

Teaching the Passive Voice: Strategies for immediate production by Joshua Cohen

Most Japanese students of English have no trouble picking up and using the passive voice in controlled or isolated instances. This is especially true of false-beginners who have been studying English for a number of years. In high school and later in college, students demonstrate that they can put (or translate,) sentences into and out of the passive voice and the teacher notes they can distinguish the difference clearly. Case closed, next subject.

This kind of teaching is an excellent way to assess whether students have a handle on material – and a necessary part of pedagogy – but hardly a way to get them talking; using material communicatively. The problem with sentence-based grammar tasks is that they only work in two dimensions and do not give learners a clear picture of how things work from different angles. This article will focus on how to present the passive voice to students studying English as a second or foreign language, specifically, false beginners, using communicative strategies.

Grammar and vocabulary pundits (as well as the Japanese Ministry of Education) often couch second-language learning in mathematical terms. A solid base of grammar followed by vocabulary and more grammar produces a language. Following the rules leads to the acquisition of language, or so they say.

In his columns on practical linguistics, Daily Yomiuri columnist Dr. Marshall Childs argues that true language acquisition is the exploration and use of forms laterally and in all dimensions. He calls this phenomenon “getting a feeling for the language.” It involves students getting their hands (or minds,) around structures or forms and using them actively. By employing as many language skills as they can simultaneously, students can “feel” out the language in ways that mirror native-speakers’ word choice and usage patterns.

The following activities are directed at false beginners to help them become more confident using the passive voice in natural, everyday situations. The hope is that by blending traditional, structural and generative tasks together, students may ‘get a feeling’ for when and how the passive voice works.

[*note] Because Japanese is said to have an adversative passive system in which the subject is adversely affected by the action portrayed in the verb, it may be wise for English teachers to first point out to students that the use of passive voice in English does not carry the same implications as it does in Japanese. The following warm up activity may be a good segue for all levels.

Warm up: a gentle introduction (10-15 minutes)

Hold up a few things, such as a marker, pen, wallet, etc, and elicit the names and the materials they are made from.

[*note] As this is meant to be a warm of sorts. Teachers shouldn't concern themselves or the class with the grammatical element of the procedure. Instead, teachers should attempt to keep the questions (and students' answers) loose. Teachers may, however, try to encourage natural responses using the passive voice:

S: It's metal.

T: What's it made of?

S: It's made of metal.

Pair students and ask them to list as many things produced or made in Japan as they can. (Cars, computers, cell phones, etc.,) A time limit of 1-2 minutes is probably good idea. This will foster student collaboration and encourage more communication between them.

Have students share their lists with the class (you could introduce a point system of sorts for original ideas as time or interest allows.)

Finally re-pair students and have them pool the contents of some of their own possessions. Get them to describe what materials these possessions are made from.

Teachers may wish to take this opportunity to point out to students that the above statements can be followed by a by phrase with the agent or doer of the action.

Ex: My computer was made in Japan (by Toshiba.) The keys are made of plastic and...

Talking: more basics (15-25 minutes)

The previous warm-up should be a good segue into this exercise. As students have just spent the last 10 minutes describing objects, the following activity may be a good way to reinforce the passive construction.

Ask students to think of the best invention ever... compare opinions. Again, the teacher may wish to use the white board to keep track of ideas and give students suggestions for the next step.

Next ask students to think of a clever (yet simple!) invention and describe it for the class without saying what it is. For example: Chopsticks. They are made of wood. They can be used for eating. Rice and other foods are often eaten with them. Beautiful designs are engraved on some of them. Teachers may wish to highlight particular passive structures and point out to the class the passive voice has uses beyond simply changing the focus of attention.

Reading/writing/talking; simple passives Describing a crime (15-20 minutes)

Teachers may want to pre-teach some of the vocabulary (ATM, yank, arrest)

Pair students and have them write questions for the missing information

In pairs have students ask and answer questions

Be sure students are using full sentences to ask and answer questions using as much of the text as they can.

Student A

In 2004 in Japan, (1) _____ was stolen from an ATM in downtown Tokyo. The crime was known as The Great ATM Heist. The bolts of the ATM were (2) _____ with blowtorches and the machine was yanked from the wall. It was then dragged (3) _____ along Chuo Street. 120 bags of banknotes were taken to a karaoke box (4) _____ was divided between the robbers. But very soon, most of the criminals were arrested and they were sent (5) _____.

Student B

In 2004 in Japan, 25 million Yen was stolen from an ATM in downtown Tokyo. The crime was known as (1) _____. The bolts of the ATM were cut with blowtorches and the (2) _____ was yanked from the wall. It was then dragged one kilometer along Chuo Street. (3) _____ bags of banknotes were taken to a karaoke box and the money was divided between the robbers. But very soon, (4) _____ were arrested and they were sent to prison.

While the class is engaged in the task, the teacher may wish to circulate through the room pointing out to students the natural usages of the passive voice.

For further oral practice, students can read the passage aloud with their partner.

For more advanced students, have them act as reporters covering a recent issue. Describe the scene for them, or have them imagine one of their own. Ask them to write a newspaper-style account of the incident. For example:

Early yesterday morning a Peruvian man was taken into custody by police in Hiroshima Prefecture. The man is being charged with the killing and abandonment of a 7-year-old girl. In the days leading up to

the arrest all of the neighbors in the area were questioned by police for possible leads. Teams of dogs were called in...

Extension (all levels)

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999), suggest another approach to foster generating the passive. Show students two photographs of the same place – one taken many years ago and one taken recently. Ask the students to say what changes have occurred. Then ask them to speculate and predict what changes they think will occur in the future.

S: A new highway was built. Sidewalks and roads were put in.

S: New houses will be built. A convenient store...

Conclusion

In addition to the activities outlined above, there are numerous other ways to get students talking. Listening and repeating (pattern practice,) jig-saw tasks and reporting and interviewing are just the beginning. Teachers should feel free to borrow the parts of exercises they like or deem effective, while passing over those they feel won't work for them or for their classes. The essence of teaching (any language,) is the engagement by students in the target language. By approaching it from as many different angles as possible, teachers can saturate students while making it fun to speak at the same time.

References:

Childs, Marshall (2005, February 11). The Practical Linguist. The Daily Yomiuri

Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) The Grammar Book: An ESL/EFL Teacher's Course, 2nd Edition. Boston, Heinle and Heinle Publishers.