

Techniques of Text Simplification

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1. Introduction

In some countries, English is used as a medium of instruction in the classroom, either at the school level or at the university level. In other cases English is used as a second language. If the standard of English is high, and if it has been used as a medium of instruction for some time, the students in such countries should—with ease—be able to make use of English texts originally intended for English students.

However, in some countries, where the overall standard of English is low, or where it is used as a foreign language outside of the classroom activities, texts which have been designed for native speakers would be difficult, or sometimes impossible, for students to use. Therefore, the texts have to be adapted or simplified so as to make them more suitable for the students. As lecturers, we sometimes simplify the texts that we use, either consciously or unconsciously. Unfortunately, as a result, our simplified version might sometimes be more difficult than the original.

In addition, some experts on text writing, e.g. B. Lott, C.C. Fries and A.A. Traver (Lott, 1959 : 3), do not favour simplified texts, especially graded or controlled vocabulary texts, because, according to a report in 1937, in “Only a limited number of instances did the substitution of known words for unknown words aid pupils comprehension” and, “...when the vocabulary of an extract is simplified, then the language of the extract will invariably appear artificial.” (Lott, 1959 : 4)

Nevertheless, “whatever may be the final aim, the learners will do well to acquire first a good foundation of plain English. Texts designed according to principles of vocabulary control, free from the archaic but also free from modern journalese and officialese, and with proper regard to simplification of syntax, will help to build such a foundation.” (Editorial, 1974 : 60)

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2. A Brief History

Originally, the idea of simplification comes from "Basic English" which was introduced by the second decade of this century by making use of "orthological controllability" of English. (Catford, 1950 : 42) "It is English controlled and simplified by the systematic elimination of everything which is not essential for the clear statement of ideas on all subjects for general purposes." However, it was not very successful. Since Basic English consists of a lot of "opaque" or "non-normal" phrases, learners have "great difficulty in trying to commit to memory every linguistic item," and it appears "unnatural." (Lott, 1959 : 10) Therefore, "Vocabulary Control" based on frequency-count came into practice in the 1920 s. Its main purpose "is concerned with the simplification of teaching, not the simplification of language." (Morris, 1947 : 163) Faucett, West and Palmer were well-known as authors and compilers of such textbooks. It was believed that "Language only at its lowest level is a means of communicating information explicitly. At higher levels, it employs words for more subtle purposes." (Morris, 1947 : 164)

Nevertheless, word-frequency counts do not provide word-value of an absolute measure applicable to all purposes since "they are based on matter selected by personal judgement." (Morris, 1947 : 190) Sometimes, they are not sufficient. Therefore, the idea of simplifying structures, as well as vocabulary items, was introduced in order to make language simple but more sufficient, and the term "Graded Reader" was used for such texts.

It is, in fact, a kind of simplification.

3. What is simplification ?

Even though West was the pioneer in the field of simplification in the 1930' s, he did not give an explicit definition of the term. He prefers to use the term "adapted" rather than "simplified or abridged" because he says that :

"...there is much more than simplification : in many cases the book is completely rewritten : it may be merely a re-telling of the plot, as the case of Robinson Crusoe, or even a modification of the plot, as in my version of The Swiss Family Robinson," (West, 1964 :1)

Therefore, we can see that the term "simplification" is rather loosely used because it implies re-telling, rewriting or modifying of the existing plot of a story. Moreover, according to West, some of the terms involved in the simplification process can be defined as follows (West, 1964 : 2) :

1. **Adaption** is a process of complete re-writing or re-telling of the plot or of only modifying an already existing plot.

2. **Abridgement** is a process of cutting out from the original text those passages that are of little use.

3. **Condensation** is similar to abridgement, and is a process of cutting out passages from the original and then making some linguistic adjustment so as to make up for the loss. He also says that,

“The simplifier takes the original and rewrites it in the manner of the translator, taking it almost sentence by sentence and modifying each one needing modification, replacing the rarer or more peculiar words and locations by commoner or more intelligible ones.”

Therefore, generally speaking, simplification is a process aiming to make the readability of a text easier for the readers or speakers to digest. Pedagogically, this kind of simplification is preferable to the one that increases the complexity of a text. Therefore, from now on, the term “simplification” is used intentionally to convey only the notion of the former.

4. The Purposes of Simplification

According to West (West, 1950 : 48) a simplified text or a Supplementary Reader (also called Plateau Reader”) serves 4 purposes :

- i. it gives extra practice in reading :
- ii. it reviews and fixes the vocabulary already learned ;
- iii. it stretches that vocabulary so that the learner is able to understand a greater width of the meaning of the words already learned :
- iv. it shows the learner that what he has learned so far enables him to do something, it encourages him to read matter which is worth reading.”

Psychologically, the four purposes of a simplified text sound very convincing, especially for a beginner. Speaking in the language of Skinner, the first purpose provides “laws of exercises” ; the second, “re-inforcement” ; the third, “laws of effects” ; and the last, “rewards.” West classified his simplified reading books into 4 stages : introduction to reading for pleasure, enjoyment, foretaste and lead-in to unadapted books. Ultimately, he hoped to form in the reader the habit of reading English books for pleasure. In early stages he wanted to show the reader that he can quickly reach a stage at which he can enjoy books suitable to his age. In a later stage, he wanted to lead his reader to read abbreviated books in their original wordings and finally to books in their original forms. This technique sounds logical and has been used since 1926 when the first simplified book, “Robinson Crusoe” appeared.

Furthermore, simplified texts are still used nowadays pedagogically in 2 ways : (Mountford, 1975 : 6)

1. to supplement existing aural–oral programmes “by providing reinforcement for structure of increased vocabulary” ; and

2. to afford models for the students compositions.

The first aims to support and develop recognition skills in the reader ; and the second is to develop productive skills of writing and speaking. Palmer, one of the pioneers in the field, says that the main purpose of simplification is concerned with the linguistic needs, rather than the original style or literary value of the text which can be lost in the simplification process. This is confirmed by his own words :

“We shall always attach more importance to the linguistic needs of readers than to the literary value of authors, for at that stage (e.g. beginning or intermediate level of EFL/ESL learning) linguistic needs are our affair and literary values are not.” (Mountford, 1975 : 4) Therefore, at this stage, we can conclude that the purposes of simplification are mainly for pedagogical reasons in providing linguistic help to learners of EFL/ESL for reading skill.

5. Components of Simplification

Before attempting to simplify any text, there are 4 main factors that should be considered seriously ; otherwise, the simplified text might not yield successful results. The 4 factors are :

1. The purposes of the simplifier

The simplifier should ask himself objectively, “What are the purposes of the simplified text I am going to create ?” A simplified text for reading for information is different from the one for comprehension. The former, for instance, may contain more technical or semitechnical terms and more complex sentences, whereas the latter may contain more common vocabulary items and simple structures.

2. The readers

This is a very important factor indeed because, basically, this is who a simplified text is for. The writer should presumably know something about his readers background e.g. what they have learned, and he should be aware of how to relate their previous knowledge to “new things” that he wants them to learn.

3. The text to be simplified

The writer should choose a text that is worth simplifying, e.g. one that will be used many times for teaching, or one that would be too difficult for the students to read by themselves, even with some help. I would suggest that a cloze procedure be used to measure the readability of a text.

4. How to simplify

Having a text, purposes, and students background, the writer has to know how to simplify the text ; otherwise, his simplified text increase the complexity of usage or make communication less effective. This component requires a detailed consideration and will be dealt with intensively at a later stage.

Consequently, to sum up, it is worth quoting Lee's words as a confirmation :

“Grading (simplifying—in a sense) must start from language and from teaching circumstances, but most of all should consider the learner. It is not merely a matter of what you grade and where, but also of who we grade for.” (Lee, 1964, 88)

In order to make the ideas mentioned in this section clearer, I would like to link them to the following two relevant points : (i) what is to be simplified ?, and (ii) how to simplify a text ?

1. *What to be simplified ?*

According to West, (1950 : 49) to simplify a text, the following components of the text should be simplified :

(i) *Vocabulary*

Vocabulary can be simplified by vocabulary limitation. Text should include only essential vocabulary items and make full advantage of them. He says, “It is absurd to tell fairy tales or fables with a vocabulary of 2,000 words.” This is because, he adds, “such an amount of words is good enough for anything and more than one needs for most things.” He suggests that the learned vocabulary should be used in a wider sense to stretch the learners vocabulary and make him practise the art of inferential reading.

Furthermore, West (1964 : 149) suggests that vocabulary should be selected “empirically.” So, for example, a word must be selected if we must have it because there is no other way of conveying the idea we want, or a word which is frequently and unavoidably necessary in the topic we are dealing with.

(ii) *Structures*

Grammatical structures should be simplified. A complex sentence of 4 or 5 lines, for example, should be avoided and simple or compound sentences should be used instead. Tenses should be used consistently. Only learned structures, as well as vocabulary, should be included in a simplified text.

(iii) *Styles*

Styles of writing should be straightforward and consistent. Social customs, certain proverbs and nursery rhymes should be avoided.

As a result, to emphasize the importance of "what to be simplified?" an editorial of *English Language Teaching* (ELT, 1947 : 59) gives us a very firm statement as follows :

"It is taken for granted, by many teachers, that a text composed within a vocabulary of 1,000, 1,500 or 2,000 words must, ipso facto, be perfectly suited to the needs of learners. Unless the syntax has been simplified too, this may not be the case. And, unless care is taken with the idioms and collocations, the simplification may in some respects be more difficult than the original."

2. *How to simplify a text ?*

As stated explicitly in section 3, simplification involves re-telling, re-writing, modifying, cutting and adjusting for the loss of the existing plot of a text. In so doing, it aims to make the readability (difficulty) of a text suit most of the readership in mind. This can be done by making a given text easier to understand by bringing its context within the area of language already assumed to be known : and allowing the inclusion of some language items not already known, but whose meaning is presumably recoverable from the context.

Therefore, at this point it should be noted that the second point is very important in simplifying a text. West refers to it as "Inferential reading" (West, 1964 : 146) and he emphasizes that learners should be encouraged to guess for meaning from the context of the text. This means that in simplifying a text the vocabulary that facilitates "inferential reading" (guessing) should be included. The reason is that "reading comprehension is a psychological guessing game." (Goodman, 1970 from Sariano, 1973 : 46) Besides, Palmer (from Mountford, 1975 : 19) suggests that translating material from another language is regarded as a kind of simplification. Bruton (1961 : 50) also suggests that diagrams are very useful devices for simplifying.

6. **Simplification of Scientific Texts**

Besides having problems in using original reading texts, non-English speaking readers also have problems in reading scientific texts. They have to struggle to cope with these problems because "English is now established as the principal international language of science." (Ewer, 1967 : 221) It is so because "Science advance has, moreover, become so rapid that it is impossible to keep even reasonably up to date in any language except English." (Flood, 1950 : 104) One

factor that makes scientific texts difficult to comprehend is the vocabulary used. Flood says that "This is no overstatement. Vocabulary presents a problem even in scientific articles written for English readers."

He says that this is because :

1. The scientist is so accustomed to using difficult words that he cannot break the habit.

2. He feels a sense of shock and loss of dignity in using popular rather than the scientific words.

3. He tends to enlarge his working vocabulary by his own assumptions.

4. He does not keep before him a constant type of readers.

5. He often overlooks the fact that he uses an "ordinary" word with a special or restricted meaning, e.g. *work salt*. Consequently, one way to simplify scientific texts is to select vocabulary items. West and Flood, (1950 : 130) suggest the following criteria :

1. Frequency of need A word must be selected if it is frequently needed, e.g. atom, cell, electrolysis, etc.

2. Power of definition A word must be selected if it is moderate necessity but is irreplaceable, e.g. violet, neutron, universe, etc.

3. The coverage of words A word of wider denotation is preferable to one of narrower meaning, e.g. *resin* is better than *plastic* because it covers artificial resin and natural resin.

4. explicit words A word must be selected if it is a key word to a group of ideas, e.g. *yeasts* is a key word in explanations involving enzymes.

5. Avoidance of duplication A word should not be selected if it duplicates another word already selected, e.g. *approximately* should not be selected if *nearly* is selected.

6. Known words A word should be selected if it is sure to be known to readers.

In addition, the authors suggest that strict control should be exercised "only with respect to scientific words." However, some "dignity" words, e.g. theory, method, represent, etc. should be included because (West & Flood, 1950 : 132) :

1. The exclusion would lead to lack of clarity in the explanations.

2. Without such words, it would make the explanations childish or "weird"

3. It is very difficult for teachers to simplify without such words.

Moreover, sometimes some vocabulary items from other fields are also used in our texts. These words are called "outside" words and have to be handled in a special way which is also suggested by West & Flood, (1950 : 134) as follows :

1. Use a glossary if the number of outside words is small and unknown to a minority of readers.
2. Use a footnote if the number of words is very small.
3. Explain the word in brackets immediately after its use or use "That is..." if the explanation is brief. In general, a near synonym can be given.
4. Make the word inferable by "faking" the sentence so that the meaning of the word is apparent without explanation, e.g. "a protein diet = food containing plenty of meat and cheese.."
5. Explain the word deliberately, if it is necessary, when it is a key word. Explanation should come before the word is used.

From all the literature mentioned so far, we can see that for text simplification there is a system which we can follow, and we can draw general techniques from this system. Here is a summary of the techniques used in text simplification.

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|-------------------|--|
| Vocabulary | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. substituting or 'simpler' for more difficult word 2. paraphrasing 3. explaining of expression 4. deleting of unnecessary word 5. translating 6. avoiding of duplication 7. providing near synonym or synonym 8. bracketing 9. adding new word (s) 10. faking the meaning |
| Structures | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. substituting (breaking into simpler sentences) 2. thematizing 3. connecting of sentences 4. creating new sentences 5. deleting unnecessary sentence 6. inserting new clause 7. deleting unnecessary clause 8. rewriting a sentence with some changes |
| Styles | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. adding of cohesive device 2. nominalizing 3. defining 4. concluding 5. explaining 6. referring |

7. naming
8. deleting of cohesive device
9. adding of anaphoric linker (s)
10. paragraphing
11. underlining or quoting

7. Conclusion

Although nowadays there are not many people talking about text simplification because more emphasis is on authentic texts, the author believes that as lecturers, we sometimes simplify the texts that we use either consciously or unconsciously. Generally speaking, simplification is a process aiming to make the readability of a text easier for the readers or speakers to digest. Pedagogically, this kind of simplification is useful because it can still convey the meanings of the text whereas the original one may make the readers have a lot of problems understanding it. Before attempting to simplify any text, we should think about the purposes of the simplification, the readers language background, the text to be simplified, and how to simplify it. There are many techniques of simplification. As teachers we should know how to use them, otherwise the “simplified text” can be more difficult than the original text !

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