

# TRACK DIAGRAMS

by David Paxman

Teaching students of other languages to write English is like teaching someone to juggle. The student no sooner masters one simple skill than the teacher throws him another ball to keep in the air, and the process goes on until the student keeps all the balls in the air or starts dropping so many that the process must either start again or slow down enough to allow him to practice longer. Students must often wonder exactly how many new balls are going to be thrown in, and that uncertainty causes apprehension which soon results in another failure. What a student needs is a mechanism for holding the balls in the air from time to time, until he can get ready for the next one to drop again.

One day when my advanced ESL students were pressing me for a more understandable explanation of the different kinds

of verbs and their respective objects and complements (I had been throwing them more and more alternatives), I created a simple graphic that has since helped my students learn to keep track of those alternatives and thus to understand and write better. I call this scheme a track diagram, since it is based on the idea that if a student can work through his sentence left to right and see in the graphic the choices he has to make at each point as well as the consequences to which those choices commit him, he can solve one problem at a time and in the right order. The student works through it as if going down a track which contains switches at various points. I have experimented with making the diagram more complex by making it include more possibilities but have learned that it loses its effectiveness when I do so. If it gets too

SUBJECT	(MODAL) [NEXT VERB IN BASE FORM]	(HAVE) [NEXT VERB IN PAST PART.]	(BE) [NEXT VERB IN PRESENT PART.]
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**PASSIVE VOICE:**

SUBJECT (object of active voice sentence)	(MODAL)	(HAVE)	(BE)	BE AND PAST PART OF TRANS. VERB	(By + subject of active voice sentence)
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complex, it becomes one more ball to keep in the air.

Before the scheme is used, the student should understand the basic verb sequence of English sentences, an area that causes many problems for foreign students, and yet which is one of the most predictable and elegantly simple aspects of English. The sequence is included here in the simplified scheme and follows these familiar principles: First, the choice of any verb (except main verb) in the sequence is optional (except as governed by meaning and time). Second, the verb choices in declarative sentences occur in the same order. Third, the first verb in the sequence is the only one that is inflected for tense. All others will be in the root form or the past or present participial form.

The diagram follows:

Once students have mastered the sequence and the switches, they are ready to see graphically the makeup of the passive voice and its relationship to the transitive verb-object sentence: Object becomes subject, a form of "be" is mandatory, and rather than being followed by the present participle, be is followed by the past participle of the transitive verb. The subject of the active voice sentence may become the object of the preposition "by" and be placed after the verb:

