The Effect of Syntactic Simplicity and Complexity on the Readability of the Text

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Abstract—The purpose of this study is to investigate the effect of syntactic simplicity and complexity on the readability of the text. To achieve this, a set of standard reading comprehension passages were syntactically modified to develop three different versions of the same text (i.e., reduced, original, expanded) at different readability levels. A number of 257 senior Iranian EFL students participated in the study. The participants were divided into three proficiency levels of high, mid, and low, each taking the three different versions of the same text. The results revealed that there was no significant difference among the high proficient students' performance on the three versions. However, there were significant differences among the mid and low proficient students' performance on these versions. The results, therefore, indicate that syntactic complexity may create comprehension problems for mid and low proficient students, but not for high proficient ones. The results of this study can be useful for language teachers, syllabus designers and test developers in selecting suitable texts matched to the learners' ability level.

Index Terms—readability, syntactic simplicity, syntactic complexity, text accessibility

I. INTRODUCTION

Readability or "text difficulty" has been a major area of concern for all those who need to establish the appropriacy of a given text for a pedagogic purpose (Fulcher, 1997). Predicting accurate readability of text is of paramount importance to language practitioners to ensure that the input to which L2 readers are exposed matches their processing ability and provides the basis for the noticing, comprehension and intake of the L2 (Crossley, Greenfield, & McNamara, 2008). The readers are unlikely to adequately decipher the author's intended meaning if the readability level of texts exceed the readers' ability level (Badgett, 2010). Readability is a complex cognitive phenomenon. "The cognitive load of a text for a reader hinges on the characteristics of a text like lexical choice, syntactic and semantic complexity, discourse level complexity as well as on the background of the user" (Sinha, Sharma, Dasgupta, & Basu, 2012, p.1142). Reading comprehension, of course, does not merely depend on text variables, but it depends on reader variables as well. However, as the reader variables like background knowledge, motivation, previous reading experience, etc. are beyond the control of the teacher, text variables have received the most attention. (Fulcher , 1997).

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Readability of a text has been defined as the comprehensibility or the ease with which readers are able to read and understand a written text (Oakland & Lane, 2004; Badgett, 2010). It refers to how well a reader is able to comprehend the content of a particular text through reading. Studies have shown that easy to read texts enhance comprehension, retention, reading speed and reading persistence (Sinha, et al., 2012). In its broader sense, readability refers to the comprehensibility of written text (Homan, Hewit, & Linder, 1994). Readability describes the combination of structural and lexical difficulty of a text, as well as referring to the amount of new vocabulary and any new grammatical form present. The readability of text is one of the main criteria which should be taken into account when selecting texts to be used in the classroom (Berardo, 2006). Authors and material developers employ a variety of approaches and materials to assist L2 readers by making the texts more comprehensible. One such tool is the use of readability formulas which provide an indication of text readability based on the word and sentence length found in the text (Crossley, Allen, & McNamara, 2011). There have been, however, many criticisms leveled against these formulas due to their limited scope of data, low reliability, measuring surface-level features (i.e., syntax and vocabulary), and lack of credibility (Oakland & Lane, 2004) and ignoring comprehension factors (Crossley et al., 2011). Further, these formulas are text-based and do not take into account the reader-based and author-based factors (Kasule, 2011).

An area related to text readability is that of simplification which results in shorter sentences, deletion or rephrasing of complex structure and the use of low-frequency vocabulary in an attempt to increase overall text comprehensibility or make it more readable (Long & Ross, 1993 cited in O'Donnel, 2009). The purpose of simplified text is to provide L2 readers with texts which are more accessible and more comprehensible (Crossley, et al., 2011). According to Anani Sarab and Karimi (2008), the objective of simplification is to create language which can be better understood by non-native readers of English texts. Simplification, the most common type of modification, involves decreasing the linguistic complexity of syntactic construction and lexical items (Long, 2007 cited in O'Donneil, 2009). A number of studies (e.g. Crossley & McNamara, 2008; Leow, 1997; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994) have indicated that L2 readers

better understand simplified texts in comparison with the unmodified versions of the same texts. Leow (1997) argued that simplification of input contributes to the L2 learners' linguistic system by providing more grammatical information, and thus facilitates comprehension in the reading process By the same token, Yano et al. (1994) indicated that simplified texts lead to a better comprehension of texts in comparison to authentic texts. The L2 readers benefit more from simplified text because it provides more comprehensible input and because it is lexically, syntactically, and rhetorically less difficult than authentic texts (Crossley & McNamara, 2008).

Pedagogically simplified texts, albeit better understood by L2 readers, are not without some undesirable side effects. According to O' Donnel (2009), as a result of simplification, readers are denied access to lexical, linguistic structure and authentic models of language in which linguistic and cultural elements are presented. It may also have a negative impact on language acquisition since it affects linguistic element and content of text. Simplified texts, in fact, deprive learners of opportunities to learn the natural forms of language (Anani Sarab & Karimi, 2008). These texts also lack the cohesiveness of authentic texts because they are created using readability formulas which cut word and sentence length and delete connectives to shorten the intended texts (Crossley, Louwerse, McCarthy, & McNamara, 2007).

Syntactic complexity refers to the range of forms that surface in language production and the degree of sophistication of such forms (Ortega, 2003, cited in Lu, 2008). It is one of the major factors which make a text less readable or difficult. An important factor associated with making a text syntactically difficult and more complex is sentence length which is measured in terms of average sentence length in words, number of clauses, letters, and syllables (Agnihorti & Khanna, 1992). Of course, there are a variety of other factors such as word difficulty and language structure, text structure, discourse style, genre, background knowledge, familiarity with the content, level of reasoning required, format and layout of text, and length of text which interact to influence the complexity of a particular text. (Hess & Biggam, 2004). In addition, elaboration, coherence and unity, audience appropriateness, quality of the writing and interestingness are other factors which influence text difficulty and accessibility (Graves & Graves, 2003).

There are a few studies which suggest that complex structures may not hinder comprehension in the reading process. For example, Anderson and Davison (1988) believed that the more complex structures are not necessarily harder to understand if the context contains discourse antecedents for some phrases which the syntax marks as special. Similarly, Crain and Shankweiler (1988) showed that complex structures may not impede comprehension, rather these structures may facilitate comprehension if used in contexts that meet the propositions on their use. Another study conducted about syntactic complexity and its relation to text comprehension revealed that "syntactic simplicity may not be an aid, but a hindrance to comprehension since simplified syntax may decrease explicit textual cohesion" (Carrell, 1987, P. 30).

It follows that investigating the difficulties EFL students encounter in reading process is of great significance. One of the most important factors contributing to students' success in reading process relates to the selection of texts at appropriate difficulty level. Thus, establishing text difficulty is relevant to English teachers and syllabus designers who wish to select appropriate materials for learners at variety of ability levels and other purposes. They also need to know whether pedagogically simplified texts enhance learners' performance in reading. This study, therefore, intends to shed some lights on the effect of syntactic simplicity and complexity on the readability of the text which may facilitate or impede comprehension process by making a text syntactically more readable or less readable. To investigate this problem and achieve the purpose of the study, the following research questions were proposed:

1. Is there any difference in the performance of Iranian high proficient EFL students on different versions of the same text at different readability levels?

2. Is there any difference in the performance of Iranian mid proficient EFL students on different versions of the same text at different readability levels?

3. Is there any difference in the performance of Iranian low proficient EFL students on different versions of the same text at different readability levels?

III. METHOD

A. Participants

A number of 257 EFL students participated in the study. They were all Iranian male and female EFL undergraduate students. All the participants were over the age of 22 and they were senior EFL students. 139 of these participants participated in the pilot study which took place in two stages, 131 participated in the validation process, and the rest of the students served as the sample of the actual study.

B. Instruments

Two instruments were utilized in the study. The first one was a standard language proficiency test, namely, TOEFL which was used to serve as an indicator of participants' proficiency level and as a criterion to validate the two newlydeveloped tests. The second test was a set of standard reading comprehension texts from which two other versions with different syntactic characteristics were developed resulting in three different sets of reading comprehension passages.

C. Procedure

The first step of the study was to develop three syntactically different reading comprehension tests. To accomplish this, a set of standard reading comprehension passages matched to the students' language ability level were selected

from an original TOEFL. In the next step, these passages were syntactically modified to develop two other versions of these texts. In modifying the texts, a number of syntactic criteria such as readability level, average sentence length, number of sentences, number of relative clauses, types of sentences, etc. were taken into consideration and the texts were modified as follows:

The first version or more readable version (reduced) was developed by splitting up long and complex or compoundcomplex sentences in the original version into short and simple sentences in order to lower the readability levels of the texts. The syntactic characteristics of this version are presented in Table 1.

TABLE 1.

	THE SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE REDUCED VERSION								
Syntact	tic Indicator		passage 1	Passage 2	Passage 3				
1	Fog Index reada	bility level	8.23	10.76	8.4				
2	average sentence length		12	12.91	9.77				
3	number of sentences		24	26	31				
4	number of words		288	310	303				
5	number of relative clauses		2	3	0				
6	number of passiv	ve verbs	5	8	2				
7	types of	simple	19	1	1				
	sentences: compound		0	1	1				
		complex	4	8	1				
		compound-complex	0	0	0				

The second version (original) was not modified and remained intact. The syntactic characteristics of this version are presented in Table 2.

TABLE 2.

	THE SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE ORIGINAL VERSION.							
Synta	ctic Indicator	passage1	Passage 2	Passage 3				
1	Fog Index readability level		11.69	13.81	13.01			
2	average sentence length		18.6	23.92	20.26			
3	number of sentences		15	24	15			
4	number of words		279	305	304			
5	number of relative clauses		5	4	6			
6	number of passive v	verbs	3	3	4			
7	types of	simple	5	5	7			
	sentences: compound		0	1	2			
		complex	10	5	4			
		compound-complex	0	4	2			

The third version or less readable version (expanded) was developed by combining simple, short and compound sentences in the original version in order to form complex or compound-complex sentences in an attempt to increase the readability levels of the texts. The syntactic characteristics of this version are shown in Table 3.

	THE SYNTACTIC CHARACTERISTICS OF THE EXPANDED VERSION.							
Syntacti	c Indicator		Passage 1	Passage 2	passage 3			
1	Fog Index readabili	ty level	19.56	19.56	16.09			
2	average sentence le	ngth	37	32.1	26.76			
3	number of sentence	8	10	12				
4	number of words	296	321	321				
5	number of relative clauses		12	10	10			
6	number of passive v	verbs	6	8	4			
7	types of	simple	1	0	0			
	sentences:	compound	0	2	1			
		complex	5	5	6			
		compound-complex	4	3	5			

TABLE 3.

It should be pointed out that vocabulary and content were held constant across the three versions. The texts were modified only syntactically, i.e., the focus was mainly on sentence reduction and sentence expansion.

Pre-testing: The reduced and expanded versions of the tests were pre-tested with two samples of students whose characteristics were similar to those participating in the actual study to ensure that the items have not been affected by syntactic modification of the texts and that no clues have been provided which may help students get the correct answer. The results of item analysis performed on these tests revealed that a number of items did not function satisfactorily. The deficient items were identified and modified. Then, the new versions of tests were again pretested with samples of 32 and 38 students, respectively. The item analysis revealed that all the items except two or three functioned satisfactorily. These deficient items were again revised.

Reliability of the tests: The reliability indexes of the reduced and expanded versions, computed using K.R.21 formula of reliability, turned out to be .73 and .76 for reduced and expanded versions respectively.

Criterion-Related Validity: To establish the validity of the tests, students' scores on these tests were correlated with their scores on the criterion measure (TOEFL) which was administered along with the reduced and expanded versions. A sample of 68 took the reduced versions and 63 took the expanded versions of the texts. The validity of the tests computed using Pearson's Product Moment Correlation Formula turned out to be .71 and .74 for the reduced and expanded versions respectively. The reliability and validity of the tests are shown in Table 4.

I ABLE 4.					
THE RELIABILITY AND VALIDITY OF THE READING TESTS.					
Variable	reduced	expanded			
reliability: r (KR-21)	.73	.76			
validity: r xy	.71	.74			

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In the next step, these three different versions were administered to a sample of approximately 257 subjects. 88 of these participants took the reduced form, 91 took expanded form, and 78 took original form. In addition to these three versions of the same texts, students in each group took the language proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL). Therefore, each student had two scores: One on the TOEFL, and the other on one of the three different versions.

To achieve the purpose of the study and answer the research question, the subjects had to be divided into three homogeneous proficiency levels of low, mid, and high. To this end, the Standard Deviation and the Mean of the students' scores on TOEFL were computed. The results are shown in Table 5.

TABLE 5.						
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS FOR TOEFL.						
Variable	Ν	SD	Х			
reduced	88	15.42	50.7			
original	78	14.82	50.11			
expanded	91	16.08	49.15			

The participants in each group were divided into three proficiency levels by taking SD and of each group, i.e., the participants whose TOEFL scores were between half SD above and half SD below mean ($\pm 1/2$ SD) were taken as mid proficient group, those obtaining scores above + 1/2 SD as high proficient, and those obtaining scores below - 1/2 SD as low proficient group. The number of participants at each level and their mean scores on each version are presented in Tables 6, 7 and 8.

TABLE 6

		version	Ν	
5	High proficient	reduced	27	11.48
eve		original	24	12.04
Ц		expanded	29	10.75

		version	Ν	
el	Mid proficient	reduced	36	9.88
eve		original	34	10.23
Г		expanded	36	8.94

TABLE 8.

	THE LOW PROFICIENT LEVEL						
		version	N				
Ы	Low proficient	reduced	25	7.12			
eve		original	21	7.04			
		expanded	26	5.38			

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the subjects at each proficiency level, three separate one-way ANOVA were carried out as follows:

TABLE 9.

ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR HOMOGENEITY OF HIGH PROFICIENT LEVEL.						
Source of Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	Fcrit	
Between Groups	2	124.7448	62.3724	1.3436	3.11	
Within Groups	77	3574.4552	46.4215			
Total	79	3699.2000				

ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR HOMOGENEITY OF MID PROFICIENT LEVEL.						
Source of variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	Fcrit	
Between Groups	2	69.3011	34.6505	1.5413	3.09	
Within Groups	103	2315.6046	22.4816			
Total	105	2384.9057				

TABLE 10.

UNE-WAY ANOVA FOR HOMOGENEITY OF LOW PROFICIENT LEVEL								
Source of Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	Fcrit			
Between Groups	2	107.4929	53.7464	.6741	3.13			
Within Groups	69	5501.6182	79.7336					
Total	71	5609.1111						

The above Tables reveal that in all the three levels, the F ratio did not equal or exceed the F critical value implying that there are no significant differences among the participants at each proficiency level and that they are homogeneous in terms of language proficiency.

IV. RESULTS

In order to come up with reasonable answers to the research questions, the students' performance on the three different versions of the same texts at each proficiency level had to be compared. Therefore, three separate One-Way ANOVA were run in order to determine whether there were significant differences among the three groups (i.e., reduced, original, expanded) at each proficiency level. These analyses are discussed below.

To answer the first research question, a One-Way ANOVA was carried out to compare the performance of the high proficient students on the reduced, original, and expanded versions. The results of this analysis are shown in Table 12.

TABLE 12.

ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR SDRCT BY HIGH PROFICIENT LEVEL.							
Source of Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	F crit		
Between Groups	2	26.3325	13.1663	2.2647	3.11		
Within Groups	77	447.6550	5.8137				
Total	79	473.9875					

Table 12 shows that the F ratio did not exceed the F critical implying that there is no significant difference among the high proficient students on the reduced, original and expanded versions of the tests. Therefore, the first null hypothesis could not be rejected because the high proficient students' did not perform significantly differently on the three versions of the same texts.

To answer the second research question, another One-Way ANOVA was carried out in order to compare the performance of mid proficient students on the three versions of the tests. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 13.

ONE-WAY ANOVA FOR SDRCT BY MID PROFICIENT LEVEL.						
Source of Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	F crit	
Between Groups	2	31.5322	15.7661	5.0189	3.09	
Within Groups	103	323.5621	3.1414			
Total	105	355.0943				

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As the Table shows the F ratio exceeded the F critical value implying that there are significant differences among mid proficient students' performance on the reduced, original, expanded versions. Therefore, the second null hypothesis is safely rejected. A post-hoc analysis, Scheffe test, was conducted to find out where the differences lay. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 14.

TABLE 14. SCHEFFE TEST G G G r r r ррр Group 3 2 1 Mean 8 9 4 4 4 Grp 3 9.8889 Grp 2 10.2353 Grp 1 * Denotes groups significantly different at the .05 1 = original 2 = reduced 3 = expanded

The Table shows that the mid proficient students in the original group performed significantly differently from those in the reduced and expanded groups.

To answer the third research question, another One-Way ANOVA was run in order to compare the low proficient students' performance on the three tests. The results presented in Table 15 reveal that F ratio exceeded the F critical value implying that the three groups performed significantly differently from one another. Therefore, the thirds null hypothesis is also safely rejected.

ONE-WAY ANOVA BY LOW PROFICIENT LEVEL .							
Source of Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F	Fcrit		
Between Groups	2	48.1982	24.0991	12.8161	3.13		
Within Groups	69	129.7462	1.8804				
Total	71	177.9444					

TABLE 15. ONE-WAY ANOVA BY LOW PROFICIENT LEVEL							
Variation	D.F	SS	MS	F			
1	2	40 1000	24.0001	12.01/1			

A Scheffe Test was conducted to find out the location of differences among the three groups. The results of this analysis are presented in Table 16.

TABLE 16.							
SCHEFFE TEST							
			G	G	G		
			r	r	r		
			р	р	р		
	Mean	Group	3	2	1		
	5.3846	Grp 3					
	7.0476	Grp 2	*				
	7.1200	Grp 1	*				
* Denotes groups significantly different at the .05							
1 = original $2 = reduced$ $3 = expanded$						d $3 = expanded$	

The Table indicates that the reduced and original groups performed significantly differently from the expanded group.

V. DISCUSSION

The purpose of the study was to investigate whether different versions of the same text at different readability levels produced any significant differences among the EFL students' performance in reading comprehension tests. The results of the study revealed that there were no significant differences among the high proficient students' performance on the three different versions of the same texts. This means that these students performed similarly better on the three syntactically modified texts. Therefore, pedagogically modified texts were not effective in ameliorating high proficient learners' comprehension and, in fact, these students could benefit from textual cohesion and complex grammatical relations within the text to decipher the author's intended meaning. However, with regard to mid and low proficient, the results indicated that the students' performance on the original and reduced versions of the texts was significantly different from their performance on the expanded version. This means that unlike the high proficient level, the students at the mid and low levels performed better on the original and simplified versions which were considered to be more readable than the expanded one. Thus, syntactic modification in the form of shortening sentences and lowering the readability level of text promote elementary and intermediate level readers' comprehension of reading material. These results are in line with a recent study conducted by Baleghizadeh and Borzabadi (2007 cited in Anani Sarab & Karimi, 2008) who found that linguistic modifications were more helpful for low proficient learners and that the high proficient learners did not benefit from text simplification. Therefore, simplified texts could be conducive in L2 instruction for lower and mid proficient learners. The results of this study are in contrast to those which suggested that syntactic complexity was not a hindrance to readers' comprehension in the reading process (e.g., Agnihorti & Khanna, 1992).

VI. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study will provide language teachers with useful information as to the difficulty level of the materials to be presented to learners at different proficiency levels. For example, the language teachers will take into account the types of texts (i.e., authentic vs. simplified) to use in the classroom and will definitely use authentic text for pedagogic purposes at advanced levels without any linguistic simplifications. However, for mid and low proficient learners, they may need to modify the texts to match them to the learners' ability level. The EFL language teachers and language testers will also be able to consider the difficulty level of a single-sentence test items by ascertaining their readability levels using special readability formulas. Syllabus designers will also be able to select appropriate materials at a variety of ability levels to be included in the students' text books.

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