

Overpassivisation in L2 Acquisition: An Examination of L1 Malay ESL Tertiary Students' Passivisation of Intransitive Verbs in English

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ABSTRACT

Overpassivisation, a phenomenon in which passive morphology is applied to intransitive verbs, is a common feature in the interlanguage of L2 English learners. This study examines overpassivisation among L1 Malay ESL tertiary students concerning the type of intransitive verb and English proficiency level. A total of 499 L1 Malay ESL students in higher educational institutions in Malaysia completed a grammaticality judgment test involving items with unaccusative and unergative verbs. The students have completed at least 10 years of formal English instruction in school and have considerably more exposure to English than ESL learners in a foreign language setting. As predicted, the participants overgeneralised passive morphology to the intransitive verbs, and more so with unaccusative than unergative verbs. Further, students' competence in rejecting overpassivised forms decreased with learners' increasing proficiency in English. The findings show that while overpassivisation is committed by the L1 Malay ESL students, unaccusative verbs contribute more to

overpassivisation than unergative verbs. It indicates learners' processing of the different underlying structures of the two classes of verbs. Also, the passive rule is progressively acquired as a reduction of overpassivisation is observed for both verb types with increasing English proficiency. L1 Malay ESL tertiary students in Malaysia at lower English proficiency levels have yet to work out intransitive structures,

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particularly those involving unaccusative verbs. The findings suggest that receiving L2 input in a high-exposure environment does not necessarily allow learners to bypass the developmental stages in acquiring the passive rule.

Keywords: English passive, interlanguage development, intransitive verbs, Malay ESL learners, overpassivisation errors, second language acquisition

INTRODUCTION

Second language (L2) learners of English, regardless of their native language (L1), face various challenges in acquiring the target language, as L2 learning is affected by many factors, including the lack of L2 input and influence from the learner's first language (L1; Mitchell et al., 2019; Saviile-Troike & Barto, 2016). The inherent characteristics of L2 structures also play an important role in determining whether learners can acquire the structure easily; the more complex the structure, the more effort is needed to work out and reconfigure the grammatical rules in their interlanguage system. One of the structures in the English language that particularly poses a challenge to L2 English learners is the passive structure (e.g., Amadi, 2018; Choomthong, 2011; Hinkel, 2004; Kalimuttu, 2016; Mahdun et al., 2022; Simargool, 2008). The structural complexity of the English passive and crosslinguistic influence from learners' L1 have been cited as factors contributing to the difficulties experienced by L2 learners in acquiring the English passive.

Among the errors committed by L2 learners, overpassivisation is a notable occurrence. Studies have reported that L2 English learners from different L1 backgrounds frequently overgeneralise the passive morphology to English intransitive verbs (e.g., Choi, 2019; Ju, 2000; Okada, 2021). Further, the type of intransitive verb has also been shown to have a bearing on learners' passivisation errors.

The Unaccusative Hypothesis (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978) postulates two subclasses of English intransitive verbs, the unaccusative and unergative. Verbs such as *fall*, *happen* and *disappear* are unaccusative verbs as they denote non-events and change of states and have non-agentive subjects. A different class of intransitive verbs is the unergative verb. Examples of unergative verbs are *run*, *sing* or *laugh*, which usually denote processes and have agentive or volitional subjects. An interesting observation is that even though the two types of verbs have similar surface structures in sentences in English, L2 learners have a higher tendency to extend the passive morphology to unaccusatives than to unergatives (e.g., Ahn, 2015; Kondo, 2005; M. Oh, 2014; Okada, 2021; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Pae et al., 2014; Yip, 1995; Yuan, 1999).

Examples of typical overpassivised unaccusative structures produced by L2 English learners are shown in Examples (a) and (b).

- a. *My mother *was died* when I was just a baby. (Zobl, 1989, p. 204)

- b. *Two or three days ago, the important trouble *was happened*. (Oshita, 2000, p. 312)

Studies focusing on passivisation errors by L2 English learners in connection with the type of intransitive verbs have been carried out over the years. In a study by Zobl (1989) which examined the writings of 114 tertiary level L2 learners of English from 25 different L1 backgrounds, it was found that there was a higher overpassivisation rate with unaccusatives than unergatives. In another study by Balcom (1997), a grammaticality judgement test and a cloze passage test were administered to 38 L1 Chinese university students of advanced English proficiency. Consistent with Zobl's findings, the analysis of learners' errors showed that the students accepted the passive morphology with unaccusative verbs as correct more significantly than overpassivisation with other types of verbs.

In a corpus-based study, M. Oh (2014) examined overpassivisation with alternating unaccusatives, non-alternating unaccusatives and unergatives. The findings showed significant differences in the error rates among the different types of intransitive verbs, with the highest rate for the alternating unaccusatives, followed by non-alternating unaccusatives, and with unergatives having the least errors. The pattern of overpassivisation errors was also found to differ according to the animacy of the subject. Similarly, Choi's (2019) study on 67 Korean ESL learners revealed that overpassivisation is influenced by verb types and passive morphemes in L1

translation. More recently, Okada (2021) obtained results from her study using high school students demonstrated a significant relationship between overpassivisation and subject animacy, as was also found by M. Oh (2014). The authors concluded that the overpassivisation of unaccusative verbs relates to subject animacy, whereas unaccusative verbs with inanimate subjects tend to be overpassivised.

The higher occurrence of overpassivised unaccusatives compared to unergatives, as has been identified in past studies, is an interesting phenomenon since L2 learners could not have encountered evidence for it in the input, as native and proficient speakers do not produce passive morphology with intransitive verbs. It suggests that the L2 learners' interlanguage is drawing on linguistic knowledge which is not directly inferable from the input of the target language and that L2 learners can distinguish the argument structures of the unaccusatives and unergatives; the argument of unaccusative verbs originates in the object position but not so with the unergatives (Kondo, 2005). It may be the reason for the higher overpassivisation of unaccusatives and lower frequency of using the passive marker with unergative verbs, as L2 learners of English may incorrectly interpret any movement from object to subject position as a passive structure construction (Oshita, 2000; Yip, 1990). Since the internal argument of unaccusatives is similar to the object of a transitive verb, L2 English learners assume that it is passivisable, and hence, their acceptance of the incorrect passive forms.

The role of L2 proficiency as a variable has also been observed when investigating passivisation errors among L2 English learners. Connecting L2 proficiency with acquiring specific L2 structures is important in L2 acquisition studies as it can provide information about the development pattern in acquiring the target structure. Several studies have reported that the rate of overpassivisation is unrelated to L2 proficiency levels (e.g., Chung, 2015, 2016; M. Oh, 2014; Owada, 2017; Pae et al., 2014; Zobl, 1989). However, some studies have reported that overpassivisation diminished as learners' L2 proficiency level increased (e.g., Choi, 2019; Hwang, 2006; Okada, 2021; Shin, 2011), pointing to a developmental pattern in learners' restructuring of the L2 system in their interlanguage.

Explaining Overpassivisation

Several hypotheses have been proposed to explain the causes of overpassivisation among L2 English learners, particularly with the unaccusatives. Several researchers have suggested a language-specific account or L1 influence for the occurrence of the errors (Hahn, 2009; Hwang, 2006; Montrul, 1999; No & Chung, 2006; Oshita, 2000; Zobl, 1989). For example, Montrul (1999) indicated an L1 influence of the Spanish intransitive marker 'se' on acquiring unaccusative verbs among Spanish ESL learners. Similarly, No and Chung (2006) reported the influence of the Korean passive morpheme 'ci' on the learners' tendency to accept passivised unaccusatives—however,

E. Oh (2011), among others, argued that the overpassivisation phenomenon is not related to L1 transfer as it has been observed cross-linguistically among L2 learners of various mother tongues (e.g., Thai, Japanese, Chinese, Arabic and Korean).

Another attempt to explain passivised unaccusatives is the Transitivity Hypothesis which states that L2 learners interpret unaccusatives as underlying transitive (Ju, 2000; Yip, 1990, 1995). Yip (1995) argued that since unaccusatives are represented as transitions in learners' interlanguage, learners tend to extend the passivisation rule to most unaccusative structures, producing ungrammatical passive forms.

Proponents of the Noun Phrase (NP)-movement Marker Hypothesis postulate that L2 learners passivise unaccusatives as an overt marker of the NP movement as they regard unaccusatives as subsumed under the syntactic rule for passive formation. The postverbal argument of the unaccusative verb is similar to the passive structure (Hirakawa, 2001; Lee, 2010; Oshita, 2000; Yip, 1995; Zobl, 1989). The similarity of the underlying representation between the intransitive unaccusative verb and the transitive passive verb is believed to create confusion for L2 learners, as the passive morphology results from NP movement from the direct object to the subject position. L2 learners misapply this rule for unaccusatives, leading to the formation of passivised unaccusative constructions. It explains the higher tendency of overpassivisation of unaccusatives than unergatives. Overpassivisation has been

interpreted as support for the Unaccusative Hypothesis (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978), which explains why L2 learners analyse unaccusatives and unergatives differently.

Furthermore, some studies have shown that overpassivisation is not applied to all unaccusative verbs homogenously (Balcom, 1997; Hwang, 2006; Ju, 2000; No & Chung, 2006). For instance, Korean L2 learners passivised the verb *disappear* more frequently than *happen*, although both verbs are unaccusatives (Ju, 2000). The between-verb variation among unaccusatives is related to the distinction between the subclasses of unaccusatives, alternating and non-alternating unaccusatives (Levin & Hovav, 1995). Alternating unaccusatives have a transitive counterpart, as in *The door closed/The child closed the door*. In contrast, non-alternating unaccusatives do not have a transitive counterpart, as in *The accident occurred/*The accident was occurred by the driver* (Kim, 2016). Overpassivisation is committed more frequently with alternating unaccusatives than non-alternating unaccusatives (Balcom, 1997). It may be attributed to the transitive counterparts of the alternating unaccusatives, which are not morphologically distinct from intransitive forms. Hence, learners may incorrectly assume those verbs can be passivised like transitive verbs. Another perspective attempting to explain the occurrence of passivised unaccusatives is animacy effects which showed that L2 learners were more likely to incorrectly accept ungrammatical unaccusatives with inanimate subjects (No & Chung, 2006; Pae et al., 2014).

L2 Proficiency and Overpassivisation

Overpassivisation has been demonstrated in L2 perception and production by learners across all proficiency levels, including learners at the advanced level (Lee, 2007; M. Oh, 2014; Shin, 2011). A study by Montrul (2001) and Moore (1993) showed that L2 learners at low proficiency levels eventually obtained the target grammar as their L2 proficiency increased, even though they failed to utilise the correct form before. Similarly, Shin (2011) revealed that learners at the high-intermediate proficiency level committed fewer overpassivisation errors than mid- and low-intermediate proficiency students. These studies suggest that the rate of overpassivisation decreases with increasing L2 proficiency.

On the other hand, some studies have reported that L2 learners' overpassivisation errors did not differ significantly across proficiency levels (e.g., Chung, 2015, 2016; M. Oh, 2014; Owada, 2017; Pae et al., 2014). Overpassivisation was observed to persist even as proficiency level increased, this possibly pointing to a learnability problem. Interestingly, it has also been reported that overpassivisation is more common among advanced proficiency learners than those in the lower proficiency groups (Ju, 2000; Kong, 2018; Park & Lakshmanan, 2007; Yip, 1995). Although advanced L2 learners are proficient in using the passive form, they are still susceptible to overpassivisation regarding unaccusative verbs (Jo, 2018). With these differences observed, it is worthwhile to re-examine the relationship between L2 proficiency and

overpassivisation for evidence that can shed light on learners' acquisition patterns.

Overpassivisation Among L1 Malay Learners

Several studies on errors committed by L1 Malay ESL learners have reported overgeneration of *be*-verb in non-obligatory contexts and used with lexical verbs (e.g., Arshad & Hawanum, 2010; Aziz, 2018; Roslina & Mohd Don, 2014; Wee, 2009; Wee et al. 2010). Wee (2009) investigated verb form errors in the writings of 50 Malay ESL learners and observed the overgeneration of *be*-verb in structures like "*The nurse was bandaged her leg*" And "*The accident was happened at Jalan Raja Laut.*" Similarly, Arshad and Hawanum (2010) and Roslina and Mohd Don (2014) reported the occurrence of *be*-verb overgeneration errors among L1 Malay ESL learners, such as in "...*was very dark. Suddenly, the lamp was opened ownself*" and "*In a few minutes, the ambulance was arrived*". While these findings point out that overpassivisation errors are committed by L1 Malay ESL learners, a description of these errors concerning the type of intransitive verb and learners' L2 proficiency is still lacking for this population.

The Present Study

Overpassivisation is one of the most common errors committed by L2 learners in learning the English passive, and it has been shown to relate to verb type and learners' English proficiency. ESL learners have been observed to extend the

passive rule to intransitive verbs frequently. This study sought to contribute to current knowledge using L1 Malay tertiary students in Malaysia, where English is widely used as a second language.

Malaysian students learn English in school from the first year in elementary school and take English as an examination subject over 10 years of formal schooling. The schooling system in Malaysia is unique in that elementary schools may use the Malay language, Chinese, Tamil, or English as the medium of instruction, depending on the type of school. Hence, students in Malaysia are at least bilingual, and many are multilingual. Further, many students continue to take English courses at tertiary institutions. English is used extensively in the country, particularly in the more urban settings. While Malay is the national language, English is recognised as a second language and is the medium of instruction for most academic programmes at tertiary educational institutions. Hence, in terms of exposure to the English language, Malaysian tertiary students have considerably more experience and familiarity with the language than learners in a foreign language setting.

It is worth noting that most previous studies on overpassivisation among L2 learners have been conducted on populations in a foreign language setting where exposure to the L2 is limited. Findings from a study on learners with prior and current high exposure to English, such as tertiary-level students in Malaysia, would be useful to bring additional insight into the phenomenon of overpassivisation in L2 acquisition.

Another point to note is that most of the studies on overpassivisation in L2 acquisition have utilised either small samples or those not representative of the target population. The current study examined overpassivisation patterns among L1 Malay ESL tertiary students in Malaysia, targeting a large sample representative of students in tertiary institutions of higher learning across the country. The following questions were addressed in the study:

1. To what extent does intransitive verb type influence overpassivisation among L1 Malay ESL tertiary students in Malaysia?
2. To what extent is overpassivisation influenced by the English proficiency level of L1 Malay ESL tertiary students in Malaysia? Are there changes in the occurrence of overpassivisation with students' increasing English proficiency?

The present study was part of a larger research investigating the interlanguage representation of the English passive among L1 Malay ESL tertiary students in Malaysia. This paper focuses on the perception aspect of the learners' interlanguage and, therefore, does not include results from the production study. By looking at errors produced by learners at different levels of English proficiency, the study sought to shed light on the interlanguage development of L1 Malay ESL tertiary students at different stages of L2 acquisition.

Unaccusative Hypothesis: The Unaccusative/Unergative Distinction

The Unaccusative Hypothesis postulates two subclasses of English intransitive verbs: unaccusative and unergative (Burzio, 1986; Perlmutter, 1978). These two classes differ in their syntactic constraints and underlying semantic representations. 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*, while the unergative verbs entail willed or volitional acts, for example, *dance*, *run*, *walk*, and *sleep* (Park & Lakshmanan, 2007).

Unaccusative verbs have an internal argument generated from the object position with a thematic role (theta role) of THEME/PATIENT, similar to the object of transitive verbs, yet lacks an external argument (subject) functioning as AGENT. Meanwhile, the unergative verbs have an external argument generated in the subject position with a theta role of AGENT, similar to the subject of transitive verbs. The difference in argument-structure property between unaccusatives and unergatives is reflected in their distinct underlying structures, as shown in Examples (c) and (d) below. Superficially, both appear syntactically similar but differ in their underlying representations.

(c) NP [_{VP} V ___] unergative
[John [_{VP} laughed]]

(d) ___ [_{VP} V NP] unaccusative
[John_i [_{VP} arrived _i]]

(Shan & Yuan, 2008, p.165)

In (c), the unergative verb requires an external argument but lacks an internal argument, which means that it has a subject (AGENT) and no object (Shan & Yuan, 2008). The sole argument of unergative verbs is in the subject position, behaving like a subject of transitive verbs (Burzio, 1986). On the contrary, as shown in (b), the internal argument but not the external argument is present, as the unaccusative verb has an internal argument and lacks an external argument. The surface subject of an unaccusative verb is derived from the direct object through NP movement. The derived subject is similar to the object of a transitive verb but differs from the subject of a transitive or unergative verb. This syntactic process is similar to the formation of the passive, which involves the NP-movement of the subject to the object position and vice versa (Kondo, 2005; Oshita, 2000; Shan & Yuan, 2008; Yip, 1995; Yuan, 1999). The verb in the passive is morphologically marked; however, it is not the case with unaccusatives. The unique syntactic structure and semantic representation of the unaccusatives have been cited as the cause of considerable learning problems for L2 learners. L2 acquisition studies have reported that L2 learners tend to overgeneralise passive morphology to intransitive verbs, and more noticeably with the unaccusatives than with the unergatives (Ju, 2000; Hahn, 2009, 2011; M. Oh, 2014; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Shin, 2011; Wee, 2009; Yuan, 1999; Yip, 1995).

As overpassivisation has been observed in the interlanguage of L2 learners of many

different L1s, it has been proposed that it is a universal phenomenon in the development of L2 English (Ju, 2000; Hawkins, 2001; Oshita, 2001; White, 2003), that is to say, it is a part of the process of working out the system of the target language rather than effects of interference from the learner's L1.

METHODOLOGY

Participants and Sampling

A two-stage random sampling technique was used in the selection at the level of institutions and classes. The first stage was a random selection of institutions of higher learning in Malaysia which was conducted using computer-generated random numbers. The institutions selected were contacted, and where there was no approval granted or reply received, the selection process was repeated. The final number of institutions selected was nine Malaysian institutions. These institutions provided a list of English classes and the lecturers' contact numbers. Another stage of random selection was then conducted on the lists of classes using computer-generated numbers. Out of the total of 71 classes, 45 classes were selected using computer-generated numbers. The respective lecturers were also contacted for permission to enter their classes. All students in the selected classes, totalling 940, completed the background information questionnaire and language tasks.

Data screening was then performed to select further participants who were L1 Malay speakers with a score of 50 on the Oxford Placement Test (Allan, 2004). The

final number of participants included in the study was 499. There were 236 students in the Elementary proficiency group, 163 in the Lower Intermediate group, 78 in the Upper Intermediate group, and 22 in the Advanced group. The sample size of 499 is deemed sufficient as this study should have a minimum sample size representative of 384 (Cohen et al., 2007; Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Instruments

The participants completed three language tasks: The Oxford Placement Test (OPT), a grammaticality judgement test, and a picture description test. As this paper focuses on participants' competence, production results from the picture description test are excluded. The OPT was used to determine the participants' English proficiency level. The grammaticality judgement test (GJT) was used to determine the participants' competence in identifying acceptable and unacceptable English passive forms. The items consist of 24 active grammatical structures and 24 ungrammatical passive structures, with half using unaccusative verbs and half using unergative verbs for both the grammatical and ungrammatical items.

The verbs in the test were adopted from those used in past studies on L2 acquisition in the English passive and studies on overpassivisation errors (e.g., Hirakawa, 2001; Ju, 2000; Kondo, 2005; Oshita, 2000; Park & Lakshmanan, 2007; Yuan, 1999). Each type of verb was represented by 3 different verbs: Unaccusative (fall, happen, die); Unergative (run, laugh, swim).

The length of the items in the GJT was between 6 to 9 syllables, and the types of tenses in the test items were balanced in number. The GJT was validated by piloting it with 48 native English speakers using an online version of the test. The result obtained was 98% accuracy. Further, the instrument was piloted on 39 Malaysian participants, and Cronbach's coefficient alpha was 0.93. The arrangement of the items was randomised in the GJT to avoid a metalinguistic focus on the part of the participants (see Carson, 2016; Elliot et al., 1969; Greenbaum, 1973).

Students' responses in the GJT were examined for accuracy in their judgement of the grammatical and ungrammatical structures of the unaccusatives and unergatives. Paired *t*-tests were then performed to determine differences between the scores for each verb type. A one-way ANOVA was also conducted to examine differences across proficiency groups (Field, 2018; Pallant, 2020).

Ethical Clearance

This research was approved by Universiti Putra Malaysia's Ethics Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects (ref: FBMK(EXP15)P42).

RESULTS

Overpassivisation and Verb Type

Students' performance (correct responses) for items in the GJT was scored. Mean scores were obtained for their competence in accepting the grammatical sentences

and rejecting the ungrammatical sentences. Grammatical sentences were active structures of the verbs, and ungrammatical sentences were the overpassivised structures

of the verbs. Table 1 presents the mean scores for both the unaccusative and unergative verbs.

Table 1

Students' mean scores in correctly identifying grammatical and ungrammatical sentences according to verb type

	Unaccusative verb <i>M</i> (n=499)	Unergative verb <i>M</i> (n=499)
Grammatical sentences	82.53	82.99
Ungrammatical sentences	59.80	71.26

Note. 0 < *M* < 100

The students performed well in accepting the grammatical structures of the unaccusative and unergative verbs. They correctly judged the active structures as grammatical, with a mean percentage score above 80%. A score of 80% and above is normally similar to native-like performance (Muftah & Wong, 2011; Soo & Wong, 2012; Wong, 1999, 2002). It suggests that the students are competent in recognising grammatical structures using intransitive verbs. However, their scores in correctly rejecting ungrammatical structures were poorer, at mean scores of only 59.8% and 71.26% for the unaccusative and unergative verbs, respectively. To find out whether these lower scores for failing to recognise

overpassivised (ungrammatical) structures are due to chance, the paired samples *t*-test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference between the mean scores for students' correct identification of the grammatical and ungrammatical sentences within each verb category. The results show that the differences are statistically significant, at $t(498) = 18.66, p < 0.001$ for the unaccusative verbs, and $t(498) = 11.68, p < 0.001$ for the unergative verbs (see Table 2). It suggests that students can make more correct judgments on the active (grammatical) structures of both the unaccusatives and unergatives than the overpassivised (ungrammatical) structures of both verb types.

Table 2

Paired samples t-test on students' mean scores in correctly identifying grammatical and ungrammatical sentences within verb types

	Grammatical Sentences		Ungrammatical Sentences		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i> (n=499)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (n=499)	<i>SD</i>			
Unaccusative verb	82.53	10.62	59.80	25.66	18.66	498	0.000*
Unergative verb	82.99	11.25	71.26	19.21	-11.86	498	0.000*

Note. * $p < 0.01, 0 < M < 100$

The results also show that students scored more poorly in recognising the overpassivised structures using the unaccusative than those using the unergative verbs. To determine whether the difference is statistically significant, the paired samples *t*-test was conducted. As shown

in Table 3, the mean score representing students' competence in rejecting the overpassivised structures using unergative verbs is significantly higher than their score for rejecting the ungrammatical structures using unaccusative verbs, at $t(498) = 16.26$, $p < 0.001$.

Table 3

Paired samples t-test on students' mean scores for correctly rejecting ungrammatical sentences across verb types

Ungrammatical Sentences	Unaccusative verb		Unergative verb		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
	<i>M</i> (<i>n</i> =499)	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i> (<i>n</i> =499)	<i>SD</i>			
	59.80	25.66	71.26	19.21	-16.26	498	0.000*

Note. * $p < 0.01$, $0 < M < 100$

Overpassivisation and English Proficiency Level

Students' mean scores were examined for each proficiency group to investigate the influence of L2 proficiency level on students' competence in recognising overpassivised structures. Table 4 shows the mean scores for both the unaccusative and unergative verb types.

The scores indicate that the students' correct rejection of overpassivised structures for both verb types progressively increases as their English proficiency levels increase. At the Elementary level, the lowest level of proficiency, students have the most difficulty discerning correct and incorrect forms, with poorer scores for unaccusative and unergative verbs (46.14% and 62.19%, respectively). At the Lower Intermediate level, while students' correct judgement of overpassivised forms with unergative verbs increased to 73.93%, which is slightly

short of 80%, their judgement of the same with unaccusative verbs remains quite low, at 62.37%, which is moderately higher than the chance level of 50%. On the other hand, the Upper Intermediate and Advanced proficiency groups appear to have acquired a high competence in recognising overpassivised structures and correctly rejecting them, at mean scores above 80%.

These findings show that students can resolve the overpassivisation confusion more easily for unergative verbs than unaccusative verbs. Overpassivisation is common for the unergative and unaccusative verb types at low proficiency levels. However, while learners at the Low Intermediate proficiency level have reconfigured their understanding of the intransitive rule for the unergative verb to a large extent (a higher mean score of 73.93), overpassivisation remains high for the unaccusative verb (a low mean score of 62.37). For the unaccusatives, there is

Table 4
Mean percentage scores for ungrammatical items across English proficiency levels

English Proficiency Level	Unaccusative verb	Unergative verb
	<i>M</i> (n = 499)	<i>M</i> (n = 499)
EL (n = 263)	46.14	62.19
LI (n = 163)	62.37	73.93
UI (n = 78)	85.15	86.75
ADV (n = 22)	97.47	93.94

Note. EL = Elementary; LI = Lower Intermediate; UI = Upper Intermediate; ADV = Advanced; $0 < M < 100$

a steep increase in the correct rejection of overpassivised forms from 62.37 to 85.15 from the Low Intermediate to the Upper Intermediate proficiency levels.

A one-way ANOVA test was performed to determine whether students' English proficiency significantly affected their recognition of overpassivised structures. Statistically significant results were obtained indicating the role of proficiency in students' rejection of ungrammatical unaccusatives ($p < 0.05$, $F(3,499)=103.61$, $p = 0.000$) and ungrammatical unergatives ($p < 0.05$, $F(3,499) = 62.65$, $p = 0.000$) (see Table 5).

The post-hoc comparison showed significant differences in the scores for the two verb types between all pairs of proficiency groups, except for the Upper Intermediate and Advanced pairing (see Table 6).

The scores between the EL, LI and UI groups are significantly different. In contrast, scores between the UI and ADV groups show no difference for both the unaccusative and unergative verb types, providing important information on the development pattern in learners' acquisition of the passive rule. While learners experience a more difficult struggle in processing the unaccusative than

Table 5
One-way ANOVA on students' correct rejection of ungrammatical sentences between proficiency groups for both verb types

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>Sig. p</i>
UG Unaccusatives					
Between	3	126468.49	42156.16	103.61	0.000*
Within	495	201404.42	406.88		
Total	498	327872.91			
UG Unergatives					
Between	3	50592.66	16864.22	62.65	0.000*
Within	495	133240.01	269.17		
Total	498	183832.67			

Note. UG =Ungrammatical, * $p < 0.05$

the unergative structures, upon reaching the Upper Intermediate proficiency level, any misinterpretation of the rule applied to both intransitive verb types appears to be resolved.

Another point to note is that the learners in the current study are students studying in higher learning institutions and who are well-exposed to the English language due to the many years of formal English instruction in school and the use of English as the medium of instruction in their tertiary academic programmes, in addition to the

fact that English is widely used as a second language in the country. However, despite the extent of exposure to and familiarity with the language, learners' proficiency level plays a vital role in determining whether the learner can sort out the English grammatical system to exclude the passive morphology from intransitive verbs. For the students in the study, the Upper Intermediate proficiency level, as measured by the Oxford Placement Test, appears to be the threshold for students to be competent in rejecting overpassivised forms (see Figure 1).

Table 6
Post-hoc Tukey Result for ANOVA

Sources	Proficiency Levels	Mean Difference	<i>p</i>
UG Unaccusatives	EL–LI	16.23	0.000*
	EL–UI	39.01	0.000*
	EL–ADV	51.34	0.000*
	LI–UI	22.78	0.000*
	LI–ADV	35.10	0.000*
	UI–ADV	12.33	0.056
UG Unergatives	EL–LI	11.73	0.000*
	EL–UI	24.56	0.000*
	EL–ADV	31.75	0.000*
	LI–UI	12.83	0.000*
	LI–ADV	20.01	0.000*
	UI–ADV	7.19	0.268

Note. UG =Ungrammatical, **p* < 0.05

DISCUSSION

The present study aims to investigate overpassivisation errors concerning verb type and English proficiency level among L1 Malay ESL students in institutes of higher education in Malaysia. The findings

indicate that while L1 Malay ESL students in Malaysian higher learning institutions can identify grammatical structures using unaccusative and unergative verbs, they had problems rejecting overpassivised structures for both unaccusative and unergative verbs.

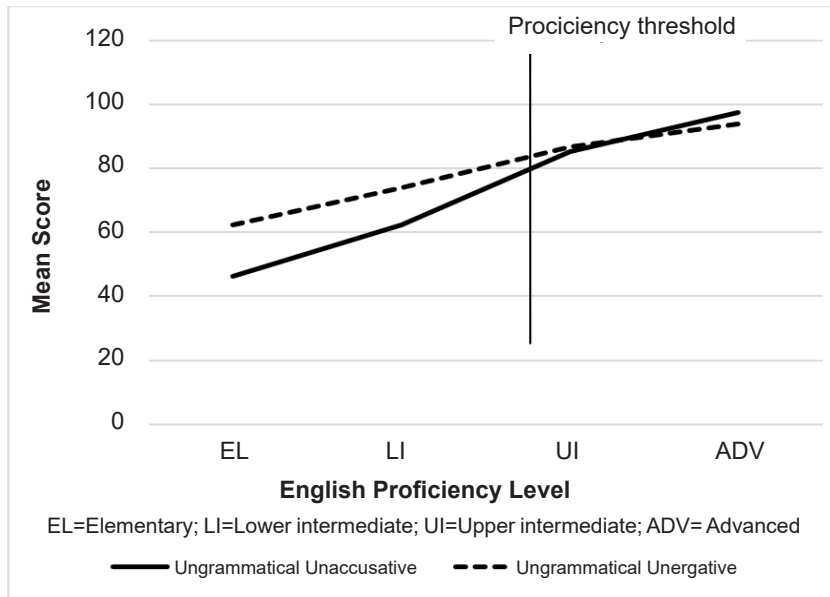


Figure 1. English proficiency level and students' mean scores in rejecting overpassivised structures

Further, the students are more inclined to extend the passive morphology to the unaccusative verbs than the unergative verbs, in line with findings of past studies (e.g., Ju, 2000; Hahn, 2009, 2011; M. Oh, 2014; Oshita, 2000, 2001; Shin, 2011). This finding is consistent with the results of previous studies, which found that L2 overpassivisation occurred more with unaccusative verbs than with unergative verbs (e.g., Balcom, 1997; Hahn, 2009; Hirakawa, 2001; Lee, 2007, 2010; Oshita, 2000; Sorace & Shomura, 2001). The unaccusatives are more susceptible to passivisation errors because their internal argument has a feature similar to the object of a transitive verb and hence, a higher tendency to be mistakenly passivised by L2 learners. In contrast, unergatives are less susceptible to overpassivisation because their

external argument is similar to the subject of a transitive verb (Burzio, 1986; Shan & Yuan, 2008). The differential acceptance rates of overpassivised structures for both the verb types imply that the students can discern between the underlying structures of both the unaccusative and unergative verbs in working out the passivisation rule in their interlanguage. The finding supports the Unaccusative Hypothesis (UAH), which postulates that L2 learners analyse unaccusative and unergative verbs differently.

The findings also revealed that as English proficiency level increases, the students become more competent in rejecting overpassivised structures; this is true for both the unaccusative and unergative verbs. This finding is consistent with previous studies, such as Montrul (2001), who found

that learners at the low L2 proficiency level failed to utilise the correct form of a particular L2 structure initially but eventually obtained the target grammar as their proficiency level increased. Also, Shin (2011), who conducted a corpus study on Korean college students' English writings, reported that learners of high-intermediate level committed fewer overpassivisation errors compared to mid- and low-intermediate students. While these past studies have shown that overpassivisation decreases with increasing proficiency, the present study attempted to shed light on the process of this development. The findings suggest that L1 Malay ESL students resolve their understanding of the ungrammatical forms more easily for the unergatives than unaccusatives as they progress in their English proficiency. While students' over-generalisation of the passive rule extends to both unaccusative and unergative verbs, especially at the lower proficiency levels, students can resolve this misapplication of the passive morphology more easily with unergative verbs than unaccusative verbs due to the inherent differences in the underlying structure of the verbs as discussed earlier. Upon reaching a higher proficiency threshold (Upper Intermediate level in this study), the type of verb makes no difference to students' performance as students can reject overpassivised forms for both verb types equally.

CONCLUSION

Acquiring the English passive is challenging for L2 learners, even those

at advanced proficiency levels (Amadi, 2018; Choomthong, 2011; Hinkel, 2004; Kalimuttu, 2016; Wang, 2016). Overpassivization is one of the notable error types observed in the interlanguage of L2 learners of different L1 backgrounds and proficiency levels. These L2 learners tend to overuse the passive morphology with the intransitive verbs, more significantly with the unaccusative verbs than the unergative verbs. The present study thus focused on L2 Malay ESL students to investigate the extent to which they committed this type of overpassivisation error. Consistent with past studies, the findings show the students have problems recognising ungrammatical overpassivised structures, and more so with the unaccusative than the unergative verbs. However, it is worth pointing out that while there were fewer wrong judgements on overpassivised unergative structures, they nevertheless did occur and be statistically higher than the extent of wrong judgements of unergative grammatical structures. Furthermore, the findings also revealed that English proficiency level influences the students' recognition of overpassivised forms as ungrammatical. Progressive acquisition of the grammatical rule with increasing L2 proficiency may be viewed as part of the process of interlanguage development, where learners go through development stages in L2 learning and through which their interlanguage grammar is continuously reconfigured and updated (Hawkins & Chan, 1997; Tarone, 2018; Towell & Hawkins, 1994; White, 2003). The study's findings provide insights

into the interlanguage representations of the English passive of L1 Malay ESL adult learners of different proficiency levels. It contributes a better understanding of the developmental process of the L1 Malay ESL adult learners to the SLA literature, particularly on the Unaccusative Hypothesis, which currently lacks insights from the perspectives of L1 Malay ESL adult learners. ESL language instructors, teachers, and language practitioners can benefit from the findings as they understand better the problems L1 Malay learners of English experience when asked to produce the English passive. Learning material for students should be carefully arranged, considering L1 influence, complexities of the L2, and learners' L2 proficiency.

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