

Holding the passive accountable: A didactic sequence proposal that integrates ELT and CSE

Emilce Andrea Torres
Universidad Nacional de Río Negro (UNRN)
emilcea.torres@unrn.edu.ar

(first received: March 27, 2023; accepted: May 6, 2023)

Abstract

The following didactic sequence aims at raising awareness of gender-based violence in the context of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (November 25th). This issue provides the setting for activities to develop students' reading comprehension skills, and to analyse the uses of the passive voice. Consequently, we can reflect on the significance of the linguistic forms we choose, and the effect they have on the way we construct social realities. Deconstructing texts give teachers and students the opportunity to challenge discourse practices and to engage in critical thinking.

Keywords: ELT- didactic sequence- CSE- reading comprehension- passive voice.

Resumen

El objetivo de la siguiente secuencia didáctica es crear conciencia sobre la violencia de género en el contexto del Día Internacional para la Eliminación de la Violencia contra la Mujer (25 de noviembre). Este tema proporciona el marco para realizar actividades que desarrollen la lectura comprensiva, y para analizar los usos de la voz pasiva. De esta manera, podemos reflexionar sobre la importancia de las formas lingüísticas que seleccionamos y su efecto en la construcción de realidades sociales. Al deconstruir textos, docentes y estudiantes tenemos la oportunidad de revisar/desafiar prácticas discursivas y de desarrollar el pensamiento crítico.

Palabras claves: Enseñanza del idioma inglés- secuencia didáctica – ESI- comprensión lectora – voz pasiva.

Introduction

According to law 26150 (*Ley de Educación Sexual Integral*, 2006), learners have the right to receive Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE), which includes a variety of topics. The following didactic sequence has been designed to raise awareness of gender-based violence in the context of the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women (November 25th). As the United Nations¹ posit, “International days are occasions to educate the general public on issues of concern, to mobilize political will and resources to address global problems”. Gender-based violence, which affects women and LGBTI+ people, is any type of behaviour that harms a person for reasons of gender, for example, an action, an insult, an attitude, silence, or lack of help (*Ministerio de Justicia y DD. HH. Argentina*, 2022). In Argentina, CSE is part of the national curriculum and is taught in all educational levels. The program covers a wide spectrum of issues, such as sexual and reproductive rights, consent, gender equality, sexual orientation, and prevention of violence and abuse. The goal of CSE is to empower young people to make informed decisions about their sexual health and to promote healthy relationships based on respect and responsibility.

Gender-based violence is a pervasive problem that is rooted in deeply held attitudes and beliefs about gender roles and power dynamics. These attitudes and beliefs are often reflected in the language that people use to talk about gender, relationships, and violence. According to

¹ <https://www.un.org/en/observances>

Foucault (1970, 1972), it is difficult for people to think outside discursive formations, that is, discursive practices used in certain typical patterns. In relation to discourse, Ehrlich (2001, p. 2) suggests that “analyses of discourse that are grounded in instances of socially-situated interactions can deepen our understanding of the structuring effects of language”. Moreover, this author claims that discursive practices embedded in particular institutional settings have an effect on the way events and participants are imbued with meaning. As Kumaravadivelu (1999) affirms, language education should also promote critical engagement and reflexivity in the classroom, and this can be achieved by questioning the ways in which power permeates discursive practices. Having the topic of gender-based violence in mind, I have designed a didactic sequence that aims at shedding light on issues of concern, and help students reflect on the ways language practices can be challenged.

The sequence has been planned for the sixth year of a state-run technical secondary school in the province of Río Negro. The curricular design of technical schools includes the subject Technical English for reading comprehension. The average language level of the class is intermediate. The group has a 90-minutes class period once a week. The activities aim at raising awareness of gender-based violence by reflecting on the effect our linguistic choices have on the way we construct social realities, as is the case of the use of the passive voice for avoidance of accountability.

Definitions of passives

Studies on the passive voice have been done extensively, and different authors have defined it in structural or functional terms. Keenan and Dryer (2006) describe passives as a type of foregrounding and backgrounding constructions. That is, the subject of the passive construction is the object of the corresponding active (the object is promoted), and the subject of the active counterpart is demoted to form an adjunct, or it is left unexpressed.

Haspelmath (1990) claims that passive clauses express the inactivization of the predicate, and that the functions of subject backgrounding and object foregrounding follow from inactivization. That is, as the situation expressed by the verb is inactive², the subject is backgrounded, and the object can be promoted to become the subject of the passive clause, rendering the predicate semantically unaccusative.

Goldberg (2002, p. 343) mentions that according to the correspondence principle “profiled³ participant roles of the verb must be encoded by profiled arguments roles of the construction”. However, in the case of verbs with three profiled roles, “one can be represented by an unprofiled argument role (and realized as an oblique argument)”. As regards passives, this author (2002) affirms that they are a type of construction that overrides the correspondence principle⁴. Consequently, a typically profiled role can be expressed in an oblique. *–by phrase*.

For Jaeggli (1986, p. 587), it is crucial to pay attention to the interaction of syntactic processes and morphological processes. He claims that “passive constructions are simply the result of the interaction of certain morphological and syntactic operations. Only these operations have any theoretical validity”. In relation to Jaeggli’s assertion, Carranza (2020) provides a comprehensive definition of passives:

Una construcción C es pasiva si

² Thus, the subject is non-agentive.

³ Following Langacker (1987a, 1991), Goldberg refers to lexical profiling as a notion that indicates “which participant roles associated with a verb’s meaning are obligatorily accessed, functioning as focal points within the scene, achieving a special degree of prominence.” (2002, p.342). Goldberg also explains that certain types of argument roles –for example, animate roles- are generally more salient and central to the scene being expressed. Therefore, they are more likely to be profiled and obligatorily expressed.

⁴ According to the correspondence principle, “the semantically salient profiled participant roles are encoded by grammatical relations that provide them a sufficient degree of discourse prominence: i.e., by profiled argument roles.” (Goldberg 2005, p.9) However, if a verb has three profiled roles, one can be represented by an unprofiled argument role, and realized as an oblique argument. The Correspondence Principle is a default principle, so it can be overridden by specifications of particular constructions (for instance, topicalization, cleft constructions).

- (i) C es de algún modo una construcción restringida en relación con otra construcción Cact irrestricta con la que establece una relación de paráfrasis o de subsunción. Llamaremos a Cact, la activa.
- (ii) el argumento externo involucrado en Cact tiene su contraparte con un oblicuo o con nada en C.
- (iii) C implica cuantificación existencial del argumento externo introducida por un elemento no (pro)nominal.(Carranza 2020, p. 99)

Firstly, condition (i) implies that passives can be defined in relation to active constructions, being actives a more productive, frequent, and non-functionally specialized way of expressing clauses like those expressed by C. Condition (ii) illustrates the difference between long and short passives. The third condition (iii) excludes existential quantification of the external argument by a (pro)nominal element, for example, *se* passives, impersonal *se*, and middle constructions.

Agentless passives

As Danet (1980) argues, “One cannot separate what happened from the language that is used to describe or explain what happened. When the meaning of an act is ambiguous, the words we choose to talk about it become critical” (p. 189). This is instantiated in the active-passive alternation, which implies argument reversal, consisting of both the fronting and postponement of a constituent. The choice between using the actives or passives may be favoured, or constrained by different factors. In the case of long passives (passives with a -by phrase), the subject of the passive must not represent newer information than that in the NP of the -by phrase, for example (Ward, Birner & Huddleston, 2002 p. 1444):

George Hendricks will take office next month. [#The current mayor, Angela Cooke, will be succeeded by him.]

The internalised NP represents older information than that in the subject.

In the case of short passives, there is no internalised NP, so there is no requirement related to discourse familiarity (Ward, Birner & Huddleston, 2002, p.1445):

- (i) I was going to show you my new car [but yesterday it was stolen]. [old]
- (ii) Did you hear the news? [A shop-keeper downtown was shot last night]. [new]

A variety of reasons can explain the speaker’s choice to omit the subject of the active clause, for instance: when the doer of an action is ignored, when the agent can be any of us, when scientists report research results to seek objectivity, or when the agent is not mentioned purposefully to avoid responsibility

As stated above, passive voice can be used to hide the agency of those who are responsible for negative acts (1), and it can be used similarly in the context of gender-based violence (2) (Henley et al. 1995). Consider the following examples:

- (1) "A series of very bad mistakes *were made*, and a tragic accident occurred." (Who made very bad mistakes?) Bill Clinton after the U.S. mistakenly bombed China's Embassy in Belgrade in 1999.
- (2) “Advantage *was taken* of a situation that presented itself.” (Who took advantage? What was the situation?) A judge made this statement in a case where a stranger had sexually assaulted a ten-year-old girl in her home. (Coates et al. 1994)

Given these uses of the passive, a thought-provoking question to pose is how grammar affects our perception of the agent’s responsibility. Henley et al. (1995) found out that the diminished linguistic agency associated with agents in the passive voice seems to have an influence in the way subjects

understand their responsibility, thus, the significance of the linguistic forms we choose, and the effect they have on the way we construct social realities. Deconstructing texts gives teachers and students the opportunity to challenge discourse practices and engage in critical thinking.

Didactic Sequence

As mentioned before, the objectives of this didactic sequence are to raise awareness of gender-based violence, and to promote reflection on discourse practices. Besides, it aims at helping students develop their reading comprehension skills. Throughout the development of the activities, we will revise some of the uses of the passive voice. The materials needed to carry out the sequence are headlines retrieved from the web, poster paper, markers, a power point presentation, and a projector, if available.

Step 1: the pre-reading stage

The objectives of this stage are to encourage students (Ss) to predict and infer ideas and vocabulary that may appear in the text, to arouse Ss' interest in the topic, and to help Ss learn new vocabulary related to the topic.

Activity 1: Activating students' background knowledge and making predictions using non-textual information. The teacher (T) shows some pictures in order to elicit vocabulary related to the topic. The T writes down the words on the board (brainstorming of ideas). For example, isolation, silence, abuse, mistreatment, bullying, harassment, freedom, human rights, gender, non-binary, violence, speak, helplessness, cruelty, power, respect, stigmatization, devalue, transgender, LGTBQI+, voice, hitting, intimidation, control, threats.



Activity 2: Working with the title of the text. The T reveals the title of the text: “The Case of the Missing Perpetrator”. In this article, the author poses that discussions about sexual assault and harassment often focus on women's behaviour, such as what they wear or how much they drink, rather than the actions of the men who perpetrate these crimes. She argues that the language used to describe violence against women can shape our understanding of the issue, and our response to it. The T asks Ss to tell her what the meaning of the title is and what they think the text is about.

Activity 3: Working on vocabulary items. In order to help Ss understand the text, some words were extracted from it. Ss have to match those words with their Spanish equivalent. The suggested

equivalents are included between brackets. The T asks Ss to work in groups. Each group will work on a specific set of words.

1. matters	(importa)	9. at fault	(en falta)
2. struggle	(lucha),	10. willful	(intencional, deliberado)
3. blaming	(culpar)	11. to be abstracted	(ser abstraído)
4. epithet	(epíteto, calificativo)	12. accountable	(responsable)
5. rape	(violación)	13. assault	(ataque, agresión)
6. wear	(vestir, usar)	14. pregnancy	(embarazo)
7. rest	(el resto, lo demás)	15. garments	(vestimenta, prendas)
8. regard	(considerar)	16. spaghetti straps	(top con breteles, tops)

The T checks the activity by saying the words in English and asking Ss to call out their answers. The T writes them on the board. The T asks Ss to establish possible connections between the words they have worked with and the title of the article. As the aim of this task is to help Ss infer ideas that may appear in the text, they may use their L1 to explain their answers.

Step 2: While-reading stage

The aims of these activities are to confirm or reject Ss' predictions about the content of the text, to enable Ss to get a relatively good understanding of the text, to help Ss construct meaning when reading by inferring and resorting to the teacher, and/or peers.

Activity 1: Skimming. The T asks the Ss to read the first part of the text (see Appendix). After reading for the first time, we try to answer this question: What is the text about? The T asks Ss for their answers. Ss mention the words/ideas that guided their answers.

Activity 2: Scanning and concentrating on particular paragraphs using text-attack skills, such as identifying the main information in the text, distinguishing it from supporting details and using context clues and prior knowledge to make inferences and draw conclusions about the meaning of the text. The Ss have to read two statements⁵ and decide if they are true or false. The T asks Ss to justify their choices.

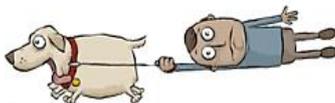
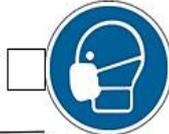
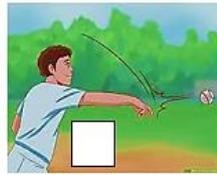
- a. La autora establece una relación entre los actos de violencia contra las mujeres y el lenguaje empleado para describir esos hechos. ()
- b. Según el texto, en ciertas narraciones sobre agresiones sexuales, los agresores son excusados al considerar sus conductas como inevitables. ()

Activity 3: Discussion. What problem(s) is the author exposing in the text? Ss will discuss and write their answers in groups of four and then share them with the rest of the class.

Activity 4: Focusing on the target structure. First, we will revise the structure of the passive voice in English. Ss have to match each picture with one of the following sentences considering whether they are in the ACTIVE or PASSIVE voice and accounting for their answers.

⁵ As the subject Technical English is oriented towards reading comprehension, the statements are in Spanish, so that students can discuss their meaning in their L1.

- a- A mess was made in the kitchen. ()
- b- The man is pulled by the dog. ()
- c- Photographs of the suspect have been taken. ()
- d- A ball was thrown at the window. ()
- e- The man pulls the dog. ()
- f- My brother made a mess in the kitchen. ()
- g- I threw a ball at the window. ()
- h- Masks must be worn. ()
- i- The jury was instructed by the lawyer. ()
- j- Bikes will be removed, ()



Then Ss will read this explanation of the passive voice⁶:

In the passive, the person or thing that the action was done to becomes the topic or theme. We can leave out the 'doer' or agent, or we can place the 'doer' in a prepositional phrase (*by* + 'doer'):

These houses were designed in the 1880s. (passive without agent)

These houses were designed in the 1880s by Edward Barnes. (passive + *by* + agent)

After that, Ss are to consider the following examples and answer if the *-by phrase* always represents an agent/doer.

- a- Alice was seen *by her neighbour*.
- b- The embassy was approached *by a tank platoon*.
- c- The award was received *by the actor's daughter*.
- d- The lake is surrounded *by mountains*.

Ss will move on to reading a list of different uses of passive voice and recognizing them in sentences a-h:

- We sometimes use the passive to avoid stating the obvious.
- We also use the passive when we don't know who did something, or when it isn't important.
- We use passives to place new information in the sentence final position.
- We use passives to avoid mentioning the subject.
- We use the passive in more formal or scientific writing.
- We use it when we refer to people in general.

- (a) A large billboard *was placed* last night.
- (b) The actor *is known* to be involved in substance abuse.
- (c) Tickets *can be bought* at the stadium.

⁶ Taken from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/grammar/british-grammar/passive-voice>

- (d) The photographer's camera *was smashed*.
- (e) In this experiment, 35 people *were tested* on how well they were able to drive.
- (f) I'm at the hotel lobby. My room is *being cleaned*.
- (g) Major miscalculations *were made* regarding the flooding risk the project poses to nearby properties.
- (h) Avatar: The Way of Water has crossed \$2 billion at the worldwide box office, which breaks huge records for the movie. The film *was directed* by James Cameron.

Activity 5: Students read the following texts extracted from news retrieved from the web. Ss have to discuss in groups if there is information given about who is/are the agent(s) in each item. Are the agents visible in the same way? Brief group presentation of the findings.

- A) "The sweater *was removed*."
- B) "A lesbian couple *was viciously beaten* in homophobic attack on London bus."
- C) "She *was admitted* [to hospital] after *being hit* in the eye, suffering from trauma and an orbital fracture."
- D) "Kyrgyzstan's entry to the Miss Universe beauty pageant contest *has been compelled*, amid a welter of public criticism, to issue an apology after using the event as an opportunity to highlight the problem of violence against women in her home country."
- E) "A 20-year-old trans man *was attacked* over July 4 weekend for using the women's restroom at a campground — after *being instructed* to use the women's restroom. He *was charged* with disorderly conduct and obstructing official business; his attackers *have not been charged* with anything at this time."
- F) "The victim *was shocked* by a group of people stealing the hat of one of her friends, and in an attempt to bring the hat back, the victim *was subjected* to a series of both verbal and physical attacks by several people (...) who stripped her of her clothes and wig."

Activity 6: Question for class discussion. What kinds of violence is/are illustrated in each of the items in activity 4 (verbal, physical, psychological, sexual, socio-economic)?

Activity 7: Making the perpetrators visible. Ss compare the following examples from Keenan and Dryer (2006, p. 325):

- a. Mary slapped John.
- b. John was slapped by Mary.
- c. John was slapped.

The T asks Ss to rewrite the statements in a way that it becomes clear who is/are responsible(s) for the actions mentioned. For example, "Those words (insults) were said." → "I said those words". We share the different versions of the statements written by the students.

Step 3: Post-reading stage

The aims of this stage are to enable Ss to connect the text to their own experiences and knowledge, and to help Ss gain a richer understanding of the text and the topic.

Activity 1: The teacher provides the students with the second part of the text "The case of the missing perpetrator" by Rebeca Solnit (see Appendix). Ss have to read it and answer the following questions. Ss may answer in their L1.

- a. According to the author, what's the main purpose of language?
- b. In terms of language, how can specific information be hidden or blurred?
- c. Does the author give an example of this? If so, mention it.

Activity 2: Ss work in groups of four. They have to design posters to raise awareness of the effect language has in the way gender-based violence is depicted. As technical schools in Río Negro include the subject Technical English for reading comprehension, the final product may be designed in the Ss' L1. This activity can be carried out with other subjects, such as ICT or Language and Communication. Each group will give a brief presentation to other 6th year classes in the context of a cross-curricular CSE project.

Conclusion

To conclude, this didactic sequence is an attempt to integrate ELT and CSE, by means of activities that focus on the passive voice and its uses, embedded in the context of reflection on gender-based violence. The sequence includes a revision of the passive voice, firstly by presenting sample sentences so that students can hypothesize about them, and then by delving into Rebeca Solnit's text (2016), which problematizes the use of agentless passives in discourse practices that represent gender-based abuse. As Dalnet (1980) and Solnit (2016) claim, language matters, and we cannot separate what happened from the language chosen to describe or explain what happened. Therefore, we should consider the ELT classroom as an opportunity to promote reflection and social change.

References

- Carranza, F. (2020). *El problema de las alternancias argumentales en la teoría lingüística: el caso de la diátesis pasiva*. Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UBA.
- Coates, L.; Beavin Bavelas, J.; & Gibson, J. (1994). Anomalous language in sexual assault trial judgements. *Discourse and Society*, 5(2), 189–206.
- Congreso de la Nación Argentina (2006). Ley 26150.
- Danet, B. (1980). *Language in the Legal Process*. Law & Society Review.
- Ehrlich, S. (2001). *Representing Rape: language and sexual consent*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1972). Discourse formations. In *Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language* (pp. 31–39). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1970). *The order of things: An archaeology of the human sciences*. Pantheon Books.
- Goldberg, A. (2005). Constructions, Lexical Semantics and the Correspondence Principle: Accounting for Generalizations and Subregularities in the Realization of Arguments. In *The Aspect of Syntax*. OUP.
- Goldberg, A. (2002). Surface Generalizations: an alternative to alternations. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 13(4), 327–356.
- Haspelmath, M. (1990). The Grammaticalization of Passive Morphology. *Studies in Language*, 14(1), 25–72.
- Henley, N.; Miller, M.; & Beazley, J. A. (1995). Syntax, Semantics, and Sexual Violence. Agency and the Passive Voice. *Journal of Language and Social psychology*, 14(1-2), 60–84.
- Jaeggli, O. (1986). Passive. *Linguistic Inquiry*, 17(4), 587–622.
- Keenan, E. & Dryer, M. (2006). Passive in the world's languages. In *Language Typology and Syntactic Description*. Cambridge University Press.
- Kumaravadivelu, B. (1999). Critical Classroom Discourse Analysis. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33(3), 453–484.
- Solnit, R. (2016). *The case of the missing perpetrator*. Literary Hub. <https://lithub.com/rebecca-solnit-the-case-of-the-missing-perpetrator/>
- United Nations. *United Nations Observances* <https://www.un.org/en/observances>
- Ward, G.; Birner, B.; & Huddleston, R. (2002). Information packaging. In *The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language*. Cambridge University Press.

Appendix

The Case of the Missing Perpetrator (Part I) by Rebecca Solnit

Language matters. We just had a big struggle around the language about rape so that people would stop blaming victims. The epithet that put it concisely is: rapists cause rape. Not what women wear, consume, where they go and the rest, because when you regard women as at fault you enter into another one of our anti-detective novels or another chapter of the mystery of the missing protagonist. Rape is a willful act; the actor is a rapist. Men are abstracted into a sort of weather, an ambient natural force, an inevitability that cannot be governed or held accountable. Individual men disappear in this narrative and rape, assault, pregnancy just become weather conditions to which women have to adapt. If those things happen to them, the failure is theirs. This training begins early. Girls in middle and high school even now, even in supposedly progressive places like New York and San Francisco, are told their forms and garments cause male behavior. Who is responsible for the behavior of boys in these narratives about spaghetti straps and leggings? Girls.

The Case of the Missing Perpetrator (Part II) by Rebecca Solnit

You drink, you get injured, but who injures you must not be mentioned, so that it's as though there's only women and alcohol in the room. The CDC¹ guidelines tell "Excessive alcohol use is commonly involved in sexual assault." It's as though there's a person named "excessive alcohol use, or rather Excessive Alcohol Use". We have all met EAU. He is often involved in sexual assault. But here's the point: he never acts alone.

Excessive Alcohol Use has a brother named Excessive Alcohol Consumption on this list, and he's trouble too: "Excessive alcohol consumption increases aggression and, as a result, can increase the risk of physically assaulting another person." EAC apparently acts alone in this narrative, which is a sentence in search of a subject. Whose aggression? Who will assault?

In the wildlife sanctuaries of literature, we study the species of speech, the flight patterns of individual words, the herd behavior of words together, and we learn what language does and why it matters. This is excellent training for going out into the world and looking at all the political statements and news headlines and CDC instructions, and seeing how it makes the world or, in this case, makes a mess of it. It is the truest, highest purpose of language to make things clear and help us see; when words are used to do the opposite you know you're in trouble and that maybe there's a coverup.

1. Center for Disease Control

(Adapted from Rebecca Solnit: The Case of the Missing Perpetrator. On Mysterious Pregnancies, the Passive Voice, and Disappearing Men)