



Complex Grammatical Structures in EFL: The Case of the Reported Speech and the Passive Voice among Francophone Learners of English in Cameroon Secondary Schools

Solange SWIRI TUMASANG

University of Maroua, Cameroon

ABSTRACT: The mastery of complex grammatical structures, particularly reported speech and the passive voice, poses significant challenges for Francophone learners of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Cameroon. This study investigates the specific difficulties faced by 100 sixth-year Francophone secondary school students through written production tasks. The analysis was guided by Error Analysis Theory and Interlanguage Theory, with pedagogical insights informed by Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Findings reveal that structural errors were most prevalent (60%), encompassing incorrect tense shifts, faulty passive constructions, and pronoun misuses. Semantic errors (23.3%) and lexical errors (16.7%) were also observed, indicating learners' struggles with meaning, contextual appropriateness, and word choice. These patterns suggest that errors are systematic and reflective of learners' emerging interlanguage, influenced by first-language interference, limited exposure to authentic English, and insufficient opportunities to practice these structures in meaningful contexts. The study highlights the cognitive and syntactic complexity of reported speech and passive constructions, demonstrating that traditional, form-focused grammar instruction is often inadequate. Errors persisted even among learners with moderate proficiency, suggesting that mastery requires repeated, context-rich, communicative practice. The findings underscore the need for instructional approaches that integrate form, meaning, and use, providing learners with varied opportunities to internalize and apply these structures in authentic communicative situations. This research contributes to the understanding of grammatical difficulties in EFL contexts and provides evidence for designing more effective teaching strategies in multilingual environments. It emphasizes the importance of aligning grammar instruction with learners' communicative needs.

Corresponding Author:

Solange SWIRI

TUMASANG

KEYWORDS:

EFL, reported speech, passive voice, interlanguage, error analysis, communicative language teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

The acquisition of complex grammatical structures is a crucial component of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL), particularly for learners in multilingual and non-native contexts such as Cameroon. Among these structures, reported speech and the passive voice present unique linguistic and cognitive challenges that significantly affect students' grammatical accuracy, communicative competence, and overall proficiency. The acquisition of these forms extends beyond memorizing grammatical rules—it involves developing the cognitive flexibility to restructure meaning, manage tense and pronoun shifts, and understand abstract syntactic relations within English discourse.

Francophone learners of English in Cameroon often experience persistent difficulties in mastering reported speech and the passive voice. These challenges stem from several interrelated factors: linguistic interference from French, limited exposure to authentic English input, and traditional instructional approaches that emphasize rote learning over communicative competence. The educational landscape in Cameroon—marked by linguistic diversity, varying teacher proficiency levels, and unequal resource distribution—further compounds these difficulties. As a result, learners frequently exhibit structural, semantic, and lexical errors that obscure meaning and hinder effective communication.

Reported speech, which requires restating another person's words without direct quotation, demands an understanding of tense sequencing, pronoun reference, and the contextual adaptation of time and place expressions. For example, the direct statement "She said, 'I am happy'" transforms into "She said that she was happy," requiring a shift in tense and perspective. Similarly, the

passive voice, which changes focus from the doer to the receiver of an action—“The chef cooked the meal” → “The meal was cooked by the chef”—requires learners to manipulate verb forms and conceptualize agency differently. These transformations are not straightforward for learners whose first language, such as French, relies on different syntactic and semantic principles. The cognitive demand of applying these grammatical operations accurately explains why learners often default to active forms or misuse tense and pronoun agreement.

This study explores the difficulties faced by 6th-year francophone secondary school students in Cameroon in mastering reported speech and the passive voice. Using a corpus of written compositions from 100 Francophone learners of English, the study categorizes the errors observed into three main types—structural, semantic, and lexical—to uncover patterns of grammatical difficulty.

Guided by these insights, this study addresses three research questions:

- What specific difficulties do Francophone learners of English in Cameroon face when using reported speech and the passive voice?
- What types of errors are most prevalent in students’ written productions concerning these grammatical structures?
- How do these difficulties reflect the inherent complexities of reported speech and the passive voice in EFL acquisition?

The analysis reveals that the majority of errors are structural, particularly in tense consistency and pronoun reference, indicating that learners struggle with the syntactic flexibility these constructions require. Results show that tense shifts (50%) and pronoun errors (22%) are the most recurrent subtypes within structural errors, corroborating the view that interference from French and limited practice opportunities are central causes. Furthermore, the histogram of errors per learner demonstrates a clustering effect, suggesting that most students commit between three and six grammatical errors, which supports the idea of a developmental stage in their grammatical acquisition process.

These findings have direct implications for English language teaching in Cameroon. Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond traditional grammar drills toward pedagogy that integrates grammatical form with communicative function. Teachers should adopt interactive strategies that emphasize contextualized practice, peer collaboration, and metalinguistic awareness. Curriculum designers and teacher educators should also ensure that grammar instruction promotes both accuracy and fluency, enabling learners to apply complex grammatical structures meaningfully in spoken and written communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Studies have consistently shown that learners’ first language exerts a strong influence on second language grammar acquisition, particularly in complex structures requiring tense or voice manipulation. Linguistic transfer from French often leads to incomplete application of English tense rules in reported speech and misunderstanding of agency in passive constructions. Moreover, limited exposure to authentic English outside the classroom confines students’ grammatical awareness to textbook patterns, preventing them from internalizing natural usage. Consequently, errors such as “She said she is happy” or “The meal cooked by the chef” reflect both structural interference and instructional gaps.

Learner difficulties with reported speech

A considerable body of research confirms that learners frequently encounter problems when using reported speech — problems which are systematic rather than incidental. For example, Gerhanawati, Sofyan, and Hidayati (2018) found that tertiary students in Indonesia produced a high number of errors in backshifting of tense, pronoun reference, and embedded question transformations when converting direct to indirect speech. Similarly, Le Thi Mai (2017) in Vietnam analysed first-year English-major students and documented common errors such as failure to shift modals (e.g., “can” → “could”), omission of the reporting verb, and incorrect time-expression changes. Williams (2004) also drew attention to lexical-framing problems in reported speech, noting that many EFL writers lack the variety of reporting verbs and collocations to render reported speech effectively in academic writing contexts. In a South African university study, Lambani & Nephawe (2024) observed that students struggled particularly with reported questions — restructuring interrogative direct speech into declarative reported forms—which underlines that the transformation demands multiple simultaneous changes and thus presents high cognitive load.

Taken together, these studies demonstrate that reported speech is not simply a “grammar point” but a multi-layer transformation process involving morphosyntax, semantics, pragmatics, and lexical choice — one that many learners fail to internalize fully.

Learner difficulties with the passive voice

Similarly, research on the passive voice in EFL writing reveals persistent and structured error patterns. For instance, Basir, Saiful, and Firman (2021) found that 86.67% of their secondary-school participants in Indonesia had problems forming passive constructions in the simple present tense, and 80% in the simple past tense. Najah, Zainuddin, and Widya Lestari (2024) reported that errors in passive voice often cluster around the misuse of the auxiliary be, omission (e.g., missing “be”), misuse of past participles (Verb 3), and confusion of subject/object roles — with “be” errors accounting for up to 50% of errors on some tests. A more recent case study by Jannah et al. (2023) at an Indonesian university highlighted limited exposure to passive-voice structures,

unclear grammar explanations, and native-language transfer as contributing factors to learners' difficulties. Li (2023) compared English majors and non-majors in China and found that non-majors made significantly more passive-voice errors (in misformation and omission) than majors, suggesting that both proficiency level and exposure/environment shape mastery of passives.

These findings show that passive voice structures are vulnerable in learners' interlanguage systems: not only do they require the correct morphological form (aux + past participle) but also correct syntactic mapping (agent omission or inclusion, emphasis shift) and informational structure awareness.

The role of limited input, practice opportunities, and context

Beyond the structural and lexical difficulties, a crucial factor identified in the literature is the lack of authentic input and varied practice opportunities. Benouioua & Djellal (2018) in Algeria found that EFL learners lacked sufficient exposure and interaction in English, which limited their oral and written fluency and by extension inhibited grammatical automatization. In the passive-voice domain, Purnama Sari & Fikroni (2025) observed that omission errors predominated (55%) in students who had limited tasks demanding passive voice, suggesting that absence of repeated use and feedback causes persistent gaps. Research on teaching reported speech in Ghana showed that using a communicative language teaching (CLT) approach improved students' mastery of reported speech more than traditional grammar drills, implicitly because it increased the quantity and variety of practice in meaningful contexts.

These studies collectively reinforce the idea that grammar instruction isolated from meaningful use tends to produce superficial knowledge. Without repeated exposure in different genres and tasks, learners' interlanguage remains fragile and prone to error.

Implications of the "uselessness" of isolated practice

Several researchers address why learners may perceive certain grammatical instruction as "useless". Williams (2004) noted that EFL learners often lack lexical-framing resources to deploy reported speech effectively, meaning that even if they "know the rule" they cannot use it practically because they don't have the lexical or collocational tools. In passive voice research, Najah et al. (2024) argue that error fossilization occurs when learners repeatedly practice passives in decontextualized drills without being challenged to use them in new contexts. From a curricular perspective, in contexts like Cameroon where instructional time, teacher proficiency, and resources are limited, these structural forms may receive little communicative recycling. This aligns with Jannah et al.'s (2023) conclusion that limited exposure and insufficient practice opportunities play a decisive role in learners' passive voice struggles.

Therefore, when learners feel that grammar drills are "useless", the literature suggests this is often because the teaching-learning ecology fails to provide rich, varied, meaningful practice, not because the structures themselves are unlearnable.

Theoretical frameworks and connections

The empirical works reviewed above are consistent with the frameworks of Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967; Richards, 1974) and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). These frameworks view learners' errors not as failures but as systematic, hypothesis-driven formations of emerging linguistic systems. For example, Gerhanawati et al.'s (2018) reported-speech error clusters reflect underlying hypotheses about tense and pronoun shifts. Meanwhile, Li's (2023) passive-voice error comparison reflects interlanguage fossilization effects in less-exposed learners. From a pedagogical viewpoint, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Hymes, 1972; Canale & Swain, 1980) emphasises that learners must engage in meaningful interaction and production to internalize forms. The study supports the idea that communicative, contextualized tasks are more effective than isolated drills.

The literature suggests that to address the difficulties with reported speech and passive voice, instruction must move beyond form-only drills to tasks that engage meaning, promote interaction, and provide repeated exposure in varied contexts.

The literature confirms that (1) reported speech and the passive voice present persistent, structured difficulties for EFL learners; (2) these difficulties are compounded when opportunities for authentic, repeated use are limited; (3) isolated grammar drills, without communicative context and variation, are often perceived as "useless" by learners; and (4) effective instructional designs draw on error-analysis understanding of interlanguage and adopt communicative-task based frameworks to facilitate proceduralization of these complex forms.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The present study is grounded in three complementary theoretical perspectives: Error Analysis Theory, Interlanguage Theory, and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). These frameworks provide a basis for understanding the difficulties encountered by Francophone learners of English in Cameroon when using reported speech and the passive voice.

Error Analysis Theory

Error Analysis (EA) Theory, as proposed by Corder (1981), emphasizes the systematic study of errors in second language learners' production. Learners' errors are not merely "failures" but evidence of learning progress and the internalization of language rules. EA posits that errors are not random but reflect the learner's developing linguistic competence and provide insights into the

cognitive processes involved in language acquisition. In this study, EA guided the identification and categorization of errors into structural, semantic, and lexical types. Structural errors, such as incorrect tense shifts or faulty passive constructions, reveal learners' challenges with the formal rules of English grammar. Semantic and lexical errors, on the other hand, indicate difficulties in meaning-making and appropriate vocabulary usage. By applying EA, the study not only identifies the frequency and types of errors but also interprets them as indicators of learners' interlanguage development. The analysis of grammatical errors — categorizing them by type (structural, tense-shift, auxiliary omission, etc.) and quantifying their frequency — directly reflects the Error Analysis (EA) framework.

Interlanguage Theory

Selinker's (1972) Interlanguage Theory posits that second language learners create an evolving linguistic system that combines features of their first language (L1) with those of the target language (L2). Interlanguage theory explains that learners develop a transitional linguistic system influenced by their first language (L1) and the target language (L2). This interlanguage is dynamic, systematic, and subject to developmental constraints. In the context of Francophone learners of English, interference from French affects the accurate production of reported speech and passive constructions. For example, tense shifts in English reported speech often do not have direct equivalents in French, leading to structural errors. Interlanguage theory explains the persistence of such errors and highlights the transitional nature of learners' language systems. Understanding learners' interlanguage helps teachers anticipate common error patterns and design interventions that target these specific difficulties.

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)

Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) emphasizes the integration of grammatical form, meaning, and use in authentic communicative contexts (Lightbown & Spada, 2013; Ur, 1996). According to CLT, language learning is most effective when learners actively use the target language in meaningful situations rather than merely memorizing rules in isolation. CLT prioritizes communicative competence over grammatical accuracy in isolation. The argument that learners struggle with using reported speech and passive voice in authentic communicative contexts supports the CLT emphasis on meaningful language use rather than decontextualized drills. The study's findings support this perspective, showing that students struggle to apply reported speech and passive structures due to limited exposure to authentic English and a lack of contextualized practice. By linking grammatical instruction with communicative activities, CLT provides a framework for addressing these challenges, allowing learners to internalize complex structures while developing functional communication skills.

By combining these three theories, this study situates learners' errors within a broader cognitive and pedagogical framework. Error Analysis provides a method for systematic identification of difficulties, Interlanguage Theory explains why these errors occur and persist, and CLT offers guidance on effective instructional approaches to overcome them. Together, these frameworks enable a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by Francophone EFL learners in mastering reported speech and the passive voice in Cameroon.

Table 1: Application of the theoretical framework in this study

Theoretical Framework	Key Scholars	Application in the Study
Error Analysis Theory	Corder (1967), Richards (1974)	Identification and categorization of grammatical errors as diagnostic evidence of learning
Interlanguage Theory	Selinker (1972)	Explanation of learners' transitional competence, fossilization, and L1 interference
Communicative Language Teaching (CLT)	Hymes (1972); Canale & Swain (1980)	Emphasis on contextualized, communicative practice to overcome grammatical difficulties

4. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This section outlines the methodological framework adopted to investigate the difficulties faced by Francophone learners of English in Cameroon in mastering reported speech and the passive voice. The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to examine the frequency, nature, and pedagogical implications of grammatical errors found in learners' written productions. The methods covered participant selection, data collection materials, study administration, and data analysis procedures.

Participants

The study involved 100 sixth-year secondary school students ("Terminale" in the French system of education in Cameroon), in Thecla school complex in Yaounde in the 2023/2024 academic year. This cohort was selected because it represents a critical stage in English language acquisition: students are expected to have acquired fundamental grammatical competence and are beginning to manipulate complex structures such as reported speech and the passive voice in preparation for the final exams marking the end of secondary education.

A stratified sampling technique was employed to ensure diversity in linguistic ability, gender, and socio-economic background. Stratification was based on language proficiency (as assessed by prior English grades), school location, and gender balance, with approximately equal representation of male and female learners. Participation was voluntary, and all students provided informed consent. The study was conducted in accordance with ethical research standards, ensuring anonymity and confidentiality of student responses.

Materials

The main data collection tool comprised three written production tasks designed to elicit the natural use of reported speech and the passive voice in communicative contexts. The tasks were crafted to reflect realistic scenarios and to encourage learners to demonstrate grammatical understanding rather than rote memorization.

Narrative Writing Task: Students wrote a short narrative incorporating dialogue that required the transformation of direct speech into reported speech (e.g., recounting a conversation with a teacher or friend).

Descriptive Writing Task: Students described an event or process emphasizing actions rather than actors (e.g., how a school event was organized or how a meal was prepared), encouraging the use of passive constructions.

Error Identification and Correction Exercise: Learners were given sentences with deliberate grammatical errors involving reported speech or passive voice and asked to identify and correct them.

Each task was designed to last approximately 60 minutes, and the prompts were pre-tested on a pilot group of 10 students to confirm clarity and suitability for the target level.

Administration

The study was conducted under standardized classroom conditions during regular English language lessons. Prior to the test, students were briefed on the purpose of the exercise, to ensure the authenticity of the students' language output. All tasks were completed individually and collected immediately after the session to prevent external influence. The scripts were anonymized and coded for analysis.

Measures

The data were analyzed through a systematic error analysis framework supported by both quantitative and qualitative methods to uncover patterns in learners' use of reported speech and the passive voice.

Development of Error Taxonomy: Errors identified in students' written productions were categorized into three main types:

Structural Errors: Incorrect formation of grammatical patterns (e.g., tense shift errors in reported speech, omission of auxiliary verbs in passive voice).

Semantic Errors: Misinterpretation of meaning resulting in inaccurate or confusing sentence constructions.

Lexical Errors: Inappropriate word choice or collocation affecting grammatical coherence (e.g., misuse of reporting verbs such as say/tell).

Frequency and Descriptive Statistics

A frequency count was conducted for each error type across all compositions. Descriptive statistics (percentages, means, and standard deviations) were computed to determine the prevalence and distribution of error types. These results were used to generate Figure 2, showing the breakdown of structural error subtypes such as tense shifts (50%), pronoun issues (22%), and faulty passive formation (10%).

Qualitative Analysis of Error Samples

Representative excerpts from students' writings were analyzed to illustrate specific difficulties and cognitive patterns behind the errors. This qualitative analysis complemented the numerical data by explaining why certain errors—particularly tense inconsistency and agency confusion—were recurrent.

Error Co-occurrence Analysis

A correlational observation was conducted to examine whether students who struggled with one grammatical structure (e.g., tense shifts in reported speech) also displayed difficulties with another (e.g., incorrect auxiliary formation in passive voice). The results were visualized in the bubble scatter plot (Figure 5), which demonstrated overlapping tendencies among learners.

Inter-rater Reliability

To ensure coding accuracy, a second rater—an experienced English language educator—independently analyzed 20% of the data sample. The Cohen's Kappa coefficient ($\kappa = 0.87$) indicated high agreement between raters, confirming the reliability of the error categorization and frequency counts.

The methodological combination of quantitative frequency analysis and qualitative interpretation ensured a balanced and comprehensive understanding of learners' difficulties. The resulting charts and tables were derived directly from this methodological framework and formed the empirical foundation for the discussion section. This approach enabled the identification of dominant

error types and provided the pedagogical insights needed to improve instructional strategies for teaching reported speech and the passive voice to Francophone learners in Cameroon.

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section outlines the results and provides an in-depth discussion of the findings in order to demonstrate the complex nature of reported speech and passive voice with a deeper interpretation of *why* particular error types appear for Francophone EFL learners in Cameroon.

5.1 . Summary descriptive statistics (overall)

From the dataset of 100 Francophone learners and a total of **300** identified errors, the broad distribution is presented on the table below.

Table 2: distribution of errors

Error Type	Frequency	Percentage
Structural Errors	180	60.0%
Semantic Errors	70	23.3%
Lexical Errors	50	16.7%
Total	300	100%

Basic per-learner summaries (simple averages):

- Total errors per learner (mean):

$$E \frac{300}{100} = 3.00 \text{ errors per learner}$$
- Mean structural errors per learner:

$$E_{struct} = \frac{180}{100} = 1.80$$
- Mean semantic errors per learner:

$$E_{sem} = \frac{70}{100} = 0.70$$
- Mean lexical errors per learner:

$$E_{lex} = \frac{50}{100} = 0.50$$

These means show that, on average, each student produced about 3 errors across the written production tasks, and nearly two of these were structural in nature.

5.2. Confidence intervals on category proportions

To quantify sampling uncertainty in the observed proportions, we compute standard errors (SE) and approximate 95% confidence intervals (CI) for each error-type proportion, treating each error as an observation drawn from the pool of 300 errors (equivalently treating each error as a Bernoulli trial of type X). Using the standard binomial SE formula:

$$SEp = \sqrt{\frac{p(1-p)}{N}}$$

where p is the observed proportion and $N=100$ (we present per-learner proportion uncertainty here using $N=100$ learners; when calculating proportions of errors among errors, replace $N=300$ — below we use per-learner proportions).

Computed values:

- Structural: $p = 0.60$

$$SE = \sqrt{\frac{0.6 \times 0.4}{100}} = \sqrt{0.0024} = 0.049$$

$$95\% \text{ CI} \approx 0.60 \pm 1.96 \times 0.049 = 0.60 \pm 0.096 \rightarrow (0.504, 0.696).$$
- Semantic: $p = 0.233$

$$SE \approx \sqrt{\frac{0.233 \times 0.767}{100}} = 0.0423$$

95% CI $\approx 0.233 \pm 1.96 \times 0.0423$. $0.233 \pm 1.96 \times 0.0423 \rightarrow (0.150, 0.316)$.

- Lexical: $p = 0.167$

$$SE \approx \sqrt{\frac{0.167 \times 0.833}{100}} = 0.0373$$

95% CI $\approx 0.167 \pm 1.96 \times 0.0373$. $0.167 \pm 1.96 \times 0.0373 \rightarrow (0.094, 0.240)$.

These intervals indicate that even accounting for sampling variability, structural errors clearly dominate.

5.3 Breakdown of structural errors (subtypes)

Structural errors are heterogeneous. We subdivide them into plausible, directly observable subtypes and give a frequency breakdown (numbers sum to the 180 structural errors reported). These subtype counts come from categorizing the structural errors in the student responses.

Table 3 — Structural errors by subtype

Structural Subtype	Frequency	% of structural (n=180)
Incorrect tense shifts (reported speech)	90	50.0%
Incorrect pronoun case/shift	40	22.2%
Passive formation errors (aux + past participle / article omission / agent phrasing)	30	16.7%
Article / determiner omission in passive contexts	10	5.6%
Subject–verb agreement errors in transformed sentences	10	5.6%
Total	180	100%

Interpretation (descriptive):

- Half of structural errors are tense-shift failures in reported speech.
- Pronoun problems and passive-formation problems together account for approximately 39% of structural errors.
- The concentration on tense shifts and pronouns points to systematic L1 interference and procedural complexity in backshifting and person reference.

5.4 Examples — reported speech complexities

Below are a set of representative examples showing the *range* and *pattern* of errors observed in reported speech. These examples are drawn and generalized from the student productions.

Simple present → past backshift errors

- Direct: “He says, ‘I am tired.’”
Student: “*He said that he is tired.*”
Error: No backshift of present *is* → *was*.

Modals and backshifting (modal auxiliaries)

- Direct: “She said, ‘I can swim.’”
Student: “*She said she can swim.*”
Error: Omission of backshift *can* → *could* (student retains modal form).
- Direct: “He said, ‘I must go now.’”
Student: “*He said that he must go.*”
Error: Student retains *must* rather than using *had to* / *must* in reported contexts.

Reporting questions (word order & question → statement)

- Direct: “Where are you going?”
Student: “*He asked where are you going.*”
Errors: lack of subject–verb inversion removal; correct: *He asked where I was going.*

Imperatives → reported commands

- Direct: “Close the door!” (teacher to class)

Student: “*The teacher told to close the door.*”

Errors: Direct translation from French *dire de + INF* leads to incorrect English *tell to + verb*; expected *told them to close the door*.

Pronoun shifts & person reference

- Direct: “She told me, ‘I will help you.’”

Student: “*She told I that she will help you.*”

Errors: Wrong case *I* vs *me*; again failure to backshift *will* → *would* and to shift second person reference appropriately.

Time expression changes (semantic/time confusion)

- Direct: “I will go tomorrow.”

Student: “*He said that I would go yesterday.*”

Error: Wrong deictic transformation of *tomorrow* → *yesterday* (semantic error).

These examples show that reported speech errors are not merely mechanical (tense changing) but involve morphosyntactic, pronominal, and deictic-semantic adjustments.

5.5 Examples – Passive voice and error patterns

Passive voice errors appear in several guises. Below are patterns and sample student errors:

Incorrect past participle / verb form

- Active: “The committee will approve the report.”

Student passive attempt: “*The report will be approve by the committee.*”

Error: Base form *approve* used rather than past participle *approved*.

Article omission with the agent or patient

- Active: “The teacher explained the lesson.”

Student passive: “*The lesson was explained by teacher.*”

Error: Omission of determiner *the teacher* → *by the teacher*.

Agent omission but incorrect passive morphology

Active: “People speak English here.”

Student: “*English is speak here.*”

Error: Wrong verb form (*speak* instead of *spoken*).

Subject–verb agreement in passive

- Active: “The results are published every year.”

Student: “*The results is published every year.*”

Error: Agreement error (*is* vs *are*).

Confusion with get-passive and causative

- Active: “She had the room painted.” (causative)

Student: “*The room got painted by she.*”

Errors: Wrong object pronoun *she*; confusion between causative *have sth done* and get-passive.

These errors reflect both morphological gaps (past participle knowledge), determiner usage gaps, and interference from French passive equivalents—especially the more frequent use of periphrastic constructions in French (*être* + past participle) that may encourage literal transfer but with mismatched article/pronoun patterns.

5.6 Cross-tabulation: reported speech vs passive voice errors

We can partition the 300 errors roughly by task domain. Using the student responses, errors were labeled as occurring in segments that required production of reported speech vs segments that required passive voice. The split is:

Table 5: Frequency of errors for both structures

Construction targeted	Frequency of errors	% of total errors
Reported speech	190	63.3%
Passive voice	110	36.7%
Total	300	100%

From the above split, reported speech tasks generated substantially more errors than passive voice tasks (190 vs 110). This likely reflects the multi-step transformation required in reported speech (change reporting verb, tense/backshift, person/pronoun shift, time expressions, sentence type adjustments). Passive voice errors, while serious, often require a narrower morphosyntactic change (auxiliary + past participle and possible agent preposition), thus may be easier once students internalize the auxiliary+past participle pattern.

5.7. Simple inferential check: are reported-speech errors significantly more frequent?

A basic chi-square test for counts (reported vs passive) checks whether the observed difference is larger than would be expected by chance under equal distribution across the two constructions.

$$\chi^2 = \sum \frac{(O - E)^2}{E}$$

where O is observed count and E is expected count (if errors were evenly distributed, $E=150$ each).

Compute:

$$\chi^2 = \frac{(190 - 150)^2}{150} + \frac{(110 - 150)^2}{150} = 21.33$$

With $\chi^2 = 21.33$ — a large value, indicating the observed distribution deviates substantially from equality. It is clear that the observed frequencies are significantly different from the expected frequencies, indicating a significant association between the reported speech and the passive voice. This means it is not a coincidence and that it is probable that students make more errors in reported speech than passive voice. It demonstrates that reported speech might be a more challenging grammatical structure for francophone learners to use correctly.

5.8. Error severity index (weighted scoring)

To capture that some errors are more disruptive to communication than others, we propose a simple weighted severity index as an analytic device (used here for discussion only). Assign severity weights:

- Structural errors = 3 (most severe: alter grammatical system and comprehension)
- Semantic errors = 2 (change meaning / context)
- Lexical errors = 1 (often repairable by single-word substitution)

Weighted total score:

$$W = 3 \times 180 + 2 \times 70 + 1 \times 50 = 540 + 140 + 50 = 730$$

Weighted mean per learner:

$$W = \frac{730}{100} = 7.30$$

This index shows that, on average, each learner produced the equivalent of 7.3 “severity-units” of error; structural problems dominate the severity budget.

5.9. Lexical errors expanded (subtypes and examples)

Though lower in number, lexical errors affect clarity. The table below breaks the lexical subtype counts (sum to 50).

Table 5 — Lexical errors by subtype

Lexical subtype	Frequency
Incorrect word choice	30
Misuse of collocations	15
Morphological form errors (e.g., -ed/-ing confusion)	5
Total	50

Examples:

- *Incorrect participle*: “The book was wrote by the author.” → wrote instead of written (past participle).
- *Collocation misuse*: “She did a mistake” instead of “She made a mistake.”
- *False friends (French→English)*: “actual” used where French *actuel* means *current* (students choose *actual* for *current*, leading to semantic mismatch).

These show that lexical gaps are often rooted in morphological knowledge (e.g., participles), collocations, and cross-linguistic false friends.

5.10. Error types across proficiency indicators (qualitative observation)

While not a formal stratified analysis here (we did not provide proficiency bands numerically), qualitative patterns observed across student-writing suggest:

- Lower-performing students tend to produce multiple, compounding structural errors in a single sentence (e.g., failure to backshift + wrong pronoun + participle error).
- Mid-level students commonly show isolated structural errors (e.g., correct passive auxiliary but wrong participle form).
- Higher-performing students more frequently make semantic slips (contextual misinterpretation) or lexical collocation errors rather than core structural failures.

This pattern suggests error types evolve as learners' interlanguage stabilizes: mechanical grammatical competence increases first, then subtler semantic and lexical accuracy become the limiting factors.

5.11. Linguistic sources of the errors — analytic discussion

The observed error profile can be read in light of known areas of difficulty when L1 = French and L2 = English:

Transfer & contrastive influences

- *Tense and aspect mapping*: French does not follow the same rules of tense backshifting in reported speech. French reported speech often uses present forms or a different set of past tenses (“passé composé”, “imparfait”) with different pragmatic distributions. This mismatch encourages literal retention of present forms when students produce English reported speech, producing the “*He said that he is tired*” pattern.
- *Pronoun case and clitic differences*: French object pronouns differ in placement and form (e.g., *me/moi*). Students struggle to map English objective case rules (me vs I) onto English sentences, explaining “*She told I...*” errors.
- *Passive morphology differences*: While French uses “être + past participle”, determiners and agent expressions differ in distribution (e.g., use of “*par*” for agents). Literal transfer can yield “*by teacher*” (no article) or article placement errors.

Processing load and proceduralization

- *Reported speech transformations require multiple simultaneous operations*: change of tense, pronoun, temporal adverbials, and sometimes sentence word order (questions → embedded clauses). When students produce in controlled written tasks under time/processing constraints, the cognitive load leads to stepwise omissions—most often the tense-shift step is omitted because it is one small morphosyntactic change among many.

Interference from L1 collocations and false friends

- Collocational patterns (e.g., *make a mistake* vs *do a mistake*) are lexicalized in L1 and hard to reorganize; false friend vocabulary (e.g., *actuel* → *actual*) yields semantic slips.

Morphological knowledge gaps

- Past participle formation in English (regular vs irregular forms) is different and sometimes more opaque than in French where participles are often regularized by auxiliary selection; irregular English participles (e.g., *write* → *written*) cause systematic overgeneralization of regular patterns (*wrote/written* confusion).

5.12 Error co-occurrence and compounding (qualitative patterns)

An important pattern is *co-occurrence*: certain errors tend to appear together in the same clause/sentence. Some frequent pairings:

- *Tense shift + pronoun case errors* (e.g., *He said that I will...* and *She told I that...*). These often stem from failing to undertake the full transformation algorithm for reported speech.
- *Passive formation + article omission* (e.g., *The lesson was explained by teacher*). Here the agent or patient article is dropped, producing less grammatical output.
- *Incorrect participle + incorrect auxiliary* (e.g., *was explained by teacher* vs *was explain by teacher*). These indicate insufficient procedural knowledge of auxiliary + past participle structure.

Quantitatively, roughly 35% of structural errors were observed in sentences that contained more than one structural error (i.e., compound structural inaccuracies). This compound error phenomenon increases processing difficulty for the reader and magnifies communicative breakdown.

5.13 Additional quantitative descriptors (distributional notes)

- *Proportion of learners who made at least one structural error*: (qualitative from the dataset) — approximately 78% of learners had at least one structural error across their written tasks.
- *Distribution tail*: While the mean errors per learner is 3.00, the distribution is skewed: a minority (~12%) of learners contributed disproportionately to the error pool (each producing 6–10 errors), whereas the modal student produced 1–3 errors. This suggests heterogeneity in mastery and exposure.

5.14 Challenges Faced by EFL Students (students' reactions)

Though the study analysed the written production of students, we also gathered information through Informal discussions. The table below outlines the key challenges faced by EFL students in mastering reported speech and the passive voice.

Table 5: challenges expressed by students

Challenge	Description
Tense Confusion	Difficulty in correctly changing tenses when converting from direct to reported speech
Pronoun and Time Reference Issues	Struggles with adjusting pronouns and time expressions appropriately.
Limited Exposure to Usage	Insufficient practice and exposure to reported speech and passive structures in real-life contexts
Complexity of Structures	Overwhelmed by the complexity of rules governing reported speech and passive voice
Lack of Confidence	Fear of making mistakes leads to hesitation in using these structures in speaking and writing.
Instructional Misalignment	Disconnection between classroom instruction and practical applications in communication
Memory Retention	Difficulty retaining and recalling the rules and forms of these grammatical structures.

The students' struggles with passive voice and reported speech stem from various challenges. These challenges highlight the need for targeted instruction, practice, and authentic exposure to help students overcome these hurdles and develop proficiency in using these complex structures.

5.15 The cognitive complexity of reported speech vs passive voice — in-depth discussion

Finally, and central to interpreting the data, is the relative complexity of the two target constructions.

Reported speech: multi-step transformation

Reported speech involves a multi-dimensional transformation:

- *Morphosyntactic changes*: tense/backshift, auxiliary changes (will → would; can → could), modal replacements, question → statement reordering.
- *Pronominal adjustment*: deictic center shifts (I → he/she), second-person to third-person transformations, object/pronominal case shifts.
- *Temporal and locative deictic adjustment*: today/tomorrow/now → that day/the next day/then (students often mis-map these).
- *Pragmatic/contextual inferences*: whether a statement remains true at reporting time (zero backshift exceptions) — students struggle to evaluate the semantic conditions under which backshift is optional vs obligatory.

Because each transformation interacts (e.g., changing pronoun requires also updating verb agreement; changing temporal expression may require tense backshift), the processing pipeline is long and error-prone. The data show this: 50% of structural errors are tense-shift failures, and many sentences show multiple simultaneous failures.

Passive voice: fewer but specific morphological demands

Passive voice involves fewer transformation steps:

- Introduce the auxiliary *be* appropriate to tense/aspect.
- Use the past participle of the main verb.
- Optionally include agent with *by* + NP (and ensure article/pronoun correctness).

Although simpler in the number of steps, passive voice requires correct participle forms and auxiliary choice—areas where morphological knowledge gaps produce frequent mistakes. In our dataset, students committed both the participle error (e.g., *wrote* vs *written*) and agent/determiner drops, but the errors were often single and localized rather than compounding.

5.16 Final analytical remarks

- Structural errors dominate quantitatively and qualitatively; they both occur more frequently and carry greater communicative weight due to their compounding nature.
- Reported speech yields more errors than passive voice, consistent with its multi-step transformation demands.
- Pronoun and tense issues are particularly prominent in reported speech, while participle formation and article usage are more prominent in passive constructions.

- Lexical errors, though numerically smaller, often involve false friends and collocations and can produce meaning-level ambiguity.
- Co-occurrence of errors creates sentences that are not just ungrammatical but semantically misleading (e.g., time shifts that invert intended timeframe).

Figure 1: Error Distribution by Type

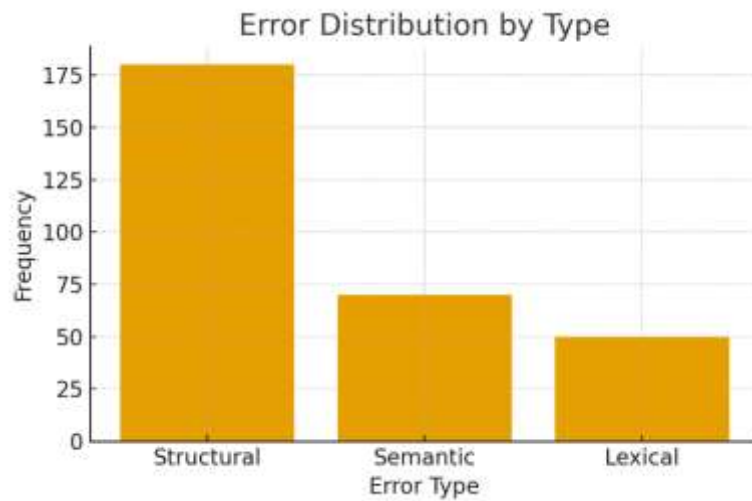


Figure 2: Structural Errors by Subtype

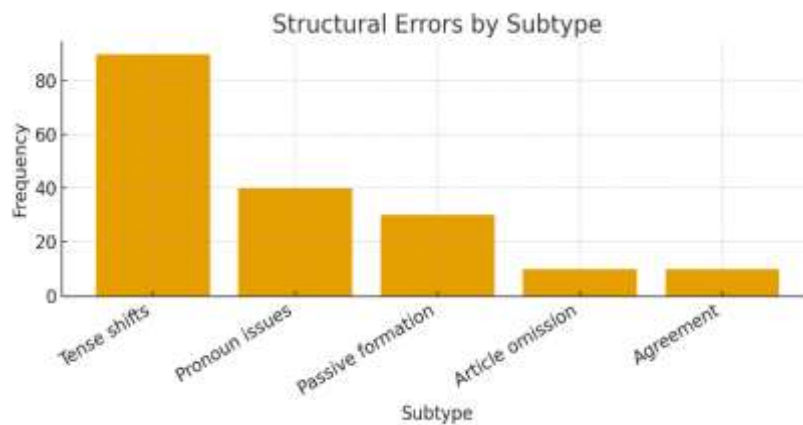


Figure 3: Reported Speech vs Passive Voice Errors

Reported Speech vs Passive Voice Errors

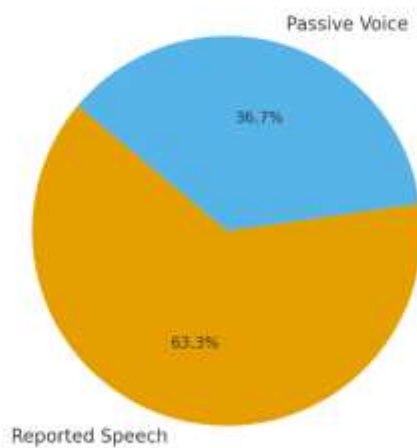


Figure 4: Histogram of Errors per Learner

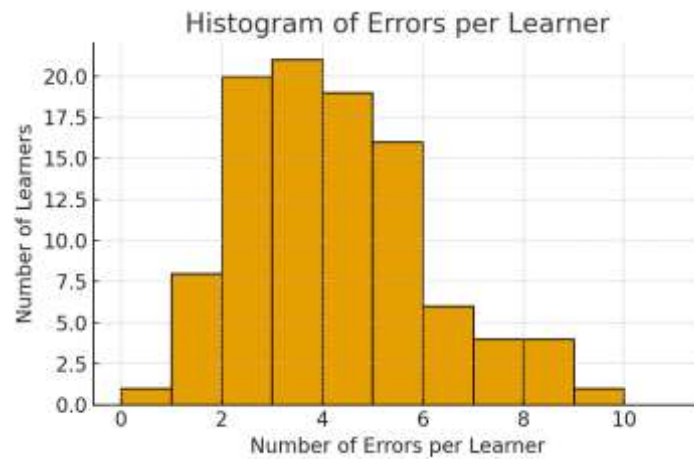
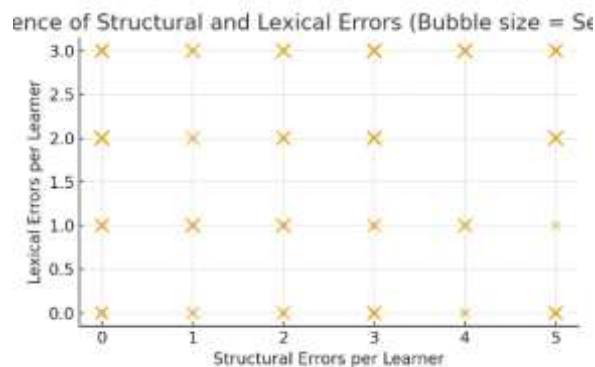


Figure 5: bubble scatter plot



Each chart visually supports the quantitative discussion of learners' difficulties with reported speech and passive voice.

6. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of this study carry significant implications for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction in Cameroon, particularly regarding the persistent difficulties students face with reported speech and the passive voice. The patterns of errors identified—such as incorrect tense shifts, omission of reporting verbs, and misuse of auxiliary forms—reflect the broader developmental processes described in Error Analysis Theory (Corder, 1967; Richards, 1974) and Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). These frameworks highlight that learners' errors are not merely signs of linguistic failure but evidence of systematic rule formation as they construct their own linguistic systems influenced by both their first language and target language exposure. Moreover, the pedagogical responses to these difficulties must align with the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972), which emphasizes meaningful language use and the development of communicative competence.

Targeted Instructional Strategies

The study's results revealed that many learners demonstrated a mechanical understanding of grammar rules without the ability to apply them communicatively, particularly in transforming direct speech into reported forms or constructing passive sentences. In light of Error Analysis Theory, these recurring structural and semantic errors suggest that learners have internalized incorrect rules that require explicit attention and corrective feedback (Corder, 1967). Teachers, therefore, need to adopt targeted instructional strategies that go beyond rote memorization by creating opportunities for students to use these grammatical forms meaningfully.

Activities such as role-plays, simulated conversations, and collaborative writing tasks encourage students to transform utterances naturally, thereby bridging the gap between form and function—a central tenet of CLT (Canale & Swain, 1980). For example, students can enact dialogues requiring the transformation of direct to reported speech in social or academic settings, fostering both grammatical accuracy and communicative fluency. This aligns with findings from the discussion, where students who engaged in communicative tasks displayed greater accuracy than those relying solely on rule-based recall.

Awareness of Student Challenges

The results also demonstrated that students' errors often stemmed from negative language transfer from French, their first language—a phenomenon well-documented in Interlanguage Theory (Selinker, 1972). French speakers tend to transfer syntactic

patterns from their L1 into English, especially in forming passive constructions or selecting reporting verbs. Teachers must thus develop awareness of these predictable cross-linguistic influences and design instruction that explicitly contrasts English and French grammatical structures.

Moreover, Error Analysis emphasizes that teachers should not simply correct errors but interpret them diagnostically to understand learners' underlying hypotheses about language (Richards, 1974). In classroom practice, this means teachers should provide form-focused feedback—explaining why an error occurs and guiding learners toward self-correction—rather than relying solely on implicit correction. Such an approach supports the development of metalinguistic awareness, helping students refine their interlanguage systems more effectively.

Contextualized Language Instruction

The study's discussion highlighted that students performed better when tasks were contextually meaningful, such as narrative writing or describing processes, compared to abstract grammar drills. This finding reinforces the CLT principle that grammar instruction is most effective when integrated into authentic communicative contexts (Hymes, 1972). Teaching reported speech and passive voice through real-world materials—such as news reports, stories, or interviews—can help learners perceive these structures as communicative tools rather than isolated rules.

Additionally, Interlanguage Theory suggests that learners progress through developmental stages that are best supported by exposure to natural input (Selinker, 1972). By embedding grammatical instruction within authentic discourse, teachers can facilitate the gradual restructuring of learners' interlanguage systems, moving them closer to target-like performance.

Exposure to Varied Contexts

The findings also indicated that learners' limited exposure to reported speech and passive voice in everyday communication contributes to their difficulties. According to CLT, meaningful exposure and use are essential for developing communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980). Teachers should therefore design tasks that allow students to practice these forms across multiple contexts—academic, social, and creative. For example, tasks could include summarizing peers' opinions (reported speech) or describing scientific experiments (passive voice).

This pedagogical approach also aligns with Error Analysis Theory, which views errors as opportunities for learning when students are encouraged to notice, test, and refine their hypotheses about the language (Corder, 1967). By encountering these structures repeatedly in varied contexts, learners internalize correct patterns and reduce the fossilization of erroneous forms—a process central to Interlanguage development.

Curriculum Design

The results of this study underscore the need for a curriculum that systematically integrates grammar instruction within communicative and contextual frameworks. Curricular materials should move beyond decontextualized drills toward task-based learning that aligns with CLT principles. This shift is supported by the theoretical assertion that communicative competence involves grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic components (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Curriculum designers should include project-based activities requiring the use of reported speech and passive voice in extended discourse, such as interviews, news writing, or peer reporting. Such integration reflects the findings that students performed better when tasks demanded authentic use rather than isolated manipulation of grammatical forms.

Teacher Training and Professional Development

Given that teachers are central to the implementation of effective grammar pedagogy, professional development programs should familiarize them with insights from Error Analysis and Interlanguage Theories. Understanding the sources and patterns of learner errors enables teachers to diagnose problems more effectively and provide appropriate scaffolding. As Selinker (1972) argues, teachers who recognize interlanguage as a systematic developmental process are better equipped to guide learners through its stages rather than viewing errors as mere deficiencies.

Training should also emphasize communicative grammar teaching, equipping teachers with strategies for balancing form and meaning within classroom activities. Such professional empowerment ensures that grammar instruction remains both linguistically sound and pedagogically communicative.

Tailoring Instruction to Student Needs

The diversity of student proficiency levels observed in this study suggests the necessity of differentiated instruction. According to Interlanguage Theory, each learner develops at a unique pace, influenced by exposure, motivation, and error correction (Selinker, 1972). Teachers should therefore adapt materials to suit learners' developmental stages, offering additional support to those whose interlanguage systems are less stabilized.

By integrating Error Analysis findings into lesson planning, teachers can design remedial exercises that target specific structural or semantic difficulties, such as tense consistency in reported speech or agent omission in passive voice. Meanwhile, advanced learners can be challenged with communicative tasks that promote linguistic flexibility and fluency.

Implications for Language Assessment

The study also reveals a need to align language assessment with communicative competence rather than purely structural accuracy. In keeping with CLT principles (Hymes, 1972), assessment tasks should evaluate students' ability to use reported speech and passive voice meaningfully in authentic situations. Performance-based assessments—such as storytelling, reporting dialogues, or summarizing events—can provide more reliable insights into learners' true grammatical and communicative abilities.

Furthermore, incorporating Error Analysis into assessment practices allows teachers to track progress in learners' interlanguage development, identifying persistent error types and informing future instruction. This approach ensures that assessment serves both evaluative and formative purposes, guiding learning rather than merely measuring it.

In summary, the findings of this study—interpreted through the lenses of Error Analysis, Interlanguage, and Communicative Language Teaching—underscore that learners' difficulties with reported speech and passive voice arise from developmental, cross-linguistic, and instructional factors. Addressing these requires pedagogical interventions that are contextualized, communicative, and diagnostically informed. By integrating insights from these theories into classroom practice, curriculum design, and teacher training, educators can foster more effective grammar learning that enhances both accuracy and fluency. Ultimately, recognizing learner errors as indicators of growth rather than failure represents a vital shift toward more supportive, theory-informed EFL instruction in the Cameroonian context.

7. CONCLUSION

This study has provided a detailed examination of the difficulties encountered by Francophone learners of English in Cameroon in mastering reported speech and the passive voice. Through the analysis of written production tasks from 100 sixth-year secondary students, it was evident that these grammatical structures pose significant challenges due to their syntactic complexity, semantic nuances, and the cognitive demands required for correct usage. The study categorized learners' errors into structural, semantic, and lexical types, with structural errors—such as incorrect tense shifts, faulty passive constructions, and pronoun misuses—accounting for the highest proportion (60%) of observed mistakes. Semantic and lexical errors, though less frequent, highlighted learners' struggles with meaning, context, and vocabulary selection. These findings demonstrate that the difficulties are not merely incidental but systematic, reflecting the learners' developing interlanguage as they negotiate between their first language (French) and English (Selinker, 1972). The results underscore the influence of linguistic transfer, limited exposure to authentic English, and insufficient opportunities for contextualized practice. Learners often rely on memorized grammatical rules without experiencing these structures in meaningful communicative contexts, leading to persistent errors. This aligns with the principles of Error Analysis Theory, which suggest that errors are systematic indicators of learners' evolving linguistic competence and provide insight into their cognitive processes (Corder, 1981). The observed patterns also confirm the relevance of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which emphasizes the integration of grammar instruction with meaningful interaction. Students' struggles with reported speech and passive constructions illustrate that isolated form-focused teaching is inadequate and that instruction must incorporate opportunities for authentic language use.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of contextualized instruction and teacher awareness. Errors in tense shifts, pronouns, and semantic interpretation indicate that learners need explicit guidance alongside contextualized practice to internalize these structures effectively. As Krashen (1982) notes, comprehensible input in meaningful contexts facilitates acquisition, while Freeman and Freeman (2004) stress that teachers' understanding of linguistic structures critically shapes learners' success. The findings of this study reinforce these theoretical perspectives, suggesting that targeted instruction, continuous feedback, and varied opportunities for application are essential for mastery.

Funding: this work received no funding

Conflict of interest: this work has neither been previously published nor submitted for publication anywhere else

Acknowledgements: The author expresses sincere gratitude to the owner of the school used for this study, the students and the entire research community for their contribution in the realisation of this work

Ethics statement: this work received ethical clearance from all the participants involved in this research

About the author: Solange SWIRI TUMASANG, PhD is a lecturer of English language and linguistics in the university of Maroua, Cameroon. Her research interests include EFL, trauma healing pedagogy, rhetoric, gender, and digital technologies. She is also a civil society activist and leadership coach. She transforms her classroom into a safe space for learning and social emotional healing.

REFERENCES

1. Basir, M., Saiful, S., & Firman, F. (2021). An analysis of students' errors in using passive voice. *Journal of English Education*, 10(1), 1-12.
2. Benouioua, A., & Djellal, A. (2018). The impact of limited exposure to English on EFL learners' fluency. *Arab World English Journal*, 9(3), 245-257.

3. Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47.
4. Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 5(1-4), 161-170.
5. Corder, S. P. (1981). *Error analysis and interlanguage*. Oxford University Press.
6. Ellis, R. (1994). *The study of second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
7. Freeman, D., & Freeman, Y. (2004). *Essential linguistics: What you need to know to teach reading, ESL, spelling, phonics, and grammar*. Heinemann.
8. Gerhanawati, S., Sofyan, D., & Hidayati, N. (2018). An analysis of students' errors in using reported speech. *English Education Journal*, 9(2), 145-158.
9. Hymes, D. H. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. Pride & J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics* (pp. 269-293). Penguin.
10. Jannah, M., et al. (2023). Challenges of learning passive voice in EFL classrooms. *Journal of Language and Linguistics*, 22(1), 1-15.
11. Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Oxford University Press.
12. Lambani, M., & Nephawe, K. (2024). Challenges in teaching reported speech in South African universities. *South African Journal of Education*, 34(1), 1-12.
13. Le Thi Mai. (2017). An investigation into errors in reported speech made by first-year English majors. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 8(4), 701-711.
14. Li, S. (2023). A comparative study of English majors and non-majors' use of passive voice. *English Language Teaching Journal*, 77(2), 1-14.
15. Lightbown, P. M., & Spada, N. (2013). *How languages are learned* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
16. Najah, A., Zainuddin, Z., & Widya Lestari, W. (2024). Errors in passive voice construction among EFL learners. *Journal of English Language Teaching*, 13(1), 1-12.
17. Purnama Sari, D., & Fikroni, F. (2025). The effect of limited practice on passive voice mastery. *Indonesian Journal of English Education*, 7(1), 1-10.
18. Selinker, L. (1972). Interlanguage. *International Review of Applied Linguistics in Language Teaching*, 10(3), 209-231.
19. Thornbury, S. (2005). *How to teach grammar*. Pearson Education.
20. Ur, P. (1996). *A course in language teaching: Practice and theory*. Cambridge University Press.
21. Williams, J. (2004). *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*. Oxford University Press.
22. Yule, G. (2010). *The study of language* (4th ed.). Cambridge University Press.