Task planning effects on IELTS academic writing task 1 grammar score

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ABSTRACT
The study was intended to investigate effects of pre-task and online task planning on IELTS Task 1 Academic Writing grammar. Forty five Iranian prospective IELTS candidates were randomly placed in three groups of Pre-task planning (PTP), Online-task planning (OTP), and Control group. In PTP, the required structures were given to the participants before the introduction of the task and then participants were asked to write the task. In OTP, as the instructor was presenting the different parts of the task, he introduced the relevant structures as well. For example, he explained the introduction and immediately he presented the types of structures candidates were supposed to write. In the control group, no planning of any sort was presented. The one-way ANOVA for the Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) showed that there was a highly significant difference between the performance of both PTP and OTP participants compared with those of the control group. Comparing the performance of PTP and OTP participants, however, it was shown that the former got higher GRA scores than the latter. The results of the study indicate that presentation of grammatical structure prior to the presentation of the task can help IELTS Task 1 candidates get higher scores.

Introduction

Pre-task planning can be defined as planning that takes place before the task is performed, while online task planning happens when the task is actually being implemented by the learners (Ellis, 2005). Ellis further classifies pre-task-planning to rehearsal and strategic planning and the former to pressured and unpressured planning. As far as rehearsal is concerned, the learner finds the opportunity to do the task once before the second time; for strategic planning, however, the learner must plan on the content he is going to employ without any opportunity for rehearsal. On the other hand, pressured planning refers to the type of planning in which the learner performs the task under a specific time limit, which is absent in the case of unpressured task planning in which an unlimited amount of time is given to the learner to perform his task.

Ellis (2009) points out that fluency, complexity, and accuracy, which constitute a learner's language proficiency, are those aspects of oral task performance which have been considered. In fact, it is believed that the proficient learner is the one who performs the task accurately and fluently using complex structures and language. Within the same line, Skehan (1998) argues that language users have a lexicalized system, with words and formulaic sequences as well as a rule-based system, with knowledge of underlying and abstract patterns. He believes that performance constitutes both systems depending on the task conditions. A natural consequence of such a claim is that, as required by the performance conditions, proficiency should be flexible enough to permit the learner to vary how to call for lexicalized and rule-based systems.

Foster and Skehan (1999) maintain that task planning (pre-task, online task and post-task) plays a significant part in EFL/ESL. They indicate such activities are both focus on form and focus on meaning (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011). In addition, they increase the quality of language learning. Ellis (2005) points out that for language production, planning affects language production.

For over two decades, second language acquisition researchers have been investigating the role planning plays in both language learning and language production (e.g., Ellis & Yuan, 2004; Foster & Skehan, 1999; and Ochs, 1979). It should be noted that most of these studies examined the role of planning in oral production, and studied its impact on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of language production (Kawauchi, 2005).

Several studies focused on how task planning and performance are interrelated, which mainly considered oral production (Ortega, 1999; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008). Ellis and Yuan (2004), however, examine written task performance. However, it seems that further research is required to shed more light on different aspects of task planning on written production among EFL/ESL learners.

There are researchers who indicate that even when language production is impromptu and natural, planning exists (Ellis, 2005). Ellis believes that "planning is essentially a problem solving activity; it involves deciding what linguistic devices need to be selected in order to affect the audience in the desired way" (Ellis, 2005, p. 3). In addition, he emphasizes that for pre-task and online task planning, learners are provided with situations in which they are able to employ planning to deal with language as form.

Second, Ellis (2009) indicates that the learner will be able to make up for the lack or insufficiency of any of the systems by applying the other one. A third corollary is that there are balances for the time when the learner focuses on structural complexity; in this situation accuracy seems to be negatively influenced. However, Robinson (2001) challenges this claim indicating that such balances are not inevitable. The reason could be attributed to the idea that complexity and accuracy are positively related to each other during task performance. Both theories of task performance maintain the role that individual difference factors have in performance.

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The present study was intended to investigate the impact of two types of task planning, namely pre-task and online task planning on the Grammatical Range and Accuracy score of Persian-speaking prospective IELTS candidates. In fact, the study was aimed to scrutinize the effect of task planning on written production, while most of the previous research mainly focused on the oral production. This study was conducted because of two main reasons. First, ESL writing has been one of the less investigated areas of study in the field of second language teaching and learning. In addition, the teaching aspects of IELTS have not been very much investigated. Most studies focus on the validity and reliability of IELTS (e.g., Carey, Mannell, & Dunn, 2011; Green & Hawkey, 2012; O'Loughlin, 2002; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010). However, this is study has considered the teaching aspects of IELTS as well. Actually, the study was designed to answer the following research questions:

1. Does task planning (pre-task planning and online task planning) affect IELTS candidates' Grammatical Range and Accuracy scores?

2. Which of the two types of task planning (pre- or online) results in better Grammatical Range and Accuracy scores?

Methodology

Participants

Participants of the study were IELTS candidates participating in IELTS preparation classes in Gooyesh Language Institute. Forty five prospective IELTS candidates were randomly placed in three groups of Pre-task planning PTP (n = 15), Online-task planning OTP (n = 15), and Control group (n = 15). They were all upper-intermediate EFL learners, aged 22-35. In order to make sure that the participants of the study were homogeneous, they were given a proficiency test (Allan, 2004). In order to ensure the comparability of the Experimental and Control groups, a one-way analysis of variance ANOVA was conducted comparing proficiency scores. Table 1 presents the results of the proficiency test.

Table 1. *ANOVA for the Proficiency Test*

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	4.44	2	2.22	.337	.716
Within Groups	276.80	42	6.59		
Total	281.24	44			

As can be seen, the results of the ANOVA comparing the PTP (M = 148.20, SD = 3.33), OTP *(M = 147.37, SD = 2.05)*, and control *(M = 147.12, SD = 2.12)* groups showed no significant difference in proficiency, $F (2, 42) = .34$, $p = .72$.

Procedure

First of all, the instructor made the participants familiar with the task in general, that is, the requirements, different types of tasks (table, bar graph, pie chart, process, etc.), the scoring procedures and everything he thought would be useful for them to know about IELTS Academic Writing Task 1. Next, the instructor made students familiar with the different parts of the task, that is, Introduction, Body, and Conclusion. In fact, he provided them with the type of structures and sentences that could be used in each section. For example, in order to write the introduction, he encouraged them to use certain structures such as: *"The following table shows ..."*; here he encouraged the students to become familiar with the type of words and grammar they needed to write the introduction. For instance, the tense of the reporting verbs (e.g., show, demonstrate, indicate, present, etc.) must be simple present, but the other tenses should be past, because most of the time (except for the process), they have to report some data based on surveys and research.

However, it is imperative to know that in the PTP group, all the required structures were given to the participants before the introduction of the task and then they were asked to write the task. That is, before participants started the writing job, the instructor made them familiar with the types of required structures for the 'Introduction', 'Body', and 'Conclusion'. In other words, he gave them the instructions and then asked them to write the parts. After the participants finished writing, they were required to read the parts and the instructor and other students commented on their writing. In this section, the participants made the participants aware of the structures they had problems with. It should be emphasized that because the focus of the study was on the GRA (Grammatical Range and Accuracy) score, nothing was done on the vocabulary and the achievement of the task.

In the OTP group, as the instructor was presenting the different parts of the task, he introduced the relevant structures as well. For example, he explained the introduction and immediately he presented the types of structures candidates were supposed to write. In other words, the structures were given during the presentation of the parts. First, the participants were given the graph and were told to write the introduction. Here, the instructor made them familiar with the types of structures they required to use. The difference between the PTP procedure and the OTP was that in the former, the participants were presented all the required structures first and then were asked to use them in their writing, but the former were given the required structure, which were exactly the same as those of the PTP group, as the students were writing the task. To be more specific, the participants wrote the introduction and were asked to read it; then the instructor introduced the relevant structures to the participants. The same procedure was followed for the 'Body' and 'Conclusion' as well. It should be noted that like the PTP group, the GRA score was considered and no attention was paid to the vocabulary and task achievement.

In the control group, no planning of any sort was presented. In this group, the participants were made familiar with the different parts of the task, like the other two groups and were given homework to do and their writings were corrected and scored by the teacher and the required comments were given as required, based on their production.

All three groups were also given homework during the week and were asked to send them by email and the instructor was required to reply by email, using the "Review" section of MS Office Word. In this part, the instructor provided them with comments on their writing.

Results and Discussion

The means for PTP, OTP, and Control groups were 7.13 (SD = .83), 6.13 (SD = .74), and 4.13 (SD = .74), respectively. To address the research question, which asked about the impact of task planning on Grammatical Range and Accuracy (GRA) scores, the data were analyzed using a one way analysis of variance with score as the dependent variable and group as the independent variable. Table 2 presents the results of the one-way analysis of variance.

As can be seen in the table, there was a statistically significant difference among the performance of experimental (PTP and OTP) and control groups $F_{(2, 42)} = 58.33$, $p < .01$ with the PTP (M = 7.13, SD = .83) and OTP (M = 6.13, SD = .74) groups being associated with significantly higher scores than the control group (M = 4.13, SD = .74).

Table 2. ANOVA for Grammatical Range and Accuracy

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	70	2	35	58.33	.000
Within Groups	25.20	42	.60		
Total	95.20	44			

However, in order to examine the difference between the performances of the PTP and OTP groups a post-hoc Scheffe was run. Table 3 presents the results of the multiple comparisons for Grammatical Range and Accuracy scores.

Table 3. Multiple Comparisons: Scheffe for Grammatical Range and Accuracy

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
PTP	OTP	1.00*	.28	.004	.28	1.71
	Control	3.00*	.28	.000	2.28	3.71
OTP	PTP	-1.00*	.28	.004	-1.71	-.28
	Control	2.00*	.28	.000	1.28	2.71
Control	PTP	-3.00*	.28	.000	-3.71	-2.28
	OTP	-2.00*	.28	.000	-2.71	-1.28
*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.						

As can be seen in Table 3, participants of the experimental groups (PTP and OTP) significantly outperformed those of the control groups, indicating that planning whether pre-task or online was much more effective than lack of it. Considering the performances of the PTP and OTP groups, it can be seen that although there was no significant difference between the performances of these groups, it seems that pre-task planning could have better results than online task planning.

In sum, the results indicate that planning, whether pre- or online, did result in better GRA scores among the IELTS candidates of the study. In fact, the participants of the experimental groups did produce more accurate and different structures than those of the control groups. However, as far as the second research question was concerned, no significant different was found. Nevertheless, the participants of pre-task planning had a slightly better performance than those of online task planning. It is critical to mention that more research is required to investigate the effects of these two types of planning more thoroughly.

Conclusion

The research question was aimed to investigate the impact of task planning, pre-task planning and online task planning, on the Grammatical Range and Accuracy score of Academic IELTS Writing Task 1 among Iranian EFL learners. The results indicated that planning whether pre-task or online was much more effective than lack of it. The results supported previous research which focused on planning in EFL/ESL writing. In fact the results clearly indicated that students are profited more by being encouraged to plan before or during their writing, as the results of experimental (PTP and OTP) groups showed compared to those of the control group. As the results of the study show, it is imperative for IELTS instructors to familiarize the candidates with planning and encourage them to use this technique in their writing. It should be noted that the study focused on the impact of planning on GRA scores of Task 1; however, it is believed that planning can be quite helpful for other parts of the task (Task Achievement, Cohesion and Coherence, and Lexical Range) as well. In fact, IELTS candidate can benefit from planning for every single part of their writing.

The results of the study have certain implications for further research. First of all, planning can be scrutinized for other areas of the task (Task Achievement, Cohesion and Coherence, and Lexical Range) to see whether they will equally benefit from planning. Furthermore, this study did not find a significant difference between pre-task planning and online task planning; however, further research is required to shed more light on different aspects of these two types of planning. Finally, the role the level of proficiency might play in the efficacy of task planning can be another interesting area of research.

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