

Gender Differences in the Use of Elaboration Strategy in FL Reading Comprehension

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Abstract

This research aims at investigating the role played by 'Elaboration', being an input modification strategy, in enhancing EFL reading comprehension. It further aims at identifying the effect of gender, if any, on using this strategy by finding a suitable answer to the question whether male or female students will get more benefit in enhancing the comprehension of lexical items at the sentential level. Based on these aims, the following research questions are addressed: 1- Is there any relation between the use of elaboration strategy and improving EFL university students' reading comprehension? 2- Is there any relation between students' gender and the use of elaboration strategy as far as improving reading comprehension is concerned? To answer these questions, a sample of 80 EFL students (40 males and 40 females) was given a self-report test, prepared by the researcher, and initially validated through distribution to a panel of juries and then piloted to a number of EFL university students, to state their responses on the basis of a scale ranging from ' nothing' to 'everything'. The results show that elaboration strategy is a good strategy for enhancing EFL students achievement in reading comprehension. There are also significant differences observed in the use of elaboration strategy in terms of students gender as better achievement in reading comprehension is noticed on the part of female students using the elaboration strategy.

Keywords: reading comprehension, input modification, elaboration, gender differences

فوارق الجنس في استخدام استراتيجيات التفصيل في الفهم القرائي للغة الأجنبية

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الملخص

استراتيجيات تعديل المدخلات في تفصي الدور الذي تلعبه استراتيجيات التفصيل كونها إحدى يهدف البحث الحالي الى تحسين الفهم القرائي للغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية. يهدف البحث ايضا الى التعرف على اثر متغير الجنس في استخدام هذه الاستراتيجيات عن طريق الاجابة على التساؤل فيما اذا كان الطلبة الذكور ام الاناث سيحصلون على فائدة اكبر في تحسين فهم المفردات في مستوى الجملة. و بناءا على هذه الاهداف، سيتم الاجابة على الاسئلة التالية: ١- هل توجد هنالك اي علاقة بين استخدام استراتيجيات التحوير وتحسين الفهم القرائي لدى طلبة اللغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية؟ ٢- هل توجد هنالك اي علاقة ما بين جنس الطلبة واستخدام استراتيجيات التفصيل فيما يتعلق بتحسين الفهم القرائي؟ وللإجابة على هذه التساؤلات تم توزيع اختبار الاجابة الذاتية لبيان اجابات الطلبة على مقياس تتراوح خياراته ما بين (لم افهم شيء) و (فهمت كل شيء) والذي اعد من قبل الباحثة وتم اختبار صدقه اولاً عن طريق توزيعه على مجموعة من الخبراء وتطبيقه بعد ذلك في دراسة استطلاعية على عينة من طلبة اللغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية. اظهرت النتائج ان استراتيجيات التفصيل هي خيار جيد لتحسين تفصيل الفهم القرائي لطلبة اللغة الانكليزية بوصفها لغة اجنبية. اضافة لذلك توجد هنالك فروق دالة لمتغير الجنس في استخدام استراتيجيات التفصيل من قبل الطلبة الذكور والاناث حيث كان التحصيل الافضل لصالح الاناث.

كلمات مفتاحية: الفهم القرائي، تعديل المدخلات، التفصيل، اختلافات الجنس

Introduction:

One of the important requirements to learn English quickly is to read lots of material; more reading leads to more input that the brain needs to get about how language works. Improving vocabulary, grammar, and writing skills can be achieved by reading through repetition of vocabulary words that have already been learned to remember.

Furthermore, reading comprehension (henceforth RC) is considered as an obstacle for EFL learners who are have low proficiency of English. EFL Learners limited vocabulary knowledge may affect comprehending what they read. As such, facilitating RC has become an urgent requirement meeting EFL teachers' need to engage learners in activities and strategies that develop their vocabulary. Among such strategies, is what is known as 'elaboration' which is one type of the strategies used in input modifying difficult vocabularies.

The problem of the current research stems from the fact that many EFL learners have unsatisfactory levels of mastery of the strategies already referred to. This, in turn, results in reading deficiency due to EFL learners inability to decode and recognize the correct meaning of some difficult vocabularies which are supposed to be linked to the comprehension of what a written text means. Moreover, RC syllabus adopted at the Department of English/ College of Basic Education composes four courses divided between the second and third levels of study; of which no course includes the use of modification strategies, specifically elaboration, among the activities on which students should be trained. Hence, the role played by such strategies in enhancing RC is still not satisfactorily identified.

Based on that, the following research questions are to be addressed:

- 1- Is there any relation between the use of elaboration strategy and improving EFL university students' RC?
- 2- Is there any relation between students' gender and the use of elaboration strategy as far as improving RC is concerned?

The current research aims, in the first place, at identifying: 1- elaboration strategy being a type of input modification at the lexis level and how it is used to improve EFL learners' RC, and 2- the effect, if any, of gender difference on the use of this strategy by EFL learners, i.e. to what extent can male or female students excel in using this strategy to improve their RC.

The current research is limited to the use of elaboration strategy only to enhance EFL learners' RC. In addition, although the use of this strategy in modification can be applied at more than one language level, namely phonological, lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels, its application in the current research, is limited to the lexical level only by replacing more difficult and complex words with shorter and simpler ones.

2. Literature review:

2.1 Input Modification:

Smith (1993:176) defines input modification (henceforth IM) as “ the manipulations that teachers or textbook writers operate in order to make input more comprehensible”. IM includes drawing more attention to some features of language input which helps learners to achieve comprehension which is the essence of reading in the foreign language. In language learning, similar processes go on when lower linguistic levels and easy grammatical structures are used by teachers for two basic reasons. The first reason is to match the levels of learners and the second is to make language more comprehensible.

The need to make input more comprehensible in order to be intake has been first motivated by Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Long’s Interaction Hypothesis. Since most English written materials are formed out of native English-speakers language, EFL learners will face difficulties in comprehension at different levels. As such, the attempt to specify approaches for modifying written input to help learners best comprehend becomes a crucial issue (Yano et al., 1994; Oh, 2001; Li et al., 2005). Among different types of IM used by recent researchers is elaboration strategy.

2.2. Input Modification Levels:

Although lexical and syntactic modifications are used to increase input comprehensibility, still there are other levels that can be effective for what learners hear or read when modification is applied to. Parker and Chaudron (1987: 107) claim that IM can be applied on phonology, lexicon, syntax, and discourse levels. These two authors state that “ modifications of input, which are typically considered to be changes in linguistics form, that is, surface syntax, lexis and phonology, are modifications of interaction, which involve features of conversation or discourse function”.

In the same realm of thinking, Darian (2001) treats the semantic, lexical, syntactic, and discourse levels as the main levels of IM, each of which have further subcomponents. For him, modification is achieved when difficult words are replaced by

easier ones and difficult sentences are punctuated or structured to reduce their complexity.

Modification of the aforementioned levels, especially the lexis level which is the basic concern of this research, depends on what makes lexis complex which depends, in turn, on its frequency in language use. This amounts to saying that the more familiar the words are to readers, the more comprehensible they will be. Following Oh's (2001) assumption, lexical modification means the replacement of more complex words with shorter and simpler ones.

2.3 Elaboration as an Input Modification:

One of the basic types of IM is elaboration that is used by EFL teachers to modify oral as well as written input. In what follows, the focus will be on elaboration definitions by different researchers, its advantages and disadvantages, in addition to its role in second or foreign language reading comprehension.

2.3.1 Definitions of Elaboration

Parker and Chaudron (1982:110) define elaboration as “ the addition of redundancy, and the explicit realization of underlying thematic relations ‘ thematic structure’ . Having the same line of thinking, Young (1999: 351) treats elaboration as a process that “ involves writing authentic discourse so that explicitness and redundancy compensate for unfamiliar linguistic items”. In our view, these two definitions entail that learners can fully understand ambiguous and unfamiliar items of the text by adding explicitness and clarification. They further mean that learners can fully understand ambiguous and unfamiliar items of a text by adding explicitness and clarification. These two last steps are achieved by adding to the original texts rather than removing or replacing what the text includes. That is to say, the unknown words in a certain text are followed, directly, by a definition to clarify their meaning.

A slightly different definition of elaboration is that presented by Hamilton (1997:299). He treats it as the enhancement of information; the essence of which is the

specification of the relationship between learners' prior knowledge and the information to be learnt. Building on this definition, the reader makes connections between the original information included within the text and the newly added clarification so that comprehension is brought about.

To sum up, the researcher views elaboration as the enhancement of EFL learners' reading comprehension through the provision of extra linguistic information. This addition of information is done by means of one of four alternatives, namely redundancy, synonyms, heteronyms, or definitions of low-frequency words (see the practical part).

2.3.2 Elaboration: A Coin of Two Faces

Elaboration, simultaneously, has advantages and disadvantages. The formers are centered around three fact, viz. 1- enhancing comprehension, 2- aiding in vocabulary learning, and 3- shortening the process of searching for words meaning in dictionaries. Enhancing comprehension can be achieved by defining lexical items, paraphrasing sentences or providing students with opportunities to access and comprehend information in native-like language (Kim, 2003:1).

As for the second advantage which is aiding vocabulary learning, Taylor (2006) claims that elaboration has its positive effects in helping FL learners comprehending difficult vocabulary by giving explanatory definition or synonyms to such type of vocabulary. In relation to the third advantage of elaboration strategy, researchers recommend the autonomy from both class-room teachers and dictionaries to the benefits of elaboration. This will certainly make the process of searching for meaning more easy and beneficial for FL learners (Morodian and Adel, 2001). In our view, all the three advantages discussed so far can boost up learners' motivation as well as confidence and comfort in reading FL materials. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, elaboration can have its own disadvantages as well. Comparing an elaborated form of a certain text with its unmodified version, the former is characterized by being longer than the latter

that has more complex features. Yano et al. (1994) support this view by claiming that elaborated texts or sentences turn to be more complex and longer in such a way that leads to the belief that they are more difficult to comprehend.

2.3.3 Elaboration and Second or Foreign Language Reading Comprehension

In his study of (1982) and a follow-up one with Terrel (1983), Krashen asserts the fact that “ acquisition depends crucially on the input being comprehensible. And comprehensibility is dependent directly on the ability to recognize the meaning of key elements in the utterance”. Building on this, Elaboration, being an IM strategy, is considered appropriately used in classroom because it provides students with a comprehensible exposure to the target language in order to trigger acquisition. It has been proved, by different researchers, that elaboration increases students’ self-confidence and motivation; it conversely decreases students’ anxiety that results out of their low proficiency levels in the second or foreign language (Young, 1991).

A similar opinion is held by Block (1992) who assumes that the difficulties encountered by students in the process of RC increase when the text is in the second or foreign language. To overcome such difficulties. i.e. decreasing students anxiety for example, the use of IM strategies is highly recommended. Such strategies include the use of repetition and paraphrasing which give students more time to comprehend, make the text more understandable, and finally culminate in better results in comprehension.

3. Methodology:

3.1 Procedures and Data Collection:

In addition to the theoretical part of this research represented by some headings that are related to the topic under investigation, there is the practical part as well. This part highlights tools used to collect data from EFL university students to check out their levels of achievement in RC.

3.2 The Population and Sample of the Research:

The present research tries to elicit data from a population that comprises EFL third year university students at the Department of English/ College of Basic Education for the academic year 2020-2021. The total number is 235 students distributed in four sections. The selection of this population has been purposeful, because at this level of study students are supposed to have had three courses of RC; they have had the amount of vocabularies required to understand reading materials.

Regarding the sample of the research, it is important to mention that it represents a number of students who share some similar characteristics and are selected from among the population either randomly or intentionally. As such, the sample includes (80) EFL students divided equally between two groups comprising male and female students.

3.3 The Research Tools:

In order to bring about the aims and answer the questions raised earlier, a forty item self-report test was designed. This test is a self-evaluation one which allows students to judge on their own performance giving themselves grades (Andrade and Du, 2007:160). To construct this test, a set of steps had been followed. The steps subsequently discussed together with the reasons behind adopting them.

3.3.1 Test Items Selection:

The test items included in the self-test are chosen from the book entitled Developing Skills by Alexander (1997). This book aims to develop EFL Students' abilities in the reading comprehension skill. By deciding on the targeted lexical items, a need for testing their difficulty level is required before conducting the final version of the self-test. This need is based upon the aim of the research viz., the use of elaboration strategy for making difficult vocabulary more comprehensible as far as students' gender is concerned.

3.3.2 Vocabulary Knowledge Test:

Building on what has been mentioned above, a sub-test was presented to (40) students other than those participated in the main test. Different interpretations in Arabic, which is students' mother tongue, of each lexical item were arranged in the form of multiple-choice options. Students' were required to choose the more appropriate interpretation of the target word.

The difficulty level was calculated by what is called the index of difficulty of facility value (henceforth FV). This value is expressed as the percentage of students' correct responses to the items. In other words, the higher the percentage the easier the item is and vice versa. The results of this test ranges between 9-45% and are considered satisfactory.

3.3.3 Unmodified and Elaborated Versions of the Main Test:

The unmodified version of the test included (40) most infrequently occurring words randomly and chosen put in meaningful sentences. Each sentence included only one low-frequent word taking into consideration that this word would be unknown to the participants. To draw participants' attention, the words were typed in bold form as in the following example:

Unmodified version: Cox brothers used a **conscientious** ghost that did most of their work for them.

This is as far as the unmodified version of the test is concerned. Turning to the elaborated version, the unmodified words were lexically elaborated by adding a clarifying definition or synonyms between brackets, written in italic, right after the unmodified targeted word. The following example is an illustration:

Modified version: Cox brothers used a **conscientious** (*taking care to do things carefully and correctly*) ghost that did most of their work for them.

To ensure the accuracy of the elaborated form of words, Oxford Advanced Learner's English-English dictionary (2000) was used.

3.4 The Self-report Comprehension Test:

In order to measure students' performance, different tests have been put; the self-report test is one of them which means, following Andrade and Du (2007:169), that students judge on their own performance and give themselves grades. Moreover, such kind of test is supposed to be more accurate and can be safely adopted. As such, a self-report test that is built on a 6-likert scale has been used to investigate students' performance in RC. The scale ranges from the point representing 'nothing', i.e. the student understood nothing of the sentence, to 'everything', i.e. the student understood everything of the sentence. For achieving the aim of this research, students were required to tick the option that mostly represents their comprehension of the sentences presented in the self-report test. Yet, before employing this test, one more practical step is needed, viz. meeting both validity and reliability.

Both face and content validity have been achieved before applying the test via presenting it to experts in TEFL. All jury members have agreed upon the validity of the test for the purpose it has been put for. After that the test-retest procedure has been conducted to ensure the reliability of the test used in this research. This application has revealed the stability of the test results over time with 82% correlation of the first sitting results of the test with the answers of the second application of the test. This step paves the way for the application of the next adopted procedures.

3.5 Procedures:

The procedures used to investigate the aims of this research have been presented into two phases following the two forms of the self-report test designed, viz. the base-form phase and the elaborated-form phase. These two forms of the test were presented to

students via using a laptop in the format of google forms. During the first phase, both groups of students, the male and female groups, were given an internet link that includes the base-form test. All participants were asked to read each sentence then tick one of the rates (nothing, very little, some, about a half, almost everything or everything) that represents how much they understood.

Turning to the second phase of the procedures, which is about the elaborated form of the test, participants, in both groups, were required to reply to another google form link. The same instructions as with phase one were presented, i.e. asking students to read each sentence in the test and tick the rate that mirrors their understanding. As such, both groups, males and females, have been tested twice, first in the base-form version and second in the elaborated-form version of the test.

To calculate the results yielded, the responses were tabulated in the form of numbers (from 0-5) representing the rates of understanding (from nothing to everything), respectively.

3.6 Statistical Means and Data Analysis:

To analyze the data obtained, some statistical means were used, viz. the mean scores, the standard deviation and t-test formula. Before subjecting the two male and female groups of participants to the elaborated form of the test, it was important to equalize them in the base-form phase. To accomplish this step, a comparison of the female group responses in the base-form phase was done with the responses of the male group. This comparison was done using an SPSS program. Table (1) below presents the results of equalization.

Table (1): Results of the Comparison between the Male and Female Responses in the Base-form Phase

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t _ test	Sig.
				t Cal.	

Male Group	40	83.08	٢,٦٧	١,٥٧	٠.١٢٠	NS.
Female Group	40	84.00	٢,٥٣			

The results show that there are no statistical differences between the two groups in their achievement in RC which means that the two groups are equal. This result is due to the fact that the difference is not that significant at 0.05 level.

To test and answer the first question, viz. “Is there any relation between the use of elaboration strategy and improving EFL university students’ RC?”, the responses of the two groups in the base-form test were compared with their responses in the elaborated-form of the test. The responses were represented by numbers ranging from (0 = nothing to 5= everything). By using the mean scores and the standard deviation, a t-test for two independent samples using the SPSS program was achieved. Table (2) below shows these results.

Table: (2) Results of the Comparison between the Responses of the Base-form and Elaboration Phases of the Test of the Two Groups

TEST	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t _ test	Sig.	
				t Cal.		
Base-form	40	٨٣,٠٨	٢,٦٧	١٤,٤٦	٠,٠٠٠	Sig.
Elaboration		٩٢,١٤	٢,٩٢			

It is quite clear from the preceding table that there are significant differences between the two groups in favour of the elaborated form of the test. This difference is due to the lower significance of the used mistake percentage in the research which is 0.05 level. Moreover, the mean value and standard deviation of the elaborated phase are higher than those of the base-form phase. Building on that, it can be stated that the use of elaboration strategy has played an important role in improving students' RC achievement.

Turning to the second question which reads: "Is there any relation between students' gender and the use of elaboration strategy as far as improving RC is concerned?", the analysis of the relevant collected data included a comparison between the response of the female group in the elaboration-form of the test with those of the male group in the same version of the test to find out the effect, if any, of gender in this phase. Similarly, the responses ranged from (0= nothing to 5= everything); and a t-test for two independent samples were done using students' mean scores and the standard deviation following the SPSS program. Table (3) presents the results.

Table (3): Results of the Comparison between the Male and Female Responses in the Elaboration Phase of the Test

Group	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	t _ test	Sig.	
				t Cal.		
Male Group	40	٨٤,٣٥	٥,٠٣	٨,٦٤	0.00	Sig.

Female Group	40	٩٢,١٤	٢,٩٢			
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Having a look at the above table, it is quite clear that the mean score of the female group is higher than that of the male group. A fact which is mirrored in the significant differences between the two groups at the significant level used which is 0.05. Moreover, the difference is in favour of the female group as their mean score of achievement in RC is higher than that of the male group.

3.7 Discussion of Results:

Our primary aim, in this study, is the identification of an overall gender difference that exists in using elaboration strategy for enhancing RC. Building on the results of the previous section, table (2) shows that the results of comparing students' achievement in RC in the base-form of the test with that in the elaborated-form of the test is in favour of the latter phase. This fact is reflected clearly by the mean score of the base-form which is lower than that of the elaborated version of the test presented to students. As such, it is quite clear that students faced difficulty in comprehending the original form of sentences presented in the self-report test as they included difficult, unmodified low frequency words. By elaborating these words, in the second version of the test, students achieved higher scores in RC. This means that by way of modification, through changing unfamiliar words with their explanation, RC achievement can be highly enhanced.

As for the second research question , it was posed to investigate the difference in gender in relation to the use of elaboration strategy in RC. Table (3) clarifies that RC scores are in favour of the female group. The mean scores of this group is (92.14) which is higher than that of the male group which is (84.35). These scores lead to the finding that there is a statistical significant difference between the two groups in favour of the female group. This result is supported by other studies conducted in relation to gender differences in language acquisition, for example, White (2007), Hossein and Ashtarian

(2008), and Lafontam Monseur (2009), Piasecka (2010) who state that females are better at spelling, reading, strategies use, and tests. More than one interpretation of this result can be formulated. In our view, biologically speaking, females develop earlier than males; a fact which may lead to the superiority of females using the reading skills and strategies at early stages. This can be one of the reasons for females scores in making use of the elaboration strategy to improve their RC achievement. Any written evidence?

4. Conclusions and Recommendations:

The aim of this research is to explore the effect of the use of elaboration strategy in enhancing EFL university students' achievement in RC. Furthermore, it is assumed that gender differences have their effect on EFL students' performance in reading.

Generally speaking, the results of this research revealed a significant difference between the reading comprehension of sentences in their original authentic form and the elaborated form of the same sentences. This means that students, whether males or females, have difficulty in comprehending unfamiliar, low-frequency words in the base-form of the test. In spite of the fact that elaboration strategy makes sentences longer, however it serves as a tool to provide students with native-like language. Such language is achieved by keeping the original, unmodified words but followed by a definition that elaboration strategy is a good option for enhancing EFL students achievement in RC.

However, there have been significant gender differences observed in the use of elaboration strategy by male and female students. Better achievement in RC by females, using elaboration strategy, has been noticed. More specifically, female students have endorsed more the use of elaboration strategy than their male counterparts. This means that gender differences has its effect on the use of elaboration strategy to enhance students RC.

Based on such conclusions, and because the majority of teachers do not use elaboration strategies, it is highly recommended to give teachers learning strategy training and encourage the use of this strategy in FL classes. Additionally, it is quite

important to motivate language learners to ask for meaning modification through this strategy. As such, teachers are able to increase comprehensibility and achievement. Moreover, it is advisable for syllabus designers to incorporate elaboration in EFL materials to achieve better outcomes.

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