Effect of Planning on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Mastery of Writing Skill

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Abstract—**Accomplishing mastery in writing is difficult for EFL learners and needs employing special teaching strategies. Planning is one of the strategies that has been of interest to EFL researchers since a long time ago because it is believed that it affects learners' quality of writing. Planning can be looked at from three perspectives: its timing (before or during writing), its scope (micro or macro), and the number of people involved in it (individual or collaborative). This study focused on the third perspective and sought to explore if both individual and collaborative planning can improve EFL learners' writing quality. The study also investigated if these two types of planning impact on the components of writing (*content, organization, vocabulary, language use*) differentially. Utilizing a quasi-experimental design, two homogenized groups of 26 students all having the same L1 received an eight-session treatment. The Paired-samples T-tests run on the pretest and posttest scores of the participants indicated significant improvement in their writing performance. The Multivariate Analysis of Variance, comparing the four components of the writings, revealed that all four components were affected significantly with the content being affected more positively. Findings of the study highlight the importance of planning before writing tasks.**

Index Terms—**writing skill, collaborative planning, individual planning, writing components**

I. INTRODUCTION

Up to the end of 1960s, writing was considered to be secondary to speech and a reinforcing tool for learning vocabulary and grammar. Actually, it was dealt with as a vehicle for practicing language (Silva, 1990). Nevertheless, due to scientific advances, writing gradually became synonymous with composing, and the process of composition began to gain importance. Also, theoretical models emerged that aimed at providing teachers with guidelines about how to teach this skill. The presented models generally involved three basic systems: *Formulation*, *Execution* and *Monitoring*. According to Kellog's (1996) model, for example, each basic system has two processes. Formulation involves planning and translation; execution involves programming and executing; and monitoring involves reading and editing. As a result of such models, learners could be active and able to generate thoughts and ideas.

By the emergence of new trends in language learning, writing witnessed a great shift from the strictly product-focused concerns of correctness in grammar, usage, and mechanics to more process-focused concerns. As a process, writing is a meaningful activity for thinking and problem-solving and involves organizing and expressing thoughts, generating ideas, brainstorming, revising, and editing.

Since writing is a very complex cognitive activity, writers need to be in control of a host of variables all at the same time (Bell & Burnaby, 1984). This involves synthesizing or integrating information at the discourse level, in addition to the sentence level. It seems that writing is so intricate and difficult that even many native speakers of English never truly master it (Celce Murcia & McIntosh, 1979).

Consequently, the majority of learners consider writing as boring and are quite reluctant to produce written texts. In Iran, this skill should receive even more attention in EFL classrooms because it is a key element of giving and receiving information. Learners' linguistics ability is also usually measured by their written outputs. Accordingly, attention to anything that facilitates and improves EFL learners' writing processes, including planning time, seems essential.

Ellis (2005) states that planning influences the linguistic form. In order to attend to form and meaning equally, Willis (1991) suggests the pre-, mid- and post-task activities within task-based approaches to instruction. These kinds of tasks provide opportunities for achieving instructionally specified goals. In other words, to attain the desired pedagogic outcomes, some tasks may be more useful than others.

Planning is one of the task choices that can affect the quality of written assignments. As stated, there are three general types of planning: planning before or during writing, macro and micro planning, and planning individually or collaboratively. The last type of planning is the focus of this article. Unlike individual planning, collaborative planning supports group-based methods in instructional settings. Based on studies in the field, although positive effects have been found for individual planning, it is collaborative planning that consistently improves both educational and emotional status of learners (Johnson & Johnson, 1992).

Regardless of the type of writing, students need to introduce one main idea and come up with some chief points to support that idea. In addition, students need to develop the text through using reasons, examples, details, etc. Furthermore, learners need to offer information in an organized manner and to connect ideas through using appropriate

linking words or grammatical and lexical elements to help the reader understand the flow of ideas. All the elements should be integrated in order to create an acceptable and cohesive written text.

The above paragraph states the tenets of the approach that views text as an analyzable whole and is the basis of the scoring method suggested by Jacobs et al. (1981) called ESL Composition Profile. In this scoring procedure, writing components are summarized as content, organization, discourse, syntax, vocabulary, and punctuation. Analytic scoring measures learners' performance on each component and helps the writer find his/her knowledge gap properly.

Two research questions were investigated in this study:

1. Does planning have any effect on EFL learners' writing ability?

2. Which component of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) is affected most by planning time?

The two null hypothesis below were driven from the above research questions:

H_{01}. Planning does not have any effect on EFL learners' writing ability.

H_{02}. Planning time does not affect writing components (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) differentially.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Pre-task planning enables learners to encounter the outline of the task they are going to perform so that they can go about the complete task with added facility and sophistication. It gives learners the chance to practice performing the task before the main performance. Within a task, planning can be manipulated based on the available time. This involves rapid planning (Ochs, 1979). In the context of speaking, Yuan and Ellis (2003) detected two new types of planning in the literature: macro-planning and micro-planning. These strategic planning types provide learners with access to more information and increase the complexity of their speech.

Planning engages students in implicit processes of acquisition. It is believed that providing learners with greater planning opportunities has beneficial effects on their language development through pushing them to extend what they are capable of doing with language (Foster & Skehan, 1999).

Recently there have been suggestions in the literature to incorporate collaboration, too, in second language acquisition studies. It is hypothesized that collaboration may lead to deeper reflection on form–meaning relationship as different viewpoints can cross-fertilize each other.

According to Foster and Skehan (1999), and as proponents of teacher-led planning say, in group-based collaborative planning the amount of time needed for agreeing on the way of doing the task may reduce, but performance may be negatively affected and be of little efficiency. Teacher control might be an efficient instrument for directing learners' focus on relevant items of the task.

Strategies which follow planning typically involve focused and unfocused instructions to students to plan their performance during the task. Foster and Skehan (1996) measured the influence of planning on doing different tasks. They reported greater complexity and fluency in language for planning without guidance in comparison to no-planning condition. But, they also reported superior effect for guided planning condition compared with the unguided planning condition, and marginally better fluency. They hypothesized that when planning is not guided, learners use preparation time to rehearse language; in contrast, the guided planners intensify the complexity of the task and sometimes the accuracy gets less attention (Foster & Skehan, 1996).

Considering the theoretical perspective behind collaborative learning, the theory dates back to the social constructivist view of Vygotsky (1978) stating that children learn by being scaffolded or mediated by more competent adults or peers. Scaffolding makes children be able to cope with tasks that they could never do on their own. Webb and Farivar (1994) point out that some children are often more cognizant of things that other children have problem understanding; These children can help the less cognizant ones to concentrate on the features that are relevant to the problem and can explain it to them in a readily accessible way. Children's interaction with each other also provides them with thinking, reasoning and problem-solving models provided by the more competent learners. These skills in turn foster the social construction of new understandings, knowledge and skills (King, 1999, as cited in Gillies & Ashman, 2003). Similar results were found in the study done by Foster and Ohta (2005) who demonstrated that language development is not limited to the interactive processes but also strategies such as negotiation of meaning, co-construction, other-correction, and continuers.

In group- or pair-work, children are more disposed to use L2 for teacher-initiated functions such as suggesting, questioning and providing feedback. Thus, collaborative work in any form may increase the quantity and quality of L2 practice that learners get involved in. In other words, assigning learners to work in groups provides more opportunities for practicing L2 (Ohta, 2001).

Kowal and Swain (1994) but are against pairing of students with different ability levels. They believe that such pairing, especially when the difference is large, may result in the less proficient learner being overwhelmed by the more proficient one. In other words, unequal proficiency pairing may be to the disadvantage of the less proficient learner. Along the same lines, Storch (2013) questions the usefulness of pairing students of unequal proficiency unless they work collaboratively. In a previous study, Storch (2005) had investigated collaborative writing in a classroom-based setting. Students were given a choice to write in pairs or individually. A comparison of the texts produced by pairs and

individual learners revealed that paired learners produced shorter but qualitatively more complex and accurate texts. According to the interviews from this study, most students were positive about the experience.

In 1981, Johnson and colleagues examined benefits of the cooperative learning in comparison to individual learning. They reviewed 122 studies to examine effects of the co-operative, competitive, and individualistic learning types on achievement. The results showed that, in comparison to interpersonal competition and individual work, cooperation stimulates higher achievement and productivity. The results, likewise, did not change across subject areas, age groups, and cognitive demands of the tasks.

Many scholars including Madsen (1983) and McCafferty (1992) assert that there are many elements to be considered in writing. These factors include form, content, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, penmanship, speed, mechanics, relevance, elaboration, originality, dictation, lay out, coherence, cohesion, unity, organization, and logic. In this regard, Madsen (1983) enumerates a number of different components and skills to be tested in writing. For Stern (1992), vocabulary, structure, accuracy, and speed of script writing, spelling, punctuation, content, and organization of material are all elements of writing. Meanwhile, McCafferty (1992) suggests grammar, coherence, relevance, and structure of the argument as the essential attributes of a written task. Jacobs et al. (1981), proposed five components for writing. In this regard, based on ESL Composition Profile (1981), writing is viewed as a communicative skill with five components namely content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

It looks that, preparing an opportunity to focus on the main elements of written texts makes students pay attention to grammatical and lexical structures and try to include the main components in any kind of writing. Therefore, planning time to organize an essay first, as a distinctive step in the writing process, is an important part. Planning provides an opportunity to review writing elements and take the efficient linguistic knowledge. Directing students at the earlier stage helps them attend to specific points at the later stage.

Scott (1995, p. 139) argues that "teaching foreign language writing is essential at all levels of language study" if students are to succeed in managing the time and focusing on content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics as the main components.

In general, there are four major methods of scoring in writing assessment. These methods as studied by Bailey (1984) are:
1) Holistic scoring
2) Analytic method
3) Primary trait scoring
4) Frequency count method

Brown (2001) defined holistic scoring as "an approach in which the teachers use a single general scale to give a single rating for each student's language production" (p. 61). But holistic scoring of a written text has the disadvantage that it provides situations that students will not be aware of their knowledge gap. In contrast, in analytic scoring each component of the writing is scored according to a descriptor designed for that purpose. In primary trait scoring, each text is scored based on one trait that is considered to be primary, such as persuading. Frequency count is but based on determining word frequency. Taking all these scales into account it seems that, the analysis of each feature in a text can help students to be more aware of their lacks in writing. Therefore, the analytic rubric of Jacobs et al. (1981) was used in the rating stage of the present study which examined the writing performance of Persian speakers learning English language. According to this scale, each paper was rated on the writing components including *content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics* out of 100 (Content 30 points, Organization 20 points, Syntax 25 points, Vocabulary 20 points, Mechanics 5 points).

III. METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of this study were 52 male and female Iranian university students. 26 of the participants were male and 26 female. The first language of all of the participants was Persian and their ages ranged from 20 to 25. Before taking part in the study, all of the participants had studied English for several years in different language schools and had completed at least two English conversation books.

Instruments

A simplified version of a proficiency test—taken from Top Notch/Summit Placement Test A (Saslow & Asher, 2006)—consisting of listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar sections was prepared. The test included listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar sections. For the listening section the participants had to listen to two audio texts and answer a few multiple-choice questions that followed them. The reading section consisted of one passage followed by true or false questions. And finally, the vocabulary and grammar sections measured the participants' general knowledge of these elements.

The test had already been given to a similar group of students and its reliability was established though running a Chronbach Alpha test. Every attempt was made to select items that were exactly directed at measuring the students' general English proficiency. Therefore, the test could also be considered to be valid. Other materials used included some writing topics for pretest and posttest and treatment sessions which were taken from the book '*How to Prepare for the TOEFL Essay*' Edited by *Abbas Zahedi* (2002).

Data Collection Procedure

Out of 190 randomly chosen students who took the placement test, 52 intermediate students were included in the study. These students were randomly divided into two groups each with 26 members of both genders. After dividing the participants into two mixed groups, the groups were further subdivided into two male and female groups each. The participants were divided into male and female groups because four groups were needed to carry out the research, but according to regulations of the Ministry of Education in Iran, male and female students cannot be put in the same class in language institutes. Therefore, there were four groups, two male groups and two female groups each with 13 students. Participants in all of the four groups then received the pretest for writing. They were required to write a 100- to 150-word text about one of the two topics given to them. When the pretest scores were collected, a One-way ANOVA was run on them to see if the groups were homogeneous. The groups were not significantly different from each other in terms of their writing ability and result of the Levene's Equality of Error Variance test, which is performed as part of ANOVA, revealed that there was no significant difference across the four groups (P=.071>.05, df=3, 48, F=2.490) in terms of the scores dispersion.

After these preliminary stages, eight treatment sessions were held in each group. In each gender category, students in one group worked individually and in the other collaboratively, that is, they were paired up. In the collaborative groups, the students chose their own partners and had the opportunity of collaborative planning throughout the treatment sessions and during the posttest. However, after planning, each learner wrote individually about the topic he or she had selected.

Treatment Sessions and Scoring Procedure

During the treatment sessions, the participants were first given some information about the components of ESL composition. These components included *content, organization, vocabulary,* and *language use*. Then, a topic was given to them and they were asked to plan (one male and one female groups individually, and the other two groups in pairs) and produce a 100- to 150-word text about it. The teacher, afterwards, provided the learners with analytic feedback about each of the writing components. Each written text was assessed on each of these multiple dimensions by some qualitative criteria from *Excellent* to *Very Poor*. In this way, the learners had the chance of knowing about their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to actual writing during the first four treatment sessions, the learners were also taught about the structure of topic sentence, supporting sentences, paragraph unity, different kinds of paragraphs (description, cause & effect, argumentation, and comparison & contrast) and the required expressions for each of these paragraph types.

During the two following sessions the students were taught on how to appropriately use mechanics including indentation, capitalization, comma, semicolon, etc. Finally, in the last two sessions, the learners were provided with some useful grammatical as well as word formation information and appropriate formulaic expressions.

Since assessing written texts in terms of quantitative results needs precision, scoring the participants' written productions in this study was done on the basis of Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring profile. According to this assessment profile, each text is scored out of 100. This analytic scoring measures learners' written performance on the five components of *content, organization, vocabulary, language use,* and *mechanics*. The maximum score assigned to each component based on Jacobs et al.'s descriptor is as the following: Content 30 points, Organization 20 points, Language use 25 points, Vocabulary use 20 points, and finally Mechanics 5 points.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS

To investigate effects of the treatments, some statistical analyses were performed. First of all, normality of scores in the pretest was checked through running a 1-sample K-S test. The following table shows the results of this test for all four groups.

TABLE 1
TESTS OF NORMALITY OF SCORES' DISTRIBUTIONS AT PRETEST

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test				
	male individual pretest	male collaborative pretest	female individuals pretest	female collaborative pretest
N	13	13	13	13
Test Statistic	.135	.118	.133	.215
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.200[c,d]	.200[c,d]	.200[c,d]	.102[c]

a. Test distribution is Normal.

Then, a One-way ANOVA accompanied by a Levene's homogeneity test was run. The purposes of running these tests were to first ascertain that the mean scores of the groups were not substantially different from each other and second to make sure that the groups' variances were almost equal at the beginning of the study.

TABLE 2
ANOVA TEST RUN ON PRETEST SCORES

pretest scores	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	961.135	3	320.378	2.490	.071
Within Groups	6175.846	48	128.663		
Total	7136.981	51			

The ANOVA test conducted on the pretest scores showed no significant difference among the groups' pretest scores at P=.07>.05 level. The accompanying Levene's test of equality of error variances or the homogeneity test also revealed that the groups of the study were comparable with each other, since the *Sig* value calculated, as represented in Table 3, was larger than .05.

TABLE 3
LEVENE'S TEST OF EQUALITY OF ERROR VARIANCES

Levene's Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.554	3	48	.648

One of the main objectives of this study was to see if planning had any effect on the participating EFL learners' writing ability. To test the related hypothesis, the participants' posttest scores were also entered into the statistical program and Paired-samples T-tests were run. The purpose of running these tests was to compare the groups' pretest and posttest means. Results of the tests are given in Table 4 below. The *Sig.* values in Table 4 show significant differences between the pretest and posttest scores of the all four groups at $P<0.001$ level. In other words, the participants made significant gains from the pretests to the posttests as a result of treatments. To understand about the strength of the differences between the pretest and posttest results, it was also necessary to calculate the effect sizes. The formula for the effect size calculation for paired-samples T-tests is $t^2/t^2 + (N-1)$. The calculated effect sizes for the groups in this study using information from Table 4 are given below the same Table. As can be seen, the strengths of the differences in individual planning situations both for male and female students are slightly higher than the strengths of the differences in collaborative groups but in both conditions the differences are very strong according to Cohen's (1988) criteria for interpreting effect sizes.

TABLE 4
PAIRED-SAMPLES T-TESTS SHOWING GROUPS' PROGRESS FROM PRETEST TO POSTTEST

		Paired Differences						Sig. (2-tailed)
				95% (CI)				
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1	male individual pretest - male individual posttest	-17.61538	6.62745	-21.62031	-13.61046	-9.583	12	.000
Pair 2	male collaborative pretest - male collaborative posttest	-19.15385	10.05689	-25.23116	-13.07653	-6.867	12	.000
Pair 3	female individuals pretest - female individual posttest	-19.30769	8.49887	-24.44351	-14.17188	-8.191	12	.000
Pair 4	female collaborative pretest - female collaborative posttest	-15.15385	7.50385	-19.68837	-10.61932	-7.281	12	.000

Effect size for male individual planning group: 91.78/91.78 + (14) = .87
Effect size for male collaborative planning group: 47.61/47.61+ (14) = .77
Effect size for female individual planning group: 67.24/67.24 + (14) = .83
Effect size for female collaborative planning group: 53/53 + (14) = .79

Another purpose of this study was to see which component of writing was affected by planning type or whether they were affected differentially. It should be noted that during the treatment sessions some detailed data were collected from the participants in terms of their performance on different components of writing. These components included content, organization, vocabulary, and language use. To see which component of writing was affected by planning time, we had to run a One-way MANOVA. However, MANOVA has some assumptions that should be satisfied before running the test. The first of these assumptions is multivariate normality which is examined by calculating Mahallonobis distance. The result of this test is given in Table 5. For four dependent variables, the maximum Mahal distance calculated should not exceed 18.47. But, our maximum Mahal value is slightly larger than 26 which means we have had outliers among our participants. In such cases, Pallant (2013) suggests examining Cook's distance to see if it exceeds 2 or even more stringently 1. Cook's distance gives us an estimate of the effect of outliers on the normality of the multivariate distribution. Fortunately, the maximum value for this test in our table is equal to .778 which is smaller than one. This finding puts us on a safe ground to continue with our analysis.

TABLE 5
TESTS OF MULTIVARIATE NORMALITY

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
Mahal. Distance	.366	26.070	3.923	4.937	52
Cook's Distance	.005	.778	.033	.107	52

a. Dependent Variable: individual and collaborative

Another assumption of MANOVA is homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices. The Box's test tells us whether we have violated this assumption or not. The *Sig* value in this table should be larger than .001. The *Sig* value we have calculated, as shown in table 6, indicates that we have not violated this assumption.

TABLE 6
BOX'S TEST OF EQUALITY OF COVARIANCE MATRICES

Box's M	22.555
F	2.060
df1	10
df2	11952.191
Sig.	.024

The last assumption of MANOVA that should be examined, in addition to the common assumptions of general linear models, is the homogeneity of error variances. This assumption is tested by Levene's test. The *Sig* value calculated for each level of the dependent variable should exceed .05 for this assumption to be met. This was the case in this study as shown in Table 7.

TABLE 7
HOMOGENEITY TESTS OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES (LEVENE'S TEST)

	F	df1	df2	Sig.
content	.164	1	50	.687
organization	1.546	1	50	.219
vocabulary	3.416	1	50	.070
language use	.451	1	50	.505

Tables 8 and 9, that is, Multivariate Tests and Tests of Between-Subjects Effects show the results of a One-way MANOVA which was used to investigate the second hypothesis.

TABLE 8
DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GROUPS ON A LINEAR COMBINATION OF DEPENDENT VARIABLES (MULTIVARIATE TESTS)

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.
Planning Type	Pillai's Trace	.254	4.008[b]	4.000	47.000	.007
	Wilks' Lambda	.746	4.008[b]	4.000	47.000	.007
	Hotelling's Trace	.341	4.008[b]	4.000	47.000	.007
	Roy's Largest Root	.341	4.008[b]	4.000	47.000	.007

TABLE 9
TESTS OF BETWEEN-SUBJECTS EFFECTS

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Planning Type	content	99.692	1	99.692	15.359	.000	.235
	organization	6.942	1	6.942	6.958	.011	.122
	vocabulary	3.769	1	3.769	9.280	.004	.157
	language use	23.558	1	23.558	9.311	.004	.157

According to the results in Table 8, there has indeed been an effect for planning. But, it is clear only from Table 9 that content has been affected the most followed by language use, vocabulary, and organization. These comparisons can be made by looking at *F, Sig, and Partial Eta Squared* values in the relevant columns in Table 6. The results, therefore, force us to reject the second null hypothesis of the study which hypothesized no difference in the effect of planning type on writing components.

V. DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSION

This study was conducted to find out if planning had any effect on EFL learners' writing ability, as well as to see which component of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) was affected most by the planning type. Results of the analysis revealed significant differences between pretest and posttest scores which meant planning had a positive effect on EFL learners' writing performance. This suggested that if learners are given planning time before writing, whether individually or collaboratively, they will produce more accurate and more appropriate texts. These results are in accordance with the previous studies that reported benefits for planning before writing (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ojima, 2006; Storch, 2005). Findings of this study but contradicted some of the previous studies (e.g.,

Elola & Oskoz, 2010, Nixon, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) which reported more effect for collaborative planning in comparison with individual planning. In general, findings of this study revealed that through planning EFL learners are able to produce more organized texts with better content, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, and organization regardless of what type of planning they are involved in.

Concerning second hypothesis of the study, it is said that learners largely focus on meaning rather than form when they are given planning time before writing (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Gilabert, 2005; Ortega, 1999; Wigglesworth, 1997). Even though the grammatical accuracy of the students in this study was improved, the most highly affected aspect of their writing was content which is in a way in conformity with the findings of these studies. In brief, in the present study, all planners improved a lot in going through the writing tasks. More specifically, they tended to focus on meaning and planed the content of their writings more than any other component. Because of the lack of control groups, no comparison was made between planners and non-planners. However, from the very strong effect sizes, it can be speculated that planners would perform better than non-planners. This, of course, needs empirical proof.

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