

## The effect of explicit lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing of EFL learners

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1

**Abstract-** This study investigated the effect of explicit lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing of 70 intermediate EFL learners at Pardis language institute in Khodabandeh. The subjects' target recognition vocabulary assessed by teacher-made vocabulary test containing 36 multiple-choice items. Before instruction any reading activity, the subjects of both groups (experimental and control) wrote a composition entitled "A Cruel Sport". Writing before teaching elaborated text showed that 15.56% of recognized target vocabulary converted into productive vocabulary. This increased significantly to 75.8% after teaching the reading passage by elaborated text. The result indicated that explicit lexical elaboration had a significant effect on the subject's recognition vocabulary to become productive vocabulary in immediate writing tasks.

**Keywords:** Explicit elaboration; passive vocabulary; active vocabulary; writing skill

### 1. Introduction

Writing is one of the most essential skills, especially in second or foreign language learning. Graham and Hebert (2010) believe that one way for improving reading comprehension is to give students opportunities to write about what they read, to teach them the writing skills and the processes of creating a text, and to give much time to engage in writing activities. In addition, the writing lends itself more naturally to individual practice and the written tasks can be completed individually by students and causes them to relieve themselves of the discomfort of having to produce language in public (Chastain, 1988, p. 249).

If we view writing in certain context as a tool for improvement of general language, one area that is considered important and require more attention, is vocabulary. Some studies confirm that vocabulary is the most important trait of writing (Muncie, 2002) and lack of vocabulary causes difficulty in writing for foreign language learners ( Astika, 1993; Santos, 1988). So it is the duty of second language teaching experts that pay more attention to vocabulary learning and teaching. Rubin (1987) believes that teachers should be cognizant of a number of strategies that can be embedded into their existing curricula. In order to improve the overall classroom performance, they should familiarize their students with those strategies.

### **1.1. Input modification**

There are various methods and strategies for learning vocabulary in methodology text books. The significant approach to language learning in general and vocabulary learning in particular is input modification. Input modification is motivated by Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1981, 1985, and 1987) and Long's Interaction Hypothesis (1983a, 1983b, 1996). Modification to input is based on the assumption that "input must be comprehensible to become intake" (Watanabe, 1997, p, 287). A theory of Input Modification finds its empirical evidence in acquisitional practices by L1 and L2 learners. For example, In the case of first language acquisition mothers make adjustments to their speech when they talk to their babies while they are trying to learn their L1. The modified speech which foreigners are exposed to as "foreigner talk", the term which Ferguson (1971) employed to describe such a language. In language learning settings, teachers lower their linguistic level to match that of the learners. They use simple words and easy grammatical structures to make their language understandable to language learners in classrooms. Such a register which is used by language teachers in instructional situations is called "teacher talks" (Marefat & Moradian, 2008).

### **1.2. Type of modification to input in language acquisition**

There are two types of modification: (a) simplification, and (b) elaboration. Simplification as the simplified graded materials available for English Language Teaching show, removes the difficult vocabulary items and complex syntactic structures from a text which has been already written by and for a native speaker. But, as cited in Hassanvand (2012) in an elaborated text, on the other hand, difficult vocabulary items and complex syntactic structures are retained. Several researchers talk against the effectiveness of simplification because (a) input

simplification leads to comprehension, but not consistently (e.g., Blue, 1982) and (b) it omits the input linguistic items from a native speaker text that L2 learners need to learn (Long, 1983; 1996; Yano et al., 1994).

A number of studies (e.g., Blau, 1982; R. Brown, 1987; Cervantes, 1983; Chaudron & Richards, 1986; Chung, 1995; Johnson, 1981; Tzang, 1987; Yano et al., 1994) have investigated the effects of input simplification and input elaboration on comprehension. They conclude that although input simplification by way substituting difficult vocabulary and syntax with simpler vocabulary and syntax helps comprehension, they do not do so consistently. In contrast, input elaboration had a consistent effect on comprehension. Some other studies have shown that there is no significant differences in L2 vocabulary acquisition between reading elaborated and unmodified texts (Chung, 1995; Kim, 1996; Silva, 2000) and between reading elaborated and simplified texts (Chung, 1995). Urano's study (2000, cited in Kim, 2006, pp. 244-5) is an exception. Urano reports that there is a significant difference between lexical elaboration and lexical simplification in scores on a form-recognition and meaning-recognition test.

A few studies (e.g., Hassanvand & Gorgian, 2012; Moradian & Adel, 2011; Marefat & Marefat, 2008; Mousapoor Negari & Rouhi, 2012) have examined the effects of lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary acquisition through reading. They conclude that explicit elaboration of L2 vocabulary in the text is an effective approach in meaning recognition.

Compared to the large body of research about techniques of teaching vocabulary, the quality of learner's vocabulary use in writing has not been widely investigated (Laufer, 1994). Therefore, the purpose of present study is to show the effect of explicit lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing of EFL learners.

The following research hypotheses will be addressed in the present study:

**H1:** Passive vocabulary does not become active vocabulary before explicit elaboration of target vocabulary among Iranian EFL intermediate students.

**H2:** Passive vocabulary does not become active vocabulary after explicit elaboration of target vocabulary among Iranian EFL intermediate students.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Participants**

A sample of 75 female students at Pardis English language institute of Khodabandeh was involved in this study. Their homogeneity in terms of language proficiency was established through the use of Nelson test and 70 students whose scores were between one standard deviation above and below the mean of the test were selected. Those subjects were assigned randomly into two groups (control and experimental group). Their age ranged from 22 to 30. They were Persian native speakers.

### **2.2. Material preparation**

A sport article that had been written by a native speaker (NS) of English for NSs was initially adopted from Lee (2003) as an unelaborated original NS text. It contained 378-word and 26 sentences. To ensure that the passage is suitable in terms of text difficulty for the intended groups, the readability formula was used. The result was 60.7. Before conducting the actual study, as part of the pilot study, a group of intermediate students were asked to read the baseline text and underline unknown words. The 14 low-frequency lexical items were chosen as the target vocabularies (TWs) for the study.

The resulting text was the original material that the explicit elaborated version was created. And also, it served as a text in which taught for control group in normal instruction procedure to investigate how much subjects in this group would learn from a text which had been not explicitly elaborated, in comparison to the experimental group who read the elaborated version.

After choosing the TWs, several EFL / ESL dictionaries were used to find the most suitable definitions or synonyms for them. Then the definitions and synonyms were placed right after the TWs.

The lexical elaboration devices used in the study was only explicit. Examples of explicit lexical elaboration devices include questioning, description, definition, and naming,

(Chaudron, 1982, p.175). This study, following Moradian and Adel (2011), used synonyms and definitions (X, which means, Y) as the most explicit elaboration devices.

### **2.3. Instruments**

The following instruments employed in this study:

#### **2.3.1. Language Proficiency Test**

In order to ensure the homogeneity of the students in terms of English language proficiency, a Nelson test (adopted from Nelson English Language Tests, by Flower and Coe (1976) was administered.

#### **2.3.2. Vocabulary test**

The teacher-researcher administered the vocabulary test containing 36 multiple-choice items to estimate the passive vocabulary of the students in both groups. Vocabulary test consisted of two sections: Section 1 included 30 sentences, each containing a blank for a target single word. Section 2 consisted of six sentences, each containing a blank for a target lexical phrase. The criteria for selecting distracters were closeness in meaning, pronunciation, or spelling with the target items (e.g. *furtive* and *famous* for *furious*; *behave* and *act* for *perform*).

#### **2.3.3. Elaborated text**

To rule out the subject's possible previous exposure to published material, the teacher-investigator used elaborated reading passage. A detailed description about (1) how a reading text thus selected was elaborated, and (2) how the target words (TWs) were selected, explained earlier in the part of material.

#### **2.3.4. Writing Frame**

This is a four-column sheet that students wrote about one paragraph about the questions in which were asked them. These questions acts as guide to paragraphs and provide organization so that students can concentrate on vocabulary.

### **2.4. Procedure**

#### **2.4.1. Administration of the Vocabulary test**

The students were asked to read the instruction and the test sentences and vocabulary items very carefully before they choose the answers from the alternatives. The students were not allowed to use dictionaries, machine translators, and peer assistance. The vocabulary test was not returned to the subjects until the end of the projects.

#### **2.4.2. Pre- writing**

After administrating the vocabulary test, students were asked to write a composition of 180 words about a very familiar topic entitled "A cruel sport". The time allotted for performing pre-writing, was 45 minutes. After collecting the writing samples from each student, each writing sample was scored by the teacher- investigator. The vocabulary items which used correctly, check-marked and highlighted by the teacher.

#### **2.4.3. Teaching reading passage by elaborated text**

A week after performing prewriting task, the teacher- investigator distributed the EFL learners text which elaborated lexically by the investigator. Then, the students were asked to read a text in English for 45 minutes and at the same time they would pay attention to the text content while reading. Peer and teacher help were not permitted. Then, subjects performed the exercises of reading comprehension individually. Then, the teacher collects up the student's exercises and does some error correction work and returned them to the students at the same day. No penalty for grammatical errors was considered. The answers were discussed orally and then the teacher collected up the reading passages and the answers.

In the control group, the students were received a reading passage which is not elaborated lexically. The teacher-investigator used normal instruction procedure in teaching that reading passage. In teaching target words, he/she explained the meaning of them, gave some synonyms, and then insisted on memorization.

#### **2.4.4. Post- Writing**

For consistency, the writing topic was limited to cruel sports. At this stage, the students were given a writing frame in which includes some questions about sport. The answers to these questions provide more guidance in student's developing ideas and will form the basis to their compositions. The subjects were given 45 minutes to complete their compositions.

No access to dictionaries, machine translators, the reading passage, and peer or teacher assistance was allowed. The teacher scored the post writing and provides feedback and then returned them to the students the next day.

### 3. Data Analysis and results

**3.1. The Nelson test:** The overall mean and variance of the Nelson test scores were 15/53 and 58/53, respectively, with scores ranging from 4-18. Reliability for the 50-item Nelson test was 0.90. Then, an independent t-test was employed to identify any significant difference among the mean scores of the two groups on the Nelson test. The observed value t is 1.484. This value of t at 68 degree of freedom is lower than its critical value, i.e.1.980. Therefore, it can be concluded that there is not any significant difference among the mean scores of the two groups on the Nelson test. Based on this result, it can be claimed that the two groups enjoy similar level of language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatment.

### 3.2. The vocabulary test:

Table 3-1 compares the scores of the experimental and control groups on the vocabulary test. The vocabulary scores of the experimental groups were 360 out of a possible 1260, or 28.57% (mean 9.45, range 2-18, S.D= 4.71). The control group's scores on the vocabulary test were 351 out of a possible 1260 or 27.85% (mean 9.17 range 2-17, S.D=3/07).

**Table 3.1:** Experimental and control subject's passive vocabulary

	Experimental group	Control group
Passive single words	331/1050	321/1050
range	2-18	2-17
Mean	9.45	9.17
Std .Dev	3/12	3/07
Passive lexical phrases	29/210	30/210
Range	1-4	0-4
Mean	0.82	0.85
Std .Dev	0/92	0.93
Total passive target vocabulary	360/1260	351/1260
Range	2-18	2-17
Mean	10.28	10.02
Std. Dev	5/06	5/53

t(df68)= .211

Table 3.2 compares the experimental subject's passive vocabulary and their active vocabulary in pre writing. The total productive vocabulary score was 56, that is, 15/56% of passive vocabulary became active before instruction (mean 1.6, range 0-4, S.D=1/28).

**Table3.2:** Experimental subject's passive vocabulary and active vocabulary in pre-writing

	Total	Range	Mean	Std. Dev	productive
passive single words	331	2-18	9.45	3/12	
active single words	49	0-4	1.4	1/2	14.8%
passive lexical phrases	29	1-4	0.82	0/92	
active lexical phrases	7	0-2	0.2	0/45	24.13%
Total passive vocabulary	360	2-18	10.28	3/25	
Total active vocabulary	56	0-4	1.6	1/28	15.56%

t (df 34) =10.03

Table 3.3 compares the control group's active and passive vocabulary before instruction. The total active vocabulary score was 49, that is, 13.96% of passive vocabulary became active before instruction (mean 1.4, range 0-4, S.D=1/20)

**Table 3.3:** Control's passive vocabulary and pre-instruction active vocabulary

	Total	Range	Mean	Std. Dev	%productive
Passive single words	321	2-17	9.17	3/07	
active single words	44	0-4	1.25	1/13	13.7%
passive lexical phrases	30	0-4	0.82	0/93	
active lexical phrases	5	0-3	0.14	0/38	16.7%
Total passive vocabulary	351	2-17	10.02	3/21	
Total active vocabulary	49	0-4	1.4	1/20	13.96%

t(df 34)= 8.281

Table 3.4 indicates the result of the experimental subject's active vocabulary scores in pre- and post writing. The score for active target vocabulary items on post writing was 273 (mean 7.8, range 1-15, S.D=2/83). Thus, 75/8% of passive vocabulary becomes active in post writing, compared to 15.56% in pre- writing for the experimental group.

**Table 3.4:** Experimental subject's active vocabulary in pre- and post-writing

	Pre- writing	Post- writing
active single words	49	245
Range	0-4	1-13
Mean	1.4	7.00
Std .Dev	1/20	2/68
%Productive	14.8%	68.5%
Active lexical phrases	7	28
Range	0-2	0-2
Mean	0.2	0.80
Std .Dev	0/45	0/90
%Productive	24/13%	96.5%
Total active target vocabulary	56	273
Range	0-4	1-15
Mean	1.6	7.8
Std. Dev	1/28	2/83
%Productive	15.56%	75/8%

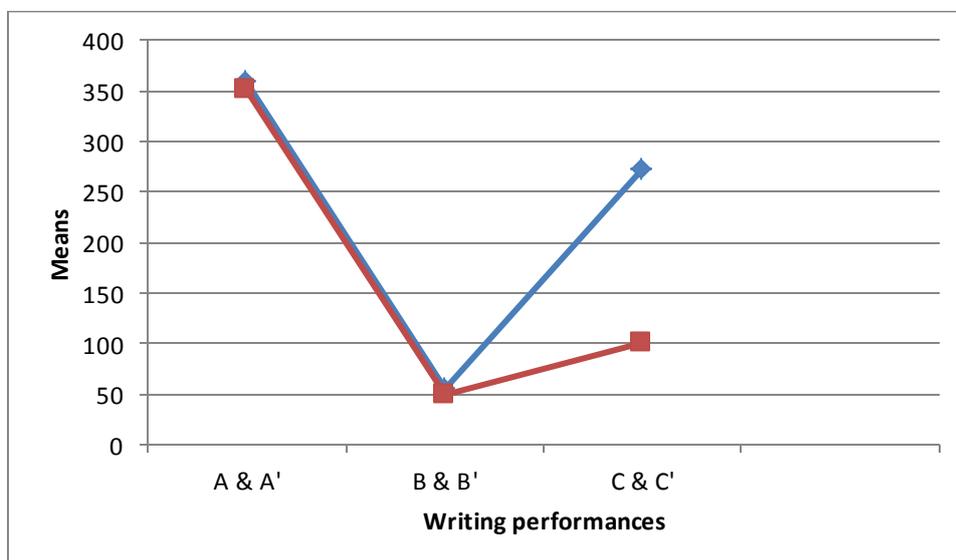
$t(df\ 33) = 9.674$

Table 3.5 shows the result of the control group's active vocabulary scores in pre- and post-writing task. The score for active target vocabulary items on post-writing was 100 (mean 2.85, range 1-13, S.D=1/71). Thus, 28.49% of passive vocabulary became active in post-writing, compared to 13.96% in pre-writing for the control group.

**Table 3.5:** Control subject's active vocabulary in pre- and post writing

	Pre-writing	Post- writing
Active single words	44	86
Range	0-4	1-11
Mean	1.25	2.45
Std .Dev	1/13	1/59
%Productive	13.7%	26.79%
Active lexical phrases	5	14
Range	0-3	0-3
Mean	0.14	0.4
Std .Dev	0/38	0/64
%Productive	16.7%	46.7%
Total active target vocabulary	49	100
Range	0-4	1-13
Mean	1.4	2.85
Std. Dev	1/20	1/71
%Productive	13.96%	28.49%

t(df 34)=-1.992



**Figure 3-1:** Vocabulary Tests and Writing tasks line Graphs in Contrast

In this figure, on the X axis, for the dark line representing means related to the experimental group, (A) stands for vocabulary test, (B) stands for the pre-instruction writing task, and (C) stands for the post-instruction writing task, while on the same axis, for the white line, representing means related to the control group. (A') stands for the vocabulary test, (B') stands for the pre-instruction writing task, and (C') stands for the post-instruction writing task.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Research question 1

To probe the first research question which concerned whether passive vocabulary becomes active vocabulary before explicit elaboration of target vocabulary in a text among Iranian EFL intermediate students, paired sample t-test was used. The study tested the performance of two groups on the vocabulary test and pre-instruction writing task. The findings showed that only 15.56% of passive vocabulary was active. Data indicated that since the value of t-observed (10.03) is larger than the critical value of t (2.00) at 34 df, the difference between subject's passive and active vocabulary was significant that is, the subject's passive vocabulary was significantly larger than their active vocabulary. **Based on these findings Hypothesis 1 was supported.**

The comparison between the results obtained from vocabulary test and pre-writing of two groups shows a sharp contrast between the scores of these tests. The findings of first research question are in support of Aitchison's (1989) and Channel's (1988) view who suggests that receptive vocabulary is larger than active vocabulary. Contrarily, the related findings of this study are in contrast with Laufer's and Paribakht's (1988) view. They believe that relationship between receptive and productive vocabulary is vague and unsubstantiated and also this relationship has not conclusively demonstrated by anyone, which how much larger it is, or the growth of receptive vocabulary leads to the growth of active vocabulary. Such a finding is probably due to the fact that according to Laufer (1998) in language classroom there is lack of production tasks such as writing a composition. Since such practices provide opportunities for using receptive or new words. So this causes L2 receptive vocabulary developed to a higher extent than their active vocabulary.

## 4.2. Research question 2

Regarding the second research question, whether passive vocabulary becomes active vocabulary after explicit elaboration of target vocabulary in a text among Iranian EFL intermediate students, paired sample t-test was employed. The result indicated that there were significant increase in post-instruction writing for the experimental group since the amount of t-observed (9.674) is larger than t-critical at  $df=33$ .

And it was found that 75.8% of passive vocabulary became active vocabulary in an immediate writing task. And also the results of the comparison between the two groups (CG and EG) in post- writing showed that the t-observed is larger than t-critical. Since a significant improvement was seen in learner's writing performance after reading elaborated texts, it can be concluded that after reading elaborated text by experimental group, active vocabulary increased significantly than control group whom taught by unelaborated text.

**Hypothesis 2 was rejected.**

The findings of second research question are compatible with that of Konopak's (1988) who detected that reading the elaborated texts increase the word knowledge of students. And as we saw the performance of experimental group in post writing improved which it indicates because of teaching elaborated text, their vocabulary knowledge leads to higher vocabulary use. Also these findings are consistent with that of Chung's (1995); Kim's (1996); and Urano's (2000). Results of these studies showed that all elaborated groups performed better than the unelaborated groups.

This study has shown that if students write their compositions with a topic that is related to their reading material, they can help to expand the context of that reading. And also, these help learners to use contextually appropriate vocabularies. The study supports Greenberg and Pytlik's (1986) statements which writing on a topic related to the textbook topics and personal experience contribute to the vocabulary learning and better compositions.

## Conclusion and implications

The aim of this study was to show the effect of explicit lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing of EFL learners. To do this, elaborative version of baseline text for employing in experimental group was created. Also this study limited itself to lexical elaboration only.

The results suggest that a) before elaborating target vocabulary explicitly in a reading passage, passive vocabulary does not become active vocabulary b) Explicit elaboration of target vocabulary in a text aids improving target vocabulary use in writing task.

The results of this study can benefit to EFL teachers and learners. The findings help teachers realize the importance of writing on a topic related to reading material. The results are of great value to teachers who -despite devoting time and energy to vocabulary – are usually faced with student's problems in learning vocabularies. Teachers can apply explicit lexical elaboration as a technique to develop the extent of student's active vocabulary from their passive vocabulary. Positive effects of lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing found in this study lend support to the use of this technique in designing L2 reading materials. An advantage of lexical elaboration is that it can be used more easily by adding synonyms to supposedly unknown words will not require much time and effort on the part of the language teacher and/or text writer.

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