THE EFFECTS OF PLANNING ON THE USE OF PAST TENSES IN SECOND LANGUAGE NARRATIVE WRITING

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OS EFEITOS DO PLANEJAMENTO DO USO DOS TEMPOS DO PASSSADO NA ESCRITA DE NARRATIVA EM SEGUNDA LÍNGUA

Resumo

Este trabalho apresenta um estudo empírico dos efeitos de planejar com exatidão o uso dos tempos do passado na escrita narrativa da segunda língua. Com base no estudo de Ellis & Yuan (2004), que analisou os efeitos de planejar fluência, complexidade e exatidão na escrita narrativa, este artigo relata um estudo do efeito dos dois tipos de condições de planejamento (um pré-planejamento de tarefas e nenhum planejamento) em narrativas escritas de 12 aprendizes brasileiros extraídas através de uma cena de filme. Os resultados indicam que o planejamento de pré-tarefas tem efeito na exatidão do estudo do uso de tempos do passado, diferenciando de resultados obtidos em estudo anterior.

Palavras-chave: tempos do passado; narrativa; escrita em segunda lingua.

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Abstract

This paper presents an empirical study of the effects of planning on accuracy in the use of past tenses in second language narrative writing. Based on Ellis & Yuan's study (2004) that analyzed the effects of planning on fluency, complexity and accuracy in second language narrative writing , this article reports a study of the effect of two types of planning conditions (pretask planning and no planning) on 12 twelve Brazilian learners' written narratives elicited by means of a movie scene. The results indicate that pretask planning has some effect on the accurate use of past tenses, differing from the results obtained in the previous study.

Key Words: past tenses, narrative, writing in a second language.

LOS EFECTOS DEL PLANEAMIENTO DEL USO DE LOS TIEMPOS DEL PASADO EN LA ESCRITA DE NARRATIVAS EN SEGUNDA LENGUA

Resumen

Este trabajo presenta un estudio empírico de los efectos de planear el uso preciso de los tiempos pasados en la escritura narrativa de segunda lengua. Basándose en el estudio de Yuan y Ellis (2004), que examinó los efectos de planear la fluidez, la complejidad y la precisión en la escritura narrativa, este artículo relata un estudio del efecto de dos tipos de condiciones de planificación (una planificación previa de tareas y ninguna planificación) en las narraciones escritas de 12 estudiantes brasileños extraídas a través de una escena de película. Los resultados indican que la planificación previa de tareas tiene efecto sobre la exactitud del estudio de la utilización de tiempos pasados, diferenciando de resultados obtenidos en el estudio anterior.

Palabras Clave: tiempos del pasado, la narrativa, escrita en una segunda lengua.

This research paper presents an empirical study of the effects of planning on accuracy in the use of past tenses in second language narrative writing. The research was based on Ellis & Yuan's study entitled *The Effects of Planning on Fluency, Complexity, and Accuracy in Second Language Narrative*.

The objective of this research paper is to investigate the effect of two types of planning conditions (pretask planning and no planning) on a group of pre-intermediate Brazilian learners' written narratives based on a scene of a movie. The written narratives are going to be used to check if the pretask planning results in greater accuracy in the use of past tense verbs forms.

Ellis & Yuan's study (2004) involves two research areas simultaneously: task-based research in SLA, and first (L1) and second (L2) language writing. According to the authors:

> Task based research has been primarily concerned with the effects of task design and implementational variables on the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of language in oral production. Psycholinguistically oriented writing research has typically used data collected from think-aloud protocols to identify the strategies used by writers and to model the mental systems responsible for the production of written text. (ELLIS; YUAN, 2004, p.59-60)

The authors also point that there are many studies which have investigated the effects of planning on L2 learner's oral narratives. In general, they showed that when learners have the opportunity to plan a narrative before they speak, they have gains in both fluency[1] and complexity[2].

Ortega (1999, p.110) says that when learners are provided with time to plan before they perform an L2 task, they are induced to focus on whichever formal and systemic aspects of language that they need to accomplish a particular task:

> From a focus-on-form perspective, then, the theoretically interesting claim is not only that planning may lessen the cognitive load of a given task and free up attentional resources at the micro levels of speech production but also that it may foster during the planning phase a shift of conscious attention to formal aspects of language needed to accomplish the task. (ibid, p.110)

Ortega also points that the beneficial effects of pretask planning do not have an immediate payoff in relation to the accuracy of planned performance. The author believes that proficiency levels are the factors that might affect accuracy in this context:

> In any case, there is still the possibility that, in providing the space for sustained devotion of conscious attention to formal and systemic aspects of the language required by a task, and in allowing learners to access and use the upper limits of their interlanguage, planning yields benefits that are indirect and cumulative,

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[1] Whether measured in terms of temporal variables such as number of syllables per minute or hesitation variables such as frequency of reformulations (Ellis; Yuan, 2004, p.60).

[2] Measured most commonly in terms of the degree of subordination (ibid. p.60).

even (or even more so) at lower levels of language proficiency. Longitudinal investigations of planning processes and planned products will be necessary in order to determine the effects of focus on form through pretask planning on long-term interlanguage development. Other fruitful directions for research will examine the impact of various operationalizations of pretask planning across task types and learner proficiencies. (ibid., p.138-139).

Confirming Ortega's point of view, research in this area produced mixed results when the focus was accuracy, when measured, for example, in terms of the percentage of error-free clauses. According to Ellis & Yuan (2004, p.60) "these studies demonstrated that pretask planning aids fluency and complexity but not necessarily accuracy in L2 learner's oral narratives."

In relation to writing research, Ellis & Yuan (ibid. p.61) say that "planning has been viewed as one of several processes involved in the production of written text", and consequently its role needs to be considered in relation to the other composing processes.

One of the obstacles for those who conduct research about writing is the absence of a universally accepted theory of L2 writing. (Cumming apud Ellis & Yuan, 2004 p. 61). Woodhall (2002, p.7-8) says that research on second language (L2) writing in the last two decades has basically supported that the process of writing in L1 and L2 are basically the same.

Although L2 writing researchers have identified some differences between writing in one's mother tongue and writing in a second (or subsequent) language, these differences tend to be quantitative, rather than qualitative (Cumming, Jones & Tetroe, Whalen & Ménard, apud Woodhall, 2002, p.7). Ellis & Yuan (2004) had chosen Kellog's model of writing as the basis of their study because it fits their purposes well. Ellis (2004) summarizes this model that distinguishes three basic systems involved in text production: formulation, execution and monitoring: [3]

Formulation: entails planning, during which the writer establishes goals for the writing, thinks up ideas related to these goals, and organizes these to facilitate action, and translating, when the writer selects the lexical units and syntactic frames needed to encode the ideas generated through planning and represents these linguistic units phonologically and graphologically in readiness for execution.

Execution: requires programming, where the output from translation is converted into production schema for the appropriate motor system involved (e.g. handwriting or typing), and executing or the actual production of sentences.

Monitoring: consists of reading, where the writer reads his or her own text, and editing, which can occur both before and after execution of a sentence and can involve attending to micro aspects of the text such as linguistic errors, macro aspects such as paragraph and text organization, or both aspects. The extent to which a writer is able to engage in monitoring depends in part on whether the writer has the time to adopt a polished draft strategy or is

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[3] For a more detailed discussion see Kellog 1996.

engaged in pressured text production, as in Elbow's (1981) free-writing. Kellog, like the authors of similar models, emphasized that writers simultaneously activate formulation, execution, and monitoring processes although the extent to which this activation is achievable depends on working memory. (ibid., p. 62-63)

Concluding, the theoretical basis used for this research is basically the same proposed by Ellis & Yuan (2004), the difference is that while these authors investigated the effects of three types of planning conditions (pretask planning, unpressured on-line planning and no planning) on fluency, complexity and accuracy, in this study, I only explore the effects of pretask planning and no planning in the use of past tenses in the students' written narratives.

Research on and discussion about the effects of planning on accuracy in the use of past tenses in second language narrative writing can bring significant contributions to the field of second language narrative writing. The significance of this study therefore is that it might interest teachers and scholars, since the potential of planning can lead to a better performance in writing tasks.

RESEARCH QUESTION

This study was designed to answer the following research question:

1. Do L2 learners produce more accurate use of past tense verb forms when they have the opportunity to plan a written narrative in advance than when they have no such opportunity?

METHOD

Design

This study has two levels of planning conditions (pretask planning and no planning). Twelve participants were divided in two groups of six by their English teacher according to their grades in a recent written test. Participants with similar scores were placed in different groups to minimize the possible effects of the difference of proficiency between them. Each group produced a written narrative based on a scene of a movie. Their writings were then analyzed in terms of accuracy in the use of past tenses.

Participants

The participants were twelve intermediate students from the English extracurricular course offered at UFSC (Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina). They usually have three hours of English per week. All the students were invited and agreed to participate in the study. They were told that the task was for purposes of research only, but they were not told what was being investigated. They were also assured that

they would not be identified in the research paper. Each student received a chocolate after the collection of data.

As it was previously said, the students were divided into two groups of six according to their grades in a recent written test. Students with similar grades where placed in different groups to minimize the possible differences of proficiency between them, since the groups from extracurricular courses are never homogeneous in terms of this aspect. This procedure was also adopted by Ellis (2004), who affirmed that it is important to ensure that the groups involved in the experiment "constitute a fairly homogeneous group in terms of their learning history and English proficiency (ibid., p. 9).

Task

The task required students to write a short narrative based on a set of events that happened during the first ten minutes of the movie *The Truman Show* (1998) that they watched during the class.

The piece of the story consisted of a sequence of events that happened to the character called Truman, played by Jim Carrey in this movie: Truman talked to himself while he was looking at the mirror, then his wife called him and said that he would be late for his job. He went out of the house, greeted his neighbors and suddenly something fell from the sky. He looked at the strange object with curiosity and then entered the car. He drove his car, stopped in a square, talked to two twin guys, went a newsstand and bought a magazine for his wife. After this, he walked to his office. He talked to his boss that told him that he would have something to do out of the Island, but Truman tried to refuse. In the sequence he made a mysterious telephone call asking about a woman that lived in Fiji. One of his colleagues indiscreetly tried to listen to his conversation. Truman left the office and went to a port, with the intention to attend to his boss' instructions. He bought a return ticket but he could not cross the bridge and get into the boat because he was afraid of water. He gave up and went home, worked in the garden for a small period of time and talked to his wife. At night he went to a bridge with his best friend. They drank beer and Truman told him about his plans, he definitely wanted to travel to Fiji.

The task instructions were given in Portuguese and the students were requested to write a narrative about the scene. The students were explicitly told that they should use the past tenses in the narrative, because in the first attempt of collection of data (in a different group), students practically did not use the past tenses in the narratives. They basically wrote it using present tenses, as it would be expected when you informally retell a story in Portuguese.

Task conditions

In this study, planning was operationalized at only two levels: no planning and pretask planning. The participants were supposed to perform the task in their normal classroom setting. All the students watched the scene of a movie together and then they were divided into two groups. The first group (no planning condition), stayed in the classroom with their teacher and were asked to write a narrative of at least 200 words in twenty minutes. The second group went to another room with the researcher who told the students that they would have ten minutes to plan their text by taking notes before writing the narrative. The

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researcher asked them not to write sentences and paragraphs during this stage. After ten minutes, they were also asked to write a narrative of at least 200 words in twenty minutes. The students were allowed to use the notes during the narrative writing phase.

Measure

The accuracy measure for the use of the past tenses proposed by Ellis & Yuan (2004, p.72) was adapted for this study. Originally, they calculated and analyzed the percentage of accurately used verbs in general, including all tenses used by the participants in the written narratives. In this study, only the verbs in the past tenses were considered for the analysis.

Accuracy Measure

1. Correct past verb forms: the percentage of accurately used verbs in terms of past-tense and subject-verb agreement.

Data analysis

The main objective of this study was not to make any statistical analysis of the data. Ellis & Yuan (2004) used ANOVA [4] to test the significance of the results. For the purposes of the present analysis, I just used a statistic test called Chi-Square to check whether there was or not a relation between the amount of correct and incorrect uses of the verbs in both groups (planning and no-planning). The Chi-Square is a very simple statistic test and does not measure the strength of the relation between the variables. It only shows the probability of the event being caused at random.

Results

The data obtained from the narratives provided information regarding the number of times participants in both groups produced correct and incorrect verb forms in the use of past tenses.

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[4] In statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA) is a collection of statistical models, and their associated procedures, in which the observed variance is partitioned into components due to different explanatory variables. The initial techniques of the analysis of variance were developed by the statistician and geneticist R. A. Fisher in the 1920s and 1930s, and is sometimes known as Fisher's ANOVA or Fisher's analysis of variance, due to the use of Fisher's F-distribution as part of the test of statistical significance. (Wikipedia, 2008)

Table 1. Number of correct and incorrect verb forms used in the narratives.

Planning Group	No-Planning group
Total number of words: 855	Total number of words: 807
Correct verb forms: 76	Correct verb forms: 87
Incorrect verb forms: 23	Incorrect verb forms: 63
Total number of verb forms: 99	Total number of verb forms:150

As can be observed in Table 1, the planning group produced a total of 99 verbs forms in their narrative. From this total, 76,76% of the verb forms were correctly used and 23,23 % were incorrectly used. On the other hand, the no-planning group produced 150 verb forms. The amount of verb forms in the past tense produced by this group was bigger if compared to the planning group, but they also produced more incorrect forms in relation to the total. In the no-planning group the correct verb forms corresponded to 58% of the total, and the incorrect verb forms corresponded to 42% of the total.

The results of the Chi-Square showed that there is a relation between the amount of correct and incorrect uses of the verbs and the two conditions of writing (planning and no-planning). As it was previously mentioned, the Chi-Square is a very simple statistic test and does not measure the strength of the relation between the variables. It only shows the probability of the event had been caused at random and if it is worth to investigate the relation between the variables deeply.

Figure 1 shows how the Chi-Square is calculated: the number of correct and incorrect uses of verbs in the past tenses are placed in the cells, the numbers 76 and 87 represent respectively the number of correct occurrences of verbs in the planning and no planning group; and the numbers 23 and 63 represent the number of incorrect occurrences of verbs in the correspondent groups.

Figure 1: Chi-Square data entry[5]. Source: http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/newcs.html, accessed in 20/nov/2008

Figure 2: Chi-Square results. Source: http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/newcs.html, accessed in 20/nov/2008


The Chi-Square show that the probability (P) of these results had happened at random is of three in one thousand. So, it is possible to say that there is a relation between the planning time and the accurate use of verbs in the past tenses. The result provided by Cramer's variable is not going to be analyzed in the present study.

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[5] <http://faculty.vassar.edu/lowry/newcs.html>, a website that automatically calculates the Chi-Square, the user only needs to include the data.

Discussion

The results presented in the previous section indicate that there is a relation between planning time and the accurate use of verbs in the past tenses, as can be observed in Figure 3:

Figure 3: Number of correct and incorrect verb forms used in the narratives
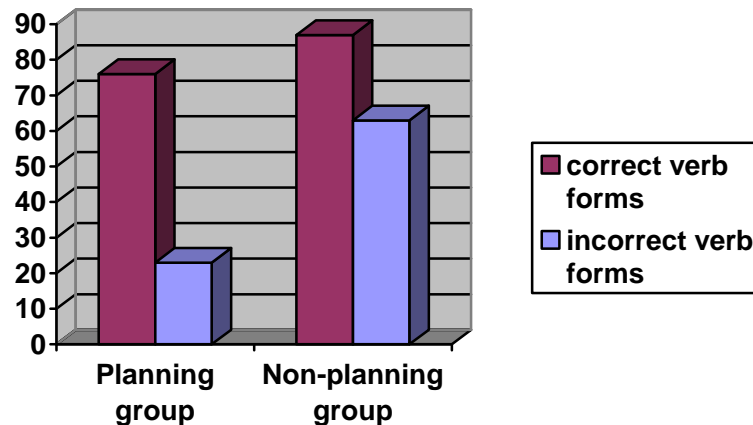
Based on the amount of correct and incorrect verb forms produced by the two groups, it is possible to conclude that the results obtained in the present study differ from the results obtained by Ellis & Yuan in their study. The authors concluded that:

> Pretask planning had some effect on linguistic accuracy, but the comparisons for both error-free clauses and correct verbs did not achieve significance. Enhanced accuracy in writing may be due primarily to the monitoring that occurs when writers revise the output of translation, using explicit knowledge of their L1, L2, or both. Pretask planning does not contribute to this in any significant way. The variables results obtained for the effects of pretask planning on accuracy in previous task-based research may simply reflect the extent to which the participants in those studies had sufficient time to engage in editing during the task, a variable that was not controlled for. (Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p.78-79)

Despite of the fact that no statistical test was made to verify in details if the differences between the results obtained by the two groups can be considered significant, it is clear that the time for planning had an influence in the accurate use of verbs in the past tenses in the participants' written narratives. Therefore, the answer for the research question proposed in this study tends to be affirmative, because the participants in the planning group clearly produced more accurate use of past tense verb forms and made fewer mistakes (incorrect verb forms) than the participants of the no-planning group.

In summary, the results presented in the previous section show that there is a relation between planning time and the accurate use of verbs in the past tenses, but this information is still not sufficient to explain why this variation occurred between the two groups. Since the results obtained in this study differed from Ellis & Yuan's, it is important to consider the limitations involved during the process of collecting and

analyzing data and reinforce the need to analyze more carefully the effects of planning on accuracy in future research .

The first limitation was the small amount of data (only twelve narratives) and the absence of a statistical model to test the real significance of the results obtained. The second limitation was that, given the limitations of time, it was not possible to make a pretest with the participants to evaluate their knowledge regarding the use of past tenses. Even with the strategy to divide the two groups based on their grades, the difference of proficiency levels among students might have interfered in the results.

Finally, it is important to mention that the explicit instructions (see appendix) given to the students might have also interfered in the results obtained in this study. Since they were explicitly requested to use past tenses in their narratives, it is possible that they had put more attention and mental effort on the use of verb forms during the process of writing. Ideally, it would be better not to explicitly request the use of past tenses during the instructions. But one more time, given the limitations of time and the few opportunities to be in the classroom with the participants, the explicit instructions helped the researcher to obtain the structures that were supposed to be analyzed.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to explore the effect of pretask planning on accuracy (related to the use of verbs in the past tense) in written narratives. Just like Ellis & Yuan in the original experiment, I did not attempt to analyze the strategies and processes involved during the process of writing to explain the effects found during the research. But in the end, I concluded that this kind of knowledge would be essential in this kind of study to properly analyze the data.

Like Ellis & Yuan (ibid. p.82) pointed, I believe that

> there is a need to examine more closely the relationship between "process" and "product" using the same experimental design but probing more deeply what L2 writers actually do when they engage in pretask planning.

The process of writing in a second language is a very complex activity that demands many abilities and strategies, so it is not surprising that we still do not have an accepted theory of L2 writing (Cumming apud Ellis & Yuan, 2004, p.61). Understanding how these processes happen would be fundamental to explain why there was such a variation on the use of past tenses in the planning and no-planning groups in this study.

The findings of this study point to a need for experimental research to examine the relationship between process and product, and the results would be extremely important for teachers and testers because it would bring contributions to improve pedagogical procedures in the classroom environment and in the appliance of proficiency tests.

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APPENDIX

TASK INSTRUCTIONS USED IN THE STUDY

1. No Planning Group: Escreva uma narrativa de aproximadamente 200 palavras descrevendo o que aconteceu com Truman, personagem de Jim Carrey no trecho do filme assistido. A narrativa deve ser escrita no passado (Ex: Today Truman woke up and washed his teeth, etc.), portando usem os tempos verbais no passado durante o processo de escrita. Vocês têm vinte minutos para escrever o texto.

2. Planning Group: Vocês têm 10 minutos disponíveis para fazer anotações sobre o trecho do filme assistido e planejar a estrutura de um texto que descreva os acontecimentos que se passaram no mesmo. Façam anotações e não escrevam frases longas nem parágrafos. (*aguardar 10 minutos para dar o restante das instruções*). Escreva uma narrativa de aproximadamente 200 palavras descrevendo o que aconteceu com Truman, personagem de Jim Carrey no trecho do filme assistido. A narrativa deve ser escrita no passado (Ex: Today Truman woke up and washed his teeth, etc.), portando usem os tempos verbais no passado durante o processo de escrita. Vocês têm vinte minutos para escrever o texto. As anotações feitas na etapa anterior poderão ser utilizadas durante a elaboração da narrativa.

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