

# LINGUISTIC FEATURES FOR A LANGUAGE LEARNING RESEARCH: The Case of Passives and Medio-Passives in English

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## Abstract

Conducting a research on EFL learning may be initiated by students' problems in understanding linguistic-grammatical features of the learnt language. Therefore, students' problems and difficulties in understanding English grammatical features can be the sources of problems of language teaching researches. This paper, which is practically derived from experiences of teaching English grammar and conducting researches in 2009 and 2012, particularly discusses how to derive the linguistic-grammatical features of English become the topic/research problem of researches on EFL learning. By using the case of passives and medio-passives of English, the discussion presented in this paper specifically is the answer for questions: (i) why do passives and medio-passives of English become academic problems for most Indonesian learners?; and (ii) how can the linguistic features of English passives and medio-passives be derived as a topic/research problem of EFL learning? The data presented in this paper are those collected through researches conducted in 2009 and 2012, and supported by others picked up during the teaching-learning processes of English Grammar subject at the English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang. The idea of this paper may give scientific information to the researchers in order to derive and to develop topics and/or research problems of EFL learning.

*Key words:* linguistic features, language teaching, research, passives, medio-passives

## A. INTRODUCTION

Conducting researches on the teaching-learning processes of a language (L1, L2, FL) is formally aimed at finding a big number and various data that can be used as the bases for building and developing better ways of teaching and learning languages. Research-based learning is one of ways to have better success of language learning programs. In relation to the ideas of second and foreign language researches, Hinkel (in Hinkel (ed.), 2005:3) states that research into second and foreign language teaching and learning has come to recognize that second (and foreign) language research, teaching, and learning can be as diverse as the multitudes of human life paths, living environments, living conditions, societies, and cultures, as well as the economic, geographic, legal, and power-based circumstances. In short, today the science and practice of second or foreign

language (L2/FL) teaching and learning have come to recognize the learners and the contexts of language learning are myriad.

There are a lot of evidences telling that linguistic studies and findings are needed to supply linguistic and grammatical data for any programs of language teaching. Language data and linguistic features can theoretically and practically be used in the processes of any language learning. Stern (1994:174), based on Valdman's, Corder's, and Spolsky's, stresses that a linguist may seek validity in a coherent and consistent linguistic theories, while a language teacher judges a theory for its usefulness in the design of materials, in curriculum development, or in instruction. It can be argued that the descriptions of language made by linguists are academically needed for the teaching of grammar, course book, dictionary, and other materials for language teaching.

Voice system of a learnt language, let's say English, is one of linguistic and grammatical features which need serious attentions in order to know the specific-grammatical characteristics of the language. The understanding on voice system of English is not only needed for academic reasons, but also necessary for building learners' grammatical consciousness. As a nominative-accusative language, English grammatically differentiates active and passive (clause) constructions based on the voice system. It has been generally known that the passive clause construction in English is grammatically indicated by the general formula: *be + Past Participle*.

However, many EFL learners in Indonesia do forget that the following active constructions must be semantically understood as the passive ones.

- (1) *It happens everyday, sir.*
- (2) *Your idea sounded controversial, but we were ...*
- (3) *It seems that you are not ready for that moment.*
- (4) *The golden window opened only twice a year.*
- (5) *Reservoir fills with tap water like in the left position.*

The clause constructions, such as (1) – (5), which are linguistically called as *medio-passive constructions*, frequently bring about serious learning problems for many EFL learners. Many teachers and/or lecturers of English grammar do not have special attention and instructional explanation that the constructions do not follow the general-grammatical rules of passive voice, but they are semantically

comprehended as passive ones. They almost forget to introduce to the EFL learners that such “stylistic” construction is one of grammatical-stylistic construction in English (see Hundt, 2007).

In fact, the following ‘ungrammatical’ constructions like (6\*) – (8\*) below were frequently found in EFL learners’ writings (see Mukhaiyar and Jufrizal, 2012) that they are not naturally accepted in English, although they “formally” follow the general formula of English passive constructions.

(6\*) *It was seemed all right at that time.*

(7\*) *The wooden window is opened twice a day.*

(8\*) *It is looked as a simple problem.*

Many students do not really know that the followings (6) – (8) are the accepted ones in English, instead.

(6) *It seemed all right at that time.*

(7) *The wooden window opens twice a day.*

(8) *It looks like a simple problem.*

The grammatical constructions as in (1) – (8), linguistically called *medio-passive* constructions, are grammatically constructed as actives, but they should be semantically understood as passives. Therefore, the constructions (6\*) – (8\*) are not grammatically accepted, in nature in English. The case of passives and medio-passives are, in origin, the linguistic-grammatical features. In reality, the success of language learning programs cannot be separated from the understanding on linguistic features of the learnt language. Consequently, the innovations in EFL researches can be inspired by linguistic phenomena and grammatical features which are the essential parts of language learning materials. Linguistic features concerning with passives and medio-passives in English may ideally be the source of topics and/or research problems of language teaching and learning. This paper, which is derived and developed based on researches conducted in 2009 and 2012, discusses how to derive research problems on language teaching and learning based on linguistic-grammatical features, in particular. To be more specific, the data and discussion presented in this paper are the case of passives and medio-passives in English. The overall discussion presented in this paper is specifically based on two questions: (i) *why do passives and medio-passives of English become academic problems for many EFL learners*

*in Indonesia? (ii) how can the linguistic-grammatical features of English passives and medio-passives be derived as a topic and/or research problem of ELF learning?*

The purposes of the discussion presented in this paper are to see the academic and psychological problems faced by EFL learners in Indonesia dealing with passives and medio-passives of English and how the linguistic-grammatical features can be derived as innovative topics and/or research problems of researches in EFL learning. The idea, data, and information presented in this paper are those collected through a descriptive research conducted in 2009 (Jufrizal et. al., 2009) and a library research conducted in 2012 (Mukhaiyar and Jufrizal, 2012). Other information and additional data for further discussion were obtained from practical-accidental classroom activities at the English Department of *Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni Universitas Negeri Padang* where the writer formally teaches *English Grammar*.

As the scientific study of language, linguistics constitutes the most systematic study of human languages. Linguistics cultivates a rational outlook upon language; the linguists take an objective view of language and all linguistic phenomena. Linguistics is not only theoretical, but also empirical and descriptive; linguistics makes detailed observations on particular languages to confirm or refute generalization. In other words, it observes and analyzes data found in natural languages, following the general principles of empirical research procedures. Linguistic works and studies aim at describing and explaining the nature of human languages (see Stern, 1994).

In relation to language teaching and learning, Stern (1994:119) further argues that as soon as someone tries to learn a language, he comes up against the most fundamental questions about the nature of language. One cannot teach or learn a language for long without being faced with some of the great puzzles about the nature of language that have baffled the great thinkers since antiquity. The ‘theory’ of language with which the teacher operates may not be consciously formulated; it may simply be implicit in the teaching traditions, in the concepts employed to talk about languages, in the way textbooks are arranged, or in the content and format of dictionaries and grammars; but it is hardly imaginable that a language could be taught without some underlying conception of the general

nature of language. Then, it would be unreasonable for language teaching theory to disregard what linguistics has to say about language.

The theories and descriptions of grammar and other linguistic information are essentially needed in constructing appropriate and relevant approaches, methods, and/or techniques, and learning materials as well. Stern (1994) argues, as well, that the grammatical descriptions may provide particular data and information for suitable materials of instructions. The idea that language teaching theory implies the theory of language and that of linguistics had a direct contribution to language pedagogy become more and more accepted. Following Spolski's, Stern (1994) also states that the relations between linguistics and language teaching as dual: 'applications and implications'. The descriptions of language made by linguists can be 'applied' in the sense that they provide the data needed for writing about teaching grammars, course books, and dictionaries. The need for grammar teaching in any form and level of language teaching and learning is not only for the first language (L1) and the second language (L2) but also for foreign language (FL).

According to Brown (2001: 65), one category of principles of language learning and teaching centers on language itself and on how learners deal with the complex linguistic systems. The complexity of grammatical features and rules of a learnt language may cause academic problems for learners. Therefore, the phenomena of linguistic-grammatical features can be raised as the topics and/or problems of researches in language teaching and learning. Particular linguistic phenomena and grammatical features of a learnt language, especially those which are highly different from those of learners' L1, lead serious academic problems and practical difficulties. It may be argued that the unsuccessful EFL learning programs are not only caused by approaches, methods, techniques, and/or other learning materials, but also caused by particular problems of understanding linguistic-grammatical features of the learnt language. In relation to this, it is also highly appreciated to derive research problems of language learning from particular linguistic-grammatical features of a learnt language.

Typologically, the grammar of English is different from that of bahasa Indonesia or with that of learners' L1 in Indonesia. The grammatical gaps are ideally supposed as the sources of learning problems of EFL. In addition, the great

number of L1 with different grammatical typology spoken by EFL learners adds other “complexity” and “difficulties” of teaching-learning grammar of English in Indonesia. Formal constructions of English passives are mostly discussed in EFL learning programs, but the case of medio-passives has not had serious attention yet. It has been already known that there three main types of English passives, namely: (i) *common passive (indicated by be + past-participle)*; (ii) *get passive*; and (iii) *causative passive*. In addition to the passives, English has medio-passive construction as well. The medio-passive construction is the type voice system in between active and passive. It is semantically passive, but it is grammatically constructed active form. Sometimes, it needs pragmatic views to get the meanings (see Saeed, 1997; Payne, 2002; Hundt, 2007). Thus, the medio-passives are more on stylistic constructions rather than grammatical ones. The followings are semantically passives, although they are grammatically written in active forms.

(9) *The book sells well.*

(10) *Heat-sensitive material molds to your body shape.*

(11) *The turtleneck collar cuddles up warmly beneath the chin.*

(12) *The film script reads like a demented kind of litany...*

This fact causes further grammatical and academic problems for most Indonesian learners, because they think in bahasa Indonesia and then they literally translate the clauses into English by using general formula of passivization (see (6\*) – (8\*) above).

## B. RESEARCH METHODS

The two researches formally conducted in 2009 and in 2012 were the descriptive ones; the two studies aimed at exploring and explaining the students' ability in understanding English tenses and relevant grammatical features involved. The research conducted in 2009 focused on the analysis of students' understanding on English tenses and aspects; it was a type of descriptive research in the classroom. The population was the English Department students who were taking Grammar 4 subject. The samples were selected by using cluster-random sampling. The data were students' scores of grammar test formally administrated. The research conducted in 2012 was also the descriptive one, but it was a type of document analysis. The research focused on students' problems in constructing passives and how they formally constructed the passives in their theses. The data

of the study were the ungrammatical passives collected from the theses they had written. The data of both researches were analyzed descriptively by using statistical formula and scientifically interpreted based on relevant theories. For this present paper, the data were added by qualitative ones in order to answer the questions raised. In this paper, the analysis and discussion are mostly referred to the methodological aspects on how to have innovative research of language learning based on linguistic-grammatical phenomena by having the case of passives and medio-passives of English.

### C.RESULT AND DISCUSSION

#### 1. Passives and Medio-passives: why are problematic?

Human languages perform different systems and characteristics of grammar cross-linguistically. Linguists, especially typologists, have already found that the various languages of the world are structured according to many different patterns of phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (see Finegan, 2004:224). Although both English and bahasa Indonesia have passives, but the grammatical rules and systems governing the passive constructions are relatively different. Passivization in English are grammatically constructed by using certain rules as they produce the three types of passive, general passives, get passive, and causative passives. Meanwhile, bahasa Indonesia is more on morphological passives by means of affixation with *di-*, *ter-*, or *ke- ... -an*. Other local languages in Indonesia may have other different rules of passivization. Therefore, the different grammatical typology of English compared to bahasa Indonesia has can be claimed as the first factor of most learners of English in Indonesia.

The following table shows the percentage of the seven groups of ungrammatical constructions of the passive voice found in 40 theses written by postgraduate students of English Department of PPs UNP (Mukhaiyar and Jufrizal, 2012).

Table 1: Number and Percentage of Grammatical Problems of Passives

Types of the Grammatical Problems	Number of Data	Percentage
I. Problem on Tense and Voice (Active for passive)	98	34.4%

II. Problem on Agreement of Subject, Copula, with V3	51	17.9%
III. No subject, copula, and verb agreement	81	28.4%
IV. Problem on using Prepositional Phrase and Adverb	11	3.86%
V. Misuse of passive voice	32	11.23%
VI. Problem of using double <i>to be</i>	3	1.05%
VII. Problem on using subject and sentential logics	8	2.8%

The followings are the examples of the ungrammatical passive constructions written by English Department of FBS Universitas Negeri Padang found in their theses (and please compare with the correction codified by a below).

(13) *\*It is hope for the next researchers to conduct...*

(14) *\*For vocabulary test was also given by using multiple choice.*

(15) *\*After the researches was evaluated the task of the students...*

(16) *\*Secondly, it is implied that ...*

(17) *\*Each cycle was consisted of plan, action, observation, and reflection...*

(18) *\*This research was focused on the implementation...*

(16a) *Secondly, it implies that...*

(17a) *Each cycle consisted of plan, action, observation, and reflection...*

(18a) *This research focused on the implementation...*

As claimed by Jufrizal (2012), at least, there are two additional factors causing the grammatical problems of passive constructions faced by EFL learners, namely: (i) the interference of learners' L1 (first language); and (ii) the inflectional and formal changes of verb and *copula be* following the tenses change. The data (16 – 18) are the examples of students' problems on medio-passives; those sentences should be written in active construction as in (16\*, 17\*, 18\*).

It has been claimed that students' problems and difficulties concerning with medio-passive constructions in English may be caused by three linguistic factors (Jufrizal, 2013), namely: (i) mediopassive construction has complicated and complex theoretical bases; it relates to the grammatical combinations of active and passive voice, ergative constructions, and the interface between syntax and semantics, as well; (ii) such construction is more on language style rather than



grammatical regulations; and (iii) language style and speakers' creativities are not static. Language styles and socio-cultural background of language uses and its meanings tend to change at any time naturally.

## 2. Linguistic-Grammatical Features for a Language Learning Research

As it has been argued by Hinkel (in Hinkel (ed.), 2005:3), today the science and practice of second and/or foreign language teaching and learning has come to recognize that learners and the context of language learning are myriad. The areas for the researches on a second or foreign language may be derived as diverse as the multitudes of human life paths, living environments, living conditions, societies, and culture, as well as the economic, geographic, political, legal, and power-based circumstances. In addition, learners in different locations and contexts have different needs and different language abilities. In Indonesia, for instance, EFL learners come to learn English with different linguistic background of L1; they have had various L1 before coming to English. In the local-situational conditions, problems and difficulties of learning the foreign language are caused by linguistic and non-linguistic factors. Therefore, researches on EFL learning are also possible to derive from linguistic-grammatical features which are relatively different from those of learners' L1. It can be stated that one way to have innovation of researches on language learning is to have research problems derived from linguistic-grammatical features.

Based on the facts that passives and medio-passives in English are relatively still problematic for many EFL learners in Indonesia, research problems derived from the linguistic-grammatical features dealing with passive and medio-passive constructions in order to increase the success of EFL learning are highly significant and meaningful. This paper proposes an alternative way of deriving and/or having an innovative research problem on EFL learning based on the case of passives and medio-passives in English. The alternative way proposed in this paper can be called as *comparative grammatical typology analysis to learners' grammatical awareness*. This way consists of four stages which begin with linguistic viewpoint and continued to language learning phases.

The first stage how to derive the linguistic-grammatical features become research problem for language learning is to do a comparative analysis on the similarities and differences dealing with grammatical typology of English and EFL

learners' L1. In this stage, a researcher pays close attention to the grammatical typology of particular linguistic-grammatical units in which the learners have learning problems and/or difficulties. Let's take the case of English passives and medio-passives! As mentioned above, the fact is that many EFL learners at English Department of Universitas Negeri Padang are in serious problems in understanding and using passive and medio-passive constructions of English. It is obvious that the fact is one source of a research problem. Based on comparative analysis on the grammatical typology of passives and medio-passives of English and those of bahasa Indonesia, the following comparisons are available.

Table 2: Comparison of Passives in English and in Indonesia

English		Bahasa Indonesia	
Passives	Medio-passives	Passives	Medio-passives
1. passivization rules	1. active construction	1. passivization rules	-
2. morpho-syntactic markers	2. morpho-syntactic markers	2. morphological markers	-
3. <i>be + Past Particp.</i> , get passive, causative passive	3. syntactically actives, but semantically passives	3. <i>di-</i> , <i>ter-</i> , <i>ke- ... -an</i>	-

After having the similarities and differences resulted from the comparative analysis on grammatical features of English and bahasa Indonesia, the second stage is to relate the items with relevant theories of language learning and their practical application. In this stage, the researcher critically consults the relevant theories and their practical applications in EFL classrooms in order to decide what the topic area is specifically chosen. This stage is more on the processes of considering and deciding the specific area of study by which there will be logical-scientific co-interaction between linguistic-grammatical features with innovative progress of language learning programs.

This stage leads researcher to have prospective choices of possible areas of research problems for researches in EFL learning. Referring to the data and research finding described above, the followings are examples of prospective choices of research problem areas:

- (a) *Promoting EFL learners' grammatical awareness through grammatical-typology approach in grammar learning;*
- (b) *Students' difficulties in understanding and using English passives and medio-passives in writing scientific essays;*
- (c) *Exploring EFL learners' grammatical problems and academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English;*
- (d) *Developing learning materials for better understanding on English passives and medio-passives;*
- (e) *The studies on typological constructions and grammatical features of English passives and medio-passives for student's grammatical awareness;*
- (f) *Developing grammatical assessments of English passives and medio-passives;*
- (g) *Critical-grammatical views on English passives and medio-passives for better spoken and written English;*
- (h) *etc; ...*

The third stage of deriving innovative research problems based on linguistic-grammatical features of English for EFL researches is to have close attention to students' levels and aims of learning programs. This stage refers to pedagogical and academic consideration in order to have suitable purposes, design, and types of planned researches. Dealing with passives and medio-passives, the research problems are more on building learners' language and/or grammatical awareness. There are a lot of methods and techniques of EFL classrooms that can be used as the ways to bring and to "capsulate" linguistic-grammatical features as the "content area" of language learning researches. The levels of EFL learners can be elementary, intermediate, and/or advanced.

The last stage for deriving innovative research problems in language learning researches based on the linguistic-grammatical features is that to formulate research problems (and/or relevant research questions). In this stage, a researcher has to state or to formulate research problems and/or (followed by) research questions depending on type and design of research he wants to conduct. Based on the topic area mentioned above, let's take the topic area (c): *“exploring EFL learners' grammatical problems and academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English”* as the example. This topic area of research problem may be addressed to a descriptive-qualitative, descriptive-quantitative, or mixing research. Again, it depends on researcher's decision, main goals, or level of learners. As for the fourth stage, the followings are the examples of formulation of possible research problem and research questions for a research at university.

Formulation of research problem (an example):

*“Why do English Department students of UNP face and have grammatical problems and academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English in writing scientific essays?”*

Research questions (examples):

- (1) Do English Department students of UNP face and have grammatical problems and academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English in writing scientific essays?*
- (2) What are the forms and types of the grammatical problems and the academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English in writing scientific essays?*
- (3) Why do the students face such grammatical problems and academic difficulties in understanding and using passives and medio-passives of English in writing scientific essays?*

The language learning research conducted based on the research problem and research questions above are basically initiated by linguistic-grammatical

features or phenomena. The linguistic-grammatical features and phenomena of a learnt language may be different and or similar with those of the learners' L1. The facts bring about certain learning problems, both in theoretical and practical aspects. It means that innovative research problems of language learning are not only derived from the teaching-learning approaches, methodologies, techniques, and other practical-operational materials of language learning, but also probably derived from linguistic-grammatical aspects of a learnt language. It is of course that these types of researches are highly supported by linguistic-grammatical viewpoints in nature.

## F. CONCLUSION

Research-based learning is one of the best ways of learning a language, whether it is L1, L2, or FL. Conducting well-planned and “innovative” researches on any levels of language learning programs are academically meaningful and helpful for their success. Language lecturers, teachers, and instructors should regularly conduct particular areas of researches in which they are interested in. Topic areas and research problems of language learning researches are possibly derived from a lot of aspects. In addition to learning theories, approaches, methodologies, and other practical-operational materials of language learning as the sources of research problems, linguistic-grammatical features and phenomena of a learnt language are also potential sources of research problems of language learning. This paper, however, only discusses a “*small part*” of linguistic-grammatical features of English and “*limited*” example of a language learning research, in this this case EFL learning. Other forms and types of research problems deriving from othe linguistic-grammtical features are suggested to have. Therefore, a well-planned and innovative research on language learning, in particular cases, can be derived from certain linguistic-grammatical features of a learnt language.

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