LTJ_31.2_Pre-task_Planning_Effects_17

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Glenn: From the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom, this is Glenn Fulcher with another issue of Language Testing Bytes. The first paper, in Issue 31.2 of Language Testing is by Ronita of the Aoyama Gakuin University in Japan, and [Unintelligible 00:20] Katsuhara of the University of Bedfordshire in the UK, they are concerned with a very practical question, 'What is the effect of giving test takers planning time prior to appear for a math speaking test?' Does it affect, what the test takers say, does it change the scores they get?

The answers will inform the designer speaking test, not only in high stakes assessment context, but probably in classrooms as well. Welcome to Language Testing Bytes, to talk about planning time in preparing for a math speaking test.

Respondent 1: Thank you for inviting us.

Respondent 2: Thank you very much Glen for having us here today.

Glenn: Let's start if we can with what seems to be a fairly straight forward issue. For most teachers, it appears intuitively obvious that if learners have planning time, before doing a test, they are going to use that time to make sure that what they say is better that what they would otherwise say.

I realize here that what we mean by better, has to be defined for research purposes, what does pedagogic research tells us about planning time, and is this intuitively obvious as it seems at first sight?

Respondent 1: Well this is exactly issues the issue that test researchers have been faced with during the last two decades or so. When researcher, started test with research, using pre-test planning, in the early 1990s they thought pre-test planning would simply [Unintelligible 01:43] the performance from learners.

As we are thinking tutor planning time indeed lead to better performance to some extent but when researchers looked at the results carefully, they saw a very complex picture. In those studies they usually measure learner's performance by using these [Unintelligible 02:04] variables such as [Unintelligible 02:07] and complexity.

In a nutshell, my test in research, reported the benefit of planning in terms of fluency but result were mixed in terms of complexity and accuracy depending on how much planning time was given whether

the planning was guided or unguided, in what context and with what types of learning. So the landscape of pre-test planning has become a complex than researchers initially expected 20 years ago.

Glenn: So let's now turn to language testing. In testing it's much more common to manipulate contextual variables much more carefully than in pedagogic research, and to have operational measures of what we might count as better performance. So is there anything in the language testing research to date that paints a different picture?

Respondent 1: Yes, language test in research has made the picture even more complex. Most test research report at least some benefits of pre-test planning, even if there were some differences in detail but when pre-test planning was applied to learners test in research, a good number of studies report virtually no effect of pre-test planning, in the testing context.

There are several possible reasons for such inconsistencies between pedagogic and the language testing research, and one of them is as you say, in testing, we use writing scales to measure learners performers other than this [Unintelligible 03:40] measures. So to better understand the complexities, we paid particular attention to the ways in which we analyze the collective data.

Glenn: No my understanding is that all of this research has been conducted almost exclusively with monologic task but you are more interested in the paired format right? So presumably you wish to see the effect of variation in planning time on features of interactional competence. Can you outline what features of talk you want to look at with the hypothesis that variation and planning time might cause them to change?

Respondent 2: Yes, we fell that we should really look at dialogic task because a paired speaking format is not very popular to measure learner's interactional competence but we did not seem to have any information available but the effect on planning time on these tasks.

So we firstly wondered how examination boards have actually decided to have or not to have planning time in the first place, because the difference between monologic and dialogic tasks is that in dialogic task, conversation is core constructed between the speakers so the conversational task is always open and subject to [Unintelligible 05:04] by both parties.

Evelyn Glass paper on paired format was very good and it was actually a strong inspiration for our study. She characterized types of paired interaction into collaborative parallel and asymmetric patterns and those patterns can always change at any point of the discourse. So we became very curious about how planning time could affect types of discourse in paired test also as Rio has just mentioned, we

thought that the ways in which we analyze the data was crucial so we decided to look at the process of speech using conversation analysis as well as the product of speech with more traditional methods such as discourse anagogic measures and writing scores.

Glenn: Now that we have talked about independent and independent variables, can you very briefly take us through the result of your study, leaving aside the questionnaire and perceptual elements. Just focus if you can on the difference in scores, discourse and conversation analysis.

Respondent 2: Sure, we first of all, looked at rating scores under the two conditions planned and unplanned, and to do so, we used a modified version of [Unintelligible 06:28] rating scales on fluency, accuracy and the complexity.

Under the planned condition, participants got slightly higher scores on fluency and complexity but we must say that the real score difference were rather small, and for the discourse analytical measures, we looked at three types of fluency, speech breakdown and repair fluency, and syntactic and lexical complexity and also accuracy.

In addition because we wanted to see some interactional features, we decided to look at total length, the number of words per [Unintelligible 07:05]. The result showed that the planning time, improved breakdown fluency, in the time length but was detrimental to speed fluency.

Then we moved onto conversational analysis, that was the most interesting in the informative part of the study we observed many collaborative interactions under the unplanned condition and probably the asymmetric interactions under the planned condition, where learners did not have planning time, they had frequent short term exchanges at the beginning of the talk, and as they went on, they gradually developed interaction collaboratively. They incorporated their partner's ideas into their own speech.

In contrast, when they had planning time, they started with slower and longer times presenting what they had planned to say during the planning time. They were both busy in just recalling and telling their own ideas ending up with parallel interaction that resemble a series of monologues.

After a while, they tended to fall into a second hand period as they run out of ideas, then towards the end, they started talking again but the interaction was often asymmetric, one person being more dominant than the other.

So it seems that learners have better chances to demonstrate their own abilities to interact collaboratively when they don't have planning time at all.

Glenn: The most remarkable findings is clearly that pre-test planning result in talk that is much more unnatural, in the sense that it likes many of the features we now associate with interactional competance. Can you briefly speculate as to why planning time has this negative effect on performance?

Respondent 1: Mine being as a reasons for unnatural performance with planning time for dialogic test but we primarily speculate that when learners had planning time, many of them tends to prioritize to say what they had planned and paid mutual attention to what their partner said.

If fortunately they had planned similar ideas they might have the [Unintelligible 09:28] idea collaboratively but this is usually not the case. So on the planned condition they started trying to tell their planned ideas anyway without aiming to collaborate with their partner.

As a result in spite we used direct test, the instruction resembled monologues of course which is not test designers intention, and in contrast, the unplanned condition seem to push learners into collaboration presumably because each of them has no particular idea to start with.

I mean, learners were more encouraged to cooperate with each other under this difficult condition. As a result many of them constructed the conversation more collaboratively than the unplanned condition, so we able to [Unintelligible 10:23] only one pair interaction indeed in detail in this paper but interestingly most pairs resembled very similar interactional patterns.

Respondent 2: Yes, that's right. We also had questionnaire data on what learners did during their planning stage, and how they felt about their own performances, and it was interesting to find that only very few learners thought at the planning stage, about what their partners might say.

Also when they were performing the task, they found it more difficult to produce ideas when they had planning time. This was completely contra-intuitive but this could explain that with planning time, the task became more like a monologic task where they need to produce ideas on their own, and this could also explain their struggles, their experience when they ran out of ideas in the middle of the conversation.

Also this might be slightly off topic, but when we talked about our results, to my colleague Vlad, Digerack who specializes in

intercultural communication, he shared a very interesting study with us that he did on group discussions, at an international meeting if the agenda is shared in advance and if each country has a chance to discuss their issue internally then the participants tend to become more egoistic and it becomes more difficult to reach a consensus at meeting.

Instead when they are given the topic to discuss on the spot, they can discuss it more collaboratively to reach agreement together. It is fascinating that we can actually see some sort of similarity between what happens at those international meetings, and at paired speaking tests so by giving better planning time to candidates, we are actually encouraging them to be more egoistic unconsciously, maybe yes.

Glenn: That's really interesting and of course this has consequences for the practice of examination boards, and I am also assuming that there maybe be advice from this for the teacher who uses paired format test in the classroom. What is the headline message you have for both of this potential audience for your research?

Respondent 2:   Yes, we'd like to say that implementing pre-test planning time, prior to a paired format, is not advisable because it is true that providing planning time, seem to benefit test takers slightly in terms of scores and some discourse measures but this study raised a concern that planning time might deprive candidates of the chance to demonstrate their abilities.

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