

The Role of Planning Time in Foreign Language Narrative Written Production: Focusing on Accuracy

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Abstract

The present study was an attempt to investigate the effects of two types of task planning on foreign language narrative written production. Particularly it addressed the issue of how accuracy vary among two different types of task planning (i.e. pre-task strategic planning condition & unpressured within-task planning condition). The participants were 45 EFL university students majoring the English translation. The participants were randomly assigned into three groups. In the strategic planning group, the participants were given ten minutes to plan in advance but they were asked to complete the task within a limited time. In the unpressured within-task planning group, the participants were asked to write down their text immediately but no time limit was allotted to this group. In the no-planning group, participants were asked to perform the main task performance immediately within a limited time, so, they were given a zero-planning time. The results of statistical analysis showed that both strategic planning and unpressured within-task planning have statistically significance effect on accuracy of foreign language narrative written production; however, no significant difference was evident between the performances of the two groups in terms of accuracy.

Keywords: task, planning, writing performance, accuracy.

1. Introduction

Tasks have a central place in L2 research and also in language pedagogy. In recent years there have seen an enormous growth of interest in task-based language learning and teaching which is because of the fact that task is seen as a construct of equal importance to SLA researchers and to language teachers. Task is both a means of clinically eliciting samples of learner language for purposes of research and a device for organizing the content and methodology of language teaching (Ellis, 2000). Tasks came into widespread use in school education in the 1970s (Kasap, 2005). So TBLT received more attention from the point of view of SLA researcher's, curriculum developers, educationalists, teacher trainers and language teachers worldwide (Van den Branden, 2006). Planning, as one of several processes involved in the written production, has been considered an important process in SLA, therefore the role that planning plays in writing should be taken into account in relation to the other composing processes such as monitoring, revising, and evaluating Piri, Barati and Ketabi (2012).

Language learning entails both conscious and unconscious acquisition of not only receptive skills such as listening and reading but also productive skills such as speaking and writing. These skills must be well integrated within the course syllabus in order to enable the learners to have a good command of the target language. Task-based writing activities may prove to be a good means of integrating the four skills and foster effective language learning because

such activities are done with the purpose of producing something, reaching a conclusion and/or creating a whole picture of something within a pre-set frame. Although such activities are done in order to improve the learners writing skill, they are expected to help improve the other skills, as well (Tilfarlioglu and Basaran, 2007).

2. Literature Review

2.1 Planning

Planning is an inseparable part of all spoken and written language use. That is, all speakers and writers have to decide what to say and write and how to do it (Ellis, 2005, p. 3). There are a number of different types of planning and these are discussed and operationalized by Ellis (2009). According to him, a basic distinction is drawn between *pre-task* and *within-task planning* (also called online planning). These are distinguished based on when the planning takes place either before the task itself or during the performance of the task. The former is further divided into *rehearsal* or *strategic planning*. In rehearsal planning learners are provided with an opportunity to perform the task before the main performance. So, learners are given an opportunity to repeat a task. In strategic planning, learners prepare the task while they will need to encode the content and how to express this content. The latter is further divided into also take two forms. It can be *pressured* (i.e. learners are required to perform the task rapidly by specifying a time limit) or *unpressured* (i.e. they are given an unlimited amount of time to perform the task). According to Bagheridouost and Allahyari Fakoor (2013) in an unpressured planning, students can have a careful planning of their task with no time restriction, and they are provided with enough time to plan on-line, while in a pressured one students should perform the task during a restricted time rapidly without any prior preparation.

3. Method

3.1 Research Question and hypothesis

Q1. Which type of task planning (strategic and unpressured within-task) leads to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing?

Ho1. The strategic task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing.

Ho2. The unpressured within-task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing.

3.2 Participants

The participants of the study were 45 BA learners (32 females and 13 males) who were studying [English translation at Islamic Azad University of Karaj](#), Iran. They were selected from a pool of 68 learners. They were between the ages of 20 and 27 years. They had passed their writing course in English prior to conducting the study. They were from Persian language background. Also, to ensure that the participants' English language experience are equal, they were required to fill in a questionnaire about the number of terms they had passed at university, the score of their writing course, and their total average score. It was supposed that they would provide us with reliable information. The data obtained from the questionnaires showed that there were no significant differences between 45 participants in terms of the number of terms

they had passed at university, the score of their writing course, and their total average score. Also, to add to the validity of the study and to ensure the homogeneity of these 45 participants, a reliable pre-test of TOEFL iBT was given to them. One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the proficiency scores in the three groups. The results of ANOVA proved that the students of the three intact groups (strategic task, within-task, and control) were homogeneous advanced students regarding English language proficiency. The finding of this test helped the researcher to ensure about participant's homogeneity and their proficiency level. Then participants were randomly distributed in three groups. The number of participants in strategic group was 15 of which 11 were females and 4 were males and the number of participants in unpressured within-task group was 15, 8 females and 7 males. There were 15 participants in control group, 13 females and 2 males.

3.3 Materials

As was mentioned above, a version of TOEFL test developed for non-native speakers of English was used as the first instrument to ensure the homogeneity among the participants. The second instrument, the writing task, the task material employed in this study (See Appendix A) was a narrative based on pictures from Heaton (2006, p.157). Participant were asked to complete the writing task under one of the three conditions (pre-task planning condition and unpressured within-task planning condition and no planning condition).

In order to justify the length of time during which participants are required to perform the task, a pilot study involving similar participants had been carried out. Based on the results of this pilot study it was found that 15 minutes was the fastest time for completing the task. This time was given to complete the task in the main study to participants in strategic planning condition and no-planning condition to avoid within-task planning on the part of the participants.

In the present study 10 minutes planning time was provided to the participants prior to performing the main task in strategic planning condition. The choice of 10 minutes planning time was based on the pilot study that was conducted with a similar number of participants before the main task. Also with regard to the planning time, however, previous studies (e.g. Foster and Skehan, 1996; Ellis & Yuan, 2004; and Rahimpour and Jahan, 2011) examining the effects of pre-task strategic planning on language production have mostly choose 10 minutes planning time prior to performing the main task. According to Nakakubo (2011) in this type of pre-task planning, learners receive a period of time prior to task performance, during which they deliberate on the information they need to deliver and how to convey it to carry out the task. Strategic planning gets learners involved in thinking about the content and the language they need for the task performance. The planning time in the previous studies varies from one minute to one hour, but in the majority of the studies the learners had a 10 minutes preparation time.

3.4 Variables of the study

a) Independent variables

Planning time and the time of occurrence were the independent factors in this research. There are three planning conditions in the present study: pre-task strategic planning, within-task planning and no-planning condition.

b) Dependent variable

In order to find whether there were any significant differences in the texts written by the learners in pre-task strategic planning, within-task planning groups and no-planning condition, the texts were analyzed based on one dependent variable (accuracy).

Accuracy measure: The number *error-free T-units per T-units*. T-unit is defined as "the main clauses plus subordinate clauses attached to or embedded in them" and error-free T-units are those T-units that contain no grammatical, lexical, or spelling errors (Salami, Alavinia, Hosseini, 2012; Salimi, Dadaspour & Asadollahfam, 2011).

3.5 Procedures

In this study the task condition was operationalized at three levels. These three conditions were: strategic planning condition, unpressured within-task planning condition and no-planning condition.

In pre-task strategic planning group students were given 10 minutes to plan their performance and 15 minutes to perform the task. They were required to produce at least 150 words to reduce opportunities of on-line planning. Following Ellis and Yuan, (2004) no detailed guidance was provided but participants were told to plan their writings in terms of content, organization, and language. At first they were given a sheet of paper to take notes, but were asked not to write the whole text as they would be taken away after 10 minutes. They were asked to plan what they would write during the main writing task on the papers given first. After 10 minutes the papers given first were collected and second papers on which task topic were distributed. Then they were given 15 minutes to write the essays. On the other hand, the participants in unpressured within-task planning group were given papers on which topic was written and they were asked to start writing immediately after receiving the topic to decrease the possibility of pre-task planning. No detailed guidance was given but the students were asked to plan their writing in terms of content, organization, and language. There was no time limit for completing the task; however, they were given no time in advance to plan their task. The participants in this group were not needed to concern for the length of the writing task. So the participants in this planning condition were not provided with pre-task planning time but ample time to plan their writings during their main performance. The start and finish times were recorded in unpressured within-task planning group to make sure that they spent more than 15 minutes (the time allocated to strategic planning group and control group) to write. Unlike the other group the participants were not required to write a minimum of 150 words, as this may have been interpreted as requiring them to write quickly (Rahimpour & Jahan, 2011). The control group was the no-planning condition in which participants were given no time for planning and were asked to write at least 150 words in 15 minutes (see Appendix B).

4. Results

4.1 Testing Assumptions

Five assumptions of interval data, independence of subjects, normality, homogeneity of variances and covariance should be met before one decides to run parametric tests (Field, 2009). The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. Bachman

(2005, p. 236) believes that the assumption of independence of subjects is met when the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individual. The third assumption deals with the normality of the data which is checked through One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test. The normality results, as appeared in Table 1, showed that the probability value associated with the one sets of scores was above .05. So it was concluded that the normality assumption was met.

Table 1

One-Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test of Normality for Proficiency and Accuracy in the Three Groups

Variable	Group	N	M	Kolmogorov-Smirnov Z	Sig.
Proficiency	Strategic task	15	550.87	.535	.967
	Within-task	15	554.33	.379	.999
	Control	15	556.33	.508	.959
Accuracy	Strategic task	15	.484	.662	.773
	Within-task	15	.434	.720	.678
	Control	15	.325	.352	.999

The other assumptions – homogeneity of variances and equality of covariance – will be discussed when reporting the results of the inferential statistics.

4.2 Proficiency Test Results

TOEFL iBt was administered to the three intact groups in order to ensure that the participants are homogeneous regarding language proficiency. One-way ANOVA was conducted to compare the proficiency scores in the three groups. Before discussing the results of ANOVA, the descriptive statistics of TOEFL proficiency means in the three groups were calculated and set forth in Table 2 below. As Table 2 clarifies, the students' performances in strategic task group (M = 550.87, SD = 19.96) are not far from the within-task (M = 554.33, SD = 21.15) and control (M = 556.33, SD = 24.78) groups on proficiency test.

Table 2

Descriptive Statistics of TOEFL Proficiency Means in the Three Groups

Groups	N	M	SD
Strategic task	15	550.87	19.967
Within-task	15	554.33	21.158
Control	15	556.33	24.784
Total	45	553.84	21.678

ANOVA (Table 3) failed to find any statistically significant difference in proficiency scores among the three groups at the $p < .05$ level, $F(2, 44) = .236$, $p = .79$, $p > .05$, in which our p value (.79) was higher than .05, and our F value, .23 was lower than the F critical (3.21); as a

result it was proved that the students of the three intact groups (strategic task, within-task, and control) were homogeneous advanced students regarding English language proficiency.

Table 3
ANOVA for Comparing three Groups' Proficiency Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	229.511	2	114.756	.236	.791
Within Groups	20448.400	42	486.867		
Total	20677.911	44			

Figure 1 below is a line graph that the displays results of TOEFL in the strategic task, within-task, and control groups.

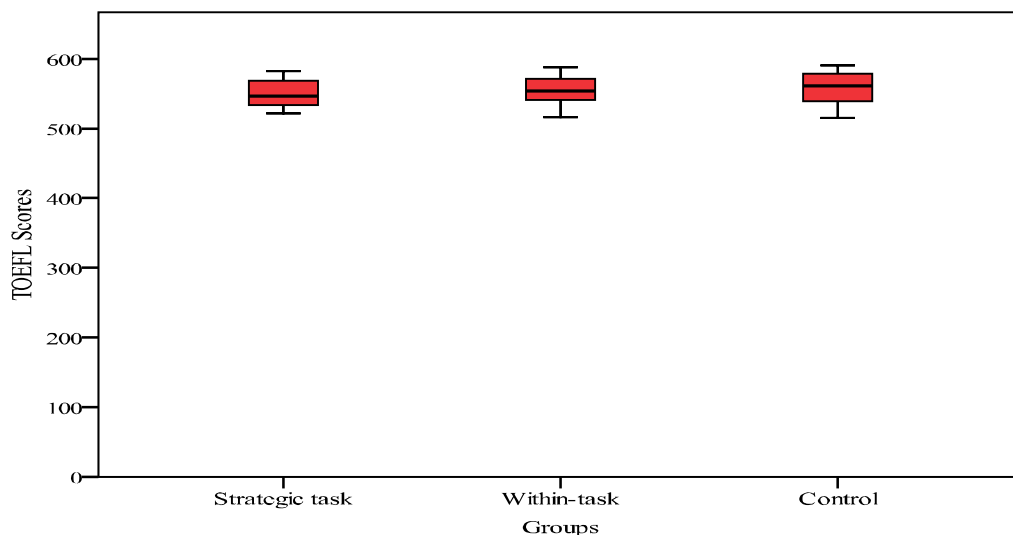


Figure 1. Proficiency results in the three groups

4.3 Investigating the Research Question

The research question of this study asked which type of task planning (strategic and unpressured within-task) leads to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' descriptive writing. In order to answer the research question One-way ANOVA was used. Before discussing the results of this analysis, the descriptive statistics of participants' accuracy scores in the three groups were computed and laid out in Table 4. According to Table 4, the means of strategic task group ($M = .48$, $SD = .08$) was not dramatically greater than the within-task group ($M = .43$, $SD = .08$), and these two groups were significantly more than the control group ($M = .41$, $SD = .10$).

Table 4
Group Statistics of Accuracy Scores in the three Groups

Group	N	M	SD
Strategic task	15	.484	.089
Within-task	15	.434	.082
Control	15	.325	.050
Total	45	.414	.100

The main assumption of ANOVA is homogeneity of variances. So Levene's Test was utilized. As Table 5 displays, the homogeneity of variance assumption has not been violated for the three groups' accuracy scores since the Sig. for Levene's test was .09, which is greater .05.

Table 5
Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Accuracy Scores in the three Groups

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.534	2	42	.091

Table 6 below depicts the results of ANOVA comparing the accuracy scores in the three groups.

Table 6
ANOVA for Comparing three Groups' Accuracy Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	.197	2	.099	16.943	.000
Within Groups	.245	42	.006		
Total	.442	44			

ANOVA results, as shown in Table 6, indicated a statistically significant difference in accuracy scores among the three groups at the $p < .05$ level, $F(2, 42) = 16.94$, $p = .000$, $p < .05$. Fortunately our p value (.000) was less than .05, and our F value, 16.94 was more the F critical (5.15). Figure 2 below is a bar graph that graphically compares the three groups' accuracy means.

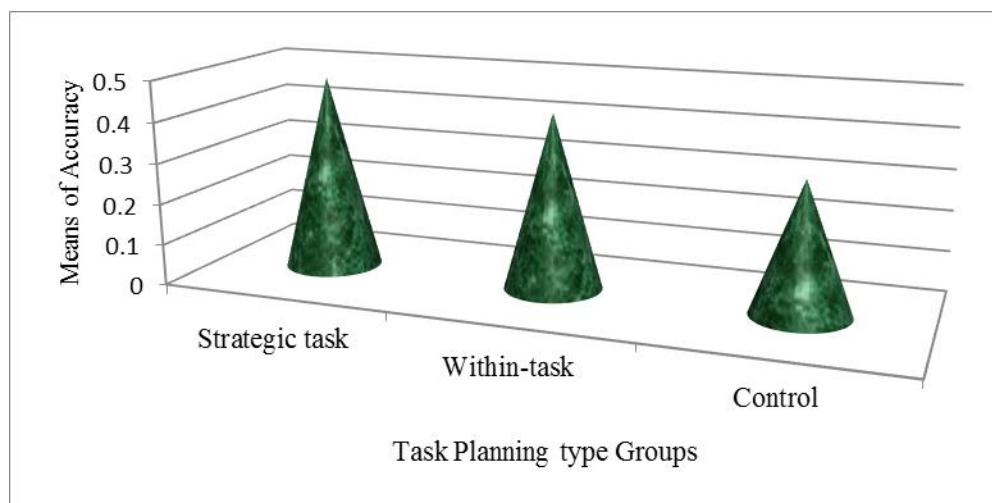


Figure 2. Accuracy means in the three groups

Because ANOVA does not tell us the exact location of the differences among the groups, we run Tukey's HSD, and the related results are provided in Table 7 below.

Table 7
Tukey's HSD post-hoc Tests for Multiple Comparisons of three Groups' Accuracy Scores

(I) Group	(J) Group	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
Strategic task	Within-task	.0500	.02787	.184
	Control	.1587*	.02787	.000
Within-task	Control	.1087*	.02787	.001

Table 7 shows that Tukey's HSD Post-hoc Test discovered a significant difference between the strategic task ($M = .48$) and control ($M = .32$) groups on accuracy, $P = .000$, $P < .05$, with the mean difference of .15; therefore, the first null hypothesis of the present study as 'The strategic task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing' was rejected, and therefore we concluded that the strategic task planning has an effect on accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing.

Equally, Tukey's HSD Post-hoc Test (Table 7) found a significant difference between the within-task ($M = .43$) and control ($M = .32$) groups on accuracy, $P = .001$, $P < .05$, with the mean difference of .10; thus, we were quite safe to reject the second null hypothesis that states 'The unpressured within-task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' narrative writing'. In other words, it was proved that the unpressured within-task planning influences accuracy in Iranian EFL learners' descriptive writing.

Further, Table 7 indicates that there was not any significant difference between the strategic ($M = .48$) and within-task ($M = .43$) groups on accuracy, $P = .18$, $P > .05$, with the mean difference of .05 in favor of the strategic group. In other words, it was found that the strategic

task planning was not more practical than within-task planning in improving accuracy in narrative writing.

5. Discussion

The present study addressed the impact of task planning conditions on the accuracy of task response. Two hypotheses were proposed earlier predicting this impact.

5.1. First hypothesis

The first research hypothesis of this study was “the strategic task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners’ narrative writing.”

The results of the study indicated that pre-task planning impacted the accuracy (i.e. error-free T-units per T-units) of the EFL learner’s written production significantly. Based on this results this hypothesis was rejected.

5.2. Second hypothesis

The second research hypothesis was “the unpressured within-task planning does not lead to accuracy in Iranian EFL learners’ narrative writing.

Results of the present study indicated statistically significant differences between strategic planning group and no-planning group regarding accuracy. Based on these results I was quite safe to reject the second null hypothesis of this study.

The results of this study provided support to previous studies which showed strategic planning and within-task planning significantly facilitates accuracy in L2 written production. The studies performed by Ellis and Yuan (2004); Rouhi, and Marefat (2006); Rahimpour and Jahan (2011); and Salimi, Alavinia, and Hosseini (2012); Salimi, Alavinia, Hosseini and Shafaei (2012); Bagheridoust and Allahyari Fakoor (2013); Ghavamnia, Tavakoli and Esteki (2013); Haghverdi, Biria and Khalaji (2013) all report that providing learners with an opportunity to plan before and while task performance can have beneficial impacts on accuracy.

6. Conclusion

This study attempted to investigate the effects of planning time in foreign language narrative written production in terms of accuracy. In the present study, statistically significant differences were found between strategic planning group and no planning group and between unpressured within-task planning group and no planning group regarding accuracy. Also there was not statistically significant difference between learners’ performance in strategic planning group and unpressured within-task planning group. So, the findings of this study showed that planning influenced the accuracy of the narrative writing of language learners. It means that having an opportunity to plan in advance and while learners task performance resulted in more accurate performance for participants compared to those in no planning group. Planning in the L2 writing process enabled learners to lower their cognitive load during task completion and to yield high quality writing with regard to their scores (Haghverdi, Biria & Khalaji, 2013).

7. Implications

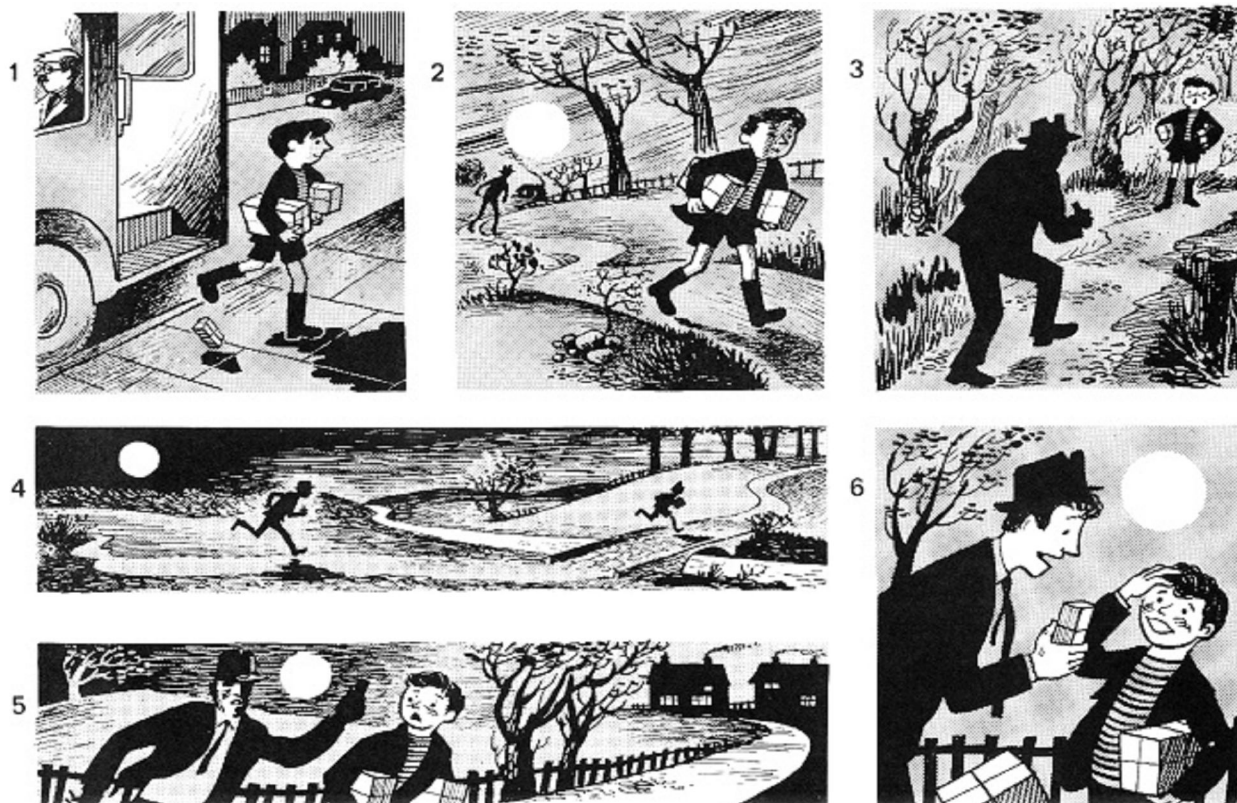
Finding of the present study may have implication for material developers, language teachers in their practices in teaching, learners. As Rahimpour and Safarie (2011) mentioned planning is considered as one of the task implementation factors that can be manipulated by giving chance or not providing time for planning, offering different types of planning to the learners in task performance, and providing learners with various lengths of planning time. Also these findings may also add to the present literature in SLA theory, language testing, syllabus design, and material development.

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Appendix A: Picture adopted from Heaton (2006, p.157)



Appendix B: Instructions given to the participants in each group

Pre-task Planning

You have just seen a set of pictures. These pictures tell us a story. Please write a story in English based on the pictures for people who have never seen the pictures and are interested to learn about it from you. So please write it in as much detail as you can. Before you begin writing, you will be given ten minutes to prepare for your story. To assist you to prepare, you are given a sheet of paper and a pencil. Use it to write down notes, but please do not write a complete sentence in Persian or English. During the ten minute time, try to think of the vocabulary and grammar you may use and the sequence of the events in the story. When you begin writing the story, the sheet of paper will be taken away. Then you will be given 15 minutes to complete writing the story. In addition, you are required to write at least 150 words during this period of time. You can begin with a sentence like this "This evening, Andy....."

On-line Planning

You have just seen a set of pictures. These pictures tell us a story. Please write a story in English based on the pictures for people who have never seen the pictures and are interested to learn about it from you. So please write it in as much detail as you can. While writing the story, try to think of the vocabulary and grammar you may use and the sequence of the events in the story. You can take as long time as you need to complete the story and correct mistakes as many times as necessary. You can also write as many words as you can. You can begin with a sentence like this "This evening, Andy....."

No- Planning

You have just seen a set of pictures. These pictures tell us a story. Please write a story in English based on the pictures for people who have never seen the pictures and are interested to learn about it from you. So please write it in as much detail as you can. You will be given 15 minutes to complete writing the story. In addition, you are required to write at least 150 words during this period of time. You can begin with a sentence like this "This evening, Andy....."

APPENDIX C: Raw scores on TOEFL and accuracy

Raw Scores on TOEFL and Accuracy

N	TOEFL			Accuracy		
	Strategic	Within	Control	Strategic	Within	Control
1	522	516	515	14.32	14.51	10.02
2	528	525	518	13.08	15.06	13.03
3	530	537	525	19.93	16.19	13.59
4	533	539	537	14.33	15.36	11.19
5	534	544	541	16.41	13.58	10.63
6	539	545	550	14.56	14.33	10.41
7	542	549	556	15.02	14.12	12.06
8	547	554	561	16.85	14.32	13.24
9	557	555	563	14.01	15.5	10.58
10	561	558	564	17.05	13.03	10.34
11	568	569	577	15.69	11.76	11.55
12	570	574	580	15.16	14.18	11.53
13	572	579	583	16.07	14.97	10.51
14	578	583	584	16.49	11.93	13.65
15	582	588	591	15.57	11.81	12.91