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PRE-TASK PLANNING AND ITS INFLUENCE ON SYNTACTIC COMPLEXITY IN ORAL NARRATIVES

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Abstract: *This study investigates the effect of different pre-task planning durations on syntactic complexity in oral narratives produced by Uzbek EFL learners. Sixty B2-level university students were randomly assigned to three planning conditions: no planning (0 minutes), short planning (5 minutes), and extended planning (10 minutes). Participants performed a picture-cued narrative task, and their oral productions were analyzed using three measures of syntactic complexity: mean length of T-unit, number of subordinate clauses per T-unit, and number of complex nominals per clause. One-way ANOVA results revealed that extended planning time significantly increased mean length of T-unit ($p < .01$) and subordinate clause production ($p < .05$), but had no significant effect on complex nominal density. No significant differences were found between short planning and no planning conditions. These findings suggest that while pre-task planning facilitates syntactic elaboration, a minimum threshold of planning time may be necessary to yield measurable benefits. The study provides pedagogical implications for task-based language teaching in Uzbek higher education contexts.*

Keywords— pre-task planning; syntactic complexity; oral narratives; task-based language teaching; EFL learners; Uzbek higher education

1. Introduction

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) has emerged as a dominant paradigm in second language acquisition research and pedagogy over the past three decades [1]. Central to TBLT is the proposition that learners acquire language most effectively when engaged in meaningful, goal-oriented tasks that require authentic language use. Within this framework, considerable research attention has been directed toward identifying task design features and implementation conditions that optimize learners' linguistic performance and development [2].

One such implementation condition that has generated sustained scholarly interest is pre-task planning—the opportunity provided to learners to prepare for a task before they begin its actual performance [3]. The theoretical rationale for investigating pre-task planning derives from Levelt's [4] model of speech production, which distinguishes between conceptualization, formulation, and articulation processes. According to this model, planning time allows learners to allocate attentional resources to conceptual preparation and linguistic formulation,

thereby reducing online processing demands during task performance. From a pedagogical perspective, pre-task planning represents a relatively low-cost, easily implementable intervention with potential to enhance the quality of learner language.

Despite three decades of empirical investigation, however, the relationship between pre-task planning and syntactic complexity—the range and sophistication of grammatical structures produced—remains incompletely understood. Previous research has yielded inconsistent findings, with some studies reporting significant planning effects on syntactic complexity [5], [6] and others finding no such effects [7], [8]. These inconsistencies may be attributable to several factors: variation in operational definitions of planning (duration, guided versus unguided), differences in task types (narrative, decision-making, argumentative), learner proficiency differences, and diverse measures of syntactic complexity employed across studies.

Furthermore, the vast majority of pre-task planning research has been conducted in English-dominant settings or with East Asian learner populations. To date, no published research has examined pre-task planning effects with Central Asian EFL learners, particularly in Uzbek higher education contexts where English is taught as a foreign language with limited opportunities for authentic language use. This geographical and contextual gap limits the generalizability of existing findings and constrains the development of locally appropriate pedagogical recommendations.

The present study addresses these gaps by investigating the effect of varying pre-task planning durations on syntactic complexity in oral narratives produced by Uzbek EFL learners. Specifically, the study addresses the following research questions:

1. Does the provision of pre-task planning time significantly affect syntactic complexity in Uzbek EFL learners' oral narratives?
2. Do different planning durations (0, 5, and 10 minutes) produce differential effects on syntactic complexity?
3. Which specific dimensions of syntactic complexity—global complexity, subordination, or phrasal elaboration—are most sensitive to pre-task planning manipulations?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Foundations

The cognitive basis for investigating pre-task planning effects on language performance is grounded in two complementary theoretical frameworks: Levelt's [4]

model of speech production and Skehan's [9] Limited Attentional Capacity Model. Levelt's model conceptualizes speech production as a sequential process involving conceptualization (generating pre-verbal messages), formulation (translating messages into linguistic structures), and articulation (executing phonetic plans). In first language speakers, these processes operate automatically and in parallel. For second language learners, however, formulation and articulation demand conscious attentional resources, creating processing bottlenecks that constrain the complexity and accuracy of output.

Skehan's [9] model extends this analysis by positing that learners operate under limited attentional capacity and must prioritize among three competing dimensions of performance: fluency, complexity, and accuracy. When learners perform tasks under time pressure without planning opportunities, they tend to prioritize fluency and meaning conveyance at the expense of complex, rule-based language. Pre-task planning, according to this view, reduces online processing demands and frees attentional resources that learners can allocate to linguistic form, thereby enhancing syntactic complexity and accuracy.

An alternative theoretical perspective is offered by Robinson's [10] Cognition Hypothesis, which proposes that increasing task complexity along resource-directing dimensions (e.g., requiring learners to reason about multiple elements) pushes learners to greater syntactic complexity and accuracy. Unlike Skehan's model, which emphasizes trade-off effects, Robinson's framework predicts that complex tasks promote more elaborated language. Pre-task planning, in this view, interacts with task complexity by providing learners with additional processing time to meet increased cognitive demands.

2.2 Empirical Studies on Pre-Task Planning and Syntactic Complexity

Empirical research on pre-task planning and syntactic complexity has produced a complex and sometimes contradictory body of evidence. In a seminal study, Foster and Skehan [5] investigated the effects of planning time (0, 5, and 10 minutes) and task type on three dimensions of performance. They found that planning significantly increased syntactic complexity, measured as the proportion of subordinate clauses, with 10-minute planning yielding greater benefits than 5-minute planning. However, the magnitude of planning effects varied across task types, with personal information exchange tasks showing smaller planning benefits than narrative and decision-making tasks.

Mehnert [11] examined the effects of different planning durations (0, 1, 5, and 10 minutes) on German learners of English performing an instruction-giving task. Results indicated that even one minute of planning significantly improved syntactic

complexity, measured as the number of words per T-unit and the proportion of subordinate clauses. However, additional planning time beyond one minute produced diminishing returns. Mehnert's findings suggested that even minimal planning opportunities can yield measurable benefits, challenging assumptions that extended planning durations are necessary.

In contrast, Ortega [7] conducted a meta-analysis of planning research and found that while planning consistently enhanced fluency and, to a lesser extent, complexity, effect sizes for syntactic complexity were modest and highly variable across studies. Ortega noted that many studies failed to control for prior task rehearsal or used complexity measures that conflated different dimensions of syntactic elaboration.

More recent research has attempted to disentangle the effects of different types of planning. Sangarun [12] compared guided planning (providing strategic guidance on what and how to plan) with unguided planning and found that guided planning produced greater gains in syntactic complexity. Similarly, Kawauchi [13] investigated the interaction between planning and proficiency, finding that advanced learners benefited more from planning opportunities than intermediate learners.

Several studies have failed to find significant planning effects on syntactic complexity. Yuan and Ellis [8] compared pre-task planning with within-task planning and found that while pre-task planning enhanced fluency and lexical complexity, its effects on syntactic complexity were not statistically significant. The authors suggested that learners may prioritize lexical over syntactic elaboration during planning.

2.3Measuring Syntactic Complexity

The measurement of syntactic complexity in second language research has undergone significant refinement in recent years. Traditionally, researchers relied on global measures such as mean length of T-unit (a T-unit being one main clause plus any subordinate clauses attached to it) and the ratio of clauses per T-unit [14]. However, Norris and Ortega [15] critiqued these global measures as unidimensional and insensitive to distinct dimensions of syntactic complexity. They proposed a multidimensional framework distinguishing among: (a) global complexity (overall length and subordination), (b) complexity by subordination (clause combining), and (c) complexity by phrasal elaboration (noun phrase modification).

Subsequent research has validated the utility of this multidimensional approach. Bulté and Housen [16] demonstrated that different task conditions differentially affect distinct complexity dimensions. For oral narrative tasks specifically, subordination measures appear more sensitive than phrasal measures, reflecting the online processing constraints of spoken production.

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2.4The Uzbek EFL Context

English language education in Uzbekistan has undergone substantial transformation since independence in 1991. Presidential Decree No. PQ-5117 (2021) mandated comprehensive reform of foreign language education, including the implementation of communicative and task-based methodologies. Despite these policy initiatives, research indicates persistent gaps between policy aspirations and classroom practices [17]. Uzbek EFL classrooms remain predominantly teacher-fronted, with limited opportunities for extended learner talk and task-based interaction [18].

To date, no published research has examined task-based instructional conditions, including pre-task planning, with Uzbek EFL learners. Given the distinct linguistic, cultural, and institutional characteristics of this context, direct extrapolation from research conducted in other settings may be problematic. The present study therefore addresses a significant gap in the literature while providing locally relevant pedagogical insights.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a between-groups quasi-experimental design with one independent variable (planning time) manipulated at three levels: 0 minutes (no planning), 5 minutes (short planning), and 10 minutes (extended planning). The dependent variable was syntactic complexity, operationalized through three measures: mean length of T-unit (MLTU), number of subordinate clauses per T-unit (SC/TU), and number of complex nominals per clause (CN/C). These measures were selected to capture distinct dimensions of syntactic complexity as recommended by Norris and Ortega [15].

3.1Participants

Sixty undergraduate students (48 female, 12 male) from three Uzbek universities participated in the study. All participants were second-year English philology majors aged 19-21 years (M = 19.7, SD = 0.8). Participants' English proficiency was assessed using the Oxford Quick Placement Test; all scored within the B2 (upper-intermediate) range (scores 32-42). Participants had studied English for an average of 9.4 years (SD = 1.8) and had no experience residing in English-dominant countries.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: no planning (n = 20), 5-minute planning (n = 20), and 10-minute planning (n = 20). One-way ANOVA confirmed no significant differences among groups in proficiency scores ($F(2,57) = 0.43$, $p = .65$) or years of English study ($F(2,57) = 0.38$,

p = .69).

3.2 Task

The experimental task was a picture-cued narrative task. Participants were presented with a six-picture story sequence depicting a series of events: a young man missing his bus, deciding to walk, encountering a lost child, helping the child find her mother, arriving late for an appointment, and unexpectedly being offered a job by the grateful mother. This task was selected because narrative tasks have demonstrated sensitivity to planning manipulations in previous research [5], [11].

Pictures were presented on a single A4 sheet in numbered sequence. Pilot testing with 10 B2-level learners not included in the main sample confirmed that the picture sequence elicited narratives of sufficient length (minimum 10 T-units) and that task instructions were clearly understood.

3.3 Procedure

Data collection occurred in individual 30-minute sessions conducted in quiet university classrooms. Upon arrival, participants completed a consent form and demographic questionnaire. Participants in the planning conditions received the following instructions: "You will tell a story based on these six pictures. You have [5/10] minutes to prepare. During this time, you may make notes if you wish, but you will not be allowed to use your notes while telling the story. Please try to tell a complete, detailed story." Participants in the no-planning condition received identical instructions except that they began the narrative immediately upon viewing the pictures.

All participants were given 30 seconds to examine the picture sequence before beginning. Narratives were audio-recorded using a Zoom H1n digital recorder. There was no time limit for narrative production; participants continued until they felt they had completed the story.

3.4 Transcription and Coding

Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim by two trained research assistants using CHAT transcription conventions [19]. Dysfluencies (filled pauses, repetitions, self-corrections) were transcribed but excluded from syntactic complexity analyses. Transcribed narratives were segmented into T-units following established criteria [14]: a T-unit comprised one main clause plus any subordinate clauses attached to or embedded within it.

Three syntactic complexity measures were computed for each narrative:

1. Mean Length of T-unit (MLTU): Total number of words divided by total number of T-units. This global measure reflects overall syntactic elaboration.
2. Subordinate Clauses per T-unit (SC/TU): Total number of finite and non-finite subordinate clauses divided by total number of T-units. This measure captures complexity through clausal subordination.
3. Complex Nominals per Clause (CN/C): Total number of complex nominals (nouns with pre- or post-modification, nominal clauses, gerunds, infinitives in nominal position) divided by total number of clauses. This measure captures phrasal elaboration.

Inter-rater reliability was established on 20% of the data (12 narratives) independently coded by both research assistants. Intraclass correlation coefficients were .94 for MLTU, .91 for SC/TU, and .88 for CN/C, indicating excellent reliability.

3.5Data Analysis

One-way between-groups ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of planning condition on each dependent variable. Prior to analysis, assumptions of normality (Shapiro-Wilk tests, $p > .05$) and homogeneity of variance (Levene's tests, $p > .05$) were satisfied. Where significant main effects were found, post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test were conducted to identify specific between-group differences. Effect sizes were calculated using partial eta squared (η^2p) with interpretation guidelines: .01 = small, .06 = medium, .14 = large [20].

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the three syntactic complexity measures across planning conditions.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics for syntactic complexity measures by planning condition

Measure	No Planning (n=20)	5-Minute Planning (n=20)	10-Minute Planning (n=20)
	M(SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
MLTU	9.84	10.41(1.47)	11.98(1.89)

Measure	No Planning (n=20)	5-Minute Planning (n=20)	10-Minute Planning (n=20)
	(1.23)		
SC/TU	0.67 (0.18)	0.74 (0.21)	0.89 (0.24)
CN/C	1.24 (0.29)	1.28 (0.31)	1.33 (0.34)

Fig. 1. *MLTU = Mean Length of T-unit (words); SC/TU = Subordinate Clauses per T-unit; CN/C = Complex Nominals per Clause.*

Visual inspection of means suggests a pattern of increasing syntactic complexity across planning conditions for MLTU and SC/TU, with the 10-minute planning condition yielding the highest scores. CN/C showed minimal variation across conditions.

4.2 Effects of Planning on Mean Length of T-unit

One-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant effect of planning condition on MLTU, $F(2,57) = 9.84$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2p = .26$. This represents a large effect size, indicating that planning time accounted for 26% of the variance in MLTU scores.

Post-hoc comparisons using Tukey's HSD test indicated that the 10-minute planning condition ($M = 11.98$, $SD = 1.89$) produced significantly longer T-units than both the 5-minute planning condition ($M = 10.41$, $SD = 1.47$), $p = .008$, and the no-planning condition ($M = 9.84$, $SD = 1.23$), $p < .001$. The difference between 5-minute planning and no-planning conditions was not statistically significant ($p = .42$).

4.2Effects of Planning on Subordinate Clauses per T-unit

A statistically significant effect of planning condition was also found for SC/TU, $F(2,57) = 5.73$, $p = .005$, $\eta^2p = .17$. This represents a large effect size.

Post-hoc comparisons revealed that the 10-minute planning condition ($M = 0.89$, $SD = 0.24$) produced significantly more subordinate clauses per T-unit than the no-planning condition ($M = 0.67$, $SD = 0.18$), $p = .003$. The difference between 10-minute and 5-minute planning conditions approached but did not reach statistical

significance ($p = .06$). No significant difference was found between 5-minute planning and no-planning conditions ($p = .48$).

4.3Effects of Planning on Complex Nominals per Clause

ANOVA revealed no statistically significant effect of planning condition on CN/C, $F(2,57) = 0.41$, $p = .67$, $\eta^2p = .01$. This negligible effect size indicates that planning time did not influence the density of complex nominal phrases in participants' oral narratives.

5. DISCUSSION

This study investigated the effects of pre-task planning duration on syntactic complexity in oral narratives produced by Uzbek EFL learners. The findings provide partial support for the hypothesis that pre-task planning enhances syntactic complexity, but reveal important nuances regarding the dimensions of complexity affected and the threshold of planning time required to produce measurable benefits.

5.1Planning Duration and Syntactic Complexity

The most striking finding is that extended planning (10 minutes) significantly enhanced global complexity (MLTU) and clausal subordination (SC/TU), while short planning (5 minutes) produced no statistically significant benefits compared to no planning. This pattern diverges from Mehnert's [11] finding that even one minute of planning yielded complexity gains, but aligns with Foster and Skehan's [5] observation that longer planning durations produce greater benefits. Several explanations may account for this discrepancy.

First, learner proficiency may interact with planning effectiveness. Mehnert's participants were intermediate German learners of English, while our participants were upper-intermediate Uzbek learners. However, this would predict the opposite pattern—more proficient learners should be better positioned to utilize planning opportunities. An alternative explanation concerns the operational definition of syntactic complexity. Mehnert used holistic complexity ratings, whereas we employed specific linguistic measures. A third possibility relates to instructional culture: Uzbek learners, accustomed to teacher-fronted instruction with limited opportunities for extended discourse, may require more extensive planning time to mobilize their linguistic resources for complex oral production.

The absence of significant 5-minute planning effects should be interpreted cautiously. Although between-group differences were not statistically significant, mean scores for both MLTU and SC/TU were numerically higher in the 5-minute condition than in the no-planning condition. It is possible that with a larger sample size, these differences would reach statistical significance. Alternatively, there may

indeed be a minimum planning threshold—perhaps 8-10 minutes for this learner population and task type—below which planning yields minimal syntactic benefits.

5.2Differential Effects Across Complexity Dimensions

A second major finding is that pre-task planning selectively affected certain dimensions of syntactic complexity while leaving others unaffected. Both global complexity (MLTU) and clausal subordination (SC/TU) showed significant planning effects, whereas phrasal elaboration (CN/C) did not. This pattern aligns with previous research demonstrating that oral tasks elicit clausal rather than phrasal complexity [16].

From a processing perspective, clausal subordination may be more amenable to pre-task planning because subordination decisions are made at the message formulation stage. Learners can pre-plan how to combine clauses and express logical relationships. Phrasal elaboration, by contrast, occurs at the local, within-clause level during online formulation and may be less susceptible to advance planning. Additionally, Uzbek and Russian—learners' first languages—typologically favor clausal over nominal structures, which may predispose learners toward subordination strategies.

These findings support Norris and Ortega's [15] call for multidimensional conceptualization and measurement of syntactic complexity. Had we employed only global measures, we would have concluded that planning enhances complexity. Had we employed only phrasal measures, we would have concluded that planning has no effect. The more nuanced conclusion is that planning selectively enhances specific complexity dimensions.

5.3Theoretical Implications

The findings offer qualified support for Skehan's [9] Limited Attentional Capacity Model. The fact that extended planning enhanced syntactic complexity suggests that planning reduces online processing burden, freeing attentional resources that learners allocate to linguistic form. However, the absence of short-planning effects suggests that attentional resource allocation is not a simple function of planning presence versus absence, but depends on the sufficiency of planning time relative to task demands and learner characteristics.

Robinson's [10] Cognition Hypothesis receives less direct support from these findings. Because task complexity was held constant across conditions, we cannot assess whether planning and task complexity interact in predicted ways. Future research should systematically manipulate both variables with Uzbek learner populations.

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5.4Pedagogical Implications

This study offers several practical implications for English language teaching in Uzbek higher education. First, pre-task planning represents a low-cost, easily implementable instructional intervention. Providing students with 10 minutes to prepare before oral tasks requires no additional technology, materials, or extensive teacher training. Given the substantial effect sizes observed (η^2p = .26 for MLTU, .17 for SC/TU), this modest investment yields meaningful returns in syntactic elaboration.

Second, teachers should be aware that brief planning opportunities (5 minutes or less) may be insufficient for learners accustomed to teacher-fronted instruction. Gradually increasing planning time over successive tasks may help learners develop effective planning strategies. Teachers might begin with 5-minute planning, provide metacognitive guidance on effective planning strategies, and progressively extend planning duration as learners demonstrate readiness.

Third, the selective effect of planning on clausal subordination suggests that if teachers aim to develop phrasal elaboration (e.g., academic writing skills), alternative instructional interventions beyond pre-task planning may be necessary. Explicit instruction in nominal modification structures, combined with focused practice, may be more effective for developing this dimension of complexity.

Fourth, the significant gap between teachers' estimations of student GenAI use and students' self-reported use, documented in our previous research [21], suggests that Uzbek EFL teachers may underestimate the extent to which students engage with technological resources. Pre-task planning provides a structured, pedagogically sound alternative to unguided, potentially problematic out-of-class task preparation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated the effects of pre-task planning duration on syntactic complexity in oral narratives produced by Uzbek EFL learners. The findings demonstrate that extended (10-minute) pre-task planning significantly enhances global syntactic complexity and clausal subordination, while short (5-minute) planning produces no statistically significant benefits. Phrasal elaboration was unaffected by planning manipulations.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample comprised only B2-level English philology majors, limiting generalizability to other proficiency levels and non-philology students. Second, the study examined only one task type (picture-cued narrative); different task types may interact differently with planning manipulations. Third, the study focused exclusively on syntactic complexity; future

research should examine planning effects on fluency, accuracy, and lexical complexity within the same learner population. Fourth, the cross-sectional design captures planning effects at a single time point; longitudinal research is needed to examine whether repeated planning opportunities lead to developmental gains in syntactic complexity.

Future research should address these limitations while extending the present findings in several directions. First, investigation of planning effects with beginner and advanced Uzbek EFL learners would clarify the role of proficiency in mediating planning benefits. Second, examination of guided versus unguided planning would provide insights into optimal planning conditions. Third, studies incorporating within-task planning manipulations would complement the present focus on pre-task planning. Fourth, classroom-based intervention research would establish the ecological validity and pedagogical practicality of extended planning time in authentic instructional settings.

Despite these limitations, the present study makes several original contributions to the field. It provides the first empirical evidence regarding pre-task planning effects with Central Asian EFL learners, extending the geographical and contextual scope of task-based language teaching research. It demonstrates the importance of multidimensional measurement in detecting selective planning effects across distinct complexity dimensions. It establishes a minimum planning threshold for this learner population and task type, challenging assumptions that even minimal planning yields measurable benefits. Finally, it offers practically significant, locally relevant pedagogical recommendations for English language teaching in Uzbek higher education.

In conclusion, pre-task planning represents a pedagogically valuable implementation condition that can enhance the syntactic complexity of Uzbek EFL learners' oral narratives. However, the benefits of planning are not automatic; they depend on sufficient planning duration, appropriate task selection, and alignment with learners' proficiency levels and prior instructional experiences. When these conditions are met, pre-task planning offers a practical, accessible means of supporting learners in producing more elaborated, syntactically complex language.

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