The effect of explicit lexical elaboration on

L2 vocabulary use in writing of EFL learners

Sakineh Mosavi

Abstract- This study reported the effect of explicit lexical elaboration on L2 vocabulary use in writing of 70 intermediate Iranian EFL learners. The subjects' target passive 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 passive target vocabulary converted into active 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 passive vocabulary to become active vocabulary in immediate writing tasks.

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

1. Introduction

According to Chastain (1988) writing is a basic communication skill and a unique asset in the process of learning a second language. He states that "the unique feature of writing is that it lends itself more naturally to individual practice it is usually solitary activity. Corson (1997) believes that L2 learner's lexical capabilities may determine the quality of their reading comprehension and writing performance because the moderate – to low- frequency words have much more occurrences in textual contexts than in speech discourse.

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

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

(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. Such a special jargon or register which is employed by language teachers in the instructional situations is referred to as "teacher talk"(Moradian, 2008).

There are two type 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 vocabularies 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 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; Johnson, 1981) 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

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

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; Moradian & 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.

3

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

75 female EFL students aged between 22 to 30 at Pardis English language institute of Khodabandeh, Zanjan, were selected. 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). 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

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

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 (2008), 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 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

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

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

Step1: 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.

Step 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.

Step 3: Teaching reading passage by elaborated text

   A week after performing prewriting task, the teacher- investigator distributed the EFL learners the text which elaborated lexically by the investigator. Then, the students would be asked to read a text in English for 45 minutes and at the same time they

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

would pay attention to the text content while reading. Peer and teacher help were not allowed. 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. The students didn't punish for their grammatical errors. The answers were discussed orally and then the teacher collects up the reading passages and the answers.

But in the control group, the students were received a reading passage which is not elaborated lexically. In this group, 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.

Step 4: Post- writing

For consistency, the writing topic was limited to cruel sports. In 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

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

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

result, it can be claimed that the two groups enjoy similar level of language proficiency prior to the administration of the treatment.

The vocabulary test:

Table 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).

7

Table 1: Experimental and control subjects recognition vocabulary

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

Table 2 indicates the comparison between experimental subject's passive vocabulary and their active vocabulary in pre- writing. The total active 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).

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

Table 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	o-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 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: 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

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

Table 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 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 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.

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

Table 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

Discussion

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. 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

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

is, the subject's passive vocabulary was significantly larger than their active vocabulary. **Based on these findings Hypothesis 1 was supported.**

These findings 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 no one has conclusively demonstrated how much larger it is.

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 in Table 4 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. Thus, it can be claimed that after reading elaborated text by experimental group, active vocabulary increased significantly than control group whom taught by unelaborated text. **Hypothesis 2 was rejected.**

These findings 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 .And 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

11

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

the textbook topics and personal experience contribute to the vocabulary learning and better compositions.

 As suggested in chapter 2, language teachers and researchers are realizing that vocabulary learning is at the heart of language learning (Mackay, 1986) especially for improvement of writing skill, because vocabulary is the most important feature of writing. So, it is necessary to instruct useful strategies for vocabulary learning. One of the strategies that this study attempted to determine its effectiveness was using explicitly elaborated texts to contribute learners in learning vocabulary and then improving writing performance. After performing post writing by two groups, the results of the study confirmed that the vocabulary learning could be improved through the use of explicitly elaborated texts.

12

The results of this study may be of 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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The effect of explicit lexical elaboration on
L2 vocabulary use in writing of EFL learners
Sakineh Mosavi

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13

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

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14

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

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