

In the Name of God



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Faculty of Foreign Languages
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M.A. Thesis

**The Effects of Individual and Collaborative Planning on Fluency,
Complexity, and Accuracy in L2 Written Production of Iranian
EFL Learners: Focusing on the Relationship among Planned
Conditions, Language Proficiency, and Task Type**

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Abstract

With an aim to determine the effects of pre-task planning on second language written production, the present study examined Iranian EFL learners' argumentative and instruction writing tasks under the conditions of individual and collaborative planning. Particularly, it addressed the issue of how three aspects of language production (i.e. fluency, complexity, and accuracy) vary among the two planned conditions, task types, and proficiency levels. One hundred sixty eight EFL university students were divided into two groups. Participants in both groups were given 10 minutes for planning in a pre-structured task sheet. One group worked individually, and the other group worked in pairs. Afterwards, learners were given 30 minutes to complete one writing task, either the argumentative or the instruction task. The performances of individual planners and collaborative planners were then analyzed using the three measures of fluency, complexity, and accuracy. ANOVA tests revealed that collaborative planning promoted more accurate textual output while individual planning resulted in greater fluency, and neither type of planned conditions benefited complexity. Findings for the effects of task type indicated that learners produced more fluent instruction writings and more complex argumentative writings regardless of planning conditions. In contrast, individuals achieved significantly greater accuracy in the instruction task; while, pairs obtained greater accuracy in the argumentative task. Moreover, a general pattern was found favoring language proficiency in fluency and accuracy but not in complexity. The results further disclosed that there were significant interaction effects between planning and task type and likewise, between planning and proficiency level. The findings of this study further the understanding of cognitive processing involved in second-language production and have pedagogical implications with special relevance to task-based language teaching.

Keywords: individual and collaborative planning; second language writing; language proficiency; fluency; complexity; accuracy

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.1. Background to the Study

Writing has usually been considered a solitary task because it expresses internal thoughts and feelings. Students may use group work to discuss ideas, peer edit, or even proofread, but the actual task of putting words on paper is solitary. It is also a task for individual accountability. Lunsford (1999) discusses the traditional belief that “solitary, original authorship = powerful, privileged, and good; collaborative, shared authorship = uncreative, transgressive, and bad, very nearly a ‘crime’ of writing” (p. 530). Professionals in composition agree that writing is a discovery process and the writer can learn through writing but as individuals (e.g., Elbow, 1991; Schneider, 2003). However, in other fields, many professionals agree that students learn through conversation (e.g., Bruffee, 1999). Johnson and Johnson (1986) claim that there is evidence that students who work

in teams achieve a higher order of thinking and retain information longer than students who work individually (as cited in Gokhale, 1995). Research, beginning with Abercrombie in the late 1950s, has continuously shown that students learn best through conversation or collaboration (Bruffee, 1999). Questioning and re-evaluating assumptions in a collaborative environment will promote a more thought-provoking dialogue as students try to justify their arguments. In light of the fact that students learn through writing and also through conversation, the question arises: "Can collaboration enhance writing skills?"

One use of collaboration is in the planning stage before doing the task which is called pre-task planning. Numerous studies have defined the construct of planning as "the availability of a certain amount of time immediately before performing the experimental tasks" (Ortega, 1999, p. 113). Students are often given time in class to plan and prepare for their writing. Learners may carry out this kind of preparation, referred to by Ellis (2005) as strategic planning, individually or in groups.

Over the past decade there has been a growing interest in the effect of strategic pre-task planning on subsequent performance (Tuan & Storch, 2007). Researchers (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996, 1999; Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005; Wendel, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) have manipulated various aspects of planning (e.g. planning time, foci, guided/unguided), and types of tasks in an attempt to investigate the effect of different task planning conditions on subsequent task performance. Learners' performance has been analyzed using three dimensions of language production: fluency, complexity, and accuracy.

It is worth noting that there are lots of variables which might influence the usage of planning time. One such variable which requires more investigations is the source of planning. Numerous studies so far have focused upon individual planning, that is to say, learners were given time to plan but planning was

performed in isolation. It was therefore subsequently decided to undertake further exploration and to collect additional evidence about individual and group planning in L2 written output. Specifically, the current study tries to focus on the effect of planned conditions on L2 writing production as well as how this effect is associated with learners' proficiency levels and different writing tasks.

In this Chapter, the following sections will appear. First, the problem under investigation will be stated. Following this, the questions guiding this research and the formulated hypotheses will be presented. It is then intended to discuss the significance of the present study and to provide definitions for the key terms.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite advances in L2 writing research, many fundamental questions about the nature of writing process have still remained unresolved. How planning benefits writing performance is one such vague area that needs to be investigated. Central to planning research in the present study is the notion of "planned condition," which refers to any condition that allows for planning.

With regard to research on planning, the issue of whether planning has effects on learners' task performances has been hotly debated in the contemporary task-based research literature (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Ojima, 2006; P. Skehan, 2009; Tuan & Storch, 2007). Task-based research has been practically concerned with the effects of task design and implementational variables. Meanwhile, L2 writing research has approached the issue of planning based on theoretical frameworks of writing processes and has brought to light the complex interplay among L2 learners' composing processes and individual differences.

It is well documented that planned conditions have produced better research results than unplanned (Ortega, 1999; P. Skehan & Foster, 1999; Tuan & Storch, 2007; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Nevertheless, previous research exploring the effects

of planning has neglected the interrelatedness among task types, planned conditions, and learner variability. This is partly due to the fact that most of the researchers studied the effect of a single variable (e.g., proficiency, planned conditions, task types, or planning time) on task performance, separately but not in interaction.

Several issues associated with planning which were raised from the findings of previous studies are worthy of further exploration in the present study and are expected to encapsulate different aspects of written language development in L2 learners. First, only a few studies to date have conveyed an interest in the interaction between planned conditions and written performance (Ellis & Yuan, 2004). The body of literature on planning has focused heavily on learners' oral performance under the presence or absence of planned conditions (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Gilabert, 2007; Kawauchi, 2005; Ortega, 1999; Sangarun, 2005). Investigating how learners perform different written tasks in different planned conditions enhance understanding of the interactive nature of planning in the writing modality.

Second, the variations among different planned conditions need to be examined at the sentence level to capture the comprehensiveness of L2 writing processes with relevance to planning. In order to accomplish this, it can be beneficial to examine the quality of learners' written output using three aspects of language production: fluency, complexity, and accuracy. The three aspects of learner performance can be seen as constituting a learner's language proficiency. That is, it is assumed that a proficient writer will be able to perform tasks fluently and accurately, using complex language (Ellis, 2009).

Third, discovering the relationship between written task types and planned conditions is also critical to implement effective planning activities in the actual classroom. The results from previous studies have shown that there is great variation in the effects of planning which are dependent on the types of writing

tasks studied (e.g., Gilabert, 2007; Kellogg, 1990; Koda, 1993; Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997). Acknowledgment of how planning and task types interact in L2 writing performance, however, has been considered less important in writing research than other factors, including the amount of time provided for planning. For example, Torrance (1996) argued that learners' familiarity with the tasks might affect their cognitive processes as well as their writing strategies during task completion. Thus, research needs to scrutinize the effects of planning with careful attention to the writing task types.

Moreover, proficiency differences among learners also need to be taken into consideration in order to properly implement task-based instruction in classroom contexts (Ellis, 2009). A considerable amount of research (e.g., Raimes, 1998; Torrance, 1996; Zamel, 1983) has suggested that low proficient writers tend to be context free, intuitive, and plan less and review more at the sentence level. High proficient writers, however, tend to plan more, revise more at the discourse level and show more commitment to the given assignment. Investigating how learners' variability influences their ability to identify a problem, to make a decision, and to execute their writing plan through different planned conditions would provide valuable information about learners' characteristics.

Using the key factors mentioned above which might affect L2 writing performance, the present study investigates the ways that learners interpret and construct writing tasks under different planned conditions. Particularly, this study attempts to consider issues such as the function of planning implemented in the classroom, the role of task types, and the role of learners in a given task. Specifically, this research tries to investigate the effect of individual and collaborative planned conditions on L2 composition evaluated by analytic scoring (i.e. fluency, complexity, and accuracy) as well as the interaction between planned condition, task type, and proficiency level regarding the quality of L2 written performance.

1.3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Considering the aforementioned issues, this study addressed the following research questions and null hypotheses.

Q1: Is there any significant difference between collaborative and individual planned conditions in influencing the Iranian EFL learners' written products in terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy?

H1: There is no difference in fluency of Iranian EFL learners' written products in individual and collaborative planned conditions.

H2: There is no difference in complexity of Iranian EFL learners' written products in individual and collaborative planned conditions.

H3: There is no difference in accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' written products in individual and collaborative planned conditions.

Q2: Do Iranian EFL learners produce more fluent, complex, and accurate argumentative writings than instruction essays in individual and collaborative planned conditions?

H4: There is no difference between individual and collaborative planned conditions in influencing Iranian EFL learners' argumentative and instruction writing essays in terms of fluency.

H5: There is no difference between individual and collaborative planned conditions in influencing Iranian EFL learners' argumentative and instruction writing essays in terms of complexity.

H6: There is no difference between individual and collaborative planned conditions in influencing Iranian EFL learners' argumentative and instruction writing essays in terms of accuracy.

Q3: Does proficiency level have any effects on the Iranian EFL learners' written products in terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy in individual and collaborative planned conditions?

H7: There is no difference between low and high proficiency levels of EFL learners' written productions in collaborative and individual planned conditions in terms of fluency.

H8: There is no difference between low and high proficiency levels of EFL learners' written productions in collaborative and individual planned conditions in terms of complexity.

H9: There is no difference between low and high proficiency levels of EFL learners' written productions in collaborative and individual planned conditions in terms of accuracy.

Q4: Is there any interaction between planned condition, task type, and proficiency level regarding the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' written products?

H10: There is no interaction between planned condition, task type, and proficiency level regarding fluency, complexity and accuracy of Iranian EFL learners' written products.

1.4. Significance of the Study

The significance of this study can be explained from five different perspectives. First, it is important to note that the majority of research to date on pre-task planning has investigated the impact of planning on L2 learners' oral production, and has generally reported its positive effects on their task performance. However, little research on planning has been conducted in writing contexts, and there is no firm evidence to demonstrate that pre-task planning

promotes L2 learners' written production in the ways that many researchers have reported for L2 speaking (Ojima, 2006).

Second, few studies have compared compositions produced as a result of different planned conditions; that is, individual and collaborative planned conditions. Only Kellogg (Kellogg, 1988, 1990) has emphasized the importance of using an individual planning strategy while other studies (e.g., Shi, 1998; Storch, 2005) have been more concerned with collaborative writing strategy. In addition, little research has been conducted on the effects of different types of planned conditions on L2 writing. Therefore, more empirical research and discussion on the effect of different planned conditions (e.g., the individual planned condition and the collaborative planned condition, respectively) are necessary.

Third, it has been suggested that diverse writing tasks require learners to control varying degrees of linguistic or discourse requirements (Dellerman, Coirier, & Marchand, 1996; Koda, 1993). Thus, more attention needs to be paid to the relationships between task types and planning effect on the performance of a written text. Task types may be one of the crucial factors in determining if writers are able to automatize certain features of writing tasks or deal with additional cognitive load to process those aspects (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Franken & Haslett, 2002; Sweller, 1994). For example, argumentative writing requires writers to generate complex information, which makes it more demanding than descriptive writing. In contrast, descriptive writing is characterized as a task that has a clear inherent structure (Foster & Skehan, 1996), which requires writers to describe individual actions or characters. Findings by previous researchers have revealed that collaborative planning results in positive effects during a more difficult task, presumably because that interaction calls attention to gaps in writers' knowledge of their topic or development of ideas (Franken & Haslett, 2002; Shi, 1998; Skehan, 1996). Thus, it would be