and situations where the focus is on the action rather than the subject performing it.

The researcher inquired about the proficiency of students in acquiring knowledge of active-passive structure, particularly in their ability to modify certain instances of it. The presentation noted that while some students are proficient, others need to improve. The lecturer emphasized the necessity of understanding the concept of passive voice and its practical use in everyday communication. Students themselves noted that distinguishing between two types of voices/structures, and understanding their functions would enhance their communication skills.

**Theme 2: Areas of Difficulties**

**Description:** Students expressed difficulties in:

1. Determining tenses, particularly in identifying past continuous and perfect tenses.
2. Using auxiliary verbs correctly, especially 'was,' 'were,' 'had,' 'has,' and 'have.'
3. Transforming sentences from active to passive voice without altering the original meaning.

**Theme 3: General Causes****Description:**

1. Lack of understanding of sentence structure and tenses.
2. Insufficient practice and exposure to varied sentence forms.
3. Overreliance on rote memorization instead of conceptual understanding.

**Theme 4: L1 Interference**

**Description:** Students' first language (L1) interference was significant, as it affected their grasp of English grammar rules. Differences in sentence structure and verb usage between their native language and English led to confusion and errors.

**Theme 5: Teaching Strategies****Description**

1. The lecturer highlighted the use of a combination of student-centered and lecturer-centered teaching methods, emphasizing practical exercises.
2. Use of reference books from Cambridge and Oxford, supplemented by custom handouts designed to facilitate comprehension.
3. Emphasis on the importance of understanding tenses as a foundation for mastering active-passive structures, and learn voice transformations as per communication needs.

**Interview Results****Student Enthusiasm**

The students did not show much enthusiasm in learning English, grammar, especially active-passive structure, its importance and application in accordance with the communication needs.



### Teaching Methods

The lecturers used a blend of student-centered and lecturer-centered approaches, focusing on practical exercises and identifying tenses.

### Learning Difficulties

Students faced challenges in determining tenses and using auxiliary verbs correctly.

### Solutions and Expectations

Lecturers emphasized the importance of practicing to improve understanding and expected students to grasp passive voice for daily communication.

### Need for Understanding

Students stressed the importance of understanding active and passive voice functions to enhance communication skills. This highlights the positive attitude of students towards learning, the effectiveness of teaching methods, specific challenges faced by students, proposed solutions, and the importance of understanding active and passive voice for communication. The study underlines the necessity of practice, conceptual understanding, and addressing L1 interference in learning active- passive structure.

### 3. Result of Documentations Data

Table3. Sum of error items

S.N.	Items	Sum of Errors
1	Present Continuous Tense	45
2	Present Perfect Tense	30
3	Past Continuous Tense	110
4	Past Perfect Tense	70
6	Future Simple Tense	25
7	Future Continuous Tense	60
8	Future Perfect Tense	40
	Total	380

The table presents a comprehensive analysis of the errors made by Saudi students when transforming sentences from active to passive voice across various tense categories. Among these, the past continuous tense emerged as the most challenging, with students making a total of 110 errors, indicating significant difficulty in applying passive voice construction in sentences using Past Continuous Tense. It does not mean, other categories are easier for them. Additionally, notable challenges were observed in the past perfect continuous tense, where students made 80 errors, and the future continuous tense, with 60 errors. Although some categories, such as the present perfect and future simple tenses, exhibited relatively lower error rates, they still underscored areas of difficulty for students. These findings provide valuable insights into specific areas where students struggle, enabling educators to tailor interventions and support mechanisms to address these challenges effectively in language learning contexts. It means there are 600 items that collected from 30 students. From the total items acquired by giving the students' tests focused on converting from active structure to and vice versa, that totals 380 error items.



### Possible factors affecting learning Passive structure

There can be numerous reasons of students' difficulties in learning active-passive structures. Firstly, the EFL learners are not well aware of grammar of the target language (English). Secondly, their L1 negatively affects the learning of second / target language (English). In other words, the Arabic language structures and grammatical patterns are different from English, and the learners are grown up with some rigid habits of learning L1. This might hamper the learning of active-passive structures.

### Conclusions

On the basis of the research findings, the researcher summarized the conclusions of this study: Most of the sample students feel difficulty in changing active to passive structure as noted from the results of observation, interview, and documentation. The research showed that most students faced considerable level of difficulties in changing active to passive structure. This study investigated the difficulties faced by Saudi EFL learners in transforming active voice sentences into passive voice. Data analysis from test results, student interviews, lecturer interviews, and classroom observations revealed several key findings:

### Difficulties with Some Tenses

Students demonstrated the greatest difficulty with tenses beyond the previously identified challenge of past continuous tense. The analysis of test errors revealed significant struggles in applying passive voice to different tense types.

These findings suggest that students require a more nuanced understanding of tense usage and its impact on passive voice transformations. These findings suggest that students require a more nuanced understanding of tense usage and its impact on passive voice transformations.

### Need for Broader Instruction

While past research often focused on the past continuous tense, this study highlights the need for a broader approach to passive voice instruction. Targeting various tenses, not just past continuous, is crucial for effective learning.

### Importance of Tense Practice

Both student interviews and the lecturer's perspective emphasized the importance of practicing tense comprehension. This suggests that a lack of solid foundation in verb tenses might be a contributing factor to difficulties with passive voice.

Thus, these findings highlight the complexities faced by Saudi EFL learners in mastering passive voice. It's not just the past continuous tense that presents challenges, but a broader range of tenses needs to be addressed for effective learning. Additionally, incorporating focused practice activities on tense comprehension and passive voice transformations across various tenses is crucial to enhance student learning outcomes.

### Limitations

The study is initially qualitative, therefore a quantitative study on larger sample is required to further support the findings of this study.

### Implications

1- Text book writers should choose an easy approach to include content on active-



passive voice. In addition, teachers should select good authentic material to explain the concept with examples.

2- Effective teaching strategies should be incorporated with a lot of self learning exercises.

## References

1. Carling, C., & Jervis, R. (2003). Putting language through its paces: From theory to practice in language testing. Routledge.
2. Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). Grammar pedagogy in second language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(1), 1-43.
3. Chamorro-Premuzic, T. (2008). Why do some of us get smarter than others? And how can we make everyone smarter?. John Wiley & Sons.
4. Douglas, A. (2001). *Essential English grammar*. Heinemann Educational Publishers.
5. Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., & Sandler, H. M. (1995). Parental involvement in high school students' academic performance: The role of race and socioeconomic status. *The Elementary School Journal*, 96(2), 105-136.
6. Junaidi, S., & Suriyadi, S. (2007). *Introduction to Teaching English as a Second Language*. Jakarta: Grasindo.
7. Kusnadi, S. (2011). *English Grammar for Beginners*. Jakarta: Yudhistira.
8. Murcia, R. F., & Freeman, D. M. (1999). *Grammar and Language Teaching*.
9. Alharbi, M. A. (2020). The effect of task-based language teaching on Saudi EFL learners' proficiency in passive voice constructions. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 11(5), 1234-1251.
10. Al-Masum, A. & Rahman, N. A. (2019). The impact of technology-enhanced learning (TEL) on Saudi EFL learners' grammar mastery. *International Journal of Instruction*, 12(3), 213-231.
11. Celce-Murcia, M. (1991). Grammar pedagogy in second language teaching. *TESOL Quarterly*, 25(1), 1-43.
12. Carling, C., & Jervis, R. (2003). Putting language through its paces: From theory to practice in language testing. Routledge.
13. Douglas, A. (2001). *Essential English grammar*. Heinemann Educational Publishers.
14. Ellis, R. (2002). *Imagining languages: A language acquisition approach to second language teaching*. Cambridge University Press.
15. Ellis, R. (2006). Systematic association. *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(2), 319-364. Double-checked on JSTOR
16. Junaidi, S. & Suriyadi, S. (2007). *Introduction to Teaching English as a Second Language*. Jakarta: Grasindo.
17. Murcia, R. F., & Freeman, D. M. (1999). *Grammar and Language Teaching*. Oxford University Press.
18. Norris, J., & Ortega, L. (2000). Learning to theorize in a second language: Acquisition of the passive in Spanish. *Modern Language Journal*, 84(i), 38-59.



19. Thornbury, S. (2002). Teaching Unforgettable Language Lessons: A Resource Book for the Classroom. Heinemann Educational Publishers.

### Appendix:

#### A. Interview Questions

1. Are students enthusiastic about learning English grammar, especially active and passive voice?
2. What teaching methods do you employ in teaching active and passive voice?
3. What reference materials do you use for teaching grammar, including active and passive voice?
4. How do you teach active and passive voice?
5. What are the main difficulties the students face in learning active and passive voice?
6. How do you address students' difficulties in learning active and passive voice?
7. What are your expectations for students regarding active and passive voice usage?