

Strategic planning in task-based language teaching: The effects of participatory structure and task type

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Abstract

This paper investigates the influence of task type and participatory structure (or classroom organisation) in pre-task planning on the fluency, complexity and accuracy of learners' oral production. 32 participants, divided into three experimental groups and one control group, carried out two tasks — a decision-making and an information-exchange task. The control group had no opportunity to plan while the experimental group participants planned for each task in one of the three planning conditions: pair work, individual or teacher-led. Individual task performances were scored for fluency, complexity and accuracy prior to statistical analysis. Results show that planning led to significantly superior performance than no planning across all dependent variables. Pair work planning significantly advantaged fluency compared to teacher-led planning but not accuracy or complexity. Consistent with previous research, teacher-led planning had some benefits for accuracy, and individual planning for complexity, but neither of these effects reached significance. The decision-making task, meanwhile, led to greater complexity than the information-exchange task. These results can be interpreted as implying that there are benefits in varying classroom organisation in pre-task planning, and that individual planning, whose value has sometimes been underestimated, should not be neglected.

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1. Introduction

Recent years have seen a substantial accumulation of research into various aspects of task-based language teaching and learning (TBLT), inclusive of the impact of task design and task implementation variables on student oral production. While these studies have increased our understanding of TBLT, there remain areas of uncertainty (concerning, for example, effects of different participatory structures on the language used in task performance), which further research, including the present paper, may help illuminate. Here we focus on the effects of classroom organisation (i.e. 'participant structure' Ellis, 2003:263) in pre-task planning on task performance.

Pre-task planning (also known as 'strategic planning') has already been the focus of considerable research: no less than 19 studies are reviewed by Ellis (2009a), for example. The majority of these report positive effects of planning on fluency (e.g. Foster and Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003) and on complexity, where the main effect

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appears to be on grammatical rather than lexical complexity varying with the type of task transacted (see e.g. Foster and Skehan, 1996; Skehan and Foster, 1997).” For accuracy, on the other hand, results are mixed: some studies report positive effects (e.g. Foster and Skehan, 1996; Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005) but others detect no significant effect (e.g. Yuan and Ellis, 2003). This may be because the effects of planning are mediated by task type, learner proficiency level, and learner orientation while planning.

While the effects of planning are generally understood to be positive, pre-task planning is itself far from invariable. Planning time, for instance, may be utilized in different ways and with different degrees of efficiency, though this has seldom been investigated, an exception being Ortega’s (1999) study. Planning may also vary according to whether it is guided or unguided (see e.g. Foster and Skehan, 1996), predominantly meaning or form focused, and according to whether instructions are specific or general. Investigating the latter, Park (2010) found that specific instructions tended to encourage learners to focus more on morpho-syntax and less on lexis in task performance. Finally, and of particular interest to us, pre-task planning may vary in terms of what Ellis (2003) refers to as ‘participatory structure’, the principal options being individual (solitary), teacher-led, or group/pair work planning. Of these, group/pair work is clearly dominant in TBLT. Indeed, a number of researchers and methodologists (e.g. Skehan, 1998; Wills, 1996) seem to assume that TBLT necessarily involves small group work, an assumption that Ellis (2003) regards as unjustified since one can readily conceive of task work, not to mention pre-task planning, being undertaken individually or in whole class mode.

The present study has similarities with Foster and Skehan (1999), which to our knowledge is the only major study to have investigated the influence of participatory structure (PS) in pre-task planning. The major difference, however, is that whereas Foster and Skehan (1999) investigated focus of planning (content versus language) in interaction with participatory structure, this study focuses on participatory structure (PS) in interaction with task type.

The key findings of Foster and Skehan (1999) were that the teacher-led planning condition gave rise to the most balanced task performance with distinctly higher levels of accuracy than the other conditions. There were also satisfactory levels of fluency and complexity. The individual planners, meanwhile, produced more complex language, while the group planners were the least effective, performing at a level indistinguishable from the no-planning control participants. The other independent variable in this study — focus of planning — had no significant effect on task performance.

It is useful to re-test these findings with different participants working in somewhat different conditions because such partial replication can enhance the robustness of findings. The main motivation of the study, however, is to help inform principled pedagogical decision-taking by teachers who seek to implement, and possibly adapt, TBLT to their own classroom context. One possible adaptation is to substitute alternative modes of classroom organisation for group/pair work, which has been found to be problematic in certain classroom conditions or educational cultures — for example, in monolingual East Asian secondary school classes, where concerns have been raised about loss of classroom control, avoidance of English and limited linguistic output (see e.g. Littlewood, 2007; Carless, 2007; Adams and Newton, 2009). Given this background, the provision of any empirical information about the likely (or possible) effects of different participatory structures on the language used in task performance can only be helpful.

Accordingly, our two main research questions are as follows:

- a. What are the effects of employing different participant structures (PS) during guided pre-task planning on the fluency, complexity and accuracy of learners’ oral production?
- b. Are these effects mediated by the type of task undertaken? If so, how?

The literature, inclusive of the Foster and Skehan (1999) study, also leads us to propose the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The no-planning condition will lead to inferior task performance compared to the other pre-task planning conditions.

Hypothesis 2: The teacher-led planning condition will lead to higher levels of accuracy than the other planning conditions

Hypothesis 3: The individual planning condition will lead to higher levels of complexity than the other planning conditions

Hypothesis 4: The effects of participatory structure (PS) on fluency, complexity and accuracy will interact with task type.

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