

# Acquisition of Passive in Second Language

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UNIVERSITY OF RIJEKA  
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Acquisition of Passive in Second Language  
(Undergraduate thesis)

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## **ABSTRACT**

This study explores the acquisition and use of impersonal passive constructions by Croatian students studying English language and literature. Impersonal passive voice, which is often used in formal and academic writing, poses challenges for non-native speakers due to its complexity and infrequent use. The aim of this research is to assess how students understand and apply this grammatical structure, with a focus on the accuracy and frequency of its use when rephrasing sentences. A survey was conducted among 42 Croatian university students, who were asked to rephrase sentences so that their meaning stays the same. The findings reveal a strong preference for passive and active voice constructions over impersonal passive forms, indicating that even advanced learners tend to avoid more complex grammatical structures. While participants demonstrated the proficiency to produce grammatically correct sentences in the impersonal passive voice, many exhibited unnecessary tense shifts, leading to subtle changes in meaning. The findings of this study suggest a need for more focused instruction on impersonal passive constructions in advanced English curricula to improve proficiency in academic writing.

**Key words:** *impersonal passive, second language acquisition, Croatian students, English language learning, grammatical structures, passive constructions.*

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## 1. Introduction

The numerous grammatical constructions of the English language already present difficulties for non-native speakers of English, therefore the less common structures like impersonal passive ought to pose some challenges. The impersonal passive construction can be seen in more formal and academic writing, where it allows one to express actions without explicitly specifying the agent of the action. However, since this construction is complex and rarely used, it can cause problems for non-native speakers and even those who are more advanced learners.

This study aims to explore how Croatian students of English language and literature use and understand impersonal passive constructions, seeing how they are more advanced non-native speakers of English. More specifically, this research looks to determine which grammatical structures participants opt for when given the opportunity to rephrase sentences and to assess the frequency and accuracy of their responses. This study intends to reveal the challenges that non-native English speakers face when producing the impersonal passive structure and to potentially provide some information on how to improve language teaching practices. Language instruction can become more effective by understanding these patterns of usage, especially in the context of advanced academic English.

## 2. Passive voice

Voice is considered to be the relationship between the subject and the verb of a phrase (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). When a phrase is in the active voice, the subject performs the verb's specific action, whereas passive voice sentences emphasize the action being performed on the subject rather than the subject performing the action (Celce-Murcia & Larsen-Freeman, 1999). In sentences with an action verb and a direct object, two key features indicate who is performing the action and who is receiving it: word order and verb form (Britannica Dictionary, n.d.). Typically, English language follows a subject → verb → object order, as in "Sara wrote the letter." In this sentence the subject performs the action, therefore the sentence is in the active voice. However, in the passive voice, the subject is the entity being acted upon, as in "The letter was written by Sara," where the original object ("the letter") becomes the subject, and the original subject ("Sara") is introduced by "by."

Stanley (1975), stresses that the passive voice has long been controversial and problematic in English grammar discussions. Furthermore, he notes that there is not a full agreement on its definition in English. Additionally, the meaning and function of the passive remain elusive, regardless of modern linguistic theories. Stanley suggests that understanding the passive voice calls for analysing the contexts and real-world situations in which it is used, as well as the criteria for agent deletion.

According to Allan (2009), the English passive voice is usually formed by joining a form of the verb "be" with the past participle of a lexical verb, therefore creating what is known as a periphrastic passive. This construction is different from the morphological passives found in a great deal of other languages, which use suffixing, prefixing, infixing, or internal vowel changes (Allan, 2009). While the "be" + past participle structure is often unambiguous, it is important to bear in mind that not all such forms are passive. The passive auxiliary in English usually comes last in a sequence of helping verbs. Sometimes, the auxiliary verb "be" is unstated, as in "The report [that was] submitted by the committee." Some linguists argue in support of additional passive auxiliaries such as "have," "get," "become," "come," "grow," "stand," "feel," "rest," "sit," "appear," "lie," "look," "remain," and "seem." Among these, the get-passive is especially significant for its colloquial nature and its higher frequency among working-class speakers in the U.S. compared to upper-class speakers (Allan, 2009). The choice between the "be" and "get" passives can also indicate the speaker's involvement or attitude toward the



specific event (Allan, 2009). Finally, the appropriate use of the passive voice often depends on the context and the beliefs of the participants who engage in the discourse.

Walpole (1979) challenges the typical criticism of the passive voice that sees it as weak, wordy, and ineffective. This critical view is commonly held by composition teachers and is supported by countless handbooks. While it is true that passive constructions are rarely used as opposed to active ones, with a ratio of three actives to one passive for transitive verbs, they remain an important stylistic choice, especially in scientific prose where the agent of the action is often irrelevant or obvious (Walpole, 1979). The passive voice, which is used about 25% of the time in correct contexts, should not be dismissed completely. It can provide clarity and conciseness, particularly in adjectival functions, such as past-participial modifiers. For instance, "The unlatched window was broken by the storm" is far more effective and succinct than its active counterpart, "The storm broke the window that someone had left unlatched." Walpole's defence highlights the fact that the passive voice can be the clearest and most efficient way to convey information in some situations, which in turn makes it an indispensable tool in different writing contexts.

## 2.2. Impersonal passive

In contemporary usage, the term impersonal passive stands for passive forms of verbs in sentences for which one cannot postulate an underlying subject (Frajzyngier, 1982). It is considered that the impersonal passive is a formal way of reporting thoughts, beliefs and opinions when there is no specific subject identified.

Formal styles are prevalent in English writing, and the choice of grammar and vocabulary plays a crucial role in their effectiveness (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Formal styles usually do not contain many personal pronouns, while noun phrases and the passive voice are commonly used (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). As a style becomes more formal, it tends to adopt a more detached and impersonal tone (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). For instance, personal pronouns can be replaced by impersonal constructions using "it" and "there." For example, the more personal sentence "We suggest that you leave the building after 8 p.m." can be made more detached and impersonal as "It is suggested that you leave the building after 8 p.m." (Cambridge University Press, n.d.). Moreover, impersonal passives, just as personal passives, can occur with or without an overt agent (Siewierska,

1984). According to Siewierska (1984), crosslinguistic studies reveal that agentless impersonal passives are most frequent.

Passive voice is frequently used in academic writing when events and processes are more important than the 'doer' of an action. In Impersonal passive voice, it is not necessary to mention the subject and only the action is considered important. Impersonal passive voice is generally used in technical writing. Therefore, for students to construct more sophisticated pieces of writing, they need to be able to write from an impersonal perspective. This can be achieved by avoiding opinions and pronouns.

Blevins (2003) argues that passive and impersonal constructions have a clearly different status in contemporary theoretical and descriptive studies. He notes that current approaches recognize passive constructions and link them to active ones, and failing to do so would be a major oversight. Furthermore, many descriptive grammars use a broad definition of 'passive' to include any case where the subject isn't expressed (Blevins, 2003). However, impersonal constructions are often overlooked in both descriptive and theoretical work, partly because many frameworks do not consider subjectless constructions (Blevins, 2003).

In academic writing, especially in scientific writing, introductory clause verbs are often written in the passive voice with a neutral subject "it" (Oshima & Hogue, 2007). According to Maling & Kibort (2015), impersonal passive constructions in English display unique syntactic properties. These constructions can be created from both intransitive and transitive verbs and usually suggest an unspecified human agent. For example, in sentences like "It was decided to postpone the meeting," no NP argument is promoted to the subject position, yet the construction suggests that a decision was made by someone. This inherent ambiguity between impersonal passive and impersonal active interpretations challenges traditional grammatical distinctions, demonstrating fluid boundaries within English syntax (Maling & Kibort, 2015). Maling & Kibort (2015) highlight that these constructions have been extensively debated, emphasizing their complexity and variability within the language.

Impersonal passives exist across various languages and are not limited to specific language areas or genetic families (Keenan & Dryer, 2006). Languages like Dutch, German, Latin, Classical Greek, North Russian dialects, Shona, Turkish, and Taramahua all utilize similar syntactic and morphological processes to derive impersonal passives from intransitive verb phrases (Keenan & Dryer, 2006). These constructions often involve subject deletion, where an underlying subject in the deep structure is removed through transformational rules,

resulting in what appears to be a subjectless sentence on the surface (Mørk, 1969). For example, according to Mørk (1969), in Serbo-Croatian, subject deletion leads to sentences like "čita se," which translates to "reading is being done," demonstrating the process of anonymization where the agent is either unspecified or unnecessary.

Khrakovsky (1973) divides impersonal passives into four broad groups:

1. Impersonal passives without an overt subject and verbal morphology distinct from that used in the closest corresponding active (e.g., Turkish).
2. Impersonal passives with a form word in subject position and verbal morphology distinct from that used in the closest active counterpart (e.g., Dutch).
3. Impersonal passives without an overt subject and active verbal morphology (e.g., Russian).
4. Impersonal passives with a form word in subject position and active verbal morphology (e.g., French).

These categories draw attention to the syntactic diversity of impersonal passives. However, they all share a common function of depersonalizing the action, often employing specific morphological markers like the reflexive "se" in Serbo-Croatian to achieve this (Mørk, 1969). Such constructions serve to anonymize the agent, paralleling the function of impersonal passives in other languages.

### 3. Methodology

With the intention of better understanding how often non-native English speakers use impersonal passive and with which level of accuracy, a survey was created and carried out. This study aims to research how non-native English speakers construct particular grammatical constructions and which construction is preferred, with a focus on their use of impersonal passive structures. To achieve this, a quantitative survey was developed and administered to a diverse sample of Croatian English language and literature students. In the survey, they were asked to rephrase provided sentences according to their understanding so that the meaning of the sentence stays the same. This approach enabled the collection of data that shows the preference for grammatical constructions as well as the accuracy when producing them. The following sections provide a detailed description of the participant selection process, the design of the survey instrument, data collection procedures, and the methods used for data analysis.

#### 3.2. Survey design

The introduction to the survey was written in Croatian to ensure that participants clearly understood the survey's purpose. It informed them that the survey aimed to investigate the frequency and accuracy of specific grammatical structures. Additionally, participants were assured that the data collected would be kept confidential and used solely for the undergraduate thesis. The introduction also stressed the anonymity of the survey and encouraged participants to reach out via email in case of any questions or concerns.

The first section of the survey included questions about the participant's demographic details, such as gender, age, year of study, and current GPA. This was designed to provide insights into the respondent's basic profile. In the second section of the survey, participants were asked to rephrase the provided sixteen sentences in English so that the meaning stays the same. The survey included sentences where authorities or experts provide confirmed reports (e.g., "Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident" and "Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken"), as well as those reflecting general beliefs or expectations (e.g., "People think that money is the most important thing in the world" and "People expect that the President will resign"). It also covered statements based on assumptions or speculations (e.g., "They suppose that the two prisoners escaped" and "People claim that he is living in Croatia"). Additionally, the survey contained sentences

that expressed widespread beliefs or knowledge (e.g., "Everybody knows that war is devastating" and "People believe that English is the most widely spoken language"). The second part of the survey aimed to determine the grammatical structures participants would use to rephrase the sentences and to assess how frequently they employed the impersonal passive voice. Additionally, it sought to evaluate the grammatical correctness of these rephrased sentences. The original survey design is provided at the end of this thesis.

### 3.3. The participant selection process

Participants for this study were all Croatian students enrolled in English language and literature programs at various universities across Croatia. The primary requirement for inclusion in the survey was that participants were non-native English speakers with advanced proficiency in English. The easiest way to ensure this proficiency was to make sure that the participants were students of English language and literature. This selection of participants made sure that the participants in the survey had a strong foundation in English grammar, which made them capable of creating more complex grammatical constructions, such as the impersonal passive. The sample included students from 5 universities from different academic years, which ensured a range of perspectives on how these constructions are created and used at various stages of their academic development. A total of 47 participants partook in the survey. This created a diverse group of participants when it comes to age, academic progress, and educational background.

### 3.4. Data collection procedures

To collect data for this study, an online survey was developed and distributed using Google Forms. Participants were procured through different channels such as email invitations through multiple Croatian universities and social media platforms. The survey was accessible for approximately four and a half weeks, during which period participants were encouraged to complete the questionnaire. Ethical considerations were followed by ensuring that participation was voluntary and that participants were informed about the purpose of the survey as well as the confidentiality of their responses. The data collection process yielded a total of 47 responses, which were then analysed to ensure the completeness and adherence to the survey instructions.

### 3.5. The methods used for data analysis

Qualitative evaluation and descriptive statistical techniques were used to analyse the survey data. Previous to the analysis, the data were carefully cleaned to ensure that only complete and relevant responses were included. This consisted of the removal of responses that did not follow the instructions provided in the survey. Five participants' inadequate responses needed to be removed since they translated the provided sentences into Croatian instead of rephrasing them in English as required. After cleaning the data there were 42 adequate responses to the survey which were analysed. The analysis of the survey was conducted using JASP, a statistical software tool suitable for the type of quantitative analysis required for this study. Frequency distributions, box plots, and pie charts are examples of descriptive statistics that were computed to give an overview of participant demographics and the frequency of specific English grammatical constructions in their responses. In addition, a qualitative assessment was conducted on the sentences that were rephrased using the impersonal passive construction. The aim of this was to identify common grammatical mistakes or tense shifts that the participants might have made. To make sure that the conclusions were in line with the goals of the study, the results of these analyses were interpreted in the light of the research questions.

## 4. Results

This section of the thesis shows the findings of the survey in order to study the implementation and understanding of impersonal passive constructions in English among non-native students of English language and literature. The survey was constructed to evaluate how often and how efficiently students transform sentences into impersonal passive structures, providing insight into their comprehension and usage of this specific grammatical form.

Understanding how students process and rephrase sentences into impersonal passive structures is crucial for identifying their proficiency with this grammatical structure. The results of this survey will contribute to a deeper understanding of how impersonal passives are internalized by learners and will inform strategies for teaching this complex grammatical form more effectively.

The results section is organized as follows: first, an overview of the demographic characteristics of the respondents is provided; second, the overview of the frequency of certain grammatical structures in the responses is created and finally, the responses with the impersonal passive structures are analysed for grammatical and semantic correctness.

### 4.2. Descriptive statistics

The first question of the survey was related to the gender of the participants. Analysed responses to this question show a higher representation of female participants in the survey compared to male participants. Out of a total of 42 participants, 73.8% identified as Female, with 31 participants and 26.2% identified as Male, with 11 participants.

The second question of the survey asked participants about their year of study. All participants identified themselves as students of English language and literature. Analysed responses to this question show a higher representation of third-year undergraduate study participants than any other year of study. Out of total of 42 participants, 21,4% of them are first-year undergraduate students, 19% of them are second-year undergraduate students, 52,4% of them are third-year undergraduate students, 4,8% of them are first-year graduate students and 2,4% of them are second-year graduate students. The graphical representation of this analysis is provided in the distribution plot below.

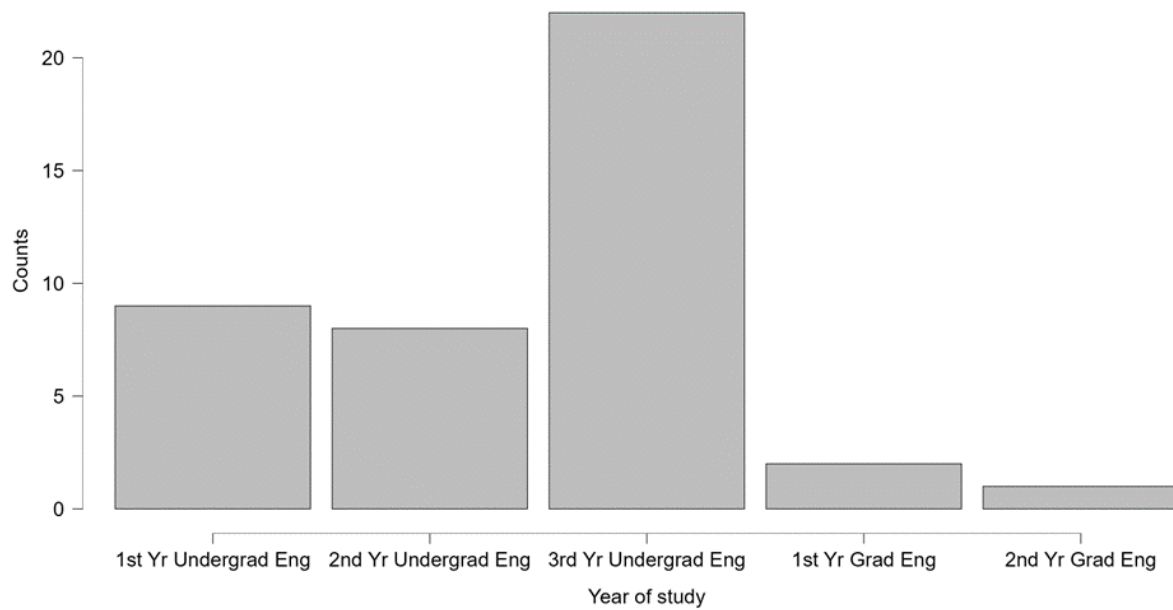


Figure 1 Distribution of Year of Study Among Survey Respondents

The third question of the survey requested that participants provide their age in numerical form. Analysed responses to this question show a higher representation of participants aged 21 years than any other age group. Out of total 42 participants, 19% of them were 19 years old, 16,7% of them were 20 years old, 33,3% of them were 21 years old, 16,7% of them were 22 years old, 9,5% of them were 23 years old, and 4,8% of them were 24 years old. The graphical representation of this analysis is provided in the distribution plot below.



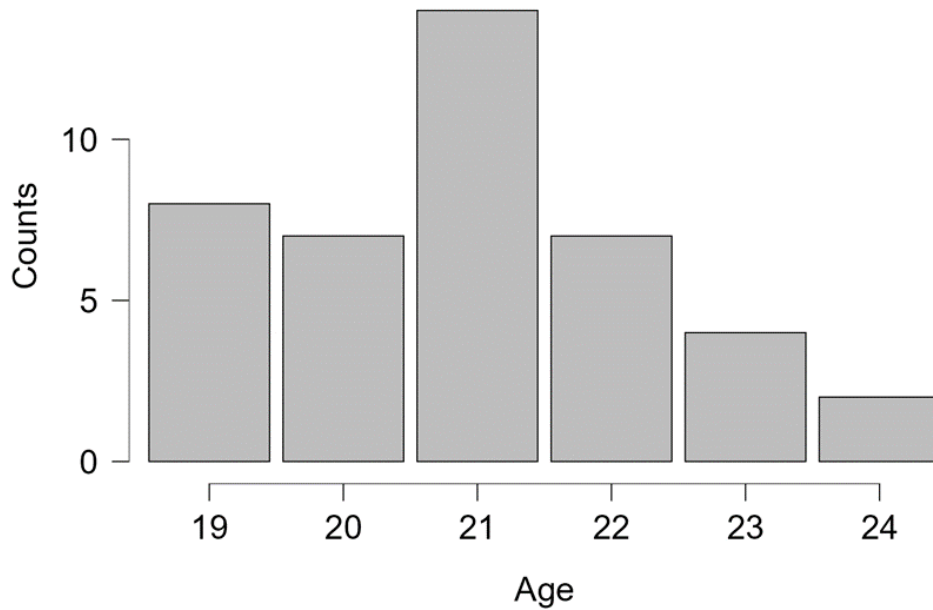


Figure 2 Age Distribution of Survey Respondents

The fourth question in the study asked participants to choose their current GPA represented by letter grades. The analysis of responses to this question reveals that participants with a GPA of B are more common than those in any other grade category. Out of a total of 42 participants, 11,9% of them selected that their current GPA equals a letter grade A, 45,2% of them selected that their current GPA equals a letter grade B, 40,5% of them selected that their current GPA equals a letter grade C, and 2,4% of them selected that their current GPA equals a letter grade D. The distribution plot below offers a graphic depiction of this analysis.

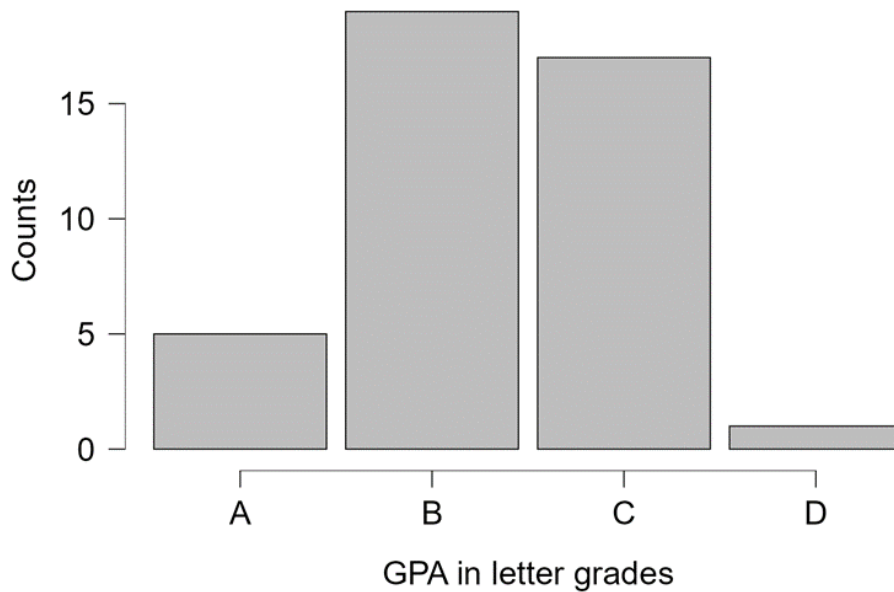


Figure 3 Distribution of Survey Responses for Current GPA in Letter Grades

#### 4.3. Survey Findings

The second part of the survey consisted of sentences that participants had to rephrase so that the meaning of the sentence stayed the same. The first sentence of this part of the survey was: “Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident”. The responses were analysed and categorized according to various grammatical voices, and the resulting frequency table was created to give a thorough explanation of the findings.

#### Frequency Table

*Frequencies for 1. Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident.*

1. Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	18	42.857	42.857	42.857
Active Voice	18	42.857	42.857	85.714
Passive Voice	6	14.286	14.286	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	42	100.000		

The table reveals that there were equal frequencies of responses preferring the "Impersonal Passive" and "Active Voice" options, each receiving 18 responses, constituting 42.86% of the total responses. Meanwhile, the "Passive Voice" option was less preferred, receiving 6

responses, which accounts for 14.29% of the total. The cumulative percentage for "Active Voice" is the highest at 85.71%, showing that the majority of participants preferred either "Impersonal Passive" or "Active Voice" constructions when rephrasing the statement.

The second sentence of this part of the survey was: “Experts consider that drugs are very dangerous”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 2. Experts consider that drugs are very dangerous.*

2. Experts consider that drugs are very dangerous.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Passive Voice	31	73.810	73.810	73.810
Active Voice	8	19.048	19.048	92.857
Impersonal Passive	3	7.143	7.143	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	42	100.000		

The majority of rephrased sentences (73.81%) fall under the Passive Voice, suggesting that the sentence is most often rephrased in a way that stresses the action (being considered dangerous) rather than the subject (experts). In contrast, 19.05% of the sentences are rephrased using Active Voice, where the experts are the ones considering the danger of drugs. The Impersonal Passive category, making up only 7.14% of the responses, reflects a less common approach where the subject and the action are generalized without directly referencing the experts. This distribution indicates that when rephrasing, there's a strong tendency to use the Passive Voice, possibly to use a more formal or generalized tone, while the Impersonal Passive is hardly used.

The third sentence in this section of the survey was: “Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 3. Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident.*

3. Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	10	23.810	23.810	23.810

*Frequencies for 3. Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident.*

3. Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Passive Voice	22	52.381	52.381	76.190
Active Voice	10	23.810	23.810	100.000
Missing	0	0.000		
Total	42	100.000		

Many rephrased sentences (52.38%) fall under the Passive Voice, suggesting that the sentence is most often rephrased in a way that stresses the action (presuming responsibility) rather than the subject (citizens). In contrast, 23.81% of the sentences are rephrased using the Active Voice, where the citizens are the ones presuming the responsibility of the government. The Impersonal Passive category just as the Active Voice takes up 23.81% of the responses, where the subject and the action are generalized often without directly referencing the citizens. This distribution suggests that, like the previous sentence, there is a tendency to use the Passive Voice when rephrasing, likely to achieve a more formal or generalized tone.

The fourth sentence in this section of the survey was: “People think that money is the most important thing in the world”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

### **Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 4. People think that money is the most important thing in the world.*

4. People think that money is the most important thing in the world.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	7	16.667	17.073	17.073
Passive Voice	26	61.905	63.415	80.488
Active Voice	8	19.048	19.512	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

Just as in the previous two examples, the most frequent category used to rephrase the sentence was Passive Voice (61.91%) with 26 responses. Meanwhile, Active Voice was used 8 times (19.05%) and Impersonal Passive was used 7 times (16.67%). Also, there was one participant who did not rephrase this sentence. This again shows a tendency of the participants to opt for Passive Voice when rephrasing a sentence.

The fifth sentence in this section of the survey was: “Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 5. Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken.*

5. Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	16	38.095	39.024	39.024
Passive Voice	19	45.238	46.341	85.366
Active Voice	6	14.286	14.634	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

Once again, Passive Voice was the most frequently used category for rephrasing, accounting for 45.24% with 19 responses, which is less than half of the participants. Close behind was Impersonal Passive, accounting for 38.1% with 16 responses and the Active Voice category was the least popular when rephrasing this sentence, accounting for 14.29% with 6 responses. Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of this sentence.

The sixth sentence in this section of the survey was: “My boss expects that the job will be done soon”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 6. My boss expects that the job will be done soon.*

6. My boss expects that the job will be done soon.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	9	21.429	22.500	22.500
Passive Voice	26	61.905	65.000	87.500
Active Voice	5	11.905	12.500	100.000
Missing	2	4.762		
Total	42	100.000		

With more than half of participants opting for the Passive Voice category (61.91%), it was the most frequently used construction for rephrasing this sentence. Less frequent was the Impersonal Passive category with 9 responses (21.43%), and the least frequent category was the Active Voice category with 5 responses (11.91%). Additionally, two participants did not provide a rephrased version of this sentence.

The seventh sentence in this section of the survey was: “Many people think that women are not as strong as men.”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 7. Many people think that women are not as strong as men.*

7. Many people think that women are not as strong as men.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	15	35.714	36.585	36.585
Passive Voice	16	38.095	39.024	75.610
Active Voice	10	23.810	24.390	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

When rephrasing this sentence, most people decided on the Passive Voice, which accounted for 38.1% of the responses (16 out of 42). Close behind, with just one response less, was Impersonal Passive, representing 35.71% of the rephrased sentences. Active Voice was used less frequently, making up 23.8% of the responses (10 out of 42). Also, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The eighth sentence in this section of the survey was: “They say that Mr Smith is a millionaire”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

**Frequency Table**

*Frequencies for 8. They say that Mr Smith is a millionaire.*

8. They say that Mr Smith is a millionaire.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	13	30.952	31.707	31.707
Active Voice	6	14.286	14.634	46.341
Passive Voice	22	52.381	53.659	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

As in most previous examples, the Passive Voice was the most commonly used construction, with 22 rephrased sentences (53.66%). Next was Impersonal Passive, which accounted for 13 responses (30.7%), while Active Voice was the least favoured, with only 6 responses (14.29%). Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of this question.

The ninth sentence in this section of the survey was: “They suppose that the two prisoners escaped”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

### Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 9. They suppose that the two prisoners escaped.*

9. They suppose that the two prisoners escaped.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	11	26.190	26.829	26.829
Passive Voice	13	30.952	31.707	58.537
Active Voice	17	40.476	41.463	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

Unlike the previous examples, the Active Voice was the most frequently used construction, with 17 rephrased sentences (40.48%). The less frequent construction used was the Passive Voice with 13 responses (30.95%) and the least used construction was Impersonal Passive with 11 responses (26.19%). Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of this question.

The tenth sentence in this section of the survey was: “Journalists reported that three people had been injured in the fire”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

### Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 10. Journalists reported that three people had been injured in the fire.*

10. Journalists reported that three people had been injured in the fire.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	12	28.571	30.000	30.000
Passive Voice	20	47.619	50.000	80.000
Active Voice	8	19.048	20.000	100.000
Missing	2	4.762		
Total	42	100.000		

When rephrasing this sentence, most people decided on the Passive Voice, which accounted for 47.62% of the responses (20 out of 42). Fewer participants decided on Impersonal Passive, representing 28.57% of the rephrased sentences. Active Voice was used least

frequently, making up 19.05% of the responses (8 out of 42). Also, two participants did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The eleventh sentence in this section of the survey was: “People claim that he is living in Croatia”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

## Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 11. People claim that he is living in Croatia.*

11. People claim that he is living in Croatia.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Active Voice	10	23.810	24.390	24.390
Passive Voice	17	40.476	41.463	65.854
Impersonal Passive	14	33.333	34.146	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

When rephrasing this sentence, many participants opted for the Passive Voice, which made up 40.48% of the responses (17 out of 42). Impersonal Passive was selected by fewer participants, representing 33.33% of the rephrased sentences. Active Voice was the least commonly used, comprising 23.81% of the responses (10 out of 42). Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The twelfth sentence in this section of the survey was: “People expect that the President will resign”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

## Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 12. People expect that the President will resign.*

12. People expect that the President will resign.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	11	26.190	26.829	26.829
Passive Voice	22	52.381	53.659	80.488
Active Voice	8	19.048	19.512	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		



Most participants rephrased this sentence using Passive Voice, accounting for 52.38% with 22 responses. Twice as fewer participants used Impersonal Passive, accounting for 26.19% with 11 responses. Active Voice was used the least frequently, accounting for 19.05% with 8 responses. Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The thirteenth sentence in this section of the survey was: “People believe that Mr. Williams moved to Croatia last year”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

### Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 13. People believe that Mr Williams moved to Croatia last year.*

13. People believe that Mr Williams moved to Croatia last year.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	18	42.857	43.902	43.902
Passive Voice	19	45.238	46.341	90.244
Active Voice	4	9.524	9.756	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

When rephrasing this sentence, most people decided on the Passive Voice, which accounted for 45.24% of the responses (19 out of 42). Close behind, with just one response less, was Impersonal Passive, representing 42.86% of the rephrased sentences. Active Voice was used less frequently, making up 9.53% of the responses (4 out of 42). Also, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The fourteenth sentence in this section of the survey was: “Very few students are thought to have passed their exams”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

### Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 14. Very few students are thought to have passed their exams.*

14. Very few students are thought to have passed their exams.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	20	47.619	50.000	50.000
Active Voice	10	23.810	25.000	75.000
Passive Voice	10	23.810	25.000	100.000

*Frequencies for 14. Very few students are thought to have passed their exams.*

14. Very few students are thought to have passed their exams.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Missing	2	4.762		
Total	42	100.000		

Interestingly, when rephrasing this sentence, most people decided on the Impersonal Passive, which accounted for 47.62% of the responses (20 out of 42). Twice fewer participants opted for Passive and Active Voice, representing 23.81% of the rephrased sentences. Also, two participants did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The fifteenth sentence in this section of the survey was: “Everybody knows that war is devastating”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

## **Frequency Tables**

*Frequencies for 15. Everybody knows that war is devastating.*

15. Everybody knows that war is devastating.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	19	45.238	46.341	46.341
Passive Voice	19	45.238	46.341	92.683
Active Voice	3	7.143	7.317	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

When rephrasing this sentence, most people decided on the Impersonal Passive and Passive Voice, which accounted for 45.24% of the responses (19 out of 42). Active Voice was barely used, with just 3 responses (7.14%). Also, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

The sixteenth sentence in this section of the survey was: “People believe that English is the most widely spoken language”. After analysing and categorizing the responses based on different grammatical voices, the following frequency table was constructed to provide a detailed breakdown of the results.

## Frequency Tables

*Frequencies for 16. People believe that English is the most widely spoken language.*

16. People believe that English is the most widely spoken language.	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Impersonal Passive	13	30.952	31.707	31.707
Passive Voice	26	61.905	63.415	95.122
Active Voice	2	4.762	4.878	100.000
Missing	1	2.381		
Total	42	100.000		

More than half of the participants decided to rephrase this sentence with a Passive Voice construction, accounting for 61.91% with 26 responses. Impersonal Passive was used less frequently, accounting for 30.95% with 13 responses. Active Voice was barely used, accounting for 4.76% with 2 responses. Additionally, one participant did not provide a rephrased version of the sentence.

#### 4.4. Impersonal Passive Usage

In formal and academic writing, impersonal passive constructions are frequently employed to communicate objectivity by eliminating the direct agent of the action. Given the significance of this structure, knowing how these sentences are put together by various writers can provide insightful knowledge about the English language's versatility and constraints.

The main goal of this analysis is to identify grammatical mistakes potentially made by participants as well as tense shifts that can change the meaning of the sentences. By evaluating these rephrased sentences, this study aims to identify patterns of common errors, shifts in tenses, and differences in the conveyance of meaning.

In the analysis that follows, sentences will be examined based on several key criteria: grammatical accuracy, tense consistency, and nuance and meaning. Each rephrased sentence will be compared against these criteria to determine its effectiveness and correctness.

When asked to rephrase the first sentence of the survey, 18 participants decided to use an impersonal passive structure. All those rephrased sentences are grammatically correct. Sentences like "It has been reported that Anna caused the accident" and "It has been reported

that Anna was the one who caused the accident" effectively convey the same basic meaning, with minor differences in emphasis on Anna being "the one" who caused the accident. The addition of "by the police" in sentences like "It has been reported by the police that Anna was the one who caused the accident" or "It was reported by the police that the accident was caused by Anna" introduces the reporting authority, adding a layer of specificity that strengthens the source of the report. However, these variations also introduce redundancy in some cases, particularly when both "it was" and the agent "by the police" are used, as in "It was reported by the police that it was Anna who caused the accident." This construction is grammatically correct but slightly wordy. When it comes to tense consistency, only 5 of those sentences maintain the original tense structure (Present Perfect) while the rest of them shift the tense of the reporting verb from the present perfect ("have reported") to the simple past ("was reported"). While the tense shift is a deviation from the original, it still produces a grammatically correct sentence. However, the shift from present perfect to simple past changes the nuance: the simple past suggests that the report was made at a specific time in the past, whereas the original present perfect suggests that the report has current relevance.

When asked to rephrase the second sentence of the survey, only 3 participants decided to use an impersonal passive structure. Although all those sentences are grammatically correct, one of them did not preserve the original tense, which in turn changed the meaning of the sentence. The sentence "It was considered by the experts that drugs are very dangerous" implies that this belief may no longer be a part of the current views of experts. In contrast, "It is considered by experts that drugs are very dangerous" accurately mirrors the original statement's present tense, indicating that this belief is currently held by experts. The sentence "It is considered by the experts that drugs are very dangerous" introduces a subtle distinction by specifying "the experts," which may imply a particular group rather than experts in general. Overall, while both the second and third sentences preserve the present relevance of the belief, the inclusion of "the" in the third sentence slightly narrows the scope of the experts discussed.

When analysing the rest of the sentences the same problems arose. While rephrasing the sentence, "People think that money is the most important thing in the world", one out of ten responses changed the tense from present to past tense, and therefore the meaning of the sentence was changed. The same problem arose with the fourth sentence, where one out of seven participants changed the present tense to the past tense. The fifth sentence, "Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken," proved to be more challenging for the

participants, with only 5 out of 16 responses maintaining the original tense. The rest of the responses either shifted to the simple past tense (“was confirmed”) or the present perfect tense (“has been confirmed”), both of which altered the meaning of the original sentence.

While rephrasing the sixth sentence, “My boss expects that the job will be done soon”, one of the participants again changed the tense from present to past tense and another one changed the word “will” to “would” consequently introducing a level of uncertainty or conditionality to the sentence. The seventh and eighth sentences of the survey did not cause any problems for most of the participants, and only one of them changed the tense of the original sentence. In the seventh sentence present tense was changed to present perfect tense and the eighth sentence’s present tense was changed to past tense.

When rephrasing the ninth sentence, “They suppose that the two prisoners escaped”, most of the participants provided accurate rephrased sentences. However, some of them shifted the original tense. In the rephrased sentences where participants shifted the tense, subtle changes in meaning and timing were introduced. For example, in the sentence “It is supposed that the two prisoners have escaped”, the use of the present perfect tense (“have escaped”) suggests that the escape may still have relevance to the present situation, adding a nuance that the original sentence lacked. This contrasts with the simple past tense “escaped,” which indicates that the event is entirely in the past with no immediate connection to the present. In the sentence “It was supposed that the two prisoners have escaped”, a tense inconsistency arises with “was supposed” (past) and “have escaped” (present perfect), creating confusion about when the supposition occurred relative to the escape. This inconsistency disrupts the clarity of the original meaning. These shifts in tense, although subtle, show how changes in verb forms can influence the perceived timing and relevance of events in a sentence.

While rephrasing the tenth sentence, “Journalists reported that three people had been injured in the fire”, one participant shifted the original past tense (“was reported”) to present tense (“is reported”) and another to present perfect (“has been injured”) subsequently altering the meaning of the sentence. Two participants changed the second part of the sentence by shifting the past perfect tense (“had been injured”) to past simple tense (“were injured”), and another participant changed it to present perfect (“have been injured”).

While rephrasing the eleventh sentence two participants changed the original present continuous tense (“is living”) to present simple tense (“lives”), which suggests a more

permanent or habitual state rather than an ongoing action. This implies that the subject generally or regularly lives in that place, rather than focusing on the ongoing nature of the action. Furthermore, one of the participants changed the first part of the sentence by shifting the present tense to the present perfect tense. This shift can introduce a sense of completion or result, suggesting that the situation started in the past and continues to influence the current state.

Rephrasing the twelfth sentence did not seem to cause problems for the participants since all but one rephrased the sentence correctly. One of them simply changed “will” to “would” which like in the ninth sentence introduces a sense of uncertainty or conditionality to the sentence. Moreover, sentences 13., 15. and 16. were successfully rephrased into impersonal passive without any grammatical mistakes or tense inconsistencies with the exception of one participant who changed the present simple tense to present perfect, which introduced a subtle yet significant shift in meaning.

When rephrasing the fourteenth sentence, “Very few students are thought to have passed their exams”, only 9 out of 20 participants rephrased it without unnecessarily shifting tenses. For instance, the original sentence, "Very few students are thought to have passed their exams," uses the present perfect tense ("have passed") to imply that the action of passing the exams has relevance or impact on the current situation. However, when rephrased to "It is thought that very few students passed their exams," the simple past tense "passed" shifts the focus only to the fact that the exams were passed in the past, without suggesting any current importance. Similarly, sentences such as "It is thought that very few students had passed their exams" introduce the past perfect tense, suggesting a specific temporal context where the passing occurred before another past event, thereby altering the original meaning and introducing potential confusion regarding the timeline of the events. These tense shifts can therefore change the emphasis and perceived relevance of the action described, changing how the information is understood and interpreted.

Lastly, it is important to note that some participants included the unnecessary determiner "the" when rephrasing certain sentences. This addition slightly narrowed the scope of the subjects discussed. Overall, it can be concluded that participants who used the impersonal passive structure did not encounter grammatical issues. However, some participants shifted tenses unnecessarily during the rephrasing process, which led to minor changes in meaning and deviated from the given instructions.

## 5. Discussion

The aim of this research was to explore how non-native English speakers, such as Croatian students of English language and literature, understand and apply impersonal passive constructions in sentences. The study's focus was to identify which grammatical constructions participants preferred to use when rephrasing sentences and to evaluate the accuracy and frequency of impersonal passive usage.

The survey results show a strong preference for passive voice constructions over active voice or impersonal passive constructions. For example, in sentences like "Experts consider that drugs are very dangerous," 73.81% of people preferred to use passive voice construction to rephrase the sentence. While only 7.14% of responses were in the impersonal passive construction. These results show that even advanced non-native English speakers tend to use more familiar grammatical structures such as passive voice instead of the less frequently encountered impersonal passive constructions. This preference for passive voice constructions agrees with the existing literature that emphasizes the difficulties of non-native speakers of English in trying to master more complex grammatical constructions such as impersonal passive. Furthermore, Blevins (2003) and Maling & Kibort (2015) highlight the complexity and ambiguity of impersonal passive constructions, which can consequently contribute to lower usage among non-native speakers. According to the results, those participants who decide to use impersonal passive construction can produce grammatically correct sentences. However, impersonal passive construction continues to be underutilized, possibly due to its formal nature and the specific contexts in which it is generally used.

When it comes to unexpected results, one of them was the high use of active voice in some sentences. The sentence "Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident" had 42.86% of sentences rephrased into active voice and the exact same percentage into impersonal passive. This could indicate that participants feel more comfortable using active voice when the subject of the action is specified or when they are able to turn a verb into an adjective. For example, many participants decided to turn the verb "suppose", from the sentence "They suppose that the two prisoners escaped," into "supposedly" to make an active voice construction such as "The two prisoners supposedly escaped".

The findings of this study imply the need for students to concentrate more on impersonal passive constructions through advanced English curricula. Given the increased processing difficulty that passive constructions present for English learners, as evidenced by longer speech onset latencies and the need for alternative strategies (Wang, 2010), it is crucial to focus on these areas. Since impersonal passives are predominantly used in technical and formal contexts, incorporating more targeted exercises into academic writing curricula could help students overcome these challenges and become more proficient in using this grammatical construction. Additionally, Wang's study suggests that focused instruction, like that provided in specialized programs like interpreting and translation, can significantly improve students' ability to produce complex passive structures, including impersonal passives (Wang, 2010).

The limitation of this study was the relatively small and unvaried sample size that only included Croatian students of English language and literature. This narrows the ability to generalise these results to other non-native English-speaking people. Furthermore, the online format of the survey may not fully reflect the speaking ability of the participants. Further studies could expand the sample size by including non-native English speakers from different countries and with different linguistic backgrounds. Furthermore, researching how and when non-native speakers choose to use impersonal passive constructions in writing and speaking tasks can procure more in-depth and general results.



## 6. Conclusion

This research has offered insight into the grammatical preferences of Croatian students of English when rephrasing sentences, especially when it comes to impersonal passive constructions. Even among advanced learners, there is a clear preference for more familiar grammatical structures such as passive voice over the impersonal passive. These results indicate that impersonal passive's complexity and formality may make it less accessible to non-native speakers, regardless of their level of proficiency.

The findings of this study are especially significant for language educators, seeing as they highlight the need for more targeted instruction and practice on impersonal passives in advanced English courses. Educators can help students get more comfortable with creating impersonal passive structures by incorporating more examples and exercises into their courses. This would ultimately improve student's academic writing skills.

Even though this study has some valuable findings to the use of impersonal passives among non-native speakers, it still had some limitations. Since it has a relatively small and homogenous sample size, future research should seek to explore those patterns in a more diverse group of learners so that the results can be generalised to a wider population.

In conclusion, this research highlights the need to direct attention to less commonly used grammatical forms in language education. It also opens the door for future studies that can further explore the complexities of impersonal passive usage among non-native English speakers and come to new findings and conclusions.

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## 8. Appendices

# Upitnik o usvajanju određenih gramatičkih konstrukcija u engleskom jeziku

U sklopu izrade završnog prijediplomskog rada provodi se istraživanje o usvajanju određenih gramatičkih konstrukcija u drugome jeziku.

Cilj upitnika je ispitati učestalost korištenja određenih gramatičkih glasovnih konstrukcija kao njihovu točnost. Podaci prikupljeni ovim upitnikom koristiti će se na povjerljiv način samo tijekom i u svrhu navedenog pisanja završnog rada.

Za rješavanje upitnika potrebno je svega nekoliko minuta Vašeg vremena. Upitnik je potpuno anonim.

Ukoliko imate bilo kakvih pitanja ili nedoumica, molim Vas da mi se obratite putem elektroničke adrese [tcerovec@student.uniri.hr](mailto:tcerovec@student.uniri.hr)

Opće informacije

Odaberite opciju koja se odnosi na vas.

### 1. 1. Spol

*Označite samo jedan oval.*

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2. 2. Koja ste godina studija?

*Označite samo jedan oval.*

- Prva godina prijediplomskog studija Engleskog jezika
- Druga godina prijediplomskog studija Engleskog jezika
- Treća godina prijediplomskog studija Engleskog jezika
- Prva godina diplomskog studija Engleskog jezika
- Druga godina diplomskog studija Engleskog jezika

3. 3. Dob

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4. 4. Procjena trenutnog prosjeka ocjena

*Označite samo jedan oval.*

- Nedovoljan
- Dovoljan
- Dobar
- Vrlo dobar
- Odličan

U sljedećem djelu upitnika molim Vas da ponuđene rečenice ponovno napišite na Engleskom jeziku tako da promijenite strukturu rečenice no značenje rečenice ostane isto.

**Re-write the following sentences so that they have the same meaning as the original.**

1. Police have reported that it was Anna who caused the accident.

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2. Experts consider that drugs are very dangerous.

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3. Citizens presume that the government is responsible for the accident.

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4. People think that money is the most important thing in the world.

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5. Astronauts confirm that the rocket was broken.

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6. My boss expects that the job will be done soon.

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7. Many people think that women are not as strong as men.

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8. They say that Mr Smith is a millionaire.

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9. They suppose that the two prisoners escaped.

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10. Journalists reported that three people had been injured in the fire.

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11. People claim that he is living in Croatia.

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12. People expect that the President will resign.

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13. People believe that Mr Williams moved to Croatia last year.

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14. Very few students are thought to have passed their exams.

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15. Everybody knows that war is devastating.

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16. People believe that English is the most widely spoken language.

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