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An Error Analysis of Students' Use of Passive Voice: Comparison between English and Non-English Majors

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Abstract

This study empirically analyzes students' ability to identify various types of passive voice (PV) errors through a grammaticality judgment multiple-choice test and examines grammatical errors in constructing the PV in a Chinese-to-English translation (C-E translation) task. The study was conducted among English majors (EM) and non-English majors (NEM) from different universities. The research aims to identify and compare the common error types made by EM and NEM when constructing PV sentences and explore their potential causes. For this purpose, data was collected from a large sample of university students. The findings reveal that errors in passive construction manifest in various forms. The five most common issues are errors in tense, participles, word choice, by-transposition, and the insertion, omission, or misuse of the auxiliary "be". Another significant finding is that, in general, EM performed better than NEM. However, in some specific areas, NEM performed better than EM, which are, the wrong choice of patient-agent and incomplete translation aspects. Based on these results, this study offers pedagogical suggestions for teaching PV to EM and NEM, respectively.

Keywords: passive voice, error analysis, English majors, non-English majors, Chinese-to-English translation, grammatical judgment

1. Introduction

Duan (2011) suggests that Chinese students' English has its characteristics. It is important to analyze and study these characteristics. For decades, error analysis has been a popular topic among researchers. Error analysis is a practical approach to studying second language acquisition (Schachter, 1974). Moreover, error analysis enables learners to identify errors and enhances their ability to write well-structured paragraphs by helping them correct them through practice (Ariani & Arham, 2020). Besides, it could be used to understand better what difficulties learners face. However, most research focuses on students' general errors in their writing or translation tasks. There is insufficient research to focus on specific types of PV errors.

There are several reasons for analyzing PV errors between EM and NEM. First, few studies have focused specifically on PV errors. Second, traditional error analysis often treats passive sentences as simply grammatical or ungrammatical without detailed error types. Third, PV is a key grammatical structure. According to Polat (2017), with the rise of Communicative Language Teaching, which is regarded as a highly effective method for language learning, discussions surrounding the role of grammar have become increasingly prominent. Besides, PV is also a significant part of writing tasks. According to the research of Ariani and Arham (2020), passive construction is one of the important parts of writing tasks, especially in IELTS writing task one. Nowadays, more and more students need to study abroad, and most NEM need to pass CET-4 and CET-6, while EM need to pass TEM-4 and TEM-8. As an important part of grammar, the PV is crucial in these writing tasks; thus, it seems necessary for learners to produce well-formed passives to make writing more cohesive at the discourse level. Fourthly, different teaching strategies are used among EM and NEM in China's universities. Thus, it is necessary to determine the differences in their PV error types, as these differences can be attributed to the varying focuses of their language education. EM typically receive more in-depth training in grammar, vocabulary, and translation skills, while NEM often focus on practical language usage and communication. Identifying these error types will help tailor more effective teaching methods to address the specific challenges faced by each group.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Passive Voice

In many kinds of written expository prose, especially academic journal articles, passive constructions can be widespread, with whole passages written in the passive voice (Biber et al., 2021, p. 466). However, this widespread use is not universal across all languages. Some languages use passive constructions more extensively than others, depending on their grammatical structure and discourse conventions. Keenan and Dryer (2007, p. 325) pointed out that the use of PV holds varying degrees of significance across languages, with some relying on them more heavily in their grammatical systems than others. McEnery and Xiao (2005) suggests that the frequency of passive voice usage in English is significantly higher than in Chinese. They also suggest that in English, the PV is often used to show objectivity and formality, such as in academic writing and official documents.

In Chinese, however, the PV often carries a negative or adversative meaning, which limits when and how it is used. According to the research of Chu (1973, p. 437), the passive construction in Mandarin Chinese consists of (a) a higher-level sentence containing the verb "bei", (b) a further elevated sentence where a stative verb is realized as either an adverb or auxiliary, or where the verb you is used, which in a positive context is realized as "le", (c) a resultative complement if the higher verb is "ba", and (d) a complement clause embedded within the "bei-sentence".

In English, the basic structure of the PV consists of a copular verb, "be", followed by the past participle of the main verb. The agent is typically introduced by the preposition "by", though it can be omitted in specific contexts. In some cases, the auxiliary verb "get" can be used to form the PV. There are five types of English PV: passive with "be", prepositional passives, get-passives, embedded passives, and adjectival passives (Pullum, 2014).

The differences between Chinese PV and English PV are obvious. One major difference lies in the idiomatic structure of the impersonal in English expression. For this reason, the PV is often used to show objectivity and formality. Also, using the PV can avoid naming the person who will act, which is useful in academic and formal contexts. The PV in English sentences is composed of the auxiliary verb plus the past participle form of the main verb. In contrast, the Chinese structure is more inclined to use the active voice, which reflects a different syntactic and stylistic preference.

2.2 Contrastive Analysis

Many methods analyze learners' difficulties in second language acquisition, with contrastive analysis and error analysis being common. In the 1960s and early 1970s, contrastive analysis was widely used to explain challenging language features but proved limited as it overemphasized negative transfer and underestimated universal language principles and cognitive factors (Rustipa, 2011).

2.3 Error Analysis

Another approach that can be used in analyzing the problems learners face in second language learning is error analysis. Brown (2014, p. 227) suggests that error analysis differs from contrastive analysis by examining errors from all sources, not just those caused by negative transfer from the native language. Undoubtedly, to some extent, error analysis is better than contrastive analysis. Thus, this is one of the reasons why the author chose the error analysis method to gain a deeper understanding of the sources of errors and provide a more comprehensive approach to language learning.

However, error analysis still has many drawbacks, which many researchers have criticized. Brown (2014, p. 227) suggests that one of the shortcomings in error analysis is an overemphasis on production data, which means that this method overlooks the importance of comprehension in language learning. Another drawback is that without prior predictions, error analysis fails to address the avoidance phenomenon. Sideeg (2002) and Krashen (1982) argued that learners tend to avoid the passive voice due to a limited understanding of the rules. If students find PV challenging, they may avoid using this structure. Hence, no amount of error analysis can explain why this happens (Schachter, 1974).

Despite the shortcomings of error analysis, it remains important in several aspects. Firstly, it can help students assess their learning progress, provide insights into learning strategies, and offer feedback on language acquisition. Secondly, it enables teachers to determine what types of errors students face so that teachers can offer more targeted support to students. Thirdly, for textbook editors, error analysis offers feedback on students' error patterns so that they can design more targeted teaching materials.

2.4 The Difference between Error and Mistake

It is essential to differentiate between an error and a mistake, as they differ in several aspects. An error occurs when a learner lacks knowledge of a particular language, whereas a mistake happens when they fail to apply their linguistic competence correctly (Corder, 1967).

2.5 Types of Error

Different researchers classify errors from different perspectives. Burt and Kiparsky (1974) distinguish local errors, which do not hinder comprehension, from global errors, which disrupt communication and obscure meaning. According to Touchie (1986), applied linguistics researchers distinguish performance errors that result from fatigue or haste and are easily corrected from competence errors that stem from insufficient learning and indicate deeper language proficiency gaps.

Dulay (1982) identified six primary domains of error classification: the noun phrase domain, verb phrase domain, clause and sentence domain, prepositional domain, adjective phrase domain, and other common error domains.

2.6 Source of Error

According to Brown (2014, pp. 232–234), there are four primary sources of error: (a) interlingual transfer, (b) intralingual transfer, (c) context of learning, and (d) communication strategies. Interlingual transfer suggests that many errors arise from the interference of the native language. In contrast, intralingual transfer primarily involves overgeneralization within the target language. Besides, errors can occur due to teachers' inaccurate explanations or incorrect presentation. Furthermore, the communication strategies used by learners may also contribute to errors.

2.7 Procedure of Error Analysis

Error analysis consists of five steps: (1) Collection of a sample of learner language; (2) Identification of error (3) Description of error; (4) Explanation of error; (5) Evaluation of error. (Corder, 1967)

2.8 Previous Researches

Most researchers analyze errors from a macro perspective. For example, Wang (2011) carried out a sentence translation survey among 60 EM and analyzed the use of the PV. Based on a translation test involving 20 Chinese sentences, the research investigates common errors and explores their causes, but the analysis of their error types was insufficient. She did not separately discuss exactly which part of the PV the students had made errors in.

Similarly, Ni (2013) conducted C-E translation research among NEM to explore negative transfer effects. In her research, she has explored negative transfer in C-E translation among university students. Studies typically focus on identifying common transfer errors, analyzing their causes, and investigating their relation to students' English proficiency. Errors are generally categorized into morphological, lexical, and syntactic types based on data collected from the translation task.

According to the research of Li et al. (2016), students' grammatical errors in compositions were identified. There are ten major categories of errors, including problems with verbs (e.g., PV, tense), nouns, articles, prepositions, and sentence structure. Their findings suggest that grammatical inaccuracies, particularly in verb use, remain a significant barrier to writing proficiency. Li et al. (2016) also attribute these errors primarily to negative transfer from Chinese, cultural and cognitive differences in language structuring, insufficient mastery of grammar rules, and limited writing practice.

PV errors pose a significant challenge for L2 learners. Jung (2006) investigated this issue among Korean university students through an argumentative essay task, identifying six main error types: misuse of be-auxiliary, incorrect past participle, errors in by-phrase, improper agent-patient selection, incorrect voice choice, and inaccurate lexical selection. Jung attributed these errors primarily to interlingual interference, overgeneralization, simplification, avoidance, and faulty rule hypotheses. However, a limitation of using essay tasks to analyze PV errors is that some students may avoid passive constructions due to unfamiliarity with the structure, which may lead to the potential inadequacy of certain error types. Schachter (1974) also proved that students can use interpretive relationships to avoid complex structures while still being able to express their ideas in their experience.

Similarly, Wang (2020) suggests that L1 Chinese learners are inclined to avoid using the English passive construction. Hence, the collected data from Jung's research will not reflect students' real error rate in producing passive construction, which is one reason the author did not choose the free-writing task in this experiment to evaluate students' performance.

3. Method

3.1 Research Questions

To investigate the purpose of this study, the author has formulated the following research questions:

1. What types of PV errors do participants frequently make?
2. Are there significant differences in the frequency and types of PV errors between EM and NEM?
3. What are the main factors contributing to PV errors among EM and NEM?

3.2 Participant

Table 1. Distribution of Participants by Major and Grade

Major	First-year	Second-year	Third-year	Fourth-year	Total
EM	27	28	40	15	110
NEM	30	25	42	13	110
Total	57	53	82	28	220

220 undergraduate students from 80 universities in China participated in the study, including 110 EM and 110 NEM. As shown in Table 1, although the distribution within each academic year was not completely the same, the number of lower-year (first-year and second-year) and upper-year (third-year and fourth-year) students was equal in both groups. Before the survey, all participants were informed of the general purpose of the survey and they all consented to participate in the survey. However, the participants were not told the specific purpose of analyzing the error of constructing PV. After the survey, they received payment.

3.3 Instruments

The grammaticality judgment multiple-choice task and the C-E translation task were used in this study to answer research questions.

3.3.1 Grammaticality Judgment Multiple-choice Task

Chomphooyod et al. (2023) state that using multiple-choice questions is an efficient method to assess the performance of English language learners because it can evaluate learners' performance rapidly. Hence, this task was taken as a reference for the author to evaluate students' performance.

There were ten questions on this task, which can be seen in Appendix A. For each question, there were five choices for participants to choose. Among five choices, there was merely one choice that was the correct answer. If participants chose the first choice, which meant they thought the original sentence was grammatically correct. If they chose one of the four choices, participants thought the original sentence was wrong and needed to be corrected. There were eight experimental items and two control items. In the grammatical aspect, eight experimental sentences were wrong and needed to be corrected, while two controlled sentences were entirely correct.

3.3.2 Translation Task

Presada (2014) suggests that error analysis is helpful in translation classes. In this task, participants were asked to translate five Chinese sentences into English, as seen in Appendix B. The sentence that needs to be translated includes four passive and one active voice constructions, to prevent participants from consciously using the PV due to recognizing the purpose of the test. The sentences were created using vocabulary from the university's vocabulary book to ensure participants had no vocabulary difficulties. Additionally, complex sentences were avoided in the tasks. Participants were not explicitly required to use the PV in their responses, which aimed to investigate students' natural usage of PV.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Grammaticality Judgment Multiple-choice Task

Table 2. Frequencies of Error Option Selections by EM and NEM

Error Categories	Number of Error in Choices	*EM (%)*	*NEM (%)*
Be-auxiliary	13	5.3	10.4
Tense	7	4.6	9.0
Subject-verb disagreement	2	2.3	8.2
Be-insertion/omission/misuse	4	8.2	14.1
Past participle	10	6.6	11.1
By-phrase	10	5.1	8.0
Wrong preposition	4	1.4	7.5
By-omission	1	0	1.8
Overgeneralization	3	7.6	8.5
By-transposition	2	11.4	11.4
Wrong choice of patient-agent	10	4.2	6.2
Wrong choice of voice	14	5.3	10.8
Misuse of passive for active	3	5.8	14.8
Misuse of passive with intransitive verb	7	6.1	10.0
Misuse of active for passive	4	3.4	9.1
Total	57	26.5	46.5

Note. EM (%) refers to the percentage of EM who made the error, while *NEM (%)* refers to the percentage of NEM.

The data reveal clear differences in PV error patterns between EM and NEM, with NEM consistently making more errors, indicating a weaker grasp of passive structures. NEM particularly struggle with structural aspects such as auxiliary verb use and voice transformation. However, some error types show similar rates across both groups, suggesting these may stem from general language acquisition challenges rather than major differences. The most common error for both groups involves choosing the wrong voice, while the omission of the agent phrase is rare. Overall, the findings suggest NEM need more targeted instruction on PV formation, while EM benefit from greater exposure to grammar and academic writing.

4.2 C-E Translation Task

In Task 2, 220 participants were instructed to translate five Chinese sentences into English. Out of the 1100 collected responses, 777 valid PV constructions were identified and analyzed. As shown in Table 3, a chi-square test demonstrated a statistically significant difference in error rates between the two groups, confirming the difference in error rates between the two groups is statistically significant. NEM encountered greater challenges in producing grammatically accurate PV sentences.

Table 3. Results of the Passive Errors by Major

	EM	NEM	Total
Grammatical Error	79 (20.4%)	134 (34.3%)	213 (27.4%)
Total passive used	387	390	777
		p = 0.0000125	

The classification of some error categories in this study was adapted from Jung (2006), Lamunpandh and Chaengchenkit (2020), and Somphong (2013). In the following analysis, students' errors in constructing PV included the be-auxiliary, past participles, by-phrases, wrong choice of patient-agent, wrong choice of voice (active or passive), and wrong choice of words and non-sentence error. In the following analysis, representative examples of students' erroneous translations are provided to illustrate specific error types. Each example is labeled with a number (e.g., (1), (2)) for ease of reference. The corrected version of each sentence is indicated by a prime mark (e.g., (1'), (2')). Additionally, the student group and participant number (e.g., EM #3, NEM #12) are included in parentheses to identify the source of each sample.

Table 4. Grammatical Errors by Categories

Categories	EM		NEM	
	N（%）	N（%）	N（%）	N（%）
Be-auxiliary		40 (10.3)		53 (13.6)
Tense	31 (8.0)		32 (8.2)	
Subject-verb disagreement	9 (2.3)		12 (3.1)	
Be-insertion/omission/misuse	0 (0)		9 (2.3)	
Past participle		16 (4.1)		31 (8.0)
By-phrase		0 (0)		4 (1.0)
Wrong preposition	0 (0)		3 (0.8)	
By-omission	0 (0)		1 (0.3)	
Wrong choice of patient-agent		5 (1.3)		2 (0.5)
Wrong choice of voice		0 (0)		7 (1.8)
Misuse of passive for active	0 (0)		6 (1.5)	
Misuse of passive with intransitive verb	0 (0)		1 (0.3)	
Wrong choice of word		10 (2.6)		27 (6.9)
Non-sentence error		8 (2.1)		10 (2.6)
Incomplete translation	8 (2.1)		5 (1.3)	
Translation redundancy	0 (0)		5 (1.3)	
Total		79 (20.4)		134 (34.3)

Note. EM (%) and *NEM (%)* refer to the proportion of each error type out of the total number of errors made by EM and NEM, respectively.

4.2.1 Be-auxiliary Error

In the translation task, be-auxiliary error was the most common one that participants might make (EM: 40, 10.3%; NEM: 53, 13.6%). It includes three types: tense error, subject-verb disagreement, and insertion, omission and misuse of the auxiliary "be".

4.2.1.1 Tense Error

The result showed that tense errors made up a considerable proportion of errors (EM: 31, 8.0%; NEM: 32, 8.2%), while the percentages of EM and NEM were similar. In the source text, there was an obvious tense mark, "了", which also is an obvious past tense mark in Chinese expressions. Participants' translation examples are as follows.

(1) The dress *is* bought in Shenzhen.

(EM #3)

(1') The dress was bought in Shenzhen.

(2) Measures *are* taken to solve the problem.

(EM #6)

(2') Measures were taken to solve the problem.

(3) My phone *is* stolen.

(NEM #12)

(3') My phone was stolen.

(4) His opinion *is* praised by teacher.

(NEM #109)

(4') His opinion was praised by the teacher.

Using the simple present tense instead of the past tense is a common error among learners. In most source texts, a clear past tense marker "了" was present, signaling a completed action. However, in example (1), the source sentence lacked "了." Still, the verb "买" (buy) indicates a punctual past event, so the simple present passive "is bought" is incorrect; the correct form is "was bought." Examples (2), (3), and (4) did include "了," yet learners still used present passive forms like "are taken" or "is stolen" instead of the past passive.

This error likely results from structural differences between Chinese and English. Chinese verbs do not mark tense morphologically. In Chinese, tense is inferred from context or particles such as "了." Learners may transfer this understanding to English. However, tense is explicitly marked in English, which may lead to the misuse of present tense in past contexts.

4.2.1.2 Subject-verb Disagreement Error

The proportion of subject-verb disagreement errors was slightly higher among NEM (3.1%) than among EM (2.3%), with 12 and 9 instances, respectively. Examples are as follows.

(5) His views *was* acclaimed by teacher.

(EM #9)

(5') His views were acclaimed by the teacher.

(6) The problem *have* been solved.

(EM #95)

(6') The problem has been solved.

(7) Measure *have* been taken to solve this problem.

(NEM #50)

(7') Measure has been taken to solve this problem.

(8) Her dressings *was brought* in *shenzhen*.

(NEM #15)

(8') Her dresses were bought in Shenzhen.

Most subject-verb agreement errors from the data resulted from the incorrect pairing of singular and plural subjects with their corresponding verbs. For instance, in (5), the plural subject "views" should take the plural verb "were" rather than "was." In (6) and (7), singular nouns like "problem" and "measure" were erroneously matched with the plural verb "have." In (8), also shows a mismatch between the plural subject "dressings" and the singular verb "was."

These errors reflect the difficulty Chinese learners face in maintaining number agreement between subjects and verbs, largely due to structural differences between Chinese and English. Chinese verbs do not inflect for number or person, and subject-verb agreement is not grammatically marked. This lack of morphological agreement in Chinese leads to negative transfer, causing learners to overlook verb form adjustments needed for singular and plural subjects in English.

4.2.1.3 Be-insertion/omission/misuse

Surprisingly, be-insertion, be-omission or be-misuse did not appear among EM. In contrast, NEM made nine errors (2.3%) in total, suggesting that NEM encountered difficulties in mastering the structural requirements of the English PV. The following are examples.

(9) My *smart phone* was *been* stolen.

(NEM #106)

(9') My smartphone was stolen.

(10) This dress ____ bought in Shenzhen.

(NEM #76)

(10') This dress was bought in Shenzhen.

(11) Actions has *be* taken to solve this problem.

(NEM #71)

(11') Action has been taken to solve this problem.

In (9), "been" is unnecessarily inserted; in (10), the participant missed the auxiliary "was"; in (11), it should be "been" instead of "be". These errors may be attributed to negative transfer from the learners' first language. In Mandarin Chinese, passive constructions are typically realized through the use of the marker "被 (bèi)" followed directly by a verb phrase, without the need for an equivalent of the auxiliary "be". As a result, Chinese learners may not fully realize the necessity of "be" in English passive constructions, leading to its incorrect use. Moreover, since Chinese verbs do not inflect for tense or aspect in the same way as English verbs, learners may struggle with selecting the correct "be" form (e.g., "was", "been") by tense, aspect, and subject-verb agreement. The overuse or incorrect insertion of "been" further reflects confusion between the simple passive and the perfect passive structure, a distinction absent in Chinese syntax. These structural mismatches between L1 and L2 increase the cognitive load during sentence formation, especially for learners with limited explicit grammatical instruction, and may result in syntactic fossilization in more advanced stages of interlanguage development.

4.2.2 Past Participle Error

The data show that EM students made 16 past participle errors (4.1%), considerably fewer than the 31 errors (8.0%) made by NEM students. This suggests a better grasp of this grammatical structure among EM.

(12) This dress was *brought* in Shenzhen.

(EM #23)

(12') This dress was bought in Shenzhen.

(13) My photo was *stealed*.

(EM #25)

(13') My photo was stolen.

(14) My mobile phone was *steal*.

(NEM #43)

(14') My mobile phone was stolen.

(15) This shirt was *buied* in Shenzhen.

(NEM #106)

(15') This shirt was bought in Shenzhen.

The above examples demonstrate several common error examples in data. One issue is that participants apply regular "-ed" patterns to irregular verbs in (13) and (15), suggesting a limited mastery of irregular verb forms. In (12), the student confused semantically related verbs, namely "buy" and "bring." This error indicates incomplete lexical knowledge. In (14), the participant omitted the past participle form entirely, using the base form steal instead. The above errors show incomplete knowledge of irregular verb forms.

4.2.3 By-phrase Error

The fact that only NEM students made these following four errors, while EM students did not, indicates that EM students have a better understanding of passive constructions.

4.2.3.1 Wrong Preposition

Three NEM (0.8%) used wrong prepositions when translating.

(16) His point was praised *of* his teacher.

(NEM #16)

(16') His point was praised by his teacher.

(17) This problem was solved *through* taking action.

(NEM #20)

(17') This problem was solved by taking action.

In (16), the preposition "of" is incorrectly used in place of "by" to indicate the agent in a passive construction. This error may stem from negative L1 transfer. In Chinese expressions like "得到了老师的表扬," learners may interpret "老师的表扬" as a possessive structure (i.e., "the teacher's praise"), leading them to choose "of" to express this perceived relationship. However, in English passive constructions, the agency must be marked with "by."

In (17), the preposition "through" is erroneously used instead of "by" to indicate the means of solving the problem. Both prepositions can express cause or method, "by" is the conventional marker for agency or means in passive constructions, particularly when followed by gerunds (e.g., by taking action). This error may also be influenced by L1 transfer from Chinese. When translating, participants may have understood the phrase as "已经通过采取措施解决这个问题了." In Chinese, "通过" broadly covers both processes and means without distinguishing between "by" and "through." As a result, learners often confuse these prepositions and incorrectly use "through" where "by" is grammatically required to clearly indicate agency or means in English PV.

4.2.3.2 By-omission Error

NEM made only one by-omission error in the translation task (0.3%). In this section, EM did not make a by-omission error. The example is as follows.

(18) *Has* opinion was praised ___ the teacher.

(NEM #8)

(18') His opinion was praised by the teacher.

In this case, the participant omitted the preposition "by". This error reflects an incomplete grasp of the syntactic structure required in English PV. In English PV, it is necessary to introduce the agent of an action. There are two possible reasons for this error. Firstly, the learner appears to recognize the passive form (was praised) but fails to fully realize the complete structure. The omission of "by" suggests a misinterpretation that once the passive verb is used, the agent phrase is optional or unnecessary. This may be influenced by intralingual simplification, where learners internalize a simplified rule that overlooks necessary components. Secondly, the omission is likely influenced by L1 transfer. In Chinese, there is no preposition needed to introduce the agent. The source text "他的观点得到了老师的表扬" can be interpreted as "他的观点被老师表扬了" when students were translating. There is only "被" in Chinese to introduce the doer, namely the agent, "老师". Learners may therefore assume that English allows the same flexibility, and that the omission of the agent does not affect the grammaticality of the sentence. However, in English, if the agent is to be mentioned, it must be introduced by "by." Omitting it renders the sentence ungrammatical and incomplete.

4.2.4 Wrong Choice of Patient-agent

Surprisingly, in this aspect, EM made more errors than NEM (EM: 5, 1.3%; NEM: 2, 0.5%). Examples are as follows.

(19) *The problem* has been taken *measures* to solve.

(EM #1)

(19') Measures have been taken to solve the problem.

(20) *This question* has been *taken action* to solve.

(EM #78)

(20') Action has been taken to solve this question.

(21) *It* has been *taken resolution* to *solve this problem*.

(NEM #92)

(21') The resolution has been taken to solve this problem.

(21") Measures have been taken to solve this problem.

(22) *The problem* has been taken *steps* to solve.

(NEM #101)

(22') Steps have been taken to solve the problem.

The sentences above are ungrammatical because they use non-agentive nouns (e.g., the problem, this question) as the subject in passive structures involving fixed collocations such as take measures, take action, or take steps. This error stems from a misunderstanding of how passivation works in English. In these collocations, the object of the verb in the active voice should be promoted to the subject in the passive form (Measures have been taken), not the noun representing the issue (e.g., the problem).

These errors are especially common among EM, who may be more exposed to complex structures and try to use advanced forms without fully grasping their syntactic limits. Additionally, influence from Chinese plays a role: in Chinese, expressions like "采取措施解决问题" allow flexible word order, often putting "问题" (the problem) before the verb phrase, which may lead learners to treat it as the subject in English too.

4.2.5 Wrong Choice of Voice

In this section, only NEM made errors related to voice selection (7, 1.8%). These errors can be divided into two subcategories, which are, the misuse of passive for active structures and the misuse of PV with intransitive verbs. In the experimental task, a controlled sentence was included, which some students erroneously believed should be translated into the PV. However, their translations revealed incorrect voice choices, resulting in semantic inaccuracies and grammatical errors.

4.2.5.1 Misuse of Passive for Active Structures

In this aspect, there are six NEM errors, which accounted for 1.5%.

(23) They *have been written* this paper.

(NEM #15)

(23') They have written this paper.

(24) They *have been finished* the report.

(NEM #45)

(24') They have finished the report.

In both examples, the learners incorrectly used the PV where the active voice is grammatically and semantically required. The verbs "write" and "finish" are transitive and should take a direct object in active constructions. However, the students wrongly inserted the passive auxiliary "have been", resulting in ungrammatical forms. Moreover, the agent's presence in the subject position further conflicts with the passive structure, where the agent is either omitted or introduced by a by-phrase.

The primary source of this error is learners' confusion between the present perfect aspect (have/has + past participle) and the PV (be + past participle). Since both constructions involve the past participle form of the verb, students may wrongly assume that the passive auxiliary has been required whenever a verb appears in this form. As a result, they insert passive auxiliaries into contexts that require only active perfect constructions. Negative transfer from the Chinese also likely contributes to this error. In Mandarin Chinese, the distinction between aspect (e.g., the perfective marker "了") and voice (e.g., the passive marker "被") is often realized through context rather than overt syntactic structure. Furthermore, Chinese verbs do not require auxiliaries to form tense or voice, which can make English auxiliaries seem interchangeable or optional to learners. This structural ambiguity may lead learners to overuse or misapply passive auxiliaries in English when expressing completed action.

4.2.5.2 Misuse of Passive Voice with Intransitive Verbs

In this aspect, one NEM (0.3%) made an error when they translated, while EM did not make an error.

(25) His opinion is *agreed* by his teacher.

(NEM #29)

(25') His teacher agreed with his opinion.

There are two errors here. Firstly, the verb "agree" is an intransitive verb. Therefore, it cannot be passivized. Besides, the participant erroneously chose the verb. "Agree" cannot be used to translate "表扬".

This error reflects NEM failure to recognize the restrictions on which verbs can undergo passivation in English. The learner's native language may influence this misuse. In Chinese, structures such as "他的观点被老师同意了" are grammatically acceptable, and the passive marker "被" is often used in contexts where the English equivalent

would not permit passivation. This form-function mismatch may lead learners to overgeneralize the rules of English PV based on native syntactic patterns, resulting in structural transfer errors.

4.2.6 Wrong Choice of Word

Specifically, a total of 10 wrong cases (2.6%) were identified in the EM group, while 27 wrong cases (6.9%) occurred in the NEM group.

(26) The problem has been worked out *through actions*.

(EM #11)

(26') The problem has been worked out by taking action.

(27) *Solutions* have been taken to solve this problem.

(EM #47)

(27') Measures have been taken to solve this problem.

(28) His viewpoint was accepted by the teacher.

(NEM #42)

(28') His viewpoint was praised by the teacher.

(29) *Difficulty have* been solved by *taken* this way.

(NEM #69)

(29') The problem has been solved by taking this way.

(29") Measures (ways) have been taken to solve this problem.

Errors involving the wrong choice of words in passive constructions were found in both groups. Among EM, the errors primarily involved inappropriate lexical collocations within otherwise grammatically acceptable structures. For instance, in (26), "worked out through actions" reveals a misuse of the preposition "through", which deviates from standard collocational patterns in English; a more natural alternative would be "by taking action." Similarly, in (27), the verb "taken" is inappropriately collocated with "solutions", which are not typically described as being "taken" in English. These errors suggest that while EM have generally understood the PV structure, their lexical choices are still influenced by literal translation or first-language interference, leading to semantically awkward expressions. In contrast, NEM not only demonstrated lexical mis-selection but also struggled with basic grammatical accuracy. In (28), the use of "accepted" to describe the teacher's response to a student's viewpoint indicates a failure to capture the intended nuance, as "praised" would better convey approval. The sentence (29) further illustrates a compounded error involving subject-verb disagreement ("difficulty have"), an incorrect participial form ("taken"), and an unnatural phrase ("by taken this way"). These examples reflect a more fundamental misunderstanding of both word usage and passive construction rules among NEM.

4.2.7 Non-sentence Error

Apart from errors in PV construction, NEM made more errors than EM in some other non-sentence error, with 10 erroneous cases (2.6%) and eight erroneous cases (2.1%), respectively. The errors primarily involve incomplete translation and incorrect PV usage.

4.2.7.1 Incomplete Translation

Surprisingly, EM made more errors than NEM in this section (EM:8, 2.1%; NEM: 5, 1.3%).

(30) This ___ has already been solved ___.

(EM #31)

(30') This problem has already been solved by taking measures.

(31) The problem has been *sloved* ___.

(EM #88)

(31') The problem has been solved by taking measures.

(32) ___ Having been *made* measures to ___ this problem.

(NEM #52)

(32') Measures have been taken to solve this problem.

(33) The problem *have been* ___ taken measures.

(NEM #87)

(33') The problem has been solved by taking measures.

The examples above showed incomplete translations. For example, in (30), this participant forgot to translate "问题", "采取措施", leading to an incomplete passive construction. Another error appears in (31); the issue is the misspelling of "solved" as "sloved" and the omission to translate "采取措施".In (32), the structure of the sentence is flawed. "Having been made measures" is not a correct English passive construction. Besides, the participant also forgot to translate "解决". Furthermore, this sentence uses the wrong lexical word choice. "Made measures" is not an idiomatic expression. In (33), the participant forgot to translate "解决" and the whole structure lacks "by".

Overall, the errors in this section reflect issues with both linguistic competence and translation awareness. Surprisingly, EM made more incomplete translation errors than NEM, which may suggest that EM, despite their relatively higher language proficiency, sometimes overlook the importance of fully conveying the source meaning. In contrast, NEM struggled more with structural and lexical accuracy, as seen in ungrammatical constructions like "having been made measures" and non-idiomatic phrases like "made measures". A common cause across both groups was the omission of key source elements, such as "问题" (problem) or "采取措施" (taking measures), which led to incomplete PV structures. Additionally, misuse of PV components and incorrect lexical choices reflect gaps in both grammatical knowledge and translation strategies. These findings highlight the need to emphasize linguistic accuracy and translation completeness in PV instruction for learners at different proficiency levels.

4.2.7.2 Translation Redundancy

In this respect, only five NEM (1.3%) made errors, while no such errors occurred among EM.

(34) My phone was stolen *by others.*

(NEM #19)

(34') My phone was stolen.

(35) The dress was *brought to me on ShenZhen.*

(NEM #108)

(35') The dress was bought in Shenzhen.

The difference in the rate of making errors reflects EM have stronger awareness of target language conventions and a better grasp of translation fidelity. In (34), the phrase "by others" adds extra information not present in the source text. Similarly, in (35), there are two issues. Firstly, "brought to me" implies a recipient that is not mentioned in the source text. Secondly, "on Shenzhen" is a misuse of preposition and misrepresents the location.

These examples indicate that NEM may rely too heavily on assumption or over-interpretation, leading to the addition of information beyond the source meaning. In contrast, EM demonstrate better understanding in maintaining fidelity to the original while ensuring grammaticality and idiomaticity in the target language. This advantage suggests that EM has developed more advanced translation strategies and a clearer understanding of equivalence between source and target languages.

6. Conclusion and Suggestions

This study investigated the use of PV among university students, with a particular focus on the differences between EM and NEM. Research questions will be answered in the following words.

The results reveal that both groups made high rates of errors in tense, participles, choice of words, by-transposition and the insertion, omission, or misuse of the auxiliary "be". However, significant differences appeared in both the frequency and types of errors. EM generally demonstrated better command of the PV. However, they made more errors than NEM in the wrong choice of patient-agent and incomplete translation aspects. In contrast, NEM showed a much higher overall error rate. They had a higher error rate in areas such as misuse of PV for active, wrong preposition, subject-verb disagreement, the insertion, omission, or misuse of the auxiliary "be", and misuse of active for passive. These findings suggest that EM have higher PV proficiency and more focused grammatical instruction, whereas NEM relatively lack structural knowledge of PV. The causes of PV errors are multifaceted, involving inter-lingual interference, overgeneralization, simplification, avoidance, erroneous hypotheses, and so on (Jung, 2006). Beyond this shared cause, the reasons probably differ between the two groups. For EM, errors mainly arise from semantic confusion and translation interference. For NEM, their errors may be caused by insufficient grammatical knowledge and limited practical use of English.

Based on the results, a shared pedagogical approach can be applied to both groups to address the common high-frequency errors identified in this study. Teachers can explain the basic structure of the PV clearly; especially its usage in various tenses, and help students master the correct form of past participles through example sentences. Meanwhile, students can also be guided to pay attention to common passive collocations and understand which collocations are natural in English. The practice methods can include sentence correction, rewriting exercises and C-E translation, enabling students to learn to use the PV correctly in specific contexts. Besides, Diyata (2022) also suggests that task-based learning supported by a procedural form allows students to independently explore and understand the process of transforming active sentences into passive ones. For specific errors of each group, different pedagogical approaches should be adopted. For EM, instruction should focus more on semantic accuracy and discourse-level use of the PV, particularly in areas such as patient-agent alignment and translation fidelity. These students would benefit from advanced tasks that promote nuanced understanding and contextual appropriateness of passive structures. In contrast, NEM require more foundational grammatical support. Teaching for NEM should emphasize the structural aspects of the PV, including proper auxiliary usage, verb agreement, and the distinction between active and passive constructions. Explicit instruction, targeted error correction, and more exposure to passive forms in context are recommended. Tailoring pedagogical strategies to each group's specific needs will help reduce errors and enhance overall proficiency.

Several limitations of the present study must be acknowledged. First, to minimize confusion, complex syntactic structures were intentionally avoided in task design, which may have restricted the depth of grammatical analysis. As Batubara and Mahardhika (2020) suggest the greatest difficulty was observed in forming the past continuous passive tense, followed by the future continuous, past future perfect, past perfect continuous, past perfect, and passive infinitive forms. Their research shows that different passive tenses cause different levels of difficulty for learners. Second, although multiple-choice questions are widely used to assess grammatical knowledge, they often fail to reflect the full complexity of students' understanding, as they allow only one fixed answer and do not account for alternative interpretations (Diaz et al., 2008). Third, the grammatical correction items did not cover all possible error categories, and the number of items per error type was not evenly distributed, potentially affecting the representativeness of the findings. Additionally, the translation task was limited by the lack of explicit prompts guiding the use of the PV, resulting in several grammatically correct active responses that were excluded from the final analysis due to their deviation from the intended task outcome. These factors may have influenced the scope and reliability of the results. Future research may consider incorporating more open-ended and context-sensitive tasks, as well as ensuring balanced error category representation, in order to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of learners' PV usage and inform more effective instructional strategies.

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Appendix A

Grammaticality Judgment Multiple-choice Task Questions

1. A message writing by Jim.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "A message is wrote by Jim."

C. 错误，应改为: "A message is writing by Jim."

D. 错误，应改为: "A message was written by Jim."

E. 错误，应改为: "A message writes Jim."

2. He is disappeared from the stage yesterday.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "He was disappeared from the stage yesterday."

C. 错误，应改为: "He disappeared from the stage yesterday."

D. 错误，应改为: "He has been disappeared from the stage yesterday."

E. 错误，应改为: "He has disappeared from the stage yesterday."

3. Industrial smoke is cause by air pollution.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "Industrial smoke is caused of air pollution."

C. 错误，应改为: "Air pollution is caused by industrial smoke."

D. 错误，应改为: "Industrial smoke is caused by air pollution."

E. 错误，应改为: "Air pollution causes industrial smoke"

4. The activity was postponed （推迟）to 2027.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "The activity postponed to 2027."

C. 错误，应改为: "The activity was postponing to 2027."

D. 错误，应改为: "The activity were postponed to 2027."

E. 错误，应改为: "The activity was postpone to 2027."

5. The window was break of David.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "The window was broken by David."

C. 错误，应改为: "The window breaks David."

D. 错误，应改为: "The window broke by David."

E. 错误，应改为: "The window was broken of David."

6. By water, the accident was polluted.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "Because of water, the accident was polluted."

C. 错误，应改为: "By the accident, water was polluted."

D. 错误，应改为: "By water, the accident pollutes."

E. 错误，应改为: "Because of the accident, water was polluted."

7. The cat is eaten an apple.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "An apple is eaten by the cat."

C. 错误，应改为: "The cat eaten an apple."

D. 错误，应改为: "An apple is ate by the cat."

E. 错误，应改为: "The cat is eaten by an apple."

8. The nature have begun to destroy.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "The nature has been begun to destroy."

C. 错误，应改为: "The nature was begun to be destroyed."

D. 错误，应改为: "The nature has begun to be destroied."

E. 错误，应改为: "The nature has begun to be destroyed."

9. A new library was built in our school last year.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "A new library is built in our school last year."

C. 错误，应改为: "A new library builds in our school last year. "

D. 错误，应改为: "A new library built in our school last year."

E. 错误，应改为: "Our school was built a new library last year."

10. She was arrived at the cafeteria （自助餐厅）yesterday.

您认为这句话正确吗？

A. 正确

B. 错误，应改为: "She was arrived by the cafeteria yesterday."

C. 错误，应改为: "She has been arrived at the cafeteria yesterday."

D. 错误，应改为: "She arrived at the cafeteria yesterday."

E. 错误，应改为: "She is arrived at the cafeteria yesterday."

Appendix B

Source Text for the C-E Translation Task

(1) 我的手机被偷了。

(2) 他的观点得到了老师的表扬。

(3) 这件裙子是在深圳买的。

(4) 他们写完了这个报告。

(5) 已经采取措施解决这个问题了。