The Effect of Elaborative Text Modification on Pre-intermediate Male and Female EFL Learners' Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: This study was conducted to determine whether text modification through elaboration enhances reading comprehension performance of pre-intermediate male and female EFL learners. To this end, 60 pre-intermediate learners were selected based on their performance on a standard version of Longman's New Opportunities Placement Tests. The participants also received a piloted version of a researcher-made reading comprehension test as the pretest to ascertain their homogeneity. Then, they were divided into two equal groups to represent the experimental group and the control group (each group containing two male and female sub-groups that totally form four groups). Five reading passages based on two reading tasks (unmodified and elaborated versions) were administered to the participants. The experimental group received the elaborated texts as the treatment, while the control group received unmodified baseline texts. Following five weeks (for ten sessions) the posttest was administered. The results of a two-way ANOVA indicated that regardless of the gender difference, there was a significant difference between the experimental group's and the control group's reading comprehension performance. This study concludes that elaborative text modification can be a worthy option in EFL classes.

1. Introduction

For many years reading comprehension has drawn the attention of second or foreign language researchers, and it has been studied from different perspectives. It has been widely accepted among second language learning researchers that exposure to the target language input is necessary for SLA. Moreover, input needs to be comprehended by second language (L2) learners for subsequent language acquisition processes to take place (Chaudron, 1985).

Facilitating the reading process for second or foreign language readers is a high priority for language researchers, teachers, and, of course, language learners. The question of *how to make the reading process easier and more effective* has created a wide variety of theories, approaches and texts. Recent research on input modification addresses the relative effectiveness of two different types of modification, i.e., simplification and elaboration, on L2 comprehension (Oh, 2001). It claims that if textual modification in direction of elaboration is provided, EFL learners' reading comprehension performance will be enhanced. This study addresses the almost neglected issue in the literature related to text modification and its impacts on reading comprehension, especially when it comes to pre-intermediate students in an EFL context. Generally, by looking at the related literature it becomes obvious that we are still in need of further research in order to confirm the relative effectiveness of elaborative text modification.

Accordingly, this study is carried out to answer the following questions:

1. Does elaborative text modification have any main effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension?

2. Does gender have any main effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension?

3. Do elaborative text modification and gender have any interaction effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension?

There are lots of theoretical and practical studies, research, and reports on effectiveness of pre-modification in language teaching and learning (Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994; Oh, 2001; Kim, 2006; Ragan, 2006; Maxwell, 2011). But the point is that by going through the related literature, it becomes obvious that there is a lack of empirical research and studies dealing with elaborative modification on reading comprehension among male and female learners in EFL contexts like Iran.

Maxwell (2011) investigated the effects of simplification versus elaboration. The results of this study did not provide a clear indication of any significant effect that text modification can have on elementary ESL learners' reading comprehension. Brewer (2008) investigated the effects of lexical simplification and modification on sentence-level

perceived comprehension. The results of the test showed no significant difference between comprehension ratings for items that had been simplified, elaborated, or left in the original form. Kong (2007) explored the effects of lexical simplification and elaboration on L2 Korean reading comprehension. He showed that both simplified and elaborated input promoted the participants' reading comprehension with no significant difference between the two. Chung (1995, as cited in Urano, 2000) hypothesized that both simplification and elaboration would facilitate L2 reading comprehension. He found no significant differences between the elaborated conditions and the baseline condition.

Pica, Doughty, and Young (1986), found that simplification is not consistently superior to elaborative modification. Young (1999) concluded that simplification will not necessarily aid comprehension of a text. Loschky (1994) indicates that premodified input sometimes fails to improve learner's comprehension. A possible reason explaining this fact is that elaboration or simplification of input may not be helpful but detrimental in some occasions.

However, the majority of research, up until Yano et al. (1994) and Oh (2001) had been centered on the effects of simplifying the vocabulary and syntax of aural language and written text (Jeong, 1987; Lee, 1986; Strother & Ulijn, 1987 all as cited in Oh, 2001). Studies done on the effects of simplification versus elaboration on aural input comprehension and retention have shown that elaboration techniques tend to enhance comprehension more than linguistically simplified input (Chaudron, 1983).

Mary E. O'Donnell (2005) indicated that L2 readers of short literary texts that have been modified elaboratively can recall more information about the texts and are able to identify more vocabulary that appeared within the text. Kim (2003) stated that input modification in the direction of elaboration is preferred in SLA on the grounds that elaborated input retains the material that L2 learners need for developing their interlanguage and provides with natural discourse model (as cited in Xiaohui, 2010).

Urano (2002) confirmed that lexical elaboration had more effects than lexical simplification in terms of both L2 reading comprehension and vocabulary acquisition. Ellis (1995) revealed that interactionally modified input was more effective in vocabulary acquisition. Long (1983) showed that modification was helpful in the amount of perceived comprehension. Ragan (2006) believes that text elaboration might help to alleviate the difficulties less skilled readers have when relying on imprecise or incorrect background knowledge. These findings have supported on many researchers such as Yano et al.,

(1994) and Oh (2001) to extend these findings from aural input to written input.

2. Method

The participants of the present study were 60 pre-intermediate male and female EFL students selected from among the general population pool of 90 students studying at Rose Language Institute in Ardabil, Iran. All the participants were at the same language proficiency level, according to the results of the standard placement test (Longman's New Opportunities Placement Tests) administered by the researcher prior to the study. The participants who were at the pre-intermediate level of proficiency were divided into two equal experimental and control groups, each consisting two separate classes of 15 students for males and females.

A researcher-made test of reading comprehension was developed based on the level of the learners. Two passages of reading comprehension were selected from the book *"Reading and Vocabulary Development 2 (Thoughts and Notions)"* by Ackert and Lee (2005) and 20 items in different formats, namely, MCQs, T/F, and open-ended were developed based on the mentioned passages. The test was piloted among 30 students with the same characteristics (age, gender, level) for the purpose of calculating the reliability of the test and then modified. The results represented that the mean was 13.5 and the SD was 1.61. The reliability of the test then was calculated as 0.74 based on KR-21 method which is an acceptable reliability.

This test which was comprised of 20 items was used both as the pre and post-test in the present study to measure and compare the participants' reading comprehension before and after the study. The pretest was administered at the beginning of the study in order to ensure the homogeneity of learners regarding their knowledge of reading comprehension.

The posttest was administered at the end of the experiment for the purpose of checking the effect of the treatment on the reading comprehension ability of the learners. Five reading passages in the forms of two reading tasks- unmodified baseline and elaborated versions- were administered to four groups of participants.

The selected texts were all relatively short, ranging 142-246 words in unmodified form. Elaboration has been shown to increase text length (Rose, Souza, & Hanna, 1996). The elaborated versions ranged from 217- 429 words. Readers of the elaborated versions were expected to complete the readings and following multiple- choice reading comprehension questions in the same amount of time as the students who read the unmodified texts. The students received approximately fifteen minutes to

read each passage and respond to the following related questions. To get accurate results as much as possible, and to probe or reject the hypotheses in this study, various data analyses were done throughout the study the list of which goes as follows:

1. Descriptive statistics of pre/ posttest was done for the purpose of calculation of its reliability in the pilot study phase.

2. Normality tests were run to see if the data could meet the assumption of normality based on the ratios of Skewness and Kurtosis.

3. An independent- samples t-test for the reading comprehension pretest scores was run to determine the degree of homogeneity between the experimental and control groups and genders.

4. A two-way ANOVA was run to compare the male and female experimental and control groups' means on the posttest of reading comprehension in order to probe the research questions posed in this study.

3. Results and Discussion

The means and standard deviations for the reading comprehension pretest and posttest scores for both groups and genders were calculated. The experimental group's mean score (M= 14.43, SD= 2.30) was almost similar to the control group's mean score (M= 14.23, SD= 1.85) at pretest. This was the case with the experimental group's male (M= 14.80, SD= 2.30) and female (M= 14.07, SD= 2.31) participants and their counterparts in the control group, males (M= 14.40, SD= 1.76) and females (M= 14.07, SD= 1.98).

As it is clear, the experimental group's mean score (M= 16.23, SD= 1.88) at posttest was higher than the control group's (M= 15.20, SD= 1.37). The posttest mean score of the experimental group's male participants (M= 16.93, SD= 1.58) was higher than that for the control group's males (M= 15.27, SD= 1.10), whereas the posttest mean score of the experimental group's female (M= 15.53, SD= 1.95) participants was almost similar to that for the control group's females (M= 15.13, SD= 1.64).

The descriptive findings from the pretest suggested that there was no difference in the mean scores of the participants. However, based on an independent-samples **t-test** for the reading comprehension pretest scores, the degree of homogeneity between the experimental and control groups and genders was statistically determined. As shown in Table 1, no statistically significant group t (58) = .37, p = .71 or gender t (58) = .99, p = .32, differences were observed.

Table 1.*Results of Independent-Samples Tests for Pretest Scores*

Source	t	df	Sig. *(2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference
Pretest Group	.37	58	.71	.20	.53
Pretest Gender	.99	58	.32	.53	.53

* p≤ .05

Although the descriptive findings from the posttest suggested that there were group and gender differences in the posttest mean scores of the reading comprehension, it was necessary for the data to be further examined through inferential statistics, as well. Prior to the inferential data analysis, the data were checked for normality of distribution. It was found that the Skewness and Kurtosis of the reading comprehension posttest scores fell within the acceptable range from –1.0 to +1.0. Since the dependent variable satisfied the criteria for skewness and kurtosis, it was assumed that there was no violation of the normality assumption.

Although there is one level for the dependent variable of reading comprehension (reading comprehension posttest scores), there are two levels for the independent variable of the instructional condition (experimental and control groups) and two levels for the independent variable of gender (male and female). Thus, this is considered as a 2×2 factorial design. For this reason, the two-way ANOVA was performed to examine the main and interaction effects for the instructional condition (experimental and control groups) and gender (male and female) in reading comprehension posttest scores of EFL learners.

Levene's test for homogeneity of group variance was non-significant (p = .09). As shown in Table 2.below, the main effect for the instructional condition was statistically significant, F (2, 56) = 6.25, p = .01. The main effect for the instructional condition suggests that without considering the gender difference, there was a significant difference between the experimental group's and the control group's reading comprehension performance. This means that the first research hypothesis (*H1*: Elaborative text modification has a main effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension) is accepted.

The main effect for the gender was not statistically significant, F (1, 56) = 3.44, p = .06.That is, without considering the difference in the instructional condition, there was no difference

between the male and the female participants in terms of their reading comprehension performance. Therefore, the second research hypothesis (*H2*: Gender has a main effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension) is rejected. Finally, there was no statistically significant interaction effect for the group and the gender on the reading comprehension posttest scores, F (1, 56) = 2.35, p = .13. This indicates that the third research hypothesis (*H3*: Elaborative text modification and gender have an interaction effect on pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension) is rejected.

Table 2.*Results of Two-way ANOVA for the Reading Comprehension Posttest Scores*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig. *	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Group	16.01	1	16.01	6.25	.015	.101	.69
Gender	8.81	1	8.81	3.44	.069	.058	.44
Group × Gender	6.01	1	6.01	2.35	.131	.040	.32
Error	143.33	56	2.56				

* $p ≤ .05$

In addition, examination of the profile plot of the reading comprehension posttest scores indicated that the participants in the experimental group (*M*= 16.23, *SD*= 1.88) outperformed those in the control group (*M*= 15.20, *SD*= 1.37).

4. Conclusion
This study made an attempt to determine whether input elaboration can enhance reading comprehension performance of Iranian pre-intermediate male and female EFL learners. To sum up the findings of the present study, it can be stated that elaborative text modification had a statistically significant effect on the pre-intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension. Generally speaking, regarding the effects of pre-modified input, input elaboration is likely to be a facilitating factor on students' comprehension (Le, 2011). Also, the results revealed that there was no significant difference between the male and the female participants in terms of their reading comprehension performance.

As was noted, technique of simplification has some drawbacks stated and approved by several researchers. For example, Yano et al., (1994) concluded that linguistically simplified texts create less realistic models of the language which can negatively affect language learning. On the other hand, technique of elaboration provides learners with opportunities to encounter, more or less, authentic materials and assist them in comprehension more successfully. Elaboration, therefore, seems to constitute an important alternative to simplification for written input, and be worthy of greater attention by scholars, English language teachers, and EFL learners.

The current study highlighted our understanding by considering the effectiveness of input modification in general and elaborative text modification in particular. Based on the outcomes of this study, we can maintain that less proficient EFL learners will enhance their reading comprehension if teachers pay more attention to providing appropriate elaborated texts for their students. In conclusion, it cannot be denied that input modification can promote comprehension, especially in reading and vocabulary learning.

As was mentioned among the limitations of the study, the limited framework of the current study does not allow broad generalizations of the results. This study did not pay attention to the Interaction hypothesis and its role in facilitating language learning. So, further research is expected to shed more light into the effect of text modification on comprehension.

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