

## GRAMMATICAL HURDLES IN PASSIVE VOICE CONSTRUCTION: A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF INDONESIAN EFL LEARNERS

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### Abstract

This study aims to analyze the challenges faced by sixth-semester students in the English Language Education Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu in using the passive voice. The researcher employed a qualitative descriptive design, utilizing a 20-item multiple-choice test and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) interviews as research instruments. The research subjects consisted of 14 students selected using the *total sampling* technique. The findings revealed that the average student score was 53.2, with the following major errors: misunderstanding of the passive voice concept (50%), errors in the use of auxiliary verbs (30%), and errors in verb forms (20%). The interview results revealed that these challenges were exacerbated by limited vocabulary and a lack of deep understanding of tense formulas. These findings underscore the need for instructional strategies that focus more on the conceptual differences between active and passive sentences in the English language education curriculum.

Keywords: Passive voice, English proficiency, auxiliary verbs, grammatical errors, conceptual misunderstandings.

### BACKGROUND

There are four major skills in English: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Almahameed et al., 2022). Listening and reading are receptive skills, whereas speaking and writing are productive skills (Jordan, 1997; Yasim et al., 2018). The language components, vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, and spelling, are taught in an integrated manner alongside these skills (Altin, 2023). Among these, grammar is foundational, encompassing numerous aspects essential for effective communication.

Grammar governs the construction and arrangement of sentences, making it indispensable for language learners to produce accurate and coherent discourse (Rosmiaty et al., 2023). However, university students frequently encounter significant difficulties when mastering passive voice constructions, primarily due to the complex

syntactic transformations required to shift subjects and objects (Fadhilawati et al., 2022). Specifically, many learners struggle with the mechanical deployment of the auxiliary verb "be," which constitutes a primary hurdle in maintaining structural accuracy during these transformations (Muziatun et al., 2022). Beyond these mechanical errors, students often grapple with identifying the major constituents of a sentence, leading to the random rearrangement of syntactic elements (Ahmed & Lenchuk, 2020).

In the sixth semester of the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu, students are expected to master both active and passive voice constructions, as passive voice is crucial for academic and professional writing, enabling focus on actions and results rather than agents. Preliminary

observations of these sixth-semester students revealed persistent difficulties in passive voice usage, including incorrect verb forms (e.g., "The bakso was cook by Naruto" instead of "The bakso was cooked by Naruto"), tense inconsistencies, and mishandling of indirect objects. These errors not only undermine sentence grammaticality but also impair clarity and precision in both spoken and written English, hindering overall communicative competence.

Such challenges align with broader research indicating that passive voice poses significant hurdles for EFL learners due to its structural complexity, tense shifts, and semantic nuances. Although previous research has extensively explored errors in the use of passive sentences at the high school level (Septy & Juliani, 2023; Ha & Duong, 2024), studies specifically targeting students in English language education programs as prospective educators remain relatively limited. As prospective teachers who will eventually bear pedagogical responsibilities, these students' grammatical proficiency should ideally be at a high level of competence; however, in reality, a gap between the theory they learn and its practical application in the field is still frequently observed (Muziatun et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the majority of existing studies tend to be quantitative, merely mapping the frequency of errors without delving into the internal factors and cognitive barriers actually experienced by students through an in-depth qualitative approach. This study aims to fill this gap by comprehensively analyzing the syntactic and conceptual barriers faced by students in the context of higher education in Indonesia, thereby making a tangible contribution to the development of future grammatical teaching strategies. To address this gap, this study analyzes the specific difficulties faced by sixth-semester English Education students at Muhammadiyah University of Palu in constructing passive sentences. The central research question is: "What problems do

sixth-semester students of the English Education Study Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu face in using the passive voice?"

## LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review presents the theoretical foundation underlying the analysis of students' grammatical difficulties in using passive sentences. The discussion begins by examining the role of grammar in English language proficiency from a macro perspective, followed by a technical elaboration on the syntactic mechanisms of passive sentences. Additionally, this section discusses error analysis theory to provide a framework for understanding the linguistic challenges faced by learners. This entire theoretical synthesis is designed to map the relationship between students' conceptual understanding and practical performance, which ultimately underscores the urgency of conducting this research within the context of higher education in Indonesia.

### **Grammar as the Foundation of Communication Competence**

Grammar is a system of rules that governs how linguistic units are combined to produce accurate meaning (Rosmiaty et al., 2023; Yasim et al., 2018). In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, grammar is not merely a set of formal rules but a foundational tool for achieving effective communication competence, encompassing grammatical form, meaning, and use (Altin, 2023; Yasim et al., 2018). Without a strong grasp of grammar, messages risk causing ambiguity, such as subject-verb disagreement or poor sentence arrangement, which hinders information transfer and overall proficiency (Rosmiaty et al., 2023). This is particularly evident in EFL contexts like Indonesia, where L1 interference leads to persistent errors in structures like passive voice (Muziatun et al., 2022; Yasim et al., 2018).

## Syntax and the Mechanism of the Passive Voice

The passive voice is a syntactic construction in which the focus of the discourse shifts from the agent of the action to the recipient of the action (patient or object) (Jordan, 1997). Structurally, the passive voice is formed by combining the auxiliary verb "be" with the past participle (Ahmed & Lenchuk, 2020; Fadhilawati et al., 2022; Muziatun et al., 2022). The use of passive voice is crucial in academic writing to create an objective and formal impression. However, the complexity of shifting from active to passive voice often strains students' cognitive capacity, especially when they must adjust *tenses* according to different subject numbers (Almahameed et al., 2022; Jordan, 1997)

## Analysis of Grammatical Errors in English Language Learning

Errors in grammar usage are a natural part of the second language acquisition process (Yasim et al., 2018). In learning passive sentences, errors often appear in the form of *misformation* (verb form errors) and *misordering* (word order errors) (Ahmed & Lenchuk, 2020; Muziatun et al., 2022; Yasim et al., 2018). Such misformations commonly involve failures in subject-verb agreement, especially with the auxiliary "be," and irregularities in past participle forms, often exacerbated by L1 interference and overgeneralization of simpler verb structures (Fadhilawati et al., 2022; Mahdun et al., 2022; Muziatun et al., 2022). For instance, learners may select incorrect inflections like "was" instead of "were" or substitute base forms for participles such as "builded" for "built," leading to structurally deviant outputs (Septy & Juliani, 2023; Yasim et al., 2018). These persistent issues underscore varying proficiency levels among EFL students and signal the need for explicit instruction on morphological rules and syntactic

reconfiguration (Ha & Duong, 2024; Suprpto et al., 2022).

Although various theories regarding passive sentences have been extensively discussed in the global literature, this study is necessary for several compelling reasons: 1) Sixth-semester students are prospective graduates expected to have mastered advanced language structures for academic and professional purposes. The fact that they face challenges at this stage indicates a *missing link* in the instructional process that needs to be specifically identified. 2) The challenges faced by students at Muhammadiyah University of Palu may have unique characteristics influenced by the local sociolinguistic environment and the teaching patterns applied in that region. 3) The results of this study serve not only as statistical data on errors but also as a basis for instructors to develop teaching strategies and more adaptive learning methods.

By thoroughly mapping out the issues, this study is expected to provide practical solutions for faculty and students to overcome grammatical barriers, thereby ensuring that the quality of English language education graduates can compete globally.

## METHOD OF THE RESEARCH

### Research Design

This study employs a qualitative descriptive design. This approach was chosen to systematically and accurately describe the facts and characteristics of a specific population or field in a factual manner without giving special treatment to the research subjects. According to Sugiyono (2018), the qualitative descriptive method is used to study objects in their natural state, where the researcher is the key instrument for understanding complex linguistic phenomena.

### Research Subjects

The research subjects were sixth-semester students in the English Language

Education Program, Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Muhammadiyah University of Palu. The subjects were selected using total sampling, a sampling technique in which all members of the population are included in the sample (Arikunto, 2010). This was done because the population size was relatively small, consisting of 14 students. Sixth-semester students were selected on the assumption that they had completed the advanced grammar course, so that any obstacles that arose could provide an objective picture of retention of passive sentence material.

### Data Collection Instruments

To obtain accurate data, the researcher employed a triangulation technique to verify the validity of data from various sources using different methods (Moleong, 2017). The instruments used included:

- *Written Test*: A multiple-choice test consisting of 20 items. This test focuses on the ability to convert active sentences into passive ones across various tenses (such as the Simple Present, Simple Past, and Future Tense). The test serves as primary data to identify categories of students' technical errors.
- *Interview (FGD)*: The researcher conducted a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) using a list of 10 structured questions. This interview technique was used to explore the subjective reasons behind students' errors, the challenges they faced, and the internal factors causing confusion in the application of grammatical rules.

To ensure the instrument's accuracy in measuring students' linguistic challenges, the test items underwent a validation process by faculty experts in the field of English language education before being administered to the research participants.

### Data Analysis Procedure

The data were analyzed through a systematic process based on the data analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which includes:

- 1) *Data Reduction*  
The process of selecting, focusing, and simplifying raw data from test results and interviews. Student errors were grouped into specific categories (e.g., auxiliary verb errors or past participle errors).
- 2) *Data Display*  
Organizing information in the form of error percentage tables and descriptive narratives to make it easy to understand.
- 3) *Drawing Conclusions*  
The final stage to verify findings and provide answers to the research questions regarding the main challenges faced by students.

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

This section presents data obtained from written tests and interviews with 14 sixth-semester students in the English Language Education Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu. This data is presented to identify the students' proficiency levels and the types of errors they encounter when using passive sentences.

### Findings

#### *Student Written Test Results*

Based on the test, which consisted of 20 multiple-choice questions, there was a significant variation in scores among the respondents. The highest score achieved was 90, while the lowest was 20. Overall, the students' mean score was 53.2. The distribution of student scores is presented in the following table:

Table 1. Students' Test Result

Category	Score
Highest Score	90
Lowest Score	20
Average Score	53.2

These results indicate that, in general, students' ability to construct passive sentences remains at a lower-intermediate level, given that the average score has not yet reached the minimum proficiency standard expected at the university level.

### **Classification of Student Errors**

After analyzing the 280 responses collected, the researchers classified the students' errors into three main categories. The highest frequency of errors was found in the area of understanding basic concepts.

Table 2. Percentage of Error Categories

No.	Type of Error	Percentage
1.	Misunderstanding of the Concept of the Passive Voice	50%
2.	Errors in the Use of Auxiliary Verbs	30%
3.	Errors in Verb Forms	20%

The data above shows that half of all errors (50%) stem from students' inability to distinguish between the basic functions of active and passive sentences. Meanwhile, 30% of students struggle to match auxiliary verbs (such as is, am, are, was, were) with the correct tenses. The smallest proportion of errors (20%) relates to the use of the past participle.

### **Findings from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)**

Through focus group discussions (FGDs), the researchers explored the reasons behind the high error rate. Qualitative findings highlight several key points:

- **Confusion Regarding Tense Formulas**  
Students admitted to frequently forgetting specific formulas when

converting active sentences to passive, particularly with continuous and perfect tenses.

- **Limited Vocabulary**  
A lack of vocabulary hinders students' ability to grasp the meaning of sentences in the questions, making it difficult for them to identify the correct subject and object.
- **Deceptive Answer Choices**  
Many students get tripped up by answer choices that look similar, especially those involving the addition of "-ing" or "been" that do not fit the context.
- **Retention of Material**  
Most students stated that they had studied this material in their early semesters but rarely applied it in daily communication, leading to a decline in memory (forgetting) of these grammatical rules.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study indicate that sixth-semester students in the English Language Education Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu still face significant challenges in mastering passive sentences, with an average score of 53.2. This score places the students' proficiency at the lower-intermediate level, indicating a gap between the material studied and its retention and practical application at the university level.

The predominance of errors related to conceptual misunderstandings (50%) is a crucial point in this discussion. Students' inability to distinguish the basic functions between active and passive sentences suggests that grammar has not yet fully become a functional tool of communication for them. This aligns with the view of Ahmed and Lenchuk (2020), who state that the failure to identify key constituents in a sentence often leads to the random arrangement of syntactic elements. Without a strong conceptual understanding, language use will continue to be marred by ambiguity

that hinders the accurate transfer of information.

The high error rate in conceptual understanding (50%) indicates a strong influence of first language (L1) interference, namely Indonesian. In the grammatical system of Indonesian, the formation of passive sentences is relatively simple and consistent, where learners simply add the prefix 'di-' to the base verb (e.g., *dimakan* or *ditulis*) without having to change the verb form based on tense. In contrast, English requires far more complex syntactic changes, involving the reconfiguration of the auxiliary verb (be) and the past participle (Verb 3), which must align with the sentence's temporal aspect. This stark typological contrast leads to overgeneralization by students; they tend to overlook the complexity of auxiliary elements and verb morphological changes because they are accustomed to the more practical passive patterns of Indonesian. This phenomenon reinforces the argument that significant structural differences between L1 and L2 are the primary source of cognitive barriers in target language acquisition.

Furthermore, the 30% error rate in the use of auxiliary verbs reflects the cognitive load students experience when performing complex syntactic transformations. Challenges in using "be" are a common mechanical hurdle faced by EFL learners, particularly when adapting its form to varying tenses. FGD findings revealing students' confusion regarding tense formulas reinforce the argument that shifting from active to passive voice requires significant cognitive effort. Additionally, the influence of the first language (L1) often triggers interference that leads to deviant sentence structures.

Verb form errors, at 20%, though the smallest percentage, still indicate issues with morphological mastery, particularly regarding the past participle form. Students often engage in overgeneralization regarding

basic verb forms or get stuck using irregular verbs. This situation underscores the need for explicit instruction on morphological rules and syntactic reconfiguration within the curriculum.

Finally, internal factors such as limited vocabulary and a lack of daily application of this material in real-world communication are the primary causes of students' diminished recall of grammatical rules. To address this, the integration of multimedia elements into learning, as suggested by Mayer (2017), can serve as a solution to visualize changes in sentence structure more intuitively. Additionally, the development of "Techno-resilience" strategies by instructors is expected to create more adaptive learning methods capable of addressing the unique characteristics of students' challenges in this region.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

### Conclusion

Based on the results of data analysis and discussion, this study concludes that sixth-semester students in the English Language Education Program at Muhammadiyah University of Palu still face serious challenges in using passive sentences. This is reflected in the average test score of 53.2, which indicates a level of proficiency that remains in the lower-middle category.

The main challenges identified are hierarchical in nature: (1) Misunderstanding of the Concept of the Passive Voice (50%) is the most dominant obstacle, where students struggle to distinguish between active and passive functions; (2) Errors in the use of auxiliary verbs (30%), indicating confusion in synchronizing auxiliary verbs with tenses; and (3) Errors in verb forms (20%) related to mastery of past participle morphology. Factors such as limited vocabulary, the complexity of tense formulas, and a lack of daily practice are the main triggers for students' low retention of this material.

Overall, students' mastery of passive sentences has not yet reached the level of automation required for complex academic writing.

### Suggestion

Based on the findings of this study, several strategic recommendations are proposed to improve students' grammatical competence in the use of passive sentences. For English teachers and lecturers, it is highly recommended to revise the pedagogical approach from the original theoretical-mechanical one to a more functional-contextual one. The focus of teaching should be directed toward a deep conceptual understanding of the differences between active and passive sentences through the use of multimedia learning materials capable of intuitively visualizing sentence structures to reduce students' cognitive load. On the other hand, students are expected to enhance their independent learning by expanding their vocabulary and integrating the use of passive sentences into daily academic communication and writing practices to maintain retention of complex grammatical rules. Finally, for future researchers, these descriptive findings can serve as a foundation for conducting more in-depth experimental research to test the effectiveness of innovative learning methods, such as the flipped classroom or blended learning, in minimizing specific errors regarding auxiliary verbs and verb morphology in higher education settings.

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