

When The Agent Goes Missing: SiSwati L1 Learners' Struggles with English Passives

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ABSTRACT

This study examined how siSwati L1 speakers acquire and produce English passive constructions, focusing on the promotion of the agent in the nominative case to the subject position. It explored how structural differences between siSwati and English influence learners' use of the passive voice. The study contrasted passive constructions in the two languages, identified areas of structural non-correspondence that predict syntactic transfer, and analysed learners' written passives to determine sources of error. Data were drawn from a passive construction task administered to second- and third-year university students majoring in English. Using contrastive analysis, the findings revealed significant non-correspondence effects, particularly in agent promotion and tense-participle formation. Although learners demonstrated general awareness of passive morphology, many produced errors linked to interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, and peripheral normativity. The study concludes that these difficulties reflect both L1 interference and incomplete L2 syntactic development, highlighting the need for targeted pedagogical support in teaching English passives in siSwati-dominant contexts.

Keywords: passive; interlanguage; second language acquisition; error analysis; siSwati; learners.

1. INTRODUCTION

Textbooks on siSwati (Doke 1954, 1992; Dlamini 1979; Ziervogel and Mabuza 1976; Sibanda and Mthembu 1996) and English (Conway 1997; Burton-Roberts 2011; Collins and Hollo 2010) demonstrate that in passive constructions, the agent executes the action or specifies the state expressed by the verb, while the nominal argument receives the external force of the verb. In some cases, the passive is used even when the agent is unknown but understood (Chomsky 1982, 1993; Sibanda and Mthembu 1996; Huddleson and Pullum, 2002). Although passives in Bantu languages and English express similar semantic force (Doke 1992), the syntactic behaviour of English passive participles can be ambiguous, functioning as adjectives denoting an ongoing state or as verbs denoting dynamic events (Jespersen 1949; Wassow 1977; Levin and Rappaport-Hovav 1986 in Israel et al. 2000).

Research on passives in siSwati (Nkuna, Khoza, and Lee, 2024) shows that the language marks agents with the prefix /ng-/ and forms passive constructions through verb extensions such

as /-w-/ or /-iw-/ (e.g., *In-cwadzi i-bhal-w-a ng-um-ntfwana* 'A book is written by a child') as well as /y-/ (e.g., *Si-nkwa si-dl-iw-a y-in-tfombatana* 'Bread is eaten by a girl'). These morphological strategies differ markedly from English passive formation, which relies on auxiliary selection (typically *be*) and past participle marking. As a result, learners experience syntactic transfer difficulties when moving between the two systems (Dlamini, 2014). Although learners in Eswatini are officially introduced to English instruction in Grade 5, many are exposed to English as early as preschool and are taught in English throughout their twelve years of schooling (Dlamini 2025). At university, English majors study English syntax throughout their four-year undergraduate programme. However, despite the extensive pedagogical exposure, siSwati L1 tertiary level students continue to produce non-target like passive constructions in English. Dlamini (2014) and Dlamini (2024) observed that L1 siSwati-speaking tertiary students generally struggle with English grammatical structures and attributed such difficulties broadly to L1 influence. Dlamini (2014), for instance,

documents general challenges but does not systematically examine how L1 passive constructions shape learners' production and interpretation of English passives. Consequently, it remains unclear which aspects of English passive syntax are most vulnerable to L1 influence and how these influences manifest in learners' output. Since, there is limited empirical work that isolate specific grammatical domains where interlingual transfer is most pronounced, this study investigates how siSwati L1 learners construct the passive, which, given its syntactic and morphological divergence from English, may be susceptible to interlingual interference. By isolating the passive as a site of interlingual transfer, the study seeks to contribute to contrastive linguistics, Second Language Acquisition (SLA) and pedagogical grammar in the Eswatini context.

The aim of this study is to examine how siSwati L1 speakers acquire and produce English passive constructions, with particular focus on whether they incorrectly promote the agent (nominative case) to the subject position in English passive sentences.

To achieve this aim, the study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To contrast the structural properties of the passive in siSwati and English, focusing on agent marking, NP-movement, and verb morphology.
2. To identify structural non-correspondences between the two languages that are likely to influence L2 acquisition and production.
3. To analyse written passive constructions produced by siSwati-speaking ESL learners for patterns indicative of interlingual transfer, intralingual transfer, or developmental challenges.

2. REVIEWED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section reviews key literature and situates the study within the frameworks of Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis (CAH) and SLA transfer theory. These theoretical lenses guide the interpretation of learner data by highlighting how structural differences between a learner's first language (L1) and a second language (L2) may lead to either positive or negative transfer. In this context, the study examines how siSwati-speaking learners of English acquire and produce passive constructions.

2.1 Linguistic Contrasts between English and siSwati Passive Constructions

The passive construction is a syntactic structure where the thematic role typically assigned to the object in an active sentence is promoted to the subject position. According to

Baker (1989), the passive voice reassigns theta roles such that the verb's internal argument surfaces as the grammatical subject. In English, passive constructions are formed through auxiliary verb + past participle structures, and allow both indirect object and prepositional passive forms (Willim, n.d., 215). The demoted agent is optionally expressed in a by-phrase, functioning as an adjunct (Pienemann, Di Biase and Kawaguchi 2005; Bortz 2012). For example:[1]

1. (Active voice) Professor Harford presented a brilliant inaugural lecture.
2. (Passive voice) A brilliant inaugural lecture was presented by Professor Harford.

In example [1], "a brilliant inaugural lecture" (the object in the active sentence) becomes the subject in the passive construction, while the agent "Professor Harford" is demoted to a by-phrase.

In contrast, siSwati passive constructions are morphologically marked on the verb through the addition of passive extensions such as **-w-** or **-iw-**, depending on the verb's syllable structure (Doke 1954, 1992; Dlamini 1979; Ziervogel and Mabuza 1976; Sibanda and Mthembu 1996; Nkuna, Khoza and Lee 2024). The agent is realized as a copulative beginning with **ng-** or **y-**, as shown below:[2]

i. ACTIVE:

Thishela u- shay-a um-ntfwana.
cl.1a-Teacher – sc.1-beat-fv cl.1-child
"A teacher beats a child."

ii. PASSIVE

Um-ntfwana u-shay-w-a ngu-thishela
cl.1-child sc.1-beat-APPL-fv COP-teacher
A child is beaten by a teacher. [3]

i. ACTIVE

Im-fene i-dl-a um-mbila
cl.9-baboon sc.9-eat-fv cl.3-corn
"A baboon eats corn."

ii. PASSIVE

Umbbila udl-iw-a y-imfene

cl.3- corn sc.3-eat-APPL-FV COP-cl.9-baboon

“Corn is eaten by a baboon.”

Examples [2] and [3] illustrate that while both English and siSwati allow for agent demotion and patient promotion, they differ structurally in how passives are formed and how agents are reintroduced. English uses auxiliary constructions and morphological case, whereas siSwati uses verbal morphology and class agreement.

Through the lens of Contrastive Analysis, these differences are critical. CAH posits that where L1 and L2 structures differ significantly - as in the case of passive voice construction - learners are more likely to experience negative transfer, leading to errors in L2 production. For instance, siSwati learners may omit auxiliaries or misapply participial forms in English passives due to the absence of corresponding structures in their L1.

2.2 Case Marking in English and siSwati

Another important area of divergence lies in case marking. English employs morphological case distinctions, particularly evident in pronoun forms (e.g., he/him, she/her), which change depending on their syntactic role. In contrast, siSwati utilizes covert, noun class-based agreement, where pronouns and nouns do not undergo overt morphological changes between subject and object functions (Willim n.d., Iwasaki and Oliver 2018) as shown in 4 below.[4]

i Active voice

She adores me
Ye-na u-tsandz-a mine
abs.2ps.-STAB sc.1-adore-fv abs.1ps-STAB

ii Passive voice

I am adored by her
Mine *ngi-tsand-w-a ngu-ye(na)*
abs.1ps -mi-STAB sc.1ps-adore-PASS-fv cop-abs.p.1-STAB

iii Active

He saw her
Ye-na u-bon-e ye-na
abs.3ps ye-STAB sc.3ps-see abs.3ps ye-STAB

iv Passive

She was seen by him

Ye-na u-bon-w-e ngu-ye
abs.3ps ye-STAB sc.1ps-see-PASS-pst Cop-abs.1ps

v Passive: *Her was seen by he (incorrect due to cause confusion)

This typological discrepancy has implications for SLA transfer theory, which examines how L1 knowledge influences L2 acquisition. Specifically, learners whose L1 lacks overt case distinctions may struggle with English constructions that require them, such as using the correct pronominal forms in passive constructions as shown in example 4 (v) above.

As noted by Dlamini (2014), siSwati-speaking learners often exhibit morphosyntactic errors in English passives, such as agent misplacement or incorrect pronoun case, thereby reflecting L1 influence. According to transfer theory, these errors result from learners applying their L1 grammar rules to the L2, especially in early interlanguage stages.

By situating passive acquisition within the frameworks of contrastive analysis and transfer theory, this study aims to identify the specific areas where siSwati L1 learners face challenges in acquiring English passives. The structural contrasts—particularly in verb morphology, agent marking, and case assignment—serve as potential loci for transfer-related errors. These theoretical insights will inform the analysis of learner data, helping to distinguish between developmental errors and those stemming from negative L1 transfer.

2.3 Perspectives on the Acquisition of Passive Cons

Research on the acquisition of the passive voice demonstrates that it is a complex, staged developmental process in both first language (L1) and second language (L2) contexts (Borer and Wexler 1987; Hinkel 2004; Montrul 2010). In L1 acquisition, particularly in English, children must acquire abstract syntactic operations, including argument re-assignment and agent suppression, to produce passive constructions (Borer and Wexler 1987). These operations involve NP movement, a syntactic process that emerges gradually during early grammatical development. Developmental studies show that L1 learners typically produce "short passives" (e.g., The car was stolen) before mastering full passives with explicit agents (e.g., The car was stolen by a thief) and appropriate participial morphology (Demuth 1989). Wexler and Culicover (1980) further note that children acquire the distinction between resultative and non-resultative participles over time, underscoring the cognitive and

syntactic complexity involved in acquiring the passive voice.

In L2 contexts, although the developmental path mirrors that of L1 learners, additional factors such as L1 transfer, input quality, and exposure to the target language significantly shape acquisition outcomes (Hinkel 2004). Learners often overgeneralize the active-to-passive transformation or omit the *by*-phrase due to processing limitations or structural differences in their L1 (Iwasaki and Oliver 2018). Montrul (2010) observed that L2 learners frequently develop partial representations of passive constructions, resulting in non-target-like usage, optionality, or avoidance even at advanced proficiency levels.

In Eswatini, although English is introduced early in formal education (Dlamini and Meyers 2023), it functions as a second language, and learners are typically exposed to English in classroom settings where input may be limited or inconsistent in quality (Dlamini 2014). As such, the typical L1 developmental trajectory—mastery of NP movement, agent suppression, and participial forms—applies to siSwati L1 learners, though it is mediated by L1 influence and input variability (Demuth 1989; Pienemann et al. 2005). Empirical studies that support this view include Wang (2010) who found that Mandarin L1 learners of English initially demonstrated high error rates in *by*-phrase inclusion and verb agreement, but improved over time with increased exposure and instruction. Similarly, Bortz (2012) reported that Japanese L1 learners struggled with agent realization and word order in passive constructions, with accuracy increasing through metalinguistic awareness and corrective feedback. Both studies highlight common L2 learner issues such as overpassivization and incorrect use of the *be + past participle* structure, often due to L1 transfer and reliance on formulaic learning strategies.

Further challenges in L2 passive acquisition have been observed in African contexts. In Nigeria and Kenya, learners often acquire the morphology of the passive in isolation, without the ability to use it appropriately in extended discourse (Bamgbose 1998; Mwangi 2015). This pattern is attributed to pedagogical practices that emphasize rote memorization over communicative competence. Similarly, studies in Southern Africa indicate that L1 speakers of isiZulu, Xitsonga, and Sesotho conceptually understand the passive but encounter persistent difficulties with the auxiliary *be*, tense marking, and past participle morphology (Mahlobo 2011; Nxumalo 2015). These challenges are linked to the agglutinative nature of Bantu verbal morphology, where the passive is marked by inflectional extensions such as *-w-* or *-iw-* rather than through auxiliary constructions typical of English. Nxumalo (2015) further observed that learners frequently overgeneralized active voice word order and rarely

used the *by*-phrase, thereby suggesting incomplete acquisition of agent demotion in English.

Overall, these findings indicate that the acquisition of English passives by siSwati L1 learners in Eswatini is best understood as a developmental process rather than evidence of a syntactic deficit. The pattern reflects an interaction between universal processes of language acquisition and L1-specific structural features, together with limited exposure to passive constructions in discourse and the effects of instructional mediation (Dlamini 2014). Although the broad developmental trajectory resembles that observed in first-language acquisition, the rate, distribution, and variability of learning are shaped by typological differences between English and siSwati and by the sociolinguistic positioning of English as a second language in Eswatini.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a written exercise to investigate the acquisition of English passive constructions by SiSwati L1 learners. A total of forty-seven (47) Year II and III English major students at the University of Eswatini participated in the study. Each participant was presented with fifteen (15) active sentences and was required to convert them into the passive voice. The sentences were carefully designed to include a range of syntactic structures, including transitive, ditransitive, and sentences with agentive pronouns, to assess the learners' ability to produce accurate passive constructions across contexts. The analysis of the collected data followed a contrastive error analysis approach. Responses were first examined for the presence of the auxiliary /*be*/ + past participle construction, which signals awareness of the passive form. Special attention was also paid to the correct realization of agentive adverbs (*by*-phrases) and the appropriate positioning of the agent, reflecting learners' grasp of syntactic movement and thematic role assignment. Errors were categorized thematically, including omission of the agent, word-order changes, tense errors, and incorrect reproduction of active voice structures. Each identified error was then compared to the equivalent siSwati construction to determine whether L1 interference contributed to the observed difficulties.

To quantify the relative difficulty of each item, Item Facility (IF) was computed using the formula $IF = R/N$, where R represents the number of correct responses and N is the total number of participants (Mkhelif 2019). Items with an IF below 0.3 were classified as difficult, while those above 0.85 were considered easy, providing an empirical measure of students' performance across different passive constructions.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the study. Participation was voluntary, and students were informed about the purpose of the study, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

This methodology allowed for a detailed and systematic examination of the learners’ acquisition of English passives, identifying not only areas of strength and error patterns but also potential sources of L1 interference, while maintaining ethical rigor throughout the research process.

4. RESULTS

Thematic analysis of errors highlighted several recurring patterns.-

4.1. Awareness of Passive Forms

The analysis showed that a majority of students demonstrated awareness of the English passive construction. Out of a total of 666 responses (47 students × 15 sentences), 526 responses (78.9%) were correct. Table 1 presents the results of students’ performance on the items of the exercise.

Table 1: Students’ Performance on Passive Conversion Items

Question Item	Correct Responses		Incorrect Responses		Item Facility (IF)
	2 nd Year’s	3 rd Years	2 nd Year’s	3 rd Years	
1	29	11	5	2	0.85
2	21	10	13	3	0.65
3	31	12	3	1	0.91
4	28	11	6	2	0.83
5	24	11	10	2	0.74
6	33	13	1	0	0.98
7	31	13	3	0	0.94
8	31	13	3	0	0.94
9	31	13	3	0	0.94
10	16	7	18	6	0.49
11	15	9	19	4	0.51
12	16	13	7	0	0.62
13	20	10	14	3	0.64
14	21	12	13	1	0.70
15	12	9	22	4	0.45
Total	359	167	140	28	0.79 (Avg)

Note:

Item Facility (IF) = R/N, where R = total correct responses and N = 47 (total participants). Items with IF ≥ 0.85 are considered easy; IF ≤ 0.30 are difficult

The findings reveal that the basic transitive sentences were generally well-handled, with correct use of the auxiliary /be/ and participle forms. The agentive adverb (/by-phrase/) was also included appropriately in many sentences, indicating learners’ understanding of its role in English passives. Sentences with simple active-to-passive conversions generally yielded high accuracy and high Item Facility scores

(IF > 0.85). This finding aligns with Mahlobo (2011) and Nxumalo (2015) that learners conceptually understand passivization.

4.2 Omission or Suppression of the Agent in Passive Constructions

A notable finding from the data was the frequent omission or suppression of the agent (the by-phrase) in passive sentences. Learners produced two types of grammatical passive constructions without agents

4.2.1 Conventional/acceptable agent omission

As shown in the Table 2 below, respondents legitimately suppressed the agent

Table 2 – Examples of acceptable agent omission in English

Student Output (English)	siSwati Equivalent	Interpretation
Seven chickens are slaughtered on Christmas day.	<i>Le-ti-sikhombisa tiN-khukhu ti-ya-hlatj-w-a ng-e-li-langa la-Khisimusi</i>	Pragmatically acceptable habitual action; agent implied.
Weed is smoked during break.	<i>IN-sangu i-bheny-w-a ng-e-li-khefu</i>	Generic agent (“students”) suppressed; acceptable omission.
The money I won was stolen.	<i>I-mali le-ngi-yi-win-il-e ye-b-iw-e</i>	Agent unknown; suppression pragmatically acceptable.
I am loved (to bits).	<i>Mi-ne ngi-tsandv-w-a ka-khulu</i>	Focus on state/experience; agent non-referential.
Her legs were flaunted.	<i>Ya-khe imi-lente y-a-chay-is-w-a</i>	Stylistic passive; agent backgrounded (designers/photographers).

Across Table 2 learners correctly processed the passive form without producing a by-phrase, leading to grammatically acceptable English structures. As shown in the siSwati equivalence, the passive morphemes /-w-/-iw-/ mark passivity without necessarily requiring the agent in siSwati. As noted by Sibanda (1994), Bantu languages permit agent omission in passive forms, especially where the agent is unknown or inferable from context; a sentiment shared by Chomsky (1982) and Huddleson and Pullum (2002). Also, the Processability Theory (Pienemann, Di Biase and Kawaguchi, 2005) supports the notion that learners at advanced stages can competently process NP movement and passive morphology, choosing agent suppression as a pragmatic option rather than a syntactic error. In the context of this study, learners transferred this grammatical feature into English, presuming that the suppression of the agent does not compromise clarity or acceptability. The suppression/omission of the agent suggests that learners were not merely omitting agents out of error but, in many

cases, following an appropriate pragmatic suppression of the agent, whether the agent is unknown, obvious, or irrelevant to the communicative intent.

Therefore, the correct passive structures produced by UNESWA students indicate not only L2 grammatical competence but also mature pragmatic awareness. Since agent suppression requires understanding when the agent is semantically relevant, these students demonstrate developmental readiness consistent with adult L2 learners, who are capable of manipulating argument structure based on discourse needs.

4.2.2 Unconventional/Objectionable agent omission

Data revealed that some respondents omitted the agent where English requires or strongly prefers its inclusion for the sentence to remain interpretable. In Table 3 are examples where the agent much as English requires it, is omitted and their interpretation differs from 5.2.1 above

but signals an error rather than a genuine pragmatic choice.

Table 3: Examples of Agent Omission Resulting in Error

Student Output (Passive)	siSwati Equivalent	Issue
The students were awarded certificates	<i>Ba-fundzi ba-nik-w-e ti-tifiketi</i>	The agent is missing yet where English conventionally requires one (awarders).
The accident was caused	<i>In-goti y-ent-i-w-a</i>	English demands an agent for clarity (e.g. by the driver/other cause).
The baby was carried	<i>Um-ntfwana w-a-phatf-w-a</i>	Sentence is semantically incomplete without an explicit agent.
The suspect was arrested	<i>Um-solwa w-a-bosh-w-a</i>	Police agent is conventionally required in legal reporting.

The cases in 5.2.2 above altogether show that not all agentless constructions produced by students were pragmatic, but were attempts at passivization. These patterns resulted in grammatical but semantically incomplete passives and indicated partial understanding of the English passive, particularly in sentences requiring explicit promotion of the object to subject position. Although English allows certain passive constructions without an explicit passive (Chomsky 1982, Huddleson and Pullum 2002), the contexts in which the students omitted the agent resulted in semantic incompleteness, ambiguity or a break down in argument structure.

4.3 Errors in Word Order and NP Movement

A recurring error involved incorrect realization of NP movement, where learners either maintained active word order or incorrectly promoted non-patient arguments to

subject position. Instead of promoting the object to subject position and demoting the agent to a by-phrase (agentive adverb), some learners produced structurally altered active sentences.

4.3.1. Word Order Change with Active Voice Reproduction

The data in Table 4 reveal that many learners produced syntactically active structures with superficial word order changes, rather than fully-formed passive constructions. These responses often began with temporal or locative adjuncts, or employed cleft constructions (e.g., It is X that...), but failed to realize the core grammatical features of the passive voice. In several instances, learners appeared to reframe the sentence semantically or rhetorically, without executing the necessary syntactic transformations associated with passivization in English.

Table 4 – Word order and NP movement errors

Learner Output	siSwati Equivalent	Error Type
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For the first time in Mozambique, you ate prawns.	<i>Kwe-kucala e-Mozambique wa-dl-a ema-prawns</i>	Retained active voice word order; no passive transformation
During break, they smoke weed.	<i>Nge-li-khefu ba-bhema in-sangu</i>	Active structure; failure to convert to passive
When it is hungry, it chews on the table leg.	<i>Uma i-lamb-il-e i-hlafun-a um-lente we-li-tafula</i>	Active syntax retained
I was bought by them sweet flowers.	<i>Mi-ne ngi-tseng-el-w-e ngi-bo ti-mbali</i>	Incorrect subject selection; benefactor promoted instead of theme
We were given our boarding tickets late in the afternoon.	<i>Tsi-ne si-nik-w-e e-tfu ema-thikithi e-ntsambama</i>	Incorrect NP movement; dative benefactor as subject

These findings suggest partial knowledge of the English passive construction. Learners demonstrate an awareness of the need to alter sentence structure, but their output reveals non-target-like application of syntactic rules, particularly with NP movement, agent demotion, and subject promotion. From a SLA perspective, these errors reflect developmental stages in interlanguage grammar. Learners may initially restructure sentences at the discourse or constituent level (e.g., topicalizing time/place adjuncts), but lack full syntactic control over passive transformation. This aligns with Pienemann’s Processability Theory, which posits those certain syntactic operations—such as object-to-subject movement—emerge only at more advanced stages of L2 development.

Using the lens of the CAH, the structural divergence between siSwati and English passives helps explain these patterns. In siSwati, passivization is marked morphologically on the verb (*/-w-//iw-/*) and does not require an auxiliary verb (be) or participial form. Moreover, the syntactic structure allows the agent to be optionally expressed using pre-verbal or post-verbal adverbials. As a result, siSwati learners may transfer active voice word order from their L1, mistakenly treating adjunct-fronted or cleft constructions as equivalent to passives in English.

From an Error Analysis (EA) perspective, the observed structures highlight interlingual errors - those resulting from direct influence of L1 syntax—as well as developmental errors

that are common across L2 learners regardless of L1 background. For example, the over-promotion of benefactors (I was bought by them sweet flowers) reflects confusion between theme and recipient roles, a known difficulty in both L1 and L2 passive acquisition (cf. Demuth 1989; Montrul 2010).

All-in-all, these findings indicate that while learners are sensitive to the need for structural change in the passive, their performances reflect incomplete syntactic reanalysis. The tendency to begin sentences with adjuncts or retain active voice structure suggests that acquisition of the English passive is still at a formative stage, influenced by L1 interference, limited metalinguistic awareness, and insufficient exposure to varied passive constructions in authentic discourse

4.3.2 Benefactor’s Assumption of Agent Position

The findings indicate that siSwati L1 learners systematically misanalyse English passive constructions by promoting the benefactor (recipient) to subject position, while the true patient/theme remains in object position. As shown in Table 5, learners treat the benefactor as the syntactic subject of the passive, a pattern that results in non-target-like English structures but mirrors grammatically licensed applicative–passive constructions in siSwati.

Table 5 - Interlingual transfer effect.

Student output	siSwati equivalence	Correct version	Issue
a) I was bought by them sweet flowers	<i>Mi-n-e ngi-tseng-el-w-e nga-bo le-ti-mnandzi tim-bali.</i>	Sweet flowers were bought for me by them	Incorrect mapping of thematic roles: the benefactor (I) is promoted to subject, while the patient (sweet flowers) is retained as an object. English does not license double-object passives of this type.
b) We were given our boarding tickets late in the afternoon	<i>Tsi-n-e si-ni-k-et-w-e e-ntsambama ema-thikithi e-tfu e-ku-khwel-a</i>	We were given our boarding tickets by the teachers late in the afternoon	Partial transfer from siSwati applicative passive: although closer to acceptable English, the construction reflects L1-driven promotion of the recipient (we) without clear restructuring of argument hierarchy.

In English passives, the subject position is canonically occupied by the patient/theme, while the agent is either demoted to an optional by-phrase or omitted altogether. However, learner data reveal a transfer of siSwati argument-structural rules, where applicative morphology allows the promotion of a recipient or benefactive argument to subject position under passivisation.

In siSwati, applicative morphology allows a recipient/benefactor to be promoted to object position, and when combined with passivisation, this argument can be further promoted to subject position (Sibanda and Mthembu 1996). As a result, sentences such as *Mine ngitsengelwe ngibo letimnandzi timbali* 'I was bought by them the sweetest flowers' are fully grammatical, with the benefactor as subject and the theme retained as an internal argument. Learners transfer this rule wholesale into English, assuming that English permits similar benefactor-subject passives, which it does not.

In 5.3.2(a) the learner assigned subject-hood to the benefactor (I), and demonstrated confusion over thematic role hierarchy in English passive constructions. In 5.3.2(b), the learner attempted to construct a double-object passive, a structure that English does not productively allow. While English permits limited recipient passives (e.g. I was invited to a party), this alternation is lexically constrained and does not

extend to verbs such as buy in the same way it does in siSwati.

5.3.3. Complete Reproduction of the Active Voice

Some students reproduced the original active sentences without attempting passivization:

1. It chews on the table leg when it is hungry.
2. You ate prawns for the first time in Mozambique.

Such reproduction signals either incomplete understanding of the passive or inability to retrieve appropriate morphological and syntactic forms.

5.4. Verb Tense/agreement and Participle Formation Errors

Another significant challenge observed in students' passive production was the incorrect application of tense, agreement and participle forms. Learners frequently produced mismatched auxiliary-verb sequences, combining inappropriate tense, agreement markers or omitting/misforming the past participle altogether. These errors often resulted from attempts to translate siSwati

tense/agreement patterns directly into English, or from incomplete knowledge of English morphological rules governing the passive.

Unlike English, where tense in the passive is expressed through a combination of an auxiliary (be) and a past participle (/ -en/ -ed/ form), siSwati indicates tense and agreement primarily on the verb complex without a separate auxiliary. This structural difference seems to have influenced

learners' passive constructions.

Also, although English requires nouns and pronouns to agree with their antecedents in person, number, and gender, siSwati only marks agreement in person and number, not gender. The students' sentences are examples of agreement and tense mismatches that reflect interference from this L1 system, as seen in Table 6 below.

Table 6: Tense and Participle formation errors

Student Output	Correct Form	Error Type
a) The students <u>has</u> since been paid their allowances...	The students <u>have</u> since been paid their allowances...	Auxiliary agreement error (singular/plural). Students incorrectly selected the auxiliary has instead of have, showing plural mismatch) The student output is even incorrect in their L1
b) The money I had won from the lottery <u>have</u> been stolen by him	The money I had won from the lottery <u>has</u> been stolen by him	Agreement/auxiliary mismatch. (Here, the siSwati version prompts plural agreement because imali 'money' is semantically treated as a mass/plural noun, leading to have instead of has been stolen.)
c) Weed <u>was</u> smoked by them during break.	Weed <u>is</u> smoked by them during break	Tense mismatch (habitual vs past).
d) Prawns <u>is</u> ate for the first time in Mozambique.	Prawns <u>are eaten</u> for the first time in Mozambique	Agreement and participle errors.
e) During break, weed was <u>smoken</u> .	During break, weed was <u>smoked</u>	Incorrect participle form.

All the examples in 5.4 have auxiliary mismatches, agreement or participle errors. However, example 5.4 (b) indicates that learners transferred siSwati noun concord logic to English, leading to agreement mismatches in auxiliary selection within the passive. And example (e) demonstrates overgeneralisation of the English past participle rule, where the learner analogically applies the irregular -en participle

pattern (as in *spoken* and *broken*) to the regular verb *smoke*, producing the non-target form *smoken*. This error reflects a developmental interlanguage strategy rather than transfer from siSwati.

4.5 Clumsy and Ungrammatical Passive Constructions

In addition to tense and participle errors, some students produced clumsy constructions that showed traces of passive formation but did not meet the structural requirements of either English or siSwati passivization. These constructions, as

reflected in Table 7 below, typically misplaced constituents or omitted obligatory grammatical elements.

Table 7: Ungrammatical Passive Constructions

Student Output	Issue
To bits, am loved.	Missing subject; incomplete structure. The phrase attempts to foreground emphasis but omits a subject, resulting in neither a valid English nor siSwati passive structure
The money owed, my uncle paid her.	Fragmentary clause; passive cues without grammatical form.
Her legs are flaunting on every runway.	Active idiom misuse; not a passive.
Seven chickens are being slaughtered...	Progressive tense where habitual simple passive is required.

In the examples in Table 7, the sentences fragment passive clauses without grammatical embedding or appropriate linkage, thus producing unstructured sequences rather than true passive constructions.

These forms demonstrate that while learners may recognize certain morphological cues of the passive (/w-/-iw-a/ in siSwati or /-ed//-en/ in English), they lack full command of how the passive restructures clause hierarchy, subject roles, and argument placement.

The tense and participle errors, along with clumsy and fragmentary passive formations, suggest that learners rely on intralingual transfer (overgeneralization within English itself) as well as interlingual transfer (from siSwati). Additionally, these mistakes signal incomplete mastery of English verb morphology and reliance on formulaic or memorized patterns rather than full syntactic competence. The findings are consistent with research showing that the passive requires

advanced processing skills, including auxiliary manipulation and NP-movement, which develop later in L2 syntax acquisition.

4.6 Incorrect Use of Tense and Verb Sequences

A significant proportion of students produced tense mismatches and ungrammatical verb sequences, especially where English passive requires the auxiliary /be/ + past participle. Learners alternated incorrectly between simple past, present, progressive and perfect forms. This is partly attributed to siSwati’s passive formation through verbal extensions (/w-/, /iw-/) without tense restructuring, which may cause learners to overlook tense-based auxiliary requirements in English. This is illustrated in the examples in Table 8 below:

Table 8 - Incorrect Use of Tense and Verb Sequences

	Student Output	Issue	Correct Version
a)	Weed was smoked by them during break.	Context demands habitual present, not past	Weed is smoked by them during break
b)	The table leg was chewed on by it when it is hungry	Tense mismatch & wrong agent choice	The table leg is chewed on when the dog is hungry. (more logical agent) The table leg is chewed on by the dog when it is hungry

c)	Her legs are flaunting on every runway	Incorrect verb sequencing (active idiom misuse)	Her legs are flaunted on every runway
d)	Prawns is ate for the first time in Mozambique.*	Number and participle error	Prawns are eaten for the first time in Mozambique
e)	During break, they smoked weed	Active instead of passive	During break, weed was smoked by them
f)	During break, weed was smoken	Incorrect participle	During break, weed was smoked.
g)	The table leg is chewn on when it is hungry	Incorrect participle	The table leg is chewed on when it is hungry
h)	Seven chickens are being slaughtered on Christmas day	Progressive tense in habitual context	Seven chickens are slaughtered on Christmas day

The errors in (a) to (h) above indicate:

- i) L1 transfer from siSwati, where passive marking does not require an auxiliary nor tense shift.
- ii) Developmental overgeneralization, where learners apply /be + V-ing/ or simple tense to contexts requiring perfect/passive forms and
- iii) Low morphological awareness of participle forms (smoken, chewn), suggesting limited lexical internalization of verb paradigms.

These errors underscore the added complexity of multiple argument integration in English passives, contrasting with siSwati, where verbal extensions handle passivity and argument roles more transparently.

A comparison with equivalent siSwati constructions revealed instances of L1 interference. Unlike English, siSwati maintains the same pronoun forms for subject and object, and passive markers are verb-bound extensions rather than auxiliary constructions. Several learners exhibited transfer errors, either promoting the agent incorrectly to the subject position or neglecting the by-phrase, consistent with the influence of their L1 on English syntactic patterns.

Overall, the results indicate that while most students are aware of the English passive form and can produce it in familiar contexts, a significant minority experience challenges in agent realization, verb sequence, and word order. These findings corroborate developmental accounts of L2 acquisition, where exposure and experience gradually improve learners' accuracy, but residual L1 influence and intralingual errors persist, particularly in syntactically complex constructions (Demuth 1989; Iwasaki and Oliver 2018; Israel et al. 2000).

5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings indicate that siSwati L1 learners at UNESWA exhibit general awareness of English passive constructions, consistent with predictions from processability theory.

However, while they generally recognize and produce English passive forms, residual errors reflect both L1 interference and developmental intralingual challenges in L2 acquisition.

5.1. Evidence of Passive Awareness and Developing Interlanguage

The high proportion of correct responses (78.9%) and item facility scores above 0.85 for most items indicate that learners generally understand the formal features of the passive, particularly the /be + past participle/ construction. Many students also demonstrated appropriate pragmatic suppression of the agent, showing development consistent with Processability Theory (Pienemann et al. 2005). The ability to use short passives correctly indicates that NP movement is within their developmental grasp.

5.2. Influence of siSwati Morphology and Syntax

The findings revealed two siSwati features that emerged as significant predictors of error:

(i). Agent suppression as default

Because siSwati passives commonly omit the agent without compromising meaning, learners sometimes transferred this to English even where the agent is required for clarity. This confirms earlier predictions by Dlamini (2014) and Iwasaki and Oliver (2018) on L1-driven agent omission.

(ii) Pragmatic equivalence of agentless passives in siSwati and English

Learners' assumed pragmatic equivalence between siSwati and English passive constructions. Since siSwati passives routinely background or suppress the agent without loss of meaning, learners extended this discourse strategy to English, producing agentless passives even in

contexts where English requires explicit specification of the agent for interpretability. This indicates transfer operating at the pragmatic-functional level rather than at the level of verbal morphology alone.

5.3. Structural Complexity and Item Difficulty

Items involving ditransitive verbs, pronoun agents, idiomatic actions and non-prototypical passives (e.g., stative vs. dynamic) yielded the lowest IF scores (0.45–0.51). This suggests that learners struggle when passive formation is not a simple one-to-one active-to-passive transformation. This finding is consistent with Borer and Wexler (1987), complex passives (particularly those involving indirect objects and ambiguous semantic roles) place heavier cognitive demands on NP movement and thematic role reassignment.

5.4. L2 Development and Incomplete Acquisition

The errors observed—particularly in agent promotion and tense-participle sequencing—indicate incomplete syntactic development rather than lack of exposure. As English in Eswatini is primarily acquired in formal environments (Dlamini 2014; Dlamini 2025), learners may not receive adequate naturalistic input to fully internalize complex syntactic patterns like passives. The findings, therefore, point to a developing interlanguage grammar influenced by both L1 transfer and universal L2 developmental features.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study investigated siSwati L1 learners’ acquisition and production of English passive constructions, focusing particularly on whether they incorrectly promote the agent to subject position. The findings reveal a nuanced interlanguage system that combines correct morphological awareness with predictable L1-driven syntactic and case-marking errors. First, learners demonstrate strong awareness of passive morphology, as reflected in high overall accuracy (78.9%). Second, instances of the agent omission demonstrate that it is both a pragmatic skill and an L1 transfer issue, depending on sentence type. Third, incorrect agent promotion, though less frequent, reveals deep structural influence from siSwati, particularly in how siSwati marks subjects, objects, and agentive adjuncts. Fourth, the errors in tense-participle formation reflect intralingual overgeneralization and incomplete L2 development, rather than L1 interference. Finally, ditransitive and non-prototypical passives pose the greatest challenge in students’ discourses, and confirm that structural complexity influences acquisition.

The findings suggest several pedagogical implications for the teaching of English passive constructions in siSwati-dominant

contexts. First, instruction should adopt a contrastive approach that explicitly highlights the structural and functional differences between siSwati passive extensions marked by the morphemes /-w-//iw -/ and the English *be + past participle* construction. Such contrastive awareness can help learners recognise that agent omission, while grammatically and pragmatically licensed in siSwati, is more restricted in English.

Second, learners require increased and systematic practice with complex passive structures, particularly ditransitive passives, passives involving pronominal agents, and less frequently occurring passive forms. This targeted practice would enable learners to develop greater sensitivity to the syntactic and discourse constraints governing agent expression in English.

Third, the use of corpus-based examples is recommended to illustrate authentic patterns of passive usage in English, especially in distinguishing contexts where the *by*-phrase is obligatory from those in which it is pragmatically optional. Exposure to real language data can support learners in developing more nuanced judgments about acceptability and communicative appropriateness.

Finally, passive constructions should be integrated into communicative classroom tasks that require learners to actively manipulate agent and patient roles within meaningful contexts. Such tasks can promote functional understanding of passivisation beyond rule memorisation and encourage learners to make informed choices about when to foreground or background the agent in discourse.

ABBREVIATIONS

cl. – Noun class
sc. – subject concord
fv – final vowel
STA – Stabilizer
PASS- passive
COP – Copulative
Abs. – Absolute Pronoun
3 rd – third person
APPL – applied extension

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