

The Impact of Gender and Strategic Pre-task Planning Time on EFL Learners' Oral Performance in Terms of Accuracy

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Abstract—The role of planning time and gender as an interactional factor or task condition in second language development is one of the interesting issues in the realm of task-based language teaching and learning. The present study intends to investigate the effects of strategic pre-task planning and gender on EFL learners' oral task production in terms of the linguistic domain of accuracy. In order to collect the data, a narrative pictorial task was employed as the means of data collection. The orally collected data was quantified and measured by means of the measure of accuracy. Then, the data was fed into the SPSS Software (Version 16) for statistical analysis. Independent Samples T-Test was employed as the statistical means of analysis. The results of the study indicated significant differences between the oral performance of the female and male learners in both planned and unplanned conditions. The results of the study carry some pedagogical implications for SLA researchers, language teachers in EFL contexts, and teacher educators.

Index Terms—task-based language teaching, task, gender, pre-task planning time, strategic planning time, accuracy

I. INTRODUCTION

Tasks are of great importance in recent second language acquisition literature, research, and pedagogy. This is obvious in a large number of studies and research pertaining to task-based language teaching and learning. According to Williams and Burden (1997), task is viewed as a pedagogic tool for the language teacher and a central unit for syllabus design and research. Thus, due to the importance of task, many studies over the past two decades have been carried out to investigate different aspects of it (Bygate, 2001; Robinson, 2001, 2005, 2007; Gilabert, 2005; Ortega, 1995; Skehan and Foster, 1999; Elder and Wigglesworth, 2003; Ellis, 2005; Rahimpour, 2007, 2008; Rahimpour and Yaghoubi-Notash, 2008; Wang, 2008; Salimi and Yousefi, 2009; Mehrang and Rahimpour, 2010; Salimi and Dadashpour, 2010; Dadashpour, 2011; Shafaei, 2012; Salimi et al, 2012; Salimi and Dadashpour, 2012a, 2012b). Planning time and gender of language learners have been the topic of research in many studies in the literature of second or foreign language research. However, their joint effect on L2 learners' oral and written task production in terms of three production elements of accuracy, fluency, and complexity is something which has rarely been explored in the field of task-based language teaching and there is a gap in the current literature on the topic. Thus, the present study was an attempt to contribute to the current literature and tried to investigate the effects of L2 learners' gender and pre-task strategic planning time on their oral task performance in terms of accuracy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Task-based Language Teaching and Learning (TBLT)

According to Ellis (2003, p. 30) tasks can function as a useful device for planning a communicative curriculum, particularly in contexts where there are few opportunities for more authentic communicative experiences, for instance, many English as foreign language (EFL) learning contexts.

As Rahimpour (2008) states, task-based approaches to teaching second language concentrate on learners' ability to perform target-like tasks without any explicit teaching of grammatical rules. According to Long and Crookes (1992), these approaches involve procedural syllabuses, process syllabuses, and task-based language teaching (TBLT). The third approach, task-based language teaching (TBLT), owes its development to the dissatisfaction with the previous methods and approaches of language teaching such as audiolingual, grammar translation, etc (Salimi et al, 2012c). According to Rahimpour (2010), task-based language teaching is a response to a better understanding of a language

learning process. Tasks, in TBLT, are considered as the units of analysis and the creation of meaning without any prior prescription of forms is emphasized in TBLT. Therefore, language learners are free to employ any strategies and forms to perform the task and achieve the task goal (Willis and Willis, 2001).

As Ellis (2005) argues task-based language teaching challenges the main approaches to language teaching in that it is based upon the fact that language learning will develop most successfully and effectively if teaching aims simply to create context and condition in which learners' natural language learning ability can be nurtured.

The various approaches to task-based language teaching (TBLT) reflect the issues that figure mainly in the current discussions of language pedagogy and SLA research. These issues are the role of meaning-based activity, the need for more learner-centered curricula, the importance of affective factors, the contribution of learner-training, and the need for some focus on form (Ellis, 2003). Task-based language teaching provides ways of addressing these various concerns and for this reason is attracting increasing attention of language teachers and researchers (Ellis, 2003).

B. Definition of Task

Crookes (1986, p. 1) argues that in neither research nor language pedagogy is there complete agreement as to what constitutes a task, making definition problematic, nor is there consistency in terms employed to describe the different devices for eliciting learner language. According to Long and Crookes (1992), task is pedagogical unit that can be used as a basis for designing language courses. By specifying what tasks are to be used course designers can create blueprints for the kinds of language use that will foster language development (Ellis, 2003, p. 27).

Different researchers and scholars have offered various definitions for the notion of task over the past two decades (Long, 1985; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Bygate, Skehan, and Swain, 2001; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008). Nunan (2004) goes on defining a task as follows:

A piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning and in which the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form. The task should also have a sense of completeness, being able to stand alone as a communicative act in its own right with a beginning, middle and an end (p. 4).

C. Planning Time in Task-based Language Teaching

Over the past two decades, task planning has become a burgeoning area of research within task-based language teaching. As Ellis (2005, p.3) points out, planning is an indispensable part of every spoken and written language use. That is, one who wants to speak need to decide what to say and how to do it. Besides, Sangarun (2001, p. 6) argues that planning time is assumed to be "an important feature of language production". Comparing planned and unplanned L1 oral and written productions, Givon (1979) proposed two modes of production: the "pragmatic mode" and the "syntactic mode". On the one hand, adult L1 unplanned production, according to Givon, was comparable to the pragmatic mode in the sense that its coordination is loose, and its use of grammatical morphology is low. On the other hand, adult L1 planned production is comparable to the syntactic mode which had high subordination and high use of grammatical morphology.

Planning, in research on language production, generally involves the retrieving and organizing an utterance (Wendel, 1997). Foss and Hakes (1978) suggest that planning in language production includes formulating an idea, choosing suitable vocabulary, and organizing them "in a suitable semantic and syntactic framework" (p. 170). In language teaching, planning has been associated with interlanguage (IL) development. Interlanguage is a term first coined by Selinker (1972) and refers to the developmental language between learners' first and second languages. Corder (1981) suggests that it is a mixture language that incorporates the learner's first and second language properties, and also has its own properties. Ellis (1987) argued that planning helps the learner access the linguistic forms that have not yet been totally automated. Further, Crookes (1989) suggested that planning stretches IL and engages the processes of second language acquisition.

D. Pre-task Planning Time and Its Types

According to Ellis (2005) planning time is divided into two types of pre-task and within-task planning time. Pre-task planning which is the topic of this paper refers to planning that occurs before the main performance of the task (Ellis, 2005, p.3). It involves, according to Schmidt (2001), preparatory attention which contributes in performing actions with greater accuracy and speed.

In task-based language teaching, pre-task planning involves two kinds of rehearsal and strategic planning. In rehearsal, learners are given the chance to carry out the task before its main performance (Ellis, 2005, p. 3). That is, the learners' first performance of the task is considered as a practice or rehearsal for the final performance. The other type, strategic planning, refers to the learners' preparation of the content of the task they want to perform. In strategic planning, they "have access to the actual task materials" (Ellis, 2005, p.3).

E. Studies Conducted on Planning Time

Since 1980s, many SLA researchers have done several studies on the impacts of task planning and its types on language performance and language acquisition of language learners (Ochs, 1979; Crookes, 1989; Wigglesworth, 1997;

Foster and Skehan, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Kawauchi, 2005; Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005). Findings of many of these studies have indicated that planning has obvious effects on language learners' task performance in terms of complexity and fluency (Foster and Skehan 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Foster and Skehan, 1999; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Kawauchi, 2005) but the findings regarding language learners' accuracy have not been homogenous which is part of the focus of the present study. Crookes (1989) investigated the consequences of ten minutes pre-task planning time on the learners' performance while performing two information-gap tasks. He found that learners in planned condition produced more fluent and more complex language than the learners without planning, but the performance of learners in planned condition was not more accurate than the others. Ortega (1999) investigated the effect of strategic planning on two groups of language learners from low intermediate and advanced proficiency levels. As a result, he found that planning affected the fluency and complexity of language learners. On the contrary, planning had a beneficial effect on the lexical complexity of just the low-intermediate participants and conversely, planned narratives were more accurate in case they were produced by the advanced learners but not by the low-intermediate level speakers. Salimi and Fatollahnejad (2012) studied the effects of strategic planning and topic familiarity on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' written performance in TBLT. The results of the data analyses showed that strategic planning and topic familiarity did not have any significant effects on the learners' written task performance.

F. Gender and Second Language Learning

Gender issues in classrooms appear in a growing body of research. In many approaches to language teaching and learning, it has been delineated that females are superior to the males in language learning. The female superiority in second or foreign language learning, by most of neurolinguistic experimentations, is related to the more contribution of left hemisphere in females which is believed to be responsible for language development (Long and Crookes, 1992). Also, Oxford (1994) stated some points about the differences of male and female learners. He stated that females, specially, adults, are more dependent on the field (global) and males are more independent from the field (analytic). He also commented that females tend to be more reflective than males. Maher and Ward (2002) pointed out many implications of gender bias in classrooms and suggested that these contribute to loss of self-esteem and academic security for girls. Adolescence is also a time when the lives of boys and girls become even more sex-differentiated. Besides, Taylor (1993) strongly insists that social construction of gender is an active and ongoing process; teachers must supply materials with alternative versions of femininity—those more helpful to females in developing a sense of self and their future as women. Furthermore, Alcoff (1988) argued that gender is not a point starting, not a given, but a construct, formalizing discourse in some non-arbitrary way through a matrix of habits and practices.

Reviewing the studies carried out in the field of task-based language teaching, it was revealed that there was a gap in the current literature on the role of L2 learners' gender and pre-task planning time on their task performance in terms of three production elements of accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Therefore, the present study aimed at investigating the impact of gender and strategic pre-task planning time on EFL learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy.

III. RESEARCH QUESTION AND HYPOTHESIS

The above literature review yielded the following research question and research hypotheses:

RQ₁: What are the effects of gender and strategic pre-task planning time on L2 learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy?

H₀: There are no significant differences between gender and strategic pre-task planning time and L2 learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy.

H₁: Female learners while performing task with strategic pre-task planning time will produce more accurate language than male ones.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Participants

40 Learners of English in an intermediate level of language proficiency affiliated to Iran national Language Institute Miandoab Branch were chosen as the participants of this study. They were chosen from among the intermediate level English learners based on their performance on a pre-test which was administered in order to ensure the homogeneity of the learners participating in the study. They aged between 18-27. The participants of this study involved twenty males and twenty females. The participants were taking conversation courses for at least two years. Their first language background was Turkish and Persian. After the selection of the participants, according to the goal of the study, they were randomly divided into two groups of male and female.

B. Data Collection Instrument

In order to collect the required oral data for this study, a valid narrative pictorial task taken from the Mock or sample examinations of Cambridge University Press (2007) was employed as the data collection instrument in the study. Narrative tasks, according to Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), refer to the stories based upon a set of sequenced picture prompts which are given to language learners to elicit language performance. Attempts were made to find those picture

prompts which were appropriate to the proficiency level of the participants in the study in terms of clarity, length, and difficulty, and were culturally familiar for the participants. Eventually, the task employed in the study was selected as the means of data collection since it is mostly suitable for the purpose of the study.

C. Procedure

In order to collect the data, each participant was called from the class individually to perform the narrative task. Then, they were informed of what they were expected to do. Also, the participants were told that their oral performance would be recorded while they are performing the pictorial task. Moreover, they were ensured that the recordings of their oral performance would be confidential, and that this was not a test.

The oral data for this study was collected as following. Firstly, the participants of female group were asked to perform on the narrative task with strategic pre-task planning time. They were given the pictorial task to look at it and narrate the story of the picture prompts. Then, the male learners were asked to perform on the same task. At this level (performing the narrative task with strategic pre-task planning), both male and female learners were given 10 minutes for strategic pre-task planning time. Having collected the data with strategic planning time, the participants of both male and female groups were asked to narrate the story of picture prompts without strategic pre-task planning time. That is, they were not given any time for strategic pre-task planning time before they perform on the task. It needs to be noted that the data collection without strategic pre-task planning time was conducted after an interval of two weeks. This interval was due to eliminating the learners' memorial effects. The collected oral data from the participants was transcribed, quantified, and measured by the accuracy measure employed in the study.

D. Accuracy Measure

To measure accuracy, percentage of error-free clauses is divided by the total number of words (Ellis, 2003).

V. DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Table 1 clearly presents the means differences of accuracy of the male and female groups in narrative task with strategic pre-task planning time.

TABLE 1
COMPARISON OF THE MEANS OF ACCURACY OF ORAL PERFORMANCE OF MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS WITH STRATEGIC PRE-TASK PLANNING

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Means
Accuracy Planned Female	20	0.51	0.13	0.03
Accuracy Planned Male	20	0.34	0.09	0.02

According to the data presented in table 1, female learners produced more accurate (0.51) language while performing narrative task with strategic pre-task planning than male learners (0.34).

Figure 1 shows the means differences of accuracy of the male and female groups in narrative task with strategic pre-task planning time.

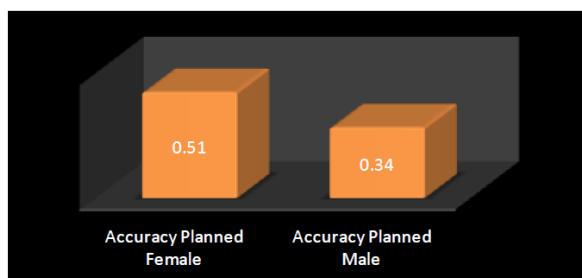


Figure 1 Comparison of the Means of Accuracy of Oral Performance of Male and Female Groups with Strategic Pre-Task Planning

Table 2 shows the results of Independent Samples T-test for the means of accuracy the male and female groups in narrative task with strategic pre-task planning time.

TABLE.2
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR THE MEANS OF ACCURACY OF ORAL PERFORMANCE OF MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS WITH STRATEGIC PRE-TASK PLANNING

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Independent Samples Test	4.39	.043	4.64	38	.000	0.17	0.036	0.096	0.24
Equal variances not assumed			4.64	33.70	.000	0.17	0.036	0.095	0.24

The results of statistical analysis of applying Independent Samples T-test to test the proposed hypothesis are presented in the above table. The results of SPSS at $df = 38$ and $\alpha = .05$, indicated that there was a significant difference between gender of the learners and strategic pre-task planning and L2 learners' accuracy of oral performance in narrative task. Therefore, the proposed null hypothesis claiming "there are no significant differences between gender and strategic pre-task planning time and L2 learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy" was rejected.

The means differences of male and female learners' oral performances in narrative task while performing the task without pre-task strategic planning are presented in the following table (table 3).

TABLE 3.
COMPARISON OF THE MEANS OF ACCURACY OF ORAL PERFORMANCE OF MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS WITHOUT STRATEGIC PRE-TASK PLANNING

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Means
Accuracy Unplanned Female	20	0.44	0.11	0.024
Accuracy Unplanned Male	20	0.35	0.11	0.024

As it is clear from table 3, the learners of the female group outperformed the learners of male group in terms of accuracy of oral production in narrative task without strategic pre-task planning. Female learners produced more accurate (0.44) language while performing narrative task without strategic pre-task planning than male learners (0.35).

Figure 2 clearly shows the means differences of accuracy of oral performance of the male and female groups in narrative task without strategic pre-task planning time.

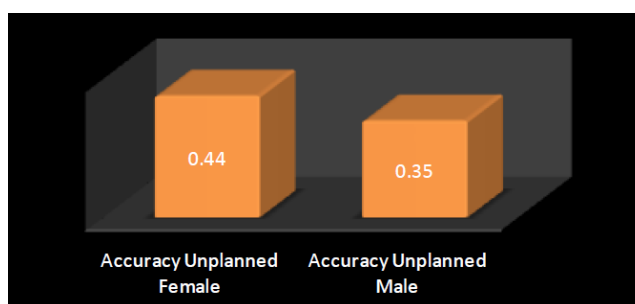


Figure 2. Comparison of the Means of Accuracy of Oral Performance of Male and Female Groups without Strategic Pre-Task Planning

Table 4 shows the results of Independent Samples T-test for the means of accuracy of oral performance of the male and female learners in narrative task without strategic pre-task planning time.

TABLE 4.
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TEST FOR THE MEANS OF ACCURACY OF ORAL PERFORMANCE OF MALE AND FEMALE GROUPS WITHOUT STRATEGIC PRE-TASK PLANNING

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Independent Samples Test			2.64	38	0.012	0.093	0.035	0.021	0.16
Equal variances not assumed	0.033	0.85	2.64	37.99	0.012	0.093	0.035	0.021	0.16

The results of statistical analysis of applying Independent Samples T-test to test the second hypothesis of the study are presented in table 4. The results of SPSS at $df = 38$ and $\alpha = .05$, revealed that there was a significant difference between gender of the learners and strategic pre-task planning and L2 learners' accuracy of oral performance in narrative task. Therefore, female participants outperformed males. Thus, our proposed hypothesis stating that "female learners while performing task with strategic pre-task planning time will produce more accurate language than male ones" was confirmed.

VI. DISCUSSION

Considering the impacts of gender and strategic pre-task planning time on L2 learners' oral performance in terms of accuracy in narrative task, it was found that there was a considerable difference between the learners' gender and strategic pre-task planning time and the accuracy of their oral production. That is, the female learners performing the narrative task with strategic pre-task planning time outperformed male learners in oral accuracy (Tables 2 and Figure 1). The findings of the study are in line with the findings of Foster and Skehan (1996), Rahimpour and Yaghoubi-Notash (2008). However, the findings of this study regarding accuracy of oral production are in odds with Robinson, Ting, and

Urwin (1996), Gilabert (2005), and Mehrang and Rahimpour (2010). The production of more accurate language can be interpreted according to pragmatic and syntactic modes introduced by Givon (1989) who states that requiring learners to use greater syntactic resources and abilities will increase their grammatical accuracy. The findings of this study in terms of accuracy can be attributed to the fact stated by Skehan (1998) who argued that trade-off effects occur between different dimensions of language production due to limited attentional resources of humans. This means that language learners are not capable of paying a balanced attention to different aspects of language simultaneously. Finally, it could be concluded that planning time, and in the case of the present study has a positive effect on L2 learners' oral production in terms of accuracy. Also, it could be concluded that females employ strategies such as planning better than male learners in their language production. The outperformance of females over males could be attributed to the precision females put on the task performance as well as their verbal language skills.

VII. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The present study carries some implications for language teachers, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, and syllabus and task designers. The findings may contribute language teacher and, especially, syllabus designers to design instructional activities that alternate attention to all three aspect of language production (accuracy, fluency, and complexity) so that learners can develop these three elements of language production in a good balance. Furthermore, the findings of this study can contribute to methodology of task-based teaching since, as Ellis (2009) argues, planning is regarded as one of the task implementation factors which can be manipulated by providing or not providing time for learners to plan their performance, providing learners with different kinds of planning before performing a task, and giving different lengths of time for planning and the influences of planning can be viewed in language learners' language performance (Ellis, 2009). This study and its findings can have some contributions to the current SLA and task-based language teaching (TBLT) literature.

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