Title of project:
The influence of pretask instructions and planning
on incidental focus on form

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Summary:

The current study investigated whether pretask instructions and pretask planning affect learners' balanced attention to both meaning and form (or "focus on form") (Ellis, 2001) during learner-learner interaction in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context. In traditional EFL classrooms in Korea, language is viewed as an object of study with little emphasis on meaning/communication. Consequently, this approach has led to EFL learners studying vocabulary and grammar at a discrete level and lacking the ability to communicate using such knowledge (Fotos, 1998). In order to improve this situation, the current study, supported by a TIRF doctoral dissertation grant on "integration of grammar instruction into adult ESL/EFL curricula: approaches and their effectiveness," examined whether pretask instructions and pretask planning promote learners' focus on form during communicative learner-learner interaction in an EFL classroom.

From an information processing perspective, humans have a limited attentional capacity for processing information, which means that paying attention to one area of performance may reduce this attention elsewhere (Skehan, 1996, 1998). This human tendency can also apply to language learners, particularly those at a low proficiency level, who need to process form and meaning simultaneously (VanPatten, 1990, 1999). One way to overcome this attentional limitation is to provide learners with some planning time before they are asked to engage in a main task. It is theoretically argued that those with planning time are more likely to lessen their attentional pressure during the main task than those without planning time, resulting in improved performance (e.g., Crookes, 1988; Ellis, 2005). Thus, the present research investigated whether pretask planning enables learners to focus on meaning and form (vocabulary and grammar) during the main task.

However, most previous pretask planning studies have not isolated pretask planning and pretask instructions. Previous researchers who have studied planning administered different pretask instructions prior to the planning time, which means that it is not clear whether it was pretask instructions, planning availability, or both that influenced the planned performance (e.g., Crookes, 1988, 1989; Foster & Skehan, 1996; Mehnert, 1998; Ortega, 1999; Tajima, 2003; Wendel, 1997). Thus, the present study investigated the individual and combined effects of pretask instructions and planning opportunity on focus on form during task-based learner-learner interaction. In addition, from a language teacher's point of view, it would be important to know how learners make use of planning time, because depending on the answer to this question, they can deliver more effective pretask instructions for both planning time and main task performance.

Motivated by such theoretical, empirical, and practical issues, one hundred and ten Korean EFL learners completed two oral picture narrative tasks in dyads over a two-week period during their regularly scheduled classes. This was done under one of four conditions: specific instructions with pretask planning, specific instructions without planning, general instructions with planning, and general instructions without planning. The general instructions

had general descriptions as to how to complete the picture narrative tasks in dyads, while the specific instructions included specific foci to the general instructions such as asking learners to specifically focus on meaning (content and organization) and form (vocabulary and grammar) while planning and/or carrying out a main task. In terms of pretask planning, the "planners" had 10 minutes to plan, individually, before they were put together with their classmates and carried out the oral picture narrative task, while the "nonplanners" had no planning time and immediately began the dyadic interaction.

In order to explore whether pretask instructions and planning time promote focus on form during the learner-learner interaction, all the interactions were transcribed and analyzed as either lexical or grammatical language focus. The lexical language focus was defined as learners' talk about vocabulary, while the grammatical language focus was defined as learners' discussions about grammar during the learner-learner interaction. When both planners and nonplanners completed their dyadic, oral, picture-based narrative tasks, they completed a written questionnaire individually. In terms of what learners did while planning, three data sets were examined: learners' think-aloud protocols while planning, their written notes produced while planning, and their written responses to the questionnaire conducted after the dyadic task interaction.

The findings revealed that regardless of pretask instructions and planning opportunity, the learners exclusively focused on vocabulary during the dyadic task interaction. This seems to be due to the rationale behind the picture-based narrative task that a meaningful context should be set for a language task in order to promote both meaning and form when learners perform the task. In fact, the basic instructions given to all learners, irrespective of pretask instructions and planning opportunity, were intended to describe the pictures as precisely as possible with extensive details. This indeed may have driven learners to search for vocabulary, which is a language form that carries the most meaning (VanPatten, 1999). Thus, if learners are provided with a list of vocabulary that is needed for the given task in advance, it is more likely that they may also attend to grammar during the main task, so that balanced attention to meaning and form can be achieved in completing a language task.

However, the present study also revealed that despite learners' predominant focus on vocabulary, those under the specific instructions that included a grammar focus component paid greater attention to grammar and less to vocabulary than did those under the general instructions that did not pinpoint any language aspect. This indicates that although the nature of the task learners are required to complete plays an important role, if the teacher adds some focus on language form as part of the task instructions, it does have some, though not a significant, effect on that particular language form. It is then hypothesized that if the task instructions were to address only language forms (unlike the specific instructions that addressed both meaning, such as content and organization— and form, such as vocabulary and grammar), or even specifically one aspect of language form such as grammar, it might achieve learners' greater attention to that exclusively focused language form during the main task performance. At the same time, the learners may still attend to meaning, as with the given task, since a picture-based narrative requires learners' attention to meaning as the default requirement of the task.

To the contrary, however, when the planning data were examined, both specific planners and general planners did not produce a significant difference in terms of content, organization, vocabulary, and grammar planning. As previously explained, it may be that the inherent task nature or goals play a more important role than the verbal task instructions given by the teachers. Other factors that influenced both types of planners about what to plan included their own L2 competence and their orientation to language modality. Some planners purposely avoided paying attention to grammar, because they thought they would not benefit from such an approach anyway without help from others, while other planners specifically focused on grammar because they knew they were weak at it. Thus, the confidence level of each planner seemed to affect whether they were willing to devote some time, independently, on their weak areas or not. Other planners considered the oral aspect of the given task, as, in speaking, grammar does not have to be correct; thus, these learners

devoted more time to other areas of the task performance.

What these results imply for language teachers seems to be that when giving a task, in addition to external conditions such as task nature/requirements, planning availability, or pretask instructions, internal factors such as learners' confidence about their own proficiency and orientation to language mode also need to be taken into account. In other words, it would be important for teachers to carefully observe individual learners in their classrooms and assess their learners' varying orientations to language study as well as their sense of self- esteem or perceived confidence levels about their own language abilities. Taking into account this internal learner assessment, the use of external conditions may be more likely to lead to the expected result when administering a task in the classroom.

Finally, irrespective of the hypothesis that having planning time would enable learners to focus on language more during the main task than when planning time was not provided, the study showed no such difference. A possible explanation is the discrepancy between the discourse mode (monologic vs. dialogic) used for planning and the main task. First, the learners' individually planned ideas were sacrificed when a dyad disagreed with their storylines with regard to the pictures presented. Second, by trying to create a story with their partners during the main task, learners may have naturally focused on language forms, removing the expected advantage of planners over nonplanners. Third, learner variables such as proficiency, personality, and learning styles, as described above, might have made it difficult to measure planning effects. Thus, a future study is called for to re-examine the effect of planning.

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