



# On the effects of online planning with task repetition on the learner's accuracy and complexity in writing proficiency: A case for Iranian EFL learners

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**Abstract:** *Planning prior to language production is inevitable. The importance of language planning prior to its production and to what extent it may affect the learner use of language have received increasing attention over the past years. However, little research has reported to investigate whether the simultaneous use of online planning with task repetition affects the learners' writing proficiency. The present paper reports the result of a study which has examined if the simultaneous use of online planning with task repetition improves 50 Iranian EFL learners' writing proficiency in reference to accuracy and complexity. The participants were divided into two control and experimental groups. Each group were asked to write on a topic with enough time allowed (hence, the online planning). In addition to online planning, the experimental group received four-session treatment where the researcher explicitly encourages the participants to write accurate and complex sentences by repeating the writing task. The results of both immediate and delayed post-tests revealed that online planning with task repetition did improve significantly the writing proficiency of the participants in the experimental group compared to their counterpart in the control group. Pedagogical implications are discussed.*

**Keywords:** *Task Repetition, Complexity, Accuracy, Writing Proficiency, Careful Online Planning, EFL Learner*

## INTRODUCTION

Planning prior to language production is inevitable. Ellis (2005) believes that planning is an integral part of even the most careless and speeded speech or writing. According to Ellis (2005, 2008), different types of planning are differentiated in terms of when the planning occurs: Careful online planning (COLP) and pressured online planning (POLP). He believes that COLP takes place online and during the performance of the task and at the formulation stage of the Levelt's three-staged model. It is different from the POLP in that in the COLP language learners are provided enough time to plan what they want to say or write and uses of the allotted time to carefully attend to their performances. However, according Ellis and Yuan (2005), in the POLP language learners are not given time to plan their speech and they need to produce language under time pressure. Yuan & Ellis, 2003 define careful online planning 'the process by which speakers attend carefully to the formulation stage during speech planning and engage in pre-production and post-production monitoring of their speech acts' (p. 6). These two types of planning are said to influence the learners' language in terms of fluency, accuracy and complexity both in written or oral modes. There is a significant body of research which has investigated the effects of planning on language production (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Ellis,

1987; Foster and Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Yuan and Ellis, 2003; Willis, 2004; Wang, 2009; and Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang; 2012). Generally, these studies have corroborated the beneficial effects of both careful online planning and task repetition on accuracy, complexity. For example Skehan and Foster (1997) found that planning can raise the fluency, complexity and accuracy with which tasks are performed. Or Yuan and Ellis (2003) found that pre-task planning enhances grammatical complexity and while on-line planning positively impacted on accuracy and grammatical complexity. Wang (2009) and Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012) showed that developing greater accuracy entails rehearsal through strategic planning and repetition and monitoring through on-line planning and using post-tasks.

Ahmadian and Tavakoli' (2010) study of 60 Iranian intermediate-level EFL learners showed the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition enhanced accuracy significantly in oral production. To the best knowledge of the researchers, there is no or little research which has reported to investigate the effects of on-line planning with task repetition on the Iranian EFL learner writing performances with reference to its fluency and complexity. Therefore, this provides enough motivation for the present paper to examine if one-line planning with task repetition affects the Iranian EFL advanced learners writing abilities regarding fluency and complexity.

## **Background to the Study**

### **Careful online planning**

As mentioned above, careful online planning takes place online and during the performance of the task and at the formulation stage of the Levelt's three-staged model. Levelt's speech model is a three-stage model in which according to Kormos (2006), 'people produce speech first by *conceptualizing* the message, then by *formulating* its language representation (i.e. encoding it), and finally by *articulating* it' (p. 7). This implies that the language user first conceptualize the message before s/he wants to articulate the message. That is to say, s/he plans his or speech prior to production. This allows the speaker or writer allows opportunity to monitor the speech before production. Therefore, planning prior production seems to be important and the researcher hypothesize that it significantly impacts the speaker or writer's language in regard to complexity and fluency as the case was in Yuan and Ellis (2003). According to information-processing theory (e.g., Anderson, 1995; Schmidt, 2001) our attention is limited and selective. Stated otherwise, we can only focus our primary attention to one thing at a time. Therefore, our attention is divided and according to Skehan, 1996, 1998) attending to one side of performance (e.g. complexity) may have deleterious impacts on other dimensions of performance (e.g. accuracy). Also Van Patten (1990) points out that 'conscious attention to form', which monitors the accuracy and complexity, 'competes with conscious attention to meaning' (p. 269) that controls the speech for its fluency.

### **Task repetition**

One type of planning is the repetition of a task. Bygate and Samuda (2005) point out task repetition refers to "repetition of the same or slightly altered task—whether the whole tasks, or parts of a task" (p. 43). There is agreement in the literature that task repetition is one effective strategy which can be employed to improve accuracy, fluency and complexity of the performance of a task. Bygate (2001) supports the use of task repetition in language learning in that "part of the job of conceptualization, formulation and articulation done at the first time is stored in the learners' memory and could be used for second time" (p. 29). Also, Ellis's (2008) assertion lends another support to the importance of the task repetition in that it allows the learner opportunities to possess more processing time to attend to both form and meaning of the message. Consequently, as Ellis (2003) suggests, this will increase the quantity of the output, the fluency and complexity. Bygate and Samuda (2005) points out that the task repetition includes two phases:

"A first enactment of a task, in which learners are likely to organize the cognitive content, scope out the likely useful lexico-grammar, and process it in real time, generating an experientially derived multi-level schema to

support subsequent linguistic work; followed by a second enactment, during which the speaker can build on the previous one” (p. 45).

Previous research (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1989; Skehan and Foster, 1997; Bygate, 1996; 1999; Gass et.al’s, 1999; Bygate, 2001; Lynch and MacLean, 2000; 2001) revealed that task repetition impacts positively on the accuracy, fluency and complexity of the language learner. All in all, the beneficial effects of both careful online planning and task repetition on accuracy, complexity, and fluency of language performances have been reported by the studies cited above. In contrast, the effects of simultaneous use of careful online planning and task repetition on of the Iranian EFL learner writing performances with reference to its fluency and complexity have not been reported. Therefore, this provides enough impetus for the researchers to investigate if one-line planning with task repetition affects the Iranian EFL advanced learners writing abilities regarding fluency and complexity.

### **Accuracy, complexity**

Accuracy, complexity, and fluency are integral parts of lanagueg production. Any piece of speech or wiring performance should possess all these dimensions to be considered effective. Skehan (1996) defines accuracy as concerned with ‘a learner’s capacity to handle whatever level of interlanguage complexity she has currently attained’ (p. 46). This implies that if a learner wants to be accurate, s/he should monitor linguistic elements in his/her speech or writing performance. In cases where the learner is encouraged to produce language more accurately, it fosters the use of controlled rather than automatic processes. The researchers argue that controlled processes become automatic when the learner is provided with enough time to repeat the task in online planning. With reference to complexity, Skehan (1996) considers that complexity refers to ‘the stage and elaboration of the underlying interlanguage system’ (p. 46). ‘Elaborated language’ in Ellis and Barkhuizen’s (2005) terms is defined in two different phases. First, it is the cutting edge development of the learner language, which is not yet fully automatic. Second, learners are ready to employ a wide range of linguistic resources. The trade-off effects among these two dimensions of language are still a contentious subject. However, Wendel (1997) asserts that careful online planning and pre-task planning enhance complexity and careful online planning aids accuracy. Given the importance of the online planning for the improvement of complexity and accuracy, the present paper aims at seeing whether simultaneous use of online planning with task repetition affects the Iranian EFL learners’ writing performance.

### **The current study**

Given the above explanation on the importance of the online planning and task repetition in language learning, the present paper intends to investigate the effects of careful online planning with task repetition on the Iranian EFL learners writing performance with a focus on two dimensions namely, accuracy and complexity. Reviewing the previous literature, the researchers address the following research questions:

1. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the immediate post-test?
2. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity (taken together) of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the immediate post-test?
3. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity (taken together) of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the delayed post-test?

## **Method**

### **Participants**

50 Iranian female EFL learners constituted the participants of the present paper. They were studying English in a language institute in Karaj, Iran. They were ranked as advanced learners according to the language institute’s forms of assessments and the placement tests that they had taken (such as Oxford Placement Test). The participants were between 19 to 27 years old.

### Research Design and Procedures

The participants were randomly divided into two groups: control (hereafter, G1) and experimental (hereafter, G2). Then they were given a pre-test which involved them to write on a topic. The topic was selected from among a list of topics which the participants were interested in writing about them. The rationale behind this was that, as Laufer and Hulstijn (2001) argue, “students who experience high amounts of external and internal drive or need to learn, will achieve higher levels of proficiency than students with low levels of drive” (p. 1). This implies that “educationalists may attempt to increase students’ motivation by providing tasks and materials which students may experience as interesting and appealing” (p. 2). To operationalize the online planning, we gave both groups ample time to write about the topic. Their writing assignments were then checked by the researchers and were given scores. To make sure that the scores are reliable a second scorer (who was an expert in ELT and was teaching English for nine years) was invited to score the participants’ assignments. The inter-rater reliability between the scores was estimated at 0.81. Also, the results of the Independent Sample T-Test did not show significant differences between the G1 and G2 (Table 1) thereby supporting the fact that the two groups were of the same proficiency level (i.e., advanced level).

**Table 1:** Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the pre-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	25	0.81	0.43	0.08	0.05	0.79	0.41
2	25	0.79	0.42	0.07	0.06		

Notes: 1= Control Group 2=Experimental Group

Then, researchers gave back the assignments of the participants in G2 to further check their cases of inaccurate and incomplex sentences. More particularly, the researchers focused the attention of the participants in G2 to inaccurate and incomplex sentences and taught them how to write accurate and complex sentences by repeating the writing task. This treatment took five sessions for the researchers to repeat the task and practiced this by all the participants one by one. The reason for the choice of task repetition technique is, as Gass et al (1999), Bygate (2001) and Lynch and MacLean (2000, 2001) believed, it intensifies learners’ fluency and complexity and has positive effects on the learners’ incomplete accuracy. Similarly, Levi (1988) argues that we know things through working with them, through experiences “marked by love and by hatred, by silent, furious battles, enthusiasm and weariness, victory and defeat, resulting in more and more reined knowledge” (pp. 76-77). In contrast, the participants in G1 proceeded with the daily class activities and did not receive feedback on the inaccurate and incomplex sentences. Then, the participants in both G1 and G2 took an immediate post-test. The post-test involved the participants planning about the topic before they wanted to write, hence to comply with the assumptions of online planning. The purpose was to see whether the online planning with task repetition (included as treatment) improved the writings of the participants in G2 in terms of accuracy and complexity. One month later, a delayed post-test was given to both groups to investigate whether online planning with the repetition of the writing task had long-term impacts on the writing performance of the participants.

### Data Analysis

The Independent-Samples t-test was employed as an appropriate statistical formula to reveal any differences between the two groups. We based our measurement of the variables on Errasti (2003), Larsen-freeman (2006), and Storch and Wigglesworth (2009). To measure the accuracy loads of writing of the participants, we divided the total number of error-free T-units by the total number of T-units. Spelling errors were not taken into account unless they spoiled the meanings of the words. Once they were counted, they were not given negative marks if the participants repeated the same errors on later occurrences. Errors of capitalization,

prepositions, punctuations and errors of lexical choices were not taken into account if they did not hinder comprehension. Similarly, we measured the complexity by calculating the percentage of dependent clauses to total number of clauses. To do this, we first counted the total number of dependent and independent clauses and then dependent clauses. Then, we divided the total number of dependent clauses by the total number of clauses (both dependent and independent) for each writing assignment. Then, we employed the Independent Samples T-Test to check whether the online planning with task repetition participants improved the writing proficiency of the participants in terms of accuracy and complexity.

**Results and Discussion**

1. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the immediate post-test?

The results of the independent sample t-test revealed a significant difference in the performance of the two groups with the G1 performing far more better compared with G1 (Table 2). As shown in table 2, the sig was less than 0.05 and we concluded that the online planning with task repetition did improve the writings of the participants with reference to accuracy and complexity.

**Table 2:** Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the immediate post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	25	0.79	0.41	0.08	0.05	0.001	0.001
2	25	0.89	0.67	0.05	0.09		

Notes: 1= Control Group 2=Experimental Group

The results of the present study lent support to those in Gass et al’s (1999), Bygate (1996; 2001), Skehan and Foster, (1997), Lynch and MacLean (2000, 2001) and Bygate and Samuda (2005) who found that task repetition impacted significantly on fluency, accuracy and complexity of the learners’ performances. It also supported Ahmadian and Tavakoli’s study (2010) who found that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition enhanced accuracy and complexity significantly in oral production. Moreover, the results supported Wang (2009) and Skehan, Xiaoyue, Qian, and Wang (2012) that developing greater accuracy involves rehearsal through strategic planning and repetition, and monitoring through on-line planning and using post-tasks.

2. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity (taken together) of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the immediate post-test?

Table 3 shows that G2 outperformed their counterparts in G1 (since the sig is less than 0.05) and we conclude that online planning with task repetition did have significant effects on the accuracy and complexity (taken together) of Iranian EFL learners’ writing skill in the immediate post-test.

**Table 3:** Independent samples test to compare both the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the immediate post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Sig.
1	25	1.33	0.06	0.000
2	25	1.89	0.08	

Notes: Notes: 1= Control Group 2=Experimental Group

This finding lent support to Ellis (1987), Crookes (1989) and Skehan and Foster (1997) who found that planning brought about greater complexity and accuracy. Moreover, the result was in line with that of

Ahmadian and Tavakoli (2010) who found that the opportunity to engage simultaneously in careful online planning and task repetition improved both accuracy and complexity significantly in oral production.

3. Does careful online planning with task repetition have any significant effect on the accuracy and complexity of Iranian EFL learners' writing skill in the delayed post-test?

Beside the short-term effect of online planning with task-repetition, we also aimed at investigating if online planning with task repetition left its effects on the participants' writings one month after the treatment with reference to their accuracy. As shown in Table 4, on the one hand, G1 outperformed significantly the participants in G2 (since sig is less than 0.05) and on the other hand, the task repetition did leave its positive impacts on the writings of the G1 despite the passage of one month since the their means remained approximately the same (compare Tables 2 and 4)

**Table 4:** Independent samples test to compare the accuracy and complexity of experimental and control groups in the delayed post-test (*Italic*=statistically significant difference)

Group	N	Mean		Std. Deviation		Sig.	
		Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity	Accuracy	complexity
1	25	0.76	0.39	0.07	0.13	0.001	0.001
2	25	0.86	0.62	0.05	0.08		

Notes: 1= Control Group 2=Experimental Group

Similarly, we found the same result with relation to the complexity loads of the participants in the experimental and control groups. Table 4 shows that G1 performed more significantly compared to their counterparts in G2 (since sig. is less than 0.05 and also G1 possessed the highest means). Moreover, the means of the experimental group remained approximately the same in the immediate and delayed post-test the researchers reached the conclusion that the task repetition left its impacts on the participants' use of complex sentences in their writings one month after the treatment (compare Tables 2 and 4). Shiffrin and Schneider's (1977) two types of controlled and automatic processing can account for this result. They pointed out that once a skill is practiced (by repetition, for example) and automatized, it goes to the long-term memory and becomes an internalized part of one's learning. Subsequently, it becomes easy to the learner to recall information from the memory for later use. In the current study, because we repeated the task for the participants, it assisted them to automatize and establish the information (hence the long-term retention of the material).

### **Conclusion, pedagogical implications and suggestions for future research**

The current paper aimed at investigating the impact of online planning with task repetition on the Iranian EFL advanced learners' writings in terms of accuracy and complexity. Our analyses of both immediate and delayed post-tests showed that online planning with task repetition did improve the learners' writings in terms of accuracy and complexity. This implies that online planning with task repetition can be considered as one of the affective techniques to improve the students' writing proficiency. Thus, the researchers recommend that teachers employ such strategies as simultaneous use of online planning with task repetition so as to allow their learners to automatize and establish the language being learned. Moreover, the present research brought to attention the importance of the investigation into other related areas. As explained above, the current research selected only female English language learners as the participants of the study. Therefore, the researchers suggest that a future study is needed to examine whether gender affects the performances of the participants by choosing both male and female learners. Also, the present study delimited its participants to EFL advanced learners. We recommend that participants of different proficiency levels be chosen as the participants to see if the online planning with task repetition improves the writing proficiency of all



participants or proficiency level is mediates the effects of online planning with task repetition. This line of research which seems to be ignored in the related literature should show how learners at different levels of proficiency respond to online planning with task repetition treatment. Last but not the least, it is suggested that fluency as another dimension of affective writings along with accuracy and complexity should be investigated to come to a more generalizable results to provide us with a clearer picture of how online planning with task repetition improve them taken together.

To the best knowledge of the researchers this is the first study which investigated the impact of online planning with task repetition on the Iranian EFL advanced learners' writings in terms of accuracy and complexity in an Iranian context. Therefore, we suggest that the findings of this study be generalized with caution since it was carried out in a particular classroom setting with a particular group of Iranian EFL learners and at a particular time period.

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