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The Impact of Pre-Task Planning on the Oral Production of Saudi EFL Learners

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Abstract- The motive of this paper was to examine the impact of pre-task planning on Saudi EFL learners and to find out how planning could influence their accuracy and fluency. The study also intended to investigate the different outcomes from guided and unguided planning. For this purpose, thirty-six Saudi EFL learners took part in this study. They have participated in Picture-Cued Storytelling Task PCST. The findings of the study revealed that guided planning made a minor influence on Saudi EFL learners' accuracy. Fluency, on the other hand, was not affected positively by neither guided nor unguided planning.

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The Impact of Pre-Task Planning on the Oral Production of Saudi EFL Learners

Sami M. Alanazi

Abstract- The motive of this paper was to examine the impact of pre-task planning on Saudi EFL learners and to find out how planning could influence their accuracy and fluency. The study also intended to investigate the different outcomes from guided and unguided planning. For this purpose, thirty-six Saudi EFL learners took part in this study. They have participated in Picture-Cued Storytelling Task PCST. The findings of the study revealed that guided planning made a minor influence on Saudi EFL learners' accuracy. Fluency, on the other hand, was not affected positively by neither guided nor unguided planning.

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I. Introduction

One of the processes in SLA that has received much emphasis in the recent decades is task planning (Ochs, 1979; Crookes, 1989; Wigglesworth, 1997; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005; Kawauchi, 2005). It is clear through results of majority of these studies that there are certain evident impacts of planning on task performance of language learners with regard to fluency and complexity (Foster and Skehan 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Ortega, 1999; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Kawauchi, 2005).

There has been a considerable amount of attention on planning, and it has been indicated that it leads to relatively uniform impacts on L2 production (Ellis, 2005). Learners who employ planning prior to engaging with a task are believed to develop more complex and fluent language performance (Foster &Skehan, 1996; Ellis, 2005). Consequently, in the field of applied linguistics; fluency, accuracy, and complexity have become the key research variables (Ghavamniaet. al, 2012). These three features of linguistic performance have been differentiated by Skehan (1996), whereby fluency is regarding the capability of the learner to develop language in real-time without any unnecessary hesitation or pausing. Complexity denotes the elaborate of the produced language (Skehan, 1996).

The impact of planning on oral narratives performance of L2 learners has been analysed in several studies (Foster and Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Skehan and Foster, 1997, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003). It was found through these studies that there was considerable increase in complexity and fluency when learners were given the option to plan out a narrative prior to speaking it. There are interactions between planning conditions and the type of task, for example, the impact of planning was more for Narrative and Decision-Making tasks (Foster and Skehan, 1996). Ellis (2005) stated that there are two segments of planning time: pre-task and within-task planning time. This paper is focused on pre-task planning which is planning that takes place prior to the actual performance of the task (Ellis, 2005).

Further sub-types of planned are guided and unguided task planning. Learners are left with their own approach for planning in unguided planning, whereas in guided planning, they are advised about what and how to plan (Ellis, 2005).

II. Background

In pre-task planning, learners prepare propositional material and distinct segments of language so as to encode it (Ghavamnia et. al, 2013). It investigates how production is impacted through planning before actual performance. Pre-task planned is categorised into two segments, rehearsal and strategic planning (Ellis, 2005).

It is indicated through studies by Crookes (1989), Foster and Skehan (1996), Skehan and Foster (1997), Wendel (1997) and Mehnert (1998) that fluency increases through pre-task planning. Moreover, suggests that complexity is positively impacted by pre-task planning, and that planners develop a more complex language than non-planners (Wendel, 1997; Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2004). By the same token, Wigglesworth (1997) stated that even a single minute of planning time for a difficult task increased the language complexity in high proficient learners.

a) Strategic Planning

Strategic planning is the preparation of students regarding the content and how that content is presented for the task. It involves preparation of learners for performance of the task by working on the content that they require to encode and how they will present this content. It also involves presenting the learners with the actual task materials the planning process (Ellis, 20005). There have been numerous studies on strategic planning which indicate that all three aspects of students' language performance (accuracy, fluency, and

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complexity) are influenced through strategic planning (Foster, 1996; Foster and Skehan, 1996, 1997; Wnedel, 1997; Ortega, 1999; Ellis 2005; Wang, 2008) among others.

Fluency and complexity are positively impacted by strategic planning, but with regard to accuracy, there are mixed findings (Salimi and Fatollahnejad, 2012). Accuracy did not seem to have been influenced through strategic planning (Yuan and Ellis, 2003). Foster and Skehan (1996) presented that the impact of planning on accuracy was influenced through the type of task. When decision-making task is considered, planned learners have more accuracy than non-planned learners, whereas in case of narrative task, there was no evidence of effect of planning on accuracy (Wang, 2008).

b) Planning Time

A number of studies have analysed planning time regarding first and second language production. Researchers have analysed the impact of planning time on performance of learners (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Mehnert, 1998) among others. There is a systematic impact on accuracy levels in accordance with the amount of planning time that a learner has (Ellis, 1987). Mehnert (1998) states that improved accuracy was observed in 1-minute planning learners, however no further improvement in accuracy was observed when more time was provided for planning (5 or 10 minutes). She analysed various time durations of planning (no time, 1, 5, and 10 minutes) and observed that with each increase in time, the fluency also improved (Mehnert, 1998). Nonetheless, Mehnert (1998) indicates that language complexity positively emerged from 10-minute planning time.

Mehnert (1998) states that one main factor which shows where the planners have to focus their attention is the duration of time. She suggests that learners focus on accuracy when they have 1 minute to plan, and when the planning time is 10 minutes, they focus on more complex language use and to exclusion of more improvement of accuracy.

As Skehan and Foster (1997) argue, learners can use the planning time in narrative task to focus more on accuracy, whereas since decision-making tasks are inherently unstructured, learners use planning time to arrange the way of presenting complex ideas, and therefore little time is left to focus on accuracy in this task. Nevertheless, there is no consensus in the literature regarding the time that should be allowed for pre-task planning. Hence this factor needs to be addressed by further research.

III. Methodology

This study was a between-subjects design with three levels of planning condition (guided pre-task planning, unguided pre-task planning, no planning). Twelve participants were randomly assigned to each groups. Data was collected by employing a Picture-Cued Storytelling Task, PCST elicited by the three planning conditions.

a) Research Question

The study addressed the following research questions:

Will guidance and planning affect Saudi EFL learners' choices of past verb forms?

b) Participants

The participated in this study were thirty-six full-time undergraduate and postgraduate Saudi students studying in the UK. They were all adults, 24 males and 12 females who had completed a one-year general English language program in the UK. For the homogeneity of the subject, the study included intermediate level participants with IELTS between 5.0 and 6.0. The participants were studying in different disciplines, and have been in the UK for at least two years.

c) Tasks

The study implemented a Picture-Cued Storytelling Tasks for data gathering. The PCST was used to test the oral narrative production of the Saudi EFL learners. The task employed a set of pictures to used as cue for the participants to build a short story about. The task targeted the past verb forms only.

d) Planning And Guidance

The the participants were put into three groups: guided-planning, unguided-planning, no-planning. The guided and unguided planning groups were given up five minutes for each task to plan their answers. The guided planning group has received an explanation about the nature of the two tasks before engaging with the tasks. During their planning time, they have received assistance from the researcher in the form of explaining the differences between the past verb forms with examples on how to use them in context. The unguided planning group has only received an explanation about the nature of the two tasks prior to starting their planning.

IV. Results

This task was audio recorded to target the oral productive knowledge of the participants and to test their ability on telling a story in English using only the past tense. Audio recordings were transcribed using NVIVO software, then manually coded using Cambridge Grammar of English (2006) as a reference. The calculated sentences were sorted into three categories: The Past Simple, The Past Progressive, and The Past Perfect before analyzed them using SPSS. One-way analysis of variance ANOVA was employed.

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a) The Past Simple Form

The analysis of variance ANOVA showed that no significant results emerged from the three groups [F (2, 33) = 1.384, p = 0.265]. However, the guided-planning group used the past simple tense in the storytelling task less than the other two groups (M = 2.08, SD = 0.669). The no-planning group used the past simple tense more frequently than the other two groups (M = 2.50, SD = 0.522), and the unguided planning group (M = 2.33, SD = 0.651).

Table 1 : The One-way ANOVA results for the past simple

Group	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
Guided-planning	2.08	0.669	0.265
Unguided planning	2.50	0.522	
No-planning	2.33	0.651	

b) The Past Progressive Form

The results obtained from this category in the picture-cued storytelling task were not evenly distributed. Only eight participants of the thirty-sex produced correct forms. Therefore, and due to the unevenness in the distribution of the data, the analysis test that was used before had to been changed. One-way ANOVA can only be conducted if the data is evenly distributed, otherwise the results will be misleading. Hence, to help understand the results statistically, a nonparametric statistical test was the appropriate choice; in this case I used the Kruskal-Wallis Test. The Kruskal-Wallis Test is the equivalent to One-way ANOVA for non-normally distributed data.

Table 2 : Shows Kruskal-Wallis Test results for the past

Group	Participants		Mean Rank	Sig.
	Total	Actual		
Guided-planning	12	4	4.50	1.000
Unguided planning	12	3	4.50	
No-planning	12	1	4.50	

The Kruskal-Wallis Test showed that there was no statistically significant difference in the past progressive tense score between the three groups [$\chi^2(2) = 0.000$, p = 1.000] with a mean rank the past progressive tense score of (4.50) for each group.

c) The Past Perfect Form

The same problem emerged when analyzing the past perfect tense results. In fact, it was even more complicated than the past progressive form, because one of the groups scored zero and only four participants from the thirty-sex produced correct forms. The data was non-normally distributed, therefore, the same nonparametric test was applied, and that is Kruskal-Wallis Test.

The Kruskal-Wallis Test showed no statistically significant difference in the past perfect tense score between the three groups [$\chi^2(2) = 0.000$, p = 1.000] with a mean rank for the past perfect tense score of (2.50) for guided-planning group and unguided planning group. The no-planning group, however, scored zero. The scores analyzed in the category were obtained from only four of the participants out of the thirty-six.

Table 3 : Shows Kruskal-Wallis Test results for the past perfect

Group	Participants		Mean Rank	Sig.
	Total	Actual		
Guided-planning	12	2	2.50	1.000
Unguided planning	12	2	2.50	
No-planning	12	0	0	

In summation, there were no statistically significant differences among the three groups. The results from the picture-cued storytelling task showed no significance at all. Generally, the results were disappointing.

V. Discussion

This paper was intended to discuss the influence of pre-task planning on fluency and accuracy in Saudi EFL learners' oral and written productions. I will summarize the findings in this section and and link them to the research question raised at the beginning of this paper.

The findings of the oral production test PCST revealed that the participants were unable to produce a story using the aspect of the past tense only fluently and accurately. The first and the second encounter were very similar in terms of the type of production. A major factor that I believe have affected the participants' performance was time allowed to plan the answer before engaging with the task.

As mentioned in section 0.0, the allowed time was limited to up to 5 minutes, during which, the participants have received an explanation about the nature of the task. The planning groups were asked to look and the set of pictures and plan their answers in no more than 5 minutes. The allowed time was probably

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too short for the participants to organize their answers, specially that they were asked to use specific verb forms. That been said, the participants current level of language competence has to come into the account. As the participated learners in this study were all in intermediate level, 5 minutes planning-time did seem to be sufficient for them.

To sum up, the results show no improvement in accuracy and fluency with guided and unguided pre-task planning in oral production task. That been said, the type of guidance and the short amount of time allow for planning could have affected the results negatively.

VI. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to investigate the impact of pre-task planning on the accuracy and fluency of Saudi EFL learners' productive knowledge in a Picture-Cued Storytelling Task. The study was conducted on thirty-six Saudi university students in the UK with an intermediate level in English. The impact of pre-task planning was measured by comparing the guided and unguided planners to non-planners.

The findings revealed no statistical differences between the participants with regards to fluency in the oral production task. These findings support the claims of Yuan and Ellis (2003) that the accuracy is not influenced through strategic planning. It can also support the claims of Foster and Skehan (1996) that the type of the task determines the impact of planning on accuracy.

Based on the reviewed literature and findings of this paper, it is safe to argue that various aspects influence whether increased accuracy occurs through pre-task planning: the kind of planning, complexity of the task, grammatical aspects involved, learners' proficiency level, and duration of planning time.

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