

Active VS Passive: The Miniature Structures with Massive Impacts in Business Writing

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บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อสะท้อนสถานการณ์การใช้โครงสร้างกรรตุวาทและกรรมจากในภาษาอังกฤษในการเขียนเชิงธุรกิจ จากการทบทวนวรรณกรรมในส่วนของ การเรียนการสอนภาษาอังกฤษเชิงธุรกิจ และการสื่อสารธุรกิจพบว่า การเรียนการสอนตลอดจนตำราด้านการสื่อสารธุรกิจ เน้นให้ผู้เรียนเขียนประโยคโครงสร้างกรรตุวาททดแทนการใช้โครงสร้างกรรมจาก เนื่องจากมองว่าโครงสร้างกรรตุวาทมีความชัดเจนและสื่อสารได้เข้าใจง่ายกว่า อย่างไรก็ตาม ผู้เขียนมองว่าโครงสร้างทั้งสองรูปแบบมีความจำเป็นในการเขียนเพื่อการสื่อสารเชิงธุรกิจ เพราะแต่ละรูปแบบมีการใช้ต่างกันขึ้นอยู่กับวัตถุประสงค์ของการเขียนและผู้อ่านหรือผู้รับสารเป็นสำคัญ ทั้งนี้ได้เสนอทฤษฎีต่างๆ ที่เกี่ยวข้อง เช่นทฤษฎีการสื่อสารในเชิงธุรกิจ และหลักการใช้โครงสร้างทั้งสองรูปแบบ เป็นต้น นอกจากนี้ยังเสนอให้มีการปรับแนวคิดในด้านการเรียนการสอน เพื่อสนับสนุนให้มีการใช้กรรตุวาทและกรรมจากควบคู่กันในการเขียน

คำสำคัญ กรรตุวาท กรรมจาก การเขียนเชิงธุรกิจ การสื่อสารธุรกิจ

Abstract

This article aims to reflect the use of active and passive voice in business writing. The literature of business writing and business communication instruction indicates that instruction as well as textbooks emphasize the minimization of passive voice, and encourage the use of active voice in writing. Here, the author

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discusses the necessity of remaining both active and passive voice in business writing as they are different and depend on the writing purpose and on the reader as the receiver of the message and presents related theories including business communication and principles of use of active and passive voice to encourage the use of both voices in business writing instruction.

Keywords: Active Voice, Passive Voice, Business Writing, Business Communication

1. Introduction

English is widely known and accepted as an international or medium language not only used in English speaking countries, but also in most settings where intercultural communication occurs. Realizing its significance and considering it as part of national success, most countries, especially non-English speaking countries, emphasize English education at all levels. That is why a non-native English speaker with a high level of English proficiency is considered advantageous in addition to being well-educated.

Undeniably, English is necessary, especially in business where business people with different native languages must deal with each other. Business communication no longer occurs domestically; it occurs in every corner of the world. We cannot avoid seeing a bilingual label on the packages of local products. Wherever international business exists, English tends to be used. English Communication takes place at almost every stage in international business – from dealing with a foreign customer to negotiating with foreign investors. International business communication requires at each level English, as the language itself maintains some typical standards which are internationally adopted.

Among the English skills, writing plays a significant role in business communication. Letters and emails are daily sent and received; financial reports

are prepared and presented; meetings and conferences are recorded and rewritten for formal minutes. Business writing should be carefully revised for effective formats, vocabulary and business terminology, accuracy, etc. to meet the standards of business language and preserve the credibility of a company. A good writer always seeks the most 'effective' words and structures, making sure that his written message will reach the business objectives; consequently, tone and language style are considered as well.

Among writing elements, grammar is viewed as an important task of which the writer must be concerned. Bad grammar and illegible language structure causes misunderstanding and possibly ceases business activities with a business partner. Teaching business writing mainly focuses on a number of writing elements including formats, business terminology, courtesy, etc. One such element is grammar which is part of successful transactions as it brings credibility to its writer.

Correct grammar reflects a writer's professionalism and carefulness. However, despite its grammatical correctness, a well-revised text is not always the best for presentation to a receiver or reader. Among grammatical units, active and passive voice seem to be least considered. Mistakes and errors in passive and active forms seem not to be found among writers with good English proficiency. When a sentence contains correct passive or active forms, it is always skipped or overlooked by a supervisor or a person who proofreads it. This phenomenon has been supported by Doughty (2001) who agreed that structures and forms of the target language were found vital in a second language classroom where a learner's language accuracy is expected.

Nowadays, the hundreds of business communication and writing textbooks available worldwide rather emphasize forms and structures than uses. Indeed, most of them encourage their readers to write active statements and

minimize passive ones. Hence, this article aims to discuss the phenomenon of active and passive use in business communication/writing textbooks and demonstrate the necessity of the balance of active and passive voice in business writing as well as provide suggestions towards better use of the two voices.

2. Active and Passive Voice Lessons in Business Communication Textbooks

A number of business communication textbooks neither mention nor focus on active and passive voice. Obviously, most of these textbooks put it in the ‘Grammar’ section, and it is possible that textbook authors position them as a self study section. Some leave grammar in the appendix; learners are expected to use it as a language reference for their business writing assignments or homework.

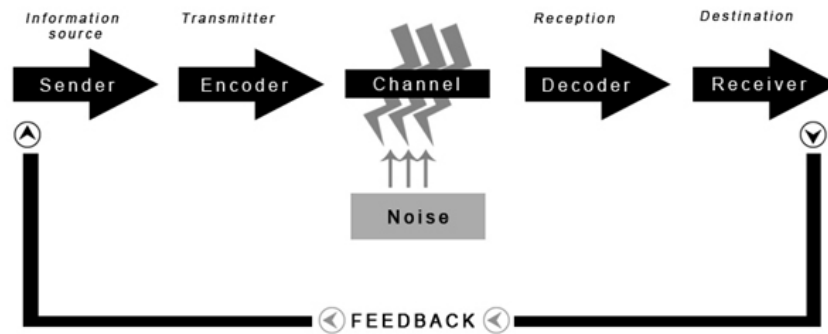
Considered less important than formats, terminology, and so on, grammar is viewed by business writing learners as a tool that only enables correct language forms. Grammar is not the priority in business writing classes, especially among native English speaking learners. Terrell (1991, p. 52) views grammar as an input model which directly forms language learners’ output. That is, language learners’ utterances are based on what their brains acquire and store. In business writing classrooms where English is a mother tongue, learners are mainly taught what to write and what writing style to use rather than how to write a grammatically correct paragraph. Most authors are professors who lecture on business communication at universities. When the objective is business communication, language forms stand behind communicative strategies. That is why lessons in most business communication textbooks are designed to meet their learners (business communication students). Garette (1986, pp. 133-148) suggests that grammatical competence is found attached to communicative competence. Not playing a vital role in business communication classes, grammar is treated as reference or a supporter in writing and is designed to be self-learned instead of instructor-taught.

Active and passive voice in business communication textbooks are mostly detailed with forms and uses. Appearing in the grammar section, active forms and passive forms with derivational forms of ‘be’ plus past participle are contrastively presented, and uses of the two voices are briefly detailed together with example sentences. Is it enough? Many experienced teachers, as well as myself, would say “No.” In business communication, whether a sentence is active or passive, it affects the reader’s perception of the message, one way or another.

Writers of English in business writing programs have been instructed to stick to active statements rather than passive ones. Davis (2005) states that an active sentence seems to be more readable and effective than a passive one. Westheimer and Nelson (1990) consider the sentence, “The plant was inspected by the supervisor” less strong than “The supervisor inspected the plant.” Active statements considered better and more effective in use, a lot of English grammar authors recommend their readers to emphasize the use of active sentences in their business letters, reports, and other documents. This phenomenon has led me to reconsider why business writers should use more active sentences. Is there a place for a passive statement in business writing? Studying business communication textbooks, I have found very few of them which suggest a business writer to use both active and passive statements.

3. Active and Passive Voice: Means of Effective Communication

As far as objectives of communication are concerned, each of the elements in the communication process illustrated by communication theorists is significant. Figure 1 is a renowned communication model by Shannon and Weaver (1949) which shows the relationship of each element to the others.



SHANNON-WEAVER'S MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

Figure 1: Shannon and Weaver's Model of Communication

According to Shannon and Weaver (1949), the sender (encoder) sends a message (code) to the receiver (decoder). Nevertheless, the receiver may perceive an incomplete or distorted message due to existence of noise, leading to an unsuccessful communication. What is “noise”? Noise can be anything which keeps the receiver away from the message sent. Noise can be caused by physical (a disturbing sound from a construction site or a working mower), psychological (personal attitudes or values against the message or the sender), physiological (the receiver's hearing or visual impairments) and semantic (understandability of language) features. To communicate successfully, the sender needs to ensure that noise is minimized.

A lot of business communication theorists have adopted the Shannon-Weaver Model, and noise occurring during business situations is a major concern. Noise is believed to affect the receiver's perception of the message. To ensure successful communication, Cutlip et al. (2006) introduce the 7C's principles which have internationally been accepted. The principles include:

- 1) Completeness – The message should contain all information needed.
- 2) Conciseness – The message should be as brief as possible and save the receiver's time reading.

- 3) Consideration – The message should be specifically created for the receiver.
- 4) Clarity – The language use should be simple and understandable.
- 5) Concreteness – The information presented in the message should be specific and vivid.
- 6) Courtesy – The message should maintain relationship between the sender and the receiver, and not cause bad feelings in its receiver.
- 7) Correctness – The message should use correct language forms (grammar, spelling, etc.).

These principles directly affect communication in all settings even in business writing. Among the 7 principles, Clarity affects the use of language in communication. When the ‘Clarity’ principle demands communicators to use simple and clear language, active voice, then, is suggested to be used in written statements. In business communication, clarity is vital as the message sent to the receiver must be understandable. According to Ashley (2010), a written message must be clear and easy to understand, containing no colloquial language or unknown abbreviations. Clear messages keep their receivers from misunderstandings or confusions.

Courtesy is always a concern for the writer. A courteous message causes little or no noise, contributing to a good relationship between the interlocutors. When it does matter, the sender needs to be careful when choosing words and language forms. That is why passive statements should not be ignored in business communication.

4. Active Voice: the Effective Form

A lot of English grammar books that include active and passive lessons emphasize correct forms and uses of active and passive sentences as well as strengthen learners’ grammatical knowledge through a variety of exercises. One

of the most popular exercises learners experience is writing which requires them to transform active sentences to passive ones or vice versa.

However, this writing lesson works against many business-oriented textbooks which attempt to minimize passive statements in business documents. Many business communication books emphasize the use of active voice, suggesting the readers to use active statements claimed to be better, clearer, and more direct than passive ones.

Westheimer and Nelson (1990) state that active verbs strengthen written statements; on the contrary, passive ones delay the action since they focus on receiving an action instead of accomplishing or creating it. Their idea supports the weakness of passive voice provided by Swindle (1983) who encourages business writers to use active statements as they make writing more interesting. Convinced by business communication textbooks, readers tend to follow the suggested rule, “Write active, not passive statements”. Consequently, most business writers minimize passive statements in their writing for fear that the message they are communicating through will not be strong, effective, and successful.

According to Lester and Beason (2005), verbs found in statements are formed in only two voices, active voice and passive voice. However, they are different in use. In an active voice sentence, the subject of the sentence plays as the doer or performer of an action stated by its verb. Contrarily, in a passive sentence, the subject receives the action and, sometimes, a doer is unidentified. Since accuracy, apart from time and money, does matter in business, a business message needs to carry a direct meaning. An ambiguous or unclear message takes time being interpreted. This could probably be a reason why an active statement defeats a passive one in business writing.

5. Passive Voice: The Overlooked Form

A passive voice sentence in which the subject is the recipient of the action is considered less powerful. On the contrary, in active statements, the performer of the action is necessary; it is not necessary to mention it in passive ones. Due to an existence of ‘be’, passive forms look different from active ones. A writer comes up with the passive formula ‘be’ + *past participle* when writing a passive statement, incorporating ‘be’ into tense and modal forms.

For two centuries, active voice has been supported by writing scholars as it has been claimed more advantageous and stylistic than passive voice. Avoiding writing passive statements was considered important in writing as suggested by Foerster and Steadman (1931). Orwell (1946) also supports the minimization of passive statements in his six rules, one of which states: “Never use the passive where you can use the active.” Use of passive sentences in a document is considered bad English. Finally, as noted by contemporary researchers, 19th-century grammarians considered passive voice caused no negative effects to the message in which they appeared, but early in the 20th century, writers have continuously been recommended not to use it (Haussamen:1997 & Pullum: 2014).

Reviewing the literature on the usage of active and passive voice, I have come up with two questions:

- Is active voice better than passive voice?
- Why do English grammar books and teachers of English still teach both active and passive voice?

Pullum (2014) shows a strong disagreement towards the emphasis on active voice rather than passive voice that teaching students to avoid passive should be over, stating that “College students should certainly be taught enough grammar to permit them to recognize passives in what they write; and it might be

reasonable to teach the discourse condition on passives stated explicitly” In fact, students should be taught to consider the discourse condition or communication situation before deciding on a language form such as passive or active voice. In addition, teachers should provide them with guidelines to help them decide when to use each.

6. Which One Is Better in Use: Active or Passive?

Using only one voice in business writing is like the two-edged sword. Despite the fact that active voice makes a clear meaningful statement, in some cases, it is not appropriate in use. Two is better than one. Actually, both active and passive statements are necessary in writing. Consider the following sentences written in different voices.

Active: *Somebody has eaten my sandwich.*

Passive: *My sandwich has been eaten.*

When we consider the meaning given through both of the sentences, they may look similar. However, syntactically different, the sentences contain different focuses; in fact, they cannot replace each other. Semantically, the active sentence suggests that the speaker believes the sandwich was “stolen” and eaten by an unknown person. It expresses the feeling that a crime or an injustice has occurred. On the other hand, the passive sentence suggests the feeling of regret that the sandwich was eaten before the speaker had the opportunity. The speaker missed the opportunity or was too late to eat the sandwich. The feelings expressed in each sentence convey very different meanings regarding the events before and after the sandwich was eaten. That is, in the active, a crime was committed; in the passive, it was a missed opportunity.

7. Impact of Active Voice and Passive Voice on Business Communication

Traditionally, active statements are considered clear and meaningful. Millar et al. (2012, pp. 393-414) as well as others previously mentioned,

recommend the use of more active voice in writing. Using active voice can gain confidence and trust from the reader as it makes a direct and clear statement. In addition, in business communication, confidence and trust is formed by use of correct language and effective words. A business document with correct language and effective words reflects its writer's awareness and carefulness. According to the discussion given by Pullum (2014), writers should analyze the situation where communication occurs and choose the voice that fits the context.

If the writer decides to use active sentences because he prefers to focus on the agent which is the doer of the action, he, then, is ignoring the receiver of the message. Whether the statement is written in active or passive voice, the receiver perceives the message differently. It is necessary for the writer to bear in mind that active voice is not always the right choice.

Although Davis (2005) suggests his readers use active verbs as they are more readable and effective, he did suggest they use passive voice when contextually necessary. Passive voice seems more readable if the real subject receives the action of the verb, especially in technical and scientific writing in which procedures and tests are always mentioned. That is, passive voice is necessary when it is reasonable to use it. In business writing, use of passive voice often can make an unclear statement; however, there are some contexts when it should appear.

Enquist and Oates (2005) indicate passive voice is suggested in persuasive writing, especially in case it is necessary to conceal the doer of the action. See the examples below.

A. *Someone submitted the report this morning.* (No)

B. *The report was submitted this morning* (Yes)

When the subject is unknown or is not the subject of the utterance, passive voice reads better. It is not always right to put ‘someone’ or ‘somebody’ as the subject. Sentence A sounds more uncertain than Sentence B. Hearing or seeing Sentence A, the reader may wonder “who” or think the writer is not sincere, keeping confidential the name of “Someone”. It creates the feeling of a subterfuge. In addition, the writer must analyze the reader’s focus. If the focus is ‘the report’, then that must be the subject. Gilling (2013) states: “If the subject of the action is unknown or of less importance than the action itself, the passive voice works best.”

Enquist and Oates (2005) also add that even when the subject is known, but the writer wants to conceal it, passive is the right voice. This use of passive voice is similarly suggested by Ashley (2010) stating that in business correspondence writing passive voice should be used in complaints and adjustments. Blaming a person for his or her mistakes is not a good idea and is not the right focus in such letters.

In business transactions, mistakes and faults can occur anytime. All employees represent the companies they work for. A customer experiencing a delay of delivery may not be satisfied and write a complaint to the company, not to the delivery man. Passive voice is suggested when a mistake or fault is mentioned, generally seen in complaint and adjustment letters. In addition, it is used in cases that avoid taking responsibility out of necessity (Davis, 2005). See Table1.

Active	Passive
<i>A. You must correct the mistake as soon as possible.</i>	<i>B. The mistake must be corrected as soon as possible.</i>
<i>C. Our employees made mistakes.</i>	<i>D. Mistakes were made.</i>

Table1: Comparison of Active and Passive Statements

Sentence A in the table sounds inappropriate as it shows the writer's dissatisfaction with 'You' who receives the complaint; Sentence B focuses on what must be done. Correction of mistakes is the purpose, so the writer should focus on it, not on a person. Reading or receiving the complaint of Sentence A may cause bad feelings in the receiver, so Sentence B contains a better, a more positive and less judgmental or critical voice. Likewise, Sentence C looks less appropriate than Sentence D. Using Sentence C, the writer is blaming 'our employees', focusing on the doers. The customer may not want to know who in the company made the mistakes; the customer only wants to know how the problem will be resolved. The company, as an entity, and not the individual employees, should take responsibility for the mistake.

Imagine what might happen if there were only one voice for all kinds of writing. Having only active statements in business would seem strange and very problematic. How would we write a sentence with an unknown subject? Noise caused by language forms would occur quite often. The message would be distorted and might mean something different from what the sender intended. Think how a statement: "*You must correct the mistake*" might be interpreted when read by the receiver. In the sender's mind, this message is to inform the receiver an action will be taken for the mistake. On the other hand, the receiver might learn that the sender is complaining to him about it.

Realizing the importance of active and passive voice contributes to more successful business writing. What the writer needs to be concerned with most is not only how perfect the grammar is and what words are used, but also what the receiver will feel and how he or she will react to the written statements. Perfect grammar and word choice reflect only how professional the writer is, however, it may harm the receiver's feelings and finally lead to the end of a business relationship if the document written contains some sensitive issues and the right voice is not implemented.

The best solution to prevent misunderstanding in communication is selecting the right tone in a message. The message should be tailor-made and based on the purpose of communication. The sender or writer needs to put himself/herself in the receiver's shoes, expecting what he or she might think or feel when reading the message. In business communication where communicators are business people, companies, and organizations and the main objective is to gain mutual profits, business transactions must maintain relationships between business counterparts. It is, therefore, impossible to deny a variety of language forms as each has its own role and position. That is why business writers should use not only active voice but also passive voice in their writing.

8. Conclusion

Business communication textbooks and instructors encourage learners or students to use active statements in writing as they are considered to be clear and meaningful statements. However, realizing only the clarity of the message written, a writer may not accomplish the communicative goal. Active and passive statements play their own role in specific situations. Deciding the right voice based on the situation given, a writer will be successful in writing for communication. A writer needs to make sure the message written will satisfy the reader as the receiver of the message. Using only active statements may cause unexpected bad outcomes; therefore, authors, scholars, together with instructors, need to emphasize the use of both voices, not only the active one. Also, they need to play roles in instruct readers, learners, students, or writers how and when to use each of the voices. Using the right one, a writer can send a message with a right tone to his or her receiver leading to successful communication and good relationship between the message owner and the receiver who are business partners.

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