

The Role of Conceptualizable Agent in Overpassivization of English Unaccusatives in Iranian English Majors

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Abstract

The present study is an attempt to explore the effect of one of the pragmatic elements of discourse (namely the conceptualizable agent) on overpassivization of English unaccusative verbs. Through employing the questionnaire originally used by Ju, (2000), 206 Iranian intermediate and advanced English majors were asked to choose the more grammatical form (active or passive) in target sentences with unaccusative verbs. Each target sentence was embedded in two different contexts expressing external and internal causation. The participants' performance supported the hypothesis that unaccusatives were overpassivized more when the discourse context offered a conceptualizable agent, and that monadic unaccusative verbs were passivized more than dyadic ones. The learners recognized conceptualizable agents offered by the discourse context and their judgments on sentence acceptance were influenced by these agents. Since, in the literature, other researchers like Ju (2000); Oshita (1997); Yip (1995); and Zobl (1989) reported that many non-native English learners cross-linguistically over-passivize unaccusative verbs, it provided additional support for the claim that these errors are language

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universal rather than language specific. Thus, this paper argues against a purely syntactic analysis of interlanguage errors such as overpassivization and talks in favor of an approach that takes pragmatic factors into account as well.

Keywords: 1. Overpassivization 2. Unaccusatives 3. Conceptualizable Agent in Discourse 4. Transitivity of Unaccusatives 5. Transitive Alternation

1. Introduction

Zobl (1989) who examined the written production data of 114 ESL learners with various L1 backgrounds observed that errors like (1) and (2) were persistent in his intermediate and advanced English learners:

- 1) **My mother was died when I was just a baby.*
- 2) **The most memorable experience of my life was happened 15 years ago.*

Since Zobl (1989) found that L2 learners face the learnability problems with unaccusative verbs, L2 researchers have dedicated themselves to the task of revealing the enigmatic learnability problems inherent in unaccusative verbs (Balcom, 1995, 1997; Hirakawa, 1995, 1999, 2001; Ju, 2000; Oshita, 1997, 2000, 2001, 2005; Sorace, 1993a, 1993b, 1995; Yip, 1994, 1995). The studies just cited have all reported that errors like (1) and (2) are very common among L2 learners irrespective of their native language. These learners passivize verbs that ought to be active. This is known as overpassivization (Yip, 1990), a phenomenon defined as non-target-like or non-native-like passivization of intransitive verbs by L2 learners.

In English, unaccusative verbs have non-agentive subjects and the subject has non-volitional control over the action or undergoes a change of state. The term unaccusative arises from the inability of these verbs to assign accusative case to their objects, which triggers their movement to subject position (Yip, 1995). There are two types of unaccusative verbs in English: 1) one with transitive counterparts (e.g. open, melt, etc.) and 2) one without transitive counterparts (e.g. happen, appear, etc.).

To date four major accounts of overpassivization phenomena have been advanced: Transitivity Hypothesis (Yip, 1990, 1995); Postverbal NP Movement (Balcom, 1997; Oshita, 1997; Zobl, 1989); Unaccusative Trap (Oshita, 2001) and Conceptualizable Agent (Ju, 2000). Of these, the first three are semantic and syntactic accounts explainable within the generative theory of syntax. However, this study attempts to test the verifiability of the last account, that is, the role of conceptualizable agent as a pragmatic element in discourse among Persian speaking English majors in Iran.

2. Background

One persistent problem for any language learner is to identify how properties of argument structure (the relationship between participants – arguments- and events) are realized morpho-syntactically in the particular language they are learning. English verbs may have one to three arguments. In this language mono-argument (intransitive) verbs can be divided into two subcategories: unaccusatives and unergatives. The argument of unaccusatives is assigned a THEME or PATIENT role and base generated in the object position at D-structure, and moves to the specifier of IP at S-structure as in (3) whereas that of unergatives is assigned an AGENT role and base generated in the subject position as in (4):

- 3) a. [IP e past [VP arrive John]] (D-structure)
 b. [IP John_i past [VP arrive t_i]] (S-structure)
 4) [IP John past [VP laugh]] (D- and S-structure)
 (Hawkins 2001, p. 183)

Although some unaccusative verbs such as '*sink*' may alternatively be used transitively and intransitively, others must only be used intransitively. In the related literature, the former is called as alternating, dyadic or +T unaccusatives and the latter monadic, -T or non-alternating unaccusatives. For example, the verb '*sink*' may be used as:

- 5) *The Titanic sank in 1912.*
 6) *The Titanic was sunk in 1912.*

The difference between (5) and (6) is that the verb '*sink*' in (5) is inherently agentless while in (6) it has an agent (the omitted logical subject) which can be added with a by-phrase. Logical inference though leads to the conclusion that some entity ultimately caused the event.

The entity (here, an iceberg) that caused the event to occur is a 'pragmatically conceptualizable agent of the predicate (Ju 2000: 92). It means that unaccusative verbs can have conceptualizable agents which may not be part of the semantic representation the speaker has of the sentence, but it is more or less available, depending on the saliency of the source of causation influenced by the nature of the verb and the discourse context. In light of this, Ju (2000) hypothesizes that overpassivization of unaccusatives is more likely to occur if the discourse context offers an agent which for transitive verbs would be available for the by-phrase. Presence or absence of an agent, as Ju (2000) concludes in her study, may be taken as a criterion for the language learner to let him passivize the unaccusative. If the verb is an alternating unaccusative, the passivized construction will be a grammatical one as in (7); however, with regard to nonalternating unaccusatives the passivization will produce an ungrammatical sentence such as (8):

7) *The glass was broken at night..*

8) **The accident was happened early in the morning.*

Ju (2000: 86) states: " ... these overpassivization errors are not related to any L1 group which suggests that these errors are language universal rather language specific." If the claim is true there must be other causes for committing such errors besides L1 influence.

3. Statement of the Problem

Since the overpassivization phenomenon has been universally observed among learners of English as an L2, it has been studied by many SLA researchers (e.g. Balcom, 1997; Hirakawa, 2001; Hubbard, 1994; Ju, 1997, 2000; Montrul, 1999; Oshita, 1997; Yip, 1995; Zobl, 1989). An interesting point about these errors is the fact that they persist among L2 learners of English even up to advanced levels of proficiency;

hence, they must not stem from the learners' lack of structural or even semantic knowledge. For example, Ju (1997) reported that although advanced Korean learners of English had the ability to use passives correctly in transitive verbs in the data, they had problems with unaccusatives. Such findings may suggest that there must be some other nonlinguistic or pragmatic elements in discourse which induce the learner to overpassivize unaccusatives. Ju (2000) was the pioneer who claimed that a conceptualizable agent in discourse may account for the phenomenon. In her study, she found that her Chinese learners were more likely to overpassivize unaccusatives when an agent or cause was obviously identified in the pragmatic domain, which suggests that pragmatic factors play a key role in overpassivization.

The findings by Ju and the persistence of overpassivization errors in the production of Iranian learners of English encouraged us to conduct a study in Iran to investigate the effect of the conceptualizable agent in discourse on this phenomenon. The study focuses on Persian-speaking Iranian English majors to discover if the existence of conceptualizable agents in discourse is a significant motive for the L2 learners to overpassivize unaccusatives in English or not. More specifically, answers to the following questions are sought:

4. Research Questions

1. Are Iranian English majors more likely to overpassivize unaccusative verbs when the discourse context offers them a conceptualizable agent?
2. Do they passivize dyadic unaccusatives significantly more than monadic ones?
3. Is there any significant difference between the performance of the two groups of intermediate and advanced groups in the study?

4.1 Hypotheses

Hypothesis A: There is no significant difference in the performance of Iranian English majors in the passivization of unaccusatives in

externally versus internally caused events.

Hypothesis B: There is no significant difference in the rate of overpassivization between dyadic and monadic unaccusatives.

Hypothesis C: There is no significant difference in the performance of the intermediate and advanced groups on the target sentences in the study.

5. Method

5.1 Participants

A total of 206 Iranian informants participated in the experimental group of this study. They were selected from among English major students who were attending regular English courses in three state universities in Shiraz, Kerman and Rafsanjan during the first semester of 2008 when the researcher conducted the study. According to the information they provided, their ages ranged from 19 to 44 with the average age being 22.10.

The experimental group was then divided into two groups of intermediate and advanced levels based on the scores they obtained from the 1995 version of Oxford Placement Test. This was done according to the instructions and score ranges provided in the test manual. Based on the proficiency test results, ten students were excluded from the study since either their scores were lower than those of the intermediate level or they failed to do the tasks completely.

The participants also took the passive/active knowledge test embedded in the forced-choice questionnaire to demonstrate their knowledge of English passive rules and finally 183 learners were selected based on the number of errors they made in 16 distractor sentences in the questionnaire, that is less than four errors. The remaining 23 learners were excluded from further data analysis procedures since their knowledge of passive rules in English was not enough to ensure the researcher they actually knew the rule. Additionally, 25 undergraduate native speakers of English acted as a native control group. The group consisted of six males and nineteen females to evenly match the

experimental group in terms of participants' sex distribution since, as represented in Table 1, the female participants of the experimental group outnumbered the males by almost 4:1. The results obtained from the control group would provide native-like uses of the verbs so that the learners' judgments could be scored in terms of deviation from these uses. The following table summarizes the participants' relevant data:

Table 1. Participants' relevant data

Groups	Male	Female	Total
Advanced	19	88	107
Intermediate	17	82	99
Control	6	19	25
Total	42	189	231

5.2 Materials and procedure

5.2.1 Oxford Placement Test (OPT)

A 1995 version of OPT was administered to screen the subjects across the two levels of intermediate and advanced in English language proficiency. It consists of two parts with fifty multiple choice items on the correct use of the language. In the first part, there are two sets of 10 multiple choice items in 20 separate, numbered sentences about weather and a well-known champion in boxing, respectively. The other 30 items are presented in the second part which is a text on the history of the airplane. Here the text sentences are not separated and the items are inserted within the text. Based on the results of the OPT, the participants in the experimental group were divided into two different proficiency levels: the intermediate level (N=99) and the advanced level (N=107). According to the test manual, the cut-off point for the placement of the testees at the two different levels is a score of 70 out of a maximum of 100. The results of the test are presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Oxford Placement Test results

Groups	N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum	SD
Intermed.	99	59.89	50	68	9.893
Advanced	107	76.49	70	90	8.893

According to the OPT manual, all the structures tested in Part B of the test which the researcher used in this study were derived from the analysis of test items used by standardized tests such as the Cambridge University Examinations Syndicate and the British Council. Lexis had been carefully controlled and the test was balanced according to the level of difficulty. The facility values and discrimination indices of particular items showed a high level of consistency from one large multi-lingual sample to another. In the present study, its index of reliability was .81, calculated by using KR-21 formula.

5.2.2 Forced-choice questionnaire

A questionnaire adapted from Ju's study (2000) in the form of a forced-choice exercise was used to provide the researcher with the required data. The forced-choice exercise consisted of paired sentences, 52 pairs in total. The first sentence of each pair provided the participants with context clues which could be applied to the second sentence where the testees were asked to indicate the structure (i.e. passive or active) they considered to be the best grammatical choice; (9) illustrates the form used throughout the questionnaire.

- 9) *A driver offered the traveler a ride.
The offer (**accepted/ was accepted**) quickly.*

The forced-choice questionnaire gave the participants the chance to make decisions based on relative grammaticality, rather than on absolute grammaticality. This is in accordance with the main hypothesis which states that learners will choose the passive form over the active form in certain contexts.

Furthermore, the questionnaire is put together so as to avoid the role that animacy plays in choosing voice forms, as Croft (1995) shows. Also, some languages "differentiate mobile subjects from immobile ones in choosing voice forms" (Ju, 2000: 95) which results in the questionnaire using only immobile inanimate subjects for the target sentences. In addition, to ensure only passive readings for the unaccusatives instead of

stative ones, adverbials are added to the target sentences, as examples (10) and (11) below illustrate.

- 10) *My car was very old.*
The engine (died/ was died) suddenly.
- 11) *I pushed the door.*
The door (closed / was closed) immediately.

In choosing the unaccusatives, Ju (2000) used a list of frequently overpassivized verbs compiled by Yip (1990) and Oshita (1997). The limits put on the surroundings for the verbs, immobile inanimate subjects, plus the need for two contexts, internal and external, reduced the number of verbs that were usable for the questionnaire. Due to there being more dyadic unaccusatives than monadic unaccusatives, Ju (2000) selected 13 of the former, and 5 of the latter, resulting in 18 unaccusative verbs in total. The questionnaire features all unaccusatives, both monadic and dyadic, in two contexts: one where the described event is internally caused and one where the event is externally caused, (10) and (11) demonstrate this. The primer sentence in (10) indicates an inactive role for the agent and provides internal causation, whereas the primer sentence in (11) presents a more prominently involved agent, providing external causation.

In order to mask the focus on unaccusatives, the questionnaire also includes 16 distractor sentences with transitive verbs (without an unaccusative counterpart). To offset the imbalance caused by all target sentences being correct only in the active voice, the distractors were correct only in the passive voice. As illustrated by (12), the (passive) distractor sentences were all left agentless so as to have much in common with the structure of the target sentences; being structurally similar to the target sentences, the distractors provided no clues towards where the usage of either active voice or passive was required.

- 12) *New toys arrived in the toy store yesterday.*
Most of the toys (purchased / were purchased) immediately.

The distractors also served as a pre-test, testing whether the participants' knowledge of the passive rules was sufficient to be included

in this and the original study. Subjects with four errors or more (four errors out of 16 equals 25%) were excluded from the analysis because their judgments were more likely to spring from a lack of structural knowledge of the passive construction than from the nature of the verbs in question. Table 3 summarizes the overall questionnaire design.

Table 3: Organization of questions in adapted questionnaire

Group	Agent Type	Number of sentences
[Dyadic]	Externally Caused	13
	Internally Caused	13
[Monadic]	Externally Caused	5
	Internally Caused	5
Distractor		16
Total		52

Note: Distractors = transitives.

The arrangement of the sentences was not random since every target sentence occurred twice (once in each context). They were arranged so that they would not occur on the same page of the questionnaire.

Table 4: Questionnaire property arrangement

Property	Agent Type	Sentence Numbers	Total
[Dyadic]	Externally Caused	9, 11, 17, 20, 22, 25, 29, 33, 39, 43, 46, 48, 51	13
	Internally Caused	3, 7, 14, 15, 21, 24, 27, 32, 34, 40, 44, 47, 49	13
[Monadic]	Externally Caused	6, 12, 18, 36, 41	5
	Internally Caused	1, 5, 30, 37, 52	5
Distracter		2, 4, 8, 10, 13, 16, 19, 23, 26, 28, 31, 35, 38, 42, 45, 50,	16
Total			52

5.3 Data analysis

Out of 206 learners, 8 were eliminated because they did not complete the task completely. Another 15 were excluded since they did not know passive rules well enough. Hence, their judgment on unaccusatives might not necessarily come from the

verbs or the contexts in which they were embedded. In the end, 183 task papers were available for analysis.

Testing Hypotheses A and B

The mean number of errors on the distractor sentences was 1.12 (SD 1.23). The mean number of errors on the target sentences was 13.45 (SD 5.12), which roughly corresponds to a mean error percentage of 37.34%. Table 5 gives a summary of the errors the participants made in each condition and verb category. Figure 1 provides a visual summary of the same data.

Table 5: Summary of the errors in the FCT by Iranian English majors

	MI (5 verbs)	ME (5 verbs)	DI (13 verbs)	DE (13 verbs)
<i>Passivized</i>	218(23.81%)	501(54.80)	605(25.43%)	1112(46.74%)
<i>Not Passivized</i>	697(76.19%)	414(45.20)	1774(74.57%)	1267(53.26%)

Notes: MI and ME = Monadic unaccusative verbs in internal and external causation
 DI and DE = Dyadic unaccusative verbs in internal and external causation

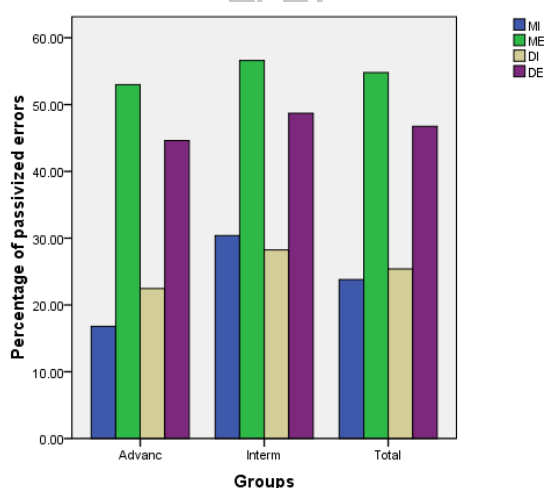


Figure 1. Percentage of passivized errors in FCT by Iranian English majors

As shown in Table 5 and Figure 1, the participants' number of passivized errors increased noticeably in both monadic and dyadic unaccusative verbs from internal to external conditions. For the participants in the two groups, it was from 23.80% to 54.8% in monadic unaccusatives and from 25.43% to 46.74% in dyadic unaccusatives. Interestingly enough, it seems that the shift from internal to external causation had approximately affected the two groups in the same way.

The sentences were divided into four groups depending on causation type (external versus internal) provided by the primer sentence and the verb type used in the target sentence (i.e. monadic or dyadic unaccusative). The mean scores and standard deviations for these four groups and cumulative values are shown in Table 6.

Table 6: Total passivized scores of Iranian English majors in eight conditions:
Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
MI	183	1.00	5.00	3.8095	1.14434
ME	183	.00	5.00	2.2571	1.58738
DI	183	2.00	13.00	9.6952	2.37424
DE	183	.00	13.00	6.9238	2.88129
D	183	6.00	26.00	16.6190	3.84153
M	183	1.00	10.00	6.0667	2.23721
E	183	.00	15.00	7.2857	3.72547
I	183	4.00	16.00	11.5429	2.89903
Valid N (listwise)	183				

Note: D = Dyadic, M = Monadic, E = externally caused, I = internally caused.

The obtained scores were then submitted to a repeated measures ANOVA test by SPSS. The results of the initial multivariate analysis appear in Table 7 below:

Table 7: Multivariate tests for overpassivization of unaccusative verbs:

Multivariate tests^b

Effect	Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
factor1 Pillai's Trace	.989	1.520E3 ^a	6.000	98.000	.000
Wilks' Lambda	.011	1.520E3 ^a	6.000	98.000	.000
Hotelling's Trace	93.036	1.520E3 ^a	6.000	98.000	.000
Roy's Largest Root	93.036	1.520E3 ^a	6.000	98.000	.000

a. Exact statistic

b. Design: Intercept

Within Subjects Design: factor1

As Table 7 shows the value for Wilk's Lambda ("the most commonly reported statistic" (Pallant, 2002, p. 199)) is .011, with a probability value of .000. The p value is less than .05: therefore, it can be concluded that there is a statistically significant effect for the 8 different verb categories. The results of the differences between and within subjects are presented in Table 8. The statistical analysis revealed that the conceptualizable agent which was provided by the context in FCT target sentences led to a significant difference in the subjects' performance on overpassivization of unaccusative verbs used in the test, $f(7, 182) = 513.87, p = .000$.

Table 8: Results of the repeated measures ANOVA

Source of variance	SS	df	MS	F	P
Within-subjects effects	5133.04	7	2161.70	*513.87	.000
Between-subjects effects	3044.61	182	29.56	*1819.85	.000
Total	8177.65	189			

In order to identify exactly where the difference lies, the data were submitted to a number of paired-samples t-tests. The pairs used were as

follows: Pair 1 $_{[DE]/[DI]}$, Pair 2 $_{[ME]/[MI]}$, Pair 3 $_{[D]/[M]}$, and Pair 4 $_{[E]/[I]}$. Table 9 summarizes the four paired samples t- test results obtained from the software.

Table 9: Summarized results from paired-samples t-tests.

Pairs	MD	SD	t value	Sig.(two tailed)
*Pair 1 $_{[DE]/[DI]}$	2.771	3.622	7.840	.001
*Pair 2 $_{[ME]/[MI]}$	1.552	1.629	9.765	.001
*Pair 3 $_{[D]/[M]}$	10.553	3.568	30.306	.001
*Pair 4 $_{[E]/[I]}$	4.154	4.265	9.932	.001

Note: 1. MD = Mean Difference, 2. D = Dyadic, M = Monadic, E & I = External & internal causation,
3. * significant at .001

The magnitude of all the t- values, in Table 9, showed a significant variation in performance of the participants in the two verb categories (monadic and dyadic unaccusative verbs) and in the two conditions (externally and internally caused).

Pair 4 $_{[E]/[I]}$ showed a significant variation in overpassivization between externally caused events and internally caused events, $t_{(182)} = 9.932$, $p = .001$. It rejects hypothesis A: *There is no significant difference in the performance of Iranian English majors in the passivization of unaccusatives in externally and internally caused events.* In this pair, the t-value was lower than that of Pair 3 $_{[D]/[M]}$ which might indicate that the learners' performance was affected more by the nature of the verb (a semantic or syntactic explanation) than its degree of causation provided by the context (a pragmatic explanation).

Pair 3 $_{[D]/[M]}$ showed a significant difference in overpassivization between verbs with and verbs without transitive counterparts, $t_{(182)} = 30.306$, $p < .001$. The t value for this pair is the highest of the other three pairs. It strongly rejects hypothesis B: *There is no significant difference*

in the rate of overpassivization between unaccusatives with transitive counterparts and those without. Tables 6 & 9 show that the participants were more inclined to passivize non-alternating unaccusative verbs than their alternating counterparts when there was a pragmatic agent in discourse.

Pair 1_{[DE]/[DI]} showed a significant difference in overpassivization for dyadic unaccusatives between externally caused events and internally caused events, $t(182) = 7.840$, $p = .001$. Similarly, Pair 2_{[ME]/[MI]} showed a significant difference in overpassivization for monadic unaccusatives between externally caused events and internally caused events, $t(182) = 9.765$, $p = .001$. It meant that Iranian English majors overpassivized the two types of unaccusative verbs more in externally caused events than in internally caused events. The stronger t value in Pair 2 indicates that the external causation is more at work for monadic verbs.

Testing Hypothesis C

To test hypothesis C, the participants were divided into two groups of intermediate and advanced based on their scores in the Oxford Placement Test. The mean number of errors on the distractor sentences for the advanced and intermediate students were 0.9 (SD 1.773) and 1.33 (SD 2.394), respectively. The small difference in the magnitude of the two means shows that the two groups' performance, in the distractor sentences, was not significantly different, $t_{(89)} = 1.462$. The mean number of errors in the target sentences for the advanced students was 12.22 (SD 9.130) and for the intermediate ones was 14.35 (SD 8.624). For this analysis, two pairs were used: Pair 1_{[AdvTE]/[InterTE]} (the advanced and the intermediate target errors) and Pair 2_{[AdvDE]/[InterDE]} (the advanced and the intermediate distractor errors). Comparing the means for Pair 2, however, showed that the two groups' performance in the target sentences was significant, $t_{(89)} = 3.190$, $p = .003$. It indicates that the two groups' performance on the target sentences was significantly different. The result leads to the rejection of hypothesis C: *There is no significant*

difference in the performance of the Iranian advanced and intermediate English majors on the target sentences in the study.

Table 10 gives a summary of the two groups' descriptive statistics and Table 11 summarizes the two paired samples t-tests.

Table 10: Summary of descriptive statistics for intermediate and advanced

Groups	N	Mean	SD
Adv.Tgt.Ers.	90	12.22	9.12
Inter.Tgt.Ers.	93	14.35	8.78
Total	183	13.31	9.02
Adv.Dist.Ers	90	0.90	1.77
Interm.Dist.Ers.	93	1.33	2.39
Total	183	1.12	2.14

Note: Adv.Tgt.Ers. = advanced target sentence errors, Inter.Tgt.Ers = intermediate target sentence errors, Adv.Dist.Ers = advanced distracter errors, and Inter.Dist.Es.= intermediate distracter errors

Table 11: Summary of the two paired- sample t-tests

	Df	t value	Sig.
*Pair1 [AdvTE]/[InterTE]	89	3.190	0.003
Pair2 [AdvDE]/[InterDEj]	89	1.462	0.000

Notes: 1. AdvTE & InterTE= advanced & intermediate target errors,
2. AdvDE & InterDE= advanced & intermediate distracter errors,
3.* significant at .001

In sum, the results obtained from the Forced-choice Task showed that the participants passivized unaccusative verbs more when the discourse context provided an agent. Contrary to previous findings by Yip (1995) and Ju (2000), the difference was more significant for non-alternating unaccusative verbs than their alternating counterparts.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The data presented in this paper rejected the three null hypotheses made at the beginning of the study. Learners overpassivize unaccusatives more when the discourse context offers a conceptualizable agent, and monadic unaccusatives are significantly more likely to be overpassivized than dyadic unaccusatives. Learners recognize the conceptualizable agents offered by the discourse context and their judgments on sentence acceptance are influenced by these agents, possibly because the conceptualizable agent makes the patient-like nature of the subject of the unaccusative verb prominent; this makes it likely for learners to assume that the verb can bear a *by-phrase* and the accompanying passive morphology. The analysis of Pairs 1 [DE]/[DI] and 2 [ME]/[MI] shows that monadic unaccusatives are overpassivized more often in the presence of a conceptualizable agent than dyadic unaccusatives are. Given that the body of research points to universal acquisition challenges for unaccusatives, this finding provides a further support for Transitivity Hypothesis (Yip, 1995; Balcom, 1997; Hirakawa, 1995; Shomura, 1996; Montrul, 2004; and Ju, 2000). According to this analysis, L2 learners first create a nonce causative verb (for that specific verb) by a non-target lexical process which adds a causer of the event, as an external argument (x), to the original argument structure of a non-alternating unaccusative verb. The nonce verb is then passivized through the suppression of the external argument (x = %) before it is syntactically utilized (Balcom, 1997). This hypothesis predicts that monadic unaccusatives pose more of a problem when acquisition is concerned than dyadic unaccusatives do.

The data provides partial counter-evidence to the Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis. Oshita is specific in not distinguishing monadic from dyadic unaccusatives and backs this claim up with a number of studies (see especially Oshita, 2001, pp. 289–292). However, this study shows that monadic unaccusatives do present more difficulties for acquisition than dyadic unaccusatives do. It is possible that dyadic unaccusatives are universally easier to acquire than monadic unaccusatives are. Another possibility may be the role of the subjects' L1. For example, in their

study on Turkish L2 learners of English, Özhan & Deniz (2006) found that their learners overpassivize non-alternating unaccusatives significantly more than alternating ones. They concluded that this might suggest L1 effect since Turkish has an overt reflex on the intransitive variant of an alternating pair. It is proposed that the presence of this property in L1 leads learners to overgeneralize passive morphology to non-alternating intransitives and learners allow overpassivization with non-alternating verbs more than they do with alternating ones. However, to the researcher's knowledge, Persian does not have such a lexical device to mark one of the variants of unaccusative verbs.

Whatever the cause, this study points out that Persian learners of English treat dyadic unaccusatives differently from monadic ones. This does not invalidate the Unaccusative Trap Hypothesis completely., Though it points out that it should be adapted to account for the observed distinction between the two groups, this influence might even be measurable for certain L1–L2 combinations only.

It is possible that, besides discourse context, the place of a verb in the Split Intransitivity Hierarchy plays a role in the likelihood of it being overpassivized; it can be expected that as a verb comes closer to the core unaccusative side of the spectrum, its chances of being overpassivized will be greater than those of verbs closer to the core unergative side. However, this could not be tested in this study because the target verbs did not represent the spectrum from unergative to unaccusative, as defined by the Split Intransitivity Hierarchy. Though Sorace & Shomura (2001) show that the Split Intransitivity Hierarchy is of influence on order of acquisition, it does not deal with overpassivization. Therefore, separate research is needed to verify or refute this expectation.

This study also revealed that although the subjects had been screened into two intermediate and advanced levels by a standardized test, their performance on the distractor sentences was not significantly different. Ju's (2000) justification for inclusion of these sentences was to test the subjects' knowledge of English passive rule. Those subjects who made more than 4 errors in the 16 distractor sentences were excluded

from the study. In the present study, 15 subjects out of 206 were excluded since they did not meet the same criterion. However, their homogeneity in the knowledge of the English passive demonstrated no effect on their performance in the target sentences. This might be an indication of at least two points. First, all the participants, regardless of their proficiency levels, have acquisition problems with unaccusative verbs and second, the majority of senior high school students learn English passive rules years before they become university students. In Iran, the current English language teaching methodology prior to university level focuses on English grammar and reading comprehension skill; thus, learners cover English grammar before they study English at academic levels. Testing the second point requires a separate study to include other subjects from proficiency levels lower than that of the intermediate. However, the results supported the researcher's prior speculation that the two groups of advanced and intermediate students must be homogeneous in terms of their grammatical knowledge.

This paper adds support to the claim that Ju (2000) makes; that existing theories on unaccusative acquisition should take into account the influence of discourse pragmatics. In a broader sense, it supports the assumption that unaccusative acquisition in L2 English is L1 universal. Also, this study shows that there is a difference in the acquisition of monadic and dyadic unaccusatives, which contradicts the assumptions of some theories and the results of other research. This is an area requiring more research.

As for English language teaching in Iran, because the mean error for the target sentences amounts to roughly 38% of all the target sentences (34% for the advanced and 40 % for the intermediate), acquisition of unaccusatives seems somewhat unsuccessful, and it requires special attention in English language classes. Iranian English majors take at least 10 credit courses in English grammar and the mean error obtained in this study shows that the subjects in this study have not acquired unaccusatives in English properly. Teachers need to be aware of the basics of the

unaccusativity theory and the way it applies to second language acquisition in order to be able to assist their students. Before that they themselves should recognize nonnative unaccusative usage, its background, and the U-shaped acquisition pattern associated with unaccusative acquisition.

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