



**Research Article**

# The Effect of Pre-task Planning on the Speaking Accuracy of Iranian EFL Learners

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Received: 23/01/2023

Accepted: 04/03/2023

**Keywords:**

Accuracy

Pre-task planning

Speaking

Task-based language teaching

**ABSTRACT**

**Introduction:** Speaking is at the heart of second language learning. Nowadays, it is believed that pre-task planning, which is planning prior to performing a task, may enhance the speech production of learners. Therefore, the current study aimed to determine the effect of pre-task planning on the speaking accuracy of EFL intermediate learners.

**Methodology:** The participants in this study were 90 male and female EFL learners studying English at language institutes in Iran. To investigate the effect of individual and group pre-task planning on learners' accuracy in speaking, the participants were randomly divided into three equal-in-number groups. In this regard, 30 participants were in individual pre-task planning, group pre-task planning, and no-planning groups. The obtained results of the pretests and post-tests were compared.

**Results:** The findings of the study revealed a positive meaningful relationship between pre-task planning time and speaking accuracy of Iranian EFL learners. It was found that individual pre-task planning was significantly more effective than group pre-task planning in terms of accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' speaking. The findings indicated pre-tasking could improve learners' speaking accuracy, compared to no-planning.

**Conclusion:** The obtained results of the current study may help language teachers, particularly syllabus designers, design pedagogical activities that pay specific attention to accuracy in language production so that learners can develop these elements of language production in a good balance.

## 1. Introduction

The field of language learning is constantly evolving and has drawn the interest of numerous researchers who are devoted to studying its various aspects throughout their careers. In recent times, the teaching of speaking skills and its impact on language learning has garnered significant attention from researchers in both first and second language studies. Speaking is the most important skill among the four language skills, and individuals who possess language knowledge are considered speakers of the language (Ur, 2000). Communication is incomplete without speaking, which is a critical aspect of expressing and exchanging ideas through the use of verbal and nonverbal symbols within diverse contexts (Chaney, 1998). Teaching speaking is distinct from teaching other language skills, such as listening, reading, and writing, as it requires the formation

of habits due to its productive nature (Kayi, 2006). Nunan (2003) defines teaching speaking as the process of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) learners to produce English speech sounds and sound patterns, use word and sentence stress, intonation patterns, and rhythm of the second language, select appropriate words and sentences based on the social setting, audience, situation, and subject matter, organize their thoughts in a meaningful and logical sequence, express values and judgments, and speak fluently with confidence and few unnatural pauses. It, therefore, seems essential to identify the problems that EFL learners have in dealing with a speaking skill, as there might be a lack of enough opportunities for EFL learners to speak outside the classroom (Tabatabaei, 2012).

As traditional language teaching methods focused on

using language in natural and communicative ways, there has been a shift towards more learner-centered and communicative approaches in language teaching (Ellis, 2003; Yahyazade et al., 2014). One of these new approaches is called task-based language teaching (TBLT), which builds on the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT). The TBLT involves using various tasks in the classroom to make language learning more meaningful, focusing on achieving a specific outcome.

Looking at the history of second-language teaching, the idea of using tasks as the fundamental components of teaching emerged in the 1980s when scholars began to see tasks as useful research tools for second-language acquisition (Khoram, 2019). According to some proponents of TBLT (e.g., Bygate, 2016; East, 2012; and Ellis, 2009), TBLT can be seen as a natural progression of CLT since it builds on some of the principles that emerged from the CLT movement in the 1980s. The TBLT advocates argue that involving learners in task-based activities creates a more effective learning environment than focusing solely on language forms. This approach provides more opportunities for language acquisition. As reported by Ellis (2005), TBLT is based on the idea that language is acquired through meaningful activities. Therefore, TBLT structures the learning process around tasks to be performed in the target language, rather than focusing on functions, notions, topics, or structures.

According to Ellis (2003), the learners' capacity to perform different tasks depends on a series of parameters, shaped by the methodological procedures employed to teach those tasks. These procedures are called task procedures and can either increase or decrease the cognitive load on the learner. The procedures can be classified into pre-task procedures, during task procedures (such as limiting the time to complete the task), and post-task procedures (such as repeating the task). Pre-task planning opportunities enhance both the accuracy and fluency of oral production (Ellis, 1987). Planning ahead of a task can increase speech accuracy by freeing up learners' attentional resources to attend to language form, assuming that meaning takes priority during real communication (Van Patten, 1990, 1996). Furthermore, pre-task planning can encourage learners to allocate their attentional resources equally between meaning and form (Wendel, 1997; Skehan, 1998). Planning also promotes speech fluency by allowing learners to process the content and language of their speech at a deeper level and practice it before producing it for real communication (Wendel, 1997). Ellis (2005) suggests two types of pre-task planning, namely strategic planning and rehearsal. Strategic planning involves learners preparing for the task by thinking about the information they need to convey and how to express it, while rehearsal involves repeating the task with the first attempt serving as a preparation for subsequent performances. Regardless of the type of pre-tasking, planning a task beforehand can help L2 learners improve their speech fluency by allowing them to process both the content and language of their planned speech more deeply and meaningfully. In addition, pre-task planning enables learners to practice applying the content

and language of their speech before actually producing it for oral communication (East, 2014; Long, 2015).

Such findings encourage researchers to investigate the effect of pre-tasking foreign language learners' performance. However, Wendel (1997) argues that the existing research on pre-task planning suffers from limitations due to several factors. Firstly, studies have employed a wide range of tasks, making it difficult to draw general conclusions. Secondly, pre-task planning has not been consistently defined or operationalized across studies, further complicating the analysis of results. Thirdly, while it was assumed that planning occurred, there was no clear understanding of the cognitive processes involved during the planning stage. Finally, studies have used different measures to evaluate language production and even when using the same measure, there were variations in the way it was operationalized.

In a more recent attempt, Ojima (2006) investigated the effects of pre-task planning on discourse markers, grammatical accuracy, and the complexity of speech of non-native English-speaking teaching assistants. Ojima's study showed that pre-task planning promoted speech complexity but not speech accuracy. Foster and Skehan (1996) also found that pre-task planning and task-based activities positively affect the complexity and fluency of learners' language. Another research conducted by Sangarun (2001) revealed that pre-task planning could potentially improve EFL learners' speech performance. Yuan and Ellis's study (2003) on pre-task and online task planning also proved that pre-task planning positively influenced grammatical complexity. Their results showed that a pre-task planner produced more fluent and lexical varied language than an online planner. Ahmadian et al. (2015) conducted a study to examine how the joint influence of task-based careful online planning and the storyline structure of a task affects L2 oral performance in terms of complexity, accuracy, and fluency. The findings indicated that participants who completed a structured task with careful online planning produced more logically complex, accurate, and fluent language. Conversely, those who completed an unstructured task with pressured online planning achieved the lowest scores in all three areas of speech production. Atai and Nasiri (2017) conducted a study to investigate how strategic planning, online planning, joint planning (combining strategic and online planning), and no planning affect the complexity, accuracy, and fluency of oral productions in simple and complex narrative tasks. The results showed that not planning was the least beneficial for both tasks. Strategic planning led to significant improvement in both complexity and fluency in the simple task and only fluency in the complex task. Online planning helped participants to enhance their accuracy significantly in both tasks. Finally, joint planning resulted in significant improvement in accuracy and fluency in the simple task and complexity and accuracy in the complex task. Khoram (2019) investigated how task type and planning conditions affect the accuracy of learners' oral performance in task-based language teaching. The results showed that pre-task planning conditions and task type significantly improved learners' oral production accuracy. The study suggests that

appropriate task-based conditions can enhance language learners' accuracy and provides implications for task-based language teaching.

Although many studies have supported the positive impact of pre-task planning on accuracy and fluency (e.g., Davies, 2004; Nunan, 1989; Rezvani & Askari Bigdeli, 2012; Stark, 2005), the obtained results have not been conclusive. In modern language classrooms, tasks can be completed either individually or in groups. This raises the question of whether it is more effective for teachers to group students together for pre-task planning or encourage them to plan individually before starting the task (Stark, 2005). Therefore, the current study attempted to discover a new way of speaking instructions, which can improve speaking performance of L2 learners by focusing on their accuracy and fluency. Therefore, a deep study into less investigated forms of oral interaction can bring results of great practical value. Moreover, comparing the effect of group and individual pre-task planning seems to be essential. In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions were raised:

- 1) Does pre-task planning have any significant effect on Iranian EFL intermediate learners' accuracy in speaking?
- 2) Does individual and group pre-task planning significantly affect Iranian EFL intermediate learners' accuracy in speaking ability?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Participants

The participants were selected by purposive sampling method from the original pool of 122 foreign language learners enrolled in English classes at the foreign language institute of Arian, Gorgan, Iran. The selected participants were 90 intermediate-level male learners aged 18 to 30. All participants had passed at least 12 semesters in English in the mentioned institute, and their proficiency level was intermediate. Since most EFL learners faced difficulty in speaking tasks and these tasks were somehow challenging, they were willing to participate in this study as the participants. The researchers randomly divided 90 participants into three equal-in-number groups; individual pre-task planning, group pre-task planning, and no-planning groups. The first two groups served as the experimental groups of the study, and the third group was the control group.

### 2.2. Instrumentation

#### 2.2.1. Preliminary English test

In order to account for the homogeneity of the original pool of 122 participants, a sample of Preliminary English Test (PET), which includes speaking, listening, reading, and writing sections, was employed to determine the participants' levels of proficiency. The PET is a Cambridge qualification test designed to check the learners' proficiency at preliminary levels (Yaghchi et al., 2016). After scoring the

test papers based on participants' performance on the PET, those whose scores were within one standard deviation above or below the mean were included as participants in the study. Consequently, 32 participants were excluded from the original pool of participants.

#### 2.2.2. Pretest and posttest

A decision-making task was given to the learners both at the beginning and end of the experiment. The task completed at the beginning of the experiment served as the pretest, and the one completed at the end served as the post-test. With regard to Ellis' (2003) classification of production variables used in task-based research, the accuracy of participants' speaking was measured based on the number of self-corrections, target-like use of verb tenses, target-like use of articles, target-like use of vocabulary, target-like use of plurals, and target-like use of negation. For each category, four scores were considered; consequently, the scores were calculated out of 20. Following Foster et al. (2000), who proposed the analysis of speech units (As-units), the total accuracy score in the current study was estimated by calculating the proportion of these production variables to the total AS-units which each participant produced in carrying out the task. According to Foster et al. (2000), an As-unit refers to the complete idea expressed by a speaker through a main sentence or a subordinate clause, along with any additional clauses that modify or provide further information. Having transcribed the students' utterances in speaking tests as pre and post-tests, the researchers analyzed the occurrence of each element of scoring rubrics and calculated their speaking scores based on the five mentioned factors.

#### 2.2.3. Theoretical framework of the study

Following Skehan and Foster's (1999) classification of task types, the study employed three different kinds of tasks. The first type involved personal tasks, which relied on information familiar to the participants to ease the cognitive burden. The second type comprised narratives, accompanied by visual aids, but demanded some level of skill in organizing the material for effective storytelling. Finally, the third type of task was decision-making, which was more interactive in nature, and demanded the ability to link a series of moral values to a set of decisions that had to be made.

### 2.3. Procedure

Owing to the nature of the research questions, a quasi-experimental study with a pretest-posttest design was adopted for the study. The research was quasi-experimental because the researchers manipulated the independent variables and did not randomly assign participants to conditions. Therefore, it could be considered quasi-experimental research. In other words, due to the limited number of learners in the mentioned language institutes, the researchers could not apply random sampling, and they

administered purposive sampling. In this study, individual pre-task planning and group pre-task planning were independent variables, whereas speaking accuracy was the dependent variable. The treatment took six sessions, during which the researchers described the task for all participants in both experimental and control groups. However, only the participants in the two experimental groups were provided a five-minute planning time to think about what they wanted to say when carrying out the task. In addition, the learners in the individual-planning group were told to do the task individually, while those in the group-planning group did it in groups. The participants in the control group had no planning time prior to carrying out the task. Four different tasks were given to the students during the treatment. Following Skehan and Foster's (1999) classification of task types, three task types were chosen as personal tasks, narrative tasks, and two decision-making tasks. On the first day of the treatment—one week after pretesting, the learners carried out two personal tasks which were based on the learners' personal and known information, hence seemed to be appropriate to be used as the warm-up of the experiment.

The next day of the treatment was dedicated to completing two narrative tasks, which require some degree of knowledge in coherence and cohesion on the part of the learners, i.e., learners needed to know how to organize the material to tell the story more effectively. Finally, two decision-making tasks were carried out on the last day of the treatment. The requirement of completing decision-making tasks was the learners' ability to relate a set of reasons to a set of decisions. In order to safely measure the accuracy of participants' speaking, their completion of the decision-making task in the pretest and post-test sessions was tape-recorded.

The collected data were analyzed by SPSS (version 25). Given the nature of the variables and the researchers' objective to determine the effect of the independent variable (pre-task planning) on the dependent variable (speaking accuracy) concerning individual and group form, two paired-sample t-tests were conducted to address the first research question. In order to answer the second research

question, two-way ANOVA was the appropriate statistical procedure to analyze the data obtained through the decision-making task. P value less than .05 was considered statistically significant.

### 3. Results

In order to answer the first research question, before running t-tests, the reliability and normality of the data were calculated and tabulated as follows.

As can be seen in Table 1, the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic indicated that the normality of the distribution of scores was not violated since the obtained results were non-significant ( $p > .05$ ).

**Table 1.**  
*Normality of Data*

	Tests of Normality					
	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Total	.652	90	.175	.923	90	.189

Note. a = Lilliefors significance correction

Based on Table 2, it can be safely concluded that there was a significant difference in the participants' accuracy in speaking before and after the treatment in the individual planning group.

Regarding group planning, there was also a significant difference in the participants' speaking accuracy before and after the treatment in group planning (Table 3). Consequently, it could be confirmed that individual and group task planning could have a significant effect on the participants' speaking accuracy ( $p < .05$ ).

The obtained results for the control group indicated no significant difference before and after the treatment (Table 4).

In order to answer the second research question, the researchers ran a two-way ANOVA to check any probable difference between the obtained results from the three investigated groups.

**Table 2.**  
*Paired Samples T-test for Individual Pre-task Planning*

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest Individual - Pretest Individual	-3.13793	1.05979	.19680	2.73481	3.54105	15.945	28	.000

**Table 3.**  
*Paired Samples T-test for Group Pre-task Planning*

		Paired Samples Test							
		Paired Differences					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest Group - Pretest Group	2.20690	.86103	.15989	1.87938	2.53442	13.803	28	.000

**Table 4.**  
Paired Samples T-test for Control Group

		Paired Samples Test					t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Paired Differences							
		Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Posttest Group – Pretest Group	1.25070	.03403	.12149	1.14538	1.43242	1.213	28	.093

**Table 5.**  
Two-way ANOVA for Individual and Group Pre-task Planning Pretests

Pretest					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.156	2	.578	.186	.831
Within Groups	270.633	87	3.111		
Total	271.789	89			

According to Table 5, there was not any significant difference between the obtained scores of the three groups in pretest, which lent support to the homogeneity of the participants ( $p < .05$ ). This means that the three groups were at the same level of proficiency at the beginning of the study. However, the within-subjects factor in Table 6 indicated the difference between individual and group scores of post-test. The significance value reported for this factor was .00, which was smaller than the standard .05 level, indicating a significant difference between the participants' performance in the post-test. The size of this effect was large as the value of the Partial Eta Squared was .80 because as Pallent (2005)

stated, the Partial Eta Squared is small if it is .01, moderate if it is .06, and it is considered large if it is above .06.

According to Table 6, there was a significant difference ( $p < .05$ ) between the post-tests of individual and group pretask planning groups. The size of this effect was large as the value of the Partial Eta Squared was .68.

As the results showed, the participants in the individual pre-task planning group outperformed the ones in group pre-task planning. Accordingly, the second null hypothesis of the study is rejected. The significance value in all groups was bigger than alpha ( $p > .05$ ), and consequently, none of them was significant (Table 7).

**Table 6.**  
Two-way ANOVA for Individual and Group Pre-task Planning Post-tests

ANOVA					
post-test					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	98.956	2	49.478	17.205	.000
Within Groups	250.200	87	2.876		
Total	349.156	89			

**Table 7.**  
Multiple Comparisons of Post-tests

Multiple Comparisons						
Dependent variable: posttest						
Tukey HSD						
(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Individual	Group	1.20000*	.43786	.020	.1559	2.2441
	Control	2.56667*	.43786	.000	1.5226	3.6107
Group	Individual	-1.20000*	.43786	.020	-2.2441	-.1559
	Control	1.36667*	.43786	.007	.3226	2.4107
Control	Individual	-2.56667*	.43786	.000	-3.6107	-1.5226
	Group	-1.36667*	.43786	.007	-2.4107	-.3226

\* $p < .05$ .

#### 4. Discussion

Speaking competence plays a critical role in learning and understanding any language. Therefore, educators and teachers attempt to use different methods to improve students' speaking skill in the learning processes. Different teaching and classroom techniques have been the subjects

of many research studies to discover which kinds are the most useful for students as far as arranging them for a useful and triumphant life through their education.

Students' speaking ability is an interactive procedure of creating meaning that engages in producing, receiving and processing information (Burns & Joyce, 1997; Richards & Renandya, 2002). Consequently, the learners should be

provided with opportunities to learn and practice the language through communicative tasks. Therefore, researchers, such as Coles and Quirke (2001), consider various tasks and ways to overcome the learners' barriers to learning. Task-based teaching can effectively address some of the challenges faced by learners in the language learning process, by providing them with authentic opportunities to practice and use the language in meaningful contexts (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Warrican (2006) stated that tasks as support processors could be employed to observe the responses of students and teachers and language learning results.

Therefore, the current study was motivated to examine the effect of employing pre-task planning on Iranian EFL students' speaking accuracy. To gain the purpose, two experimental and control groups were considered to examine the study questions. The oral tests at the first and end of the semester were administered to examine students' progress during the term. The teacher employed individual and group task planning in the experimental groups. As the results indicated, the learners were more successful in the individual task group and outperformed those in the group task planning group.

The present research aimed to investigate the effect of pre-task planning on the speaking accuracy of EFL learners. The results of quantitative data analysis showed the effect of the independent variable, i.e., pre-task planning with regard to individual and group form, on the dependent variable, i.e., speaking accuracy. The result echoed earlier findings in the literature (e.g., Sangarun, 2001; Soleimani et al., 2014). The better performance of the learners in the experimental group indicates the effectiveness of the pre-task planning. Moreover, speaking proficiency of the experimental group differed from that of the control group. Similarly, research conducted by Sangarun (2001) revealed that pre-task planning has the potential to improve EFL learners' speech performance. Gaillard (2013) also investigated the effects of pre-planning on students' performance during speaking tasks, and after studying the effect of pre-speaking planning on the accuracy of students, he reported the positive impact of teacher-led planning on accuracy. Gillard (2013) also mentions that Thompson's approach to teacher-led planning also resulted in helping students produce more accurate speech. It is in line with a study by Birjandi and Alipour (2010), in which they also concluded that pre-task planning could significantly improve learners' speaking performance. This finding of the research is in contrast with that of Qin (2015), revealing that the participants' language fluency, complexity, and accuracy improved when planning was performed in pairs. Qin (2015) also mentioned that researchers disagree on whether pre-task planning can improve language accuracy.

## 5. Conclusion

The findings of this study verified the importance of using pre-task planning as an effective way to achieve a good command of speaking skill. In other words, the data

generated in this study suggest that implementing pre-task planning prior to speaking for EFL learners would improve their speaking skill. However, it cannot be ignored that there were several limitations to the present study. First and foremost, the amount of time given to the number of students in each class was not considered, and students' efforts could not be accomplished in qualitative grades. Second, age and gender, which were left untouched in the present study, could be dealt with in further research to see if they affect students, speaking accuracy.

Acknowledging the importance and effectiveness of these kinds of planning before teaching is not sufficient. What has to be done is to incorporate them theoretically and practically. Future studies can take variables, such as grammatical and lexical accuracy and fluency of learners and the influence of pre-task planning on them into account, which may contribute to the field of task-based language teaching. Other studies can focus on the study of L2 task-based strategies and the results when the learner faces various types of pre-tasks. Such studies would help develop a more comprehensive model of applying tasks and pre-tasks in the classroom. Furthermore, the effect of pre-task planning on other language skills, rather than speaking, can be an insightful resource for further studies in this field. Moreover, fluency and complexity of learners' speaking were two aspects of language production, and the effects of pre-task planning on them were not taken into account as the main factors of this study and can be investigated in further research in this field.

## Declarations

### Competing interests

None.

### Funding

The authors were not supported financially by any institution to conduct this research.

### Authors' contribution

Behrooz Ghoorchaei designed and supervised the study. Ashour Farde Davaji performed the study, data collection, and data analysis. Both authors read and approved the final draft of the manuscript.

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