

THE ACQUISITION OF PASSIVE IN L2 ITALIAN: EVIDENCE FROM COMPREHENSION AND PRODUCTION

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Abstract: *The present study reports and discusses results of a comprehension and an elicited production task aimed at investigating the acquisition of passives in L2 Italian. Both tests were carried out with 47 university students of Italian (mean age 22;6) who differed in their levels of proficiency and their L1s. Results show that, although L2ers do not have difficulties in comprehending the passive voice, they seem to struggle in producing it. The production of passives is avoided especially by the L2ers with a low proficiency that tend to rely on (S)VO actives and object clitic constructions. However, the production of passives seems to increase with the L2 proficiency.*

Keywords: *L2 acquisition, passives, morphosyntax, comprehension, production.*

1. Introduction

The acquisition of the passive voice in L1 has been widely investigated cross linguistically. Studies have shown that until the age of 6, children do not fully master passive structures (e.g. English: Maratsos et al. 1985 among others, see also Crain et al. 1987 for different results; Spanish: Pierce 1992).

In Italian, studies have been conducted that investigate the acquisition of the passive in L1. According to Manetti (2012) and Volpato et al. (2013), children between ages 4 and 5 reach an adult- like comprehension of actional-passives. However, even at that age, they still have difficulties comprehending the non- actional passive¹.

Regarding the production studies, results from an elicited production task conducted by Manetti (2012) revealed that children between ages 3 and 4 tend to avoid the passive and rely on pronominalized structures and SVO-actives (contrary to adults who prefer to produce passives in the same context). However, new evidence from syntactic priming studies conducted in Italian show that under certain experimental conditions, children can properly produce passives by the age of 3-4 (Manetti & Belletti 2015; see also Volpato et al. 2014 for similar results using an elicitation task).

Data concerning the acquisition of passives in L2 are still limited (see Rastelli 2015 for results with a group of L2 adult learners of Italian adopting online and offline tasks).

The present study aims at providing new evidence on the acquisition of passive structures by L2 adult learners of Italian by discussing the results of a comprehension and a

¹ Actional-passive: “The girl is washed by the mother”; non-actional passive: “The girl is loved by the mother”.

production study. The tests were administered to a group of university students who differed in their levels of proficiency and their L1s. The comprehension was tested using a picture-matching task. In production, a picture description task aimed at eliciting a passive structure by answering to patient-oriented questions. The productions were then analyzed to explore the answering strategies preferred by the L2 learners in a context where a passive was appropriate.

1.1 *The Passive Morphosyntax*

Passive structures imply a redistribution of the arguments of the transitive verb compared to active structures (1). In a passive sentence, the arguments follow a non-canonical order of the grammatical functions: (2) shows how the patient turns out to be the subject of the clause whereas the agent can be optionally expressed with a *by-phrase* (Belletti & Guasti 2015):

- (1) The mother washes the girl
- (2) The girl is washed by the mother

In Italian, the periphrastic passive can be expressed by the auxiliary *essere* (to be) and by the auxiliary *venire* (to come):

- (3) La ragazza è/viene lavata (dalla mamma)
the girl is/comes washed (by the mother)

With the present tense, *venire-* auxiliary is typically adopted to express the passive voice of an actional verb (4) in order to avoid any ambiguous reading (stative or resultative) related to the *essere-* auxiliary passive construction (Renzi et al. 1991):

- (4) La porta viene chiusa
the door comes closed
- (5) La porta è chiusa
the door is closed

2. *The Comprehension Study*

2.1 *Methods*

2.1.1 *Participants*

A group of 47 university students of Italian (mean age 22;6) and a control group of 20 Italian native speakers (mean age 23;0) participated in the two experiments². The L2

² As for the L2 learners 20 out of 47 was first administered the PMT and then the production task; 27 out of 47 participants took the test in the opposite order. As for the control group, the first half was

learners were recruited from a college in New York, USA and had different levels of proficiency in Italian, as well as different languages as their L1.

Referring to the Italian courses the L2 participants were enrolled in³, three levels of proficiency have been identified: the elementary (19 participants), the intermediate (14 participants) and the advanced level (14 participants). As far as the L1s concern, 34 out of 47 participants were monolingual English speakers, 6 out of 47 were Spanish speakers with English as their child L2, 7 out of 47 (“other” henceforth) were Chinese (2) speakers with English as their adult L2 and Albanian (2), Korean (1), Hindi (1) and French (1) speakers with English as their child L2 as well.

2.1.2 Materials

A picture- matching task (PMT) (adapted from Messenger et al. 2008, Manetti 2012 from English into Italian) was used in order to assess the comprehension of passive. The test included 24 experimental items, 12 active and 12 passive sentences presented with a match and a mismatch picture. The match pictures depicted a transitive event with animal characters as agents and human characters as patients (Fig.1); a reversed order of the arguments (Fig. 2) created the mismatch condition. Across the experiment the passive auxiliary was manipulated (*venire* to come vs. *essere* to be). All verbs were actional: *accarezzare* (stroke), *trascinare* (drag), *colpire* (hit), *sollevare* (lift), *schiacciare* (squash), *mordere* (bite). The test included 8 filler items.

Here below are two sample stimuli included in the test, an active (6) and a passive sentence (7) with their relative match and mismatch pictures:

- (6) La bambina colpisce il leone
The girl hits the lion
- (7) Il leone è/viene colpito dalla bambina
The lion is/comes hit by the girl



Fig. 1: match picture



Fig. 2: mismatch picture

given the PMT first, and then the production task. For the other half, the tests were given in the opposite order.

³ The courses in which some students were enrolled in did not always reflect their proficiency in Italian. For this reason, during the analysis, one of them was moved from the intermediate to the elementary level and one vice versa; three of them were moved from the intermediate to the advanced level.

2.1.3 Procedure

The experiment started with 3 warm-up trials. The PMT was digitally presented and the experimental stimuli were audio-recorded. During the test the participants were asked to match one picture to the sentence they heard. All the sessions were audio-recorded.

Before the beginning of the experimental session, the participants were asked to identify the characters included in the test to verify that all of them had sufficient knowledge of the vocabulary.

2.2 Results

Table 1 provides the percentages of responses given by the L2ers and the native speakers.

	Passive	Active
L2 learners	90%	99%
Native speakers	100%	100%

Table 1: % of correct responses for the L2ers and the native speakers.

This analysis show that L2 learners performed better in the comprehension of the active voice compared to the passive one, which was in line with the scores reported by the native speakers. Overall, L2 learners do not seem to struggle with the comprehension of both voices. Tables 2a and 2b show in detail the results based on L2ers' levels of proficiency and L1s.

	Passive	Active
Elementary	80%	98.6%
Intermediate	98%	100%
Advanced	98%	98.2%

Table 2a: % of correct responses according to level of proficiency

The data from Table 2a reveal that the participants of the elementary level had more difficulties in comprehending the passive voice when compared to the other groups whose percentages of accuracy reached the native-like performances.

	Passive	Active
L1 English	88%	99%
L1 Spanish	99%	100%
L1 "Other"	93%	98%

Table 2b: % of correct responses according to L1s.

Table 2b shows that throughout the different L1 groups, no noticeable difference in accuracy emerged.

3. The Production Study

3.1 Methods

3.1.1 Materials

The production of passives was tested using a picture description task adapted from Manetti (2012).

The task included 24 experimental pictures depicting transitive actions: *lavare* (wash), *catturare* (catch), *graffiare* (scratch), *leccare* (lick), *sollevare* (lift), *schiacciare* (squash), *mordere* (bite), *spingere* (push). Each event was included 3 times, once for each experimental condition, and done by animals as agents and humans as patients.

The experiment was run under three experimental conditions listed in the table below:



Question type	Examples	Target Answers
Neutral	<i>Che cosa succede?</i> What is happening?	Active: la tigre lecca il clown <i>the tiger licks the clown</i> Passive: il clown è/viene leccato dalla tigre <i>The clown is/comes licked by the tiger</i>
Agent-oriented	<i>Che cosa fa la tigre?</i> What is the tiger doing?	Active: (la tigre) lecca il clown <i>(the tiger) licks the clown</i>
Patient-oriented	<i>Che cosa succede al clown?</i> What is happening to the clown?	Passive: (il clown) è/viene leccato dalla tigre <i>(the clown) is/comes licked by the tiger</i> Object Clitic Pronoun: la tigre lo lecca <i>the tiger him.Cl licks</i>

Table 3: experimental stimuli and target responses of the elicited production task.

The test included 8 filler items: 4 wh-questions (*Chi schiaccia il clown?* Who does the clown squash?) and 4 yes/no questions (*La tigre solleva il dottore?* Does the tiger lift the doctor?).

3.1.2 Procedure

The test was conducted using the same procedure as the PMT.

Each participant was asked to describe a picture by answering one of the experimental questions.

3.2 Coding

The answers have been coded as follows: *(S)VO-Active* for all the productions consisting of an active verb, a direct object and a null or overt subject; *Passive* for all the productions consisting of a short or long passive construction with either *venire* and *essere* auxiliary; *Dislocation/Pronoun* for all the productions in which the object has been pronominalized and in some cases dislocated either to the left or to the right of the structure; *Other* includes non-target (S)VO-actives and copula constructions.

A total of 14 responses (13 from the experimental group and 1 from the control group) have been excluded from the analysis because they were not classifiable under any of the coding categories.⁴

3.3 Results

Table 4 and 5 show the percentage of productions provided by the L2ers and the control group after each question type.

	Active (S)VO	Passive	Dislocation/Pronoun	Other
NEUTRAL	64%	1%	1%	34%
AGENT	62%	1%	1%	36%
PATIENT	48%	15%	10%	28%

Tables 4: % of L2ers' productions after each question type.

	Active (S)VO	Passive	Dislocation/Pronoun	Other
NEUTRAL	81%	4%	0%	15%
AGENT	91%	0%	1%	8%
PATIENT	3%	89%	4%	4%

Tables 5: % of native speakers' productions after each question type.

Results revealed that L2ers answered accurately after the neutral and agent-oriented questions, providing a high number of (S)VO-actives, which are, however, lower when compared to the native-like performance.

⁴ They were all variations of "I don't know".

By isolating the data regarding the production of (S)VO actives under the agent-oriented question it emerged that the native speakers tended to answer with a proVO structure omitting the subject in 95% of the cases, while the L2ers omitted the subject only in 17% of the cases. Grouped by L1s, Spanish speakers omitted the subject in 37% of the cases in contrast with the L1 English and “Other” groups that produced fewer proVO structures, respectively 15% and 13%.

As for the patient-oriented question aimed at eliciting a passive construction, L2ers produced some passives, a structure that seems to be avoided to a great extent by relying on the production of an SVO-active, other responses or a pronominalized structure. The native speakers instead preferred to produce a passive, turning to object clitic constructions only in very few cases.

Finally, what seems to distinguish L2ers from native speakers is the high percentage of other responses. Even in a context where a simple (S)VO- active was required, L2ers tended to answer with a non-target active or a copula construction.

3.3.1 Results of the patient-oriented condition

Table 6 reports the percentages of the structures produced in response to the patient-oriented questions by the native speakers and the L2ers, who are grouped by level of proficiency:

Patient-oriented	Active (S)VO	Passive	Dislocation/Pronoun	Other
Elementary	46%	2%	15%	37%
Intermediate	52%	15%	4%	29%
Advanced	46%	32%	9%	13%
Native speakers	3%	89%	4%	4%

Table 6: % of productions after the patient-oriented question

Considering these results, it seems that the production of passives increases with the L2 proficiency⁵, while the production of other responses and the production of clitics decreases. However, the production of clitics increases from the intermediate to the advanced group.

The passives produced by the participants were principally long passives containing a *by-phrase* (89% vs. 94%, L2ers and native speakers respectively). Moreover, the passive sentences produced by L2ers presented a structure of the type proVO in 46% of the cases compared to the 98% of the proVO passives provided by the native speakers. Again, Spanish-speaking participants produced more proVO passives across the L1s’ groups (92% vs. 32% and 20% of the L1 English and L1 “Other” groups respectively) interestingly at a higher proportion compared to the proVO-actives (37%).

⁵ Although for some participants the PMT preceded the elicited production task (see footnote 2), no learning effect has been observed.

A type of answer that appears to remain constant across the L2ers is the simple (S)VO-active. Note also that a felicitous answer strategy adopted by the elementary group is to rely on the use of the clitic at the highest rate across the groups, providing a total of 23 pronominalized structures, which in detail 8 out of 23 were produced by English speakers and 15 out of 23 were clitic doubling constructions produced by Spanish speakers.

By looking at the production of passive sentences in terms of the auxiliary selected by the participants, it emerged that L2ers preferred the *essere* auxiliary at a much higher rate compared to the native speakers, who instead pre-eminently chose the *venire* auxiliary:

	Essere	Venire
L2 learners	80%	20%
Native speakers	15%	85%

Table 7: % of the type of auxiliary selected by each group

4. Discussion

This study investigated the acquisition of the passive voice in Italian by L2 adult learners through a picture matching task and an elicited production task. Both tests have been administered to a group of university students who had different levels of proficiency in Italian and different L1s, and also to a control group of Italian native speakers.

Evidence from the comprehension study suggests that L2ers do not struggle in comprehending actional passives and reach a native-like performance.

Evidence from the production study showed that L2ers comprehend passive structures more than they produce it. Those with a high level of proficiency produced some passives mostly with a *by-phrase* (in line with the native controls' performances) and with the *essere* auxiliary although all verbs involved an eventive reading, in contrast with the native speakers who instead preferred the *venire* auxiliary as expected. Overall it seems that the participants experienced difficulties with the passive voice and instead resorted to (S)VO-actives and other responses. It is also worth noting that L2ers relied on clitic object constructions, while the control group usually produced passives (in line with children's results, Manetti 2012).

More in details, the study shows that English and Spanish speaking participants of the elementary group produced most of the object clitic constructions. Productions of this type by L1 Spanish speakers were predictable due to the shared morphosyntactic properties that characterize Spanish and Italian pronominal systems. Interestingly, it is the production of pronominalized structures by English speakers who did not experience the acquisition of clitics in their L1, which is not expected. Acquisition studies agree that the acquisition of object clitics is indeed delayed by L2ers of a romance language whose L1 grammar does not involve such a pronominal system (see Hamann & Belletti 2004 for results on L2 French; Leonini & Belletti 2004 for results on L2 Italian).

When reviewing the (S)VO-actives and the passives provided by the participants respectively under the agent and patient oriented questions, a remarkable result emerged. In such contexts, the subject is already introduced in the discourse context to the question.

Due to the pro-drop nature of the Italian language, the pragmatically appropriate way to answer is with a proVO structure. However, L2ers tended to produce more SVO- actives and passives with a full NP as the subject, in contrast with native speakers whose results confirmed the previously stated expectations. Spanish speakers were expected to adopt the same linguistic behavior because Spanish, like Italian, is a pro-drop language. Instead, they tended to produce the subject in the active sentences, suggesting that their exposure to English might have influenced their performance by applying a rule of English to Italian. Yet, they omitted the subject mostly in all the passive structures produced.

These results seem to be consistent with findings from Belletti, Bennati, Sorace (2007), which indicated that even L1 English speakers who are near-natives of Italian still do not properly use null subjects. According to their study, L2 learners who appeared to have reset the null subject parameter tend to overproduce pronominal and lexical subjects in a context where they are not felicitous. Their result therefore predicts that the acquisition of discourse-related properties is a complex process, which is reinforced by this study.

5. Conclusions

The first study showed a full mastery of the comprehension of actional passive by L2 learners. However, further studies are needed to determine whether they would experience difficulties in comprehending non- actional passive as children do (Manetti 2012). The fact that L2ers fully comprehend Italian actional passives on a low proficiency may indicate that when using a syntactic priming technique, priming effects after passive primes might be observed.

From the production study we found that L2 learners with an elementary level of Italian resorted to object clitic constructions more than the passive. This result suggests that in terms of morphosyntax, object clitic constructions may involve a different kind of complexity and may be primarily accessible to the L2 grammar compared to passive. As a matter of fact, results also showed that the production of passives increased once the L2ers became more advanced in terms of proficiency.

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