



Facing Difficulties in the Acquisition of the English Passive by L1 Speakers of Hungarian

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Abstract. Hungarian learners of English encounter difficulties when learning the passive constructions. Based on my classroom experience, passive is one of the most difficult phenomena when it comes to teaching it, and therefore it is well worth some investigation. Furthermore, the direct method does not allow possibilities for presenting Hungarian structures corresponding to the passive voice in English, as a consequence Hungarian students learning English as a foreign language use the passive constructions erroneously or will totally avoid using them. The present paper will demonstrate with empirical evidence that, leaving the direct method aside for a while, presenting properly the characteristics of the English passive and its Hungarian counterpart structures, with some practice, we can get students to understand, form and use the passive constructions in appropriate contexts. The intervention provides a methodological model for teaching the English passive voice.

Keywords: passive construction, L1 conditioning, SLA

1. Introduction

The aim of the present paper is to map the difficulties Hungarian children encounter when learning and using the English passive voice, and also to propose some solutions for the enlisted problems. At the same time, we will provide

empirical evidence that with practice students can be guided towards properly understanding and correctly using structures that are different in their mother tongue.

2. The problem

Some linguists argue that there is no real passive voice in Hungarian (see Siewierska 1984, MacWhinney, Pléh and Bates 1985); others claim that there is (e.g., Alberti 1996, or Márkus 2008), considering the *predicative verbal adverbial construction* a real passive structure.

- (1) *A cég meg van alapítva.*
 the company PERF be:3SG.PRESENT found-ADV.PART
 ‘The company has been founded.’ (Kertész 2005: 12)

As an English teacher, I have experienced that the passive voice is one of the most difficult phenomena when it comes to teaching it, explaining it and using it. In spite of the fact that L1 speakers of Hungarian in Transylvania also learn about Romanian passive structures, which are very similar to the English passive constructions regarding their structure, form and use, students commit a series of mistakes when using the passive structures, and in essays and other freely composed texts they almost totally avoid using the passive.

The question arises: to what extent do native speakers of Hungarian understand and acquire the English passive voice? An important issue of the problem is that, from an information-structure point of view, the English passive has several corresponding structures in Hungarian.

2.1. The third person plural form of the verb, generic reading

- (2) *Meg-vizsgálják a gyermek-et.*
 PERF-examine: 3pl.present the child-ACC
 ‘They examine the child.’

Though the sentence in Example (2) literally means [*They*] *examine the child.*, it is more commonly meant as *The child is examined*. The fact that this sentence behaves like a passive voice is shown by the fact that the above (third person plural) form can be used even when only one agent is meant (i.e., *The child is examined by one doctor*). This is due to the fact that whereas English uses word order as the main way to case/role assignment (Bates et al. 1982), Hungarian allows word order to vary and relies on case marking in order to determine “who does what to whom”.

2.2. The predicative verbal adverbial construction

In the perfect aspect, passive can be expressed by the existential verb *van* ‘to be’ plus the adverbial participle form ending in *-va/-ve*, e.g., *be van csukva* ‘it is closed’. This construction is used when the result of the action is emphasized.

- (3) *Az ajtó be van csuk-va.*
 the door PERF be:3SG.PRESENT close-ADV.PART
 ‘The door has been closed.’ (de Groot 1989: 196)

It is important to highlight that this type of structure is compatible with transitive and unaccusative verbs, as shown in the examples below:

- (4) a. *A kávé meg van őrl-ve.*
 the coffee PERF be:3SG.PRESENT grind-ADV.PART
 ‘The coffee has been ground.’
 b. *A tó be van fagy-va.*
 the lake PERF be:3SG.PRESENT freeze-ADV.PART
 ‘The lake is frozen.’ (Kertész 2005: 2)

Grétsy and Kovalovszky (1980) mention that the predicative verbal adverbial construction implies a change of state. According to Alberti (1996, 1998), the change must be physically noticeable, otherwise the structure will not be correct. Compare the following sentences:

- (5) a. *Az autó le van fest-ve.*
 the car PERF be: 3SG.PRESENT paint-ADV.PART
 ‘The car has been painted.’
 b. **A könyv el van olvas-va.*
 the book PERF be: 3SG.PRESENT read-ADV.PART
 ‘The book has been read.’ (Kertész 2005: 6)

In contrast, English passive structures are acceptable even if no physically noticeable change occurs as a result of the action denoted by the verb.

- (6) a. *The book has been read.*
 b. *Tom was seen at the cinema.*

We can form the predicative verbal adverbial construction by replacing the existential verb with *lett/lesz* ‘become’, as well, thus introducing more dynamicity

into the sentence. From the point of view of dynamicity, the predicative verbal adverbial construction with *lett/lesz* resembles the English get-passive.

- (7) a. *Az asztal le lesz fest-ve holnap.*
 the table PERF become: 3SG.FUTURE paint-ADV.PART tomorrow
 ‘The table will be painted tomorrow.’
- b. *Az asztal le lett fest-ve tegnap.*
 the table PERF become: 3SG.PAST paint-ADV.PART yesterday
 ‘The table got painted yesterday.’ (Laczkó 1995: 190)

2.3. Active sentence with the direct object in topic position

- (8) *A könyvet be-csomagoltam.*
 the book-ACC PERF-pack: 1SG.PAST
 ‘I have packed the book.’

The topic is an element extracted from the verbal phrase and occupies the position on the left periphery of the Hungarian sentence. It names the individual about which the predicate of the sentence states something (É. Kiss et al. 2003). Regarding its form, it has to be definite, as it denotes an individual asserted to be existing by both the speaker and the listener (É. Kiss 2008).

2.4. Active sentence with the DO in topic position and the subject in focus

- (9) *Ezt az autót ÉDESAPÁM vásárolta.*
 this-ACC the car-ACC father.my buy: 3SG.PAST
 ‘This car has been bought by my father.’

Compared to the previous construction, here the subject, too, occupies an emphasized position (besides the direct object), i. e., it is in focus position, carrying the main accent. The focus exhaustively identifies a subset of a previously (contextually or situationally) determined set of individuals for which the assertion contained by the verbal phrase is true (É. Kiss 2006a, 2006b, 2009). The element carrying the main accent occupies the pre-verbal position, and no modifier can intervene between them. The first element of the predicative phrase is supposed to be stressed, however the focus extirpates the accent of the element standing right next to it (É. Kiss et al. 2003).

2.5. The archaic synthetic passive form

Hungarian used to have a synthetic (verbal) passive, formed with the suffix –*tat/-tet*. In the codices these passive forms are used very frequently. However, they occur extremely rarely in contemporary Hungarian, and only with certain verbs. For example: *születik* ‘be born’, from *szül* ‘give birth’, *adatik* ‘be given’, from *ad* ‘give’, *viseltetik* ‘owe somebody certain feelings’, from *visel* ‘bear’, *foglaltatik* ‘be included’, from (*magába*) *foglal* ‘include’. It must be also mentioned that though used, most of these forms (except for *születik*) are considered archaic.

For students who are not really familiar with the characteristics of the enumerated structures, it seems rather difficult to choose from so many possible verbal forms and passive-like constructions. Given the complexity of the phenomena in Hungarian, in the present phase of the research we will consider only two of the constructions which, from an information-structure point of view, can be considered counterparts of the English passive, namely active sentences with the direct object in topic position and active sentences with the direct object in topic position and the subject in focus.

3. The hypotheses

Due to the relatively free word order in Hungarian, Hungarian learners of English might find passive structures useless in English, consequently they might avoid using them or might form incorrect constructions. The problem seems to be that they do not sense the difference between the two languages regarding focus and topic positions: they fail to recognize that in Hungarian the focus is in pre-verbal position, while in English it is at the end of the sentence.

The issue is even more important, as it provides evidence / counter-evidence for the hypotheses regarding the influence of the first language parameters on second language acquisition (Avram 2002). If the mother tongue has, indeed, influence on second language acquisition (SLA), and this is true in the case of passive / passive-like constructions, L1 speakers of Hungarian are expected to commit mistakes, at least in the initial stages of learning English. At a more advanced level, learners acquire the correct passive constructions as a result of general learning mechanisms and use well-formed English passive sentences.

Our main hypothesis is that L1 conditioning helps SLA. The paper provides empirical evidence that practice of certain structures could help children understand and use correctly structures absent in Hungarian. If the parameters of the L1 impress upon SLA, the parameter in our case being the relatively free word order in Hungarian, we will find that Hungarian students learning English consider passive structures useless, they generate incorrect constructions, and/or they avoid using them.

Our second hypothesis is closely connected to the first one. We hypothesize that if they understand that the Hungarian counterpart of an English passive construction can be an active sentence, where the direct object is in topic position (e.g., *Az autót megjavították.* ‘The car has been mended.’), furthermore, if they understand that the focus position in English is in the *by*-phrase at the end of the sentence, while in Hungarian the focus is on the pre-verbal position (e.g., *Az inget ANYÁM mosta ki.* vs. ‘The shirt was washed *BY MY MOTHER.*’), they will use correctly the English passive construction. Consequently, our hypothesis is that explaining all these characteristics and practising these structures will lead to a proper use of the English passive voice.

4. Research methodology

4.1. The subjects

The empirical research examines the use of the passive constructions by eighth graders studying English in traditional and step-by-step learning environments in the “József Attila” Elementary School in Miercurea Ciuc (n=64). The participant students were 13-14 years old, they had been learning English in two hours per week since third grade. They had more or less the same level of foreign language knowledge; based on the Cambridge University English Language Examinations level test¹ at the beginning of the current semester the majority of learners could be considered pre-intermediate level students. The research was carried out in December 2009.

At this point, we will ignore the Romanian influence, as very few subjects can be considered bilingual speakers of Hungarian and Romanian. The great majority of the tested subjects had been learning and using Romanian exclusively at school, having 4-5 classes per week. The test was carried out on 64 subjects: the control group consisted of 15 students who completed the test without previous training; the other two groups consisted of 49 students who benefited from previous exercises and explanations.

4.2. The training

Before completing the test, with one of the groups we gathered and discussed sentences where the direct object occupies the topic position in Hungarian, comparing them to English passive constructions (e.g., *A házat felépítették.* ‘The house has been built.’), with the other group (other than the control group) we did the same thing with sentences where the subject appears in pre-verbal focus position, following the accent-deprived direct object topic (e.g., *A levelet BOTOND*

¹ Test available online: http://www.englishjet.com/english_courses_files/test_level.asp.

írta. ‘The letter has been written by Botond.’). The test is intended to measure to what extent the proper explanation and exercising of the described phenomena clears up the use of the English passive voice.

4.3. The test

The test used in this experiment had two versions. Both versions contained three tasks: two translation tasks and a sentence completing task. Among the Hungarian sentences to be translated into English there were some with the direct object in topic position and some with the subject in focus and the direct object in topic position (É. Kiss et al. 2003; Kiefer 1992). Furthermore, in each test there were three regular active sentences, that served as distractors. Regarding the English sentences to be translated into Hungarian, the first test contained passive constructions without the agent *by*-phrase, while the second test always included the agent. In the third task, both variants of the test included some pictures, each being attached to an incomplete sentence beginning with the direct object.

Testing was carried out exclusively during English classes. The intervention, where it was the case, lasted for about 20 minutes and it included observation, explanation and exercises with the already described structures, except for the control group, where there was no intervention whatsoever. Each subject had 30 minutes to complete the tasks: to translate six English sentences into Hungarian and six Hungarian sentences into English, also to continue six incomplete sentences based on the given pictures. When evaluating the tests, we took into account the total amount of sentences a group had to translate and complete. Thus, in the first test we examined 90 sentences in case of the control group and 138 sentences in case of the other group, while in the second test we analysed 156 sentences in case of the group with intervention and the same 90 sentences in case of the control group.

Meant for testing the first part of our hypotheses, the first test was completed by a total of 38 (23+15) subjects. These students had English passive sentences to translate into Hungarian, also to translate Hungarian active sentences into English, each with the direct object in topic position (e.g., *Az ablakot betörték*. ‘The window has been broken.’). Testing our second hypothesis, the second test was completed by a total of 41 (26+15) students. Their task was also to translate English passive sentences into Hungarian, and further Hungarian active sentences into English, each with the subject in focus position, following the direct object in topic (e.g., *A pizzát a BARÁTNŐM készítette*. ‘The pizza was made by my girlfriend.’).

All subjects in all groups were allowed to use dictionaries. This was to avoid problems due to poor vocabulary or bad spelling, as it was no intention of ours to measure these. When evaluating the tests, we neglected the following types of mistakes: spelling problems; the incorrect past participle form of the verb (e.g.,

verb with *-ed* instead of an irregular form or the second form instead of the third form in the case of the irregular verbs); leaving out the definite article; using another verb instead of the given one, if the construction was correct in all other respects; using a nominative form of the pronoun after the preposition *by*; translating the singular with a plural or the other way round and leaving out the particle *for* when translating the Hungarian verb *fizet* ‘pay for’.

In turn, we paid special attention when it came to recognizing the agent/patient roles, the pre-verbal position of the internal argument (direct object), the correct construction (proper form of the existential verb, agreement with the subject, suitable form of the main verb – the form with *-ed* or the past participle) or the placement of the external argument (logical subject) in the *by*-phrase at the end of the sentence.

5. Results

5.1. The first test

As already mentioned in section 4.3, in the sentences of the first test, the internal argument occupied the topic position. When translating these sentences, only 15% of the control group used the passive voice, while in the other group 83% of the subjects did the same (see the results presented in Figure 1, and Table 1).

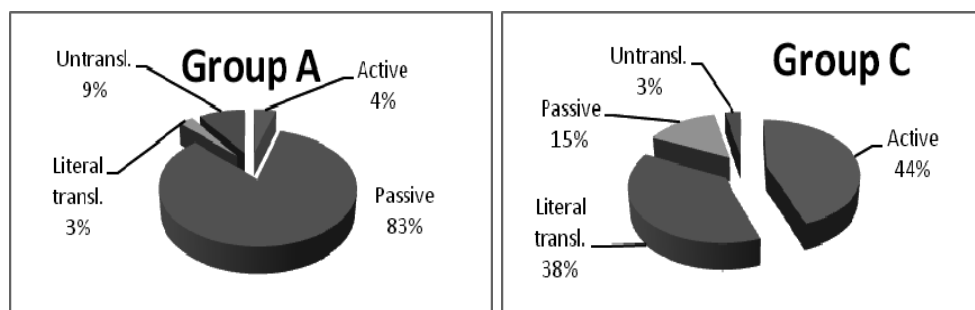


Figure 1. Results of translating Hungarian sentences (with the DO in topic position) into English

In the figures *Active* means that the subjects used active voice when translating an English passive sentence; *Passive* refers to the use of passive voice; *Untranslated* means that they did not provide any translation whatsoever; *Literal translation* refers to improper, word-by-word translation.

As expected, these results lead us to acknowledge that, though they have learnt about the English passive voice, the subjects in the control group do not really

know the characteristics of a passive sentence, they are not able to recognize the contexts where passives are to be used; furthermore, they do not identify the Hungarian passive-like constructions.

Hungarian sentences translated into English (with the DO in topic position)				
Group	Literal translation	Active sentence	Passive sentence	No translation
Trained gr.	4	6	115	13
Control gr.	15	34	38	3

English passive sentences translated into Hungarian					
Group	Active sentence	No translation	Active sentence, DO in topic	Predicative verbal adverbial constr.	Literal translation
Trained gr.	16	30	62	30	---
Control gr.	44	5	9	28	4

Table 1. Summary with the results of the first test

As opposed to the control group, the majority of subjects of the other group, due to the explanation and brief exercising, were able to recognize contexts suitable for a passive structure, as well as to identify the corresponding Hungarian structures (e.g., an active sentence where the direct object occupies the topic position).

In the case of translating English passive sentences into Hungarian we have more complex results, because subjects had more possibilities to choose from. Only 10% of the control group translated the passive with an active sentence with the internal argument in topic position, 49% of them giving a regular active sentence as counterpart of the English passive structure (see Figure 2, and Table 1).

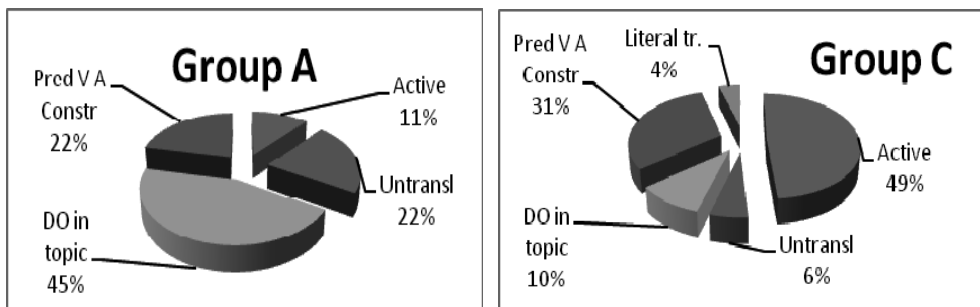


Figure 2. Results of translating English passive sentences (without agent) into Hungarian

A significant proportion of the mentioned subjects (31%) found the predicative verbal adverbial construction best for translating the English passive. At this point we must mention that the predicative verbal adverbial construction is not suitable in every situation, because it cannot be used with unergative verbs (Kertész 2005).

In the figures *Active* means that the subjects used active voice in translation; *Pred V A Constr* refers to the use of predicative verbal adverbial construction; *Untranslated* means that they did not provide any translation; *Literal translation* refers to word-by-word translation; *DO in topic* marks the active sentences with the direct object in topic.

Almost half of the trained group (44% of the subjects) used the observed structure (i.e., active sentence with the direct object in topic position) when translating the English passive sentences, while 22% of them chose the predicative verbal adverbial construction. Another 22% failed to fulfill the task. Though it may have other explanations, as well, most likely this was due to time limits. However, we do not wish to further comment on this issue.

In order to examine the magnitude and significance of the differences between the two groups, we have used statistical analysis. Applying the ANOVA test, we have reached the conclusion that differences between the two groups are relevant ($P=.048$).

5.2. The second test

In each of the Hungarian sentences of the second test the subject was in pre-verbal focus position, following the direct object in topic. When translating these sentences, 42% of the control group used a passive structure, while 93% of the trained group did the same (see the results presented in Figure 3, and Table 2). This allows us to reason that more than half of the control group failed to recognize that English focus position is at the end of the sentence, in the *by*-phrase, while in Hungarian it occupies the pre-verbal position.

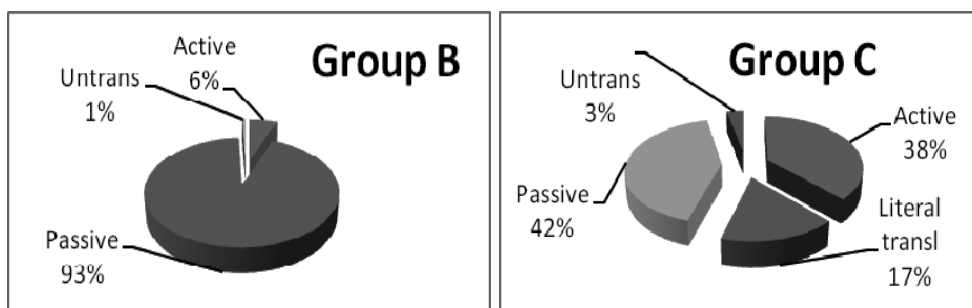


Figure 3. Results of translating Hungarian sentences (with the direct object in topic position and the subject in focus position) into English

Contrary to the control group, the subjects of the trained group had the opportunity of getting acquainted with the characteristics of the Hungarian and English focus and comparing the corresponding English and Hungarian structures, consequently the vast majority (93%) was able to recognize the contexts where the passive was required and identified the corresponding Hungarian structure (i.e., active sentence where the direct object is in topic, the subject is in focus position).

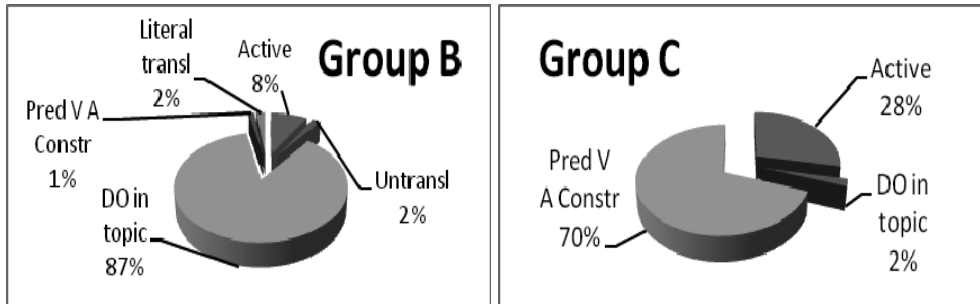


Figure 4. Results of translating English passive sentences (with agent) into Hungarian

When translating English passives into Hungarian, again, the results tend to be more complex, just like in the case of the first test. Only 2% of the control group used the expected active sentence with direct object topic and subject focus, while 28% of them used a regular active sentence to translate the passive constructions. As shown in Figure 4, and Table 2, the vast majority of the control group (70%) opted for the predicative verbal adverbial construction.

Hungarian sentences translated into English (with the DO in topic and subject in focus position)				
Group	Literal translation	Active sentence	Passive sentence	No translation
Trained gr.	---	9	146	1
Control gr.	34	40	13	3

English passive sentences translated into Hungarian					
Group	Active sentence	No translation	Active sentence, DO in topic	Predicative verbal adverbial constr.	Literal translation
Trained gr.	13	3	135	2	3
Control gr.	26	---	2	64	---

Table 2. Summary with the results of the second test

Contrary to the control group, 87% of the trained subjects used the observed structure (that is, active sentences with the internal argument in topic and subject in focus position), only 1% chose the predicative verbal adverbial construction. Running the ANOVA test of the SPSS statistical analysis program, we have reached the conclusion that differences between the two groups are relevant ($P=.032$).

It is important to highlight that in both tests there were three regular active English sentences to be translated into Hungarian, used as distractors. The great majority of the trained subjects translated these active sentences with passive-like Hungarian structures, while nobody from the control group attempted to do so. Here we might be dealing with a phenomenon known in the literature as overgeneralization (Avram 2002).

6. Conclusions

Observing the results of the two tests presented above, we can conclude that native speakers of Hungarian tend to avoid using the English passive voice; those who rarely use it have problems with recognizing the differences between the English and Hungarian focus. As the present empirical research shows, knowing the corresponding phenomena from Hungarian helps in the process of acquiring the English passive. It seems adequate to use knowledge from the L1 during English classes from time to time. As such, we wish to take stand against the exclusive use of the direct method during foreign language classes.

A further step in the present research is a post-testing of the same subjects that would strengthen our hypotheses, and at the same time it would exclude the possibility that the subjects apply their knowledge from L1 only when they are warned about the similarities and differences, forgetting to do so without previous training.

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