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## The Effect of Planning on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Mastery of Writing Skill

Sara Mirazi  
Asgar Mahmoudi

*Department of English language and teaching, Ahar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ahar, Iran*  
*Department of English language and teaching, Ardabil Branch, Islamic Azad University, Ardabil, Iran*

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### Abstract

This study was concerned with Iranian intermediate EFL learners' writing. Since writing mastery is a difficult task for EFL learners to accomplish, the present research investigated if both individual and collaborative planning can facilitate students' mastery of this important skill. The study was also interested in finding out if any particular component of writing (*content, organization, vocabulary use, language use, mechanics*) was affected differently from other components. Using a quasi-experimental design, two homogenized groups, each with 26 students all having the same first language, underwent 8 treatment sessions. The results of the Paired-samples T-tests revealed that both planning types were effective in improving the learners' writing performance. Moreover, running a Multivariate Analysis of Variance revealed that all four components of writings were affected with content of the writings being affected more positively. Findings of the study highlight the significance of planning before writing tasks. These findings could be beneficial for EFL teachers and learners alike.

**Keywords:** writing skill, collaborative planning, individual planning, writing components

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### 1. Introduction

Up to the end of 1960s, writing skill was considered as secondary to speech and reinforcement to learning vocabulary and grammatical knowledge. Definitely, it was a "vehicle for language practice" (Silva, 1990). Nevertheless, due to scientific improvements, writing gradually turned to be synonymous with composing, and the process of composition began to gain importance. In order to improve learners' writing skill, models emerged to provide teachers with a theory about how to teach this neglected skill. The presented models involved three basic systems: Formulation,

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Execution and Monitoring. According to Kellogg's (1996) model each system has two processes. Formulation involves planning and translation; execution involves programming and executing; and monitoring involves reading and editing. As a result of such models, learners could be active and able to generate thoughts and ideas.

By the emergence of new trends in language learning, writing skill witnessed a great shift from the strictly product-focused concerns of correctness in grammar, usage, and mechanics to more process-focused concerns. As a process, writing is a meaningful activity for thinking and problem-solving and involves organizing and expressing one's thoughts, generating ideas, brainstorming, revision, and editing.

Bell and Burnaby (1984) point out that writing is an extremely complex cognitive activity in which the writer is required to demonstrate the control of a number of variables simultaneously. At the sentence level, these include control of content, format, sentence structure, vocabulary, punctuation, and spelling. Beyond the sentence, the writer must be able to structure and integrate information into cohesive and coherent paragraphs and texts. It seems that writing is so intricate and difficult that even many native speakers of English never truly master it (Celce Murcia & McIntosh, 1979).

Consequently, the majority of learners consider writing as boring and are quite reluctant to produce written texts. In Iran, this skill should receive more attention because it is a key element in giving and receiving information in a foreign language and the written output measures learners' ability in an academic environment in which they should present their ideas through clear and well-organized texts. So, as a main activity in language classes, planning time to design the content and outline of a written text seems essential.

Ellis (2005) states that planning influences the linguistic form in speech. In order to attend to form and meaning equally, Willis (1991) suggests the pre-, mid- and post-task activities within task-based approaches to instruction. These kinds of tasks provide opportunities to achieve particular instructional goals. Some task choices, in other words, may be more effective than others in terms of targeted pedagogic outcomes.

Planning is one of the task choices that can affect the quality of written assignments. There are three general types of planning: planning before or during writing, macro and micro planning, and planning individually or collaboratively. The last type of planning is the focus of this article. Unlike individual planning, collaborative planning supports group-based methods in instructional settings. Based on the studies in the field, although positive effects have been found for individual planning, collaborative planning consistently improves achievement and retention, creates more positive relationships among students and promotes students psychological health and self-esteem (Johnson & Johnson, 1992).

In all types of writing, it is useful for students to identify one main idea and some major points to support that idea, to plan how to organize the writing, and to develop the text through using reasons, examples, and details. Also they need to express information in an organized manner, to use effective

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linking words to connect ideas, and help the reader to understand the flow of ideas by using a range of grammatical elements and lexical items for effective expression. All the elements should be integrated in order to create an acceptable written output.

The above paragraph states the tenets of the approach that views text features analytically and is the basis of the scoring method suggested by Jacobs et al. (1981) called ESL Composition Profile. In this scoring procedure, writing components are summarized as content, organization, discourse, syntax, vocabulary, and punctuation. Analytic scoring measures learners' performance on each component and helps the writer to find his/her knowledge gap properly.

Two research questions were investigated in this paper:

1. Does planning have any effect on EFL learners' writing ability?
2. Which component of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) is affected most by planning time?

The two null hypothesis below were driven from the above research questions:

**H0<sub>1</sub>**. Planning does not have any effect on EFL learners' writing ability.

**H0<sub>2</sub>**. Planning time does not affect writing components (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) differentially.

## 2. Literature Review

Pre-task planning enables learners to encounter the main outline of the task so that they can go about the complete task. It provides learners with an opportunity to perform the task before the main performance. Within a task, planning can be manipulated according to the time available to do the task in which learners engage in rapid planning (Ochs, 1979). In the context of speaking, Yuan and Ellis (2003) introduced two new types of planning in the literature: macro-planning that is manageable and productive, and micro-planning that is detailed. These strategic planning times provide learners with access to more information and increase the complexity in their speech.

Planning engages students in implicit acquisitional processes. It is believed that providing learners with greater planning opportunities might have beneficial effects on their course of language development, since a planned second language discourse could push learners to extend what they are capable of doing with language (Foster & Skehan, 1999).

Recently there have been suggestions in the literature to include the concept of collaboration which can be productive. It may lead to more effective consideration of form-meaning relationship as different viewpoints cross-fertilize each other and planning time is used more effectively.

According to Foster and Skehan (1999), in collaborative planning with the group-based condition, it is argued by the advocates of teacher-led planning that negotiation between group members and an agreement as to how best to proceed may reduce the amount of time that is needed but lead to

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generally lower performance and finally least efficiency. Teacher control might be an efficient instrument for focusing on relevant items of the task.

Strategies which follow planning typically involve focused and unfocused instructions to students to plan their performance during the task. Foster and Skehan (1996) explored the influence of planning on different variables such as personal performance and narrative and decision-making tasks. They reported that planning without guidance produced greater complexity and fluency of language. They also reported that the guided planning condition produced greater complexity than the unguided planning, and slightly greater fluency. They hypothesized that when planning is not guided, learners use preparation time to rehearse language, in contrast, the guided planners intensify the complexity of the task and sometimes the accuracy gets less attention (Foster & Skehan, 1996).

Considering the theoretical perspective behind collaborative learning, the theory dates back to the social constructivist view of Vygotsky (1978) stating that children learn by interacting with adults or more capable peers who scaffold or mediate learning so that they are able to complete tasks they could not do alone. Webb and Farivar (1994) observed that some children are often more aware of what other children do not understand, so by helping them to focus on the relevant features of the problem, they often can explain it to them in a way that can be readily understood. Moreover, as children interact with each other, they find opportunities to model thinking, reasoning and problem solving skills of each other, receive feedback, and as a result, socially construct new understandings, knowledge and skills (King, 1999, as cited in Gillies & Ashman, 2003). Similar results were found in the study done by Foster and Ohta (2005) who demonstrated that language development is not limited to the interactive processes but includes strategies such as negotiation of meaning, co-construction, other-correction, and continuers. When learners work in groups or pairs, they are more likely to use the L2 for a range of functions normally reserved for the teacher, such as making suggestions, asking questions and providing feedback. Thus, group and pair work may provide learners with an improved quantity and quality of L2 practice. Therefore, assigning learners to work in groups provides more opportunity to practice L2 (Ohta, 2001).

Kowal and Swain (1994), who worked with both similar and mixed L2 proficiency pairs, suggested that pairing students of different proficiency may result in the more proficient learner dominating the interaction, particularly when the proficiency difference between members of the pair is large. This suggests that mixed proficiency pairing may disadvantage the lower proficiency participant. Along the same lines, Storch (2013) highlights the effect of collaborative work and suggests that pairing students of mixed L2 proficiency may benefit both learners, but only if the learners work collaboratively. In a previous study, Storch (2005) had investigated collaborative writing in a classroom-based setting. Students were given a choice to write in pairs or individually. The study compared texts produced by pairs with those produced by individual learners and investigated the nature of the writing processes evident in the pair talk. The study also elicited the learners' reflections on the experience of collaborative writing. The study found that pairs produced shorter

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but better texts in terms of task fulfilment, grammatical accuracy, and complexity. According to the interviews from this study, most students were positive about the experience.

In 1981, Johnson and colleagues examined the benefits of cooperative learning in comparison to individual learning. They reviewed 122 studies to examine the effects of co-operative, competitive, and individualistic learning on achievement. The results showed that co-operation promotes higher achievement and productivity (i.e., encouragement to learn) than interpersonal competition or working individually, and that these results were consistent across all subject areas (language, arts, reading, mathematics, science, social studies, psychology, physical education), for all age groups (elementary, secondary, college, adult), and for a variety of cognitively challenging tasks.

Many scholars including Madsen (1983) and McCafferty (1992) assert that there are many elements to be considered in writing. These factors include form, content, vocabulary, grammatical accuracy, penmanship, speed, mechanics, relevance, elaboration, originality, dictation, lay out, coherence, cohesion, unity, organization, and logic. In this regard, Madsen (1983) enumerates a number of different components and skills to be tested in writing. For Stern (1992), vocabulary, structure, accuracy, and speed of script writing, spelling, punctuation, content, and organization of material are all elements of writing. Meanwhile, McCafferty (1992) suggests grammar, coherence, relevance, and structure of the argument as the attributes of a written task.

Jacobs et al. (1981), proposed five components for writing. In this regard based on ESL Composition Profile (1981), writing is viewed as a communicative skill with five components namely content, organization, vocabulary, grammar, and mechanics.

Preparing opportunity to focus on the main elements of written texts seems makes students pay attention to grammatical and lexical structures and try to include the main components in any kind of writing. Therefore, planning time to organize an essay first, as a distinctive step in the writing process, is an important part. Planning provides an opportunity to review writing elements and take the efficient linguistic knowledge. Directing students at the earlier stage helps them attend to specific points at the later stage.

Scott (1995, p. 139) argues that "teaching foreign language writing is essential at all levels of language study" if students are to succeed in managing the time and focusing on content, organization, language use, vocabulary, and mechanics as the main components.

In general, there are four major methods of scoring in writing assessment. These methods as studied by Bailey (1984) are:

- 1) Holistic scoring
- 2) Analytic method
- 3) Primary trait scoring
- 4) Frequency count method

Brown (2001) defined holistic scoring as "an approach in which the teachers use a single general scale to give a single rating for each student's language production" (p. 61). The holistic scoring of a written text provides situations that students will not be aware of their knowledge gap. In contrast,

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in analytic scoring each component of the writing is scored according to a descriptor designed for that purpose. In primary trait scoring, each text is scored based on one trait that is considered to be primary such as persuading. Frequency count is but based on determining word frequency. Taking all these scales into account it seems that, the analysis of each feature in a text can help students to be more aware of their lacks in writing. Therefore, the analytic rubric of Jacobs et al. (1981) was used in the rating stage of the present study which examined the writing performance of Persian speakers learning English language. According to this scale, each paper is rated on the writing components including *content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics* out of 100 (Content 30 points, Organization 20 points, Syntax 25 points, Vocabulary 20 points, Mechanics 5 points).

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Participants

The present study was conducted on 52 Iranian university students (26 males and 26 females) with the same mother tongue and an age range of 20 to 25 years old. Prior to taking part in the study, all participants had studied English for several years at different schools and had completed two or more English conversation books in private language schools.

#### 3.2. Instruments

A simplified version of a proficiency test—taken from Top Notch/Summit Placement Test A (Saslow & Asher, 2006)—consisting of listening, reading, vocabulary, and grammar sections was prepared. The listening section was the first section and contained two conversation passages with a few multiple-choice and other comprehension check questions. The reading section included one reading passage with eight true/false questions. The other two parts were intended to test the students' general knowledge of vocabulary and grammar through items of mixed difficulty. The reliability of the test had already been established by applying to a similar group of students and statistical analysis of the results and the test was considered to be valid, because, in addition to its reliability, the items were all directed at measuring students' general English proficiency.

Other materials included some writing topics for pretest, posttest and the treatment sessions which were taken from the book '*How to Prepare for the TOEFL Essay*' Edited by Abbas Zahedi (2002).

#### 3.3. Data Collection Procedure

Out of 190 randomly chosen students who took the placement test, 52 intermediate students were included in the study. These students were randomly divided into two groups each with 26 members of both genders. After dividing the participants into two mixed groups, the groups were further

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subdivided into two male and female groups each. That is, there were four groups, two male groups and two female groups each with 13 students. Then, the pretest for writing was administered. In the pretest, the students were given two topics and asked to write a text of about 100 to 150 words about one of them. In order to assure the homogeneity of the groups in terms of writing ability, the statistical test of One-way ANOVA was conducted on the pretest scores. The result of the Levene's Equality of Error Variance test revealed that there was no significant difference across the four groups ( $P=.071>.05$ ,  $df=3, 48$ ,  $F=2.490$ ).

After these preliminary stages, eight treatment sessions were held in each group. In each gender category, students in one group worked individually and in the other collaboratively, that is, they were paired up. In the collaborative groups, the students chose their own partners and had the opportunity of cooperative planning throughout the treatment sessions and during the posttest. However, after planning, each learner wrote about the topic individually.

### 3.4. Treatment Sessions and Scoring Procedure

During the treatment sessions, a topic was given to the students and they were asked to plan (one male and one female groups individually, and the other two groups in pairs) and produce a 100- to 150-word text about it. The treatments included comprehensive information about the components of ESL composition including *content*, *organization*, *vocabulary use*, *language use*, and *mechanics*. Then, the teacher provided the learners with analytic feedback about each of the components every session. Each written text was assessed on each of these multiple dimensions by some qualitative criteria from *Excellent* to *Very Poor*. In this way, the learners had the chance to know about their strengths and weaknesses.

In addition to actual writing during the first four treatment sessions, learners were also taught about the structure of topic sentence, supporting sentences, paragraph unity, different kinds of paragraphs (description, cause & effect, argumentation, and comparison & contrast) and the required expressions for each of these paragraph types.

During the two following sessions the students were taught on how to appropriately use mechanics including indentation, capitalization, comma, semicolon, etc. Finally, in the last two sessions, the learners were provided with some useful grammatical information, as well as word formation, and appropriate formulaic expressions.

Since assessing written texts in terms of quantitative results needs precision, scoring the participants' written productions in this study was done on the basis of Jacobs et al.'s (1981) scoring profile. According to this assessment profile, each text is scored out of 100. This analytic scoring measures learners' performance on each of the five components of writing including *content*, *organization*, *vocabulary use*, *language use*, and *mechanics*. The maximum score assigned to each component based on Jacobs et al.'s descriptor is as the following: Content 30 points, Organization 20 points, Language use 25 points, Vocabulary use 20 points, and finally Mechanics 5 points.

#### 4. Data Analysis

To investigate the effects of the treatments, some statistical analyses were performed. First of all, the normality of scores in pretest, which is an important assumption of parametric tests, was checked by running a 1-sample K-S test. The following table shows the results of this test for all four groups.

Table 1.  
*Tests of Normality of Scores' Distributions at Pretest*

	One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test			
	male individual pretest	male collaborative pretest	female individuals pretest	female collaborative pretest
N	13	13	13	13
Test Statistic	.135	.118	.133	.215
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.200 <sup>c,d</sup>	.200 <sup>c,d</sup>	.200 <sup>c,d</sup>	.102 <sup>c</sup>

a. Test distribution is Normal.

Then, a One-way ANOVA accompanied by a Levene's homogeneity test was run. The purposes of running these tests were to first ascertain that the mean scores of the groups were not substantially different from each other and second to make sure that the participants were almost at the same level of proficiency before the beginning of the study.

Table 2  
*ANOVA Test Run on Pretest Scores*

pretest scores					
	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	961.135	3	320.378	2.490	.071
Within Groups	6175.846	48	128.663		
Total	7136.981	51			



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The ANOVA test conducted on the pretest scores showed no significant difference among the groups' pretest scores at  $P=.07 > .05$  level. The accompanying Levene's test of equality of error variances or the homogeneity test also revealed that the groups of this study were comparable with each other, since the *Sig* value calculated, as represented in Table 3, was larger than .05.

Table 3  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Variances*

Levene's Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
.554	3	48	.648

One of the main objectives of this study was to see if planning had any effect on the participating EFL learners' writing ability. To test the related hypothesis, the participants' posttest scores were also entered into the statistical program and Paired-samples T-tests were run. The purpose of these tests was to compare groups' pretest and posttest means. The results of these tests are given in Table 4 below. The *Sig.* values in Table 4 clearly show significant differences between the pretest and posttest scores of the all four groups at  $P < 0.001$  level. In other words, there had been statistically significant increases in the participants' scores from the pretests to the posttests as a result of treatment. To understand about the strength of the differences between the pretest and posttest results, it was also necessary to calculate the effect sizes. The formula for the effect size calculation for paired-samples T-tests is  $t^2/t^2 + (N-1)$ . The calculated effect sizes for the groups in this study using information from Table 4 are given below the same Table. As can be seen, the strength of the differences in individual planning situations both for male and female students are slightly higher than the strength of the differences in collaborative groups but in both conditions the differences are very strong according to Cohen's (1988) criteria for interpreting effect sizes.

Table 4  
*Paired-samples T-tests Showing Groups Progress from Pretest to Posttest Paired Samples t-test*

		Paired Differences			t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference Lower Upper			
Pair 1	male individual pretest -- male individual posttest	6.62745	17.61538	-21.62031 -13.61046	-9.583	12	.000

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Pair 2	male collaborative pretest --	10.05689	-25.23116	-13.07653	-6.867	12	.000
	male collaborative posttest	19.15385					
Pair 3	female individuals pretest --	8.49887	-24.44351	-14.17188	-8.191	12	.000
	female individual posttest	19.30769					
Pair 4	female collaborative- pretest - female	7.50385	-19.68837	-10.61932	-7.281	12	.000
	collaborative posttest	15.15385					

Effect size for male individual planning group:  $91.78/91.78 + (14) = .87$

Effect size for male collaborative planning group:  $47.61/47.61 + (14) = .77$

Effect size for female individual planning group:  $67.24/67.24 + (14) = .83$

Effect size for female collaborative planning group:  $53/53 + (14) = .79$

Another purpose of this study was to see which component of writing was affected more by planning time or whether they were affected differently at all. It should be noted that during the treatment sessions some detailed data were collected from the participants in terms of their performance on different components or aspects of writing. These aspects included content, organization, vocabulary, and language use. Tables 5 and 6, that is, Multivariate Tests and Tests of Between-Subjects Effects show the results of a One-way MANOVA which was used to investigate this hypothesis. Needless to say that all assumptions of MANOVA were met even though they are not reported here for space limitation.

Table 5  
*Difference between Groups on a Linear Combination of Dependent Variables*

		Multivariate Tests <sup>a</sup>				
Effect		Value	Hypothesis			Sig.
			F	df	Error df	
Planning Type	Pillai's Trace	.254	4.008	4.000	47.000	.007
			b			
	Wilks' Lambda	.746	4.008	4.000	47.000	.007
			b			
	Hotelling's Trace	.341	4.008	4.000	47.000	.007
			b			
	Roy's Largest Root	.341	4.008	4.000	47.000	.007
			b			

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Table 6  
*Tests of Between-Subjects Effects*

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Planning Type	content	99.692	1	99.692	15.359	.000	.235
	organization	6.942	1	6.942	6.958	.011	.122
	vocabulary	3.769	1	3.769	9.280	.004	.157
	language use	23.558	1	23.558	9.311	.004	.157

According to the results in Table 5, there had indeed been an effect for planning. But, it is clear only from Table 6 that content had been affected the most followed by language use, vocabulary, and organization. These comparisons can be made by looking at *F*, *Sig*, and *Partial Eta Squared* values in the relevant columns in Table 6. The results, therefore, force us to reject the second null hypothesis of the study which had assumed no difference in the effect of planning time on writing components.

### 5. Discussions and Conclusion

The present study was performed in order to find out if planning has any effect on EFL learners' writing ability, as well as to see which component of writing (content, organization, vocabulary, language use) is affected most by planning time.

The results of the analysis showed a significant difference between pre and posttest scores which meant planning had had positive effects on EFL learners' writing performance. This suggests that planning before a writing activity is effective in leading learners to produce linguistically more accurate and appropriate texts. These results are in line with the previous studies (e.g., Foster and Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Storch, 2005; Ojima, 2006) which report benefits for planning. The findings of the study but contradict some of the previous studies (e.g., Nixon, 2007; Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009; Elola & Oskoz, 2010) which report more effect for collaborative planning in comparison with individual planning. In general, the findings of the study revealed that through planning EFL learners are able to create more organized texts with better content, grammatical accuracy, vocabulary, and organization regardless of what type of planning they are involved in.

Concerning second hypothesis of the study, it is said that when learners are allowed to plan, they choose to focus on meaning and plan *what* they want to say rather than plan grammatical forms (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Gilabert, 2005; Ortega, 1999; Wigglesworth, 1997). Even though the grammatical accuracy of the students in this study was improved, the most highly affected aspect of their writing was content which is in a way in conformity with the findings of these studies. In brief, in the present study all planners improved a lot in going through the writing tasks. More specifically, they tended to focus on meaning and planned the content of their writings more than any other component. Because of the lack of control groups no comparison was made between planners and non-planners. However, from the very strong effect sizes, it can be speculated that planners would perform better than non-planners. This, of course, needs empirical proof.

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تکمیلی دانشگاه‌های عضو اتحادیه قفقاز

دانشگاه محقق اردبیلی

16-17 خردادماه

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16-17 خردادماه

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