

Glossing is sometimes a distraction: Comments on Cheng and Good (2009)

Alan M. Taylor
Brigham Young University
United States

I really enjoyed reading the study by Cheng and Good (2009). The results of their study seem especially interesting from the point of view of reading comprehension. Indeed, their results mirror to some degree Joyce's (1997) study, in which glossing actually had a somewhat negative effect on third semester second language (L2) readers' reading comprehension, especially when compared to first and second semester readers. Glosses have the potential of getting in the way of reading comprehension because of the important relationship between learner level and text level. As Cheng and Good (2009) suggest, if a text is difficult enough, the glosses become more relevant. If the text is not difficult, glosses become less helpful. Of course, there are other variables that can influence L2 reading comprehension. For example, amount or frequency of glossing can be a key variable. More glosses available proportionate to the number of words in a text (e.g., Jacobs, 1994; Taylor, 2002) or more frequent L1 glossing of the same lexical items (Rott, 2007) may result in better L2 reading comprehension.

Almost amazingly, Cheng and Good's (2009) results for reading comprehension for the Level 4 students with L1 and marginal glosses (see Table 3 of Cheng & Good, 2009) are on average lower than for those Level 4 students that had no glosses. In two of the three experimental groups for Level 4, the results were less comprehension than the control group. That is, the average reading comprehension score for the L1 in-text gloss with L2 examples was 2.43 and the average score for the marginal gloss group was even lower—2.38. The no gloss group had a mean of 2.57. If we were to average all the Level 4 experimental groups, we would probably get approximately 2.54, which of course is still less than the 2.57 of the control group. These results occur despite the fact that the researchers selected a more difficult text for Level 4 readers. Such results may mean that at least for 15 L2 readers, glosses were generally not very helpful for reading comprehension. Although on the surface this appears unlikely, because one would assume that most glossing help would seem to benefit most L2 readers, it nevertheless seems to demonstrate that glossing, or at least some types of glossing, can be a distraction from the process of comprehending a reading text. It is plausible that the flow of reading can be interrupted by glossing for higher-level students because attentional resources are not allocated toward L2 text comprehension (e.g., Rott, 2007).

It is also interesting that the L2 readers generally preferred the L1 glosses but that such glosses did not always greatly facilitate reading comprehension—especially at the higher levels. Perhaps students do not always know what is best for them in terms of L2 reading comprehension (Taylor, 2006). Or perhaps the majority of the 34% of those preferring the L1 glosses were from the lower levels of proficiency—especially from the Level 1 group in which glossing, more

specifically L1 glossing, had a larger effect on reading comprehension.

In conclusion, it would seem that there may be a competency level at which reading comprehension is actually hindered by glosses. Even adjusting for text level, it seems that the Cheng and Good (2009) study helps us further understand the importance of text selection, since their study actually attempted to control for the variables of learner and text levels. Future studies should attempt to identify a L2 reading threshold at which glosses may become a hindrance to comprehension. Studies have attempted to identify the reading threshold at which L1 strategies and abilities can be transferred to the L2 (e.g., Laufer, 1996), and perhaps similar measurements can be applied to the glossing studies in the future.

References

- Cheng Y., & Good, R. L. (2009). L1 glosses: Effects on EFL learners' reading comprehension and vocabulary retention. *Reading in a Foreign Language, 21*, 119–142.
- Jacobs, G. M. (1994). What lurks in the margin: Use of vocabulary glosses as a strategy in second language reading. *Issues in Applied Linguistics, 5*, 115–137.
- Joyce, E. E. (1997). Which words should be glossed in L2 reading materials? A study of first, second and third semester French students' recall (report number FL 024 770). Pennsylvania Language Forum, (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 427508).
- Laufer, B. (1996). The lexical threshold of second language reading comprehension: What it is and how it relates to L1 reading ability. *Jyvaskyla Cross-Language Studies, 17*, 55–62.
- Rott, S. (2007). The effect of frequency of input-enhancements on word learning and text comprehension. *Language Learning, 57*, 165-199.
- Taylor, A. M. (2002). A meta-analysis on the effects of L1 glosses on L2 reading comprehension. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Purdue University.
- Taylor, A. M. (2006). The effects of CALL versus traditional L1 glosses on L2 reading comprehension. *CALICO Journal, 23*, 309–318.

About the Author

Alan Taylor teaches French and conducts applied linguistics research in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Brigham Young University-Idaho. His primary research interests include L2 reading comprehension and meta-analytic research. Email: TaylorAl@byui.edu