

A Pedagogical Approach to Passive Constructions in Critical Languages: Insights from Mandarin Chinese and Arabic¹

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical implications of typological differences between Mandarin Chinese and Arabic passive constructions from a form-focused instructional perspective. Although both languages background the agent and foreground the affected participant, they differ substantially in the grammatical mechanisms used to express passivization. Chinese relies on specialized passive markers with semantic constraints, whereas Arabic employs internal vowel alternation, derived verb stems, and periphrastic constructions within a root-and-pattern morphological system. Based on classroom observations, these differences create distinct learning challenges involving thematic-role assignment, morphological awareness, semantic interpretation, and agentive marking, particularly for native speakers of English, whose language expresses passivization

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differently. Pedagogical examples indicate that passive constructions may serve as an important indicator of learners' control of grammatical structure, semantic interpretation, and pragmatic language use. Adopting a form-focused approach, this pedagogical discussion highlights the importance of explicit attention to cross-linguistic contrasts and form–meaning relationships in developing learners' productive use of passive constructions.

Keywords: Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, passive constructions, cross-linguistic contrast, form-focused instruction, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

Recognized as two critical languages by U.S. educational agencies due to their strategic importance, Mandarin Chinese and Arabic form basic passive sentences in distinct ways with regards to their morphosyntax and semantics. Although both languages allow speakers to background or suppress the agent of an event and foreground the affected participant, the grammatical mechanisms used to express passivization differ between the two systems. In terms of form and function, Arabic verbs undergo vocalic alternations, that is, changes in vowel quality, to condition the argument structure of passive verbs, whereas Chinese verbs do not undergo inflectional changes, with the passive instead being expressed through specialized markers with semantic connotations. In addition, Arabic provides several alternative strategies for constructing passive-like forms, including derived verb stems and periphrastic constructions. The expression of an agent, the typical participant that carries out the action described in a sentence, is peripheral or optional in both languages, but Chinese and Arabic differ in the degree of restriction on how an agent may be introduced.

These typological differences have pedagogical implications, particularly in relation to potential learning challenges and learner errors stemming from L1-to-L2 influence, such as those found among non-native speakers

learning either language. For example, the English passive voice typically involves the auxiliary *be* and a past participle together with an optional *by*-phrase introducing the agent. English-speaking learners of Chinese or Arabic must therefore reinterpret the relationship between thematic roles, grammatical functions, and morphological marking in ways that differ substantially from English patterns. Structures that rely on unfamiliar morphological alternations, specialized syntactic markers, or language-specific semantic constraints may consequently present considerable difficulty and lead to transfer effects, processing challenges, and overgeneralization of familiar patterns.

Given the extensive descriptive work on passive constructions in both Chinese and Arabic, an in-depth understanding of typological differences between the two systems may help shape pedagogical approaches for teaching these structures more effectively in the classroom. From a pedagogical perspective, this paper argues that instructors can provide targeted guidance that addresses L1–L2 contrasts early on and use learner errors as diagnostic tools to identify misunderstandings of agent and patient roles, misplacement of passive markers, and incorrect morphological alternations in learner production. Adopting a form-focused approach (Spada 1997), the study integrates typological description with insights from second language acquisition research to

examine how patterns of Chinese and Arabic passives inform error patterns and pedagogy. In particular, the paper highlights the importance of making cross-linguistic contrasts explicit and of guiding learners in recognizing how passive constructions reorganize thematic roles and grammatical relationships across languages.

This paper is organized as follows: Section 2 introduces the background of this study and the pedagogical framework. Section 3 provides a description of the Chinese passive voice. Section 4 gives an outline of the passive voice in Arabic and its dialects. Section 5 discusses learner patterns and errors from a form-focused approach, along with pedagogical reflections presented in some detail. Section 6 concludes the paper.

2. Background and the Pedagogical Framework

Cross-linguistically, in events involving two participants, the agent—the initiator or performer of the action—is typically expressed as the sentential subject, whereas the theme or patient—the entity undergoing, affected by, or benefiting from the action—is expressed as the object. Their grammatical roles as subject and object are characterized by the way they alternate between active and passive constructions (Keenan and Dryer 2007; see also Chen 2026 and the references therein for an overview of non-active constructions). The properties associated with the active–passive alternation across languages are threefold: it is typically morphologically, syntactically, and semantically significant.

Structures that rely on unfamiliar grammatical cues or require learners to reinterpret argument structure may pose particular challenges for second language learners. Previous second language acquisition research has shown that typological contrasts between languages can influence acquisition through transfer effects, processing difficulty, and the salience of linguistic input (Ellis 1994; Spada 2011). Structures that are morphologically transparent or highly frequent in the input are often acquired earlier, whereas constructions involving less salient morphological or syntactic cues may pose greater challenges (Bardovi-Harlig 2000). For

additional discussion of Chinese passives, see, among others, Jing-Schmidt and Jing (2011) and Chen and Liu (2020). In the case of passive constructions, learners must recognize how grammatical forms signal relationships between participants in an event. The formal differences between the Chinese and Arabic passives mentioned in Section 1 suggest that learners of Chinese and Arabic may encounter distinct processing and interpretive challenges depending on the grammatical cues available in each language.

A primary contribution of typological work to classroom instruction is that it enables both instructors and students to develop a deeper understanding of contrasts between L1 and L2, regardless of learners' linguistic backgrounds. While typological studies, including those on critical languages such as Chinese and Arabic, describe the properties of the passive voice, it is the instructor's task to determine how these observations—both similarities and differences—can be effectively incorporated into classroom instruction. As will become clearer in the following sections, both Chinese and Arabic passives involve alternations in form and structure, with dedicated linguistic properties serving as indicators that signal a sentence as passive. This means that in reading and listening, learners rely on such cues to interpret passive sentences, whereas in speaking and writing, they use the same cues to express situations in the

passive voice. Crucially, successful use of the passive depends on learners' awareness of these cues and structural or formal alternations.

Given that passive constructions may involve a threefold set of factors—morphological, syntactic, and semantic—depending on the language, one natural question arises: should structural alternations be explicitly highlighted in the classroom so that instructors can better prepare learners to fully understand and use passive constructions effectively? Hummel (2014) characterizes such an approach as form-focused instruction (FFI), in which pedagogical interventions “draw the learners’ attention to language form either implicitly or explicitly” (Spada 1997). Importantly, rather than teaching grammar as isolated rules, form-focused instruction integrates attention to grammatical structure within meaningful language use. In a more recent study, Spada (2011) argues that explicit FFI benefits second language acquisition across a range of linguistic forms, a finding often attributed to learning processes involving conscious attention and effort. Framed in terms of awareness, FFI can therefore be understood as facilitating learners’ attention to form–meaning relationships, in which case the instructor plays an important role in making these relationships explicit.

Building on this framework, the present study argues that FFI can be beneficial in addressing learning challenges related to thematic-role assignment, morphological alternation, semantic interpretation, and agentive marking. Rather than making empirical claims about learnability, the study reviews the properties of the passive voice in Chinese and Arabic and proposes instructional approaches designed to enhance learners' awareness of the linguistic properties discussed in this paper.

3. The Passive Voice in Mandarin Chinese

Chinese does not mark case relations morphologically, and grammatical roles are associated with the syntactic positions in which the participants appear. The active-passive alternation in Mandarin Chinese has been extensively discussed in the literature (e.g., Chao 1968), which has highlighted both the formal marking of the passive and the semantic interpretation commonly associated with it, the latter having received increased attention in more recent studies. These properties, as reviewed in this section, are directly relevant to classroom instruction, as their mastery plays a key role in how successfully students acquire the passive voice.

In his seminal work, Chao (1968) identifies several grammatical and semantic properties of the Chinese passive:

(i) the theme is fronted and focused, functioning as the sentential subject, (ii) the verb itself does not morphologically distinguish between active and passive forms, (iii) the passive is signaled by a dedicated marker, (iv) the perfective aspect can be added to yield an accomplishment interpretation, indicating that the event has reached its endpoint, a reading typically associated with the passive, and (v) passive sentences convey unfavorable or adversative situations. The discussion below illustrates these properties.

In active voice, the agent typically appears sentence-initially, whereas in passive voice, the non-agentive argument occupies the sentence-initial position and the agent is optional. The linear representation of the active-passive alternation in terms of word order is summarized in (1), where Theme represents a non-agentive role.

- (1) a. Active: Agent + Verb + Theme
 b. Passive: Theme + *bei* + (Agent) + Verb

Active voice is illustrated by a simple question-answer pair in (2). Unlike in English, the theme, represented by the interrogative noun *shénme*, remains in its postverbal position and does not move (a phenomenon known as *wh*-in-situ; see Huang 1982). The addressee can respond by replacing the question word with a specific theme, such as *bēizi* ‘cup’.

(2)

Q: 你 打 破 什 麼 ?	A: 我 打 破 杯 子 。
ni dapo shenme	wo dapo beizi
you break what	I break cup
‘What did you break?’	‘I broke a cup.’

In passive voice, the agent is optional. The theme is placed in the initial position, which is followed by a marker that signifies the passive, such as *bei* (被), as illustrated by the question-answer pair in (3).

(3)

Q: 什 麼 被 打 破 了 ?	A: 杯 子 被 打 破 了 。
shenme BEI dapo le	beizi BEI dapo le
what PASS break PFV	cup PASS break PFV
‘What was broken?’	‘The cup was broken.’

When an agent is expressed, as illustrated in (4), it follows the passive marker. This construction forms a long passive with an overt agent, which contrasts with the short passive in (3), where the agent is not expressed (Xiao et al. 2006), either because it is unknown or irrelevant. The verb in the active-passive alternation does not change its form.

(4)

Q: 誰 被 他 騙 了 A: 我 被 他 騙 了。
 shei BEI ta pian le wo BEI ta pian le
 who PASS him fool PFV I PASS him fool PFV
 ‘Who was fooled by him?’ ‘I was fooled by him.’

With respect to passive marking, *bèi* (被) is the marker most typically used in passive sentences. However, the passive can also be expressed by other permissive verbs such as *gěi* ‘give’ (給/给), *jiào* ‘call’ (叫) and *ràng* ‘let’ (讓/让) (Chao 1968; Lin and Huang 2015), as shown in (5). All of these permissive verbs yield an interpretation in which the dog is the agent.

(5)

我的 鄰居 被/給/叫/讓 狗 咬 了。
 wode linju BEI/gei/jiao/rang gou yao le
 my neighbor PASS/give/call/let dog bite ASP
 ‘My neighbor was bitten by a dog.’

Besides the formal properties reviewed above, the passive is typically associated with an unfavorable or adversative interpretation (Chao 1968; cf. a similar use in Japanese, Washio 1987). It is most commonly found with

disposal verbs, which indicate that an agent causes the theme to be disposed of, removed, or affected in a certain way. Chao (1968) also notes that, under the influence of translations of foreign languages into Chinese, the passive has become more productive and appears with verbs that do not conform to these traditional descriptions.

Recent studies have confirmed Chao's earlier observations. Xiao et al. (2006) found that passive constructions occur statistically more frequently with adversative or inflictive meanings than their English counterparts. The aspectual tendency associated with the interpretation of accomplishment and achievement has been further discussed and attributed to the semantic feature of affectedness in the Chinese passive by Law and Hirschberg (2025), who show that mystery and detective narratives, as well as religious writing, show a high frequency of passive constructions and that the forms used correlate closely with colloquial versus written genres, a pattern also found in Arabic.

4. The Passive Voice in Arabic

The passive voice in Arabic is a grammatical process in which the agent is suppressed and the focus shifts to the action or its undergoer. In both Classical Arabic and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), the element functioning as the object in the active clause becomes the grammatical subject in the passive and receives nominative case marking (Agameya 2011). The passive voice—referred to as *al-mabnī lil-majhūl* (المبني للمجهول) in Arabic—is marked morphophonologically, through systematic changes to the internal vowels of the verb and, in certain derived forms, through predictable prefixation. These morphological changes encode the distinction between active and passive directly in verbal forms.

One challenge learners of Arabic must contend with is the variation across Arabic varieties in the formation of the passive voice, a challenge well documented in the literature (e.g., Brustad 2000; Holes 2004; Laks 2013) and consistently borne out in classroom practice. The following subsections examine the mechanisms of passivization in both Modern Standard Arabic and the dialects, as well as the realization of agentive phrases in Arabic. The functional and pedagogical implications of these patterns for learners of Arabic as a foreign language are discussed in section 5, within a broader pedagogical framework that includes Chinese.

4.1 Passivization in Modern Standard Arabic

In Modern Standard Arabic (MSA), passivization is encoded primarily through internal vowel alternation within the verb rather than through the addition of auxiliary markers. The realization of a passivized verb correlates with the distinction between two grammatical aspects: the perfective and imperfective aspect. In the perfective, the passive is normally formed by replacing the active vowel sequences *a–a*, *a–i*, or *a–u* with *u–i*. In the imperfective, the passive is marked by the *u*-series of prefixes together with a fixed *a* as the stem vowel (Bubeník 2011; Laks 2013). Table 1 presents the canonical active and passive morphological templates for Arabic verb forms in the perfective and imperfective, using the conventional *fa‘ala* schema as an abstract root-and-pattern representation of vowel alternations associated with passivization²³⁴:

² The patterns shown represent canonical morphological templates rather than exhaustive surface realizations. As abstract root-and-pattern schemas, they do not capture phonological or lexical variation associated with weak, hollow, geminate, or hamzated roots, which may diverge from these idealized forms. Traditional Arabic grammatical labels (Forms I–X) are used consistently throughout, in conjunction with conventional templatic notation, rather than with a feature-based or autosegmental representation.

³ Traditional Arabic grammatical descriptions assign characteristic semantic values to the derived patterns, which—while not rigid determinants of meaning—provide useful guidance for understanding derivational relationships: Form I: basic, unaugmented root meaning; Form II: intensive or extensive; causative; estimative. Form III: conative (denoting effort toward the Form I meaning), often implying an involved or affected participant. Form IV: causative; factitive; sometimes inchoative. Form V: reflexive or effective counterpart of Form II. Form VI: reciprocal of Form III; sometimes iterative or simulative. Form VIII: reflexive of Form I or middle; occasionally benefactive. Form X: reflexive correlate of stem IV; benefactive; estimative; educative (Holes 2004).

⁴ Forms VII (*infa‘ala*) and IX (*ijf‘alla*) are not included in the table because they do not form passives through apophony. Form VII is already middle or passive in meaning, derived with the *in-* prefix, and rarely exhibits a distinct passive counterpart. Form IX, restricted to color terms and physical states (e.g., اصْفَرَّ *isfarra* ‘to become yellow’), is stative in nature and

Table 1. Canonical Active and Passive Morphological Patterns Across Arabic Verb Forms

Form	Perfective (Active → Passive)	Imperfective (Active → Passive)
I	faʿala / faʿila / faʿula → fuʿila	yafʿalu / yafʿilu / yafʿulu → yufʿalu
II	faʿʿala → fuʿʿila	yufaʿʿilu → yufaʿʿalu
III	fāʿala → fūʿila	yufāʿilu → yufāʿalu
IV	afʿala → ufʿila	yufʿilu → yufʿalu
V	tafaʿʿala → tufuʿʿila	yatafaʿʿalu → yutafaʿʿalu
VI	tafāʿala → tufūʿila	yatafāʿalu → yutafāʿalu
VIII	iftaʿala → iftuʿila	yaftaʿilu → yuftaʿalu
X	istafʿala → istufʿila	yastafʿilu → yustafʿalu

The following examples demonstrate how the abstract templates in the table are realized in real verbs. Each example corresponds to a listed form and shows the same internal vowel shift—from active to passive—that characterizes the MSA internal vowel passive.

likewise does not participate in the regular passive alternation system (Bateson 2003). Their omission reflects the fact that the productive morphological passive of MSA is limited to Forms I–VI, VIII, and X.

Form I

فَتَحَ الرَّجُلُ الْبَابَ	→	فُتِحَ الْبَابُ
fataḥa r-rajulu l-bāba	→	futiḥa l-bābu
opened the-man the-door	→	was-opened the-door
'The man opened the door.'	→	'The door was opened.'

Form II

نَظَّمَ الْمَدِيرُ الْحَفْلَةَ	→	نُظِّمَتِ الْحَفْلَةُ
naẓẓama l-mudīru l-ḥaflata	→	nuzzimati l-ḥaflatu
organized the-director the-event	→	was-organized the-event
'The director organized the event.'	→	'The event was organized.'

Form VIII

تَعَقَّلَ الْحُكُومَةُ الْكُتَّابَ	→	يُعْتَقَلُ الْكُتَّابُ
ta'taqilu l-ḥukūmatu l-kuttāba	→	yu'taqalu l-kuttābu
arrests the-government the-writers	→	are-arrested the-writers
'The government arrests the writers.'	→	'The writers are arrested.'

In addition to the internal vowel alternation, MSA exhibits a secondary and less productive strategy for expressing passive-like meaning: the morphologically active Form VII, formed by prefixing *n-* to the Form I base (*fa'ala* → *infa'ala*). Unlike the internal passive, the Form VII counterpart does not necessarily imply an external agent. Consider the contrast below:

قُطِعَ الْحَبْلُ	إِنْقَطَعَ الْحَبْلُ
quṭi'a l-ḥablu	inqaṭa'a l-ḥablu
was cut the rope	was cut / got cut the rope
'The rope was cut (by someone).'	'The rope got cut / broke (on its own).'

Form VII therefore overlaps semantically with the passive but is not a dedicated passive marker. As described in Holes (2004), it frequently encodes middle or reflexive-passive meanings—situations in which the subject undergoes a change of state without reference to an external agent, or participates in an event that affects itself. A useful illustration comes from the verb *inqalaba*, the Form VII derivative of *qalaba* “to overturn,” which can mean both “to get overturned” and “to turn against.”

اِنْقَلَبَتِ الشَّاحِنَةُ عِنْدَ جَانِبِ الطَّرِيقِ

inqalabati	sh-shāhinatu	‘inda	jānibi	t-tarīq
was overturned	the truck	at	the side	the road

‘The truck got overturned at the side of the road.’

اِنْقَلَبَتِ نَائِبَةُ الرَّئِيسِ عَلَى الرَّئِيسِ

inqalabat	nā’ibatu r-ra’isi	‘alā	r-ra’is
turned	the vice president	against	the president

‘The vice president turned (herself) against the president.’

Finally, the lexical verb *tamma* (تَمَّ, when followed by a verbal noun (مَصْدَرٌ *maṣḍar*), serves in MSA as an additional strategy for expressing passive-like meaning. Although *tamma* is not morphologically marked for the passive, it frequently conveys a resultative or completive sense—‘to be completed, carried out, or fulfilled’—which allows the construction

‘*tamma* + verbal noun’ to function semantically as a paraphrastic passive. In this periphrastic structure, the clause denotes that an event has been fully realized, thereby yielding a reading equivalent to ‘X was done,’ which is similar to the perfective interpretation of Chinese passives. For example:

تَمَّ التَّوْقِيعُ عَلَى الْعَقْدِ

tamma	t-tawqī‘u	‘alā	l-‘aqd
be.completed	the-signing	on	the-contract

‘The signing of the contract was completed,’ i.e., ‘The contract was signed.’

In sum, MSA expresses passivization through several distinct mechanisms. The templatic passive, formed through internal vowel alternation, is the primary and most productive strategy, providing a systematic morphological alternation across verb forms. Form VII adds middle and reflexive-passive interpretations, while constructions such as *tamma* + *maṣḍar* supply a paraphrastic means of foregrounding the event rather than the agent. Together, these patterns show that passivization in Arabic is distributed across morphological, derivational, and lexical resources—an important consideration for both typological comparison and language pedagogy.

4.2 Passivization in Arabic dialects

In many Arabic dialects, changes in the vowel system have led to what is often described as the loss—or, more accurately, the reduced productivity— of the internal passive found in Classical and Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). As a result, passivization in most dialects is now expressed morphologically through affixation rather than through internal vowel alternation. The most common strategy involves the prefixation of *in-* (or *it-* in some dialects) to the Form I base verb, or the prefixation of *it-* to Forms II and III, yielding verbs structurally parallel to Form VII (*in-* + Form I), or to Forms V and VI (*it-* + Forms II/III) of MSA.

The *t*-stem affix in MSA is known to add reflexive or mediopassive meaning through prefixation (to Forms II and III) or infixation (in Form I). It is therefore unsurprising that many dialects have extended its use to form true passives. Likewise, the *n-* prefix—which marks Form VII in MSA and often overlaps with the internal passive—has been recycled and expanded in the dialects to compensate for the phonological loss of vowel-based passivization. In dialects that employ this strategy, the *n-* prefix may attach productively to nearly any Form I verb to indicate a passive meaning (Holes, 2004).

The following examples, drawn primarily from Levantine Arabic, illustrate dialectal passive verbs formed

through prefixation of *in-* to Form I stems and *it-* to Forms II and III:

Active Voice

سَمِعَ الصَّوْتُ مِنْ آخِرِ الشَّارِعِ

semeʿ s-ṣawt min ʾākhir sh-shāriʿ

heard the-sound from the-end the-street

‘He heard the sound from the end of
the street.’

حَوَّلَ بَيْتَهُ لَ مَتْحَفٍ

ḥawwal baytu la mathḥaf

transformed his-house to museum

‘He transformed his house into a museum.’

قَاوَمَتِ الْإِحْتِلَالَ

ʾāwamet l-iḥtilāl

resisted the-occupation

‘She resisted the occupation.’

Passive Voice

اُنْسَمِعَ الصَّوْتُ مِنْ آخِرِ الشَّارِعِ

insamaʿ al-ṣawt min ʾākhir al-shāriʿ

was-heard sound from the-end the-street

‘The sound was heard from the end of
the street.’

تُحَوَّلَ بَيْتُهُ لَ مَتْحَفٍ

tḥawwal baytu la mathḥaf

was-transformed house-his to museum

‘His house was transformed into a museum.’

تُقَاوَمُ الْإِحْتِلَالَ

tʾāwam l-iḥtilāl

was-resisted the-occupation

‘The occupation was resisted.’

Arabic dialects also employ an indefinite third-person plural verb form—often translated as ‘they’—to convey a passive-like meaning without specifying an agent. This construction allows the speaker to background or omit the doer of the action, as illustrated in the following examples (Hitchcock 2024):

كيف بيروح ع حلب؟

kīf byirūhu ‘a Ḥalab?

how go-they to Aleppo

‘How do they get to Aleppo?’ / ‘How does one get to Aleppo?’

امش هيك بيسكرو الباب

mush hēk bisakkru l-bāb

not like-this close-they the-door

‘This is not how they close the door!’ / ‘This is not how one closes the door!’

The dialectal evidence thus suggests that passivization in Arabic is realized through multiple, partially competing strategies, a fact that complicates learner expectations formed on the basis of MSA and helps explain persistent difficulties in mapping form to function across varieties.

4.3 The agentive phrase

Although Arabic passivization typically suppresses the agent, the language provides several mechanisms for reintroducing

or expressing the agentive phrase when desired. One strategy involves juxtaposing an agentless passive clause with its active equivalent, where the direct object of the active construction is replaced by a pronominal clitic referring to the passive subject (Bubeník 2011). This structure effectively yields a compound sentence that restores the agent without breaking the syntactic integrity of the passive. For example:

نُصِرَ فُلَانٌ، نَصَرَ اللهُ

nusira	fulān,	nasarahu	Allāh
was.given victory	so-and-so,	gave victory-he him	God
‘So-and-so was given victory; God gave him victory.’			

A second and more common strategy involves attaching an agentive prepositional phrase to the passive clause, typically introduced by *min* (مِنْ ‘from’), which functions semantically like the English preposition “by”.⁵ For example:

وَقَدْ سَمِعَ ذَلِكَ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ

wa-qad	sumi‘a	dhālika	min	ahli	l-kitāb
and-indeed	was.heard	that	from	people.of	the Book
‘This was heard by the People of the Book.’					

⁵ The prepositions *bi-* and *li-* may also occur with passive agents, but their semantic profiles make them less natural for expressing prototypical agentivity and thus far less frequent in this function (see Bubeník 2011).

The preposition *min* may also appear in compound forms that carry more specific or formal nuances, such as *min qibal* ('on the part of'), *min jānib* ('from the side of'), and *min ṭaraf* ('on the part of'). Other compound agentive expressions in MSA include *'alā yad* ('at the hands of') and *bi-wāsiṭat* ('by means of'). The following examples illustrate these forms:

نُودِيَ بِالصَّلَاةِ مِنْ قِبَلِ الْمُؤَذِّنِ

nūdiya	bi-ṣ-ṣalāti	min qibali	l-mu'adhdhin
was.called	for-prayer	from part.of	the-muezzin

'The call to prayer was made by the muezzin.'

قُتِلَ ثَلَاثَةُ جُنُودٍ مِنْ جَانِبِ مِلِيْشِيَّاتٍ مَحَلِّيَّةٍ

qutila	thalāthatu	junūdin	min jānibi	milīshiyyātin	maḥalliyya
was.killed	three	soldiers	from side	militias	local

'Three soldiers were killed by local militias.'

تَمَّ التَّكْيِيدُ عَلَى الْخَبَرِ مِنْ طَرَفِ الْوِزَارَةِ

tamma	l-ta'kidu	'alā	l-khabari	min ṭarafī	l-wizāra
was.completed	the-confirmation on	the-news	from side	the-ministry	

'The news was confirmed by the ministry.'

وُقِّعَتِ الْإِتِّفَاقِيَّةُ بِوَسِطَةِ مُمَثِّلِ الْحُكُومَةِ

wuqqi'ati	l-ittifaqiyyatu	bi-wāsiṭati	mumaththili	l-ḥukūma
was.signed	the-agreement	by-means.of	representative	the-government

'The agreement was signed by the government representative.'

حَصَلَ إِسْلَامُهُ عَلَى يَدِ النَّبِيِّ

ḥaṣala	islāmuḥu	‘alā yadi	n-nabiyy
was.happened	conversion-his	at hand	the-Prophet

‘He embraced Islam at the hands of the Prophet.’

Taken together, these examples illustrate the range and flexibility of Arabic agentive marking: although the default passive construction suppresses the agent, Arabic provides a variety of syntactic and lexical options for reintroducing it when clarity, emphasis, or stylistic choice requires it. Crucially, these agentive expressions differ semantically in whether they encode a true agent (e.g., *min qibal*, *min janib*), an institutional or abstract source (*min ṭaraf*), an instrument or means (*bi-wāṣiṭa*), or an embodied initiator (*‘alā yad*), distinctions that are frequently neutralized by the single English preposition *by* and therefore may give rise to predictable learner overgeneralizations.

5. Learner Errors and a Form-Focused Approach

Given the complexity of the passive voice in both languages, learner errors may provide instructors with useful diagnostic information about difficulties related to the grammatical properties discussed in Sections 3 and 4. This section presents illustrative examples of learner errors and response patterns based on the authors’ classroom teaching experience.

These examples are presented not as the results of a formal empirical study but as illustrative cases that highlight potential structural difficulties arising from typological differences among English, Chinese, and Arabic. Their purpose is to raise awareness among both instructors and learners of how a form-focused approach may help address these difficulties.

5.1 The case of Chinese

Depending on the curriculum and textbooks used, the Chinese passive voice is introduced at varied stages. For instance, it appears as a grammar description when 被 is introduced as both a new character and a passive voice marker in Unit 22 of *Intermediate Written Chinese* (Kubler 2016). The passive voice is presented as a single grammar point in Level 1, Part 2 of the *Integrated Chinese* series (Liu et al. 2013), usually taught in the second year of a Chinese program; its grammatical description outlines the major uses of the passive construction by distinguishing semantic roles and noting its limited frequency and negative connotations. The *bei* marker is also introduced in relation to two specific permissive verbs, *jiao* ‘call’ (叫) and *rang* ‘let’ (讓/让) within the text. While this presentation provides a clear and accessible overview of the passive construction, a university-level curriculum often does

not allow for an extensive discussion of the full range of its syntactic and semantic nuances.

In the classroom, the use of the passive typically emerges only among learners of higher proficiency, owing to its linguistic complexity. For this reason, it may be regarded as an indicator of more advanced language competence, comparable to the use of aspectual markers in narration, in contrast with reliance on temporal expressions, which often signals lower proficiency (Chen 2020). While some advanced learners may exhibit non-native-like patterns, others may produce native-like forms, as illustrated by the examples in (6), drawn from separate compositions produced by three learners at the same learning stage in their third year of instruction for a Chinese news and media course at a university (examples presented in their original traditional or simplified script forms).

(6)

- a. 老師 就 能 教得 更好, 學生 被 教得 更多
laoshi jiu neng jiaode henghao xuesheng BEI jiaode gengduo
‘Teachers can teach better, and students can be taught more.’
- b. 中国 警察 突然 被 他们 三位 美国 公民 滞留
Zhongguo jingcha turan BEI tamen sanwei Meiguo gongmin zhiliu
‘The Chinese police were suddenly detained by three
American citizens.’

- c. 印尼 和 汶莱 都 相信 那些 被 中国
宣告 主权 的 部分 领土 属于 本国

Yinni he Wenlai dou xiangxin naxie BEI Zhongguo xuangao
zhuquan de bufen lingtu shuyu benguo

‘Both Indonesia and Brunei believe that parts of the territory
claimed by China as its own actually belong to their
respective countries.’

Example (6a) illustrates the use of the passive in a neutral context—students being taught. The sentence is grammatical, but it carries an undertone of adversity, implying that the students are affected by the act of teaching. When comparing the Chinese passive sentence with its English translation, (6a) can be understood as a case of L1-to-L2 transfer. Sentence (6b) exemplifies a common error involving the reversal of agent and patient roles: the American citizens in question should serve as the topic and appear in the sentence-initial position, while the *bei*-construction introduces the agent, namely the Chinese police. This error reflects a word-order mapping problem with the agent and theme, a typical structural mismatch. Sentence (6c) demonstrates a more appropriate use of the passive construction, in which the agent follows the passive marker *bei*, the theme is affected by the act of claiming ownership, and the sentence expresses an adversative situation.

5.2 The case of Arabic

In Arabic, the passive voice is embedded within the root-and-pattern (جذر-وزن) morphological system rather than marked by an independent particle. Both the internal passive—signaled through predictable vowel alternation that replaces the active template—and the various external passive strategies—most often built through derived stems such as Forms V (*tafa‘ala*), VI (*tafā‘ala*), VII (*infa‘ala*), and VIII (*ifta‘ala*)—require learners to handle patterned changes in the verb and recognize how vocalic templates encode grammatical meaning. For students who have not yet mastered these morphological processes, the passive can be difficult to notice, interpret, and produce. Consider the following example below:

قُتِلَتِ الْمَرْأَةُ بِالشُّرْطَةِ

qu-tilati

l-mar’atu

bi-sh-shurṭa

be.killed.PFV.3MSG

the-woman

with the-police

‘The woman was killed with the police.’ Intended: ‘The woman was killed by the police.’

The learner here makes the error of misusing the preposition *bi-* to mark the agent. The appropriate agentive phrase here would be *‘alā yad* ‘at the hands of’. The choice of

preposition in Arabic passive constructions is sensitive to the semantic structure of the event, and learners frequently overextend *bi-* as a default equivalent of English “by”. This results in unidiomatic or semantically ambiguous expressions, since *bi-* typically encodes instrumentality, not agency. In standard usage, true agentive phrases in the passive are limited to *min qibal* (‘on the part of’), *‘alā yad* (‘at the hands of’), or *bi-wāṣiṭat* (‘by means of’) in formal registers.

On the basis of the typology outlined above, two additional learner error types can be predicted in Arabic classrooms. First, learners sometimes struggle to distinguish between internal and external passive mechanisms. They may conflate the internal passive of Form I (*fa‘ala* → *fu‘ila*) with the derived passives of Forms VII and VIII, resulting in either the production of internal passive forms in dialects that do not use them, or the creation of incorrect “passive-like” forms by adding the *in-/it-* prefixes (or the *t*-stem infix) indiscriminately. Second, learners frequently overgeneralize the *tamma*-construction, which literally means “was completed” and is typically restricted to formal or media registers. Students may treat *tamma* + *maṣḍar* as a default passive, using it far more broadly than native speakers do. Such overgeneralization typically suggests L1-to-L2 rule transfer.

5.3 Pedagogical reflections and a form-focused approach

The descriptive characteristics of the passive constructions in Chinese and Arabic, along with English, are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. *Characteristics of the passive voice in Mandarin Chinese, Arabic, and English*

	Mandarin Chinese	Arabic	English
Verbal morpho-phonological marking	no verbal marking	- internal vowel change - affixation	past participle
Syntactic form	passive marker <i>bei</i> (and related markers)	- agentless passive: the verb appears in the passive without any agent phrase. - agent expression: the passive agent is introduced by a prepositional phrase.	a <i>by</i> -phrase
Semantic effect	– accomplishment or achievement – adverse (or neutral)	- internal passive: downranks the agent but still implies its presence. - affixal/derived passives: suppress the agent more fully, often yielding middle or spontaneous-event readings.	neutral

The error patterns in learners of Chinese and Arabic center on the linguistic properties of their respective forms as outlined in previous sections. On one hand, as illustrated by the examples in (6), learners of Chinese may confuse the semantic roles of two participants, overlooking their specific grammatical positions in passive sentences. Specifically, the theme appears to follow the agent when introduced by a *bei*-phrase, potentially causing confusion with respect to which argument is affected by the action conveyed by the sentence. Furthermore, learners can overlook the semantic effect usually triggered by the passive, especially when they are not familiar with the use of the passive or its adversative connotations. On the other hand, learners of Arabic have to tackle various formal complexities, including varied patterns of internal vowel change based on verb types, the selection of different prepositional phrases, case marking, and subject-verb agreement, which all contribute to the complexity of acquiring the passive voice of Arabic.

Xiao et al. (2006) draw the conclusion that Chinese passive constructions are frequently associated with adversative or inflictive meanings; Law and Hirschberg (2025) attribute the interpretation of accomplishment and achievement in the passive voice to its semantic feature of affectedness, which is frequently observed in mystery, detective, and religious writing. While these semantic

properties are restricted and grounded by discourse and context, the error patterns in learner language may suggest learners' unfamiliarity with the passive voice due to its limited frequency and their reduced exposure to these text types. This could be improved by introducing learners to relevant materials, genres, or similar narratives.

In classroom settings, learners appear to produce passive constructions less frequently than many other sentence types. More advanced learners of Chinese may use passive constructions more readily, whereas learners of Arabic may avoid them, resulting in stylistically limited production and reduced access to more advanced registers. These patterns may reflect the complexity of passive constructions, particularly when learners have limited exposure to their forms and uses.

Learners' unfamiliarity with the passive voice correlates with its frequency, both in the textbooks and in other sources, including authentic materials. The Chinese passive is used most frequently in mystery, detective, and religious writing (Law and Hirschberg 2025), which suggests that learners can have more exposure to the passive when they study materials, including news articles, which are related to these genres or similar narratives. A challenge about learning or identifying the Arabic passive from texts is that vowels are not typically marked, that is, texts are often

unvowelled, although vowels can occasionally be marked for reasons of disambiguation. This can cause learners to misinterpret passive forms as active forms or vice versa.

In reflection, interventions within a form-focused approach can enhance learners' comprehension and production of the passive voice across languages, although the Arabic passive forms without formal cues may require more classroom practice to reinforce learners' awareness of the voice alternations. The pedagogical approach corresponding to the characteristics of Chinese and Arabic is discussed as follows.

First, for Arabic, a language with various morphophonological changes in verb forms, focused training on vowel patterns and derived verb stems (e.g., *kataba* versus *kutiba*) can help learners develop an intuition for associating verbal form with passivization. Learners may also benefit from developing a habit of identifying arguments through case marking or subject-verb agreement, thereby inferring a passive meaning and an absent agent. This skill is especially crucial for navigating unvowelled texts. Early instruction can also help learners understand more clearly that the internal passive is restricted to MSA, while dialects rely on other strategies, thereby preventing cross-register transfer errors. By contrast, Chinese does not exhibit morphophonological alternations comparable to those found in Arabic. As a result,

learners must rely less on morphological cues and more on passive markers and contextual information to identify passive constructions. Despite these typological differences, both languages may benefit from form-focused activities such as input-enhancement tasks, in which learners identify passive markers and constructions in short reading passages and explain how contextual information contributes to the interpretation of thematic roles and affectedness, as well as learner error-analysis activities, in which learners identify, explain, and correct errors related to passive constructions.

Second, frequent exposure to different types of texts through guided reading activities, news reports, mystery narratives, or media texts can enhance learners' proficiency in the comprehension and production of the passive. Chinese and Arabic both allow the introduction of the agent syntactically, i.e., via a peripheral phrase. While Arabic shows selectional restrictions on the choice of a prepositional phrase (including *min*, *bīwāsitat*, and *'ala yad*) that frames the agent's role, Chinese imposes two different semantic restrictions on the resulting passive construction; the sentence typically conveys an accomplishment or achievement, as well as typically an adverse event. Comprehending and producing passive constructions therefore requires the learner's contextual and metalinguistic knowledge, as well as the ability

to infer meaning and capture the sentiment of a particular text.

Third, learners can compare topicalized, active, and passive constructions in short discourse contexts and discuss how each construction changes the focus of the message pragmatically. Both Chinese and Arabic utilize constructions of topicalization, where the focused arguments appear in specific locations (e.g., sentence-initial versus non-sentence-initial positions). In Arabic, passive constructions mainly emphasize the theme, thereby deemphasizing the agent, and thus serve pragmatic purposes. Understanding how to use and interpret these different constructions can be especially useful because they are common in media Arabic and formal writing.

Based on the discussion above, a form-focused approach may incorporate instructional activities such as input-enhancement tasks, thematic-role identification exercises, active-passive sentence transformation, sentence-reordering activities, and learner error analysis to direct learners' attention to the morphophonological, syntactic, and semantic properties of passive constructions. Although the effectiveness of these instructional practices remains to be evaluated empirically, they provide a principled pedagogical framework for addressing the learning challenges discussed in this paper.

6. Conclusion

According to the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages 2024), grammar and syntax are crucial linguistic features that reflect accuracy in learner language. Mastery of a variety of sentence types and constructions is typically associated with higher proficiency. For example, the key distinction between intermediate and advanced writing lies in the former's reliance on loosely connected sentences versus the latter's ability to produce paragraph-level, connected discourse. Mandarin Chinese and Arabic passives can be challenging in their own ways, as they involve multiple grammatical components in both languages. With more recent work furthering our understanding of the passive voice in Chinese and Arabic, the passive may also serve as an important indicator of a learner's command of grammar and syntax in the target language, a topic that warrants further research. Precisely because of its diagnostic value, it also merits explicit pedagogical attention. Through a form-focused approach, instructors can promote productive use of the passive, thereby fostering register sophistication and strong control of a range of grammatical structures.

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