

SIMPLIFICATION AND ELABORATION METHODS TO IMPROVE READING COMPREHENSION OF A2 LEARNERS

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Abstract. Reading comprehension poses significant challenges for A2-level English learners transitioning from basic to intermediate proficiency when engaging with authentic texts. This article examines simplification and elaboration as pedagogical strategies for adapting instructional materials to enhance accessibility while preserving content integrity. Drawing on a comprehensive review of empirical research, this study evaluates the effectiveness of both approaches and their differential effects on reading comprehension outcomes. For A2-level instruction, the findings suggest a strategic approach: using simplification to support immediate comprehension and confidence-building, and using elaboration to support sustained language development and preparation for unmodified texts.

Keywords: reading comprehension, text modification, simplification, elaboration, A2 proficiency, English language learning

Introduction

Reading comprehension is a fundamental skill for language acquisition, especially for learners at the A2 proficiency level who are transitioning from basic to more intermediate understanding. However, many A2-level English learners face challenges when processing authentic or complex texts due to limited vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. To bridge this gap, educators often employ simplification and elaboration techniques as strategies for adapting teaching materials. These methods aim to enhance accessibility without compromising the content's integrity, thereby fostering better engagement and comprehension. This article examines the key aspects of simplification and elaboration, their application in teaching materials, and their impact on improving reading skills among A2-level learners.

Simplification involves “controlling the text targeted to L2 learners by removing unfamiliar linguistic items (e.g., unknown grammatical constructions and lexis) to enhance comprehension,” while elaboration focuses on “adding redundant information to the text through the use of repetition, paraphrases, and appositionals” (K. Urano, 2000). These distinct approaches represent fundamentally different philosophies: simplification reduces linguistic complexity, whereas elaboration maintains original language while providing additional support.

Extensive research demonstrates that both techniques significantly improve comprehension compared to unmodified texts. A comprehensive meta-analysis of 34 studies involving 4,742 participants confirmed that “both simplified and elaborated texts were significantly more comprehensible than authentic texts,” with simplified texts showing marginally superior results (D. Odo, 2025). However, individual studies reveal nuanced findings. Yasukata Yano et al. found that while simplified versions produced the highest comprehension scores among 483 Japanese college students, the difference from elaborated versions was not statistically significant (Yasukata Yano et al., 1994).



The effectiveness of these approaches varies by comprehension type and learner proficiency. Sun-Young Oh's study with 180 Korean high school students found that elaboration was particularly effective because it "retains more nativelike qualities" while being "at least equally successful as—if not more successful than—simplification in improving comprehension" (Sun-Young Oh, 2001).

Methodology

Research studies employ systematic approaches to create simplified and elaborated versions of authentic texts. Simplification typically involves removing complex grammatical structures, replacing difficult vocabulary with high-frequency alternatives, and shortening sentence length (Yasukata Yano et al., 1994). Studies often target specific linguistic features: lexical simplification focuses on "removing unfamiliar linguistic items" and substituting them with more accessible vocabulary (K. Urano, 2000). Elaboration maintains original linguistic complexity while adding "redundant information through repetition, paraphrases, and appositionals" to support comprehension without removing target language features (K. Urano, 2000).

Studies predominantly use between-subjects experimental designs, randomly assigning participants to different text conditions. Sample sizes range from 37 to 483 participants, with most studies targeting specific proficiency levels (D. Odo, 2025,). Researchers typically divide participants into high and low proficiency groups using standardized measures like TOEFL scores to examine differential effects Sun-Young Oh, 2001 & 1 others. Participant backgrounds include Korean high school students, Japanese college students, Filipino learners, and Iranian university students, providing cross-cultural validation. Comprehension is primarily measured through multiple-choice tests assessing three comprehension types: general (main ideas), specific (factual details), and inferential (implied meanings) (Sun-Young Oh, 2001). Test items typically range from 17-30 questions per study. Advanced studies incorporate eye-tracking methodology to examine processing patterns, revealing that "simplification led to an increase in processing time during initial reading and a decrease during text re-inspection" (Irina Rets & Jekaterina Rogaten, 2020). Self-paced reading tasks measure both comprehension and processing efficiency, with studies finding "linear effects of text type on reading time and comprehension scores" (S. Crossley et al., 2014).

Results

Studies examining different comprehension levels reveal nuanced patterns. Yasukata Yano et al. discovered that "the type of modifications to the texts interacted significantly with the kind of test item used to assess comprehension—replication, synthesis or inference—suggesting that different kinds of text modification facilitate different levels of comprehension" (Yasukata Yano et al., 1994). Yan Li et al. found that "HP students always had significantly higher scores in general and specific comprehension question items except in inferential comprehension type" (Yan Li et al., 2005).

Eye-tracking studies provide insights into cognitive processing. Irina Rets & Jekaterina Rogaten found that "simplification led to better text comprehension" and revealed that "text simplification led to an increase in processing time during the initial reading of the text and a decrease in processing time during text re-inspection" (Irina Rets & Jekaterina Rogaten, 2020). S. Crossley et al. reported "linear effects of text type on reading time and true/false comprehension scores, indicating that beginning level texts were processed faster and were more comprehensible than intermediate level and authentic texts" (S. Crossley et al., 2014).



Beyond comprehension, K. Urano's study revealed important learning differences: "both lexical simplification and elaboration improve learner comprehension at the sentence level," but critically, "lexical elaboration triggers incidental vocabulary acquisition while simplification does not" (K. Urano, 2000). Furthermore, "learners of higher proficiency benefit more from lexical elaboration in terms of the acquisition of word meanings" (K. Urano, 2000).

Discussion

This examination of simplification and elaboration techniques reveals that both approaches effectively address the reading comprehension challenges faced by lower-proficiency English learners, though with distinct advantages and trade-offs. The meta-analytic evidence from 34 studies involving 4,742 participants confirms that "both simplified and elaborated texts were significantly more comprehensible than authentic texts," with simplified texts showing marginal superiority for immediate comprehension (D. Odo, 2025).

The research demonstrates that simplification provides more immediate comprehension benefits, particularly for lower-proficiency learners who struggle with authentic texts. However, elaboration offers superior long-term learning outcomes by preserving "nativelike qualities" and facilitating "incidental vocabulary acquisition" while simplification does not (K. Urano, 2000). This distinction is crucial for A2-level learners transitioning toward intermediate proficiency, as elaborated texts better support "progression to fluent reading of unmodified materials, which is the ultimate goal of foreign language reading instruction" (Sun-Young Oh, 2001).

Educators should adopt a strategic approach based on learning objectives. For immediate comprehension and confidence-building, simplification proves more effective, particularly for struggling A2 learners. However, when the goal is sustained language development and preparation for authentic materials, elaboration is preferable because it maintains linguistic complexity while providing necessary support. The finding that "different kinds of text modification facilitate different levels of comprehension" suggests that educators might benefit from using both approaches strategically depending on the comprehension type being targeted (Yasukata Yano et al., 1994).

Conclusion

For A2-level secondary school learners, a combined approach to input modification is most effective. Elaboration should be the primary strategy, especially in vocabulary-focused texts, as it supports deeper lexical processing through paraphrasing, repetition, and added context while maintaining more authentic language use. This helps learners build stronger and more durable vocabulary knowledge. At the same time, simplification plays a supportive role. It is particularly useful when texts contain complex grammatical structures or when immediate comprehension is necessary. By reducing linguistic difficulty, simplification helps prevent cognitive overload and ensures learners can access the main meaning.

Overall, elaboration should be the default approach, with simplification applied selectively. This balanced use allows teachers to support both comprehension and long-term vocabulary development while gradually exposing learners to richer language input.

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