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Use Strategic Planning in IELTS Part 2 Narrative Task

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Abstract: When English is regarded as the lingual franca in the global world, English learners' communicative competence is emphasized. In China, however, most of L2 learners' willingness to communicate and communicative competence is relatively low. This article focus on how to improve Chinese IELTS learners' poor communicative competence in the classroom. I mainly use guided strategic planning in narrative tasks to enhance learners' fluency and complexity.

Keywords: Communicative competence; Strategic planning; TBLT; China

1. Situation and focus

1.1Social Context and Individual Factors

In China, L2 learners mostly perform poorly in communicating in English, even though they all have received an exam-oriented English education in their previous school years and have acquired good linguistic knowledge (spelling, grammar, and vocabulary). This lack of communicative competence may be due to limitations in the social context and individual factors.

For social context, Chinese language education context is quite like Japan, where Nakata (2006, p. 166)[5] observes: "…the educational system has resulted in Japanese learners with weak English communication ability." Because in China, English has been stripped of any communicative function and regarded as "content for a series of examinations that have profound consequences for future academic or career prospects (Ryan, 2009, p. 125)." Thus, the learners may not think English as a lingua franca that can be used to communicate with people from any foreign community.

Speaking of individual factors, Wang (Wang, 2014)summarized three factors that can influence learners 'speaking competence, including cognitive factors, linguistic factors, and affective factors. Firstly, cognitive factors indicates that "language users (tend to) prioritize one aspect (fluency, accuracy, and complexity) of language over another (Ellis, 2005)[1]," and the attention to other areas are reduced. Chinese learners tend to pursue "a hundred percent correctness (Ortega, 2005, p. 93)" in their L2 expressions. Thus, they may sacrifice fluency and complexity to secure accuracy. Secondly, linguistic factors ask EFL learners to use accurate pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary(Wang, 2014). Chinese learners usually struggle with pronunciation of less frequent words as they acquired them mostly from reading and writing. Thirdly, in terms of affective factors, Chinese EFL learners may feel anxious and nervous "when they are asked to speak in class without any preparation (Wang, 2014)."

Under the effect of Chinese general education context and individual factors, TBLT and strategic planning is introduced to speaking-focused classroom to help improve L2 learners' fluency and complexity.

1.2 TBLT and Strategic Planning

Task-based language teaching (TBLT) argues that "the most effective way to teach a language is by engaging learners in real language use in the classroom(Willis & Willis, 2013, p. 1)." This way of teaching concerns more on building the confidence and willingness to speak in L2 regardless of limited language resources. It is suitable in speaking-focused classroom, and it helps learners acutely aware of what they need to learn (Willis & Willis, 2013, p. 2).

As Ellis' (2005) [1] Figure 1 shows, strategic planning belongs to pre-task planning, which "entails learners preparing to perform the task by considering the content they will need to encode and how to express this content (ibid, p. 3)." In strategic planning, the learners can access the actual task materials, which distinguishes it from other pre-task activities. In addition, Ellis' study concluded that strategic planning helps fluency and complexity promotion.

As mentioned above, in this task design, guided strategic planning is suggested to use in a speaking class. Foster & Skehan's (1996)[2] studying on non-native speakers found that guided strategic planning help learners increase their syntactic complexity in language use. The research also claimed that the benefit of gaining in planning time is the dramatically reduced pausing, or fluency enhancement. The time of guided strategic planning is 10 minutes. As Kawauchi's (2005)[3] study concluded that most studies focusing on planning choose to provide 10 minutes for planning. Nevertheless, the task I design contains teacher instruction, which may take 15 minutes. Finally, the total pre-task planning time is 25 minutes.

2. Respond

2.1 Teacher's Instruction in Strategic Planning

The target students are intermediate level English learners, and they will be grouped into pairs according to their linguistic competence, and the dyads should have the similar level of English proficiency. As Mercer (1994)[4] believe that the pair of learners with similar ability seem to learn better in a problem-solving task.

The whole process of the task was shown in Table 1, which can be divided into pre-task, while-task, and post-task stages. In the pre-task stage, the teacher will spend 15 minutes offering instruction. 1), the teacher will introduce the whole sequences of tasks and

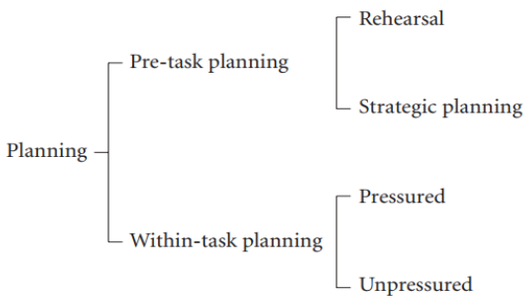


Figure 1 Types of task-based planning (Ellis, 2005, p. 4)[1]

prime learners what will be expected in the target task. 2), the teacher will offer task-related material input by providing a mixture of vocabulary, phrases, and sentences. The learners can decide if they need to use them or not based on meaning they formed later. 3), the guidelines for IELTS speaking part 2 narrative task are introduced (see Appendix 1), learners can use it in the self-planning part as guidance. The guidelines are adapted from Sangarun's (2005, p. 135) Guidelines for the Argumentative Task. The functions of the guidelines are as below: a), help learners brainstorm, "plan the meaning, discourse structure, vocabulary and grammar of their speech (Sangarun, 2005, p. 117)." b), instruct learners do not write down every single word they want to say. c), allow learners to do a pre-verbal rehearsal in mind. d), promote the process of self-correction and self-monitor.

2.2 Learner's Strategic Planning

After the teacher's instruction, the learners then need to finish draft writing on the note-sheet (see Appendix 2), which can help guide "the syntax, lexis, content, and organization of what they would say (Foster & Skehan, 1996, p. 307)[2]." The sufficient planning time allows them to do the pre-verbal rehearsal as well. The core questions that learners concentrate are: 1), what ideas do I want to express? 2), how can I best express those meanings?

Table 1 the whole process of the task

Task implementation phase	Task design detail
Pre-task	Teacher's instruction input: Time: 15 minutes L2 spoken text input Grammar and vocabulary explication guidelines for IELTS speaking part 2 narrative task Strategic planning: Time: 10 minute Draft writing on note-sheet Rehearsal
While-task	Speaker: Monologic oral narrative for peer-listener
Post-task	Listener: Evaluate speaker's answer Ask several further related question Give some modification advice Exchange the role of listener and speaker, repeat from while-task again. Remodify the answer, upload the final version.

2.3Task and Post-Task

After pre-task planning, the pair group will be assigned to the role of speaker and listener respectively and randomly. The speaker will present the answer he/she planned to the listener. The listener need to make notes to record the mistake and problem of the speaker's answer. And when the narration is completed, the listener will score the speaker's performance from the aspect of accuracy, complexity, and fluency. Then the listener will ask several questions based on the speaker's answer. The following Q&A part is an interactive activity close to actual communication. The listener can ask for repeating the part he/she missed, paraphrasing the part he/she cannot understand, or ask questions provided below the question card or questions she/he is interested in. When the whole process is accomplished, the speaker and listener will change the role and carry out the same task mentioned above. Finally, remodify their answer and give a final presentation to the teacher.

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