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Developing a Simple Passive Voice Constructor in English: A Learning and Testing Tool for Students of ESL especially from Rural Areas

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Abstract
English is a highly communicative language in the digital age. A student who is equipped with enough knowledge in English and also learning English as a Second Language (ESL) may be known as a *communicative competent*. Part of the communicative competence the students of ESL have to develop is linguistic competence which means an adequate and sufficient mastery of the structure and vocabulary of English language. Based on this, this paper attempts to study about the construction of passive voice as it contains certain rules like the nature of verbs and type of object in the active voice, etc., to be followed. A lot of students of ESL in rural areas lack of this knowledge and they have rare sources to get lucid in this area. Having kept it in mind, a simple user-friendly learning and testing computational tool, called *Passive Voice Constructor*, for the study of the structures of passive voice especially for the good side of the school and university students from rural areas, is developed with the help of a computer programming language. It is believed that the developed tool will help the students learn and test how the passive voice is constructed from the active voice, and also easily and confidently improve his or her knowledge in active and passive voice to great extent.

Keywords: passive voice, digital age, communicative competence, linguistic competence, computational tool

1. Introduction
English language has two voices: *active* and *passive*. In general, readers approach a sentence looking for its character, the action, and the action's goal, in that order (Vande Kopple). And this order belongs to an active sentence. For instance in the sentence, *The girl made the mistake*, the character is (*the*) *girl*, i.e. the subject performing the action, and the action and the action's goal are *making* and (*the*) *mistake* respectively. Like reading, in the process of any writing like *letter*, *discourse*, *essay*, *composition*, *article*, etc., it is obvious that an active voice makes them stronger, clearer, more emphatic, and direct or vivid. Instead of strength, clarity, and directness of an active voice, learning to know the passive constructions and using them appropriately in the writing tasks will further improve the quality of writing every time. Like active voice structures, the constructions of passive voice are also easily understood.

Definition of Passive Voice:
The "voice" of a sentence concerns the relationship of the subject to the verb (Martha Kolln: Robert Funk). Defining the passive voice structure is not difficult when the active voice is first understood or explained clearly. Every sentence contains, at minimum, a subject and an action (i.e. verb). The subject is the person or thing the sentence is about, and the action is what the subject is doing. When a sentence is in active voice, the subject is doing the action and this subject typically comes before the action in the sentence. For example, in the sentence, *the girl drove the car*, a question can be raised as *who did the driving?* to know the subject of the sentence. The answer is (*the*) *girl* which is the subject of the sentence. This subject is *actively* performing the verb, i.e. it is actively *doing* the verb *drove* to a direct object (the *car*). Then, it is known that the mentioned virtuous sentence is in the structure of active voice. But in the sentence, *the car was driven by the girl*, the learners may ask

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themselves what the subject is (The *car*.) What is the subject doing? (nothing.) The subject is not driving anything else. So who exactly is doing the verb *to drive*? It is not clear unless the learner adds a preposition *by* to the *doer* of the verbal action which linguists use the term *agent*, i.e. the prepositional phrase *by the girl* at the end of the sentence. The subject is *passively* driving, doing nothing, while some outside agent performs the action (driving). Since the subject of the sentence is grammatically passive, the sentence as a whole is said in passive voice structure.

**The Mechanism (rules) of Changing Active Voice into Passive Voice:**
To understand the mechanism, i.e. the process of changing the active voice into passive, it is vital to identify what happens to the subject-verb relationship in the sentence. For instance, the reversal of the active voice *Nigesh ate the pieces of apple* results the passive voice, *The pieces of apples were eaten by Nigesh*. Here, the slot that follows the verb in active voice is the direct object (the *pieces* of apple) which is the focus of the sentence though the subject, *Nigesh*, is the sentence topic. But in the said passive voice, *Nigesh* is no longer the sentence topic, it is the agent or actor; and *the pieces of apple* is so-called "receiver of the action", i.e. getting eaten. The passive voice construction or transformation involves three steps.
1. The object of the active voice becomes the subject of the passive voice.
2. A form of *be* is added as an auxiliary verb (in the above case the past form, *was,* because *ate* is past) and then the past participle of the active verb.
3. The subject of the active voice becomes the object of the preposition *by*, i.e. the agent.

By applying the above steps, the following sentences show the formation of passive voice from the active voice.

No.	Tense	Active Voice	Passive Voice
1.	Present simple	Meera eats an apple.	An apple is eaten by Meera.
2.	Present progressive	Meera is eating an apple.	An apple is being eaten by Meera.
3.	Present perfect	Meera has eaten an apple.	An apple has been eaten by Meera.
4.	Present perfect progressive	Meera has been eating an apple.	An apple has been being eaten by Meera.
5.	Past simple	Meera ate an apple.	An apple was eaten by Meera.
6.	Past progressive	Meera was eating an apple.	An apple was being eaten by Meera.
7.	Past perfect	Meera had eaten an apple.	An apple had been eaten by Meera.
8.	Past perfect progressive	Meera had been eating an apple.	An apple had been being eaten by Meera.
9.	Future simple	Meera will eat an apple.	An apple will be eaten by Meera.
10.	Future progressive	Meera will be eating an apple.	An apple will be being eaten by Meera.
11.	Future perfect	Meera will have eaten an apple.	An apple will have been eaten by Meera.
12.	Future perfect progressive	Meera will have been eating an apple.	An apple will have been being eaten by Meera.

When the second step said above in passive voice transformation is taken into consideration, the passive verb has three requirements: (1) tense, (2) the auxiliary *be*, together with (3) the past participle form of the main verb. Based on these requirements, the sentence, *An apple was eaten by Meera*, reflects the following components of the passive construction:

$$past + be + \text{-en} + eat = was\ eaten$$
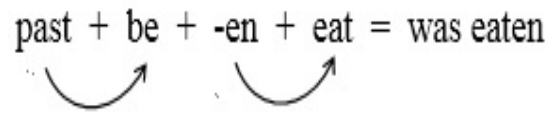
Further, in the passive voice construction, the following changes are also made.
If the indirect object of the active voice sentence is a personal pronoun, it has to be changed into a subject pronoun to be the subject of the passive voice construction.

Object in active voice	Subject in passive voice
me	I
us	We
you	You
him	He
her	She
it	It
them	They

The Necessity of Passive Voice
It is said by some people that the passive voice should be avoided in writing as much as possible, because it makes a person's writing less clear and less interesting. However, there are many situations where the passive voice is needed and useful. In fact, passive voice is a Standard English form. In academic writing, especially scientific disciplines use the passive voice more than subjects in the humanities, arts or social sciences. Ability to know the correct construction of the passive voice in writing will develop the learners' power of writing greatly. Thus, why passive voice construction is important or desirable in writing is clearly pointed out in the following cases.

1. **The actor is unknown**
- *The business man was shot dead*. (Here, it is unknown who shot the business man).

2. **The actor is irrelevant:**
- *An experimental solar power plant will be built in the Australian desert*. (We are not interested in who is building it).

3. **The passive is customary in many expressions where a writer or speaker may choose to be vague about assigning responsibility:**
- *Mistakes were made*. (Common in bureaucratic writing!)

4. **A general truth is talked about:**
- *Rules are made to be broken*. (By whomever, whenever).

5. **The person or thing acted on is emphasized:**
- *Insulin was first discovered in 1921 by researchers at the University of Toronto. It is still the only treatment available for diabetes.*

6. The scientific writing usually relies on passive voice. It is often preferred in lab reports, scientific research papers, etc.:
- *The sodium hydroxide was dissolved in water. This solution was then titrated with hydrochloric acid.*

7. Some verbs do not usually appear in the active form. For instance;
- *Mahesh was born in 1988.*
- *He's called Professor Noam Chomsky.*
- *It is reputed to be a good language school, but the administration is terrible.*
- *The process was deemed satisfactory.*
- *She was hospitalized.*

Methodology

In India and Sri Lanka, English is a second language and the knowledge of English is inevitable for all students for their higher education, especially for students entering the universities from rural areas. As far as the students from rural areas are concerned, they lack of facilities in developing their English knowledge and many factors can be reasoned out for this deplorable state. Thus, the participants taken for this study are the students from rural areas studying at Annamalai University; and they are nearly 90 % of the total students at the university. Related to this study, and to elicit the existing knowledge in active and passive voice, especially the passive voice construction, these students were given some simple active sentences and asked to construct the relevant passive voice. Only 34 % of students came across the correct answers and others were struggling to find out the correct ones. Some of the asked active sentences are: *1.Dr.R.Saranya teaches Linguistics well*, *2.Fire destroyed the documents*, *3.The teacher is teaching grammar to the students*, *4.The servant had cleaned the kitchen*, *5.Siva will repair his bicycle*, and *6.Arul will be doing a test tomorrow*.

Thus, it is felt that a simple teaching and testing tool of passive voice construction will help not only the 66% of the students of ESL who were struggling to find out the answers, but also the 34% of the successful students to develop their spoken and written English through getting the knowledge in active and passive voice. It will also be helpful to improve their subject knowledge, as well. Further, the tool has been developed to work out for the active sentences in which the subject (noun phrase) and the object (noun phrase) have no modifiers in predicative position. For example, in the sentence *The boy ate the mango*, the subject NP and the object NP are *The boy* and *the mango* respectively; and these are not modified predicatively. Thus, the passive construction of the sentence, i.e. *The mango was eaten by the boy* will be quite possible. But the sentence, *The boy in the garden ate the mango under the tree* cannot be converted into the passive voice as the subject NP and the object NP have the modifiers in the predicative position, i.e. the modifiers are *in the garden* in the subject NP *The boy in the garden*; and *under the tree* in the object NP *the mango under the tree*. Moreover by thinking this tool as an initiative, to make it easy and effective the simple active sentences with irregular verb are considered as inputs as English language consists of nearly 200 irregular verbs. What is more, the programming language, vb6, is successfully used to design this tool.

Sample Visual of the developed Tool
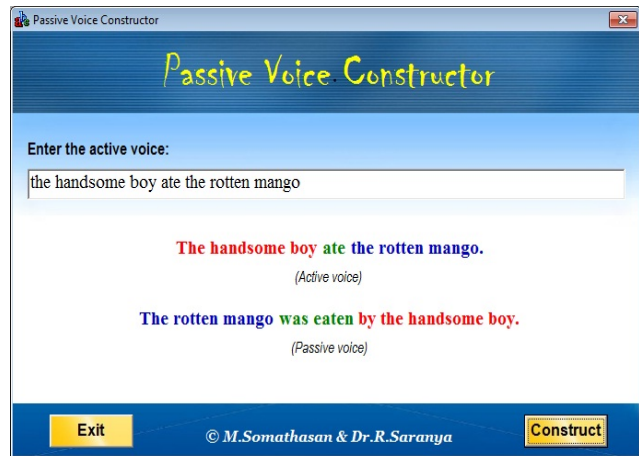
Conclusion

Most of the sentences a learner of ESL uses in his day-to-day situation are active and simple. And it is not denied that to make his knowledge of English high, the usage of passive constructions or sentences is quite necessary. To prove this, there are some places in written and spoken contexts where the usage of passive voice is realized, for example, in the sentence, *148 people were killed in the plane crash*, the agent of this action is not known. Thus, the passive voice construction to convey this idea is suitable rather than active voice. Thus, it is clear that English language is important for students of ESL from rural areas to be successful in their academic career and life; and they should effectively make use of any chances that will be able to help them develop their written and spoken English. Therefore, no doubt can be found that these students can develop the English knowledge, forever when they go through this developed tool and study about the ways and means of constructions of passive voice effectively.

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