In the Name of God

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The Effect of Lexical Simplification and Elaboration of ESP Texts on the Reading Comprehension of Civil Engineering Students at Shahid Bahonar University of Kerman

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To My Dear Children…

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Abstract

The present study aimed to determine whether the rate of reading comprehension increases by applying the two techniques of modification on ESP texts. It tends to simplify and elaborate unknown lexical items of ESP reading texts in order to explore whether these techniques have any contribution to reading comprehension. And, if they both do, which one is more effective in enhancing the rate of reading comprehension. This dissertation met these research aims through an extensive study of relevant literature and the implementation of practical research. The practical study was carried out through presenting three civil engineering-related texts in one of the forms of original, simplified and elaborated to 359 Civil Engineering students, and comprehension was assessed by a 16-item multiple-choice test. The data analysis was done by applying One-Way ANOVA and multiple comparisons of Post Hoc tests. The findings provided that lexical simplification and elaboration are both helpful in enhancement of the comprehension rate. It indicated that replacing simpler words for more difficult ones or keeping the more difficult words intact and adding more linguistic items to clarify them can be regarded as two modification techniques that are useful for ESP text comprehension. However, using multiple comparisons of Post Hoc tests-Scheffe test - indicated that there was no significant difference between simplification and elaboration in enhancing the rate of reading comprehension as subjects did nearly the same in simplified and elaborated reading passages. However, since elaborated texts preserve the authenticity and naturalness of the language to a quite degree, they are preferable to the simplified texts.

Key Terms: Reading comprehension, ESP, Lexical modification, Simplification, Elaboration

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List of Abbreviations

EFL: English as Foreign Language

ESL: English as Second Language

ESP: English for Specific Purposes

PET: Preliminary English Test

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

1.1. Preview

English is an important medium for general communication across the nations. But with the advancements in scientific, technical and economic activity in the world, its importance is growing more as an international language. John and Dudley-Evans (1991) announce that the demand for English for specific purposes (e.g., English for science and technology, English for business, vocational ESL) continues to expand over the world. Also, Richards (1976) says that the only and most important skill required to access professional information in various subject fields is reading comprehension. Especially for students in an academic setting to make use of materials in different areas of science and technology, reading ability has been found to be the most required skill. Parallel to this, Beasley (1990) stated that acquiring the ability to read academic texts is of supreme importance for the university students of English as a second language and as a foreign language.

Regarding the significance of acquiring the reading ability by students for academic purposes, steps have been taken to identify the problematic factors underlying reading process. Researchers interested to pursue these steps have to first specify whether comprehension failure is

because of linguistic complexity of original, authentic texts or something else. Grabe (1991) argues that some knowledge areas that have influence on the efficiency of reading process are structural and vocabulary knowledge. That is, readers with less command of such areas of knowledge will get into trouble processing written texts. Campbell (1987, p.132) said that "linguistic difficulty would more affect the less advanced learners' enjoyment of texts and their development of fluent reading skills in the target language". The above-mentioned arguments illuminate that there exists a relationship between poor reading and linguistic complexity and pedagogical forces must join to remove or to at least lessen reading-specific problems of students.

In reading skill, however, one of the elements in the process of reading comprehension that plays an important role is the text. Studies in this regard have shown that lexical and syntactic elements are two features of texts that highly influence reading comprehension. Such finding has helped researches to work on the idea of making the texts more comprehensible through some modification techniques.

1.2. Statement of the Study

The crucial purpose of reading is its comprehension. However, sometimes the reader may not be able to comprehend the whole intended meaning. Therefore, there may be some difficulties on the part of the reading texts so that they hinder or decrease the amount of comprehension.

On the other hand, with rapid growth of science and technology, it is important that students comprehend the texts related to their specialties in English. Therefore, texts that are needed in English for Specific Purpose (ESP) courses should be selected with great care. Therefore, the additional research in the effect of applying the various techniques of modification on the rate of reading comprehension seems to be necessary.

1.3. Purpose of the Study

This study aims to determine whether the rate of reading comprehension increases if the two techniques of modification- simplification and elaboration- are applied on ESP texts. It tends to simplify and elaborate unknown lexical items of ESP reading texts in order to explore whether these techniques have any contribution to

reading comprehension. And, if they both do, which one is more effective in enhancing the rate of reading comprehension.

1.4. Significance of the Study

This study follows the previous researches that studied the effect of simplification and elaboration on the rate of reading comprehension. It is worth noticing, however, that practical studies done on modification of texts mostly have been in EFL/ESL area. Young (2001), for example, took into account the relative effects of two types of input modification - simplification and elaboration- on Korean high school students' reading comprehension. Six English reading passages in one of three forms -(a) baseline, (b) simplified, (c) elaborated- were presented to 180 students, who were divided into two proficiency levels (i.e., high proficiency and low proficiency). Comprehension was assessed by an 18-item multiple-choice test, which included items for assessing (a) general, (b) specific, (c) inferential comprehension. The results supported the suggestion that input should be modified in the direction of elaboration rather than by artificial simplification, because elaboration retains more native-like qualities, and is at least equally successful, if not more successful than simplification in improving comprehension.

However, in ESP scope, Nabifar (2002) conducted a similar research on simplification and elaboration but on computer students at Iran University of Science and Technology. This study replicates Nabifar's (2002) work, but with Civil Engineering students. In fact, this study aims to investigate this problem in engineering sciences. The results of the study can be used for comparing the effect of these techniques in different university courses in Iran context.

On the other hand, the findings of this study can be applied in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) material preparations based on the assumption that lexical modification can significantly enhance the rate of comprehension.

1.5. Research Questions

Regarding the purpose of the research, the present study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. Is there any significant relationship between the performance of Iranian ESP students on original and simplified versions of a reading comprehension text?

2. Is there any significant relationship between the performance of Iranian ESP students on original and elaborated versions of a reading comprehension text?

3. Is there any significant relationship between the performance of Iranian ESP students on simplified and elaborated versions of a reading comprehension text?

1.6. Hypothesis

Following the research questions, one null hypothesis was posed: There is no significant relationship between the performance of Iranian ESP students on original, simplified, and elaborated versions of a reading comprehension text.

1.7. Limitations of the Study

Every study has a set of limitations (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), or "potential weaknesses or problems with the study identified by the researcher" (Creswell, 2005, p. 198). A limitation is an uncontrollable threat to the internal validity of a study. The subjects of the study were from a single field of study, i.e., civil engineering, and the selected texts were from the same field in order to control the background knowledge of the students.

1.8. Delimitations of the Study

Delimitations refer to what the researcher is not going to do (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005), which in turn, may impact the external validity or generalizability of the results of the study. Since the area of modification of reading texts is a broad one, covering all aspects of modification is not possible in just one study. Thus, the present study focuses on two techniques of simplification and elaboration and among various levels of modification on lexical one in order to limit the scope of the research.

1.9. Theoretical Framework

Reading requires vocabulary recognition and comprehension at its most fundamental level (Koda, 2005; Laufer, 1997). If a reader cannot access the meaning of a critical amount of vocabulary in a text, the reading process will break down (Laufer, 1997). Much research has shown a correlation between vocabulary size and reading comprehension scores in ESL learners (Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Koda, 2005; Laufer, 1992). Much of this research has shown that as subjects demonstrate greater general vocabulary knowledge, their reading comprehension scores tend to increase.