

AN INVESTIGATIVE STUDY OF L2 LEARNERS' ABILITY TO
COMPREHEND SELECTED FORMS OF REFERENCE IN ESL
READING

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Abstract

Reference is a type of cohesive device, which contributes to the creation of links on the textual surface. This study investigates the comprehension of selected forms of referential ties by ESL learners in Sri Lanka. The study focuses on whether Sri Lankan ESL learners are able to process referential ties in a variety of discourse levels. The study also focuses on whether ESL learners can recognize all forms of referential ties at all levels of complexity or whether a developmental sequence could be detected in relation to the processing of the various types of referential ties. The comprehension of the three main types of reference (personals, demonstratives and comparatives), by two groups of learners, (high & low proficiency) was tested under several conditions: three levels of discourse, two levels of readability and in varying syntactic functions. The main findings of the study suggest that comprehension of referential ties by both the low and high proficiency students, is affected at higher levels of discourse. This study also suggests that there is a sequence in the acquisition of the referential ties i.e. a developmental pyramid of L2 learners' ability to comprehend referential ties. Demonstratives seem to be the first acquired as both groups of learners can process the tie independent of the syntactic role and the difficulties of the level of discourse. Personals appear to be next in the order of acquisition because only high proficiency students are able to comprehend this form of reference at all levels of discourse and in all syntactic forms. Comparatives seem to be last in the developmental sequence because both groups have difficulties in processing this particular form of reference.