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The Effect of Proficiency on Strategic Planning: What Difference Does It Make?

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Abstract

This study investigates the role of proficiency in task-based planning studies within a psycholinguistic cognitive processing framework. Through mixed-methods research, a narrative task was used to examine the effects of planning time on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of language production and explore the allocation of learners' attention during planning time between two sets of language proficiencies in a Sultanate of Oman Foreign Language (EFL) context. The methodology employed a within-subjects design with two levels of planning conditions (strategic and pressured on-line), and a between-subjects design with two levels of proficiency (low-intermediate and high-intermediate). The results of both quantitative and qualitative analysis show that different proficiency levels interact differently to planning time. This has implications for both previous task-based planning studies and in attaining balanced inter-language development in the EFL classroom.

Keywords: Task based planning, Psycholinguistic, Cognitive processing, Narrative task, Role of attention, Fluency, Accuracy, Complexity, Strategic planning, Attention priority, Oral production

1. Introduction

Since the early 1970s, there has been an increasing interest in using tasks as a potential instructional mechanism through which language development and acquisition can be fostered. Cognitive theories of language learning are central to this as they necessitate an increased use of tasks in the foreign language classroom. However, critics of the task-based

approach are quick to argue that the use of tasks promotes fluency at the expense of accuracy, leading to impoverished language use of little acquisitional value making it less likely that continuing inter-language growth will occur (Bruton, 2002; Burrows, 2008; Seedhouse, 1999; Sheen, 1994; Swan, 2005). Indeed, one of the greatest challenges to task-based instruction is how "to balance a sufficient focus on form to enable inter-language development to proceed" (Skehan 1998:4).

As a primary area of investigation in task-based language learning and teaching, researchers have focused on the effects of planning on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of L2 learners' oral production (Crookes, 1989; Ellis, 1987, 2005; Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Foster & Skehan 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega 1995, 1999, 2005; Wigglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) to show how planning can foster a 'focus on form'. However, these studies have shown that while planning time improves fluency and complexity in L2 oral performance, its effect on accuracy has been somewhat inconclusive (Ellis, 2005, 2009; Ortega, 1999). The results of some studies revealed more accurate production by pre-task planners (Crookes, 1989; Sangarun, 2005; Tavokoli & Skehan, 2005), whereas other studies show partial or no effects of pre-task planning on accuracy (Ellis, 1987; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega 1995, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Wigglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Despite the inconclusive results, empirical evidence generally suggests that planning time provides space for students to consider language forms (Skehan, 1998) and improves second language learners' production (Ellis, 2005).

However, although these studies show how planning time can lead to a focus on form, many of them make the generalization that everyone is the same. This generalization is a limitation of previous studies as the focus on form, whether it be complexity or accuracy, can be dependent upon proficiency level. They therefore assume that no adaption in teaching is necessary to take account of the differences between learners.

As far as the researcher is aware, the only studies that have examined the proficiency variable on task planning have been Wigglesworth (1997), Kawauchi (2005), and Tavakoli & Skehan (2005) and similar to the general studies above, they have also shown inconclusive results. This paper further examines the importance of taking learner differences into account by showing how proficiency interacts with planning time and the subsequent role that it plays in providing a focus on form in an oral narrative task.

The theoretical framework of this study is located in psycholinguistic cognitive processing theories of language learning. These theories hold that information processing and the subsequent roles of memory and attention are critical to language development and acquisition. This will be further discussed in the literature review, but it is proposed that proficiency will affect the outcome of the balance in what is attended to during language processing, and that this will lead to different production results. Within this framework the effects of proficiency on planning in an oral narrative task will be explored through a mixed methods approach. It presents quantitative results for the three dependent variables on language production: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. In addition, qualitative results based

on a questionnaire will examine how learners use their planning time to ease the cognitive load.

1.1 Research Questions

In this study, two research questions are explored regarding the proficiency variable on the effect of task planning on L2 learners' oral production. It investigates the effects of pre-task planning on fluency, accuracy, and complexity in a narrative oral task between two sets of language proficiencies in a Sultanate of Oman English as a Foreign Language (EFL) setting and explores the allocation of learners' attention during pre-task planning and on-line planning. The following questions are investigated in the study:

1) What effect does proficiency-related variation have on EFL learner's task performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity in an oral narrative task after strategic planning?

2) What effect does proficiency-related variation have on what EFL learners attend to during pre-task planning and on-line planning?

The first research question addresses the effect that proficiency plays on the results of planning time on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of speech. The second question takes a look at what different proficiency levels attend to in terms of allocating attention between grammar, vocabulary and organization during the pre-task planning stage and during the on-line performance of the oral narrative task.

In the next chapter, the theoretical frameworks in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) that are relevant to the research on planning are reviewed, a definition is given for the classification of planning and its structure to illustrate the different ways in which planning can be utilized and past studies on each type of planning are presented along with the measurements used. In Chapter Three, the methodology employed in this study is described. Chapter Four presents the results of the analyses of the speech data and Chapter Five discusses the implications of the results and presents suggestions for future research.

2. Literature Review

This chapter first reviews the theoretical rationale for the study of task planning within a framework of psycholinguistic accounts of language processing. In particular, current information processing perspectives on the nature of language learning (Skehan, 1998), the role of attention (Robinson, 2003; Skehan, 1998), Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 1995, 2005), and a focus on form (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998) will be examined to show how task planning can create optimal conditions for language learning to take place. It will then draw on past literature to give a definition of terms for the classification of planning and its structure, examine the results of previous studies to show how planning has effected language production before finally taking a look at the different measures that have been used to assess the quality of language production in tasks.

2.1 Cognitive Processing: The Role of Attention

Cognitive processing, and the subsequent role of attention within, "takes language learning as essentially [a] mental process of acquiring systems of knowledge through processing, storing, and retrieving linguistic information" (Tavakoli & Foster 2011: 40). In Levelt's Speech Processing Model (1989, 1993) there are three processing components that compete for limited attentional resources: conceptualization, formulation and articulation. The "conceptualizer" works pre-linguistically to generate the intended message, the "formulator" encodes the intended message into the requisite grammatical and phonological forms, and the "articulator" uses the phonological encodings to execute the speech plan. Limited attentional resources results in slow speech or even silence for the language learner. VanPatten (1990) states that in any competition for attentional resources the conceptualizer will win. Bygate (2001), Ellis (1987), Foster & Skehan (1996), and Mehnert (1998) have suggested that it is possible to increase attentional resources for the formulator and articulator through planning time and task repetition, presumably because an initial performance of the task, or planning time before the task, takes care of the conceptualizer's attentional needs leading to more capacity for linguistic encoding and articulation. In turn, this should provide the speaker with greater capacity for attention to L2 forms.

The idea of human attention as a limited resource has a long pedigree in the psychology of learning (e.g., Cheng, 1985; Schneider & Shiffrin, 1977; Shiffrin & Schneider, 1977; cited in Tavakoli & Foster 2011: 41) and current cognitive information-processing theories have focused upon an attention-driven perspective (Skehan, 1998; Robinson, 2001). Skehan's cognitive processing model (1998) proposes a dual processing system: an exemplar-based system and a rule-based system. The "exemplar-based system" is lexical in nature and consists of words and ready-made phrases that can be easily and quickly accessed; hence, it is perfectly appropriate for fluent language performance. The "rule-based system" is made up of abstract representations of language patterns, requires more processing and is ideally suited for more controlled, less fluent language performance. Skehan (1996a) argues that within this, there are three areas that enter into competition with each other for attentional resources. These areas are:

1. **Fluency:** The capacity to use language in real time, to emphasize meanings, possibly drawing on more lexicalized systems. (Skehan & Foster, 1999: 96)
2. **Accuracy:** The ability to avoid error in performance, possibly reflecting higher levels of control in the language, as well as a conservative orientation, that is, avoidance of challenging structures that might provoke error. (Skehan & Foster, 1999: 96)
3. **Complexity:** The capacity to use more advanced language, with the possibility that such language may not be controlled so effectively. This may also involve a greater willingness to take risks, and use fewer controlled language subsystems. (Skehan & Foster, 1999: 96)

Levelt's (1989, 1993) and Skehan's (1998) models maintain that learners possess a limited processing capacity such that trade-offs between fluency, accuracy, and complexity

(especially these last two) are likely to occur. In other words, if language users, for example, focus on producing a more fluent language and drawing on their exemplar-based system, their production will be less accurate and less complex. Therefore, L2 learners' must prioritize where to allocate their attention. However, limited capacity processing has been challenged by Robinson (2001, 2003, 2005) who proposes that the role of attention is premised on a multiple-resources view of processing – that is, that learners have the capacity to attend to more than one aspect of language at the same time. Form and content are not in competition but in league with one another. According to this view, there is no trade-off between fluency, accuracy, and complexity, and learners are able to attend to more than one aspect of language simultaneously. A further view, promulgated by Robinson (2003), is that pre-task planning simplifies the task and thus obviates the need to attend closely to form during performance but assists automatic access to stored language and so leads to greater fluency. Providing learners with the opportunity for pre-task planning or for unpressured within-task planning can ease the burden on working memory, allowing learners the opportunity to engage in controlled processing and to process multiple systems linearly. In short, planning is seen as a means of helping learners overcome the limitations in capacity of their working memory.

2.2 Focus on Form

In the context of language pedagogy, "focus-on-form" refers to attempts to intervene in the process of acquisition by inducing learners to pay attention to linguistic form while they are primarily concerned with decoding or encoding message content (Doughty & Williams, 1998; Long, 1991; Long & Robinson, 1998). The rationale for this claim relates back to the idea that learners have a limited working memory capacity and therefore experience difficulty in attending to meaning and form at the same time (Ellis, 2005; Ortega, 1999; VanPatten 1990). Ellis explains that the opportunity to plan for a task extends the limits of attentional capacity and allows learners to shift their attention to formal aspects of the language while preparing for meaningful language use, which may enable them to connect form and meaning. Ortega (1995, 1999, 2005) reported that learner-driven focus on form occurred during task planning in the two studies she conducted in 1995 and 1999. From a focus-on-form perspective, then, the theoretically interesting claim is not only that planning may lessen the cognitive load of a given task and free up attentional resources at the micro levels of speech production, but also that it may foster during the planning phase a shift of conscious attention to formal aspects of the language needed to accomplish the task. However, unlike most types of interventions guided by the principle of focus on form, in pre-task planning the choice of what aspects of the language code to attend to (and to what degree) is left to the learner.

2.3 The Output Hypothesis

A further rationale for the intense interest in planning is that it is believed to foster "pushed output" (Swain, 1985) and hence aid acquisition. The Output Hypothesis, developed by Swain (1985) proposes that speech production causes learners to engage in syntactic processing; hence, it contributes to language acquisition. According to Swain's Output Hypothesis, syntactic processing is at the core of L2 production and acquisition can be

induced when language users make an attempt to produce meaningful language and need to attend to form. Furthermore, Swain (1995, 1998, 2005) claims that "noticing" may prompt learners to generate new L2 knowledge or to strengthen the knowledge that they have already gained and suggests that there are multiple levels of noticing. For example, learners may notice a certain L2 form because it appears frequently or because it has salient features. Learners may also notice that there are some differences between the L2 form in discourse produced by native speakers and the form in their inter-language. Finally, learners may notice that they do not know how to deliver their message in the L2.

The second function of output is "hypothesis testing" (Swain, 1995, 1998, 2005). Learners may examine their hypothesis of how some aspects of the L2 works by trying it out in speaking or writing. In other words, learners may produce language to test whether it is comprehensible and whether it is formed correctly (Swain, 1995). By doing so, learners are expanding the current level of their inter-language. At times, learners receive feedback on their output, which may trigger reformulation of their hypothesis. Swain and Lapkin (1995) propose that the process of this type of reformulation is one of the ways that language learning takes place.

Lastly, Swain (1995, 1998, 2005) discusses the "metalinguistic function" of output; that is, speaking serves as a mediating tool to reflect on language production. Learners may talk about someone else's or their own language production, and by talking about language, what they notice and the hypotheses they form and test will become accessible for examination (Swain, 1998). Output enables learners to articulate, transform, and reflect on their thoughts and to draw their attention.

In summary, although each approach differs, they are all consistent in showing how pre-task planning may promote a greater balance between fluency, accuracy, and complexity in the class, lead to better production and a focus on form. During cognitive processing, the opportunity to plan for a task may reduce the cognitive load that is involved in speaking by creating extra capacity in attention resources that are directed towards form. From the perspective of output hypothesis, task planning may assist L2 learners in producing better output by allowing them to spend time to evaluate their linguistic knowledge. Furthermore, when learners are allowed to plan for a task, they may be able to shift their attention to form while being engaged in meaningful language use, which may lead to language learning.

2.4 Classification of Planning: Type and Structure

There are a number of different types of planning discussed and operationalized by Ellis (2005). The following section will give a description and outline the different classifications of planning.

2.4.1 Type

As principal types of planning, the major difference between pre-task planning and within-task planning, also known as on-line planning, is the timing of planning with respect to task performance. Pre-task planning takes place prior to task performance, and there are two types of pre-task planning: rehearsal and strategic planning. Ellis defines "rehearsal" as

task repetition; that is, learners "perform the task before the main performance" (2005: 3). The second type of pre-task planning is "strategic planning": learners receive a period of time prior to task performance. Although pre-task planning includes both rehearsal and strategic planning, many studies use the term pre-task planning to indicate only strategic planning (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999, 2005; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Wendel, 1997; Wigglesworth, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). The planning time in the previous studies varies from one-minute (Mehnert, 1998; Wigglesworth, 1997) to one-hour (Ellis, 1987), but in the majority of the studies the learners had ten-minutes preparation time (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Wendel, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) and in most cases, learners were allowed to take notes to prepare for the main performance (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Sangarun, 2005; Skehan & Foster, 2005; Wendel, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003).

In contrast, on-line planning, also referred to as within-task planning, is a type of planning that is available while engaging in task performance. Ellis (2005) classifies on-line planning into two categories: pressured and unpressured planning. In "pressured on-line" planning, learners have a time limit to complete the task, which restricts their time to engage in planning during the task. On the other hand, in "unpressured on-line" planning learners are allowed to spend as much time as they wish on the task. Although pre-task planning and on-line planning contrast with each other, it is possible to employ both types of planning for task performance.

2.4.2 Structure

Planning can also be categorized in terms of differences in its structure (Ellis, 2005). These categories of planning include guided and unguided planning, which are also referred to as detailed and undetailed planning respectively (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Skehan & Foster, 2005). Under the "guided" planning condition, learners may be asked to pay attention to the grammar, vocabulary, content, or structure of their oral production. Those instructions can be classified into three types: focus on meaning, focus on form, or focus on both meaning and form (Crookes, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Sangarun 2005; Skehan & Foster, 2005; Wendel, 1997). Whereas under the "unguided" planning condition, learners receive no such instruction and plan on their own for the task without being guided to pay attention to grammar, vocabulary, content, or structure.

2.5 Previous Studies on Planning

Past research has explored all of the planning types and structures, either individually or combined and investigated the effects on learners' task performance. These studies have been conducted in a variety of settings, across different modalities, with different allocations of time for planning and have used different forms of measurement. This section reviews the previous findings of those studies.

SLA researchers have explored the effects of the opportunity to plan for a task on the oral performance of adult language learners and have generally found positive effects on fluency

and complexity in L2 oral performance. However, its effect on accuracy has not been conclusive (Ellis, 2005, 2009; Ortega, 1999). The results of some studies revealed more accurate production by pre-task planners (Crookes, 1989; Sangarun, 2005; Tavokoli & Skehan, 2005), whereas other studies obtained results that show partial or no effects of pre-task planning on accuracy (Ellis, 1987; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1995, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Wigglesworth, 1997; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Concerning these contradictory findings, Mehnert (1998) claimed that different measures for accuracy contributed to different results. Some studies used specific measures such as plural forms (Crookes, 1989; Wigglesworth, 1997) and articles (Ortega, 1999) whereas others used more general measures such as percentage of error-free clauses (Foster & Skehan, 1996; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Another possible explanation for the mixed results for accuracy is learner proficiency. This is because different proficiency levels are likely to interact differently to the task itself and the opportunity to plan.

2.6 Limitations of Previous Studies

This section will review three limitations found in many past studies on the effects of task planning on L2 learners' performance, namely that of proficiency, the choice of measurements used, and the lack of information on processes used by leaners during planning time.

2.6.1 Proficiency

As mentioned in the previous section, past studies have failed to take the proficiency variable into consideration. That learners of different proficiency levels may indeed be showing different effects for planning on the fluency, accuracy, and complexity of L2 measured performance is a consideration that needs to be taken into account not only when viewing the results of past studies but also when using tasks in the classroom to balance goals between fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

Although Crookes (1989) carried out an experiment on a wide range of Japanese learners of English whose Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) scores ranged from 460 to 620, it is difficult to see how the higher and lower-level proficiency learners responded to the tasks since no distinction was made in his analysis. As far as the researcher is aware, the only studies that have examined the proficiency variable on task planning language production have been Wigglesworth (1997), Kawauchi (2005) and Tavakoli & Skehan (2005).

The study by Wigglesworth (1997) focused on twenty-eight high and twenty-three low-proficiency learners to examine the effect of one-minute planning time on a tape-mediated oral test consisting of four kinds of tasks. The findings indicated that planning time only helped more highly proficient learners to produce more complex language (i.e., subordinate clauses) and more accurate language (i.e., verb morphology). The opportunity to plan did not seem to benefit the lower level of proficiency. For fluency, lower proficiency learners produced fewer self-repairs than high proficiency learners in all four tasks, while

higher proficiency learners improved only in the summary task, which was the most difficult. The findings from this study led Wigglesworth to conclude:

> [F]or the high-proficiency candidates, planning time may improve accuracy on some measures where the cognitive load of the task is high, but that this effect does not extend to the low-proficiency candidates (1997: 85).

This finding is important in that it suggests that the effects of planning will differ according to the learner's proficiency level; specifically, that the effects on complexity and accuracy are more likely to be found in higher proficiency learners when the task is cognitively more demanding. These claims from Wigglesworth are noteworthy; however, further research is necessary to confirm them since her study is based on just one-minute of planning in a testing situation, which is different from most other studies, that were conducted in classrooms or laboratory settings and usually allowed 10 minutes of planning.

Kawauchi's (2005) study focused on three proficiency levels (low EFL, High EFL and Advanced ESL) and used three narrative tasks differing in complexity. Kawauchi concluded that the:

> [H]igh EFL group benefitted most from the opportunity to plan in the case of fluency and complexity, while the low EFL group did so in accuracy. The advanced ESL group appeared to benefit much less than the other two groups (2005: 161).

These results, in contrast to Wigglesworth's findings (1997), indicate that lower levels have most to gain and that planning seemed less helpful to the higher group than the lower two groups. More importantly, however, the results again suggest that the effects of planning will differ according to the learner's proficiency level.

Tavakoli and Skehan (2005) also conducted a study on eighty adult EFL learners in Iran at elementary and intermediate levels to see amongst other things, what extent proficiency mediates the effect of language production. They found that while the more proficient learners' language was more fluent, complex and accurate, there were:

> [O]ccasions where there is higher performance by the elementary proficiency planners compared to the intermediate non-planners. This is interesting because it suggests that higher performance can be achieved if task/assessment conditions allow for planning compared to simply having a higher proficiency level (Tavakoli & Skehan 2005: 268).

These studies are important in that they give insight into the possibility that planning time and proficiency interact in different ways, not only at the production level in gains that are likely to be seen in fluency, accuracy, and complexity, but also, as Kawauchi (2005) shows, at the process level in the attention that learners' give to different aspects of language. In summary, they suggest that the effects of planning will differ according to the learners' proficiency level.

2.6.2 Measurements

As discussed, previous studies by Wigglesworth (1997), Kawauchi (2005) and Tavakoli & Skehan (2005) have explored the proficiency variable in planning studies and results are inconclusive. Three difficulties exist with these past studies. Inconsistent research design and a variety of measures used to evaluate fluency, accuracy, and complexity make it difficult to compare results across these studies (Ellis, 2005; Ortega, 1999). Task complexity varies between each of the studies due to the use of different tasks and groups of learner proficiencies. One final point of concern is that only Kawauchi (2005) has investigated the processes involved in internal planning.

2.6.3 Process

The majority of previous studies have assumed that learners attend to language during planning by simply examining their output, and only a few of them have attempted to shed light on what was actually being focused on internally (Ellis, 2005; Ortega, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 2005). While we have learned a great deal about how the opportunity to plan before or during a task improves some aspects of L2 speech, we have little knowledge about what L2 learners actually do to plan for a task. Insight into learners' cognitive processes are rich with information for research on planning and can support the results on production. While Sangarun (2005) found that learners generally focused on meaning regardless of the type of planning instructions they received it is possible that they differ in their focus when it comes to accuracy and complexity. Ortega (1995, 1999) conducted one of the first studies that attempted to answer these questions. Ten years after her first attempt to illustrate what learners did during the strategic planning phase, Ortega (2005) reanalyzed the same interview data and found that advanced level learners and low-intermediate learners used different types of strategies. This would indicate that the outcome i.e., production after planning, would also be somewhat different between the proficiency levels. Kawauchi (2005) also compared strategy use during pre-task planning by low-intermediate and advanced learners and reported that one of the major differences between these two groups was the focus of their planning. Low-intermediate learners attended more to the planning of vocabulary, and they tried to avoid ideas and reduce the content when they had trouble finding the appropriate vocabulary to express themselves. On the other hand, advanced learners were more concerned with the organization and content of stories and tried to find effective ways to convey their intended meanings.

2.7 Conclusion

In summary, within cognitive processing theories of language learning the perspective on the role of attention as being limited accepts that the areas of fluency, accuracy, and complexity enter into competition with each other. Planning time lessens the cognitive load of the task and frees up attentional resources allowing attention to form and this leads to increased output, a desirable condition for inter-language development. Planning can be deployed in a variety of ways, but ultimately the focus on language form, whether it be complexity or accuracy, may be dependent on the proficiency variable.

3. Methodology

This chapter presents the methodology for the study, which consists of a narrative task and a retrospective questionnaire in which participants were asked after completing the task how they allocated their attention during the planning stages. It first describes the participants, followed by an explanation of the materials, design and procedures. Two approaches were taken to this investigation. The first was a quantitative comparison of the raw scores of the two groups for the measurement of accuracy, fluency and complexity. The second was a qualitative comparison between the two groups for how they prioritized attention during both the pre-planning stage and on-line performance of the task. In using both methods a stronger set of results will be presented to understand proficiency as a variable in the effects of task planning.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were twenty low-intermediate and twenty high-intermediate EFL learners; all were studying General English courses at the Preparatory Studies Centre of the University of Technology and Applied Sciences (UTAS) in the Sultanate of Oman. They were aged between 18 and 21 years and all native Arabic speakers who had been studying EFL since first grade at elementary school. None of the learners had prior to the study lived overseas, and previously the only contact they had with English was inside the classroom at school or University.

In order to collect the data, permission was first requested and granted by the University of Technology and Applied Sciences. The participants were of two levels of proficiency (low-intermediate and high-intermediate) and this was determined by their placement scores taken on entry to the University that placed the students in one of four proficiency levels within the University. Following this, participants were then selected from a total of 240 students (120 from each proficiency group) based on mid-term scores and oral presentation scores during the semester that were analyzed to select students whose scores within their respective proficiency group fell into the same range. The teacher for each proficiency level was the same so there would be no inter-reliability issues regarding the scoring. This was done to compose as much as a homogenous group as practical for both proficiency levels. Following this, the participants were identified, asked and given the option whether or not to participate in the study. All agreed to volunteer and each individual group met in a quiet classroom over a two-day period at the same time and location. The participants in this study received no compensation upon completing their participation and the sample size was considered practical on logistical grounds.

3.2 Design

As Table 1 displays, the study employed a within-subjects design in which the same group of subjects served in more than one treatment (planning condition) and a between-subjects design (proficiency level) in which each proficiency group was compared to the other to examine the effects of planning. The groups are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Design of the Study

Proficiency Level	Planning	No planning
Low-intermediate	(N=10)	(N=10)
High-intermediate	(N=10)	(N=10)

A 2 X 2 design was used in the current study with pre-task planning condition and proficiency level as independent variables. Planning condition was within-subjects; even though they were different participants, the homogeneity of the participants was considered strong enough to render them as within-subjects. Language proficiency was between-subjects, in which learners were assigned to either of the two proficiency levels.

The design of the study was quasi-experimental with an experimental group and a control group. The former, prior to task performance, was provided with ten minutes planning time treatment, identified by Mehnert (1998) as the optimal amount of planning time to achieve effects on production. The latter received no treatment and were given zero planning time before performing the task. In this study, planning time and proficiency were considered as independent variables while the three dimensions of oral production – fluency, accuracy, and complexity were considered dependent variables.

3.3 Materials

Prior to the study, pilot tests were conducted to determine the appropriateness of the materials and none of the students who participated in the pilot were known to any of the students from the subsequent groups in the study.

3.3.1 Quantitative Materials: Measure of Oral Production

Following previous task planning studies (Crookes, 1989; Elder & Iwashita, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Gilabert, 2007; Kawauchi, 2005; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Ortega, 1999; Park, 2006; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Tavokoli & Skehan, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003), this study used an oral narrative task with sets of pictures to examine L2 learners' oral production. The task used was a narrative based on six picture strips from Heaton (1975; see Appendix I). This type of task was chosen for three principal reasons. Firstly, narrative tasks are considered to be more cognitively demanding than conversational discourse or a personal narrative (Skehan & Foster, 1997) and, therefore, will more likely reveal the effects of strategic planning (Skehan & Foster, 1995, 1997; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Kawauchi, 1998; Wigglesworth, 1997). Secondly, as well as being cognitively demanding it was within the capacity of both sets of learners to complete while not being too easy for either group. Lastly, the task was monologic in nature rather than dialogic and therefore it offers a basis for deriving measures of learner performance that are not influenced by interactional variables. The learners told a story out loud as if to someone who had not seen the pictures.

3.3.2 Qualitative Materials: Retrospective Questionnaire

In addition to the (football) oral narrative task and in order to answer research question two, all participants completed a questionnaire (see Appendix III) immediately after finishing the task. The post-task questionnaire, adapted from Yuan & Ellis (2003) and Genc (2011) aimed to obtain self report-data from the students about how they allocated their attention during the pre-task planning stage as well as during the on-line task completion. Students were asked to give a priority order for grammar, vocabulary and organization and put these three component areas on a scale of one to three according to the time and attention they gave for each one. By analyzing what the participants had prioritized while being engaged in planning, this questionnaire attempted to reveal differences between each of the two proficiency levels in the prioritization of attention. To avoid any misunderstandings and following Foster & Skehan's (1996) study, the questions were translated and given in Arabic to prevent any degree of ambiguity from arising.

3.4 Instructions

All instructions were given in a quite classroom immediately prior to the task over a four-day period in which each of the four groups completed the task at the same time on consecutive days. Participants were reminded in English that their participation was voluntary, that all details of the proceedings would be confidential, that there was no connection with any class or grading procedure on campus, and that if they wished to leave at anytime, either then or during the experiment, they would be free to do so. All four groups received only task descriptions as to how to complete the narrative task. There were no specific instructions guiding learners to attend to organization, vocabulary or grammar. Participants were told that their stories would be recorded, that the recording would be anonymous, and that this was not a test. Apart from age, major and whether they had lived overseas, no personal information was sought.

This study involved a 'strategic-planning' and a no 'strategic-planning' group for each proficiency level. The strategic planning group was given ten minutes to plan prior to task performance. This was a standard amount of time in the literature and similar to Crooks (1989) study. Participants were handed written procedures in Arabic for the task (see Appendix II) and instructed that they could write on the provided paper, but not complete sentences or continuous prose, and that these pieces of paper would be taken before they began to tell their stories. There were two reasons for this: (1) to ensure that participants did in fact engage in planning, and (2) to avoid any confusion of modality (Crooks 1989). All participants in the strategic planning groups followed instructions and after ten minutes of strategic planning were asked to press record on the recorders on their desk and begin to tell their narrative. They were given a five-minute limit in which to tell their stories.

In contrast, participants with no planning time in which to plan their narratives were handed instructions (see Appendix II) written in Arabic. They were asked to press record on the recorders on their desks, turn over the paper with the pictures on it and begin to tell their narrative. They were given a five-minute limit in which to tell their stories. The same

procedures were applied across both low-intermediate and high-intermediate proficiency groups. All participants co-operated and were happy to participate in the research.

3.5 Measures

The following measures for fluency, accuracy, and complexity displayed in Table 2 were considered most appropriate for this study. Fluency was operationalized as a percentage of fluent versus non-fluent speech and included both filled and unfilled pauses as non-fluent speech. Accuracy was measured as the percentage of error-free clauses by dividing the number of error-free clauses by the total number of clauses. Two measures of complexity were selected: the total number of clauses divided by the total number of T-units measured syntactic complexity, and the number of different words (type) to the number of total words (token) measured lexical complexity. A detailed description of each measure, together with their coding methods and reasons for selection, are presented in the following sections.

Table 2. Measures for L2 Oral Production

Fluency:	Percentage of fluent v non-fluent speech (global)
Accuracy:	Percentage of error-free clauses (global)
Complexity:	Percentage of clauses to T-unit (syntactic) Type-token ratio (lexical)

3.5.1 Fluency Measures

The measure for fluency in the participants' oral production was determined as a percentage of fluent versus non-fluent speech and followed previous studies by Wigglesworth (2003) and Skehan & Foster (1999). To identify the percentage of fluent versus non-fluent speech, first the amount of time for filled and unfilled pauses were calculated using a timer. For unfilled pauses any silence greater than one second was included in the count. The next stage was to identify and count the duration of time for filled pauses (self-repairs). Following Skehan & Foster (1999) these included repetitions (repeated words, phrases or clauses without any modifications to morphology, syntax, or word order), false starts (abandoned utterances before completion), reformulations (repeated utterances with some modifications to morphology, syntax, or word order), and replacements (substituting one word or phrase with another one). Once the time for unfilled pauses was calculated and added together with the time for filled pauses (self-repairs), this total was then divided by the total amount of time it took to complete each narrative story.

The measure of calculating the percentage of fluent speech versus non fluent speech was seen as a better indicator of fluency over speech rate (dividing the total amount of words by total time) and the calculation of the number of syllables to measure fluency used in previous studies (Gilabert, 2007; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Sangarun, 2005; Tavokoli & Skehan,

2005; Wendel, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) as it allowed for the inclusion of self repairs in non-fluent speech.

3.5.2 Accuracy Measures

For accuracy measures, a global measurement was favored over a specific measurement like the percentage of correct verb forms used in the studies by Ellis & Yuan (2005), Foster & Skehan (1996), Sangarun (2005), Tajima (2003), Yuan & Ellis (2003), and Wendel (1997). This was because task conditions in this study did not include guided planning on the specific use of past tense verbs. Therefore, it was decided not to use a specific measurement of accuracy as this is considered to be more suited to tasks where guided planning on the specific use of past tense verbs had taken place.

Furthermore, a global measurement was considered to be sensitive to detecting differences between experimental conditions (Foster & Skehan 1999). In past studies, global measurements for accuracy have differed from errors per clause, errors per T-unit, and errors per 100 words (Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005). However, the percentage of error-free clauses had been most widely used in previous planning studies (Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Elder & Iwashita, 2005; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005; Skehan & Foster, 1997, 2005; Tajima, 2003; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In keeping this study as closely aligned as possible with the accuracy measurement of past studies, percentage of clauses containing no errors was selected. Error-free clauses refer to those clauses that do not contain any errors of syntax, morphology and/or lexical choice (Ellis & Yuan, 2005).

3.5.3 Complexity Measures

Two complexity measures were selected for this study, one for syntactical complexity and the other for lexical variety. Syntactic complexity is the ability to compress an increasingly large number of ideas, or chunks of information, into fewer words and was measured using the number of clauses per T-unit. A T-unit is a measure of the linguistic complexity of sentences and is defined as consisting of “a main clause plus all subordinate clauses and non-clausal structures attached to or embedded in it” (Hunt 1970:4). For the assessment, clauses and T-units were coded in the data and the ratio of clauses to T-units in the participants’ narratives was calculated by dividing the number of clauses by the number of T-units in each narrative. Although the validity of using T-units to measure spoken data has been questioned (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000), it was favored over both A/S units (Foster, Tonkyn, & Wigglesworth, 2000) and C-units (Foster & Skehan, 1996) as a measure of syntactic complexity because the task was monologic and therefore no backchannel cues or discourse boundary markers existed in the transcripts that would cause difficulties in coding. Additionally, T-units had been most widely used in past L2 planning studies to analyze spoken data (Crookes, 1989; Ellis & Yuan, 2005; Gilabert, 2007; Kawauchi, 2005; Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003) making it easier to compare the results of this study to those of past studies.

The second measurement for complexity was for lexical variety. Type-Token Ratio (TTR) is the number of different words (type) in the text to the number of total words (token). TTR was selected because, as a measure of vocabulary variation, it has been the most widely used in past studies as a measure of lexical complexity. It should be pointed out that TTR can be misleading if using variable lengths of texts because it is easier to produce a higher TTR ratio for smaller texts than for longer texts. This was considered an issue in the analysis of lexical complexity in this study as all forty texts were not similar sized-segments and this led to misleading results.

3.6 Data Source: Transcriptions of Oral Production

The data source for the analysis consisted of forty recordings of the participants' narrative stories in English, these were transcribed so that the transcripts could be analyzed and coded. Any utterances during the task performance that were not considered as part of the narrative stories (self-talk) were not included in the analysis. Since the narratives were quantified on several measures for statistical analyses, inaccurate transcriptions would directly affect the results. In order to create the most accurate transcriptions possible a Lecturer employed by UTAS was recruited as a second grader and asked to transcribe ten randomly selected recordings to check for discrepancies. None were found.

3.7 Inter-Rater Reliability and Data Analysis

After transcription, measures for inter-rater reliability were obtained from the discourse. Two raters, the researcher and a native English professor, independently coded a random sample of 40% of the data produced by the participants for segmentation of the speech into clauses, the marking of correct clauses and the segmentation of speech into T-units. Inter-rater reliability (percentage of agreement) was 96%, 99% and 94% respectively. The rest of the data was then analyzed and coded by the researcher. In the next section the results of this study are presented.

4. Results

The first part of the results section will present the quantitative data to answer research question one:

> *What effect does proficiency-related variation have on EFL learner's task performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity in an oral narrative task after strategic planning?*

The second section will analyze the qualitative data to answer research question two:

> *What effect does proficiency-related variation have on what EFL learners attend to during pre-task planning and on-line planning?*

4.1 Quantitative Results: Proficiency and Production

The quantitative results section will first present descriptive data for the measures of production in the narrative task between the two proficiency levels and over the two planning conditions. This is followed by a two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to show the effects

of both proficiency and planning, and the likelihood of the data being replicated again. Finally, the difference in the dependent variables between planning condition will be presented through a paired sample t-test analysis for both proficiency levels.

Table 3 presents a summary of the descriptive statistics for all measures between low-intermediate and high-intermediate groups. It shows the mean scores and standard deviation for fluency [F], complexity [C], and accuracy [A].

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics for Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity

Measures	Low-intermediate	High-intermediate
[F] Fluent speech (%)		
- Planning	48.67 (12.06)	65.56 (8.40)
+Planning	60.81 (9.51)	73.41 (7.61)
[A] Error-free clauses (%)		
- Planning	25.48 (8.17)	55.14 (21.97)
+Planning	40.89 (7.44)	55.19 (13.27)
[C] Clauses per T-unit		
- Planning	1.17 (0.12)	1.30 (0.23)
+Planning	1.17 (0.12)	1.46 (0.11)
[C] TTR		
- Planning	0.48 (0.09)	0.40 (0.05)
+Planning	0.41 (0.05)	0.45 (0.08)

Key: () Standard deviation

In order to examine the first research question, linguistic outcomes from unplanned and planned performances were compared. As can be seen in Table 3, fluency improved across the planned condition for both groups (from 48.67% fluent speech to 60.81% for the low-intermediate group; and from 65.56% to 73.41% for the high-intermediate group). Accuracy improved across the task condition for the low-intermediate group (from 25.48% to 48.89%), but had very little effect for the high-intermediate group (from 55.14% to 55.19%). Clauses per T-unit (syntactic complexity) had no effect for the low-intermediate group (it remained at 1.17 clauses per T-unit under the planning condition), but improved for the high-intermediate group (from 1.30 to 1.46 clauses per T-unit), whereas TTR (Lexical complexity) decreased for the low-intermediate group (from 0.48 to 0.41), but improved for the high-intermediate group (from 0.40 to 0.45). With the exception of complexity for the low-intermediate group, Table 3 indicates that almost all the measures favoured the planned over the unplanned task condition.

The data was then submitted to a two-way ANOVA (2 proficiency levels x 2 planning conditions) with repeated measures for each dependent variable (fluency, accuracy, and complexity scores). Skehan & Foster (1999) indicate “a two-way ANOVA is considered

viable (rather than a multivariate ANOVA) since the structure of the dependent measures is clearly defined in terms of the three separate areas of fluency, accuracy, and complexity" (cited in Kawauchi 2005: 156). Table 4 presents the results.

Table 4. ANOVA Results for Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity

Measures	**SS**	**DF**	**MS**	**F**	**Sig. of F**
[F] Fluent speech (%)					
Proficiency	2174.15	1	2174.15	23.86	< .0005*
Planning	999.00	1	999.00	10.96	.002*
Proficiency x Planning	46.01	1	46.010	0.51	.482
[A] Error-free clauses (%)					
Proficiency	4830.55	1	4830.55	24.74	< .0005*
Planning	596.99	1	596.99	3.06	.089
Proficiency x Planning	588.67	1	588.67	3.02	.091
[C] Clauses per T					
Proficiency	.44	1	.44	18.54	< .0005*
Planning	.06	1	.06	2.52	.121
Proficiency x Planning	.06	1	.06	2.52	.121
[C] TTR					
Proficiency	.01	1	.01	1.08	.305
Planning	.00	1	.00	.10	.753
Proficiency x Planning	.03	1	.03	6.41	.016*

Key: * Significant difference is reached

There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot for values greater than 1.5 box-lengths from the edge of the box. 'Fluency', 'accuracy', 'syntactic complexity' and 'lexical complexity', scores were normally distributed for all group combinations of proficiency and planning, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test ($p > .05$). The results confirmed that the low-intermediate and high-intermediate students came from significantly different groups in all measures except TTR. The results for fluency show that there were main effects for both proficiency and planning on the fluency measure. The main effects for proficiency were significant (F=23.86, $p < .0005$), and this was due to the difference between the high-intermediate and the low-intermediate groups. There was also a main effect found for planning condition (F= 10.96, $p = .002$). No interaction was found between proficiency and planning. From these results it is seen that fluency increased in the planned performance and this increase was seen across both proficiency levels.

The results for accuracy are now considered. Main effects for proficiency were found at a statistically significant difference between the high-intermediate and low-intermediate groups for accuracy ($F = 24.739$, $p < .0005$), again confirming a difference between the high-intermediate and the low-intermediate groups. No effects for planning were found in the

accuracy of language produced as the results showed no statistical significance in the difference between those with planning time and those without, (F = 3.057, p = .089). Table 5 reveals that this was due to strategic planning not facilitating accuracy for the high-intermediate group. Similar to the results for fluency, no interaction was found between proficiency and planning.

Finally, the effects on complexity were examined. In syntactic complexity, main effects for proficiency were found between those of low-intermediate and those of high-intermediate to be statistically significant, (F =18.541, p < .0005) again confirming that they came from different groups. For planning, there was no statistically significant difference between planned and unplanned 'syntactic accuracy' (F = 2.517, p = .121). This again can be attributed to the difference in score between the proficiency groups. There was no interaction between proficiency and planning condition.

For lexical complexity no statistically significant difference between proficiency was evident, (F = 1.082, p = .305). Similarly for planning, no statistically significant difference was found, (F = .100, p = .753). This was due to the fact that smaller text length found in the low-intermediate narratives made it easier to produce a higher TTR ratio than the longer texts found in the high-intermediate group. A statistically significant interaction was found between proficiency and planning on lexical complexity, (F = 6.414, p = .0.16). Further analysis revealed that under the planned condition the low-intermediate group produced a lower TTR ratio than they had done under the no planning condition. This indicates that strategic planning did not facilitate an increase in TTR for low-intermediate learners although considering the variable length of texts these results can be misleading.

To examine the effects of planning on the two groups, gains from the planned group were compared to the unplanned performances to see which proficiency group benefitted most from the opportunity to plan. Within-subjects paired sample t-tests, comparing performance between no planning and planning time were carried out separately for each measure on the two proficiency groups to determine the significance of planning time on each of the four variables. There were no outliers in the data, as assessed by inspection of a boxplot for values greater than 1.5 box-lengths from the edge of the box. 'Fluency', 'accuracy', 'syntactic complexity' and 'lexical complexity' scores were normally distributed for all group combinations of proficiency and planning, as assessed by Shapiro-Wilk's test (p > .05). The results are shown in Table 5.

Table 5. Gains in Planned performances: Paired Sample T-Test Results

Measures	Low-intermediate	High-intermediate	Sig. of gain (L-I) & (H-I)
[F] Fluent speech (%)	+12.14 (12.53)	+8.72 (14.59)	.013* & .091
[A] Error-free clauses (%)	+15.40 (12.09)	+0.05 (30.86)	.003* v .996
[C] Clauses per T	+0.00 (.18)	+0.15 (0.24)	1.00 v .074
[C] TTR	-0.06 (.11)	+0.05 (0.09)	.117 v .113

Key: * Significant gain is reached
() Standard deviation
(L-I) Low-intermediate
(H-I) High-intermediate

In the case of fluency, it is seen that students who are given time to plan spoke with far fewer repairs and pauses, and were less likely to lapse into silence. The effect was strongest for the low-intermediate group as a significant gain (.013*) was found. However, while the high-intermediate group gained in fluency it was not considered a significant gain. This suggests that for fluency the low-intermediate group benefitted more than the high-intermediate group.

In the gains for accuracy, it was found that there were differences between the two groups as measured by the number of error-free clauses compared to the total number of clauses. A significant gain was evident in the low-intermediate group (.003*). The paired t-test revealed that the low-intermediate group showed the largest gain, which was greater than the increase in the high-intermediate group (.996).

Syntactic variety was investigated to see whether planners were more willing to take risks by using more challenging forms. Although no significant differences were evident in the results for either group, it is clear that the effects for students with planning time again differed by proficiency. The high-intermediate group showed that they were more likely to produce complex language from planning than the low-intermediate group.

Results for lexical complexity showed the opportunity to plan again benefitted the high-intermediate group whereas planning time had a negative effect on the lexical complexity for the low-intermediate group. Therefore, in the two complexity measures (the number of clauses per T-unit and Type Token Ratio) it is evident that the high-intermediate group benefitted from strategic planning time, more for syntactic complexity than lexical complexity, whereas in contrast, strategic planning time for the low-intermediate group had no effect on the syntactic complexity measure and a detrimental effect on the lexical complexity measure.

4.2 Qualitative Results: Proficiency and Attention Priority

The second research question was carried out through qualitative measures by means of a questionnaire to analyze what L2 learners do during planning. Data was collected through questionnaires that consisted of a set of predetermined attention allocation categories (see Appendix III). The attention participants gave was classified into three categories: grammar, vocabulary and organization. All participants of the oral narrative task completed the questionnaire to answer the following research question:

Research Question 2: *What effect does proficiency-related variation have on what EFL learners attend to during pre-task planning and on-line planning?*

Table 6 presents the descriptive results for students' priority order for grammar, vocabulary, and organization to look at the differences each proficiency level group gave attention to prior to and during completion of the narrative task as reported by the participants in the post-task questionnaire. The allocation of attention is shown in the table along with the ranking. The percentage numbers in the table represents the ratio of participants who ranked attention to grammar, vocabulary, and organization in order of importance.

Table 6. Attention Allocation Rankings

	Low-intermediate			High-intermediate		
	+Planning		-Planning	+Planning		-Planning
Attention Ranking	**Planning**	**On-line**	**On-line**	**Planning**	**On-line**	**On-line**
Organization						
First	70%	70%	80%	60%	30%	10%
Second	20%	10%	20%	40%	20%	60%
Third	10%	20%	0%	0%	50%	30%
Vocabulary						
First	0%	30%	20%	40%	60%	70%
Second	70%	60%	80%	60%	40%	10%
Third	30%	10%	0%	0%	0%	20%
Grammar						
First	20%	0%	0%	0%	10%	20%
Second	10%	30%	0%	0%	40%	30%
Third	70%	70%	100%	100%	50%	50%

The results indicate that both low-intermediate and high-intermediate groups allocated attention in different ways. The low-intermediate proficiency group generally used similar strategies across the three planning stages; that is, priority was given to organization, followed by vocabulary then grammar. These strategies were different when compared to the

high-intermediate group. The following section provides further examination of these results and indicates that similar to the quantitative results, allocation of attentional resources interacts with proficiency.

4.2.1 Allocation of Attention: Strategic Planning

In this section attention allocation use during pre-task planning is examined. Participants in these groups had the opportunity to plan before task performance. The results for attention allocation are displayed below in order of rank.

Low-intermediate: 70% Organization>70% Vocabulary>70% Grammar

High intermediate: 60% Organization>60% Vocabulary>100%Grammar

The results show that generally both proficiency levels distributed attentional resources in a similar fashion during the strategic planning stage and ranked organization as the highest focus of attention, followed by vocabulary and then grammar. However, a closer inspection reveals that the low-intermediate group attended more to grammar than the high-intermediate group. Therefore, it appears that although both proficiency groups showed similar patterns of attention during strategic planning time, the low-intermediate gave more attention to grammar (accuracy) while the high-proficiency group gave more attention to vocabulary (complexity).

4.2.2 Allocation of Attention: Strategic Planning (On-line)

This section focuses on the participants' allocation of attention during the task after the opportunity to plan as seen from the results in Table 6. The rank of importance is shown below.

Low-intermediate: 70% Organization>60% Vocabulary>70%Grammar

High intermediate: 60%Vocabulary>50%Organization>50%Grammar

As seen in the allocation of attentional resources during strategic planning time, there was little change in the allocation for the low-intermediate group. However, notable differences were found within the high-intermediate group. Firstly, they differed in that the low-intermediate group ranked vocabulary as a top priority followed by organization, rather than organization followed by vocabulary. The high-intermediate group, unlike the low-intermediate group, changed their allocation of attentional focus after strategic planning from Organization>Vocabulary>Grammar to Vocabulary>Organization>Grammar. Thus, the on-line planning after strategic planning seemed to encourage the high-intermediate group to attend to more complex language (vocabulary), but for the low-intermediate group it had very little effect as a similar pattern of attentional allocation was displayed. This indicates that the high-intermediate group paid more attention to the syntactic and lexical complexity of the language during the on-line planning stage after strategic planning than the low-intermediate group.

4.2.3 Allocation of Attention: No Planning (On-line)

Participants who had no strategic planning performed the task under different planning conditions than the previous group. This group had no strategic planning time and very little opportunity to plan on-line during the task. The low-intermediate participants of this group again displayed a similar rank in the allocation of attentional resources as they had done during both strategic and on-line planning opportunities. Once again, organization was ranked as being the most significant followed by vocabulary and then grammar as is shown below.

Low-intermediate: 80% Organization>80% Vocabulary>100% Grammar

High intermediate: 70% Vocabulary>60% Organization>50% Grammar

The high-intermediate group, however, showed a difference in how they allocated their attentional resources with vocabulary taking up most attention followed by organization and then grammar. This would indicate that again the high-intermediate group, even without planning time, paid more attention to the complexity of language (vocabulary) over meaning (fluency). However, this differed from what the same group had given priority to during the on-line planning stage after strategic planning.

4.3 Proficiency Variable Comparison of Allocation of Attention

The previous section showed that during strategic planning both proficiency groups generally favoured organization over vocabulary and then grammar, consistent with theoretical considerations discussed in the literature review. Reviewing the results, it was found that participants allocated attention to different aspects of language based on their proficiency level. The results seem to indicate that the opportunity to plan had little effect for how the low-intermediate group attended to grammar, organization and vocabulary; however, a reduction for vocabulary and an increase in the attention given to grammar is seen. This would indicate that, for the low-intermediate group, strategic planning had an effect on increasing attention towards grammar (accuracy) while for the high-intermediate group, strategic planning had the effect of decreasing attention from grammar (accuracy) and increasing it towards vocabulary (complexity).

The results indicate that different proficiency levels allocate attention differently, that for the low-intermediate group it increases allocation towards grammar at the expense of vocabulary, while for the high-intermediate group it decreases attention to grammar in favour of vocabulary. These results are in line with the findings in research question 1 which found that strategic planning benefitted the accuracy of language production for the low-intermediate group most, while for the high-intermediate learners it benefitted the complexity of the language used. Furthermore, it appears that strategic planning had a greater effect in how the two proficiency levels planned during the online planning.

It is important to note that the results for attention allocation relied upon self-report data. The priority order was as reported by the students themselves in the post-task questionnaire. This was because it is difficult to obtain direct evidence of how much time and the importance the

participants actually allocated for grammar, vocabulary, or organization before or during the tasks.

4.4 Summary of Results

The quantitative results on production revealed that almost all the measures favoured the planned over the unplanned condition with the exception of lexical complexity for the low-intermediate group. They also show that the low-intermediate and high-intermediate students came from significantly different groups in all measures except lexical complexity. Overall significant gains were found for fluency and accuracy in the low-intermediate group and though no significant gains were found in the production for the high-intermediate group, it was seen that they benefitted in fluency and complexity from the planned condition. The qualitative results revealed that for the low-intermediate group strategic planning increased attention towards grammar (accuracy) while for the high-intermediate group it increased it towards vocabulary (complexity). In the next chapter, the findings of this chapter will be discussed.

5. Discussion

The results of this study investigate the effects of proficiency on task performance in terms of fluency, accuracy, and complexity after strategic planning and explore proficiency related variation on what learners attend to during pre-task and online planning. In this chapter, the results are summarized, trade-off effects are discussed and then pedagogical implications are proposed. The chapter concludes with study limitations and directions for future research.

5.1 Discussion of Results

First, as might be expected, the performance of the two groups in the unplanned task corresponded to their proficiency level. That is, overall, the low-intermediate group were the least fluent, used the least complex language and were least accurate while the high-intermediate group produced better results on all measures. A key finding was that for some measures the low-intermediate group was able to catch up with the high-intermediate group in the planning task. This was evident in a comparison of planning time gains between the two groups for fluency (see Table 5) that showed that gains for the low-intermediate group were greater than the high-intermediate group. In the case of gains for accuracy, the low-intermediate group again showed the greatest gain. However, for complexity the findings showed that the opportunity to plan for the low-intermediate group had zero effect on syntactic complexity and interestingly, lexical complexity decreased under the planning condition. This could be in part due to the failure of TTR as a valid and reliable measure of lexical complexity. In contrast, the high-intermediate group gained in both syntactic and lexical complexity, even though the results shown were insignificant. These findings indicate that the low-intermediate proficiency group benefitted the most from the opportunity to plan in an oral narrative task, especially in terms of fluency and accuracy, which were found to be significant (.013 and .003 respectively).

In investigating the effect of planning on the attention given to language forms it was found that planning time led to an increase in a focus on form; however, whether that focus was upon grammatical accuracy or complexity seemed to be dependent on proficiency.

5.2 Trade-off Effects: Fluency, Accuracy, and Complexity

An explanation of these findings can be found in the theoretical models of second language acquisition outlined in the literature review in Chapter Two. When learners have time to plan, working memory is freed up and this allows L2 learners to attend to different forms of the language. The results of this study seem to indicate that for the low-intermediate group the focus was on fluency and accuracy and that this came at the expense of complexity, which was negatively effected. In contrast, the high-intermediate group concentrated on fluency and complexity, and although no negative was seen for accuracy, the limited effect on it seems to indicate that this came at the expense of accuracy and could be interpreted as a trade-off. These results are supported by the learners' responses to the questionnaire, which indicated that the low-intermediate group focused on grammar (i.e., accuracy) and that the high-intermediate group gave more attention to vocabulary (i.e., complexity) when allocating attentional resources.

In general, the findings from previous research investigating the effect of planning time on tasks have found complexity to be more greatly influenced than accuracy. The findings here suggest that where planning time is provided, the low-intermediate group benefit in accuracy as well as fluency. In contrast, the high intermediate group benefits were found for fluency and complexity. These findings are in support of trade-off effects.

The results of this study are not in accordance with that of Wigglesworth (1997), who found a planning effect for accuracy mainly in her higher proficiency learners. The present results also fail to support Ortega's suggestion (1999) that, in the case of accuracy, planning might have the greatest effect on advanced level learners. However, they are in accordance with Kawauchi who found that:

> [T]here were differences among the three groups in the gains for accuracy. This time, the Low EFL group showed the greatest gain, which was significantly different from that of the Advanced ESL group (2005: 160).

Furthermore, Kawauchi concluded that "the High EFL group benefitted most from the opportunity to plan in the case of fluency and complexity, while the Low EFL group did so in accuracy" (Kawauchi, 2005: 161). Part of the reason for this can be found in task conditions, but also the complexity of the task might have played a hand in this. Kawauchi indicates a possible reason for the difference in effect of planning time is that "there might have been a ceiling effect" (2005: 162). It is possible that the high-intermediate group were able to handle the task well even when it is unplanned because their L2 knowledge is sufficiently proceduralized to enable them to access it easily. In contrast, the low EFL learners appear to be focusing only on meaning and attending least to form in the unplanned task, and thus when planning time is given it provided the low-intermediate learners with the opportunity to attend to form as supported by Van Patten's (1996) study and that of Skehan & Foster (1999).

5.3 Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study have pedagogical implications not least because they seem to indicate that the choice of language focus, whether it be accuracy or complexity, is influenced by proficiency. Therefore, proficiency interacts with the task and the subsequent outcome of it, which will have implications for attaining a balanced focus on language development within the classroom.

5.3.1 Balance Focus in Class

The results from this study indicate that the opportunity to plan leads to better language production and has shown that planning time can affect both accuracy and complexity of language in different ways depending upon proficiency. Awareness of the effects of proficiency on task performance is important in order to better balance the goals of the class. As Skehan asserts:

> [T]he main claim is an old one – the key to sustained progress is balanced development in the different areas of second language performance. In other words, excessive development in one direction may be at the expense of others (1998: 41).

No single answer will be adequate for all proficiency levels within a task-based approach, but it is thought that this study has provided a need for classroom instruction to provide the right balance of meaning-based and form-based instruction at the level of proficiency. The effects of planning can be manipulated at the level of task complexity and conditions that can better serve the pedagogical goals to promote balanced development of second language learning.

5.4 Limitations of the Present Study

Two limitations in this study need to be acknowledged. First, the design of the study (see section 3.2) meant that it was not possible to compare the same individual participants within each proficiency group performing the same task under both planning and non-planning conditions as it would have meant that the same participants would have repeated the task and this would have skewed the results. However, given that the two proficiency groups were found to be equivalent in terms of their language ability, this need not be considered a major problem.

The second limitation is that the findings of this study may not be generable to different tasks. A single oral narrative task was used in this study and task complexity interacts as a variable on the outcome of tasks. Where a task is more complex, planning time will be more beneficial owing to the higher cognitive demand that it places on the learner. It would therefore be interesting to examine the effect of task complexity as a further independent variable on the process and production between proficiency groups to see if similar findings would be present.

5.5 Directions for Future Research

This study has shown the need for further research to understand the role of strategic planning. Different proficiency levels are clearly responding differently to pre-task planning and the balance between complexity and accuracy can be dependent upon proficiency. However, the current study involved only an oral narrative task and as task complexity is a further variable there is a call to further explore proficiency variation in relation to task complexity.

A direction for future research is to conduct a multivariate study on both proficiency and complexity. Additional research like this is likely to develop a clearer picture of the effect of planning time on oral output and its important implications both for theory and practice.

5.6 Summary of Discussion

The results of this study suggest the need to consider proficiency as a variable in the effects of pre-task planning and have shown that there are differences between low-intermediate and high-intermediate learners in the effects of strategic planning. They also indicate a higher quality of output and a focus on form for the strategic planning condition, which may facilitate more opportunities for learning. In this study whether that focus was on accuracy or complexity was dependent on proficiency. This carries implications for the results of previous studies that have not taken into account the proficiency variable, and also carries pedagogical implications for attaining a balanced focus on language development in the EFL classroom.

6. Conclusion

Regardless of the limitations in section 5.4, this study provides clear evidence that learners' L2 proficiency is a factor in determining the allocation of attention and to what extent strategic planning effects task performance. The results indicate that both the quantitative and qualitative analyses are in support of each other and show that planning time not only increases the quality of output but also a focus on language form that, according to language theories, leads to a better learning environment.

The study shows that proficiency will lead to a variable outcome on planning in task based planning research. In the case of low-intermediate learners, that outcome (supported by the qualitative results on attention allocation) indicated that fluency and accuracy came at the expense of complexity, and for high-intermediate learners, although no trade-off was seen in that accuracy was not negatively affected, the limited effect on it seemed to indicate that it was left to the benefit of fluency and complexity. These findings are in support of Skehan's (1998) trade-off hypothesis, but more importantly indicate that different proficiency levels are likely to trade-off different aspects of language.

To conclude on a practical note, the findings in this paper suggest that planning time may be justified because it actively improves the quality of the output. Given the importance of output to SLA, this is enough to justify the inclusion of planning on the more cognitively demanding tasks in the classroom. According to Yuan & Ellis (2005), planning:

> [M]ay enable learners to draw on their explicit L2 knowledge to assist both formulation and monitoring. In short, the opportunity for careful planning frees up short-term memory, allowing learners to maximize their existing proficiency (188).

It has been shown that proficiency has an effect on issues such as accuracy, complexity and fluency and on the extent to which attention is devoted to these goals. We have seen that not all proficiency levels benefit from the same effects of planning time both at the level of process and production. Understanding this nature and the role of planning on the relationship of production and process, and specifically the focus on form, allows us to tailor planning conditions specific to each proficiency level to the benefit of the balanced goal of the classroom.

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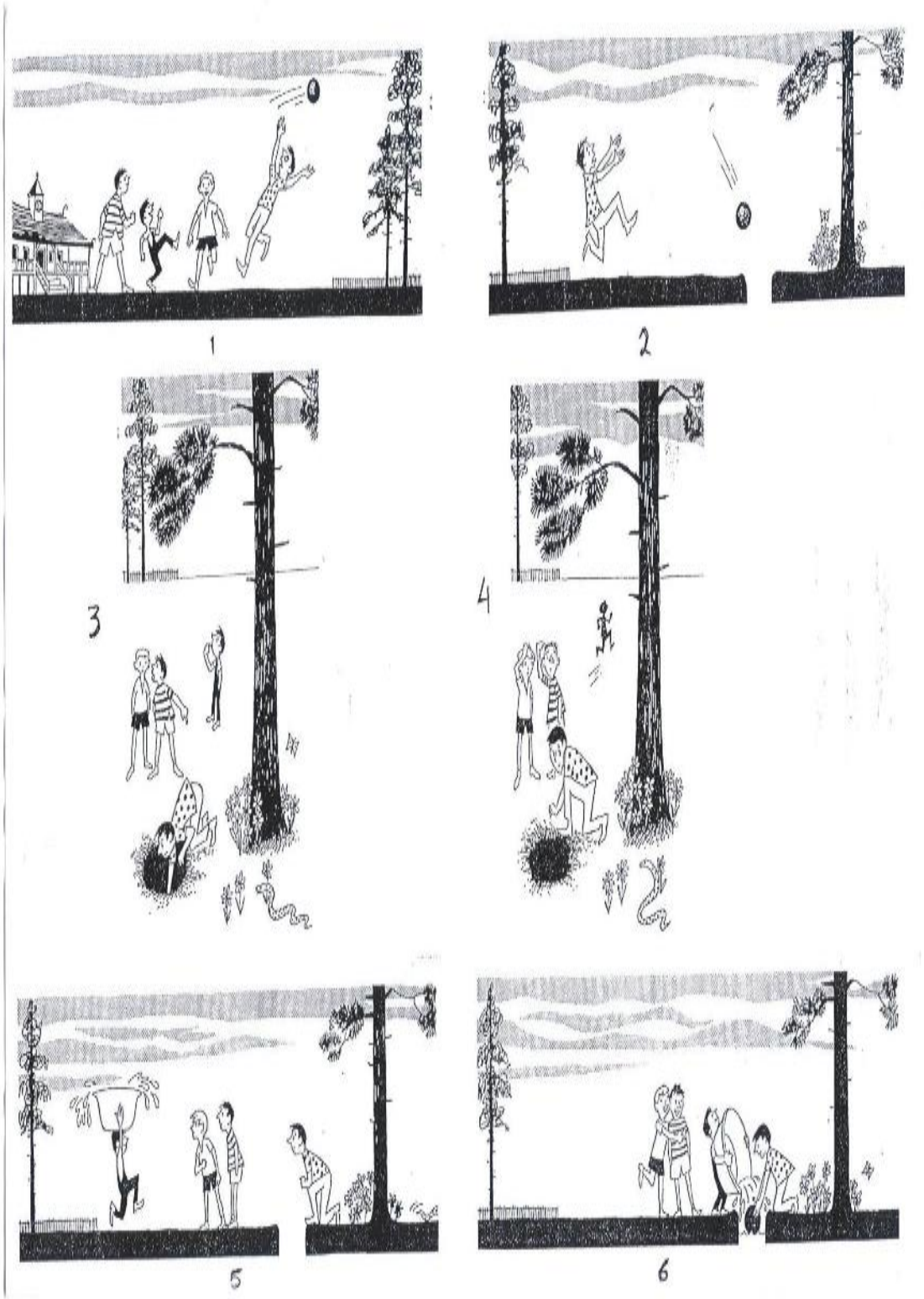
Appendix 1. Football Narrative Task (Heaton: 1975)



Appendix 2. Task Instructions: English Instructions

No planning groups

Instructions: You have just seen a set of pictures. These pictures tell us a story. Now I would like you to retell this story in English. Imagine that somebody has never seen these pictures and this is his/her first time to learn about the story from you. So please tell the story as detailed as you can. In addition, you have only 5 minutes and you must produce at least four sentences for each of the six pictures. If you like, you can produce more than four sentences for each picture.

Press record on the device. Please begin.

Strategic planning groups

Instructions: You have just seen a set of pictures. These pictures tell us a story. In a short while, I would like you to retell this story in English. Before you retell the story, you have 10 minutes to plan what you are going to say. Imagine that somebody has never seen these pictures and this is his/her first time to learn about the story from you. So please tell the story as detailed as you can. To assist you to prepare, you are given a sheet of paper and a pencil. You can use them to write some notes. But please don't write a complete sentence either in Arabic or in English. *When you begin to tell your story, I will take the paper away*. You have only 5 minutes and you must produce at least four sentences for each of the six pictures. If you like, you can produce more than four sentences for each picture.

(After 10 minutes)

It is time for you to begin. Press record on the device. Please begin.

Arabic Translation

No planning groups

مجموعات بدون تخطيط:

التعليمات:

شاهدت للتو مجموعة من الصور. هذه الصور تحكي لنا قصة. المطلوب إعادة سرد هذه القصة باللغة الإنجليزية في وقت وجيز.

تخيل أن شخصا ما لم ير هذه الصور من قبل وأن هذه هي المرة الأولى التي يطلع فيها على محتوى القصة من خلالك.

لذا يرجى سرد القصة بكل تفاصيلها قدر الإمكان. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، لديك 5 دقائق فقط لتكوين أربع جمل على الأقل لكل صورة من الصور الست. يمكنك تكوين أكثر من أربع جمل لكل صورة إذا شئت. اضغط على زر التسجيل. ابدأ الان من فضلك..

Strategic planning groups

مجموعات التخطيط الاستراتيجي

التعليمات: شاهدت للتو مجموعة من الصور. هذه الصور تحكي لنا قصة. المطلوب إعادة سرد هذه القصة باللغة الإنجليزية في وقت وجيز. قبل الشروع في سرد القصة لديك 10 دقائق للتخطيط لما ستقوله.

تخيل أن شخصا ما لم ير هذه الصور من قبل وأن هذه هي المرة الأولى التي يطلع فيها على محتوى القصة من خلالك.

لذا يرجى سرد القصة بكل تفاصيلها قدر الإمكان. لمساعدتك سنمدك بورقة وقلم رصاص لكتابة بعض الملاحظات.

لكن لا تكتب جملة تامة سواء باللغة العربية او الإنجليزية رجاء. عندما تبدأ في سرد قصتك، سأسحب منك الورقة.

لديك 5 دقائق فقط لتكوين أربع جمل على الأقل لكل صورة من الصور الست. يمكنك تكوين أكثر من أربع جمل لكل صورة إذا شئت.

(بعد 10 دقائق)

.لقد حان الوقت لكي تبدأ. اضغط على سجل على الجهاز. اضغط على زر التسجيل. ابدأ الان من فضلك..

Appendix 3. Sample Questionnaire: Attention Allocation

Post-task Questionnaire

Oral Task – With Strategic Planning.

Name:_____

Age: _____ **Major:** _____

1. During the 10-minute planning period, how did you plan? Did you think more about grammar, vocabulary, or the best way to organize your story?
   Put these in order of priority according to time and attention you spent for each during the 10-minute planning period before you told the story.

   (1) (2) (3)

2. While you were telling the story, did you think about grammar, vocabulary, or the best way to organize your story?

   Put these in an order of priority according to time and attention you spent for each while you were telling the story.

   (1) (2) (3)

Post-task Questionnaire

Oral Task – No Planning.

Name: _____

Age: _____ **Major:** _____

1. While you were telling the story, did you think about grammar, vocabulary, or the best way to organize your story?

   Put these in an order of priority according to time and attention you spent for each while you were telling the story.

   (1) (2) (3)

Arabic Translation

الاستبيان البعدي

النشاط الشفوي - مع التخطيط الاستراتيجي

الاسم: ----------

العمر: ---------- **التخصص:** ----------

1. كيف خططت خلال مدة التخطيط الممتدة لـ10 دقائق؟ هل فكرت أكثر في النحو أو المفردات أو الطريقة الأمثل لتنظيم قصتك؟

رتب العناصر التالية حسب أولوية الوقت والتركيز الذي خصصته لكل عنصر خلال مدة التخطيط الممتدة لـ10 دقائق قبل سردك للقصة.

(1) ---------- (2) ---------- (3) ----------

2- هل فكرت خلال فترة سردك للقصة في النحو أو المفردات أو الطريقة الأمثل لتنظيم قصتك؟

رتب العناصر التالية حسب أولوية الوقت والتركيز الذي خصصته لكل عنصر طوال مدة سردك للقصة.

(1) ---------- (2) ---------- (3) ----------

الاستبيان البعدي

الاختبار الشفوي - بدون تخطيط

الاسم: ----------

العمر: ---------- **التخصص:** ----------

1. هل فكرت خلال فترة سردك للقصة في النحو أو المفردات أو الطريقة الأمثل لتنظيم قصتك؟

رتب العناصر التالية حسب أولوية الوقت والتركيز الذي خصصته لكل عنصر طوال مدة سردك للقصة.

(1) ---------- (2) ---------- (3) ----------