

THE IMPACT OF SENTENCE LENGTH ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION AND PREFERENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION LEARNERS

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Abstract: Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), i.e., English as Foreign Language (EFL), is one of the most important factors for modern sustainable development. And teaching is conducted via words and sentences. Length of the sentences in EFL for sustainable learning has been subject to academic research and its/appropriate application. Many studies have demonstrated that the length of sentences impacts students’ EFL. However, its comprehensive approachability, applicability, and sustainability are still debatable. This study aims to discuss the perspective on sentence length and highlights challenges, and what the students regard as important in EFL, i.e., it aims to discuss the sentence length as factors that impact sustained conversation in EFL. One hundred and nineteen higher education students responded to the online questionnaire. The results indicated that more students preferred longer sentences. The students who preferred short sentences for learning EFL were more engaged in classes if the teacher offered shorter, structured sentences, and if there were clear instructions, which led to better learning, less anxiety, and an easier way to learning. However, simplified sentences did not bring more sophisticated language output. Their language output often fell short of expectations, which suggests a need for more targeted activities that support the development of more sophisticated and accurate language production.

Keywords: Sentence length, content comprehension, CEFR, higher education

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning a language is one of the first activities that a human starts being engaged in. Native language is considered much easier activity as it occurs naturally, however learning a second language (L2) or a Foreign Language (FL), becomes more challenging, especially as age increases.

Learning a foreign language, prior to the 1960s, there was a powerful focus on reading and writing. Speaking and listening i.e., learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) through these skills was greeted with skepticism (Wyse and Jones, 2000). The 1960s made a (r)evolution to EFL, by considering speaking and listening, i.e., ‘oracy’ – sensical when the focus was more on teaching styles. On the other hand, Lumettu and Runtuwene (2018) pointed out that students can become proficient in English if the four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing are not separated from one another. Based on them, the development of one skill leads to the development of the other skills. Eslit and Vanderama (2023) mention students’ preferences on reading, listening, writing or speaking skills. According to them, regardless of students’ preferences when learning a foreign language, “the teacher needs to implement an appropriate method and media to achieve the target aims for the current topic” (Eslit and Vanderama, 2023). In addition, Rao (2019) supports the application of various teaching activities that enhance speaking practices in English classroom and beyond.

For more, these skills are categorized as receptive skills, or passive ones: listening (oral input) and reading (written input), whereas productive skills, or active ones are speaking (oral output) and writing (written output). As supported by Rao (2019), the students need to combine all these skills, as when producing a sentence it involves grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure which can be developed if they are exposed to input activities first. In addition, Keshavarz and Atai (2007) claim that “content schemata have a greater effect than linguistic simplification on both EFL reading comprehension and recall” (p.31). Also supported by Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2022), who claim that there is a “need to tailor adaptation to the learner context in order to generate learning opportunities” (p.183).

Good teaching mirrors the significance of the theory of communication, by encouraging students to engage in activities that require the construction of purposeful forms of language Wyse and Jones (2000, p.31). Based on them, the construction of the whole text is emphasized more than a concentration on fragments of text.

Wyse and Jones (2000, p.31) mention general theories that underpin the teaching of English:

- “The communication of meaning is the driving force of language
- All language users seek to avoid ambiguity in their communication unless this is deliberately intended
- Language is governed by conventions the conventions of language (rather than rigid rules) which are constantly changing

- The conventions of language are driven by what is the most efficient and quickest way to communicate meaning, therefore certain features become redundant if they do not support this” (p.31)

Many researchers consider that speaking is the most important skill for learning a foreign or second language (Rao, 2019). In addition, Lumettu and Runtuwene (2018) point out that when speaking, a listener receives various sounds as words, or sentences; and when combined they deliver dialogues, stories or songs.

Regardless of skills, content of the text and understanding how sentence length in texts affect EFL learning is essential. The comprehension of sentences, i.e., research on sentence complexity, and learner processing capacity via input simplification, provides valuable insights into the relationship between grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure and comprehension outcomes. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to the content of texts, i.e., sentence length and their potential for modification to suit learners’ needs. To this, Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2022) succinctly discuss the adaptation of the texts as:

- (1). omission (reduction in material amount) - subtracting and abridging
- (2). addition (increase in material amount or enhanced function) - extemporization, exploiting, extending, expanding, supplementing
- (3). substituting
- (4). modification (change of language, procedures, or content) -restructuring, rewriting, reordering.

It is evident that longer sentences comprise more complexity i.e., more syntax and embedded clauses. This may increase cognitive load for second language (L2) learners. On the other hand, shorter sentences lead to faster EFL processing, i.e., shorter sentences are more accessible.

Eraslan (2018), in her research investigated the impact of sentence length on fluency and the students’ self-perceptions when interpreting different sentence lengths. She came to conclusion that the length of the sentences impact fluency regarding pauses, repetitions, false starts or repairs within the sentence, and most students of her research were not satisfied with their own performance.

Whereas Crosley et al (2011) findings support the idea that texts should be simplified with simple, selected words as shorter sentences bring more focus on comprehension leading to more comprehensible language and improved comprehension. On the other hand, Keshavarz and Atai (2007), state that modification of the text “does not necessarily result in greater readability for EFL learners” (p.31). Whereas Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2022) support the idea of shaping instructional practice creatively via textbook adaptation by teachers.

Based on the upper-mentioned researchers and their claims regarding the impact of sentence length in language comprehension, this study aims to identify the types of sentences that impact EFL. As such, the study poses the following questions:

- To what extent are this group of HEI students willing to be taught using short or long sentences in speaking, reading activities, discussions, writing?
- Do short, or long sentences impact students’ fluency?

As the aim of this study is to examine how sentence length affects the students’ language development based on their language background and class size, the study aims to provide insight on the use of short/long sentences according to the following attributes:

- This study explores students’ ability to learn EFL fluently in relation to their sentence length preferences;
- Students’ perceptions on fluency when learning EFL via short or long sentences; and,
- The effects of tailoring EFL texts according to the students’ needs.

The role of text content, i.e., sentence complexity in passive and/or productive skills, imply the need for more research in order to EFL fluency followed by reading and listening comprehension. As such, a balance between students’ engagement, text content and instructional clarity are decisive for effective EFL learning. Engaging activities boost motivation and participation, but they must be grounded in clear, structured instruction to support meaningful language acquisition.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

A total of 119 first year HE students took part in the study. These students attended English as a Foreign Language once a week for 180 minutes in B1.2 level of CEFR for English language. Following syllabuses, these students were offered topics and activities regarding general English for one semester.

The design of this research included comparative study, i.e., the researcher informed the students about the research, and asked the students whether they wished to be taught by offering adapted and modified topics with short sentences, or they would prefer to be taught the topics from the books, without any adaptation or modification of the texts/topics. For this, an online questionnaire was distributed, to asses the students’ preferences in Q1 and Q2.

As a result, two groups were formed based on students’ preferences: Group A consisted of 43 students and received an additional 45 minutes of online instruction per week. The teaching of this group was conducted with modified

texts i.e., short sentences, whereas groups Group B (76 students), followed the topics from the books i.e., standard textbook content without modifications.

The students started learning EFL at the beginning of the semester. The evaluation process, i.e., tests followed the syllabus plan. As one semester comprised fifteen weeks according to the syllabus, tests were organized in week seven and fourteen. Results of both test weeks were categorized according to student's group. Again, the exam results were also categorized in the chart. The results i.e., results of EFL learning in week seven, results of week fourteen and the results of the final exam were calculated, and analyzed for both groups.

As Group B followed the syllabus without any modification or adaptation, the texts and activities conducted with Group A were modified and adapted. In cooperation, one researcher adapted the texts whereas the other researcher provided teaching. At the end of the semester, both researchers synthesized the completed results, discussed their findings and reached a conclusion.

The questionnaire with ten questions was distributed to the students. The questionnaire used a Likert scale ranging from "Strongly Agree" to "Strongly Disagree."

Second phase of the research, included interviews with the students (13 in total). Four students from Group A, and nine students from Group B. They were asked about language comprehension and increased motivation and their opinion regarding language proficiency level and the sentence length impact in learning. Students' fluency is also categorized in this phase.

This research followed quantitative and qualitative approach, it included grades, i.e., average grades of the students from both groups (Group A and Group B), their fluency. The research evaluated students' success based on their sentence length learning preferences, which also encompassed the quality of learning, as indicated by both the results and the students' responses to the online questionnaire.

3. RESULTS

Learning a foreign language is challenging. The ability to read, speak, listen and write a foreign language is the key to develop successful learning of a FL. These processes are the abilities to envisage their reflective stance i.e., to reflect on their own language development. As seen from the data, students in Group B had higher average grade initially, and it continued to be so even in the end of the semester in Test 2. Larger number of students who wanted to be taught without any modification of the texts and their higher average grade indicates that this group were better English language users.

The average grades of both groups are almost similar. Whereas in week fourteen, as the data show, not all participants took part in the test i.e., Group A 36, Group B 65 students. However, the results show slightly better grade results for Group B.

The analysis of the data show the similarities and differences of groups before and after teaching/learning with short and long sentences and the students' preferences i.e., number of students in groups, whether they remained the same preferences, or the students had doubts and changed the sentence length preferences i.e., whether they changed the group.

Based on the evidence, the students remained in the same groups. The smaller group was a result of some students who choose not to participate in the study. For the sake of transparency, the study provided all group participants.

The final grade takes into account also the students' active participation in class, seminar papers and students' presentations of topics covered in the syllabus. That is, it included an evaluation of all language skills.

The responses of the questionnaire were straightforward. However, there were some doubts among students in Group A regarding effectiveness and anxiety. This group of students were less anxious when learning but they know that shorter sentences do not bring much learning.

The results of the online questionnaire reveal that students of Group A, preferred shorter sentences, they were more confident (# 76 % strongly agree) and their learning was more effective via shorter sentences. However, in the interview they were aware that their learning and use of richer vocabulary was limited. Due to inexplicable results from the questions #Q5 and #Q11, regarding students' anxiety and success when learning with shorter, simplified sentences and texts, the researchers felt it necessary to interview the students to clarify the meaning and gather deeper insights. As a result, these students confirmed that learning with shorter and simplified texts was easier for them, which led to more sustainable learning. What they had learned they would remember, knowing that they had poorer vocabulary.

Similarly, students of Group B who preferred learning with longer sentences, 72% of them agreed that longer sentences boost their confidence.

4. DISCUSSIONS

Teaching EFL class need to be aware of the precise stage of FLL development. The students develop language learning sentences through the emergent provision phase, through rich and meaningful texts. In order to strengthen the students' achievements in learning, remedial learning is required (Eslit and Valderama, 2023).

The results convey important data regarding the extent of students' willingness to be taught using short or long sentences in speaking, reading activities, discussions, writing. Based on the number of students who chose to follow the regular textbooks, which was larger compared to Group A who preferred simpler texts, the study implies that these students like learning FL being offered longer sentences. Based on the students' responses, these students highlighted the speaking skills as the most important, that can be improved by listening, reading, and writing longer sentences. This is also in line with Eslit and Valderama (2023) who consider that fluency, accuracy and confidence are indicators for successful EFL learning.

The results indicate that students who used longer sentences had richer vocabulary and they were able to deliver longer sentences spontaneously. This is in line with Lumettu and Runtuwene's (2018) claim that students can become better in using a FL, i.e., their speaking is more fluent and natural, if they become creative to produce their own sentences and develop their speaking.

The second study question that deals with the impact of short or long sentences in students' fluency, again the students convey that longer sentences make them more fluent.

Despite these insights, few students have chosen long and short sentences in instructional contexts, which makes the study discussion debatable. Half of the students focused on productive skills (outputs), half on comprehension or fluency. And only three students stated the impact of sentence style and its impact on learning. Again, the discussion continues with the students' language level based on the CEFR for English. Their preference also varied depending on this factor.

Based on the analysis of the results, it is evident that this group of students prefer longer sentences while learning English. Students who prefer shorter sentences resulted with similar learning outcomes as students who preferred longer sentences. However, in interviews, the students who were taught with longer sentences were more fluent. Students who preferred short sentences (Group A) produced grammatically correct responses, but their sentences were limited in length and complexity. Which implies less creativity in word selection. In addition, the students from Group B were more active in class, were more willing to present and discuss topics.

Modified texts i.e., simpler sentences expose students to examples of English. The4se simple examples help them preview and review lesson content, which is in line with Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2022).

Given the central role of receptive and productive skills, i.e., listening and reading, and, speaking and writing, the study has discussed length sentence impact on EFL learning. As such, linguistic elements should have a greater emphasis, enabling EFL students internalize essential language features for more accurate and fluent language. And the teachers can offer opportunities to become more aware of understanding longer sentences, as well as speaking by using such sentences. Nevertheless, the simplification of sentence length to enhance readability and learning outcomes is needed.

As pedagogical implications for teachers i.e., material designers, the study ponders that the process of adaptation of texts involves also other factors, as mentioned by Rathert and Cabaroğlu (2022), such as school facilities and course requirements. Except the already mentioned factors, the students' social environment and the teacher's ability to offer best and most appropriate, applicable teaching approaches when understanding the students' needs and lacks, as well as their desires to learn are factors that need to be tackled.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Proficiency in reading, speaking, listening, and writing a foreign language is imperative to effective foreign language acquisition. The idea of teaching a foreign language and the idea of assessment for EFL that results from providing short sentences or long sentences and commenting students' perceptions on their language acquisition provides insights to general EFL.

All these provisions aimed at supporting students' learning can be developed beneficially to EFL and offers insights and helps teachers to focus on various teaching approaches, methods and techniques in order to eliminate difficulties that students encounter while learning.

It has been shown that the path of learning EFL from simple conversation to more sophisticated follows a paced approach. Regarding the question: To what extent are this group of HEI students willing to be taught using short or long sentences in speaking, reading activities, discussions, writing, the study may conclude that the majority of higher-performing students prefer texts and sentences to remain unchanged, meaning no modifications or adaptations. In contrast, lower-performing students prefer shorter, simpler sentences for learning English. However, their learning progress follows a similar pace to that of the higher-performing students.

Regarding the second question if short or long sentences impact students' fluency, the study concludes again that fluency is greater among students who are taught using longer sentences.

This study supports Keshavarz and Atai (2007), who consider that content is of the utmost importance. In line with this, the study recommends more focus should be put on the text content with new linguistic items to EFL readers, helping students grasp the best linguistic features more effectively.

As the study is conducted with a smaller sample of students, this study suggests that more research should be focused on students' learning preferences, especially preparation of text design i.e., short and long sentences. Spontaneous EFL learning via short sentences can help the students have a richer vocabulary, however longer sentences help the students become more creative in developing more sophisticated sentences with more creative ideas. As a result, when the student is able to create longer and complex sentences, then the student can be considered a successful language learner and user.

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