Section 7 passives

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language notes

Those languages that have a structure similar to the English passive may not use it in exactly the same way. The equivalent of ‘English is spoken’, for example, may be something like ‘One speaks English’, or a reflexive structure similar to ‘English speaks itself’. So students may not find it natural to use the passive in some situations.

Some English passive expressions have active equivalents in other languages, and vice versa – e.g. to be born, to die, so it is not always obvious to students whether a particular idea should be expressed with an active or a passive verb.

The use of get as a passive auxiliary is mentioned in this book (see page 140), but is not taught explicitly at this level.

Passives of verbs that have two objects (e.g. I was given a present), and passives of prepositional verbs, (e.g. He hasn’t been heard from) are difficult for most students, and are best left until they have mastered the basic passive structures. We deal with them in Oxford English Grammar Course Intermediate.

Pronunciation: the unstressed forms of auxiliary verbs am, are, was and were can be difficult for some students to hear. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises will help with this.

transformation exercises

There is a traditional kind of exercise in which students have to transform sentences from the active to the passive (e.g. I ask > I am asked or Peter invited us > We were invited by Peter.) We don’t think this activity is very useful. Native speakers of English don’t produce passive sentences by starting with the active equivalents (any more than they produce actives by starting with passives). Actives and passives are independent structures, used in different kinds of situation for different reasons. (And note that only about 20% of English passives have expressed agents with ‘by …’.) We feel it is better to practise the formation and use of passives directly in appropriate contexts.

possible further activities

Quizzes Preferably after studying pages 94–99, groups of students can make up their own quizzes for the class, using similar structures. Help with vocabulary.

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language notes

A few languages form passives in the same way as English, with the equivalent of be plus past participle. For many students, however, the structure is likely to be difficult. A common cause of confusion is the fact that both parts of the passive (be and the past participle) are also used in active structures. Compare:

was eating (active)
was eaten (passive)
has eaten (active)

Not surprisingly, mistakes like the following are common:

*These cars are making in Japan.
*My brother questioned by the police.
*I was studied French at school.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.

➔ Section 7 continues
possible further activities

There are some good opportunities for grammar-and-vocabulary work here.

*Products* Individually or in groups, students write sentences about where things are made/grown/found. (‘Computers are made in Japan, the US, Korea, and …’ ‘Rice is grown in India and …’ ‘Diamonds are found/mined in South Africa.’ See who can make ten or more sentences. You can teach some useful vocabulary, including the names of countries.

*Materals* You can do a similar exercise working on the names of materials. (‘Furniture is made of wood, metal or plastic.’) Note the difference between *made of* and *made from* in cases like *This table is made of wood / Paper is made from wood.*

*Translations* Get each student to tell you what something is called in another language. (‘This [pointing to her head] is called *Kopf* in German.’)

*Languages* Students say what languages are spoken in different countries, learning the names of some languages at the same time.

*Spelling* Students can practise spelling their own (or each other’s) names, using the English names of the letters. (‘My name is spelt *d, a, n, a.*’ ‘I think your name is spelt …’) Look out for confusions between the English names of *e* and *a*, *i* and *e*, *a* and *r*, and *g* and *j*.

*Pronunciation test* Write up pairs of words like the following. Students say whether they are pronounced the same or aren’t pronounced the same.

- *her/hair her/hear here/hear hair/hear were/where were/wear*
- *wear/we’re there/their there/they’re write/right walk/work*
- *want/won’t would/wood hour/our*

*Contractions* Write up or say full-form simple present passive sentences and get students to say them with contractions.

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possible further activities

*Future fame* Get students to say which currently famous people they think will be remembered / forgotten in ten, twenty, fifty or a hundred years. Who will always be remembered / never be forgotten? (‘The Beatles will be forgotten in twenty years.’ ‘Leonardo da Vinci will always be remembered.’)

*Contractions* Write up or say full-form future passive sentences and get students to say them with contractions.

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language notes

Note that the common mistake ‘*I am born* for *I was born* may be a blend of two confusions. The mother-tongue equivalent in, for example, French, is an active present perfect structure – *je suis né* – and with this verb French uses the word for *be*, not the word for *have*, as a perfect auxiliary. So ‘*I am born* may be an attempt to say, as it were, ‘I have come into the world’.
possible further activities

Pronunciation This is a good place to pay attention to the pronunciation of the unstressed ‘weak forms’ of *was* (/wəz/) and *were* (/wə/). The vowels are quite different from those in stressed and negative forms. Compare:

*It was (/wəz/) seen.  Yes, it was (/wɜːz/)*.  *It wasn’t (/wɜːnt/) seen.  They were (/wə/) told.  They weren’t (/wɜːnt/) told.*

It’s not very important for students to produce these weak forms correctly unless they want a very high standard of pronunciation, but they do need to recognise them when they hear them. The ‘Pronunciation for grammar’ exercises for Section 7 will help with this.

Born Get students to say when they think current celebrities, or other famous people, were born. (‘I think X was born in 1990 / around 1990 / between 1985 and 1990.’) This will also give practice in saying dates.

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possible further activities

Contractions Write up or say full-form present progressive passive sentences and get students to say them with contractions.

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possible further activities

Return visit Tell students to imagine that they return to their hometown after twenty years away. A lot of things have been done. Can they imagine three or more changes? (‘A new hospital has been built.’ ‘A statue of me has been put up in the town centre.’) Help with vocabulary.

Contractions Write up or say full-form present perfect passive sentences and get students to say them with contractions.

pages 100–101

possible further activities

Split sentences: various passives Write out some passive sentences on cards; then cut them into three parts, shuffle them, and give one to each student. Students have to walk round saying (not showing) what is on their cards, and trying to form groups of three to make possible sentences. Some suggestions:

These shoes | were made | in Italy.
This book | was written | 100 years ago.
Our new house | will be finished | next year.
My passport | was stolen | while I was on holiday.
We | have all been invited | to a party.
English and French | are spoken | in Canada.
Football | is played | by two teams of eleven players.
This room | has not been cleaned | for a very long time.