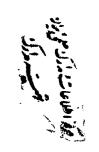IN THE NAME OF GOD

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The Impact of Simplified and Interactive Input on Reading Comprehension of Iranian EFL Learners

By
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Thesis
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts
in TEFL

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Tehran, Iran
Jan 2008

عنوان پایان نامه: تاثیر تادیلات تعاملی بر توانایی خواندن متون انگلیسی دانشجویان ایرانی	
نام دانشجو: محمد	نام خانوادگی دانشجو: کریمی حرم ابادی
رشته تحصیلی: زبان انگلیسی	شماره دانشجویی: ۸۴۴۱۱۰۱۲
استاد راهنما: آقای دکتر عنانی سراب	استاد مشاور: آقای دکتر فاطمی
استاد داور: آقای دکتر بالغی زاده	تعداد واحد پایان نامه:۴
تاریخ شروع پایان نامه: فروردین ۱۳۸۶	تاریخ اتمام پایان نامه: دیماه ۱۳۸۶
تاریخ دقیق دفاع از پایان نامه:۱۳۸۶/۱۰/۲۵	نمره پایان نامه به عدد: ۱۹/۵
نمره پایان نامه به حروف: نوزده و نیم	معادل: عالی
آدرس و شماره تلفن دانشجو: ولنجک- خوابگاه برادران ۰۹۱۲۳۸۰۶۲۵۴ ـ	

چکیده پایان نامه:

اهداف: بررسی نقش سودمند مباحثات معنایی در درک مطلب زبان انگلیسی

روش های اجرا: آزمایشی

خلاصه پایان نامه:

در این تحقیق تأثیر تعدیلات تعاملی را در درک مطلب خواندن زبان انگلیسی مورد بررسی قرار گرفته است.

نتایج: تعدیلات تعاملی بیشترین تأثیرمفید را روی درک مطلب زبان دارد.

کلید واژه ها: - ۱- ورودی   ۲- تعدیلات   ۳- تعدیلات تعاملی

استاد راهنما: آقای دکترعنانی سراب	استاد مشاور: آقای دکتر فاطمی	استاد داور: آقای دکتر بالغی زاده
نام و نام خانوادگی:	نام و نام خانوادگی:	نام و نام خانوادگی:
امضاء:	امضاء:	امضاء:

۹۸۳۴۸۹

Abstract

To date, a plethora of empirical evidence has been obtained showing the benefits of negotiation of meaning for comprehension of oral input. This study, however, aimed to contribute to current understanding of the role of second language (L2) input modification in comprehension of written material. Three research questions guided this investigation: (1) Does interactional modification of input promote the comprehension of English written input by Iranian adult EFL learners? (2) Does linguistic modification of input promote the comprehension of English written input by Iranian adult EFL learners? (3) Is there any difference between the two strategies of input modification (linguistic and interactional) in terms of the comprehension of written input?

The treatment consisted of three successive sessions, and 41 Iranian EFL students hosted this study under three conditions: Unmodified written input [U], Linguistically Modified written input [LM], and Interactionally Modified written input [IM]. Comprehension, then, was assessed using ten multiple-choice questions shortly after each condition. The three types of treatment were carried out three times over three successive sessions. The data were analyzed using repeated measures ANOVA and paired samples t-test with a Bonferroni correction made on the study-wide alpha level. The results showed that negotiation of the meaning of unmodified input led to the highest comprehension among the three conditions. In turn, comprehension was superior in the linguistically modified input condition to that in the unmodified input condition. The findings lend weight to the idea that modifications to input should be in the direction of interaction rather than linguistic simplification.

Key words: Input, linguistic modifications, interactional modifications

Dedicated to my wonderful mother &

In loving memory of my father

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I give thanks and praise to God, who has been with me from the very beginning and through every step of my educational career. Without Him I am nothing, and with Him I am able to accomplish anything. This study was supported by loving family members, loyal and knowledgeable friends, and supportive professors. I wish to extend my sincere and heartfelt appreciation to all of those who have aided in the realization of my ardent aspirations:

To Dr. Anani Sarab, my advisor and committee chairperson, for his resourceful advice and interminable encouragement. His amazing depth of knowledge is an inspiration to all of his students. He is wise, patient and persistent; he pushes all of his students to go above and beyond what they think they can do. Thank you for persevering with me as my advisor throughout the entire thesis process. To Dr. Fatemi Jahromi and Dr. Baleghizadeh, my adorable professors and members of my thesis committee, for their invaluable comments and expert guidance. To both of you, I express much fervent gratitude for your essential contributions to this project. I cannot thank you enough for your time, talent, dedication and open-door policy. On more than one occasion they dropped their own work to explain the more esoteric terminology of research techniques, and to recommend the reference that would serve as the guide for this research.

To Shahid Beheshti University Language Arts Department which provided insightful education and uniquely supportive environment, I am greatly indebted.

My thanks also go to sophomore EFL students at Tafresh Azad University who allowed me to interrupt their lives for the sake of my research- a special thanks to Rouhollah Sharifi, the instructor of the classes and long-time friend.

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EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

FT: Foreigner Talk

IM: Interactionally Modified

LM: Linguistically Modified

L2: Second Language

NNS: Non-Native

NS: Native Speaker

SL: Second Language

SLA: Second Language Acquisition

TEFL: Teaching of English as a Foreign Language

TL: Target Language

U: Unmodified

UG: Universal Grammar

WHO: World Health Organization

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

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1.1 Introduction

All types of data from a target language that the learners are exposed to and from which they learn are called "input". To date much foreign and second language research has focused on input comprehension, under the influence of the hypotheses that assume a relationship between the comprehension of the input and its contribution to the acquisition process. Written input through reading materials is one, if not the most important, source of input in EFL situations. The written world surrounds us daily, therefore the ways through which learners can promote their comprehension of written texts have become the focus of interest of many researchers. (e.g. Palinesar and Brown, 1984; Paris, Wasic, and Turner, 1991). Since reading comprehension is intrinsic to understanding much of the input that learners are exposed to, teachers must have a clear methodology for developing reading comprehension skills. Nuttall (1996) considers three kinds of class organization: *the individual mode*, *the teacher fronted mode*, and *the group work*. Among these three, the third one has been stressed as the most fruitful one.

It has been widely acknowledged that input should be comprehensible if it is to help the process of SLA. (Krashen, 1981, 1982, 1985, and 1994). In order to make input comprehensible several methods have been proposed. Krashen (1985) suggested two solutions: first the use of context by the learner and second the use of simplified input by the teacher. The other way to make input comprehensible is through, as Long (1983, 1985), proposed negotiation of meaning. According to Long (1985, 1996) the most valuable way in which input is made comprehensible is through interactional

adjustments. These are the attempts of learners and their conversation partners to overcome comprehension difficulties so that incomprehensible or partly comprehensible input becomes comprehensible through meaning negotiation. In these negotiations, problem utterances are checked, repeated, clarified, or modified in some way (lexically, phonologically, morpho-syntactically) so that they are brought within the optimum i+1 level. In short, Long's proposition is that input simplification has a role in making input comprehensible, but he maintains that interactive input is a more crucial factor than non-interactive input in SLA. Ellis (1990) mentions some of the interactional modifications as being clarification request, confirmation checks, comprehension checks and self repetitions. All in all, research has shown that cooperative learning can have a significant positive effect on students' achievement, attitudes, and social relations particularly if it includes both group goals and individual accountability (Johnson and Johnson, 1989; Slavin, 1990). Cooperative learning also makes the processes more active as students discuss tasks with one another. Through cooperative activities students provide elaborative explanations to one another that give them a deeper understanding of what has been taught (Palincsar and Brown, 1984; Webb, 1985).

Vygotsky (1978) maintained that socially interactive learning is critical to cognitive development, and that thought processes do not develop in isolation. He stated: "Social interaction is a prerequisite to learning and cognitive development."

Krashen (1982) does not deny the importance of meaningful interactive communication among students as a useful element in cognitive development and second language acquisition. He, however, believes that the only role that the speaker's output plays is to provide a further source of comprehensible input.

As a variation of cooperative learning, collaborative reading can offer promising set of strategies for L2 reading comprehension and development. Social acceptability is high on an adolescent's list of priorities. The feeling of self worth can be further enhanced by the contribution that is made by the student with a learning disability to an overall group effort. A cooperative learning experience can actively engage a learner in the learning process that might otherwise be passive when working independently. Students with reading disabilities gain feelings of acceptability and self worth by contributing to the success of the group, while receiving the help that they require to learn to be a successful reader (Klingner & Vaughn, 1998). Therefore, in the current study the effects of interactionally modified input through collaborative reading vis-à-vis the pre-modification of reading material will be examined.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Many schools and language teaching institutes are currently facing serious problems related to providing students with quality education. So the provision of quality education is not only favorable but clearly mandated. One option for teachers, as shown by research results is the different approaches through which they can make a text more comprehensible and the second is the ways through which they can run reading classes. In many commercially published reading materials as well as texts that teachers prepare by themselves, input tends to be *"pre modified"* (i.e. manipulated with regard to its level of difficulty prior to the moment when the reader is confronted with it.). In classrooms where reading instruction is used as a way to promote language proficiency, such as in second or foreign language classes and in primary schools, the simplification of written input may prove counterproductive.

That is if texts are stripped of all that is new and unknown, they may be useful as input for comprehension only, but not as input for learning.

As alternatives to the simplification of input, other kinds of modifications have been suggested to be applied to reading materials, elaboration being one of the most prominent (Yano, Long, and Ross, 1994). This kind of pre-modification deals with lexical and syntactic complexity, through clarification of message content and structure and the addition of redundancy. Some empirical evidence is available that shows elaborated texts are as comprehensible as simplified texts (Parker and Chaudron, 1987; Yano et al. 1994). On the other hand, some empirical evidence exists that shows pre-modifications, of any kind they be, have a negative effect on comprehension (Derwing, 1996; Ehrlich, Avery, & Yorio, 1989).

Simplification and elaboration may further miss their target in that they only work for a portion of the readers they are supposed to support. Many course designers have a fairly homogenous target group in mind when developing reading materials. But in many classrooms, learners may differ widely in terms of such things as language proficiency, reading proficiency, learning styles, world knowledge, etc. So the same text may be too easy or too difficult for some students. It is up to the teacher to compensate for this through providing opportunities for interaction and negotiation of meaning.

Negotiation of meaning refers to the joint efforts that interlocutors make in oral or written interaction to deal with problems of message comprehensibility (Pica, 1994; Varonis & Gass, 1985). Pica (1994) defined negotiation of meaning as:

> The modification and restructuring of interaction that occurs when learners and their
> interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message
> comprehensibility, whether repeating a message verbatim, adjusting its syntax,

changing its words, or modifying its form and meaning in a host of other ways. (p. 494)

A major problem in peer-to-peer and group learning in foreign language classes has been the creation of meaningful, comprehensible L2 input and output in classroom interaction. True communication may not be occurring even though students are engaged in group learning activities. An obstacle to peer-group learning in foreign language classes is the lack of mutual accountability for shared material. Even when students are working in small groups, mutual sharing of material and knowledge is not assured. Students who are accustomed to traditional, individually competitive classroom practices must be trained to think in terms of group achievement (Cohen, 1994; Slavin, 1995). Krashen (1985, 1988) stressed the importance of cooperative learning as a social, interdependent endeavor, in which second language acquisition can ensue as a product of comprehensible input provided by peers. Vygotsky (1978) also believed that learning and cognitive development do not transpire in isolation, but rather result from individuals sharing experiences and prior knowledge.

Also, if the only emphasis is on speaking without some accountability for content and comprehension among the participants, the product of so-called communicative activities in the foreign language class is reduced to mimicry or decontextualized patterned response.

Since how useful negotiation of meaning can be in reading instruction remains largely an open question, this study is going to investigate whether negotiation of meaning can be a compensatory device for pre-modification of written texts. In other words, the results of this study can provide evidence for the interaction hypothesis.

1.3 Research questions

The intent of this research is to answer the following questions:

1. Does interactional modification of input (pair-work) promote the comprehension of English written input by Iranian adult EFL learners?

2. Does linguistic modification of input promote the comprehension of English written input by Iranian adult EFL learners?

3. Is there any difference between the two strategies of input modification (linguistic modification and interactional modification) in terms of the comprehension of written input?

1.4 Research hypotheses

The specific hypotheses that will be tested in this study are as follows:

Null Hypothesis 1: There will be no significant difference between reading comprehension scores of the learners who read the interactionally modified material and those who read the unmodified texts.

Alternative Hypothesis 1: The learners who read interactionally modified texts will outperform those who read the unmodified texts.

Null Hypothesis 2: There will be no significant difference between reading comprehension scores of the learners who read the linguistically modified texts and those who read the unmodified texts.

Alternative Hypothesis 2: The learners who read linguistically modified texts will outperform those who read the unmodified texts.

Null Hypothesis 3: There will be no significant difference between reading comprehension scores of the learners who read the interactionally modified material and those who read the linguistically modified texts.

Alternative Hypothesis 3: The learners who read interactionally modified texts will outperform those who read the linguistically modified texts.

1.5 Rationale of the study

This study has been designed under the assumption that a clearer understanding of the multiple complexities inherent in L2 input modifications and their effect on the comprehension of written material will enable the language teachers to adapt their instruction to the diverse needs of individual learners, and thereby achieve greater instructional quality. Conceivably a broader pathway to reading mastery in a new language will also be useful in tailoring pedagogical strategies to accommodate the varying needs of the individual learners. To this end, cooperative learning can open fulfilling horizons for the learners as to how to deal with problems of input incomprehensibility.

One variation of cooperative learning that offers itself as a platform for communicative activities is reciprocal teaching, a series of strategies pioneered by Palincsar and Brown (1984, 1986, and 1988) to improve reading skills of poor English speaking readers. Through these activities, students construct their knowledge of material based on prior knowledge and experiences, but with the additional input of others' prior knowledge and experiences (Tharp & Gallimore, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). By working together, students expand their knowledge base by cooperatively sharing and exploring the new material (Anderson, 1978).

Reciprocal teaching activities in the foreign language classrooms have been shown to increase students' oral communication skills, vocabulary acquisition, and a sense of efficacy in using the foreign language (Ligeron, 1993; Oxford, 1994). Also a marked decrease in anxiety in speaking the target language, and an increased retention of vocabulary when the learners are required to narrate a story to partners in small-

group learning pods have been reported (Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1992). Interaction among L2 students in the classroom may be facilitated by the use of cooperative learning activities. The value of cooperative learning in the school setting is well documented (Johnson & Johnson, 1994; Slavin, 1995). Johnson & Johnson (1994) maintained that the documented success of socially interactive learning activities forms one of the major social-psychological tenets of current research. Cooperative learning has also been proven to be of value in foreign language classrooms by providing more opportunities for students to speak the second language. The interdependency and collaborative efforts among group members have been shown to enhance the L2 learning experience (Colville-Hall, 1992; Dornyei, 1997; Holt, 1993; Kessler, 1992; Oxford, 1997; Szostic, 1994).

Paired Reading is yet another approach that utilizes the peer affect to gain a benefit. Paired reading is a type of instruction that pairs two students (usually a skilled reader with a less skilled reader). Paired reading provides the one-to-one instruction that is vital to the successful outcomes that so many students and parents hope for. One-to-one instruction is limited on the teacher-to-student level due to time constraints and monetary factors (Nes, 2003).

Although the merits of interactive reading have been shown to be indisputable, the case for linguistic simplification of written material tends to be shaky. On the one hand, there has always been a belief that linguistic modifications of the majority of textbooks and 'graded readers' through the manipulation of the range of structures and vocabulary items they contain enhances comprehension and thus learning (Blau, 1982; Brown, 1987; D. Johnson, 1981; Kelch, 1985; Klare, 1974; Leow 1993, 1997a; Loxterman, Beck, & McKeown, 1994; Lucas, 1991; Long & Ross, 1993; Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Tsang, 1987). At the same time, however, other research studies