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## Use of Passive Structures in ESL Narrative Compositions among Malay Students

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### ABSTRACT

Narrative compositions provide essential information regarding the narrators' linguistic competence. This study was conducted to explore the use of passive structures in ESL narrative compositions; specifically, to describe the passive voice structured by the Malay students of SMK Tanjung Datuk in their ESL narrative compositions, and to describe the effect of their mother tongue (the Malay language) in structuring the passive sentences in English. The study combined both quantitative and qualitative methods, using the Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) by Joan Bresnan (1970) as the theoretical framework. LFG was chosen as the framework of the study as it involves both constituent structure and functional structure in sentence analysis. Therefore, a better illustration and explanation on the function-dependent rules like passivisation across languages are better portrayed. The sample for this study involved only 30 Form 4 Malay students (the participants) of intermediate level of proficiency, from SMK Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor. The participants were given a question on a narrative composition taken from the real 2014 1119SPM English Paper to be answered within one hour. An interview session with three participants from this study was also conducted in order to support and clarify the data gathered. The findings showed that the structures of the passive voice in the ESL narrative compositions of the participants comprised adjectival, resultative and verbal passives. The participants were able to utilize the passive voice in their ESL narrative compositions, but the structures written were mostly inaccurate due to the influence of their mother tongue (the Malay language) in constructing the passives in the English language, whereby a negative transfer occurred from L1 to L2 in terms of the sentence types, sentence patterns and the formation of the passive verbs.

*Keywords:* passive, narrative, Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG)

### Introduction

The present study was conducted in SMK Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor. The school which was built in 1970 is the oldest secondary school in Pengerang, Johor. The population of the school comprises 70% Malay, 28% Chinese, 1% Indian and another 1% of other race students. There are 76 teachers and 21 working staff while the principal is Mr. Farzeli bin Che Mat Mustafa.

In Malaysia, for the public examination, *Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* (SPM), one of the tasks given in the English paper is for students to write a composition in 350 words in one hour. There are different genres that students can choose from which are descriptive, expository, persuasive and narrative. Based on the teachers' experience, most students of SMK Tanjung Datuk, especially the Malay students, prefer the narrative over the other genres. Therefore, they are prone to utilize both the active and passive structures when narrating.

Writing passive structures is challenging among students. In English, the active structure follows the order of Subject-Verb-Object (Marinis & Saddy, 2013) whereby the

verb of action is done by the subject. The emphasis is clearly given to the subject. In the passive; however, the emphasis is given to the verbs of action and the object rather than the subject itself. As such, complicated principles need to be adhered in order to convey the passive voice in the form of written structures.

### **Statement of the problem**

The students of SMK Tanjung Datuk range from low to upper intermediate level in terms of their English language proficiency. As second language learners of English, they experience difficulties in grammar and vocabulary. This is evident especially during their writing class. The students, especially the Malays, tend to use direct translation when expressing their ideas in writing. As a result, their sentence structures are inaccurate and some may even lead to distortions in the content. Most of the cases are clearly seen when they write in the passive.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study is to explore the use of passive structures in ESL narrative compositions. Specifically, the research was conducted to describe the passive voice structured by the Malay students of SMK Tanjung Datuk in their ESL narrative compositions, and to describe the effect of their mother tongue (the Malay language) in structuring the passive structures in English.

### **Limitations of the study**

This study focuses only on 30 Form 4 Malay students, aged 16 years old, of intermediate level of proficiency from SMK Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang Johor. This study involves a study on the use of passive structures in their narrative compositions. This research is different from other studies as it focuses only on Malay students having Malay language as their mother tongue while other studies used other ESL learners having different mother tongues (like Chinese, Croatian etc) and did their studies on passives by not using the LFG framework. Most of the studies done on the passives were merely analyzing the existing corpus such as literature and legislative texts. However, this study involves genuine data taken from ESL learners' written production, thus will add to the field of studying passives in English.

### **Research questions**

This study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is the structure of the passive voice in the ESL narrative compositions of the Malay students in SMK Tanjung Datuk?
1. How does their mother tongue affect the way they construct the passive structures in their ESL narrative compositions?

### **Theoretical Framework of Study**

#### **Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG)**

Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG) which was first developed by Bresnan and Kaplan in 1970 is the framework chosen for this study. LFG rejects Chomsky's idea of transformational grammar as it suggests a single level of syntactic structure which does not have any syntactic movement of constituents nor does it allow any alteration of grammatical relations within syntax (Neidle, 1994).

In LFG, there are two syntactic structures which are the constituent structure (c-structure) and the functional structure (f-structure). The c-structure signifies the phrase structure trees and word order, dominance, constituency and syntactic categories. Meanwhile, the f-structure

shows the attribute value matrix which includes the symbol and its value, semantic form, grammatical function, as well as the morphosyntactic information (Asudeh & Toivonen, 2009). The most important part of the f-structure that makes it relevant to the current study is that the f-structure vocabulary is universal across languages which makes it possible to be utilized in analyzing and comparing sentence structures from various languages. It enables us to see if there is any parallelism or points of difference between the two languages which cause the L1 influence in the production of the L2 structures.

### Review of Literature

#### The English Passive

In the passive structure, Puckica (2009) stated that the passive is assimilated to the 'BE past participle' construction or, to clauses or sentences that combine BE, GET, or some other verb exchangeable with BE, and a past participle. Moreover, the English passive has three constructions - the verbal passive, adjectival passive and resultative passive (Toyota, 2009). Table 1 shows the conditions to classify the three categories of the passive.

Table 1  
Conditions classifying the three categories of the English passive

Types	Details	Examples
Verbal	The clause denotes the dynamic aspect and the outer cause is involved.	<i>The employee was fired (by the chief manager).</i>
Adjectival	The clause denotes a secondary state and the outer cause is obviously implied.	<i>I am very surprised.</i>
Resultative	The clause denotes the natural state and there is no outer cause.	<i>The shop is located in the city center.</i>

(Taken from Toyota, 2009, p.478)

#### The Malay Passive

The Malay passive is defined as a structure comprising a passive verb or a passive verbal phrase, which always depends on the role of the noun phrase of a sentence (Mohd Rashid, 2009). When analyzing the Malay passive, it is of utmost importance for a researcher to be familiar with the Malay sentence patterns. The Malay language has four basic constructions which become the essence of its sentence patterns. Mohd Rashid (2009, cited in Nik Safiah, 1981) suggests that the Malay sentence patterns are (i) FN+FK (Noun phrase + Verbal phrase), (ii) FN+FN (Noun Phrase + Noun Phrase), (iii) FN+FA (Noun Phrase + Adjectival Phrase), and (iv) FN+FS (Noun Phrase + Adverbial Phrase). Below are the examples of each pattern:-

Table 2  
The Malay sentence patterns

Sentence Pattern	Example	English Translation
FN+FK	<i>Siti menangis</i>	Siti cries.
FN+FN	<i>Sarah bayi</i>	Siti baby. (Siti is a baby)
FN+FA	<i>Naufa nakal</i>	Naufa naughty. (Naufa is naughty)
FN+FS	<i>Ahmad di dalam bilik</i>	Ahmad inside room. (Ahmad is inside the room)

(Taken from Mohd Rashid, 2009, p. 70)

Nevertheless, the Malay and English languages also share things in common by which the Malay language also has its markers to indicate the passive verbs just like the English passive has its past participle form to mark the passive verbs. In Malay, there are four types of inflections as affixes to mark the passive verbs and they are *di-*, *teR-*, *beR-*, and *ke-\_-an* (Mohd Rashid, 2009).

In more recent studies, the Malay passive is grouped into three forms which are morphological passives, bare passives and adversative passives (Nomoto & Kartini, 2011; Siaw-Fong 2011). The verb in the morphological passive is marked by the prefix *di-* and the word order is "Theme/Patient V (*oleh* Agent)". It is also known as the canonical passive. On the other hand, the bare passive has a special word order "Theme/Patient (Aux/Adv/Neg) Agent V", whilst the verb appears in its base form. The adversative passive word order is "Theme/Patient *kena* V(Agent/PP) and it often results in a negative effect to the passive subject. The examples are given in Table 3 below.

Table 3  
Conditions classifying the three categories of the Malay passive

Types	Details	Examples
Morphological/ canonical	-the verb is marked by the prefix <i>di-</i> and the word order is Theme/Patient V ( <i>oleh</i> Agent)	<i>Buku itu di-baca (oleh) Siti.</i> book that PASS-read by Siti 'The book was read by Siti.'
Bare	- the verb appears in its base form and it has a special word order: Theme/Patient (Aux/Adv/Neg) Agent V	<i>Surat itu sudah Ali baca.</i> letter that already Ali read 'The letter has already been read by Ali.'

Adversative	-the verb appears in its base form and it often results in a negative effect to the passive subject. Theme/Patient <i>kena</i> V(Agent/PP)	<i>Duit itu kena simpan di atas meja.</i> money that NEED TO put on table 'That money was put on the table.'
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(Taken from Nomoto & Kartini, 2011)

Based on Tables 1 and 3, and the explanation above, obviously English and Malay languages have different passive systems both structurally and pragmatically. Therefore, if students employ the direct translation technique while writing, they could be influenced by their mother tongue, leading to an inaccuracy of L2 production, especially the passive structures in ESL narrative compositions.

**Narrative Composition**

Narrative composition entices students to use the tools of language including preferred diction and various sentence structures to convey their ideas and feelings. Thus, the narrative is the most suitable genre to study the use of syntax, discourse and pragmatics in any particular language and culture. Besides, Mortensen et al. (2008) concluded that while writing expository essays, writers tend to utilize the verbs of thinking and feeling. Narratives might involve more verbs of action. As such, for the present study, there is a great possibility that students may use a significant number of passive structures within their essays to vary their sentence structures while incorporating the verbs of action throughout their narratives.

**The Influence of L1 on L2 Writing**

When studying the influence of students' mother tongue in second language learning, writing could reflect L2 learners' best performance as students' discourse skills and linguistic competence could be measured more accurately (Kang, 2005). This is because the interference problem is apparent when using productive skills, especially in a written task (Solano et al., 2014). Furthermore, in L2 writing, students still need to undergo the same process of planning and organizing ideas as in their L1 writing, with the increased challenge of matching linguistic resources in L2; particularly, in terms of finding suitable lexical and syntactic encoding in the composing process (Kormos, 2011). Due to this cause, it is postulated that intermediate and weaker students may be influenced by their L1 vocabulary and syntax when transcribing their ideas into words in L2 writing.

**Research Methodology**

The research combined both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method was used to count the number of passive structures written in the participants' narrative compositions and to see the frequency of the types of the passives used in their compositions. Meanwhile, the qualitative method was used for the coding of each structure and describing the shortlisted passive structures by using the LFG framework.

### Participants

The participants for this study were thirty Form 4 Malay students from SMK Tanjung Datuk, Pengerang, Johor. They were of the intermediate level of proficiency in English language. This was based on the results of their 2014 standardized Form Three Assessment (PT3). Basically, their grades for the writing task in PT3 ranged from C to D.

### Instrument of Study

A question on a narrative composition taken from the real 2014 SPM 1119 English Paper was the main instrument of the study. The question was to write a composition by continuing the phrase given in the introduction "*The wind blew strongly. Out at sea ...*". The participants were required to write the composition in not less than 350 words within one hour.

Besides, a set of interview questions was also prepared. The interview was conducted among three selected participants who had written the most number of passive sentences. They were interviewed to investigate on why they constructed such passive structures to understand how their mother tongue (Malay) influences their writing in English.

### Inter-raters

There were two inter-raters appointed in order to assist the researcher in analyzing the data. Both of them are English teachers and well experienced SPM English exam paper markers. Basically, they were to verify the work done by the researcher in terms of the coding of each structure and the types of the passive structures found in the thirty samples gathered from the study. This was to ensure that the analysis was done accurately to ensure that the findings were valid and reliable.

### Procedure of study

To do this study, the researcher first obtained permission from the Malaysian Ministry of Education (KPM), under the Division of Planning and Education Policy Research (EPRD). Once the ministry had granted the permission, the researcher sought approval from the Johor State Department of Education (JPNJ), before proceeding to the respective school where the study was going to be conducted. As soon as the Principal of SMK Tanjung Datuk granted the permission, the researcher started the study.

First, the researcher had a meeting with the teacher of the participants to brief her about the study. Upon reaching an agreement, a suitable time to carry out this study was set. The teacher used her English language period with the participants to conduct the writing task for one hour. After they had finished and submitted their compositions, the teacher explained to them about the study before getting their consent to participate in this study. They were assured of their anonymity and how they could benefit from the study.

After the data analysis was completed, three samples consisting of the most number of passive structures written were identified and the respective participants were interviewed in order to understand why they constructed such structures to provide concrete arguments on the findings.

### Data Analysis

Upon getting the thirty samples of narrative compositions, the researcher coded each sentence written by the participants in their compositions. Then, the coding was cross-checked and verified by the two inter-raters. Next, the inter-raters wrote their comments on the participants' samples particularly on the passive structures. After that, the researcher made a shortlist of the coded passive structures. A discussion was held between the researcher and the two inter-raters concerning the findings. Finally, a few shortlisted passive structures

were selected to be analyzed using the LFG framework. The data from the c-structure and f-structure is presented and interpreted in the next section.

### Findings and Discussion

#### **RQ1 : What is the structure of the passive voice in the ESL narrative compositions of Malay students in SMK Tanjung Datuk?**

Based on the participants' narrative compositions, the inter raters and the researcher identified and listed the passive structures constructed by them. The summary of the findings is shown in Table 4 below.

Table 4

The percentage of passive structures written by the participants in their narrative compositions

<b>Types of Passives</b>	<b>Written with accuracy</b>	<b>Written with Less accuracy</b>	<b>Total</b>	<b>Percentage %</b>
Adjectival	15	28	43	<b>47.78</b>
Resultative	9	15	24	<b>26.67</b>
Verbal	5	18	23	<b>25.55</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>61</b>	<b>90</b>	
<b>Percentage %</b>	<b>32.22</b>	<b>67.78</b>		<b>100</b>

The total percentage of adjectival passives written by the Malay participants was 47.78%, followed by the resultative passives with 26.67% and verbal passives, 25.55%. Meanwhile, for each type of the passives, the number of structures written with less accuracy (61) exceeds the number of structures written with accuracy (29). Hence, 67.78% of the passive structures written were inaccurate and only 32.22% of the passive structures were written accurately.

In order to answer Research Question 1, the data presented in Table 4 shows that the structures of the passive voice in ESL narrative compositions of the 30 Malay participants of this study in SMK Tanjung Datuk consist of adjectival, resultative and verbal passives. Apparently, most of the participants write their passive voice in adjectival passives to express how they feel following the events throughout their narrative compositions.

#### **RQ2 : How does the students' mother tongue affect the way they construct the passive structures in their ESL narrative composition?**

In order to answer Research Question 2, the researcher needs to select one sample using the LFG framework to demonstrate the effect of student's mother tongue (the Malay language) when constructing the passive structures. The sentence \*'Pak Abu scared' (ungrammatical) is taken from sample C016. The researcher will first demonstrate the c-structure of this sentence as follows:

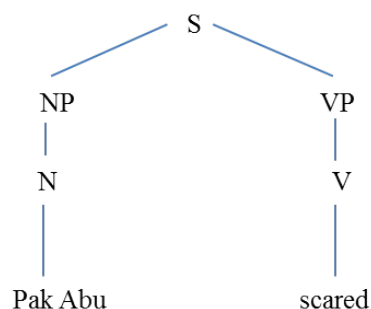


Figure 1: c-structure of the attempted adjectival passive in sample C016

In Figure 1, the sentence consists of a noun phrase ‘*Pak Abu*’, a proper noun, followed by a verb phrase which is a lexical verb ‘*scared*’ in its past form. The following is the f-structure of the same sentence.

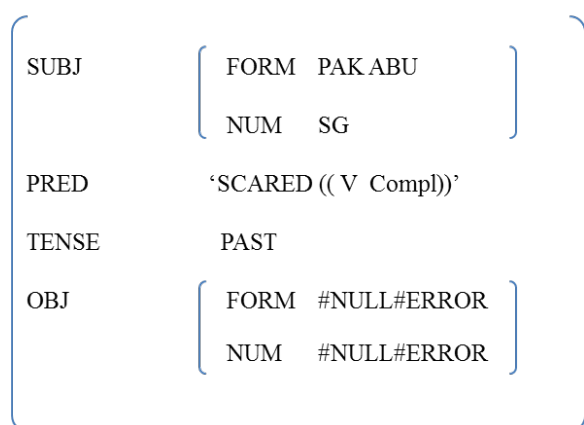


Figure 2: f-structure of the attempted adjectival passive in sample C016

Figure 2 shows the functional grammar of each constituent in the sentence. First, the proper noun which indicates a person's name ‘*Pak Abu*’ acts as a singular subject of the sentence. The predicate of this sentence is ‘*scared*’, written in the past tense. Generally, this sentence should be an active sentence whereby the verb ‘*scared*’ happens to be a transitive verb which requires an object as the verb complement. However, such a case does not happen, thus leads to an error in the f-structure as shown above.

In order to understand the circumstance of the above case, the fact that this sentence was taken from a narrative composition must be taken into account. The only logical explanation based on the participant's complete narration is that he was actually trying to construct a passive sentence to express how scared Pak Abu was, using the adjectival passive. Hence, the sentence \*‘*Pak Abu scared*’ should be written as ‘*Pak Abu was scared*’. Below is the c-structure of the correct adjectival passive for C016.



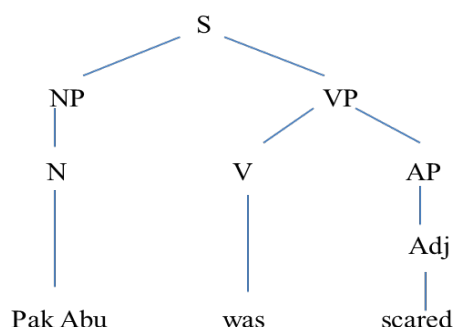


Figure 3: c-structure of the correct adjectival passive for sample C016

Figure 3 shows that the sentence is made up of a noun phrase ‘*Pak Abu*’, a special noun, followed by a verb phrase which consists of a verb and an adjective phrase, whereby the verb is an auxiliary ‘*was*’ and the adjective is ‘*scared*’. Based on the c-structure, there is no proof to say that the sentence is written in the passive. Therefore, Figure 4 below shows the f-structure of the sentence to show how each constituent functions grammatically to construct the adjectival passive.

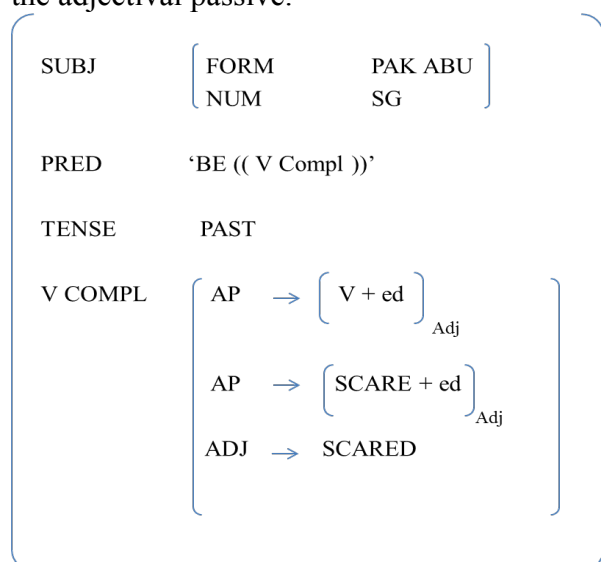


Figure 4: f-structure of the correct adjectival passive for sample C016

Figure 4 shows the subject of the sentence is a singular noun, ‘*Pak Abu*’. The predicate consists of an auxiliary *be*, acts as the main verb in the past tense and an adjective phrase as the verb complement. The adjective phrase is crucial in explaining the adjectival passive. It is understood that the passive is assimilated to the ‘BE + past participle’ construction. Hence, the f-structure above shows that the adjective ‘*scared*’ is actually derived from the verb ‘*scare*’ which has undergone a morphological change by adding the inflection *-ed* to form a past participle that meets the requirement of the passive principle in the sentence, ‘*Pak Abu was scared*’ whereby ‘*was*’ is the auxiliary *be* and ‘*scared*’ is the past participle. Also, under the morphological change, the past participle ‘*scared*’ has become an adjective in the lexical entry that proves undoubtedly that this sentence is an adjectival passive.

The reason for this inaccuracy to happen in the participants' adjectival passive is due to their mother tongue influence. The adjectival passive ‘*Pak Abu was scared*’ was written as \*‘*Pak Abu scared*’ because participant C016 was thinking of the idea in Malay. \*‘*Pak Abu scared*’ is translated as ‘*Pak Abu ketakutan*’ in the Malay language. The claim that students are influenced by their mother tongue as they write their passive sentences can be proven by

looking at the c-structure and f-structure of ‘*Pak Abu ketakutan*’, the equivalent translation of ‘*Pak Abu scared*’.

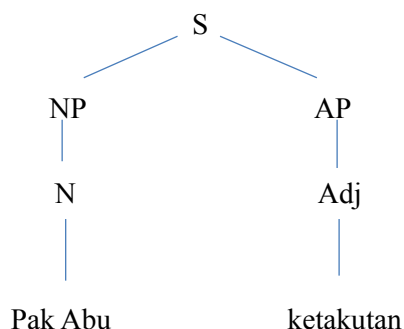


Figure 5: c-structure of adjectival passive translated into Malay language for sample C016

Figure 5 shows that the sentence is made up of a noun phrase and an adjectival phrase. The noun phrase is the subject of the sentence and it is a special noun, ‘*Pak Abu*’, whilst the adjectival phrase in the predicate is an adjective, ‘*ketakutan*’ (scared). In the Malay language, there are four sentence patterns and this is an example of the second pattern which is ‘FN+FA’ (Noun Phrase + Adjectival Phrase). There is no need of a verb within this pattern, unlike the English language by which a verb is compulsory in a sentence. Next is the f-structure of the same sentence.

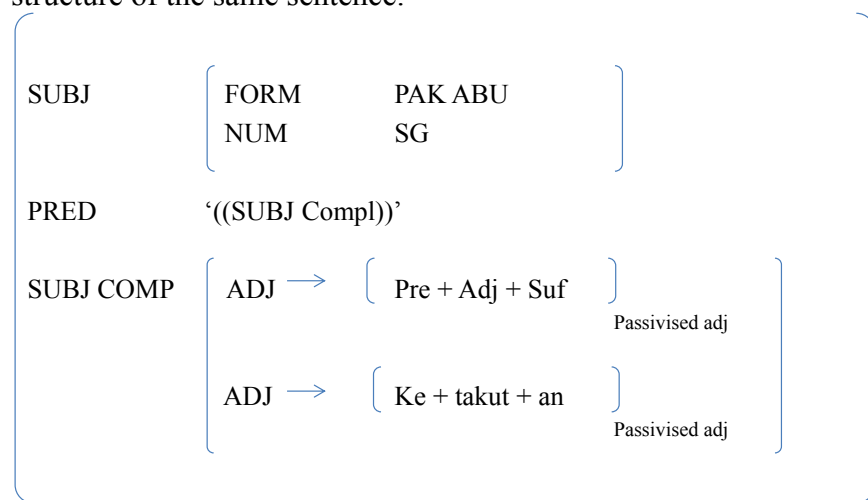


Figure 6: f-structure of adjectival passive translated into Malay language for sample C016

Figure 6 shows the subject of the sentence is a singular noun, *Pak Abu*. The predicate consists of a subject complement which is an adjectival phrase. Apparently, the noun ‘*ketakutan*’ is derived from an adjective, ‘*takut*’. It has undergone a morphological change by the affixation of prefix ‘*ke-*’ and suffix ‘*-an*’ to form a passivised adjective ‘*ketakutan*’.

The English adjectival passive attempted by student C016 and its equivalent translated structure in the Malay language shows a big difference in terms of their sentence types. The sentence taken from sample C016 is a passive sentence while the Malay equivalent sentence is merely a statement under the case of core sentence (*ayat inti*), with the use of passivised adjective, which is completely different from the Malay passives. Thus, if the Malay participants think of this idea in their mother tongue (Malay), then they will have a tendency

to translate it structurally while they are writing in the English language. In the end, it causes a negative transfer that leads to inaccuracy in the construction of the English language sentence.

### **Findings from an Interview Session with Participants**

Based on the participants' responses during the interviews, it can be concluded that the Malay ESL participants of SMK Tanjung Datuk are aware of the construction of the verbal passive, but not the adjectival and resultative passive structures. They also employed the direct translation technique consciously when they wrote their narrative compositions. Thus, the data from this interview showed that there is an influence from the participants' mother tongue in the construction of the English passives that support the previous findings of L1 influence in L2 writing.

### **Recommendations**

The study has put forward areas for future research. Since this study has utilized the LFG framework to study the use of English passives among Malay students, the researcher has opened further areas for other researchers to use the same framework across other languages. The LFG has proven that it is a stable framework that could aid our understanding on how grammatical categories in each language function. This study has also opened areas for comparative studies between languages to be done in the future.

### **Conclusion**

Based on the findings and discussion above, the Malay participants from SMK Tanjung Datuk managed to employ all the three categories of the English passive structures namely adjectival, resultative and verbal passives within their ESL narrative compositions. Despite the inaccurate structures written, the participants were aware of the basic principles underlying the English passives. They used the direct translation technique to convey their ideas from their mother tongue, the Malay language, into English. Even though this technique has influenced and caused inaccuracy in their written passive structures, the reader could still make sense of the meaning conveyed. Therefore, it is concluded that the Malay participants from SMK Tanjung Datuk were able to use the passive structures fairly well in their ESL narrative compositions.

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