The Effects of Pre-task Planning on the Writing Fluency of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract—According to Nunan (2004), Task-Based Language Teaching is an approach to the use of tasks as fundamental units of planning and language instruction in language teaching. The present study aimed to investigate the impact of pre-task planning on the fluency of the argumentative essays written by Iranian male and female EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level. For this purpose, an IELTS Writing Task was administered to a population of 100 EFL learners studying at an English institute in Isfahan. Based on their scores, a sample of 50 intermediate level students were selected and randomly divided into two homogenous groups, 25 each. These samples served as control and experimental groups respectively. The role of gender differences was also investigated in this study. Accordingly, the learners in control group were taught by a structure-based traditional approach while the learners in experimental group were taught by a task-based approach. In order to compare the collected data of the two groups, several *t* tests were utilized. The obtained results of the written essays by the male students revealed that pre-task planning improved fluency. On the other hand, the comparison of the essays written by the females in both group revealed that they produced more fluent texts.

Index Terms— task, task-based language teaching, argumentative essays, fluency

I. INTRODUCTION

Communicating with people from other countries with different cultures, attitudes, and social backgrounds through foreign languages has always been of a great concern to human. The dominant method in language teaching was Grammar Translation Method up to the 1940s. The focus of the method was on grammar and translation from L2 to L1 and vice versa. Because the Grammar Translation Method emphasizes reading rather than the ability to communicate in a language there was a reaction to it. Then the changes in communicative needs and the developments in psychology and linguistics led to the rapid emergence of new methods and approaches, with a new look at different aspects of teaching and learning foreign languages. This shift of focus introduced the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) to the teaching profession.

Developing "communicative competence" in learners and paying attention to all four skills were the main goals of language teaching in Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) (Richard & Rodgers, 2001; Brown, 2007). In CLT, the primary attention paid to meaning rather than the formal features of language give rise to learning to communicate the intended meaning. Therefore, CLT put a considerable emphasis on fluency and claimed that accuracy can be improved by improving fluency. Based on Brown (2007, p. 241) "CLT is best understood as an approach not a method" and many other new methods have been derived from it. Task Based Language Teaching (TBLT) is a "logical development of CLT" (Richard & Rodgers, 2001; p. 233). Tasks are the basic and fundamental units of planning and instruction in TBLT (Ellis, 2000, 2003; Littlewood, 2004).

Many scholars have used task in their curricula and methodologies and they have long been part of the ELT. However, Task-based language teaching (TBLT) offers a totally different rational for the utilization of tasks in language teaching. In addition, TBLT presents some essential criteria for devising, choosing and sequencing tasks in the classroom instruction for the teachers. Here tasks are utilized as the main output units in instruction, practice and even in evaluation. Moreover, task-based instruction has very stronger bedrock in theory and research such as cognitive approach to language teaching and the concept of psychological reality in psycholinguistic theories.

Concerning the ability to write in a foreign language, the bulk of research indicates that it is gaining increasing importance. Accordingly, the instruction in writing is assuming a more fundamental role. In the past, writing skill was not considered as an important skill due to ambiguous nature of writing and it was not investigated by the researchers. Thus the dominant approach in teaching writing was the "product approach" which focuses on the end product of writing and put the emphasis on writing aspects like grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and spelling. According to Badger and White 2000, "In product based approaches writing concerned with the structure knowledge of language, and writing development the result of the group's imitation, in the text form provided by the researcher " (p. 154).

A turning point in the teaching of writing was the advent of the "process approach". This approach helped to promote the effectiveness of the writing instruction in EFL/ESL contexts. In this approach, the primary attention was given to the processes involved in producing the written text not the final text or the linguistic aspects of the text. Harmer (2001) had defined the process approach as processing any piece of writing through pre-writing phases, editing, redrafting to meet the ultimate goal which is the various skills that should be employed when writing a text. Therefore, pre-writing processes and during writing processes such as writing, rewriting, revising and drafting have received a lot of attention. Process based approach considers writing as a recursive, dynamic, and meaning-centered activity in which the learners are actively engaged in the process of writing. As such, process based approach has been reported to be more effective than the product approach.

With regard to the teaching of writing skill, genre approach was another movement which emphasized on the social, cultural and linguistic differences between different texts. The concept of genre is utilized in different educational contexts to refer to the recognizable and recurring patterns of daily, academic and literary texts that occur within a specific culture. Genre approach has certain principles in common with the process approach and has renewed some of the principles of product approach.

The later developments in the theory and practice of writing, directed a lot of research towards the writing modes and their rhetorical structures. Stifler (2002) defines rhetorical modes as patterns of organization aimed at achieving a particular effect in the reader. Therefore essays with specific purposes and text organizations are classified as different rhetorical modes, including description, narration, exposition and argumentation. In the early stages of learning to communicate in a fluent and accurate at intermediate and more advance levels writing pedagogical purposes include improving, developing, training and practicing language (Raimes, 1987). In this case, writing see as a complicated process through which writer expresses created thoughts and ideas. Learning to write in a second language is a hard work in compare with L1 writing. In order to become a skillful writer in a foreign language going through time-consuming and complex process is needed.. Unsurprisingly, role of English writing instruction in foreign language education is considerable in order to become a skillful writer (Weigel, 2002).

It seems that composing a paragraph accurately and fluently is by no means an easy task. As relevant studies indicate the ability to write cannot be separated from language learning and without language learning an effective acquisition cannot be gained, writing has been attracting attention in language teaching and learning. In fact, writing is a hard laden task not only for native speakers but also for non-native speakers (Biria & Jafari, 2013). Iranian EFL learners are no exception in this matter. Over the last decades interest in writing as one of the most important communicative skills in English language teaching has gained momentum (for more information, see Hayes & Flower, 1986).

Evidently, a piece of writing conveys the writer thoughts encoded in the form of the composition as a bridge between the reader and the writer. Mao (2002) has introduced the term "Games rules" as an effective way for writer to organize the whole composition in to a coherent structure with regard to a particular topic. These rules are used for the reader to decode writing correctly. Although writing is generally taught as a product-based approach, this study uses task-based approach to teaching writing. Studies provide strong support to the noticeable impact of planning on language production where fluency and complexity are scrutinized. Studies by Crookes (1989), Foster and Skehan (1996), as well as Wendel (1997), among others, report that pre-task planning affects fluency positively.

On this basis, the present study aimed at collecting a sample of Iranian EFL learners writing at an intermediate level to ascertain the effects of pre-task planning on their written performance and measuring the pedagogical utility of pre-task planning on fluency. The basic assumption behind the research was to find out whether pre-task planning influences writing fluency. The current study also measured the extent to which pre-task planning can affect fluency in argumentative essays written by Iranian male and female EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Richards and Rodgers (2001) believe that task-based language teaching is an approach based on the utilization of tasks as the fundamental units of planning which have a significant part in language teaching. According to Willis (2001), language learners can communicate in the foreign language that they are learning as a result of task-based language teaching (TBLT). Willis (2004) points out that task-based instruction (TBI) are considered as a meaning focused approach that shows the use of language in real world to achieve its primary purpose. In TBLT, all of the four language skills are considered as significant. Task-based language teaching is supported by an increasingly larger number of SLA studies and theories. Nunan (2004, p. 76) states that "... it [task-based language teaching] is supported by a rich and growing research agenda". This view towards task-based language teaching makes it different from other methods of language teaching. Moreover, Richards and Rodgers (2001) consider tasks as research tools in SLA. Ellis (2003) adds that, in SLA studies, language use samples can be elicited through tasks. In other words, the process of second language acquisition is identified through tasks. Thus, SLA studies provide a scientific basis for task-based language teaching. Some of the main underlying theories and hypothesis including input hypothesis, interaction hypothesis, and output hypothesis also support the task-based language teaching.

Clearly, the Bangalore Project is the early application of task-based approach within a communicative framework for language teaching. "It ran from 1979 to 1984 and was based on the percept that language form can be learnt in the classroom entirely through a focus on meaning, and that grammar construction by the learner is an unconscious

process". (Menhert, 1998, p. 321). According to Prabhu (1987), this project was the result of dissatisfaction with the structural approach to English language teaching. Along with a series of problem-solving activities evolved through a sustained period of trial and error, this project encourage the language students to learn English through meaningful communication.

Malaysian Communicational Syllabus as another application of task-based approach refers to by Richards and Rodgers (2001) in 1975. Besides Nunan (2004) introduces the Australian Language Level (ALL) project which utilized Holliday's macro skills as the point of departure for curriculum development. He mentions that "ALL is one early version of a task-based curriculum" (p. 42). The Bangalore Project which is also called Communicational Teaching Project (CTP), was conducted in eight schools and can be seen as an effort towards task-based teaching (Menhert, 1999). Actually, Howatt (1984) believes that "whatever happens Bangalore Project has set the context for one of the most interesting arguments of the eighties, if not beyond" (p. 288). With regard to the evaluation of the Bangalore Project, Bretta and Davies (1985) believe that Prabhu's learners were more successful, compared to their counterparts who were taught traditionally. Malaysian Communicational Syllabus as another application of task-based approach refers to by Richards and Rodgers (2001) in 1975. Besides, Nunan (2004) introduces the Australian Language Level (ALL) project which utilized Holliday's macro skills as the point of departure for curriculum development. He mentions that "ALL is one early version of a task-based curriculum" (p. 42).

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In spite of the crucial role of writing in language learning, it has long been ignored. Teaching writing seems to be too difficult and time-consuming in comparison with the other language skills, so insufficient attention has been drawn to teach and practice writing in the class (Zeng, 2005). It is clear that student's wealth of knowledge is needed to flow ideas so as to compose a concise writing. Certain practices exist in public and private schools and English institutes in writing English. Although these practices are not successful due to time limitation, students' English proficiency, and low motivation.

IV. RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study was to investigate the impact of Task-based language teaching, more specifically pre-task planning and its efficacy on the writing performance of Iranian EFL learners at an intermediate proficiency level. The prime target is the students' writing creation in the case of fluency. For this purpose, the present study attempts to touch upon the following research questions.

1. To what extent does pre-task planning influence fluency of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **male** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level?

2. To what extent does pre-task planning influence fluency of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **female** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level?

Based on these research questions, the following null hypotheses were designed:

H01: There is no positive evidence for the influence of pre-task planning on *fluency* of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **male** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level.

H02: There is no positive evidence for the influence of pre-task planning on *fluency* of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **female** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level.

V. METHOD

A. Participants

The present study was conducted in one of the English language institutes, Isfshan city, Iran. The participants were chosen from among Iranian EFL learners based on a pretest. An IELTS Writing Task was administered to choose 50 out of 100 participants with the proficiency of intermediate level. The story behind choosing intermediate level students rather than the students of the other levels was that at elementary level students are required to compose essays of 250 words and it is claimed that elementary students with low level of L2 proficiency are not able to write a composition with considerable difference. On the other hand, advanced students are so developed that may invalidate the effect of pre-task planning on fluency of argumentative essays writing. The selected sample included 20 males and 30 females. They were all native speakers of Persian who learned English as a foreign language in an English institute. This study was carried out in summer 2013 and conducted with Iranian female and male English learners who ranged in age from 19 to 23. The participant average age was 21.

The selected sample assigned as either control or experimental group. From the 50 intermediate learners selected as the result of IELTS Writing Task, 25 learners were randomly assigned to the control group (11 males and 14 females) and another 25 served as the experimental group (9 males and 16 females).

B. Design

An IELTS Writing Task was administered to measure the students' writing ability in order to achieve maximum possible homogeneity among the subjects regarding their general English proficiency. The selected sample was

assigned as either control or experimental group randomly. The participants developed an argumentative essay through the pre-task phase .In this phase they were asked to compose argumentative essay in 25 minutes.

C. Materials

This study enlisted two kinds of materials. First, an IELTS Writing task was administered to choose 50 EFL learners at an intermediate level of proficiency. The participants were selected based on scores which they got on the IELTS Writing task, that is, those subjects who scored 3/5 - 5 were chosen as the participants of the study. Second, an argumentative essay writing task whose topic selected from IELTS and was a topic of general interest was given to the students. Afterwards, 30 written texts, 15 of which produced by students in the control group and 15 by students in the experimental group, were manually typed in to a computer. The AntConc 3.2.1 w software was employed to count the number of words.

D. Procedures

In the present study, planning was operationalized at two levels (a) no planning (NP) for the control group, (b) pre-task planning (PTP) for the experimental group.

In the no planning condition, the participants performed the task under normal classroom settings. The control group consisted of 25 learners who were asked to write an essay in 40 minutes. The essay writing was traditionally, a structure based approach, taught to the participants in this group. In the pre-task planning condition, the topic was introduced and the instructor encouraged the students to activate the related schemata and the background knowledge. Like the no planning they were required to finish the task in 40 minutes preparing an essay consisting of at least 250 words. Afterwards, the written texts were analyzed in terms of fluency.

VI. RESULTS

*A. Null Hypothesis/**H01***

H01: There is no positive evidence for the influence of pre-task planning on *fluency* of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **male** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level. Fluency of essays written by the males in the control group was compared with fluency of essays produced by the participants in the experimental group through measuring the average number of T-units per text. The following tables show the results of the comparison for T-units, and the fluency.

Table I incorporates the descriptive statistics including mean, standard deviation, and standard error of the means regarding the essays written by male participants in the control and experimental groups. Table I depicts, among other things, the mean scores, and standard deviations of writing fluency of male participants in the control and experimental groups. The mean score of male control group (MCG) is 17.36 while that of male experimental group (MEG) equals 20.88. To see if the difference between the mean scores is statistically large or not, the *t* test table should be examined.

TABLE I.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS COMPARING WRITING FLUENCY OF MALES IN THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FLUENCY	MCG	11	17.3636	3.66804	1.10596
	MEG	9	20.8889	2.20479	.73493

TABLE II.
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T TEST RESULTS COMPARING WRITING FLUENCY OF MALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		*t* test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Errors Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower	Upper	
Fluency	Equal Variances Assumed	1.622	.219	-2.527	18	.021	-3.52525	1.39518	-6.45641	-.59410	
	Equal Variances not Assumed			-2.655	16.709	.017	-3.52525	1.32788	-6.33056	-.71995	

The two means obtained from two independent groups were compared and an independent Samples *t*- test was used for analyzing the data. Table II, by contrast, shows the results of the Independent Samples *t* test according to the means of T-units per text for male essays in the control and experimental groups. For T-units, the level of significance was 0.21 (bolded in Table II, under [Sig/2-tailed] column); the difference between the two groups was significant. In fact, there was a significant difference between male essays regarding the average number of T-units in both control and experimental groups. Since the value under Sig. (2-tailed) is .02, it is obvious that p is less than our specified level of significance (i.e., .02 > .05), indicating a statistically significant difference between male participants in the two groups. Writing fluency of males, as a result, was indeed affected by the pre-task treatment utilized in this study.

To have a better understanding of the differences between the means for the male participants in the control and experimental group, the following bar graph was used: (Figure 1)
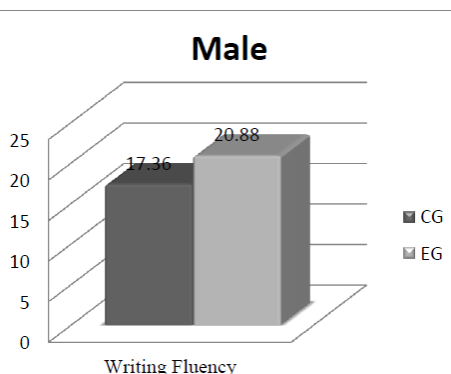

Figure1. Graphical representation of the writing fluency mean of the male

Fig. 1 displays that there was a noticeable difference in the average number of T-units per text for control and experimental groups. In comparison with male participants in the control group, participants wrote more fluent writings in the experimental one. According to the results of the study, there was significant difference between the mean of fluency in argumentative essays written by the males in the control and experimental groups; therefore, null hypothesis was rejected in this regard.

*B. Null Hypothesis/**H02***

H02: There is no positive evidence for the influence of pre-task planning on *fluency* of argumentative essays writing by Iranian **female** EFL learners with an intermediate proficiency level.

To this point, the fluency of the scripts produced by females in the control and experimental groups has been scrutinized separately. At this stage, the difference in percentage should be investigated. In a different way, the second research question was posed to scrutinize the impact of pre-task planning on the degree of development in fluency of the writing task. To this aim, the female written essays in the control group have been compared with the female written essays in the experimental one in terms of mean for each measure. The following tables seek to illustrate in the following tables. Each table is followed by some figures which show the improvement degree in bar graph. It should be remind that the results will be presented within two tables first of which referring to the results of descriptive statistics pertinent to the comparison of female participants' fluency scores in the control and experimental groups, and the second one to the results of the comparison for T-units, and the fluency.

In Table III, the essays written by the females in the control and experimental groups are compared regarding the average number of T-units per text. As can be seen, the means for the second sub-measure of fluency that is average number of T-units per text in the experimental group produced by the females were higher than those in the control group.

TABLE III.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS COMPARING WRITING FLUENCY OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONTROL & EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

	Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
FLUENCY	FCG	14	18.0000	3.63741	.97214
	FEG	16	21.0625	2.95452	.73863

Table 11 displays, among other things, the mean scores, and standard deviations of writing fluency of female participants in the control and experimental groups. The mean score of female control group (FCG) is 18.00 while that of female experimental group (FEG) equals 21.06. To see if the difference between the mean scores is statistically large or not, the *t* test table should be considered.

TABLE IV.
INDEPENDENT-SAMPLES T TEST RESULTS COMPARING WRITING FLUENCY OF FEMALE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONTROL AND EXPERIMENTAL GROUPS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t test for Equality of Means							
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Errors Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
									Lower	Upper	
FLUENCY	Equal Variances Assumed	.381	.542	-2.544	28	.017	-3.06250	1.20374	-5.52826	-.59674	
	Equal Variances not Assumed			-2.508	25.094	.019	-3.06250	1.22091	-5.57654	-.54846	

In as much as the value under Sig. (2-tailed) is .017, it could be construed that a statistically meaningful difference exists between female participants in the two groups. Writing fluency of females, hence, was improved by the pre-task treatment utilized in this study.

Using the following bar graph can help much to have a better picture of what has happened.
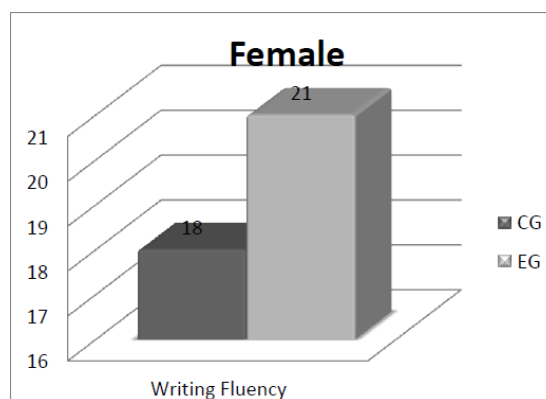

Figure 2. Graphical representation of the writing fluency mean of the female

According to Figure 2, the mean for the argumentative essays written by females in the experimental group was higher than those in the control group. However in both groups considerable progress was achieved, the participants in the experimental group overcome the control group in using clauses. This difference in percentage was noticeable.

Consequently, the pre-task treatment used in this study turned out to affect writing fluency of the female participants. Therefore, the null hypothesis is not rejected.

VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Referring to the first question of this study about the influence of pre-task planning on fluency of argumentative essays written by **male** EFL learners. Table I and II show that there is significant difference between the fluency of male essays in the control and experimental group. (It is here worthy to mention that for the null hypothesis to be rejected, the observed value of p must be smaller than the significance level of .05 [$p < .05$]. If the observed p-value is equal or greater than the significance level of .05, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected (Biria & Jafari, 2013)). Since the p-value for fluency of the texts written by the male in the experimental group is 0.21 and it is smaller than .05, the null hypothesis is rejected in this regard. This is supported by the study of Rahimpour (2011) in an assessment context according to which pre-task planning had effect on fluency. Therefore, the pre-task treatment leads to affect writing fluency of the male participants. Table I and II reveals the results of sub-measures of fluency (the average number of T-units per text) and fluency itself respectively for the essays written by the male in the control and experimental group. Generally speaking, the pre-task treatment used in this study helped learners to produce writings which are more fluent. As it can be conveyed in figure 1, the male participants in the experimental group developed a growth in number of T-units per text.

To consider second question of the study regarding the influence of pre-task planning on fluency of argumentative essay writing by **female** EFL learners at intermediate level, table III, and table IV demonstrate that there is significant difference between essays created by the participants in the control and experimental groups. In accordance with the finding results, pre-task planning enhances writing fluency of females. Therefore, it has affected the fluency of the texts and caused female to produce scripts which are more fluent. As it can be conveyed in Figure 2, experimental group developed a growth in number of T-units per text.

The effectiveness of the task-based instruction on teaching is supported by the study of Storch and Wigglesworth (2007) according to which writing tasks within a task-based framework lead to the production of more fluent texts.

In short, this study was conducted to scrutinize the efficacy of pre-task planning on the fluency of composition composed by Iranian intermediate learners. The outcomes of the study are an opportunity to express the rising progress in the use of T-units by the experimental groups.

APPENDIX A. NUMBER OF OCCURRENCE FOR EACH MEASURE IN CONTROL GROUP

Male Participants	Words	T-units	Clauses	Dependent Clauses	Error-Free T-units	Error-Free Clauses
1	289	23	29	6	9	14
2	285	21	28	7	8	14
3	284	21	27	6	7	15
4	278	18	25	5	6	12
5	273	17	25	8	6	13
6	265	19	26	3	7	14
7	254	17	25	5	7	13
8	248	16	24	4	6	12
9	237	16	23	3	5	11
10	220	12	20	2	3	9
11	215	11	19	3	3	9

Female Participants	Words	T-units	Clauses	Dependent Clauses	Error-Free T-units	Error-Free Clauses
1	295	23	28	5	10	15
2	287	23	29	7	8	15
3	286	22	30	8	9	15
4	283	21	30	9	10	16
5	281	19	27	8	8	15
6	270	19	28	7	9	16
7	269	19	27	8	9	16
8	261	18	26	7	7	14
9	255	18	24	2	5	12
10	245	15	23	4	4	10
11	235	14	24	9	5	11
12	231	16	21	5	6	10
13	224	14	22	3	5	11
14	219	11	20	1	2	8

APPENDIX B. NUMBER OF OCCURRENCE FOR EACH MEASURE IN EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

Male Participants	words	T-units	Clauses	Dependent Clauses	Error-Free T-units	Error-Free Clauses
1	334	25	35	10	14	30
2	329	23	33	10	13	24
3	325	22	32	10	10	16
4	316	21	33	12	14	19
5	313	21	29	8	12	18
6	288	20	31	11	9	16
7	278	19	33	14	9	24
8	265	19	28	9	7	15
9	247	18	24	6	5	11

Female Participants	Words	T-units	Clauses	Dependent Clauses	Error-Free T-units	Error-Free Clauses
1	332	27	42	15	18	38
2	329	26	43	17	17	39
3	324	24	43	19	15	33
4	312	23	40	17	15	28
5	309	23	40	17	14	31
6	299	22	41	19	11	31
7	280	22	37	15	14	25
8	283	20	33	13	10	20
9	276	19	29	10	7	19
10	265	19	32	13	12	16
11	261	20	35	15	12	19
12	258	20	34	14	13	18
13	252	19	35	10	11	17
14	249	19	34	15	10	16
15	245	17	34	17	9	15
16	241	17	26	9	9	13

APPENDIX C. QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF FLUENCY OF THE CONTROL GROUP

	Participants	N	Mean
Words	Male	11	258.90
	Female	14	260.07
T-units	Male	11	17.36
	Female	14	18
Clauses	Male	11	24.63
	Female	14	25.64

APPENDIX D. QUANTITATIVE MEASURES OF FLUENCY OF THE EXPERIMENTAL GROUP

	Participants	N	Mean
Words	Male	9	299.44
	Female	16	282.18
T-units	Male	9	20.88
	Female	16	21.06
Clauses	Male	9	30.88
	Female	16	36.12

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