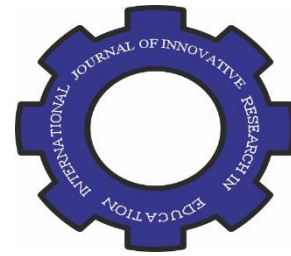




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Exploring the differential effects of pre-task planning conditions on intermediate EFL learners' oral production

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Abstract

Task planning plays a crucial role in task-based language teaching (TBLT) and second language (L2) acquisition. However, the effects of different classroom organizations during pre-task planning on task performance remain unclear. This study examines how various planning approaches impact intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners' oral performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Sixty intermediate EFL students were randomly assigned to three experimental groups and one control group. The control group performed a decision-making task without planning, while the experimental groups engaged in pre-task planning under three conditions: individual planning, pair work, and guided planning (using content and language guidelines). Findings revealed that individual and pair work planning significantly improved fluency compared to guided planning. Individual planners achieved the highest complexity levels, followed by pair work and guided planners, while guided planning resulted in better accuracy than the other approaches. These results highlight the varying effects of classroom structures on different aspects of L2 performance. Tailoring pre-task planning methods to instructional goals can optimize specific language performance dimensions. The study emphasizes the need for flexible planning strategies to support diverse learner needs and pedagogical objectives in TBLT.

Keywords: Guided planning; individual planning; pair planning; task planning

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1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past thirty years, researchers have extensively studied various aspects of task-based language teaching (TBLT), particularly examining how task design and implementation variables affect learners' oral production (Yixuan, 2024; Sudharshana & Mukhopadhyay 2022). Planning has emerged as a significant focus of research (Ahmadian, 2011; Javad Ahmadian et al., 2015; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Khoram, 2019; Qin, 2019; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Understanding planning concepts benefits both SLA researchers focusing on L2 acquisition theories, and language educators seeking to enhance learning effectiveness (Ellis, 2005b). Consequently, numerous scholars have investigated planning's effects on language production (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Ellis, 2009; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Li et al., 2015; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Qin, 2022; Qin & Zhang, 2022).

Task-based planning research largely draws from information processing theory, which recognizes limitations in human information processing capacity for input and output (Ellis et al., 2020). Learners possess finite attention resources, with different language modules competing for these limited capacities; focusing on one aspect (meaning) may compromise another (form) (Skehan, 1996; VanPatten, 2002). Planning time helps overcome working memory limitations, allowing learners to connect form with meaning through their developing linguistic knowledge (Ellis, 2005a). Thus, planned L2 production should enhance learners' expressive abilities (Foster & Skehan, 1999).

Evidence supports that planning enhances language production, particularly regarding fluency and complexity (Ortega, 1999). Multiple studies (Bui & Tai, 2022; Crookes, 1989; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Skehan and Foster, 1997; Wendel, 1997; Mehnert, 1998) show that pre-task planning improves fluency. It also positively affects complexity, with planners producing more sophisticated language than non-planners (Ellis, 2004). According to Foster and Skehan (1996), learners who planned in detail used notably more subordinate clauses than those who planned minimally. In Wigglesworth's (1997) study, just one minute of planning enhanced language complexity only among advanced learners tackling challenging tasks, while Yuan and Ellis (2003) demonstrated that planning before the task enhanced linguistic complexity.

Ellis (2005a) and Gui & Ismail (2024) explained planning as a “problem-solving activity” because participants need to decide “what linguistic devices need to be selected to affect the audience in the desired way”. Ellis (2005a) distinguished between pre-task and within-task planning (also called online planning by Yuan & Ellis, (2003) in task planning. These differ in timing: pre-task planning occurs before, while within-task planning happens during the task. Both types can be either unguided (no specific guidance provided) or guided (specific recommendations given). In guided planning, teachers can emphasize linguistic form, meaning, or both. Park (2010) demonstrated that specific instructions directed learners' attention more toward morpho-syntax and less toward lexis. Pre-task planning can be conducted individually or collaboratively with peers (Ellis, 2003).

Ellis's (2009) review of 19 studies revealed that planning consistently enhanced fluency and structural complexity (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996), but showed varied effects on accuracy, with some studies finding no significant impact (Yuan & Ellis, 2003) and others reporting positive effects (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2008). These inconsistencies partly stem from variables like task type (Dawadi, 2019; Song & Lee, 2015) and content familiarity (Bui & Huang, 2018). Further investigation under different conditions could strengthen these findings.

1.1. Purpose of study

This study examined pre-task planning sources in Iran's EFL context to guide instructors in implementing TBLT. Given that complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) are essential for "greater functional proficiency" (Skehan & Foster 1999), understanding how implementation conditions affect these three areas of L2 oral performance is crucial.

2. METHOD

2.1. Participants

Sixty male EFL learners at an intermediate level, aged 18-20 (mean age 19.5), were randomly chosen from 136 students at an Iranian English language institute. Having studied English for 6-7 months in an instructed environment, they were classified as intermediate based on the institute's criteria and placement assessments. The Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was administered to verify participant homogeneity, with scores ranging from 50-55 out of 100 ($M = 54.24$; $SD = 1.01$), confirming their similar proficiency levels. The participants were randomly assigned to four groups of 15 each. All of them signed written consent forms at the outset of the study.

2.2. Speaking task

Task-based learning has been seen to be very influential in language-speaking tasks (Hasnain & Halder 2024). Following Skehan and Foster's (1999) approach, a monologic decision-making task was used, requiring participants to select survival items for a two-week desert island stay. This task type was selected for its non-dialogic nature and its previous use in task-type research (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 1997), facilitating result comparison.

2.3. Measurement of the CAF triad

To evaluate the quality of the participants' spoken output, criteria for measuring fluency, accuracy, and complexity were established for the segmentation, coding, and scoring of the recorded audio data. The CAF triad (Complexity, Accuracy, Fluency) was measured using established metrics from previous oral production studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Geng & Ferguson, 2013; Wendel, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Fluency was assessed through pruned speech rate (words per minute excluding false starts and fillers). Accuracy was calculated as the percentage of error-free clauses, considering syntactic, morphological, and lexical errors. Complexity was determined by the ratio of total clauses to AS units. AS-unit is defined as ". . . a single speaker's utterance consisting of an independent clause or sub-clausal unit, together with any subordinate clause(s) associated with it" (Foster et al., 2000).

2.4. Procedure

Consistent with earlier studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Geng & Ferguson, 2013; Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), participants in planning conditions received 10 minutes for pre-task preparation and were instructed to utilize the entire planning period. While note-taking was allowed during planning, these notes could not be used while performing the task. For those in the guided condition, the researcher provided planning guidelines addressing both content and language, verbally explaining the task and reading the guidelines aloud to participants. The participant's attention was drawn first to content by asking several 'priming' questions (for instance, "Will you take a sleeping bag if you want to live on a desert island?"). Thereafter, the researcher concentrated on grammar and lexical items: for instance, participants were recommended to deploy transition words or phrases (for instance "... furthermore, however..., finally") so that it is easy for listeners to follow what they are saying. When the participants asked for help, they were assisted with the lexis and grammar suggestions. Meanwhile, those assigned to individual and paired conditions proceeded with the task without interference. The control group, lacking pre-task planning time, began the task immediately. Following the planning phase, each participant delivered a 4-5-minute oral presentation, which was recorded and transcribed to evaluate complexity, accuracy, and fluency.

3. RESULTS

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics showing fluency, complexity, and accuracy measurements across all planning conditions.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Fluency, Complexity, and Accuracy Measurements

Measures		Individual condition	Pair condition	guided condition	No planning
Fluency	Means	74.45	79.91	64.28	60.28
Speech rate	SD	5.75	7.54	7.81	7.92
Complexity	Means	1.61	1.41	1.35	1.03
Clauses per AS-unit	SD	.25	.23	.31	.27
Accuracy	Means	3.78	3.91	3.65	6.15
Errors per 100 words	SD	.57	.49	.64	.48

The data clearly shows that no planning yields notably lower scores across fluency, complexity, and accuracy compared to other conditions. Fluency scores peak in pair work and individual planning, both surpassing the guided condition. Individual planning yields the highest complexity scores, with pair work and guided conditions following in descending order; pair work participants produced marginally more complex language than those in the guided condition. For accuracy, the guided condition demonstrates superior results compared to other approaches. Overall, these results suggest that pair work and individual planning better facilitate fluency than guided planning, while guided planning enhances accuracy, and individual planning achieves the most balanced results across all three measures.

A MANOVA was conducted to evaluate how no planning and pre-task planning affected oral performance. The analysis revealed a significant main effect for planning conditions (Wilks 'Lambda .122, $F = 12.76$, $p = .001$), warranting further comparison between the no-planning scenario and the three pre-task planning conditions. Table 2 presents these findings.

Table2

Simple Contrasts: no planning vs. guided pre-task planning

Variable	Contrast	Contrast estimate	Sig.
Fluency	No planning vs. guided planning	5.482	.045
	No planning vs. pair work planning	17.967	.001
	No planning vs. individual planning	16.186	.001
complexity	No planning vs. guided planning	.302	.002
	No planning vs. pair work planning	.274	.004
	No planning vs. individual planning	.491	.001
Accuracy	No planning vs. guided planning	-1.470	.001
	No planning vs. pair work planning	-1.252	.001
	No planning vs. individual planning	-1.611	.001

The data demonstrate that the no planning control condition is significantly different and lower than all of the pre-task planning conditions. This result is not surprising and aligns with earlier studies (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), which showed that pre-task planning benefits fluency and complexity. In this instance, a beneficial effect on accuracy was also observed.

A MANOVA was conducted to identify variations among the three planning conditions. Results revealed a statistically significant difference in oral performance linked to planning condition source, $F(7, 60) = 2.443$, $p = 0.002$, Wilk's Lambda = 0.370, $\eta^2 = 0.215$. Following this, mean differences across the three planning conditions were examined using multiple one-way ANOVAs. Table 3 displays these ANOVA findings.

Table 3
One-way Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) for CAF Measurements

Variable	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	P value
complexity	0.104	2	0.052	1.200	0.112
Accuracy	0.002	2	0.001	0.185	0.333
Fluency	763.698	2	381.849	8.2	0.001*

Note: * = significant at $p < 0.05$

The ANOVA findings indicate variations in fluency, complexity, and accuracy measurements across the three planning sources studied, with fluency showing a significant F-value of 8.2 ($p < .05$). The Tukey post hoc analysis revealed that pair work and individual planning yielded significantly higher fluency compared to guided planning ($p = .001$ and $p = .003$), while no meaningful fluency difference emerged between pair work and individual planning. The results suggest that guided planning did not lead to notably higher accuracy levels compared to other planning conditions, despite slightly higher mean scores. Likewise, individual planning failed to produce significantly greater complexity levels than other conditions, though mean scores showed a slight advantage.

4. DISCUSSION

This investigation examined how guided, pair, and individual planning approaches affect L2 spoken output in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Consistent with prior research (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Khoram, 2019; Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), planning generally enhanced task performance. However, this study revealed stronger effects, showing substantial benefits of guided pre-task planning across all measures, including accuracy, whereas Foster and Skehan (1999) found only minor accuracy differences between planning conditions. This aligns with Levelt's (1993), speech production model suggesting that planning time's psycholinguistic advantages—enhanced access to lexical and grammatical resources and reduced cognitive load—enabled more accurate language production. The no-planning group, lacking preparation time, may have approached the task less seriously, potentially compromising accuracy efforts. This indicates that the absence of planning could have negative affective and psycholinguistic consequences.

The study also revealed that guided planning somewhat improved accuracy, supporting Foster and Skehan (1999) and Geng and Ferguson (2013), while individual planning enhanced complexity. However, unlike Foster and Skehan (1999), these differences weren't statistically significant, possibly due to limited sample size and different measurement criteria.

Further analysis revealed varying effects of planning conditions on CAF measures. Pair-work planning significantly enhanced fluency compared to guided and individual planning, aligning with Geng and Ferguson (2013) but contradicting Foster and Skehan (1999). The latter found no advantages of group-work planning for any CAF measures. These conflicting results likely stem from differences in task types, fluency measurements, and planning group sizes. While this study and Geng and Ferguson (2013) focused on pairs, Foster and Skehan (1999) examined larger groups. Pairs may utilize planning time more effectively than larger groups, which often show considerable variation in collaborative efficiency (Storch, 2002; Foster, 1998). The superior fluency of pair planners might be attributed to their mutual assistance in object identification and selection justification, essentially functioning as task rehearsal. This practice potentially enhanced cognitive processing during conceptualization, as described in Levelt's (1993) model, leading to more fluent task execution (Ahmadian & Tavakoli, 2011; Bygate, 2013).

5. CONCLUSION

This research seeks to provide empirical evidence about how pre-task planning is organized in TBLT classrooms and determine implementation factors that could reduce tasks' cognitive load for language learners while predictably directing performers' attention to specific language aspects. It showed that task completion conditions

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significantly impact how tasks are ultimately performed. However, although a great deal of effort was put in to avoid some of the design, assessment, and analytic defects, several limitations need to be acknowledged. First, this research is constrained by its limited sample size, restricted dependent variable measures, and notably, its lack of ecological validity due to laboratory testing conditions. Thus, caution should be exercised when interpreting and extending these results to other learning environments. Second, despite the efforts made to select supplementary and separate measures, this investigation is still fairly limited in the assessment of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Future investigations, hence, necessitate the utilization of more precise and profound assessments to measure these three constructs.

The findings suggest that while Pair/group work pre-task planning may enhance fluency, alternative planning approaches offer distinct advantages. Guided planning tends to improve accuracy rather than fluency, while individual planning promotes complexity. These findings are significant as the TBLT methodology has often overlooked the value of guided and individual planning approaches. Individual planning strengthens learner autonomy, enables content selection, and allows for personal practice. However, it requires learners to rely solely on their own linguistic and metacognitive resources, which some may find overwhelming.

Pair/group work, particularly associated with TBLT, offers clear potential advantages both pedagogically and theoretically. However, research indicates these benefits aren't consistently achieved. Results can sometimes yield minimal meaning negotiation, limited output modification, and subpar discourse quality - factors largely dependent on group composition, interaction quality, collaborative willingness, and related variables.

Each planning condition presents unique advantages and limitations, potentially affecting fluency, complexity, and accuracy differently. For example, pair/group planning typically enhances fluency rather than accuracy. Teachers should therefore diversify pre-task planning approaches instead of relying solely on pair/group work. This challenges the misconception that TBLT mandates small group work exclusively. Further research is needed on various planning conditions' effects during both pre-task planning and task execution before definitive recommendations can be made. Studies should examine how learner characteristics interact with different planning conditions in affecting performance measures. Future research might also explore how various task types (personal, narrative, information exchange) differently impact oral production.

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