

The Effects of Guided vs. Unguided Pressured Planning on EFL Learners' Writing Fluency

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Abstract

Task-based planning can be conceptualized as the opportunity to work out task performance before the actual performance. It allows learners to process the content and language of their planned production at a deeper and more meaningful level. In the face of the wide range of research conducted on the effects of pre-task planning on L2 production, relatively little attention has been paid to the impacts of pressured within-task planning. The present study was, therefore, primarily aimed at investigating the effects of guided pressured within-task planning and unguided pressured within-task planning on the fluency of EFL learners' written production. The participants of the study were 30 upper-intermediate EFL learners whose age ranged between 18 and 22. In both guided and unguided conditions, the participants were provided with two sample process-writings, the only difference was that in the guided condition, the participants were provided with the samples including underlined sequence markers, bolded passive verbs, and underlined simple present verbs plus a list of sequence markers to serve as guide during writing. The results obtained from independent-samples *t*-test revealed the fact that guided pressured planning condition resulted in greater fluency than unguided pressured planning condition. The findings of the study may have pedagogical implications for teachers to design sequences of instructional activities providing opportunities for the learners to benefit from different types of planning in task performance.

Keywords: fluency, guided pressured, process writing, unguided pressured, within-task planning

1. Introduction

Writing in a second language (L2) is traditionally assumed to be the hardest skill to acquire. Compared with listening and speaking skills, writing is more complex in that it involves constructing a new text rather than dealing with an already created one. Writing ability is only learnable with the help of formal and organized instruction (Emig, 1997). Thus, it should be given specific attention in L2 curriculum.

The ability to write is considered essential as a means of developing overall L2 capability. By its nature, writing is often a companionless activity, done silently, involving physical as well as mental effort and taking a lot of time. The greater attention toward L2 writing is leading educators to search for effective teaching methods to accommodate the needs of learners of L2 writing. Also, L2 learners find it difficult to cope with the writing system of the new language and always seem to be lagging behind the threshold of standard writing level.

Writing process can be divided into four stages of drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading, respectively (Smalley, Mary, & Kozyrev, 2001). Drafting is the actual writing of the paragraph or essay without being overly concerned with the grammatical correctness. In the Revising stage, the writer may rethink or reconsider the paper and shift from suspending judgments to making them. Later, in the editing stage, writer rephrases or edits some of the unclear sentences and makes sure they are grammatically and mechanically correct. Proofreading, as the final stage, refers to reading the paper and finding any errors in grammar which pose trouble.

In the process of writing in a foreign language making too many mistakes would make it difficult to understand. It is possible to lessen L2 learners' problems in production if they are given time to plan before they produce an L2 utterance or composition. In other words, by giving learners the opportunity to plan the linguistic and propositional content of an upcoming task, they can make up for the drawbacks in their language production and as a result the quality of the linguistic output is improved. With regard to planning research, the issue of whether

planning has effects on learners' task performances has been hotly debated in the contemporary task-based research literature (e.g., Skehan 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Ellis, 2000) and L2 writing literature. Meanwhile, L2 writing research has approached the issue of planning based on theoretical frameworks of writing processes. Research findings from both task-based research and L2 writing research can promote the implementation of a more efficient teaching method.

Additionally, whether the use of guided and unguided pressured within-task planning on written language has any effect on language production is an area which has not been investigated so far. Considering the importance of teaching writing and the main role that planning has in improving the writing ability, it has been decided to conduct this research.

The present investigation attempts to examine the effects of two subcategories of within task planning, namely guided pressured and unguided pressured planning on the fluency of Iranian EFL written essays. It is hoped that the findings of the study help broaden the understanding of second language learners' cognitive writing process involving planning. In addition, the results will expectantly prove to have pedagogical implications benefitting the teachers and instructors in the field of *Teaching English as a Foreign Language* (TEFL) as well as theoretical implications in second language writing and relevance to second language writing assessment. In order to respond to above-mentioned query, the present study addresses the following research question: Is there any significant difference between guided pressured and unguided pressured planning in their possible effects on the fluency of EFL learners' process writing essays?

2. Review of the Related Literature

A wide range of research has been conducted on the effects of planning on language performance and language acquisition since 1980s (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Wendel, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997; Mehnert, 1998; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Kawauchi, 2005, to name but a few). All these studies have addressed the issue of task planning from different viewpoints and they have examined oral as well as written production of learners and have focused on investigating the effects of planning on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of language production.

Findings of majority of studies supported the effects of planning on improving fluency of learners' performance (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Kawauchi, 2005). For instance, Foster and Skehan (1996) investigated the effects of detailed and undetailed planning conditions on complexity, accuracy, and fluency of EFL learners' speech. They revealed that speech which was produced under 10-minute strategic planning was more fluent in all tasks than the speech which was produced under minimal strategic planning. Additionally, it was reported that guided planners produced more fluent speech in narrative tasks. Likewise, Wendel (1997) inspected the effects of strategic planning on speech production. A total of forty Japanese low to intermediate EFL students took part in the study. They were divided into two equal groups. The first group was offered with ten minutes to plan for the content, discourse structure and vocabulary in its oral narrative. On the other hand, the second group narrated one of the two films they have watched. Greater complexity and fluency were revealed in the first group.

Wigglesworth (1997), in a similar vein, examined the effects of strategic planning along with proficiency level on speech production in a testing situation. One hundred and twenty high and low proficiency ESL candidates participated in this study. Findings of the study reported that planning time positively affected fluency of the speech of high proficiency level students, but this effect was not found with low proficiency level participants. In another study which was carried out by Mehnert (1998) on the effects of different lengths of planning time on the speech performance of L2 speakers, it was found that fluency increased as a function of planning. Ortega (1999) conducted a study to investigate whether planning opportunity results in increased focus on form and improves quality of speech of American advanced learners of Spanish as a second language. The study was performed under two planning conditions: minimal and 10-minute strategic planning. Results reported that the speech produced under the planning condition was more fluent compared to the speech produced under unplanned condition.

In a study on the effects of strategic and unpressured within-task planning on oral and written language regarding complexity, accuracy, and fluency, Yuan (2001) found that both planning conditions have the same effects on fluency of production. Additionally, it was disclosed that the unpressured within-task planning condition has greater effects on oral than written language. Yuan and Ellis (2003) also carried out a study on the effects of strategic and unpressured within-task planning on oral production. Forty two undergraduate students majoring in English narrated a story based on a picture composition. It was discovered that language produced under strategic planning condition was more fluent and lexically varied compared to the language produced under the unpressured within-task planning condition.

In much the same way, Kawauchi (2005) studied the effects of strategic planning on production in oral narrative tasks and whether or not proficiency level played a role in the effect and type of planning. Thirty nine Japanese learners of English with varying levels of proficiency participated in the study. Two planning conditions were employed in the study (i.e. no planning and strategic planning). Kawauchi found that strategic planning had positive effects on fluency of oral narratives. Furthermore, task planning had stronger effect on the fluency of the high-intermediate EFL group than the low intermediate and advanced EFL group.

In general, Ellis (2009) reviewed nineteen planning studies that had investigated the effects of three types of planning, i.e. rehearsal, pre-task planning, and within-task planning, on the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of L2 performance. All three types of planning had been shown to have a beneficial effect on fluency.

Khomeijani Farahani and Meraji (2011) examined the effects of two task design features, namely pre-task planning time and immediacy, on writing performance of Iranian EFL learners. Results demonstrated that both provisions of pre-task planning time and immediacy of time and space led to significantly more fluent production. Similarly, Rahimpour and Safarie (2011) carried out another study on the effects of on-line and pre-task planning on descriptive writing of Iranian EFL learners. Thirty seven learners of English as a foreign language participated in this study. The results of data analysis revealed that planning time positively influenced the fluency of pre-task planning group.

Nariman-Jahan and Rahimpour (2011) investigated the effects of planning and proficiency on language production of writing task performance. Seventy-two high and low EFL proficiency learners of English completed two monologic production tasks under two planning conditions, with and without time for planning. The results supported that low proficiency learners benefit more from time for planning regarding concept load and fluency. Alternatively, high proficiency learners were advantaged by planning without time concerning concept load, fluency, complexity, and accuracy. In another study, Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2011) explored the effects of simultaneous use of careful online planning and task repetition on accuracy, complexity, and fluency. They found that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition enhances accuracy, complexity, and fluency significantly.

Finally, Piri, Barati, and Ketabi (2012) carried out a study on the effects of pre-task, on-line, and both pre-task and on-line planning on fluency, complexity, and accuracy on Iranian EFL learners' written production. Participants of the study were forty five Iranian learners of English. It was revealed that pre-task planning had a significant effect on fluency (i.e. syllables per minute) of the written narratives.

3. Method

The procedures used in this study consisting of description of methodology, design of the study as well as instrumentation, data collection, and data analysis are outlined in the following sections.

3.1 Participants

The participants of the present study comprised of a total of 30 Iranian EFL learners, both males and females. They were learning English as a foreign language at Atlas English Language Institute in Urmia, Iran. The participants' mother tongue was Turkish, and their age ranged between 18 and 22. Their English proficiency was considered to be upper-intermediate. In order to ensure the homogeneity of the participants, a Quick Placement Test (QPT) (2001) was administered. According to the level chart of the QPT, those students whose scores ranged between 31-40 were considered to be upper-intermediate in terms of their language performance.

3.2 Instruments

Two instruments were implemented in this study: a Quick Placement Test (version 2) and two process essays.

3.2.1 Quick Placement Test

The Quick Placement Test (QPT) which is a valid and reliable measure of English proficiency was administered in order to assess the participants' proficiency level. The test consists of 60 multiple-choice items. The questions measure the test takers' English language knowledge regarding usage, prepositions, and vocabulary in the form of close passages as well as filling in the blank questions. The small number of the QPT's items together with the short time (which is only thirty minutes) allotted to it contribute to its efficiency as a practical test.

3.2.2 Process Essays

The tasks used in the present study were process essays based on chronological order. According to Oshima & Hogue (2006), chronological order is a way of organizing ideas in the order of their happening over time. Chronological order was used to tell stories, to relate historical events, to write biographies, and autobiographies, and it was used to explain processes and procedures. For example, we would use chronological order to explain

how to take a photograph, or how to set up an accounting system. Such essays are called ‘how to’ or ‘process’ essays.

To meet the objectives of the study, some kinds of process pictures were needed. Therefore, two process pictures were selected from *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS* (1996-2011) for the main task of the study. Also, four process essays, which are commonly used in academic IELTS exams and in research article writings, were selected out of many process essays available at Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS to serve as samples in the study.

3.3 Procedure

Three weeks before the main study, a pilot study was conducted. Eight participants of the same level of proficiency participated in the current study under two planning conditions. However, they were not involved in the main study to avoid ‘practice effects’. The central aim of pilot study was to detect the problems that may occur in the main study, and to examine the participants’ response and understanding of the task. Potential problems were solved regarding understanding of the tasks. As a result, it was decided that more explanation was needed on how the tasks were required to be performed.

In the next stage, 30 EFL students with upper-intermediate English proficiency level were selected. Then, in order to be assured of their homogeneity, a QPT was administered. The researcher explained the goals of the study in Persian to the participants and reminded them that the experiment was not part of their course material and all details would be remained confidential. To meet the objectives of the study, a kind of process picture was needed. Therefore, two process pictures were selected from *Cambridge Practice Tests for IELTS* (1996-2011) for the main task of the study. Also, four process writings were selected out of many process writings in abovementioned books to be served as samples in the study. The main study was held in the participants’ classroom, and the researcher explained to them what they exactly had to do prior to completion of the task.

Planning was operationalized at two levels: a) unguided pressured within task planning, and b) guided pressured within task planning. It was decided to carry out the unguided part of the experiment in one session and the guided part in the second session. Therefore, in the first session, the participants were given two sample process writings and a process picture, and they were asked to study sample writings and write their own process writings based on the picture given to them.

In the second session, that was, the guided session, the participants were given two sample process writings with underlined discourse markers, bolded passive verbs and underlined simple present verbs, plus a list of sequence markers, as a guide and were asked to write their own writings based on the process picture given to them.

In both guided and unguided conditions, students were supposed to finish their writings in thirty minutes. Students were provided with IELTS answer sheets to write on. It should be noted that for both tasks the participants were instructed to write at least 150 words. Time and word length were based on the framework adopted in IELTS, Academic Module, Writing Task 1.

3.4 Data Analysis

With regard to Skehan (1996), the general aims for language teaching are to enrich fluency, complexity, and accuracy in learners’ production. These three aspects of language performance have also been applied consequently to measure the quality of language production in different studies. In order to find out whether there were any identifiable differences in the essays written by the learners under the guided pressured condition and unguided pressured condition, with regard to fluency which is dependent variables in this study, learners’ writings on process writing tasks, were analyzed to determine the number of T-units, and dependent clauses. This was the same procedure followed by Wigglesworth and Storch (2009) throughout their work. Sentence fragments were not taken as T-units also back channel cues such as hmm and yeah and discourse boundary markers such as ok, thanks, or good were not counted as T-units.

Moreover, all the written narratives were coded based on the measures chosen for assessing fluency. In order to ensure the reliability of scoring, 30% of the data were coded and scored by an independent expert colleague. The inter-rater reliability of the raters’ evaluation of the participants’ writings with regard to the fluency was computed using Cohen’s Kappa test. The resulting Kappa of .84 indicates that both raters had “almost perfect agreement” for the fluency. The statistical analysis of data was completed by means of an *Independent-Samples t-test*.

4. Results

In order to investigate the differences between guided pressured and unguided pressured planning and their

possible effects on the fluency of participants' writings, the following statistical procedures have been carried out using *Statistical Package for Social Sciences* (SPSS) version 18. First, descriptive statistics were used to show the spread of scores with regard to mean and standard deviation. Then, to have a better understanding of the exact differences among the participants with regard to their writing performances, an *Independent-Samples t-test* was conducted.

Also, in order to check the normality of distribution, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic was conducted. In Table 1, the results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic are given. This assesses the normality of the distribution of scores. A non-significant result ($p > 0.05$) as is observed here indicates normality.

Table 1. One-sample kolmogorov-smirnov test

		Writing
N		180
Normal Parameters ^a	Mean	17.2011
	Std. Deviation	5.35696
Most Extreme Differences	Absolute	.074
	Positive	.061
	Negative	-.074
Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z		1.008
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)		.261

a. Test distribution is Normal.

The research question of the present study aimed at exploring the differing effects of guided pressured and unguided pressured planning on the fluency of Iranian EFL learners' writings. Table 2 shows that there is a considerable difference between the means of both types of planning. In other words, the guided pressured planning results exceed those of unguided pressured planning. Hence, it can be inferred that guided pressured planning has been effective in improving learners' written production fluency. The descriptive results are given below.

Table 2. Descriptive results of guided pressured vs. unguided pressured planning

Group Statistics	Planning	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Writing Fluency	Guided	30	54.900	10.4365
	Unguided	30	36.333	11.3634

In order to address the research question statistically, the results of independent-samples *t*-test are given below (Table 3). As can be seen in Table, there is a significant difference between the means of guided pressured and unguided pressured planning, $t(58) = 6.591, p = .000$ (two-tailed).

Table 3. Results of independent-samples *t*-test of guided pressured vs. unguided pressured planning

Independent Samples Test		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means		
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Writing	Equal variances assumed	.659	.420	6.591	58	.000
Fluency	Equal variances not assumed			6.591	57.585	.000

As can be seen in Table 3, Iranian EFL learners' fluency was affected by guided pressured planning. Hence, it can be concluded that providing guided pressured planning is beneficial with regards to the learners' written production fluency.

5. Discussion

This finding of the current study is consistent with the findings of Foster and Skehan (1996), Wendel (1997), and Mehnert (1998). Foster and Skehan (1996), for instance, pointed that the speech produced under guided planning condition, was significantly more fluent than the speech produced in unguided planning condition. Likewise, Wendel (1997) conducted a study in which the participants were guided to plan meaning, vocabulary, and discourse structures of their narratives. His findings indicated that meaning/form focused planning condition had positive effect on improving the fluency of the participants' speech production. Although Foster and Skehan, Wendel, and Mehnert's studies and the current study are not very much comparable, neither in terms of the type of planning nor the tasks used, the findings may in general provide support for the effectiveness of guided planning for promoting fluency in EFL learners' written performance.

In a similar study, exploring the effectiveness of providing planned preemptive focus on form on learners' oral production in Iranian EFL context, Panahzade and Gholami (2014) found that providing upper-intermediate female learners with planned preemptive focus on form have beneficial impact on their oral production fluency. They concluded that by giving learners the opportunity to rehearse their oral performance in dyadic interactions with their pairs prior to the main task, planned preemptive focus on form enjoys the effectiveness of pre-task planning implementation on learners' oral production.

In fact, by attending to content words as well as lexical items in the input more than grammatical items for semantic information (Vanpatten, 1990, 2002), learners gave priority to communicative value of the task and performed well in terms of fluency following guided planning compared with the unguided planning condition. In other word, as Yuan and Ellis (2003) contended, guided planning seems to lead learners to attend to propositional content and its organization which contributes to their fluency. That is, guided planning condition triggers attention to message conveyance which is reflected in greater fluency.

All in all, it can be concluded that Iranian EFL learners may benefit from guided pressured planning with regards to the fluency of their process writing essays. By providing learners with guided pressured planning, the current study may infer that 'linguistic scaffolding', which triggers a range of strategic, metalinguistic, and metacognitive behaviors (Ortega, 2005), may be beneficial to EFL learners' process writing essays.

6. Conclusion

The present study aimed at investigating the effects of two subcategories of within task planning, namely guided pressured and unguided pressured planning, on the fluency of Iranian EFL learners' written essays. The results obtained from independent-samples *t*-test revealed the fact that guided pressured planning condition resulted in greater fluency than unguided pressured planning condition.

The major contribution that this study makes to the existing literature is the discovery that guided pressured within-task planning positively impacts the EFL learners' fluency in their written production. Also, the findings of the present study make it possible for the teachers to design sequences of instructional activities that provide chances for the learners to benefit from different types of planning in task performance. Moreover, the present study was a novel attempt to analyze the differences between guided and unguided time-bound tasks and to explore their impacts on EFL learners' process writing ability, which is an under-researched writing type among other genres of writing. A further implication of the study is to the IELTS teachers and practitioners in preparing writing courses. That is, by developing linguistic scaffolding through guided planning, they can teach writing, especially IELTS process writing task, in a more comprehensible way.

The current research has some limitations. The first limitation concerns small sample size which was only thirty students and restricted to Iranian EFL learners with Turkish as their L1. Therefore, this limits the scopes for the generalizability of research findings. Secondly, the study investigated only one level of proficiency, i.e. the upper-intermediate level, and does not allow generalizability across a broader range of proficiency. In other words, these kinds of studies require to be conducted in other levels of proficiency in order to observe whether the same results will be accomplished. Therefore, it is suggested that future studies take into account the numbers of participants, individual learner differences, and other important factors such as motivation, learner style, and proficiency level which may establish important indicators of task performance.

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