# INCIDENTAL FOCUS-ON-FORM IN TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING: A RATIONALE FOR STRATEGIC AND ON-LINE PLANNING PROCESSES

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There has been much research on strategic planning (i.e., a period of time given prior to a task) and on-line planning (i.e., active engagement in formulation and monitoring on task), under the premise that language acquisition would be enhanced in such planned conditions by reducing cognitive load. However, the underlying mechanisms of this rationale have not been fully understood. To develop this present understanding further, this theoretical paper aims to explore the psycholinguistic mechanisms of strategic and on-line planning effects on L2 performance. Drawing on pedagogic recommendations for focus-on-form, the paper argues that strategic planning and on-line planning may promote incidental focus-on-form but to different extents. In particular, it is suggested that on-line planning, beyond a simple improvement of accuracy, would increase consciousness of form and bring learners into deeper grammar processing. In language classrooms, it is of significance to consider how to implement strategic and on-line planning in authentic ways.

#### Introduction

Through a growing body of research on the effects of planning time on learner's language in both experimental and classroom settings, second language acquisition (SLA) researchers have developed a rationale for planning implementations. The literature explains that under planned conditions learners' attempts to use more varied and complex language structures act against any tendency to stabilize comfortably at a premature and inadequate level (Foster, 1996). Despite the possibility of such significant effects of planning on both L2 production and interlanguage (IL) development, there have been few attempts to specify how planning helps L2 production. If the case is that provision of planning time promises to upgrade the quality of output and finally lead to a significant improvement of one's proficiency, then what are the underlying mechanisms of this process? To answer this question, it is necessary to look at the recent development of on-line planning research, which extends our concept of planning to on-task planning processes.

In rethinking the conceptual framework behind planning strategies, firstly I specify the meaning of 'planning' in a task-based framework proposed by Skehan (1996, 1998). Then, I consider L2 speech production processes influenced by two different types of planning: strategic planning and on-line planning. Although both planning conditions aim to help learners' on-task cognitive processing, the findings have revealed different influences on performance; i.e., the positive effects on fluency and complexity in strategic planning and those on complexity and accuracy in on-line planning. To understand such different planning effects, I explore the occurrences of incidental focus-on-form (Long, 1991) in two planning conditions. Built on the current understanding of planning, this paper aims to consider the effects of strategic and online planning on L2 performance and construct a theoretical framework of how these different types of planning impact on L2 performance and promote incidental focus-on-form. I argue that planned production tends to push learners into more syntactic processing than non-planned production.

# **Task-based Language Teaching and Planning**

In what Kumaravadivelu (1994) calls the "post-method" era, there are a considerable number of pedagogic approaches under the umbrella of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Among various candidates, the area of task-based language teaching (TBLT) has been growing rapidly and extensively in both language pedagogy (e.g., Brown *et al.* 1984; Edwards & Willis 2005; Nunan 1989, 2005; Prahbu 1987; Willis 1996; Willis & Willis, 2007) and SLA (e.g., Bygate 1999, 2000; Bygate *et al.* 2001; Candlin 1987; Ellis 2000, 2003; Long & Crookes 1992; Robinson, 2001; Skehan 1996, 1998, 2003). Although the original meaning of 'task' covers wide categories, Skehan (1998) summarizes the main task characteristics, following Candlin (1987), Nunan (1989) and Long (1989):

- meaning is primary;
- there is some communication problem to solve;
- · there is some sort of relationship to comparable real-world activities;
- task completion has some priority;
- the assessment of the task is in terms of outcome.

These characteristics reflect the important themes of CLT which puts a high value on the development of the ability to use appropriate language in authentic, communicative contexts. Among these characteristics, the present discussion pays particular attention to the first, "meaning-focused" issue, because it clarifies the separation of TBLT from traditional teaching methods characterised by explicit form-focused instruction (FFI: see Ellis 2001 for a detailed discussion). In this respect, tasks appear synonymous with "pure communicative activities," but it is noticeable that primacy on meaning does not mean an absolute rejection of any FFI. TBLT does not include explicit types of FFI in the sense of traditional approaches, but some sort of focusing on form can be one of the central objectives of TBLT (Long, 2000; Ortega, 2007; Skehan, 2003; van den Branden, 2006). It is thus possible that despite their primary focus-on-meaning orientation, tasks aim to create the opportunities to switch learners' attention from meaning to form in some conditions.

Understanding the essential components of task-based instruction, the next question to raise is how attention to form can be achieved in this framework. A number of studies have investigated what types of task lead to learners' attention to form without impairing task characteristics (e.g., Fotos & Ellis 1990, Loschky & Bley-Vroman 1991), but there another area to consider is how we can implement task conditions without overriding a focus on communication. For this aim, Skehan (1996) proposes the task implementing sequence of pre-emptive, during-task and post-task stages (see Table 1).

In these methodological stages, the most actively and widely researched area is pre-task planning as one of the pre-emptive activities, assuming that this would ease the processing load that learners will encounter when actually doing a task, releasing more attention to form (Skehan 1996). However, it is also possible to claim that there is always some sort of planning process involved *during* the task such as constructing a message and/or selecting an appropriate expression (Ellis 2005a). Following this conjecture, planning implementation can be extended into the during-task stage.

As a major area influencing and adjusting on-task performance, Skehan (1996) advocates manipulation of communicative stress, comprising time pressure, modality (e.g., speaking or writing), scale (e.g., how many learners participate in the task), stakes (i.e., how important the task completion is for partici-

Stage	Goal	Typical techniques
Pre-emptive work	Restructuring - establish target language - reduce cognitive load	Consciousness-raising Planning
During	Mediate accuracy and fluency	Task Choice Pressure Manipulation
Post 1	Discourage excessive fluency Encourage accuracy and restructuring	Public performance Analysis Testing
Post 2	Cycle of synthesis and analysis	Task Sequences Task Families

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pants' life) and control (e.g., whether participants can decide task goals). In terms of processing, "time pressure" is most straightforwardly concerned with communicative pressure (Skehan 1996) because in real world language use, speakers usually suffer from some sort of pressure from interlocutors to avoid communication breakdowns such as taking long pauses and making dysfluent markers, and this often makes them unable to use their linguistic competence to its full potential, finally ending up with simplified and erroneous production. Thus, it can be assumed that pressured conditions tend to limit speakers' potentiality, while unpressured production gives them more comfortable access to their linguistic repertoire. Following this assumption, I draw attention to two types of planning: strategic planning as one of the pre-emptive implementations.

#### Mechanisms of Planning Effects on L2 performance

Having located the position of planning in Skehan's framework, this part considers how strategic and on-line planning psycholinguistically influence learners' performance. To account for mechanisms of planning effect, I adopt a dual-mode perspective on L2 processing (e.g., Carr & Curren 1994; Sinclair, 1991; Skehan 1995; Widdowson, 1989; Wray, 2002) as a frame of reference for the following discussion.

#### A dual-mode perspective on L2 processing

In recent years, a number of studies have emphasized the importance of implicit functions in L2 speech production. For example, some researchers (e.g., DeKeyser 1998, Segalowitz 2003) demonstrate that certain forms of practice are beneficial for L2 learning in terms of developing automatization by transforming declarative knowledge into procedural knowledge. Another influential view is that a large stock of lexicalized items (e.g., "NP be-TENSE sorry to keep-TENSE you waiting" [Pawley & Syder, 1983]) could be one of the keys to reducing the processing burden of formulating language (e.g., Nattinger & DeCarrico 1992; Pawley & Syder 1983; Weinert 1995).

Although much weight has been placed on implicit knowledge in SLA, understanding the role of explicit knowledge is also requisite for better understanding of L2 speaking. This is not only because it is extremely difficult for adult learners to achieve a high degree of automaticity in linguistic processing and a great amount of lexicalized items in knowledge store (Poulisse 1997), but also because explicit knowledge seems to play some important functions.

A dual-mode perspective on L2 speech processing postulates that learners tend to economize the proc-

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essing by mainly using implicit knowledge in rather simple conditions, but they may engage in effortful processing using explicit knowledge when they encounter some kind of linguistic difficulty in the use of L2 (Ellis 2004). In this condition, if time pressure is lessened, careful monitoring of the information to be understood and produced may function (Hulstijn 2002). That is, to compensate for insufficient amounts of lexicalized items and lack of automaticity, learners, more often than not, need to improvise language by accessing the explicit, rule-based system. Skehan (1995) explains the interactive mechanisms of the two distinctive systems:

What seems to be the default is that accessibility [i.e., access to the exemplar-based system] has greater priority, but given that such a system, not inherently focusing on rules, may hit problems, it is possible to 'shift down' to a more rule-governed mode of processing, closer to the analyst's model, as the need arises.(p.97)

This processing can be regarded as one of the unique functions of L2, because "second language learners are likely to manage the two processes less seamlessly, compared with L1 speakers' fluent balance between the two processes" (Bygate 1998, p.28). Bialystok (1978) investigated the performance of grammaticality judgments under time pressure and more relaxed conditions with 317 learners of French, showing that only when they had to make more detailed judgments about what part of the sentence was problematic or what rule was violated, did time pressure make a difference. She concluded that learners make their grammaticality judgments on the basis of implicit knowledge, and only switch to the use of explicit knowledge when more fine-grained decisions are required. Although this research was conducted in a decontextualized condition, the findings lend support to the idea that learners might change gear between controlled and automatic processing, and selectively and most efficiently use different levels of knowledge to meet the communicative necessity.

L2 speakers utilize the rule-based system not only for compensating for the exemplar-based system but also for complexifying their production. Access to the rule-based system might reduce the speed of speech delivery, but it plays a significant role in stretching "competence" because "on occasions where rule-based systems are used for the generation of language, the products of such activity can themselves become exemplars and then retrieved and used as exemplars on subsequent occasions" (Skehan 1996, p.43).

Despite the importance of access to declarative, explicit knowledge, communicative pressure tends to preclude learners from accessing the system, because attention to meaning is prioritized. Only when this meaning aspect is cleared and processing space is left, can learners shift attention to form (VanPatten 1990). There are a number of attempts to explore pedagogic interventions to draw learners' attention to form, and this paper argues that planning may also function to achieve this goal. The next part of this discussion will review previous strategic and on-line planning studies to support this proposal.

## Strategic planning

Among various strategic planning studies (see Ellis [2005b] for a collection of recent studies), those by Crookes (1989) and Foster and Skehan (1996) are paramount in terms of designing the way of planning research and identifying the effects of strategic planning. Crookes (1989) investigated the relative effects of strategic planning conditions (10-min planning vs. non-planning) on IL variation (i.e., complexity, accuracy, lexical variety and discourse) in monologic tasks, showing that the participants produced significantly more complex language, but did not clearly identify a significant improvement in accuracy. Following and extending Crookes' work, Foster and Skehan (1996) inquired into the effects of planning on oral performance (fluency, complexity, and accuracy) in interactional tasks by operationalizing detailed (i.e., instruction of how to conduct planning was given) and undetailed planning conditions (i.e., no instruction was given).

The results were more or less consistent with those in Crookes (1989), showing that planning had an influence on fluency and complexity but mixed results of accuracy; that is, in accuracy, undetailed planners outperformed detailed planners as well as no planners in all the tasks. In response to this mixed result, Foster and Skehan (1996) argue that "the goal of complexity and accuracy compete for limited information processing resources and that what is achievable depends on the precise allocational decisions made" (p.320).

The most noticeable point drawn from these studies is the clear influence of strategic planning on "complexity" and "fluency" but the limited influence on "accuracy". In theory, it can be hypothesized that planning opportunities lead to better performance in all the three components by freeing up cognitive capacity, as suggested by VanPatten's (1990) theory that strategic planning opportunities tend to clear the meaning aspect of language, so that learners can pay attention to form on task. However, in practice the impact on accuracy is fairly limited. That is, strategic planners are mainly involved in the overall planning of "the direction and phrases of the discourse" (Bygate 2001, p.25) through accessing the general knowledge store, being less attentive to formal aspects of language.

### **On-line planning**

To understand the nature of planning and the difficulty of accuracy-improvement, on-line planning must be taken into account. With reference to the mixed results of accuracy in the strategic planning research, Wendel (1997) argues that whether learners attend to fluency or accuracy depends on the type of planning. It cannot be emphasized too strongly that in spite of focus on *off-line* (i.e., strategic) planning, it is likely that the participants in the strategic planning studies were also implicitly engaged in *on-line* planning, assuming that the degree of on-line planning engagement might give different effects on accuracy results. Focusing on this methodological hurdle might give us a clue to solving the complex nature of accuracy in L2 speech production.

Yuan and Ellis (2003, p.6) define on-line planning as "the process by which speakers attend carefully to the formulation stage during speech planning and engage in pre-production and post-production monitoring of their speech acts"<sup>1</sup>. Following the function of working memory (WM)(e.g., Baddeley 1986, Miyake & Shah 1999), Ellis and Yuan (2004, 2005; Yuan & Ellis, 2003; Ellis, 2005a) theorize that when learners have the opportunity to engage in careful on-line planning, they are better able to access long-term memory (LTM), in particular, the planning of grammatical features, which are typically accessed in the planning process later than lexical items, as stipulated by a dual-mode processing model. That is, when speech production is pressured, learners make use of the limited processing time available to them to search mainly for lexical material, but when it is unpressured, they are better able to search their LTM for grammatical information after lexical searches have been processed.

To illustrate the effects of time pressure on task performance in a dual-mode model, Ellis (1987) investigates the differences of adult learners' use of past tense between planned (written and oral) and unplanned (oral) conditions. In the first task, the participants were asked to write a story based on a given picture in one hour (planned written). In the second task, they were asked to record an oral version of the story without looking at the written version (planned oral). In the final task, in two minutes, the participants were asked to record an oral version of the second picture (unplanned oral). As pointed out by Yuan and Ellis (2003), this three-way condition concerns the distinction between on-line planning (Task 1), strategic planning (Task 2) and non-planning (Task 3), because the writing process allows the learners to monitor the ongoing composition process. The findings largely support the on-line planning rationale within a

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> To induce on-line planning, Yuan and Ellis (2003) give the following instruction; "You can take as much time as you want when telling the story. If you think you say something not correct or not to your satisfaction, you can correct it as many times as you want".

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dual-mode perspective; accuracy on the regular past form declined in the unplanned condition (Task 3), while the correctness of the irregular past form was more or less consistent between the planned (Task 1& 2) and unplanned conditions (Task 3). That is, improved regular past forms in on-line planning give evidence that the learners were able to access rule-based knowledge, while at the same time, exemplar-based knowledge (i.e., irregular forms) was unaffected.

Building on Ellis' (1987) earlier work, Yuan and Ellis (2003) investigate the effects of strategic and on-line planning on oral performance. In fluency measures, the strategic planning group spoke the fastest and reformulated the least, while the on-line planning group spoke the slowest, reformulated and repeated the most. In complexity measures, strategic planning had a positive influence on grammatical complexity and also greater lexical variety, while on-line planning led to greater grammatical complexity but not lexical variety. In accuracy measures, the on-line planning group had the highest results, while the non-planning group had the lowest.

Importantly, increasing on-line cognitive space by on-line planning may be beneficial not only for enhancing accuracy but also for the development of IL. Despite the learner's inability to use this apparatus in spontaneous speech, if sufficient processing time is given, it is likely that they will be able to use brain function more correctly and appropriately by accessing grammatical knowledge in their LTM. Taking into account that speakers' minds are pressured within the limited WM capacity, depleting attention and time is extremely problematic particularly in speaking, because access to declarative knowledge requires considerable time to search for and employ it. This will result in learners' prioritizing fluency and resorting to lexicalized knowledge. As pointed out by much SLA research (e.g., Skehan 1996, Swain 1995), the opportunities to challenge the language beyond the present comfortable state of control is crucial to developing linguistic competence beyond a stabilized state of L2. As far as these processing problems are concerned, online planning can be a pedagogic tool to stretch out the upper limit of IL by giving the optimal condition to access less automatized, pre-lexicalized items and to elicit more accurate and sophisticated language use in LTM.

#### **Focus-on-Form and Planning**

In line with positive effects of planning on IL development, on-line planning also seems to contribute to L2 development through attempting accuracy enhancement. As "tasks" are widely regarded as vehicles to provide learners with meaning-focused activities, one of the important aims in TBLT is to consider how learners' focus on formal aspects can be elicited despite engaging in meaning-focused activities. For this aim, on-line planning seems closely linked to the current trend of focus-on-form study, because of its conscious effort to formulate and monitor the language.

#### Conditions increasing focus-on-form opportunities

There is a considerable body of research on the focus-on-form model constructed by Long (1991) and associates. The original motivation for this concept was to reject the dichotomous options of focus-on-formS (teaching linguistic forms isolated from communication, such as the grammar-translation method and audiolingualism) and focus-on-meaning (no overt focus on linguistic forms at all, such as the natural method and content-based learning), widely employed in foreign language classrooms, and to take a balanced position between them to raise the ultimate level of attainment. In his seminal paper, Long (1991) defines focus-on-form as overtly drawing learners' attention to linguistic elements as they arise *incidentally* in lessons whose overriding focus is on meaning, or communication. Although it is not necessarily an essential component in other focus-on-form definitions (e.g., Ellis 2001, Doughty & Williams 1998, Williams

2005), a key to Long's original theorization is its incidental nature, considering learners' built-in syllabus and its conformity to their psycholinguistic readiness to acquire L2 (Corder 1967, Lightbown 1998). According to the Teachability Hypothesis (Pienemann 1985), teaching particular linguistic items often fails to integrate with learners' IL system (i.e., focus-on-formS), since there is a gap between the teacher's and the learner's syllabus,

In line with cognitive processing concerns, Doughty (2001) proposes three pedagogical recommendations to promote focus-on-form chances, which can be assumed to reinforce a good connection between incidental focus-on-form and strategic/on-line planning:

- 1. The noticing issue: Do learners have the cognitive resources to notice the gap between their IL utterances and target language (TL) utterances around them?
- 2. The interruption issue: Is a pedagogical intervention that does not interrupt the learner's own processing for language learning even possible?
- 3. The timing issue: If so, then precisely "when", in cognitive terms, should the pedagogical intervention occur?

For the first issue, planning implementations are expected to give more frequent opportunities than spontaneous speech to notice the gap between IL and TL due to more expanded cognitive space caused by engaging in conceptual planning prior to the task in strategic planning or being free from on-line communication pressure in on-line planning. In dialogic conditions between a teacher and students or students and more advanced students, planning opportunities may lead to noticing the gap between IL (students) and TL (a teacher or advanced students); while in monologic conditions, it may be more likely to lead to noticing a hole between what they can say and what they want to say (Swain, 1998). While learners are still under online processing pressure in strategic planning, presumably on-line planning is more likely to create cognitive space on-task leading to noticing. The second, interruption, issue seems unproblematic in planning because, once speech has commenced, every decision about speech processes is, consciously or unconsciously, left to the speaker. Although planning may cause conscious awareness of linguistic form to intrude in the speaker's mind, an occurrence of this interruption can also be regarded as natural processing, because the decision whether or not they spend some time on thinking about the language is entirely up to the speaker, not the teacher. This learner-initiation seems to guarantee the last, timing, issue, because identification of problematic linguistic features should arise incidentally from their own current IL during realtime performance.

To bolster the focus-on-form effect of planning, studies by Ortega (1999, 2005) are important. Drawing on the information-processing theories that planning may lessen cognitive load and free up attentional resources at the micro levels of speech production, Ortega (1999) hypothesizes that the conscious attention of L2 speakers may shift to formal aspects of the language, and thus strategic planning could enhance learners' attention to form without directing than specifically to attend to the code. Ortega examined the process of strategic planning and found its focus-on-form effects through retrospective interviews. However, it was also suggested that "attention to form cannot be assumed as a guaranteed by-product of pretask planning opportunity" (p.136). That is, many other factors (e.g., the communicative requirements of the task, learners' predisposition towards communication or accuracy, and learner proficiency) might have an influence on accurate performance (Ortega, 1999, 2005). Although it is necessary to conduct research investigating such individual differences and contextual influences, the effects of on-line planning on focus-on-form is also important in an information-processing perspective. As more on-line cognitive space for noticing is made theoretically in on-line planning, more focus-on-form occurrences are likely to occur than with strategic planning.

# **Deeper processing**

Another probable distinction caused by strategic and on-line planning can be explained by "depth (or levels) of processing" in cognitive psychology (Craik & Lockhart, 1972). According to Craik and Lockhart (1972), speed of analysis does not necessarily predict retention; rather, retention is a function of depth and various factors including the amount of attention devoted to a stimulus, its compatibility with the analyzing structures, and the processing time available. That is, if learners are involved in more elaborate and deeper level of linguistic analysis, manipulated linguistic knowledge is more likely to be stored in LTM in a more durable and stronger state. Thus, deeper processing is likely to lead to more learning.

The original proposal of depth of processing concerns an aspect of input processing and is primarily applied to vocabulary learning research in SLA (e.g., Hulstijn, 2001; Laufer & Hulstijn, 2001), but it can be assumed that deeper processing is expected more in output than in comprehension (e.g., Swain 1995). In a study investigating noticing effects by input enhancement and an output production task where more positive effects in output were found, Izumi (2002) observes that input may have caused mere recirculation or rehearsal at the relatively shallow processing level, which led learners to experience only a short-term retention of the attended form, while output triggered deeper and more elaborate processing of the form, which led them to establish a more durable memory trace.

Extending this finding, as argued by several researchers (e.g., Bygate 1999, Izumi 2003, Skehan 1998), there may be further distinctions of processing levels within 'deeper processing' of output production. Although it is widely accepted that output production leads to syntactic processing more than comprehension, "not all circumstances of production may provide language learners with ideal grounds in which to encourage syntactization and sensitization to language forms" (Izumi, 2003, p.189). Considering factors such as required attention and sufficient processing time, on-line planning might more readily encourage learners to engage in syntactic processing, triggering deeper and more elaborate processing, which may lead to different learning effects from strategic planning.

As Craik and Lockhart's depth of processing was challenged for the ambiguities of its construct, the present paper provides only partial support for its application to the differential benefits of strategic planning and on-line planning. Thus, it does not go beyond the level of speculation, but it may be worth mentioning possible differences of depth of processing by different planning conditions in order to support the view concerning different degrees of focus-on-form effects brought about by different types of planning.

## **Implications for Teaching**

Pedagogic tasks with planning implementation can create the condition whereby learners are forced to rely on approximations of words since they cannot retrieve the exact terms due to insufficient lexical resources. Beyond a simple preparation time prior to or within task, planning may function as an opportunity to scrutinize one's own IL system and to control linguistic knowledge in communicative conditions. It is expected that planning integrates various L2 functions, and through these it may contribute to developing the language processing capacity needed for real world language use. It is reiterated that the strategic and on-line planning conditions created opportunities for learners to focus on form on-task, which is not easily realized in real communication exclusively prioritizing meaning.

It is probably true to say that strategic planning can be rather easily implemented in language classrooms. It may simply provide a certain amount of planning time prior to a task to design more authentic situations by, for example, planning a public speech in front of an audience (Willis 1996). For the pedagogic application of on-line planning, Yuan and Ellis (2003) gave the instruction to direct learners to pay careful attention to form and monitoring while doing a task. Skehan and Foster (2005) implemented a surprise element mid-task to encourage learners' on-line planning engagement. In addition to these ways, it may be important to consider how to design 'authentic' tasks that naturally include on-line planning. For example, a task where learners are applicants for a job and have to leave a voice message for their future employer saying why they want the job under conditions where the voice message can be edited before sending. This would allow as much time as necessary for on-line planning, with a natural pressure on accuracy.

## Conclusion

The planning research tells us that L2 learners tend to use more varied and complex language in planned conditions and this upgraded performance would lead to IL development, but the underlying mechanism for this rationale has been less certain. This paper has attempted to promote our understanding of planning and its effects on L2 performance. One of the problems raised in the previous research is that strategic planning tends to lead to fluent and complex language but does not guarantee accurate language. To explore this unsolved issue, this paper has focused on the distinction between strategic and on-line planning and observed the mechanisms of their differential effects on task performance. More specifically, on-line planning arguably tends to lead to deeper syntactic processing than strategic planning and, beyond a simple improvement of accuracy, meets the focus-on-form inducing conditions.

The present paper argues that more focus-on-form effects of on-line planning can be conceivable, but the relatively small number of studies on on-line planning does not provide evidence, compared to the large number of strategic planning studies in various pedagogical contexts. Together with a growing demand for the process-orientated view, it is important to embark more on on-line planning research in qualitative as well as quantitative manners to examine the proposed effects of this particular implementation. Although the ways of implementing on-line planning in the language classroom may need more consideration, some kind of "on-line planning" may be needed for developing learners' ability in syntactic formulation.

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