

Simultaneous Simplification: Stretching the Boundaries of UDL

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Abstract

As the narrative of UDL implementation is rapidly unfolding, its boundaries are gradually explored. The inclusion of learners with significant cognitive disabilities within UDL settings often challenges these boundaries. The incorporation of simultaneous simplification, the process of real time translation into plain language, via an earphone based audio system, may enable people with significant cognitive disabilities to fully engage and actively participate in various learning experiences. The following describes the usage of such a system for the implementation of simultaneous simplification during an international disability conference. Thus providing conference attendees with cognitive disabilities, whose language of fluency was not the language of address, with the ability to follow and contribute to conversation in a manner supporting their autonomy. This activity demonstrates that individuals with cognitive disabilities can be valued stakeholders and participants in dialogue regarding fundamental and complex matters when provided with appropriate accommodations.

Keywords

Cognitive accessibility, Language simplification.

INTRODUCTION

UDL is a unique educational framework which bases itself upon the belief that learning environments should be flexible in order to accommodate diverse needs. This fundamental premise supposedly includes the needs of those with cognitive disabilities as part of the diverse learning spectrum. However, in practice, identifying or developing appropriate accommodations for people with cognitive disabilities has been challenging. Therefore, they are often-times excluded in even the most advanced UDL learning curricula.

Accessibility

Providing closed-captioning for videos or ensuring both visual and audio representations of learning material are currently considered common UDL practice, thus enabling full inclusion of students with sensory disabilities (King-Sears, 2009). These means of representation, while at times somewhat costly or time consuming for teachers and lectures to incorporate, are considered to be beneficial for all learners (National Center on UDL n.d.) and therefore more readily implemented. On the contrary, accommodations such as language simplification, which are essential for students with cognitive disabilities, are much less common in UDL curricula. This might be an indication that these practices elicit resistance as they are at times considered disruptive for other learner.

Simultaneous Simplification

In a recent international disability conference the use of simultaneous simplification was introduced for the first time. Simultaneous simplification refers to the process of real time translation into plain language (either between languages or within a single language). This concept takes root from both language simplification and simultaneous interpretation.

Language simplification refers to the structured process of processing and editing information so as to make it clear, simple and readily understood by people with cognitive disabilities. This process involves practices such as translation into plain language, use of short and clear sentences, use of pictograms and other graphic elements to support the text, use of various representation modalities etc. (Uriel-Karl, Tene-Rinde, & Yalon-Chamovitz, 2011; Yalon-Chamovitz, 2009). Language simplification may be applied in both oral and written communication. It can occur in the adaptation of formal and informal documents such as in the incorporation of plain language and pictograms in medical instruction sheets, or when a speaker simplifies their phrasing, uses shorter and more common words, or uses alternative parsing to make it less burdensome for the learner to process content (Peterson & Ostendorf, 2007).

Simultaneous interpretation is a specialized area of translation, which requires accurate and complete oral translation, at the same rate of speech as the speaker, with only a few seconds of lag time. Simultaneous interpretation enables people from different countries or populations to find common language in which to communicate and learn together (Fügen, Waibel & Kolss, 2007). Fluency in both the input and output languages is insufficient; interpreters must also have familiarity with the subject matter being discussed at a technical level, as well as a knowledge of both related cultures in order to concurrently edit content in an appropriate and sensitive manner that can easily be understood by the target audience (Liu, Schallert & Carroll, 2004). Simultaneous translation is also commonly utilized within the same language in the legal (Ali & Algane, 2013) and medical fields (Flores, 2005), for example, where an exact understanding of all related concepts is vital.

Simultaneous simplification is a novel practice based on theoretical and practical knowledge stemming from both language simplification and simultaneous interpretation. It entails real-time content editing, interpretation and translation into plain language, which enables people with cognitive disabilities to fully participate in a learning community.

At the Beit Issie Shapiro 6th International Conference on Disability in 2015, simultaneous simplification was available to all conference attendees. The simultaneous simplification was provided via a designated channel on the simultaneous interpretation earphone based audio system to all conference attendees, including people with significant cognitive disabilities. An assessment research was conducted during the conference (via observations) and after (via focus groups and interviews). The findings of the study revealed that the incorporation of simultaneous simplification via an earphone based audio system enabled people with significant cognitive disabilities to fully participate in a professional conference. Not only did the participants actively engage during the conference but many of them also demonstrated learning and absorption of conference content from the lectures simplified as far as a few weeks after the conference.

Thus, simultaneous simplification should be adopted as a means to include students with cognitive disabilities in the UDL learners' spectrum.

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