The Teaching of Passive Constructions in Indonesian: An Alternative Approach

Imade Markus

It seems that passive constructions are more commonly used in Indonesian than their active counterparts. Further research is definitely needed to prove this assumption. This is probably due to the fact that in Indonesian culture we tend to talk about things and people around us rather than talking about what we do ourselves. Therefore, we put forward the object (be it a thing or another person) being affected by an action expressed in the verb and put the agent or doer of the action later in the sentence or omit this agent altogether. The object is considered to be more important to talk about than the agent itself. Therefore it becomes predominantly the focus of our talk in our daily communication.

In linguistics terms, the object is often called the undergoer because it undergoes the action expressed in the verb and the agent the doer of the action. These two terms will be used in this paper since they are semantically clearer than the terms object and subject respectively, which can be misleading and confusing in talking about passive and active constructions.

In learning Indonesian, passive constructions are one of the most difficult areas of learning for foreigners with both a similar language pattern of Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) like English, and with a completely different language pattern of Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) like Japanese. Since these constructions are very important in Indonesian, we need to find better ways to teach them to our students.

This paper attempts to discuss another approach to teaching passive constructions in Indonesian so the students will hopefully get a better grasp in understanding and using them.

Forms

These passive constructions are mainly used with transitive verbs (vt) in Indonesian, like membeli, membuka, membaca, menulis (their active counterparts) meaning “buy”, “open”, “read”, and “write” respectively, which normally need a thing as an undergoer such as sebuah buku “a book” after all of these verbs. With intransitive verbs (vi) and other types of words such as nouns (n), adjectives (adj) we need to transfer them into their transitive verb forms first through the prefix me-kan, like datang (vi) “come” becoming men-datang-kan (vt) dia “make him come”, rumah (n) “house” me-rumah-kan (vt) pegawainya “make their staff stay at home”, bersih (adj) “clean” mem-bersih-kan (vt) kamar “make the room clean”.

There are roughly two basic forms of passive constructions in Indonesian. The first one is formed using the prefix di-root of the verb form from the active form me-root of the verb and di-root-kan verb form from the me-root-kan verb form. For example, di-beli “is bought”,

NUCB JLCC, 4, 1 (2002), 33–39
di-buka “is opened”, di-baca “is read”, di-tulis “is written”, di-datang-kan “is made to come”, di-rumah-kan “is made to stay at home instead of going to his office to work”, di-bersih-kan “is made clean”.

The second one, which is more difficult, is formed using the doer-root form and the doer-root-kan form when the doer is in its pronoun form, especially in spoken style. Take for example, sentences in (1a) and (2a) with which many learners have difficulty producing incorrect sentences like in (1b) and (2b).

1a. Buku itu dia beli di pasar.
   “The book he bought in the market,” but not
b. Buku itu dia *membeli di pasar.
   “The book he bought in the market.”

2a. Buku yang saya beli di pasar itu mahal sekali.
   “The book (which) I bought in the market is very expensive,” but not
b. Buku yang saya *membeli di pasar itu mahal sekali.
   “The book (which) I bought in the market is very expensive.”

The same thing is true with other pronouns as doers of the actions such as in sentences in (3a), (4a) and (5a) with incorrect sentences in (3b), (4b) and (5b) produced by many foreign learners.

3a. Pintu itu saya buka tadi.
   “The door I opened just now,” but not
b. Pintu itu saya *membuka tadi.
   “The door I opened just now.”

4a. Buku itu mereka baca tadi malam.
   “The book they read last night,” but not
b. Buku itu mereka *membaca tadi malam.
   “The book they read last night.”

5a. Buku itu anda tulis tahun lalu.
   “The book you wrote last year,” but not
b. Buku itu anda *menulis tahun lalu.
   “The book you wrote last year.”

Uses

The first form is used when the doer is completely unknown as in sentence (6) below or considered not that important in that particular communication, as in sentence (7) below, or the undergoer is the focus of the communication, as in sentence (8) below.

   “My bicycle was stolen last night.”
   “The meat is cut in small pieces.”
8. Buku itu dibeli (oleh) ayah di pasar.
   “The book was bought by father in the market.”

The doer in sentence 6 is completely unknown because we do not know who stole the bicycle. So the passive form is more naturally used to express the meaning rather than its active counterpart Seseorang mencuri sepeda saya “Someone stole my bike”. The doer in sentence 7 is not that important for that communication because it is implicitly understood that the doer is “you” or the cook or whoever wants to do the job of cooking in that particular situation. The doer in sentence 8 is less important so it is expressed later and the focus of communication at that moment is the undergoer buku itu “the book” and not the doer ayah “father” although the information is still needed for possible use in the course of the discourse.
The second form is used when all pieces of information, especially on the competitive doer and undergoer, are available and needed for clear and detailed communication but still the focus or topic of discussion is on the undergoer, such as *buku itu* “the book” in sentences (1), (2), (4), (5) and *pintu itu* “the door” in sentence (3) above, rather than the doer *dia* “he/she”, *saya* “I”, *mereka* “they” or *anda* “you” in sentences from (1) to (5) above. Some linguists use the term Object Focus Construction (OFC) to refer to this form, which is more self-explanatory in nature, and the term passive construction is preferably used merely for the first form.

### Approaches to Teaching Them

The common approach to teaching them is emphasizing the forms needed to construct passive sentences from their active counterparts neglecting the topic or focus of communication in a particular speech event. The topic keeps changing from sentence to sentence while keeping the form the same, that is, the passive forms, throughout the fragmented and unnatural discourse. Many course books still use this approach, which may be referred to as the formal approach since it emphasizes the formal features of the constructions (cf. Anderson, 1996: 352–53; Partoredjo, 1975: 7–8).

A more natural and probably more interesting approach is emphasizing the topic or focus of the communication since in our daily communication we pay attention more on a particular topic for a while before we move to another topic in the course of our communication. At one point, for example, we talk about our new car and we usually stay on that topic for a few seconds or minutes until we need to move to another topic. This may be true in many language communities, particularly in Indonesian society, where we tend to put forward the undergoer of an action rather the doer. Under the topic of a new car, a few sub-topics come to the speaker’s mind such as where, when, what for, how much he bought it as they might be commonly prompted by a close and inquisitive neighbour. In this context of natural communication the following conversation (9) may be frequently heard, in which it focuses on one topic for some time, i.e. *mobil baru* “the new car” before it moves to other topics:

9. A part of a conversation between two friends living as neighbours

```
Neighbour: Selamat, Pak. Mobil baru.
Owner : Terima kasih. Dibelikan ayah.
N     : Dibeli di mana?
O     : Dibeli di Jakarta.
N     : Kapan dibelinya?
O     : Dibeli baru minggu lalu.
N     : Bagus sekali. Berapa harganya?
O     : Dicicil ayah selama 5 tahun.
N     : Dicicil berapa setiap bulannya?
O     : Dibayar satu juta setiap bulannya.
N     : Murah sekali untuk mobil sebagus itu.
O     : Ngak juga. Cukup mahal.
N     : Dipakai untuk apa mobil baru itu?
O     : Ya, akan dipakai ke kantor aja, Pak.
...```

“Congratulations! A new car.”
“Thanks. Bought by my father.”
“Bought where?”
“Bought in Jakarta.”
“When (was it) bought?”
“Bought just last week.”
“Very good. How much?”
“It is paid by installments for 5 years.”
“How much per month?”
“It is paid 1 million every month.”
“Very cheap for a good car like that.”
“Not at all. Expensive enough.”
“What is that new car used for?”
“Well. It will be used just to go to the office.”
It is a very natural and typical conversation in Indonesian, definitely with some other comments and remarks here and there, but it is mainly in passive forms, which other speech communities might have used more active counterparts, like for example, in English.

Interesting topics to talk about are topics related to what the students and their parents have, such as school bags, bicycles, motor-bikes, cameras, watches, radios, television sets, tape, CD or video players, cars and/or houses.

**Steps**

After selecting interesting topics to talk about, it is worth trying to follow these steps: First, we start with a situation where the doer is not known so the students will be forced to focus on the undergoer. This is very helpful for students with English background which uses more active constructions than the passive counterparts. Situations where their properties are stolen or broken into are good to start with. After introducing the forms and the necessary vocabulary items, we can give more meaningful and communicative practice in a conversational context focusing on one topic, like this one in (10) below, for example.

10. A conversation between two students talking about his missing bike

A: *Di mana sepedamu?*  “Where is your bicycle?”
B: *Sepeda saya dicuri orang.*  “My bicycle was stolen by people.”
A: *Kok bisa? Nggak dikunci?*  “How come? Wasn’t it locked?”
B: *Dikunci. Tapi kuncinya dirusak.*  “It was locked. But its key was broken up.”
A: *Nggak dilaporkan ke Polisi?*  “Hasn’t it been reported to the Police?”
B: *Sudah dilaporkan.*  “It has been reported.”

Using this conversation as a model, they can practice with other topics such as *Sepeda motor saya* “My motor-bike”, *Mobil kami* “Our car” which may use exactly the same pattern. With a little adaptation, they can move to other topics like *Kamera saya* “My camera”, *Arloji saya* “My watch” *Telesvi kami* “Our television set” until *Rumah kami* “Our house” which was broken into the previous night. They must pretend that they have experienced the same things, sometimes with their own created scenarios which will make the practice more fun for them.

In the second step, we use a cooking situation where the cooking ingredients are more important to manipulate in making a cooking recipe rather than the cook him/herself. We can start from a very simple recipe which many of them are familiar with, like making a cup of coffee or tea, fried chicken, soup, etc. until making their own favourite foods and drinks which may need a longer and more complex process. It is more helpful to make a list of the ingredients first. This practice can be done in writing before oral presentation. This model (11) may be used to introduce the idea.

11. Making a cup of coffee with the ingredients needed: *air* “water”, *bubuk kopi* “coffee powder”, *gula* “sugar”, *krim susu* “milk cream”

*Air dipanaskan sampai mendidih.*  “The water is heated up to its boiling point.”
*2 st bubuk kopi dimasukkan ke dalam cangkir.*  “2 tea spoon of coffee powder is put into a cup.”
*Air panas dituangkan ke dalam cangkir.*  “The hot water is poured into the cup.”
*Lalu, kopi diaduk baik-baik.*  “The coffee is then stirred well.”
*Kalau mau, gula dan krim susu ditambahkan.*  “If you wish, some sugar and cream may be added.”
Lalu, kopi diaduk lagi baik-baik.
Kopi enak diminum panas-panas.

“Then the coffee is stirred well again.”
“It is nice to be drunk while it’s hot.”

In the third step, we can use them to talk about school buildings and other public buildings down town since we usually do not remember or are not interested in who built, repainted, renovated, demolished them. Probably we still remember when they were built, and then repainted, remodeled and now are used for particular purposes and will be demolished due to a new master plan in line with the recent development of the area. In this situation we introduce the following conversation (12) with further follow-up communicative activities using a new site plan replacing the present existing site situation.

12. A conversation between a journalist (J) and an engineer (E) about the new building site plan

J: Mengapa akan dibongkar, Pak?
E: Karena sebuah bank besar akan dibangun di sini.
J: Lalu toko buku itu akan dipindahkan ke mana?
E: Toko buku itu akan dipindahkan ke Jalan Solo.

“This bookstore was built in 1990 and it was renovated in 1980 but it will be demolished in 2005.”
“Why will it be demolished?”
“Because a big bank will be built here.”
“Then, the bookstore will be moved where?”
“It will be moved to Solo Street.”

In the fourth step, we start introducing a situation where the information on both the doer and the undergoer is needed but the information about the undergoer is still being emphasized. A good situation for this step is a situation in which we discuss copyrights of popular books, paintings, songs, and films. It can also be used to widen the students’ general knowledge about some famous pieces of works in literature, arts, music and films and talk about them in the target language using passive constructions, for example using this pattern (13).

13. Novel “…” dikarang oleh … tahun … dan diterbitkan oleh … tahun …

“Novel ‘…’ was written by … in … and published by … in…”

In the last step we introduce more examples of everyday life situations where both information on the doer of the action and the undergoer needs to be expressed explicitly for clearer communication but the focus is still on the undergoer. Unlike the situation in the fourth step where the doer is always a third person, in this step the doer can be the first person (speaker), the second person (listener) and the third person as well, usually for special emphasis, both in their singular forms (saya “I”, anda “you”, dia “she/he”) and plural forms (kami/kita “exclusive/inclusive we”, kalian “you”, mereka “they”). Since the focus of our communication is still on the undergoer of the action, it is presented first in the sentence and then come the verb elements consisting of the doer (only in the pronoun form) and passive form of the verbs without the prefix di-. These verb elements (doer and passive verb) are inseparable although they are written in two words separately. Modal verbs come before them rather than before the verbs themselves (see the pattern in (14) below with its unacceptable word-by-word translation in (15).
14. The Pattern of Object Focus Construction (OFC)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergoer</th>
<th>Modals</th>
<th>Doer</th>
<th>Passive Verb without di-</th>
<th>Adverb of time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rumah itu</td>
<td>tidak akan</td>
<td>saya</td>
<td>bangun</td>
<td>tahun ini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tidak akan</td>
<td>anda</td>
<td>beli</td>
<td></td>
<td>tahun depan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>harus</td>
<td>di</td>
<td>renovasi</td>
<td></td>
<td>tahun 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kami, kita</td>
<td>bongkar</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kalian</td>
<td>sewakan</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mereka</td>
<td>tempati</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>jual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15. The English literal word-by-word translation of the OFC pattern in (14)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Undergoer</th>
<th>Modals</th>
<th>Doer</th>
<th>Passive Verb without di-</th>
<th>Adverb of time</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>That house</td>
<td>will not</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>built</td>
<td>this year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will not be</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>bought</td>
<td></td>
<td>next year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>does not have</td>
<td>he/she</td>
<td>renovated</td>
<td></td>
<td>in 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>we</td>
<td>demolished</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>you</td>
<td>rented</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>they</td>
<td>sold</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>jual</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This OFC pattern is the most difficult form for many students to learn, especially those with English background because it is completely different from the English syntactical rules as seen from the literal word-by-word translation of the OFC pattern in (14) as seen in (15) above. In English the idea will be expressed in active sentences and probably never in their passive counterparts. Many of them will make incorrect sentences like in (16) below although they have achieved a relatively high level of mastery in Indonesian.

"*That house will not I bought this year.”
"Rumah itu tidak akan dapat mereka *menjual tahun depan.
"*That house will not I sold next year.”

Therefore, a lot of practice is needed to learn this OFC pattern using this new approach where the students have to talk about their properties such as their houses, cars, motor-bikes, cameras, videos or whatever they may have. They are expected to produce related and more cohesive sentences like in (17) below, which represent more natural use of Indonesian in daily communication.

"We bought this house in 1980.”
"Lalu (rumah ini) kami renovasi tahun 1985.
“Then, we renovated it in 1985.”
"Rumah ini kami tempati sampai sekarang.
“We occupy it until now.”
"Dan (rumah ini) akan kami sewakan atau
“And we will rent it or
kami jual tahun depan.
sell it next year”!"
Conclusion

It is clearly seen that it is really difficult to learn passive constructions in Indonesian. They should be introduced after the students have mastered relatively enough active and other constructions. It needs a lot of time to gradually learn them bit by bit from the simpler forms to more and more complex ones with a lot of practice throughout the course. It is not wise to teach them all at once or just in a few lessons. It needs to be introduced with enough practice both orally and in writing, and then reviewed and used again and again together with other constructions whenever they can match naturally.

Then gradually passive constructions in compound and complex sentences can be introduced and practiced when the real needs for them come. This new approach has been tried several times and it seems to be more interesting for the students to approach this difficult subject in this way (Markus, 1995: 115–145). However, some research is needed before more conclusive statements about the effectiveness of this alternative approach can be made more precisely.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Henri Daros and Mikihiro Moriyama of Nanzan University for their helpful comments on the earlier draft of this note. All oversights are of course mine.

Notes

1. It is more natural to express the ideas in these OFCs in their active counterparts in English which can explain why it is very difficult for English speakers to learn them.

References