

A New Way to Teach Passive Voice

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Abstract: The author has begun a new try in teaching the passive voice to English majors, which breaks through the traditional teaching method. By introducing the two physical teaching terms “variable” and “constant”, he intends to help his students have an overall look at the relationship between the passive voice and the active voice in order not to abuse the former in practice.

Keywords: The passive voice; The active voice; Constant and variable

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1 Introduction

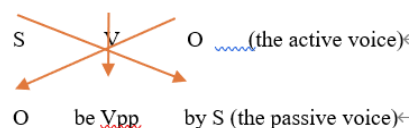
In teaching practice, I find that some college students, including some English majors, often make mistakes in the passive voice. Their mistakes are either in grammar or in usage, which seems unbelievable, but it is just the case. At first, I also felt at loss for the reasons why English majors had made such funny mistakes in the grammatical point, which seems a piece of cake to them. After doing surveys and researches, I have been aware that the students have cut off the inherent relationship between the active voice and the passive voice, namely, they have separated the passive voice from the active voice. They all have the two misunderstandings: One is that the passive voice is an isolated language phenomenon dependent from the active voice, and the other is that all the transitive verbs should have the passive voice, and the voice taught in middle school English is based on different tenses, whose usage is put in the first place rather than the relationship between the active voice and the passive

voice. Consequently, it’s hard for the students to have an overall look at the passive voice. Based on this point, I have begun a new try in teaching the passive voice in order to help English majors correctly use the grammatical point, for which I am willing to share some advice from other colleagues.

2 Methodology

2.1 Construction of passive voice

Voice is another finite form of verbs, which is used to express the relationship between a subject and a verb (a predicate). English verbs have two voices: the active voice and the passive voice. The active voice means the subject is the agent of an action, and the passive voice means the subject is the recipient of an action. e.g. Tom likes the film. The film is liked by Tom. The two sentences tell us the corresponding relationship between the active voice and the passive voice. The corresponding forms mentioned above indicate that the former object has been transformed into the subject in the passive structure, the former subject has been converted into the object of “by” and the verb has been changed from the active voice to the passive voice. Although the two sentences are different in structure, they are the same in meaning, whose corresponding relationship can be shown in the patterns as follows:



Here, S stands for Subject, V for Predicate, O for Object and Vpp for Past Participle respectively.

From the corresponding relationship mentioned above, we can see that only “be” doesn’t have a corresponding part in the active voice. It is changeable, so it can be called a variable and the other parts are

fixed, so they can be called constants^[1]. Therefore, be is a key to constructing the passive voice. The change of be is decided by the two elements: One is the number of the former object in the active voice, and the other is the tense of the former verb in the active voice.

e.g. Tom has read two books -----Two books have been read by Tom .

Tom will read two books -----Two books will be read by Tom.

In order to help you understand the passive voice, we can reduce all the passive structures into two:

A.O + be + v pp +by s

B. O + be + being + v pp + by s

The second refers to the passive structure in all the continuous tenses. e.g. Tom is reading the book----The book is being read by Tom. Tom was reading the book---The book was being read by Tom. Tom has been reading the book since this morning----The book has been being read by Tom since this morning. Tom will be reading the book at 3 this afternoon---- The book will be being read by Tom at 3 this afternoon.

2.2 Get-structure of the passive voice

Besides “be”, “get” can also be used to construct the passive voice, in here, the word has lost its original meaning, whose function is similar to “be”. The structure is often used in oral English. Compared to “be-structure”, “get-structure” can stress the action of a verb. e.g. Our house is getting painted. Did your question get answered? My question didn’t get answered. My papers got burned in the fire. From the examples, we can see that by somebody or by something is usually omitted.

2.3 Passive voice and 3 basic structures

S V O, S V o O and S V O C

We have already mentioned the structure at the beginning, so here we will focus on the last structures: S V o O and S V O C.

2.3.1 The Passive Voice and S V o O

In English, some verbs can be followed by two objects. They are called double-object verbs, such as “give”, “buy”, and so forth. The first object is called the indirect object (usu. a person) because it is not the direct recipient of an action. The second object is called the direct object (usu. something) because it is the direct recipient of the action. When S V oO is transformed into the passive voice, one of the two objects should be converted into a subject in the passive voice. Relatively

speaking, the former is more often used than the latter. When the indirect object is changed into a subject in the passive voice, the direct object can be kept directly. .e.g. Tom gave Mary some books----Mary was given some books by Tom. Tom bought Mary a birthday present-- --Mary was bought a birthday present by Tom. When the direct object is changed into a subject in the passive voice, we should add “to” or “for” before the indirect object. .e.g. Tom gave Mary some books----Some books were given to Mary by Tom. Tom bought Mary a birthday present----A birthday present was bought for Mary by Tom^[2].

Attention: in S V oO, if the direct object is a clause, only the indirect object can be changed into the subject in the passive voice .e.g. Tom told Mary what he was doing-----Mary was told what he was doing by Tom.

2.3.2 The Passive Voice and S V O C

In S V O C, C is short for complement, which means the complement of an object in S V O C. When the object is changed into the subject in the passive voice, the complement is kept as the complement of the subject. e.g. They named the boy Tom----The boy was named Tom(by them).(n) We painted the wall blue-- -- The wall was painted blue(by us).(adj) Tom asked Mary to wait for him----Mary was asked to wait for him(by Tom) .(infinitive) They kept us waiting---- we were kept waiting.(gerund)

Attention: in S V O C, if it is used as preparatory object, the word can also be changed into a subject in the passive voice. e.g. They considered it a wrong decision to have sent the troops to Iraq---It was considered a wrong decision to have sent the troops to Iraq^[3].

3 Conclusion

Although the passive voice is one of the finite forms of notional verbs, it is not often used in English. In most cases, it is more natural to use the active voice. The passive voice is only restricted in the following cases:

(1) The agent of an action is not known. .e.g. The Great Wall was built in the Ming Dynasty. Many people were killed and injured in the war.

(2) It’s not necessary to mention the agent. .e.g. The book was published in 2000. A peace treaty was finally signed.

(3) The recipient of an action is a center of a speech. .e.g. Hamlet was written by Shakespeare. Zhaozhou Bridge was built by Li Cun in the Sui Dynasty.

(4) The agent should be avoided in diction. e.g. It's hoped that such things would not happen. It's regarded as impolite to stare at somebody. From what has been mentioned above, we can summarize the uses of the passive voice as follows:

(1) It often appears in a notice. e.g. Smoking is strictly prohibited on the train. Applications must be sent by the end of July.

(2) In news reports. e.g. The bank robbers haven't found yet. 3 people were killed in the fire.

(3) In newspaper headlines ("be" is often omitted) e.g. A Millionaire Kidnapped. A Hostage Saved

(4) In scientific articles .e.g. The vaccine of bird flu for human use is being researched in China.

Attention: What should be paid attention to is that not all transitive verbs can be used in the passive voice, whose verbs can't be used in this way are usually some static verbs, such as "have", "resemble". Not all prepositional verbs, "such as agree with", "agree to" etc. can be used passive structures.

References

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