# A corpus study of English *get*-passive and its implication on grammatical education

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목 차



## 초 록

본 논문은 영어의 get 수동태 구문의 분포적 특성을 be 수동태 구문의 분포적 특성과 비교대조하여 분석하였다. 말뭉치 연구를 기반으로 get 수동태와 be 수동태의 사용에 제약을 주는 요인들을 살펴보았고, 영어화자가 get 수동태와 be 수동태 중에 하나를 선택해 사용함에 있어서 해당 요인들이 가지는 영향력의 순서를 탐구하였다. 본 연구의 결과와 그 의미는 외국어로서의 영어학습 환경에서의 get 수동태 관련 문법교육에 기여할 수 있을 것이라고 제안하는 바이다.

*키워드 : get 수동태, be 수동태, 말뭉치 연구, 문법교육

## ABSTRACT

This article aims to investigate the distribution of the English get-passive in comparison to that of be-passive. We conducted a corpus study to explore what factor groups constrain the usage of get-passive and be-passive and the order of significance of the factor groups affecting the choice of one passive type over the other type. We suggest that the results of the present study and its implications shed light on the grammatical teaching of get-passives in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

* **Keywords** : *get*-passive, *be*-passive, corpus study, linguistic variable, grammatical education

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# 1. Introduction

The present study is concerned about the so-called *get* passive construction in English, which is syntactically very close to, but has received relatively less attention than the *be*-passive construction in the field of English education. Consider the following naturally occurring examples of the English *get*-passive and *be*-passive constructions (all taken from Google).

**(1) *Get*-passive construction [*get*+V-*en*+(*by*-phrase)]**

a. She **got hit** by a car yesterday and we took her to the vet.

b. I **got phoned** by the publisher who said that she didn't think the book was suitable for the competition.

c. All my notes on my iPad **got replaced** by old notes from the iCloud.

d. It is perhaps surprising that any Syriac texts got translated into Greek at all.

**(2) *Be-passive construction [be+V-en+(by-phrase)]***

a. A ten - year - old - girl **was hit** by a car while walking on the street.

b. She **was phoned** by someone claiming to be from Police and Fire Association.

c. The Gatt Agreement **was replaced** by the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995.

d. The English play, written by Lillian Hellman, **was translated** into French by Signoret.

Both English *get*-passives and *be*-passives are often taken to convey the same proposition and thus to be interchangeable, as illustrated by the data taken from Cheshire (2005:230) below, in which the two passive constructions in (3a) and (3b) share the same verb and the same subject and by-phrase.

**(3)** a. Josephine **got run** over by a bus.

b. Josephine **was run over** by a bus.

c. A bus ran over Josephine.

Obviously, the *get*-passive and *be*-passive constructions in (3a) and (3b) share the same proposition with the active counterpart in (3c), i.e., 'a bus ran over Josephine.' Also, it is well-known that the passive voice is usually used when more attention is assigned to a patient argument than an agent argument. Givon (1979:123), for example, claims that "the function of passive sentences in language is to code sentences in the context in which the non-agent is more topical." Therefore, the *get*-passive and *be*-passive in (3) can be said to involve the same discourse function in terms topicality, given that the two constructions both assign focus on the patient argument Josephine (by placing it into the grammatical subject position).

Given the above discussion regarding the similarity between the *get*-passive and the *be*-passive, the present study assumes that the two types of passives form a so-called linguistic variable. Labov (1966:15) defines the linguistic variable as "a class [or a linguistic unit] of variants which are ordered along a continuous dimension and whose position is determined by an independent linguistic or extralinguistic variable", suggesting that variation in language is not (necessarily) free or random, but is systematically rule-governed by the linguistic (e.g., syntactic) and extralinguistic (e.g., sociolinguistic) factors. Under Labov's perspective, alternations or variants of a linguistic variable differ in their forms but should share the same meaning in discourse. Therefore, given the above observation that they are two different ways of saying the same thing, one could reasonably come to a conclusion that *get*-passives and *be*-passives alternate with each other and they are thus variants of a linguistic (or syntactic) variable.

There has been, however, a question of whether the English *get*-passives truly alternate with the *be*-passives. Carter and McCarthy (1999) maintain that in spite of their syntactical closeness in terms of structural configuration, there is general agreement that in terms of semantics and pragmatics, the two types of passives are different from each other, especially in specific contexts, which we discuss in detail in later sections. Wolfram (2006) also raises the issue of whether the two types of passives are authentic alternatives which have meaning equivalence. If there is no meaning equivalence between them, the *get*-passives and *be*-passives then cannot and should not be taken to form a linguistic variable.

However, if the general similarities between them are more focused on and a relaxed view is taken on meaning equivalence for the linguistic variable, the *get*-passives and *be*-passives in English can be taken to alternate with each other appropriately. Consider the following Rosenbach's (2007:15-16) comment on the view.

One might take a more relaxed view on meaning equivalence and only demand that two grammatical variants overlap sufficiently in meaning, the stance taken by Weiner and Labov's (1983) classic study on active-passive alternation. Under this view, the two variants only need to share the same propositional, truth-conditional or descriptive meaning but do not have to be equivalent in every semantic, pragmatic and/or functional aspect.

Under this relaxed view, the two passive sentences in (3a) and (3b) have the same verb of passive participle run over and the same entities Josephine and bus as arguments, so they are semantically equivalent and, therefore, do not lose a chance to form a linguistic variable.

The starting point of the present study is the assumption that there is indeed variation between the English *get*-passives and *be*-passives which form a linguistic variable. We firstly focus on presenting a couple of features that possibly affect the authentic distribution of the *get*-passives and *be*-passives in English. We then show an artificial data set of naturally-occurring 'tokens' of get-and be-passives drawn from the Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA) and then investigate how the two passives actually alternate according to the alleged independent variables.[1] In doing so, we hope that the results obtained from the present corpus study and its implications shed light on the grammatical teaching of *get*-passives (and *be*-passives, too) in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context.

## 2. Background

As mentioned above, there has been a large consensus in many of the existing studies that in spite of similarities in their syntactic structure and general proposition and discourse function, *get*-passives and *be*-passives are still different in various aspects.[2] In this section,

[1] Coca is the Corpus of Contemporary American English, containing more than one billion words from year 1990 to 2019 in various genres of text such as spoken, fiction, magazines, newspapers, and academic.

[2] The verb get in the get-passive construction functions like a linking verb in a similar way to the auxiliary verb be in the be-passive construction. The former, however, behaves differently from the latter in various syntactic tests for auxiliarihood (e.g., Haegeman 1985), as illustrated in the following examples.

(i) Subjec-aux inversion:
Was she fired? / *Got she fired? (cf. Did she get fired?)

(ii) Negation:
She was not fired. / *She got not fired. (cf. She did not get fired.)

(iii) Tag question:
She was fired, wasn't she? / *She got fired, got'nt she? (cf. She got fired, didn't she?)

Unlike the passive auxiliary verb be, get is much the same as other lexical main verbs, which require do-support in the above auxiliarihood tests.

we briefly present how the two passive types are distributed differently depending on the properties that have been discussed in the existing studies.

### *2.1. Expression of adversity*

It has been claimed that *get*-passives are frequently used to indicate negative attitudes of the speakers towards the events or situations described in the utterances, while *be*-passives are not sensitive to such a semantic feature (e.g., Herold 1986, Carter and McCarthy 1998, Mieints 2003, McEnery and Xiao 2007). Herold (1986) observes in his corpus study that 85 percent of *get*-passives involves adversative character and negative connotations. Carter and McCarthy (1998:49) also claim that 124 out of the 139 types of *get*-passive examples are used in adversative contexts, i.e. "a state of affairs that is signalled contextually by the conversational participants as unfortunate, undesirable, or at least problematic." Consider their adversative 'get+V-en' examples listed below.

**(4)** get arrested, get flung about in the car, get locked inout, get picked on, get intimidated, get nicked [= stolen], get done [for fraud; done = charged], get killed, get sued, get criticized, get kicked off, get beaten, get stopped (by the police), get locked in/out, get burgled, get lumbered [= landed with an unpleasant job]

It is noticeable in the above list that the verbs preceded by get themselves have adversative meanings or images. Carter and McCarthy (1998:50) also provide examples of *get*-passives in which the verbs preceded by get are inherently neutral in their semantics, but "problematic or contentious" mood is created by the external context, as illustrated in the following example.

**(5)** The 46-year-old actor revealed that Cameron Diaz is her best friend and she meant to send her video of her getting dressed. But it accidentally **got sent** to a 16-year-old boy named Mathew. She then said that Mathew texted her back by writing that he will not put the video out anywhere.

Note above that the verb sent does not involve any adversative meaning or implication inherently, but the surrounding contexts convey some problematic or contentious mood.

### *2.2. Dynamism*

It has been argued that *get*-passives have more "active or causative qualities" than the *be*-passives, and they are interpreted in a more dynamic way (e.g., Quirk et al. 1985, Meints 2003).[3] Cheshire (2005) even mentions somewhat in an extreme way that *get*-passives only occur in dynamic events or situations, but *be*-passives do not have such a semantic sensitivity. Now compare the following two sentences.

**(6)** a. The window **was** broken.
b. The window **got** broken.

According to Quirk et al. (1985), the be-passive sentence in (6a) can have two different interpretations according to which aspect is concerned, the action affected by the window or the state of the window at the moment of utterance. Due to its dynamic nature, however, the use of *get*-passive provides a way of avoiding such a semantic ambiguity that the use of *be*-passive might bring out. That is, the *get*-passive sentence in (6b) has only the "action" meaning.

### *2.3. Roles of agent and patient*

As mentioned earlier, it is well-known that a passive construction is usually used instead of its active counterpart when the patient (or theme) argument is intended to be more focused in the event than the agent. The by-phrase is often omitted in a passive construction where an agent is contained in that less importance or attention is assigned to the agent which is, therefore, needless to be mentioned. Given these general properties of passives, the difference between get-and be-passives at this point is that more attention is assigned to a patient and an agent (or by-phrase) is more frequently omitted in the former than in the latter (Quirk et al. 1985, Collins 1996, Carter and McCarthy 1999).

With regard to why such a difference between them is made, Meints (2003) suggests that

[3] The term dynamism is cited from Meints (2003).

the adversative nature of the *get*-passive generates a stronger focus on the patient than the *be*-passive. Also, it has been claimed that the *get*-passive puts more stress on the speaker's attitude towards the patient (or the grammatical subject), the event the patient is involved with and its effect on the patient (Quirk et al. 1986, Cater and McCarthy 1999).

Also, in terms of the animacy of patients (or subjects), *get*-passives dominantly occur with human or animate patients, but *be*-passives occur with human or animate patients and non-human patients as well (Givon and Yang 1994, Collins 1996). On the other hand, Collin's (1996) corpus-based study shows the very few cases of overt agents which are equally animate or inanimate. [4)]

### *2.4. Formality and text type*

It has been suggested that the *get*-passives are more frequently used in informal and spoken English, while their uses tend to be avoided in more formal and written English (Granger 1983, Quirk et al. 1985, Collins 1996, Carter and McCarthy 1999).

### *2.5. Regional and social variety*

Granger (1983) points out that *get*-passives occur less frequently in British English than in American English while be-passives usually occur more frequently than *get*-passives in both British and American English. Weiner and Labov (1983) also suggest in their study of American English speakers that the use of *get*-passives is increasing, as evidenced by Figure 1 (provided by the Corpus of Historical American English (COHA).[5)]

Givon and Yang (1994) have found from their study on the distribution of get- and *be*-

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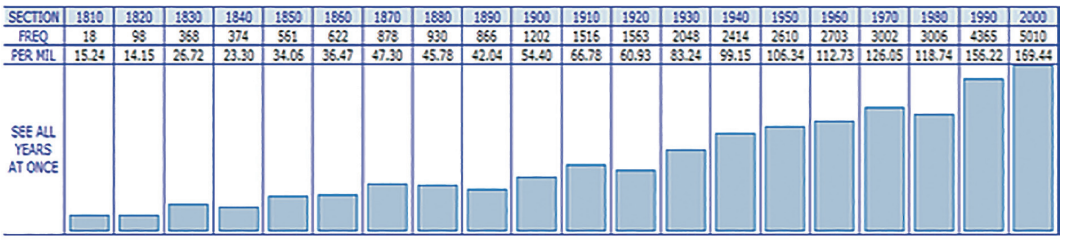
4) We have not found in the previous studies any comments or explanation on the animacy of agents in be-passives.

5) Weiner and Labov (1983:43) mention factors like age, race and gender also affect the distribution of get-passives and be-passives.

> Adults show a preponderant use of be, as do female teenagers to a lesser extent; male teenagers are significantly different from all other groups in their heavier use of get, and this tendency is stronger among blacks than whites [...] A shift to the get passive appears to be one of the most active grammatical changes taking place in English; and at least in the North, it seems to be also a stigmatized sociolinguistic variant which is used more by males than females.




**<Figure 1> Frequencies of get-passives(1810s-2000s) (normalized frequencies per 1 million words)**

passives according to American speakers' social status that speakers in upper class mostly use *be*-passives while working class speakers almost equally use the two passives, as seen in Figure 2 below.

So far, we have briefly examined through the previous studies how *get*-passives and *be*-passives are differently distributed according to various properties. On the basis of this, we first consider several independent variables and examine how those might influence the distribution (or alternation) of *get*-passive and *be*-passives.

| | Social Class | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Working | | Upper | | Total |
| | N | % | N | % | |
| *get* passive | 89 | 49% | 30 | 17% | 119 |
| *be* passive | 91 | 51% | 147 | 83% | 238 |
| Total | 180 | 100% | 177 | 100% | 357 |

**<Figure 2> Distribution of get-passives and be-passives depending on social class**

# 3. Methodology

## *3.1. Independent variables*

Considering the factors described in Section 2, we set up 6 independent variables for the study and coded values of each variable in an arbitrary way, as seen in Figure 3 below.[6)]

- Register : whether the passive is used in spoken or written text.

6) Social variety and regional variety are not considered here in that the COCA used for the present study do not provide any information on those factors.

- Animacy of patient: whether the patient (or subject) is animate or inanimate.
- Existence of by-phrase: whether by-phrase is existent or not.
- Animacy of agent: whether the agent is animate or inanimate.
- Negativeness of verb: whether the passive verb has a negative meaning or not.
- Dynamism of verb: whether the passive verb is a dynamic or stative.

| Dependent variable | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1- *be*-passive 0- *get*-passive | | | | | |
| Independent variable | | | | | |
| **Register** | **Animacy of patient** | **Existence of *by*-phrase** | **Negativeness of verb** | **Dynamism of verb** | **Animacy of agent** |
| w-written<br>s -spoken | a -animate<br>i -inanimate | b -existent<br>d -non-existent | n -negative<br>m -neutral | y -dynamic<br>s -stative | o -animate<br>x -inanimate |

**<Figure 3> Coding scheme**

### *3.2. Delimitation of types of tokens*

There has been widespread disagreement on the "delimitation of the class" of *get*-passives in the literature (e.g., Collins 1996). Stein (1979), for instance, considers as examples of *get*-passives sentences like Let's get started and I got completely lost, while Granger (1983) disagrees with that (cf. Collins 1996).[7] Considering the importance of delimitation of the class, we will exclude in the present study the above sentences on the controversy which are classified as peripheral members of *get*-passives.

Collins (1996) claims that there exists a "gradation from prototype to periphery" among *get*-passives. He classifies the examples of *get*-passives as central or peripheral on the basis of their "potential relatedness to a propositionally equivalent active clause". Now consider the following.

(7) a. I **got phoned** by a woman friend. (Central )
b. He **got killed**.
c. She **get worried** about that/He got frightened.
d. Let's **get dressed** up. / They **got married**. / They **got involved**.
e. I **got used** to it. / I **got accustomed** to it. / I **got fed** up with it. (Peripheral)

[7] Granger (1983) does not accept those sentences above as get-passives in that an agent cannot be expressed in such a sentence and they can not alternate with an active clause.

According to Collins, (7a) has an explicit agent in its by-phrase so that it easily meets the criterion above, and (7b) also meets the criterion without a problem as an implicit agent can be readily recovered from the context, both of which are, therefore, considered central. In this sense, psychological (or adjectival) *get*-passives, reflective*get*-passives and formulaic (or fixed) *get*-passives in (7c) and (7d) are considered peripheral. The first two central types of *get*-passives like (7a) and (7b) are only taken as valuable tokens for the study.

### *3.3. Collecting data*

We randomly collected from the COCA a total of 800 tokens composed of 400 *get*-passive and 400 *be*-passive tokens. All the tokens were the data from 2005 to 2009. As mentioned, we did not collect the peripheral members of *get*-passives and the corresponding examples of *be*-passives as well, so the tokens like be married, be interested and be used to were also excluded. When it comes to the judgement of negativeness of verb, a verb is considered as negative if it inherently has and reflects a negative meaning and feeling or decreasing or minus image and might be linked to an unfortunate result of an event, as shown in (8).

**(8)** a. Days later, Hall's appeal **was rejected**.
b. About 43% of the securities that originally carried S and P's highest AAA rating have been downgraded.
c. The last time I saw the face was when he **got murdered** in jail.
d. The Midwest too often **gets ignored** in favor of the East and West Coasts.

Also, animacy of agent is considered in a token only when there is by-phrase and, therefore, an explicitly-expressed agent. For judging the dynamism of verb, we used a list of stative verbs provided online, as can be seen in (9). That is, we only considered a verb as stative if it is included on the list. As a dichotomous process, therefore, we considered those verbs non-stative or dynamic.[8)]

**(9)** agree, appear, believe, belong, concern, hear, imagine, know, love, remember, see, suppose, surprise, think...

8) The list provides 50 of stative verbs and can be downloaded at www.perfect-english-grammar.com. I simply follow the dichotomous notion that a verb which is not stative can be considered as a dynamic verb.

## 4. Results and discussion

Table 1 below strikingly shows that be-passives are much more frequently used in written text (384 out of 400) than *get*-passives (272 out of 400). Also, as seen from the comparison 128 (88.9%) and 16 (11.1%), *get*-passives are more frequently used in spoken texts than *be*-passive. At least, therefore, we might say that *get*-passives are more often used in informal contexts than *be*-passives.

**<Table 1> Text**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| w | N | 384 | 272 | 656 | 82.0 |
| | % | 58.5 | 41.5 | | |
| s | N | 16 | 128 | 144 | 18.0 |
| | % | 11.1 | 88.9 | | |
| Total | N | 400 | 400 | 800 | |
| | % | 50.0 | 50.0 | | |

Table 2 below shows that in the tokens of *be*-passives 81% of the patients(326 out of 400) are inanimate, while in the tokens of *get*-passives 83% of the patients(332 out of 400) are animate, which tells us that *get*-passives are used more frequently with animate patients than *be*-passives. It also presents that when patients are inanimate, *be*-passives are more frequently used at the ratio of 4 to 1 (326 vs.68), while *get*-passives are more frequently used at the ratio of 4 to 1 (332 vs.74) when patients are animate. From the data, we can understand that according to whether patients are animate or inanimate, the uses of *get*-passives and *be*-passives are distributed almost at the similar ratio.

**<Table 2> Animacy of patient**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| i | N | 326 | 68 | 394 | 49.2 |
| | % | 82.7 | 17.3 | | |
| a | N | 74 | 332 | 406 | 50.8 |
| | % | 18.2 | 81.8 | | |
| Total | N | 400 | 400 | 800 | |
| | % | 50.0 | 50.0 | | |

In Table 3, we can see that about 90% of *get*-passive tokens (359 out of 400) do not have by-phrases while about 70% of *be*-passive tokens (283 out of 400) do not have by-phrases, which shows that an agent is more frequently omitted when *get*-passives are used.

**<Table 3> Existence of by-phrase**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| d | N | 283 | 359 | 642 | 80.3 |
| | % | 44.1 | 55.9 | | |
| b | N | 117 | 41 | 158 | 19.7 |
| | % | 74.0 | 26.0 | | |
| Total | N | 400 | 400 | 800 | |
| | % | 50.0 | 50.0 | | |

Table 4 shows that among all the tokens which have by-phrases, about 60% (71 out of 117) of the *be*-passives have inanimate agents, while 60% (41 out of 25) of the *get*-passives have animate agents.

**<Table 4> Animacy of agent**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| x | N | 71 | 16 | 87 | 55.1 |
| | % | 81.6 | 18.4 | | |
| o | N | 46 | 25 | 71 | 44.9 |
| | % | 64.8 | 35.2 | | |
| Total | N | 117 | 41 | | |
| | % | 74.0 | 26.0 | | |

Table 5 shows that in the tokens of *get*-passives about 67% of the verbs (266 out of 400) are negative, while in the tokens of *be*-passives about 10% of the verbs(41 out of 400) are negative and this comparison tells us that *get*-passives are used more frequently with negative verbs than *be*-passives. Also, the result presents that when the verbs are negative, *get*-passives are more frequently used at the ratio of 6.5 to 1 (266 vs. 41), while *be*-passives are more frequently used at the ratio of 2.8 to 1 (359 vs.134) when the verbs are not negative. Considering the two ratios mentioned, we can understand the uses of *get*-passives are more affected by negativeness of verb than *be*-passives.

Table 6 shows that in the tokens of both get-and be-passives, there hardly exist tokens with stative verbs. Most of all, there is no stative verb token for *get*-passives. Therefore, dynamism of verb cannot be considered as a factor which affects the distribution of *get*-passives and

**<Table 5> Negativeness of verb**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| m | N | 359 | 134 | 493 | 61.6 |
| | % | 72.8 | 27.2 | | |
| n | N | 41 | 266 | 307 | 38.4 |
| | % | 13.4 | 86.6 | | |
| Total | N | 400 | 400 | 800 | |
| | % | 50.0 | 50.0 | | |

*be*-passives. The fact that the stative verb tokens appear only in *be*-passives, however, might explain the dynamic character of *get*-passives mentioned in the previous studies anyhow.

**<Table 6> Dynamism of verb**

| Group | | 1 | 0 | Total | % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| y | N | 388 | 400 | 788 | 98.5 |
| | % | 49.2 | 50.8 | | |
| s | N | 12 | 0 | 12 | 1.5 |
| | % | 100.0 | 0.0 | | |
| Total | N | 400 | 400 | 800 | |
| | % | 50.0 | 50.0 | | |

Additionally, by using the GOLDVARB 2001 application (Robinson et al. 2001), we conducted a multivariate analysis of the contribution of the factor groups (FGs), i.e., the independent variables, selected as significant to the probability of the get- and be-passive uses. Given that the more significant factor group affecting the choice of one variant over the other has the higher range of the factor weight, the results indicate the six factor groups can be listed according to their significance, as illustrated in (10) below.

**(10)** Negativity of verb (FG range = 55) > Animacy of patient (FG range = 52) > Register (FG range = 50) > Dynamism of verb (FG range = 25) > Existence of by-phrase (FG range = 23)

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Corrected Mean | | | .56 |
| Log likelihood | | | -710.916 |
| Total N | | | 2000 |
| FG | Factor weight | % | N |
| **Negativity of Verb** | | | |
| negative | .81 | 86 | 829 |
| non-negative | .26 | 24 | 1171 |
| *Range* | 55 | | |
| **Animacy of Patient** | | | |
| animate | .77 | 81 | 963 |
| inanimate | .25 | 21 | 1037 |
| *Range* | 52 | | |
| **Register** | | | |
| spoken | .91 | 94 | 263 |
| written | .41 | 43 | 1737 |
| *Range* | 50 | | |
| **Dynamism of Verb** | | | |
| dynamic | .51 | 51 | 1939 |
| stative | .26 | 10 | 61 |
| *Range* | 25 | | |
| **Existence of by-phrase** | | | |
| non-existent | .55 | 55 | 1549 |
| existent | .32 | 32 | 451 |
| *Range* | 23 | | |

## 5. Conclusion

In the present study, we have examined how *get*-passives and *be*-passives are differently distributed in their uses according to a couple of semantic and pragmatic factors. We have also discovered the order of the significance of the factor groups affecting choice of one passive over the other passive.

Obviously, the *get* passive is syntactically very similar to, but has gained relatively less attention than the *be*-passive. In light of this, the results of the current corpus study can contribute to the formal education on English grammar, especially in the EFL context, by

giving an implication on what must be taught in actual English grammar classes for learners to master the authentic uses of *get*-passives (as well as *be*-passives).

The limitation of the present study, however, is that we extracted from the COCA the same number of tokens for the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive. In fact, in the COCA, more than 2.5 millions of tokens for *be*-passives are found while 67 thousands of tokens for *get*-passives are found, which mean that *be*-passives are actually much more frequently than *get*-passives. Therefore, the dataset we created for the study might be threatened by the matter of representativeness of the two passives' authentic frequencies. Nevertheless, the present study acquired systematic and reasonable results to which supports from the previous studies could be given.

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