

# Guided Task-based Planning and Writing Accuracy: The Case of Iranian Lower-intermediate EFL Learners

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**Abstract**—This study examined the effects of applying one type of guided task-based planning on pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners' writing accuracy. The guided pre-task planning used in this study was of three types: meaning-based, form-based and meaning and form based. To fulfill the purpose of the present study, forty eight low-intermediate female EFL learners' studying at Rahamooz Shokooch English language institute in Ghaemshahr, Mazandaran, Iran, were selected from among a total number of 100 students through their performance on the Nelson test of proficiency. The selected forty eight low-intermediate learners were randomly assigned to three experimental groups of sixteen students. In the form-based pre-task planning group, the learners were first taught how to plan the form of their written production in five minutes for eight consecutive sessions. In meaning-based pre-task planning condition, the learners were given instructions about planning the content of their argumentative writings in five minutes for eight sessions. In the third group, however, the learners were helped to focus both on form and content in five minutes for eight consecutive sessions. Then, they engaged in planning. The three groups received the same pre-test as post-test and the same topic in each of the eight sessions with the same examples. After collecting and analyzing the pretest and posttest data, the results showed the significantly superior effects of form- and meaning-based pre-task planning on the accuracy of the production the learners' writing.

**Index Terms**—guided pre-task planning, writing accuracy, meaning-based, form-based, meaning and form-based

## I. INTRODUCTION

Among the four skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing), writing is still the one that requires the constant attention of the foreign language educators as it has not received its due attention so far. Unlike listening and speaking, writing has to be taught to the learners; therefore, various strategies and techniques have been proposed to improve this skill (Hamidi & Montazeri, 2014). A favorable approach to the development of language skills including the writing skill has been the application of task-based language instruction (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2005) and there have been a number of researches on different aspects of 12 learners' performance of tasks (Ellis, 2003). A number of task planning designs and their influences on the language produced by learners in terms of accuracy, complexity and fluency have been studied by many researchers (Ellis, 2009; Foster & Skehan, 1999; Housen & Vedder, 2009). To highlight the significance of planning in the field of SLA, Ellis (2005) says "all spoken and written language use, even that appears effortless and automatic, involves planning". So speakers and writers must decide what they want to say and write and how to perform that. On account of importance of task-based planning in learners' task execution, manyexamines have centered on the performance of language learners and interaction of planning (Ellis, 1987; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Robinson, 1995; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

Kellog's (1996) model of writing seems to be an effective theory in writing and planning studies. This model consists of three systems of formulation, execution and monitoring. Each system consists of two main processes. Formulation, as the first step in writing, and the one which is relevant to the purpose of the present study, has two processes: planning and translating. Planning that involves finding goals organizes some ideas associated with these goals. Translating implies determining the vocabulary and syntactic structures and representing these phonologically.

According to Rezapanah and Hamidi (2013), writing is a complex skill in nature, so writing as one of the four main language skills needs to be practiced regularly to be mastered. Richards and Renandya (2002) also believe that writing is the most difficult skill for second language learners to overcome. The difficulty lies not only in creating and forming ideas but also in translating those ideas into meaningful texts. So tasks are central in learning to write and present a fundamental aspect of the teacher's planning and bringing of a writing course. The tasks teachers assign will aid learners to learn from their experience, to arise an understanding of the text and to control their writing skill.

Generally speaking, a lot of EFL students have problems with writing and do not find writing a very pleasant and easy experience. According to Montazeri, Hamidi, and Hamidi (2015), any strategy or technique which is partly capable of improving the learners' language proficiency should be taken into account to be investigated. One way to help the

learners overcome the problems they face in writing is to provide them with assistance in pre-task planning which involves writing about different topics after planning the form, meaning or both. We still need to do some more studies to be able to examine the possible effects of directing learners' attention to accuracy of production during writing task performance.

## II. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

### A. *Planning and Pre-task Planning*

In SLA planning has been regarded a significant process among several process which demanded in written performance, so in relation to the other processes of writing like monitoring, revising and evaluating, the role of planning which is important in writing should be taken into account. In the field of SLA for significance of planning Ellis says even the effortless language which is naturally occurring should be involved with planning. And also among all written and spoken language use, planning which is closely connected, can not be considered separately. Therefore according to Ellis all writers and all speakers require to determine what they write and what they say and also it is better to say how they do it (2005).

Ellis recognized two principal types of task planning; pre-task planning that takes place before performing the task, and within planning that relates to planning that takes place while performing the task (2005). Pre-task planning is one of the time types of task planning which takes place before the task performance. In fact, in pre-task planning, learners are provided with time and the actual task material to plan before the task performance (Ellis, 2005). Empirically, previous studies on the effects of both pre-task and within-task planning on writing have suggested that planning is effective on language performance in terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy in general (Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Sangarun, 2001; Skehan & Foster, 1999; Skehan, 1996; Wendel, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Yuan, 2001). Various works have shown that planning contributes to gains in fluency (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999). Crookes' (1989) examine, in which the participants were guided to plan both the meaning and the form of their speech, reported just higher complexity was achieved through both "meaning/form-based pre-task planning" than the "minimal pre-task planning" term.

The types of pre-task planning have been pointed to have an effect on all three aspects of performance, namely accuracy, fluency and complexity approximately. Some of studies expressed the Pre-task planning increase accuracy while others do not show any effect for it. Studying the effect of planning on the use of regular past tense, Ellis described that when learners had the opportunity for both pre-task and on-line planning, they produced more accurate language (1987). Mehnert's study showed that 1-minute planners produced a clearly more accurate language than non-planners (1998). However, there was no significant difference between the 1-minute planners and the 5-minute and 10-minute planners in terms of accuracy. In another studies pre-task planning did not contribute to greater accuracy (e.g., Crookes 1989, Wendel 1997). Ortega determined that pre-task planning was more accurate in the case of Spanish noun-modifier agreement, but no result was reported for articles (1999). Foster and Skehan detected that both detailed and undetailed pre-task planners were more accurate than the non-planners on a decision-making task, whereas only the undetailed pre-task planners made language with greater accuracy on a decision-making task than non-planners (1996). Some numbers of the studies have described positive effects on accuracy (e.g. Kawauchi, 2005; Mehnert, 1998).

### B. *Guided Planning*

Guided planning is utilized in this research which is one category of pre-task planning and also students can be predisposed to attend to linguistic form, meaning, or both form and meaning at the same time through guided planning then learners during writing use teacher-guided in which they plan the content and how to express the content in order to prepare the task performance. "Guided planning" is one option for pre-task planning which provides learners with specific instructions about what and how to plan. In fact, through guided planning learners can be predisposed to attend to linguistic form, to meaning or both meaning and form. In this way, learners' subsequent performance can be affected by their focus on some specific aspects of language (Ellis, 2005). Mehnert's examine depicted the difference in accuracy of the students with 1-minute planning and the students without planning (1998). It was also found that the guided planning group produces more and more accurate relative clauses in Kawauchi, (2005).

### C. *Task*

Prabhu was the first person who has applied task-based language instruction so as to teach plans and practice (1987). In Bangalore of southern Indian in 1979 it was Prabha who began his great experiments of task in order to put his principles in to action that appeared in his time. According to Prabhu (1987) students will get the point more effectively while their brains are concentrated on the work, instead of the language they are utilizing.

### D. *Form-based, Meaning-based and Meaning-form Based Instruction*

On the basis of grammatical parts, the proponents of grammar-focused and form-focused instruction keep that foreign language could be taught and students through deductive learning have to put every part together in the first step, in next step they attempt to use the rules of oral performance (Nishimura, 2000). Two particular examples are grammatical

translation and audio-lingual ways. According to Larsen-Freeman (2001), students should be memorized grammatical principles and practice the teacher's model by substitution and translation drills as accurately as possible.

Meaning-based instruction as next scheme of teaching, in this approach all children should naturally learn first language successfully, and even adults in this theory if they use and follow the natural principles of their first language learning, they could be mastered their foreign or second language (Long & Robinson, 1998). There are two particular examples like natural approach and direct approach that the characteristics of these approaches insist on meaning rather than on forms.

Based on Van Lier, giving grammatical forms separately does not reach to successful speltproduct and traditional grammatical teaching is out of date (1988). He said "The midst term, relating to meaning and form, fluency and accuracy, would appear to be the most sensible style to continue, and surely there presently looks to be a general consensus that it is unwise to neglect either area" (Van Lier, 1988 p. 276).

Based on Lightbown and Spada (1990) also depeacted that in oral production a higher degree of grammatical accuracy is expected in compounding of meaning-based and form-based.

#### *E. Form-based Planning and Meaning-based Planning*

Form-based planning is one of the classes of guided planning in which learners are influenced to attend to linguistic form. Actually in form-based planning learners are supplied with teachings and time before task performance to determine how to stay or write what they are going to say or write (Ellis, 2005).

Meaning-based planning is one of classes of guided planning in which learners are influenced to attend to meaning. Actually in meaning-based planning learners are supplied with teachings and time before task performance to determine what they are going to say or write (Ellis, 2005).

### III. METHODOLOGY

#### *A. Participants*

The participants of this study were female L2 learners, whose ages ranged from 12 to 23, chosen from a pool of learners who were from Persian language background, studying at the RahamoozShokooh institute in Ghaemshahr, Mazandaran. The number of participants at the beginning was 100 participants. Then a NELSON test of proficiency was administered for the sake of homogeneity and 48 learners who were of lower intermediate proficiency level were selected. The researcher selected the scores with the range of 34-52 which were one standard deviation below and above the mean (Mean=43.8 and standard deviation=9.07). Later, they were randomly assigned into three groups (16 participants for each group).

#### *B. Material*

A version of Nelson test was used in order to select three homogeneous groups of participants. The numbers of test items were 50. The test included three skills of structure, vocabulary and pronunciation. The other material for this study was six argumentative tasks involving learners in argumentative writing for all the three groups. In these argumentative tasks six topics were selected from the book 'For And Against' by L.G. Alexander to be written about by the learners. The main instrument was argumentative task in which one topic was selected as pre-test and post test. Before the treatment phase, the topic was given to students and for the second time it was given after the treatment phase. The topic "It is foolish to give money to the baggers" was given for pre-test and post-test and students writing. Eighteen students were selected randomly from another institute to take the pre-test and wrote about this topic for the purpose of piloting the instrument. The reliability of this topic was 0.90. And also this topic was shown to nine experts in the field to make sure they are suitable for the purpose of this study.

#### *C. Measure of Accuracy*

One measure of accuracy, Error-Free, didn't hold any errors (in lexical choice, syntax and morphology were regarded. Mistakes in lexical were determined equally errors in collection or lexical form). The same measurement used by Larsen-freeman, (2006), Rahimpour, (2008), Errasti, (2003) and Storch, (2009).

#### **T-Unit**

The other name of T-Unit is "Terminable Unit". "It is a measurement of the linguistic complexity of sentences, defined as the shortest unit (The Terminable Unit, Minimal Terminable Unit, or T-Unit) which a sentence can be subtract to, and consists of one independent clause together with whatever dependent clauses are attached to it" (Richards & Schmidt, 2000 p. 566). For example the sentence *After she had eaten, Merry went to bed* would bedescribed as containing one T-Unit. Compound sentences contain two or more T-Units.

### IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

The present study proposed to look into the effects of pre-task (guided) planning on lower-intermediate EFL learner's written production. The following study questions treated here were:

#### *A. Research Questions*

In order to achieve the purpose of the present research, the following three research questions were posed:

1. Do lower-intermediate L2 learners produce more accurate writings when they engage in meaning-based pre-task (guided) planning than form-based pre-task (guided) planning?
2. Do lower-intermediate L2 learners produce more accurate writings when they engage in meaning-based pre-task (guided) planning than meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning?
3. Do lower-intermediate L2 learners produce more accurate writings when they engage in form-based pre-task (guided) planning than meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning?

### B. Research Hypotheses

According to the three research questions of the present study, the following null hypotheses were formulated:

H1: Meaning-based pre-task (guided) planning and form-based pre-task (guided) planning do not differ in their effects on Iranian lower intermediate L2 learners' writing accuracy.

H2: Meaning-based pre-task (guided) planning and meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning do not differ in their effects on Iranian lower intermediate L2 learners' writing accuracy.

H3: Form-based pre-task (guided) planning and meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning do not differ in their effects on Iranian lower intermediate L2 learners' writing accuracy.

### C. Data Analysis Procedure

Analysis of students' performance was conducted by using the SPSS software. To answer questions one, two, three, the researcher investigates gain-score of pre-test and post-test phase in writing scores performance (gain score = post-test score– pre-test score). Then mean, standard deviation and significance of the students from the gain-score of pre-test and post-test were considered.

The result of the tests of normality of the gain-scores for meaning, form, and meaning-form based accuracy groups and also their histogram show that the researcher would be allowed to use the parametric tests to compare the performance of the three groups. In all three cases, the sig values are larger than the cut-off value of .05 (Group one = .89; Group two, .19; Group 3, .29). Therefore, the data collected from the three groups did not violate the assumption of normality and the researcher would be allowed to use parametric tests.

TABLE 1.  
ONE-WAY ANOVA RESULT FOR ACCURACY MEASURES  
ANOVA

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.773	2	.386	12.576	.000
Within Groups	1.383	45	.031		
Total	2.156	47			

According to the results shown in One Way ANOVA the sig value of .000 is much smaller than the cut-off value of .05 which means the performances of the three groups were statistically different from each other and a Tukey Post hoc test was run and the results are displayed.

TABLE 2.  
THE RESULT OF POST HOC TEST MULTIPLE COMPARISONS  
TUKEY HSD

(I) VAR00002	(J)VAR00002	Mean Difference(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval Lower Bound	Upper Bound
1.00	2.00	.01750	.06198	.957	-.1327	.1677
	3.00	-.26000*	.06198	.000	-.1402	-.1098
2.00	1.00	.01750	.06198	.957	-.1677	.1327
	3.00	-.27750*	.06198	.000	-.4277	-.1273
3.00	1.00	.26000*	.06198	.000	.1098	.4102
	2.00	.27750*	.06198	.000	.1273	.4277

\*. The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Therefore, form-based pre-task (guided) planning and meaning-based pre-task (guided) planning did not differ in their effects on the writing accuracy of Iranian Low-intermediate EFL learners. (Mean difference = .017 Sig Value = .957). Accordingly, the first hypothesis is confirmed.

However, on account of the size of Mean difference = .26 Sig Value = .000 between group one (meaning-based pre-task planning) and group three (meaning and form based pre-task planning) the difference was statistically significant in the case of writing accuracy. Accordingly the second hypothesis is rejected.

Moreover, considering the mean difference (.277) and sig value (.000) between group two (form-based pre-task planning) and group three (meaning and form based pre-task planning), it shows that the difference was statistically significant on writing accuracy. Therefore the third null-hypothesis is also rejected.

## V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Some of studies expressed the pre-task planning increase accuracy while others do not show any effect for it. Skehan and Foster (1997) described that undetailed pre-task planning improved accuracy on the personal and narrative tasks, but no consequence was encountered for the decision-making task. Foster and Skehan described that while teacher-led pre-task planning resulted in greater accuracy, no consequence for learners' focusing on form or meaning during planning was found (1999). Some number of research, on accuracy described great results like Kawauchi (2005) and Menhert (1998) but it was not confirmed in examines by Ellis and Yuan (2004) and Yuan and Ellis (2003). According to Lightbown and Spada a prominent level of accuracy in oral product is anticipated in compounding teaching of form and meaning (1990).

Foster and Skehan (1996) established that the type of task influenced the effect of planning on accuracy. They showed that both detailed and un-detailed pre-task planning were more accurate than the non-planners on a decision-making task, whereas only the un-detailed pre-task planners made language with greater accuracy on a decision-making task than non-planners. Based on Menhert in oral production the effects of planning on accuracy, fluency and complexity (three aspects of language) could be measured when 10 minute for planning time was given (1998).

Sangarun (2005) in Thailand, among different kinds of planning (like minimal, form focused, meaning-based and meaning-form based planning), he engaged 40 high school students in order to perform under one planning condition. Students' attention was drawn to up to four specific structures in each task in the form-focused planning condition. Sangaran (2005) found that form-focused planning along with two other planning conditions had positive effects on students' oral production, including accuracy. However, no significant difference among the three pre-planning conditions was described. She contended that former research may have not been successful in drawing the learners' attention to form and accuracy properly.

In addition, some studies proposed that accuracy is raised when pre-task planning is allowed (Ellis, 1987; Kawauchi, 2005; Menhart, 1998). Sangarun (2005) discovered that focusing on form, meaning, and form and meaning influenced accuracy significantly. In the aspect of Spanish noun-modifier agreement Ortega supplied a mixed obtaining which was that planning raised accuracy (1999). Based on the results of this study, it is inferred that planning is effective. Different planning bases and learners' production: Focusing on only the meaning was like the form only in pre-task (guided) planning in which learners would not be able to increase writing accurately. The present work confirms the hypothesis which guiding lower-intermediate learners' attention to both meaning and form of language improves their production. Meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning improves low-intermediate learners' performance more than two other groups.

Pre-task (guided) planning is a necessary methodological issue in language teaching and learning. Students need guidance as to how to use the planning time to make best use of their planning time. Therefore, our students may not know how exactly to do in pre-task planning if they are not guided. Teachers may have the responsibility to inform students to meaning and form focused (guided) planning, based on Lightbown and Spada in compounding of meaning-based and form-focused teaching, a higher level of grammatical accuracy in oral production is expected (1990). And also in this study both higher level of accuracy in writing performance in meaning and form based pre-task (guided) planning is reported.

This study has important pedagogic implications for L2 writing by showing that meaning and form based pre-task guided planning significantly influences accuracy of written production. In fact, language teachers can readily boost learners' accuracy of writing by first supplying them with instructions to make them focus on meaning and form for their subsequent production and then allowing them to plan their writings prior to their actual writing activity.

#### APPENDICES

##### Test of Normality for Group One (Meaning-Based Accuracy)

TEST OF NORMALITY						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
VAR00001	.109	16	.200*	.974	16	.896

\*.This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

##### Test of Normality for Group Two (Form-Focused Accuracy)

TEST OF NORMALITY						
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
VAR00001	.167	16	.200*	.924	16	.195

\*.This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

##### Test of Normality for Group Three (Meaning and Form Focused Accuracy)

## TEST OF NORMALITY

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
VAR00001	.118	16	.200*	.935	16	.293

\*.This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a. Lilliefors Significance Correction

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