

PERSPECTIVES

Perspectives on the Passive Voice in Academic and Scientific Writing: Considerations for EAP Instructors

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In many EAP curriculums, the passive voice is considered to be an essential grammatical component for many instructors and programmes. Historically, this language has been associated with an objective, impersonal style that is suitable for balanced argumentation and the reporting of data. From an EFL perspective, non-native writers struggle with issues of accurate form and understanding the rhetorical use of passive grammars, which are fairly well-documented in the literature. However, there is some debate around the use and value of the passive voice in academic communication. Studies in recent years would suggest that there is a shift in professionalized discourse which may have implications for those teaching academic English. Corpus linguistics of contemporary research writing would suggest a change in how often and when the passive voice is utilized. This article will (a) overview the common functions of passive voicing in EFL grammars, (b) present some learner issues related to this, and (c) cover some of the key changes in academic discourse using the available corpus data and debates. It is hoped that this article will be a valuable and accessible resource to support EAP instructors with their curriculum choices and knowledge development.

Keywords: passive voice, EAP, academic writing, corpus linguistics, research genres

One major element of academic writing is the acquisition and use of the non-causative passive voice (Feak & Swales, 2012). This grammar has a number of different functions and registers that correlate to an established style of academic prose. For non-native writers (NNW), this type of sentence structure is sometimes avoided, or is confused with other auxiliary verb forms and heavily associated with overly complex, 'difficult' expressions. By extension, the use of passive voicing is central to debates on what constitutes 'good prose' because some believe it generates long, complicated sentences that impact readability (; Baratta, 2009; Billig, 2013; Pullum, 2014). For some critics, academic writing has become unnecessarily 'passivized' and they have suggested that the active voice should be preferred to accommodate more readable articles (Billig, 2013; Inzunza, 2020). A cursory glance at university style guides online reveals a multitude of contradictory institutional perspectives which can be confusing to educator and learner alike. In contrast with this, there is the strong belief by EAP instructors that passive voicing is an essential component of any EAP curriculum in conjunction with other writing skills such as citation, lexical development, plagiarism, and abstract writing (Ferreira, 2022). But what is best practice for EAP instruction? According to recent corpus studies, there are major developments in the presence of passive, impersonalised language in academic texts, as well as changes in the culture of academic communication (Hyland & Jiang, 2017; Leong, 2020; Li, 2022;). Considering the

above context, this paper will focus on the present and past simple passive voice for academic writing by looking at a cross-section of the available literature on this topic. This article has been written for EAP practitioners, especially those supporting research paper writers, to concisely support their future pedagogical decision-making with these updates in mind. The paper is structured as follows: (a) to overview passive grammars, (b) to present a number of learner issues related to NNW use, and (c) to discuss a selected group of corpus linguistics studies as well as style arguments. By using evidence-based studies, this paper will consider what the passive is used for, how it impacts learners, and if EAP instructors should be teaching it.

Discoursal Features: Usage and Meaning

Before surveying the research on passive voicing in academic writing, it is worth foregrounding the literature against some of the most prominent grammars and review what is commonly understood. The passive voice, in contrast with the active, is a grammatical feature found in a variety of genres of English, though its presence in academic writing is important for a number of functions. Primarily, the passive alters subject/object emphasis without changing the inherent meaning of a sentence, usually to present new or important information (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). This includes who or what performed the action, or how something was performed. By implication, the emphasis or focus is shifted to the recipient of the action/object, thereby relegating the subject to after the verb, or omitting it entirely (Parrott, 2004). Therefore, passives can be used to highlight what is newsworthy and to maintain topic consistency over extended stretches of writing to support cohesion (Thornbury, 2005b). In academic use, the passive voice is seen to have five main functions which make it preferable to actively voiced sentences:

- a) when emphasis is placed on what has occurred:

The paper was published last month.

- b) when the instigator of the action is unknown:
Paper was invented around 100 BC in China.
- c) when the instigator is irrelevant/unnecessary:
A mixed methods approach was used in this methodology.
- d) to achieve a more objective tone and in order to diplomatically distance the subjective voice in critical writing:
The data analysis method was used inappropriately in this case.
- e) to describe technical/manufacturing processes:
The substance is then spun in a centrifuge.

From a discoursal perspective, this voicing provides a number of varied stylistic choices that can augment meaning, especially when subject repetition is negatively perceived and when semantic precision is highly valued. Further use concerns the description of various academic forms of narrative:

- a) historical events (e.g., *The Oxford curriculum was reformed in 1852*),
- b) biographical details (e.g., *William of Durham was educated in Wearmouth monastery and in France*),
- c) recent changes (e.g., *The new legislation towards immigration was passed last month*). (Thornbury, 2005a)

It is also important when constructing formulaic reporting phrases of detached, impersonal style (e.g., *'it is stated that...'*) and with the infinitive (e.g., *it is thought to be an essential theory*) (Byrd & Coxhead, 2010; Flowerdew, 2013). In terms of frequency, most genres of academic prose are more likely to use dynamic passive forms (be-passive constructions) when presenting positions:

- a) *to postulate* (e.g. *The results are thought to show an upward trend in sustained abnormal behaviour*)
- b) *to avoid subjective focus* (e.g. *The infected room is gradually emptied as experiments are terminated*)

That said, academic discourse usually favours concrete and abstract ideas, seldom using verbs related to mental processes such as thoughts and emotions (Biber et al, 2007). This means that verb choice relates to the existence of things and the occurrence of events (e.g., *is recognised that, are involved in, are exerted on, were used, etc.*). A final key feature of the passive is the use of omission. Agentless passives are often a stylistic decision based on the relevance or knowledge of the agent at work to provide a more 'scientific' description (Lewis, 1986; Willis, 2003). As academic style has historically favoured the avoidance of generic subjects/pronouns in the place of the agent, omission is highly possible.

This means the verb can produce clause completion (Biber et al, 2007):

The current cohort for neurological tests was performed (by researchers/us/the institution).

Given the range of applications, the need for these basic passive constructions is potentially fundamental in EAP courses, highlighting the importance of their accurate use.

Pedagogical Studies and Learner Problems

From the perspective of non-native academic writers, there are a number of error types that relate to utilizing the passive for academic assignments. Firstly, a common problem is that students can confuse auxiliary verbs, such as 'be', 'have' and modals, when forming the passive in their writing. This leads to very different impressions of aspect, tense, or coherence that may be erroneous (Parrott, 2004), as exemplified below:

For this study, 90 participants were interviewed.

For this study, 90 participants had (been) interviewed.

For this study, 90 participants may (be) interviewed.

In a study by Muziatun et al. (2022), Indonesian students inaccurately used the

'be' auxiliary 70% of the time precisely because they favoured using the active voice when communicating. In contrast, error rates for Chinese learners were low but there were significant weaknesses in the areas of tense and verbal agreement (Romano, 2019). Conjointly, the prepositions that follow passive forms cause problems for learners of many nationalities because rules are overgeneralized:

*The samples were sent (to) the lab.
The research was performed (in) a controlled environment.*

This causes further issues for a wide range of NNW because of the multifunctional nature of prepositions in their respective L1s which operate similar to English, leading to transfer errors (Swan & Smith, 2002). NNW can also struggle with untrue or agentless elements, such as using 'on' or 'in' as ways of expressing means (e.g., *in the supermarket/on a sheet of paper*). Furthermore, due to the subtle nature of agent use, it can be difficult for learners to decide whether or not to include such information. Knowing when a subject is responsible for an action or not, or knowing when this information is expendable can cause confusion (e.g., *The town was rebuilt (by the government/builders) after the earthquake*). Finally, past participles, a non-finite post-modifying verb form that usually end with the regular *-ed* form or the irregular *-d, -t, -en, or -n* variants, are used to form the passive (Richards & Schmidt, 2010). These spelling variants have less impact in academic work because of word processors and correction aids but the overgeneralization of these suffixations can have an effect on the accuracy of spelling.

There are a number of empirical studies related to NNW behaviours and preferences. In a study that compared English native writers and Armenian NNW, it was discovered that the *be* passive dominated in terms of frequency across both cohorts, that native users demonstrated a wider range of aspect and tense, and that NNW avoided past tenses

much more (Nemishalyan & Soghomonyan, 2023). In this same study, NNW favoured using a range of formulaic structures because it thematized their stance and supported cohesion. In an additional case of Indonesian English thesis writers, there was a low frequency of passive usage evidenced in their writing as these structures were avoided due to preferences for active voicing (Yannuar et al, 2014). Some studies suggest that learners will often avoid syntactically complex structures which may account for reduced deployment and semantic precision in their writing (Granger 2013; Hinkel, 2002).

There are a number of L1 factors that may contribute to this behaviour. Some languages value formality over others and this conceptualization can be a factor in the frequency of passives used (Horbowicz et al, 2019). Another reason for this is that students are often uncertain about when to use the passive or understanding the difference between the object and subject. This is because conceptual difficulties occur with tense-aspect changes and syntactical structuring, confusing this with past and perfective voicing (Amadi, 2018). For these learners in particular, a working knowledge of transitive verbs supported memorization and use, as it provided a more refined conceptual distinction. It is important to note that L1 impacts higher error counts and types. Higher error rates tend to occur in Japanese learners compared to French or Italian learners because of the syntactic similarity of the languages (Oshita, 2000). Error correction is said to support accuracy issues and overuse, but learners need to be acquainted with differences in transitive verbs and the passive (Cowan et al, 2003). Another consideration made in the literature is how conceptualization of noun animacy may influence L2 passive expressions.

Lexical animacy can impact the perceived agency of a noun because of sentience and the transitive features of any noun. This can be especially difficult for Chinese, Japanese, and Korean users because passive constructions are usually performed

by inanimate subjects (Hinkel, 2002). Such conceptual grounding clearly has an impact on how teachers may perceive learner competence of passives and noun-based issues. One final observation is that educational prescriptivism may impact passive voice in non-native writing. There is evidence to suggest that perspectives on this grammar preference for NNW may be institutional or a teacher-led bias. Advocating voicing strategies may have meaningful consequences for how academic style is perceived and operationalized (Romano, 2019). A range of genre-based pedagogies such as noticing and genre analysis using authentic materials can acquaint learners with how passives are used accurately and in context.

Linguistic and Language Research: A Look at Professional Practice

While for many EAP instructors it is clear that the passive should be included in their EAP curriculum, perhaps an underappreciated consideration is how the language is deployed in real-world contexts. As many of the assumed genre norms are derived from the professional practice of discourse communities in research, it is worth overviewing what changes are occurring and how this might impact EAP teaching. One major diachronic study surveyed the passive in academic writing from the 17th to 21st century (Leong, 2020). In line with the general trends to make research more accessible, there was a 25% fall in passive use from 2017 and an increase in the first person. Prior to this change, the conventions in the corpus have remained relatively stable since the 1800s. From the data, writing behaviours reveal that as the use of passive structures decreases, the rise in the active voice has led to more personalized texts, while alternative strategies are being used to produce 'academic' tone through lexical choice and nominalization. However, base passives were not necessarily linked to accessibility or readability issues because they were deployed when the agent was unknown or as an omission strategy. Additionally, the highest frequency of passive

constructions was implemented with formulaic structures to aid cohesion at the sentence head.

Concurrently, Li (2022) has provided corpus data of applied linguistics writing that reveals a similar 30-year decline in passive use, parallel with the increase in personal pronouns. In both of the above studies, evidence shows that this change is not indicative of increased informal voicing in writing as language remains tonally discursive and because a wider range of strategies are used. This suggests a shift in the social mores of academic discourse and the relationship with the readers (both specialist and non-specialist).

More specifically, there are various studies that consider how research discipline may determine these behaviours and trends, and how they might be evolving. One corpus study covering informal style in four different disciplines discovered that personal voicing has increased by 45% and the passive has reduced (Hyland & Jiang, 2017). But more specifically, the data showed that scientific disciplines are becoming more informal and applied linguistics more formal (though marginally so). The authors claim that informality may not be evidenced by changes in the passive but rather in the pronouns, unattended references, and initial conjunctions, which have all increased. Likewise, listing, contractions, and exclamation marks are beginning to feature in peer reviewed research papers. Some decline in passive structures has additionally been confirmed in other studies that show hard science writing features a higher frequency while the humanities or law feature a much lower frequency which is concurrent across these micro-disciplines, especially in technology fields (Farhady et al, 2018; Hiltunen, 2016). Hundt et al. (2016) found that discipline primarily determines the characteristics of discourse, not just regionality or first language. When comparing a range of Englishes, humanities texts showed a lower frequency compared to social science and hard science disciplines, while British academic writing featured more than

American. In most research arenas, quite reasonably, things are the focus of evidence and analysis which justifies the use of a range of impersonal strategies, not just the use of the passive (Ding, 2002). This is not only limited to field but also to the structural 'moves' or sections of papers. For example, physics journals commonly featured the use of active, pronoun-focused sentences, but these were used to specifically express decision making and positions of ownership in methodology sections precisely to indicate the agency of the researchers (Tarone et al, 1998).

This study suggested that passives represent a range of contextual strategies for academic voicing for specific sections rather than an optimum approach to whole texts. A final consideration is washback from scientific journals that showed a preference for active voicing because it is seen as clear, concise, and more accessible for non-technical audiences (Okamoto, 2022). Professional writers are being asked to consider the subject focus before deciding which is appropriate for the paper. The influence of publishers and journals has an enormous impact on written presentation because they set the cultural standards. However, these guidelines are becoming more confusing for academic writers when publishers themselves fail to follow their own preferences, or when they offer no voice preference across their various publications (Billig, 2013; Minton, 2015).

Conclusion

Overall, the use of passive voicing still remains highly pervasive in academic English. As is shown in this paper, there is a wide spectrum of potential uses, learner issues, and practice-related revaluations. But what do these changes mean for EAP instruction? Firstly, one key to cohesion in academic communication is the range of structural strategies available to express a variety of ideas, relationships, and progressions of which the passive contributes. For Minton (2015), arguments against passivized language in academic discourse are

problematic because they limit the range and precision of academic writers. Importantly, when looking at the established grammars, corpus data, and learner issues, these stylistic judgments may reveal more about taste than the correct function or placement of the language (Pullum, 2014). It is also true that complaints related to passive voicing stem from accusations of overuse and redundancy (Leong, 2020). Some responsibility must be placed on the writers for the high frequency, and by implication, on the educators of academic discourses. The purpose of this language is not necessarily to generate longer or more complex language, nor is it to conceal a sentence object (Smith & Swan, 2002; Thornbury, 2005a). This may be a misperception on behalf of writers and educators. Secondly, in order to develop proficient writers in most academic fields, it is important for learners to be sensitized to this grammar-genre relationship by their EAP instructors. This includes where, when, and how often to use certain structures for maximum effect on learner literacy in a bid to cultivate communication techniques relevant to their field of study. This is where genre analytical approaches, especially those focused on contemporary writing, can be enormously rewarding to students attempting to complete written academic tasks. This is supported by the corpus studies presented

above. However, this may be contradicted by the quantity of overly simplified advice through academic guides and misinformation available online. This is further problematized by the promotion of active voice use by established style guides like APA (7th edition), which continue to provide models that are predominantly filled with passive structures (Li, 2022). Finally, linguistic prescriptivism seems to be a counterproductive approach and limiting for learners and professional writers alike, irrespective of discourse community standards. Biber and Gray (2016) state that EAP teachers may need to challenge some of the expectations and perceived conventions of academic discourse based on how these fields may be changing. This includes developing an awareness of the wider range of developments occurring in professional practices to better inform their learners on how to write and what might serve their desired post- course outcomes. Crucially, attitudes towards the passive are changing in conjunction with the introduction of simplified abstracts, 'research snippets', and other such micro-genres, all of which are designed to promote the accessibility of research to wider audiences. By reassessing the passive with a context-led and pragmatic view, students will acquire authentic forms of language practices that will support their academic writing and beyond.

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