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Effect of Information-gap, Reasoning-gap, and Opinion-gap Tasks on EFL Learners' Pragmatic Production, Metapragmatic Awareness, and Comprehension of Implicature

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Abstract

Although the effective role of instruction in developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence has been acknowledged in the literature, very few studies have investigated the effect of a specific language teaching method on the development of pragmatic competence. Thus, to address the existing gap, this study was conducted (1) to investigate the effectiveness of task-based instruction (TBI) on the development of pragmatic competence and (2) to see the effect(s) of information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap tasks on the development of EFL learners' pragmatic production, metapragmatic awareness, and comprehension of implicature. To this end, 60 homogeneous intermediate EFL learners were selected and assigned to three groups randomly. The twenty members of each group received instruction on the three speech acts of request, refusal, and apology through one task type, i.e., in group #1, through information-gap, in group #2, through opinion-gap, and in group #3 through reasoning-gap tasks. The findings confirmed the positive effect of TBI on EFL learner's pragmatic competence. Also, learners in the information-gap task group outperformed the other groups on pragmatic production and metapragmatic awareness, but there was no significant difference among the groups regarding their comprehension of implicature. This study has implications for English language instructors, materials developers, and researchers.

Keywords: *Task, Task-based Instruction, Pragmatic Competence, Pragmatic Production, Metapragmatic Awareness, Implicature*

In foreign language classrooms, usually the focus of instruction is on explaining grammar rules, vocabulary items, and some related exercises; consequently, the communicative aspects of language are overlooked (Derakhshan, 2014). Knowing the rules and a set of words may enable learners to create a grammatically correct sentence; however, this is not the aim of language learning. Learners also need to know how language is used appropriately in the given context (Bardovi-Harlig, 2012); this is the ability that is known as pragmatic competence. However, instructors often neglect to teach about pragmatic features of the second language (L2) (e.g., Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Derakhshan & Eslami-Rasekh, 2015; Morrow, 1996; Olshtain & Cohen, 1990; Vellenga, 2011). Moreover, whereas teachers pay attention to lexical and grammatical errors in an L2 learner's speech or writing, inappropriate pragmatic performance is usually not within the scope of what teachers focus on (Schauer, 2006). Therefore, there is a range of proficient learners who know many vocabulary items and grammar rules and make well-ordered sentences out of them; however, their final output is not contextually and situationally appropriate (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1990). According to Bardovi-Harlig (1999, p. 686), "high levels of grammatical competence do not guarantee concomitant high levels of pragmatic competence." This inappropriacy is due to the lack of or deficiency in L2 learners' pragmatic competence. The rationale behind this phenomenon is that despite the positive effect of instruction in developing second language pragmatic competence (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2009; Takimoto, 2006; Yoshimi & Wang, 2007), the instruction of pragmatics is insufficient or even pragmatic features are not taught at all in L2 classes (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 1991; Billmyer, 1990; Derakhshan & Eslami-Rasekh, 2020; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Olshtain & Cohen 1990; Soler & Martinez-Flor, 2008).

Rather than just acknowledging this deficiency in the L2 instructional program, it would appear to be a propitious moment for language educators to develop a comprehensive and well-structured methodology in order to better foster pragmatic competence among L2 learners. A significant number of studies show that both explicit and implicit instruction of pragmatic features can be effective (e.g., Alcón-Soler, 2012, 2015; Alcón-Soler & Guzman, 2010; Derakhshan, 2014; Derakhshan & Eslami-Rasekh, 2015; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021; Eslami-Rasekh & Liu, 2013, Ghobadi & Fahim, 2009; House, 1996; Kubota, 1995; Shakki et al., 2020; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama et al., 1997) though explicit instruction has been observed to be more effective in many pedagogical interventions (Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019). Besides, since different methods of instruction can influence pragmatic competence differently (Billmyer, 1990; Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2004; Rose & Ng, 2001; Tateyama, 2001; Wishnoff, 2000), introducing new, genuine, and innovative methods – which involve communicative approaches and consider the learners' role in the process of instruction – can pave the way for pragmatics instruction in an EFL/ESL context.

One approach to communicative language teaching has been found to be highly productive in helping to develop learners' communicative competence is task-based language teaching (TBLT). In this approach, the learner acquires the language through "using the language in carefully structured situations" (Nunan, 2014, p. 460). Also, negotiation of meaning, which results in attention to form in doing tasks, has been shown to lead to the development of L2 acquisition (Ellis, 2003). Despite the proven benefits of TBLT, there have not been many studies investigating the effect of tasks and task-based instruction (TBI) on the development of pragmatic production and comprehension (Derakhshan, 2014; Tajeddin et al., 2012; Takimoto,

2012). In addition, the possible effect of TBI on the development of metapragmatic awareness and the comprehension of implicature among L2 learners appears not to have been investigated. Thus, the main objective of the present study was to examine the effect of TBI on the development of pragmatic competence among EFL learners. To do so, the effects of three types of tasks, namely information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap on the development of the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology among Iranian EFL learners were investigated. Also, the effects of these three different types of tasks on EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness and the comprehension of implicature were examined. Therefore, the following research questions were formulated:

How do EFL learners given either information-gap, reasoning-gap, or opinion-gap tasks compare with regard to:

1. their production of the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology?
2. their metapragmatic awareness?
3. their comprehension of implicature?

Literature Review

Pragmatic Production and Metapragmatic Awareness

Pragmatic competence has been studied from different perspectives and many aspects like pragmatics development (Bergen & Grodner, 2012; Kasper & Rose, 2002), pragmatic comprehension and production (Bouton, 1994; Derakhshan & Arabmofrad, 2018; Derakhshan & Eslami-Rasekh, 2020; Kubota, 1995; Takahashi, 2001), pragmatics across cultures and languages (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987, Zand-Moghadam & Adeb, 2020), pragmatics strategies (Cohen, 2005, 2019; Derakhshan et al., 2021; Malmir & Derakhshan, 2020; Tajeddin & Malmir, 2015), and the explicit or implicit instruction of pragmatics (Derakhshan & Shakki, 2020; Fukuya & Zhang, 2002; House, 1996; Rose & Ng, 2001; Takahashi, 2001; Tateyama, 2001), have been investigated in the literature. Most of these studies have investigated the effect of intervention on the development of different dimensions of pragmatic competence among L2 learners. In 2015, Taguchi found that in 58 studies, the effective role of L2 pragmatics instruction is confirmed. In a meta-analysis, Yousefi and Nassaji (2019) analyzed 39 studies and concluded that instruction improves L2 learners' pragmatic production and comprehension. Many of the meta-analyses (e.g., Badjadi, 2016; Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019) also indicated that not only L2 pragmatics instruction is beneficial, but also the explicit teaching of L2 pragmatic features is more effective. For instance, in the most recent meta-analysis on 17 studies, Derakhshan and Shakki (2021) found that there is an overall large effect size on the effectiveness of the instruction of request ($g = 1.48$) in an Iranian context. They also reported that some variables such as gender and treatment type were found to be a moderator for this effectiveness. Moreover, it was found that the male group produced a larger effect size ($g = 3.09$) than the female one ($g = 1.10$), and regarding treatment types, the explicit group yielded a larger effect size ($g = 1.53$) than the implicit one ($g = 1.20$).

Eslami-Rasekh et al. (2004) investigated the effect of explicit instruction on advanced EFL learners' speech act comprehension. The results revealed that the learners' speech act comprehension improved significantly. In another study, Eslami-Rasekh and Eslami-Rasekh (2008) investigated the effectiveness of metapragmatic instruction on the speech act of apology. To do so, they randomly assigned 52 advanced EFL learners to an experimental and a control

group. The researchers utilized an eight-item DCT and an error recognition test (ERT) as pretests and posttests. The results showed the improvement of the experimental group in the performance and recognition of the speech act of apology. Salehi (2011) conducted a study on 40 university students to investigate the effect of explicit and implicit instruction on the acquisition and performance strategies for the speech acts of apology and request. The results revealed pragmatic gains in both groups, but not at a level of statistical significance. A study was conducted by Nguyen et al. (2012) to compare the explicit and implicit modes of instruction, focusing on criticism. It was observed that both groups' pragmatic performance, compared with a control group, improved; however, the explicit group could gain more than the implicit group. However, in 2012, Li focused on the speech act of request while implementing CALL and observed that the implicit group could outperform the other groups.

Martínez-Flor and Alcón-Soler (2008) studied the effects of instruction on developing pragmatic awareness among EFL learners. They studied 81 university students in Spain and observed that instruction could develop learners' pragmatic awareness. Alcón-Soler and Guzmán (2010) also tried to investigate whether instruction can develop learners' pragmatic awareness. Ninety-two graduates in translation participated in their study. The speech act of refusal was chosen as the pragmatic component to observe, and verbal reports were the means to analyze the ability of the participants in comprehending and producing refusals. The results revealed that the differences in attention before and after instruction were significant and that pedagogical intervention was helpful. Alcón-Soler and Guzman Pitarch (2010) claimed that instruction can develop awareness among language learners.

Implicature

Conversational implicature was introduced by Grice in 1975 to refer to the implied meaning that the addressee infers based on the contextual clues. It is "... the inference a hearer makes about a speaker's intended meaning that arises from their use of the literal meaning of what the speaker said, the conversational principle and its maxims (Paltridge, 2006, p. 70)." According to Taguchi and Yamaguchi (2019), implicature studies are of three types. In the first type, only Grice's maxims are taken into consideration (e.g., Bouton, 1992, 1994; Roever et al., 2014). In the second type, "the comprehension of direct and indirect speech acts" (Taguchi & Yamaguchi, 2019, p. 32) is studied (e.g., Cook & Liddicoat, 2002; Garcia, 2004). The last type of studies investigated irony (e.g., Yamanaka, 2003). As far as instruction of pragmatics is concerned, not many studies have been conducted on conversational implicature (e.g., Bouton, 1999; Derakhshan, 2014, 2019; Desilla, 2012, Kubota, 1995; Lee, 2000; Padilla Cruz, 2013; Taguchi, 2007), the results of which support the positive effect of instruction on implicature development. Bouton (1999) observed the positive effect of explicit teaching of implicature to language learners. In a study, Kubota (1995) observed that explicit instruction and the use of consciousness-raising tasks would have a positive effect on Japanese university students' understanding of conversational implicature.

A study was conducted by Mitchelson (2011) to investigate the comprehension of implicature in an L2 setting. In doing so, two groups of nineteen native and non-native speakers of English participated in the study. They were provided with five dialogues that contained the flouting of Grice's four maxims. The participants had to answer some open-ended questions. While native speakers outperformed non-native participants in comprehending implicature and specifying the flouts of Grice's maxims, non-native speakers showed an interest in implicature skill development. They were the potential for improvement throughout instruction.

In the context of Iran, Mirzaei et al. (2016) studied 90 EFL undergraduate Iranian students and compared the three groups of computer-mediated communication (CMC), social media networks (SMNs), and a control group in terms of implicature comprehension. Their findings revealed that treatments of both types could improve the participants' ability to comprehend conversational implicatures. The effect of some methods of pragmatic instruction, such as metapragmatic consciousness-raising, translation, etc., on 51 EFL learners' comprehension of implicature was also studied by Derakhshan and Eslami-Rasekh (2020). They observed that instruction of any type could have a positive effect on the participants' ability to comprehend implicatures. It is also found out that implicature can be influenced by a couple of factors, such as "cultural background, conventionality, the degree of formulae in implicatures, L2 learners' length of exposure to the target context, and L2 learners' general proficiency in the target language" (Mirzaei et al., 2016, p. 146).

Task, Task-based Instruction, and Pragmatic Competence

Although task-based instruction has been studied by many well-known researchers since the late 1990s, very few studies have focused on the effect of this communicative approach on the development of pragmatic competence among EFL or ESL learners. As Martín -Laguna (2020, p. 28) believes, "research on the intersection between TBLT, pragmatics, and multilingualism is still in its initial stages."

Investigating a task-based tutorial program, Winke and Teng (2010) found that the pragmatic competence of 19 learners of Chinese developed in eight weeks. In a pioneering study, Tajeddin et al. (2012), examined the effect of TBLT on 75 Iranian university students' pragmatic production and metapragmatic awareness. The treatment was given in the pre-task, while-task, and post-task phases. A written discourse completion test and a metapragmatic awareness questionnaire were also used to collect data. The results indicated that the use of tasks in the framework of TBLT was effective in developing the participants' pragmatic production and metapragmatic awareness. The effect of TBI on implicatures, pragmatic routines, and speech acts was investigated by Shoushinasab (2013). The study was conducted on 100 intermediate EFL students (50 male & 50 female) at a language institute in Ahvaz, Iran. The researcher concluded that TBI, though effective in general, did not yield the same results as concerns pragmatic competence, i.e., different pragmatic components were developed differently. The effect of web-based tasks on study-abroad students' pragmatic comprehension was studied by Teng and Fei in 2013. It was observed that web-based tasks were effective in developing their knowledge of L2 pragmatics, especially speech acts.

The production of pragmatic markers in relation to task types was studied by Neary-Sundquist in 2013. She observed that there is a relationship between proficiency level and the use of pragmatic markers. Pragmatic-focused tasks were also studied by Martín -Laguna (2014). She observed that there is more attention to pragmatics in the interaction between the teacher and the learners, rather than between the learners themselves. Tajeddin and Hosseinpour (2014) also conducted a study to see the possible impact of different consciousness-raising tasks on the acquisition of the speech act of request by EFL learners. The main instrument was a written discourse completion test. The results revealed that instruction in any mode has positive effects on developing students' speech act production. Taguchi and Kim (2016) explored the impact of dialog construction tasks on 74 Korean learners of English, focusing on the speech act of request. The researchers observed the positive effect of collaborative dialog in developing request head acts in the collaborative group.

By reviewing the literature, it was made clear that only a few studies have investigated the effect of task-based instruction and different task types on the development of L2 learners' pragmatic competence and that the main components of pragmatic competence have not been taken into consideration in the previous studies. Thus, the present study not only investigated the effect of task-based instruction and the main types of tasks on Iranian EFL learners, but also considered speech act production, metapragmatic knowledge and the comprehension of implicature as the main building blocks of pragmatic competence.

Method

Participants and Research Setting

The sample in the present study included 60 (33 female and 27 male) intermediate English students who were selected based on their proficiency level from a private language institute in Tehran, Iran. Their level of proficiency had already been determined by the institute. Their ages ranged from 16 to 46. These 60 participants were randomly assigned to one of the three treatment groups, each receiving a different task: information-gap, opinion-gap, or reasoning-gap task. There were 20 participants in each group. In that institute, the *American English File* series (Latham-Koenig et al., 2013) was being used as the main textbook series. These books come in 6 volumes (from Starter to Book 5), and the participants of the present study read Book 3.

Instruments

Three different instruments were used in this study as both the pretest and the posttest.

Written discourse completion task (WDCT). The written discourse completion task (WDCT) used in the present study was constructed by Tajeddin et al. (2012). It consisted of 15 items, including five situations for each of the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology. The situations covered various topics and checked for control over the following factors influencing pragmatics: social status, degree of familiarity, and the degree of imposition/severity. The participants had one minute to provide their answers for each situation.

Metapragmatic awareness questionnaire (MPAQ). In the present study, the MPAQ developed by Jianda (2006), which was confirmed to have a sufficient degree of reliability and validity, was utilized in the same situations as in the WDCT, including 15 items; five items for each of the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology. The participants had to read the situations and answer three questions. The first question was on the degree of severity or imposition, the second was about the status of the interlocutors, and the third about the degree of social distance or familiarity between the interlocutors. The learners had to answer the first and the third questions based on a five-point Likert scale, and choose the correct answer from among three choices for the second question.

Implicature comprehension test (ICT). The ICT was constructed by Derakhshan (2014) and consisted of 26 multiple-choice items. It was used as a test of how well learners perceived what was implied pragmatically in each situation. Each item included a short conversation and a description of the situation in which the conversation took place, followed by a question. For every item, the participants were required to listen to a conversation and choose the correct choice based on their comprehension of the conversation.

Instructional materials. In this study, instruction was given through the use of information-gap, reasoning-gap, and opinion-gap tasks. The rationale behind selecting these three types of

tasks was that they were considered cognitive tasks in Ellis's (2003) model. Information-gap tasks involve "a transfer of given information from one person to another or from one form to another or from one place to another" (Ellis, 2003, p. 213). Realization of such tasks became possible through an information transfer activity (Widdowson, 1978; as cited in Ellis, 2003) and standard information-gap activity. Reasoning-gap tasks, according to Prabhu (1987, p. 46), involve "deriving some new information from given information through the processes of inference, deduction, practical reasoning, or a perception of relationships or patterns." Finally, opinion-gap tasks involve "identifying and articulating a personal preference, feeling, or attitude in response to a given situation" (Ellis, 2003, p. 213). These tasks could engage the students in collaborative cooperation as well as individual performances.

To design the instructional tasks, the researchers used the available examples and samples, textbooks for conversational courses, and some websites for English language teaching (e.g., *Let's Talk, Books One & Two*, englishforeveryonr.com). The tasks' pragmatic foci were on the three speech acts of request, refusal, and apology as they manifested themselves in listening and reading, as well as in speaking and writing. Regarding the types of tasks, the researchers designed a variety of tasks, like dialogs, role-plays, listing, classifying, discussion, etc., and made use of them in the form of a three-chapter pamphlet. To design the tasks, Ellis's (2003) model was adopted. Thus, many features like task input, information configuration, interactant relationship, interaction requirement, orientation of tasks, discourse mode and domain, etc. were taken into consideration.

Data Collection Procedure

As was mentioned above, the sample of this study was 60 intermediate EFL learners whose English proficiency level had already been determined by a language institute in Tehran. These participants were randomly assigned to three groups of information-gap task (IGT), reasoning-gap task (RGT), and opinion-gap task (OGT). Each session in that institute took two hours and 15 minutes of instruction, but, every session, only 45 minutes to one hour was dedicated to teaching the designed tasks. The data collection procedure for the present study lasted for 11 sessions. In the first session, the WDCT, MPAQ, and ICT were administered before the treatment. From the second session up to the end of the tenth session, each group received instruction on the three speech acts through information-gap tasks, reasoning-gap tasks, and opinion-gap tasks, respectively. Three sessions were required for each of the speech acts of refusal, request, and apology to be instructed, and, on the whole, instruction of the speech acts lasted for nine sessions. In the eleventh session, the WDCT, MPAQ, and ICT were administered as the posttest.

Data Analysis

In this study, the findings from the pretests and the posttests and also the students' performance in each group were compared and contrasted with each other to provide reasonable answers to the questions. To address the first research question, first, the participants' productions of the speech acts of request, refusal and apology in the pre-and posttest (WDCTs) were rated based on a 6-point Likert scale (from 0 to 5) developed by Taguchi (2006). Second, each group's performance on a WDCT in the pretest was compared with its performance on the same WDCT in the posttest using a multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA). Finally, the three groups' pragmatic productions were compared with each other.

To address the second research question, the participants of the present study had to answer the Metapragmatic Awareness Questionnaire (MPAQ), which was developed by Jianda (2006). The participants were asked to read the situations and answer the three items. The first item was on the degree of severity or imposition of the situation; the second item was about the interlocutors' status, and the third item investigated the degree of social distance or familiarity between the interlocutors. Learners had to give their answers to the first and the third item, based on a five-point Likert scale. The second item was in the form of a multiple-choice item, and the learners were supposed to choose the correct answer from among the three options. Thus, in order to get precise results, each of the three items was analyzed separately. To investigate whether the three groups were homogenous in terms of their metapragmatic awareness before the main study, a multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) was run. After ensuring the homogeneity of the groups in the pre-test, a multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) was run to compare the three groups' means on the posttest.

To address the third research question, the participants' responses to the Implicature Comprehension Test (ICT) at the beginning and the end of the study were compared through a one-way ANOVA. Before conducting the test, the homogeneity of the participants was also ensured.

Results

The Comparability of Speech Act Production across Task Groups

This first question compared the pragmatic performance of the IGT, RGT, and OGT groups on the request, refusal, and apology speech acts. The results of the paired-samples t-test ($t(19) = 17.31, p = 0.000, r = 0.97$, representing a large effect size) indicated that the IGT group had a significantly higher mean on the posttest of total WDCT ($M = 64.50, SD = 3.44$) than the pretest ($M = 52.10, SD = 3.50$). The OGT group's answers to the WDCTs in the pre- and posttest were also scored and compared. The results of the paired-samples t-test ($t(19) = 15.01, p = 0.000, r = 0.96$, representing a large effect size) indicated that the OGT group had a significantly higher mean on the posttest of total WDCT ($M = 61.75, SD = 3.30$) than the pretest ($M = 51.40, SD = 3.56$). As for the RGT group, their answers to the WDCTs in the pre- and posttest were scored and then compared to investigate the possible difference before and after using such tasks. The results of the paired-samples t-test ($t(19) = 12.86, p = 0.000, r = 0.947$, representing a large effect size) indicated that the RGT group had a significantly higher mean on the posttest of the total WDCT ($M = 61.75, SD = 4.82$) than the pretest ($M = 52.05, SD = 4.58$) (Table 1).

Table 1. Comparison of the Three Groups (Pragmatic Production; Pretest vs. Posttest).

Group	Test	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	T	df	P
Total WDCT	Posttest	64.50	20	3.44	.76	17.31	19	.000
IGT	Pretest	52.10	20	3.50	.78			
Total WDCT	Posttest	61.75	20	3.30	.73	15.01	19	.000
OGT	Pretest	51.40	20	3.56	.79			
Total WDCT	Posttest	61.75	20	4.82	1.07	12.86	19	.000
RGT	Pretest	52.05	20	4.58	1.02			

Then, before running the MANOVA, the homogeneity of covariance was ensured through the Box's test ($Box's M = 8.70, p = 0.78$). The non-significant result of Levene's tests, i.e., the

second assumption, also indicated that the groups enjoyed homogenous variances on the pretests of the speech acts of request ($F = 0.16, p = 0.84$), refusal ($F = .86, p = 0.42$) and apology ($F = 0.63, p = 0.53$). Therefore, MANOVA was run.

The results of MANOVA ($F(6, 112) = 1.39, p = 0.22, Partial \eta = 0.07$, representing a moderate effect size) indicated that there were not any significant differences among the three groups' means on the pretests of the speech acts of request, refusal, and apology. Thus, the next comparison was made among the three groups in the posttest. The results indicated that (a) there were not any significant differences among the means of the IGT ($M = 21.60$), OGT ($M = 20.65$) and RGT ($M = 21.25$) groups' means on the posttest of the speech act of request ($F(2, 57) = 2.41, p = 0.099, Partial \eta = 0.07$, representing a moderate effect size); (b) there were not any significant differences between the means of the IGT ($M = 20.65$), OGT ($M = 19.60$) and RGT ($M = 19.60$) groups' means on the posttest of the speech act of refusal ($F(2, 57) = 2.03, p = 0.14, Partial \eta = 0.067$, representing a moderate effect size), and (c) there were significant differences between the means of the IGT ($M = 22.25$), OGT ($M = 21.45$) and RGT ($M = 20.95$) groups' means on the posttest of the speech act of apology ($F(2, 57) = 3.78, p = 0.029, Partial \eta = 0.11$, representing a moderate to large effect size) (Table 2). To recognize where the difference exists, a post-hoc Scheffe's test was also used. The results of the post-hoc Scheffe's test indicated that from among the pairwise comparisons done, there was only one significant difference between the IGT and RGT groups' means on the posttest of apology; the IGT group ($M = 22.25$) had a significantly higher mean than the RGT group ($M = 20.95$) on the posttest of the speech act of apology ($MD = 1.30, p = 0.030$).

Table 2. Comparison of the Three Groups (Pragmatic Production in Posttests).

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	Post WDCT Req	9.23	2	4.61	2.41	.099	.07
	Post WDCT Ref	14.70	2	7.35	2.03	.140	.06
	Post WDCT App	17.20	2	8.60	3.78	.029	.11

The Comparability of Learners' Metapragmatic Awareness by Task Group

The second question looked at the impact of task group (IGT, RGT, or OGT) on the learners' metapragmatic awareness. To address this question, first, it was observed that at the beginning, the three groups were homogeneous: Box's test ($Box's M = 8.48, p = 0.79$) and Levene's test [request ($F = 0.62, p = 0.53$), refusal ($F = .03, p = .96$), and apology ($F = 3.11, p = .05$)]. Then, the results of MANOVA ($F(6, 112) = 1.12, p = 0.354, Partial \eta = 0.05$, representing a weak effect size) indicated that there were not any significant differences between the three groups' means on the pretests of metapragmatic awareness of request ($F(2, 57) = 1.82, p = 0.140, Partial \eta = 0.06$, representing a moderate effect size), refusal ($F(2, 57) = 0.10, p = 0.900, Partial \eta = 0.004$, representing a weak effect size), and apology ($F(2, 57) = 1.24, p = 0.29, Partial \eta = .042$, representing a weak effect size).

Next, the non-significant results of the Box's test ($Box's M = 4.29, p = 0.984$) indicated that the assumption of homogeneity of covariance matrices was met. It was also observed that the groups enjoyed homogenous variances on the posttests of metapragmatic awareness of request

($F = 2.61, p = 0.082$), refusal ($F = 0.54, p = 0.584$), and apology ($F = 0.19, p = 0.827$). Then, a MANOVA was run to compare the three groups on the post-test. The results ($F(6, 112) = 3.97, p = .001, \text{Partial } \eta = 0.17$, representing a large effect size) indicated that there were significant differences between the three groups' means on the posttests of metapragmatic awareness of request, refusal, and apology.

It can be stated that (a) there were significant differences between the means of the IGT ($M = 39.90$), OGT ($M = 36.20$), and RGT ($M = 36.75$) groups' on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of request ($F(2, 57) = 6.75, p = 0.002, \text{Partial } \eta = 0.19$, representing a large effect size). The results of the post-hoc Scheffe's tests also indicated that, first, the IGT group ($M = 39.90$) significantly outperformed the OGT ($M = 36.20$) on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of request ($MD = 3.70, p = 0.005$); second, the IGT group ($M = 39.90$) significantly outperformed the RGT ($M = 36.75$) on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of request ($MD = 3.15, p = 0.020$). Finally, there was not any significant difference between the RGT ($M = 36.75$) and OGT ($M = 36.20$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of request ($MD = 0.55, p = 0.880$); (b) there were significant differences between the means of the IGT ($M = 43.85$), OGT ($M = 42$) and RGT ($M = 41.60$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of refusal ($F(2, 57) = 4.84, p = 0.011, \text{Partial } \eta = 0.145$, representing a large effect size). Accordingly, it can be mentioned that, first, there was not any significant difference between IGT ($M = 43.85$) and OGT ($M = 42$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of refusal ($MD = 1.85, p = 0.060$); second, the IGT group ($M = 43.85$) significantly outperformed the RGT group ($M = 41.65$) on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of refusal ($MD = 2.20, p = 0.020$). Finally, there was not any significant difference between the RGT ($M = 41.65$) and OGT ($M = 42$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of refusal ($MD = 0.35, p = 0.900$), and (c) there were significant differences between the means of the IGT ($M = 36.80$), OGT ($M = 35.65$) and RGT ($M = 34.50$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of apology ($F(2, 57) = 3.53, p = 0.036, \text{Partial } \eta = 0.11$, representing a moderate to large effect size). Accordingly, it can be claimed that first, there was not any significant difference between the IGT ($M = 36.80$) and OGT ($M = 35.65$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of apology ($MD = 1.15, p = 0.419$); second, the IGT group ($M = 36.80$) significantly outperformed the RGT group ($M = 34.50$) on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of apology ($MD = 2.30, p = .036$). Finally, there was not any significant difference between the RGT ($M = 34.50$) and OGT ($M = 35.65$) groups' means on the posttest of metapragmatic awareness of apology ($MD = 1.15, p = 0.419$) (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of the Three Groups (Metapragmatics in Posttests).

Source	Dependent Variable	Type III Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Group	Post MPACQ Req	159.43	2	79.71	6.75	.002	.19
	Post MPACQ Ref	55.90	2	27.95	4.84	.011	.14
	Post MPACQ App	52.90	2	26.45	3.53	.036	.11

The Comparability of Learners' Comprehension of Implicature by Task Group

The third research question looked at how learners' comprehension of implicature might have been impacted by the task group to which they were assigned for the treatment (IGT, RGT, or OGT). Before administering a one-way ANOVA to compare the three groups in the pretest,

the Levene's test ($F = 0.372, p = 0.691$) indicated the homogeneity of variances. ANOVA results in the pretest also showed that there were not any significant differences between the three groups' means on the pretest of implicature comprehension ($F(2, 57) = 0.65, p = 0.525, \omega^2 = 0.01$, representing a weak effect size) (Table 4). Thus, it was found out that the learners enjoyed the same level of implicature comprehension before administering the treatments.

Table 4. Comparison of the Three Groups (Implicature Comprehension in Pretests)

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	13.63	2	6.81	.65	.525
Within Groups	596.55	57	10.46		
Total	610.18	59			

Then, a one-way ANOVA was run to compare the three groups' means on the posttest of implicature comprehension. First, based on Levene's test ($F = 0.21, p = 0.804$), the assumption of homogeneity of variances was observed to be met. The results of one-way ANOVA ($F(2, 57) = 2.11, p = 0.130, \omega^2 = 0.03$, representing a weak effect size) indicated that there were not any significant differences between the three groups' means on the posttest of implicature comprehension (Table 5).

Table 5. Comparison of the Three Groups (Implicature Comprehension in Posttests).

	Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	28.93	2	14.46	2.11	.130
Within Groups	389.80	57	6.83		
Total	418.73	59			

Discussion

Summary of Findings

The main objective of this study was to investigate the effect of instructing three types of tasks, namely information-gap task (IGT), opinion-gap task (OGT), and reasoning-gap task (RGT) on EFL learners' pragmatic competence. To this end, a sample of 60 intermediate EFL learners was selected and assigned to three groups, with 20 learners in each group. Pragmatic competence was also defined as the production of the speech acts of refusal, request and apology, metapragmatic awareness, and the comprehension of implicature, which were assessed at the beginning and at the end of the study through a written discourse completion task, a metapragmatic awareness questionnaire, and an implicature comprehension test in turn. After designing the appropriate and pragmatically-oriented tasks, each group was given task-based instruction (TBI) based on the type of tasks. The comparison of the pretests and the posttests revealed that in all groups, learners' pragmatic production had improved in the posttest compared to their performance in the pretest. Thus, it can be argued that task-based instruction of pragmatic features positively affects learners' pragmatic production. As far as metapragmatic awareness is concerned, the findings revealed that there were significant

differences among the three groups in the posttests of metapragmatic awareness and that the IGT group could perform better than the other two groups. It was also noticed that TBI was effective in improving the participants' comprehension of implicature among the three groups. Therefore, TBI was observed to be effective in developing the participants' pragmatic competence.

Limitations

This study, like many other studies, had a number of limitations and delimitations. The first limitation was getting permission to collect data from one language institute in Tehran. Giving different types of treatments to learners needed much time and permission from the authorities in that language institute. Therefore, it took about a month to get the necessary permission to use the language institute's classes. The other limitation was the number of students, i.e., the researchers had to wait for more students to register and take the placement test to be called intermediate. The next limitation was that task-based instruction was not implemented in that language institute; therefore, it led to the learners' confusion at the beginning of the treatment process and the teacher, who was one of the researchers, had to spend more time on implementing the tasks. The whole sample in this study included 60 participants. Thus, lack of generalizability can be predicted as the last limitation of the present study. Regarding the delimitations of the present research, it should be mentioned that the speech acts studied in this research were only three speech acts of refusal, request and apology, and that other speech acts were not included. Also, pragmatic production was only evaluated through a WDCT. In addition, this study was conducted on intermediate EFL learners of English and students in other levels of proficiency were excluded.

Interpretation

The finding that task-based instruction of pragmatic features improves EFL learners' pragmatic competence is in line with the findings of Tajeddin et al. (2012). They investigated the effect of task-based language teaching (TBLT) on EFL learners' pragmatic production and showed that task-based language teaching enhanced learners' pragmatic production to a great extent.

Many different factors can enhance pragmatic production. In this study, the IGT group mainly received tasks in the form of information-gap activities, in which, as Prabhu (1987) stated, information is transferred from one person or form to another. In information gap activities, there is a lack of information among people dealing with a common issue. According to Ellis (2003), these tasks bring about interaction. Based on the interactants' relationships, there are two types of tasks: one-way and two-way information-gap tasks (Ellis, 2003). One-way information-gap tasks are the tasks that do not require an exchange of information. Two-way information-gap tasks, on the other hand, refer to those tasks which require the participants to exchange the information (Long, 1980). Most of the information-gap tasks utilized in the current study demanded a two-way interaction among the participants (around 11 tasks). Many interactionist theorists believe that language learning results from participating in face-to-face interaction (Ellis, 2003). Based on the assumptions of Interaction Hypothesis by Long (1983, as cited in Ellis, 2003), "comprehensible input that arises when the less competent speaker provides feedback on his/her lack of comprehension assists acquisition" (p. 79). Therefore, it can be claimed that these tasks, by involving interaction in the learning process and bringing comprehensible input, lead to the improvement of language acquisition, and here in this study, they improved pragmatic production.

The same claims can be made as to the effectiveness of opinion-gap and reasoning-gap tasks, which were utilized in the two other experimental groups since the nature of opinion-gap tasks demands learners to constantly participate in conversations to express their opinions, feeling, and ideas regarding an issue (Prabhu, 1987), and this brings both interaction and negotiation of meaning through language use. Reasoning-gap tasks, at the same time, involve sharing information but require going beyond the provided information by the participants (Prabhu, 1987). Thus, all the processes mentioned above were involved in these task types. Since most of the tasks involved a two-way interaction (9 tasks), learners were provided with the opportunity to negotiate meaningfully. Common to all of the task types utilized in this study, instruction of speech acts through various task types, which required learners to go over the different processes in second language learning, brought about input enhancement (Ellis, 2003). These factors, together with many related aspects of language learning, led to the effectiveness of task-based language teaching and the enhancement of the participants' pragmatic production.

The fact that the participants' metapragmatic awareness significantly improved in all the three groups in this study confirmed the findings of the previous studies in the realm of task-based language teaching and L2 pragmatics. In a study by Tajeddin et al. (2012), task-based language teaching had proved to be effective in enhancing EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness. According to Larsen-Freeman (2001), by engaging learners in a variety of tasks that have a clear outcome, language learning is facilitated. Moreover, different task types utilized in the present study were designed to improve the pragmatic competence of learners by focusing on three speech acts of request, refusal, and apology. Thus, it can be claimed that different task types in the present study, with the purpose of enhancing pragmatic competence among learners, facilitated the learning of the pragmatic features of the second language, including metapragmatic awareness. On the other hand, since the types of tasks used in this study involved many activities in which interaction was a requirement, learning pragmatic features was facilitated through comprehensible input (Ellis, 2003). Thus, it can be claimed that the pragmatic aspects of language were consciously noticed, and, as a result, the required output was produced.

As for the observed differences among the three groups (in the posttest) in terms of their metapragmatic awareness and the outperformance of the IGT group, it can be claimed that although the majority of the tasks applied in this study motivated students to produce the desired outcome through interaction and meaning negotiation, based on Pica et al.'s (1993, as cited in Ellis, 2003) typology, in information-gap tasks completion, interaction is required since the participants, to perform these tasks, are demanded to either request or supply information (Ellis, 2003). Thus, interaction becomes the fundamental aspect of an information-gap task. This is the case when in the other two types of tasks, opinion-gap and reasoning-gap tasks, interaction is optional. Therefore, it can be claimed that the types of tasks in the IGT group, which require learners to interact in task performance, lead to their improvement in metapragmatic awareness.

The finding that task-based instruction was observed to be effective in improving the participants' comprehension of implicature is in line with the findings of a number of studies on the effectiveness of instruction on the development of implicature comprehension (Bouton, 1994; Kubota, 1995; Lee, 2000). Bouton (1994) stated that implicature comprehension might not develop among EFL learners without explicit instruction. Following Bouton (1994),

Kubota (1995), in his research on the effectiveness of deductive and inductive methods of instruction, reported increased implicature comprehension among the learners in the inductive group. In a recent study, Derakhshan (2014) investigated the effect of consciousness-raising tasks on the comprehension of implicatures and confirmed the findings of the previous studies as to the effectiveness of instruction. However, the improvement of implicature comprehension among EFL learners through TBLT can be the outcome of different factors.

First, as mentioned earlier in this study, implicature comprehension did not improve among learners without explicit or implicit instruction. Thus, it can be argued that different types of tasks used in this study provided the learners with the opportunity to interact meaningfully and offered comprehensible input because of receiving feedback through the task completion process, which in turn facilitated second language learning (Long, 1983) and, here, the pragmatic features of the language. Second, according to Bouton (1994), implicatures should be taught; otherwise, they are learned slowly by second or foreign language learners. This means that implicature learning comes with noticing and conscious attention and follows Schmidt's (1993) noticing hypothesis in the sense that acquisition without noticing the linguistic form is not possible. Therefore, it can be claimed that task-based language teaching, by providing EFL learners with comprehensible input, opportunity to interact meaningfully, and conscious attention to the linguistic feature of the language, facilitated and improved the participants' comprehension of implicature in the posttest. Moreover, the comparison of the three groups' performance on implicature comprehension test in the posttest indicated that there were not any significant differences between the three groups' means on the posttest, showing that the participants of the three groups almost improved, to the same extent, their comprehension of the implicatures. Therefore, it can be contended that task-based instruction of pragmatic features to EFL learners, irrespective of the task types, can enhance learners' implicature comprehension.

Suggestions for Future Research

Since the main focus of this study was on finding the relative effectiveness of task-based instruction and different task types on the development of pragmatic competence, a number of suggestions for further research can also be made. First, a similar study can be conducted to investigate the effect of other task types, following other task classifications, on pragmatic competence. Other task types may affect pragmatic competence differently. Second, a similar study can be conducted on EFL learners with other levels of proficiency. Through that study, a comparison can also be made among the proficiency levels in terms of task effectiveness. Another suggestion is conducting a study with the same design but different speech acts. The speech acts that were selected and studied here were among the face-threatening speech acts; however, there are other speech acts in our daily interactions that can be investigated. As the last suggestion, investigating the effectiveness of teacher and peer feedback during task completion on the development of pragmatic competence is suggested.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study inform course and content design and provide considerations for instructors, instructional designers, and researchers. Results from this study form an illustrative map of the types of tasks and activities that benefit second language learners in pragmatics instruction, as well as the way(s) these tasks should be organized and sequenced. Moreover, this study provides syllabus designers and instructors with an innovative and effective type of methodology and meaningful activities through which learning of a second or foreign language

pragmatic features is facilitated. Moreover, researchers can gain more in-depth insight into how different types of tasks can have a different impact on L2 learners' pragmatic development.

Conclusion

Many conclusions can be drawn out of the present study. First, it can be inferred that instruction, specifically task-based instruction of pragmatic features, as stated by numerous studies, improves EFL learners' pragmatic competence (Birjandi & Derakhshan, 2014; Derakhshan, 2014; Derakhshan & Eslami-Rasekh, 2015; Martín -Laguna, 2014; Martín -Laguna & Alcón-Soler, 2013; Taguchi & Kim, 2016; Tajeddin et al., 2012), necessarily, speech act production, metapragmatic awareness, and implicature comprehension. While pragmatic aspects of the second language are at times neglected by L2 instructors, it was shown that tasks facilitate the learning of these features through language use, and that second language learners notice the pragmatic features which are required as the task outcome.

Since tasks have a communicative nature, while students try to produce the required speech act in each task, they pay conscious attention to the pragmatic features through language use. On the other hand, task completion necessitates interaction, which is one of the main conditions of language learning. As a result of the interaction, learners are provided with two primary sources of comprehensible input; one through interaction with their partners and the other through interaction with the teacher while receiving feedback. Therefore, task-based instruction of pragmatic features improves EFL learners' pragmatic production, which means that TBI helps learners to learn speech acts, their realization, and speech act-related strategies. Furthermore, metapragmatic awareness of EFL learners, referred to as the explicit knowledge that a language user has about the forms and functions of speech acts (House, 1996), is positively affected by task-based language teaching. Kinginger and Farell (2004) also define metapragmatic awareness as the "knowledge of the social meaning of variable second language forms and awareness of the ways in which these forms mark different aspects of social contexts" (p. 20). The term awareness, one more time, reminds the importance of noticing, which is one of the salient features of tasks. Task completion not only requires learners to interact meaningfully during task performance, but also leads them to provide their partners with feedback in completing shared tasks.

Consequently, in the search for finding an effective method of instruction of pragmatic features, task-based language teaching appears effective in developing EFL learners' metapragmatic awareness. It helps them improve their knowledge of social meaning and aspects of second language forms as well as the social context in which they are produced. Implicature comprehension, as another component of pragmatic competence, is positively affected by TBLT. Accordingly, based on the literature on the necessity of instruction of implicatures, task-based language teaching because of its interactive nature, which brings about attention to the meaning as well as conscious attention to linguistic forms, can appear effective in teaching implicature to second language learners; by receiving instruction through tasks, learners raise their understanding and comprehension of the speakers' intended meaning.

The second broad conclusion is that different task types can improve L2 learners' pragmatic competence. However, it was observed that information-gap tasks, which require interaction by nature (Pica et al., 1993; as cited in Ellis, 2003), were more effective than the two other task types classified as cognitive tasks by Prabhu (1987) as far as the development of pragmatic production and metapragmatic awareness is concerned. These types of tasks, by providing the learners with comprehensible input and the opportunity to interact meaningfully assist L2

learning (Long, 1983; as cited in Ellis, 2003). Opinion-gap tasks and reasoning-gap tasks, despite having an optional interaction requirement, expose learners to comprehensible input and give them the opportunity to interact, send and receive feedback, and in some cases, solve a problem in fulfilling the desired outcome of tasks (Ellis, 2003). Thus, task-based instruction of pragmatic features improves EFL learners' pragmatic competence, and by involving more information-gap tasks, this positive effect improves.

Finally, it can be concluded that task-based instruction of pragmatic features, regardless of task-types, can develop EFL learners' pragmatic competence in all the above-mentioned areas by exposing learners to comprehensible input, interaction, negotiation of meaning and giving and receiving feedback during task completion. Therefore, in an EFL context, whenever instructors search for an effective method of teaching pragmatic features, task-based language teaching can be the best choice.

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