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Difficulty with English passive voice in news report: A case study of Malaysian trainee teachers

Abstract

This study examines difficulty with the forms and functions of English passive voice in news report encountered by L2 learners of English. The participants were 80 trainee teachers in an undergraduate Teaching of English as a Second Language degree programme at a Malaysian university. The participants were asked to identify the passives in a brief news report, and reformulate it as an active sentence. They were also asked to state the author's purpose in using passives in the news report. The results show that only 25% of the trainee teachers were able to identify the passive forms correctly and subsequently transform the passive into an active sentence. The points of confusion seem to be the regular past tense form (-ed) of the verbs and the use of the reported speech in news reports. Awareness of the functions of passive voice is mainly restricted to the focus on the action and object of action at a sentence level. The findings suggest explicit teaching of passives in the context of relevant text-types to develop awareness of how passives are used to achieve a variety of communicative purposes.