

## The Impact of Pre-task Planning on the Quality of ESL Learners' Writing

JULIANA OTHMAN

The teaching of writing has undergone major changes since theorists and researchers began to look into what actually happens when people write. Among other areas, recent research (Beare, 2000; Silva, 1993; Friedlander, 1990) has focused on the planning aspects of second language composing processes. Researchers such as Bereiter and Scardamalia (1987) suggest that the writing process involves several levels of information processing. These processes are hierarchical and constrained by information in long-term memory such as topic-relevant information, knowledge and audience expectations, grammatical rules and rhetorical strategies. They are also constrained by limited capacity in short-term memory. Thus, when a low proficiency learner uses his short term memory for non-automated skills related to grammar, it reduces the capacity that is available for planning and rhetorical analysis. If capacity is reached, ideas may be lost and performance will deteriorate. Thus, Raimes (1985) argues that writing difficulties for most ESL students are largely the result of difficulties with composing skills rather than with linguistic skills.

Writing obviously involves planning, both at the global and local levels. Planning processes used by writers in the initial or preparatory stage of writing involve idea retrieval and organization (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1986; Hayes and Flowers, 1980). Planning to write may involve writing outlines or rough

drafts so as to focus on the generation of ideas (Galbraith, 1999). One can also mentally plan what one wants to write. Breetvelt, Van de Bergh and Rijlaarsdam (1994) point out that very little research has been done on the subject of the effects of planning strategies on the written products. The small number of studies conducted on planning reported that L2 writers did less planning at the global and local levels (Campbell, 1987; Whalen, 1988; Yau, 1989). On the other hand, L2 writers tend to devote more attention to generating material (Hall, 1990) and this process is difficult and less successful in that more time is spent on figuring out the topic and organizing the generated material.

Studies on planning processes in L2 have been conducted to understand the influence of L1 on planning writing in L2. Cumming (1989) in his study of the writing process of 23 Francophone Canadian intermediate and advanced learners found that 'inexpert' writers consistently used L1 to generate ideas. Friedlander's (1990) study analyzed the written plans and compositions of 28 Chinese speaking advanced learners, revealing that content generation in L2 enhanced the learners' written output if they used the language in which they acquired the topic or subject matter. Further, Akyel (1994) who examined English compositions written from plans in English and Turkish, found that the language used for the plan did not make a significant difference to the quality of the plans written by high proficiency students but did have an effect on the plans written by lower proficiency students.

In L2 writing, pre-task planning can help learners to prepare the message they want to convey and activate the appropriate language items to express the intended message. Thus, it can be argued that by planning, processing load can be reduced, thereby facilitating the improvement of the quality of their written text.