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The Impact of Lexical and Syntactic Simplification of Materials on Listening Comprehension of Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

The aim of this study was to investigate the impact of lexical and syntactic simplification of materials on listening comprehension of intermediate EFL learners and to see whether or not there was any significant difference between learners who listen to authentic materials and those who listen to simplified ones. It was also intended to compare the lexically-simplified-material group with the syntactically-simplified-material group in order to examine which type of simplification leads to a greater gain in listening comprehension. To this end, three hundred Iranian EFL intermediate learners from different language institutes in Sari participated at the onset of the study. To choose a homogeneous sample, an OPT was administered and 150 subjects were selected. Then they were randomly assigned into 3 groups, one control group and two experimental groups. A pretest of listening was administered to assess the initial status of the participants. Then, the intervention was given for two hours in ten sessions. The control group listened to authentic materials, but the two experimental groups listened to lexically and syntactically simplified materials, respectively. Afterwards, a posttest was administered to compare the groups to see how much they improved. The scores of the three groups were analyzed through ANOVA. The results revealed a significant difference among the control group and the two experimental groups. Moreover, the group who listened to syntactically simplified materials outperformed the group who listened to lexically simplified materials.

Keywords: authentic materials, EFL intermediate learners, lexical simplification, listening comprehension, simplified materials, syntactic simplification

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1. Introduction

Listening has a prominent role in communication in general and language learning in particular (Azizinia, Sadeghoghli, & Mohebkhah, 2017; Lynch, 2012). It is an essential skill in language development due to the fact that humans first listen to the language before they start to speak. In fact, listening skill is the main source for the development of other language skills in the context of classroom (Khezr Minaei & Gholami, 2021; Vandergrift, 1999). Thus, listening plays a pivotal role in learning a second or a foreign language as it is the case for first language acquisition. Similarly, Brown (2007) points out that listening is an essential skill by which language learners internalize linguistic information without which they cannot produce language.

Language input functions as a deciding factor in language learning in general and in second/foreign language learning in particular. In fact, it is the prerequisite for language acquisition as discussed by Gass and Torres (2005). Osada (2004) asserted that language learners cannot learn anything without understanding the input. In language classroom as a formal language learning context, learners are mostly exposed to the foreign language through texts. Some experts prefer the texts that have been written for purposes other than language learning and instruction, i.e. authentic texts. They believe that authentic texts expose learners to real language and arouse their interest and motivation. However, it is obvious that in language classrooms, learners grapple with a number of problems in listening and despite devising different methods, strategies, and techniques, they have difficulty in understanding native speakers.

In fact, many scholars, practitioners, and materials developers believe that authentic texts can be challenging and overwhelming for learners in terms of sophisticated linguistic features they contain and that they may get overloaded by the complexity of their structures and vocabulary (McLaughlin, 1987; Sonmez, 2007). In the realm of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) materials development, scholars and practitioners believe that authentic texts do not fit most Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) contexts and they concur with what Widdowson (1984) stated that "pedagogic presentation of language necessarily involves methodological contrivance" (p. 218). Likewise, Saggion (2017) asserted that EFL learners "may have a very restricted lexicon and may not be able to understand certain grammatical constructions" (p. 4). Thus, most language teaching scholars and language teachers argue that language input must change and be simplified so as to be appropriate and comprehensible for learners. Advocates of text simplification discuss that altered texts provide the language learners with more comprehensible input by having more high-frequency words, simpler linguistic structures, and less sophisticated linguistic features.

Siddharthan (2014) discussed that text simplification is a process in which we reduce the lexical and syntactic complexity of a text and at the same time try to preserve its originality by making use of shorter sentences, simpler structures, and simpler vocabulary. According to Siddharthan (2014, p. 259), the main goal of text simplification is to make information more comprehensible and more accessible. He defined text simplification narrowly and broadly. The narrow definition of text simplification refers to the processes by which the linguistic complexity of a text is reduced while the original information and meaning are retained. Broad definition of text simplification includes other manipulations, including *conceptual simplification* in terms of both content and form, *elaborative modification* by which explicitness and redundancy are utilized for emphasizing key points and *text summarization* by which peripheral or improper information is omitted. With regard to listening comprehension, however, the results have been inconclusive.

Twelve studies of the effects of simplified materials on comprehension were reviewed by Parker and Chaudron (1987). It is confirmed through these studies that linguistic simplification (lexical and syntactic) usually improves comprehension (Brown, 1987; Fujimoto, Lubin, Sasaki & Long, 1986; Johnson, 1981; Long, 1985; Tsang, 1987), although simple sentences alone may not help (Speidel, Tharp, & Kobayashi, 1985) and can even hinder comprehension (Blau, 1982). Also Shirzadi's study (2014) revealed that those groups who exposed to syntactically simplified and lexically simplified material respectively outperformed the group who listened to authentic material while in Barekat and Nobakhti's study (2014), the experimental group who listened to authentic material outperformed the control group who received non-authentic material.

As a novelty of research on the concept of (text) simplification in second/foreign language studies, this piece of research aims at comparing the impact of authentic, syntactically simplified, and lexically simplified materials on listening comprehension of Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Thus, the present study attempts to find answers to the following research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the control group who listened to authentic materials and the two experimental groups who listened to syntactically simplified and lexically simplified materials respectively in listening comprehension?

2. Is there any significant difference in the effects of lexical simplification and syntactic simplification on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension?

1.1 Statement of the Problem

Today listening comprehension is one of the most challenging issues in EFL settings. While many different techniques, tactics, and methods are used for improving this skill, the learners still have problems in grasping the native speakers' fluent speech. Although some possible advantages of using authentic materials are that they seem to be more motivating for L2 learners (Peacock, 1997; Vandergrift, 2007) and also they are proof that the language is used for real-life purposes by real people (Nuttall, 1996), but the issue of using authentic materials or simplified materials for listening in English as a foreign language context has always been a point of discussion for both theoreticians and practitioners. Critics of authentic materials, on the other hand, disagree about their effectiveness on several grounds. Richards, (2006), in his article mentions some of them: (a) created materials may be superior to authentic materials because they are generally built around a graded syllabus, (b) authentic materials often contain difficult and irrelevant language, and (c) using authentic materials is a burden for teachers. For these reasons, this study aimed at investigating the effectiveness of using simplified materials on listening comprehension to see whether or not this skill would improve and foster.

2. Review of the Literature

The controversy on making use of simplified versus authentic texts has long been regarded as one of the main issues of discussion in the realm of language teacher education in general and language teaching/learning materials development in particular. A number of scholars assert that text simplification can lead to learning while the other group believes that they may deprive the language learners of informal, naturally-occurring learning (Tomlinson, 2013). Advocates of text simplification argue that as a result of containing a lot of unknown vocabulary and complicated language structures, authentic texts do not provide the language learners with digestible content and comprehensible input. Moreover, contrary to the trend of favoring authentic texts, a great deal of texts in second/foreign language learning textbooks are simplified and most teacher educators, practitioners, and material developers, in reality, highly appreciate the value and significance of simplified texts and their efficacy specifically for learners at elementary and intermediate levels (Johnson, 1981; Shook, 1997). In second/foreign language education, text simplification has been a common practice for achieving the comprehensible input and a great deal of EFL textbooks/learning materials have been modified and simplified linguistically (Tomlinson & Masuhara, 2013).

Davies (1988, cited in Crossley & McNamara, 2012) regarded text simplifications as invaluable aids to second/foreign language learners by which they can expand the knowledge of the target language. According to Crossley, Allen, and McNamara (2011), in text simplification it is intended to provide the learner with an input that is more approachable, comprehensible, and learner-friendly. As a noteworthy point, in most studies on investigating the impact of text simplification on learners' performance, a significantly positive effect of text simplification has been reported (Crossley & McNamara, 2016; Gardner & Hansen, 2007; Heydari et al., 2013; Moradian et al., 2013; Oh, 2001; Tweissi, 1998; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994; Young, 1999). Comparing second language learners' reading comprehension of simplified and authentic texts, Crossley and McNamara (2016) stated that "simplified texts lead to greater comprehension gains" (p. 14). McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhara (2013, p. 75) presented that texts can be simplified in terms of:

1. Sentence structure, i.e. reducing long sentences to shorter ones, or rephrasing complex sentences as simple ones.

2. Lexical content, i.e. reducing the number of difficult vocabulary items and replacing them with the simple words that learners have already learned.

3. Grammatical structures, i.e. making use of simple and less complex structures. For example, passives are changed into actives; indirect speech is converted to direct speech.

Having investigated the effects of topic familiarity and different types of linguistic simplification (lexical, syntactic and lexical-syntactic simplifications) on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners, Keshavarz et al. (2007) found that topic familiarity had a positive impact on the learners' comprehension but text simplification, in general, did not

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have such an effect. Moreover, the research showed that there was not a noticeable difference among different types of text simplification (lexical, syntactic, and lexical-syntactic simplifications). Considering the literature of research on text simplification reveals that by comparing the effect of authentic materials with non-authentic materials on EFL learners' listening comprehension, researchers implemented different authentic and non-authentic materials, developed different listening comprehension tasks for assessing learners' listening comprehension and selected different proficiency levels for their participants.

Alijani, Maghsoudi, and Madani (2014) examined the effect of the authentic versus non-authentic listening materials on Iranian EFL students' listening comprehension. 80 upper-intermediate students participated in two experimental treatment groups. They were trained in listening to authentic radio-tapes and non-authentic listening materials. The results of this research demonstrated that the students who were instructed on the basis of authentic radio-tapes had gained a higher degree of listening comprehension than non-authentic groups. Barekat and Nobakhti (2014) investigated the impact of authentic and inauthentic materials on EFL learners' listening comprehension ability. The participants were randomly divided into two equal groups, the control and experimental groups. The control group experienced listening activities through inauthentic materials, while the experimental group dealt with authentic materials. A Paired-Sample T-Test indicated that participants' listening comprehension ability has significantly improved. A One-way ANOVA test was run to compare the mean-scores of the groups in the post-test. The results represented that learners' listening ability in the experimental group had improved better than the learners in the control group.

Shirzadi (2014) examined the impact of syntactic and lexical simplification on students' listening comprehension. 180 female Iranian EFL students participated in this study. They were randomly divided into three groups (one control group, two experimental groups). Two versions of a passage were prepared at a high and low language proficiency level. The participants were asked to answer the multiple-choice questions after listening to the passages. A t-test was used within levels to specify whether or not there were significant differences between groups' performances. The results of the t-test showed that the groups exposed to syntactically and lexically simplified versions outperformed the other groups. Also, Shewan and Canter (1971) did a research in which they studied the effects of text simplification and compared its results with those of sentence length, vocabulary, and syntactic complexity impact on aphasic people's auditory comprehension. The study showed that the concept of syntactic complexity brought aphasics the most difficulty.

The other piece of study on examining the impact of using authentic materials compared with simplified materials was the one that has been done by Khalili Sabet and Mahsefat (2012), in which the impact of using simplified and authentic listening materials on listening skills of Elementary Iranian students at university level was investigated. To do so, sixty students of university were chosen and assigned to two groups randomly. The control group received simplified listening materials and the experimental group received authentic listening materials. A proficiency test of listening comprehension was administered as a pretest. After the sessions of instruction, the same proficiency test was administered again to the two groups. Comparing the performances of the two groups, the results of the study revealed that the experimental group who received authentic listening materials outperformed the control group in posttest.

To investigate the difference between the use of authentic and pedagogical (simplified) listening materials, also, Latifi, Youhanaee, and Mohammadi (2013) did a research in which two groups of participants as intermediate language learners have been formed; one group receiving authentic listening material and the other one receiving pedagogical listening material. In the control group, pedagogical listening materials have been treated while in the experimental group authentic listening materials (some episodes from movies) have been covered as the treatments. Having taken the IELTS listening task as the post-test, the results of the study revealed that the experimental group that received authentic listening materials outperformed the control group that received pedagogical (simplified) listening materials.

Despite the great number of researches in literature investigating text simplification effects, there has been a paucity of study on the impact of different types of simplification (i.e., syntactic and lexical simplifications) on second/foreign language learners' listening comprehension. There have been only a few studies in which the impact of different types of linguistic simplification have been compared, and the findings have been mixed and inconclusive. To provide some contribution and resolve the issue, the present study tries to investigate the effects of lexical and syntactic simplifications on listening comprehension of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners.

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3. Methodology

3.1 Design of the Study

The design of this study was the quasi- experimental design. In this study lexical and syntactic simplification were the independent variables practiced through treatment sessions, and listening comprehension was the dependent variable. Samples were selected from several institutions in Sari, Mazandaran, Iran. Administrating OPT, they were assigned into experimental and control groups. A listening test was administered to groups as the pretest. Then, the experimental groups were exposed to instruction by practicing listening through simplified lexical and syntactic materials. The control groups did not receive instruction in this way, but they were taught through traditional teaching methods for listening. After 10 sessions, a posttest was run. The results were analyzed to see whether or not the treatment had any impact.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the present study comprised 150 Iranian EFL learners selected by OPT, with an age range of 15 to 30, learning English at intermediate level at different language institutes in Sari, Iran. In order to make sure their level as intermediate, they were chosen through OPT table (scores between 120-149). There was no sex limitation and the learners were both male and female. They were randomly assigned to the one control group and the two experimental groups. In other words, three different groups, in which three different types of listening materials were implemented and used, were studied in this piece of research.

3.3 Instruments

The original texts and simplified texts of audios along with three listening cloze tests from the same texts with two hundred eighty-two blanks in total were used for assessing the learners' listening comprehension. The instruments used in the present study included 3 authentic listening audios from NPR news along with their 3 listening cloze tests with 282 blanks in total for control group. The authentic audios were simplified either syntactically or lexically respectively for the two experimental groups by two native speakers to ensure the quality. Therefore, for one group of experimental group, 3 syntactically simplified materials with their 3 listening cloze tests with 282 blanks in total were used and for the other group 3 lexically simplified material along with 3 listening cloze tests with 182 blanks in total were implemented.

The contents of the three authentic audios simplified either syntactically or lexically were based on text simplification model proposed by McDonough, Shaw, and Masuhaara (2013). In this study, complicated words and complex structures of the contents of the three texts of authentic audios were simplified for the two experimental groups. For lexical simplification, difficult words were replaced with simpler, more common and more accessible ones with reference to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (6^{th} edition). Moreover, semantically ambiguous phrases were rewritten in unambiguous forms. For syntactic simplification, grammatically complicated phrases and sentences were rephrased into simple statements and also all passive voice sentences were replaced by active voices. It should be mentioned that the naturalness of both the syntactically simplified and lexically simplified texts was approved by an experienced language teacher and teacher educator who has an M.A. in English literature.

3.4 Data Collection Procedure

Initially, the participants of the study were chosen through an OPT and based on the OPT scoring criteria (scores between 120-149) 90 subjects were selected as the intermediate ones and randomly assigned to one control group and the two experimental groups. A pretest of listening comprehension was administered and each group listened to each audio and completed its listening cloze test simultaneously to test their initial listening comprehension status. It is worth mentioning that the topic of the three listening audios was the same for the three groups. The learners of each group were required to listen to three audio files and complete every 8^{th} word of their listening cloze tests. Then the treatment session started and for 10 sessions the experimental groups practiced listening through simplified materials while the control group did the same thing by using authentic materials. After the treatment sessions a post-test of the same level was administered. The difficulty level of both tests was measured based on Fry's graph (1977) to make sure both pre and post-tests have the same level of difficult. They were instructed to write only one word in each blank and to try to fill in every blank. The data of the present study were collected in one session and used for the statistical analysis.

3.5 Data Analysis

Exact-word scoring method was used in calculating the participants' listening comprehension scores, that is, the total number of words written correctly by a participant on each listening cloze test was recorded as his/her listening comprehension score. The maximum score for three listening cloze tests was 182 points. The scores of the participants on listening cloze tests were analyzed through an ANOVA and a post hoc test (Scheffe test) to provide answers to the research questions.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Results for the OPT

The learners who took part in this research were all studying at the intermediate level in several language institutes in Sari province. However, to ensure their homogeneity and to double-check their being at the intermediate level of proficiency, measures were taken to calculate the descriptive statistics of their placement test scores, identify the mean score, and include in the sample those whose scores ranged between 120 and 149. The result of the test is indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics results of the OPT

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Max.
150	39.6	21	120	149

The result of placement test is shown in Table 1. The number of the participants (N=15), the mean score (39.6), standard deviation (21), and other descriptive statistics of those learners with the scores between 120 and 149 were selected as intermediate based on OPT table.

4.2 Results for Research Question One

The first research question was whether or not there was any significant difference between the control group who listened to authentic material and the two experimental groups who listened to syntactically simplified and lexically simplified material respectively in listening comprehension.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the pre- test results

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Authentic material	7	34	21
Syntactically simplified material	7	35.17	48.33
Lexically simplified material	7	37. 2	41.38
Total	21	97.3	49.2

Table 2 presents the descriptive statistics of the pre-test results. As the table indicates, the performance of the three groups were not so much different on the test. The mean scores of the participants are not so much different.

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Table 3**.** Descriptive statistics of the post- test results

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Authentic material	7	54	29.13
Syntactically simplified material	7	160.57	58.440
Lexically simplified material	7	137.42	64.38
Total	21	117.33	68.72

Table 3 presents the descriptive statistics of the post-test results. As the table indicates, the performance of the three groups were different on the test. The participants who listened to syntactically simplified material had the highest mean score, and the group who listened to lexically simplified material ranked the second.

Table 4. Results of ANOVA Analysis of the Scores

	Sum of squares	Df	F	Sig.
Between Groups	43991.238	2	7.845	.004
Within Groups	50459.429	18		
Total	94450.667	20		

ANOVA analysis was applied to indicate whether the difference among control group and the two experimental groups was statistically significant or not. The results of the ANOVA analysis of the results (Table 4) revealed that the difference among them was significant. The p-value (0.004) was significantly below the critical p-value. Therefore, the first null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between control group, who listened to authentic audio materials, and the two experimental groups, who listened to syntactically simplified and lexically simplified materials respectively in listening comprehension was rejected.

The p-value (.022) was considerably below the critical p-value, which revealed that lexically simplified materials had a significantly higher effect on the EFL intermediate learners' listening comprehension than authentic materials. Therefore, based on Scheffe test results, the first null hypothesis that there is no significant difference between control group, who listened to authentic audio materials, and the two experimental groups, who listened to syntactically simplified and lexically simplified materials respectively was rejected again. All in all, both experimental groups benefited from simplified materials for their listening comprehension.

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4.3 Results for Research Question Two

Table 5. Scheffe test results

Groups	(I)	(J)		Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
	Authentic Material	Syntactically Material	Simplified	106.57143	.004
	Authentic Material	Lexically Material	Simplified	83.42857	.022
	Syntactically Simplified Material	Lexically Material	Simplified	23.14288	.697

To determine which differences were statistically significant, a post hoc Scheffe test was carried out on the scores (Table 5). As it is shown, the mean difference between the groups who listened to authentic material and the group who listened to syntactically simplified material (-106.57) was statistically significant. The p-value (.004) was considerably below the critical p-value, which revealed that syntactically simplified materials had a significantly higher effect on the EFL intermediate learners' listening comprehension than authentic materials. Moreover, the mean difference between the group who listened to authentic materials and the group who listened to lexically simplified materials (83.42857) was statistically significant.

However, the mean difference between the participants who listened to syntactically simplified materials and those who listened to lexically simplified materials (23.14288) was not considerably great, and there was no statistically significant difference between the performances of these two groups. Therefore, the second null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the effects of syntactic simplification and lexical simplification on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension was confirmed. The results indicated that syntactic and lexical simplifications have similar effects on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' listening comprehension.

The present study indicated that simplified materials were more comprehensible than authentic materials for EFL learners. When either syntactic or lexical complexities of the content of the material is reduced, the foreign language listener will have less trouble comprehending it. However, this finding contradicted with a previous research finding. In the study by Alijani et al. (2014), authentic materials in language classes were more comprehensible and fruitful for EFL learners than non-authentic ones, the language of which was simplified. However, this finding rejected some of these contradictions and confirmed the result of the study by Shirzadi (2014) which indicated that there was a significant difference between the performances of those who took authentic materials and the participants who received simplified materials and advocated using the second one. It is also in line with Davies' study (1988, cited in Crossley & McNamara, 2012) that regarded text simplifications as invaluable aids to second/foreign language learners by which they can expand the knowledge of the target language. It also confirmed Crossley, Allen, and McNamara (2011), in which text simplification is intended to provide the learner with an input that is more approachable, comprehensible, and learner-friendly.

The study results showed that although syntactic simplification was found to be more effective than lexical simplification, there was no statistically significant difference in the effects of these two types of simplification on EFL learners' listening comprehension. This is in line with the findings of the studies done by Safari and Mohaghegh Montazeri (2017) and also Keshavarz et al. (2007). Although these two studies investigated the effects of simplified materials on reading comprehension of Iranian EFL learners, in both studies, there was no significant difference between the performances of those who received syntactically simplified materials and participants who received lexically simplified materials. In the first study, syntactic simplification was more effective, although not significantly, than lexical simplification. In the second study, lexical simplification was more effective, although not significantly, than syntactic simplification. Thus, some of the findings of this study confirmed the findings of previous studies, and some contradicted previous findings. Further research is required to fill the research gap in this area and shed more light on this issue.

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5. Conclusion and Implications

Although a great deal of research is needed to be done to corroborate the findings of this study, what can be concluded from the results of this research and the other similar researches is the impact of materials simplification as a deciding factor on the language learners' comprehension that has been found to make a difference in their performances. This study tried to discover how the simplification of lexical and syntactic materials influenced L2 learners' listening comprehension. The results of this study indicated that in situations learners experience more simplification of materials. They enjoy a better understanding of the texts. These method of practice was found to have positive effects on learners' second or foreign language learning. Additionally, the results showed that teachers could increase their learners' motivation by this type of practices. The recommended procedure is a big help for learner. For instance, encouraging learners to listen to different topics, supporting learners, having fun, highlighting learners' strength instead of their weakness, and encouraging learners to watch English language movies. In conclusion, simplification of materials as mentioned throughout this research significantly influence learners' willingness to language learning and participation in classroom interactions. Therefore, the authors suggest that language teachers should pay close attention to these factors and the way they exert influence on learners. Thus, it will be applicable for language teachers and language educators.

One of the noteworthy implications of the findings of this study can be the gradation of the language learners' instructional materials. By taking the benefits of materials simplification into consideration, materials developers and teachers can provide their learners with some more appropriate learning materials that are fine-tuned with their language proficiency, especially for the elementary and intermediate-level learners who are learning English for different purposes like International English Language Testing System (IELTS) examination candidates, as it was the case in this study. They will surely get overloaded by authentic materials and find them difficult and demanding to get over at the early stages of language learning. Thus, devising and making use of some simplified materials geared to the learners' levels can function as a facilitator of language learning and a prerequisite for authentic materials which would preferably be used at some later stages when the learners have got well-prepared for them. Although the findings of this study indicated that the participants who received syntactically simplified materials outperformed the other two groups, both syntactic and lexical simplification of the materials were found to influence the two experimental groups' performances, which implies that both syntactic and lexical simplification of materials can be suggested to be used by materials developers and teachers to improve and help EFL learners for a better comprehension of the listening texts.

5.1 Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study was that a few number of individuals participated in this study as a result of the inaccessibility of some more intermediate learners and also the time limit to do the research. The second limitation of this research was that only the intermediate learners were selected as the participants and those of other levels were excluded.

5.2 Suggestions for Further Research

It is recommended that in future studies researchers investigate the rate of speech and its modification as an issue of research and another variable of study besides the simplifications of learning materials. To corroborate and confirm the effectiveness of the concept of simplification on the comprehensibility of materials, also, it is suggested that in future studies, researchers conduct researches in a wider scale by having different groups of participants, each group being at a specific level of language proficiency. In so doing, the variable of simplification of materials can be studied in different groups with various levels of language proficiency, and also the performances of the groups can be compared with each other.

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