



## UNCOVERING NEW TRENDS OF INVESTIGATION IN WRITTEN TASK PLANNING

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### ABSTRACT

*Task planning is considered as an influential variable that can impact the performance of both written and spoken tasks. Although planning has been fully investigated in spoken tasks, fewer investigators have paid attention to the role of planning in written task. To this end, the present paper tries to provide a theoretical background for task planning and report researchers' findings concerned with written task planning. Based on the findings of other studies, it provides some recommendations for further research. In this case the article tries to uncover those aspects of written language planning that need more investigation.*

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**Keywords:** Accuracy, Complexity, Fluency, Language planning, Task based teaching.

### Contribution/ Originality

This study contributes in the existing literature of planning in language classes. Its primary purpose is to introduce new trends of research in the field of planning used by language teachers.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) many researchers have tried to study different aspects of task performance (Bygate *et al.*, 2001; Ellis, 2003). A variety of variables have been determined that influence task performance. Among the influencing variables some of them have shown to have consistent effects on task productions, but some of them have not. Task planning is one variable that has relatively shown considerable effect on second language (L2) production (Ellis, 2005). All types of language use, either spoken or written, are influenced to some extent by planning. The purpose of the present paper is to review the effect of task planning on the performance of written language. To this end, first task planning is defined and different types of planning are introduced. Then, theoretical underlying assumptions of task planning will be

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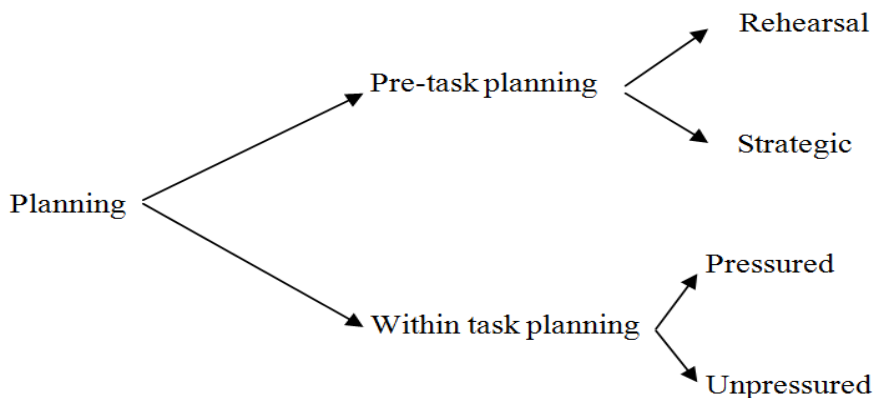
elaborated. Finally, some recent studies concerned with the effect of task planning in written language will be introduced and drawn conclusions will be presented.

### 1.1. Task Planning

Newell and Simon (1972) define planning as goal-oriented mental activities that people are involved in to obtain a particular objective. The concept of planning draws on information processing theory. It is believed that human has a limited processing capacity and cannot attend completely different aspects of task at the same time (Anderson, 1993). This fact causes second language learners cannot focus on both form and meaning at the same time; therefore, they have to prioritize one aspect over another (VanPatten, 1990; Skehan, 1996). It worth knowing that this capacity limitation can be compensated by planning linguistic or propositional aspects of language; in this way learners are able to enhance the quality of their output (Skehan, 1996). Ellis (2005) considers planning as a problem solving activity because in order to influence the audience in a preferred way, planning helps language users to decide what linguistic devices should be selected.

The main classification of planning was suggested by Ellis (2005). He suggests two main planning classifications: pre-task planning and within task planning. Pre-task planning happens before doing the main task and is further divided into strategic and rehearsal (repetition) planning. Within task planning occurs during the performing the main task and is further categorized as pressured and unpressured based on the time available for doing the task (Figure 1). Ellis (2005) believes that pre-task planning provides access to the actual task materials. Rehearsal task provides an opportunity for language users to try the task before the main performance. It provides a time for learners to repeat the task as a preparation for a subsequent performance. However, strategic planning prepares learners by introducing the content that they need during the main performance and they are familiarized with how to express the content.

Figure-1. Principal types of planning (adapted from Ellis (2005)).



The next principle type of planning is within-task planning. This type of planning happens during the main task (Ellis, 2005). Two subcategories of within-task planning are pressured and unpressured. Unpressured performance provides opportunity for learners to engage in careful online planning. It results in 'planned language use' ((Ochs (1979), cited in Ellis (2005)). Pressured

performance equips learners with rapid planning. It results in what Ochs called 'unplanned language use.

### 3. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF PLANNING

The study of task planning draws on three main theoretical frameworks (Ellis, 2005). These include: 1. Tarone's (1982) theory of stylistic variation, 2. Levelt's (1989) model of speech production, and 3. cognitive models of task performance.

Theory of stylistic variation suggested by Tarone's (1982) draws on Labov's (1970) social variability. Labov (1972) suggests that there is no-single speaker. It means everyone shifts the way he or she speaks based on several factors in speaking situation such as topic under discussion or social class. Labov (1972) framework proposes that speaking styles differ along a continuum of prestige. Styles at the lower end of the continuum have more informal and stigmatized features but styles at the upper end of the continuum contain more formal features. Tarone's (1982) proposed a similar continuum for second language learners called *capability continuum*. It contains careful style (formal language use) at one end and vernacular style (informal language use) at the other. She believes learners are more likely to use correct target grammatical forms in contexts which call for a careful style, but they are more likely to use transitional, learner forms in their vernacular style.

The most well known model of language production was suggested by Levelt's (1989), called *Monolingual Model of Language Production*. Levelt proposed his model through three main components. Conceptualizer is the first level of Levelt's model. It is in charge of generating the communicative intention and encoding the intention into coherent conceptual plan. Moreover, it monitors what and how something is going to be said. On the other hand, 'the conceptualizer' is responsible for generating and monitoring messages. 'The formulator' is the second level responsible for giving grammatical and phonological shape to messages and which feeds on the lexicon. During this stage preverbal plan activates some items in lexicon to match as much as possible with the intended meaning. In this model both phonological and grammatical encodings are lexically driven. Contrary to conceptualization that requires attention, formulation is an automatic process. The third stage of the model is 'the articulator' that is responsible for the motor execution of phonetic plan. The result of articulator is overt speech.

There are two main cognitive frameworks underlying planning in task-based instruction. They include Skehan's (1998) *Limited Attentional Capacity Model* and Robinson's (2001) *Cognition Hypothesis*. Skehan's (1998) model proposes since L2 learners enjoy limited attentional capacity, their focus is on meaning for fluency or it is on form for accuracy and complexity during completing a task. Skehan and Foster (2001) believe when the focus is on form, there is a competition between accuracy and fluency. The second framework was proposed by Robinson's (2001). To investigate the effects on SLA, he suggested a triadic framework. The framework is based on a multiple-resources perspective of attention and consists of task complexity, task difficulty and task conditions.

### 3.1. Planning of Written Tasks

Many investigators have tried to study different types of planning time and find out their effects on L2learners' written performance in terms of complexity, accuracy and fluency (CAF). (See Appendix 1).

Maybe the oldest study in language planning was done by Ellis (1987). Ellis researched the effect of planning on accuracy in both spoken and written language production. The participants of the study were 17 English as Second Language (ESL) learners. He found that planning had a positive correlation with grammatical accuracy. He suggested in planned condition learners have more access to the forms which are not fully automatized.

Dellerman *et al.* (1996) studied the effects of planning on the performance of argumentative writing. The participants were to write an argumentative composition within 30 minutes. The results of the study revealed that planning had a significant effect on the production of argumentative writing especially for non-proficient learners.

Ellis and Yuan (2004) explored the effects of different types of planning on the performance of narrative writing. The subjects were to write a story based on the set of pictures available. The planning conditions applied in the study consisted of no planning, pre-task planning, and on-line planning. The findings of the study demonstrate the positive effect of planning on learners' written production in pre-task and on-line planning conditions. However, the participants in no-planning group showed no development in CAF components.

Shin (2008) studied the effect of planning conditions, proficiency levels and task types on performance of written production of 157 Korean English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. The participants were asked to do one expository and one argumentative written task. The planning conditions included individual and collaborative planned conditions. The findings of the study showed that the planning conditions had effects in the performance of both tasks. The participants in collaborative group gained higher scores in expository task but not in argumentative task.

The results also revealed that proficiency level had affected learners' output in both tasks.

Shin concluded that the participants' performance was affected by planned condition and proficiency, but not so much by the nature of task type.

Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan (2011) explored the effects of task condition and proficiency on concept load, fluency, complexity and accuracy of written tasks. They tried to control the type of task by choosing a narrative task. The participants of the study were 172 EFL learners. They were assigned into two groups based on their proficiency levels. Among them 81 students were in high-proficiency group and 87 students were in low-proficiency group. The design of the study was 2X2X1 factorial design. Proficiency was between-participant variable and planning condition was within-participant variable. All the participants were asked to perform narrative task under both pre-task and online planning. The findings of the study revealed that low-proficient participants benefited more from planning time in concept load, complexity and fluency. However, those of the high-proficiency group benefited from planning time in concept load and accuracy.

Rahimpour and Safarie (2011) tried to investigate the role of pre- task planning (PTP) and on-line planning (OLP) on the performance of descriptive writing of Iranian EFL learners. The participants of the study were 37 sophomore students of Teaching English as a Foreign Language

(TEFL). They were randomly assigned into two groups. Their score in writing course showed that both groups had same average score. The number of participants in OLP group and PTP group were 20 and 17, respectively. Participants were supposed to describe one of the nationwide ceremonies or festivals in Iran. Participants of PTP group had 10 minutes to plan their performance and 17 minutes to do the task. They were to write at least 200 words. In this case they did not have time for on-line planning. However, participants of OLP group were asked to write immediately. They did not have any time limitation therefore they had ample time for on-line planning. The findings of the study showed a significant difference between PTP and OLP group only in term of fluency but not accuracy and complexity.

Rezazadeh *et al.* (2011) investigated the effect of two types of task on the written performance of Iranian EFL learners. The tasks used in the research were argumentative and instruction tasks. The participants of the study were randomly assigned into two task type groups. Participants of one group were supposed to do an instruction task (a low demand task), and those of the other group were asked to do an argumentative task (a high demand task). Separate ANOVAs were calculated on each dependent variable. The results of the study showed that participants in instruction-task group outperform participants of the argumentative-task group in terms of accuracy and fluency but not complexity. However, participants in argumentative-task group outperform participants of the instruction-task group in terms of complexity.

Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan (2011) investigated the effects of both planning and proficiency level on the performance of written tasks. They selected a group of 72 Iranian English learners. They were assigned into two groups of high EFL proficiency and low EFL proficiency. The designed employed for the study was a within subjects design. The participants of both groups were asked to perform two monologic production tasks once with time planning and once without time planning. To analyze the performance, paired samples *t-test* was used. Performance aspects considered in the study concept load, fluency, accuracy and complexity. The results of the study showed that low-proficiency group benefited from concept load and fluency during time planning. However, high proficiency group benefited from all aspects, concept load, fluency, accuracy and complexity, during without time planning.

Meraji (2011) explored the effects of pre-task planning on the written production of Iranian EFL learners. He utilized four conditions: two conditions in pedagogic context (no planning, and pre-planning) and two conditions in testing context (no planning and pre-planning). The findings revealed a development in accuracy, syntactic complexity and fluency as the result of pre-planning in pedagogic context. Moreover, in testing context, planners showed higher accuracy, fluency and syntactic complexity than no-planners. Finally, the result of interview supported that planners in both contexts applied cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies more than other types of strategies.

Khomeijani Farahani and Meraji (2011a) studied the effects of pre-task planning and immediacy on written narrative output. They assigned 123 Iranian EFL learners to 4 different groups. The groups included: 1) No planning and Here-and-Now, 2) No planning and There-and-Then, 3) Planning and Here-and-Now, and 4) Planning and There-and-Then. All the participants were asked to write a narrative written task based on a series of pictures. Findings of the study revealed that the participants of pre-task planning increased grammatical accuracy. Moreover, it

was revealed that pre-task planners used more complex discourse than no-planners. Furthermore, displacement of time and space accompanied with pre-task planning caused development in syntactic complexity but not in lexical complexity. Finally, fluency developed in groups enjoying planning.

[Khomeijani Farahani and Meraji \(2011b\)](#) studied the effect of the length of pre-task planning on narrative written output of Iranian EFL learners. There were three planning conditions in the study: 1) no planning, 2) three-minute pre-task planning and 3) ten-minute pre-task planning. The results revealed that the participants of both planning conditions had greater fluency and accuracy than no-planners but not complexity. However, there was no difference between three-minute and ten-minute planning. The second aim of the study was comparison of scores in these groups, that results supported no significant differences in scores of three groups.

[Salimi and Fatollahnejad \(2012\)](#) explored on strategic planning and task familiarity. To this end, 80 Iranian EFL learners were assigned into four groups. All the participants were female. Each group consisted of 20 participants. In the first group, participants were asked to write about a familiar topic, Norouz. They had 10 minutes planning before the task. The second group also wrote the same familiar topic but without any planning time before doing the task. However, the participants of the third group wrote about an unfamiliar topic, Charismas. They were given 10 minutes pre-planning, exactly the same of the first group. The fourth group wrote about the same unfamiliar topic without any planning time. The results of the study revealed that strategic planning time couldn't impact accuracy significantly. It only increased fluency and complexity of high-intermediate group. Concerning to topic familiarity, only complexity was affected.

[Salimi et al. \(2012\)](#) investigated the joint effects of task complexity and strategic planning on Iranian EFL learners' written task performance. The participants of the study were 50 intermediate EFL learners. Among the aspects of performance, they examined accuracy. To ensure the homogeneity, the researchers conducted a pre-test and all of the participants were intermediate. Data gathering was done during two phases. First, participants performed a simple version of a decision-making task. Participants in planned group had 10 minutes for strategic planning. However, participants of unplanned group did the same task without any time for planning. Second, both groups were asked to perform the complex version of the task after two weeks. The conditions for the complex version were similar to those of simple version. The results of data analysis revealed that in terms of accuracy in simple task, strategic planning led to more accuracy than no planning. However, the findings showed a slight difference in accuracy of complex task between strategic and on-line planning.

[Mohammadzadeh Mohammadabadi et al. \(2013\)](#) studied the effects of simultaneous use of +/- planning and +/- Here-and-Now on the components of CAF of 30 Iranian EFL learners. The participants of the study were assigned to four different groups. The participants of all four groups were asked to write a narrative task based on picture. The results of the study revealed that planning groups (both here-and-now and there-and-then) enjoyed higher complexity than unplanned groups (both here-and-now and there-and-then). However, both accuracy and fluency were the same over four groups.

Haghverdi *et al.* (2013) investigated whether planning had any effect on the accuracy of narrative writing or not. Participants of the study were 90 Iranian EFL learners. They were randomly assigned into three groups, no-planning group, within-task planning group and strategic planning group. All participants were asked to write based on six-picture series. Error-free clauses were considered as measure of accuracy. The findings of the study revealed that participants in strategic planning group outperformed other groups.

#### 4. RECOMMENDED RESEARCH TRENDS IN WRITTEN TASK PLANNING

The purpose of present paper was to review the findings of investigations done in planning effect on written language performance and recommend new trends of research. Reviewing the aforementioned studies revealed some facts that may be considered as the new direction of research in the field.

Compared to spoken language, little attention has been paid to the nature of planning on L2 writing and the number of studies in writing is less than speaking. As a result more studies are needed to study the effect of planning on written language.

Ignoring some exceptions (Ellis, 1987; Dellerman *et al.*, 1996), most of the studies have been done in EFL context. It means more task planning investigations in ESL context are needed to be able to compare the effect of planning in both contexts. On the other hand one trend of research can be the comparison of planning in EFL and ESL contexts.

Narrative task has been the most common task used by researchers (Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan, 2011; Khomeijani Farahani and Meraji, 2011a) among others) but the findings are mixed. Therefore, simultaneous attention should be paid to both task types and planning effects. More studies are needed to compare the effect of task planning across different types of task such as descriptive tasks, expository tasks, and argumentative task.

Another area of task planning research is the effect of individual differences on task planning. Perhaps the most significant individual difference is proficiency level. Research has shown that lower levels take more advantage from planning than higher levels of proficiency in spoken language. For example, Nakakubo (2011), Ellis (2009), and Kawauchi (2005) claim that more advanced learners benefit less from planning in spoken language. However, the number of investigations that have studied the effect of proficiency level on planning is very few (Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan, 2011). Therefore, more studies seem necessary to find out how provision of planning may affect written production of L2 learners with different proficiency.

Investigating task characteristics is another interesting topic of task research. Task features such as reasoning or planning time have not been investigated in isolation. Although some researchers have investigated these task variables (Robinson and Gilabert, 2007), they studied the integration of them and they have not shown which variable was responsible for the results. Researchers need to design task research in which particular task features can be studied in isolation. This trend of research seems substantial, because the findings of the research have immediate classroom implications. Moreover, the results are fruitful for syllabus designers too.

One research trend that has been ignored is the effect of task planning on second language acquisition (SLA). This trend of research needs more longitudinal studies. Mostly all studies done

in task planning have been cross-sectional studies in which task planning effects have been studied for short period of time (Ellis, 1987; Dellerman *et al.*, 1996; Ellis and Yuan, 2004; Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan, 2011) among others). This trend of research bears great important in SLA, because it enriches our knowledge concerned with task planning and SLA.

With the advent of socio-cultural perspectives in language learning, the significant role of context has become more important than before. Cumming (1998) believes that writing cannot happen in a social vacuum. Therefore, social/cultural contexts in which writing is conducted should be paid more attention in writing research (Sasaki, 2002). Prospective researchers need take the role of context of writing into consideration in their investigations.

The thorny issue of validity and reliability of production measures is among the unsolved issues. More valid and reliable measures are needed for written language. Nakakubo (2011) believes holistic measures are needed to examine the quality of L2 production. It is believed that these measures may identify changes that are not captured by quantitative measures as a result they may discover new effects of planning.

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**Appendix-1.**

<b>Author(s)</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Types of Written Task</b>	<b>Performance Component(s)</b>	<b>Planning Condition</b>	<b>Findings</b>
(Ellis, 1987)	17 ESL Learners		Accuracy		positive correlation between planning and grammatical accuracy
(Dellerman <i>et al.</i> , 1996)	both proficient and non-proficient ESL learners	argumentative task			planning had a significant effect on the production of argumentative writing especially for non-proficient learners
(Ellis and Yuan, 2004)		narrative writing	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	no planning, pre-task planning, and on-line planning	Only pre-task and on-line conditions showed positive effect on CAF
(Shin, 2008)	157 Korean EFL learners	expository & argumentative Tasks		individual and collaborative planned conditions	collaborative group gained higher scores in expository task
(Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan, 2011)	172 EFL Learners	narrative task	concept load, fluency, complexity and accuracy	pre-task and online planning	low-proficient participants benefited more from planning time in concept load, complexity and fluency high-proficiency group benefited from planning time in concept load and accuracy

Salimi and Fatollahnejad (2012)	80 EFL learners	descriptive task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	no planning & Strategic planning	strategic planning increased fluency and complexity but not accuracy
Khomejani Farahani and Meraji (2011b)	EFL learners	Narrative Task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	no planning, three-minute (pre-task) planning ten-minute (pre-task) planning	planners had greater fluency and accuracy but not complexity no difference between three-minute and ten-minute planning
Khomejani Farahani and Meraji (2011a)	123 EFL learners	Narrative Task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	+/- planning & +/- Here-and-Now	planners used more complex discourse and grammatical accuracy displacement of time and space caused development in syntactic complexity
(Meraji, 2011)	EFL learners		Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	no planning, and pre-planning (pedagogic & testing contexts)	development in accuracy, syntactic complexity and fluency pre-planning in pedagogic context in testing context, planners showed higher accuracy, fluency and syntactic complexity than no-planners
(Rahimpour and Nariman-Jahan, 2011)	72 High and Low proficient EFL Learners		concept load, fluency, accuracy and complexity	once with time planning and once without time planning	low-proficiency group benefited from concept load and fluency during time planning high proficiency group benefited from all aspects, during without time planning
(Rezazadeh et al., 2011)	EFL Learners	argumentative and instruction tasks	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity		instruction-task group outperform participants of the in terms of accuracy and fluency but not complexity
(Rahmpour and Safarie, 2011)	37 EFL learners	descriptive task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	pre-planning (PTP) and on-line planning (OLP)	significant difference between PTP and OLP group only in term of fluency but not accuracy and complexity

(Salimi <i>et al.</i> , 2012)	50 EFL learners	decision-making task (simple and complex versions)	Accuracy	no planning and on-line Strategic planning	difference in accuracy of complex task between strategic and on-line
(Mohammadzadeh Mohammadi <i>et al.</i> , 2013)	30EFL learners	narrative task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	+/- planning & +/- Here-and-Now	planners enjoyed higher complexity not fluency and accuracy
(Haghverdi <i>et al.</i> , 2013)	90 EFL learners	narrative task	Accuracy, Fluency Complexity	no-planning within-task planning & strategic planning	strategic planning group outperformed other groups in accuracy, fluency and complexity

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