

# Ideas for Teaching Ergative Verbs to ESL Students

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This article discusses some practical techniques that ESL teachers can use in the teaching of English ergative verbs. It is suggested that teachers should expose students to a situation which will elicit different responses in different voices (active, middle and passive) authentically and spontaneously.

## Introduction

In English, there is a category of verbs known as Ergative Verbs. They are verbs which allow the three-voice option of active, middle or passive (Lock, 1996). Examples include *close*, *evaporate*, *bend*, *increase*, *sink*, *shrink*, *drown*, *break*, *change*, *drop*, etc.

e.g.

1. The sun evaporates water. (Active Voice)
2. Water is evaporated (by the sun). (Passive Voice)
3. Water evaporates. (Middle Voice)
4. Someone dropped a pen. (Active Voice)
5. A pen was dropped (by someone). (Passive Voice)
6. A pen dropped. (Middle Voice)

What is the middle voice? The middle voice can be seen as in the middle of active voice and passive voice. When it is used, the object of a transitive clause (e.g. *water* in sentences 1 and *a pen* in sentence 4) becomes the subject of an intransitive clause (see sentences 3 and 6). These subjects can be argued as the doers of the actions represented by the ergative verbs (e.g. *evaporate* in sentence 3 and *drop* in sentence 6) and act upon themselves, but the actions involved normally come about more or less spontaneously. There may be no doers at all, and even if there are doers, the actions are often not done deliberately or intentionally by the doers.

## Some Useful Teaching Techniques

It has been suggested that the differences between ergative and non-ergative verbs can be highlighted by a comparison between two texts, one eliciting non-ergative verbs in the active or passive voice and one eliciting ergative verbs in the middle voice. Students will need to use dictionaries that give sufficient examples and/or grammatical information to allow them to do the comparisons (Lock, 1995). It is also useful to introduce tasks requiring students to select appropriate verb forms in context by deciding whether the events should be represented as implying a doer or not and ask students to formulate a rule about when to use the active voice and when to use the passive voice (Jones, 1995). I found these suggestions practical and I often use them in my own lessons. However, before working on these exercises, I introduce the characteristics of ergative verbs using a pen, like this:

- First, I ask students to pay attention to what I will do;
- Then, I drop the pen onto the floor and ask "What did I do?". Students will not hesitate to answer "You dropped the pen.";
- I continue by asking "What happened to the pen?". Students will say something like "The pen was dropped by you.";
- In order to illustrate the possibility of using the middle voice with the verb "drop", I put the pen on the edge of a desk, continue to say something to distract the students, walk to the back of the desk and suddenly bump into the desk hard

(as if I could not balance myself) so that the table moves and the pen drops by itself;

- Then, I ask "Oh, what happened to the pen?". Some students may answer "The pen dropped." while others may keep saying "The pen was dropped.";
- I invite students to repeat their answers, asking them to pay attention to the differences between the structure of their answers (i.e. some answers are in the passive voice and some are not);
- At this stage, I will introduce the use of the three voices by stating the difference between the first incident (I dropped the pen hard) and the second incident (the pen dropped by itself).

## Conclusion

The rationale behind this teaching technique is that it is best to show students the characteristics of ergative verbs by exposing them to a situation which will elicit different responses in different voices authentically and spontaneously. Although it is useful to explain the three-voice option of active, middle or passive verbally using written examples and/or text comparisons, I think it is more effective if students can see, using both their eyes and their brains, that things may happen without an intentional doer, and that there is a need for using the middle voice in situations where a doer is not necessarily implied (or that using the passive voice is not precise enough). The possibility of using the three-voice option for ergative verbs is better discovered by students themselves. I have tried this technique several times with my own students and found it very successful. This technique is also entertaining because it will create some laughter in the classroom. We teachers are not just educators -- sometimes we have to be good actors as well.

## Reference

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