

# Pre-modified Input in Second Language Learning

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## Abstract

According to Krashen (1985), input must be comprehensible so that acquisition can take place. Input can be made comprehensible in two ways: pre-modified input and interactionally modified input. This literature review focuses on the former—pre-modified input. It reviews experimental studies on three types of pre-modified input: simplification, elaboration, and enhancement as well as the effects of pre-modified input on second language acquisition. Based on the results of these studies, limitations of pre-modified input will be discussed. This paper also includes an illustration of pre-modified input in teaching English as a Foreign Language. I show how different types of pre-modified input can be combined together to help facilitate reading comprehension and vocabulary learning. The implications of these kinds of pre-modified input are discussed with respect to reading and vocabulary acquisition.

## Introduction

The notion of input has received increased attention in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) for almost thirty years. Input is among the most important factors that can lead to the mastering of a second language (Gass, 1997, p. 1). There are two types of modified input: pre-modified input and interactionally modified input. The former refers to input which is modified before being supplied to the learner; the latter refers to input that is modified through negotiation for meaning in interaction. This paper gives an overview of the literature on the three ways to pre-modify input: simplification, elaboration, and enhancement. Following the literature review, I will provide a brief example to illustrate input modification.

Krashen's (1985) Input Hypothesis maintains that learners acquire language when the input which they are exposed to is comprehensible, or at the  $i + 1$  level. According to Krashen (1985), " $i$ " represents the linguistic competence already acquired, and " $i + 1$ " refers to new knowledge and skills just a little beyond the learners' current level of L2. From Krashen's (1985) viewpoint, it can be inferred that comprehensible input is the most essential feature for language acquisition. A number of researchers (e.g., Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994; Oh, 2001; and Kim, 2006) have conducted empirical experiments to investigate how to facilitate input comprehension in second language acquisition. These researchers

conducted classroom-oriented experiments to differentiate three types of pre-modified input, namely, simplification, elaboration, and enhancement. These kinds of pre-modified input were found to have important roles in the acquisition of L2 learning in such areas as writing, reading, discourse, and lexis.

As mentioned above, pre-modified input is classified into three types: simplification, elaboration, and enhancement. Simplification refers to changes to the input so that there is less syntactical and lexical complexity while elaboration refers to changes in which unfamiliar linguistic items are paraphrased with redundancy and explicitness. The typical features of simplification include the addition of sentence connectors and boundary markers; repetitions of words and phrases; removal of subordinate clauses to reduce sentence length and complexity; and the restriction of lexis to familiar items. In contrast, elaboration facilitates language learning through paraphrases, synonyms and restatements; optional syntactic signals; rhetorical signaling devices; slowness of rate of speech, clearer pronunciation and emphatic stress; and self-repetition (Parker & Chaudron, 1987, p. 110). The third kind of pre-modified input is enhancement, which refers to typographical enhancement (written input) and intonational enhancement (oral input), for example.



## The Effects of Pre-modified Input

In this section, I am going to review four studies on pre-modified input with the goal of reviewing the effects of pre-modified input on language acquisition. They are (1) Parker and Chaudron (1987), (2) Yano et al. (1994), (3) Oh (2001), and (4) Kim (2006).

In a study on linguistic simplification and elaborative modifications, Parker and Chaudron (1987) investigated the effect of elaborative modifications on reading comprehension by means of a combination of redundancies and thematic structure. They gave two written passages to two groups of learners of English as a second language: 43 undergraduate and graduate students attending two tertiary level institutions in Hawaii. The written passages were divided into two types: one is an unmodified version and the other is a modified version with two types of elaborative modifications: redundancies and thematic structure. Redundancies serve to separate the theme from the rest of the sentence (presentative) and include left-dislocation, anaphoric demonstrative noun phrases, and generic noun phrase. Parker and Chaudron gave the following example: “*What* separates the expert from the novice *is* the expert’s ability to remember board positions. *This ability, it appears,* is related to superior knowledge of the game, not to superior memory” (p. 116). In the first sentence, the *Wh*-cleft structure serves to set the theme following *what* apart from the information presented after *is*. The demonstrative noun phrase *This ability* in the second sentence functions as a redundancy that helps readers to realize that *ability* is the theme of the second sentence. This kind of elaboration—redundancy—is used to make the thematic-presentative relationships obvious. Thematic structure refers to non-canonical word order which aims at placing the given information first and the new information second. The researchers analyzed the cloze test results to determine which was superior in promoting comprehension: redundancy or thematic structure. Parker and Chaudron’s conclusion was that elaborated input is a better option than non-elaborated input for language comprehension.

In a related study, Yano et al. (1994) investigated the effects of simplified and elaborated texts on EFL learners’ reading comprehension in Japan. Thirteen reading passages in three forms—native baseline, simplified, or elaborated—were presented to 483 Japanese students. The simplified texts included reduction of the sentence length, embedded clauses, and multisyllabic words whereas the elaborated versions consisted of parenthetically paraphrased information and definitions of low-frequency content words. The results of the experiment showed that students who read the original passages without modification scored far lower on a comprehension test than did students who read linguistically simplified or elaborated texts. Interestingly, there was no significant difference in scores between students who read the simplified and elaborated passages. Another finding was that with respect to making inferences from texts, students found elaborated passages to be more helpful. This was quite similar to Parker and Chaudron’s (1987) result.

Taking a step further, Oh (2001) conducted an experiment focusing on the relative effects of simplification and elaboration on Korean high school students’ reading comprehension at different proficiency levels. One hundred and eighty students, grouped according to high and low proficiency levels, were presented with six English reading passages in one of the three forms: baseline, simplified, or elaborated. An 18-item multiple-choice comprehension test was used to assess (a) general comprehension, (b) specific comprehension, and (c) inferential comprehension. Furthermore, to measure students’ perceived comprehension, a 6-point scale, marked for 0%, 20%, 40%, 60%, 80% and 100%, was administered to elicit the students’ responses to the question “What percentage of the passage do you think you understood?” (Oh, 2001, p. 78). The findings revealed that the difference between simplified input and elaborated input was not significant. Students’ reading comprehension was enhanced by input elaboration for both high and low proficiency levels, thus once again confirming that elaboration is an

effective method for input pre-modification (see also Parker & Chaudron, 1987; Yano et al., 1994). No interaction effect was found between students' proficiency and the modification type but students' performance on general or specific test items of comprehension improved when either simplified and elaborated input was used (in contrast with non-modified input).

Also using Korean students in EFL context, Kim (2006) carried out an investigation into input elaboration effects on vocabulary acquisition through reading. In this study, however, Kim did not compare the relationship between simplification and elaboration. He used typographical (written input) enhancement—one type of input enhancement that draws L2 learners' attention to formal features in the L2 input—and compared it with elaborated input. Prior to Kim's study, no researchers had ever investigated systematically whether and how incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition through reading was affected by typographical enhancement; nor had anyone investigated whether incidental L2 vocabulary acquisition was facilitated by the combination of both input enhancement and elaboration or by either input elaboration or enhancement. The purpose of Kim's research was to examine whether the acquisition of English vocabulary was facilitated by (a) lexical elaboration (LE), typographical enhancement (TE), or a combination of these, and (b) explicit or implicit LE. The most noticeable results of the experiment were that vocabulary recognition for form and meaning was not aided by TE alone and that there was no distinction between the effects of explicit and implicit LE on form and meaning recognition of vocabulary.

Taken as a whole, it appears that modified input can help enhance learners' comprehension whether it is simplification, elaboration or enhancement. Simplification and elaboration can be used separately depending on the type of comprehension process required (Yano et al., 1994; Oh, 2001). For instance, when extraction of main ideas or detailed information is called for, simplification of syntax and lexis was needed; on the other hand, elaborative modification is the only

source for semantic detail that learners can use in making inferences about the reading materials. Elaboration, however, is considered a better option in teaching written texts or in oral presentation (Parker & Chaudron, 1987). Further, elaboration is recommended instead of simplification to improve comprehension since more native-like qualities were retained with elaboration than with artificial simplification (Oh, 2001). In fact, a combination of elaboration and enhancement may be a good selection for vocabulary acquisition because this double treatment should better draw L2 learners' attention to form (i.e., target words) and meaning (i.e., lexical elaboration) at the same time. In addition, semantic redundancy has a positive effect on enhancing comprehension.

### **Limitations of Input Pre-modification**

The studies above also mention some limitations of the three types of input modification. In the case of simplification, using controlled vocabularies as well as short and simple sentences in simplified texts may cause "choppy, unnatural discourse models" (Yano et al., 1994; Oh, 2001), which may make the text differ noticeably from authentic materials. Moreover, removal of unfamiliar linguistic items from a text may prevent exposure to the items that learners should know (Yano et al., 1994; Oh, 2001; Gass, 1997, p. 77). One more limitation of simplification is that reading strategies used for un-simplified target language materials becomes inappropriate with simplification (Oh, 2001). Finally, simplification may make the text more difficult to comprehend as a simplified input process usually removes a large amount of redundancy present in language (Oh, 2001; Gass, 1997, p. 77). Elaboration, on the other hand, is considered "wordy" or of greater length, containing items of lower-frequency vocabulary or subordination (Yano et al., 1994). Lastly, enhancement may not ensure learners' engagement with the enhancement features (Kim, 2006).

It is clear from these findings that input simplification and enhancement can facilitate comprehension, but more often linguistic

elaborative input have been shown to be more effective than linguistic simplification or enhancement. In practice, teachers should use an appropriate type of input modification or an appropriate combination of the various ways to modify input in order to support L2 learners.

In the next section, I will present an example of input pre-modification in light of the findings of the studies reviewed above and with the context of teaching English in Vietnam.

### Illustration of Input Pre-modification

I have been a teacher of English at the secondary level in Vietnam for several years.

My students' English levels range from beginner to mid-intermediate. With their levels, I think that a combination of simplification, elaboration and enhancement in teaching reading and vocabulary through texts may help them increase their comprehension. Some relevant strategies include reducing the length of the sentences, low-frequency words (words likely to be difficult for the students to understand), and the amount of embedded clauses, adding some simple words, and using images to illustrate the text. For instance, below is an original version of a text (baseline version), followed by a modified version using simplification, elaboration, and enhancement:

Baseline text (from Nguyen et al., 2005):

Tornadoes are funnel-shaped storms which pass overland below thunderstorm. They can suck up anything that is in their path. In Italy in 1981, a tornado lifted a baby, who was asleep in its baby carriage, into the air and put it down safely 100 meters away. (p. 78)



Simplified, elaborated, and enhanced version:

**Tornadoes** are a kind of storms which look like a **funnel**. Tornadoes move on the ground, often under storms with thunder and lightning. Tornadoes can pick up anything in their way. For example, in Italy in 1981, a tornado picked a baby up into the air when he was sleeping in a **baby carriage**, or baby stroller. Later, the tornado put the baby down safely on the ground 100 meters away.



**Simplification:** Low-frequency lexical items (*funnel-shaped, pass overland, path, and suck up*) were substituted for higher frequency words or simpler expressions (*look like a funnel, move forward on the ground, way, and pick up*). A drawback of these substitutions is that they increase the sentence lengths.

**Elaboration:** Supplementary definition of lower-frequency words were added (*a storm with thunder and lightning* in place of *thunderstorm*) and synonym (*baby stroller* added after *baby carriage*). Redundancy (turning phrases such as *pass overland* and *below thunderstorms* into a new sentence where the subject is repeated, such as *tornadoes move on the ground, often under storms with thunder and lightning*, adding redundant phrases such as *on the ground* in the last

sentence) and paraphrases (*Tornadoes are a kind of storms which look like a funnel, a baby when he was sleeping in a baby carriage*) were supplied. Besides, clearer signaling of thematic structure in the form of a discourse marker (*For example*) was placed into this version to clarify the relationships between the given and new information. Additionally, the last sentence in the baseline text was broken down into two sentences in order to provide learners with a clearer depiction when they read the text. The redundancy adverb *later* was embedded in the broken sentence to clarify the flow of events.

**Enhancement:** The original text enhances input with a picture of a tornado. In the simplified version, I have enhanced the input further in the following ways. The word

funnel and baby carriage were bolded to attract learners' attention and facilitate their memory. Also, to help the learner understand the meaning of the words baby carriage and funnel, two pictures (from Delicious Baby, 2008; Shutterstock Images, 2011.) were placed next to the version, respectively.

## Conclusions

This paper attempts to review four studies on the role of pre-modified input in second language acquisition. Regarding the effects of pre-modified input, input elaboration is likely to be a facilitating factor on students' comprehension. In addition, semantic redundancy has a positive effect on enhancing comprehension. In vocabulary acquisition, to draw L2 learners' attention to form and meaning, a combination of enhancement and elaboration is suggested. This may be because this double treatment could draw L2 learners' attention to form (i.e., target words) and meaning (i.e., lexical elaboration) at the same time.

In conclusion, it cannot be denied that input modification can promote language

acquisition, especially in reading and vocabulary acquisition. As we can see in the illustration, input can be pre-modified by the use of a combination of three strategies: simplification, elaboration, and enhancement. It seems that the substitutions for the lower-frequency lexical items expand the sentence length. Similarly, the length of the simplified, elaborated, and enhanced version is much longer than that of the baseline one. These are some limitations when applying pre-modified input for texts. Nevertheless, positive effects based on this application are worth the teacher's effort.

Some questions arise from the above literature review and example text. Is modified input only necessary for reading or vocabulary acquisition? What are some strategies to train language teachers so that they know how to pre-modify input properly in their teaching? Finally, further research is necessary to investigate the effects of a combination of three types of pre-modified input on comprehension.

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