

# **An application of second language acquisition research to ESL grammar teaching: What to do with novel passives**

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This paper demonstrates how second language acquisition research can inform textbook writers and language teachers. It begins with a summary of research which indicates that inappropriate passives are produced and accepted by learners with a variety of L1s and at different levels of proficiency. Researchers agree that the phenomenon is related to unaccusativity. It then presents an analysis of 40 ESL grammar textbooks which shows that few even mention unaccusative verbs or inappropriate passives in their presentation of active and passive voice. Only 7.5% discuss unaccusative verbs, while 10% give examples of inappropriate passives (explicit mention) and 10% explain that certain verbs cannot passivize (implicit mention). Moreover, those texts which do attempt to deal with unaccusatives and inappropriate passives are not complete, and may mislead the learner. The paper concludes with suggestions for dealing with unaccusativity and inappropriate passives in the ESL classroom, based on the relevant SLA research as well as studies in lexical semantics.

Cet article illustre comment les recherches en acquisition d'une langue seconde peuvent être appliquées au développement des manuels de cours ainsi qu'à l'enseignement de la grammaire. Dans un premier temps, nous présentons un résumé de la documentation qui indique que les apprenants d'anglais langue seconde à divers niveaux et avec diverses langues premières acceptent et produisent les structures passives non standard. Les chercheuses et chercheurs sont d'accord que ce phénomène est relié à l'inaccusativité. Par la suite, nous passons à une analyse de 40 manuels de grammaire qui indique que très peu d'entre eux mentionnent l'inaccusativité. Seulement 7,5% mentionnent l'inaccusativité, tandis que 10% donnent des exemples des structures passives non standard (mention explicite) et 10% expliquent que certains verbes ne peuvent pas être utilisés à la voix passive (mention implicite). De plus, les textes qui traitent les structures passives non standard ne sont pas complets, et en effet peuvent induire les apprenants en erreur. En se basant sur les recherches pertinentes en acquisition de l'anglais langue seconde ainsi que sur les études en sémantique lexicale, l'article conclut avec des suggestions pour aborder l'inaccusativité et les structures passives non standard en salle de classe.

In this paper I will show how research in second language acquisition (henceforth SLA<sup>1</sup>) can be applied to second language teaching. More specifically, I will discuss the production and acceptance of inappropriate passive morphology by learners of English as a second language and demonstrate how research exploring this issue can inform both textbook writers and teachers.

In (1) I have given examples of inappropriate passive morphology taken from the writing of advanced ESL learners. I will henceforth refer to this phenomenon as *novel passives*.

- (1) a. \*Without the effective control of public emotion . . . , a civil fight *was occurred* inevitably.  
 b. \*Of course these methods *weren't fallen* down from the sky.  
 c. \*Since these violent TV shows are on, that [polite] manner *has been disappeared*.  
 d. ?For pregnant women over 35, the risk of having a Down syndrome child *is increased*.

The verb in each sentence belongs to a different sub-class of a group of intransitive verbs — unaccusatives — which differ from regular intransitives such as *laugh* in that the grammatical subject is not performing the action described by the verb. The sub-classes of unaccusatives, taken from Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995), include both alternating and non-alternating verbs. Non-alternating unaccusatives are intransitive verbs such as those in (1a) to (1c) in which the grammatical subject does not perform the action described by the verb. Moreover (and hence their name), non-alternating intransitives do not have a transitive counterpart as does (1d). Non-alternating unaccusatives include three subclasses: verbs of occurrence (1a), verbs of inherently directed motion (1b) and verbs of appearance and disappearance (1c). Note that (1d) is not strictly ungrammatical, but an intransitive would be preferred (*For pregnant women over 35, the risk of having a Down syndrome child increases*) because there is no Agent causing the risk to increase. For the purposes of this paper, I will collapse the sub-groups of non-alternating unaccusatives into one, since to the best of my knowledge there is no published research which shows that learners treat the various sub-classes of non-alternating unaccusatives differently.

I will begin with a brief discussion of voice and verb classes because the SLA research shows that ESL learners frequently mark unaccusative verbs with passive morphology (henceforth *be + -en*), but rarely do so with regular intransitive verbs. I will then summarize the relevant research on the L2 acquisition of unaccusativity, analyze how the issue is treated in ESL grammar textbooks and conclude with suggestions as to how the topic might be presented to high-intermediate and advanced ESL students in academic ESL courses.



morphologically marked in English (with *be* + *-en*) while unaccusatives are not. Moreover, with passives there is an Agent, either occurring overtly in a *by*-phrase (6a), or implicit in (6b) and (6c) where the adverb *deliberately* and the infinitival of purpose indicate the presence of an implicit Agent who can act volitionally.

(6) *Explicit and Implicit Agents with the Passive:*

- a. The boat was sunk [by the navy].
- b. The boat was sunk [deliberately].
- c. The boat was sunk [to collect the insurance].

(based on Roeper, 1987, pp. 267–68)

This is not the case with clauses containing unaccusative verbs, where the action is viewed as occurring on its own, without external intervention (Levin and Rappaport Hovav, 1995). The examples in (7) show that there is no possibility of an Agent, either explicit or implicit, with unaccusatives:

(7) *Explicit and Implicit Agents with Unaccusatives:*

- a. \*The boat sank [by the navy].
- b. \*The boat sank [deliberately].
- c. \*The boat sank [to collect the insurance].

(based on Roeper, 1987, pp. 267–68)

As I mentioned above, the class of unaccusatives includes alternating unaccusatives, which have a transitive counterpart, as in (8), as well as non-alternating unaccusatives, which do not have a transitive counterpart (9).

- (8) a. Prices increased./The stores increased their prices.
- b. The cup broke./The child broke the cup.
- c. The door opened./Mavis opened the door.
- (9) a. The accident occurred./\*The careless driver occurred the accident.
- b. The cup fell./\*The child fell the cup.
- c. The rabbit disappeared./\*The magician disappeared the rabbit.

Although the transitive sentences in (9) are ungrammatical in English, towards the end of the next section I will present evidence that in Interlanguage English non-alternating unaccusatives do have transitive counterparts.

### **Second language acquisition of unaccusativity**

The topic of novel passives has received a fair amount of attention in the SLA literature on the acquisition of unaccusativity in English because sentences such as (1a) to (1c) do not occur in the input, nor can they be explained by

transfer from the first language. Their study can therefore give insights into the processes underlying L2 acquisition.

Research studying the acquisition of unaccusativity by ESL learners has shown that:

- Novel passives such as those in (1) are produced and judged as grammatical by learners with a variety of first languages and at different levels of proficiency. The studies include: ESL learners with 8 different first languages (Hubbard, 1983 cited in Hubbard, 1994); Dutch (Kellerman, 1978); French (Balcom, 1995, 1999); Japanese (Zobl, 1989; Hiramawa, 1994, 1995; Oshita, 1997, 1999, 2001); Korean (Ju, 2000); Persian (Youhaneae, p.c.); Italian, Spanish and Korean (Oshita, 1997, 2001); Arabic, Spanish, Turkish, Thai, Indonesian (Zobl, 1989); as well as Cantonese, Mandarin and Taiwanese (Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1997; Han, 1998).
- The phenomenon is related to unaccusativity, since novel passives are frequently produced and accepted with both alternating and non-alternating unaccusative verbs, but almost never with regular intransitive verbs. (Zobl, 1989; Hubbard, 1994; Hiramawa, 1995; Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1997; Han, 1998; Oshita, 1998, 2001.)
- Although learners produce and accept novel passives with all sub-classes of unaccusative verbs, alternating change-of-state verbs such as *open* and *increase* occur most frequently and persistently as novel passives (Hiramawa, 1995; Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1997; Han, 1998).
- Novel passives may fossilize, although some learners do attain native-like performance with unaccusatives. Han (1998) asserted that novel passives fossilized in the Interlanguage of two very advanced Chinese learners of English, and Yip (1995) and Oshita (1997) both suggested that novel passives might fossilize. Yet Balcom (1995) showed that novel passives had almost totally disappeared in the controlled production of very advanced Francophone learners, although they continued to accept them in their judgements. Similarly, Balcom (1999) found no significant differences between Francophones who were advanced learners of English and native speakers of English in both their production and acceptance of grammatical unaccusatives and novel passives. These differences may be due to the first language of the participants in the various studies, Chinese, Japanese and Korean as opposed to French.

While this survey of the literature shows that SLA research on the acquisition of unaccusativity in English is quite robust, it is still not clear why learners produce and accept novel passives, and there have been a variety of proposals to account for this phenomenon (see Oshita, 1999 for a critical review of the different proposals). One suggestion is that novel passives are actually

adjectival passives with a stative reading (Hubbard, 1994); another is that *be* + *-en* or *be* and an unmarked form of the verb represents a tense marker (Richards, 1973 and Anderson, 1980 respectively). A third proposal to account for novel passives is that *be* + *-en* is an overt marker of movement of the logical object from post-verbal to pre-verbal position (Zobl, 1989; Oshita, 1997, 2001). Finally, it has been suggested that learners view both alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives as basically transitive, and that inappropriate *be* + *-en* represents a syntactic passive (Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1997. Montrul, 1999 made a similar proposal for the acquisition of unaccusativity in Spanish as a second language). Some support for the latter position can be found in the research which shows that learners also produce and accept novel causatives (Hirakawa, 1994; Oshita, 1998; Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1999).

- (10) a. . . . concentrated population could *occur* these kind of problem.  
 b. . . . he *falls* a piece of note into dough by mistake.  
 c. The TV *appear* all kinds of animals. (Oshita, 1998)

Ju (2000) showed that Korean learners of ESL were more likely to accept novel passives of alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives in a judgement task when there was an implicit Agent which could be inferred from the context. This finding also suggests a relationship between syntactic passives and novel passives with unaccusative verbs in Interlanguage English. More data in support of the syntactic passive account is Hirakawa's subjects' acceptance of sentences such as (11), where novel passives occur with a *by*-phrase (Hirakawa, 1994). However, she noted that further research with learners with different first languages was required, because her subjects' acceptance of such sentences may have been due to transfer of the adversative passive from Japanese.

- (11) \*Jane was fallen down by Mary. (Hirakawa, 1994, p. 11)

There is anecdotal evidence to support this hypothesis as well. For example, one Taiwanese learner asked me why *The book was fallen on the floor* was ungrammatical, because "someone made it fall". The student, and others in the class, thought *Somebody fell the book* was a grammatical sentence.

To summarize this section, the SLA research demonstrates that:

1. learners with different first languages and at different levels of English proficiency produce and accept novel passives, which researchers have linked to unaccusativity;
2. the phenomenon occurs with all sub-classes of unaccusatives, although alternating change-of-state verbs occur most frequently and persistently as novel passives;
3. novel passives may fossilize.

Clearly, the phenomenon should be addressed in the ESL classroom, but in the next section I will show that it is rarely discussed in ESL grammar textbooks, and when it is presented the rules provided could potentially mislead students, given what is known about the L2 acquisition of unaccusativity in English.

### How unaccusatives are treated in ESL grammar textbooks

In my survey of how unaccusatives are treated in ESL grammar textbooks, I examined all ESL grammar textbooks dating from 1981 to 1999 in a well-stocked teacher resource centre at a Canadian university with a large ESL programme. Because of the close relationship between passives and unaccusatives discussed above, I examined chapters on the passive in the texts. I also looked for sections on alternating change-of-state verbs, since as I mentioned in the previous section, these verbs occur most frequently and persistently as novel passives. Grammar sections of integrated (four-skills) textbooks were excluded, but separate grammar texts in integrated series were included (Werner, 1990 for example). There were 40 texts which met these criteria: they are listed in Appendix 1. To give an indication of the representativeness of the textbooks surveyed, four of the five books listed under “Pedagogical Suggestions” in Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman’s (1999) chapter on the passive are included in the list.

Despite the prevalence of novel passives in the acquisition of unaccusativity in Interlanguage English, very few texts even mentioned unaccusative verbs or novel passives; only 11/40, or 27.5% did so. Table 1 lists texts which discussed alternating change-of-state verbs (7.5%) as well as texts which mentioned novel passives, either explicitly, by giving examples of the phenomenon (10%), or implicitly, by stating that certain verbs cannot passivize (10%). In some cases, the text is included in more than one category.

**Table 1:** Presentation of Novel Passives in ESL Grammar Textbooks

Change-of-state verbs as “special” intransitives	Explicit mention of novel passives	Implicit mention of novel passives
	Aronson (1984)	
	Azar (1992)	Azar (1999)
Danielson et al. (1990)	Danielson et al. (1990)	Dart (1997)
Davis (1989)		Pollock (1997)
Thewlis (1993)		Thewlis (1993, 1997)
	Werner and Nelson (1990)	

Before I begin my analysis of the grammar texts, I want to emphasize that I have chosen the most comprehensive and accurate examples for each type

of text. I am not singling out these texts for criticism, but rather discussing those which gave enough information to comment upon. I would also like to emphasize I recognize that the purpose of rules and explanations in ESL grammar textbooks is to give students generalizations which can help them progress in the L2 without presenting them with unnecessary details. In what follows I will show that although the generalizations presented may be valid, some are incomplete and could lead to learner errors. Moreover, I show that in some instances (that is, Thewlis, 1993) it is actually possible to simplify the author's generalizations with no loss of accuracy.

### ***Explicit mention of novel passives***

Figure 1 is a reproduction of the relevant section of Azar (1992, pp. 282–83). She gives one example of a novel passive (*An accident was happened.*) along with a brief rule and an exercise which requires students to passivize verbs (both transitive and intransitive) where possible.

**Figure 1:** Explicit mention of novel passives  
(Azar, 1992)

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- (a) **TRANSITIVE VERBS**  
ACTIVE: Bob *mailed* the letter.  
PASSIVE: The letter *was mailed* by Bob.
- (b) **INTRANSITIVE VERBS**  
ACTIVE: An accident *happened*.  
PASSIVE: (*not possible*)
- (c) INCORRECT: An accident was happened.

Only transitive verbs can be used in the passive. A transitive verb is a verb that is followed by an object. . . . An intransitive verb is a verb that is not followed by an object. . . . An intransitive verb CANNOT be used in the passive.

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Although the rule “only transitive verbs can be used in the passive” is accurate, it could be problematic given what is known about the L2 acquisition of unaccusativity in English. I have already cited research which showed that learners accept and produce novel causatives with verbs such as *occur*, *fall* and *disappear*. In (12) I have repeated examples of novel causatives which learners at different levels of proficiency in English produce and accept. These data suggest that learners may view these verbs as transitive; Azar's rule would therefore not help them and might in fact encourage them to incorrectly passivize the verbs.



- (12) a. . . . concentrated population could *occur* these kind of problem.  
 b. . . . he *falls* a piece of note into dough by mistake.  
 c. The TV *appear* all kinds of animals. (Oshita, 1998)

Second, alternating change-of-state verbs such as *open*, *break* and *increase* have an intransitive and a transitive form and therefore passivize, as is shown in (13).

- (13) a. Prices increased./The stores increased their prices./Prices were increased by the stores.  
 b. The glass broke./The child broke the glass./The glass was broken by the child.  
 c. The door opened. /Mary opened the door./The door was opened by Mary.

This calls into question Azar's assertion that "An intransitive verb CANNOT be used in the passive", since alternating change-of state verbs such as *increase*, *break* and *open* clearly can. Although I acknowledge that Azar's intention is to inform students that it is the transitive form of such verbs that passivizes, it does not follow that this is how students will interpret the rule. There are two approaches to unaccusativity. Some linguists have proposed that the intransitive form of alternating change-of-state verbs such as *break* and *increase* is basic and the transitive derived by adding a causer argument (Marantz, 1984; Pinker, 1989 for example). On the other hand, Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995) view the transitive as basic, with the unaccusative derived by removing the causer argument, as do Borer (1991) and Hale and Keyser (1993) among others. ESL learners, like some linguists, may assume that the intransitive form is basic. There is evidence in support of this assumption: as I illustrated in (12), learners produce novel causatives with non-alternating unaccusatives. This is related to the previous point: if one sub-class of unaccusatives has a transitive and intransitive variant, learners may assume they all do. Rules like Azar's would therefore not help them.

### ***Implicit mention of novel passives***

Pollock (1997, p. 180) is representative of texts which mention novel passives implicitly, by giving examples of unaccusative verbs (*seem* and *disappear*) and stating that such verbs do not passivize (Figure 2).

Pollock's rule is very similar to Azar's and the same comments apply: the SLA research suggests that in Interlanguage English verbs such as *disappear*, *occur* and *fall* do have a transitive counterpart. Moreover, learners may view the intransitive form of alternating change-of-state verbs such as *increase*, *break* and *open* to be basic, and these verbs can be "changed into the passive voice". Thus, Azar's and Pollock's rules, although technically correct, may not help students since the rules do not reflect Interlanguage English.

**Figure 2:** Implicit mention of novel passives  
(Pollock, 1997)

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Not every verb can be changed into the passive voice. Only transitive verbs (verbs that have an object) can be changed. Intransitive verbs (verbs that do not have an object) cannot be changed into the passive voice. For example, these sentences cannot be written in the passive voice because the verbs are intransitive.

*She seems tired.*

*The dog disappeared.*

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**Change-of-state verbs as “special” intransitives**

Figure 3 is Thewlis’ (1993, p. 56) introduction to “intransitive change-of-state verbs” (what I refer to as alternating unaccusatives).

**Figure 3:** Change-of-state verbs as “special” intransitives  
(Thewlis, 1993)

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Many verbs appear in active sentences without expressing the agent. Most of these verbs describe changes of state. Even though the subject obviously doesn’t do the action, you can use active rather than passive forms.

- (a) (**active**) Somebody or something **broke** the window.
  - (b) (**passive**) The window **was broken** into a million pieces.
  - (c) (**change of state**) The window **broke** into a million pieces.
- 

The problem with this introduction is that it does not indicate clearly what differentiates the passive and intransitive change-of-state verbs, apart from their form. Table 2 presents Thewlis’ rules for when to use the passive and when to use the intransitive change-of-state verb. Thewlis provided examples for each rule, which I have not reproduced for expository purposes. I have in some cases changed the order of the rules to highlight their similarities.

Note that one rule — which is indicated in boldface — is almost exactly the same for both passives and intransitive change-of-state verbs, while the others, with one exception, would not help students choose the correct form.

Part of the exercise on using passives and intransitive change-of-state verbs is reproduced in (14). An intransitive form would be preferred in the blanks, but the SLA research shows that learners would be likely to use the passive in such contexts. Yet it would be difficult to explain why the intransitive form is preferred, based on the rules in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Thewlis’ Rules for Using the Passive and Change-of-state Verbs

<i>Choosing Passive versus Active</i> (p. 54)	<i>Change-of-state verbs</i> (p. 56)
Sentences usually require passive verbs instead of active verbs: <b>if the agent is unknown, unimportant,</b> or obvious from the context.	You can use change-of-state verbs in active form: when there is no single identifiable agent, or <b>the agent is unknown or unimportant</b>
to emphasize the recipient.	when the most important information is not the verb.
to connect ideas in different clauses more clearly.	for dramatic narration.
to make generic explanations, statements, and announcements. <sup>4</sup>	when the subject is one that can change without an apparent agent.

(14) The difference between the income of the richest 5% of American families and the rest of the country \_\_\_\_\_ (widen) to the biggest difference since 1947. While the incomes of the richest 5% of Americans \_\_\_\_\_ (increase), the incomes of most other Americans \_\_\_\_\_ (decrease). (Thewlis, 1993, p. 57)

This lack of clarity in distinguishing passives and unaccusatives with alternating change-of-state verbs may be the reason Focus 7 “Change-of-State Verbs” was eliminated from the second edition (Thewlis, 1997).

There is one rule Thewlis gives which does differentiate unaccusatives and passives simply and unambiguously: “You can use change-of-state verbs in active form when the subject is one that can change without an apparent agent” (p. 86), and I will take this point up again in the next section.

**Points for teaching**

What follows are general pedagogical considerations for presenting unaccusativity in conjunction with the passive voice to high-intermediate and advanced learners studying ESL at university. ESL teachers have a variety of ways of teaching the passive: the purpose of this section, which summarizes and augments the information presented above, is to assist teachers in enhancing their presentation by introducing unaccusativity and comparing it to the passive. Although I have found these points to be useful in explaining the difference between the passive and unaccusatives to ESL learners, who in turn appreciate the information and always ask numerous questions, I acknowledge that there is some debate as to whether or not direct grammar instruction is effective in second language teaching.<sup>5</sup>

**Point 1: Not all unaccusatives are alternating.**

Most change-of-state verbs (e.g. *increase, break, open, boil, freeze*) have a transitive counterpart, but other sub-classes of unaccusatives (*occur, fall,*

*disappear*) are exclusively intransitive. ESL learners' use of novel passives with all sub-classes, as well as their novel causatives, may indicate that they view *all* unaccusatives as alternating. They need to be explicitly told that only change-of-state verbs like *increase* have a transitive and intransitive form. For example, students can be given lists of alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives and be told that only verbs such as *open* and *increase* have a transitive form, and that verbs such as *occur*, *fall* and *disappear* are exclusively intransitive. (Appendix 2 provides a list of unaccusative verbs which are attested to in the SLA literature as having been produced and accepted as novel passives.) Once the distinction between alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives has been established, special attention can be paid to alternating change-of-state verbs, since the research has shown that they occur most frequently and persistently as novel passives.

***Point 2: Intransitive change-of-state verbs express events which occur without external intervention.***

According to Rutherford (1987), ESL learners, even at the advanced level, are not aware of the possibility of non-agentive grammatical subjects in English, unless they are marked by passive morphology. Similarly, Yip (1995) mentioned that one subject in her study commented that neither his teachers nor his textbooks had made any mention of unaccusativity; he therefore thought that a sentence with a grammatical subject which was not the logical subject required passive morphology. Subjects in Balcom's (1997) study made comparable observations, saying they used the passive when the grammatical subject was inanimate. In addition, Ju (2000) showed that Korean learners of ESL were more likely to accept novel passives with both alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives when there was an understood external cause in the discourse. The SLA findings, coupled with anecdotal evidence, suggest that ESL teachers should present unaccusative verbs, particularly alternating change-of-state verbs, in conjunction with the passive.

Students can be told that both the passive and alternating change-of-state verbs are possible means English provides for expressing a similar meaning: the logical object is the grammatical subject, and emphasis is placed on the change of state resulting from the action of the verb, and in both cases the logical object moves from post-verbal to pre-verbal position. Passives and unaccusatives differ in that this movement is marked (using *be* + *-en*) with passives, but not with unaccusatives. Moreover, with passives there is an Agent (either explicit or implicit) bringing about the event described by the verb while the event described by the unaccusative verb is viewed as occurring by itself.

As mentioned above, one of Thewlis' (1993) rules was: "You can use change-of-state verbs in active form when the subject is one that can change without an apparent agent" (p. 86). In other words, the intransitive change-

of-state verb is used when the event can be envisaged as occurring by itself, without the intervention of an Agent who acts volitionally or at least has control over the situation, and when the causing event is not specified (Levin and Rappaport, 1995). Comparison of (15) and (16) reveals that although the meanings of the pairs of verbs are quite close — *break/destroy* and *close/lock* — only the events described by the first verbs in each pair (i.e. *break* and *close*) can be conceived of as occurring on their own, so only they have an intransitive form. Because *destroy* and *lock* require the intervention of a Agent using an instrument (unspecified in the case of *destroy*, usually a key in the case of *lock*), they do not have unaccusative counterparts.

- (15) a. The toy broke./The toy was broken (by someone)  
 b. The door closed./The door was closed (by someone.)
- (16) a. \*The toy destroyed./The toy was destroyed (by someone).  
 b. \*The door locked./The door was locked (by someone).

To summarize this point, with passives, but not intransitive alternating change-of-state verbs, there is always an Agent who performs the action described by the verb. This Agent may occur explicitly in a *by*-phrase, but even if it is not present in the sentence it is implicit in its interpretation. The intransitive change-of-state verb is preferred when the action can be viewed as occurring spontaneously (“by itself”), and when there is no Agent causing the event to occur. To illustrate this point, the sentences in (17), produced by advanced ESL learners in their spontaneous writing, sound somewhat odd because the events are more likely to have occurred without the intervention of an Agent, so the unaccusatives in (18) are more natural.

- (17) a. ?If the legal drinking age were raised, drinking and driving accidents *would be decreased*.  
 b. ?The [volcanic] rock is so hot that it *is melted*.
- (18) a. If the legal drinking age were raised, drinking and driving accidents *would decrease*.  
 b. The [volcanic] rock is so hot that it *melted/melts*.

### Introducing unaccusativity in the ESL classroom

The exercise in Figure 4 has been used with high intermediate and advanced students studying English for Academic Purposes in a university setting. It can serve as a probe of students’ current knowledge of active and passive voice and unaccusativity, and indicate which areas need to be introduced or clarified. Its purpose is to complement the ESL teacher’s presentation of the passive voice.

The questions in this exercise allow the teacher to introduce or clarify the following points:

**Figure 4:** Exercise introducing unaccusativity in the ESL classroom

## THREE FLIPS

Without making light of the horrors brought by a powerful and devastating storm (Tropical Storm Barry Lashes Nova Scotia—July 10), perhaps what’s most disturbing is that Canadian Press reports, “One driver flipped his car three times after hitting water on a highway just outside Halifax.”

Did the writer fail to realize that this stunt was accomplished by the brave driver because there was a chance that home-video camera operators were at the ready, to peddle their wares to American TV tabloid programs?

Surely three flips are always involuntary.

Grant Elliot, Toronto  
(Letter to the Editor, *The Globe and Mail*,  
Saturday, July 15, 1995)

*Questions*

1. Why did the author of the letter react negatively to the report by Canadian Press?
2. Would it have been better for Canadian Press to write: “One car flipped three times.”? Why or why not?
3. What is the difference in i) form and ii) meaning between the two sentences below?
  - (a) One car flipped three times.
  - (b) One car was flipped three times.
4. Can you think of any other verbs that are like “flip” in the way they can appear in sentences?

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- a) Question 1: In the active transitive sentence (“One driver flipped his car three times”), there is an Agent who caused the event and acted deliberately (e.g. *The stunt driver flipped her car three times*). The letter writer expresses the opinion that the event was surely not intentional.
  - b) Question 2: The unaccusative form is preferable (*The car flipped three times*) because the event was accidental. As the letter writer indicated, the event was not voluntary!
  - c) Question 3: In the passive sentence (*The car was flipped three times*) there is passive morphology (*be + -en*), and an implicit Agent who brought about the event described by the verb. With the passive as with the active transitive sentence, the act would be under the control of the Agent.
  - d) Question 4: Once students have generated a list of verbs like *flip*, the teacher will be able to ascertain whether they view all unaccusative verbs

as alternating (if they say that verbs such as *occur*, *appear* and *fall* are like *flip*). This leads to the introduction alternating and non-alternating unaccusative verbs. (See Appendix 2 for a list of unaccusative verbs which the SLA research has shown learners use as novel passives.)

### Conclusions

Given that novel passives are produced and accepted by ESL learners with different first languages and at different levels of proficiency, and given that these errors may fossilize, the phenomenon should be addressed in the ESL classroom. In the previous section I have provided some indication of how this can be done. Empirical research is required to determine whether the suggestions made in this section would have a positive effect on ESL learners' acquisition of unaccusativity, and help them avoid novel passives or eradicate them from their Interlanguage English.

More generally, I have shown that SLA research can be applied to textbook writing and classroom teaching. Whether explicit grammar teaching furthers L2 acquisition remains an empirical question, but textbook writers and language teachers with not only a good understanding of grammar but also of the relevant SLA research can at least ensure that their explicit instruction is accurate and in line with how the phenomenon is acquired. With such understanding, grammar teaching may prove to be more effective.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In this paper I follow a convention in SLA research whereby SLA indicates the research area and L2 acquisition refers to the process L2 learners go through.
- <sup>2</sup> Jackendoff (1987) defined *Theme* as “the object in motion or being located” (p. 377), and *Patient* as the “object affected” (p. 394). Although he makes an important distinction between the two, the terms are often used interchangeably.
- <sup>3</sup> *Unaccusative* verbs are sometimes called *ergative*. They are similar to middle constructions as in (i) since in both cases the grammatical subject is the logical object, but differ in that middles in English are generic statements which usually occur in the non-past tense with an adverbial of facility. Moreover, middles have an implicit Agent, as do passives when there is no *by*-phrase.
  - (i) a. This bread cuts easily.
  - b. Irish crystal breaks easily.
- <sup>4</sup> See note 3, where I mentioned that middle constructions such as *This bread cuts easily* are generic statements, but in what Thewlis called “the active form” rather than the passive. Thewlis' rule could, therefore, confuse learners.
- <sup>5</sup> Space constraints do not permit an overview of the literature on the efficacy of direct grammar teaching in second language learning. I refer the reader to Long (1983) and Ellis (1986) for two early surveys on the effects of grammar teaching, and Ellis

(1994), Doughty and Williams (1998) and Rutherford and Sharwood Smith (1998) for more recent discussions of this complex and contentious issue. Ellis (1998) provided a useful discussion on the different types of form-focussed instruction and their contribution to L2 learning.

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**Appendix 2:**

**Unaccusative Verbs which occur as Novel Passives in Interlanguage**

All of the following unaccusative verbs have been documented in the SLA literature as having been produced and/or accepted as novel passives by ESL learners.

**A. Alternating change-of state verbs**

boil, break, burn, change, close, decrease, dry, grow, improve, increase, melt, open, sink, slide

**B. Non-alternating unaccusatives**

*Verbs of occurrence:*

happen, occur

*Verbs of inherently directed motion:*

arrive, come, fall, go, rise

*Verbs of appearance and disappearance:*

appear, arise, develop, die, disappear, emerge, erupt, vanish

*Verbs of existence:*

be, become, co-exist, exist, live, remain, seem

*Internally caused change-of-state verbs:*

deteriorate, degenerate

**C. Aspectual Verbs**

begin, continue, end, originate, start