Planning for Second Language Oral Production

James Wolf

This paper provides background on the planning that L2 learners engage in both prior to and during L2 oral tasks, which is considered to impact their oral task production in terms of fluency, complexity, and accuracy. To that end, the two types of pre-task planning that learners do, strategic planning and rehearsal, are first differentiated. Second, the putative benefits of pre-task planning on learners’ L2 oral production are discussed. Third, it is noted that both types of pre-task planning can take place under either guided or unguided planning conditions, which are described. Fourth, pre-task planning is then contrasted with the planning that learners engage in during tasks (i.e., within-task planning). Finally, the paper ends with a discussion of the needs and future directions for L2 planning research.

Over the past few decades a number of second language (L2) researchers have looked to cognitive psychology for ideas on how to develop the speaking skills of L2 learners (e.g., Segalowitz, 2010; Skehan, 1998). This quest for knowledge has led some L2 researchers to become interested in the concept of planning (e.g., Ellis, 2009; Ortega, 1999; Skehan & Foster, 1999), which has been integral to research on human problem solving in cognitive psychology. In particular, L2 planning researchers have drawn on information processing models of planning developed by cognitive psychologists, who consider planning vital for converting one’s knowledge into overt action when attempting to solve problems (e.g., Miller, Galanter, & Pribram, 1960). For example, some L2 researchers have drawn on Levelt’s (1989) model of speech production, originally developed to account for L1 speech production, to consider how planning prior to performing L2 oral tasks helps L2 learners convert their L2 knowledge into overt L2 speech (e.g., Ellis, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003). Thus, based on information processing models, speech planning for both L1 and L2 production is considered a fundamental aspect of the human language production system, which is a subcomponent of general human cognition (Butterworth, 1980). Due to the putative connection between speech planning and production, some L2 researchers have sought to determine how planning might be manipulated to positively impact aspects of L2 learners’ oral task production (e.g., Mehnert, 1998; Sangarun, 2005).

Pre-Task Planning: Strategic Planning vs. Rehearsal

In terms of the planning that L2 learners engage in for oral tasks, thus far L2 researchers have mainly studied pre-task planning (e.g., Crookes, 1989; Gilabert, 2007; Wigglesworth & Elder, 2010), which refers to the preparation that learners do before performing oral tasks. In doing so, L2 researchers have studied the effects of two types of pre-task planning on L2 oral task performance: strategic planning and rehearsal. Strategic planning is defined as the allotment of time to learners prior to a task so that they can silently organize their ideas and select the language necessary for the upcoming task (Ellis, 2008). In contrast, rehearsal is defined as the opportunity for learners to actually orally practice the task before the upcoming task (Ellis, 2008). Thus, strategic planning involves silent preparation, whereas rehearsal entails preparation through active oral practice, for an upcoming task. Thus, both strategic planning and rehearsal allow learners to engage in preparation, which constitutes planning, for an upcoming task. According to Ellis (2009), strategic

* Lecturer, Faculty of Global Media Studies, Komazawa University
planning and rehearsal can both benefit L2 oral task production. Although strategic planning can be construed as silent preparation for tasks, it is important to note that this might not always be the case. This is because some learners might use sub-vocalization to mentally run through the task during strategic planning, which is akin to rehearsal.

Benefits of Pre-Task Planning on L2 Oral Production

In addition to claiming that pre-task planning generally enhances L2 oral task production, L2 planning researchers have made specific claims regarding its benefits. These claims are largely based on the notion that speech production places greater strain on the working memories of L2 speakers compared with native speakers. Accordingly, some L2 researchers have proposed that providing learners with the opportunity for pre-task planning can enhance their L2 oral task performance (e.g., Kawauchi, 2005; Ortega, 2005; Skehan, 1996), which indicates that they believe it can offset working memory limitations. In terms of specific benefits, these L2 researchers have claimed that pre-task planning helps learners compensate for limitations in their working memory capacities (Skehan, 1996), better access their existing linguistic knowledge (Kawauchi, 2005), and more effectively focus their attention on production and on linguistic form (Ortega, 1999). In support of these claims, a number of L2 researchers have found that pre-task planning enhanced L2 oral task performance in their studies (e.g., Nielson, 2014; Skehan & Foster, 1997; Tavakoli & Skehan, 2005). Thus far, L2 planning researchers have assessed the impact of planning on L2 learners’ oral task performance in terms of the fluency, complexity, and accuracy of their discourse, which respectively indicate their capacity to (a) use language in real time, (b) use more advanced language, and (c) avoid errors in performance (Skehan & Foster, 1999).

Pre-Task Planning: Guided vs. Unguided Planning

Both types of pre-task planning, strategic planning and rehearsal, can be carried out under guided and unguided planning conditions. In the case of unguided planning, participants are simply assigned a task and asked to prepare for it alone without receiving specific instructions or performing specific activities. In contrast, with guided planning participants are required to follow specific instructions or perform specific activities to prepare for a forthcoming oral task (Ellis, 2009). In terms of specific activities under guided planning, L2 researchers have required participants to engage in pre-task listening activities (Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Ortega, 1999), as well as pre-task reading, writing, and speaking activities (Kawauchi, 2005). The aim of having L2 learners perform these types of activities under guided planning is to further enhance the benefits of pre-task planning on L2 oral task performance. Thus, the rationale for pre-task activities is that they can help lessen the difficulty of performing the main task for L2 learners. In other words, the assumption is that guiding L2 learners by means of pre-task activities can more effectively prepare them for the task than can unguided planning.

Pre-Task Planning vs. Within-Task Planning

Second language researchers have made a further distinction between pre-task planning (i.e., strategic planning and rehearsal) and within-task planning (Ellis, 2005, 2008). Once again, pre-task planning refers to the preparation for oral production that learners engage in offline, that is, before starting oral tasks. Thus, when L2 learners take time to prepare for an upcoming task, they are engaging in pre-task planning. In contrast, within-task planning refers to the speech planning that L2 learners engage in online, that is, on a moment-to-moment basis as they speak during tasks. Indicators that learners are engaging in within-task planning during a task include breaks in the flow of their speech, pauses, and hesitations (Pawley & Syder, 2000). Furthermore, pre-task and within-task planning can each be divided into two distinct types (Ellis, 2005, 2008). Table 1 shows that the two types of pre-task planning are strategic planning and rehearsal. In the case of strategic planning, participants are allotted time in
advance to silently organize their ideas and to select the language necessary to perform the upcoming task (Ellis, 2008). In contrast, with rehearsal participants are provided the opportunity to actually perform the task in question, which is considered to be practice, that is, rehearsal for the main performance afterwards (Ellis, 2008). In short, participants either silently prepare (i.e., strategically plan) or actively practice (i.e., do rehearsal) for the upcoming task during pre-task planning.

### Table 1. Types of Task-Based Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pre-task planning</th>
<th>Within-task planning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Strategic planning</td>
<td>1. Pressured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Rehearsal</td>
<td>2. Unpressured</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, Table 1 shows that the two types of within-task planning are pressured and unpressured planning. As for pressured within-task planning, there is typically a time limit for learners to finish the oral task, whereas the unpressured condition allows extended time for task completion (Ellis, 2008). Whether encouraged or not, learners obviously engage in at least some within-task planning while performing tasks as evidenced by sudden breaks, pauses, and hesitations in their speech. Moreover, Ellis (2005) noted that pre-task and within-task planning are not mutually exclusive. To illustrate, Table 2 summarizes the possible combinations of pre-task and within-task planning highlighted by Ellis (2005). As shown, it is possible to have learners engage in (a) both pre-task and within-task planning, (b) either pre-task or within-task planning, or (c) neither pre-task nor within-task planning.

### Table 2. Possible Combinations of Pre-Task and Within-Task Planning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition 1</th>
<th>Condition 2</th>
<th>Condition 3</th>
<th>Condition 4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-task planning</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unpressured within-task planning</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>+</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Condition 1 = A task requiring both pre-task and within-task planning; Condition 2 = A task requiring only within-task planning; Condition 3 = A task requiring only pre-task planning; Condition 4 = A task requiring neither pre-task nor within-task planning.

### Need for L2 Planning Research

L2 researchers’ claim that planning benefits L2 oral task performance has received support from the results of L2 planning studies (e.g., Foster & Skehan, 1996; Nielson, 2014). Despite this support, questions remain especially concerning the relative merits of (a) the two types of pre-task planning and (b) pre-task activities under guided planning. These questions generally apply to L2 research on planned L2 oral task performance involving foreign language learners in various countries. By further investigating these two aspects of L2 planning, a clearer picture can emerge regarding the effects of planning on L2 performance as detailed below. First, although both types of pre-task planning have been shown to positively impact L2 oral task performance, the relative merits of strategic planning versus rehearsal remain unclear. The main reason for this is the dearth of L2 studies aimed at comparing these two types of pre-task planning. Therefore, further investigation of the relative merits of these types of pre-task planning might reveal their respective advantages toward developing different aspects of L2 oral proficieny.

Second, thus far few L2 researchers have studied the effects of pre-task planning activities un-
nder guided planning on L2 oral task performance (Kawauchi, 2005; Mochizuki & Ortega, 2008; Ortega, 1999); therefore, more studies are needed to provide a clearer picture of their relative merits. For example, although both Ortega (1999) and Mochizuki and Ortega (2008) investigated the effects of pre-task listening activities on L2 oral task performance, neither contrasted listening with other pre-task planning activities. Kawauchi (2005) contrasted the effects of pre-task reading, writing, and speaking activities on L2 oral task performance, but found no distinguishing benefits between them. Due to the paucity of studies, additional research aimed at contrasting the effects of pre-task planning activities involving different modalities (i.e., listening, reading, writing, and speaking) is needed.

Furthermore, research aimed at contrasting the effects of pre-task story input (L1 versus L2) on L2 oral task performance is also needed. For example, for pre-task listening, Ortega (1999) had her American learners of Spanish listen to a taped L1 English version of a story to be later narrated in their L2 Spanish, while Mochizuki and Ortega (2008) instead had their Japanese learners of English listen to a taped L2 English version of a story to be narrated in their L2 English. Because neither Ortega nor Mochizuki and Ortega studied the effects of both L1 and L2 pre-task story input, their relative effects on L2 oral task performance could not be contrasted.

In sum, then, research on the relative merits of strategic planning versus rehearsal, as well as the effects of both the modalities and language of pre-task input on L2 oral task performance is needed.

**Future Directions for L2 Planning Research**

In line with the problems highlighted in the previous section, future L2 planning research should have two aims. The first aim is to contrast the effects of strategic planning and rehearsal on L2 oral task performance. This can shed light on whether these two forms of pre-task planning differentially impact L2 oral task performance, which might also indicate how they can be used to improve specific aspects of performance such as fluency, complexity, and accuracy. The second aim is to contrast the effects of different pre-task planning activities on L2 oral task performance. Importantly, this might demonstrate whether permutations of the modality and language of pre-task input influence aspects of L2 oral task performance and whether the effects are beneficial or not.

**References**


Kawauchi, C. (2005). The effects of strategic planning on the oral narratives of learners with low and high intermediate L2 proficiency. In R. Ellis (Ed.), *Plan-
Planning for Second Language Oral Production (James Wolf)


