Avoidance of the English Passive Construction by L1 Chinese Learners

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Abstract
This research investigated avoidance behaviour, one of the strategies L2 learners may resort to because of L1-L2 differences, or the non-existence of L2 structures for L1 learners, i.e. the Avoidance Behaviour Hypothesis (Schachter 1974). However, based on the Factors of L2 Non-Avoidance Hypothesis (FNAH) (Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2013, 2019), despite the aforementioned factors, L2 avoidance does not necessarily emerge. The study recruited thirty L1 Chinese intermediate participants. The tasks used to elicit data were the Comprehension Task and the Indirect Preference Elicitation (IPE) Task. Results showed that the participants significantly produced more passives than actives, which means they tended not to avoid the English passive construction. The study investigated further the different contexts in the IPE task. Findings revealed that the participants tended to avoid the English passive under non-adversity contexts because of the complexities of the passive compared with the active. However, they would not avoid the passive construction under adversity contexts due to transfer of training in the Chinese setting. The overall results were in support of FNAH.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the seminal work by Schachter (1974) brought the Avoidance Behaviour Hypothesis (ABH) into the SLA field, researchers have realised that empirical studies not only have to take L2 learners' overt errors into account, but also their tendency to apply avoidance of the target structures. That is, L2 learners are likely to avoid producing the structures they find difficult as a result of differences between their native language and the target language or the non-existence of the L2 structures in their native language.

Studies on L2 avoidance have explored different L2 features among learners from several L1 backgrounds, e.g. avoidance of English phrasal verbs by L1 Hebrew, Swedish, Dutch and Thai learners (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Kosolsombat & Pongpairoj, 2017; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya, 2004), avoidance of English relative clauses by L1 Chinese, Thai learners (Li, 1996; Rattanasak & Phoocharoensil, 2014; Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2013; Yip & Matthews, 1991), and avoidance of inversion by L1 Thai learners (Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2019).

The English passive construction interplays with a complex system of tense and modality, so the level of sophistication in acquisition may pose difficulties for L2 learners (Wang, 2010). However, in the avoidance studies of the English passive construction, it seems controversial to the extent that some researchers claimed that L2 learners would avoid the English passive because of its syntactic or distributional difficulties, e.g. Kleinmann (1977); Seliger (1989), whereas others argued that L2 learners did not seem to avoid it, even under the L1-L2 differences, e.g. Chotiros and Pongpairoj (2012).

Thus, avoidance behaviour of the passive construction still opens this subject for exploration and elaboration with learners from more diverse language backgrounds. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, no previous studies have focused on avoidance of the English passive construction by L1 Chinese learners. Thus, the present study aims to bridge this gap by investigating avoidance of the English passive construction by L1 Chinese learners. The research objectives are: 1) To investigate whether L1 Chinese learners would avoid the L2 English passive construction in their language production, and 2) To establish possible factors accounting for L1 Chinese learners' avoidance of the English passive construction.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Differences Between the Chinese and English Passive Construction

2.1.1 The Chinese Passive Construction

The Chinese passive construction includes the formal passive, the notional passive and the lexical passive (Yip & Rimmington, 2006). The formal passive, which is concerned with this study, is introduced here.

The Chinese passive can be marked overtly through the addition of a passive morpheme (or passive marker) (Yip & Rimmington, 2006). The basic structure is as follows:

(1) PATIENT SUBJECT NP + PASSIVE MARKER (+ AGENT NP) + VP

For example:

(2) 钱包　　　被　　　(小偷)　　偷　　了。
     qiánb_a_o   bèi   (xiǎot_o_u) t_o_u   le
     wallet   PSV[1]   (thief)   steal   PART[2]
     'The wallet was stolen (by a/the thief).'

It is worth noting that the passive marker 被 'bèi' could be replaced by 让 'ràng', 叫 'jiào', 给 'gěi', 让…给 'ràng…gěi', 叫…给 'jiào…gěi', etc. in casual speech. However, the most salient feature of the formal passive is the inclusion of the passive marker 被 'bèi'; that is, the passive marker using被 'bèi' is the most common and prototypical passive in Chinese (Yip & Rimmington, 2006).

In terms of the distribution of the Chinese passive, Ross and Ma (2017) argued that the Chinese passive can be used to expressed adversity, indicating that the event has negative consequences or is in some way 'bad news' for the narrators, as shown in (2). Or, it can be used to express surprise or astonishment, as shown in (3). For the arrangement of the syntactic elements, the Chinese passive can be used to emphasise the affected noun phrase rather than the agent, as shown in (4) or, to describe an action when the agent is unknown, as shown in (5).

(3) 我们　　的　　秘密　被　政府　　　发现　了。
     wǒmén de   mǐmǐ bèi zhèngfǔ   f_a_xǐan le
     3SG   PART   secret PSV   government find   PART
     'Our secret was discovered by the government.'

(4) 这　　的　　树　都　被　人　　砍　了。
     zhè   de   shù d_o_u bèi rén   kǎn le
     here   PART tree all   PSV   people cut   PART
     'The trees here were all cut down by people.'

(5) 那个　警察　　　被　　　打伤　　　了。
     nàgè   jǐngchá   bèi   dǎshāng   le
     that   policeman PSV   hit-wounded PART
     'That policeman was wounded.'

(Ross & Ma, 2017, p. 102)

Generally speaking, even though the Chinese passive is used in different conditions claimed by Ross and Ma (2017), it is more frequently used with a negative meaning because the passive marker 被 'bèi' is derived from a verb with an inflictive meaning (Yip & Rimmington, 2006). However, this semantic constraint on the use of the passive structure has become more neutral, especially in written Chinese, under the influence of western languages (Xiao et al., 2006).

2.1.2. The English Passive Construction

The English passive construction is also called the passive voice and it can be expressed by the formula:

(6) PATIENT SUBJECT NP + VP (+ PREPOSITION + AGENT NP) (Quirk, 2010)

For example:

(7) She *is respected* (by the man).

According to Hewings (2005), there are some situations where the passive rather than the active would be employed, e.g. using the passive structure allows omitting the unknown or unimportant agent in the context by leaving out the prepositional phrase with 'by', as shown in (8); employing the passive structure allows putting old information at the beginning of the sentence (or clause), and placing the new information at the end, as shown in (9); the passive also could be used to place agents which consist of long expressions at the end of the sentence, which makes the sentence more natural, as shown in (10).

(8)   My office *was broken into* when I was on holiday.

(9)   The three machines tested for the report contained different types of safety valve. These machines *were manufactured by* the Boron Group in Germany.

(10)   I *was shocked by* Don's decision to give up his job and move to Sydney.

(Hewings, 2005, p. 60)

2.2. Previous Studies on L2 Avoidance Behavior

Previous avoidance studies have been expanded based on two opposing views: the Avoidance Behaviour Hypothesis (ABH) (Schachter, 1974) and the Factors of L2 Non-avoidance Hypothesis (FNAH) (Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2013, 2019). ABH claimed that L2 learners would avoid a target language structure which is perceived as difficult due to the non-existence of the L2 structure in the learners' L1 or the L1-L2 differences. What is used instead is a structure that they find in some sense simpler and that conveys more or less the same content as the one they initially envisaged (Laufer & Eliasson, 1993). FNAH claimed, by contrast, that avoidance does not necessarily occur, even with the condition of non-existence of the L2 structure in the learners' L1 or L1-L2 differences. This section presents the studies in support of the ABH, and those siding with the FNAH.

2.2.1 Studies in Support of the ABH

Schachter (1974) examined four sets of free English compositions written by L1 Arabic, Persian, Chinese, and Japanese learners and one set produced by a control group of L1 English speakers. Through contrastive analysis, Schachter found that the relative clauses (RCs) were positioned before the head noun phrase (NP) in Chinese and Japanese but after the head NP in Persian and Arabic, which is similar to the English structure. Thus, she predicted that the English RCs could be a learning difficulty for the Chinese and Japanese learners because the L1-L2 differences in the head noun's direction: pre-nominal or post-nominal modifier. After the prediction, Schachter applied error analysis and found that the error rate of the English RCs from the Chinese and Japanese learners was significantly lower than that by the other two non-native

counterparts, which went against the prediction. However, taking a further step, Schachter calculated the total English RCs produced in the written production of each group and found that the Chinese and Japanese learners produced noticeably fewer English RCs compared to the Arabic and Persian learners. She inferred that the Chinese and Japanese learners were more likely to avoid English RCs in their production, and ABH in SLA was formulated.

Post-Schachterian researchers investigating avoidance in SLA also sought evidence by focusing on particular linguistic structures or by employing different L1s, e.g. avoidance of English phrasal verbs by L1 Hebrew, Swedish, Thai, Dutch and Chinese learners (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Hulstijn & Marchena, 1989; Kosolsombat & Pongpairoj, 2017; Laufer & Eliasson, 1993; Liao & Fukuya, 2004); avoidance of relative clauses by L1 Thai and Chinese learners (Rattanasak & Phoocharoensil, 2014; Yip & Matthews, 1991); and avoidance of the English passive construction by L1 Arabic, Spanish, Portuguese and Hebrew learners (Kleinmann, 1977; Seliger, 1989).

The studies investigating avoidance of English phrasal verbs (PVs) also explored the factors accounting for avoidance, e.g. the factor of L1-L2 differences in Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993); semantic complexity of L2 in Ghabanchi and Goudarzi (2012); interlanguage development in Liao and Fukuya (2004).

Dagut and Laufer (1985) found that three different groups of L1 Hebrew learners preferred more familiar one-word verbs instead of PV equivalents compared to the L1 English speaker group. Since PV is a peculiarity of the Germanic languages and distinct from the Hebrew language, they argued that L1-L2 differences played a role in avoidance behaviour. Ghabanchi and Goudarzi (2012) investigated avoidance of PVs by L1 Iranian learners. Multiple choice, translation, and recall tasks were given to the learners at intermediate and advanced levels. The materials included in the tests included literal and figurative PVs. The results showed that the learners at both levels preferred literal PVs over figurative ones in all three tests. It was therefore concluded that the semantic complexity of the figurative PVs might cause the learners' avoidance, since the meaning of the figurative PVs was not derived from the meaning of the two parts, and the idiomatic meaning could make the learners confused. Liao and Fukuya (2004) found that compared with native speakers of English, the intermediate learners significantly avoided PVs, but the advanced learners did not. The avoidance tendency would diminish with increasing proficiency, even if L1-L2 differences, or semantic complexity of L2 are manifest in the target structures. Thus, they claimed that learners' interlanguage development was a factor for learners' avoidance of PVs.

In terms of the English passive construction, several studies employed comprehension and production tasks to investigate whether L2 learners would avoid this structure. Kleinmann (1977) hypothesised that the L1 Arabic learners would avoid the English passive based on contrastive analysis. According to the principle of "to be able to avoid some linguistic feature presupposes being able to choose not to avoid it, i.e. to use it" (p. 96), he initiated a comprehension test to check the understanding of the structure, aiming to eliminate the ignorance. Through the indirect preference assessment task, he found that the L1 Arab learners knew the passive construction, but they avoided using it in the performance compared with the native speakers. Thus, he claimed that L1-L2 differences based on Contrastive Analysis is 'a fairly good predictor' (p. 93) for avoidance. Seliger (1989) investigated the use of the passive construction based on four topic cues (i.e. making an omelet, changing a baby's nappy, harvesting oranges, and delivering mail) in the oral interview tasks on the native speakers of English and L1 Hebrew learners. He found that the native speakers tended to use fewer passive construction in the omelet and nappy tasks than the

other two, while L1 Hebrew learners used very few passives in any of the four tasks. He concluded that L1 Hebrew learners maintained a consistent avoidance of the passive construction because they transferred their preference in Hebrew for the active over to English. Therefore, he claimed that the reason for avoidance is not due to the complexity of the form, but the meaning attached to that form in L1.

2.2.2 Studies in Support of the FNAH

Thiamtawan and Pongpairoj (2013) expanded the research on the avoidance behaviour of the English RCs to the participial reduced relative clauses (PRRCs) by L1 Thai learners. They hypothesised that L1 Thai learners tended to produce English RCs, rather than the PRRCs because the latter does not exist in Thai. The participants were given three tests: 1) The comprehension test, which was to exclude the possibility of ignorance of the learners about this structure; 2) The cloze test; 3) The Thai-English translation test. The results overturned the hypotheses, showing that the participants did not avoid the PRRC structure. Three factors emerged to explain the non-avoidance phenomenon. The first factor was the L2 learners' familiarity with the PRRC structure due to their learning experience in their secondary school and tutorial institutes, where the English PRRC structure was an emphasized grammatical teaching and learning point. The second factor was the simplicity of the reduced adjectival clause, in contrast to the complexity of RCs. When using the English RCs, L2 learners have to consider subject-verb agreement, tenses, and relative pronouns, which complicates the information processing, whereas they only need to consider the inflectional suffix '-ed', or '-ing' in producing PRRCs. The third factor was the nature of the tasks. The task type, i.e. multiple choice, used in the study, may clearly show the target structure and its equivalent in the task, so the learners tended not to resort to avoidance. Following these findings, the researchers proposed the Factors of L2 Non-Avoidance Hypothesis (FNAH) to explain the non-avoidance phenomenon, and they claimed that "even though the features in L1 and L2 are different or L2 features are non-existent in L1, it does not necessarily mean L2 avoidance will occur" (p. 12).

Thiamtawan and Pongpairoj (2019) investigated avoidance of English inversions by L1 Thai learners. Two target structures were the English inversions after 1) copular verb phrases and/or long subjects, where the long and complex NP subjects are placed after copular verbs to satisfy the principle of end-weight (i.e. putting heavy elements at the end of the clause), e.g. *Among the director's faults is his tendency to lose composure at critical moment* (p. 13), and 2) negative adverbials, where the negative adverbs 'never', 'hardly', 'seldom', etc. are placed in the beginning of the clause, e.g. *Rarely have I seen such a beautiful sunset.* The tasks included a comprehension test to ensure all the participants understand the target structures, and an indirect preference assessment task, i.e. multiple choice, which was used to explore the participants' preference between the inversion and non-inversion structures. The results showed that the L1 Thai learners tended to avoid the former inversion type but not the latter. It seemed that FNAH would be a proper explanation for non-avoidance behaviour of the learners. It was emphasised that 'when the L1 and L2 forms are different, it doesn't necessarily mean that the learners' avoidance behaviour will be manifested' (p. 20).

As far as the English passive construction is concerned, Chotiros and Pongpairoj (2012) investigated whether L1 Thai learners would avoid using the passive construction in language

production. The participants were given a multiple-choice test as the comprehension task and were required to answer some questions based on five pictures, e.g. What happened to the dog in the picture? The results showed that the majority of the participants did not avoid using passives in the preference task. The researchers concluded that the task effect, and the more frequent use of passive in the Thai language, resulted in the non-avoidance phenomenon.

To summarise so far, some researchers claimed that L2 learners would avoid the English passive construction due to L1-L2 differences, e.g. Kleinmann (1977), while others claimed that the L2 learners did not seem to avoid the English passive, e.g. Chotiros and Pongpairoj (2012). Therefore, this study filled in the gap by investigating if L1 Chinese learners would avoid the English passive construction and establishing possible factors.

The hypotheses of this study are 1) L1 Chinese learners tend to avoid the English passive construction, and 2) the factors contributing to L1 Chinese learners' avoidance of L2 English passive construction are: (1) L1-L2 differences (Dagut & Laufer, 1985; Schachter, 1974); (2) Strategies of learning (Selinker, 1972).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

The participants in the experimental group were thirty[3] L1 Chinese learners at the upper-intermediate level (i.e., B2 in CEFR), chosen based on Oxford Quick Placement Test (Allan, 2004) by purposive sampling of convenience. Six native speakers of English were included as a control group.

The reason why the participants with B2 level were chosen is threefold. Firstly, according to the official website of the British Council[4], learners with a basic level (level A in CEFR) have not acquired the passive construction, leading to the learners' ignorance, instead of avoidance of the passive construction. Therefore, the participants with basic level were excluded from this study. Secondly, Liao and Fukuya (2004) summarised different avoidance studies and found that learners from a multiple language background experienced the same developmental track from avoidance to non-avoidance as the learners' proficiency level proceeds from intermediate to native-like. Therefore, learners at the advanced level (Level C in CEFR) were also excluded in this study on the ground that they would not avoid any structure, including the passive construction, due to their language proficiency. Thirdly, Seliger (1989) claimed that the participants should demonstrate knowledge of the target structure, at least in isolation of the avoidance study. Based on North et al. (2010), the learners at the B2 level have acquired the passive construction in different tenses and structures. Therefore, learners at the upper-intermediate level (i.e. B2 in CEFR) were the target participants in this study.

3.2 Research Instruments

3.2.1 Comprehension Test
The Comprehension Test was a semi-replication of Kleinmann (1977)'s instrument. All the candidates were administered a multiple-choice comprehension test on the passive construction.

The purpose of this test was to ensure that the participants understood this structure, such that any non-use could be attributed to avoidance, rather than ignorance.

There were twenty items in the comprehension test, with ten items in the passive structure and the other ten were distractors (See Appendix 1). The passive items covered different tenses, e.g. simple present, simple past, present progressive, present perfect, past perfect, future tense, and different sentence types, e.g. declarative, negative, interrogative and passives with modal verbs and infinitives. The purpose of designing the task was to ensure that participants not only understood the basic structure of the English passive, but also knew how to use it in different tenses and sentence types.

Also, the candidates needed to tick their confidence level according to each answer on a Likert scale to exclude the possibility of wild guess. For example:

(11)   — Oh, this is a really old school.
       — Do you know when it _____?
       A.   has been built
       B.   built
       C.   has built
       D.   was built

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure
(0)	($\pm$ 1)	($\pm$ 2)	($\pm$ 3)	($\pm$ 4)

If a candidate chose the correct answer (D) and ticked "Completely Unsure", s/he would get 1 (i.e. 1+0) point for this item. If "Mostly Unsure" was ticked, s/he would get 2 (i.e. 1+1) points for this item. If "Unsure/Sure" was ticked, s/he would get 3 (i.e. 1+2) points. If "Mostly Sure" was ticked, s/he would get 4 (i.e. 1+3) points. If "Completely Sure" was ticked, s/he would get 5 (i.e. 1+4) points. If a candidate chose a wrong answer (i.e. C) and ticked "Completely Unsure", s/he would get 0 (i.e. 0+0) point for the item. If "Mostly Unsure" was ticked, s/he would get -1 (i.e. 0-1) point, and so forth. The maximum score was 50 points (i.e. 5 points x 10 passive items). This study recruited those achieving 80% of the maximum score, which was 40 points.

3.2.2 Production Task - the Indirect Preference Elicitation (IPE) Task

The IPE task combined patient-elicited questions to cue the subject, with related pictures[5] depicting the action relationship between two objects or persons, as shown in Figure 1. The task included eight target pictures with their related questions, e.g. 'What is happening to (the patient)?' (See Appendix 2), and twelve as distractors. The total number of twenty question-picture sets were randomly arranged.

FIGURE 1. EXAMPLE ITEMS IN THE IPE TASK

To ensure the grammaticality and appropriateness regarding the language threshold of the participants, the Comprehension Test and the IPE task were validated by three experienced teaching experts, two of whom were L1 English teachers, and the other was an L1 English professor of Applied Linguistics.

3.3 Implementation of the Tasks

The tasks were verified by the Office of the Research Ethics Review Committee for Research Involving Human Subjects at Chulalongkorn University. Afterwards, the researchers collected data through online systems[6]. That is, the Placement Test and the Comprehension Test were conducted through the online survey platform, *WenJuan*[7] and the IPE task through virtual conference platform[8] *DingTalk*[9]. The time limitation for the Placement Test was 60 minutes. After scoring and selecting of the participants, the participants were asked to complete the Comprehension Test, which was set for 30 minutes. Afterwards, the IPE task was conducted for each participant at the agreed time slot. The experiment was screen-recorded visually and audibly for retrievability.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The IPE task consisted of eight pictures, which intentionally directed the participants to produce the passive construction. In the task, the six native speakers of English produced 48 sentence responses, 45 of which were passive responses and 3 were active responses, as shown in Table 1.

TABLE 1

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE RESPONSES BY THE CONTROL GROUP IN THE IPE TASK

Type	Total	Percentage	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (1-tailed)
Passive	45/48	93.7%	7.5000	6	.83666	.34157	.000
Active	3/48	6.3%	.5000	6	.83666	.34157	

It can be seen that the native speakers produced significantly more passive than active constructions in the IPE task ($p < 0.01$), which means the eight pictures can be considered as the

preferred contexts for producing the English passive, thus formulating the baseline data for the study.

As far as the experimental group is concerned, the thirty L1 Chinese participants produced 240 (30 ⬜ 8) response sentences, 132 of which were passive responses (55%), 105 were active responses (43.8%), and 3 were invalid responses (1.2%), as shown in Table 2.

TABLE 2

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE RESPONSES BY THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP IN THE IPE TASK

Type	Total	Percentage	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (1-tailed)
Passive	132/240	55%	4.4000	30	1.37966	.25189	.037
Active	105/240	43.8%	3.5000	30	1.30648	.23853	
Invalid	3/240	1.2%					

It can be seen that the participants produced significantly more passives (m=4.4) than actives (m=3.5) (p<0.05). The overall results of the IPE task, therefore, overturned Hypothesis 1.

The factors accounting for the participants' non-avoidance may be task effect and learners' familiarity with the target structure.

Firstly, in terms of the task effect, Thiamtawan and Pongpairoj (2013, 2019) state that natural production tasks are more likely to demonstrate L2 learners' avoidance because the target structure and its equivalence are equal choice in the process of production. Indeed, the majority of tasks used for investigating avoidance in the previous studies were 'free-flowing' tasks without any 'stimuli' and the participants could follow their will to choose between the target structure and its equivalent, e.g. free writing by Gass (1980), Schachter (1974), Seliger (1989), and Yip and Matthews (1991), or a multiple choice, translation, and recall tests by Dagut and Laufer (1985), Hulstijn and Marchena (1989), and Liao and Fukuya (2004). The results of most of the studies aforementioned supported the avoidance hypothesis. However, this study explores the avoidance phenomenon by investigating the possibility of whether L2 learners would avoid the target structure under the influence of some 'stimuli' in the tasks. Thus, in the IPE task, the target structure (i.e. the passive construction) was induced by the question 'what is happening to (the patient)?'. The result showed that the participants were 'sensitive' to the 'stimuli' to the extent that they could follow the 'stimuli' to the patient and produced more passive (m=4.4) than active (m=3.5) constructions accordingly. Tomlin (1995) suggested that 'stimuli' in these tasks could also be referred to as 'attention'. By using 'attention', the focused referents (i.e. the patients in the pictures) were mapped as the subjects. Therefore, the participants in this study could consciously produce the sentences following 'attention' distributed to the patients in the tasks, and took the patients as the subject, resulting in a tendency of non-avoidance of the English passive construction.

Previous researchers, e.g. Schachter (1974), Kleinmann (1977), Dagut and Laufer (1985) and Laufer and Eliasson (1993), emphasised that learning difficulties resulting from L1-L2 differences would manifest themselves in avoidance. However, it seems that, in avoidance

studies, if the participants were influenced by 'stimuli' to produce a target structure, they tended not to avoid it, even though the structure was difficult due to L1-L2 differences. From this study, the avoidance phenomenon in SLA more or less hinged on the control level of the task effect. Production of the target structure might be borne out by competition between the structural difficulties and the control level of the task effect. Clearly, if the 'stimuli' in the task was evident enough in terms of 'attention', learners would be directed to taking non-avoidance regardless of the potential difficulty posed to them, excluding the possibility of avoidance.

Secondly, Thiamtawan and Pongpairoj (2013, 2019) state that the factor of learners' familiarity with the target structure may lead to non-avoidance. There are two factors contributing to the L1 Chinese learners' familiarity with the passive construction. 1) It can be found that the passive construction is a grammatical point much emphasised in teaching and assessing English in China, especially in secondary schools. For example, one of the most widely used English textbooks, *New Senior English for China* (Book 2)[10] (Liu et al., 2007), regulates that the passive construction is one of the most important grammatical structures in high school English learning, and three units in this textbook are devoted to instructing learners how to construct the English passive sentences (pp. 48-69), including changing the bare verb to their past participle form, e.g. 'save'-'saved', adding *be* in front, and placing the patients and the agents with or without *'by'*. 2) Since the participants were upper-intermediate level learners (i.e. B2 in CEFR), it was assumed that the proficiency level contributed to their non-avoidance. Previous researchers, e.g. Liao and Fukuya (2004), claimed that only the advanced learners tended not to avoid the target structure. However, from this study, the upper intermediate learners (i.e. B2) may also take non-avoidance behaviour. Hence, it was assumed that the participants in this study were familiar with the English passive construction to the extent that, once the 'attention' was distributed to the patient and the participants took it as the subject, they would process the steps to produce the passive construction, making it the final production in response to the 'stimuli' in the particular tasks.

From the raw data of the IPE task (See Table 2), it was found that the production rates of active (43.8%) and passive (55%) were rather close to each other, compared to the baseline data (See Table 1). It is thus worth investigating further more factors related to avoidance of the English passive by L1 Chinese learners, i.e. high rates of active production. Therefore, the different contexts in the IPE task were studied, with respect to the participants' perspective of whether they considered the patients were suffering from adversity or not. Following this, the pictures in the IPE task were explored and could be divided into two sets: those considered as adversity contexts (i.e. the pictures 2, 3, 4, 6, and 8 in Appendix 2) for the patients, and those considered as non-adversity contexts (i.e. the pictures 1, 5, and 7 in Appendix 2) according to the participants' perspective[11].

As shown in Table 3, the results showed that the participants produced significantly more passive (m=3.8) than active (m=1.1333) responses (*p*<0.01) in the adversity contexts. However, in the non-adversity contexts, the participants produced significantly more active (m=2.3667) than passive (m=0.6) responses (*p*<0.01).

TABLE 3

PASSIVE AND ACTIVE RESPONSES IN THE ADVERSITY AND NON-ADVERSITY CONTEXTS

Contexts	Responses	Total	Percentages	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig. (1-tailed)
Adversity	Passive	114	76%	3.8000	30	1.12648	.20567	.000
	Active	34	22.7%	1.1333	30	1.07425	.19613	
	No production	2	1.3%			--		
Non-adversity	Passive	18	20%	.6000	30	.62146	.11346	.000
	Active	71	78.9%	2.3667	30	.61495	.11227	
	No production	1	1.1%			--		

The results in each context clearly revealed that the participants tended not to avoid the English passive construction under the adversity contexts. However, there was a tendency for the participants to avoid the passive construction in the non-adversity contexts.

As mentioned previously, the Chinese passive is used to express adversity, indicating that the event has negative consequences for the patients, whereas the English passive construction, especially the *be* passive, is used more as a stylistic preference, aiming to be an impersonal, objective, formal and technical communication discourse, thus not making adversity a basic feature of the English passive (Xiao et al., 2006). In the IPE task, the participants may sense the 'adversity' contexts and feel the 'negative aspect' of the patients in some pictures. Combined with the question directing their 'attention' to the patients, the contexts which resembled the meaning of the L1 Chinese passive seemed to strengthen the 'legitimacy' of using the passive for the production, leading to the non-avoidance phenomenon.

Also, the reason why most of the participants produced passives in the adversity contexts can be explained by transfer of training in the Chinese setting (Corder, 1967; Selinker, 1972). As mentioned previously, the textbooks or the teaching and assessment materials for L2 English learners primarily focus on the structural accuracy of the passive construction, without mentioning the distributional knowledge of the English passive construction, i.e. the contexts for using the English passive. Thus, the lack of L2 distributional knowledge might lead the L1 Chinese learners to subconsciously resort to their L1 knowledge and employ the passive in L2 English communication when the contexts are related to adversity. This may result from differences between English and Chinese textbooks when introducing the passive construction. For example, in the series of the *New Senior English for China* (Book 2) (Liu et al., 2007), the explanation of the English passive mainly focuses on the structural differences between passive and active, including the passive in different tenses and sentence types (affirmative, negative and interrogative) (pp. 87-88), without mentioning when to use the English passive in real life. By contrast, plenty of examples of the Chinese passive structures relating to the adversity contexts are listed in the Chinese language textbooks, e.g. *Handbook for Basic Knowledge of Chinese*[12] (Xue, 2007). For example:

(12) 身　　客死　　于　　秦，　　　为　　天下　　　　　笑。
　　　shēn　ke`sǐ　yú　qín,　　wéi　tiān xià　　xiào
　　　body　die　PART　Qin Kingdom.　PSV　land under heaven　laugh at
　　　'Dying in Qin Kingdom, the King of Chu Kingdom was laughed at.'

Example (12) indicates that when acquiring the Chinese passive, the L1 learners might be under the influence of 'passive more or less equaling adversity' from their L1 textbooks, and thus employ this knowledge to their L2 English production.

However, as shown in Table 3, under the non-adversity contexts, the participants might see them as 'neutral' situations, leading them to apply a simpler voice construction, i.e. the active construction. The factor for taking the active, instead of the passive, as the language production may be strategies of learning (Selinker, 1972). Selinker (1972) argued that L2 learners would resort to different kinds of strategies in their interlanguage whenever they realised, either consciously or subconsciously, that they have no linguistic competence with regard to some L2 structures. One of the 'strategies of second-language learning' (p. 219) is the tendency on the part of learners to reduce target language to a simpler system. In this study, both the active and the passive constructions could equally convey the correct meaning, but the L1 Chinese participants may be consciously aware of the structural complexities of the English passive. The complexities of the English passive can be explained from two points. First, according to Pinker (1996), there is a default association between the grammatical functions (e.g. SUBJECT, OBJECT) and the thematic relations (e.g. agent, patient) where the SUBJECT is associated with the agent and the OBJECT is associated with the patient. The association of the two elements constitutes a mapping where 'no-crossing-links between the elements may be called canonical; those that violate it are noncanonical' (p. 298). The active construction is the 'basic form' (p. 297), or a canonical structure in English, whereas the passive construction is a non-canonical mapping accordingly because the linking between the grammatical function and the thematic relation is patient-V-agent. Second, compared with the active form, the passive construction adds a form of the auxiliary *be* followed by the past participle (-ed participle) of the main verb (Quirk, 2010). Thus, these structural complexities required an extra processing load, leading to some participants employing the simpler structure, i.e. active, thus avoiding the English passive. Hence, if the participants are not influenced by the contexts where the patients are suffering from the adversity, they are very likely to turn to avoidance of the English passive construction. This would lessen the production effort owing to the potential difficulty of producing the passive structure (compared with the active), even though the patients were cued with the 'stimuli'.

To summarise, the results from the IPE task showed that the participants produced significantly more passives than actives, possibly due to task effect and the learners' familiarity with the English passive, supporting FNAH (Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2013, 2019). Furthermore, the participants tended not to avoid the English passive construction under the adversity contexts possibly due to transfer of training in the Chinese setting, i.e. the L1 Chinese learners were assumed to be influenced by their L1 knowledge. However, there was a tendency for the participants to avoid the English passive construction under the non-adversity contexts possibly due to strategies of learning without the influence of L1 knowledge on the passive.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The current study investigated the avoidance of the English passive construction among L1 Chinese learners. The results from the IPE task revealed that the task effect and the learners' familiarity with the target structure in FNAH (Thiamtawan & Pongpairoj, 2013, 2019) could explain the L1 Chinese learners' non-avoidance of the English passive construction in this study. Besides, through the investigation of different contexts with respect to the participants' perspective whether they considered the patients in the pictures were suffering from adversity or not, it was found that the participants employed their L1 knowledge on the meaning of the Chinese passive to their L2 production. Therefore, learner's L1 knowledge, especially distributional knowledge about the target structure could lead to L2 learners' non-avoidance behaviour.

The reason for investigating avoidance in SLA is to detect the learning difficulties of the target structure (Schachter, 1974), i.e. the English passive, which might be manifested in avoidance rather than error-making. Considering the results from the IPE task with respect to different contexts, whereby the participants produced more passives than actives in the adversity contexts and more actives than passives in the non-adversity contexts, the participants in this study tended to resort to the knowledge of the meaning of L1 Chinese passive in their L2 English production as a result of transfer of training in the Chinese setting. As mentioned, textbooks for teaching English in China normally focus on the structural accuracy of the passive construction, ignoring authentic ways of using the English passive and not excluding the influence of the learners' L1 knowledge of the Chinese passive. Therefore, in textbook design, the focus should be on including the production of the English passive and how to use it in different contexts in the teaching materials.

As far as limitations and recommendations of the study are concerned, firstly, this study investigated the influence of the contexts, e.g. the adversity and non-adversity contexts on the avoidance behaviour. Future research might investigate how semantic or pragmatic transfer (e.g. in different contexts) may have an impact on syntactic transfer in learners' avoidance, or how old information aligned with subject/agent and new information aligned with object/patient in order to study whether old/new information in different contexts may affect learners' avoidance. Secondly, future studies may take different verb types, for example, the regular past participle type (e.g. 'save'- 'saved') and the irregular past participle type (e.g. 'cut'- 'cut' or 'steal'- 'stolen') into consideration to see the interaction effect of the contexts and verb types on L2 learners' avoidance behaviour of the English passive construction. Thirdly, this study employed purposive sampling based on convenience, which may affect generalizability of the results. Later researchers could employ random sampling to make the results more generalized.

ENDNOTES

[1] PSV=passive marker

[2] PART=particle

[3] According to Sutter (2011), the sample size around 30 to 60 are typical in experimental research. Statistics such as the mean tend to stabilize (i.e. to be consistent from sample to sample) with this number span. Due to efficiency and convenience of sampling, this study recruited 30 participants.

[4] See https://learnenglish.britishcouncil.org/intermediate-grammar

[5] The pictures used in the study come from a website called WPClipart. It claims that these images are in the public domain (PD), which means they can be used and edited for whatever purpose, be it personal or commercial. No attribution or linking is required. See https://www.wpclipart.com/terms.html

[6] The original plan was to collect data from several universities in China. However, due to the travel ban under the COVID-19 situation, all international flights were prohibited by the government for people's health safety. The plan was adjusted to online data collection.

[7] See the copyright at https://www.wenjuan.com/register/protocol

[8] As the online survey platform, *WenJuan*, cannot work for interviews, *DingTalk* was used to implement the IPE task.

[9] See the copyright at
https://tms.dingtalk.com/markets/dingtalk/privacypolicy/euterms_of_use?wh_ttid=pc

[10] Chinese title: **普通高中**课程标准实验教科书：英语 2（**必修**）

[11] Categorisation of the task contexts was validated by a survey asking the participants in the Experimental Group to make a judgement whether the patient was suffering from adversity. The results showed that the participants considered the five situations, i.e. 'the face being hit by a ball' (90% of the participants), 'the car being stolen' (76.67%), 'the face being punched' (96.67%), 'the money being stolen'(96.67%), and 'the tree being cut' (83.33%) as the adversity contexts, whereas the participants considered the other three situations, i.e. 'the boy being saved' (70%), 'the boy being chased' (96.67%) and 'the children being blocked or protected' (100%) as non-adversity contexts.

[12] Chinese title: 语文基础知识手册（高中）

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APPENDIX 1: THE COMPREHENSION TEST

Multiple Choice Test

Instruction: Each question in this section is a multiple-choice question with four answer choices. Read each question and choose the BEST answer to enter in the Answer column below. After that, please scale yourself about how sure you are (from completely unsure to completely sure) about the answer and enter a (✔) it in the related column. (Emphasis added: the passive items are in **Bold**)

1. The world's longest cross-sea bridge, Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge, opened _____ October 24, 2018.
   A. at
   B. on
   C. by
   D. in

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

2. **— Oh, this is a really old school.**
   — Do you know when it _____?
   A. has been built
   B. built
   C. has built
   D. was built

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

3. In my opinion, _____ friends are more reliable than online ones.
   A. true
   B. close
   C. good
   D. real

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

4. – Excuse me?
   – _____
   – How can I get to the nearest post office?
   A. That's OK.
   B. What's on?
   C. Pardon?
   D. Yes?

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

5. **Teenagers shouldn't _____ alcohol because they can't be fully responsible for themselves.**

   A. be allowed to drink
   B. allow drinking
   C. allow to drink
   D. be allowing to drink

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

6. −Tony, could you please play the guitar at the art festival?
   − _____. I can only play the piano.
   A. Sure, I'd love to
   B. I'm afraid I can't
   C. Yes, I can
   D. Not bad

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

7. Ben: Diana, have you sent the important letters?
   Diana: Oh, sorry, sir.
   Ben: Really? THOSE LETTERS _____ yet?
   A. haven't sent
   B. haven't been sent
   C. are sent
   D. will send

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

8. −I will take a part in an English speech competition this Sunday. I feel nervous.
   − _____!
   A. What a pity
   B. Look out
   C. Congratulations
   D. Take it easy

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

9. Please make up your mind as _____ as possible, or you'll miss the good chance.
   A. earlier
   B. earliest
   C. more early
   D. early

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

10. −You looked unhappy just now. _____?
    − I missed the bus and arrived late for class.
    A. What did you eat for lunch

B. How was your picnic
C. What happened to you
D. How did you go there

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

11. *Tom is writing the letter.*
    The letter _____ by Tom.
    Which one completes the sentence to have the same meaning?
    A. was written
    B. is being written
    C. has been written
    D. has written

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

12. −Where did you go last summer for a vacation?
    −I _____ to New York with my family.
    A. go
    B. have gone
    C. went
    D. was going

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

13. The Museum of Modern Art is such an interesting place that many kids have fun _____it.
    A. visiting
    B. to visit
    C. reading
    D. to read

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

14. Jane: Nobody likes____, so you'd better be kind to others.
    Ben: So sorry. I won't do it again.
    A. laugh at
    B. to laugh
    C. to be laughed at
    D. laughing

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

15. One advantage of owning your own car is _____ you can go anywhere at any time you like.
    A. when
    B. that
    C. what

D. why

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

16. More than a dozen students from that school ____ abroad when the passports were revoked.
    A. sent
    B. have been sent
    C. had sent
    D. had been sent

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

17. *Everyone understands English.*
    English _____ by everyone.
    Which one completes the sentence to have the same meaning?
    A. is understood
    B. has been understood
    C. was understood
    D. understood

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

18. The play _____ at the theatre next Sunday.
    A. will show
    B. will be showing
    C. will be shown
    D. is shown

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

19. Where _____ the test _____?
    A. was; wrote
    B. is; write
    C. was; written
    D. is; wrote

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

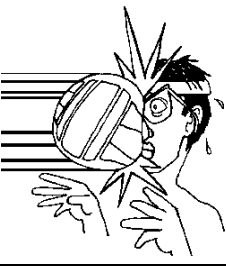20. — The school looked quite different from how it used to look.
    — Yes. Lots of trees and grass _____.
    A. have planted
    B. had planted
    C. are planted
    D. have been planted

Completely Unsure	Mostly Unsure	Unsure/Sure	Mostly Sure	Completely Sure

APPENDIX 2: THE IPE TASK

Instruction: Please answer the questions according to the pictures.

Number	Items
1	What is happening to the boy?
2	What is happening to the man in the blue jacket?
3	What is happening to the boy?
4	What is happening to the boy?
5	What is happening to the boy with black hair?

6	What is happening to the old man's car?
7	What is happening to the children behind the police officer?
8	What is happening to the tree?