

EFL TEACHERS' STRATEGIES FOR MINIMIZING NINTH GRADERS' ENGLISH PASSIVE VOICE ERRORS

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: 10/11/2023	This research was conducted to investigate English teachers' strategies for minimizing ninth graders' errors in using English passive voice. The participants were four teachers who were teaching at a secondary school in a Vietnamese rural region. The research analyzed the qualitative data from four online teacher interviews which included nine questions. The research results showed that, regarding feedback strategies, most of the teachers preferred indirect feedback, including techniques such as encouraging self-correction and circling errors in homework for students to correct independently. Feedback timing varied, with some teachers addressing errors at the end of the lesson, while others provided immediate correction. In terms of language instruction, teacher participants proposed four major strategies: instruction in mother tongue, focus on forms, focus on meaning, and fun extra activities. Especially, focus on forms through grammar reinforcement was emphasized, meaning that the teachers highlighted the importance of regular and irregular participle verbs, tenses, and sentence analysis. Focus on meaning was also deemed essential to enable students to understand sentence meanings effectively, entailing the need for vocabulary improvement.
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CHIẾN LƯỢC CỦA GIÁO VIÊN TIẾNG ANH TRONG VIỆC GIẢM THIỂU LỖI SAI CỦA HỌC SINH LỚP 9 TRONG VIỆC SỬ DỤNG CÂU BỊ ĐỘNG

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THÔNG TIN BÀI BÁO	TÓM TẮT
Ngày nhận bài: 10/11/2023	Nghiên cứu này được thực hiện để tìm hiểu các chiến lược của giáo viên tiếng Anh lớp 9 nhằm giảm thiểu lỗi của học sinh khi sử dụng câu bị động trong tiếng Anh. Những người tham gia là bốn giáo viên đang giảng dạy tại một trường trung học cơ sở ở một vùng nông thôn Việt Nam. Nghiên cứu đã phân tích dữ liệu định tính từ bốn cuộc phỏng vấn giáo viên trực tuyến bao gồm chín câu hỏi. Về mặt chiến lược khi nhận xét cho học sinh, kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy hầu hết các giáo viên đều thích nhận xét gián tiếp hơn, tức họ thường khuyến khích học sinh tự sửa lỗi hoặc khoanh tròn lỗi sai để học sinh tự sửa. Thời gian giáo viên cho nhận xét cũng rất khác nhau, và trong khi một số giáo viên nhận xét về các lỗi ở cuối bài học, những giáo viên khác sửa lỗi ngay lập tức trong khi vẫn cố gắng duy trì một không khí tích cực trong lớp. Về ngôn ngữ giảng dạy, giáo viên tham gia nghiên cứu đề xuất bốn chiến lược chính: chỉ dẫn bằng ngôn ngữ mẹ đẻ, tập trung vào cấu trúc, tập trung vào nghĩa và bổ sung các hoạt động ngoài thú vị. Đặc biệt, việc chú trọng vào cấu trúc thông qua việc củng cố ngữ pháp rất được giáo viên chú trọng. Điều này có nghĩa là họ nhấn mạnh tầm quan trọng của việc học các động từ có quy tắc và bất quy tắc, và phân tích câu. Tập trung vào nghĩa cũng được coi là cần thiết để giúp học sinh hiểu nghĩa câu một cách hiệu quả, kéo theo nhu cầu học sinh cần cải thiện vốn từ vựng.
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1. Introduction

EFL and ESL education has experienced significant development over the past few years, with increasing emphasis on all four language skills. However, the process of learning a language can never be separated from that of learning its grammar. Among the many structures in English grammar, English passive voice (EPV) which has been integrated into the teaching syllabus in most English educational institutions around the world and specifically in the public sector in Vietnam remained one of the essential components. Unfortunately, the way teachers have conveyed it in the classroom, which is purely by means of the conversion exercise, poses a number of problems in students' comprehension and practice [1]. As a result, the correct usage of EPV presents a common challenge for language learners in general [2], much less those at beginner levels. To address this issue, educators often find themselves exploring innovative strategies to enhance students' understanding of EPV and minimize passive errors in utterances. This article, therefore, aims to focus specifically on the strategies employed by teachers to minimize young learners' passive voice errors.

Despite the significance of this grammatical feature in the field of English teaching and learning, there exists a huge research gap. While a number of studies have examined passive voice instruction strategies [3]-[6], the participants in those studies are mainly adults in tertiary education. This means that limited attention has been given to the younger group in secondary schools or lower [7], and even fewer researchers touched on the area of EPV error corrective strategies. This research aims to bridge this gap by scrutinizing the strategies EFL teachers use to tackle the passive voice errors made by ninth-grade students. Through this exploration, the researchers want to provide profound insight into pedagogical methods that can improve EPV usage at this important period of language development.

The research question in this study is "What strategies do EFL teachers use to avoid ninth graders' common errors in English passive voice in a secondary school in Binh Duong, Vietnam?"

To deal with the common errors learners make when studying EPV, proper instruction along with timely feedback and correction from teachers indeed play an indispensable role in the teaching process.

1.1. Language instruction

First and foremost, in terms of the effective methods to teach EPV, there are two main types of form-focused instruction specializing in grammar teaching - focus on form (FoF) and focus on forms (FoFs). By definition, they are different in terms of the degree to which the instructors direct students' attention to the grammatical features [8]. The goal of FoFs teaching is to understand grammatical items rather than to acquire and use language for conversation, so its emphasis is on the formal aspects of language through isolated linguistic structures in a sequence predetermined by a syllabus designer or textbook writer because the assumption is that in classroom settings, language competence is best achieved through a return to discrete-point grammar teaching. In comparison with FoFs, FoF consists of an occasional shift of focus to linguistic features, which is triggered by perceived difficulties with comprehension or production [9]. Aghayi and Nourdad [10] conducted a quasi-experimental study to compare the effect of FoF and FoFs on learning EPV in different tenses including simple, continuous, perfect and perfect continuous in past, present, and future. The results revealed the FoF group outperformed FoFs group in learning EPV.

In striking contrast to FoF and FoFs instructions, focus on meaning (FoM) is also applied in grammar teaching sometimes. FoM is a type of student-centered teaching that shifts the emphasis of the students' attention away from grammatical or linguistic patterns and toward the meaning of language. In FoM, which bases its claims on the idea of communicative competence, the main goal of ESL lessons should be to give students the practice they need to fulfill their communication requirements in the target language [10].

Among the three aforementioned types of language instructions, FoF stands out as the most effective one, which has been confirmed in a variety of studies. For instance, Saeidi, Shatery, and Zaferanieh [11] carried out a study on the efficacy of FoF, FoFs, and FoM on vocabulary learning in three types of tasks - dictogloss task, reading and discussion tasks, and word lists. According to their results, students in the FoF group outperformed those in the FoM and FoFs in terms of test grades. Interestingly, the FoM group scored considerably better than the FoFs group. Another study that investigated the benefits of FoF belongs to Gholami and Talebi [12]. They attempted to examine the function of implicit and explicit FoF strategies in Iranian learners on their linguistic accuracy. Their results showed that the FoF groups did better than the control group. Interestingly, additional score analysis also revealed that the implicit FoF group that received clarification and recast achieved better results compared to the group getting explicit FoF.

1.2. Corrective feedback

Besides appropriate instructional strategies, teachers' prompt feedback and correction are also critical components of the EPV teaching process. The effectiveness of corrective feedback (CF) indeed has been proven by plenty of other experimental studies [13]-[16], indicating that CF assists language acquisition. Therefore, it is obvious that there have been a number of classifications for different types of feedback. Regarding written CF, Ellis [17] distinguishes between direct, indirect, and metalinguistic strategies of correction. On the other hand, with respect to oral CF, two significant contrasts emerging are explicit versus implicit CF and input-providing versus output-prompting CF. These characteristics can be combined to provide the taxonomy illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. *A taxonomy of CF strategies*

	Implicit	Explicit
Input-providing	Recast	Explicit correction
Output-providing	Repetition	Metalinguistic explanation
	Clarification request	Elicitation
		Paralinguistic signal

To be more specific, with direct feedback, learners are given the proper forms, but in indirect feedback, learners are given suggestions indicating that there is something wrong in their utterances, with the hope that learners would find the correct forms on their own [18].

In measuring the effectiveness of different strategies in oral language, Tayebipour [18] concluded that, as opposed to implicit methods like recasts, explicit correction is more helpful because students may have opportunities for awareness raising. This was confirmed by Rassaei [19], who explained that learners who received explicit correction usually outperformed those who received recasts because the explicit correction group could more easily identify the gap or consider the interlocutors' corrective utterances as CF, and Lyster et al [20], who claimed that learners who received explicit correction showed greater progress on several measures than those who received recasts.

Regarding written CF, the debate of whether implicit or explicit written CF is better never comes to an end. For instance, Chandler [21] reported on the advantage of direct CF over indirect CF, but the research of Ferris and Helt [22], and Laland [23] showed the superiority of indirect CF. Especially, in the context of Vietnam, Pham and Iwashita [24] demonstrated a significant enhancement in students' accuracy by employing indirect feedback. This result was attributed to the fact that this approach allowed students to rectify errors in grammar, morphology, and syntax, thereby contributing to their overall improvement.

Regarding when to make use of those two types of feedback, it seems that most researchers have a quite similar view, which is that teachers should avoid immediate correction during 'fluency' work. Hedge [25], for example, noted that teachers' notes accompanying course materials commonly encouraged teachers to delay correction until the completion of fluency tasks. Scrivener [26] also proposed that teachers keep a record of the errors during a fluency or

communication task and rectify them after the activity is completed. She advised teachers to postpone providing feedback until learners have completed a communicative task since providing feedback while the task is being performed will have a negative effect on fluency.

2. Research method

To answer the research questions, this study employed qualitative research with the data drawn from four teacher interviews. Regarding the sampling method, the researchers employed convenience sampling for the study. In particular, the sample of this study consisted of four English teachers teaching 9th graders in the school year 2019-2020 at a secondary school in Binh Duong province, Vietnam, and all four of them were willing to participate in the study, thus becoming the teacher participants. All of the teacher participants are females, with qualified Bachelor's degrees. Besides all of them are more than 40 years old with about 20 years of teaching experience, which proves their pedagogical expertise. In this research, each teacher would be assigned a number to represent their name, including teachers (1), (2), (3), and (4). A semi-structured one-on-one interview with the teachers was arranged. The interview form which is adapted from Bui [27] and Creswell [28] included nine questions. To be more specific, the first two questions aim to gain the teachers' academic background, while the remaining ones are to find out their opinion on the research problem and what suggestions they can provide the researcher with.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. Strategies involving language instruction that teachers used

In addition to the aforementioned correction strategies, several solutions involving language instruction were adopted to prevent errors in EPV. They can be presented in four main themes: instruction in L1, focus on forms, focus on meaning, and fun extra activities. Interestingly, all teachers in the interviews stated that they did use Vietnamese in EPV teaching and translation to help students absorb the knowledge better in their mother tongue. The teachers also stressed that they needed to make lessons short, and simple, but long-lasting in students' minds by not overusing the grammatical terms and the definitions. Hence, they could feel motivated to learn such a challenging grammar point.

As a teacher, I think we can try to modify the lesson plans and improve our own classroom management skills so they're motivated to learn. Secondary students are easily discouraged, so they have to stay motivated to learn not only in class, but also after class. Therefore, I give them practice exercises and organize activities so that their mind is constantly in the lesson. (Teacher 4)

As all teachers perceived grammatical incompetence as a major underlying cause for errors in EPV, focusing on forms and grammar reinforcement are indispensable parts of lesson plans and the teachers felt the need to check students' grammatical knowledge regularly. As regards verb forms, they would constantly get the students to learn regular and irregular participle verbs carefully in many ways, one of which is organizing tests focusing on those verbs. To deal with errors related to tenses, they also reminded students of the way to recognize the tenses of sentences. Fortunately, Teacher 3 suggested a helpful way to practice these two grammatical features, which is to give one verb, and then ask students to write different tenses of that verb and change these sentences into passive voice. Regarding those who had problems with identifying different elements in a sentence, Teacher 2 would ask them which one is "the place", "the time", and etc. in the sentence in facilitating them in passive formation.

I think that they make these errors because they are confused about the meanings of the EPV structures, and in some cases, they forget certain grammar rules involved with these EPV structures... I think these errors are common with weak and average students, because of their lack of knowledge in sentence formation and transformation. It's like they are confused about the positions of elements in the sentences. They have trouble figuring out where is the 'subject', the 'verb' and 'to be' (Teacher 4).

Meaning is also another linguistic aspect that was prioritized in language instruction. Half of the interviewed teachers felt the need to pay careful attention to this field by encouraging their students to improve the lexical resource as they agreed that vocabulary is the chief culprit behind students' errors in EPV.

Some possible causes for these problems are, I think, students don't master vocabulary, so they don't understand the meaning of the sentence. They can't translate or understand the sentence in their own language to recognize which one is "subject, verb, object, place, time". (Teacher 2)

Teacher 4 elaborated on the matter by saying that due to limited vocabulary, they had difficulty figuring out the meaning of the sentences. Not understanding the meaning of the active sentence, they could not recognize the subject, verb, object, adverb of place, and adverb time, and thus were not able to change it into the passive voice. To tackle the gaps in lexical resources, Teacher 2 advised students to learn more vocabulary to understand the meaning of the sentence. She highly recommended a reference book "Ôn tập Tuyển sinh lớp 10 của tỉnh Bình Dương" which contains useful exercises about vocabulary and phrasal verbs according to a myriad of topics. All teachers agreed that to completely tackle the root causes for errors in EPV, students should have more practice by revising their own lessons carefully and doing all the exercises in the course book again after school. All of them wanted to give learners more assignments with difficulty levels depending on their English competency. Two grammar books recommended for this purpose are the series "Mai Lan Huong" and "Cambridge Grammar in Use".

I think the first thing is, practice makes perfect. I often tell my students "Practice makes perfect", so I ask them to do a lot of exercises in a grammar book. For example, the book is "Mai Lan Huong". This book contains a lot of similar sentences like the structures I teach in school, and I ask them to practice this every day, or use these structures in combination. Besides that, they have to learn by heart the verb past participles. (Teacher 3)

Finally, to strengthen learners' motivation during the English period so they would continue to learn by themselves even when they step out of the class, some added extra interesting activities such as learning from useful websites on the Internet (Teacher 2) and playing some games as free practice activities (Teacher 4). Teacher 4, however, warned that the teacher in charge must set a clear target for the lesson as there should not be too many free practice activities and too few controlled practice activities.

I think there are a lot of websites to learn vocabulary on this topic. For example, tienganh123.com, The IELTS Workshop. I think there are lots of websites. I just asked them, for example, to go to Google. You can go to Google search and you can type in a certain topic and you can choose which one is related to this topic and you discover them. I ask students to do that. (Teacher 2)

Overall, teacher participants suggested four major strategies for language instruction: instruction in mother tongue, FoFs, FoM, and fun extra activities. They stressed the use of the Vietnamese language and translation as aids to students' comprehension in passive teaching. Focus on forms through grammar reinforcement was emphasized. In other words, teachers tended to focus on teaching and learning regular and irregular participle verbs, tenses, and sentence analysis. They also perceive FoM as necessary to help enable students to understand sentence meanings effectively, thus students need to improve their vocabulary.

3.2. Strategies involving corrective feedback that teachers used

To help students correct the errors mentioned above, the teacher participants suggested a number of strategies they did actually use in their own teaching practice. Regarding the explicitness of CF, the majority of the interviewed teachers opted for indirect CF when helping their students correct the errors in EPV. To be more specific, instead of writing the correct answers for students immediately, Teacher 1 would leave out the errors and ask students to say what they remember about that structure in EPV first. Regarding the errors in homework, she

would just circle or underline the flaws, then students had to look at their work again at home and rewrite the sentences. Teacher M also prioritized students identifying EPV errors and correcting them by themselves, followed by her checking them again if necessary.

After my students do their task, I ask them to give me an explanation, which tense, or they have to write the form or the usage of this sentence. If they can't, or they don't remember how to do it, I will ask the other student to say what they remember. I believe that when students compare the form or the usage of the sentence, they will recognize how fast they can change this sentence into passive voice, if they are correct or not. (Teacher 1)

As regards the timing of the feedback, there are several differences in this aspect. For example, Teacher 3 prefers to correct the errors at the end of the lesson in front of the class but does not say the names of the students who made such errors to avoid embarrassment. In case the teacher feels the need to fix students' errors on the spot to draw attention, most teachers tried to maintain a positive manner in the correction by also not specifying the name of the error-makers to avoid discouragement as mentioned above. Teacher 4 reinforced this point by claiming that she strived to correct the errors constructively and let students know she genuinely wanted them to do better in EPV.

I don't correct that mistake immediately, I correct it at the end of the lesson, and I don't say the name of the students who made that mistake. Why? Because when you correct that mistake, maybe he or she remembers it immediately, but this can make him feel embarrassed, and he won't want to volunteer to do that exercise again. (Teacher 3)

A sense of collaboration was also fostered in the English classroom. This means that peer work such as students doing passive sentences in small groups of four or checking each other's answers are some interesting activities that Teacher 4 suggested to improve learner autonomy and collaboration since learners would have a chance to learn from one another. When asked about the causes of common errors, all teachers perceived a severe lack of practice as the main reason for students' errors in EPV. To improve the situation, they, therefore, asked their students to redo the exercise at home after it was corrected in class.

And finally, I ask them to do exercise many times, even they need to re-do the exercises. The exercises are corrected in class, then the class redo the exercises. (Teacher 2)

In short, the teacher participants did not mention whether they prioritized oral feedback over written one. However, most of them had a preference for indirect feedback. The time they chose to provide the feedback greatly varied, with some teachers addressing errors at the end of the lesson without singling out specific students to avoid embarrassing them, while others opted to offer immediate correction while maintaining a positive approach.

3.3. Discussion of findings

When the researchers investigated language instruction that can facilitate young learners in learning EPV, four major themes were presented as follows: instruction in L1, FoFs, FoM, and fun extra activities. Specifically, during the interview sections, the teachers emphasized the use of Vietnamese in EPV teaching and translation to aid students' comprehension. This opinion agrees with the findings of other studies that favor the integration of the mother tongue in ESL classes [29]-[32]. Additionally, the surveyed teachers also highlighted the importance of keeping lessons short, simple, and memorable by avoiding excessive use of grammatical terms and definitions. The motivation factor was deemed crucial, and teachers suggested modifying lesson plans, improving classroom management skills, providing practice exercises, and organizing engaging activities to maintain students' interest. This idea did confirm numerous scholars' belief in motivation as one of the determinants of L2 learning achievement and acquisition [33]-[35]. Regarding FoFs, grammar reinforcement was identified as essential, with a focus on regular and irregular participle verbs, tenses, and sentence analysis. Vocabulary improvement was also seen as vital as the teachers regarded FoM as one important factor in language instruction, with

students advised to expand their lexical resources to understand sentence meanings. However, the fact that teachers in this study tended to focus on forms and meaning in their language instruction seems to contrast with the findings of a myriad of researchers [8], [11], [12], who demonstrated the superiority of FoF over both FoFs and FoM.

Furthermore, there are three aspects in the strategies suggested by teacher participants to help their students correct errors in EPV: form, explicitness, and timing. While no teachers mentioned whether they favoured oral or written feedback, the majority of them preferred using indirect CF, such as asking students to recall the correct structure or circling errors in homework for students to correct at home. The effectiveness of such a strategy was proven in the research of many previous studies [22]-[24]. However, Liu [36] warned that some low-level students may not have enough L2 knowledge to identify their own errors, so indirect CF should be employed carefully based on the learners' level of language proficiency. In addition, from the teachers' responses, the timing of their feedback may vary, with some teachers correcting errors at the end of the lesson without mentioning specific students, while others addressed errors immediately but maintained a positive approach. There are similarities between the teachers' positive attitudes towards both immediate and delayed CF in this study and those described by Li et al. [37]. It seems that the time when a teacher decides to give feedback mainly depends on the purpose of the learning task, meaning that if the objectivity of the task is accuracy, immediate CF is more beneficial while an immediate CF is more appropriate for those focusing on fluency [26], [38]. Moreover, collaborative activities were recommended to enhance learner autonomy and collaboration, in such as group work and peer checking. This suggestion further supports the advantage of collaborating learning in teaching English discussed by a number of researchers [39]-[42].

4. Conclusion

Based on the discussion that has been done, it can be concluded that, for correcting EPV errors, teacher participants suggested several key approaches according to three aspects of CF: form, explicitness, and timing. While the teacher participants did not mention whether they prioritized oral CF over written CF or not, the majority of them preferred indirect CF, including techniques such as encouraging self-correction and circling errors in homework for students to correct independently. Feedback timing varied, with some teachers addressing errors at the end of the lesson without singling out specific students, while others provided immediate correction while maintaining a positive approach. In terms of language instruction, teacher participants proposed four major strategies: instruction in L1, FoFs, FoM, and fun extra activities. They stressed the use of the Vietnamese language and translation as aids to students' comprehension in EPV teaching. This approach aimed to avoid potential anxiety barriers that could impede language learning. Focus on forms through grammar reinforcement was emphasized, focusing on regular and irregular participle verbs, tenses, and sentence analysis. Focus on meaning was also deemed essential to enable students to understand sentence meanings effectively, which entailed the need for vocabulary improvement.

These findings can have implications for teachers and administrators in the context of Vietnam. Specifically, English instructors should consider employing more FoF in their language instruction in lieu of only using FoFs and FoM to create a more interactive environment in their classroom. This entails the need for school boards to organize training workshops to instruct and support teachers in integrating a new teaching strategy into conventional lesson plans.

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