

## **Effects of Pre-Task Strategic Planning on Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners' Writing Motivation and Accuracy**

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### **Abstract**

Considering the benefits of preparation for writing in the pre-writing phase, this study attempted to examine the effects of different pre-task strategic planning activities (i.e., pre-task form-focus planning, content-focus planning, and no planning) on writing accuracy and motivation. To achieve the objectives of this study, sixty intermediate EFL learners were selected from an English language institute. They were randomly assigned into three groups, each of which included twenty participants. In order to measure the effect of strategic planning types, they were given a pretest and posttest in the form of narrative writing test and also the writing motivation questionnaire. One of the experimental groups received language focus activities, and the other one received content focus activities while the control group received no planning. After the twelve week intervention, all the groups were post tested. Results of the study based on ANCOVA showed that the form focus pre-task planning was the most effective in terms of its impact on the writing accuracy. However, it was found that there was no significant difference in the writing motivation of EFL learners who received different pre-task strategic planning activities. EFL teachers, curriculum developers and syllabus designers, and EFL learners can use the findings of this study in order to produce more accurate writings.

**Keywords:** pre-task strategic planning, form- focused and content-focused activities, writing motivation and accuracy

### **Introduction**

Since English is the primary language of international communication and also a storehouse of world knowledge, many people in all over the world seek to learn it. Speaking and writing in English language is the main goal and the only way of communication of these non-native people. The ability to express one's ideas in writing in a second or foreign language with reasonable coherence and accuracy is a major achievement (Celce.Murcia, 2001). People are not considered fully educated in a language unless they know how to read and write in that language (Chastain, 1988). Just as English as a foreign language, learners learn four language skills, yet, for many students, writing is an important means of learning. Although it is a way of communicating a message, it also facilitates speaking (Birjandi, Mosallanejad & Bagheridoust, 2006). The importance of writing is magnified where students must master certain writing genres essential for communicating at university or other settings. Most EFL students believed in the difficulty of writing. Its difficulty is not only in generating and organizing ideas, but also in translating these ideas into readable text (Richards & Renandya, 2002). Literature evidence shows that many of the EFL students' writings are poorly organized and grammatically awkward in spite of teachers' hard work (Seyyedi, Ismail, 2013). Difficulties in writing skill have also been witnessed among Iranian EFL learners when they write in English in real life or as their assignments.

Another difficulty faced by EFL learners writing in English is related to lack of motivation to perform writing tasks. Motivation to write is an important factor in writing competence. Students who are not motivated to write will not readily engage in writing activities. These students may exhibit high anxiety about writing, low self-efficiency for writing and a lack of self-regulation and self- determination when writing (Payne, 2006). Chastain (1988) concurred that the first consideration in prewriting phase of writing assignment centers on ways to motivate the students. Therefore, teachers always try to find various strategies to make their students motivated and responsible for their own learning (Vasquez, 2009).

An approach to language teaching that has influenced writing instruction is the task-based approach. The aim of this approach is to provide learners with a natural context for language use (Freeman, 2000). Dorneyei (2001) emphasized the point that the way a task is presented can motivate learners. There are some ways to prepare learners for performing a task, for instance, performing a similar task, providing a model, non-task preparation activities, and strategic planning. In strategic planning that contrast with online planning, learners have time to plan how they will

perform a task. In this way, there is no trail performance of the task or no observing a model. There are a number of methodological options available to teachers who choose strategic planning as pre-task activities, for example, form focused and content focused activities. Content focused activities that are based on content-based language teaching give priority to process over predetermined linguistic content and learners use English to learn it. In this method, teacher use content from other disciplines in a language course.

According to Freeman (2000), the special contribution of content-based instruction is that it integrates the learning of language with the learning of some other content. When students study different subjects, they need a great deal of assistance in understanding subject matter texts; therefore, there must be clear objectives as well as content learning objectives. Wesche (1993) believed that in content-based language teaching both content knowledge and language proficiency increase.

Focus on form occurs when students direct their conscious attention to some feature of the language, such as a verb tense or the organization of paragraphs (Harmer, 2007). Harmer (2007) concurred that focus on form can happen at any stage of a learning sequence as the result of intervention by the teacher, or because students themselves notice a language feature.

In this study, form-focused and content-focused activities as pre-task strategic planning were examined to find out their effects on writing accuracy and motivation. According to Fotos (1998), task performance can significantly increase learner awareness of the target structure and improve accuracy in its use, as well as providing opportunities for meaning focused comprehension and production of the target language. Sheen (2003) supported the effectiveness of focus on form and explained that an underlying assumption of a focus on form approach is that all classroom activities need to be based on communicative tasks, and that any treatment of grammar should arise from difficulties in communicating any desired meaning.

Up to now a great number of research studies have examined different factors affecting writing performance, yet the role that pre-task strategic planning may have in writing motivation and accuracy remains unclear. This study attempted to fill this gap and examine the effects of pre-task strategic planning on writing accuracy and motivation. Considering the objective of the study, the following research hypotheses were formulated:

H1: There is a significant difference in writing motivation among EFL learners who receive different pre-task strategic planning activities (i.e., pre-task form-focused planning, content-focused planning, and no planning).

H2: There is a significant difference in writing accuracy among EFL learners who receive different pre-task strategic planning activities (i.e., pre-task form-focused planning, content-focused planning, and no planning).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants of the present study were within the age range of 15 to 16 years with a bilingual background, i.e., Azari as the native language and Persian as the second language. A homogeneity test was administered in order to identify the intermediate level learners as it was assumed that learners at this level are capable of doing writing tasks. For this purpose, a sample of Preliminary English Test (PET), developed by the Cambridge University, was administered to them. Convenience sampling procedure was used to select the participants. Out of 100 students, 60 female learners were selected after the administration of the placement test. Then, the selected learners were assigned randomly to three groups of 20 participants, namely one control group and two experimental groups.

### **Instruments**

The instruments used were: a proficiency PET test, two narrative writings as the pre-test and post-test, writing motivation questionnaire, an English writing rubric known as ESL Composition Profile (Jacobs et al. 1981). A sample of the PET proficiency test (preliminary English Test for Schools), a second level Cambridge ESOL exam for intermediate level learners, was administered at the beginning of the study. Both versions, PET Test and PET for school have the same type of questions. The PET for schools test has content of interest to school-age learners. Because of the difficulty and large amount of the questions, some sections of the test were omitted. The test consists of multiple – choice questions including listening, reading and general test consisted of structure and vocabulary section. Narrative writing pretest and posttest consisted of a composition writing of about 200 words about a given topic. The students' compositions on the pre-test and post-test were scored based on the writing profile developed by Jacobs et al. (1981). This profile is a 100-point scale and uses five sets of criteria in scoring a composition: content criteria, organization criteria, vocabulary criteria, language use criteria and mechanics criteria. Each set of criteria changes a four level subjective judgment scale into interval scores. This profile is one of the most commonly used and dependable profiles for ESL composition rating since it has been developed in 1981. It considers all the different aspects of the composition and it is a successful scale based on both the holistic and analytical approaches for writing evaluation.

Moreover, Academic Writing Motivation Questionnaire (AWMQ), developed by Payne (2012), were administered to the three groups before and after the treatment (pre-task planning activities) The AWMQ, in its final form, is a 25-item; for each item, there is a statement that prompts the participants to indicate their level of agreement with the statement. There is a response scale for each item that participants use to indicate their level of agreement with each statement. The response scale ranged from zero to four, and values of the scale are as follow:

0 = strongly disagree; 1 = disagree; 2 = uncertain; 3 = Agree; 4 = strongly Agree. The purpose of this questionnaire is to assess the range of learners' motivation of writing before and after treatment.

The content validity of the Academic Writing Motivation Questionnaire was ensured by two experts. To calculate reliability coefficient of the writing motivation questionnaire for the study's sample, the internal consistency of scores (obtained at the pre-test and posttest) was determined by means of Cronbach's alpha correlation coefficient. As Table 1 shows, an acceptable level for Cronbach's alpha, namely  $\alpha = .76$  for the pre-test scores and  $\alpha = .71$  for the post-test scores, was obtained.

Table 1  
*Reliability Statistics for the Writing Motivation Scores*

	Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	Based on N of Items
Pre-test	.76	.85	25
Post-test	.71	.79	25

The data obtained from the sample was used to ensure the reliability of the EFL writing at pre-test and at post-test. To this end, inter-rater reliability was calculated. Inter-rater reliability is the degree of agreement among different raters. It gives a score of how much homogeneity there is in the ratings given by judges.

Table 2  
*Result of Inter-rater reliability of the Writing Pre-test Scores*

		First Rating	Second Rating
First Rating	Pearson Correlation	1	.933
	*Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Second Rating	Pearson Correlation	.933	1
	*Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

Note. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

Table 3  
*Result of Inter-rater reliability of the Writing Post-test Scores*

		First Rating	Second Rating
First Rating	Pearson Correlation	1	.951
	*Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
Second Rating	Pearson Correlation	.951	1
	*Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	

Note. \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

As Table 2 and 3 show, the instrument exhibited an acceptable level of inter-rater reliability ( $r = .93$ ) at the pre-test and ( $r = .95$ ) at the post-test. Normally, the values of the Pearson correlation coefficients above 0.8 are considered as excellent (Tables 2 & 3).

### **Design**

This study had a quasi-experimental design, with a pretest, posttest, and control group. Changes on the dependent variables were observed through the comparison of the post-test scores of the writing motivation questionnaire and writing accuracy test.

### **Procedures**

As the pre-test, a writing test was administered to all three groups at the beginning of the summer semester. The participants were asked to write about a topic given to them with at least 200 words. Their compositions were corrected by two raters based on the ESL Composition Profile. In addition, the participants were asked to answer the writing motivation questionnaire.

The treatments were administered using pre-task form-focused and content-focused planning activities in order to encourage brainstorming and generating new ideas, rising their imagination, activating the learners' background knowledge, and motivating them to write.

In the form-focused group, the participants received a picture description writing task. The teacher pointed to the pictures, specified the sequence of them, and gave a short introduction about what they should do. Then, she gave some explanation about a linguistic form she thought might be problematic. The teacher directly advised the learners to use a particular linguistic feature correctly, for example, a particular tense in their writings. The teacher wrote some examples related to the particular language form and drew the students' attention to the word order of English sentence, some common preposition of place and time (based on Ellis, 2015). Then, the students started to write.

In the content-focus group, the teacher had a short introduction about the task that the learners were going to do; then, she explained the setting of the story. The teacher tried to increase the learners' imagination about the pictures by asking WH\_ and Yes/No questions about the story, such as: *what do you do if you were in his shoes? Or do you think that her decision was correct?* She presented some ideas about pictures and the characters of the story; then she encouraged the learners to add some other ideas and wrote them on the board. She wrote some words or clauses related to the events of the story, and asked the students to add some more words and wrote them on the board (Brinton, 2003; Freeman, 2000; Snow, 2001).

In the no-planning group, there was no planning and activities before writing picture description. The learners received pictures and were asked to write their descriptions. The participants received the treatment once a week for 12 weeks, with each session lasting one hour and a half. Similarly, at the post-test, the writing test and the writing motivation questionnaire were administered to the participants in order to assess the differences after the treatment. To explore the effect of the pre-task strategic planning types on EFL learners' writing motivation and writing accuracy, the analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was employed.

## **Results**

The data analyses were based on descriptive and inferential statistics. The results of the descriptive analysis are represented in Table 4.

Table 4  
*Sample Sizes, Means, and Standard Deviations for Writing Motivation and Writing Accuracy Pretest and Posttest Scores*

Group	<i>n</i>	Pretest		Posttest	
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Form focus Group's Writing Motivation	20	65.60	11.00	71.85	19.19
Form focus Group's Writing Accuracy	20	10.35	3.20	16.85	4.48
Content focus Group's Writing Motivation	20	63.95	13.35	67.25	12.60
Content focus Group's Writing Accuracy	20	12.60	1.39	14.95	3.91
No Planning Group's Writing Motivation	20	64.85	10.08	67.85	11.68
No Planning Group's Writing Accuracy	20	13.10	5.01	15.00	4.73

*Note.* *M*= Mean; *SD*= Standard Deviation

To explore the effect of the pre-task planning (i.e., pre-task form-focus, content-focus, and no planning) on the EFL learners' writing motivation and writing accuracy, a statistical procedure known as analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was considered appropriate. Yet, prior to the inferential data analysis, the assumption testing was carried out for the use of ANCOVA, i.e., the normality of distribution and homogeneity of regression slopes were checked. Normality was checked both graphically and statistically. The graphical representation of normal distribution of writing motivation and writing accuracy scores ( Figure 1,2,3, & 4) both at the pretest and post-test showed almost no serious violation of the normality assumption.

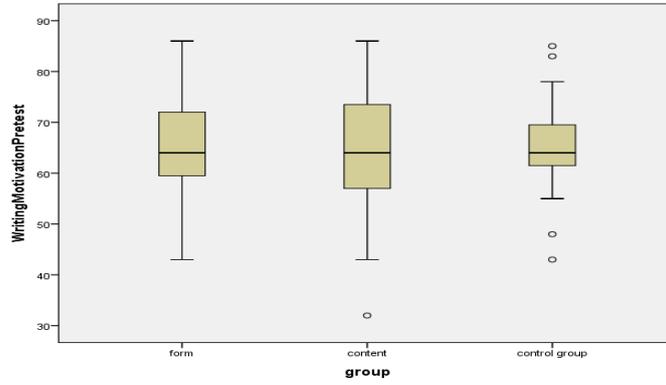


Figure 1. Graphical Representation of Writing Motivation Pretest Scores

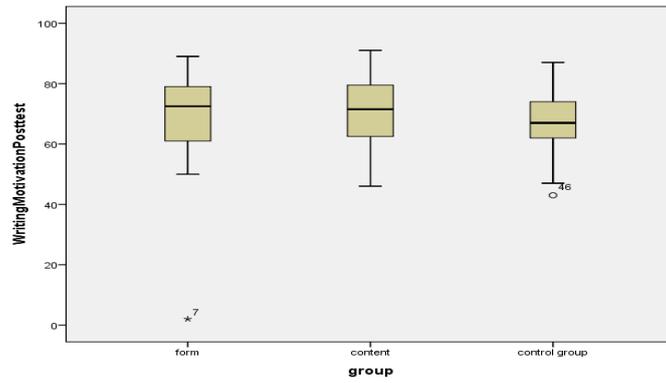


Figure 2. Graphical Representation of Writing Motivation Post-test Scores

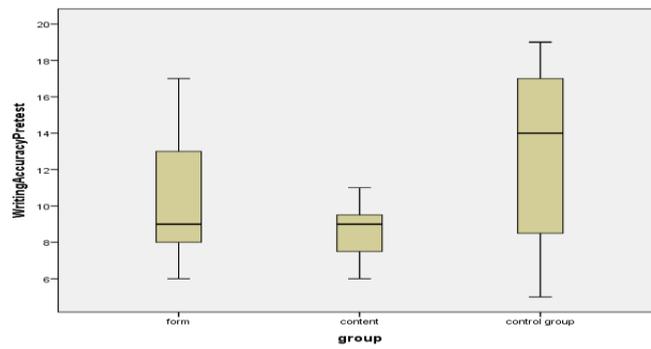


Figure 3. Graphical Representation of Writing Accuracy Pretest Scores

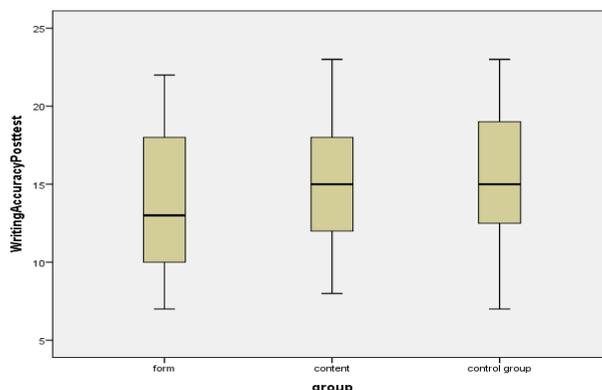


Figure 4. Graphical Representation of Writing Accuracy Post-test Scores

The result of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov statistic also indicated a non-significant result,  $p > .05$ , suggesting no violation of normality assumption. Moreover, the analysis of the homogeneity-of-regression (slopes) assumption indicated that the relationship between the covariate (writing motivation pretest scores) and the dependent variable (writing motivation posttest scores) did not differ significantly as a function of the independent variable (planning types),  $F(2, 54) = 51.176$ ,  $p = .140$ . Also, the homogeneity of regression slopes with regard to the interaction effect between the independent variable (planning types) and the covariate (the writing accuracy pretest scores) showed that there was no statistically significant interaction effect between the treatment (group) and the covariate (the writing accuracy pretest) as the  $p$  value was greater than  $.05$ ,  $F(2, 54) = .965$ ,  $p = .330$ . Therefore, the results of these analyses added the support to the assumption of the homogeneity of regression slopes.

With regard to the first hypothesis, ANCOVA was used to explore the effect of the pre-task planning types on the participants' writing motivation. The independent variable was the pre-task planning types (i.e., form-focused planning, content-focused planning, and no planning), and the dependable variable was the EFL learners' writing motivation posttest scores. The participants' writing motivation pretest scores were considered as the covariate in this analysis. First, the Levene's test of equality of variances was examined.

Table 5  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Writing Motivation Scores*

<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
2.064	2	57	.136

As is shown in Table 6 below, there was not a significant difference in the writing motivation posttest scores of the form-focused group ( $M=67.124$ ), the content -focused group ( $M=72.021$ ) and the no-planning group ( $M=67.805$ ),  $F(2, 56) = 1.241, p = .29$ .

Table 6  
*Result of ANCOVA Statistic for Writing Motivation Scores*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Corrected Model	6432.185 <sup>a</sup>	3	2144.062	18.960	.000	.504	1.000
Intercept	182.388	1	182.388	1.613	.209	.028	.239
Writing Motivation Pretest group	6278.051	1	6278.051	55.516	.000	.498	1.000
Error	280.640	2	140.320	1.241	.297	.042	.259
Total	6332.799	56	113.086				
Corrected Total	298287.000	60					
	12764.983	59					

$p \leq .05$

In general, it can be said that the results fail to accept the first research hypothesis formulated, i.e., there is a significant difference in the writing motivation of the EFL learners who receive different pre-task strategic planning activities (i.e. pre-task form focus planning, content focus planning, and no planning). With regard to the second hypothesis, ANCOVA was also used to explore the effect of the pre-task planning types on the EFL learners' writing accuracy. The results in Table 7 showed that the variances were equal as its p value was greater than .05.

Table 7  
*Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances for Writing Accuracy Scores*

<i>F</i>	<i>df1</i>	<i>df2</i>	<i>Sig.</i>
5.130	2	57	.199

As is shown in Table 8, there was a significant difference in the writing accuracy posttest scores of the form-focused group ( $M=16.085$ ), the content focused group ( $M=14.421$ ) and the no-planning group ( $M= 13.294$ ),  $F(2, 56) = 3.214$ ,  $p= .04$ . Also, the partial eta squared value (.10) shows that 10% of the variance in the writing accuracy posttest scores is attributable to the independent variable (pre-task planning).

Table 8  
*Result of ANCOVA Statistic for Writing Accuracy Scores*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared	Observed Power
Corrected Model	370.352 <sup>a</sup>	3	123.451	9.266	.000	.332	.995
Intercept	280.452	1	280.452	21.051	.000	.273	.995
Writing Accuracy Pretest group	353.452	1	353.452	26.531	.000	.321	.999
Error	85.638	2	42.819	3.214	.048	.103	.591
Total	746.048	56	13.322				
Corrected Total	13906.000	60					
	1116.400	59					

$p \leq .05$

In general, the results obtained seem to be supportive of the second research hypothesis formulated, i.e., there is a significant difference in the writing accuracy of the EFL learners who receive different pre-task strategic planning activities (i.e., pre-task form focus planning, content focus planning, and no planning).

Furthermore, it was necessary to follow up the ANCOVA with a post hoc test to determine which specific strategic pre-task planning type differed in terms of its effect on writing accuracy. This was reported in the pairwise comparisons in Table 9.

Table 9  
Pairwise Comparisons

(I) group	(J) group	Mean Difference		
		(I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.
form	content	-1.664	1.179	.007
	control group	2.791	1.214	.000
content	form	-1.664	1.179	.007
	control group	1.127	1.309	.061
control group	form	-2.791	1.214	.000
	content	-1.127	1.309	.061

The Bonferroni procedure was used to control for Type I error across the three pairwise comparisons ( $\alpha' = .05/3 = .016$ ). The results showed that the students who received form focused pre-task (*adjusted M* = 16.08) had significantly higher writing accuracy posttest scores, controlling for the effect of their writing accuracy pretest scores, than the students who received content focused pre-task planning (*adjusted M* = 14.42) and also than those who received no-planning (*adjusted M* = 13.29). In addition, there was no significant difference between the content focused planning group (*adjusted M* = 14.42) and the no-planning group (*adjusted M* = 13.29).

### Discussion

This study was primarily aimed at examining the effect of pre-task strategic planning and its different types as options of pre writing activities on the pre-intermediate female learners' writing motivation and accuracy. The data analysis shows that EFL female intermediate learners performed differently when they receive different pre-task strategic planning activities. The findings of the present study showed that, in general, pre-task strategic planning improved the learners' writing motivation and accuracy but this improvement was not significant on their writing motivation.

As Chastain (1988) emphasized, pre writing activities are helpful as they get EFL learners to recall related information and emotions from their past; pre writing activities activate their imagination and stimulate additional thinking on the topic, which is supported by the findings of this study. On the other hand, by comparing of the pre-tests and post-test scores, it can be said that learners have little knowledge of how to approach and complete the

writing composition. The explanation can be that although learners know a lot of vocabularies and different English structures such as tenses, but by pre task strategic planning they recall them. Furthermore, the exposure to some ideas, the emphasis on some forms and drawing their attention on structures, information and words can result to remembrance of more other words and ideas and persuade them to write. Also, it is evident from the findings that pre-task strategic planning (form-focused type) improve learners' writing accuracy. One possible explanation can be that pre writing form-focused activities are helpful as they get EFL learners to recall related information; pre writing activities activate their imagination and stimulate additional thinking on the topic. The results obtained from this study are consistent with some previous studies (Ellis, 1989; Fotos 1998; Schmidt, 1994; 2001) that have shown learners who receive form-focused instruction learn more rapidly. In contrast, the findings of this study run counter to some other researches (Kawauchi, 2005; Salimi & Fatollahnejad, 2012) in which the pre-task strategic planning had no positive effect on writing accuracy. One reason might be that the type of pre-task strategic planning activities that were used as the treatment in those studies varied from the current study. Another reason can be related to the participants' proficiency level. The findings from this study also reveal that pre-task strategic planning was not able to make any significant improvement in the learners' performance in terms of writing motivation. Form-focused activities and content-focused activities as pre-task strategic planning had equal effect on the learners' writing motivation. The reason might be that at pre-intermediate level, the problem is that the learners' do not know how to employ the writing task and it does not matter for them which content they are writing for. It also can be said that the usefulness of their ideas for their classmates is not important for them and does not increase their writing motivation. In other words, the important point in the improvement of the intermediate learners' writing motivation, is pre- task planning and some guidance for better writing not the topics or contents that they should write for.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Small sample size and learners' extrinsic motivation affected the findings and limited the interpretation of them. Extrinsic motivation refers to a desire to pursue a subject for reasons outside of the individual, such as rewards, grades, parental or instructor approval, etc. These individuals are motivated to learn a subject not because they want to learn it, but because learning the material will get them good grades, parental praise, or because jobs in that field pay well; all of which are external rewards. Furthermore

the learners' background knowledge in English grammar and vocabulary could influence the results.

### **Suggestions for Further Research**

Since this study had some limitations and was narrowed down in terms of its approaches, participants and variables, it seems necessary to do some further research in this field. As this study was done among intermediate-level learners, the same study can be done at other proficiency levels. This study has chosen form focused and content focused activities as two options of pre-task strategic planning; other studies can use other techniques. The present study has examined learners' narrative writing; further research needs to be conducted using other types of writing genre, such as cause and effect or argumentative. Finally, this study is expected to be replicated to find out about possible effect of pre-task strategic planning on learners' writing motivation.

### **Conclusion**

When one checks learners' homework as an English teacher, one faces mostly with empty sections in the last part of their workbook, that is, the part related to writing tasks. Or when an intermediate learner is asked to write a paragraph about his/ her school trip or narrate a picture series with clear events, whatever presented in paper is just some written lines or some separated words with no coherence. When we ask EFL learners for the reason why, they answer "what should I write" or "this is not an important task". EFL learners think that just doing grammatical and vocabulary exercises are important because their teachers believe in those activities.

In addition to some EFL learners' disinterest to write in English, there are many other reasons why they need to improve their English writing skills. Perhaps they need to reply to emails or take an English exam, for example, TOEIC or IELTS. Or they need to write essays in English for their university assignments. Unfortunately in many English classrooms in EFL contexts less time is devoted to the skill of writing than to reading, listening and speaking. In many teaching situations writing is seen as time-consuming; sometimes teachers are not aware of process of writing and different activities for producing an accurate writing. Other times teachers use inappropriate methods of writing instruction.

When learners accomplish a narrative task with focusing on the process of writing and planning with the goal of generating ideas, structuring information, and reviewing the past knowledge, they learn how to write in other situations no worries and bafflement.

Language teaching, therefore, needs to cater for both intentional as well as incidental learning by ensuring that learners have access to adequate input and, crucially, by having their attention drawn to linguistic features that otherwise they might fail to attend to. This is the role of focus on form. Through the reactive and pre-emptive strategies learners can have their attention drawn to problematic linguistic features. This study has shown that form focused activities as a pre- task strategic planning have this potential.

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