University of Zanjan
Faculty of Humanities
Department of English Language

The Impact of Pre-task Planning on the Improvement of Iranian EFL Learners' Writing Skill in Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT)

*A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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By:
Mahdi Noshadi

Advisor:
Dr. Seyyed Hesamuddin Aliasin

Reader:
Dr. Robab Khosravi

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In the Name of the Most High

To

My beloved wife for all her kind support and encouragement

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Abstract

The overarching concern of the present study was to highlight the effect of pre-task planning on the improvement of Iranian EFL learners' general writing skill as well as on two linguistic characteristics of written performance i.e. complexity and accuracy in TBLT. To this end, the researchers selected 60 Iranian Intermediate EFL learners aged between 17 and 24 and divided them into two equal groups of 30 (Experimental and Control). The instruments used for data collection included: the Oxford Quick Placement Test, Brown's (1991) categories for evaluating learners' writing, and two genuine and validated TOEFL writing tests as pre- and post-tests. The role of pre-task planning in writing performance was examined by using the independent samples t-test statistical procedure for this purpose. Also, the role of pre-task planning in complexity and accuracy of the written performance was examined by using independent sample t-test procedure. The results revealed that: a) pre-task planning was significantly associated with the improvement of EFL learners' overall writing skill; b) pre-task planning was significantly associated with the improvement of EFL learners' complexity of the written performance; c) the implementation of pre-task planning did not play a significant role in the improvement of EFL learners' accuracy of the written performance.

Keywords: Task; Task-Based Language Teaching; Pre-Task Planning; L2 Writing Performance; Oxford Quick Placement Test; Brown's categories; Proficiency level

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter One: Introduction

1.1. Introduction

…………………………………………………………………………..1

1.2. Significance of the Study

………………………………....…………………………….2

1.3 Statement of the Problem

………………………………………………………….3

1.4. Purpose of the Study

……………………………………………………………4

1.5. Research

Questions……………………..……………………………………………... 4

1.6. Research hypothesis

…………………………………………………..………………...5

1.7. Theoretical framework

…………………………………………………………………5

1.8 Limitations of the study

…………………………………………………………………6

1.9 Delimitations of the Study

………………………………………………………..…….6

1.6. Definitions of key terms

………………………………………………………………...7

Chapter Two: Review of the Related Literature

Chapter three: Methodology

Chapter Four: Results and Discussion

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 4.4: Measures of Complexity

TBL: Task-Based Learning

TBLT: Task-Based Language Teaching

TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language

Chapter One:
Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Along with growing understanding of the substantial contributions of Communicative

Language Teaching (CLT) approach to both foreign and second language learning,

dissatisfaction with traditional methods has led to their popular alternative, Task-Based

Language Teaching (TBLT) during the past three decades. Furthermore, in the domain of

teaching methodology, seeking an appropriate method for improving learners' interlanguage

system has been of much concern for decades. Exposure to explicit form-focused instruction

in the context of classroom learning has marked effects on the development of such system

(see Norris & Ortega, 2000). On the other hand, gaining access to L2 knowledge means

departure from usual declarative knowledge (i.e. "factual knowledge") such as knowing that

certain verbs in English language take *–ed* or *–d* when they are applied in past tense to that of

procedural one (i.e. knowing how to do things without thinking about their rules) for instance

a person who possesses such a knowledge can add *–ed* or *–d* to verbs without thinking about

the way the rule functions in making past tense. As a realization of CLT, the implications or

effectiveness of TBLT has recently gained much attention from Second Language

Acquisition (SLA) researchers and L2 teachers (Willis 1996; Ellis 2003). It seems that the implementation of task in the context of classroom learning can make the process of transformation from declarative to procedural knowledge much easier; therefore, the concept of task plays a central role in this context. So far, many definitions of task have been offered (Long 1985; Richards 1986; Breen 1987; Nunan 1989; Willis 1996; Skehan 19998; Lee 2000); however, a generally accepted definition of task specifies a task (Skehan 1996) as an activity in which: meaning is primary over form; there is some sort of relationship to the world; task completion has some priority over linguistic accuracy; and the evaluation is in terms of task outcome. Ellis (2003) added one extra criterion to those of Skehan's, asserting that task is a 'workplan' which 'requires learners to employ cognitive processes (p. 16).

Ellis (2005) spoke of pre-task and within-task planning as the main types of activities under the rubric of planning in TBLT. Pre-task planning itself falls within the dichotomy of rehearsal planning which is giving opportunities to the learner to perform the task before the main performance, and strategic planning which pertains to the student's preparation for understanding the content of the task.

Mostly, studies on pre-task planning to date have been conducted to investigate its impacts on oral performance and overall findings demonstrated its beneficial effects; however, few studies conducted in ESL contexts have ever explored the impacts of pre-task planning in writing skill. There exist such mixed results in these studies that no general conclusion can be reached in this regard.

1.2. Significance of the study

Despite a rigorous tendency toward providing opportunity for foreign language (FL) learners to gain competence in writing skill on the one hand and its significant role both in assessing foreign language competence and especially in language teaching methodology on the other hand, a paucity of studies have been conducted on written texts produced by FL learners.

Moreover, an abundant number of high-stakes language proficiency tests incorporate writing tasks to assess the test takers' writing competence (such as TOEFL proficiency test) and this skill, namely writing in English is important in accomplishing degrees in higher education, too.

Another area of research for the past thirty years has been the role of pre-task planning on oral performance.The potential of pre-task planning and its effects on L2 learners' language performance have been explored over the last few decades. Some studies on this domain have adopted information processing approach, which postulates that due to humans' restricted cognitive capacity while performing a task, learners' focus of attention and information processing ability are similarly restricted (Skehan & Foster, 2001). The primary assumption behind studies following information processing paradigm is that pre-task planning minimizes learners' cognitive load by allowing them to prepare in advance, hence improving the quality of their language production.

1.3. Statement of the problem

The majority of research concerning planning effects to date has been conducted in oral production in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity as three dimensions of language performance (Crooks 1989; Foster & Skehan 1996; Mehnert 1998;Ortega 1999; Yuan and Ellis 2003). However, less research has been conducted to shed light on the implementation of tasks on written output produced by FL learners. Yuan and Ellis (2003) showed that the nature of pre-task planning is complex; consequently, further research is needed for examining effective factors involved in the planning process.

Findings of previous studies in oral production revealed that rehearsal planning has positive effect on language performance. Bygate (1996), for example, found that the complexity of performance was increased by rehearsal. In another study by Nemeth and Kormos (2001), the number of supporting statements increased as the task was repeated

several times. Put in simple words, the fluency of performance increases by rehearsal planning. The existing gap in previous studies of the influence of rehearsal planning on language performance pertains to the investigation of the influence of rehearsal planning on the performance of a new task of the same type.

A bulk of research has been conducted to shed light on the impacts of planning on language performance in TBLT. Results from studies reveal that strategic planning improves fluency. To the researcher's best knowledge, there is no clear impact of strategic planning on accuracy. Strategic planning has a positive influence on complexity (Yuan and Ellis, 2003). Regarding strategic planning, it has been argued that it has beneficial effects on fluency (Foster, 1996; Foster & Skehan, 1997). Ellis (2005) by reviewing a line of previous research found that the effectiveness of strategic planning in terms of accuracy has got mixed results. It was hypothesized that strategic planning has positive influence on complexity too (Ortega, 1997 and Mehnert, 1998).

As mentioned above, so far few studies have been conducted to shed light on the significance of task implementation in improving EFL writing skills. Thus, in the present study, the improvement of students' writing skill will be investigated in terms of accuracy, and complexity in TBLT. The dependent variables in the current study include two dimensions of written performance on the part of intermediate EFL learners, complexity and Accuracy and their general writing skill, while the independent variable consists of the implementation of pre-task planning technique in TBLT.

1.4. Purpose of the study

Exploring the issue of task implementation in the realm of writing, the current study contributes to examining the interface between SLA researches and writing skill. This study is an attempt to investigate the effect of pre-task planning on the accuracy and complexity features of writings produced by Iranian intermediate EFL learners. The study also intends to

answer the question of how pre-task planning improves the learners' overall writing skill in TBLT.

1.5. Research questions

This study has attempted to answer the following research questions:

1) Does pre-task planning have any impact on the improvement of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' overall writing skill in TBLT?

2) Does pre-task planning have any effect on the accuracy of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written production in TBLT?

3) Does pre-task planning have any effect on the complexity of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written production in TBLT?

1.6. Research hypotheses

Based on the research questions posed above, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

1) Pre-task planning has no impact on the improvement of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' overall writing skill in TBLT.

2) Pre-task planning has no effect on the accuracy of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written production in TBLT.

3) Pre-task planning has no effect on the complexity of Iranian Intermediate EFL learners' written production in TBLT.

1.7. Theoretical framework

To explain the underlying mechanisms of pre-task planning impacts, the researchers adapted *information processing approach* which postulates that humans have limited cognitive load capacity, and, thus their focus of attention and information-processing ability are also limited during task performance (Robinson, 2003; Skehan and Foster, 2001); consequently, the learners' mind must divide its attention between conveying the message and linguistic form for formulating the message. Therefore, Skehan (1998) asserted that when learners perform in

an imperfectly learned L2, a great deal of pressure is imposed on their attention. This psychological theory compares the human brain to a computer. It includes the idea that the brain has a very large capacity to store information in the long term, but a more limited capacity for information which requires our attention. After a certain amount of practice, things which at first required attention become automatic, learning more attention available for focus on something else.

Few studies conducted to explore the effects of planning in writing ability (Shi, 1998; Kroll, 1990; Romstedt, 2000) pertain to ESL contexts and can barely be applied to EFL contexts. Although these studies cannot be much revealing, they all have one thing in common: pre-task planning does not seem to have much effect on L2 writing.

1.8 Limitations of the Study:

Since the teacher had to shift to learners' L1 in some cases in order for learners to have a better understanding of the purposes of implementing some specific tasks, it might have caused some interventions in the authenticity of natural classroom context. This was tried to be minimized as the teacher handed out explanations of the main points in English written forms. The teacher ensured the learners that the study is not mainly concerned with evaluation but rather improving their writing skill. Also, they were reassured about the confidentiality of the collected data.

1.9. Delimitations of the Study:

The nature of the present study requires delimiting two factors in order for the results of the study to be more reliable. These factors include the following;

1. The participants of the study were selected from one institute so that contextual differences in terms of the dominant educational system regarding the approach of the course books toward writing skill might not affect the results.

2. The themes of both pre- and post-tests were chosen from the validated and genuine TOEFL examinations. This being so, there is a safe ground that students had enough background knowledge about the topic.

1.10. Definitions of key terms

Communicative language teaching:

Nunan (2004) defines communicative language teaching as a philosophical approach to language teaching covering a range of methodological approaches which share a focus on helping learners communicate meaningfully in the target language.

Corrective feedback:

Feedback that a teacher or another learner provides in response to a learner utterance containing an error, (Ellis 2008).

Declarative knowledge:

According to Nunan (2004), declarative knowledge is a sort of knowledge that can be stated (as opposed to demonstrated). Being able to state a grammatical rule is an example of declarative knowledge.

Interlanguage:

Language produced by learners in the course of acquiring a second language. It often contains its own 'rules' that deviate from the target language, but that are internally consistent (Nunan, 2004).

Methodology:

Based on what Nunan (2004) proposed on the definition of the term methodology, it pertains to the subcomponent of the curriculum concerned with selecting, sequencing and justifying learning experiences, as well the study of the theoretical and empirical bases of such procedures.

Strategic planning:

The process by which learners plan what they are going to say or write before commencing a task. Pre-task planning can attend to prepositional content, to the organization of information or to the choice of language. Strategic planning is also referred to as pre-task planning, (Ellis 2008).

Task:

According to Nunan (2004), a task is a communicative event which has a non-linguistic outcome. However Ellis (2008) defined it as a language teaching activity where meaning is primary, there is some kind of gap, students are required to use their own linguistic resources, and there is an outcome other than the display of language for its own sake.

Task- based language teaching:

An approach to language teaching organized around tasks rather than language structures, (Nunan 2004)

Second language acquisition:

Processes underlying the development of the second or subsequent languages, (Nunan 2004).

Focus on form:

An approach to instruction which provides a systematic focus on language system (principally, but not exclusively, the grammatical system) within a communicative context. Some researchers, for example long, argue that this focus should be incidental, and appropriately timed, (Nunan 2004).

Information processing: