Pre-Task Planning in the Algerian EFL Context: Exploring its Impact on Learners' Accuracy in Writing

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Abstract:

This article explores the impact of strategic planning on EFL learners' accuracy in writing. It further probes the difficulties that are faced by the learners in writing. In pursuance of this aim, the researchers have collected data through a mixed methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative methods. While the former consisted of pre and post-questionnaires and pre-post writing tests, the latter consisted of classroom observation and textual analysis. The results revealed that EFL learners encounter several difficulties in writing which lead them to write less accurate texts. Besides, it has been concluded that students do not plan before writing. Finally, the comparison of the pre and post-tests revealed that the learners' accuracy in writing has been developed after implementing the different pre-planning strategies. Furthermore, the paired samples test revealed that the difference is statistically.

Keywords: Accuracy; EFL writing; impact; pre-task planning
Jel Classification Codes: XN1, XN2.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The recognition of writing as one of the most important skills in language learning is shared by both learners and educators. Because writing abilities lead to learners' success, practitioners are constantly interested in the more efficient strategies of teaching and learning that can help the learners develop their writing skills.

Recently, there has been substantial research interest in tasks and their usefulness in the EFL classroom. Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a reaction to the empirical approaches of teacher-dominated and form-oriented second language teaching. It is characterized by the use of tasks as the main unit of interaction, output production, and meaning negotiation (Van Den Branden, 2006).

Planning is a task implementation variable that has received greater attention from researchers and a large number of studies have been conducted to investigate it (e.g. Ellis, 2003; 2005). Nevertheless, it is worthy to note that, in the Algerian context, there appears that little research has been conducted to examine its effectiveness. Accordingly, the present investigation aims to explore the impact of pre-task planning on EFL learners' accuracy in writing. In particular, this investigation seeks to answer the following research questions:

- What kind of difficulties do EFL learners encounter in writing?

- Do EFL learners plan before writing? If yes, what are the different pre-task planning strategies they use?

- What effect does pre-task planning have on students' accuracy in writing?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Task-Based Language Teaching has emerged as a reaction to the traditional teacher-centred approaches of second language teaching. This approach is based on using communicative tasks that permit using and learning a language in context. Historically, the interest in the task as an important tool in second language acquisition emerged in the mid-1980s (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Although having various definition, the term task draws on the same idea that is an activity in which the language is used as a means to attain an objective. In this context, Byrnes and Manchon (2014) added that "Internal dimension of task can both shed new light on the relationship between task interpretation, task performance, and learning outcomes".

Planning is an activity that involves decision-making about the linguistic items to be used to communicate effectively (Ellis, 2005). Thus, in writing, planning plays a crucial role. Byrnes and Manchon (2014) refered to this by arguing that planning is a "uniquely distinctive phenomenon in writing" . In addition, Alamargot and Chanquoy (2001) stated that every writer needs to anticipate, reflect and consider what is to be written . And the longer and intensive this reflection activity (i.e., planning) is, the better writing will be. More to the point, Ellis (2005) distinguished between two main categories of planning in terms of their occurrence, either before or during task performance. And each category is in its turn divided into sub-categories . Besides, he argues that this distinction is important since it plays a role in understanding how planning variables impact learners' performance (Ellis, 2003). The categories are summarized as follows:

Pre-Task Planning: It is giving time to the learners to prepare for the task performance prior to or before the actual performance and production. It is further divided into strategic planning which involves learners preparing to perform the task and rehearsal which includes providing learners with an opportunity and time to perform the task before the main and actual performance through repetition (Ellis, 2005).

Online Planning: It takes place during the task performance. It is divided into pressured online planning that occurs when learners engage in rapid planning and unpressured online planning that occurs when learners are given time to engage in careful planning during task performance. (Ellis, 2005)

L2 researchers and educators argue that L2 performance and proficiency are multidimensional (Housen, Kuiken,& Vedder, 2012). Their constituent parts are complexity, accuracy, and fluency. Hence, learners' language performance can be measured based on these three main aspects of production always referred to as CAF.

Based on Ellis (2003), accuracy refers to the degree to which the target language produced during the performance of tasks applies the rules of this target language. In addition, Skehan and Foster (1999, as cited in Alavari and Ashari, 2012) added that accuracy is concerned with the ability to perform the language in high levels of control and avoidance of errors. In short, accuracy is the mastery of using linguistic knowledge to produce correct structures in the target language. As far as measures of accuracy are concerned, the CAF dimensions appear to be valid measures of language development (spoken or written) (Housen et al., 2012). There is a wide range of CAF measures; yet, because of the diversity of those measures and the different choices among researchers, it becomes difficult to compare results across studies. That is why more work is needed to evolve measures that provide more valid assessments (Ellis, 2005).

Moreover, accuracy can be measured in several manners and language accuracy indices can be both general and specific (Housen et al., 2012). The general measures include counting errors. In this sense, Knoch (2009) maintained that the accuracy of written texts has been analyzed by using a wide range of discourse analytic errors, usually errors have been counted. Examples of such measures include the number of words per error, the proportion of error-free units (error-free t-units and error-free clauses), and the average length of error-free units. However, regarding the percentage of error-free clauses, Skehan and Foster (1999, as cited in Byrnes & Manchon, 2014) claimed that such a "generalized measure of accuracy is more sensitive to detecting significant differences between the experimental conditions". The specific measures include, for example, error analysis, frequency analysis, and for-function analysis (Ellis, 2005).

Another idea of the measures of accuracy came into the scene, it consisted of linking between the type of the errors and its seriousness and gravity to distinguish accuracy from comprehensibility (Byrnes & Manchon, 2014). Yet, attempting to make a standard error gravity hierarchy has produced conflicting results. In a nutshell, typical measures of accuracy found in the literature mainly concerning planning include:

Error-free T-units: According to Lee Mackay (2006), one of the early indexes used to evaluate the syntactic features of L1 students' essays was what Hunt labeled T-unit . The latter is defined as "one main clause with all subordinate clauses attached to it" (Byrnes & Manchon, 2014). To code using T-units, the rater goes through the text or the essay and counts the total number of T-units, and then counts the number of T-units that are free from errors and finally presents the ratio.

Error-free clauses: A clause is defined by Fisher as a "syntactic unit which contains a finite verb" (Polio, 1997). In addition, among accuracy measures, the number of error-free clauses

divided by the total number of clauses is found (Knoch, 2009). Furthermore, error-free clauses refer to those clauses containing no error of syntax, morphology, or lexical choice. To use this measure, data are to be divided into clauses, and errors of any kind including lexis, morphology, and syntax will be marked. Thus, any clause without an error is considered an error-free clause. The percentage of error-free clauses is to be used as a score for analysis.

However, in the present study, to measure accuracy we adopted error-free T-units as it is the most cited in the literature of accuracy and planning. The learners' essays were first segmented into T-units, then, the number of error-free T-units per T-units is counted to be used for the score.

So far, while most research has investigated the effect of pre-task planning on speech performance, only scant attention has been given to its effect on writing. Empirical studies on planning showed its positive effects of fluency and complexity, as two main aspects through which performance can be measured, but mixed results on accuracy (Ellis, 2003). To this end, scholars called for further research investigations on the impact of pre-task planning on learners' accuracy in writing.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The present investigation revolves around exploring the impact of pre-task planning on EFL learners' accuracy in writing. To reach this aim, a one-group pretest-posttest pre-experimental design based on a mixed methodology was adopted. More specifically, in this design, the researcher measures a group on a dependent variable, then introduces an experimental manipulation, and finally measures again the group on the dependent variable and accounts for the differences between the pre-test and post-test scores. In our case, we have measured students' accuracy in writing before the treatment, then the treatment which consisted of pre-task planning strategies was introduced to the participants. finally, the students' accuracy in writing has been measured to find whether there is an improvement after the treatment or not.

3.1. PARTICIPANTS

This study was conducted in the Algerian higher education context during the academic year 2015-2016. 21 students represented the sample of this study; however, only 13 students attended regularly the courses.

3.2. INSTRUMENTS

To collect the necessary data, we opted for the use of questionnaires, pre- and post- tests, and classroom observation and textual analysis.

3.2.1. Questionnaire

To collect the necessary data, we relied on a questionnaire which has become one of the most popular instruments due to the ease of construction and its efficiency in terms of the researcher's time, effort, and financial resources (Dornyei, 2003)

3.2.1.1. Pre-Questionnaire

The pre-questionnaire is composed of four main sections. The first section aimed at collecting factual information about the respondents. It involves four questions their age, gender, years of studying English as a foreign language, and whether English was their personal choice. The second section was meant to collect attitudinal data, it involved four main questions. Section three evolved around learners' accuracy in writing; it comprised five questions. Section four is devoted to task planning; it involves seven questions.

3.2.1.2. Post-Questionnaire

The post-questionnaire was administered at the end of the treatment; it aimed to check whether there is a change in learners' attitudes towards planning before writing and its impact on their accuracy after the different pre-task planning strategies have been introduced. It comprised six main questions.

3.3. Pre-Test

The pre-test is considered as a pre-study aimed to collect data about the participants' level in writing and the extent to which they write accurately before implementing the treatment. The participants were asked to write an essay about their future career plans. The essays were scored using Error-free T-unit to measure accuracy.

3.4. Post-Test

The post-test is considered as a post-study; it was addressed at the end of the treatment aiming to unveil the participants' level in writing and the extent to which their texts are accurate after implementing pre-task planning strategies. The students were asked to write a short story.

3.5. Classroom Observation and Textual Analysis

In this study, the qualitative method consisted of analyzing learners' texts and classroom observation. Since this study aimed to investigate the effect of planning on the accuracy, learners' essays were analyzed in terms of their accuracy in all language aspects (including grammar, syntax, morphology, semantics…) after the implementation of the taught strategies. For accuracy measure, we adopted error-free T-units as it is the most used measure in the literature of accuracy and planning. The learners' essays were first segmented into T-units knowing that T-unit is an independent clause with its dependent clauses. Then, the number of error-free T-units per T-units is counted to be used for the score. The researcher in collaboration with the teacher evaluated a sample of 12 students' essays out of 13 since one of our participants did not attend all the planning sessions regularly. He has however missed some of them and this may influence the results. According to Sanaei (2016), observation "can be regarded as a powerful instrument, to the extent that the researchers could attain an in-depth perception of their participants' performance" (p. 906). Furthermore, (MMarczyk, Dematteo,& Festinger, 2005) contended that observation is a very important method of data collection . During the five sessions of our experiment, we have observed the students' behaviors, reactions and we have noted their comments

4. RESULTS

This section is devoted to reporting the main findings of the present investigation

4.1.   Learners' Difficulties in Writing

The analysis of the collected data revealed that EFL learners face many difficutlies in writing that lead them to write less accurate texts. Approximately, for all the participants (92.3%) vocabulary represents a big challenge in writing. Besides, 46.2% of the participants have trouble with grammar. In addition, 23.1% of the participants experience difficulties in spelling. Concerning coherence, 30.8% of the subjects find difficulties in making the text)coherent. We may relate these results to the lack of planning and the lack of using effective writing strategies. In addition, more than half of the participants (69.2%) encounter difficulties in idea generation.

Table (1): Students' Difficulties in Writing

Difficulty	Freq	Perc
Lack of vocabulary	12	92.3
Grammar	6	46.2
Spelling	2	23.1
Coherence	4	30.8
Idea generation	9	69.2
Punctuation	8	61.5

4.2. Students' Errors in Writing

Table (2): Students' Errors in Writing

Error	Freq	Perc
Grammar	6	46.2 %
Spelling	4	30.8
Punctuation	8	61.5
Vocabulary	8	61.5
Style	3	23.1 %

In Table (2), the participants' errors are reported. It can be noticed that the areas in which participants find difficulties in writing are the areas in which they most of the time make errors. 46.2% of the participants make grammatical errors. In addition, 30.8% of the subjects make spelling errors. Besides, more than half of students (61.5%) encounter difficulties in punctuation. Concerning vocabulary, 61.5% of the subjects experience challenges in vocabulary. In addition to all the mentioned difficulties, 23.1% of our participants have problems with the style and the choice of the appropriate words.

4.3. Students' Use of Planning strategies

Table (3): Students' planning of their writing

Option	Freq	Percen
Yes	**4**	**30.2%**
No	**9**	**69.8%**
Total	**13**	**100%**

Table (3) reports students' answers concerning whether they plan before writing or not. The items reveal that more than half of the participants (69.8%) do not plan their essays. Only 30.8% of the whole sample states that they plan before writing.

4.4. Students' Attitudes towards the Importance of Planning

Table (4) students' attitudes towards the importance planning (whether it is important or not)

Option	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	**13**	**100%**
No	**0**	**0%**
Total	**13**	**100%**

Table (4) displays learners' answers on whether they think that planning is important or not. The items revealed that all the participants (100%) recognize the importance of planning before the task.

4.5. The Impact of Pre-Task Planning on Accuracy

Table (5) Students' Thinking about the Positive Effect of Planning on Accuracy

Option	Frequ	Percen
Yes	13	100%
No	0	0%
Total	13	100%

Table (5) shows that all the participants (100%) believe that pre-task planning helps in making the text accurate. This may be because they have noticed that the more they plan the more they make fewer errors.

4.6. Students' Scores in the Pre-Test and Post-Test

Table (6): Students' scores in the pre and post-tests

Students	Pre-test			Post-test		
	Total T-units	Error free T-units	Scores	Total T-units	Error free T-units	Scores
1	11	8	0.72	27	25	0.92
2	22	16	0.72	51	45	0.88
3	16	8	0.50	29	21	0.72
4	24	20	0.83	38	31	0.81
5	21	6	0.28	18	10	0.55
6	13	6	0.46	28	17	0.61
7	21	9	0.42	21	9	0.60

8	26	14	0.53	61	42	0.68
9	17	8	0.47	32	29	0.90
10	13	7	0.53	19	12	0.63
11	22	16	0.72	37	30	0.81
12	23	11	0.47	20	15	0.75
Mean	**0.55**					0.73
Standard Deviation	0.15					0.12

Table (6) represents learners' scores in the pre-and post-tests. Each learner's essay was segmented into T-units; the number of error-free T-units per T-unit was calculated to measure accuracy. Then, the mean score of the whole group was used to compare the tests.
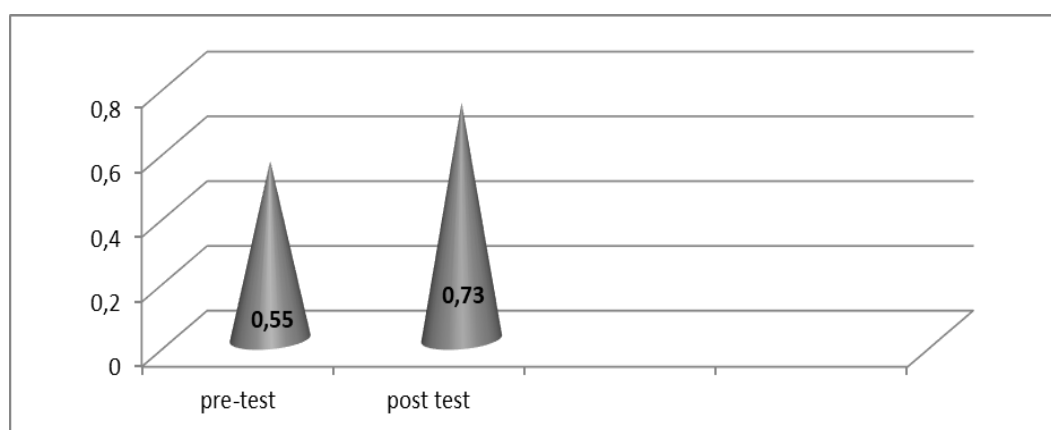

Figure 1. **Comparison between pre-test and post-test's mean' scores**

Figure (1) illustrates the mean scores of both pre-and post-tests. By comparing the mean scores, we found that the accuracy of second-year students' writing became slightly higher after implementing the different planning strategies than it was before implementing planning strategies. As seen in Figure 1, the learners' mean scores increased from M= 0.55 to M= 0.73

4.7.   The significance of the difference between the pre and post tests

Table (7): Paired Samples Test

The results of the paired samples test, as shown in the table (6) reveal that there is a statistically significant difference in the learners' writing accuracy between the pre-test (M= 0.55, SD= 0.15) and post-test (M= 0.73, SD= 0.12): t (12)= -5.673, p=0.000144<0,05. This indicates that pre-task planning is effective in developing EFL learners' accuracy in writing.

5. DISCUSSION

The primary aim of the present study is to determine whether strategic planning is effective in developing EFL learners' accuracy in writing or not. It also aims to explore the difficulties faced by learners in and the which accurately.

		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	scores of the pre-test- scores of the post-test	-,18417	,11245	,03246	-,25561	-,11272	-5,673	11	,000

EFL writing extent to they write The

participants of the current study are 12 second-year students enrolled in the department of English at the University of Bejaia.

Based on the findings, second-year EFL students at the University of Bejaia face several difficulties in writing in both content and structure. As far as structure is concerned, vocabulary is the most challenging aspect of writing. Indeed, most EFL learners tend to have restricted vocabulary that may be related to the lack of reading. During the treatment, the researchers have observed that the learners constantly use their dictionaries or ask the teacher about how things are called. Similarly, in the textual analysis, it has been noticed that students have difficulties in terms of word choice; they use inappropriate vocabulary. These findings are similar to previous studies conducted by Al Seyabi and Tuzlukova (2014) and Tanh Huy (2015). In addition to vocabulary, grammar is also challenging; students face difficulties in subject-verb agreement and tenses. What is more, students find spelling difficult; this is what the researchers have concluded in the analysis in their essays. Some examples of spelling mistakes are 'finnaly, opportunity, and lisning'. These findings are in line with the findings of Hussen (2015). Furthermore, generating ideas and making the text coherent are other areas of difficulty in writing. Ahmed (2010) reported the same results in his study.

Concerning planning to prior writing, more than half of the participants asserted that they do not plan their essays, but they start directly drafting. When the learners were first introduced the first planning strategy. Approximately all of them argued that it is something new and they have never heard about it or used it before. When they were asked to write an essay using the taught strategy, the researchers have noticed that the learners are still confused between planning and drafting mainly. Since when they were told that they have ten minutes for planning and after that their sheets will be removed, they claimed that 10 minutes are not enough to draft. Yet, in the following sessions, all the participants were collaborative and showed interest in the content. Furthermore, they asserted that pre-task planning is very helpful, but the time devoted to it is insufficient.

Regarding the central issue of the present research study, which is the effect of pre-task planning on the accuracy, the result of the paired samples test showed that learners' accuracy in writing has significantly been developed after implementing pre-task planning strategies. This has been reflected in P value (0.000144) <0.05. These findings are in contrast with Crookes (1989) who found that planning has little effect on accuracy. Besides, these findings are also in shape contrast with Skehan and Foster (1996) who concluded that planning does not affect accuracy. Nevertheless, the findings of this study are in line with Yuan and Ellis (2003, as cited in Ellis, 2003) how mentioned that pre-task planning leads to greater accuracy.

6.   CONCLUSION

In essence, in this study we aimed at suggesting a solution to one of the biggest issues in academic writing which is accuracy. Through investigating the effect of pre-task planning on EFL learners' accuracy in writing among second year students at the University of Bejaia, we have hypothesized that if EFL students plan prior to writing, they will write more accurately. In order to testour hypothesis, a pre-experimental study is conducted and the necessary data were collected through pre- and post- questionnaires, pre- and post- tests, classroom observation and textual analysis.

The data obtained from the pre- and post- questionnaires, pre- and post- tests, classroom observation and textual analysis indicate the following general results: First, our participants encounter difficulties in writing, and they always make errors. Second, only some learners reported that they plan before writing. Finally, the comparison of the pre- and post- tests revealed that our participants' accuracy has been significantly developed after implementing the different planning strategies.

Based on the results of this study and the previous research, the researchers highly recommend the integration of pre-task planning strategies as an important element in the written expression course. Thus, the researchers suggest that EFL teachers of writing should give students more opportunities to plan before writing and guide them on how to effectively use them. Last but not least, based on the findings of the present study, it is noteworthy to consider some pedagogical implications for both teachers and students, the limitations confronted in the present study, and some suggestions for further research on this issue.

7. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The aim of this study is to investigate the impact of pre-task planni.ng on learners' accuracy in writing. Through the results obtained, a number of implications emerged which will lead to the development of both teaching and learning experiences. These implications can be summarized as follows:

• Changing Learners' Views and Perceptions of the Writing Process: It is very important to perceive writing as a process, which includes different steps that should not be ignored. In this regard, teachers can raise learners' awareness of the importance of knowing the different stages of writing, how to move from one stage to another and the importance of each stage. This can be achieved through direct and explicit instructions. Because during our experiment, approximately all the participants said that they have neither been taught the different planning strategies we have dealt with, nor the importance of planning as a whole sub-process of writing.

• The Use of an Eclectic Approach in Teaching Writing: For better teaching, writing, and meeting the different needs of the learners, an eclectic approach should be adopted. Thus, teachers should neither ignore the final product nor neglect the steps. In other words, we suggest the use of the product approach mainly with beginners to help them develop their linguistic competence, and the use of the process approach to *make learners aware of the different stages of writing, and help them recognize that writing is not just combining words and sentences but rather a creative thinking process.

• Introducing the Different Planning Strategies into the Classroom: From what have been noticed and what the participants have reported, teachers do not teach the different planning strategies during written expression sessions. It is very important to teach learners how to organize their ideas before moving to drafting by using different planning strategies such as graphic organizers. Also, teachers should come with a wide range of writing tasks to encourage students to practice writing and implement different planning strategies.

8. Limitations and suggestions for future research

Throughout the present investigation, we have reached important findings; however, it is crucial to cite the several limitations encountered:

• The first limitation is the fact that planning is a sophisticated and complex term that has different meanings and what makes it more sophisticated is its relation to cognition, thinking and meta-cognition. In addition, it is also related to cognitive psychology and there is little research on pre-task planning mainly in writing. That is, the main research on planning was done in relation to speaking. Besides, what learners do exactly in the planning phase was ignored. Concerning the effect of planning on accuracy, it is also related to different aspects including the learners' level, task characteristics and individual differences (such as aptitude and intelligence) that may be difficult and sometimes impossible to control. Thus, the effect of planning on accuracy may also be affected by those aspects.

• Then, the number of the participants was limited to 13 and data were collected in a short period of time. Since, only five sessions were devoted to the experiment, the results can not be generalized. Furthermore, the use of the questionnaire as a self-reported tool may fail to reveal the real attitudes of the participants, and the honesty of the participants' answers cannot be guaranteed since their answers depend on their moods. Moreover, many factors could not be controlled such as learners' motivation, their aptitude, their interest and their absences. For future studies, with new procedures and long period of time for data collection, the already mentioned limitations might be overcome. Here are some recommendations for further research:

• First, further research can be conducted to investigate the effect of pre-task planning on writing accuracy by devoting a long period of time for the study and through the use of different data collection tools such as interviews, reflective journals, and different data analysis tools such as ANOVA and MANOVA.

• Besides, more research is recommended about learners' difficulties in writing and ways to alleviate them. In addition, working with a larger sample will lead to more reliable and valid results that can be generalized. Furthermore, investigating the effect of pre-task planning on another aspect of writing such as coherence may show new findings about the areas in which planning may actually be helpful.

• Finally, we suggest that taking into consideration other factors such as task characteristics and learners' level will help in controlling the effect of planning on writing accuracy.

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