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The Effect of Planning Time
On the Oral Performance of
Iranian Male and Female EFL Learners

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To my family who have been very enthusiastic, proud and supporting through my years of studying.

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Abstract

For over two decades, studies on task planning and its role in second language learners' oral performance have shown that the opportunity to plan for a task generally improves learners' speech (Ellis, 2005). It has been hypothesized that task planning reduces cognitive load during language processing and allows learners to attend to various aspects of language, and that this enhanced attention, in turn, results in more successful task performance. Researchers have explored the effect of different types of planning time on different aspects of learners' oral performance (e.g. Bygate, 2001; Crookes, 1989; Elder & Iwashita, 2005; Ellis, 1987, 2005; Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Kawauchi, 2005a, 2005b; Mehnert, 1998; Mochizuki & Ortega, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2005; Sangarun, 2005; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Tajima, 2003; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005; Wendel, 1997; Wgglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

In line with previous studies and to shed more light on this aspect of task-based language teaching, this study tried to investigate the effect of strategic planning on the fluency, accuracy and complexity of both male and female EFL learners' oral production. The sample consisted of 44 upper-intermediate English learners, 22 male and 22 female ones with the age range of 18-25 who were studying at a private institute in Semnan city. Participants received a set of pictures that depicted a story and were asked to retell the story. For the first session, they had almost no time to plan (about 40 seconds), but two weeks later, they were given 6 minutes to be prepared for the second story to be narrated. To examine the effects of planning on task performance, fluency, complexity, and accuracy in the participants' speech were analyzed.

The results indicated that although the differences in oral production were not statistically significant in all planned vs. unplanned situations, there is an overall improvement in learners' performance upon giving planning opportunity. Also, gender made no difference to the learners' amount of gain. Furthermore, among the four parameters of oral performance, namely fluency, accuracy, lexical complexity and syntactical complexity, accuracy received the least and syntactical complexity received the most improvement. These results provided some important pedagogical implications and suggested useful future research directions.

Key words: EFL learners, planning time, gender, fluency, accuracy, complexity

Chapter one

Introduction

1.1. Overview

With growing emphasis on learners' communicative abilities over the last two decades and the advent of communicative language teaching approach in the early 1980s, the term task-based language teaching (TBLT) began to be used prevalently in the field of second language acquisition in terms of developing process-oriented syllabi and designing communicative tasks to promote learners' actual language use. Task-based learning is a different way to teach languages. It can help student by placing his/her in a situation similar to the real world; a situation in which oral communication is of utmost importance for doing a specific task. Task-based language teaching helps students to use his/her skills at his/her current level and develop language through its use. Also, it focuses students' attention toward achieving a goal where language becomes a tool, making the use of language a necessity. In this respect, TBLT addresses questions being at the center of attention of second language acquisition research, including the relationship between target language perception, processing, production, and language learning. The central goal, then, was to establish a close relationship between a certain learning environment (the task), a communicative behavior resulting from this learning environment (task-based L2 performance), and second language acquisition (task-based L2 learning). According to Long and Crooks (1987), it should be possible to build up a multi-dimensional classification, organizing tasks in terms of their potential for second language learning on the basis of psycho linguistically and psychologically-motivated dimensions (p. 197).

Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005: 140) cite an L2 acquisition model proposed by Meisel, Clahsen, and Pienmann (1981). This model which is known as Multidimensional Model, hypothesizes two facets in L2 acquisition: (1) a developmental axis, which controls the sequence and order of acquisition of the aspects of language that are subject to processing constraints, and (2) a variable axis, which controls non-developmental features.

This theory suggests that individual learners differ in their socio-psychological orientation to learning an L2 especially regarding development along the variable axis. According to Meisel et al. (1981) learners are categorized into two different orientations: segregative and integrative. Segregative students prefer simplification to lubricate the wheels of communication, while integrative ones would rather recline to complication of structural rules to achieve the target norms. In other words, segregative learners prefer to be more fluent at the expense of making a few grammatical mistakes which could be avoided if they thought more. On the other hand, integrative students prefer to be accurate even if they need to pause for retrieving the appropriate grammatical form. Learner preference for accuracy or fluency is implicitly loaded in this dichotomy, where segregative learners would prioritize fluency at the expense of having examples of agrammatical structures in their production; integrative students prioritize accuracy and complexity over fluency for the purpose of being rule-based. The assumption underlying the model was that the learners face trouble while trying to attend to form and meaning simultaneously, so they are forced to prioritize one aspect over the other.

1.2.   The significance of task planning

It is more than two decades that researchers in second language acquisition have been investigating the effects of planning for a task on language learners' oral performance. The line of such studies was initiated by Ellis (1987). These studies are generally based on the information processing theory which claims that "humans possess a limited processing capacity and, as a result, are not able to attend fully to all aspects of a task" (Yuan and Ellis, 2003, p.1). It has been generally agreed that there is a certain amount of constraints in the allocation of attentional resources while processing language (Baddeley, 2003; Baddeley and Logie, 1999; Pashler, 1998; Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998). Due to their limited language

proficiency, L2 learners are unable to focus on all the aspects of a speaking task at the same time, so they have to choose the aspect of language to which they want to allocate their attention (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998; VanPatten, 2002a, 2002b; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). To shed light on the interaction between cognitive load and language production, EFL and ESL researchers have investigated task planning and its role in oral performance. It is hypothesized that task planning reduces cognitive load during language production processing and thus provides the opportunity for L2 learners to attend to different aspects of language to retrieve information in working memory, which will result in a more successful task performance (Ellis, 2005).

Focus on form is another notion which is taken into account while investigating the role of task planning in oral production (Ellis, 2005; Ortega, 1999). It refers to the processing that directs learners' attention to linguistic forms when learners are involved in communicative language use and is claimed to be a necessary condition for interlanguage development (Doughty and Williams, 1998a). Ortega (1995a, 1999, 2005) has reported that learners' initiated focus on form has occurred during the planning stage, which signifies positive effects of task planning on L2 learners.

Considering the studies related to task planning, two main areas of research can be detected: a) having the opportunity to plan for a task, which aspect of language benefits the most, and b) what are L2 learners' strategies to ease the limitation of attention to have a better production. Regarding the first area, many researchers have examined the effects of both types of planning (pre-task and online planning) on fluency, accuracy and complexity of L2 learners' oral performance (Bygate, 2001; Crookes, 1989; Elder & Iwashita, 2005; Ellis, 1987, 2005; Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Kawauchi, 2005a, 2005b; Mehnert, 1998; Mochizuki & Ortega, 1995a, 1995b, 1999, 2005; Sangarun, 2005; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Tajima, 2003; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005; Wendel, 1997;

Wgglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In addition to the effects of planning on fluency, accuracy and complexity of L2 learners' oral performance individually, some studies have shown that there are trade-off effects; that is, one aspect improves while another suffers because limited attention is available. These trade-off effects have been observed between fluency and accuracy, between complexity and accuracy, and between grammatical accuracy and the variety of vocabulary (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

Regarding the second area of research, a limited number of studies have been conducted to date (Kawauchi, 2005a; Ortega, 1995a, 1999, 2005; Sangarun, 2005). According to findings of these studies, L2 learners actively attend to grammatical form during planning, although degree of focus on grammatical form depends on whether their primary focus is on the accuracy of their oral performance or on communication (Ortega, 1995a, 1999, 2005; Sangarun, 2005). The results of Kawauchi's study also show that language learners at different proficiency levels use different strategies during planning.

The traditional division of language into four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, endows a considerable importance to each skill as an ability to be taught in its own right, separated from others. It also follows that ignoring one skill would lead to the impairment of language ability in that particular area. According to Brown and Yule (1983) many language learners regard speaking skills as the criteria for knowing a language. They define fluency as the ability to communicate with others much more than the ability to read, write, or comprehend oral language. Students assess their progress in terms of their accomplishments in spoken communication. So, in the present study, the researcher has used a procedure based on the use of tasks as the core unit of planning and instruction in the so-called TBLT to enhance the speaking ability of EFL learners. As mentioned earlier, TBLT

put tasks at the center of methodological focus and views the learning process as e set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve (Brown, 2001).

1.3. Statement of the problem

Generally speaking, tasks are supposed to play significant role in second language learning. Richards and Rodgers (2001: 223) mention some characteristics of tasks as follows. First, they are activities including real communication which is essential for learning. Second, tasks are activities in which language is employed for doing meaningful task to enhance learning. Third, "language that is meaningful to the learner supports the learning process". Considering the significance of tasks, many researchers have investigated different aspect of it. Activities are sequenced as pre-task, while-task and post-task. Pre-task activities which have been proven to be helpful in increasing learners' confidence and feeling that the task is less demanding, have been tested and demonstrated to be effective regarding fluency and complexity in the performance of oral narratives (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Robinson et al., 1995; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Robinson, 2001) and with writing skills (Kroll, 1990; Ellis and Yuan, 2004). Such activities can make the task more productive (Willis, 1996), and can reduce cognitive strain and processing load (Foster and Skehan, 1996; Skahan, 1996). Other reasons to be mentioned regarding the use of pre-task activities are to introduce new language, to mobilize language, to recycle language, and to ease the processing load (Skahan, 1998). Skehan (1998) have proposed three major types of pre-task activities as: teaching, consciousness-raising, and planning. Teaching involves the introduction of new language to the interlanguage system or restructuring the underlying system. Consciousness-raising activities are concerned with pre-task discussion and exposure to material relevant to the task. Planning involves the issue of time (Chang, 2007).

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Several studies have inspected the role of two types of planning time, namely pre-task or strategic planning and on-line planning on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of linguistic performance (Ellis, 1987; Crooks, 1989; Ortega, 1995; Wigglesworth, 1997; Mehnert, 1998; Foster and Skehan, 1996, 1999; Skehan and Foster, 1997, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003). Although speaking in a second language has occupied a unique position throughout much of the history of language teaching, it has begun to emerge as a branch of teaching, learning and testing in its own right only in the last two decades and has rarely focused on the production of spoken discourse (Carter and Nunan, 2001). Due to the difficulty of studying speaking; teachers, methodologists, applied linguistics and linguistics felt more at ease to focus on written than spoken language. So, In line with previous studies, this study seeks to examine the effects of planning time on Iranian learners' fluency and accuracy and complexity of oral production in narrative tasks under different conditions (planned versus unplanned). The variables are as follows:

(a) Dependent variables: oral performance or better to say fluency, accuracy and complexity have been assumed as the dependent variables of the present study.

(b) Independent variable: planning time which was not once provided for the learners, but the second time the learners were allowed to plan in advance was considered as independent variable.

(c) Moderate variable: in the present study, learners' gender was assumed as moderate variable.

(d) Control variables: in this study, proficiency level and age were selected as the control variables.

1.4. Research questions

The main research questions of the present study may be formally stated as follow:

1. Does planning time have any effect on the oral performance (fluency, accuracy, complexity) of EFL learners?

1.1. How does planning time affect the *fluency* of L2 learners' oral production in a narrative task?

1.2. How does planning time affect the *accuracy* of L2 learners' oral production in a narrative task?

1.3. How does planning time affect the *complexity* of L2 learners' oral production in a narrative task?

2. Does EFL learners' gender make a difference in the gain they get in their oral performance while the planning time is provided?

3. Are there any differences between the four parameters concerning the effect of planning time?

1.5. Research hypotheses

In order to come up with reasonable results on the basis of the aforementioned research questions, the following main null hypotheses have been proposed:

1. Planning time has no effect on the oral performance (fluency, accuracy and complexity) of the EFL learners.

2. EFL learners' gender makes no difference in the gain they get in their oral performance while the planning time is provided.

3. There is no difference between the four parameters concerning the effect of planning time.

To put more specifically, the null hypotheses can be stated as follows:

1.1. Planning time has no effect on the fluency of female EFL learners.

1.2. Planning time has no effect on the fluency of male EFL learners.

1.3. Planning time has no effect on the accuracy of female EFL learners.

1.4. Planning time has no effect on the accuracy of male EFL learners.

1.5. Planning time has no effect on the syntactical complexity of female EFL learners.

1.6. Planning time has no effect on the lexical complexity of female EFL learners.

1.7. Planning time has no effect on the syntactical complexity of male EFL learners.

1.8. Planning time has no effect on the lexical complexity of male EFL learners.

2.1 EFL learners' gender makes no differences in the gain they get in their fluency of oral performance while the planning time is provided.

2.2. EFL learners' gender makes no differences in the gain they get in their accuracy of oral performance while the planning time is provided.

2.3. EFL learners' gender makes no differences in the gain they get in their syntactical complexity of oral performance while the planning time is provided.

2.4. EFL learners' gender makes no differences in the gain they get in their lexical complexity of oral performance while the planning time is provided.

3.1. There is no difference between the four parameters concerning the effect of planning time in male learners.

3.2. There is no difference between the four parameters concerning the effect of planning time in female learners.

3.3. There is no difference between the four parameters concerning the effect of planning time in male and female learners at the same time.

1.6.   Significance of the study

As mentioned previously, authors in task-based language teaching are looking for the criteria to grade and sequence the tasks. It is generally agreed that grading and sequencing are the most controversial and challenging issues in TBLT studies and syllabus design (Rahimpour, 2002). Robinson (2003), considering the cognition hypothesis of task-based language learning states that the sequence of pedagogic tasks should be largely based on the increases in their cognitive complexity, so that increasingly they get closer to the demands of real-world target task (p.45). Furthermore, Robinson argues for a framework which attempts to operationalize the above mentioned proposal in which the basis for sequencing the pedagogic L2 tasks should be the increases in the cognitive complexity of tasks, rather than linguistic grading, and consequent linguistic input would serve as the sequencing criteria. According to Skehan (2003), sequence is characterized as a move from greater control to greater classroom practicality. The issue of sequence has motivated the researchers to study different types of task based on how they are sequenced. Therefore, by manipulating the task conditions, researchers have aimed at deeply investigating the role of task conditions on the difficulty of real-world task completion.

On the other hand, the old measures of linguistic performance such as grammar knowledge and vocabulary power have given their own places to the new measures of linguistic performance which have tried to approximate the learning environment to the real-world use of language. Skehan (1998) recognizes accuracy, fluency, and complexity as the three components of linguistic performance analysis. In this regard, a great bulk of attention has turned toward the investigation of the effect of different types of tasks on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of L2 learners' productions.

Taking all together, any attempts to find ways for the purpose of developing L2 learners' oral performance under different task conditions is to be welcomed. The results of such studies can largely assist the researchers, material designers, and teachers to suitably gear the tasks to the learners' current level of linguistic and cognitive competence. In fact, the present study is an effort to investigate the effects of planning time as a pre-task activity on EFL learners' oral performance in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity. It also aims at supporting the idea that tasks can be organized and sequenced based on the cognitive demands they pose on the learner rather than pure linguistic reasons and criteria.

1.7. Definitions of key terms

In order to come to a better appreciation of the present study, definitions of some of the key terms are provided as follows:

Planning time

As principal types of planning, Ellis (2005) presents pre-task planning and within- task planning. Their difference lies in the timing of the planning with respect to task performance. According to Ellis (2003: 128-129) within task or online planning concerns the available time for monitoring output, while pre-task or strategic planning has do to with planning time provided prior to performance. In this study, planning time refers to strategic planning.

EFL learners

EFL learners refer to the students of homogenous national and linguistic background studying English in a specific institute.