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Research Article

THE EFFECT OF TASK COMPLEXITY AND PLANNING TIME ON WRITING FLUENCY: A CASE STUDY OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT AMU

Mohammad Rizwan Khan., Malek Ahmad Kord and Asvat Kord

Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India

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A B S T R A C T

Tasked Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has widely provided learners with some opportunities to learn spoken and written language through learning activities in the major of English Language Teaching (ELT). In recent years there has been increasing interest in examining differential effects of task complexity and planning time conditions on fluency, accuracy and complexity in English as a second language (ESL) context but, the present study explored the impacts of task complexity and planning time on ESL learners' written performance in terms offluency. To this end, forty-five undergraduate English Language Learners, both male and female (within the age range of 18-24) have been recruited from Aligarh Muslim University. Two tasks were chosen as instruments for data collection. One is an argumentative essay and the other is a narrative task to measure the fluency of the participants' written production, under different planning conditions (pre-task planning, within-task planning, and no planning). One-way MANOVA was employed as the statistical means of analysis. The findings revealed a significant effect of task complexity under different planning conditions in words per minute (the number of words produced by the participants divided by the time they spent on each assignment). Syllables per minute (The number of syllables that the participants produced divided by the minutes they spent on production). Dysfluencies (the number of words they changed or modified in terms of vocabulary or spelling), regarding fluency.

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have witnessed the enormous growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching. There are several reasons for this surge of interest. First, a 'task' is a concept of equal import to both Second Language Acquisition (SLA) researchers and language teachers (Ellis, 2003). According to Ellis (2003), it has the potential to be performed in a number of ways depending on how the participants are oriented to the task. This perceived *flexibility* of task-based convention can refract some of the criticisms leveled against it. One of these criticisms is based on the claim that performing tasks and language use does not *necessarily* lead to accurate and fluent production or language acquisition (Reinders, 2009).

TBLT uses the task as the essential unit of its analysis and emphasize the creation of meaning without any preceding instruction of language forms.So, learners can use any strategies or forms to do the task and achieve the task goal (Willis & Willis, 2001). Research into TBLT is essentially conducted due to deal with the problem of determining the related classifying and sequencing principles for designing and organizing tasks for task-based syllabi (Long & Crookes, 1992; Robinson, 2003, 2006) and has mostly concentrated on discovering the effects of task design and task characteristics on task performance (Tavakoli and Skehan, 2005; Tavakoli and Foster, 2008; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 1999). Rahimpour (2010), believed that TBLT is a response to a better understanding of language learning process.Ellis (2005), divided planning time in the field of task-based language teaching into pre-task planning (rehearsal and strategic planning), planning happens before the performance of the task and within task planning (pressured and unpressured) regarding when planning takes place.

Several studies have been accomplished on the effect of different task characteristics on L2 learners' performance but, afew studies have been done to investigate the effects of task complexity and planning time. This study investigates the effects of task complexity and planning on ESL learners' written performance regarding fluency, based on two different cognitively demanding tasks, namely, argumentative essay and narrative task writing under different planning conditions. The rationale for using two different types of writing with different complexity levels lies in available theories of language production, Skehan (1998, 2001, 2003) and Skehan & Foster

Corresponding author:* **Mohammad Rizwan Khan
Department of English, Aligarh Muslim University, India

(1999, 2001) consider task complexity as the amount of attention a task demands from the learners.

Task-Based Language Teaching

TBLT introduced by John Dewey (1859-1952) based on the principles, the effectiveness of experiential learning and real-life situations are rehearsed in the language teaching classrooms (Ellis, 2009; Hu, 2013). More recently in modern theories of learning TBLT is based on the constructive theory of learning. It developed from the Communicational Language Teaching project in India by Prabhu (1987) and its history goes back to 1980s. The rationale behind its origination is the absence of performance in the target language production and other restrictions of the traditional language teaching methodologies based on the structural approach following presentation practice production paradigm (Ellis, 2003; Long & Crookes, 1993).

Richards & Rodgers (2001) considered TBLT as an approach based on the utilisation of tasks as the essential units of planning in the class which has a significant part in language teaching. Many researchers have used the task in their courses and methodologies and they have long been part of English Language Teaching (ELT). Nevertheless, TBLT offers an entirely different rationale for the implementation of tasks in language teaching. TBLT also presents some important criteria for devising, selecting and sequencing tasks in the classroom instruction that are designed for the teachers. Here tasks are used as the main output units in education, practice and even in the evaluation. Moreover, task-based instruction has a very stronger foundation in theory and research such as the concept of psychological reality in psycholinguistic theories and cognitive approach to language teaching.

The role of the learner's motivation, autonomy and cognitive abilities enjoy the central place in constructivism, which is also fundamental assumptions in TBLT (Willis, 1996; Robinson, 2011; Ellis, 2009; Bygate et al. 2001). Wang (2011) states that constructivism emphasises learners' autonomy, personal involvement, reflectivity, and active involvement of the learners in the process of learning; basically same is the case with TBLT principles. When a learner undertakes a communicative task, he is inclined to make use of his existing linguistic resources to achieve an outcome (Willis & Willis, 2007). TBLT asserts that language is best learned when the focus is on the meaning and it is contrary to the focus on form, i.e. grammatical structures of the target language based on the structural syllabus or traditional linguistic (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). Dörnyei (2005), has shown that language learning is finally a highly interpersonal enterprise, including relationships between learners and teachers, so, understanding the psychology of these relationships and the agents involved in them is half the battle (Ahmed et al., 2016).

Skehan (1996) & Carless (2009) differentiated *strong* from *weak* forms of TBLT. The *strong* TBLT form emphasis more on meaning-making in real life scenarios along with the authentic and accurate performance of the tasks. The *weak* form of TBLT provides more flexible tasks for communicative language teaching (Hu, 2013). The roles performed by the language learners in TBLT are labelled as participants, listeners/speakers, risk takers, storytellers, innovators and sequencers. They participate in group works or pair/dyads during task cycle for successful L2 development (Ahmed et al., 2016).

According to Ellis (2009) task is thecore unit of a lesson in TBLT classroom and different tasks are designed to facilitate the process of teaching andthe learners with real-life communicative situations supporting them real communicators of the target language. It is a learner-centered approach, based on the constructivist school of learning and teacher plays a facilitator role in the communicative interaction among the learners. During TBLT a language learner plays a dynamic role in the whole process of language learning and teaching as he/she takes active part in interactive and communicative activities throughout the task performance cycle to achieve an outcome (Robinson, 2011; Bygate *et al*., 2001; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003).Samuda and Bygate, 2008) defined task as "A task is a holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some nonlinguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning, through process or product or both" (Samuda & Bygate, 2008: p. 69).

Task Complexity

Task complexity is the central importance of task-based language teaching because with such knowledge teachers can have a better understanding of task design, performance, and development. It can also inform grading and sequencing decisions in a language teaching syllabus (Skehan, 1998; Ellis, 2003; Robinson, 2001). Robinson and Skehan make a sequences of predictions as to how changes in task complexity will influence the linguistic facets of L2 output or, to be specific, the accuracy (i.e., correct use of the L2) and complexity (i.e., use of advanced and elaborate inter-language constructions) of production (Skehan& Foster, 2001).

This paper concentrates on the effects of cognitive task complexity on different dimensions on fluency of Indian ESL learners' written production to prove the possibilities of improvement of the writing skills of students learning English. Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2005) and Skehan's Limited Attentional Capacity Model (Skehan & Foster, 1999, 2001) are two theoretical frameworks on which this study was based.

Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis claimed that task complexity is the outcome of the attentional, reasoning, memory, and other information-processing demands carry outby the structure of the task on the language learner. Regarding attentional resources, Robinson has suggested that the human brain has a multiple-resource attentional system, i.e., depletion of attention in one pool does not affect the amount remaining in another (Robinson, 2001).

Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2005), is also famous as Multiple Attentional Resources Model, which states that people have unlimited attentional and memory resources that can be accessed whenever there is a need. The cognition hypothesis supports the prediction that is enhancing cognitive task complexity which needs more attentional resources does develop language production qualities such as accuracy and complexity but not fluency. The underlying assumption of their Limited Attentional Capacity Model is that attentional resources are limited and increasing the complexity of tasks reduce attention capacity. As their attentional limits are reached, learners will prioritize processing for meaning over processing for form. Moreover, attending to one aspect of performance (complexity, accuracy, or fluency of language) may well mean that other dimensions suffer due to the learner's processing capacity.

Task Planning

Task planning is divided into two main types. This distinction is regarding when planning takes place. Pre-task planning (PTP) refers to planning that happens before the learner performing the task. It includes what Schmidt (2001) calls 'preparatory attention' that helps in performing actions with greater accuracy and speed. The other type of planning time is within-task planning (WTP) which refers to planning that takes place while performing the task (Ellis, 2005). In no planning, learners were required to carry out the task without any instruction that is given by the researcher. They were extremely pressured to express their ideas and plan their written production.

As Ellis (2005) states, this kind of planning prepare learners to do the task by knowing about the essential content and the way to express it. Learners are divided into two kinds of planning, namely, guided and unguided planning. In the former, learners are guided in the planning stage of what and how to plan; however, in the latter, there is no guidance or advice in the planning stage. Generally speaking, empirical studies (Skehan & Foster, 1999; Sangarun, 2001) on the impacts of pre-task and online-task planning on written production have revealed the significant positive effect of planning on fluency, complexity, and accuracy.

Fluency

Fluency is defined as the learners' ability to use language emphasizing meanings and using a diversity of lexical items for successful communication in the second language (Skehan, 1998). Ishikawa (2006) measured fluency of L2 written production as the number of words divided by T-Units.

Fluency refers to a person's general language ability. According to Lennon (1990) fluency defined as the language proficiency that is mainlycharacterized by perceptions of ease and smoothness of speech or writing. Tavakoli and Skehan (2005), fluency can be further broken down into the following: breakdown fluency, speed fluency and repair fluency. It is also defined by Skehan (2009) as "the capacity to produce speech at anormal rate and without interruption" (p.511). Moreover, as "the production of language in real time without undue pausing or hesitation" by Ellis and Barkhuizen (2005, p.139).

Many researchers have defined fluency in different ways. Housen & Kuiken (2009) believe that fluency typically refers to a person's general language proficiency, mostly as characterized by perceptions of eloquence, ease and 'smoothness' of speech or writing. Fluency is the "process of language in real time" (Schmidt, 1992, p. 358) with a focus on "the primacy of meaning" (Foster & Skehan, 1996, p. 304).

Another group of researchers have defined fluency in terms of the appropriate use of routines. For House (1996) it is a pragmatic formula and For Ellis (1996), the routine is an automatized chunk of language. Wolfe-Quintero et al. (1998, p. 13) argue that "the use of routines will result in an increase in measures of fluency because the units of production will be longer and easier to produce within a given time frame."

Research Hypothesis

There isn't any significant difference between task complexity and planning on ESL learners' writing fluency.

Research Question

To what extent task complexity and planning effect on ESL learners' writing fluency?

Research Methodology

The methodology for the research study is quantitative. It has been divided into three sections pre-test of TOEFL (To evaluate the validity of the study and to ensure the homogeneity of participants), narrative task writing and argumentative essay writing, under different planning conditions (pre-task planning, within-task planning, and no planning).

Participants

Forty-five undergraduate ESL learners are majoring English teaching both male and female (within the age range of 19-34) have been recruited from Aligarh Muslim University. To evaluate the validity of the study and to ensure the homogeneity of participants, a reliable pre-test of TOEFL was given to them. Thus, before the main writing task, participants were given the writing section of an institutional TOEFL to homogenize them regarding their writing proficiency and to cross out the outliers. Thus, 36 learners at the same proficiency level in writing continued with the next task.

Instruments

Two instruments have been applied to the present study: First,the writing section of an institutional TOEFL to homogenize them regarding their writing proficiency and to cross out the outliers (pretest). Second, the measures of accuracy, fluency, and complexity were developed to evaluate the quality of the participants' written production.

Fluency Measures

In this study, two aspects of fluency were measured as follows:

1. ***Rate A*: words per minute:** The number of words produced by the participants divided by the time they spent on each assignment.
2. ***Rate B*: syllables per minute:** The number of syllables they produced divided by the minutes they spent on production.
3. **Dysfluencies:** the number of words they changed or modified regarding vocabulary or spelling. These are the same measures used by Chenoweth and Hayes (2001) andEllis and Yuan (2004).

Data Collection

For data collection, two different tasks have been employed: the first task was a narrative task (summer routine story**)**, the task required participants to write a story based on a set of six pictures. The second task was an argumentative essay in which the three groups were supposed to compose an argumentative essay under different planning conditions. The topic was: "Some people argue that Instagram has caused a lot of harm to young people. Others argue that Instagram has brought many benefits to young people. What is your opinion? Use specific reasons and examples to support youridea."

All the participants of three groups were given 30 minutes to perform the tasks. In this phase, the pre-task planner group was asked to perform the task with 10 minutes for strategic planning. The participants of within task, plannergroup,were asked to perform the same task, but they were not given any

time for planning. They had thirty minutes to compose their ideas. However, the noplanning group did not have any opportunity to receive instruction.

Data Analysis

All writing productions of different groups under the conditions mentioned above will be segmented, coded, and scored based on the measures chosen for assessing accuracy. The data will be segmented, coded, and scored by two independent experts. Then, inter-coder/inter-rater reliability coefficient magnitudes were estimated. SPSS version 22.0 was used to check the normality of distribution via skewness and kurtosis indices. Accuracy will be submitted to MANOVA, followed by Post-HocScheffe tests.

RESULTS OF RESEARCH QUESTION

This research question was concerned about the effect of manipulating task complexity and planning on writing fluency of Indian ESL learners?Concerning this research question, it was hypothesized that manipulating task complexity will not influence writing fluency of ESL learners. To this aim, two different tasks, namely, narrative and argumentative task writing, with different complexity, under different planning conditions (PTP, WTP, NP) were introduced to the participants. In this study, fluency was measured in three different ways: the number of words per minutes (Rate A), the number of syllables per minutes (Rate B), and the number of corrections made per T-units (Dysfluencies). Table 1 summarizes the mean and standard deviation of both argumentative and narrative tasks of ESL learners regarding fluency in all three groups.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics of Argumentative and Narrative task writing Fluency

Task planning condition	Argumentative Essay		Narrative task writing	
	Mean	Std Deviation	Mean	Std Deviation
Pre-task planning				
Rate A	13.7	4.82	12.5	3.62
Rate B	16.85	5.23	14.9	4.5
Dysfluency	.76	.23	.40	.29
Within-task planning				
Rate A	11.07	3. 24	10.3	2.26
Rate B	14.56	3.75	12.5	2.7
Dysfluency	.98	.72	.67	.52
No-planning				
Rate A	7.92	1.68	5.68	0.41
Rate B	7.85	2.9	5.65	1.8
Dysfluency	1.11	.96	.88	.56

Descriptive statistics clearly indicates that PTP group in argumentative task writing produced more words per minutes (M= 13.7; SD= 4.82) compared to WTP (M= 11.07; SD= 3.24) and NP (M= 7.92; SD= 1.68) groups. In the case of syllables per minute (Rate B), the mean of syllable production for PTP, WTP, and NP, was 16.85, 14.56, and 7.85, respectively. It can be concluded that pre-task planners outperformed compared to within task planners and no planners. In addition, the descriptive statistics displayed that the participants in the PTP group had fewer dysfluencies (*M* = .76; SD= .23) in their writing in comparison to WTP group (M= .98; SD= .72) and NP group (M= 1.11; SD= .96).

Narrative task writing also provided similar results to those of argumentative task writing; in the case of Rate A (words per minutes), pre-task planners (M= 12.5; SD= 3.62) outperformed both within- task planners (M= 10.3; SD= 2.26) and no planners (M= 5.68; SD= 0.41). Therefore, it can be concluded that regarding word production increased task complexity under planning condition reduces writing fluency.

With regard to syllable production (Rate B), the results are similar to those of (Rate A) the PTP group in argumentative essay writing had the highest mean on Rate B measure (M= 14.9; SD= 4.5), followed by the WTP group (M =12.5; SD= 2.7), and NP group (M =5.65; SD = 1.8). However, regarding the rate of dysfluencies produced by the three groups, both planning groups manifested a lower rate than no planning group.

In addition to descriptive statistics of the data, Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) was performed on writing Fluency production of participants in both narrative and argumentative task writings among the three groups. In so doing, the scores obtained under different planning conditions (pre-task planning, within task planning and no planning) and different tasks (narrative and argumentative essay writing tasks) on writing fluency were submitted to MANOVA. Table 2 summarizes MANOVA Results on writing fluency, followed by post hoc Scheffe tests:

Table 2 A summary on MANOVA and post hoc scheffe test results on writing fluency.

Task/ Independent Variables	MANOVA		Location of Significance: Scheffé *p*		
	F	*P*	PTP - WTP	PTP- NP	WTP - NP
Argumentative Essay writing					
Rate A	45.13	.0001	.003	.0001	.0001
Rate B	43.18	.0001	.003	.0001	.090
Dysfluency	74.79	.0001	.11	.0001	.0001
Narrative task writing					
Rate A	16.45	.0001	.003	.0001	.005
Rate B	30.8	.0001	.0001	.0001	.008
Dysfluency	43.23	.0001	.0001	.0001	.0001

As the above table indicates, MONOVA results revealed a significant difference on how the three groups performed on narrative and argumentative tasks under different task planning conditions. In narrative task writing, rate A (F= 16.45; p= .0001), Rate B (F= 30.8; p= .0001), and Dysfluency (F= 43.23; p= .0001) showed significant difference among the groups. Similarly, in argumentative Essay writing, rate A (F= 45.13; p= .0001), rate B (F= 43.18; p= .0001), and finally, dysfluency (F= 74.79; p =.0001) all the results are statistically significant.

However, to have a better understanding of the differences among the groups under different task conditions, post-hoc Scheffe tests were conducted (table 2). Post hoc analyses also revealed that in narrative task writing; regarding Rate A, the difference between PTP and WTP marginally significant (p= .003). However, the difference between PTP and NP group was significant (.0001). However, a different picture emerged regarding Rate A in argumentative essay writing; the results revealed a significant difference among all the three groups and PTP outperformed WTP and NP.

With regard to the rate of dysfluencies produced by the three groups, in both narrative and argumentative writing, paired comparison reached statistical significance, indicating both

planning groups produced alower rate of dysfluency than that of NP group.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The first research question concerned the effects of task planning on fluency in both narrative and argumentative writings. The results of the study indicated that in both narrative and argumentative essay writing tasks, the PTP group outperformed than WTP and NP groups in the number of words per minute (Rate A) and the number of syllables per minute (Rate B). However, the number of dysfluencies of pre-task planners was less than that of WTP and NP. So we can conclude that if we provide an opportunity for the students to plan in advance on their writing, it is advantageous regarding the quality of writing production.

Regarding Kellog model of writing (1996), it can be concluded that PTP helps fluency in writing in two significant ways. First, it facilitates process and text planning for content and organization. A writer who has a clear idea of what the text type required (narrative or argumentative), organizes the information which needs to be conveyed, establishes the setting and describes the characters, identifies the main events, and evaluates them. As a result, he/she will find the pressure on working memory lessened during within-task planning (Raab, 1992, cited by Zimmerman, 2000). Second, pre-task planning may help to increase L2 writers' confidence in their ability to write clearly and efficiently and, for this effective reason, may reduce their need to engage in extensive monitoring which leads to more dysfluencies. Zimmerman (2000) found that writers revise more when they write in their L2 than in their L1; thus, one of the special effects of allowing time for pre-task planning may be to decrease the number of revisions undertaken in L2 writing, resulting in high quality like that of L1 writing. Chenoweth and Hayes (2001) found that L2 writers who were more proficient wrote more fluently than less proficient writers; pre-task planning, therefore, may compensate for lack of L2 proficiency where fluency is concerned.

The outcomes of the present studyare also in line withYan and Ellis (2004) study, who found that PTP conditions increase learners' fluency (the number of syllables per minutes). However, the results of this study ran againstthe findings of Ong and Zhang (2010). In their study, no planners outperformed WTP and PTP.

Ong and Zhang (2010) provided two possible explanations as to why free-writing allowed learners to produce greater fluency as compared to PTP. They reasoned that because pre-task planner must devote some part of their time to planning so they cannot produce more words. Also, they suspect that the writers in the complex task, free writing, may not have been engaged in deliberate and conscientious planning during the formulation process, given that they were encouraged to write without planning, write continuously, and write whatever comes to their minds. This lack of no "online" planning behavior during the transcription process may have promoted greater fluency in the NP condition.

The outcomes of the present study did lend support to the predictions of Skehan and Foster's Limited Attentional Capacity in terms of the effects of increasing task complexity concerning strategic planning time on reducing fluency.This reduces the pressure on the central executive in working memory and thus facilitates the process of translating what has been planned into the verbal schematic, even while this has to be carried out under pressure of limited time. The opportunity for pre-task planning may also add to the learners' confidence during task performance.

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