

The Effects of the Amount and Type of Simplification on Foreign Language Reading Comprehension

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In its written and spoken forms, language simplification has been found to facilitate comprehension by language learners. This study investigated whether variations in linguistic simplification, in terms of amount and/or type, entail differences in the level of message comprehensibility. The subjects of this study consisted of 200 Omani male and female learners of English. They were divided into five equal groups instructed to read five different versions of a reading text, and asked to answer a 25-item multiple-choice achievement test. The results showed that (a) simplification (in general) has a positive effect on reading comprehension; (b) type of simplification, rather than its amount, is what counts for the positive effect; (c) too much simplification (in amount, type, or both) may not necessarily lead to a better influence on reading comprehension; and (d) lexically simplified texts may produce readers who will score higher than readers of other types of texts: authentic, syntactically simplified, fully simplified, etc. Indications for FL material writers, teachers, and future research are included.

INTRODUCTION

It is well-established in the literature on second language acquisition (SLA) that comprehension of a message by the language learner is an essential condition in the acquisition process. That is, "input" in SLA has to be comprehensible for acquisition to take place (Krashen, 1980). In addition, many researchers in SLA believe that the cognitive processes involved in language acquisition are simplicity oriented. One manifestation of simplification is making the confusing variety of linguistic data more manageable to the language learner by fitting it into a framework of categories and rules that the learner already possesses or has already formulated (Ellis, 1985; Littlewood, 1984; Richards, 1975; Widdowson, 1975).

But, what makes input comprehensible? It is widely assumed that input becomes comprehensible to SL learners through the simplifications (or modifications) made in native speech or authentic writing. One of the registers that have been investigated for simplification in native speech is "foreigner talk" (speech of native speakers of a language to non-native speakers). Long (1983, p. 126) considers foreigner talk a source of comprehensible input to the language learner. He found it to be characterised by linguistic and interactional modifications that supposedly lead to better comprehension on the side of the learner. Examples of these modifications are: slower rate of speech delivery, word paraphrasing, use of a fewer number of S-nodes¹ per sentence/utterance, etc. Snow and Hoefnagel-Hohle (1982) analysed

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