

An Analysis of Errors in Passive Sentence Structures by Thai EFL University Students

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Abstract

Student errors are considered as a device that learners use and from which they can learn (Corder, 1967); they provide evidence of the learner's level in the target language (Gass and Selinker, 1983), contain valuable information on the learning strategies of learners (AbiSamra, 2003; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975), and also supply means by which teachers can assess learning and teaching as well as determine priorities for future effort (Richards and Sampson, 1974). Conducting error analysis is therefore one of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of analysis can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are revealed, it is possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions.

Errors in language learning, therefore, play an important role in this study. With this in mind, this study was designed to identify important features of students' errors and categorize those errors, in passive sentences produced by first-year students at a public university in Bangkok. Ninety students were given a written test prior to the end of an English class in July 2011. The test consisted of 25 pairs of nouns and verbs adapted from the test used by Simargool (2008). In order to elicit the passive sentences, 10 pairs were transitive verbs with the nouns that can be the subjects. The students were instructed to form sentences with all of the given nouns as subjects followed by the verb. The passive sentences generated by the students were then analyzed and divided into five categories: well-formed passives, malformed passives, actives, ungrammatical sentences, and non-sentences. In addition, the number and types of errors produced by high and low proficiency groups of students were identified and compared.

The findings will not only help improve understanding of causes of errors made in passive sentence construction but also contribute to the preparation of teaching materials and methodology appropriate to the students, which will ultimately enhance the students' ability to write passive sentences in English.

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Statement of the problem

Passive sentences or sentences in the passive voice are considered an important part of every English language teaching grammar syllabus (Cowan, 2008). Passive voice has been one of the topics discussed by various researchers in Thai context. For example, it is one of the errors frequently made by Thai students at Khon Kaen University as identified by Rujikiatkumjorn and Chiewkul (1989), by third-year sociology students at Srinakharinwirot University (Likitratnaporn, 2002), and also one of the errors found in opinion paragraphs written by most Thai students (Sattayatham and Somchoen, 2007). Passive is the second most frequent writing error (after the subject-verb agreement) made by a doctoral student in Animal Science Program at a Thai university (Arunsamran, Authok, and Poonpon, 2011). Moreover, according to Thep-Ackrapong (2005), passive voice is identified as one of the major conceptual discrepancies between Thai and English contributing to a great number of errors produced by the Thai students as well as problems involved in the teaching of English to Thais. In a more recent study, Simargool's (2008), on interlanguage passive construction, the passive sentences generated by Thai EFL students were divided into five groups: well-formed passives, malformed passives, actives, possible pseudo-passives, and other constructions.

For the reasons mentioned above, the researcher would like to study passive sentence structures written by first-year EFL university students in Thailand as well as to analyse and compare errors made in those passive sentences. This will not only help improve understanding of causes of errors made in passive sentence construction but also contribute to the preparation of teaching materials and methodology appropriate to the students, which will ultimately enhance the students' ability to write passive sentences in English.

1.2 Research questions

1. What are the types of errors in passive sentences written by first-year EFL students at Thammasat University?
2. What are the differences in number of errors in passive sentences written by high and low proficiency students?
3. What are the differences in types of errors in passive sentences written by high and low proficiency students?

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS: ERROR ANALYSIS

2.1. Definition of errors

According to Corder (1981, p. 152), errors are "the result of some failure of performance" and differentiated errors from mistakes in the way that errors are systematic in nature being "errors of competence" which occur in the continuum of the learning process. They are a noticeable deviation from the adult grammar of a native speaker and the result of learners' transitional competence. On the other hand, mistakes are "errors of performance" or performance errors that are either a random guess or a "slip," in that they are a failure to utilise a known system correctly.

Mistakes are neither systematic and nor significant to the process of language learning.

Like Corder, Norrish (1983, p. 7), defined “an error” as a systematic deviation that happens when a learner has not learnt something and consistently “get(s) it wrong.” Edge (1989) defined errors as forms that language users cannot correct by themselves even though they have been taught. James (1998, p.1) also identified a language error as an unsuccessful bit of language. He adds that language learners cannot correct their errors until they have additional knowledge on the topic. These errors occur in the course of the learner’s study because they haven’t acquired enough knowledge. Once they acquire additional knowledge, they will be able to correct their errors and the more errors the learners correct, the more conscious of language they will become. Moreover, it was pointed out that error is unique to humans, and error analysis is the process of determining the incidence, nature, causes and consequences of unsuccessful language.

2.2 Significance of errors in language teaching and learning

Errors have long been the obsession of language instructors and researchers. Before Corder (1967), errors were looked at as a problem that should be eradicated. However, errors are now considered as a device that learners use and from which they can learn (Corder, 1967); they provide evidence of the learner's level in the target language (Gass and Selinker, 1983); they contain valuable information on the learning strategies of learners (AbiSamra, 2003; Lightbown and Spada, 2006; Richards, 1974; Taylor, 1975); and they also supply means by which teachers can assess learning and teaching and determine priorities for future effort (Richards and Sampson, 1974). Conducting error analysis is therefore one of the best ways to describe and explain errors committed by L2 learners. This kind of analysis can reveal the sources of these errors and the causes of their frequent occurrence. Once the sources and causes are revealed, it is possible to determine the remedy, as well as the emphasis and sequence of future instructions.

According to Ellis (1995, pp. 51-54), the most significant contribution of error analysis lies in its success in elevating the status of errors from undesirability to that of a guide. Thus, errors are no longer seen as “unwanted forms,” but as evidence of learners’ active contribution to second language acquisition.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Participants

All of the first-year EFL students (90 students) in the South-East Asian Studies Program at Thammasat University participated in the study. They were studying English Course II as a compulsory subject during the first semester of 2011 academic year (June 2011 – October 2011) at Thammasat University, Bangkok. All participants speak Thai as their first language and, at the time of the test, have studied English for about 12 years since primary school.

3.2 Research instrument

The research instrument in this study consists of two main parts. The first part is a questionnaire concerning participants’ personal information such as gender, age, and

educational background. The second part is a written test consisting of 25 pairs of nouns and verbs adapted from the test used by Simargool (2008). In order to elicit the passive sentences, ten pairs are transitive verbs with the nouns that can be the subjects. To divert the students' attention from the targeted construction, the verbs provided, ordered randomly, include not only transitives, but also unaccusatives and unergatives as shown in Table 1. To avoid students' difficulties with the vocabulary, the selected words are those taught in high school. This is verified by a high school English specialist from the Ministry of Education of Thailand.

Table 1
Verbs and nouns used in the written test

Transitives	Unaccusatives	Unergatives
2. read (book, read)	1. happen (accident, happen)	3. walk (boy, walk)
4. drive (car, drive)	7. die (dog, die)	6. sleep (cat, sleep)
5. push (cart, push)	9. fall (leaves, fall)	15. fly (plane, fly)
8. hit (gate, hit)	11. expire (milk, expire)	21. stand (student, stand)
10. write (letter, write)	12. occur (mistakes, occur)	23. run (thief, run)
14. paint (picture, paint)	13. arrive (passengers, arrive)	
16. win (prize, win)	17. arise (problem, arise)	
19. sing (song, sing)	18. appear (shadow, appear)	
24. find (wallet, find)	20. disappear (stranger, disappear)	
25. steal (watch, steal)	22. rise (sun, rise)	

3.3 Data collection

The written test was given to all participants in July 2011. Prior to the end of an English class, they were provided 40 minutes to make 25 sentences from each pair of nouns and verbs given. To ensure the occurrence of the passive constructions, the students were instructed to form sentences with all of the given nouns as subjects followed by the verb. The expected constructions are 10 passives, 10 unaccusatives, and 5 unergatives. No terms referring to the targeted constructions were mentioned in the test.

4. RESULTS

4.1 Participants

The first part of the instrument concerning participants' personal information such as gender, age, and educational background was analyzed.

Table 2
Number of students and their gender

Male	Female	Total
36	54	90

The subjects participating in the study were all the first-year students in the South East Asian Studies program who studied English Course I (EL 171) in the first semester of the academic year 2011 at Thammasat University, Bangkok. Ninety students were present on the day of the test. The majority of the students (60%) were female while the rest (40%) were male students.

Table 3
Number of students in each group and their grades in English

High proficiency students			Low proficiency students				Total
A (80% and more of the total score)	B+ (75%-80% of the total score)	B (70%-75% of the total score)	C+ (65%-70% of the total score)	C (60%-65% of the total score)	D+ (55%-60% of the total score)	D (50%-55% of the total score)	
10	14	17	16	13	8	12	90

For the purpose of comparison in this study, all of the ninety students were divided into two main groups according to their assigned grades in EL 171: grade A, B+ and B students (41 students or 45.56%) were classified as high proficiency students, whereas C+, C, D+ and D students (49 students or 54.44%) were classified as low proficiency students.

4.2 Findings

All the sentences produced by the students were checked by the researcher and verified by an English native speaker, analyzed, and then classified into different categories to answer each of the research questions as follows:

1. What are the types of errors in passive sentences written by first-year EFL students in the South-East Asian Studies Program at Thammasat University?
2. What are the differences in number of errors in passive sentences written by high and low proficiency students in the South East Asian Studies Program?
3. What are the differences in types of errors in passive sentences written by high and low proficiency students in the South-East Asian Studies Program?

The ten sentences produced by each student were checked and grouped into five categories: well-formed passives, malformed passives, actives, ungrammatical sentences, and non-sentences as shown in Table 4.

Table 4
Results from the ten given transitive verbs

Constructions	Instances	Percentages
Well-formed passive	450	52.27
Malformed passive	240	27.87
Ungrammatical sentences	87	10.10
Non-sentences	58	6.74
Active	26	3.02
Total	861	100

From the ten transitive verbs given to the 90 students, 900 passive sentences were expected. However, only 861 instances (95.67%) were actually produced and thus used in the analysis since some items (4.33%) were left blank. Of the 861 instances, more than half (450 sentences or 52.27%) were well-formed passive sentences, followed by malformed passives (240 instances or 27.87%), ungrammatical sentences

(87 instances or 10.10%), non-sentences (58 instances or 6.74%), and correct active sentences (26 sentences or 3.02%).

Table 5
Number of students producing each construction

Construction (Number of sentences)	0-4 instances		5-7 instances		8-10 instances	
	High	Low	High	Low	High	Low
Well-formed passive (450)	3	35	14	10	24	4
Malformed passive (240)	47	89	0	5	0	0
Ungrammatical sentences (87)	19	29	0	2	0	0
Non-sentences (58)	6	28	0	1	0	0
Active (26)	3	11	1	0	0	0

4.2.1 Well-formed passive sentences

Well-formed passives refer to the sentences with the nouns given as subjects followed by the correct form of verb to be and past participle form of the main verbs. The sentences can be in any tense since it is not specified in the instruction and not the main concern of the study.

Table 6
Number of students producing well-formed passive sentences

No. of sentences	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
High	1	-	1	1	-	3	4	7	7	9	8
Low	13	8	7	3	4	5	1	4	2	2	-
Total	14	8	8	4	4	8	5	11	9	11	8

Of all 450 correct passive sentences, more than two-thirds (68.89% or 310 sentences) were produced by the high proficiency students, while 31.11% (140 sentences) were produced by the low proficiency group.

Table 6 shows that eight high proficiency students could produce all 10 well-formed passive sentences, whereas none of the students in the low proficiency group could do so. On the other hand, only one student (1.11%) in the high proficiency group could not produce any well-formed passive sentences, while 13 low proficiency students (14.44%) could not produce any well-formed passive sentences.

4.2.2 Malformed passive sentences

Malformed passive sentences are the sentences consisting of the subject (the noun given) followed by a correct form of verb to be but a wrong form of the main verb given. That is, the main verb can be in one of the following forms:

- : a past simple form (instead of a past participle) of an irregular verb (such as “drove” instead of “driven”, “wrote” instead of “written”, “sang” instead of “sung”, and “stole” instead of “stolen”)

- : a wrong –ed ending of an irregular verb (such as “readed” instead of “read”, “drived” instead of “driven”, “hited” or “hitted” instead of “hit”, “writed” instead of “written”, “wined” instead of “won”, “singed” instead of “sung”, “finded” instead of “found”, and “stealed” instead of “stolen”)

- : other wrong past participle forms (such as “rode” instead of “read”, “droven” instead of “driven”, “pushen” instead of “pushed”, “hiten” or “hitten” instead of “hit”, “wroten” or “writen” instead of “written”, “painten” instead of “painted”, and “stroen” or “stolen” or “stealen” instead of “stolen”)

- : a base form of a verb (such as drive, push, write, paint, win, sing, find, steal)

- : a present participle (or –ing) form of a verb (such as reading, driving, hitting, writing, painting, singing, finding, and stealing)

More than one fourth (27.87% or 240 instances) of the sentences produced by the students was grouped as malformed passive sentences. Of all the 240 malformed instances, 77.5% (186 instances) were produced by low proficiency students, whereas only 22.5% (54 instances) were written by high proficiency ones.

As shown in Table 7, the highest number of malformed passive sentences was in the form of a verb to be and the base form of the main verb given (87 instances), followed by a verb to be and the present participle form of the verb (48 instances), verb to be and other wrong past participle forms (43 instances), verb to be and an –ed form of irregular verbs (39 instances), and verb to be and past simple forms of irregular verbs (23 instances).

Table 7

Types and number of errors in malformed passive sentences

Types of errors	High proficiency students	Low proficiency students	Total
v. to be + base form	13	74	87
v. to be + verb -ing	3	45	48
v. to be + wrong v.3	19	24	43
v. to be + wrong –ed endings	10	29	39
v. to be + past simple form of irregular verbs	9	14	23

Of the 861 sentences, the highest number of malformed passive sentences (10.10%) was written in the form of verb to be followed by the base form of the verb. Of all 87 sentences, only 13 of them (14.94%) were produced by high proficiency students, while the rest (74 sentences or 85.06%) were written by low proficiency group. The verb “paint” was used most frequently in the base form in 17 sentences, followed by “push” (16 sentences) , “find” (14 sentences), “steal” (13 sentences), “win” (9

sentences), “sing” (7 sentences), “write” (6 sentences), and “drive” (5 sentences). For example, “The picture was paint by the artist.”, “The cart was push by him.”, “My wallet was find last week.”, “The watch was steal by thief.”, “The prize is win today.”, “Elvis song was sing in last party.”, “The letter is write by me.”, and “My car is drive on the road.”

As shown in Table 7, 48 malformed passives with the verb to be and the main verb in present participle form were produced. It is quite interesting to note that none of the A students produced this error and only one B+ and two B students did so. The remaining 45 instances were produced by the low proficiency group.

Table 8
Frequencies of the present participles

Verbs	painting	driving	singing	reading	hitting
Instances	9	8	8	5	4
Verbs	writing	pushing	winning	finding	stealing
Instances	3	3	2	2	2

For the second group of malformed passives—a verb to be plus the main verb in the present participle form as shown in Table 8, the verbs which were written in this pattern most often were “paint” (9 occurrences) followed by “drive” and “sing” (8 occurrences each). The verbs written in this pattern least often (twice each) were “win,” “find,” and “steal.” Examples of this kind of error were “This picture is painting by my sister.”, “The car is driving on the road.”, “The song is singing by superstar.”, “The wallet is finding by my son.”, “The prize was winning by Chai.”, “The watching is stealing by mom.”, “The letter was writing by that boy.”, “The book is reading by that boy.”, and “The gate is hitting by Susan.”

Table 9
Number of problematic instances per type of past participle

Types of past participle	Verbs given in the test	Problematic past participles
1. –en ending	drive, write, steal	89 (45.88%)
2. irregular verbs	read, hit, sing, find, win	68 (35.05%)
3. –ed ending	push, paint	37 (19.07%)

Apart from the present participles of the verbs, the highest problematic instances (45.88%) concern the –en past participles, followed by the irregular verbs and those with –ed endings. The frequencies of each problematic past participle are illustrated in Table 9.

Table 10
Frequencies of the problematic past participles

Verbs	written	stolen	sung	painted	driven
Instances	43	28	24	19	18
Verbs	pushed	found	hit	won	read
Instances	18	16	15	10	3

Among the malformed passives in the data, “write” is the most difficult, and “read” the least difficult for the participants.

From Table 7, forty-three instances (4.99% of the 861 sentences produced) of malformed passives with the verb to be followed by a wrong past participle form were produced. Of the 43 instances, the low proficiency group produced 24 instances of this error (55.81%), while the high proficiency group produced 19 instances (44.19%). The verbs and example sentences which appeared in the wrong past participle forms were as follows:

: “written” and “wroten” (for “write”) in “The letter was written by my friend.” and “The letter was wroten by my son.”

: “hitten” and “hiten” (for “hit”) in “The gate was hitten by my dad.” and “The gate was hiten.”

: “droven” (for “drive”) in “That luxury car is droven by the rich.”

: “stollen”, “stealen”, and “stroen” (for “steal”) in “The watch was stollen by the thief.”, “The watch was stealen.”, and “The watch was stroen.”

: “pushen” (for “push”) in “The cart was pushen.”

: “rode” (for “read”) in “The book was rode.”

: “painten” (for “paint”) in “The picture was painten.”

The next group of malformed passives was a verb to be followed by the main verbs ending with –ed (instead of their irregular forms). The verbs incorrectly used in this pattern ordered in the number of frequency were “stealed” and “drived” (7 times each), “writed” (6 times), “hitted” (5 times), “hited” and “singed” (4 times each), “readed” and “finded” (2 times each), and “wroted” and “wined” (1 time each). Some examples of sentences were “My watch was stealed by thief.”, “The car was drived by myself.”, “My letter was writed by me.”, “My gate was hitted by stranger last night.”, and “The song was singed by singer.”

For the malformed sentences consisting a verb to be and a past simple form of irregular verbs, only four irregular verbs were wrongly used in this pattern with “sang” as the most frequently found, followed by “wrote”, while “drove”, and “stole” having the same frequency. Some examples of sentences were “The song was sang by Celine Dion.”, “A car was drove by father.”, “My watch has been stole by him.”, and “A love letter was wrote by Susan.”

4.2.3 Ungrammatical sentences

Ungrammatical sentences refer to those consisting of a subject and a main verb given in the test instructions but are considered ungrammatically correct in English. Eighty-seven ungrammatical instances (10.10%) were produced by the participants. They can fall into one of the following patterns:

: the sentences with a subject and a main verb in an active voice but no object was included; for instance, “The cart pushes.”, “The watch steals.”, and “The prize won.”

: the passive sentence structures with an object, such as “The gate was hit my hand.”

: the passive sentences with a subject-verb agreement error as in “The letter were written.”

: other forms of ungrammatical sentences

Table 11
Types and number of errors in ungrammatical sentences

Types of errors	High proficiency students	Low proficiency students	Total
Active sentences without an object	20	50	70
Passive sentences with an object	2	4	6
Passive sentences with agreement errors	2	1	3
Others	-	8	8

The ungrammatical sentences with a subject and a main verb in an active voice but no object constituted 8.13% (70 instances) of all the 861 sentences produced. Of the 70 errors of this type, the high proficiency group produced only 20 instances (28.57%), while the low proficiency group produced 50 instances (71.43%). In active sentences without an object, the verbs which were used most often were “win” followed by “push”, “drive”, “sing”, “find”, “hit”, “read”, “write”, “paint”, and “steal”, respectively. For example, “The prize wins in game.”, “The cart pushes.”, “The car can’t drive if you forget a key.”, “The song sings by Michael.”, and “The wallet finds.”

In the second group of ungrammatical sentences—passive constructions with an object, only six instances of this pattern were produced. Interestingly, only one verb “hit” was used in all of the six instances. Examples of this error were “The gate was hit a student.”, “The gate was hit me.”, “The gate is hit me.”, “The gate was hit me at noon.”, “The gate is hit my hands.”, and “The gate was hit my hand.”

Passive sentences with an error in subject-verb agreement were also classified as a subcategory of ungrammatical patterns. They followed passive sentence patterns with a verb to be followed by a past participle form of the main verb, but the verb to be did not agree in number with the subject; thus, they were judged ungrammatical. Only three passive sentences (0.35%) with the subject-verb agreement error were produced. The three sentences were “The letter were written.”, “The book are read by the old man.”, and “Bus gates is hit by a crazy man.”

Other forms of ungrammatical sentences which were found in the writing of only two students in the low proficiency group consisted of two kinds of error. The first one was a correct form of verb “to have” followed by an infinitive form of the verb such as “The cart has push.”, “The picture has paint by me.”, “The prize has win.”, and “The song has sing for me.” The other subgroup contained a correct form of verb “to be” and a present form of the main verb such as “The wallet is finds.” and “The car is drives.”

4.2.4 Non-sentences

Non-sentences consisted of strings of words which did not follow any pattern of grammatically correct English sentences. In other words, neither a subject nor a finite

verb was found. All the fifty-eight instances (6.74%) produced by the students can be classified into three different subgroups:

- : a noun followed by a verb in an –ing form
- : a noun followed by a past participle form of the verb
- : others.

Table 12
Types and number of errors in non-sentences

Types of errors	High proficiency students	Low proficiency students	Total
Noun + verb -ing	-	6	6
Noun + v. 3	2	3	5
Other forms	7	40	47

Table 12 shows that 58 instances (or 6.74% of the total number of sentences) were produced by the students. Of all the 58 instances, six instances (0.7%) of a noun and a verb in an –ing form (with neither a verb to be nor an object) were produced only by low proficiency students. Only four verbs were written with this kind of error: “drive” and “paint” (twice each), followed by “read” and “write” (once each). For example, “The car driving by father”, “The picture painting by artist.”, “The book reading by student.”, and “The letter writing by my friend.”

Five non-sentence constructions (0.58%) with a noun followed by a past participle form of the verb were produced by the students. The verb “paint” was used in this pattern twice followed by “write”, “sing”, and “find” (once each). Examples of this kind of error were “The picture painted by me.”, “The letter written by Marco.”, “This song sung by famous singer.”, and “My wallet found by my mom.”

The majority of non-sentences (47 instances or 81.03% of this kind of error) were written in various forms. They all consisted of the noun and the verb given in each item but without any consistent or systematic pattern of errors. A lot larger number of these errors were produced by the low proficiency students than the high proficiency group. That is, forty non-sentences (85.11% of the total of 47 errors) were written by the low proficiency group. Some examples of non-sentences without main verbs are “Prize upon you win.”, “I prized was won.”, “This prize is a win of prizes.”, “This prize my friend is win.”, “The book read is my father.”, and “The wallet is finds.”

4.2.5 Active sentences

Table 13
Types and number of errors in active sentences

Types of errors	High proficiency students	Low proficiency students	Total
Active sentences	8	18	26

Although the test instructions clearly asked (both in Thai and English) the students to write complete sentences from the subjects and the verbs given, using the given nouns as subjects, 26 complete active sentences (or 3.02% of the total number of sentences) were produced by the participants. Among the 26 active sentences, only 8 sentences (30.77%) were produced by high proficiency students, while more than two-thirds (18

sentences or 69.23%) by low proficiency ones. Some examples of active sentences are “That gate hit me!”, “The gate is hitting me.”, “He’s read a book.”, “She buy the letter because she will write letter to her dad.”, and “I’m writing a letter to my mother who lives in Canada now.”

5. CONCLUSION

The present study aims at investigating passive sentence structures produced by Thai EFL learners, classifying error types as well as analyzing their causes. The data from Thai students in the study are elicited from a written test, in which the subjects were instructed to write sentences from 25 pairs of nouns followed by transitive, unaccusative, and unergative verbs given.

The findings show that the influence or interference of the students’ mother tongue can be detected in several aspects. Thai students may have some difficulty with and may be not very familiar with the English passive sentence structure and morphological changes since Thai is an isolating language, in which various grammatical categories, including number, case, tense, aspect, and mood are not marked by morphological inflections, but are implicit and can be identified by their syntactic environments. In terms of word order, Thai is an S-V-O and Head-Modifier language. Instead, “thuuk” has become a grammatical passive marker in Thai, which occurs with all types of passive verbs (Prasithratsint, 2006).

It is hoped that this study will not only offer useful insights on the influence of L1 on the English passive construction, but will also lead to further studies that will improve the study of the passive constructions. Moreover, the study can benefit the teachers, lesson planners, as well as materials developers in the lesson or material preparation and instruction. They should be aware of the errors the students are likely to make and thus put an emphasis on the areas that can be problematic for the students.

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