

# *Passive-voice Teaching for Senior High School Students Based on the Three Dimensions*

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**Abstract:** Passive voice is the important content that senior high school students have to review when they enter high schools. Teaching grammar should be oriented towards language application and integrate the three dimensions—— form, meaning and use. Based on three dimensions, passive-voice teaching just focuses on the differences between active voice and passive voice in the real usage and the ideographic functions.

## 1. Introduction

“General Senior High School Curriculum Standards” (abbreviated as “Curriculum Standards” in the following) has pointed out grammar learning is the expansion and continuation of that in compulsory school. [1] It evinces the necessity of continuing efforts of grammar learning, but experts in the field of foreign languages have been discussing heatedly on how to teach grammar. Teaching grammar centers on remembering grammatical knowledge—— mainly a set of rules or the ability of applying rules in different contexts... Therefore, great changes have taken place in grammar teaching methods: from early translation method, the direct method, listening and speaking method, cognitive method——focusing on separated or isolated language form, to communicative method—— transforming to semantic understanding. However, Larsen-Freeman stated that grammar is dynamic and language is surely dynamic. At the meanwhile, Freeman used grammaring instead of grammar. Grammar includes both implicit and explicit grammars, universal and language-specific grammars, the way that language ought to be used and the way it actually is use, theoretically exclusive grammars and more eclectic ones, etc. Grammaring refers to the ability to use grammar structures accurately, meaning fully, and appropriately as the proper goal of grammar instruction. “Ing” to grammar means to suggest a dynamic process of grammar using. Student must practice meaningful use of grammar in a way that takes into account transfer-appropriate processing. [2] In view of this, more emphasis is placed on the transferability of grammar in different contexts, not a set of orders.

## 2. The Three Dimensional Grammar Theory

“Curriculum Standards” has suggested English teachers should care much about the pedagogical grammar of English in their grammar teaching activities. It is the three-dimensional dynamic grammar, which integrates form, meaning, and use, and teachers have orientation toward language use. Larsen-Freeman displayed that the three dimensions are interrelated with each other—that is, a change in one will involve changes in another. The relationship between interrelated ones depicted as the following pie chart.

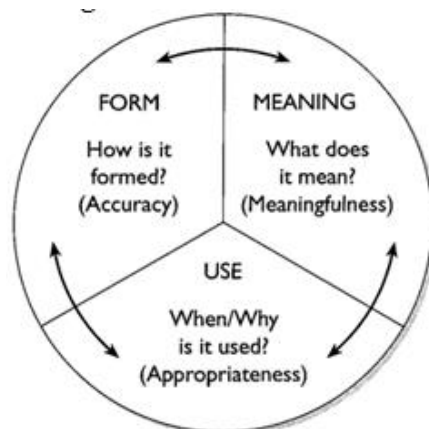


Figure 1 Form, Meaning and Use [3]

According to Figure1, it can be gotten that form cares much on how a grammatical construction is formed— word form(morphology) and word order(syntax); meaning cares much on what a grammatical construction means(semantics) and use cares much on the relationship between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language. [4] Based on this pie chart, a new pie chart on passive voice has been described in Figure 2.

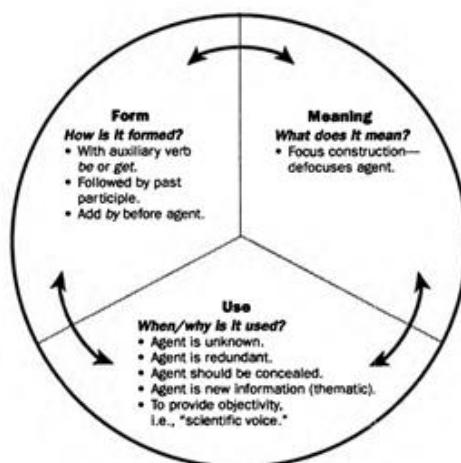


Figure 2 Form, Meaning, and Use of the English Passive Voice [5]

The interrelated relationship of form, meaning and use on passive voice is presented in Figure 2. The form of passive voice mainly has three types: be + V-ed, get + V-ed and have something done. The meaning of passive voice focuses on the construction defocuses on the agent of action. To some

degree, the construction is about end weight. The use of passive voice focuses on whether the agent is unknown, or redundant... Besides these, it shifts from focus from the agent of action to the receiver.

### 3. Passive voice teaching

Voice teaching is helpful for students for learn about grammar. What voice we encounter mostly in English learning is active voice which focuses the actor, the doer, or the agent of the action, while passive voice defocuses the agent or the agent is unknown. Whatever the sentence is about active voice or passive voice, the predicate part just talks about the subject and bears new information. What the readers get is till the moment of finishing reading the whole sentence.

#### 3.1. The main method of passive voice teaching

English teachers usually focus more on the form of language and they are apt to applying PPP (present, practice, produce) method in the process of teaching grammar. “Present” means different grammatical points are provided, such as grammatical knowledge, rules, etc. In order to understand passive voice, different forms are presented to the students and the transformation between active voice and passive voice. “Practice” means doing drills including spoken and written tasks. “Produce” means that students can make up sentences in passive voice. What’s more, students are required to transform between active voice and passive voice, but they only emphasize the transformational constructions, neglecting the ideographic function of passive voice. All of these refer to explicit grammar teaching. Otherwise, Krashen [6] [7] claimed that explicit grammar instruction has very little impact on the natural acquisition process because studying grammar rules can never lead to their unconscious deployment in fluent communication. Based on this, the beneficent way for student to acquire grammar rules is to get exposure to comprehensible input in the target language in an affectively non-threatening situation, where the input is finely tuned to students’ level of proficiency. Therefore, grammar teaching in our country is worthy of attention, compared with that in native countries.

#### 3.2. The use of passive voice

English teachers mainly display the form of passive voice——explicit knowledge about passive voice, especially the construction of “the be-passive”, “the get passive” and “pseudo-passives with have”. At the meantime, the teachers tell the students the situations where passive voice can be used. For example, when we do not know the who did the thing, we can use passive voice. E.g. He is hurt at the street. Sometimes when we want to emphasize the thing itself, not who does the thing. E.g. The criminal has been executed. Or the subject is too long. E.g. The picture was painted by a very good friend of mine whom I’d like you to meet sometime. Because the noun phrase representing the agent is too long, placing it at the end of the sentence prevents the sentence from being top-heavy [8]. Sometimes we have to use passive voice

It seems that many English teachers pay more attention to the form of passive voice. They tell students in what conditions is passive voice used. Meanwhile, they focus on how the passive voice is converted from active voice, but they do not care differences between the transformation of the two voices. The prerequisite of the transformation between active voice and passive voice is that the sentences in different voices have the same meaning, while the truth is the difference does exist between two sentences with different voices. For example, each of my family members bought two books and two books were bought by each of my family members. If teachers write down the two sentences on the blackboard, what the students get is that the latter sentence just derive from the

former one and the two sentences can be interchangeable, but meanings of the two sentences are different, especially different meanings about “two books” are in the two sentences. Two books in the former sentence refer more to two different books, while that in later one tends to two identical books. However, such differences are not told to the students.

#### 4. Implication in grammar teaching

English teachers should not go too far in explaining the transition between active and passive voice. They should pay more the practical use and ideographic function of the passive voice. In most cases, take students’ experiences into consideration. For example, which is the better way in the following situation, with the active voice (1) or passive voice (2)?

*Holiday is coming. You take the high-speed rail to the station. Your father just tells you that he will pick you up at the station. Which of the following do you want to hear?*

*(1) I will phone you and pick you up at the railway station.*

*(2) You will be phoned and picked up at the railway station by me.*

For most of people, it is believed that they want to get the first answer because the subject——“I” is the speaker, the known agent. They can be used to answer the two questions separately—— what will you do? What will other people do for you? As the information receiver, when he gets the first piece of information, he feels safe because his dad will pick him up sooner or later. When he gets the second piece of information, he just has the feeling that mostly nobody would pick him up. Perhaps some people think it is common that the agent is preceded with by in a passive voice, but it is estimated that only about 15 percent of all passive sentences include the agent [9]. What can be got is It is futile to emphasize the structure alone. What we should do is to pay more attention to the application of passive voice in reality.

In order to make students experience the differences about active voice and passive voice, it is better to find the information on the same thing in different voices. At the meanwhile, they should be told that the passive voice is not a placement for the active voice; it has its own special usage. What we should do is make a better choice between active and passive voice, not the transformation between them. English teachers should guide students to recognize the differences of the two different voices from the angles of purpose, contents, background, etc.

Take the following passages [10] as an example to analyze and appreciate the differences of active and passive voice.

##### ***The Great White Shark***

*Perhaps no creature on land or sea inspires so much terror as the Great White Shark. Great Whites are surface hunters, swift and powerful swimmers which will attack and try to eat anything. They only attack man occasionally, but the attacks are sudden, deadly and dramatic.*

*One bit a man in two, another six-meter specimen died after trying to swallow a man whole. In 1916 a Great White killed four bathers off a New Jersey beach. Sharks circle their prey, appearing from nowhere, and frequently approaching from below. A Great White has been known to part a wire rope with a breaking strength of 2,000 kilograms.*

##### ***Shark kills two off Barrier Reef***

*The skipper of a prawn trawler, wrecked off the North Queensland coast, is recovering in hospital after a 36-hour ordeal during which his two-member crew, one a woman, were taken by a shark as the three clung to wreckage.*

*Mr. Ray Boundy, aged 33, said that after the shark attacked Dennis Murphy, aged 24, taking off his leg, Mr. Murphy swam clear to draw the shark away. He was not seen again. Also killed was Linda Horton, aged 21.*

The above passages are about shark to display information, but they are in different voices: the

former one in active voice because it mainly displays the habits of the white shark. It also refers to the attacking of a man from the shark, but it is not cruel when the passage uses the shark as subject—as the topic of the attack. The later one is about a piece of news on Shark. As a matter of fact, news is apt to the results that the things have brought about. Therefore, it also focuses on the people who are hit by the shark. Naturally, it takes people as subject, so it applies to passive voice. If it is in active voice, that means the focus of the news is about the shark, not people, which will cause to readers' aversity to the news-reporters. What's more, teachers are oriented with the use and transfer ability of grammar in life—to teach students on how to choose active voice or passive voice and pay attention to the ideology of voices.

## 5. Conclusion

Some people believe that the first and most important step in gaining over the language is gaining control over its grammar. It can be understood that grammar is helpful for a person to grasp a language. Grammar-learning benefits a person's language-grasping, but in our foreign language teaching, English teachers usually present explicit grammatical rules to the students, which is not so much good for the efficiency of English learners. Teachers should keep the syllabus in mind, as a guideline of their teaching. Especially in grammar teaching, they have the orientation of language use. Transformation between active voice and passive voice should cease and they focus more the differences of different voices and the ideological function of passive voice in real life. Examples are related with students' life experience, which makes passive voice learning not so boring.

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