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 94), but is not taught explicitly at this level.

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

Quizz  The quiz can simply be used as an undemanding introduction to passives; or you can follow up by getting groups of students to 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, and can cause problems even at intermediate level. 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.

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’.

An asterisk (*) indicates an incorrect form or use.  ➔  Section 7 continues
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 (/wəz/). It wasn't (/wənt/) seen.
- They were (/wə/) told. They weren't (/wənt/) 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 the words when they hear them. The CD-ROM exercises for Section 7 will help with this.

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 English names of countries.

**Materials** You can do a similar exercise revising 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. (Make sure they use ‘is spoken’ in their sentences.)

**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.

**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.

**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.’)

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

**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 11 players.
- This room | has not been cleaned | for a very long time.

➔ Section 7 continues
**Pronunciation**  Write up pairs of words like the following. Students say whether they are pronounced the same or aren’t pronounced the same. (Make sure they say ‘are pronounced’ in their answers.)

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

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

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**possible further activities**

**Things that need to be done**  Tell students to imagine that they have just bought or been given an old house that has been empty for years. How many things can they think of that need to be done? Help with vocabulary. Some useful words: repair, clean, paint, replace, install, connect, tidy up.

Can they think of any things that need to be done in their home, school, classroom, town?

**Internet**  Get students to look for interesting sentences on the internet including the words “must never be” (+ past participle).

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**language notes**

Passives of verbs that have two objects (e.g. I was given a present) are difficult for most students; this form of the structure does not have an equivalent in many other languages.

**possible further activities**

**Personalisation**  Get students to complete one or more of these sentences:
- I’d like to be given …
- I was once promised …, but …
- I’ve often been told that …

**Unsuitable gifts**  Get students to write one or more sentences on this pattern (starting with the recipient, not the gift):
- … should not be given …

(‘Horses should not be given hamburgers.’ ‘Children should not be given guns.’)

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**language notes**

Passives of prepositional verbs, (e.g. He hasn’t been heard from) are difficult for most students; this structure does not have an equivalent in many other languages.

**possible further activities**

**Quiz**  Get students to make their own versions of the quiz in Exercise 2 (perhaps in groups, with the class trying to answer each group’s questions in turn).

➔ Section 7 continues
language notes

The choice between active and passive verbs is quite complicated. Much of our communication is about people, so we often prefer personal rather than impersonal subjects (‘Mary has passed her exam’ rather than ‘Mary’s exam has been passed by her’; ‘John has been run over’ rather than ‘A car has run over John’). As a result, we tend to choose whichever structure (active or passive) will give us a personal subject. However, some types of discourse (for instance, reports of experiments) focus on what happens rather than on who makes it happen, and so scientific and technical writing often has a high proportion of passive verbs with impersonal subjects (‘300 gm of mercury was heated to a temperature of 800º and …’). Also, in any kind of writing we tend to keep the same topic over a number of sentences, and this may mean changing from active to passive and back in order to get the right subject.

possible further activities

Internet  Tell students to look up an internet article (e.g. on Wikipedia) on a famous person (e.g. Amundsen), and one on a product (e.g. rubber). What is the proportion of actives to passives in each?