# The Effect of Lexical Modification on Developing Vocabulary Knowledge in Relation to Language Proficiency Level

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*Abstract*—**This study was an attempt to comparatively investigate the effects of lexical modification models (simplification vs. elaboration) on developing EFL learners" vocabulary knowledge in relation to their language proficiency level. To this end, 40 EFL learners were divided into two levels (i.e. elementary and pre-intermediate) based on their performance on the Nelson proficiency test. They were further categorized into two simplification and elaboration groups. The pertinent treatments were rendered through simplification and elaboration models of modification. Two-way ANOVA was run to address the research questions. The findings revealed that not only do input modification procedures significantly affect vocabulary development but also the elaboration group outperformed the simplification group. Moreover, it was revealed that language proficiency level plays a significant role in determining the effects of modification procedures as the pre-intermediate group significantly outperformed the elementary one; then, elaboration in both groups and pre-intermediate as a proficiency level proved to play a significant role in the process of modification-based vocabulary development.**

*Index Terms*—**elaboration, ESP, lexical modification, simplification, vocabulary development**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Massive development in communication in international field precedes the emergence of a great amount of need for learning English language. Rapid interest for English learning needs attention of language scholars to find ways of improving the methods of language learning easier and faster. In this regard, the field of the text modification comprehension is an issue that has attracted a lot of investigations. In this regard, the researchers have manifested that lexical and syntactic components are two features of the texts that highly affect the reading comprehension. Finding of these sorts has helped scholars to work on the idea of making the texts more comprehensible through some modification techniques. As cited in Moradian (2013), there are two types of modification (Simplification and Elaboration). In simplification method the difficult vocabulary items and complex syntactic structures from a text are removed or replaced with more simple equivalents. While elaboration refers to changes in which unknown linguistic items are paraphrased with redundancy and explicitness. These two types have been examined by different scholars such as (Blau, 1982; Chaudron, 1983; Long, 1985) who believe linguistic First, simplification usually improves literal comprehension, although simple sentences alone may not help and can even hinder comprehension. Second, simplification is not consistently superior to elaborative modification (Pica, Doughty, and Young, 1986). Third, listening comprehension is consistently improved when elaborative modifications are present (Chaudron& Richards, 1986). Fourth, there is evidence that modifications (of either type) are more useful to learners of lower L2 proficiency (Blau, 1982). Finally, with the possible exceptions of the rate of delivery, single adjustments of one type or another such as shortening sentences, repetition, or making topics salient are generally not strong enough to have an effect on the comprehensibility of whole passages or lectures (Blau, 1982, 1990)

Krashen (1981) presumes that speaking the foreign language develops acquisition, and conversation in which the learner has some kind of control over the topic and in which the other participants exert an effort to make themselves understood provide valuable intake. Krashen believes that the best activities used in a classroom are those that are natural, interesting and understood. He claims that if the teaching program can provide these characteristics then the classroom may be the best place for second language acquisition, up to the intermediate level. Similarly, Littewood (1984) considers "the ideal input for acquiring a second language is similar to the input received by the child, comprehensible, relevant to their immediate interests, not too complex, but not strictly graded either" (p.59) (cited in Hassan 2008)

As Hassan (2008) stated, Ferguson (1975) lists some features that characterize English foreigner talk discourse. In phonology, it is characterized by a slow rate of delivery, loudness, clear articulation, pauses, emphatic stress, and

exaggerated pronunciation. In lexis, it is characterized by occasional use of words from other languages, substitutions of items by synonyms, or paraphrases. In syntax, modification is presented through omission, expansion and replacement or rearrangement. Omission is exemplified by deletion of articles, copula, inflectional morphology, conjunctions and subject pronouns. Expansion is illustrated by the addition of unanalyzed tags to questions ("OK"? "Yes?" "No?") and insertion of subject pronoun "You" before imperatives. Replacement and rearrangement include such features as forming negatives without auxiliaries ("no like"), replacing subject with object pronouns ("him go"). In addition, among the common features of foreigner talk discourse are the following: shorter utterances, syntactically less complex clauses, and less subordination, and also containing less varied vocabulary (Gaies, 1977, Herzl, 1973, Hasan, 1988).

Interactional adjustments have been identified in a number of studies (e.g. Ferguson and Debose, 1977; Hatch, Shapira, and Gough 1978; Long 1983; Hatch, 1980) in two tables. The first includes input modifications in foreigner talk (pronunciation, lexis, grammar) and the other interactional modifications in foreigner talk (discourse features). Elsewhere Ellis (1995) found that modified oral input (both pre-modified and interactionally modified) play an important role in the acquisition of vocabulary. Ellis found a strong relationship between comprehension and word meaning acquisition. He also found that although more word meanings were learnt from the interactionally modified input than from the pre-modified input, the rate of acquisition (in words per minute) was faster than the pre-modified input. It should be noted that research has investigated the different variables that influence the input and the interactional adjustments in foreigner talk. Scarcella and Higa (1981) compared the foreigner talk discourse addressed to child non-native speakers with that addressed to adolescents. They found that the former type of speakers received simpler input in a more supportive atmosphere. The input they received was characterized by shorter utterances, simplified vocabulary, and more clarification requests (As cited in Hassan 2008).

Urano (2002) examined effects of lexical simplification and elaboration on second language learners. What he focused on was the learners" comprehension and incidental word learning. The results showed that elaborated texts assigned in the study had a great effect on the acquisition of the learners. This study revealed that vocabulary acquisition was due to lexical elaboration rather than to simplification; those language learners who are in higher proficiency received more benefit from lexical elaboration in the acquisition of vocabulary meanings. Yano, Long, and Ross (1994) have conducted 15 studies (eleven on studies of listening and four on reading comprehension) concerning the effects of the simplified and elaborated input on non-native speakers" comprehension. The major findings are presented in a condense form as follow:

As stated by Mousapour Negari (2012), Hajihassani and Porkar (2011) studied whether the lexical input modification and typographical enhancement could be used as an instrument to improve vocabulary acquisition of second language learners'. The outcome uncovered that lexical and typographical elaboration had an effect on incidental L2 vocabulary learning by Iranian foreign language learners.

(As cited by Mousapour Negari (2012), Marefat and Moradian (2008) examined the explicit and implicit lexical elaboration devices on the acquisition of L2 vocabulary by Iranian freshman students. The subjects were given a reading that had some unknown words. The results indicated that the tools in lexical elaboration did not assist in the recognition of second language vocabulary, while implicit and explicit lexical elaboration devices did not have any effect in the acquisition of the forms or meanings of the antecedent unfamiliar words in the text.

Le (2011) used two major types of modifications to make the approaching input more comprehensible or to modify the input for learners" level of acquisition: simplification and elaboration. Simplification apply to changes to the input so that there is less syntactical and lexical intricacy, while elaboration refers to changes in which unknown linguistic items are paraphrased with redundancy and explicitness

Kim (2006) also investigated vocabulary acquisition in reading when there was manipulation of input elaboration. He examined explicit and implicit or typographical intensification .Other inputs were attention getting or flagging used to highlight the unknown words. In his study, synonyms and antonyms were used as the form of elaboration. The outcome showed that explicit lexical elaboration had positive effect on the comprehension of the words" meanings in a reading and when typographical enhancement was added, the effect seemed to be greater ,but inunderstanding the meaning of the words neither of these showed any effect in the results. In this respect, Moradani and Addel (2011) investigated the role of explicit and implicit lexical elaboration in determination and identification of the meaning of unfamiliar words in a passage. The outcome revealed that explicit elaborated texts had greater effect on students" acquisition.

Brewer (2008) made an effort to investigate the effects of lexical simplification and elaboration on ESL readers" local-level perceived comprehension. The target verbs were simplified (replaced with a higher frequency equivalent) or elaborated (left in the sentence, but followed by a parenthetical definition). In his research the participants received both treatment types and unmodified control items in a fifty-sentence test.

Moradian and Adel (2011) believe that lexical elaboration will foster L2 learners' autonomy from classroom teachers as well as the dictionaries. In the presence of lexical elaboration, L2 learners do not need to look up the meanings of the difficult words in the dictionaries. Their fluency of reading, as Moradian and Adel state, is not also hampered by their frequent questions about the meanings of the unknown words from the teachers.

Earlier research on elaboration demonstrated that the additional meaningful links between arbitrary paired items improved learning (Sahari, 1997). The creation of a rich cognitive structure explains the efficacy of elaboration in terms of promoting retention, recall, and comprehension. Furthermore, Sahari (1997) states that elaboration allows the reader

to deduce meanings by producing more information than was presented in the text. It inspires the learner to create a broad perspective structure and assists him/her in reestablish the original author-based ideas of importance into a more substantial, practical, and personalized version. (cited in Moradian 2013)

Contrary to relatively informative literature on input modification in general and that of lexical in particular, the modification models have not been extensively addressed in return to language proficiency level. To address this problem two research questions posed as follows which were addressed in the form of their respective null hypotheses.

1. Is there any statistically significant difference between the effects of lexical input modification procedures (simplification and elaboration) on the vocabulary development among Iranian EFL learners?

2. Is there any significant relationship between the effect of types of lexical input modification procedures (simplification and elaboration) and language proficiency levels (elementary vs. upper intermediate) on the vocabulary development among Iranian EFL learners?

## II. METHODOLOGY

### A. Participants

Totally 40 Iranian male and female EFL learners aged 17-22 participated in this study. Screened based on the Nelson proficiency test, they were two equal groups of elementary and pre-intermediate levels.

### B. Instrumentation

For this study the Standardized Nelson English Proficiency Test was used to select a homogeneous group of participants and screening them into two levels. Other materials used in this study included 4 original reading texts for the participants in two levels, two reading texts for elementary level and two texts for pre- intermediate. These original texts were used in both pretest and posttest of the study. Two reading diagnostic tests for measuring vocabulary knowledge were developed to make sure of the participants" knowledge prior to the treatment. The vocabulary tests included 30 items; of these 30 items, 10 of them were matching questions Two reading comprehension tests were developed, piloted and administered to the participants as the pretest and then, as the post test at the end of the treatment sessions. The tests included 5 multiple choices and 5 true- false questions.

TABLE 1
CLASSIFICATION OF THE PARTICIPANTS

| Modulation models | Levels |
|---|---|
|  | Elementary |
| Simplification | Pre-intermediate |
|  | Elementary |
| Elaboration | Pre-intermediate |

## III. DATA ANALYSIS

### A. Instruments, Validity and Measures

Although reliability and validity of instruments have been proven, both of them were subjected to further validation process based on principal component analysis (i.e., KR-21), indicating the reliability index (Table 2) and KR-21 statistical formula showing the reliability ratios (Table 3).

TABLE 2
KR-21 RELIABILITY INDEX; POSTTEST OF VOCABULARY

|  | N of Items | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Posttest | 25 | 18.78 | 5.046 | 25.461 |
| KR-21 | .85 |  |  |  |

TABLE 3
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND KR-21 INDEX; NELSON GENERAL ENGLISH PROFICIENCY TEST

|  | N | Mean | Std. Deviation | Variance |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| NELSON50 | 80 | 16.67 | 8.957 | 80.222 |
| KR-21 | .88 |  |  |  |

### B. Results

**1. Homogeneity Measures**

Table 4 displays the descriptive statistics of the participants selected for the study:

TABLE 4
TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS, PRETEST BY GROUP BY PROFICIENCY LEVELS

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type | 2.025 | 1 | 2.025 | .565 | .457 | .015 |
| Proficiency | 5.625 | 1 | 5.625 | 1.569 | .218 | .042 |
| Type * Proficiency | 13.225 | 1 | 13.225 | 3.688 | .063 | .093 |
| Error | 129.100 | 36 | 3.586 | | | |
| Total | 1043.000 | 40 | | | | |

## 2. Testing Normality Assumptions

The data collected in this study enjoyed normal distributions. As displayed in table 5 the values of skewdness and kurtosis were lower than their critical values.

TABLE 5
TESTING NORMALITY ASSUMPTION

| Type | Proficiency | | N Statistic | Skewness Statistic | Std. Error | Ratio | Kurtosis Statistic | Std. Error | Ratio |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| elaboration | elementary | Pretest | 10 | -.091 | .687 | -0.13 | -.993 | 1.334 | -0.74 |
| | | Posttest | 10 | .170 | .687 | 0.25 | -1.478 | 1.334 | -1.11 |
| | Pre-intermediate | Pretest | 10 | .151 | .687 | 0.22 | -1.078 | 1.334 | -0.81 |
| | | Posttest | 10 | -.013 | .687 | -0.02 | -1.066 | 1.334 | -0.80 |
| simplification | elementary | Pretest | 10 | .000 | .687 | 0.00 | -.450 | 1.334 | -0.34 |
| | | Posttest | 10 | .020 | .687 | 0.03 | -1.113 | 1.334 | -0.83 |
| | Pre-intermediate | Pretest | 10 | -.348 | .687 | -0.51 | -.721 | 1.334 | -0.54 |
| | | Posttest | 10 | .128 | .687 | 0.19 | -1.610 | 1.334 | -1.21 |

## IV. INVESTIGATION OF THE FIRST RESEARCH QUESTION

The first research question pointed whether lexical input modification procedures (elaboration and simplification) have any statically significant effects on vocabulary development of Iranian EFL learners. To investigate the first research question, at the end of the treatment sessions posttests' scores (simplification and elaboration) of each group were compared with each other. An investigation of subjects' means of the posttest in both elementary and pre-intermediate levels was accomplished by a two-way ANOVA .It was run to study the null-hypotheses proposed in this study. It must be noted that there were no homogeneous variances in the divided groups.

In table 6 Levene's test of equality of error variances is illustrated.

TABLE 6
LEVENE'S TEST OF EQUALITY OF ERROR VARIANCES

| F | df1 | df2 | Sig. |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3.228 | 3 | 36 | .034 |

As displayed in Table 6 the Levene's F-value (F (3, 36) = 3.22, p = .034) was significant. As noted by Bachman (2005), Pallant (2011) and Field (2013) there is no need to worry about the violation of this assumption when sample sizes are equal; as is the case in this study.

TABLE 7
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, POSTTEST OF VOCABULARY BY GROUPS

| Group | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Elaboration | 22.850 | .616 | 21.600 | 24.100 |
| simplification | 14.700 | .616 | 13.450 | 15.950 |

TABLE 8
TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS, POSTTEST BY GROUP BY PROFICIENCY LEVELS

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type | 664.225 | 1 | 664.225 | 87.430 | .000 | .708 |
| Proficiency | 46.225 | 1 | 46.225 | 6.084 | .019 | .145 |
| Type * Proficiency | 9.025 | 1 | 9.025 | 1.188 | .283 | .032 |
| Error | 273.500 | 36 | 7.597 | | | |
| Total | 15093.000 | 40 | | | | |

Based on the results displayed in Table 7 and Table 8 it can be claimed that the elaboration group (M = 22.85, SE = .61) significantly (F (1, 36) = 87.43, p = .000; partial $\eta^2$ = .708 representing a large effect size) outperformed the simplification group (M = 14.70, SE = .61) on the posttest of vocabulary. Thus the first null-hypothesis **was rejected**.

## V. RESEARCH QUESTION TWO

The second research question addressed whether there is significant relationship between lexical input modification procedures (elaboration and simplification) and language proficiency levels (elementary vs. pre-intermediate) on vocabulary development of Iranian EFL learners. To investigate the third research question, at the end of the treatment sessions posttests' scores (simplification and elaboration) of each group were compared with each other.

To compare the elaborated and simplified elementary and intermediate subjects' means on the posttest of vocabulary a two way ANOVA was utilized in order to probe the second null-hypotheses posed in this study. It can be claimed based on the results displayed in Table.9 And Table.10 that the pre-intermediate group (M = 19.85, SE = .61) significantly (F (1, 36) = 6.08, p = .019; partial $\eta^2$ = .145 representing a large effect size) outperformed the elementary group (M = 17.70, SE = .61) on the posttest of vocabulary. Thus the second null-hypothesis **was rejected**.

TABLE 9
TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS, POSTTEST BY GROUP BY PROFICIENCY LEVELS

| Source | Type III Sum of Squares | Df | Mean Square | F | Sig. | Partial Eta Squared |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Type | 664.225 | 1 | 664.225 | 87.430 | .000 | .708 |
| Proficiency | 46.225 | 1 | 46.225 | 6.084 | .019 | .145 |
| Type * Proficiency | 9.025 | 1 | 9.025 | 1.188 | .283 | .032 |
| Error | 273.500 | 36 | 7.597 | | | |
| Total | 15093.000 | 40 | | | | |

TABLE 10
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, POSTTEST BY PROFICIENCY LEVEL

| Anxiety Levels | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Elementary | 17.700 | .616 | 16.450 | 18.950 |
| Pre-Intermediate | 19.850 | .616 | 18.600 | 21.100 |

Although not concerned in this study; there was not any significant interaction between types of treatment and proficiency levels on the posttest of vocabulary (F (1, 36) = 1.18, p = .283; partial $\eta^2$ = .032 representing a weak effect size) (Table 9).

TABLE 11
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, POSTTEST BY GROUP BY PROFICIENCY LEVEL

| Group | Proficiency | Mean | Std. Error | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| elaboration | elementary | 21.300 | .872 | 19.532 | 23.068 |
| | Pre-intermediate | 24.400 | .872 | 22.632 | 26.168 |
| simplification | elementary | 14.100 | .872 | 12.332 | 15.868 |
| | Pre-intermediate | 15.300 | .872 | 13.532 | 17.068 |

The results of Simple-Effect Analysis (Table 11) indicated that;

A: The pre- intermediate group under elaboration procedure (MD = 3.10, p = .017) significantly outperformed the elementary group under elaboration procedure.

TABLE 12
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS, POSTTEST BY GROUP BY PROFICIENCY LEVEL

| Type | (I) Proficiency | (J) Proficiency | Mean Difference (I-J) | Std. Error | Sig.[b] | 95% Confidence Interval for Difference[b] | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| elaboration | elementary | Pre-intermediate | -3.100* | 1.233 | .017 | -5.600 | -.600 |
| | Pre-intermediate | elementary | 3.100* | 1.233 | .017 | .600 | 5.600 |
| simplification | elementary | Pre-intermediate | -1.200 | 1.233 | .337 | -3.700 | 1.300 |
| | Pre-intermediate | elementary | 1.200 | 1.233 | .337 | -1.300 | 3.700 |

*. The mean difference is significant at the .050 level.

B: There was not any significant difference between pre-intermediate and elementary groups under simplification procedure (MD = 1.20, p = .337).
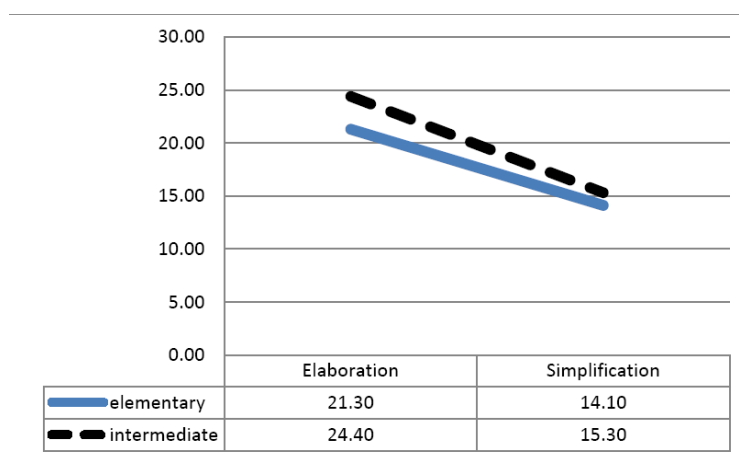
Figure 1.Interaction between group and proficiency level on posttest of vocabulary

## VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To answer the second research question, obtained scores of posttests (vocabulary and reading tests) in both groups were compared. The results indicated that the pre-intermediate group (M = 19.85, SE = .61) significantly (F (1, 36) = 6.08, p = .019; partial $\eta^2$ = .145 representing a large effect size) outperformed than the elementary group (M = 17.70, SE = .61) on the posttest of vocabulary. As it was stated earlier, modification of vocabularies (either simplification or elaboration) had positive effects on language learning. Referring to Oh (2001) linguistic complexities of the elaborated passages were approximately the same, the linguistic complexity of the elaborated texts must not have been a barrier to the students' reading comprehension. This means that linguistic simplification may not be indispensable for effective comprehension.

Based on results there are several studies, Brewer (2008) and Hill (1997) have admitted that input modification procedure (either simplification or elaboration) is often used to make the syntactic structure and the lexicon more comprehensible, while elaboration had an excessive effect rather than simplification. But, Yano, Long and Ross (1994) and Negari and Rouhi (2012) exclaimed that simplification hinders the opportunity for a learner to learn new linguistic items. They also insisted on elaboration method which outperformed the simplification method.

According to Al-Sibai (2003), fill-in-the-blanks exercises assist learners to learn the meaning of newly-acquired vocabularies, so it was constructed as a test for both groups but the elaboration group (M=22.85) notably performed better than the simplification group (M= 14.70). As Cirocki (2003), Dainty (1992), and Thornbury (2002) have stated that text/context method motivates learners to deduce the exact meaning.

Concerning the second research question, the results indicated that there was not any statistically significant interaction between types of treatment and proficiency levels on the posttest of vocabulary (F (1, 36) = 1.18, p = .283; partial $\eta^2$ = .032 representing a weak effect size). The results of Simple-Effect Analysis displayed that;

A: The pre-intermediate group under elaboration procedure (MD = 3.10, p = .017) significantly outperformed the elementary group under elaboration procedure.

B: There was not any significant difference between pre-intermediate and elementary groups under simplification procedure (MD = 1.20, p = .337).

As Brown (1987) noted, comprehension depends not so much on linguistic items as on the level of information that is available to the reader and the frequency with which the reader comes across the information. By developing redundancy (through exemplification, repetition, paraphrase, definition, and synonym) and by signaling the thematic structure more clearly, elaborative modification can help the reader utilize more opportunities to process critical information within the text and thus to comprehend the text better, even though the resulting text remains at a high level of linguistic complexity (cited in Alejandra Vessoni De Lence 2010).

In conclusion, the present study verified that some lexical items in the text positively can be considered as the preventing of comprehension. They decrease the rate of comprehension to the extent that is remarkable and should not be disregarded. Removing the problematic words in reading comprehension and using easier words in replace proved to be an effective way to intensify comprehensibility.

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