IN THE NAME OF GOD

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The Effect of Task-planning and Language Proficiency on Iranian EFL Learners' Written Performance

BY

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To my family

Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effects that pre-task and on-line planning may have on the written performance of L2 learners across different levels of proficiency (Elementary, Low-intermediate and High-intermediate) along with an examination of any possible interaction between the type of planning assigned and the proficiency levels.. For this purpose a total of 69 learners of English as a foreign language were chosen to take part in the study after being homogenized into the above mentioned groups. . Each proficiency group was randomly assigned to three planning conditions to complete a narrative task based on three sets of pictures. To compare the impact of planning across different conditions a within subject repeated measures design was adopted including a set of one way ANOVAs and tests of parameter effects in order to compare the effect of planning across the proficiency groups of the study. The results of the study showed a more significant effect for pre-task planning on the fluency measure (number of syllables per second) in comparison to the on-line planning condition which proved to have a stronger effect on the accuracy (number of errors per hundred words) and complexity (number of words per T-unit) of the language produced. As it was expected, there was no interaction between the planning conditions and the given proficiency levels in general except for the interaction found between the pre-task planning and the High-inter level, as a result of which the accuracy of the Low-inter group proved to be more than the High-inter group. The results achieved show a ceiling effect according to which it is hypothesized that there is a level beyond which the effect of planning is only random and far from systematic accordingly.

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Chapter I

Introduction

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, a good number of studies have investigated the impact of planning on language production (e.g. Crooks, 1989, Ellis. 1987, Foster and 1999a, b, Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Wendel, 1997a, b; and Fangyuan, Yuan & Ellis, 2003a, b). These studies revolve around the information processing theory, which holds that humans have access to a limited processing capacity and as a result, are not able to attend fully to all aspects of a task (Anderson, 1995). Second language learners, especially those with limited proficiency, have great difficulty with attending to form and meaning simultaneously and thus have to make decisions about how to assign their attentional resources by prioritizing one aspect of language over others (Anderson, 1995, Skehan 1996, Vanpatten, 1990). However, when they have the opportunity to plan the linguistic and propositional content of an upcoming task, they can compensate for these processing limitations and, as a result, the quality of their linguistic output will be enhanced (Skehan, 1996). Skehan has distinguished three aspects of linguistic performance; fluency, accuracy, and complexity. Fluency 'concerns the learners' capacity to produce language in real time without undue pausing and hesitation' (Skehan, 1996: 22). Various ways of measuring this have been devised- speech rate (e.g. number of syllables per minute of speech or number of syllables per minute of writing), length of run, pause length, silence, false starts, repetitions and reformulations). Complexity 'concerns the elaboration of the language that is produced' (Skehan, 1996: 22) and reflects, Skehan suggests, learners' preparedness to take risk and to restructure their interlanguages. Measures of complexity are generally based on the extent to which subordination is evident (e.g. number of clauses per T- unit or C- unit). Accuracy concerns the extent to which the language

produced conforms to the target language norms. There is no universal agreement among researchers on how this can be measured. Some (e.g. Crooks, 1989; Wigglesworth, 1997) have preferred to examine how accurately specific grammatical features (e.g. articles) are used while others have decided to use more generalized measures, such as percentage of error-free clauses (Skehan and Foster 1997). According to Skehan (1998), these three aspects of performance need to be distinguished because they are differentially affected by the particular type of processing a learner adopts. Skehan suggests that under certain conditions learners will elect to draw on their lexicalized knowledge of language, in which case fluency is enhanced, while under other circumstances they will be able to refer to their rule-based system, in which case greater complexity and accuracy may affect positively their language production, especially where fluency and complexity are concerned (Ortegga, 1999). Studies by Crooks (1989), Foster and Skehan (1996), and Wendel (1997), among others, show that pre-task planning results in increased fluency. In contrast, mixed results have been reported for accuracy (Ellis, 2003). Ellis found that planning had an effect on the rule-governed language forms but had no effect on the irregular forms (e.g. regular and irregular past forms).

Skehan and Foster (1999) also reported the clear effect of pre-planning on learners' performance. They examined the effects of contextual support on learners' production. Building on Ellis' study (1987), Yuan and Ellis (2003a) carried out another study to compare the effects of pre-task planning and on-line planning on learners' performance of a narrative task in a more systematic way. The result of their study indicates that neither pre-task nor on-line planning results in greater fluency. Yet, both result in higher complexity in comparison to no planning condition. The striking

difference lies in the accuracy aspect of performance with on-line planning bringing about greater accuracy. In another study, Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) tried to find the effect of different variables (planning condition, proficiency level, and task structure) on oral performance of learners. In this study participants were chosen from among two levels of language proficiency i.e. elementary and intermediate. Also two planning conditions (planned vs. unplanned) were chosen for the purpose of the study. The findings on planning showed that pre task planning led to a significant increase in fluency and accuracy.

Rahmanian (2004) conducted another study on the effects of planning conditions which differed from Tavakoli and Skehan's model in terms of the modality of the tasks used (written tasks instead of oral tasks). The results of the study showed that there was no significant change in the pre-task planning group in comparison to no planning groups in terms of fluency. And in general pre-task planners outperformed the other groups in terms of fluency.

Many studies have found that planning significantly facilitates fluency in L2 oral language production (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan 1996; Mehnert 1998; Ortega 1995; Wigglesworth 1997). Language complexity also increases, especially (1) for more proficient learners (Wigglesworth, 1997), and (2) with more cognitively demanding tasks (Foster & Skehan 1996). When it comes to accuracy, however, the effects of planning are less certain. Wigglesworth (1997), for example, showed that planning had a very limited effect on the verb morphology accuracy and only with highly proficient learners. Thus, the effects of planning on accuracy are not clear-cut and appear to be

influenced by specific task types, the choice of measures for analysis, and the learners' proficiency levels.

These suggest that a number of factors such as the type of planning, the inherent structure of a task, the length of time, and the proficiency level of learners can have an impact on L2 linguistic performance . Yet, so far researchers have not studied how these factors can possibly interact. Also, participant factors, which might affect language performance, have not been thoroughly investigated in the area of task-based research.

Previous studies suggest that the role of planning is three fold. First, it eases the on-line processing load as well as reducing communicative stress to yield higher fluency. Second, planning helps learners to access their maximal level of lexical and structural knowledge, which in turn, will enable them to use more complex language. Third, it facilitates the allocation of conscious attention to form and thus helps learners to generate more accurate language.

However, whereas several studies have considered how the effect of planning varies according to the cognitive load imposed by the task there has been almost no consideration of the interaction between proficiency and planning in terms of the effect that the latter can have on task performance. Indeed, these studies have investigated learners with a very limited range of proficiency except for the study conducted by Kawauchi (2005). They have examined intermediate and post- beginners (Ellis, 1989), intermediate learners (Ortega, 1995), pre-intermediate learners (Foster & Skehan 1997), and early intermediate learners (Mehnert, 1998).

A few studies have investigated learners with mixed levels of proficiency. For example, Crookes (1989) carried out an experiment on a wide range of Japanese learners of English, whose TOEFL scores ranged from 460 to 620. However, it is difficult to see how the higher and lower proficiency learners responded to the tasks, since no distinction was made in the analysis. To the best of the author's knowledge the studies by Wigglesworth (1997) and Kawauchi (2005) are the only studies that took proficiency into account. Wigglesworth in his study focused on 28 high and 23 low proficiency learners. He examined the effect of one minute of planning time on a tape-mediated oral test consisting of four kinds of tasks (i.e telephone answering machine message; picture description; summary of conversation; and general discussion). The findings indicated that the planning time only helped the more proficient learners to produce more complex language (subordinate clauses), and more accurate language (i.e. verb morphology). The opportunity to plan did not seem to benefit learners at the lower levels of language proficiency. The findings of this study led Wigglesworth to conclude that " for the high-proficiency candidates, planning time may improve accuracy on some measures where the cognitive load of the task is high, but the effect does not extend to the low-proficiency candidates" (p. 85).

This finding is important in that it suggests that the effects of planning will differ according to the learners' proficiency level. Specifically, the effects on complexity and accuracy are more likely to be found in higher proficiency learners when the task is cognitively more demanding. The other major study in this regard was conducted by Kawauchi (1997). He focused on the effects of strategic planning on oral narrative performance of tasks with respect to learners' level of language proficiency. The

participants in his study were from three levels of language proficiency, namely, low-intermediate, high-intermediate, and advanced learners. Each group did three tasks under different planning conditions. The results from this study provided clear evidence that learners' L2 proficiency is a factor in determining whether and to what extent planning affects subsequent task performance. A significant result of the study was that high EFL learners tended to benefit the most in case of fluency and complexity while the low EFL learners appeared to gain most in accuracy. The advanced learners gained the least. The results from Kawauchi's study indicate that there may be a level beyond which planning will have only a limited effect.

These claims from Wigglesworth and Kawauchi are noteworthy. However, further research seems to be necessary to confirm them. The purpose of the present study is to investigate the effects that time planning may have on L2 learners' performance of a written narrative task. The focus is on how proficiency may moderate the effect of planning in terms of two planning conditions, pre- task planning and on- line planning.

1.2 Statement of the problem

Over the past decade, second language researchers have investigated the effects of task characteristics on learners' performance in general and planning in particular. However, results for the effect which planning might have on language performance of learners are not straight forward and often seem to be rather contradictory. One reason for this issue is the various numbers of variables involved in L2 learners' task performance, which in turn, could justify the mixed results reported to date. Researchers can control only for a limited number of variables and studies to present day have suffered from a

large number of delimitations. One can never take into account all of the variables involved to deal with the threats to the internal validity of his study. As I went through the literature, Considering the resources available to me for my own study, it became clear that most studies conducted to date regarding the effects which planning might have on language performance have focused on either one type of planning (e.g. strategic planning or rehearsal activities) or, on-line planning, and mostly across one level of language proficiency, mainly intermediate learners and post-beginners. Another factor which can exert a strong influence upon performance is the conditions under which a task is done (planning vs. no planning). It is now clear that giving learners pre-task planning time leads to significant improvement in performance. The clearest generalization is that pre-task planning is associated with greater complexity and fluency, in almost all studies. There is less robust relationship with accuracy, with some studies supportive of an accuracy effect, and others much less so (Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005). Therefore, further research is necessary to uncover which particular conditions may lead to greater accuracy.

In line with the above argument the main objectives in designing this investigation is to compare the impact of (1) different types of pre-task planning (conditions under which tasks are done i.e., pre-planning vs. no planning condition), (2) language proficiency (elementary, low-intermediate, and upper-intermediate learners), and the trade offs between proficiency level, and planning type in narrative writing upon different aspects of learners' performance (fluency, complexity and accuracy).

1.3 Rationale of the study

Developing learners' communicative competence is the primary goal of foreign language instruction (Doughty and Williams, 1998; Ellis, 2000). To serve this goal, applied linguists have proposed task as a vehicle to get learners to use language in meaningful ways and in authentic situations. In fact, task-based teaching falls in the strong paradigm of Communicative Language Teaching which holds that learners should communicate to learn how to communicate. This is in sharp contrast with the earlier weak version of the Communicative Language Teaching that proposed communication as the goal of language instruction irrespective of the medium employed to build up learners' communicative competence (Ellis, 2003). Within this goal, the uses of tasks have evolved in contrast to previously dominant presentation, practice, production (3ps) model. Pedagogical choices that effectively support the SLA process involve the use of tasks with appropriate levels of structural support and content as well as decisions about their sequencing within other classroom activities (Robinson 2001, Skehan 1998).

Performance on a task may be influenced by several factors. One of these factors is planning before commencing a task. Planning prior to a task has interesting effects on aspects of language performance. The emergence of pre-task planning in the past 15 years has obsessed a number of prominent researchers such as Ellis, Crookes, Skehan, Foster, and Ortega. Such studies have raised on-going interest in the issue as they are said to lead learners to a more complex, more accurate, and even more fluent output (Babstone, 2002). According to Skehan (1996) learners have access to two distinctive information systems, an examplar-based system and a rule-based system. The former is lexical in nature and comprises discrete lexical items and prefabricated chunks. The

linguistic knowledge contained in this system can be easily and quickly accessed and thus ideally suited for occasions calling for fluent language performance. The rule based system consists of abstract representations of the underlying patterns of the language. These require more processing and thus are best suited for more controlled and less fluent language performance.

According to Ellis (2005) L2 acquisition is far from a unitary phenomenon and understanding the processes learners go through requires a multidimensional model which is best advanced in the work of Misel, Clashen, and Pienemann (1981). In this model they posited two dimensions or axis: (1) a developmental axis, which governed the order and sequence of acquisition of those aspects of grammar that were subject to processing constraints (for example, negatives or interrogatives), and (2) a variable axis, which governed non-developmental features (features that were acquirable at any time). They hypothesized that "L2 learners differ in their socio-psychological orientation to learning and L2 and that this influences, in particular, progress along the variable axis". Following his colleagues, Ellis (2005) pointed out that:

"Learners with a 'segregative orientation' are likely to engage in prolonged 'restrictive simplification (i.e. they seek optimal results in communication by reducing the grammar to make it easy to handle). Such learners achieve communicative fluency at the expense of complexity and accuracy. In contrast, learners with an 'interogative orientation' may seek to complexify their grammatical system by adhering to target language norms. Such learners may prioritize complexity and accuracy over fluency."