

## **The Use of Simplification as a Teaching Strategy at University Level: A Comparative Study**

**Asst. Prof. Dr. Hussein Ali Ahmed**  
*College of Art -University of Mosul*

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### **Abstract:**

In their attempt to drive foreign language teaching skills home and make the teaching materials more memorable on the part of learners, instructors everywhere resort, whether consciously or unconsciously, to the use of a variety of simplification techniques. Simplification is a strategy adopted by instructors in foreign language teaching so as to reduce the new language to a small set of general properties to cope with the learner's preference of reduced linguistic means for the sake of better assimilation of the teaching material, avoidance of errors, and increasing fluency. It is used as an effective teaching strategy almost every time and everywhere. The present paper aims at pinpointing the variation in the use of simplification, via a number of closely related techniques, by two samples of instructors specialized in teaching linguistics and literature at university level. As such, it is hypothesized that there are no significant differences between the two samples of instructors in their use of different simplification techniques in their teaching of the subjects of their specialization at university level. Yet, the outcomes of the practical part of the research show the availability of such a difference. Accordingly, the hypothesis concerning this aspect of the topic under investigation is rejected. The research further hypothesizes that each sample of instructors resorts to those simplification techniques that better fit the model of instruction followed in the teaching of the subjects of specialization, whether linguistics or literature. In this respect, the outcomes of the field work comply with the the relevant hypothesis, which is duly accepted. The research paper ends with some concluding remarks and pedagogical implications.

## استخدام التبسيط كأسلوب للتدريس في المرحلة الجامعية: دراسة مقارنة

أ.م.د. حسين علي احمد  
كلية الآداب - جامعة الموصل

### ملخص البحث :

في محاولة منهم لصقل مهارات اللغة الأجنبية وجعل المواد التي يقومون بتدريسها أكثر تنكراً من قبل طلبتهم، يلجأ تدريسيو اللغات الأجنبية، سواء أكانوا مدرّكين أم غير مدرّكين باستخدام مجموعة متنوعة من آليات التبسيط.

يعد التبسيط استراتيجية يتبناها تدريسيو اللغات الأجنبية بغية تقليل اللغة الجديدة الى مجموعة صغيرة من الخواص العامة وبشكل يتطابق مع تفضيل المتعلمين للوسائل اللغوية المبسطة من أجل الاستيعاب الأفضل للمادة الدراسية، وتجنب حدوث الأخطاء، وزيادة الطلاقة. كما أنها تستخدم كأستراتيجية تدريس فعالة في كل زمان ومكان.

يهدف البحث الحالي الى تحديد التباين في استخدام إستراتيجية التبسيط من خلال عدد من الآليات المرتبطة بها عن قرب من قبل عيّنتين من التدريسيين المتخصصين في تدريس الأدب واللغة في المرحلة الجامعية، وعليه يفترض البحث عدم وجود فوارق ذات دلالة بين عيّنتي التدريسيين في استخدامهم لآليات التبسيط المختلفة في تدريس المواد ضمن تخصصهم، بيد أن نتائج البحث في جزئه العملي تؤكد وجود مثل هذا الفارق.

وعليه تمّ رفض الفرضية ذات العلاقة بهذا الجانب من البحث، كما يفترض البحث بأنّ كل مجموعة من التدريسيين في عينة البحث تلجأ الى استخدام تلك الآليات التي تتناسب بشكل أفضل مع الأنموذج المتبع في تدريس المواد ضمن تخصصها، وهنا تتوافق نتائج البحث العملي مع ما تمّ افتراضه وتكون الفرضية ذات العلاقة مقبولة طبقاً لهذه النتائج. يختتم البحث بجملة من النتائج والتوصيات.

## **A. The Theoretical Part:**

### **I. Introduction:**

On addressing small children, mentally handicapped people, foreigners, hard of hearing people and anyone else who has problems with processing normal speech, special registers with certain simplified codes are used by all speech communities. Such simplified codes are usually referred to as 'baby talk', 'foreigner talk' or the like, and they usually share many structural similarities (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 288).

In the teaching-learning context in general and that of foreign languages in particular, the notion of simplification has been a quite familiar teaching strategy for a long time. Instructors, in their attempt to ease the task of learning on the part of learners and bring about better learning and assimilation of the material taught, are supposed to handle a variety of simplification processes, which are represented, in the main, by selecting and ordering the teaching materials. According to Ferguson (1975: 185), the main purpose behind the adoption of such a teaching strategy is essentially a methodological one, although "there remains the danger that something crucial may be left out of account for the sake of methodological convenience". Wesche (1994) concludes that although the exact effect of the use of simplification techniques on foreign language learning is not easy to pinpoint, its function is believed to ease the learning task on the part of the learner by accommodating to his or her communicative level.

### **II. Aims of the Research:**

In its theoretical part, the current research aims, in the first place, at presenting the concept of simplification as a teaching strategy side by side

with the simplification techniques usually used by instructors in foreign language classrooms.

In its practical part, this research paper attempts to pinpoint the simplification techniques used by a sample of instructors of both linguistics and literature at university level. It further aims at highlighting the differences between both groups of instructors in their use of the simplification techniques in the teaching of the subjects of their specialization at university level.

### **III. The Hypotheses:**

- (1) There are no differences between the instructors of linguistics and their counterparts, instructors of literature, in the use of various simplification techniques in teaching subjects of their specialization at university level.
- (2) Each group of instructors use the simplification techniques that fit better the pattern of instruction adopted in teaching subjects of their specialization, namely linguistics and literature.

### **IV. Limits of the Research:**

The present research paper is limited to the study of the use of simplification techniques by a sample of instructors, specialized in teaching linguistics or literature, at the Dept. of English, College of Arts, University of Mosul, during the first term of the academic year 2008-2009.

### **V. Definition of Simplification:**

The notion of simplification is considered the key to an understanding of the resemblances and the universal features of deviant

forms of language production. As such, it is defined, in the main, as the strategy whereby a language user, [in our case] an instructor, adjusts his language behaviour, [in our case] the oral presentation of the teaching material and all types of questioning and discussion processes, for the sake of achieving effective communication with the learners, and duly bringing about better understanding of the material taught (Ferguson, 1975: 189-190). Such an adjustment may either be a movement away from the norms of the standard language so as to handle oral linguistic forms usually viewed to be appropriate in certain contexts of use or with an increase/decrease in their complexity of usage.

Johnson and Johnson (1998: 112), on their part, define simplification as a strategy adopted by instructors in foreign language teaching to reduce the new language to a small set of general properties so as to cope with the learner's preference of reduced linguistic means for the sake of better assimilation of the teaching material, avoidance of errors or/and increase in fluency.

## **VI. Simplification Techniques: Formal Characteristics**

To shed light on the main simplification techniques used by foreign language instructors, questions like the following should be posed in the first place:

- What differences in part-of-speech usage and phrase types are found when instructors simplify their language?
- What are the characteristics of sentences which are split into multiple sentences when language is simplified?
- What are the characteristics of the syntactic structures, namely sentences or phrases which are dropped?

A close look at the points of query in the preceding questions highlights three main effects that happen to linguistic elements when

simplified, namely taking over a different shape or structure, being divided into smaller units, and/or being dropped. In other words, the formal characteristics of simplified language, seem to be related, in the main, to aspects of morphology, syntax, and vocabulary. Yet, the scope of simplification should not be limited to these sole three effects since instructors, for educational purposes, usually come out with more simplification techniques in their attempt to present a simplified language mostly shorter than the original version. As such, there are some common simplification techniques in addition to those already referred to. They are represented by: (1) modifying or simplifying vocabulary items by using synonyms for difficult words, (2) shortening long descriptive phrases, (3) paraphrasing discourse by removing syntactic structures known to be difficult for learners, (4) summarizing extractively by selecting a subset of sentences to form a summary, (5) using simplified sentences that usually contain fewer adverbs and coordinating conjunctions, and (6) splitting by reducing the syntactic complexity of the resulting sentences while retaining the same information (Ferguson, 1975: 189).

On their part, Johnson and Johnson (1998: 288) enlarge upon the scope of simplification techniques and point out that there are three basic techniques that are adopted in simplified language, namely (1) structural simplification, (2) clarification of presentation (e.g. slow, loud, clear articulation, avoidance of vowel reduction, frequent repetition of words), and (3) expression of affect (e.g. sound symbolism, mimicking a foreign accent and so on). According to them, the following are the main formal characteristics of simplification codes in comparison to normal talk:

- (1) Shorter utterances.
- (2) Syntax less complicated.
- (3) Semantic transparency.

- (4) Canonical word order.
- (5) Overt marking of optional grammatical relations.
- (6) Avoidance of certain tenses and conditionals.
- (7) Overt formulaic framing of certain types of utterances. (e.g. definition).
- (8) Frequent use of neutral and concrete vocabulary.
- (9) Avoidance of idioms and slang (p.292).

In addition to these formal characteristics, several techniques for simplifying discourse are identified in classroom talk which usually aim at giving learners better understanding of instructor talk (repetition and pausing), an easier way of participating in classroom interaction (preponderance of yes-no questions, use of topics relevant to the immediate situation, expansion of learners' statements) and so on.

## **VI. The Use of Simplification Techniques in Foreign Language Classrooms:**

Like any other teaching methodology, the process of teaching foreign languages subsumes the concepts and procedures of different areas of inquiry that are organized and expressed for the sake of making them congruent with the learner's experience. As such, instructors, whether consciously or unconsciously, adopt simplification in their teaching at all educational levels and in different language-learning contexts and duly adjust their produced language behaviour to bring about communicative effectiveness through assimilation of the teaching materials (Ferguson, 1975: 192-3). For this reason, applied linguists have embarked on studying simplification so as to (1) be knowledgeable about simplification techniques which usually demonstrate noticeable similarities with interlanguage, and (2) debate whether simplification of the input imparted to the learner really facilitates learning the language in

question (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 288). The outcomes of such studying and debating outline that the simplification process typically takes place in two consecutive stages. The first stage constitutes the teaching input and is represented by an overt pedagogic contrivance, while the second is the learning intake and is represented by the consequence of all kinds of psychological processes in the learner. Ideally, of course, the two stages should converge to form one and that the simplification of the input corresponds to the simplification of the intake (Ferguson, 1975: 185).

One of the main proponents of the use of simplification techniques in foreign language classrooms is Stephen Krashen (1982, 1985). Krashen views the use of simplification techniques as quite useful and encouraging to the learner in acquiring the new language. He further argues that simplification techniques are used as tools for communication, and duly instruction, and therefore provide comprehensible input. In the same vein, simplified language is also said to be congruent with the level of the learner's proficiency in the new language, and it is perceived by the learner as pertaining to his or her concerns (Johnson and Johnson, 1998: 291).

However, simplification techniques should not always be viewed as sources for imparting abundant knowledge and better retention of the knowledge already acquired. They may be, in themselves, be insufficient and inefficient for simplification purposes. For instance, Peterson (n.d., n.p., via the net) states that an instructor who simplifies could choose complex sentences, resulting in shorter speech but one that is too challenging and difficult. By the same token, Ferguson (1975: 189-190) draws attention to the fact that in spite of the availability of certain basic simplification techniques at work, simplification of usage does not necessarily result in the simplification of use, i.e. it does not necessarily



facilitate communication. On the contrary, it very often makes communication less effective. Yet, such opposing viewpoints that may minimize the importance of the use of simplification for pedagogical purposes should not take us far into contexts that are irrelevant to the main topic of study in this paper, namely the use of simplification techniques in foreign language classrooms in general and those of English as a foreign language in particular. Added to that, the outcomes of some sporadic research works on baby talk, foreigner talk and the like cannot deny the fact that much research on simplification techniques has been conducted on input/interaction features of instructor talk in the classroom. The only point that should be heeded attentively in this respect is that some difference in the terminology exists when some researchers, such as Wesche (1994), refer to different forms of instructors' talk in the classroom as 'modified' rather than 'simplified' input; a point that is considered by Johnson and Johnson (1998: 291-292) who state that although instructors' talk is modified, it remains characterized by standard norms of the foreign language. furthermore, the actual form and scope of modifications to learners depends on a wide range of factors such as speech styles, type of discourse, social and cultural context, and the personal characteristics of the speaker. Such a language is predominantly grammatical and well formed.

Finally, although the exact effect of the use of modified or simplified language in foreign language learning is not easy to pinpoint, its function is believed to ease the learning task of the learner by accommodating to his or her communicative level (Wesche, 1994).

## **B. The Practical Part:**

### **I. Procedure and Data Collection:**

To bring about the aims of the current research, a questionnaire of (14) items that represent different simplification techniques and of much relevance to the topic of the present paper was designed (See Appendix). The questionnaire was administered to a sample of (10) university instructors, (5) specialized in teaching linguistics and (5) in teaching literature at university level during the first term of the academic year (2008-2009). They, i.e. instructors, have been of the same academic status and of long periods of experience in teaching at university level, They were asked to give their responses according to a 5-point scale that ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree in terms of the use of each item, viz. simplification technique, in the teaching of the subject of their specialization. The following section sheds light on instructors responses through the data analysis and the discussion of results:

### **II. Data Analysis and Discussion of Results:**

To put the aims of the present research into effect, instructors' responses to the items of the questionnaire have been dealt with according to a certain computational equation that leads to the finding out of what is called "The Weighted Arithmetic Means (WAMs)". The following table shows WAMs of the responses of both groups of instructors, i.e. instructors of literature and their counterparts of linguistics, to the items of the questionnaire:

**Note:** For the sake of brevity and to avoid much redundancy, instructors of literature and their counterparts instructors of linguistics will be henceforth referred to successively as (Lit. Inst.) and (Ling. Inst.).

**Weighted Arithmetic Means of the Items of the Questionnaire  
according to Instructors' Responses**

SN	Items	Weighted Arithmetic Means	
		Instructors of Literature	Instructors of Linguistics
1	Shorter utterances than required.	3	2.4
2	Less complicated structures.	4	4
3	Semantic transparency	3.2	3.4
4	Canonical word order.	3.6	3.6
5	Overt marking of optional grammatical relations.	2.6	3.4
6	Avoidance of certain tenses and conditionals.	3.6	3.6
7	Overt, formulaic framing of certain types of utterances (e.g. definition).	2.8	3
8	Neutral and concrete vocabulary.	3.8	4.6
9	Avoidance of idioms and slang	3	4
10	Repetition.	2.8	3.6
11	Yes-no questions.	3	3.4
12	Topics relevant to the immediate situation.	3.6	4
13	Expansion of students' statements.	3.8	4.2
14	Rhetorical questions.	3.2	3
	<b>Mean</b>	<b>3.3</b>	<b>3.6</b>

Broadly speaking, a look at the WAMs leads but to very limited points of comparison between both groups of respondents and narrow avenues for comment on their responses. In this respect, one can state that (Ling. Inst.) have scored higher than their counterparts (Lit. Inst.) on all the items of the questionnaire as the total mean score of their responses is (3.6), while that for the latter is only (3.3). As such, the first hypothesis which states : *"There are no differences between the instructors of linguistics and their counterparts, instructors of literature, in the use of*

*the various simplification techniques in teaching subjects of their specialization at university level", is rejected.*

Likewise, neither effective analysis nor crucial discussion of instructors' responses can be made by mere statement that the lowest WAM, namely (2.4) which is below the mid-point 2.5, is for the item which states (Ling. Inst.) use of "shorter utterances than required", in comparison with (2.6) which is a bit above the mid-point, for (Lit. Inst.) use of "overt marking of optional grammatical relations". The same applies to the statement that has got the highest WAM score (4.6), which considered to be very high, for (Ling. Inst.)'s use of "neutral and concrete vocabulary" in comparison to the mean score (4.0) as the highest for (Lit. Inst.)'s use of "less complicated structures". Added to that, since such a limited method of analysis will definitely be inadequate for shedding light on instructors' responses and validating the hypotheses already set, the items of the questionnaire are going to be presented individually as sequenced in the version of the questionnaire distributed among both groups of instructors side by side with their weighted arithmetic means and as follows:

**When teaching my students, I use .....**

**- Item 1: *shorter utterances than required*.**

(Lit. Inst.) have scored (3) on this item, while (Ling. Inst.) have scored (2.4), the lowest mean score among their responses. This entails the fact that the statement of core linguistic information demands more detailed information in comparison to the literature information, most of which can be deduced on the part of students, as Lit. Inst. usually expect. This also indicates Ling. Inst.'s realization that presenting an idea with a minimum number of words on the account of the clarity of what is required does not remove the vagueness.

- **Item 2:** *less complicated structures.*

Both groups of respondents, (**Lit. Inst.**) and (**Ling. Inst.**) have got the mean score (4) for this item, but for (**Lit. Inst.**) it is the highest mean score among their responses. Such a high mean score highlights the fact that clarity of meaning is mostly deterred by the complexity of linguistic structures, a point that both groups of instructors endeavour to overcome by the use of less complicated structures.

- **Item 3:** *semantic transparency.*

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3.2) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (3.4). Again both groups, with somehow slight difference, have scored well above the mid-point on this point. Since meaning forms the essence of what all instructors try to impart, it is noticeably attended to by all instructors, whether of literature or linguistics.

- **Item 4:** *canonical word order.*

Both groups of respondents, (**Lit. Inst.**) and (**Ling. Inst.**) have got the mean score (3.6) for this item which indicates the realization that students are mostly rule-followers, and that rearranging an utterance by means of foregrounding or the like may add to the complexity of what is presented rather than simplifying it.

- **Item 5:** *overt marking of optional grammatical relations.*

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (2.6) on this item, the lowest mean score among their responses, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (3.4). It should be noted that due to the nature of postgraduate studies that each group of instructors have undergone, there have been different levels of focus on grammar. It is something inevitable that Ling. Inst. attend more to grammatical rules than their counterparts Lit. Inst. who attend to ideas and connotations more than overt grammatical rules or relations. This is on one hand. On the other hand, Lit. Inst. acquaintance with stylistic devices

and violation of ordinary grammatical rules due to what is called literary license or poetic license lead them to ignore such relations.

**- Item 6: *avoidance of certain tenses and conditionals.***

Both groups of respondents, (**Lit. Inst.**) and (**Ling. Inst.**) have got the mean score (3.6) for this item. This indicates both groups' realization of the difficulty that students in general and at all levels face in assimilating tenses and conditionals. Added to that, this mean score reflects both groups' realization that "form" is not the focal point in the teaching process. It is "meaning" that they want to impart. As such, they try their best to avoid the swerved sentences to make students understand better.

**- Item 7: *overt, formulaic framing of certain types of utterances (e.g. definition)***

In spite of the slight difference between the mean scores of the responses of both groups of instructors, (2.8) for (**Lit. Inst.**) and (3) (**Ling. Inst.**), both groups' use of this technique of simplification reflects a value that is neither high nor low but above the midpoint. It again reflects the importance that such types of utterances have in the presentation of both linguistic and literary subjects.

**- Item 8: *neutral and concrete vocabulary.***

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3.8) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (4.6), the highest mean score among their responses. Both mean values reflect the content of the subjects that both groups teach. In literature, where much imagination and abstract thinking is required from students, instructors' use of the neutral and concrete vocabulary will definitely be less than that of (Ling. Inst.) whose subject matters of specialization impose upon them the use of formal thinking and less imagination when dealing with linguistic matters.

**- Item 9: *avoidance of idioms and slang*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored higher, namely (4). The nature of the subjects taught by (Lit. Ins.) makes the instructors of literary subjects resort to the use of more idioms and perhaps slang items in comparison to their counterparts, (Ling. Inst.) whose subjects presuppose less use of idioms and slang expressions.

**- Item 10: *repetition*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (2.8) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (3.6). Since literary subjects deal with settings where actual events seem to take place, (Lit. Inst.) find no necessity or purpose behind reiterating what is explained or given to they students. Just contrary to what (Ling. Inst.) do who find, and due to the nature of the subjects they usually teach, in repeating certain linguistic points, perhaps over and over again, as the best way for driving an idea home and students' better understanding of the materials taught.

**- Item 11: *yes-no questions*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (3.4). No doubt that the process of questioning in the classroom is a good means for building interaction between the instructor and the taught on one hand, and among the taught themselves, on the other hand. Added to that, the nature of literary subjects gives less room for the posing of yes-no questions in comparison to linguistic subjects where many items allow for the asking of such questions.

**- Item 12: *topics relevant to the immediate situation*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3.6) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (4). The nature of the subjects of instructors' specialization imposes upon them to resort to whatever is available in the local environment to enhance students' learning of the materials presented. Linguistics subjects which are related to the immediate environment

encourages instructors of linguistics to make use of such a source more than instructors of lit. whose subjects' nature imposes upon them to resort to imaginative analysis and discussion of matters. ,

**- Item 13: *expansion of students' statements*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3.8) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (4.2). In spite of the difference in WAMs for both groups and in favour of (Ling. Inst.), it should be noted that foreign language classrooms are adequate environments for effective communication and interaction between instructors and their students. The high WAMs by both groups of instructors of this item highlight that instructors usually do not leave the answers given by their students without commenting on. Rather, they find in such responses a means to attract students' attention to a form of language uttered by a counterpart of their level, and hence it can be a source for improvement.

**- Item 14: *rhetorical questions*.**

(**Lit. Inst.**) have scored (3.2) on this item, while (**Ling. Inst.**) have scored (3). A slight difference is available here between both groups' responses. This is due to the fact that both groups are expected to use this technique due to their good knowledge of language and familiarity with the methods of teaching which find in presentation a means for better understanding of the material taught on the part of the students.

## **C. Conclusion and Pedagogical Implications:**

Simplification and simplification techniques are closely related to the teaching of foreign languages. In spite of some negative attitudes towards the use of such a strategy in the teaching of foreign languages, it should be noted that the merits behind the use of simplification usually outweigh the demerits. Instructors use such techniques with the main objective of facilitating the learning task on the part of the learner, and



making the process of the acquisition of the different linguistic skills more feasible and smooth. As such, instructors have to 1) be acquainted with the effective simplification techniques, 2) identify the situations where a certain simplification technique might be more workable, fruitful, and less time consuming, and 3) consider other relevant factors that can enhance learners' assimilation of the teaching materials, and their avoidance of the detrimental mistakes that might make all efforts go in vain.

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## Questionnaire

**Dear Teaching Staff Member:**

The present researcher investigates ‘**The Use of Simplification as a Teaching Strategy at University Level: A Comparative Study**’. Would you please state your clear and frank answers to the items of the enclosed questionnaire. Your cooperation is very highly appreciated. Many thanks in advance.

The researcher

	Items	When teaching my students, I use .....				
		To a very large extent	To a large extent	To a moderate extent	To a low extent	To a very low extent
(1)	shorter utterances than required.					
(2)	less complicated structures.					
(3)	semantic transparency					
(4)	canonical word order.					
(5)	overt marking of optional grammatical relations.					
(6)	avoidance of certain tenses and conditionals.					
(7)	overt, formulaic framing of certain types of utterances (e.g. definition).					
(8)	neutral and concrete vocabulary.					
(9)	avoidance of idioms and slang					
(10)	repetition.					
(11)	yes-no questions.					
(12)	topics relevant to the immediate situation.					
(13)	expansion of students' statements.					
(14)	rhetorical questions.					