Practice-Oriented Paper

Passive Use in Japanese EFL Learner English: a Corpus-based Study

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Japanese is considered a language that prefers to focus on situations rather than persons. Such event portrayal can affect L1 Japanese speakers' acquisition of English, a language thought to focus more on agents. Passives are a way of backgrounding agents, and L1 expression of agency could be reflected in their L2 use. Similar interference during L2 acquisition has been observed when examining argument structure and passivisation across various languages.

This corpus-based study examines written and spoken texts produced by L1 Japanese college students. It compares these to native English speakers' language and examines indications of L1 interference in passive construction use. It finds differences suggesting that structures are carried over into the learnt language, such as the adversative passive, a feature absent in English, and relative clauses that give prominence to actions rather than actors. Indications of a different perspective during event portrayal were also found. Furthermore, the study suggests that the various functions of the passive in Japanese can contribute to a wider range of EFL learners' use of some passive verbs, such as the potentially causative "made." "Make" causatives may be an area for further research on the perception of argument structure and agency during language acquisition.

Language acquisition can be affected by a world perception shaped by the learners' first language (L1). Whether these differences stem from L1 interference can be observed when examining behaviour shared by a number of learners with the same L1. This paper presents a contrastive study of a learner corpus and a native speaker corpus that examines the differences in how Japanese EFL learners use English structures compared to L1 English speakers. Because Japanese is frequently considered a language that prefers the backgrounding of agents (Ando, 2016; Hinds, 2012; Ikegami, 1981; Itasaka, 1971), it will look at passivisation, which

is one way backgrounding can be achieved. Observably different passive use in the writing and speaking of Japanese EFL learners compared to native English speakers could be an indicator of learner L1 interference linked to the expression of agency.

The paper first presents the features of the passive in Japanese and differences compared to English that may cause interference. It also reviews relevant studies that have observed L1 interference at a structural level between English, Japanese, and other languages. The data and methodology of the paper will then be presented, followed by a discussion of the results and concluding remarks. First, I will present the framework used in this study.

The following abbreviations are used below:

acc - accusative
dat - dative
nmlz – nominalizer
nom - nominative
npst – non-past
pass - passive
pol – polite
pst – past
top - topic

Passives and Agency

Compared to languages such as English, Japanese has been typologically characterised as a "situation-focused language" as opposed to a "person-focused language" (Hinds, 2012) and a "language of becoming" as opposed to a "language of doing" (Ando, 2016, p. 256; Ikegami, 1981, p. 283; Itasaka, 1971, p. 78). For example, Ando (2016) pointed out that in a Japanese sentence such as in (1) below, the event is presented as happening naturally rather than being caused by the actor, who is the subject in the English version. In this paper, I will present Japanese in its alphabetised (*romaji*) form for comprehensibility.

1. *Raigetsu,* *tenkyo-su-ru koto-ni* *nari-mashi-ta.*
   Next.month move-do-npst nmlz-dat become-pol-pst

"I'm moving out next month."

Furthermore, Shibatani (1985) mentioned passivisation as an act of "agent defocusing" (pp. 830–831) because it allows or, in some languages, requires the omission of the agent. Such observations suggest that Japanese prefers to put agents in the background.

Apart from defocusing, Yamaguchi (2001) examined the cognitive components affecting passivisation in Japanese and argues that *empathy* is a factor affecting the acceptability of various passive constructions. Empathy is, according to Kuno & Kaburaki (1977), a way to place the speaker's viewpoint depending on whether they identify with actors in a described event (as in first-person accounts) or an event is described objectively (Kuno & Kaburaki, 1977). A cognitive linguistics approach may be useful when examining the number of passives used by learners as opposed to native speakers and the types of verbs chosen for passivisation.

Shibatani also demonstrates the comparatively wider range of passive use in Japanese by presenting the adversative passive. He gave example (2) to demonstrate this feature (1985, p. 842).

2. *Keisatsu-wa yōgisha-ni nige-rare-ta.*
   police- top suspect-dat escape-pass-pst
   'The police had the suspect run away.'

The wide range of passive usage in Japanese may be another indication of the language's tendency to focus on states or actions rather than on actors. Thus, different passive use by Japanese EFL learners in their English may be a sign of L1 interference for reasons such as agency perception. The next section presents previous research on such interference between various languages.

L1 Interference

When examining the argument structure perceptions of learners of Japanese, Yamada & Miyamoto (2017) pointed out that it is impossible for learners to delearn features of their L1 when acquiring a language that does not have those features. They observe that the learners' L1 being a *pro-drop* or *non-pro-drop* language affects their interpretation of a null argument in Japanese. In other

words, the interpretation varied depending on whether their L1 allows subject ellipsis. Their study argues that speakers of a *pro-drop* language, such as Spanish, will interpret a null argument in Japanese in the same way they would an ellipted pronoun in their L1. Conversely, L1 speakers of *non-pro-drop* languages, such as English, do not show this restriction, allowing for ambiguity in interpreting a null argument in Japanese. In the test sentence shown in (3), speakers of Spanish consistently interpreted the ellipted element (e) as the bear's car, a feature carried over from their L1. Conversely, English speakers allowed a looser interpretation of (e).

3. *Kuma-wa jibun-no kuruma-o fui-ta.*
   Bear-top self-gen car-acc wipe-pst
   Soshite, Pengin-mo [e] fui-ta
   And penguin-also wipe-pst
   'Bear wiped his own car, and Penguin wiped [e] as well.'

Nakayama, et al. (2019) examined differences in the interpretation of pronouns and reflexives by Japanese EFL learners. They observed that learners found it easier to identify what noun phrase English reflexive pronouns were referring to if they were referring to the subject of a clause rather than an object, pointing to different levels of sensitivity to different elements of the argument structure.

Furthermore, Foucou and Kübler (2000) conducted corpus-based research in which they observed the difficulties that French students have with using the passive due to the less frequent use of the construction in their L1.

Like this current study, Appel and Murray (2023) used the International Corpus Network of Asian Learners of English (ICNALE) corpus. They compared English-language writing by students whose L1 is Japanese, Chinese, or Korean, focusing on lexical bundles. Their findings suggest that L1 affects L2 language production as the results for speakers of each language differed distinctly.

These various observations show that structural differences between L1 and L2 can affect how learners interpret or express semantic actors or agents and that this effect can stem from argument structure perception. The next section lays

out the method used to examine passive use in this study.

Data and Method

This paper uses data taken from the ICNALE corpus, developed by Ishikawa (2023), who described it as follows:

> The ICNALE is a large collection of controlled essays and speeches by English native speakers and college students in ten Asian countries and areas.... [B]oth speeches and writings are based on the same common topics: 'It is important for college students to have a part-time job' and 'Smoking should be completely banned at all the restaurants in the country.' (Ishikawa, 2015, p. 5)

The focus on two topics reduces the possibility of accidental findings that may be due to differences in style or register. Ebeling (2016) pointed out that these would affect the results more than the corpus size.

Because this paper examines language produced by Japanese learners of English, only texts by Japanese students and native English speakers were chosen for comparison. The two types of texts were used to create one learner corpus (JPN) and one native corpus (ENS). To compile the corpora and examine the data, the AntConc application, developed by Anthony (2022), was used.

The ENS and JPN corpora had 230,082 and 368,590 tokens, i.e., words in total, and 7,739 and 7,097 types, i.e., unique words, respectively. The type-token ratios are 0.0336 and 0.0196, respectively, indicating that the ENS corpus' language is more varied.

Due to the typical structure of English passives, I narrowed down the search to collocations as far as four words on the right and zero on the left of the node, be. This range was chosen due to the possible inclusion of adverbs (e.g., "be completely banned") and to allow the inclusion of repetitions and corrections which were observed especially in records of spoken language. An examination of the most common collocations and the proportions of passive or past participle verb forms showed the distribution of passives in both corpora.

The statistical significance of different findings between corpora was calculated using a chi-squared test(X2). Hoffman, et al. (2008) suggested

this method, using the Corpus Frequency Wizard (http://sigil.collocations.de/wizard.html), to calculate to what extent findings may be accidental. The statistical significance of single tokens used with "be" was evaluated using log-likelihood, which Hoffmann, et al. (2008) described as a measurement of the statistical significance of collocates.

Results and Discussion

The most readily observable differences were found in the use of the base form "be" (Table 1). Therefore, only passives used with this form were examined. The higher frequency of some of the most common collocates in the JPN corpus may be due to a more limited scope of vocabulary used by EFL learners, given the corpus' lower type-token ratio.

The passive "banned" being the most frequent collocate is predictable due to one of the two topics ("Smoking should be completely banned at all the restaurants in the country."), as are other verbs used to describe permission or lack thereof ("prohibited," "allowed," and "forbidden").

The most common passive verb with a semantic value unrelated to permission and, therefore, less likely to be frequent due to topic-specific bias appears to be "used" with a log-likelihood of 70.321 in the JPN corpus. A closer examination in context, however, reveals that 12 out of the 26 occurrences are in the combination "used to," meaning "accustomed to." If the passive "used" is then counted as only the remaining 14, its frequency is not statistically more significant than in the ENS corpus, which contains nine examples not listed due to their low log-likelihood.

The next most common apparent passive verb not describing permission or lack thereof in the ENS corpus appears to be "prepared" with a log-likelihood of 60.263. All 17 occurrences, however, are used in a way semantically similar to "ready," suggesting that these tokens are adjectives and are, therefore, excluded from further discussion.

Thus, the most prominent passive verb not related to permission in the JPN corpus is "protected" with a log-likelihood of 31.476. It is used to describe protecting the rights of someone and, in one instance, it presumably is a direct

Table 1

ENS and JPN Corpora 'Be' Collocate Verb

ENS Corpus				JPN Corpus			
Collocate	Rank	FreqR	Likelihood	Collocate	Rank	FreqR	Likelihood
banned	1	374	1506.731	banned	1	532	2839.290
allowed	5	61	199.360	prohibited	11	24	107.587
prepared	21	18	60.236	used	19	26	70.321
affected	26	16	52.924	allowed	20	17	59.176
left	40	14	37.591	forbidden	22	11	50.093
exposed	50	11	24.653	protected	33	6	31.476
permitted	57	6	22.136	damaged	40	7	26.801
gained	62	8	20.054	made	43	12	23.528
considered	62	8	20.054	taught	44	7	22.900
made	64	12	19.348	done	45	8	22.818
regulated	66	5	19.158	solved	50	5	21.365
				satisfied	52	6	21.167
				exposed	55	5	20.562
				controlled	63	4	18.577
				considered	63	4	18.577

translation of the Japanese *mamoru*, which also means to "adhere" to a standard, as it occurs with "morals." The verb "damaged" is also frequently used in the passive. As shown in context (Appendix), some of this verb's seven occurrences are somewhat unnatural, perhaps due to L1 influence at a lexical level. An experienced speaker may find the verb "affected" more suitable, as it appears more commonly in the ENS corpus.

The expressions preceding "made" (shown in context in Tables A3a and A3b, Appendix) are compellingly different. The difference in this verb form's frequency between the corpora is not statistically significant (X2 = 0.912). Nevertheless, there is prominently consistent use of modals in the ENS corpus, e.g., "a decision should be made" or "an argument that could be made." In these instances, passive use seems to be a way for the speakers to avoid mentioning the authorities or anyone else who should make a decision, such as on a smoking ban.

The JPN corpus, conversely, includes diverse examples of the use of the passive "made" construction. The first example is, "People who are around border can be made to keep blessing the smoke." It is not clear what the speaker means by "blessing." It is possibly a mistranslation of "receive," overgeneralised from the phrase "receive a blessing." This assumed intended meaning of the verb, however, does not explain the use of the passive. This example may be an indication of the L1's adversative passive interference.

The next example of "made" appeared in the following sentence: "If it is right, what problem is there when they think manners and smoking so that trouble may not be made to us?" The speaker is talking about the general issue of smoking, which may have led them to use the passive, to omit the agents that cause trouble and to utter a more generalised statement.

The following example occurs in this context: "For example, they make the machine which takes all smoke. It may cost a lot, but I hope it to be made." It is not clear who "they" refers to in the previous sentence, but due to the combination "they make" in the previous sentence, the speaker appears to choose this construction to avoid repetition rather than remove agency from the description of the event.

The following "made" construction appears in the sentence, "And in the first place I believe that tobacco do not have to be made anywhere because tobacco contain a large number of poison only." The Japanese loanword *tabako* has a wider range of use than the English "tobacco," which may explain the use in this context. The sentence could be paraphrased as, "And in the first place, tobacco shouldn't be smoked anywhere, because tobacco contains a large amount of poison." The ENS corpus does not contain any instances of the passive of

"smoke." This could indicate L1 interference as the JPN corpus also contains somewhat unnatural expressions such as "this restaurant cannot be smoked" or people "being smoked." In the former example, the passive is possibly used to focus on the location or people affected by smoking, rather than on the smoker. The latter example may be another sign of the Japanese adversative passive interference and a preference to remove the subject in the argument structure in such contexts.

The following example's context is, "I don't think smoking should be banned completely everywhere so far because it would be so hard for smokers, but I hope something changeable stuff will be made as she said." Despite the somewhat unnatural use of "changeable stuff," the use of "made" is semantically similar to that in the ENS corpus as it indicates some sort of authority implementing a policy.

The example after that includes "should," making it structurally similar to examples found in the ENS corpus: "Also, the restaurant which all the rooms is for the people who smoke should be made because the room where people can smoke is restricted and the room where people can smoke without any hesitation is necessary."

The next sentence is another example of "made" used with "trouble." In this case, too, agency is avoided, leaving it somewhat unclear who is causing the trouble: "It is trouble that be made breathing smoke which he doesn't hope and his lung cancer risk becomes higher."

The clause preceding the following example mentions the agent as "someone" who smokes. Therefore, agency is not avoided. "If someone smokes by us when we eat some delicious food, we will be made feel so bad by the smoke."

The next example follows the same structure with "made" as those in the ENS corpus: "I think for smokers more kind policy should be made."

The following sentence shows signs of L1 interference: "So we must choose a job that can be made much money by short hours." The sentence indicates that the writer intended "job" as the structure's focus. This becomes clear with a possible Japanese translation of "a job where much money can be made," as seen in (4).

4. *[takusan-no okane-o kaseg-e-ru] shigoto*
much-gen money-nom earn-pot-npst job

The Japanese version is a noun phrase with "job" as the head modified by the relative clause *takusan-no okane-o kasegeru*, making the noun the semantically most prominent element and not mentioning the person who would be making money. This may be an indication of L1 interference at a cognitive level due to the shift of the empathy focus away from the person who is making money and towards the "job."

The final occurrence of "made" in the JPN corpus tends to follow the same logic as examples from the ENS corpus, as it implies authorities or restaurant owners/managers as the agents. "Like restaurant we can enter with our pet, that we can make smoke can be made."

Further verbs used in the passive in the JPN corpus were "taught," "done," "solved," "satisfied," "exposed," "controlled," and "considered." Only "exposed" and "considered" also appear in the list of the 70 most frequent tokens in the ENS corpus, used significantly more in the native corpus (X2 = 93.942 and X2 = 24.252, respectively).

Both are used with semantically similar tokens in both corpora. "Exposed" is used in both corpora with words such as "smoke," "harmful," and "danger." "Considered" is frequently used in both corpora at the end of clauses with modal verbs, i.e., "ought to be considered" or "can be considered." These findings do not suggest L1 interference.

Some differences in lexical choices between the native and the learner corpus suggest that argument structure perception may influence the formation of passives by Japanese EFL learners to avoid the inclusion of a subject.

The use of "made" differed the most in each corpus. While native speakers used it predominantly to express decisions made by authorities, learners appear to use it as a broader means of causativisation. Causatives may be another point for examining differences and discussing underlying cognitive, syntactic, and semantic components that may suggest L1 interference.

The use of "made" to not only avoid agency but to suggest an adverse effect as well as a focus on an activity rather than the actor implies that there may be

cognitive factors that cause L1 interference. The use of the passive "made" or "smoked" can suggest that EFL learners carry over the empathy focus from their L1. The former is also used in a context that suggests overlap with the Japanese adversative passive. Differences in the use of other passives, such as "damaged" or "protected," may be due to L1 interference at a lexical level.

While the ICNALE corpus gives information on the students' levels, the relatively small number of passives examined made it difficult to establish whether their level was relevant to certain types of unnatural use. Also, an examination of course materials may reveal whether these differences are caused by methods used for language acquisition rather than structural differences between the languages.

Conclusion

This study examined the differences in the passive use of native speakers and Japanese EFL learners. It found differences due to lexical interference or limitations, such as the more extensive use of "damaged" and "protected" by learners. At a structural and cognitive level, L1 interference has been observed as a means to avoid agency by removing the subject in contexts suggesting adversativity and a shift of empathy focus away from the agent in order to focus on the event in contexts possibly influenced by the structure's function in Japanese. The passive verb that showed the largest differences in use was "made," pointing to the usefulness of further research on make-causatives.

The study was limited by the relatively small number of passives examined. It also did not have the scope to consider course materials.

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Appendix

Table A1

"Protected" learner corpus

a right to avoid smoking. Their rights are to be	protected	at the same time. To achieve it, we have
more enjoy eating out. The morals of smoking must be	protected	by smokers more strictly. We all have the right
Although some people say that smoker's rights should be	protected,	protecting rights of people who don't want to
I don't like smoking but smoking people should be	protected,	so restaurant is public space and it is – it
and — uh and the right to smoke also should be	protected.	So, completely separate it, um, those who don't —
by smoking. Most people's right to enjoy should be	protected.	Third, smoking itself is not bad habits, but children

Table A2

"Damaged" learner corpus

some serious illness. Of course people who smoke to be	damaged	but people who don't smoke also to be
One don't care cigar smoke, but another might be	damaged	by the secondhand smoke. According to circumstances, the customer
damaged but people who don't smoke also to be	damaged	for their health. People whom age is less than 20
to ban smoking. Second, I think Japanese government will be	damaged.	I guess that if all restaurant ban to smoke,
not only – not only the people who smoke can be	damaged,	no smokers also can be damaged. So if they
who – who smoke – who smoke. No smoking people can be	damaged	of them so the smokers should – should think that
who smoke can be damaged, no smokers also can be	damaged.	So if they want to smoke at – if they

Table A3a

"Made" native corpus

decision that should be made by yourself, it should be	made	by a group. Uh, restaurant is a public place
their own futures. The financial gains that stand to be	made	by being diligent and hardworking in college as well
and so it's not a decision that should be	made	by one person but a group decision. Uh, smoking,
um, and smoking is not a decision that should be	made	by yourself, it should be made by a group.
I – I guess there is an argument that could be	made	about have smoking sections or that kind of thing,
source of income. I think that if colleges can be	made	affordable enough or students can be given grant so
nonsmoking section and a restaurant, but it will probably be	made	back in profits from all the new customers. If
will... I do agree completely. I think smoking should be	made	completely illegal everywhere in every country because it is
personal choice. I don't think that it should be	made	illegal, although I do think that it far – it'
know, what... I do not agree that smoking should be	made	illegal. Yes, it is harmful but to decide that
tobacco has addictive properties. I suppose a case could be	made	that restaurants which allow smoke filled air to mingle
the customers and the owners and why should smokers be	made	to feel like criminals or lepers? Smokers have been

Table A3b

"Made" learner corpus

separate them completely. People who are around border can be	made	to keep blessing the smoke. Finally, because recently people
think manners and smoking so that trouble may not be	made	to us? It is the cause of those who
So the place gathering people like restaurants has to be	made	a rule about smoking, which is decided not for
may cost a lot, but I hope it to be	made.	Also, the restaurant which all the rooms is for
place I believe that tobacco do not have to be	made	anywhere because tobacco contain a large number of poison
for smokers, but I hope something changeable stuff will be	made	as she said. What I want to say is
the rooms is for the people who smoke should be	made	because the room where people can smoke is restricted
having lung cancer than smoker. It is trouble that be	made	breathing smoke which he doesn't hope and his
us when we eat some delicious food, we will be	made	feel so bad by the smoke. I think the
it. I think for smokers more kind policy should be	made.	I agree with the opinion that smoking should be
different. So we must choose a job that can be	made	much money by short hours. But I think college
with our pet, that we can make smoke can be	made.	Some of my friends are smokers. They are good