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Learning the English Passive Voice: Difficulties, learning strategies of Igbo ESL learners and pedagogical implications

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From the author's teaching experience, a greater number of Nigerian university students either stick monotonously to the active English sentences or use the expletive "It" structure. This paper investigated the difficulties Igbo bilinguals encounter when learning the English passive and the grammar learning strategies they adopt to overcome the difficulties. For the study, 30 Igbo speaking 100 level students of the Department of English and Communication Arts, Ignatius Ajuru University of Education (IAUE) Port Harcourt were selected. At the end of teaching the English passive voice, two written achievement tests were given to the class from which the scripts of the sampled students were selected. Data from three academic sessions were used for the purpose of ensuring correctness and objectivity of results. For data elicitation on the difficulties encountered and learning strategies used, the students were asked to write diaries of their problems and how they coped with them. In –class observation and think aloud protocols were also used. The findings revealed that the most difficult aspect was the tense-aspect changes of the verb phrase and the most used strategy was affective strategy. Based on the findings, this paper discussed some pedagogical implications.

Key words: English passive voice, difficulties, learning strategies, Igbo learners, pedagogical implications.

INTRODUCTION

In Nigeria, the teaching of English grammar at the primary and secondary levels is designed in such a way that the teacher presents the language structures to the learners, explain how and when any structure is constructed and as well used in a linguistic context. Thus different English language textbook series from which most schools choose their core textbooks systematically present the language structure with practice exercises (for example, Premier English for Nigerian Primary Schools Series 1-6; Melrose Communicative English for Primary Schools series 1-6; Secondary English project series, JSS – SSS; Intensive English Series JSS – SSS etc.). A major task of the teacher therefore is to ensure that he adopts a form-focused mode of instruction to enable the students de/induce the rules that underlie the structures they learn and also internalize the features. A form-focused instruction is a systematic teaching of grammatical/linguistic features of the target language as

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presented in the syllabus or in the context of communicative activities derived from the syllabus, or some combination of the two (Ellis, 2014). Through such mode of instruction, the teacher is afforded an opportunity to explicitly teach the grammatical features and/or rules of forming any grammatical construction with practice activities/tasks and use the feedbacks/errors of the students as the base for driving home the grammar points and rules. Thus, the goal of such form-focused instruction is to enable the students notice the gap between their own production and that of a competent user, develop knowledge of the grammatical systems of the target language (in this case, English) and also to produce the targeted language structure(s) accurately and appropriately. The students need not only to "learn how to use grammar appropriate to specific contents, but a focus on form is necessary for optimal second language learning" (Frodesen, 2014, p. 238) because it provides an intentional and intensive focus on the linguistic items or forms to be learned. This is necessary because since the structural differences between English and many Nigerian languages pose problems to the learning of English and the goal of teaching English is to produce competent users, using the form-focused mode of instruction in the classroom would ensure explicit teaching of any grammatical feature and/or rules in the context of communicative activities.

Despite the systematic presentation of the English language grammar in the English language textbooks used in Nigeria, Mohammed (2014) and Banjo (2012) observe that after 12 years of learning English, many Nigerian students at the tertiary level cannot produce the English passive sentence. This according to Mohammed (2014) is because the provisions made on communicative activities in the major English textbooks used at the primary and secondary levels are inadequate for the learning of the passives. Ibe (2007) and Oyetunde and Muodumogu (1999) also hold similar view. To Banjo (2012) and Umoh (1996), students' failure to use the English passive sentence accurately is traceable to the differences between English grammar and those of the indigenous Nigerian languages. Such "linguistic noise" occurs because the rules are different or misapplied or that the passive does not exist in the mother tongue (MT) or first language (L1) of the learners. That certain linguistic features that exist or do not exist in the MT/ L1 of Nigerian learners of English may affect their ability to process and use the English passive sentences is not peculiar. Hinkel (2002) posits that many ESL/EFL teachers know from experience that teaching the meaning, uses and functions of the passive voice represents one of the thorniest problems in L2 grammar instruction and that the speakers of many L1 appear to have difficulty with passive construction

Personal experiences of the author as a teacher of English language at the college and presently university levels have shown that despite the use of focus on form

mode of teaching English language structures, majority of the students still have difficulties with the passive construction. They are unable to use the English passive accurately and appropriately in written and spoken communication. It is against this background that this study investigated the features of the English passive which Igbo learners of English find difficult to master and the grammar learning strategies they adopt for constructing the English passive sentence. This is predicated on the belief that an understanding of the learners' problems and the strategies they adopt have pedagogical implications that will improve the quality of teaching and learning of the English passive by this linguistic group in particular and other second language learners of English, and also the designing and utilizing of appropriate teaching and learning materials. Also given that the West African Senior School Certificate Examination (WASSCE) examiners' reports on areas students performed poorly in English have consistently identified grammar and spelling as the weakest points, this paper hopes to contribute to the efforts made at helping the Nigerian students tackle their deficiency in English grammar and thereby alleviating the problem of poor performance in English. This study is aimed at finding out the difficulties Igbo ESL learners encounter when learning the English passive sentence, the learning strategies they adopt to learn the English passive sentence structure and discussing the pedagogical implications of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition and concept of passive voice

The passive voice is the grammatical construction in which a head noun functioning as the subject of a sentence, clause or verb is affected by the action of a verb or being acted upon by the verb. The noun functioning as the grammatical subject is typically the recipient of the action denoted by the verb rather than the agent, and may be used to avoid assigning responsibility to the doer (Choomthong 2011, Crystal, 2008). Thus, in an English passive sentence, "the logical subject – the agent – moves out of the position of grammatical subject and is relegated to a by-phrase" (Brinton and Brinton 2010, p. 131). Constructing the passive voice therefore involves the inversion of the noun phrase (NP) subject and NP object positions. That is a syntactic movement.

The inversion of the NP- subject and NP – object positions affects the verb structure of the active sentence. English has two ways of casting the verb in the passive voice, namely, using a form of the verb "to be", and using a form of the verb "to get". The commonest way is by using a form of "to be" with the past participle of a lexical verb, for example: "He *was flogged* by the teacher". This way of passivizing the verb appears in all levels of

Table 1. A Contrast of VGP of English Active and Passive Voice

	Active Voice	Passive Voice
Infinitive	to stop/ see	to be stopped/ seen
Present	I stop/ see	I am stopped/ seen
Past	I stopped/ saw	I was stopped / seen
Future	I will stop/ see	I will be stopped / seen
Conditional	I would stop/ see	I would be stopped / seen
Perfect infinitive	to have stopped/ seen	to have been stopped/ seen
Present perfect	I have stopped/ seen	I have been stopped/ seen
Past perfect	I had stopped / seen	I had been stopped / seen
Future perfect	I will have stopped/ seen	I will have been stopped/ seen
Conditional perfect	I would have stopped/ seen	I would have been stopped / seen

English; its only restriction is that the verb must be transitive. This variant is known as the "be – passive". The other variant, known as the "get-passive" is used in less formal situations and is restricted to a small number of verbs, for example: He *got arrested*. The focus of this paper is on the "be-passive".

In addition, passive voice involves using the past participle form of a transitive verb and the introduction of the preposition, *by,* before the agent noun. However, the by – phrase can be omitted, resulting in not mentioning the 'noun' agent who performed the action.

for example: *The kidnappers were arrested (by the police).*

The overall structure of the passive construction can be aptly captured if it is contrasted with the active voice. The contrast is so evident on the verb group (VGP) if displayed in a paradigm of traditional English verb tenses as shown by Payne 2006 (Table 1).

A passive VGP therefore differs from the corresponding active counterpart by containing a form of the verb *be* and the *-ed* (or *-en*) past participle morpheme being suffixed accordingly to the verb following *be*. Hence the passive forms of the active verbs *sees, jumps* are *is seen* and *is jumped*. The passive voice in English is clearly marked morphologically on the VGP with appropriate forms of the verb *to be* and the *ed/en* past participle forms of transitive verbs. Thus, the formation of passivevoice in English involves both morphological and syntactic changes.

Two types of passive voice exist in English, namely agentive passives and agentless passives. The agentive passive always takes an agent noun; that is the performer of the action must be mentioned. Hence the by –phrase marker is obligatory. For example.: *Purple Hibiscus is written by Chimamanda Adiche.* Contrarily, agentless passives do not take the by – phrase because there is no need for it since the focus is on the action not on the performer of the action. For example: *Many roads were constructed.*

With regard to the situations in which the passive voice is used in English, Oluikpe (1981, p. 94) identifies three essential situations;

1) When the active subject is unknown or cannot be easily expressed,

For example: *A man was shot.*

2) When the active subject is self-evident from the context; for example: *The singer was praised*.

3) When tact and delicacy of sentiment is needed; for example: *We would have been informed*.

This means that the passive is used when 'who' or what causes or performs an action is not important or known, or when the focus is on the action not the doer or performer of the action. Morphologically, it involves a change of verb forms and syntactically, it involves a change (rearrangement) of two clausal elements – NP subject and object positions and the introduction of new class of word – the preposition. This shows that in English the active – passive relation involves two grammatical levels: the verb phrase and the clausal NP elements.

Igbo language which is spoken predominantly in Eastern Nigeria is typologically different from English. According to Obi-Okoye (2008) Igbo does not have the passive voice. Emenanjo (2015, p.247) notes that although every Igbo verb obligatorily co-exists with inherent nominal elements, the nominal elements are not direct object of the verb but are rather syntactic complements. Thus, transitivity, a surface structure feature in Igbo is an irrelevant category for passive formation (Emenanjon, 2015). Given this clear absence of the passive structure in Igbo its avoidance by Igbo learners of English is predictable. A comparison of the passive construction in English and what looks like it in Igbo by Obi-Okoye (2008, p. 186) is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that there is the absence of parallel equivalence of English passive structure in Igbo. Obi-Okoye (2008) describes the Igbo translation of the English passive as round-about and ambiguous. Rather, what is commonly used is the expletive 'it' structural pattern and it is used for topicalization. The absence of the passive structure in Igbo means that any shift from the active verb structure to the passive structure, and the

Table 2. A Comparison between the Passive Construction in English and Igbo.

English	Igbo
The hunter killed the tiger – The tiger was killed by the hunter	Dinta gburu agu – Agu ahu bu dinta gburu ya/ o bu agu ka dinta gburu. Hunter killed tiger – Tiger that / the is hunter killed it/ it is tiger that hunter killed.
The teacher is helping the children to write – The children are being helped to write by the teacher	Onyenkuzi na-enyere umuaka aka ide ihe – Umuaka ahu ka onyenkuzi na-enyere aka idi iche Teacher is helping children hand – write something – Children those that teacher is helping hand write something.

rearrangement of two clausal elements (NP subject and NP object) and the addition of 'by' which characterize English passive voice are most likely to pose not only morpho- syntactic problems, but also semantic problems to Igbo learners of English. Such difficulties may inhibit effective writing and speaking in English. Obi – Okoye's (2008) discussion is based on a contrastive analysis of English and Igbo grammatical systems. To confirm these assumptions, empirical research is needed. Hence the study on which this paper is based is empirical.

English language learners' difficulties with learning and using the passive voice

Studies of the teaching, learning and use of the English passive voice in native and non-native contexts have shown that it poses difficulties to both native and non-native learners. According to Moreb (2016, p.3) Pullum (2014) and Leong (2014) traced the difficulties to the 'negative attitudes associated with its usage' as more often than not teachers warn their students against using it, and instead recommend the use of the active voice. Hinkel (2002, 2004) and Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) cited in Neilson (2016) also noted that teaching, learning when and how to use the passive voice presents the greatest difficulty to ESL/EFL teachers and learners.

Some studies that dealt with the difficulties ESL/EFL learners encounter in learning and using the English passive voice are McDonough, Trofimovich and Neumann (2015) cited in Neilson (2016), Elmadwi (2015), Mohammed (2014), Somphong (2013), Banjo (2012), Manea (2012), Choomthong (2011), Hinkel, (2002), Umoh (1996) etc. The overall conclusion of these studies has been that the syntactic configuration of English passive voice particularly the forms and use of the present progressive and perfect forms of the auxiliary verb '*be', (being and been)* rule of concord, tense, rearrangement of the subject and object constituent of the passive sentences constitute the greatest difficulties. All these occur because of the non-existence of the passive voice in the learners' L1 (Banjo (2012), Umoh (1996), mother tongue interference (McDonough, Trofimovich and Neumann 2015 cited in Neilson (2016),

Elmadwi (2015), Somphong, (2013), differences between the syntactic and semantic configuration of English passive voice and passive voice of the learners, L1 (Mohammed 2014, Choomthong 2011, Hinkel, 2002, Somphong, 2013, Manea, 2012).

Apart from Elmadwi (2015), Choomthong (2011) Somphong (2013) that focused on secondary and university students (learners) others were general treatments of the challenges their target ESL/EFL L2 learner have or may encounter in and using the English passive voice. This study is similar to these studies because it is aimed at finding out the difficulties ESL learners have in learning and using the English passive voice. However, this study differs because it is a study of the difficulties of first year university Igbo learners' have in learning and using of the English passive voice and the strategies they adopt to overcome their difficulties. In a way, this study is similar to Choomthong (2011) in terms of considering the learning strategies the learner adopt to overcome the challenges. To the best of my knowledge, there is a dearth of literature on the difficulties Igbo learners encounter in learning and using the English passive voice and the grammar learning strategies they adopt to overcome their challenges. This study therefore aims to fill this gap and also attempts to discuss the pedagogical implications.

Grammar Learning Strategies

According to Choomthong (2011, p. 76) grammar learning strategies also referred to as grammar strategies are "actions and thoughts that learners consciously employ to make learning to use a language easier, more effective, more efficient and more enjoyable". Purpura (2014) describes the actions and thoughts as part of the strategic competence which is critically important in learning and using a second or foreign language. Since "success in learning a second or foreign language depends on the students ability to plan, ask questions, make associations, remember, prioritize, distinguish main ideas from details, monitor progress, reflect on success and flexibly shift their approaches to language learning or use" (Purpura 2014, p. 533) studies of language learning strategies (LLSs) used by learners of second or foreign

language have been identified, described and classified into different types.

In English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) contexts studies of the strategies used by learners have been established. Hardan (2013) and Habok and Magyar (2018) assert that the most detailed study and frequently used is Oxford's (1990) taxonomic classification of the strategies into three direct and three indirect strategies. The direct strategies are specific means of language use learners deploy when working with the language itself, and they are memory, cognitive and compensation strategies. The cognitive strategies are the conscious mental strategies (for example using mnemonic devices to learn vocabulary or practice drills to learn a particular language structure) learners use to link new information with an existing schema by analyzing, reasoning, classifying and drawing conclusion based on the existing knowledge. The memory strategies are for storing, remembering and retrieving of information when needed and the compensation strategies help the learners to guess intelligently while using the language despite any deficiencies in knowledge. The indirect strategies are metacognitive, affective and social strategies and they are used when the learners manage the learning context themselves. Whereas the metacognitive strategies are used by learners to co-ordinate the learning process by organizing, planning and evaluating their learning, affective strategies are used to handle emotions and attitudes- to lower anxiety, build self-confidence by encouraging one's self. The social strategies are the activities learners use to get opportunities to ask questions, co-operate and empathize with other learners, more experienced learners and even native speakers of the language.

The significance of using these strategies to achieve second language proficiency has also been established. Helal (2016, p.152) notes O'Malley and Chamot (1990) view that they "can effectively assist foreign/second language learners in mastering different language skills on both levels, receptive and productive". Similarly, Griffiths (2013), Macaro (2001), Chamot and El-Dinary (1999), Nunan (1997) and Oxford and Burry-Stock (1995) also cited in Helal (2016) and Lee (2010) emphasize the positive correlation between the use of LLSs and second/foreign language achievement and motivation. This is because using the strategies allows the learners to extend their learning beyond the confines of formal classroom. Hence Helal (2016) maintains that these strategies provide myriad of means ESL/EFL learners can use to overcome the challenges of learning any aspect of the language.

There is no doubt that Igbo learners of English will deploy some grammar learning strategies that would enable them to understand and regulate the challenges of learning and using effectively the English passive sentence. Hence, the grammar strategies they employ are worth being considered.

Research Questions

1) What are the difficulties Igbo ESL learners encounter when learning the English passive sentence?
2) What learning strategies do the Igbo ESL learners adopt when learning the English passive sentence?
3) What are the pedagogical implications of the answers to (1) and (2)?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants in this study were 30 first year students of Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria selected from the 2013/2014, 2014/ 2015 and 2015/2016 academic sessions. From each academic session, 10 Igbo speaking students were randomly selected. They were among those who studied ENG III: 'English Grammar and Mechanics of Writing' as a compulsory course in the first semester of 100level at the Department of English and Communication Arts taught by the author. All the participants speak Igbo as their first language (mother tongue) and can also read and write Igbo language. At the time of this study, they have learned English for about 12 years (6 years primary school and 6 years secondary school).

Materials

The instruments used in this study were students' diaries, in-class observation, achievement tests, and think – aloud protocols.

Diary

Although all the students were to write diaries of the difficulties they encountered in learning the English passive and the learning strategies they used, only the sampled Igbo participants were specifically instructed to conscientiously write the problems they encountered and how they coped with them for the 3 days (of 2 hours each) it took to finish teaching the passive. This instrument is used because of the advantages which writing a diary offers to learners. According to Nunan (1997) by writing a diary, learners can record the problems that emanates from learning a subject in order to find ways to alleviate the problems. It also motivates them to be responsible and also build self-confidence. For the purpose of this study and specifically for systematic diary writing a focus on form method of teaching was adopted. That is, a step-by-step and clearly defined teaching (with authentic examples drawn from newspaper reports and the students' experiential background) of how the different aspects of the passive sentence are derived from the active sentence: exchange of subject and object positions, the addition of passive auxiliary "be", tense-aspect changes, the addition of preposition "by" and the reasons for the use of passive sentences in speech and writing.

In-Class Observation

While teaching the English passive, the author-researcher observed how the learners learnt the rules needed for effective mastery of the passive moving from the simple tasks (such as the positional exchange of subject and object nouns etc.) to complex tasks (such as the verb –tense aspect sequencing and changes), and also noted the mistakes and errors the students frequently made. That

is, the difficulties they had with changing the active sentences into their passive forms and constructing correct passive sentences with given clues. This is aimed at confirming what the sampled students had written in their diaries. In order to elicit data to ascertain the difficulties and learning strategies of the sampled students, the researcher used purposely the forced and free response evaluative styles and asked them more questions as the teaching progresses and recorded their responses in her observation note prepared specifically for the sampled students. Also, the 3 day teaching sessions were as tape-recorded.

Achievement Tests

Two achievement tests were given the students at the end of the 3 days teaching sessions (of 2 hours each) of the English passive voice by the author-researcher in order to find out the level of their understanding and its application. The first test was similar to what was taught in class, and it required the students to change active sentences into their passive counterparts. The sentences were about familiar events and activities such as cooking, writing, football, washing, reading, school etc. The second test was a fill-in-the –blank test aimed at finding out if the students can apply what they have learnt to other linguistic contexts. The two tests were given to all the students, as these constitute part of their continuous assessment score. However, for the purpose of this study, only the scripts of the sampled students were selected for further analysis. Test 1 consisted of 20 items while Test II had 12 items.

Think – aloud Protocol

After the tests, the sampled students submitted their diaries. They were shown their scripts in the two tests and asked to think aloud on how they arrived at their answers. This was to further check what learning strategies they deployed while trying to learn and use the English passive. The explanations of each student were recorded by the researcher in her observation note and as well tape-recorded.

Data analysis and findings

For the analysis of data a mixed approach is used. That is a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. The first analysis was qualitative: explanations of the data elicited from the students' diaries, researcher's in-class observation and think-aloud notes, and recordings in her phone on the difficulties of the participants in learning and using the passive voice and learning strategies deployed. The second analysis was quantitative: descriptive statistical analyses of the data obtained from the achievement tests diaries, in-class observation and think-aloud protocol. For the achievement tests a frequency count, mean and standard deviation of the participants' performance in the achievement tests was done (Tables 1 and 2 in appendix A). For the other instruments percentage counts were done where necessary. A comparison of the results of these analyses established a consistency in the participants' difficulties and the learning strategies used. However, the default base for identifying the most difficult aspect of the passive to learn is the frequency of its incorrect and no-response usages in the participants' performances in the in-class evaluation questions and the achievement tests. For the type of learning strategies which the participants adopted the default base for identifying is their direct and indirect, conscious and unconscious actions and/or behaviours. Once a learning strategy was established the data was further quantified to determine the extent of its use among the participants.

FINDINGS

The findings revealed that the students had difficulties in learning the English passive and also used some grammar learning strategies.

From the entries in the diaries, in-class observation and think-aloud protocol notes it was found that the students had difficulty identifying the situations in which the passive is used. This made their learning difficult and hindered their ability to construct and use English passive sentences appropriately. The majority of them (80%) reported in their diaries that they were uncertain when they should use the passive voice or the active voice, especially if only the subject and verb are given or the subject is to be omitted. Their incorrect or no answers to items 12, 13, 15, 16, 18, 19 and 20 in Test 1 (Appendix B) further confirmed this. Many of them (66.67%) also reported that they need to know the object (direct or indirect) of ditransitive verbs like "give" that changes position with the subject. Their incorrect and no answers to items 9, 15 and 19 in Test 1 (see appendix B) reaffirmed their diary entries.

The most difficult area for the participants is the tense-aspect changes. The result revealed that 21 (70%) of the students had difficulty in knowing how to change tense. From their diaries entries they complained that it was difficult to master the English tense and aspect. They reported that the shift from one tense to another, especially when the participle forms (perfect and progressive) are used, was confusing. The answers to tests revealed that they were confident with changing active sentences that have one lexical verb to changing those that have complex verb group.

The in-class observation and the test answers also revealed that they were unable to distinguish between passive auxiliary "be" and the progressive auxiliary 'be', and to master the order of auxiliary verbs in passive sentences. For example, to items 11, 15 and 20 on Test1 (Appendix B):

11. *The head girl is ringing the bell.*
15. *You have given me nothing.*
20. *You should have given the letter.*

The wrong answers given include*: … was been rang by the head girl; the letter should be written…; it is the letter you should write/ have written; You gave me…; I am giving….*

Although, adverbs of time such as *every day*, *daily, every Saturday*, *yesterday*, *last week* occurred as hints for guessing the tenses, 16 (53.33%) of the students failed to use them appropriately. This means that they were unaware that such time markers should enable them use the English tense appropriately.

For example:
*Property worth millions of Naira *are/is* damaged … which *sweep* across … last week.

*A book *was* read by Juan daily. *Jimmy *was* beat every day.

The students had difficulty with the conjugation of the past participle form of English verbs especially, the irregular forms needed to form passive. From the tests and in-class observation, it was found that 18 students (60%) failed to master the past participle forms of irregular verbs. They failed to add the -*ed* to the regular verbs, and also used the irregular forms wrongly by adding –*ed*.
E.g.: *Show – showed – *showed* (instead of *shown*)
*Burst – *bursted; Beat – *beated; Hit – *hitted*

Similarly, they also failed to use the present progressive and past perfect forms of the passive auxiliary, *be*. For instance, wrong answers to items 9, 11 and 15 on Achievement Test 1(see appendix B) are:
…am writing -   is written (instead of is being written)
…is ringing   -   is rang (instead of is being rung")
…have given - was given (have been given)

Such difficulties are traceable to the confusion of adding the -*ed* suffix to past tense form of regular verbs and the irregularities of the irregular forms. For instance, the use of *bursted* instead of *burst* for the past participle. Though the Igbo language uses the suffixes -*ra* and -*re* as in *biara* (*came*) and *jere* (*went*) to indicate the past participle forms of verbs, there are no irregularities. The irregular forms of some verbs present in English is absent in Igbo.

The Mastery of the syntactic structure of the English passive sentence was also difficult.
From the diaries and think aloud protocols although all the participants reported that they were taught that the structure of the English passive (subject + be+ past participle + by + NP) differs from other sentence structures in English they still had difficulty constructing the structure, especially when the verb group is complex, the active sentence is in the negative (with any form of the verb *do*) or the subject is absent. They also had difficulty distinguishing between the primary auxiliary *be* and the passive auxiliary *be*. This is evident in their failure to use the correct forms of the following verbs group: …*are watching*, - …*are watched* (instead of *are being watched*); …*is helping - is helped* (instead of *is being helped*); *is ringing – is rang/ rung* (instead of *is being rung*). Alternatively, some of them used the expletives it sentence structure or another active sentence structure. For example: *It is her picture they are showing us/ they showed us her picture*.

To 22 (73.33%) participants the present and past progressive tense are confused with the passive voice verb structure. These participants' failure to add the passive auxiliary to the main verb is traceable to this confusing syntactic structure. These findings agree with the studies cited earlier that the syntactic configuration of the English passive voice poses challenges to ESL learners.

In relation to the learning strategies the sampled Igbo

ESL learners adopted to overcome difficulties in learning English passive sentence the findings revealed that the participants adopted affective strategy, cognitive strategy and memory strategy.

Affective strategy

The majority of the participants (22; 73.33%) complained that they had problems with learning the passive Verb Phrase (VP) structure. The shift from the active verb group structure to the passive verb group and the systematic order of auxiliary verb in the passive verb structure pose a great difficulty, especially when an aspectual form (progressive or perfective) is involved. This is because the passive auxiliary *be* can co-occur with any combination of auxiliary verbs: modal + Passive + LV (*will be driven/ jumped*); Perf+ Pass + LV (*has been driven/ jumped*); Prog + Pass + LV (*is being driven/ jumped*); modal + Perf + Pass + LV *(should have been driven/ jumped*); modal + Prog + Pass +Perf + LV (*may be being driven / jumped*); modal + perf + prog + pass + LV (*could have been being driven/ jumped*).

The students' limited understanding of English passive verb phrase (VP) structure and inability to differentiate *been* from *being* made them to see English language as complex and difficult.

However, because of the status of English as the language of tertiary education, and all official communication networks in Nigeria, their attitude towards learning English is positive. As such some of the participants observe that for them to use English effectively they must have a positive attitude towards English and also encouraged themselves since proficiency in English is the hallmark of academic excellence in Nigeria. Of particular note is the diary entry and think-aloud responses of five (16.67%) more confident participants whose affective filters are low. These believe they can learn the passive structure more effectively by looking out for opportunities to practice grammar tasks that help them focus on passive sentence constructions. They therefore developed a conscious, intentional and goal oriented strategy by reading newspaper reports regularly. And this helped them to consciously rehearse any answers (s) they give to any questions(s) on changing active sentences to passive sentences.

Cognitive and memory strategies

14 (46.67%) of the participants had problems with subject – object inversion especially if the sentence contains both direct and indirect objects. They reported that they coped with this problem by invoking their knowledge and understanding of transitive verb complementation. They believe that having "learnt that transitive verbs take

objects (direct and indirect) and that by asking the questions 'what?' and 'who?' after the verb" they can identify the object, doing so could help them to do subject – object inversion required in the passive structure appropriately. However, 3 of them reported that all they did with overcoming the problems of VP structure and subject – object inversion was to memorize the rules for the construction of passive sentences. They believe that such would help them to write passive sentences correctly without much stress.

Responses from the think – aloud protocol revealed that five (5; 16.67%) participants were more confident and had a tendency to take more risks than the less confident ones. Their scores in Test II revealed that they scored well: three (3) scored 8, the other two scored 9 and 7 respectively. They were able to apply what they were taught in class and also their conscious goal oriented strategy.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study revealed that the features of English Passive the participants had difficulties with are: i) the situations when the passive sentence should be used; ii) how tense and aspect changes; iii) conjugation of the past participle forms of irregular verbs, and distinguishing between *be* as a primary auxiliary and as a passive auxiliary; iv) the syntactic structure of English passive sentences, especially with the sequence of verbs in the VP structure.

These findings reveal that the students lack both grammatical and pragmatic knowledge to enable them construct and use the English passive sentence correctly and appropriately. These difficulties are mostly attributed to lack of the passive structure in Igbo language and the discourse structure of Igbo (Emenanjo, 2015; Obi-Okoye, 2008; Umoh, 1996, etc). To overcome these difficulties, the participants adopted some grammar learning strategies such as affective strategy, cognitive strategy and memory strategy.

Given the crucial role of English in Nigeria's tertiary education and benefits that accrue from having a high proficiency in it for effective communication in school and out-of-school situations, many of the participants' low affective filter helped them to make concerted efforts toward mastering the English passive. This implies that the sustenance of such low affective filter would yield a positive impact on their learning English grammar generally, of which the passive is an aspect. The goal – directed strategy which the 5 more confident participants adopted by reading newspaper reports regularly and looking out for opportunities to practice the task of constructing active sentences and their passive forms show that the integration of real-life authentic resource materials into the teaching and learning of English in Nigeria will go a long way to arousing and sustaining the

students' motivation and improving their performance. This finding agrees with Hinkel (2002) that there is need for the presentation of the passive features in meaningful contexts.

The cognitive strategy they adopted revealed that they tried to invoke their knowledge of transitive verb complementation. While the memory strategy involved memorization of the rules for the construction of English passive sentences. This means that they perceived that if the "subject + to be+ participle" is not mastered, the passive structure cannot be formed. This implies that the participants need to be equipped with the rules that underlie and govern the formation of English passive sentence. This finding is in consonance with seeing language learning in L2 situation as more of rule-formation than of habit – formation.

The findings revealed that cognitive – code learning (CCL) method can help students tackle the problems of passivization. Although the researcher used a focus on form mode of teaching the findings revealed that there is need for more explicit teaching. This calls for the devising and using of a flexible hierarchical teaching and learning method and using illustrative sentences from students' experiential backgrounds. That is, a teaching-learning method the teacher can modify and which as well supports the presentation of learning tasks in the order of the level of difficulty involved in their learning and with a variety of real-life practice exercises for the learners.

Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study revealed that the difficulties the students had in learning the English passive sentence are associated with the morpho-syntactic features of the verb group. The obvious pedagogical implications (answer to Research Question 3) are discussed here. To help the students tackle the difficulties requires using an eclectic teaching method: a flexible method that enables a systematic presentation of the learning tasks with the aid of authentic materials in meaningful contexts; one that enables the teacher to present and explain the morpho-syntactic features of the passive sentence explicitly so that the learner does not use any item wrongly through false analogy; a method that gives learners greater opportunity to a wide variety of practice activities, and to create passive sentences from their communicative experiences (Williams, 1990).

Given that the passive is an aspect of English grammar that demands the teaching and learning of verbs, their patterns and conjugation, and active sentences, any method used in teaching it should be flexible enough to accommodate an orderly presentation of all content and use of authentic real-life materials. Therefore, this paper proposes using cognitive-code learning (CCL) method that supports hierarchical presentation of tasks as a good teaching/learning strategy.

Cognitive-code teaching and learning method postulates that language learning entails rule formation. It is a rule-governed behavior. According to Williams (1990, p.49) the underlying principles of CCL include:

1. The frequency with which an item is practiced per see is not as important as the frequency with which it is contrasted with other items with which it may be confused. Thus, it can help both teacher and learners contrast the passive structure with the active structure. Such a contrast will help the students overcome any difficulties resulting from the verb phrase structure.
2. Materials which are presented in a meaning context are more easily learned and retained. This principle gives the teacher the opportunity to systematically present the critical morpho-syntactic features of the passive sentence in meaningful contexts. The performance of 5 more confident students in the tests and the goal-oriented strategy they used affirm that in addition to explicit teaching of contrasting forms, presenting such forms in meaningful contexts would also raise the learners' affective strategies towards more realistic social strategies. This invariably would facilitate learning, aid retention and improve proficiency.
3. Language skills are better learned if conscious attention is paid to the understanding of their critical features. The critical features of the passive voice should be well spelt out and sufficient practice for generating correct forms given to the students.

Therefore CCL is considered suitable for helping Igbo ESL learners to tackle the problems of passivization. Its underlying principles supports frequent and conscious learning of the grammar of passive voice with practice materials presented in real-life meaningful contexts, thereby spelling out the correct forms and eliminating the possibilities of false analogy. That such more frequent numerous kind of association with the target items would facilitate better learning and retention is not questionable. Thus using CCL provides the Igbo (and other ESL) learners with a point of reference and a means for comparing the syntactic and semantic functions of nouns and noun phrases and the verb group structure of active and passive sentences. This would also impart positively on their grammatical judgement.

On the basis of the participants' difficulty in using the passive structure, a hierarchical teaching method should also be adopted. This is because hierarchical teaching embraces some aspects of CCL method and as well helps the teacher to outline the learning tasks which the learners need to know in order to master the passive sentence. It also supports inductive teaching-learning method which involves starting from simple tasks to complex ones, from known to unknown. This is a method allows both teacher and learner to sort out and explore concepts that support the learning task in order for the learners to recognize how the target task is constructed. Thus, it requires a clearly defined arrangement of the learning tasks to be mastered by the learners so as to raise their awareness and consciousness of the target task. This implies that effective teaching and consequent learning of the passive sentence will be achieved if the teacher presents the learning tasks from simple to complex, with the desired passive structure being the terminal task. Once the learners understand what each rung on the passive sentence "ladder" is and means, they can understand how they all fit together and how they differ from the active sentence.

Based on the finding that the morpho-syntactic structure of the passive verb phrase posed the greatest difficulty, this paper proposes the following hierarchy as the teaching-learning route for presenting learning tasks:
i) Transitive verbs: These have to be mastered first in active sentences because only transitive verbs are passivized.
ii) Subject and object of the active sentence: This is because of their positional change in the passive sentence.
iii) Contrast of the passive auxiliary verb "be" with the other uses of "be' as a main verb, or linking verb or when it is used to show progressive tense.
iv) Past participle form of verbs: As a constant feature of the passive verb group, its various forms (regular and irregular) should be well taught and learnt.
v) Tense/ Aspects: This should be properly taught and learnt because the aspect of "be" in the active sentence is the same for the auxiliary "be" and it is "be" that undergoes change according to aspects and tense.
vi) Subject – verb concord: This applies to both active and passive sentences.
vii) Active sentence: Active sentences must contain one subject with at least one object. This is because proper positioning of subject and object in active sentence facilitates subject – object inversion in the passive sentence and the meaning of the sentence.
viii) Exchange of subject – object positions of active sentence: This ushers in the passive construction because it involves inversion of subject – object positions.
ix) The 'by + agent': This ushers in the treatment of passive sentences with agents and passives without agents. This should be properly taught and learnt because it explains the situations when the use of passive is necessary in order to avoid ambiguity.

If this presentation is systematically followed at the early stages of learning (primary and secondary levels) and it flows and gives the formula: "Subject + be + main verb + en + by + agent" of the terminal task (passive sentence), learning and construction of the passive structure at later stages (tertiary levels) would only involve remediation of errors and consolidation of learned tasks.

Given that the participants adopted some strategies in order to overcome the difficulties with using the English passive sentence, especially with the morpho-syntactic

features of the verb group the pedagogical implication is that the content and tasks for teaching and learning of the passive sentence at the tertiary level should be more of a progressive systematic presentation of the varied morpho-syntactic features of the verb group of the passive sentence in contrast with their active counterparts. The importance of passive sentences in enhancing variety of sentence in academic writing demands that the content, method and materials used for its teaching and learning should address these difficulties. They should remedy errors, reinforce and enhance learning, and promote the learners' strategies that positively influence the learning of the terminal task and English language in general.

To enhance effective teaching and learning of the English passive sentence at primary and secondary levels, it is recommended that meaningful materials and practice exercises drawn from students' experiential background or other real-life contexts which illustrate the features (forms, functions and meaning) of the passive sentence to be learned should be used. The materials and exercises should also be such that make it easy for the teacher to explain the situations when the passive sentences are used and the reasons for using the passive voice. Using such materials would invariably affect the students' affective filters and their anxiety levels positively, thereby bringing about a good performance in the construction and use of passive sentences.

Conclusion

This paper presents the difficulties some Igbo ESL learners at the university level encountered in learning the English passive sentences and the grammar (language) learning strategies they adopted in order to overcome the difficulties. The difficulties are associated more with the morpho-syntactic features of the passive verb group. To tackle these problems, the students adopted different learning strategies: affective, cognitive and memory strategies. The findings have pedagogical implications related to the content, method, materials and practice exercises. The implication is that there is need for the content of grammar instruction on the English passive, especially at the secondary school level to address in details its forms, functions and meanings using materials drawn from the students' experiential background or other real-life contexts. Achieving this involves using a flexible hierarchical teaching-learning method that supports the integration of real-life materials that will raise the learner's awareness of the structure of the English passive sentence. It is hoped that the findings of this paper and the pedagogical implications spelt out would be beneficial to the ESL teachers.

However, the limitations of this study in terms of the number of participants and the focus on only first year university students do not warrant full generalization. Hence it is suggested that further and more inclusive research at this level and other levels of education on the challenges of Igbo learners in learning and using the English passive voice and the learning strategies should be carried out.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author declared that the research was conducted without any commercial or financial relationship or interest that could be construed as a potential conflict of interests.

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Appendix A.

Table 1. Percentage, mean and standard deviation of test 1.

Score (20 items)	Frequency	%
18	1	3.33
16	1	3.33
13	2	6.67
12	2	6.67
11	3	10.00
10	4	13.33
9	2	6.67
8	6	20
5	3	10
3	2	6.67
0	4	13.33
Mean = 7.97		
SD = 4.84		

Table 2. Percentage, mean and standard deviation of Test II.

Score (12 items)	Frequency	%
9	1	3.33
8	3	10
7	6	20
6	3	10
5	2	6.67
4	4	13.33
3	3	10
2	5	16.67
1	1	3.33
0	2	6.67
Mean = 4.63		
SD = 2.53		

Appendix B

Achievement tests

Test 1

Change the following active sentences into passive sentences. Pay attention to tenses.

1)   The hospital admitted him.
2)   Simbi has swept the room.
3)   Her mother beats Jimmy everyday.
4)   Esther broke the plates.
5)   The boys are watching the football match.
6)   The children feed the dog everyday.
7)   Juan reads a book daily.
8)   John gave Mary a gift.
9)   I am writing a song for you.
10)   Ali cuts the grass every Saturday.

11)   The head girl is ringing the bell.
12)   Someone might have cooked the rice.
13)   Ngozi washed my dress yesterday.
14)   I did not allow her to go.
15)   You have given me nothing.
16)   He has warned you not to be late the school.
17)   The teacher is helping her to write.
18)   I will return the book tomorrow.
19)   They are showing us her picture.
20)   You should have written the letters.

Test II

Fill in the blank spaces with the appropriate form and tense of the verbs in bracket in this news report about flooding.
Property worth millions of Naira -1 - (be, damage) by flood which –2 - (sweep) across Northern Nigeria last week. The River Niger -3 - (overflow) its bank after two days of heavy rain. Many houses - 4 - (be, wash) away. However, many people   - 5 - (be rescue) from the flood. No loss of life –6- (has, be, report) as NEMA officials who received hundreds of calls for help promptly responded. The depth of the flood - 7-   (reach) twenty metres deep in some places. Roads - 8- (be, block) by fallen trees and electricity lines   - 9-   (be, bring) down, leaving thousands of houses in Lokoja without electricity. Though thousands of people -10-   (be, render) homeless, "everything possible is -11-   (do) to get things back to normal", a NEMA official -12-   (say).