

The Effect of Gender on Planning Time in Writings of Iranian EFL Learners

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Abstract – This study aimed at investigating the relationship between genders and planning in writing among Iranian EFL learners. To achieve the goal of the study, the researchers sampled 22 male and 28 female participants out of 87 language learners who were studying at two branches of Safir Language Institute in Tehran. The groups had to write on the prompts they were assigned. They first had to write in a condition without planning and then under a planning condition. Before the writing with planning, they were instructed how to plan. Then the female and male participants were compared using independent samples t-test. The obtained results indicated that there was no significant difference between female and male participants as far as planning is concerned in writing.

Keywords: planning, gender, writing, Iranian EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

Writing in one's native language is a complex cognitive activity. As (Flower & Hayes, 1980) describe a writer as a busy switchboard operator trying to juggle a number of demands and constraints, it reveals the activation of a writer in the action of writing. In other words, the writer is not passive in the process of writing; rather he/she is actively engaged in this process. Writing in a second/foreign language (L2) is even more demanding, more difficult, and less effective, due to the additional constraints arising from the writer's L2 proficiency (Silva, 1993). In the past decades, research into L2 writing has developed. Many researchers have explored and defined the construct of second language ability in different ways at different times.

Planning time is a term which has been the focus of attention in many studies in both first and second language production (Wigglesworth, 1997) and is still "an important feature of language production" (Yuan, 2001, p.6). Most of these studies have their roots in L1 research aiming at developing cognitive models of oral production with planning as one of their components (Crookes, 1989). Givon (1979) and Ochs (1979) came to this conclusion that L1 planned discourse would promote L2 development.

Givon (1979) compared planned and unplanned L1 oral and written productions and the result of his comparison was two modes of production: the "pragmatic mode" and the "syntactic mode". According to Givon (1979) adult L1 production has a loose coordination.

This matter is comparable to the pragmatic mode. Givon (1979) also concludes that adult L1 planned production can be compared with the syntactic mode with high subordination and high use of grammatical morphology. Ochs (1979) investigated the effects of L1 planned versus unplanned discourse from a psycholinguistic point of view. The result of her study was that a number of features which exist in the discourse of three to four-year-old children show themselves in adults' unplanned discourse. She found that planned discourse was based on knowledge which had been acquired or learned later in life. She hypothesized that whenever planning time is not available speakers rely on their early-acquired morphosyntactic structures and discourse skills.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. The Definition of Planning

Generally, planning is referred to as “a goal-oriented mental activity that people engage in to achieve a particular objective” (Newell & Simon, 1972). According to Yuan (2001), planning involves the allocation of attentional resources and the regulation of cognitive processes. Das, Kar, and Parilla (1996) define planning as follows:

[Planning] is oriented to future, and may include the creation and selection of problems, as well as the anticipation of a sequence of actions to solve them. (p. 54)

Foss and Hakes (1978) argue that planning in production involves the formulation of ideas, the choice of appropriate lexical items, and organizing them “in a suitable semantic and syntactic framework” (p. 170). Wendel (1997) believes that planning involves the retrieval and organization of an utterance. Ochs (1979) also differentiates planned from unplanned discourse in terms of the presence or lack of thought preparation and discourse organization. Ellis (2005), on the other hand, considers the types of linguistic devices used in planning which he refers to as “a problem solving activity”. According to Ellis, the aim of planning is “to affect the audience in the desired way” (p. 3).

In the literature on task planning, *speech planning* and *writing planning* have been taken into account. Clark and Clark (1977) refer to two types of activities involved in speaking: *planning* and *execution*. They found that planning is an umbrella term which involves discourse, sentence, and even constituents. These elements are interwoven in the execution of a language act. Farch and Kasper (1983) differentiate *planning phase* from *execution phase*. According to them, the planning phase involves searching the linguistic repertoire and selecting the rules and items that meet the communicative needs of the speaker. On the other hand, in the execution phase these rules and items are executed to satisfy the original goal.

B. Types of Task Planning

Ellis (2005) classifies task planning into two main types. The difference is in the time of planning. The first type of planning is *pre-task planning* in which planning takes place

before performing the task. In this type of planning as Schmidt (2001) calls it, there is 'preparatory attention' which helps in performing actions with greater accuracy and speed. The second type of planning is *within-task planning*. Each of these types is divided into two other types.

Pre-task planning can be divided into *rehearsal* and *strategic* planning. In rehearsal planning, learners have the opportunity to "perform the task before the 'main performance'" (Ellis, 2005, p. 3). In this type of planning, the first performance of the task is considered as a preparation for the main performance. Strategic planning, on the other hand, involves learners' preparation of the content of the task they are going to perform. This type of planning is the focus of the present study. In strategic planning, learners "have access to the actual task materials" (Ellis, 2005, p. 3).

Within-task planning has been also divided into *pressured* and *unpressured* planning. In the first one, learners are not usually given enough time to plan on-line, while in unpressured within-task planning they are given enough time to plan online.

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study aimed to examine the relationship between planning writing and gender. To achieve the aim of the study, the researchers followed the methodology described below.

A. Participants

The participants of the study were selected from among the 87 advanced learners of two branches of Safir institute in Tehran. The 22 male and 28 female participants who were selected from among the 87 learner population were chosen on the basis of their scores on the writing scores they had obtained already. The learners were at advanced level since they had already learned how to develop various genres of writing. These learners were able to develop various genres of writing such as descriptive and argumentative styles. They had also been instructed how to develop letters in various formats such as business, formal and informal letters.

The age range of the participants was between 17 and 24. The sample comprised 50 learners. None had ever been to an English-speaking country, and they had reported little opportunity to use English outside the language classroom. The participants could be considered a fairly homogeneous group of EFL learners in terms of their instructional background. Of course, those participants who were not homogenous were deliberately excluded from among those who were going to take part in the study.

B. Instrumentation

The instruments which were used for this study could be divided into two major ones, which were teaching and testing instruments.

Some topics were used for practicing writing and teaching this skill which were selected from the prompts in *Passages series* written by Jack C. Richards since it is a reliable and valid book. The writing tasks in the book were assigned to learners each session in order to develop their writing skills more. The prompts of this book were used for assigning writing tasks to the participants since they were interesting and the learners had enough capability to write on the assigned topics. The prompts which were chosen for teaching phase were selected from the ones existing in the *Passages volume 2*. The prompts were selected on the basis of the participants' needs and interests.

The testing instruments were selected from the prompts in *TOEFL Test of Written English (TWE), Topics and Model Essays (2003)*. The prompts and topics existing in the book are really interesting and informative. Thus the researchers decided to use the prompts of this book to be sure of the participants' interest and knowledge to develop their writing assignments.

C. Procedures

In order to achieve the objective of the study, the researchers followed the following procedures. First they divided the sample of the study into two classes based on their genders. The classes practiced writing during an eight-session period. The participants of both groups practiced planning in their writings. Of course, the researchers instructed them in Persian how to plan and what points must be considered while planning in the first three sessions. The researchers elaborated the process of planning in Persian so that the participants could understand how to plan while writing. A pre-task planning condition was implemented in the planning phase of the study. In this condition, the participants were instructed to plan their essay for 10 minutes before writing for 20 minutes. So they had 30 minutes to complete an essay on the given prompt. The scores obtained in the study were recorded for statistical analysis. The essays written by the participants were gathered and assessed by two raters so that the intra-rater reliability would be guaranteed. As it was stated, the main aim of this study was to investigate any probable effects of gender on planning time in writing. The planning time as a variable was measured through timing as was stated. In other words the participants had to plan their essay for 10 minutes before the 20 minute writing session. But the main aim of this study was to find out whether there was any significant relationship between the gender of the participants and planning or not. In other words, the researchers wanted to know that whether males and females used the time which was devoted to them for planning differently.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There were two variables in this study. The first one was the gender of the participants which was considered as the independent variable and the second one was the participants' scores on writing which were considered the dependent variables and the results of planning time in writing. Since the two groups were treated as independent groups, an independent samples t-test was run, the results of which are reported in the following tables.

Table 1. Group Statistics

Gender		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Scores	Male	22	83.5000	2.32481	.49565
	Female	28	82.7143	2.97965	.56310

Based on the information presented in table 1, it can be interpreted that the two groups have almost had different performance. The mean for the male participants has been 83.50 while it has been 82.71 for females. Also the standard deviations are also different. The information in this table does not provide us with criteria to judge a significant difference between the two groups, thus the following table can be used to make a logical inference between the performances of the groups.

Table 2. Independent Samples Test

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Scores	Equal variances assumed	1.868	.178	1.017	48	.314	.78571	.77285	-.76820	2.33963
	Equal variances not assumed			1.047	48.000	.300	.78571	.75017	-.72260	2.29403

Based on table 2, there is not a significant difference between the critical and observed t; also the p value is .30 which is highly greater than .05. Accordingly it can be safely resulted that there is no significant difference between female and male learners as far as using time planning in writing courses is concerned.

As the table shows, there was not a significant difference between the gender of participants and their use of planning while writing. It is true that no other research has ever focused on the relationship between the genders of EFL writer and planning in writing, but the researchers tried to investigate this topic. The results showed that gender is not an effective factor as far as the planning in writing is concerned.

V. CONCLUSION

The present study showed that the gender of the participants did not have any relationship with the planning in their writing classes. The literature concerning the role of gender has shown that there is a significant relationship between the learners' reading comprehension and their genders. Keshavarz (2007) conducted a study in which several reading passages with the same length and readability were selected based on which a reading comprehension test was constructed on three different text types namely essay, history, and short story. After determining the validity and reliability of the reading comprehension test, it was administered to 62 male and female students who were at the same level of language proficiency based on their scores on the TOEFL Test. A one-way ANOVA was used to analyze the data, the results of which indicated that male and female EFL learners differ in their reading comprehension ability with females being better comprehenders of English passages. The results of a two-way ANOVA also showed that both males and females are better at comprehending essays followed by history and short story, i.e. different types of text are understood differently regardless of the gender of the subjects.

The results of the study might be beneficial for practitioners, syllabus designers, and theorizes in the domain of writing in an EFL context.

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