SHEIKHBAHAEE UNIVERSITY

SCHOOL OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

THE IMPACT OF LEXICAL ELABORATIVE MODIFICATION AND TYPOGRAPHICAL ENHANCEMENT ON READING COMREHENSION OF IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULLFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Abstract

Language input is seen as necessary entity for second/ foreign language acquisition and has received considerable research attention. Reading as a form of language input is regarded as one of the most important skills in the realm of language learning and teaching. Accordingly, adjusting the input provided through reading passages with the aim of making it more comprehensible to language learners is of great interest and significance for the ESL/EFL educators and researchers. The aim of this study was to investigate the effect of three lexical elaborative modification techniques, namely 'paraphrasing', 'providing definitions', and 'suggesting synonyms' for difficult and unfamiliar words, and three typographical enhancement techniques, 'boldfacing', 'italicization' and 'capitalization', on the reading comprehension performance of Iranian EFL learners. The foregoing techniques were applied to six reading texts of General English selected based on readability indices from an intermediate-level textbook. The adjusted passages which included 30 multiple-choice reading comprehension questions were then presented to the learners and their reading comprehension performance on the passages was measured using ANOVA and Post Hoc test. The results suggested that the performance of learners who read lexically elaborated and typographically enhanced versions of the reading texts was significantly better than the performance of those who read original unmodified texts. The findings also revealed that participants performed significantly better on passages modified through italicization, paraphrasing and providing definition. Further, learners' performance on passages enhanced through capitalization and boldfacing techniques was not significant. This was also true on learners' performance on passages modified through adding synonyms. The findings of the study can be of importance to material developers as well as language teachers who wish to expose students to less difficult versions of English texts in order to enhance their comprehension.

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Abbreviations

EFL: English as a Foreign Language

ESL: English as a Second Language

LE: Lexical Elaboration

NS: Native Speaker

NNS: Non-native Speaker

TE: Textual enhancement

VIE: Visual Input Enhancement

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Preliminaries

It is an undeniable fact that for many students in many parts of the world, reading is the most important of the four cardinal skills in a second language, especially in English. The ability to read printed materials is indeed of great importance in today's civilized society, a society characterized by ever-growing globalization and integration, where knowledge mainly acquired through reading is getting more and more prominent and valued (Fazeli, 2010). In fact, it can be said that efficient reading is an essential pre-requisite for success in today's complex world. Alderson's (1984) comments on the importance attached to the skill of reading are worthy of noting:

> In many parts of the world a reading knowledge of a foreign language is often important in academic achievements, professional success, and personal development. This is particularly true of English as so much professional, technical and scientific literature is published in English today (p.1).

Given the prominence of the skill of reading, the concern of many researchers (such as Wallace, 1992; Smith, 1994) has been the creation of an awareness of reading flexibility as well as the establishment of ways through which language learners can be helped to develop appropriate reading strategies.

It is believed that reading include both comprehension and acquisition. In Han (2003)'s model, an instructional outlook that allows L2 readers to process a text for form (syntactic processing) while maintaining an instructional focus on reading for meaning in series of steps has been favored (see Figure 1). First, the learner is engaged in reading for comprehension, and subsequently she/he is engaged in reading for acquisition. Reading for comprehension triggers semantic processing**,** and reading for

acquisition precipitates syntactic processing. This model is referred to as a '*dual processing model*' because both types of processing occur as the learner reads a text.

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┌──────────────────────────┐        ┌──────────────────────────┐
│ Reading for comprehension │───────▶│  Reading for acquisition │
└──────────────────────────┘        └──────────────────────────┘
            │           ╲                         │
            ▼            ╲                         ▼
┌──────────────────────┐  ╲       ┌──────────────────────┐
│  Semantic processing │──────────▶│  Syntactic processing │
└──────────────────────┘           └──────────────────────┘
     │          │                        │            │
     ▼          ▼                        ▼            ▼
┌──────────┐ ┌──────────┐      ┌──────────────┐ ┌──────────┐
│ Achieving│ │Developing│      │  Developing  │ │ Mapping  │
│comprehen-│ │efficiency│      │Metalinguistic│ │ meaning  │
│  sion    │ │          │      │  awareness   │ │ and form │
└──────────┘ └──────────┘      └──────────────┘ └──────────┘
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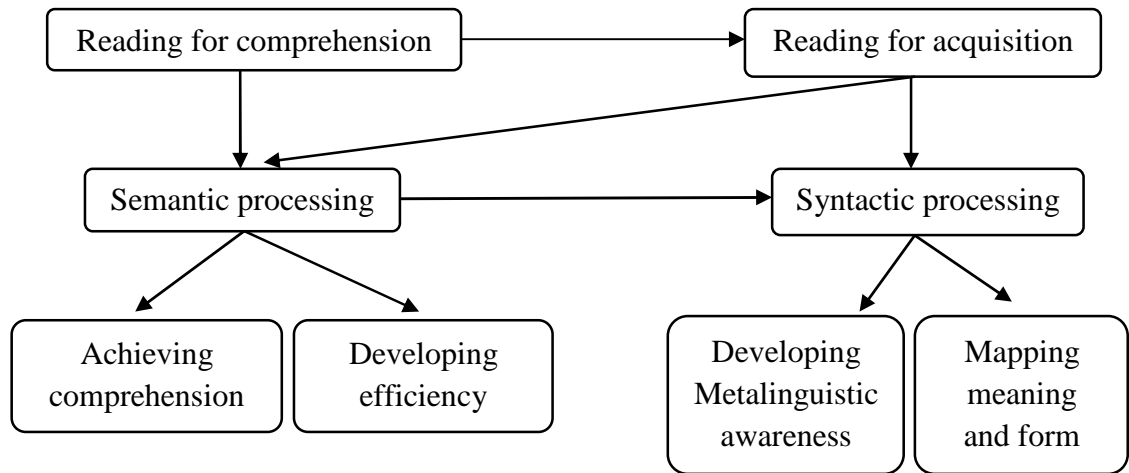
Figure 1. 1. Dual Approach to L2 Reading.

According to Han (2003)'s dual approach to L2 reading instruction model, reading can include both acquisition and comprehension. When reading takes place, comprehension precedes production. Therefore, comprehension needs more attention because it generally leads to acquisition and many studies are conducted in the field of reading comprehension to improve the quality of this skill.

One of the most notable findings of decades of research on the skill of reading is the degree to which learners' vocabulary knowledge influences their reading comprehension (Anderson & Freebody, 1981). In this regard, national Reading Panel (2000) has concluded that reading comprehension cannot be adequately appreciated without a critical examination of the role that vocabulary knowledge plays in it. In this connection, Helman (2008) has pointed out that "knowing words in a language is a key component to understanding text and being able to produce it- reading and writing" (as cited in Farstrup & Samuels, 2008, p. 211).

Despite the need for learning foreign languages in today's increasingly inter-connected world and the existence of a close relationship between reading in foreign language and lexical knowledge, it has been observed and documented time and again that a large number of EFL learners and students fail to learn to read adequately in the target language (Keshavarz & Mobarra, 2003). Oftentimes, students reading in a foreign language seem to read painfully slowly and achieve less than adequate comprehension (ibid). Students may know how to read, but the complexity of the text may prevent them to use their already known reading strategies, to deal with the text; this text complexity may cause negative attitude toward reading on the part of learners (Kern, 1989).

The students may get the meaning of each word, but linking them in order to construct meaningful ideas does not happen on many occasions. Reading can be challenging, particularly when the material is unfamiliar, technical or complex. Moreover, for some readers, comprehension, which denotes the ability to go beyond the words, to understand the ideas conveyed in the entire text, is always challenging (Fazeli, 2010). The problem of how language is processed, and consequently how a text is comprehended, has motivated language educators and scholars to carry out numerous research studies on the topic in the course of the past several decades.

One aspect of text complexity, which can be problematic for the learners, is the complexity of grammatical structures and vocabulary items used in a passage (Widdoson, 1978). Another aspect of text complexity has to do with the complexities associated with cohesion, coherence and the propositional content of a text (ibid).

One way of dealing with the complexity of texts is to adjust the reading materials to a level judged to be within the linguistic competence of the learner (Widdoson, 1978). It is consistent with what Krashen's Input Hypothesis (1985) suggests, namely

comprehensible input which should be 'i+1'(ibid). There are other ways of tackling the issue of text complexity, including 'text simplification' and 'text modification'(Ellis, 2004).

Another way of tackling the text complexity is '*input enhancement*'. By drawing L2 learners' attention to target language forms, students could notice the gap between their current inter-language and the target language. They can pay more attention to target linguistic items and make the input easier for themselves, which may lead to the better development of reading comprehension skills. This strategy consists of various techniques and tasks appropriate to students' proficiency levels.

As stated earlier in Han's dual approach, the process of reading consists of two parts, 'comprehension' and 'acquisition'. The focus of this study is on the comprehension part as it attempts to facilitate the process of comprehension using different techniques in order to achieve better and faster acquisition.

The theoretical basis of this study is rooted in two important hypotheses. The first one is Krashen's *Input Hypothesis*, which proposes the concept of '*comprehensible input*', and Long's assertion that there are different ways of making language input comprehensible. The second one is Schmidt's *'Noticing Hypothesis'*, which posits that drawing learners' attention to different elements in language data leads to the better development of language acquisition.

Also, it is believed that "mere exposure to L2 input does not ensure comprehension and intake of the L2 information; rather learners need to have comprehensible (modified) input for second language comprehension and acquisition to occur" (Chiang & Dunkel, 1992, p. 347).The teacher may make the input comprehensible by associating it with visual cues or/and demonstrated actions. Paraphrasing, repetitions of key points, and acting out meanings are some of the ways

through which speakers can help convey meaning and make the input more understandable (Pica, 1994). In the context of this study, however, the researcher's focus was on making written input more comprehensible to L2 readers. In fact, the main aim of this study is to test the effects of different techniques, including 'elaboration' and 'enhancement' on students' reading comprehension.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

From among the four language skills reading is of special importance to EFL learners considering the fact that the materials to be read today are wider and more diverse than before. Most of the English classes in Iranian educational contexts are devoted to reading activities. In Iranian EFL classes, reading receives more attention than the other language skills.

The role of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension figures prominently in many research studies and has received considerable attention by scholars. As Grabe (1991) has noted, "virtually all [L2] reading researchers agree that vocabulary development is a critical component of reading comprehension" (p. 392).

Because of the importance associated with reading and vocabulary as its cornerstone, lots of studies have already been conducted to explore ways of helping learners and students to improve their reading skill and to alleviate many problems they encounter when reading difficult texts.

Reading is influenced by different factors including attitudes, motives, topic interests, curiosity, anxiety, classroom atmosphere, learners' background knowledge, and emotional matters. From among other important factors influencing reading, knowledge of words, general knowledge, focused attention span, experience, vocabulary level, and the ability to make connections are notable ones (Kintsch & Kintsch, 2005).

Also, it should be mentioned that there are other factors that give rise to text difficulty. These include syntactic complexity, lexical complexity, referential complexity, readability and so forth. As stated earlier, there is a close relationship between reading and vocabulary and also it has been proved that vocabulary is a factor which directly affects reading comprehension (Tabrizi Namini, 1997). So, the lexical complexity is considered a matter of difficulty in comprehension and has been probed in the present study. Written texts usually are not intrinsically reader-friendly. They contain difficult and unfamiliar words which should be comprehended for L2 learners in order to facilitate their comprehension.

It seems that most of Iranian students have problem in their reading comprehension. Researchers and language teachers are trying to find effective ways due to solving students' comprehension problems. In fact, there are many different factors which can improve reading comprehension and facilitate learners' difficulties in exposure to difficult reading texts. In the present study, it is tried to find some efficient ways for improving learners' reading comprehension.

In sum, taking into consideration the significance assigned to the skill of reading, the existence of varied problems hindering the comprehension of texts by many foreign learners and students, and the role of lexical knowledge in easing the process of reading, the current research study sought to investigate the effect of using lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement techniques on the reading comprehension ability of Iranian EFL students.

1.3. Research Questions

In this study two techniques, namely lexical elaboration and textual enhancement are considered. The first technique makes written input more comprehensible and the second one draws learners' attention to target structure. For lexical elaboration, three

techniques of paraphrasing, providing definition and adding synonym and for textual enhancement, bolding, italicization and capitalization are used. These six elements are independent variables which are directly applied in reading passages and their effects are considered consequently on learners' reading comprehension.

Regarding the objectives of this study, the following research questions were formulated.

- Ø Is there any significant difference between the comprehension of unmodified texts and those modified through lexical elaboration by Iranian EFL students?
- Ø Which one of the lexical elaboration techniques is more contributive to the comprehension of texts by Iranian students?
- Ø Does typographical enhancement have any significant effect on the reading comprehension ability of Iranian students?
- Ø Which one of the typographical enhancement techniques is more contributive to the comprehension of texts by Iranian students?

1.4. Research Hypothesis

H1: There is no significant difference between the comprehension of original texts and elaboratively modified versions of texts for Iranian EFL learners.

H2: There is no significant difference among the comprehension of three lexical elaboration versions of texts for Iranian EFL learners.

H3: There is no significant between the comprehension of original texts and typographical enhanced versions of texts for Iranian EFL learners.

H4: There is no significant difference among the comprehension of three typographical enhanced versions of texts for Iranian EFL learners.

1.5. Significance of the Study

English is now recognized as one of the most widely-spoken languages in the world. Many people try to learn it as a foreign or second language and face lots of problems throughout the process of learning it. The skill of reading is an important skill in the field of language education. We learn mainly through listening and reading, both of which are seen as receptive skills and provide us with large chunks of comprehensible input. We must listen to and read the patterns of a new foreign language many times before we can begin to produce these patterns in our speech and writing.

Reading is a purposeful activity and, therefore, language teachers need to help their students identify the different purposes it seeks to accomplish and master the required strategies needed to realize reading objectives (Faghih & Hayati, 1999). Successful language learning may be largely reliant on successful reading comprehension.

Also, vocabulary is one of the most important factors influencing reading. The bulk of each reading text is vocabulary and most written texts are not reader-friendly and the level of their text difficulty gives rise to lots of problems. Hence, helping learners achieve better reading comprehension by manipulating vocabularies which leads to comprehensible input has been one of the goals of numerous language researchers, teachers and material developers.

In view of the points mentioned above, the present study tried to find a remedy for the reading comprehension problems of the students and investigated the role of lexical elaboration and typographical enhancement in the reading comprehension of Iranian EFL students.

1.6. Definitions of Key Terms

1.6.1. Input Hypothesis

The first model which treated input as the main factor in L2 acquisition was Krashen's comprehensible input hypothesis (Krashen, 1982). The idea that exposure to comprehensible input which contains structures that are slightly beyond the learner's current level of competence is the necessary and sufficient cause of second language acquisition (Richards & Schmidt, 2002).

1.6.2. Lexical Elaborative modification

' *Lexical elaboration'* provides meanings of unknown words in the form of paraphrases, and makes thematic relationships in a text more transparent. It also provides some type of additional linguistic support for language learners not by eliminating complex structures and low-frequent lexical items by adding redundancy and clarification of meaning through techniques such as the insertion of parenthetical definition, repetition, examples, paraphrasing, and use of synonyms (Long, 1996).

1.6.3. Typographical Enhancement

It is an attempt to make certain linguistic features in a text perceptually salient to L2 learners, in order to increase the comprehensibility of the content of text and enhancing those linguistic features' acquirability (Sharwood Smith, 1993).

Enhancement can make the input salient by manipulating different aspects of it. Manipulation of input often takes the form of visual enhancement which the target forms are made visually salient via such techniques as bolding, color-coding, highlighting, italicizing and so forth.

1.6.4. Noticing Hypothesis

Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1995) states that what learners notice in input is what becomes intake for learning and also posits that attention is necessary for noticing, and that noticing is necessary and sufficient for intake. According to Schmidt's noticing hypothesis a set of pedagogical techniques to draw learners' attention to formal features in the L2 input has been called input enhancement (Sharewood Smith, 1993).

1.7. Organization of the Thesis

The present thesis consists of five chapters. Chapter one features a number of components, including a general overview of the research topic, a description of relevant issues and problems and an account of the goals being pursued by the current study. Chapter two reviews many of theoretical issues as well as empirical studies related to input modification and input enhancement. All the methodological issues of the study, including participants, materials, design, and procedures are described in detail in chapter three. Chapter four presents the results of the present study. And finally, chapter five presents a detailed discussion of the study's results, plus their theoretical and pedagogical implications.