Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching

Volume 04, Issue 1, (2014) 20-28

www.awer-center.org/gjflt/

The role of careful online planning on the speaking skill of Iranian EFL learners

Behzad Rahbar*, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Zanjan, Iran.

Nazli Dadluei, Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Zanjan, Iran.

Suggested Citation:

Rahbar, B. & Dadluei, G. (2014). The role of careful online planning on the speaking skill of Iranian EFL learners. *Global Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, *4*(1), 20-28. Retrived on 3 May 2014 from http://www.world-education-center.org/index.php/GJFLT/article/view/2902

Received 1 January, 2014; revised 13 February, 2014; accepted 14 April, 2014.
Selection and peer review under responsibility of Associate Prof Dr. Ali Rahimi, Bangkok University.
©2014 SPROC LTD. Academic World Education & Research Center. All rights reserved.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the role of careful online planning in second language (L2) speech production focusing on cognitive mechanisms. The point was to examine the construct of careful online planning. The main goal of this study was to see how much careful online planning can foster the speaking skill of language learners. The secondary goal was to develop a better understanding of the monitoring mechanisms which L2 speakers utilize under careful and pressured online planning conditions. To this end, within an experimental design, the researcher tried to investigate the issue via two groups of experimental and control. The treatment understudy was as to scrutinize whether careful online planning could influence the speaking performance of Iranian EFL learners. Questions related to the degree of the effect of careful online planning and its mechanism were going to be answered in this study. Overall, results of the quantitative analysis showed L2 learners actually using the online planning time at their disposal to plan and monitor their speech online outperformed in speaking performance as compared to those who did not use it. The results of this study will inform teaching language specialists. The findings of this research can be tested upon the other skills of language within their own scope.

Keywords: careful online planning, speaking performance, speaking skill, speech production.

*ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Behzad Rahbar,** Faculty of Foreign Languages, Department of English, Islamic Azad University of Zanjan, Iran, *E-mail address*: rahbarbehzad@gmail.com

1. Introduction

One of the ongoing challenges among language teachers is whether or not to use first language (L1) in second language (L2) classroom instruction. There is no clear-cut rule to demonstrate the extent to which application of L1 should be allowed or prohibited in teaching of L2, in other words, the extent to which learners' mother tongue can be helpful for L2 classroom activities and L2 learning environment is of prime importance (Stanley, 2002).

In recent years, there has been a growing controversial debate within the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) literature regarding the influence of different types of planning on complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF) (Ellis, 2008, 2009). Going deep into planning structure gives new insights for both second language acquisition (SLA) researchers, who are chiefly interested in theorizing about second language (L2) acquisition, and language teachers, who are obsessed with helping language learners to learn languages more effectively and efficiently (Ellis, 2005). Although a plethora of research has been conducted on the effects of pre-task planning on L2 production, relatively little attention has been paid to the effect of careful online planning on speaking performance of participants.

During the last three decades, there has been a couple traditions on planning, beginning with the pioneering work of Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984). In fact, this line of research – which is the main concern of this research – studies how the planning time available to L2 learners, while they are performing a task, may affect the quality and quantity of the language they produce.

The model proposed by Ellis (2009) has informed the basis of this research. According to this model, there are four sets of variables to consider in investigating and theorizing the notion of planning successfully: (i) task variables (e.g. the structure of the task), (ii) individual difference factors (e.g. L2 proficiency, willingness to communicate), (iii) planning variables, and (iv) L2 production variables (e.g. complexity, accuracy, and fluency). Ellis' model is based on the premise that the task and individual difference variables influence how learners plan and also mediate the effect that the planning has on L2 production.

When it comes to the findings of this study in general, the findings and results can be applied in designing appropriate tasks for EFL/ESL classrooms. Also, it examins the potential of different types of task and implementation variables for enhancing different dimensions of L2 oral performance, specifically speaking skill.

The results of this piece of research can also be useful to second language acquisition (SLA) researchers interested in basic (pure) research, in that it can help them test claims regarding the nature of inter-language systems as well as the validity of speech production models which are essential in discussing the role and psycholinguistic functioning of planning in L2 performance and L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2005, 2009).

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoritecal Background

As far as cognitive psychology is concerned, the term 'planning' applies to many different aspects of cognition and cognitive control where a 'blueprint' for achieving a particular goal is required (Ward & Morris, 2005). What understimates the significance of planning for performing cognitively demanding tasks, namely speaking skill, is the assumption that human attentional capacity is strictly limited; to the effect that the amount of information that can be processed at any time is constrained (Huitt, 2003; Styles, 1997).

Online planning, the focus of this study, could be further differentiated in terms of the extent to which the task performance is rapid (pressured) or careful (un-pressured) depending on the amount of time available for task completion. Yuan and Ellis (2003) define careful online planning as '… the process by which speakers attend carefully to the formulation stage during speech planning and engage in pre-production and post-production monitoring of their speech acts'. In other words, careful online planning entails a form of 'planning-as-regrouping' while

learners are engaged in the actual process of communication, i.e. 'planning speech on the fly' (Skehan, 2007; Skehan & Foster, 2005).

2.2. Empirical studies

According to psycholinguistic issues discussed above, a couple of studies have investigated the effects of careful online planning on complexity, accuracy, and fluency and have interpreted the results with reference to Skehan's (1998, 2009) Trade-off Hypothesis whereby committing attentional resources to one dimension of L2 performance may have a negative impact on the others. With the exception of Hulstijn and Hulstijn's (1984) and Ellis' (1987), these studies are fairly comparable in that they all have operationalized careful online planning in the same manner and have used similar measures to assess the CAF triad.

In an early study, Ellis (1987) compared only the accuracy of learners' performance on written and oral narrative tasks based on pictures. The two important variables scrutinized in this study were careful online planning and strategic planning. In a specific condition, they were given a picture composition and were required to write the story. In this condition, the participants were given about an hour for task completion and were asked to start task performance straight away. In the second condition, participants were given a different picture and were asked to narrate the story orally. They were given two minutes to prepare the story they were about to tell. In the third condition, participants were given a different set of pictures and were required to narrate the story orally with minimal time for prior planning.

Hulstijn and Hulstijn (1984) in their pioneering work asked 32 learners of L2 Dutch to perform short oral narratives under four conditions involving combination of two variables, namely time and focal attention. The results of this study suggest that when learners use the time at their disposal to attend to the formulation of linguistic forms their production becomes more accurate. It was also revealed that allotting more time alone does not affect accuracy of their language. Other aspects of language performance, i.e. fluency and complexity, have not been investigated in this study.

Building on Ellis (1987), Yuan and Ellis (2003) compared the effects of pre-task and careful online planning on learner performance of a narrative task in a more organized and structured way. In the pre-task condition, participants were given ample time (about ten minutes) to plan their language prior to task performance. They were then required to perform the task under time pressure. In the careful online planning condition, participants were required to perform the task without any opportunity for pre-task planning, but they were allowed to engage in careful online planning, in that they could take as much time as they needed for task completion. In the third condition, which functioned as control condition, participants had to perform the task under time pressure and were given no chance to prepare. Results indicated that on-line planners produced both more accurate and complex language and that online planning inhibited fluency in language production.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research questions:

1. Does careful online planning affect the speaking skill of Iranian EFL learners?
2. How do EFL learners respond to careful online planning?

3.2 Research hypothesis :

Hypothesis 1:

Careful online planning condition affects the speaking skill of Iranian EFL learners.

As for the nature of the 2nd research question, being heuristic in nature, no 2nd hypothesis was formulated.

3.3 Participants:

The participants of the current research were from two intact classes at Jahad Daneshgahi Institute in Zanjan. Each class contained 30 female students and their age ranged from 20 to 25. Since the treatment was provided during usual class time, the researcher received the participants' consent informally. These two classes were upper intermediate and were based on the placement test administered by the institute. Intermediate learners were chosen because the study was going to work on speaking skill and realistically working with intermediate learners seemed easier than withother levels.

3.4 Instrument

At the outset of the study, PET (Preliminary English Test) was devised for upper intermediate level would be used as a proficiency test in order to assure the homogeneity of the groups. The second type of instrument for both the pretest and posttest part of the study was extracted from Narrative tasks of speaking (silent video files). These tools were used to see if careful online planning could have any effect on the speaking ability of the learners or not. The tool for eliciting information was a silent video after which the voice of learners were recorded by a computer microphone.

3.5 Procedure

As for procedure, learners were required to watch a silent video and were asked to narrate the story of the video monologically – i.e. into a computer microphone – as opposed to dialogically where the participant talked with an interlocutor and thereby received different sorts of feedback. This decision was made to make sure that L2 oral performance was being investigated 'as an individual attribute' (De Jong, Steinel, Florijn, Schoonen & Hulstijn, in press) rather than the product of a process of co-constructing a message which is typical of the dialogic mode of discourse (Young, 2002, as cited in De Jong, et al., in press).

The overall purpose of this phase was to explore the cognitive mechanisms which underlie speech production under careful online planning condition. The participants were randomly selected and assigned to two groups (n =30) and then taken the pretests (language proficiency). In the first group (i.e., the control group) participants were required to perform an oral narrative task under pressured online planning condition – i.e., under time pressure. Participants in the second group, however, were asked to carry out the oral narrative task under careful online planning condition – i.e., they were allowed to take as much time as they would need to do the task. To preclude learners from engaging in strategic (pre-task) planning participants in both groups were required to start narrating the story right after watching the video

3.6 Data Analysis

Different statistical tools were utilized to analyze the data and provide plausible answers to the research questions. Initially, qualitative content analysis were used to deal with the qualitative data. Also, descriptive statistics and a series of t-tests were used to address the questions which had to do with quantitative data.

Two raters having inter-rater reliability did the qualitative part of the speaking test that was digging into content of what learners would provide. As far as quantitative data was concerned, through a speaking skill checklist the scores were obtained and fed to SPSS for further analysis. Statistical tests and provisions (mean/SD, etc) as well as related tables were drawn at the end.

3.7 Variables of the Study

a) Independent variables : in this research planning condition was the independent factor.

b)dependent variable : Oral performance

4. Results

A range of interpretations with regard to data collected/analyzed are made. This was done due to the fact that the researcher wondered if careful online planning can affect the speaking skill of our subjects. Undoubtedly, the results should be at the service of the research question. Therefore, a section is dedicated to analyzing the research question.

The results support the idea that participants who underwent careful online planning for the aim of speaking test gained a better speaking quality (a good performance) than the control group. But a paired sample t-test was required to ensure that the experimental group had progressed significantly. Tables 4.1 and 4.2 show the result of the paired sample t-test.

Table 4.1 Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	pretest	13.7667	30	1.90613	.34801
	posttest	34.0000	30	1.94759	.35558

Means in table 4.1 appear to be statistically different. Paired sample t-test approved this point.

Table 4.2 Paired Sample t-test; Post-speaking test/experimental group

	Paired Differences							
				95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
pretest/ posttest	-20.23	2.28	.417	-21.08	-19.38	-48.50	29	.000

Table 4.2 shows the end result of the paired sample t-test which confirms the outstanding development in speaking abilities of experimental group, since 't' value is far more than 't' critical. In fact the results of the paired T-test which compares the performance of the experimental group within the pre and post test of the study completely support the fact that

speaking ability of the experimental group fully flourished after the treatment period. Therefore, the members of the experimental group gained from the implementation of careful online planning for the purpose of their speaking ability improvement.

The results obtained from this study supported the fact our treatment, careful online, could influence the speaking skill of the target population of the study. However, to the best knowledge of the researcher, more details are needed to be found regarding the fact that which dimensions of speaking skills are improved though our treatment. In fact, the dimensions of cognitive load, task complexity, learner repair some other related issues of speaking can be more meticulously researched in further studies.

The results of this research may be able to truly justify he reasons why some EFL learners have severe problems in TOEFL in speaking tasks where just a few seconds are dedicated for the candidates to prepare their responses. A very delicate aspect which could be researched here was to see 9f there was any relationship between lingering the time of careful online planning and the improvement of the candidates speaking ability.

5. Discussion

Two phases were carried out in this study. The first phase was a quantitative channel to one of the research questions to see if careful online planning could improve the speaking quality of the participants of the study. In the second phase, participants' were qualitatively analyzed. As far as quantitative part was concerned, the quality of learners' oral production improved significantly. The comparison of the mean scores of the control and experimental group gave credit to the idea that if learners are provided with careful online planning before embarking on the task of speaking, their oral performance gets improved.

As for qualitative part, since the data was driven from the frequency metaphors found in the interviews with participants, the following results were gained:

Second language learners use the planning opportunity to *plan* and *monitor* their speech in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and informational content.

Careful online planning condition enhances the accuracy and complexity of second language learners' speech but it has detrimental effects on the fluency of their speech. One of the chief contributions of this phase of the study was that both qualitative and quantitative analyses confirmed that careful online planning has been operationalized successfully. For instance, the findings revealed that careful online planners took more time for task completion and that most of them declared that they used the time at their disposal for planning their speech. Hence, given the fundamental similarities between the present study and the previous studies in terms of the operationalization of careful online planning, the nature of the task used for eliciting learner language, and the measures employed, the findings of the present study give further support to the previous studies' main finding that careful online planning enhances oral performance of the participants.

One of the fundamental findings of this research which is pertinent to the first research question was that second language learners use the online planning opportunity to *plan* and *monitor* their speech in terms of grammar, vocabulary, and informational content respectively. Furthermore, one of the major themes found in the qualitative analysis was related to the fact that participants *consciously* – and perhaps 'strategically' (Schmidt, 2001) – allocated their attentional resources to different dimensions of their speech. Considering these findings, it is logical to suggest careful online planning condition induces speakers to channel their attentional resources to the formulation of the message when they figure out that in the process of self-monitoring their speech entails erroneous forms or that they need to fall back on their explicit knowledge to formulate messages for which they do not already possess prefabricated chunks.

As put earlier, careful online planning condition could bring about a 'learning discourse' in which learners are fundamentally attentive to the grammatical and lexical appropriacy rather

than communicative purposes; thus, more strategies were used to enhance the speaking skill quality. In contrast, the pressured online planning condition is likely to build up a communication context which might lead speakers to be more involved with the conveyance of the message as properly as possible.

All in all, based on the results interviews careful online planning group performed better in their oral speaking and they were mostly satisfied with the amount of time given to them to plan and organize their speech. . Therefore, the findings confirm the findings and interpretations that were reported and discussed so far.

To recapitulate, the findings of this research further supported Skehan and Foster's (2005) argument that while speakers engage in careful online planning their attention could be drifted towards at least one of the following areas:

(a) Planning language for what he/she is about to say in one clause or two;

(b) Reconceptualize the content of what he/she is going to say;

(c) Monitoring their language *online* in order to self-correct.

Having analyzed the complexity of some of the utterances of the participants, with reference to Skehan's (1998) one could reason that under pressured online planning conditions participants are likely to use their *exemplar-based system* which is comprised of a large number of ready-made chunks of language and imposes lower degrees of cognitive demand on the speaker.

This finding might in turn decline the speakers' creativity and willingness to utilize the recently learnt grammatical rules for generating novel sentences. In careful online planning condition, however, since speakers have ample time for planning their speech online, they are likely to draw on their rule-based system during the formulation phase of speech production. Based on to Skehan (1998), the rule-based system includes generative linguistic rules and enables the speaker to use his/her cutting-edge linguistic knowledge and as a result produce more complex language. As far as careful online planning is concerned, this finding is similar to those of previous studies reviewed (see e.g. Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

In sum, the results of interviews suggested that learners themselves were fully satisfied to have careful online planning for their oral production. They even revealed more details about ins and outs of the careful online planning for the betterment of the oral production. The analysis of the carton video file indicated that if participants are given enough time (careful online planning), they come out to have better performance compared with those who go for pressured time procedures.

6. Conclusion

The present study was inspired by the urgent need to know what second language learners do and monitor under careful online planning condition. The fact is that previous studies have all referred to the positive effects of careful online planning on different dimensions of L2 oral performance without demonstrating, convincingly, that the participants are actually using the planning time at their disposal for planning their speech in terms of the formal and systemic aspects of language.

One of the main findings of this study was that second language learners actually plan their speech under careful online planning condition. The case in point is that this finding testifies to an overlap between 'task-as-workplan', reflecting the way task designers envision the task being carried out by the 'task performer' and 'task-in-process' reflecting the way language learners or task performers redefine and enact the pedagogic task accordingly (Breen, 1987; also see Samuda & Bygate, 2008).

During the past two decades, a number of SLA researchers with a cognitive orientation have tried to identify task design features and implementation variables which might reduce the

cognitive load of tasks and channel task performers' attention capacity to different dimensions of language in predictable ways (Skehan, 1998). A summary of the findings of the second phase of the study which could be of importance to both SLA researchers and language teachers are listed below:

a) Careful online planning has a positive effect on the complexity and accuracy of L2 speech;
b) Careful online planning has a positive motivation and satisfaction for the participants
c) Careful online planning has a positive effect on the betterment of the participants' oral production.

Of course, careful online planning is more applicable for those tasks of speaking which are lecture- based like that IELTS speaking part 2. In this task of IELTS in part two candidates are given a minute to prepare for the assigned task. Then they are given 2 minutes time to talk about the points they have prepared for the task. But in the same test in parts one and two, there is no time given for participants to have careful online planning for their given speaking tasks. It seems to the researcher of this study that as far as speaking for the purpose of testing is concerned, careful online planning is more at work for those speaking tasks which are given time for careful online planning while for interactive tasks of speaking like part 1 and two of IELTS tests the results must be reconsidered in another study. Therefore, more studies are needed to take the results of careful online planning on different tests, either time-given or interactive.

7. Implications of the study

When it comes to perspective of language pedagogy, the findings of this study assume particular importance in that they provide empirical support for the use of tasks in language classrooms. One of the main criticisms leveled at task-based language teaching and learning is that attention to form is thought to be limited to the feedback which is given to language learners by their teachers or peers (Ellis, 2009b). Also, Task-based language teaching has been criticized on the grounds that performing a task by virtue of its meaning-centered and outcome-oriented nature may at best lead to the production of impoverished and pidginized language which is of very little value for L2 acquisition (Seedhouse, 1999).

However, as the findings of this study suggest, performing tasks under careful online planning condition could promote strategic allocation of attention capacity to form, which might in turn lead to noticing the gap. To be more precise, requiring learners to perform tasks under planning conditions can lead them to produce complex and accurate language. Furthermore, the combination of careful online planning and task structure enhanced all three aspects of L2 oral speech. The findings of this line of research could, hence, contribute to the enrichment of task-based language pedagogy in EFL/ESL contexts as it could afford practitioners with procedural options which have been completely scrutinized from different angles and within different contexts.

8. Suggestions for further research

Further research can investigate a couple of other questions in line with careful online planning. For instance, the effect of careful online planning on accuracy, fluency and co mplexity of speaking can be studied. Next, more and more sample size can be utilized. Another question can be the incorporation of degree of formality within the scope of future research when investigating careful online planning, also the effect of online planning on the other skills such as written, listening part can be investigated.

References

Breen, M. P. (1987). Learner contributions to task design. In C. Candlin & D. F. Murphy (Eds.), *Language learning tasks,* 23-46

De Jong, N. H., Steinel, M. P., Florijn, A. F., Schoonen, R., & Hulstijn, J. H. (in press). Facets of speaking proficiency. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*.

Ellis R. (1987). Interlanguage variability in narrative discourse: Style shifting in the use of the past tense. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 9*, 1–20.

Ellis, R. (2003). *Task-based language learning and teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ellis, R. (2005). Planning and task-based research: theory and research. In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Planning and Task-Performance in a Second Language,* 3-34.

Ellis, R. (2006). Modeling learning difficulty and second language proficiency: The differential contributions of implicit and explicit knowledge. *Applied Linguistics, 27*, 431-463.

Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition.* 2ed edn. Oxford

Ellis, R. (2009a). The differential effects of three types of task planning on the fluency, complexity and accuracy in l2 oral production. *Applied Linguistics, 30*(4), 474-509.

Ellis, R. (2009b). Task-based language teaching: sorting out the misunderstandings. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics, 19*(3), 221-246.

Ellis, R. (2009c). *Implicit and explicit learning*, knowledge and instructing. In R.

Huitt, W. (2003). The information processing approach.
Retrieved from: http://chiron.valdosta.edu/whuitt/col/cogsys/infoproc.html

Hulstijn, J.H. (2011). Language proficiency in native and nonnative speakers: An agenda for research and suggestions for second-language assessment. *Language Assessment Quarterly, 8*, 229-249.

Hulstijn, J., & Hulstijn, W. (1984). Grammatical errors as a function of processing constraints and explicit knowledge. *Language Learning, 34,* 23-43.

Samuda, V., and Bygate, M. (2008). *Tasks in second language learning*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schmidt, R. (2001). Attention. In P. Robinson (Ed.): *Cognition and second language instruction.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Seedhouse, P. (1999). Task-based interaction. *ELT Journal, 53,* 149 – 156.

Segalowitz, N. (2007). Access fluidity, attention control, and the acquisition of fluency in a second language, *TESOL Quarterly, 41*, 181–6.

Skehan, P. (1998). *A cognitive approach to language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Skehan, P. (2007). Task research and language teaching: Reciprocal relationships. In S. Fotos, and H. Nassaji (Eds.): *Form-focused instruction and teacher education: Studies in honor of Rod Ellis, 28-48*

Skehan, P. (2009a). Modeling second language performance: Integrating complexity, accuracy, fluency, and lexis. *Applied Linguistics*, *30*(4), 510-532.

Skehan, P. (2009b). Models of speaking and the assessment of second language proficiency. In A. G. Benati (Ed.): *Issues in language proficiency*. London: Continuum.

Skehan, P. & Foster, P. (2005). Strategic and on-line planning: The influence of surprise information and task time on second language performance. In R. Ellis (Ed.): *Planning and Task-Performance in a Second Language,* 193-216

Styles, E. (1997). *The psychology of attention.* Hove: Psychology Press.

Van Patten, B. (1990). Attending to content and form in the input: An experiment in consciousness. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition, 12*, 287–301.

Ward, G., & Morris, R. (2005). Introduction to the psychology of planning. In R. Morris & G. Ward (Eds.), *The cognitive psychology of planning,* 1-34

Yuan, F. & Ellis, R. (2003). The effect of pre-task planning and online planning on fluency, complexity, and accuracy in L2 oral production. *Applied Linguistics, 24*, 1–27