Investigating EFL Students' Active-to-Passive Voice Errors through the Lens of the Surface Strategy Taxonomy

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ABSTRACT

EFL learners often find grammar challenging, particularly when using the passive voice, which often leads to errors. This study investigated the types of errors that EFL students made when converting active into passive constructions, using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) proposed by Dulay et al. (1982) as the analytical framework. A quantitative research design was employed, and data were collected through a test administered to 50 English majors in the English Language and Literature Department at Ghor University. The test consisted of 21 active sentences in various tenses, which students were required to transform into passive sentences. Analysis of the results revealed four main types of errors according to the SST model. Misformation errors were the most frequent (46.10%), followed by omission errors (34.58%). Addition errors were less common (10.85%), while misordering errors occurred the least (8.47%). The findings provide educators with valuable insights, helping them refine teaching strategies and improve students' proficiency in the passive voice.

1. INTRODUCTION

English has become a global medium of communication and plays a crucial role in education, science, technology, and international interaction. Crystal (2003) states that "English turns the big world into a small village" (p. 5). Recognizing its global importance, many countries, including Afghanistan, have integrated English into their national education systems. In Afghanistan, English is taught as a compulsory subject from the fourth grade of primary school through high school and is also offered as a major at the university level. Afghan students typically study English for academic purposes, career opportunities, or to pursue studies and work abroad.

Despite prolonged exposure to English instruction, many EFL learners continue to experience persistent grammatical difficulties. Effective language learning requires not only the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills but also a solid command of grammatical structures to ensure accurate and clear communication. One important structure is the passive voice, widely used in both spoken and written English, especially in academic and formal contexts. Nevertheless, learners often struggle with passive constructions due to structural complexity and differences between English and their first language (L1).

Classroom observations further suggest that students frequently make errors when converting active sentences to the passive voice, thereby reducing sentence clarity and grammatical accuracy. For example, a student once said, *"My car did break"* instead of the correct form, *"My car was broken."* Such errors indicate incomplete mastery of passive construction. This observation aligns with the findings of Helina (2017), Indriani (2019), and Octasary et al. (2025), who noted that extended exposure to English does not necessarily guarantee accurate grammatical usage. These recurring errors indicate that passive-voice acquisition remains a persistent challenge and highlight the need for systematic analysis.

It is widely acknowledged that making errors is a natural part of learning a language (Nadya & Muthalib, 2021; Alsoweed et al., 2025). Dulay et al. (1982) emphasize that "students cannot acquire a new language without systematically making mistakes," while Robinson, as cited in Katiya et al. (2015), notes that errors often occur due to differences between learners' native language and English. Error analysis has long been recognized as an important tool for understanding learners' linguistic difficulties (Corder, 1967). By analyzing learners' errors, researchers can identify recurring patterns, uncover underlying causes, and offer insights for both instruction and further research. Among the various frameworks used in error analysis, the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) categorizes errors into four types: omission, addition, misformation, and misordering (Dulay et al., 1982). Applying SST to study active-to-passive voice errors allows researchers to systematically identify, categorize, and quantify learners' errors, thereby providing both descriptive and analytical perspectives.

Previous research also highlights common error patterns in passive voice constructions. For instance, Alhaysony (2012) reported that omission errors were most frequent among Saudi learners, whereas Manurung et al. (2020) found misformation errors predominated in active-to-passive conversions. Similarly, Sari et al. (2022) and Suprapto et al. (2022) identified misformation and omission as the most prevalent error types. While these studies provide valuable insights, no research has examined this phenomenon among students in the English Department at Ghor University in Afghanistan, thereby revealing a significant research gap. Accordingly, the current study aims to examine the types of errors EFL students make in active-to-passive conversion, using Dulay et al.'s (1982) SST framework.

The findings are expected to help educators understand the types and patterns of errors students make when converting active sentences into passive voice. They also provide insights that enable educators to design targeted strategies and classroom activities that enhance students' grammatical competence. Furthermore, this study provides new empirical evidence by examining EFL learners' error patterns in a previously unexplored context, thereby informing both pedagogy and future research. The following research questions guide the study:

1. What types of errors do EFL students make when converting active sentences into passive voice?

2. What is the frequency distribution of error types (omission, addition, misformation, misordering) made by EFL students at Ghor University when converting active sentences into passive voice?

3. Which error type is the most frequent according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy?

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.4.1. Conceptual Framework for Analysis

Scholars have proposed several error analysis patterns. For this study, however, the researchers adopted the conceptual framework developed by Dulay et al. (1982) to examine errors in converting active sentences into passive voice. This framework was selected because of its effectiveness in categorizing grammatical errors, particularly in the context of language learning. It provides a systematic approach to analyzing errors in active-to-passive conversion, which closely aligns with the study's objectives.
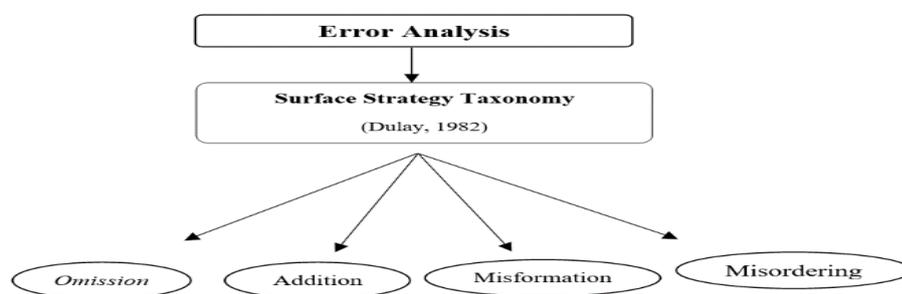

Figure 1. Error analysis

2.4.2. Procedures of Data Analysis

The researchers followed a systematic and structured procedure for analyzing the data. Errors in students' responses were identified, underlined, and labeled with initials corresponding to their type: EA for addition, EMF for misformation, EO for omission, and EMO for misordering. Following Dulay et al.'s (1982) SST model, the errors were categorized into four subdivisions: additions, omissions, misorderings, and misformations. Each error type was then analyzed and described accordingly. To quantify errors, Abdillah and Prawati's (2025) formula (p = f/n × 100%) was used to calculate the percentage for each error type, thereby ensuring accuracy and consistency in the analysis. This systematic approach provided a clear and comprehensive understanding of the students' errors in converting active sentences into passive voice.

2.4.3. Ethical Consideration

This study was carried out with full respect for participants' rights and privacy. Everyone participated voluntarily, and their responses were kept completely anonymous. AI tools were used only minimally to assist with word choice and synonym suggestions; nonetheless, all analysis and interpretation were the author's original work. The study consistently followed accepted academic and ethical practices.

3. FINDINGS

This study examined errors made by English Department students at Ghor University in converting active sentences to passive voice. Using Dulay et al.'s (1982) SST model,

errors were categorized into misformation, omission, addition, and misordering. The findings are presented in accordance with the study's research questions (RQs).

RQ1: What types of errors do EFL students make when converting active sentences into passive voice?

The analysis revealed that students made four main types of errors: misformation, omission, addition, and misordering. These error categories reflect the grammatical difficulties learners encounter when forming passive constructions.

RQ2: What is the frequency distribution of error types?

Table 1. Presents the total frequencies and percentages for each error type.

Table 1. Frequency of Errors

No.	Error Type	Total Number of Errors	Percentage
1	Omission	204	34.58%
2	Addition	64	10.85%
3	Misformation	272	46.10%
4	Misordering	50	8.47%
Total		**590**	**100%**

RQ3: Which error type is the most frequent according to the Surface Strategy Taxonomy?

3.1. Misformation

As shown in Table 1, misformation emerged as the most prevalent error, accounting for 272 instances (46.10%) of the total 590 errors. It suggests that students often substituted one grammatical form for another, such as using regular markers instead of irregular ones, selecting the wrong form of "be," or misusing past participles. For example, in the sentence *"The tree was hitted by a truck,"* the verb "hit" is irregular and should remain the same in the past tense. Similarly, *"The newspaper is readed by Mariam"* should be corrected to *"The newspaper is read by Mariam."* In *"Rice is growed in India,"* the correct past participle is "grown," not "growed." Another frequent error occurs in *"The electric bulb is invent by Thomas Edison,"* where the simple past auxiliary "was" and past participle "invented" are necessary for proper passive construction.

3.2. Omission

As indicated by the data, the second most frequent error type was omission, totaling 204 instances (34.58%). These errors show that learners often omit essential grammatical elements needed to form a passive sentence correctly. This deficiency is evident in several examples. For instance, in *"The window broken by Ahmad,"* the auxiliary verb is missing; the correct form is *"Ahmad broke the window."* In *"A window is washed by a window washer right now,"* the absence of *"being"* disrupts the passive structure; the correct sentence is *"A window is being washed by a window washer right now."* Similarly, *"The building cleaned by janitors at night"* omits the auxiliary *"is,"* which should read *"The building is cleaned by janitors at night."* Omission errors also occur in verb inflection, as in *"Many people are employ by the company,"* where the past participle *"employed"* is required. Leaving out "by-phrase" is another omission, as in *"The door is opened Karim,"*

which should be *"The door is opened by Karim."* Most of the omissions observed involve auxiliary verbs, verb conjugations, and forms of "to be."

3.3. Addition

Addition errors were less frequent, with 64 instances (10.9%). These errors occur when learners include unnecessary elements in a sentence. For example, in the sentence *"Karim was did surprise by the news,"* the auxiliary verb *"did"* is unnecessary and should be removed for grammatical accuracy. The correct sentence is *"Karim was surprised by the news."* A similar case is found in *"The package was become mailed by Ahmad,"* where the word *become* serves no grammatical function and makes the construction incorrect. Removing it results in the correct form: *"The package was mailed by Ahmad."* Another example is *"The boy was helped by the Mariam,"* where the article "*the"* before the proper noun *Mariam* is redundant and interrupts the natural flow of the sentence. The corrected version is *"The boy was helped by Mariam."* Additionally, in *"A tests was given to students by the teacher,"* the plural marker -*s* on *tests* is unnecessary because it conflicts with the singular article "A." The correct sentence is "A test was given to students by the teacher."

3.4. Misordering

Misordering errors were the least frequent, with 50 instances (8.5%). These errors happen when sentence elements are arranged in an incorrect or illogical order. For example, in *"Hammers at a hardware store is selled by people,"* the sentence components are placed incorrectly. The corrected version is *"Hammers are sold by people at a hardware store."* This sentence also includes a misformation error in the use of *"selled"* instead of the correct irregular past participle *"sold,"* as discussed in the previous section.

4. DISCUSSION

This study investigated errors made by English Department students at Ghor University in converting active sentences into passive voice using Dulay et al. (1982) Surface Strategy Taxonomy. The findings reveal systematic patterns of learner errors that can be interpreted in relation to both theoretical perspectives on second language acquisition and previous empirical studies in the field.

Misformation was the most common type of error. These errors occur because learners sometimes use incorrect morphemes or sentence structures (Suprapto et al., 2022). As results showed, students made errors with verb forms, misused auxiliaries, or chose the wrong past participles. These errors suggest that learners sometimes overgeneralize rules, such as applying regular past tense markers to irregular verbs or misusing auxiliaries in passive constructions. From an interlanguage perspective, these errors indicate that students are still learning to use passive structures correctly. At the same time, the dominance of misformation errors was limited. It indicates that prior instruction and exposure helped learners grasp the general form, even though control over verb inflection and auxiliary use remained weak. These findings are supported by Manurung et al. (2020), Sari et al. (2022), and Nurussa'adah (2024), who reported misformation as the most frequent error among EFL learners. However, Sari and Fikroni (2025) found it to be the second most common error, and Kadiatmaja (2021) reported it as the least frequent.

Generally, the results highlight the importance of giving students targeted practice with auxiliaries, verb forms, and past participles.

Omission errors were the second-most-common type. It means learners often omit important grammatical elements when forming passive sentences. Omission refers to the absence of an item that must appear in a well-formed utterance (Dewi et al., 2021). From an interlanguage perspective, learners are still developing their understanding of passive sentence structure, leading to inconsistent use of essential grammatical elements. In some cases, overgeneralization also contributed to the errors. For example, in sentences like "A window is washed by a window washer right now" and "Many people are employ by the company," learners applied rules they already knew, such as the simple passive form, *is + past participle*, to contexts where they did not fit. It shows that overgeneralization is one reason some omissions occurred. These findings are consistent with those of Baseerat et al. (2022), Sari et al. (2022), and Nurussa'adah (2024), who also reported omission as the second most common error type, whereas Kadiatmaja (2021) found omission errors to be the most common in students' passive voice writing. The differences across studies may be due to variations in learners' proficiency, teaching methods, or exposure to English.

Addition errors occurred less frequently than omission and misformation errors. It shows that students only occasionally include unnecessary elements in passive constructions. These errors occur when learners add items that should not appear in a grammatically correct sentence (Pratiwi, 2022). The relatively low number of these errors suggests that learners generally understand the basic structure of passive sentences, though they sometimes overgeneralize rules, adding forms that are not required. For example, in *"Karim was did surprise by the news,"* the auxiliary "did" is unnecessary, and in *"The package was become mailed by Ahmad,"* the word "become" adds no grammatical function. These examples show that learners sometimes apply rules they already know to contexts where they are inappropriate. The results are in line with Lamunpandh and Chaengchenkit (2020), who found that addition errors occurred less frequently than misformation and omission among Thai EFL students using passive voice. However, Al-Husban (2018), Baseerat et al. (2022), and Hafiz and Wijaya (2023) found them among the most frequent types across different learning contexts. Overall, even though addition errors were less common in this study, the findings suggest that learners could benefit from targeted instruction to help them understand when certain grammatical elements are unnecessary. Such instruction may help learners avoid overuse and produce more accurate and natural passive constructions.

The study also found that misordering errors were the least frequent. It shows that learners generally understand English sentence structure, even though they sometimes struggle with verbs or auxiliary usage. Misordering errors, as defined by Mufidah and Islam (2022), occur when a morpheme or group of morphemes is placed incorrectly within a sentence. Even though these errors were the least frequent, they show that learners are still developing their language skills as they try different word orders while applying grammatical rules. Previous studies show mixed findings. For example, Baseerat et al. (2022) observed that misordering errors were rare among ESL learners, which aligns with the low frequency found in this study.

In contrast, Sari and Fikroni (2025) reported misordering as the second most frequent error type, while Wahyuni (2022) found no instances of misordering errors at all. Such differences may be influenced by learners' proficiency levels, teaching methods, or first language background. On the whole, the findings highlight the importance of paying attention to word order in passive constructions despite them being the least frequent. Educators should provide clear guidance on sentence structure to help learners produce passive sentences more accurately and naturally.

5. CONCLUSION

The primary purpose of this study was to examine the types of errors made by students in the English Department at Ghor University when converting active sentences to passive voice. Using the Surface Strategy Taxonomy (SST) proposed by Dulay et al. (1982), four major error types were identified: misformation, omission, addition, and misordering, and their frequencies were analyzed.

The results showed that misformation and omission errors were the most frequent, followed by addition and misordering errors, respectively. This pattern highlights that converting active sentences to passive remains a significant challenge for EFL learners, especially with irregular verbs and past participles. Overall, fewer than half of the students' passive-voice sentences were error-free. It indicates considerable difficulty in constructing accurate passive structures, and certain areas require more focused instruction.

The main contribution of this study lies in its practical insights for teaching passive voice. By identifying the most common errors made by EFL learners at Ghor University, the study provides guidance for instructors in designing more targeted instruction and effective teaching strategies to help students improve their accuracy and fluency in passive constructions. These findings offer a basis for future research in similar EFL contexts and highlight the specific difficulties learners experience when using the passive voice.

5.1. Implications

The findings have practical implications for both teaching and research. For instructors and curriculum designers, the results suggest the need for carefully designed, targeted exercises on the passive voice, particularly to address misformation and omission errors, to enhance learners' overall English proficiency. For researchers, this study provides a framework for analyzing grammatical errors in other contexts. It offers fresh perspectives on EFL learners' challenges in this context and identifies areas where further investigation, such as longitudinal studies or larger samples, could yield deeper insights. All in all, the study emphasizes the importance of addressing specific grammatical difficulties to improve students' command of English.

5.2. Limitations and Further Studies

Like all research, this study has some limitations. First, it included only male students, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Including both male and female learners would provide a more comprehensive picture. In addition, the participants were English majors from a single department, so the results may not reflect the challenges faced by other EFL learners within the institution. There are several directions for future research. Further studies could investigate other grammatical problem areas, such as the

use of articles, prepositions, conjunctions, and verb tenses. Research involving learners from different departments or proficiency levels may also uncover new patterns of errors. It could offer fresh ideas for teaching and deeper insights into passive-voice acquisition. Moreover, future work could focus on the reasons behind errors in passive-voice constructions, which may help develop more effective teaching strategies.

5.3. Recommendations

For instructors

Focus on the most frequent error types by offering targeted tutorial sessions to clarify difficult areas.

1. Use specific instructional techniques to teach the passive voice more effectively, such as consciousness-raising tasks, sentence-combining exercises, and a combination of deductive and inductive rule teaching.
2. Motivate students continuously and provide frequent opportunities to practice passive structures both in and out of the classroom.
3. Present multiple examples of passive voice sentences in meaningful contexts before explaining the formal rules.
4. Make the teaching-learning process more engaging to encourage active participation and reduce error frequency.

For students

1. Practice irregular verbs and their past participles in meaningful sentences or exercises to improve passive voice accuracy.
2. Allocate time for additional practice, especially in areas that pose difficulties.
3. Supplement classroom learning with independent study to reinforce passive voice skills.

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