A Comparative Study of the Effects of Task-Based Writing under Different Pre-Task Planning Conditions on Intermediate EFL Learners’ Written Performance in Personal and Decision-Making Tasks

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ABSTRACT: During the last two decades, there have been some attempts to revitalize language teaching and move towards meaning-focused instructions including task-based syllabuses. Such practices believe in engaging learners in real language use in the classroom through transacting various tasks involving implicit learning processes. As the quality of task performance can be promoted by having planning opportunities prior to their completion, the present study scrutinized the effects of task-based writing under different pre-task planning conditions on intermediate EFL (English as a foreign language) learners’ written performance in personal and decision-making tasks. 120 intermediate learners served as the participants who were randomly assigned to three experimental groups and one control group. While the former planned individually, in pairs or groups, the latter did not have any planning opportunity. Prior to the treatment, they received two personal and decision-making pretests whose results were compared with the two post-tests belonging to the same task types to investigate the efficiency of task-based instruction in improving learners’ general writing ability. Following a factorial design, the data were analyzed, and it was indicated that pre-task planning was an effective writing strategy and cooperative planning, specifically, played a crucial role in boosting EFL learners’ general writing ability when completing personal and decision-making tasks.

Key words: Decision-making task type; General writing ability; Intermediate proficiency level; Personal task type; Pre-task Planning Condition; Task-based language teaching

INTRODUCTION

It is generally acknowledged that structural syllabuses including presentation-practice-production in which the elements of linguistic system were the basic units of analysis have failed to create opportunities for meaningful use of language and the engagement of more naturalistic acquisitional processes. In reaction to such linguistic syllabuses that are prevalent in Iran, there has been a paradigm shift within language teaching circles towards analytic syllabuses like task-based approaches to instruction. While the former set out a narrowly predetermined set of objectives and procedures for teachers, and are usually seen and discussed from teachers’ points of views, the latter are based on learner-centered views of language teaching in which the need to transact tasks that have a clear pedagogic relationship to out-of-class language use engages implicit learning processes, with such implicit processing based on the task material driving forward underlying language development (Long & Crookes, 1991, 1993). In effect, as Richards and Renandya (2002) put it, applying tasks that serve to facilitate communication and interaction lie at the heart of various proposals for task-based instruction. However, for the task to promote constant learning and improvement, one should see it as one component in a larger framework consisting of three main phases one of which is the pre-task phase (Willis, 1996). As one of the pre-task activities, strategic planning of the main task performance, the concern of the present study, constitutes all the mental and physical actions teachers take in preparation for the actual educational activity (Van den Branden, 2006). Various studies have investigated the impact of applying a task-based approach with a planning opportunity on different language skills. One such work in writing was Jafari’s (2006) who discovered not only was the structured task easier to perform, but
also planners had a better written performance. Since no studies seem to be done on the effect of applying different tasks under various planning conditions on learners’ general writing ability in an EFL context, this crucial issue has been targeted in this study.

**Task Types: Personal And Decision-Making Tasks**

Task types can be defined as the type of activities that differ from each other regarding their degree of cognitive complexity; i.e., the cognitive demands they place on learners or the degree of cognitive familiarity and the need for deeper cognitive processing (Brown et al., 1984).

As the first task type studied in this research, the personal task is considered as the less cognitively taxing task since it requires learners to use information that they know well and that they have probably already rehearsed in English (Skehan & Foster, 1997). In this kind of task, the participants were required to describe a picture in full while keeping in mind the descriptive writing structure. In this regard, Skwire and Skwire (2005) claim that a good description needs a thesis and some supporting details. The reason is that "without a thesis, it doesn't describe; it simply takes inventory" (p. 68).

However, concerning the second task type, the decision-making task is thought to be the more cognitively taxing task in which learners are supposed to work out solutions to different problems while dealing with a lot of unfamiliar information. In other words, learners are initially loaded cognitively by making rational decisions for the cases they are provided with, and then, in their output, they have to support their decisions by offering some plausible reasons they have discovered from the prompts given (Skehan & Foster, 1997; Foster & Skehan, 1996).

**Pre-Task Or Strategic Planning**

Ellis (2003, p. 348) defines pre-task planning as “the process by which learners plan what they are going to say or write before commencing a task”. During planning, the focus can be on propositional content, organization of information, or the language choice.

In this regard, Crookes (1989) considered planning as a manipulable condition of task-based performance and claimed that planned output pushes interlanguage to its limits and thus engages second language acquisition processes. Similarly, in Skehan’s (1996, 1998) recent framework for task-based instruction, planning is viewed as one of the externally manipulable task conditions regulating cognitive load. In other words, he maintains pre-task planning lessens communicative stress and enables learners to free up attentional resources and redirect them toward a focus on form.

**Principles For Task-Based Language Teaching**

There exist some underlying principles drawn on in developing the task-based instructional sequences. Nunan (2004) summarizes them as follows: 1) Scaffolding: Lessons and materials should provide supporting frameworks within which the learning occurs; 2) Task dependency: Within a task-based lesson, one task should grow out of, and build upon, the ones that have been presented before it; 3) Recycling: Recycling language maximizes the learning opportunities and activates the ‘organic’ learning principle; 4) Active learning: learners learn best by actively using the language they are learning (i.e., experiential learning); 5) Integration: Learners should be taught in ways clarifying the relationships between linguistic form, communicative function and semantic meaning; 6) Reproduction to creation: Learners should move from reproductive to creative language use; and finally, 7) Reflection: learners should be given proper opportunities to reflect on what they have learned and how well they are doing the task.

**Task-based syllabus design**

Applying the above-mentioned seven principles, one should go through the following steps in the design and development of a task-based syllabus (Long & Crookes, 1993):

1) A comprehensive needs analysis; 2) diagnosis of learner needs; 3) identification of target tasks learners are preparing to carry out; 4) classification of target tasks into task types; 5) development/selection of pedagogic tasks for classroom use; 6) sequencing of pedagogic tasks to form a task-based syllabus; 7) implementation of syllabus through appropriate pedagogic procedures; and finally, 8) assessment through performance on tasks/task-based criterion-referenced tests.

Passing through these eight stages, one can ascertain that the syllabus applied would be based upon real communicative, interactive or pedagogic tasks, and meaning-focused instructions which provide a purpose for the use of a language, rather than traditional educational practices, would be targeted at more effectively.
Task-Based Teaching Of Writing

As Grabe & Kaplan (1996) and Johns (1997) mention, the text produced by EFL writers is always, as in any other writing situation, the product of a socio-cognitive process requiring complex cognitive abilities, as well as linguistic and cultural competence.

To develop such competence, as Cabral (2004) points out, the teacher should assume a non-traditional role in classroom, which implies his/her ability to problematize and to facilitate collaborative construction of knowledge. The teacher also needs to know the sociocultural needs of the students to be able to challenge them and to promote their involvement with the task presented (e.g., writing a letter asking for/giving advice). This writing task was designed in accordance with methodological principles of the TBLT: it provided time for negotiation between the teacher and the students, and among the students themselves; it included real communicative language activities; it allowed the students to think about topics that interest them and also to share their opinions on these same topics.

To empirically examine task-based writing instruction, Bantis (2008), in his thesis, focused on meaning with an occasional shift to grammar. Therefore, after the end of the writing conference held by the teacher, the students were required to compare their rough drafts and the final draft created by the teacher so as to notice differences between their interlanguage and standard English. Doing so, he found that task-based writing instruction can be a useful vehicle for differentiated instruction and it represents a teaching strategy that is consistent with principles of second language acquisition to address the diverse needs of second language learners.

It is worth adding that, in the process of writing under learner-centered approaches to language teaching, editing is one of the key stages in which learners need to have a good degree of autonomy. In this regard, Ferris' (2002) study revealed that teacher involvement in editing student work is treated as a temporary support that should be phased out as the second language learner is taught to independently self-edit and self-correct writing pieces.

It can be concluded that what is missing in previous studies of the effects of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on learners’ general writing ability was a comparative study of the impact of task-based writing under different pre-task planning conditions while an EFL context was concerned. Moreover, a need was felt to double check the intermediate learners’ overall writing ability when they were involved in completing personal and decision-making task types.

Objectives of the Present Study

Since task-based teaching of EFL writing is left rather untouched, the present study attempts to investigate the role that task-based writing can play in language acquisition of Iranian EFL learners. More specifically, this study aims at examining the effects that completing personal and decision-making tasks under the conditions of individual, pair, group and no planning can have on EFL learners’ writing ability. Consequently, by observing two different task types, the present study seeks to bridge the gap existing in previous studies concerning the clear effects of task-based writing under 3 planned conditions on the participants’ writing ability while comparing their output with the unplanned condition. The formulated research questions follow:

RQ#1. Are there any significant differences in students’ writing abilities when there are different planning conditions in the pre- and post-tests of personal tasks?

RQ#2. Are there any significant differences in students’ writing abilities when there are different planning conditions in pre- and post-tests of decision-making tasks?

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the present study were 120 adult undergraduate students enrolling in an “Advanced Writing Course” in an EFL learning context at Islamic Azad University of Qom. They were classified into four intact classes and their ages ranged from 19 to 25. Three classes were randomly specified as the experimental groups of the study and the fourth group served as the control group that would receive no treatment. The experimental groups, were also randomly assigned to receive planning in groups, pairs, or individually.

To examine the homogeneity of the participants, a Preliminary English Test (PET) was administered at the onset of the study. The results of running a one-way ANOVA showed that they were homogenous regarding their overall writing ability.
Instrumentation
At the onset, to ensure homogeneity, the PET proficiency test (Preliminary English Test, 2004), a second level Cambridge ESOL exam for intermediate level learners, was run. In addition, prior to the treatment, the participants were required to complete two writing tasks, i.e., a personal and a decision-making task (following Skehan and Foster, 1999), as the pre-tests of their general writing ability. Having worked through these task types in different planning conditions, the learners submitted a written product of the kind of task presented to them in the form of a paragraph or two. Finally, the same task types were used as the post-tests of the study, the only difference being that other samples of these kinds of tasks were applied.

Notwithstanding, in both pre and post-tests, learners were left to themselves to decide how to perform the two tasks. In other words, the researcher did not make them aware of the need to plan prior to the completion of the tasks.

Task administration procedure
To examine the probable effects of task-based writing under various conditions of pre-task planning on learners’ quality of writing in personal and decision-making tasks, prior to the treatment, the two task types were administered in the pre-test. In addition, during the treatment, six written productions, based on three personal and three decision-making tasks were collected from each learner participating in the pre-planned (i.e., individual, pair, or small group planning) and non-pre-planned conditions.

It is worth noting while previous planning research in speaking contexts (Ojima, 2006) made a comparison between two planning conditions, i.e., pre-planned and non-pre-planned, in this study, there existed four different planning conditions under which the participants were supposed to complete the tasks, i.e., three planned and one unplanned conditions.

In order to experience the “Strategic Planning” time of Ellis (2005), the learners in the first three experimental conditions, i.e., individual, pair, or small group planning conditions, were provided with 10 minutes of planning time after the task and its rhetorical structure had been thoroughly explained to them before they began their individual writing. One reason for using this planning time was based on the findings of Tuan and Neomy’s (2007) study in which the researchers observed that most of the ideas presented in subjects’ productions were generated during the time allotted to their planning. However, contrary to the three experimental conditions, the last condition provided participants with no planning opportunity and required them to begin completing the task as soon as it had been explained to them. This condition, therefore, operated as the control group for the present study.

Concerning the optimal amount of time allocated for pre-task planning, it can be stated that it is based on the majority of research studies that have investigated this kind of planning and which have given the participants between 1 and 10 minutes (Ellis, 2006). According to Skehan (1998), 10 minutes planning time can be considered optimal for witnessing its facilitative effect.

During the planning time, the participants were required to take English notes of what they were planning. In so doing, the teacher was not only able to check their degree of involvement in planning attentively for the task, but also to examine what they were specifically planning during the time allotted to this process.

Having collected all the notes written by the participants at the preparation stage, the researcher asked them to complete the task in written form individually not in pairs or groups. However, during the 30 minutes that they were involved in the task activity, the participants had the opportunity to perform the task while having access to the input data of the specific task type, thereby easing the processing of information by reducing the complexity of the tasks presented (Ellis, 2006).

Having experimented with the personal and decision-making tasks in different planning conditions, the learners were expected to submit a written output of one or two paragraphs length while observing the rhetorical organization of the specific task types.

What finished the task-based procedure was the administration of two writing post-tests each of which was considered to measure the general writing ability of all the participants under similar circumstances concerning the lack of planning opportunity.

The first post-test was a personal task in which the input data required the learners to describe a picture they received and write about it in the form of a complete paragraph following the rhetorical organization and structure of descriptive writing. What merits attention is that when writing a description, one should limit his/her topic to concrete and vivid details and state his/her opinion or attitude about the subject described as the point or main idea. To do so, writers mostly rely on spatial order transitions and sensory details and sometimes apply time order (Pearson Education, Inc., 2007).
The second post-test was a decision-making task in which the learners were asked to make a proper decision regarding the place that each person in the prompt would visit considering his/her interests and write a paragraph justifying the reasons why they would make such decisions.

It is noteworthy that these tests were intended to make comparisons possible between pre- and post-tests thereby examining the probable effect that task-based language teaching could have on the learners’ general writing ability under various planning conditions.

Writing scoring procedure

At this stage, in order to measure the participants’ overall writing ability in the pre-tests and post-tests, two scorers who were English teachers experienced in teaching writing courses rated the papers according to the scoring criteria set in advance. To do so, ESL composition profile adapted from Jacobs et al. (1981) was applied by both raters in order to make their process of rating as objective as possible. The criteria presented by Jacobs et al. required the raters to focus on the following aspects of learners’ written output: content, organization, mechanics, language use and vocabulary use.

To determine if there was an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability, the two scorers’ ratings of thirty percent of the data that was randomly selected were checked and were found to be highly correlated with each other. This correlation check was in accordance with what Shi (1998) carried out in his study on the effects of prewriting discussions on ESL students’ compositions. Since this condition was met, i.e., the inter-rater reliability was calculated to be 0.89, the first rater’s scoring of the whole data was considered to be reliable.

RESULTS

This research intended to compare the performance of participants in the pre-tests and post-tests of personal and decision-making tasks in order to see whether the treatment based on task-based methodology could create any significant difference in their general writing ability or not. That is to say, it was checked if the process of learning through tasks under different conditions of pre-task planning would result in any significant improvements in the quality of their writing or not. To this end, four one-way ANOVAs were run to compare the learners’ means in the pre-tests and the post-tests of the personal and the decision-making tasks to reveal the effects of task-based writing under different planning conditions on their general writing ability as shown by their pre- and post-test scores.

An additional statistical technique implemented in this study was Post-hoc Scheffe’s analysis. According to George and Mallery (2000), this test allows the researcher to make pair-wise comparisons of means and locate the differences when a significant F-value has been observed in a preceding ANOVA, i.e., the results of ANOVAs for post-test scores in the present study.

Prior to the specific treatment, the degree of groups’ homogeneity was checked through Analysis of Variance and no statistically significant group differences were found in their PET proficiency scores, F(3, 97)=0.39 , p =0.76 (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PET Scores</td>
<td>63.669</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>21.223</td>
<td>.391</td>
<td>.760</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the first step in investigating the effect of task-based writing under different planning conditions on intermediate EFL learners’ written performance in personal and decision-making tasks, the learners’ writing scores in pre- and post-tests of personal and decision-making tasks were analyzed through conducting a series of one-way ANOVAs.

Initially, the results of one-way ANOVA for the pre-test of personal task indicated no statistically significant difference in the pretest scores of the personal writing task for the four pre-task conditions thereby assuring participants’ similar writing performances across the four conditions before the treatments.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>380.91</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>126.97</td>
<td>.94</td>
<td>.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
However, the results of one-way ANOVA for the personal task post-test revealed a statistically significant difference in the writing post-test scores for the four pre-task conditions. This finding suggests that participants' writing ability in the personal tasks varied across the four conditions after the treatments.

Table 3. Results of a one-way ANOVA for overall post-test scores of personal writing across pre-task conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>1499.33</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>499.77</td>
<td>4.27</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to locate the differences, the researcher employed pairwise comparisons based on the Scheffe test (Table 4). The results revealed the statistically higher mean scores of the small group (M = 71.60, SD = 10.34) and the pair conditions (M = 71.15, SD = 10.15) in the post-test of personal task in comparison to that of the no-planning condition. This suggests that participants’ writing performance in the small group and pair conditions improved as compared with the no-planning condition.

Table 4. Scheffe test for writing post-test scores of the personal task across pre-task conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) group</th>
<th>(J) group</th>
<th>Mean Difference</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>-7.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>2.26</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-7.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>9.69</td>
<td>3.09</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>-.45</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>.99</td>
<td>-8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>1.80</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>-6.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>9.23</td>
<td>2.88</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>-2.26</td>
<td>3.26</td>
<td>.92</td>
<td>-11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>-1.80</td>
<td>3.06</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>-10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Control</td>
<td>7.42</td>
<td>3.35</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>-2.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As the next step in statistical analyses, two one-way ANOVAs were employed to check if learners’ overall writing ability scores in the decision-making task both at the pretest and at the post-test would be statistically different across the four conditions, i.e., no planning, individual planning, pair planning, and small group planning. The results (Table 5) indicated no statistically significant difference in the writing pretest scores of the decision-making task for the four pre-task conditions, F(3, 98) = .07, p = .97 thereby suggesting that participants’ writing ability across the four conditions was at the same level before the treatments.

Table 5. Results of a one-way ANOVA for overall pretest scores of decision-making writing across pre-task conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>20.18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6.72</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.97</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, the overall mean scores of the decision-making writing task at the post-test were analyzed through another one-way analysis of variance.

Results (Table 6) revealed a statistically significant difference in the writing post-test scores of the decision-making task for the four conditions. This finding suggests that participants’ writing ability in the decision-making tasks varied across the four conditions after receiving the treatments.

Table 6. Results of a one-way ANOVA for overall post-test scores of decision-making writing across pre-task conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Sum of Squares</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>Mean Square</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Conditions</td>
<td>2221.21</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>740.40</td>
<td>7.19</td>
<td>.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, the Scheffe post-hoc test was applied to locate the differences among pre-task planning conditions (Table 7). The test indicated that the decision-making post-test scores of the small group (M = 73.23, SD = 11.18), the pair (M = 72.76, SD = 10.33), and the individual conditions (M = 70.65, SD = 9.72) were significantly different from that of the no-planning condition (M = 61.44, SD = 8.77).
This finding indicates that participants' overall writing ability at the decision-making task in the small group, pair, and individual conditions respectively increased, as compared with the no-planning condition.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of statistical analyses, the researcher can determine how planning affects learners' general writing ability in such a way that all experimental or planned groups had better writing performance in the decision-making tasks in comparison with the unplanned group, while only pair and group planners could create higher quality writing samples than no-planners in the personal tasks.

This finding is in accordance with Ojima's (2006) work on the impact of concept mapping as a pre-task activity on learners' written product. He observed that pre-task planning related to the learners production of better written texts in their classes in terms of complexity and fluency. In fact, their application of concept mapping could be related to their high scores on the organization and complexity measures when they composed after the planning time.

Furthermore, in contrast to the present study in which group planning was found to be the most effective planning condition for both personal and decision-making tasks, the results of Ojima (2006) imply that individual planning was more effectively applied to the learners' composing processes than group planning. However, this difference could be related to the nature of planning activities carried out prior to the task completion.

It is worth noting that somehow similar to the findings of this study regarding the positive effect of task-based writing on EFL learners' written performance, Bantis's (2008) results indicated that task-based writing instruction (TBWI) can be a useful vehicle for differentiated instruction to address the diverse needs of second language learners in a multi-level or multi-ability classroom. In fact, the actual content of each writing conference varied according to the participant's instructional needs. Therefore, it can be observed that TBWI represents a teaching strategy consistent with our understanding of the learning process and second language acquisition theory.

In a similar fashion, Cabral's (2004) study on task-based writing approved the effectiveness of this methodology. In his work, the learning sequence was developed with a class of EFL Portuguese 9th grade students. It included real communicative language activities requiring the students to interact meaningfully. It was observed that it could contribute to the integrative development of the language competence of the students to whom it was designed, since it focused on the use of English to write.

Working on the effects of planning and proficiency level on learners' written performance in two personal tasks, Nariman-Jahan & Rahimpour (2011) corroborated that low-proficiency learners appear to benefit more from time for pre-task planning with respect to producing higher concept load and greater fluency, while high proficiency learners did not differ significantly in the pre-planned and non-pre-planned conditions. These findings are reliable with the findings of the research by Ortega (1999), Wigglesworth (1997), and Kawauchi (2005). The high-proﬁciency learners were only advantaged by planning without time (i.e., online planning) concerning concept load, fluency, complexity, and accuracy. It can be concluded that the effects of planning on learners' written production can be moderated by the learners' proficiency level. This finding is somehow in line with the present study in which

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(I) group</th>
<th>(J) group</th>
<th>Mean Difference (I-J)</th>
<th>Std. Error</th>
<th>Sig.</th>
<th>95% Confidence Interval</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Small group</td>
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<td>.99</td>
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</tr>
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<td>Individual</td>
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<td>3.01</td>
<td>.86</td>
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<td>11.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>11.78</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>3.66</td>
<td>19.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>-.46</td>
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<td>-7.99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>2.10</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>-6.30</td>
<td>10.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
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<td>2.79</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>3.38</td>
<td>19.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>Pair</td>
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<td>2.95</td>
<td>.91</td>
<td>-10.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>9.21</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.26</td>
<td>18.16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>Small group</td>
<td>-11.78</td>
<td>2.85</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-19.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pair</td>
<td>-11.32</td>
<td>2.79</td>
<td>.00</td>
<td>-19.26</td>
<td>-3.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual</td>
<td>-9.21</td>
<td>3.14</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-18.16</td>
<td>-.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Scheffe test for writing post-test scores of decision-making task across pre-task conditions
pre-task planning favored intermediate learners in their written production when performing both personal and decision-making tasks especially when they planned in pairs or groups.

Investigating the effects of prewriting discussions on adult ESL students' compositions, Shi (1998) found that although students wrote mainly longer essays in no discussion condition than teacher-led discussions, the quality of their drafting was not necessarily better than the other conditions. In fact, teacher-led discussions aided students to conceptualize and organize their ideas more effectively, and peer discussions made students explore ideas more freely using different verbs of mental processes. In contrast to these conditions, no discussion writing condition made them only produce longer essays with more verbs indicating status and possession. This conforms to the results of the present study in which no planners produced lower quality writing samples in comparison with the planners.

However, incongruent with the present study in which both tasks favored group planning, the learners in Shi's (1998) study did not benefit from the group discussions maybe because they were left with a number of disorganized ideas after the discussions and they had to sort out what and how to write independently afterwards. It can also be due to the fact that they applied discussing ideas orally in a non-categorized fashion and not outlining as their prewriting activity.

CONCLUSION

Drawing on the results of the present and previous studies, it is concluded that providing learners with different opportunities for planning prior to performing written tasks of different levels of cognitive complexity (i.e., personal vs. decision-making tasks) can be considered as an effective factor in determining the EFL learners' overall quality of writing.

Based on the results of this research, while all planners were beneficial for EFL learners' writing when completing decision-making tasks, only pre-task planning in pairs or small groups (i.e., cooperative planning) was found to affect the EFL learners' quality of writing positively when they were involved in performing the personal tasks. That is to say, pre-task planning condition has the potential to contribute to an increase in the writing ability of intermediate EFL learners no matter how complex the task is. However, since only personal and decision-making tasks were scrutinized in this study, future researchers should take caution in generalizing the findings to other task types. Moreover, as intermediate EFL learners were only examined in this study, the results cannot be generalized to other proficiency levels without further investigation in the field.

What is clear in a pedagogical sense is that pre-task cooperative planning was advantageous in boosting learners' general writing ability when they were engaged in performing both task types. Accordingly, it calls for much attention to the vital role that organizing classes in pairs or groups and planning cooperatively, in turn, can have in such EFL contexts as Iran in which writing is an unresolved problem for many learners. In sum, it is hoped that, instead of only assigning students to write in traditional classes, classroom teachers will consider the potential of task-based writing and pre-task planning as one of the key stages in the writing process in promoting the EFL learners' writing quality.

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