Planning Time Effect on Writing Task

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本研究は、英文ライティングにおけるプレプランニングタイムの効果を検討するものである。日本で英語を学ぶ大学生10名を対象にした小規模実験を行ない、英文ライティングにおいて、ライティングの前に予めライティングの計画を練る時間を与えることが、彼らの英語をより正確に、流暢に、そして文法的に複雑にするのかどうかを調査した。結果、ライティングにおいてはスピーキングとは異なり、プレプランニングタイムが英語使用の正確さ、流暢さ、複雑さのいずれにも影響を与えないことが示された。この結果により、英文ライティング指導での、プレプランニングタイムの使用に関していくつかの示唆を議論する。

Key words: ライティング、プレプランニングタイム、正確性、流暢さ、複雑性

Introduction

An ultimate goal of studying English is to be able to produce the target language accurately, fluently and elaborately. In other words, learners usually want to produce accurate, fluent, and complex English. However, reaching this goal is very difficult, and even advanced students constantly make errors. The learners cannot focus on all of the three factors: accuracy, fluency, and complexity at the same time before automation (Bygates, 1999). A number of studies have investigated the task types which enhance accuracy, fluency and/or complexity and have reported that taking a planning time before production could lead learners’ more fluent and complex production (Foster and Skehan, 1996), and sometimes accurate production, too (Ellis, 1987).

Most of these studies concern the oral production, but there has been less focus on writing. Will the planning time before writing also effect on the accuracy, complexity, and fluency of production, too? Sometimes language teachers instruct that the planning before writing is important on the basis of their teaching beliefs, but is planning time before writing beneficial for accurate, fluent and complex English? This study will focus on the pre-planning time in writing task and will show the result of a small scale study which compared accuracy, fluency, and complexity of writing with pre-task planning time with writing without pre-task planning time.

In the following sections, first, I will review the literature related to the present study. Second, I will present the procedure and the data analysis of the present study. After that, the result of the study will be presented and discussed. Finally, this study
will be concluded with the implications for English language teaching.

**Literature Review**

Accuracy, fluency, and complexity are often measured when learner languages are analysed from a wider and balanced point of view. According to Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005), accuracy, fluency and complexity are summarised as follows: Accuracy refers to how accurately and correctly the target language is produced. Most of the time, the morphological correctness is the centre of the concern. In general, it is measured by the rate of numbers of errors or error free production in discourse. Fluency refers to how the target language is produced without hesitation or pausing. This factor is measured by the rate of production or the number and length of pauses and hesitation. Complexity is the state which the target language production includes a variety of linguistic structures. It is usually measured by the rate of subordinations included in oral or written productions.

Because of the limited processing capacity, it is very difficult to achieve these three factors simultaneously. One of the research fields in second language acquisition studies concerns the effects of the pre-task planning time on production. For example, Foster and Skehan (1996) report the planning time gives a positive effects on fluency and complexity. However, the effect of planning time on accuracy has mixed results. The recent study by Yuan and Ellis (2003) focuses on not only the pre-task planning time but also the online planning time. The study shows that the pre-task planning time positively effects on fluency and complexity but not on accuracy, while the online planning time gives positive effects on accuracy and complexity but not fluency. In this manner, the planning time effect differs depending on the types of the tasks and the implementation of the tasks (Ellis and Barkhuizen, 2005).

Most studies in this field investigated the effect of planning time on oral production. So, how about the writing production? Writing usually allows for on-line planning during writing process, but will writing with pre-task planning be more accurate, fluent, and complex?

**The study**

**Participants:**

Two groups of five students at a private university in Tokyo, Japan participated in this study. They are first year students, who receive English lessons 4 days a week. Their English proficiency level is lower intermediate, and their TOEIC scores are around 350 to 400.

**Data collection procedure:**

The participants completed two narrative writing activities in a week. One group
did a writing activity with pre-task planning time on Wednesday, and they did a writing activity without pre-task planning time on Friday. On the other hand, the other group did the writing activity without pre-task planning time on Wednesday, and they did the writing task with pre-task planning time on Friday.

The procedure of the writings was as follows:

| Writing with pre-task planning: 5 minutes planning time + 10 minutes writing time |
| Writing without pre-task planning: 15 minutes writing time |

During the pre-task planning time, the participants saw the pictures and they were allowed to take small notes on the margin of the pictures. The writing sheets were provided after the planning time. In the case of the unplanned writing, the participants were forced to start writing immediately after the writing sheets were provided.

**Task:**

The task is a narrative story task. The participants see four pieces of pictures and narrate a story in writing. The pictures are from Japanese famous comic “Sazae-san”. In this comic, one story consists of four pieces of pictures, which describe a funny daily life of Sazae, who is an ordinary house wife in 1970s of Japan. Two stories are selected from the comic for the task. This comic has few balloons and almost all the story is explained through pictures.

**Measurement:**

The accuracy, fluency, and complexity were measured as follows:

- **Accuracy:** Percentage of the number of error-free clauses
  
  The number of error-free clauses divided by the total number of independent clauses, sub-clauses units and subordinate clauses multiplied by 100

- **Fluency:** The number of words per writing

- **Complexity:** Amount of subordination
  
  The total number of separate clauses divided by the total number of independent clauses, sub-clauses, and subordinate clauses

**Data analysis:**

The mean scores of accuracy, fluency, and complexity on the writing with pre-task planning time and the writing without pre-task planning time were compared. The one-way ANOVA test was used in order to find the significance, which was set at .05.
Results

The means of accuracy, fluency and complexity rate showed non-significant differences between the planned writing and the unplanned writing (see Table 1).

Table 1: The means and statistic of accuracy, fluency and complexity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>n</th>
<th>Planned</th>
<th>Unplanned</th>
<th>F-value</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Accuracy</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>28.43</td>
<td>26.45</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.842</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fluency</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>49.40</td>
<td>56.40</td>
<td>.198</td>
<td>.397</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>1.26</td>
<td>1.22</td>
<td>.752</td>
<td>.661</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Notes)
Accuracy rate = Percentage of the number of error free clauses
Fluency rate = Number of words per writing
Complexity rate = Amount of subordination

Although there is no statistical significance, the mean scores of accuracy rate and complexity rate on the writing with pre-task planning time were slightly higher than the writing without pre-task planning time. In contrast, the mean score of fluency rate on the writing with pre-task planning time was slightly lower than the writing without pre-task planning time (see Table 2).

Table 2: Up or down of the results

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Accuracy</th>
<th>Fluency</th>
<th>Complexity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Planned</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>unplanned</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

The result shows that writing with or without pre-task planning time has no different effect on accuracy, fluency, and complexity. Unlike oral production, learners can have certain amount of time to think of the grammatical correctness and choice of vocabulary during the process of writing. Learners can delete what they wrote once and rewrite it. Thus, even though there is no planning time before writing, all learners can have online planning time during writing. Therefore, this study compared the differences between the writing with pre-planning + online planning and the writing with no pre-planning + online planning as shown Table 3. On-line planning time might more powerfully affect on the learners’ writing than pre-task planning time. Also, the 15 minutes writing time for writing without pre-task planning time could have been too long to give the participants time pressure.
Table 3: The task condition of this study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Pre-task planning</th>
<th>Online planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Condition 1</td>
<td>✓ in 5 mins</td>
<td>✓ in 10 mins</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition 2</td>
<td>×</td>
<td>✓ in 15 mins</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Although there was no statistical significance, there is an interesting finding which concerns with the trade-off effects. The result of this study supports the concept that learners will limitedly pay attention to ‘meaning’ or ‘form’. The present study includes a narrative task. In the narrative task, the learners have already got a story, so the participants do not need to construct complex ideas from the start. Thus, the learners could have an extra time to pay attention to forms (both accuracy and complexity) during the planning time. However, if there is no planning time, the learners cannot get the extra time to think of forms. Thus, it can be thought that the learners’ accuracy and complexity were slightly better when they had a planning time.

Implications for teaching

This study is a small scale study, so it is difficult to apply for the EFL learners in general. However, the result of this study seems to be understandable because writing task in nature allows for online planning time, thus giving pre-task planning has more limited effect compared to oral production tasks. Still some implications for teaching and further study can be considered. First to note is that writing production task is different from oral production task. Even if teachers do not give planning time before writing, students will have online planning time naturally during writing task. Thus, if teachers give students unlimited time of writing, for example as writing homework, the quality of English in writing will not be different. Second, in teaching practice, some teachers might give learners planning time before writing task in class under an expectation that learners maximise their attention to form, but that planning time will not make the writing more accurate, fluent or complex. This study indicates that merely giving pre-planning time do not directly affect accuracy, fluency, and complexity of writing, although pre-planning time might have effects on the other aspects of writing such as structuring of writing. It is an interesting topic for further research whether pre-planning time will benefit the other aspects of writing.

Finally, I will suggest an idea of a further study from a different point of view, namely writing planning time as a learning strategy. According to Oxford (1990), "planning for the language elements and functions ... for an anticipated language task or situation" is one of the language learning strategies for writing, and "this strategy includes four steps: describing the task or situation, determining its requirements, checking one's own linguistic resources, and determining additional language elements
or functions” (*ibid*: 139). In this respect, it is reasonable to think that pre-task planning time of this study was not qualified enough to work for learners’ writing improvement. If pre-writing time had had four steps as Oxford (*ibid*) mentioned, writing could have become more effective to improve writing accuracy, fluency, and complexity. In this respect, the pre-task planning time with learning strategy use will be another interesting topic for further classroom study.

**Bibliography**


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