



Research Papers in Language Teaching and Learning

Vol. 6, No. 1, February 2015, 134-143

ISSN: 1792-1244

Available online at <http://rpltl.eap.gr>

This article is issued under the [Creative Commons License Deed. Attribution 3.0 Unported \(CC BY 3.0\)](#)

The Impact of Form-focused Guided Strategic Planning on Oral Task Performance

Fatemeh MAHDAVIRAD

The main purpose of the present study is to investigate the impact of form-focused guided strategic planning on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of L2 oral output. The twenty upper-intermediate level freshmen English major participants of the study performed a planned and then an unplanned picture-prompted narrative task. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that the participants produced a more accurate, more complex, and more fluent discourse in their performance of the task when they benefited from form-focused guided strategic planning which contained detailed instructions about how to plan, by being advised to focus on form. The guidance included an explanation of the structural and lexical patterns employed to express a sequence of events. The findings highlight the need to consider guided strategic planning as a task feature in syllabus design and materials development and the necessity of considering this task feature for accomplishing accuracy, complexity, and fluency in oral task production.

Keywords: TBLT, form-focused guided strategic planning, accuracy, complexity, fluency

1. Introduction

Tasks hold a central place in current SLA research and also in language pedagogy (Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2012; Lee, 2000; Robinson, 2012; Skehan, 1998; Skehan and Foster, 2012; Willis, 1996). The issue of task types and variation in L2 learners' performance is of main concern of language teachers and syllabus designers (for a review of research see Ellis, 2003; Rahimpour, 1997; Skehan, 1998). On the other hand, planning is an inseparable part of all spoken and written language use (Ellis, 2005). Research to date lends general support to the claim that pre-task planning affects positively language production, especially as far as fluency and complexity are concerned. However, mixed results have been obtained for accuracy (e.g. Ellis, 1987, 2012; Crookes, 1989; Mochizuki and Ortega, 2008; Ortega, 1999; Tajima, 2003). Thus, more research is needed before we can decide how planning affects accurate language production. Furthermore, the previous studies mostly investigate online and/or strategic planning. In the present work, a particular kind of strategic planning,

namely form-focused guided strategic planning, will be the independent variable of the study.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Task-based Language Teaching

As early as 1970s, the communicative language teaching (CLT) approach became popular among second language acquisition researchers and teachers (Skehan, 2003). Task-based language teaching (TBLT) is a realization of CLT. It is indeed the strong version of CLT, as tasks provide the foundation for an entire language program (Ellis, 2003). According to Foster and Skehan (1997, 1999), teachers can employ some pre-, mid-, and post-task activities to enhance learning by helping learners pay a balanced attention to both form and meaning simultaneously. Variety of design factors (e.g., reasoning demand, number of elements, feedback, context support, and topic familiarity) and how they influence the language produced by learners regarding accuracy, fluency, and complexity have been the main focus of studies of many researchers (Ellis, 2009; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Housen and Vedder, 2009; Wigglesworth and Storch, 2009).

2.2. Planning

To make the significance of planning in the field of SLA understood, Ellis (2005) argues that even the language that seems to be effortless and naturally occurring involves planning and that “planning is essentially a problem solving activity”; it involves deciding what linguistic devices need to be selected in order to affect the audience in the desired way. Moreover, planning provides a chance to attend to language as form (Ellis, 2005). There are a number of different types of planning and these are discussed and operationalized by Ellis (2005). A distinction has been made between two important kinds of planning, i.e., *online planning* and *strategic planning*. The former type deals with an examination of the planning which takes place during the task performance; whereas the latter is related to the planning time prior to task performance (Yuan and Ellis, 2003). The effects of online and strategic planning are somewhat different. Online planning has been found to increase accuracy but decrease fluency (Ellis, 1987). The effect of strategic planning on accuracy, complexity, and fluency is more complicated and, depending on the measures taken and the design of the study, mixed results have been obtained. Skehan and Foster (1997) found that learners who benefit from a planning time before task performance achieve greater accuracy in unstructured rather than structured tasks, while they show greater fluency in structured rather than unstructured tasks. For Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) a task is regarded as structured when it has the following characteristics: a clear time line, a script, a story with a conventional beginning and middle and end and finally, an appeal to what is familiar and organized in the speaker’s mind. Other studies by Foster (1996), Foster and Skehan (1996), Menhert (1998), Sangarun (2001), Skehan and Foster (1997), and Yuan and Ellis (2003) suggest a positive effect on fluency and complexity, but a negative impact on accuracy. Crookes (1989), Ortega (1999), and Wigglesworth (1997), on the other hand, did not find significant differences regarding the impact of pre-planning on accuracy.

2.3. Strategic Planning

Strategic planning “may involve the provision of linguistic forms/strategies for performing the task depending on the amount of guidance the teacher wishes to provide” (Ellis, 2003:247). There are a number of methodological options available to teachers who opt for strategic planning. The first concerns whether the learners are given the task workplan and

left to decide for themselves what to plan which results in priority to content over form, or whether they are given guidance in what to plan (Ellis, 2003). Thus, pre-task planning can be *guided or unguided*. In guided planning, learners receive (more or less) detailed instructions about how to plan, for example by being advised to focus on syntax, lexis, content, or organization (Philip, Oliver, and Mackey 2006). Sangarun (2001) suggests channeling learners' attention on both form and content. Skehan (1996) believes that learners need to be made explicitly aware of where they are focusing their attention- whether on fluency, complexity, or accuracy. Foster and Skehan (1996) found that when learners tend to prioritize content, they are more likely to produce more complex discourses.

The majority of the empirical studies have examined unguided pre-task planning (Crookes, 1989; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Foster, 1996; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Hulstijn and Hulstijn, 1984; Kawauchi, 2005; Menhert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Sangarun, 2001, 2005; Skehan and Foster, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997; Yuan and Ellis, 2003). This implies that less attention has been paid to the effects of different types of guided strategic planning. Having the above mixed results in mind, the present study tries to look at the issue from a new angle. Concentrating on the oral modality of language production, and adopting more manageable measures for scoring learners' performance, the study focuses on the way form-focused guided pre-planning affects picture-prompted tasks, i.e., a pedagogic task type commonly used by language teachers in language courses.

3. Method

The study addressed the following research question and research hypothesis:

- *Research Question:* What is the effect of form-focused guided strategic planning on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of learners' oral performance?
- *Research Hypothesis:* Form-focused guided strategic planning has a positive effect on learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the study were 10 male and 10 female freshmen English majors doing their conversation course at a private-control university college in Yazd, Iran. The researcher was the instructor of that course and the learners participated in the study as part of the course assessment in their respective course. The native language of the learners was Persian. The participants' ages ranged between 18 and 30, and the average age equaled 20.

3.2. Procedure

Before the experiment, the participants were informed that the tasks would be considered as part of their course grades. Every individual participant of the study was provided with two tasks; namely, an unplanned task (Appendix 1) and a planned one (Appendix 2). Each task involved a single type of stimulus, i.e., a sequenced set of picture prompts, which were linked to each other by a common theme. Every individual participant was provided with the task prompts related to the task under investigation. The participants were asked to look at the picture prompts and talk accordingly, describing what they see in the pictures. First, the unplanned task was administered. For the performance of the planned task, the participants were allotted with a five minute planning time before performance, while for the unplanned task, the participants did not benefit from strategic planning time before performance. In addition, in the pre-planning time allotted for the planned task, the participants were told to think about the story illustrated in the picture to get ready for telling the story. They were

provided with detailed instructions about how to plan, by being advised to focus on form. The guidance included an explanation of the structural and lexical patterns employed to express a sequence of events which was provided by the teacher (i.e., the researcher). No explicit instruction was given regarding the content (see Appendix 2). The participants were also allowed to take down notes. Every individual participant's performance was observed and recorded without the presence of other participants. The allotted time for the performance of each task was five minutes. Every individual participant's performance on both tasks was audiorecorded. After the data were transcribed, they were coded, scored and analyzed with regard to the research question which the study set out to address.

4. Results

4.1. Testing Instrument

In order to score the data, the measures used by Skehan and Foster (1999) were adopted for scoring the 'fluency' and 'accuracy' of the participants' performance accordingly. 'Fluency' measurement was operationalized as the number of words per minute. 'Accuracy' measurement, on the other hand, was achieved by calculating the percentage of error-free clauses in the total number of clauses. In order to measure 'complexity', the ratio of lexical to grammatical words was calculated (Robinson, 2001). In order to test our hypothesis to examine the way form-focused guided strategic planning affected task response characteristics of the participants, these measures were employed to obtain every individual participant's score for accuracy, complexity, and fluency of task response for each task. Regarding the hypothesis of the study, the raw scores of the participants on planned vs. unplanned tasks were used for further data analysis.

5. Data Analysis

The data analysis results for the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of discourse produced by the participants in performing the planned vs. unplanned task are presented in Tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively.

<i>Task Type</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Planned Task	86.8049	3.0335
Unplanned Task	79.7804	3.9396

Table 1. Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Accuracy of the Planned vs. Unplanned Task

<i>Task Type</i>	<i>Task</i>	
	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Planned Task	1.9762	.0737
Unplanned Task	1.9240	.0743

Table 2. Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Complexity of the Planned vs. Unplanned

<i>Task Type</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Standard Deviation</i>
Planned Task	86.7586	4.1572
Unplanned Task	77.1595	3.5817

Table 3. Results of Data Analysis for the Task Response Fluency of the Planned vs. Unplanned Task

In sum, as can be seen in Tables 1-3, form-focused guided strategic planning had a positive effect on the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of the participants' task performance. In order to make the above conclusions more justifiable and test the research hypothesis, the results were compared using Matched t-Test.

Mean (Planned Task)	SD (Planned Task)	Mean (Unplanned Task)	SD (Unplanned Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
86.8049	3.0335	79.7804	3.9396	2.093	19	.05	2.211

Table 4. Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Accuracy of Planned vs. Unplanned Task

Mean (Planned Task)	SD (Planned Task)	Mean (Unplanned Task)	SD (Unplanned Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
1.9762	.0737	1.9240	.0743	2.093	19	.05	2.095

Table 5. Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Complexity of Planned vs. Unplanned Task

Mean (Planned Task)	SD (Planned Task)	Mean (Unplanned Task)	SD (Unplanned Task)	t-Value Critical	Degree of Freedom	Two-Tailed Probability	t-Value Observed
86.7586	4.1572	77.1595	3.5817	2.093	19	.05	2.404

Table 6. Matched t-Test Results for Task Response Fluency of Planned vs. Unplanned Task

It can be observed from Tables 4-6 that the observed t-value is greater than the critical t-value for the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of task response in planned vs. unplanned task ($t_{\text{observed}} > t_{\text{critical}}$, at .05 level of significance). Therefore, concerning the impact of form-focused guided strategic planning on accuracy, complexity, and fluency, the research hypothesis is confirmed. In other words, according to the results of inferential statistics, form-focused guided strategic planning had a positive effect in promoting the participants' performance of the narrative task in terms of accuracy, complexity, and fluency.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

To discuss the results, we return to our research question which addressed the impact of form-focused guided strategic planning on learners' oral performance. Dependent variables measured were 'accuracy' (operationalized as the percentage of error-free clauses in the total number of clauses), 'complexity' (operationalized as the ratio of lexical to grammatical words), and 'fluency' (operationalized as the number of words per minute). The independent variable was 'form-focused guided strategic planning'. Reported findings confirmed the research hypothesis, that is, task response characteristics of the participants' oral task performance were positively affected by form-focused strategic planning.

The results of the present study indicated that form-focused strategic planning had a positive effect on the accuracy of the performance. This finding supports the results of other studies in the literature, which investigated other types of planning (e.g., Sangarun, 2005)

and suggests that when learners are provided with form-focused strategic planning, they can plan *how* to say their intended meaning. Regarding complexity, the findings indicate that form-focused strategic planning has a beneficial effect on complexity, too. Previous research reporting the gain in complexity as a result of planning includes Crookes (1989); Ellis and Yuan (2004); Foster and Skehan (1999); Gilabert (2005); Skehan and Foster (1997); Tavakoli and Skehan (2005); and Wigglesworth (1997). Regarding the results of the present study which focused on a particular type of planning, i.e., form-focused strategic planning, the results can be justified by the fact that planners tend to focus on both form and content and thus produce more complexity. On the basis of the results of the present study, it can be hypothesized that form-focused pre-planning contributes to learners' fluency (Lange, 2000; Newton, 1991; Zuengler and Bent, 1991). As a result, the form-focused guidance would encourage the learners to function as more active speakers. It is easier for them to organize the propositional content of the task and encode the intended meaning with more self confidence in the planned tasks and this would, in turn, decrease their dysfluencies. Such a clear goal and well-organized plan reduces processing load.

The findings may have implications for syllabus design and materials development, too. As Robinson (2003) argues, the major problem in task-based language teaching is determining criteria for grading and sequencing tasks; therefore, data based empirical research is needed to determine the criteria affecting task difficulty. In line with this suggestion, the findings of the present study can be used as an empirical basis for selecting, grading, and sequencing tasks. Moreover, one of the primary implications of this study for the language classroom is the need to use a pre-planning time period to enhance fluency, complexity, and accuracy in oral tasks. Rather than limiting learners' oral performance to certain unplanned tasks, teachers can choose tasks designed to have pre-planning time. Instead of confining the learners to online processing of the talk, they can be motivated to maneuver around the task topic by having the chance to concentrate on the task prompt (pictorial or verbal), activate their memory system, organize the propositional content, plan *how* to express their intended meaning, take notes, gain confidence, and finally perform the task more actively, accurately, and fluently. This would necessitate designing tasks which allow learners to strategically plan their discourse. A focus on form in guiding the learners during the planning time can be beneficial in helping them to focus not only on the content i.e., *what* to say, but also plan *how* to say.

As in all classroom studies, the researcher was confronted with the inevitable limitation related to the sample size as the sample size for this study was not large, and thus, as always, further research is needed to make stronger generalizations. Hopefully, the issues raised and discussed in this work have offered insights for improved research practices. In order to enable better accumulation of knowledge in this research domain, sufficient numbers of studies in which variables like participant factors are taken into account, are needed. Moreover, the study can be conducted in settings different from that of this study. Different task types can also be used for data collection. Replication studies using measures other than the ones used in this study are obviously advisable in order to permit greater confidence in the results. Replication of the study across different proficiency levels and investigating the contribution of individual differences to the way form-focused guided strategic planning influences task performance are suggested.

References

- Bygate, M., Skehan, P., & Swain, M. (2001). Introduction. In, M. Bygate, P. Skehan, and M. Swain (Eds.), *Researching pedagogic tasks, second language learning, teaching and testing*, pp. 1-18. Harlow: Longman.
- Crookes, G. (1989). Planning and interlanguage variability. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 11*, 367-83.
- Ellis, R. (1987). Interlanguage variability in narrative discourse: Style shifting in the use of the past tense. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 9*, 1-20.
- Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ellis, R. (2005). Planning and task-based research: Theory and research. In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Planning and task performance in a second language*, pp. 3-34. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Ellis, R. (2009). The differential effects of three types of task planning on the fluency, complexity, and accuracy in L2 oral production. *Applied Linguistics, 30/4*, 474-509.
- Ellis, R. (2012). *Language Teaching Research and Language Pedagogy*. Oxford: John Wiley-Blackwell Inc.
- Ellis, R., & Yuan, F. (2004). The effects of planning on fluency, complexity, and accuracy in second language narrative writing. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 26*, 59-84.
- Foster, P. (1996). Doing the task better: How planning time influences students' performance. In J. Willis & D. Willis (Eds.), *Challenges and change in language teaching*, pp. 71-93. Oxford: Heinemann.
- Foster, P. & Skehan, P. (1996). The influence of planning and task type on second language performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 18*, 299-323.
- Foster, P. & Skehan, P. (1999). The influence of source of planning and focus of planning on task-based performance. *Language Teaching Research, 3*, 215-247.
- Gilabert, R. (2005). Task complexity and L2 narrative oral production. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation. University of Barcelona, Spain.
- Housen, A. & Vedder, I. (2009). Complexity, accuracy, and fluency in second language acquisition. *Applied Linguistics, 30/4*, 461-473.
- Hulstijn, J. & Hulstijn, W. (1984). Grammatical errors as a function of processing constraints and explicit knowledge. *Language Learning, 34*, 23-43.
- Kawauchi, C. (2005). The effects of strategic planning on the oral narratives of learners with low and high intermediate proficiency, In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Planning and task performance in a second language*, pp. 143-164. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Lange, M. (2000). Factors affecting communication task performance in small groups. Unpublished MA thesis, University of Auckland, New Zealand.
- Lee, J. (2000). *Tasks and communicating in language classroom*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Menhert, U. (1998). The effects of different lengths of time for planning on second language performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 20*, 83-108.
- Mochizuki, N. & Ortega, L. (2008). Balancing communication and grammar in beginning level foreign language classrooms: A study of guided planning and relativization. *Language Teaching Research, 12*, 11-37.
- Newton, J. (1991). Negotiation: Negotiating what? Paper presented at SEAMEO conference on language acquisition and the second/foreign language classroom. Singapore: RELC.
- Ortega, L. (1999). Planning and focus on form in L2 oral performance. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 21*, 108-48.
- Philip, J., Oliver, R., & Mackey, A. (2006). The impact of planning time on children's task-based interactions. *System, 34/4*, 547-565.
- Rahimpour, M. (1997). *Task complexity, task condition, and variation in L2 oral discourse*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, The University of Queensland, Australia.

- Robinson, P. (2001). Task complexity, task difficulty, and task production: Exploring interaction in a componential framework. *Applied Linguistics*, 21, 27-57.
- Robinson, P. (2003). Attention and memory during SLA. In M. Doughty and M. Long (Eds.), *Handbook of Second Language Acquisition*, pp. 631-678. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Robinson, P. (2012). Task-based learning: Cognitive underpinnings. *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Sangarun, J. (2001). *The Effects of pre-task planning on foreign language performance*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Toronto, Canada.
- Sangarun, J. (2005). The effects of focusing on meaning and form in strategic planning. In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Planning and task performance in a second language*, pp. 111-141. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- Skehan, P. (1996). A framework for the implementation of task-based instruction. *Applied Linguistics*, 17/1, 38-62.
- Skehan, P. (1998). *A Cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Skehan, P. (2003). Task-based instruction. *Language Teaching*, 36/1, 1-14.
- Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (1997). Task type and task processing conditions as influences on foreign language performance. *Language Teaching Research*, 1, 185-211.
- Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (1999). The influence of task structure and processing conditions on the narrative retellings. *Language Learning*, 49, 93-120.
- Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (2012). Complexity, accuracy, fluency and lexis in task-based performance: A synthesis of the Ealing research. In A. Housen, F. Kuiken, & P. Vedder (Eds.), *Dimensions of L2 Performance and Proficiency: Complexity, Accuracy, and Fluency in SLA*. John Benjamins Publishing.
- Tavakoli, P. & Skehan, P. (2005). Strategic planning, task structure and performance testing. In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Planning and task performance in a second language*, pp. 239-277. Amsterdam: Benjamins.
- Tajima, M. (2003). *The effects of planning on oral performance of Japanese as a foreign language*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation. Purdue University.
- Wigglesworth, G. (1997). An investigation of planning time and proficiency level on oral test discourse. *Language Testing*, 14, 85-106.
- Wigglesworth, G. & Storch, N. (2009). Pair versus individual writing: Effects of fluency, complexity and accuracy. *Language Testing*, 26, 405-466.
- Willis, J. (1996). *A framework for task-based learning*. Harlow: Longman.
- Yuan, F. & Ellis, R. (2003). The effects of pre-task planning and on-line planning on fluency, complexity and accuracy in L2 monologic oral production, *Applied Linguistics*, 24, 1-27.
- Zuengler, J., and Bent, B. (1991). Relative knowledge of content domain: An influence on native-non-native conversation. *Applied Linguistics*, 12, 397-415.

Appendix 1

(Unplanned Task)

Look at the following picture prompts and talk accordingly, describing what you see in the pictures.



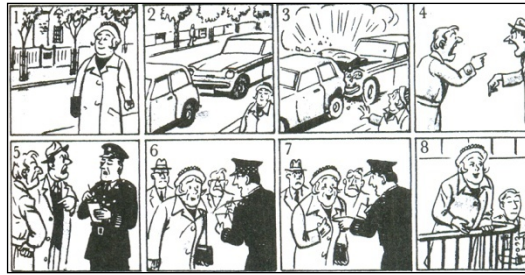
(Adapted from: Richards, J. C. (1998). *New interchange 3, Workbook*. Cambridge: CUP, p. 27)

Appendix 2

(Planned Task)

Look at the following picture prompts and talk accordingly, describing what you see in the pictures. You are allotted with a five minute planning time before performance. Listen carefully to the explanations given by the teacher and think about the story illustrated in the picture to get ready for telling the story. You are allowed to take down notes.

- The participants were provided with detailed instructions about how to plan, by being advised to focus on form. The guidance included an explanation of the structural and lexical patterns (simple present tense, and textual devices used for expressing a sequence of events) which was provided by the researcher. No explicit instruction was given regarding the content.



(Adapted from: Hill, L. A. (1980). *Advanced Steps to Understanding*. Oxford: OUP, p. 17)

Fatemeh Mahdavidrad (fmahdavidrad@yahoo.com) is an assistant professor of the English department of Yazd University, Iran. She holds a PhD in TEFL and she has been an EFL teacher for 15 years. Her research interests include task-based language teaching, syllabus design, curriculum development and SLA research.
