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**EFL Learners' Perception of Task Difficulty in  
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**Abstract**

The main purpose of the present study was to investigate learners' performance and task difficulty from EFL learners' perspective. The sixty-one upper-intermediate participants of the study performed two compare-and-contrast writing tasks in unplanned vs. planned conditions. The results of the statistical analysis revealed that the participants' written performance was more accurate when they were provided with pre-task planning time. Then, a post-task questionnaire was administered to examine the participants' perceptions of the relative difficulty of the unplanned vs. planned task performance conditions. The data analysis results indicated that the planned task was perceived by the participants as less difficult. The findings emphasized the facilitative role of pre-task planning for accomplishing accuracy in compare-and-contrast writing tasks and highlight the necessity of considering learners' beliefs and attitudes as a complexity variable for selecting and grading tasks in syllabus design and materials preparation.

**Keywords: accuracy, learners' perceptions, pre-task planning, task difficulty, TBLT**



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## **1. Introduction**

Writing is a skill which requires concentration and organization of ideas. It is a process whereby learners discover and reformulate their ideas as they try to approximate meaning. Learners usually find writing tasks difficult. Moreover, writing is a non-linear, exploratory process whereby the writer reformulates his\her ideas in an attempt to approximate meaning (Paltridge, 2004). The learners may face problems which are related to their lack of familiarity with purpose, organization, and requirements of text production. The traditional product-oriented approach suggests identifying, internalizing, and executing pre-established patterns in writing. The result is that learners do not usually achieve the required writing proficiency. In the process-oriented approach, on the other hand, researchers try to know how writing task completion can be conducted in order to achieve both accuracy and fluency. According to this approach, writing processes include planning, formulation, and revision (Kellogg, 1999). While the significance of these sub-processes has been recognized, few studies have worked on them.

In task-based language teaching, on the other hand, the issue of task difficulty is of main concern of language teachers and syllabus designers who are concerned with task grading and sequencing for learners of varying proficiency levels (for a review of research see Ellis, 2003, Skehan, 1996). The majority of studies on task difficulty are based on quantitative research on the speaking skills which mainly discuss accuracy and fluency of learners (Ellis, 2003). It implies that few studies have been conducted to examine learners' perspectives on task difficulty, particularly the difficulty variables of the written modality of language production. Thus, the present research focused on studying a particular task complexity variable, namely pre-task planning, in order to shed light on the way this feature contributes to learners' perception of task difficulty.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Task-based Language Teaching**

Task-based language teaching has inspired a lot of pedagogical innovations and theoretical investigations among teachers and researchers in an attempt to explore the way this method



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can help learners develop their language skills. Task-based language teaching presents the notion of *task* as a basic element of teaching and learning. Task is a pedagogical tool which provides the learners with learning opportunities. A task is defined as an activity that focuses on meaning which the learners undertake using the target language in order to reach a specific goal at the end of the task (Bygate, Skehan & Swain, 2001; Nunan, 1989, Skehan, 1996). Willis (1996) defines task as an activity where learners use the target language for a communicative purpose in order to achieve an outcome. In this definition, the concept of meaning is included in outcome. Similarly, for Nunan (2006) tasks have a non-linguistic outcome. He defines task as a piece of classroom activity that involves learners in 'comprehending, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is focused on mobilizing their grammatical knowledge in order to express meaning', and in which 'the intention is to convey meaning rather than to manipulate form' (p. 17).

## **2.2. Task Difficulty**

In task-based language teaching, *task difficulty* is a basic criterion for task grading and sequencing. In the TBLT literature, two somewhat competing hypotheses exist regarding the relationship between the cognitive complexity of tasks and language performance, Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (Robinson, 2001, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2010) and Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan, 1996, 1998; Skehan & Foster, 2001).

Robinson (200, 2005, 2007) defines *task complexity* as the cognitive task features which can be manipulated either to increase or decrease cognitive demands placed on the learners when they perform a task. Based on Robinson's Cognition Hypothesis (2001, 2005, 2007), *task complexity* encompasses six main variables: *number of elements, planning time, contextual support, task demand, reasoning demand* and *prior knowledge*.

Skehan's (1996; 1998) framework of *task difficulty/complexity* includes *cognitive complexity*, as well as *code complexity* (i.e., the difficulty of the language demanded to complete a task) and *communicative stress* (i.e., performance conditions affecting processing and impacting communication pressure) (Skehan, 1996, p. 52). Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis (Skehan,



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1998; Skehan & Foster, 2001, 2005) argues that humans have a limited information processing capacity. Therefore, increasing *task complexity* would result in trade-off effects among the three aspects of language production, namely accuracy, complexity, and fluency (Skehan & Foster, 1999, 2001, 2005).

### **2.3. Planning**

A common educational belief in task-based language teaching is that planning some aspects of the task before actual task performance improves learners' performance (for a review, see Crookes, 1989; Ellis, 1987, 2003; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Ortega, 1999; Skehan, & Foster, 1997; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). In other words, planning is an important task difficulty variable. Ellis (2005:3) believes that planning involves 'deciding what linguistic devices need to be selected in order to affect the audience in the desired way'. Ortega (1999: 138) argues that pre-planning, by decreasing the load on cognitive resources during task performance, lets the learners to devote more attention "to formal aspects of the code as they relate to the task, and opportunities for making form-function connections, noticing the gap, and so forth are enhanced". In other words, in addition to facilitating task performance, planning provides the learners with a context in which they can concentrate on form which would, in turn, lead to the development of their interlanguage competence.

Planning has been extensively studied in different language learning contexts because it facilitates noticing and attention (Robinson, 2001). Planning might occur at different stages of language production. Based on when planning takes place during performance, planning is categorized into *pre-task planning* or *strategic planning* and *within task planning* or *online planning* (Ellis, 2005). The former is related to the planning time prior to task performance. The latter type deals with an examination of the planning which takes place during the task performance (Yuan and Ellis, 2003).

The effect of planning on language production has been the focus of many studies. But mixed results have been reported for the effect of planning on *accuracy* which refers to error free production or the degree of deviancy from the established norm of language (Housen &



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Kuiken, 2009). Some of these studies have concluded that planning increases accuracy (e.g., Asgarikia, 2014; Kawauchi, 2005; Mahdavi-rad, 2015; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008) but others have argued that planning does not have a significant positive effect on accuracy (e.g., Yuan & Ellis, 2003). The previous research on planning also emphasizes the fact that there are a variety of variables which mediate the effects of planning on actual task performance. Examples of these factors are learners' proficiency (Kawauchi, 2005), working memory (Guara-Tavares, 2008), learners' attitudes towards planning (Tajima, 2003), and task design factors such as structure (Ellis, 2009).

Previous studies on task difficulty have largely addressed accuracy with concentrating on the oral modality of language production (for a review of research see Ellis, 2003; Skehan, 1998; Robinson, 2001). There are few studies which have investigated task difficulty from the learners' point of view. Thus, the present study tried to look at the issue from a different perspective. Concentrating on the written modality of language production, the study focused on the way pre-task planning as a task difficulty variable is perceived by EFL learners.

### **3. Method**

The study consisted of two parts. In the first part, the effect of planning on learners' achievement in terms of accuracy was examined. In the second part, a questionnaire was employed to investigate learners' perception of task difficulty in the planned vs. unplanned task performance conditions.

#### **3.1. Research Questions**

The two parts of the study addressed the following research questions and hypotheses:

##### *Part I*

*Research Question 1:* What is the effect of pre-task planning on the accuracy of learners' performance in compare-and-contrast writing tasks?

*Research Hypothesis 1:* Pre-task Planning has a positive effect on the accuracy of learners' performance in compare-and-contrast writing tasks.



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*Part II*

*Research Question 2:* What is the learners' perception of task difficulty in performing compare-and-contrast writing tasks in unplanned vs. planned conditions?

*Research Hypothesis 2:* Learners perceive planned compare-and-contrast writing tasks easier than unplanned compare-and-contrast writing tasks.

### **3.2. Participants**

The study was conducted in an Iranian EFL context. The participants of the study were 61 female upper-intermediate language learners, studying English as a foreign language at a language institute. The native language of the learners was Persian and their ages ranged between 18 and 25. The average equaled 19.

### **3.3. Procedure**

#### *Procedure for Part I*

Every individual participant of the study was provided with two parallel writing task prompts. The participants were asked to think about each prompt and write a 120-150 word paragraph accordingly, using a compare-and-contrast pattern of development for both tasks. First the unplanned writing task was given to the participants. The topic of the unplanned task was 'home schooling vs. public schools'. The allotted time was fifteen minutes.

Then, the planned writing task was administered. The topic of the planned task was 'state universities vs. non-state universities'. After giving the prompt, the participants were provided with a planning time of five minutes for thinking about the topic. In the pre-planning time allotted for the planned task, the participants were allowed to take notes. No instruction or explanation was provided by the teacher. Like the unplanned task, the allotted time for completing the planned task was fifteen minutes.

The writings of the participants in the planned and unplanned tasks were collected and analyzed with regard to research question 1.



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***Procedure for Part II***

After collecting the participants' writings, every participant was provided with a copy of a post-task questionnaire devised by the researcher, partially based on Kim (2009) (see Appendix). The post-task questionnaire was used to examine the relative cognitive complexity of the writing task in unplanned vs. planned conditions. The questionnaire used a 9-point Likert scale. The participants were asked to circle a number for each item that best represents their view concerning the difficulty level of the two tasks. In other words, their responses would vary from 1 (strong disagreement) to 9 (strong agreement).

The completed post-task questionnaires were collected for further analysis in order to find answer to research question 2.

**4. Results**

***Results of Part I***

In task-based research, certain measures of accuracy have been devised to evaluate the participants' production (For a review of different measures, see Ellis, 2003: 115-127). In the current study, the measure employed considers T-unit for scoring. A T-unit is defined as "a main clause plus any subordinating clauses" (Hunt, 1965:20). Following Errasti (2003) and Larson-Freeman (2006), accuracy was measured by the number of error-free T-units divided by the total number of T-units.

The data analysis results for the accuracy of the learners' written performance in unplanned vs. planned tasks are presented in Table 1.

*Table 1. Matched t-Test results for the participants' writings accuracy in unplanned vs. planned conditions*

<b>Task Type</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>	<b>t-Value Critical</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig (two-tailed)</b>	<b>t-Value Observed</b>
Unplanned (Task#1)	89.79	1.20	2.000	60	.05	2.191
Planned (Task#2)	79.05	1.41				





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As can be seen in Table 1, the accuracy mean score of the participants' performance in the planned task is greater than their accuracy mean score in the unplanned task. In other words, the pre-task planning had a positive effect on the accuracy of the participants' writings. In order to examine the statistical significance of this difference and test the research hypothesis, the results were compared using Matched t-Test. As Table 1 shows, the difference between the means was significant ( $t=2.191$ ,  $p=.05$ ). Thus, the first research hypothesis was confirmed, i.e., the finding of first part of the study indicates that when the participants benefitted from a pre-task planning time, the accuracy of their writings increased.

### ***Results of Part II***

The results of data analysis for the post-task questionnaire are presented in Table 2. Table 2 displays the mean and standard deviation for the participants' perception of difficulty of the unplanned vs. planned task performance conditions.

*Table 2. Matched t-Test results for participants' perception of difficulty in unplanned vs. planned conditions*

<b>Task Condition</b>	<b>Unplanned (Task#1)</b>		<b>Planned (Task#2)</b>		<b>t-Value Critical</b>	<b>df</b>	<b>Sig (two-tailed)</b>	<b>t-Value Observed</b>
<b>Difficulty</b>	M	SD	M	SD	2.000	60	.05	2.101
	4.26	1.58	2.37	2.55				

As can be seen in Table 2, the difficulty mean score of the participants' performance in the unplanned task is greater than their difficulty mean score in the planned task. In other words, the pre-task planning had a positive effect on the perceived difficulty level of the writing tasks.

In order to examine the statistical significance of these mean differences and test the second research hypothesis, the results were compared using Matched t-Test. As Table 2 displays, the differences between the means were significant ( $t=2.101$ ,  $p=.05$ ). Therefore, the second research hypothesis was confirmed. In other words, the findings of the second part of the



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study indicate that when the participants were provided with a pre-task planning condition, the task was found easier to perform.

### **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

In previous studies which have examined the effects of pre-task planning on written language production it has been found that pre-task planning improves fluency and complexity of learners' performance (Ellis and Yuan, 2004). However, regarding accuracy mixed results have been reported (Ellis, 1987; Crookes, 1987). In the present study, statistically significant differences were found between pre-task planning condition and no planning condition regarding error-free clauses which is one of the variables for accuracy.

In addition, it was found that pre-task planning was viewed by the participants as a difficulty factor. This is perhaps why Skehan and Foster (2001) used task complexity interchangeably with task difficulty to refer to the amount of attention a task demands from participants, though Robinson (2007) makes the distinction between *task difficulty* (i.e., influenced by learner factors) and *task complexity* (i.e., influenced by task inherent factors). The results of the study revealed the beneficial effects of *planning time* on decreasing *task difficulty* for learners in performing compare-and-contrast writing tasks. This was in line with the finding of the first part of the study, too. The writings of the participants were more accurate in the planned condition. This finding implies that pre-task planning resulted in more confidence for the participants in putting more emphasis on form due to a lower difficulty level of the task. In other words, the participants had enough time to cope with structure and consequently produce a more accurate writing. It also indicates that although no explanation or instruction was provided for them during the planning time, the participants had a better chance for concentration and organization of ideas in order to express meaning in their writings.

The findings also shows that *task difficulty* is indeed a matter a learners' perception more than the prediction of materials developers. In this regard, Bachman (2002) cautioned against the consequences of building on deterministic and speculative postulates where *difficulty* is



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gauged against a hypothetical learner. In other words, *difficulty* is a result of interaction between the learner's ability and the characteristics of the task' (Bachman, 2002).

### **6. Implications and Recommendations**

Considering the findings of the present study certain implications can be drawn. Although writing is an important skill, most EFL teachers are untrained as writing teachers. One of the possible reasons for poor written performance of learners can be teachers' deemphasizing of variables such as planning which influence effective writing process. An understanding of the role of planning can be helpful for both teachers and learners to improve their writing skills.

Moreover, as Robinson (2003) argues, empirical research is needed to determine the criteria affecting *task difficulty* variables. The present study indicated that planning as a *complexity variables* could have differential effects on learners' *perception of difficulty*. Thus, it is necessary to consider *planning* when selecting, grading, designing or adapting writing tasks for use in the EFL classroom.

As always, further research with larger samples is required to make stronger generalizations. Also, sufficient numbers of studies in which complexity variables other than the ones examined in the present study are needed. Moreover, replications of the study across different proficiency levels are suggested.

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### Appendix

#### Post-task Questionnaire

**Instruction:** After completing the writing tasks, read the statements related to each task and indicate your extent of agreement or disagreement by circling one of the numbers from one to nine.

- |                                   |                   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------|
| 1. Task#1 was easier than Task#2. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 |
| 2. Task#2 was easier than Task#1. | 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 |