

Factors associated with glossing: Comments on Ko (2005)

Alan Taylor
Brigham Young University-Idaho

Ko's study is important because the second language (L2) glossing experimental group has a larger overall mean than the first language (L1) group and the L2 group mean is significantly higher than that of the control (no gloss) group. Such results are noteworthy because they suggest that L1 glosses should not be used for the more advanced L2 learner, which helps keep the class in the L2. Furthermore, the study is significant because more L2 gloss use may encourage deeper processing of the glossed items as it may do for vocabulary learning (see, e.g., Grace, 1998).

Interestingly, Ko's results are predictable for two reasons at which she has already hinted: 1) The testing instrument was in the L2; and 2) the text level compared to the student level was not high enough to warrant the consultation of the L1 glosses.

Ko correctly mentions that the type of testing instrument can influence the results. Besides test type, I would like to emphasize that the language of the test is very important as well. If the text, the glosses, and the test are all in the L2, it should not be too unexpected that the L2 gloss group does well – especially with higher-intermediate learners of English who may be more comfortable reading and testing in the L2.

With regard to learner and text level, an interesting experiment that sheds light on Ko's results is Joyce's 1997 study, in which she found that glossing has a differential effect, depending on the level of the learner. In other words, there seems to be a certain fit between learner level and text level. Thus, if the text is fairly simple to understand for a more intermediate to advanced L2 reader, there is little reason to consult the L1 glosses. Furthermore, if there is traditional glossing (the teacher chooses the items), such as that in Ko's study, the L2 reader may not actually need the targeted items. This introduces another aspect that is important to consider in future studies – whether L1 or L2 glossing in a computer-assisted language learning (CALL) environment may be more effective in L2 reading comprehension, as CALL glossing can be tailored to the needs of the student and potentially dramatically increases comprehension (e.g., Hayden, 1997; Stoehr, 1999).

References

- Grace, C. (1998). Retention of word meanings inferred from context and sentence-level translations: Implications for the design of beginning-level CALL. *The Modern Language Journal*, 82, 533-544.

Hayden, S. (1997). *An investigation into the effect and patterns of usage of a computer-mediated text in reading comprehension in French*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania.

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 427 508).

Ko, M. H. (2005). Glosses, comprehension, and strategy use. *Reading in a Foreign Language*, 17(2), 125-143. <http://nflrc.hawaii.edu/rfl/October2005/ko/ko.html>

Stoehr, L. E. (1999). *The effects of built-in comprehension aids in a CALL program on student-readers' understanding of a foreign literary text*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Texas at Austin.

About the Author

Alan Taylor teaches French and does research in applied linguistics in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at Brigham Young University-Idaho. His primary research interests include L2 reading comprehension, glossing, reading strategies, and meta-analytic research methodology. His current project is qualitative research on the successful language learner.