



UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA

***ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH PASSIVE BY L1 MALAY ESL ADULT
LEARNERS***

MAHANUM BINTI MAHDUN

FBMK 2022 6



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By

MAHANUM BINTI MAHDUN

**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra
Malaysia, in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

July 2020

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Abstract of thesis presented to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia in fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

ACQUISITION OF THE ENGLISH PASSIVE BY L1 MALAY ESL ADULT LEARNERS

By

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July 2020

Chairman : Associate Professor Chan Mei Yuit, PhD
Faculty : Modern Languages and Communication

The English passive is one of the problematic structures to be acquired by L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds. Second language acquisition studies have shown that L1 Malay ESL adult learners face difficulties in acquiring the English passive. This could be due to the varying competency levels among the L2 learners as well as cross-linguistic interferences from the learners' L1, which is Malay language. The Interlanguage Hypothesis postulated that the L2 learner's interlanguage (IL) system is characterised by systematicity, variability and permeability. L2 learners' interlanguage grammar undergoes developmental stages in the acquisition process, influenced by their L1 and L2, particularly learners at the initial stages of acquisition. Hence, this study aims to study the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners in Malaysia by investigating the IL representations of the English passive at four different levels of proficiency: Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Upper Intermediate and Advanced. 499 L1 Malay ESL adult learners from randomly selected higher learning institutions in Malaysia participated in the study. Firstly, the respondents completed a background questionnaire (BQ) and a placement test (Oxford Placement Test). The results of the OPT determines the respondents' proficiency groups. Subsequently, a Grammaticality Judgement Task (GJT) and a Picture Description Task (PDT) were administered to examine the respondents' underlying knowledge and production of the English passive. The data were tabulated and described using frequency distribution and analysed using paired T-tests and one-way ANOVA.

The results indicated that most of the L1 Malay ESL adult learners have acquired the English passive. However, their competency level was non-native like, even for the Advanced group. Their judgements on the

grammaticality of the test items were indeterminate, particularly those at the lower proficiency levels. In terms of unaccusativity, it was observed that the learners were inclined to overgeneralise the passive morphology the English intransitive verbs; the unaccusative verbs (UAV) and unergative verbs (UEV). The overgeneralisation was higher with the UAV than the UEV and this might be due to the similar underlying representations of the UAV and the passive verb. It seems like the learners were sensitive to the distinction between UAV and UEV, as indicated by the significantly higher overpassivisation errors with the UAV. Besides, the results also indicated that the main errors committed by the L1 Malay ESL adult learners are related to omission of the *be* verb, incorrect past participle forms and incorrect SVA. It is suggested that these errors could be due to the absence of the *be* verb, and the [+/-tense] and [+/-agreement] features in the Malay language. This study concludes that the L1 Malay ESL adult learners have not fully acquired the English passive and there is a significant difference among the proficiency groups in their performance on the English passive. The L1 Malay ESL adult learners also tend to overpassivise the UAV more than the UEV. Furthermore, these learners produced interlingual and intralingual errors in their acquisition of the English passive. The findings of this study sheds light into the IL representations of the English passive in the language acquisition/learning process of the L1 Malay ESL adult learners. This contributes insights to the SLA literature, particularly the Interlanguage and Unaccusative Hypotheses. In addition, the findings would have pedagogical implications for the English as a second language (ESL) classroom.

Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia
sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Doktor Falsafah

**PEMEROLEHAN AYAT PASIF BAHASA INGGERIS OLEH PELAJAR
MELAYU DEWASA YANG MEMPELAJARI BAHASA INGGERIS SEBAGAI
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Ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris merupakan satu struktur yang sukar dikuasai oleh kebanyakan pelajar Bahasa Inggeris sebagai bahasa kedua (*ESL*). Kajian lepas menunjukkan bahawa penutur Bahasa Melayu juga menghadapi kesukaran dalam penguasaan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris. Ini mungkin berpunca daripada tahap kesukaran struktur ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris itu sendiri atau pengaruh dari bahasa pertama mereka. Menurut Hipotesis *Interlanguage*, sistem bahasa antara bagi pelajar *ESL* mempunyai aturan tertentu, kepelbagaian dan mudah dipengaruhi. Dalam proses penguasaan bahasa, pelajar *ESL* akan melalui beberapa tahap perkembangan dalam sistem bahasa antara. Ia juga banyak dipengaruhi oleh bahasa pertama mereka. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji sejauh mana tahap penguasaan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan penutur Bahasa Melayu dewasa di Malaysia. Kajian ini dijalankan dengan meneliti penggunaan dan pembentukan ayat pasif dalam sistem bahasa antara. Seramai 499 orang pelajar dari sembilan buah institusi pengajian tinggi yang dipilih dengan kaedah persampelan secara rawak, terlibat sebagai responden dalam kajian ini. Pada peringkat pertama pengumpulan data, responden perlu melengkapkan Soal selidik Profil Responden (BQ) dan *Oxford Placement Test* (OPT). Manakala pada peringkat kedua responden perlu melengkapkan *Grammaticality Judgement Test* (GJT) dan *Picture Description Task* (PDT). Kaedah data analisis yang digunakan dalam kajian ini adalah taburan frekuensi dan ujian statistik T-test dan ANOVA.

Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa penutur Bahasa Melayu *ESL* dewasa masih belum menguasai ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris sepenuhnya. Pencapaian mereka didapati tidak setanding dengan penutur asal Bahasa Inggeris. Selain itu, penutur Melayu *ESL* juga melakukan kesalahan dengan penggunaan kata kerja tidak transitif *unaccusative* (UAV) dan *unergative* (UEV) dalam pembentukan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris. Penutur Bahasa Melayu *ESL* lebih cenderung melakukan kesalahan ini dengan kata kerja UAV berbanding kata kerja UEV. Kesalahan ini berlaku disebabkan oleh persamaan antara struktur pembentukan UAV dan kata kerja pasif yang mengelirukan pelajar dalam pembentukan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris. Selain itu, dapatan kajian ini juga menunjukkan bahawa kesalahan ayat pasif yang paling kerap dilakukan oleh penutur Bahasa Melayu *ESL* adalah tidak menggunakan *be verb*, pembentukan *past participle* yang salah, dan penggunaan SVA yang salah. Kesalahan ini berlaku disebabkan ketiadaan struktur *be verb*, [+/-tense] dan [+/-agreement] dalam Bahasa Melayu. Kesimpulannya, dapatan kajian ini menunjukkan tahap penguasaan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris dalam sistem bahasa antara penutur Bahasa Melayu dewasa. Jenis dan sumber kesalahan juga dikenal pasti dan dibincangkan. Hasil dapatan kajian ini menyumbang data dan maklumat tentang penguasaan ayat pasif Bahasa Inggeris di kalangan penutur Bahasa Melayu *ESL* dewasa kepada literatur dan bidang pembelajaran bahasa kedua. Ia juga memberi sumbangan kepada Hipotesis *Interlanguage* dan *Unaccusative*. Selain itu, hasil kajian ini juga memberi implikasi pedagogi bagi pengajaran dan pembelajaran Bahasa Inggeris sebagai Bahasa kedua.

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This thesis was submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. The members of the Supervisory Committee were as follows:

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ACC	Accusative
ADV	Advanced
ANOVA	Analysis of variance tests of statistical significance
BQ	Background questionnaire
DET	Determiner
DP	Determiner Phrase
L1	First language
L2	Second Language
EL	Elementary
ESL	English as a Second Language
FLA	First Language Acquisition
GJT	Grammaticality Judgement Task
GR	Grammatical
GR PASS	Grammatical Passive
IUM	International Islamic University Malaysia
ILG	Interlanguage Grammar
IUKL	Infrastructure University Kuala Lumpur
IP	Inflectional phrase
KMS	Kolej MARA Seremban
KUIS	Kolej Universiti Islam Antarabangsa Selangor
LI	Lower Intermediate
NOM	Nominative
NP	Noun Phrase
OPT	Oxford Placement Test
PDT	Picture Description Task
PP	Prepositional Phrase
SLA	Second Language Acquisition
SPEC	Specifier
SPM	Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia
UAV	Unaccusative Verbs
UEV	Unergative Verbs

UG	Universal Grammar
UGR	Ungrammatical
UGR PASS	Ungrammatical Passive
UI	Upper Intermediate
UiTM	Universiti Teknologi MARA
UniKL-RMC	Universiti Kuala Lumpur – Royal Medical College
UPM	Universiti Putra Malaysia
USIM	Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia
UTeM	Universiti Teknikal Malaysia
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase



CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This chapter details the key components positioning the present study. It encompasses the background of the study, statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, research objectives, research questions, theoretical framework, significance and scope of the study, as well as the definition of key terms.

1.1 Background of the Study

1.1.1 First and Second Language Acquisition

All children, given a normal developmental environment, acquire their first language fluently, efficiently and naturally without special instructions, although not without significant effort and attention to the language (Brown, 2014; Chomsky, 1981; Mitchell, Myles, & Marsden, 2019; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016; Towell & Hawkins, 1994). Their language is remarkably rich and shows the mastery of phonological, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic pattern systems, as well as a high degree of communicative competence in an appropriate use. The pattern of first language acquisition (FLA) is relatively uniform across different children, languages, and cultures; language is acquired with relative ease and rapidity. Furthermore, children show a mental representation of language and creativity, which not only goes beyond the input they are exposed to (i.e., poverty of stimulus) but is also strikingly similar to that of other speakers of the same language variety (Brown, 2014). Studies in FLA have shown that they go through homogenous developmental stages, use similar constructions in expressing interchangeable meanings, and make nearly identical kinds of errors (Aitchison, 2008; de Villiers & de Villiers, 1973; Denham & Lobeck, 2019; Ellis, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2019; Pinker, 1994; White, 2003). Researchers and linguists in the generative perspective believed that children could not acquire their L1 so quickly and effortlessly without the help of an innate linguistic mechanism to guide them. They claimed that humans are biologically endowed with an innate linguistic mechanism in the language faculty that provides a genetic blueprint which serves the basis of language acquisition (Chomsky, 1959; 1981; Cook, 2008; Flynn, 1987; Hawkins, 2001; Johnson & Newport, 1989; Mitchell et al., 2019; Pinker, 1994; Schwartz & Sprouse, 1994, 1996; White, 1989, 2003). This innate linguistic mechanism, termed as the Universal Grammar (UG) lexicon, is a tool in assisting humans to acquire language, consisting of principles and parameters which place limitations and constrains on the grammar and structures of natural languages (Chomsky, 1981; Mitchell et al., 2019; White, 2003).

Second language acquisition (SLA) is similar to FLA in which second language (L2) learners have to construct abstract representations of the L2. This is undertaken on the basis of limited samples of language that they actually encounter (i.e., poverty of stimulus) in order to comprehend and use the target language (TL) (Schwartz & Sprouse, 2000; White, 1989, 2003). Nonetheless, contrary to the ease and rapidity of FLA, acquiring L2 is a task of higher complexity and challenge for most L2 learners (Mitchell et al., 2019; Saviile-Troike & Barto, 2016). While it is postulated that the principles of UG are always available to L2 learners, its parameters are already set to their native language (Mitchell et al., 2019; White, 2003). If the parameters of the L1 and L2 are similar, learners' L2 acquisition will be more efficient. On the contrary, if the parameters for L1 and L2 are very different, learners will find it much more challenging to acquire the L2 structure. This is observed particularly after a certain age or critical period, as the L2 parameters are not instantiated in their L1 (Muftah & Wong, 2014; Towell & Hawkins, 1994; White, 2003). Besides the parametric differences between L1 and L2, L2 learners are also cognitively more mature and influenced by social, cultural, and other factors in the SLA environment. Such instances may be a setback for their effective and successful acquisition of an L2. Hence, unlike the success in FLA, the outcome of SLA results in a varying degree of success. Some L2 learners acquire near-native competency, while others stop short of native-like success, thereby leading to incompleteness or fossilisation in certain areas of L2 grammar and structure. Even after years of exposure to an L2, it is common for L2 speaker to still have a strong foreign accent, use non-native grammatical constructions, and present non-native intuitions regarding the interpretation of certain types of structures (Mitchell et al., 2019; Saviile-Troike & Barto, 2016; Selinker, 1972; Towell & Hawkins, 1994).

SLA researchers have reported five observable phenomena in SLA, which are cross-linguistic influence or transfer, staged development, systematicity, variability, and fossilisation (Mitchell et al., 2019; Saviile-Troike & Barto, 2016; Tarone, 2018; Towell & Hawkins, 1994). In brief, cross-linguistic influence or transfer refers to the transfer of L1 linguistic properties to the L2. It occurs in all levels of interlanguage vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, and all other aspects of language structure and use (Saviile-Troike & Barto, 2016; Selinker, 1972). L2 learners also encounter a series of transitional stages or staged development in the process of acquiring the properties of L2. Such staged development phenomenon is also termed as interlanguage (IL), an in-between language system produced by L2 learners in SLA. Meanwhile, systematicity in the development of L2 competence or L2 knowledge among L2 learners is also observed (Clahsen & Musyken, 1986; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018). Past studies have reported that albeit having different L1 backgrounds and being subjected to dissimilar learning conditions, L2 learners undergo similar stages of development (i.e., Bailey, Madden & Krashen, 1974; Dulay & Burt, 1973; Dulay & Burt, 1974). Moreover, it has been observed that at certain stages of development, the mental grammar or intuitions of the L2 learners allow them to produce variations for certain aspects of L2 grammar or structures, despite the L2

construction having only one form (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016; Towell & Hawkins, 1994). L2 learners also appear to achieve varying degrees of success in SLA, whereby some achieve near-native or native-like competence in L2. Regardless, most cease to make further progress at a certain point in SLA, resulting in a state inclusive of instances of L1 interference or deviant structures, a frozen state of progress known as fossilisation or incompleteness in SLA (Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016; Tarone, 2018; Towell & Hawkins, 1994).

1.1.2 Issues in the Acquisition of English Passive in SLA

Studies in SLA have reported that L2 learners of English from various L1 backgrounds experience difficulties in acquiring and being competent in the target language (Brown, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2019; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016). One of the properties that is particularly problematic to these L2 learners is the passive structure (Amadi, 2018; Choomthong, 2011; Cornelis, 1996; Hijjo, 2013; Hinkel, 2004; Kalimuttu, 2016; Martinaj, 2016; Tankó, 2010; Simargool, 2008; Wang, 2016). The English passive is an important grammatical structure that is widely used, especially in academic and scientific texts when it is not necessary to mention the doer or agent (Aschermann et al., 2004; Hinkel, 2004; Kirkman, 2005). Even though the more commonly used voice is the active voice, the passive voice is frequently used by speakers and writers, particularly in academic writing (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 2015; Robinson, 2000). The presence of such structures provides flexibility in sentence construction, as the syntactic role of the subject can be either the semantic agent or the patient. As opposed to passive construction usage, active voice utilisation places the process or description in the background, causing the focus of stage to be lost and the emphasis to shift to the agent (Swales & Feak, 2012).

The passive structure is used to focus on the recipient, the goal of any action, or the result of any event mentioned (Robinson, 2000). For example, *the cat was buried by the man last Sunday* (i.e., to put an emphasis on *the cat was buried*). Besides, it is used when the agent is unknown, such as in *the man was murdered last night* (i.e., action is undertaken by an unknown agent). It is also used when the agent is “universal” contextually, evidenced by *rules are made to be broken* (i.e., action is applicable to anyone). However, compared to the active structure, the passive structure is perceived as difficult to be acquired by L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds. Most SLA studies on the English passive have shown that it poses a challenge to L2 learners due to the higher difficulty for acquisition and comprehension secondary to the structural complexity. Even advanced proficiency ESL learners might find it difficult to produce appropriate and well-formed English passive. Hinkel’s (2004) analysis of academic essays written by 746 speakers of seven languages (i.e., English, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Arabic) has shown that even after many years of L2 learning and usage, advanced non-native

speaker students may still have difficulties with the use of tenses, aspects, and the passive voice in written academic discourse.

Furthermore, a number of studies on the acquisition of the English passive by L1 speakers of different L1 backgrounds have reported instances of cross-linguistic influence in the learners' IL grammar in their attempt to form and use the English passive structure (i.e., Abdulwahid, 2016; Choomthong, 2011; Gieseler, 2008; Hameed, 2016; Kalimuttu, 2016; Kim & Kim, 2013; Marinis & Saddy, 2013; Purnama, 2014; Somphong, 2013; Tankó, 2010; 2017; Wang, 2016; Yip, 1995, among others). Generally, they indicated that while similarities between the learners' L1 and L2 facilitate, dissimilarities lead to interference in acquiring and using the English passive appropriately, and these led to the variability of outputs observed in the L2 learners' IL. For instance, Somphong (2013) reported that Thai tertiary students produced quite a high percentage of erroneous English passive structures. It was observed that there is occurrences of cross-linguistic influence or interference in several aspects, particularly in the use of morphological inflections in forming the English passive.

Similar findings were also reported by Choomthong (2011) in her study on Thai tertiary ESL learners. The learners found it very difficult to grasp the concept of English verb forms and they generally fail to use the correct past participle form when forming the English passive due to the absence of past participle feature in Thai language. Unlike English, Thai is a language without inflection markings for number, tense, case, and aspect. The lack of this feature poses a problem to the Thai learners when they have to use the correct verb form in the English passive structure. This could be also attributed to the fact that the verb in Thai passive structure does not require any changes, thus creating confusion to the Thai learners in the use of tenses for the English passive verb. It was observed that, even though the passive marker *tuuk* is used in pre-verbal position in the Thai passive structure, which is similar to the insertion of *be* verb preceding the passive verb in the English passive, the Thai ESL learners were inclined to avoid the use or omit the *be* verb when forming the English passive, with the highest occurrence observed among the lower proficiency learners. Nevertheless, this similarity seems to facilitate those in the higher-level proficiency learners who used it as a strategy in recognising the English passive form. These studies have concluded that the absence of these properties and features in the Thai language contributed to the difficulty among Thai ESL learners in acquiring and using the English passive. Besides interference from Thai language, other aspects such as the complexity of the L2 itself, learners' attitude and motivation also play a role in determining their level of competence in the English passive.

Meanwhile, a study by Hameed (2016) has also shown that L1 Arab ESL learners tend to use incorrect past participle forms and *be* verbs, as well as to omit the *be* verbs in the formation of English passive due to the absence

of those properties in the Arabic language. The learners were also confused with the word order of the English passive as it is different from the one they have in Arabic. Another study on the use of English passive by Arab ESL learners revealed that learners' errors were mainly misinformation errors, substitution and omission errors due to the influence from their L1. Even though the verbal system in Arabic language is morphologically rich and diverse, there are no auxiliary verbs and no structure equivalent to the English past participle form (Hameed, 2016). The non-existence of these properties contributed to the problems faced by the Arabic ESL learners in forming the English passive.

Collectively, these studies have shown that the English passive is a problematic structure to acquire and use by L2 learners, particularly among those whose L1 is different from the English language. Mainly, cross-linguistic influence as well as the complexities of the English language has been observed to interfere with the learners' acquisition and use of the English passive. This view has been supported further by SLA studies which have reported that L2 learners from various L1 backgrounds describe difficulties in acquiring certain properties in the English language. This is especially true if the L2 properties are different from their L1s (i.e., Abdul Aziz & Mohd Don, 2013, 2014; Ellis, 2015; Hashim, 2017; Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Mitchell et al., 2019; Muftah & Shameem Rafik-Galea, 2013; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016).

Moreover, a number of studies have also reported a language-universal phenomenon where L2 learners display an inclination to overgeneralise the passive morphology to the English intransitive verbs (i.e., Ahn, 2015; Bagherianpoor, 2015; Choi, 2019; Hahn, 2011; Ju, 2000; Lee, 2007, 2010; Mortazavi, 2012; Oh, 2014; Ortega, Lee & Miyata, 2018; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Pae, Schanding, Kwon & Lee, 2014; Yip, 1995). Following the Unaccusative Hypothesis (UAH) (Perlmutter, 1978), English intransitive verbs are divided into the two subclasses of unaccusative verbs (UAV) and unergative verbs (UEV), and these intransitive verbs do not allow passivisation. The UAV has an internal argument in the object position which exhibits the syntactic characteristics of the object of a transitive verb while the UEV has an external argument in the subject position which is similar to the subject of transitive verbs. Superficially, both appear to be syntactically similar, but their underlying representations are different. However, despite the restriction to be passivized, L2 learners tend to overpassivise the English intransitive verbs, more substantially with UAV than UEV. Therefore, the studies have indicated that unaccusativity has an influence on the rate of overpassivisation errors observed among L2 learners of different L1 backgrounds. Some instances of overgeneralisation of the passive morphology *be* to intransitive verbs observed in the learners' IL are *the man was disappeared* and *my mother was died when I was a baby* (Balcom, 1997; Ju, 2000; Zobl, 1989).

SLA researchers have considered the overpassivisation error in UAV as a universal phenomenon in the development of English, since its occurrence is observed among L2 learners of different L1s and at different English proficiency levels (Ju, 2000; Oshita, 2001; Shan & Yuan, 2008). There are several hypotheses on the cause of these occurrences; L1 influence (Hahn, 2009; Hwang, 2006; Masuko, 1996; Richards, 1973; Zobl, 1989), confusion and difficulty to differentiate UAV and transitives (Balcom, 1997; Hubbard, 1994; Hubbard & Hix, 1988; Yip, 1995), and the lack of agent or subject which is similar to the passive formation (Oshita, 2000; Zobl, 1989). Nevertheless, the source of this IL structure is still inconclusive.

One of the issues regarding the difficulty faced by L2 learners with the English passive is whether the learners' IL errors can be remedied as their proficiency increases. Several studies have suggested that learners' errors related to the English passive, particularly the overpassivisation errors, have been observed in L2 production across various levels of proficiency, even advanced L2 production (Hinkel, 2004; Lee, 2007; Shan & Yuan, 2008; Ting, 2011; Yip, 1995; Zobl, 1989). On the contrary, other studies (i.e., Montrul, 1999; Moore, 1993) have found that the more proficient the learner is, the lesser errors they commit. This is indicative of the decline in learners' errors with the increase of learners' proficiency level. Such notion is supported by studies which stated that L2 learners' competency in English passive is linked to their English proficiency level (Chou, 2008; Shin, 2011). Generally, more proficient L2 learners are able to produce well-formed and target-like passive structures, while less adept ones tend to create malformed passives.

As discussed above, there are quite a number of issues related to the acquisition of the English passive by L2 learners. With this in mind, the researcher intends to investigate the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners. The next section presents the problem statement of the study.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Acquiring a second language is challenging for L2 learners, which is also the case observed among ESL learners in Malaysia (Brown, 2014; Mitchell et al., 2019; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016). Having more than a decade of formal exposure to the English language, it is expected that Malaysian L2 learners to be competent in the language. However, their linguistic command is still far from satisfactory; a drastic decline has been noted in the proficiency in both written and spoken English among the younger generation in Malaysia (Alias, 2018; David, Thang & Azman, 2015; Musa, Koo & Azman, 2012; Raja Zarith Sofia, 2017).

One of the properties in the English language that is particularly problematic in SLA is the English passive. Few studies have reported that Malay ESL learners too experience difficulty with the structure, especially its form and use in a specific context (Kalimuttu, 2016; Ting, 2011; Wee, 2009). The English passive is seemingly troublesome to be used correctly by these learners in an appropriate context due to L1 interference and the complexities of the English language itself. Such notion is supported by a number of cross-linguistic studies on the passive in English and other languages (i.e., Cao, 2016; Choomthong, 2011; Huynh, 2013; Kim & Kim, 2013; Kong, 2020; Simargool, 2008; Tankó, 2010, 2017; Ursic & Zoghbor, 2020; Wang, 2016). These studies have underlined the difficulties that affect the acquisition and learning of the English passive voice among L2 learners. In most cases, the differences between the learners' L1 and L2 pose a challenge to L2 learners in acquiring the passive form. This is especially true if the form and function of the English passive are somehow different or absent from the passive in their L1s.

In the English language, the canonical passive structure is formed by *be* Verb + past participle, features which are absent in the Malay language. On the contrary, the Malay passive structure is formed based on the pronoun person feature (Haji Omar, 2009; Karim, Onn, Haji Musa & Mahmood, 2015; Mahmood, 2003). There are three main types of Malay passive, the first person passive, the second person passive, and the third person passive. The first and second person passives are formed by the word order of Object-Subject-Verb. There is no passive morphology added to the verb and they are known as the bare passives (Nomoto & Abdul Wahab, 2012). For instance, *Buku itu saya tulis* and *Baju ini awak basuh*. Meanwhile, the third person passive, which is also known as the *di-* passive, is formed by the word order of Object-Verb-by phrase-Subject. The passive morphology *di-* is added to the verb, for example, *Nasi dimakan oleh dia*. The third person Malay passive is regarded as structurally similar to the English passive. In short, pronoun feature plays an important role in the Malay passive formation, but not in the English passive formation. Moreover, the first and second person passive types in Malay have different structures from the English passive. Hence, it is predicted that the differences in the syntactical structures between English and Malay passive might contribute to the difficulty in using the English passive by the L1 Malay ESL adult learners.

Furthermore, the passive formation in English requires the use of tenses, aspect and agreement features, which may pose a problem to L1 Malay ESL adult learners because these features are not instantiated in their L1. Regarding this, few studies have indicated that some of the noticeable errors committed by L2 learners in using the English passive include the use of incorrect past participle forms, subject-verb agreement (SVA) errors, omission, and incorrect form or overuse of the *be* verb (Choomthong, 2011; Kalimuttu, 2016; Muftah & Wong, 2011; Ting, 2011; Unlu & Hatipoglu, 2012). Most of these errors are attributed to the non-existence of those features in their L1s, as well as the complexities of the TL itself (Elmadwi, 2015;

Kalimuttu, 2016; Neilson, 2016; Somphong, 2013; Ting, 2011). Therefore, due to the absence of tense and agreement features in Malay language, it is expected that L1 interference might play a role in difficulty faced by the L1 Malay ESL adult learners in correctly forming the English passive.

Besides the structural and grammatical aspects, it is equally important for L1 Malay ESL adult learners to know which types of verbs are allowed to be passivised when forming the English passive. Most English transitive verbs can be passivised, whereas the English intransitive verbs are not passivisable (Berry, 2018; Klammer et al., 2012). A number of studies have indicated a high overpassivisation error rate involving intransitive verbs among L2 learners from different L1 backgrounds (i.e., Hahn, 2011; Lee, 2007, 2010; Montrul, 2001; Mortazavi, 2012; Oh, 2014; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Pae et al., 2014). For example, L2 learners may produce structures such as *the accident was happened*. Moreover, these learners have displayed more inclination towards overgeneralisation of the passive morphology to the unaccusative verbs (UAV) as compared to the unergative verbs (UEV) (Oshita, 2000; Perlmutter, 1978; Zobl, 1989). Therefore, this substantiates the influence unaccusativity poses on the rate of overpassivisation errors among L2 learners. Despite many SLA studies reporting on the overpassivisation of UAV (i.e., Oshita, 2000; Shin, 2011; Yip, 1995; Yuan, 1999), to the researcher's knowledge, only one study (i.e., Wee, 2009) has described instances of these overpassivised structures among Malay ESL learners. Such errors committed by Malay ESL learners are indicated in examples like *the accident was happened at Jalan Raja Laut* and *in a few minutes, the ambulance was arrived*. Nevertheless, Wee's (2009) focus was generally on the types of verb-form errors in narrative, descriptive, and expository essays. There is only little explanation provided regarding the source for this particular overpassivisation error. Therefore, the present researcher intends to investigate whether L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different English proficiency levels also tend to overgeneralise the passive morphology to the intransitive verbs when forming the English passive and subsequently provide an explanation for such occurrence.

Undoubtedly, it is important for L1 Malay adult ESL learners to be able to correctly formulate and use the English passive. It is one of the important grammatical structures that must be learned and understood as it has significant functions in conveying the intended meaning in a variety of contexts and discourse. However, the declining proficiency level among this group of learners results in their difficulties to grasp the correct formation and use of the English passive, especially those at the beginner stages. Second language learners' level of English proficiency and their competence in the English passive are interrelated, learners of higher proficiency levels construct more well-formed passives, while those at the lower proficiency levels produced more malformed passive structures (Chou, 2008; Shin, 2011). Thus, in order to be competent in the form and functions of the English passive, it is crucial for L1 Malay ESL adult learners of English language to overcome the difficulties associated with acquiring the structure.

Despite the abundant number of SLA studies conducted on the English passive, to the researcher's knowledge, to date, little attention has been given to its acquisition by L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different levels of English proficiency. The issues mentioned above have underlined the need for a study that focuses on the competency level and English passive use by L1 Malay ESL adult learners in Malaysia. Such study can provide invaluable insights into the IL of L1 Malay speakers and the reasoning behind their acquisition of the property accordingly. Very few studies (i.e., Kalimuttu, 2016; Wee, 2009) have reported the utilisation and errors in relation to English passive by Malay ESL learners. Even so, the main focus of Wee's study (2009) is generally on the errors of grammatical aspects observed among 50 Malay tertiary ESL learners, whereas Kalimuttu's study (2016) emphasised on the use of English passive in ESL compositions by Malay secondary school students. Likewise, Ting's (2011) study on Malaysian ESL students of various ethnicities (Chinese, Malay and indigenous students) focused on the difficulty in using the English passive in news reports. None of these studies have investigated the acquisition of English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different English proficiency levels.

Hence, the present study intends to bridge the gap by investigating the acquisition of the English Passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners of the Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, and Advanced levels. The English passive voice is chosen as the structure for investigation in this study for several reasons. First, it is an important structure that provides flexibility in sentence constructions, whereby the focus is placed upon the action being done (i.e., patient or theme role) rather than the subject or agent of a sentence. Thus, it is crucial for L2 learners to be competent when using the structure. The second reason is to provide insights into the complexity behind acquiring the passive in English, which will assist language instructors and enhance their understanding regarding the acquisition process and the difficulties faced by L2 learners. Finally, due to the scarcity of studies undertaken on the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different proficiency levels, the present study intends to bridge that gap. It is hoped that the findings of this study will contribute to the body of literature on SLA and thus provide important implications contributory towards the language experts and practitioners, and the generative grammar approach, particularly in the local context. The following section will present the purpose of the study.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to investigate the extent to which L1 Malay L2 adult learners have acquired the English passive. The IL representations, L1 and unaccusativity influence, and the types of errors committed by L1 Malay ESL adult learners will be investigated to further understand the acquisition process and challenges encountered by L2 learners.

Based on the purposes mentioned above, the present study aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To investigate the extent to which L1 Malay ESL adult learners at the Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, and Advanced proficiency levels have acquired the English passive.
2. To find out the extent to which unaccusativity influences the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners.
3. To analyse the types of errors in the IL of L1 Malay ESL adult learners in their acquisition of the English passive.
4. To examine the role of L1 in the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners.

1.4 Research Questions

To achieve the aims and objectives of this study, the present study attempts to address the following research questions:

1. To what extent have L1 Malay ESL adult learners at the Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Upper Intermediate, and Advanced proficiency levels acquired the English passive?
2. To what extent does unaccusativity influence the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners?
3. What are the types of errors found in the IL of L1 Malay ESL adult learners in their acquisition of the English passive?
4. To what extent does L1 influence the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners?

1.5 Theoretical Perspectives of the Study

This section discusses the theories that underlie the theoretical framework of the study. As mentioned in section 1.3, this study aims to investigate the extent to which L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different proficiency levels have acquired the English passive: developmental stages, the influence of L1 and unaccusativity, as well as the types of errors they committed in their IL grammar. In order to gain insights on the L1 Malay ESL adult learners' acquisition process, the integration of theories subsumed under the generative linguistics approach; the Interlanguage Hypothesis (ILH) (Han & Tarone, 2014; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018), Error Analysis (EA) (Corder, 1967) and the Unaccusative Hypothesis (UAH) (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978) were adopted as the theoretical foundation of the present study.

The generative approach postulated that children are equipped with an innate language faculty which assists them in acquiring a language. Proponents of the generative view believed that this innate mechanism functions as a blueprint that guides the acquisition process since children are able to acquire and use forms and rules beyond the impoverished input they were exposed to (poverty of stimulus). Similar to FLA, L2 learners also need to construct abstract representations of the L2 based on limited samples of language input. Even so, unlike FLA, L2 learners face more challenges in their learning process as at least one complete and established linguistic system has already occupied their language faculty. Besides that, they are also cognitively more mature and influenced by other external factors in the SLA environment (i.e., social, cultural, etc.). Often the L2 learners have to endure a long and complex task of acquiring an L2. A number of researchers in the SLA field claimed that the similarities and differences between the learners' L1 and L2 play a crucial role in determining the degree of difficulty in SLA; similarities seem to facilitate SLA, while differences hinder acquisition (Selinker, 1972; White, 2003). However, other research have reported that there are cases where L1s that possess similarities with certain structures of the L2 make the acquisition process more challenging for the L2 learners as compared to L1s with differences or absence of that particular structure (Ionin & Montrul, 2001). Therefore, more often than not, unlike the success and complete acquisition among L1 acquirers, L2 learners achieved varying degrees of ultimate attainment; few achieved native-like competence, while majority of them stop short of native competence (Han & Tarone, 2014; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018). The lack of English competency is also observed among tertiary Malay ESL learners even though most of them have been exposed to the English language since primary years. Hence, adopting the insights of the generative perspective, the present study intends to investigate the IL representations and difficulties faced by the Malay ESL learners in acquiring the English passive.

In order to understand the L2 acquisition process, the learners' IL system has to be analysed. As claimed by the ILH (Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018), the IL system or learner language refers to a specific linguistic system which indicates the learners' attempts to produce the TL in the learning process. The learners' developmental stages are reflected in the outputs in their ILs. This in-between linguistic system is constantly developing and evolving with the input of the TL. It is characterised by transfer, systematicity, variability and incompleteness or fossilisation. A pervasive and inevitable feature of IL system is the occurrence of errors. Learners' errors have become one of the most significant aspects that indicates the development of a learner's ILG in learning the TL (Corder, 1967; Lightbown & Spada, 2006; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018). The L2 learner's progress or development in the TL might fluctuate along the IL continuum as it is influenced by the input that they received. Some of the errors may be attributed to L1 interference and the inherent difficulty of the L2. The influence of L1 or cross-linguistic influence affects language acquisition as it plays an important role in the development

of an individual's IL (Ellis, 1985; Tarone, 2018). The occurrence of cross-linguistic influence is said to be attributed to the similarities and differences between a L1 and L2 regarding in the acquisition of an L2 property. Positive transfer is said to occur when the patterns of the L1 and L2 are similar, where it is claimed to facilitate the acquisition/learning process. Meanwhile, negative transfer or interference is present when the L2 is different from the L1, where it poses difficulties in the acquisition/learning process (White, 2003; Yan, 2010).

Besides L1 interference, the complexities of the TL itself have been a main source of errors among L2 learners. These errors are known as intralingual errors that reflect the common features of rule learning such as the generalization of the incomplete application of rules and failure to learn and use the rules (James, 1998). Furthermore, Richards (1974) stated that intralingual errors refer to the outcome in L2 learners' IL system, which does not reflect their L1, but due to generalisation of partial knowledge of the rules of the target language. When learners lack knowledge of a TL form, they follow some learning strategies or some communication strategies to solve their acquisition problems (James, 1998). These types of errors are known as developmental errors which are produced in the learners' attempt to use the TL with limited input and experience. As stated by Selinker (1972) and White (2003), in the initial stages of L2 acquisition or learning, the learners' errors are typically characterised by L1 interference. However, over time and once the learners have begun acquiring the L2 system, higher occurrence of generalisation within the TL is manifested. Thus, the present study will adopt the error analysis method to analyse the errors produced in the learners' IL and identify the possible source of difficulty.

Furthermore, a number of research have reported the tendency of ESL learners to overuse the passive morphology to English intransitive verbs (i.e., Hahn, 2011; Ju, 2000; Lee, 2007; Lee, 2010; Mortazavi, 2012; Oh, 2014; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Pae et al., 2014; Yip, 1995). According to the Unaccusative Hypothesis the English intransitive verbs are divided into two subclasses: UAV and UEV (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978). Regardless of their L1s, L2 learners overgeneralise the passive morphology to UAV more substantially than to UEV. These studies have indicated that unaccusativity has an influence on the overpassivisation errors with intransitive verbs among L2 learners. Among the hypotheses attempting to explain this overpassivisation phenomenon are the influence from learners' L1s (Richards, 1973) and the NP-movement marker hypothesis (Oshita, 2000, 2001; Zobl, 1989). The present study is also interested to investigate whether similar case is observed among L1 Malay ESL adult learners.

Hence, this study intends to investigate the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners. It examines the learners' linguistic competence on the English passive, explores the role of L1 and unaccusativity, analyses learners' errors and explains possible sources of

errors. Therefore, based on the discussion above, the three prominent hypotheses of the generative approach; the ILH, EA and UAH are deemed to be the appropriate theories to be adopted and utilised in the present study in seeking answers for the research questions of the study. The summary of theoretical framework of the present study is illustrated in Figure 1.1.

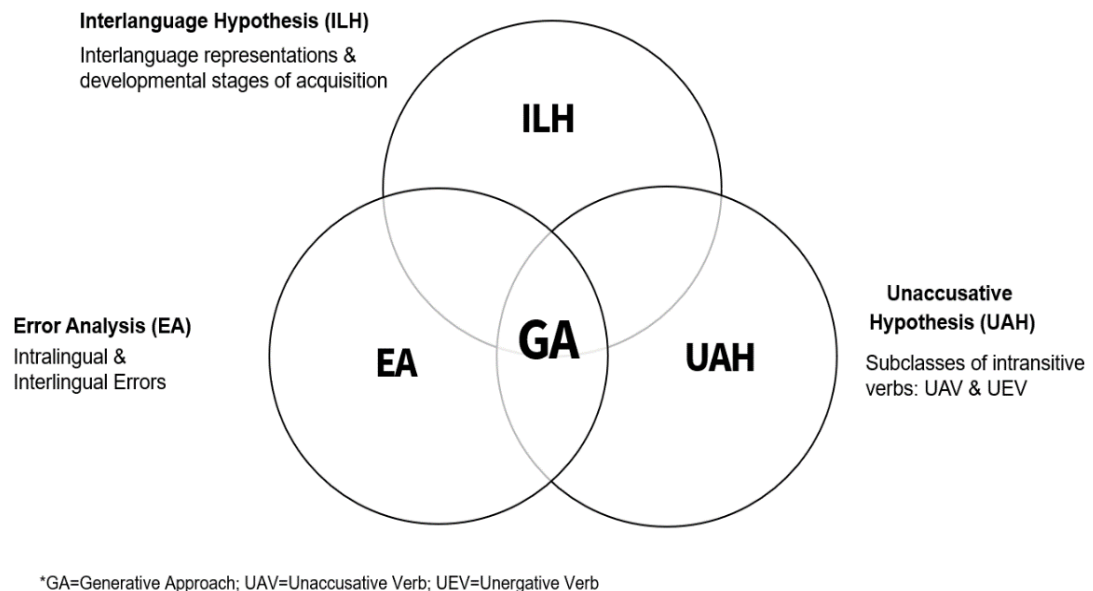


Figure 1.1 : Theoretical Framework
(Corder, 1967; Perlmutter, 1978; Selinker, 1972; Tarone, 2018)

1.6 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study provide (i) a better understanding of the extent to which L1 Malay adult speakers have acquired the English passive structure, (ii) insights into the difficulty of acquiring/using the features/properties of the English passive structure (*be* verb, [+/-tense], [+/-aspect] and [+/-agreement] features), (iii) insights on the types and possible source of errors in relation to the English passive, and (iv) a better understanding on the developmental stages in the learners' acquisition and use of the English passive. Hence, the findings of the present study are significant in several ways.

Firstly, the findings of the study provide insights into the L2 learners' acquisition of the English passive, hence this study may add to the knowledge about learning a second language or second languages which could benefit ESL language instructors, teachers, language practitioners and second language learners, especially adult L2 learners. For example, language instructors, especially those teaching Malay ESL adult learners, can obtain more insights of the types of forms and errors of the English passive that the learners produced across proficiency levels. They can better

understand the developmental stages of L2 learners in the acquisition of the English passive. Furthermore, language instructors could have a better understanding about the difficulties the L2 learners faced in using the English passive and identify the problematic areas to which attention should be given. Hence, they can specifically focus on those problems and areas in planning their teaching materials and approaches. For the L2 learners, the findings of this study could provide insights into their language learning process, especially regarding the problems encountered by L2 learners in the acquisition of the English passive. Hence, they can better understand themselves as L2 learners and could find ways to overcome those problems. Besides, they will be more aware of the different linguistic features in the English and Malay passive, so they could learn and use them correctly and appropriately.

Furthermore, the findings of this study provide a better understanding of the IL representations of the English passive across proficiency groups among the L1 Malay ESL adult learners. It sheds light on the developmental stages of the L2 learners in acquiring and constructing the English passive at different proficiency levels. Since there are limited studies carried out on the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners, it is hoped that the findings of this study to significantly contribute towards enriching the existing SLA literature that lacks in the area and to further advance the existing knowledge on English passive acquisition by L2 learners. Moreover, it may provide further explanation of the SLA phenomena, which may contribute to the SLA theories. Finally, the findings of this study could benefit researchers in the SLA field for future research on the English passive and L2 learners. The next section discusses on the scope of the study.

1.7 Scope of the Study

This study investigates the acquisition of the English passive by L1 Malay ESL adult learners at the Elementary, Lower Intermediate, Upper Intermediate and Advanced proficiency levels. The IL representations of the English passive at different developmental stages of acquisition, the types and sources of errors, and the occurrences of cross-linguistic influence are analysed, discussed and explained based on the theoretical framework underpinning the study: ILH, EA and UAH. This study involves 499 L1 Malay ESL adult learners from 9 randomly selected higher learning institutions in Malaysia. They use the standard Malay language substantially in all aspects of life and they have had at least more than 6 years of formal exposure to the language. The scope of this study is constrained to the study of the English passive structure, L1 Malay ESL adult learners in Malaysian higher learning institutions, and under the scope of ILH, EA and UAH.

1.8 Definition of Key Terms

Cross-linguistic Interference

Cross-linguistic interference, which is also known as transfer, refers to the influence of learners' L1 on their L2. There are several definitions of cross-linguistic interference offered by researchers in SLA, namely: 1) the habitual automatic transfer of the surface structure for the L1 onto the surface structure of the TL (Dulay & Burt, 1982); 2) the errors in the learner's use of the TL that can be traced back to the L1 (Hashim, 2017; Tarone, 2018); and 3) the transfer or influence that the learner's L1 exerts over the L2 (Ellis, 1985). The term cross-linguistic interference, cross-linguistic influence, and transfer will be used interchangeably in this study.

The English Passive

The English passive is formed by the movement of the object in an active sentence to the subject position, and the subject of an active sentence to the object position. Then, the passive morphology [(be + past participle)] is added to the verb. The significant role of the passive voice is shown by its use in various genres, especially in the scientific genre, such as in medical journals (Amdur et al., 2010; Rundbald, 2008), research papers and dissertations, in news headlines, and in academic essays (Baratta, 2009), as well as narrative and expository texts (Hell et al., 2005).

The Malay Passive

The Malay passive formation is based on the person feature (i.e., 1st, 2nd, and 3rd person). The first and second passive types are known as bare passives and have a word order of Object-Subject-Base Verb, while no passive morphology is added to the verb. In contrast, the third person passive is formed by Object-Verb-by phrase-Subject, with the passive morphology *di-/ter-* added to the verb.

First Language (L1)

A first language, also known as native language and mother tongue, is the language or are the languages that a person has been exposed to from birth and speaks best. It is acquired by language input from people in the child's surrounding.

First Language Acquisition (FLA)

First language acquisition refers to the acquisition of one's native language during childhood. FLA is not dependent on one's intelligence or special ability for languages. It is postulated that all humans are equipped with an

innate linguistic mechanism to serve as the foundation of language acquisition (Mitchell et al., 2019; White, 2003). Children worldwide go through similar stages, use almost identical structures to express similar meanings, and make the same kinds of errors (Brown, 1973; Mitchell et al., 2019).

Interlanguage (IL) / Interlanguage Grammar (ILG)

The term interlanguage is coined by Selinker in 1972, referring to the language produced by L2 learners during the process of SLA, whereby the TL is not acquired completely yet and the influence of L1 is still present. When learners learn the TL, they build their own system of language that differs from their L1, resulting in something new and distinguishable. It is neither L1 nor L2, but something in-between.

L1 Malay ESL/L2 Adult Learners

L1 Malay ESL adult learners refer to Malay native speakers who are learning English as a second language either in natural or classroom settings. They use the standard Malay language substantially in all aspects of life. These learners have had at least more than 6 years of formal exposure to the language and are studying at various higher institutions in Malaysia. Since they are Malay native speakers, they have utilised the Malay language since birth, and have acquired the language's grammar informally and formally.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

The term second language acquisition or learning is used interchangeably, referring to the subconscious or conscious processes of acquiring/learning another language other than the mother tongue, be it in a natural or tutored setting (Brown, 2014; Ellis, 1985; Mitchell et al., 2019; Saville-Troike & Barto, 2016).

Second language (L2)/ Target language (TL)

Mitchell et al. (2019) refer second language as any natural/human language other than the learner's first language or native language. Second languages encompass both languages of wider communication encountered within a local region or community, whereby they are truly foreign languages and have no immediate local users or speakers. They may indeed be the L2 the learner is working with in a literal sense, or their third, fourth, or fifth language.

Unaccusative Hypothesis (UAH)

Unaccusative Hypothesis (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978) postulates that the English intransitive verb class is not homogenous. The intransitive verbs are divided into the two subclasses of unaccusative verbs and unergative verbs. The unaccusative verbs denote “unwilled or non-volitional acts”, which are verbs of change of state or location, such as *burn*, *melt*, *fall*, and *happen* (Park & Lakshmanan, 2007). Syntactically, they resemble other intransitive verbs in which they have an internal argument (theme/patient argument) but no external argument (agent argument). Meanwhile, unergative verbs are those that entail “willed or volitional acts”, with examples being *dance*, *run*, *walk*, and *sleep*. Generally, they cannot be passivised despite some being used in prepositional passives, such as *George Washington slept in this bed* (Levin, 1993).

1.9 Overview of the Thesis

This chapter briefly discussed the background of the study and explained the problem statement that initiated the study, its purpose and objectives, research questions, significance and scope of the study and the definition of key terms. The theoretical framework was presented succinctly to ensure that the overall process of the study would be clearly understood. Chapter 2 discusses previous studies on SLA in general, and the acquisition of the English passive specifically. First, it highlights the main issues relating to SLA, the IL hypothesis, cross-linguistic influence, the role of UG in SLA and past studies on acquisition on the English passive. It also discusses the types, functions, and formation of the English passive, the UAH, and past studies on the overpassivisation errors among L2 learners. Subsequently, Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study, encompassing the sample, research procedure and instruments, data collection and data analysis procedures. Chapter 4 presents the findings and analysis of the study. Finally, Chapter 5 outlines the summary of key findings and discusses the contributions to body of knowledge and the implications of the study. It also includes the limitations of study and recommendations for future studies.

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