The Effect of Pre-Task Strategic Planning on Russian A2 EFL Learners' Monologic Oral Performance

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Abstract

The paper addresses the problem of pre-task planning advisability for A2 Russian EFL speakers. The research presented examines the structure, breakdown, repair, syntactic complexity, lexical diversity and accuracy of the discourse produced by 37 Russian participants of the English language competition held in Kazan, Russia, in January 2016. The discourse analysis revealed that the pre-task time is used by A2 EFL speakers not to plan a response but elicit a topic text from the memory thus focusing on form rather than meaning. Hence, in A2 tests prioritizing meaning over form and measuring the ability for spontaneous speech, the one-minute pre-task planning time is viewed as questionable.

Keywords: oral performance, pre-task planning, A2, Russian EFL speakers, discourse.

Introduction

Pre-task planning time is indeed one of the central concerns of a number of teachers, test-developers and researchers. Unfortunately, the results of the research conducted in psychology, cognitive science, psycholinguistics and discourse analysis are too inconsistent to provide practitioners with a theoretical foundation for calculating time ratio of preparation and oral performance.

In modern Russian EFL paradigm, pre-task planning time is viewed as a norm (Mann, 2006). Typically, the time provided before oral performance is equal or little less than speaking time and ranges between one and ten minutes (Verbickaya *et al*, 2015). This paradigm is subsequent upon the three interconnected postulates developed in the 20th century: 1) humans possess a limited capacity to process information (McLaughlin, 1983; Posner, 1973); 2) students'/examinees' attention can be profitably channeled through making instructional choices (Schmidt, 1990); 3) L2 speakers' attention to one area of the language (i.e. form) is typically drawn at the expense of another (i.e. content) (Foster *et al*, 1999). Teachers and test-developers view pre-task planning as a possibility for test-takers to focus on what and how to speak during planning time so that they can prioritize meaning during oral performance. Thus, these theories a priori implicate that planning before speaking helps control the level of cognitive demand imposed by potentially unfamiliar topics and establish a fair environment for test-takers. In this regard, the question of rationale for pre-task planning time and its amount is in fact a question of attention between the form and meaning (Nitta, 2014).

Before the Unified State Exam in English was developed and introduced in the Russian Federation in 2007, the choice had predominately been made for the form: examinees' performances were mainly rated by grammar and vocabulary accuracy only (Solnyshkina *et al*, 2014). The present reality, when educators in Russia are looking for tools to assess real life performance not reproduction mechanisms, poses the problem of pre-task planning practicality. This problem becomes more urgent with A2 speakers who tend to use planning time for rehearsals of the topics memorized before.

With the hypotheses being (1) 'With pre-task time provided, A2 speakers tend to reproduce rather than produce speech' and (2)'The length of planning time effects the discourse produced', the paper focuses on whether A2 test-takers should be provided with planning time before oral performance. But acknowledging the partiality of the topic chosen and limitation of the data, in this article, the authors try to avoid any predictions, but rather raise the problems.

Literature Review

It is traditionally accepted that "constraints in attentional capacity during task performance result in one aspect of performance being prioritized and improves, whereas another aspect receives less attention and remains the same" (Yuan et al, 2003). Such phenomena known as trade-off effects have been investigated intensively mostly in dialogue tasks (Nitta, 2014; Foster and Skehan 1999), but research in the area target mostly B2 – C1 speakers and view pre-tasks planning time as necessary to regulate the cognitive demand imposed by potentially unfamiliar speaking topics thus improving test-takers' oral performance (Nitta, 2014).

As for comparative studies of pre-task planning effects on A2 speakers' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in monologic performances, it is to the best of our knowledge still under-investigated element in EFL and language assessment.

The results of the previous studies also prove to be in part contradicting and in rare cases mutually exclusive: Mehrang and Rahimpour (2012) report that planning time had no effect on the accuracy and fluency of the learners' performances. While Yuan and Ellis (2003) argue that pre-task planning impacts positively on language production, especially where fluency and complexity are concerned. Ahangari and Abdi (2011) demonstrate that learners with the opportunity to plan before task performance may produce language which is more complex, whereas no positive effect is evident in the accuracy of learners' oral performance. Some benefits of pre-task planning are also reported in Tavakoli (2005) and Wigglesworth (1997). While Wigglesworth (2010) in his later studies and Elder (2005) revealed limited or no effects.

Research Questions

This study was designed to address the following questions:

1. What are typical A2 discourse markers (structure, breakdown, repair, syntactic complexity, lexical diversity, accuracy) in test-takers' oral performance after a minute pre-task planning time?
2. How do A2 EFL test-takers manage their pre-task planning time?
3. Do A2 EFL test-takers need a minute pre-task planning time before they speak?

Procedure: Participants and Background of the Experiment

The 37 participants of the research were secondary school students aged 11 – 13 participating in the English language competition in Kazan, Russia, in January 2016. The English language proficiency level of the participants was assessed as A2 CEFR based on the results of the test written a day before. The test contained grammar and vocabulary questions along with Reading, Listening and Writing tasks.

The speaking tasks developed by the local Department of Education were formally in full concordance with the Manual "Relating Language Examinations to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (2009) issued by the Council of Europe: the competitors were expected to demonstrate ability to "give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes etc. as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list". The competition organizers expected each participant to produce a two-minute oral monologue elicited by means of a card with one of the two tasks written on it:

Task A: *In a minute you will have to speak about your favourite kind of sport. Do you enjoy watching or playing? Who is your favourite sportsman?*

Task B: *In a minute you will have to speak about your favourite dish. What food do you prefer? Can you cook something by yourself?*

The competitors were not allowed to take notes. The pre-task planning was defined by the competition organizers as strategic unguided planning, though seven of the participants demonstrated elements of rehearsal during the pre-task time provided.

The time-limit set for the oral performance were two minutes. Each participants' performance was assessed by two separate raters who applied an analytic approach scoring the following language features: Task response – 10 points, Coherence /cohesion – 10 points, Grammar range and Accuracy – 3 points, Lexical Resource – 3 points, Fluency Pronunciation – 2 points, Time – 2 points. The entrants were informed about the rating scale against which their oral performances were assessed. The speaking time fell within the range 24 – 102 seconds.

Discourse Analysis

The participants' textual products were audio recorded and transcribed. Pauses were referred to as hesitation, if silence lasted between 0.3 to 0.4 sec., or unfilled if silence was equal or over 0.5sec. All pauses fillers, such as *um, ah, ham, er,* were measured with a stop watch and registered in the transcripts. The following notations were used in the transcripts: three dots represent a silent pause, Russian inclusions were transcribed in Latin graphics in square brackets, e.g. [tak], [da], etc.

The scripts were then analyzed with the use of discourse analytic measures adapted from Nitta (2014): fluency (speed – the number of words per second, breakdown – the number of lexicalised / unlexicalised pauses per speaking time, repairs – the number of repetitions and corrections), complexity (syntactic complexity – the number of clauses, lexical diversity), accuracy the number of errors per 100 words.

As it was anticipated all participants as winners of school and district English language competitions demonstrated the ability "to use a series of phrases and sentences to describe in simple terms family and other people, living conditions, educational background and present or most recent job" (CEFR Level A2), and generally produced clear, coherent discourse using a number of cohesive devices. But the performances were not completely homogeneous across the population: some participants achieved a B1 standard, while others managed to A2 band only.

The discourse markers of individual responses also varied considerably across criteria and were not consistent in all the phases of the performance. The complex structural analysis of the discourses produced by the entrants revealed a three-part pattern of the responses: a. a reproductive part, b. a hesitant part, c. a productive part.

The results of the statistical analysis of each part of the discourses produced are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 .Correlations among Discourse Markers

Discourse markers		*Reproductive/Planned phase*	*Hesitant phase*	*Productive phase*
Duration, mean (sec)		23	15	43
Utterance Fluency	speed (words / second), mean	1,9	0,2	1,3
	breakdown (filled / silent pauses / speaking time), mean	0,17	0,46	0,2
	repairs (repetitions and	2, 1	7, 5	4, 7

	corrections), mean			
Complexity	syntactic complexity (the number of clauses)	12	0, 4	7
	lexical diversity	83.66	31.64	45.64
Accuracy	accuracy (errors / 100 words)	3	25	14

As the Table above shows, the duration of each phase is significantly different: the reproductive phase (with the mean of 27 sec.) turned out to be the second in the length after the productive part (with the mean of 43 sec.) and presented in every participant's performance. In the beginning of the performance many of the participants expressed themselves with smooth fluency, syntactic complexity and lexical diversity associated with B1 band. But 17 of the 37 monologues reproduced some parts of the texts ("Michael Schumacher", "Russian Playmaker Andrey Arshavin" and "Russian Tennis Player Mariya Sharapova") from Spotlight 6 (Vaulina *et all*, 2008), the textbook used in Russian schools. All other monologues also demonstrated some elements of reproduction. Those were typically accurate stretches of speech produced at even tempo. The shortest performance lasted 24 seconds, the longest – 59 seconds. 14 participants presented the reproductive planned part only. Speed and Complexity of the Planned Part is higher than those of the Hesitant and Productive (Unplanned). The number of pauses and repairs are lower. The speakers concentrate on delivering what they prepared.

The hesitant part started when the memorized text (in 19% cases – rehearsed) was reproduced: the speakers stopped eliciting texts from their memory and had to engage themselves in advance planning. 17 demonstrated complete inability to maintain the performance and stopped talking. The rest lost fluency, resorted to various time-gaining mechanisms and in many cases resulted in disjointed speech. The pressure to focus on the content while talking during this phase caused the participants use various strategies to compensate for their lack of words to maintain monologue: repetitions, rephrasing, numerous parentheses (''you know', 'perhaps', 'probably', etc.), and pauses. In this 'plan-executive mechanism' pauses marked cognitive planning while the consecutive part was execution of the plan. In a number of cases pauses went beyond 15 seconds thus dividing utterances into chunks with unclear boundaries. The repairs fell into two types: one-word (over 78%) and over-one-word repetitions. E.g."*But in my… in my town hasn't a…a…a any a…a…a tennis clubs*" [Transcipt 11]. *"in this summer I was …in her play*" [Transcipt 23]. The hesitant part was on average 68, 4 words. In the Hesitant Phase the number of stops, pauses, false starts and restarts increased dramatically, speed reduced, accuracy and complexity dropped.

The performances were also inconsistent in lexical diversity across the parts. The mean of "the range of different words" (McCarthy et al, 2010: 381) analyzed with Textinspector (textinspector.com/workflow/) proved to be 83, 66 words in the Planned Part, 31.64 words – in the Hesitant Part and 45.64 words – in the Productive.

The Productive Part started when apprehensions were overcome, new ideas began being formulated, the number of pauses (both lexicalized and non-lexicalized), repair and hesitations reduced, speed gradually increased, accuracy and complexity raised. The

participants began generating unprepared speech and focusing on the task and cohesion. The Productive part was on average 237, 5 words. Another finding was that eye-contact was used more frequently than in the previous two parts.

Conclusion

The discourse analysis of A2 EFL test-takers oral performances revealed that the pre-task time is used by A2 EFL speakers not to plan a response but elicit a topic text from the memory thus focusing on form rather than meaning. Hence, in A2 tests prioritizing meaning over form and measuring the ability for spontaneous speech, the one-minute pre-task planning time is viewed as too long and not helpful. The study of pre-task planning time offers new insights into potential differences between the ways A2 and higher proficiency level students use their pre-task time. The research therefore provides a method to investigate rationale for the amount of time students need before oral performance. The results of this study may also be helpful in syllabus design and English language teaching.

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