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Using Task-based Instruction to Develop EFL Learners' Pragmatic Competence: The Case of Oral Fluency

Bahman Gorjian^{1*}, Farzaneh Mir¹

¹ Department of English Language Teaching, Arv. C., Islamic Azad University, Abadan, Iran

*Corresponding author: bahman.gorjian@iau.ac.ir

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Abstract:

Learning speech acts is a vital ability in the successful conversations. English language learners need not only how to construct grammatical structures but they also need to know the pragmatic functions of those utterances. The objective of the current research is how to instruct learners to master pragmatic functions of language which is a big challenge among Iranian learners. The current research explored task-based instruction (TBI) efficacy in developing Iranian advanced EFL learners' pragmatic competence of oral fluency. A quasi-experimental study with pre-test and post-test was adopted to examine the learners' problems in using pragmatic oral fluency via task-based exercises to solve this problem. The research sample comprised 64 students who were selected from the research population in an English language institute. They were randomly assigned into two equal groups (i.e., each 32 participants) of a control (CG) receiving a conventional approach (i.e., Presentation, practice, production, PPP), and an experimental (EG) acquiring pragmatic competence of oral fluency. In a pretest, they passed conversation tests. Then they participated in intervention sessions of text-based exercises in the CG and TBI in the EG for a whole semester. Parametric statistics showed the outperformance of TBI over the PPP in the post-test. Implications of the study suggest the effective impact of TBI on students' pragmatic oral fluency since EFL learners are able to match linguistic structures with the functional use of language in real contexts..

Keywords: Oral Fluency, Presentation-Practice-Production, Pragmatic Competence, Task-Based Instruction

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INTRODUCTION

The term pragmatics was coined by Morrison (1938) who addressed three aspects of language including semiotics: syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Wittgenstein (1953) associated pragmatics with factors such as context, culture, and history. Generally, pragmatics is defined as the use of appropriate language functions in a conversation to arrive at the negotiation of meaning. Thus, the interlocutors are actively participating in communication and making some choices of speech to properly communicate with each other. Accordingly, there are several choices that the speakers use to affect listeners and achieve desired outcomes during communication. Therefore, EFL (English as foreign

language learners) should be aware of three aspects of language uses including linguistic, strategic, and pragmatic choices they can use in certain contexts in oral fluency (Masuram & Nagini Sripada, 2020). González Lloret (2022) defines pragmatic competence of oral fluency as the ability of speakers to produce effective speech to convince the listeners and fulfill their intentions of conversations and achieving their goals. An effective conversation can depend on the use of pragmatic competence that needs to be trained via formal and informal exposure (Omar & Razi, 2022). The EFL learners acquire oral fluency in informal settings affecting the inadequacy of learning pragmatic competence since they are not exposed to real conversations in a natural or informal context. They may acquire partial pragmatic

competence affecting the lack of full mastery of their oral fluency. In short, there is a clear relation between learning pragmatic competence and natural oral exposures in natural and informal contexts (Kim & Taguchi, 2015).

EFL learners face the problem of language use in appropriate contexts rather than the use of linguistic structures (Khadangi Barani & Mousapour Negari, 2023). Thus, there are two abilities including linguistic ability and pragmatic abilities that require EFL learners to master two competencies of linguistics and pragmatics (Alavi et al, 2020). Learning both of these competencies can be affected by the learners' first language (L1) which makes both linguistic and interlanguage pragmatics (Barron, 2003). The former addressed the transferring of linguistic elements coming from L1 like “*The film is in TV” as it is seen as a wrong use of the preposition of place among Iranian speakers. The latter addresses the correct linguistic structure but the wrong use of pragmatic meanings like “Thank you” to the question of “How are You?”.

Kasper and Rose (2002) believe the users' utterances are pragmatically motivated and sometimes these utterances may make interferences on behalf of the speakers. This phenomenon is called interlanguage pragmatics (ILP). This problem may cause misunderstanding among the native speakers of the English language since they are likely unaware of the ILP of EFL learners committing oral fluency errors in conversations. The differences between linguistic and pragmatic transfer from L1 were addressed by Kasper and Rose (2002) who differentiated between two aspects of L1 transfer in learning a second language (L2). Several researchers (e.g., Barron, 2003; Kim & Taguchi, 2015; Omar & Razi, 2022) have also focused on ILP and pragmatic aspects in instructional methods and task-based activities like teacher's feedback, or implicit learning of pragmatic features (Ellis, 2009).

Teaching pragmatics is taught via several speech acts that are classified as routines in interpersonal communications (Khadangi Barani & Mousapour Negari, 2023). Following Kim and Taguchi (2015), a speech act is the use of language to perform a determined function of language in a particular context. The speech act may include a set of strategies that are used according to the speaker's intention. For instance, for the function of an apology, there are several strategies as follows:

- a) apology (I'm sorry to do that),
- b) take responsibility (It is my mistake),
- c) explanation (Yesterday, I had to stay home since I was sick.),
- d) repair (I will tell him again.), and
- e) promise it does not happen again (It will not repeat it.).

Following Cindy (2012), pragmatic competence of oral fluency addresses: (a) speech clarity is the learners' capability to participate in conversations without any linguistic and communicative problems like pauses, doubts, misunderstandings, etc., (b) utterance production that addresses the learners' ability to construct functional and meaningful sentences or expressions to encode highly complex sentences, representing a wide variety of content-

form relationships, (c), semantic fluency that is the ability to understand, retrieve, and use a wide variety of words, (d) phonological fluency which is the ability to pronounce correctly and accurately long strings of syllables and sounds in unfamiliar combinations, and (e), pragmatic fluency that is the ability to know what to say under a wide variety of social circumstances.

Native speakers of the language acquire pragmatic competence of oral fluency when they are in natural settings within the family and society. Iranian EFL learners lack such settings. Thus, they try to compensate for this inefficacy in a formal setting in the classroom. EFL teachers did their best to make a semi-natural or artificial environment for making conversations around the popular topic in pair, peer, and class discussions but they do not meet native speakers inside and outside the classes to gain their self-esteem and self-confidence. This can demotivate them and do not trust the pragmatic functions of their utterances in practice. The other problem in this situation is that learning linguistic structures is the focus and pragmatic competence is a peripheral one. Therefore, Iranian EFL learners focus on grammar, reading, and writing abilities. Oral exercises and pragmatic aspects of language are drilled a little or may be seen at advanced levels (Fazilatfar & Cgeraghi, 2013; Khadangi Barani & Mousapour Negari, 2023; Mahdavi, 2022; Vahid Dastjerdi & Rezvani, 2010; Tajeddin et al, 2012).

Rossiter (2009) and Rossiter et al (2010) note that acquiring oral fluency and achieving pragmatic competence is a time-consuming task that needs native speakers to meet the expectations of other native speakers' feedback and responses. This is very similar to a problem-solving activity in a live and informal setting. But non-natives lack such a process and this makes them participate in informal settings of conversations. In this case, pragmatic competence may be practiced via TBI to make a near-native context and teach EFL learners acceptable language behaviors in conversations. TBI focuses on EFL learners who can participate in appropriate and semi-natural tasks and get the strategies and functions of language in use (Ahmed, 2022; Omar & Razi, 2022; Tajeddin et al, 2012). TBI deals with two activities including learning oral fluency and pragmatic competence since both of them are the target objectives of pragmatic fluency (Alavi et al, 2020; Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005; Ruso, 2007).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Implementing TBI, according to Ellis (2009), needs a set of features as (a) a planned work/program, (b) the central focus is meaning, (c) the real or natural use of language in a specific context, (d) engagement of all learners, (e) the use of four language tasks (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing), (f) the use of cognitive activities, and (g) use of communicative activities. In sum, these features could be included in two main categories of meaningful and communicative aspects of exercises. To be clear, the task is a language learning activity that is meaningful, communicative, functional, and contextualized. These four elements are essential for designing effective tasks in

the classrooms. TBI in learning pragmatic competence of oral fluency may follow several steps (Herraiz-Martinez, 2018) allowing EFL learners to engage effectively in their conversations. These steps are to prepare them to open and close conversations and not to violate the conversational rules. These rules are:

1. Topical focus that learners know what and how to say something related to the topic.
2. Conversation organization addresses the steps of opening and closing the conversation, the turn-taking system, signals, clarity, understandability, and brevity.
3. The use of gambits (i.e., ok, well, yea, etc.) when they are used by the learners is regarded as a sign of pragmatic fluency. These signs can function as conversation shifts since they show signals that you need to take the floor.
4. Prefabricated patterns are the use of routines and patterns that provide information about pragmatic fluency. For instance, "How are you? What's up, etc."
5. Contextual clues that are important for the interlocutors to receive the senders' implied meanings. Thus, the conversations are not just linguistic elements but are full of intentions that the speakers are to imply and the listeners need to infer these intended meanings.

According to Willis and Willis (2009), TBI is very effective since it is based on real communication rather than semi- or false communications like closed role-play or simulated (i.e., pre-planned) oral activities. Oral tasks are real, communicative, functional, and contextual and can create a real atmosphere in the classroom. These oral tasks that boost EFL learners' pragmatic competence can be performed in pair, peer, and group works. The topics could be authentic and based on realities. In this sense, a communicative task is a problem-solving activity that triggers learners' minds to find a way to present their intended meanings and fulfill their conversation objectives (Samuda & Bygate, 2008). Tasks may focus on various oral fluency of academic and non-academic. Academic tasks address conversations in academic settings like scientific lectures, round table debates, university discussions, etc. Non-academic tasks refer to daily conversations like phone calls, buying goods, outside class talks, etc.

Classroom tasks could be effective if the teachers think of the task as a real conversation activity. Barron (2003) suggests that open role play allows learners in a quite natural situation in which pragmatic use is required. Esfandiari et al (2012) note the reality of tasks is essential in TBI since the learners gain self-confidence in running the conversation. Ruso (2007) believes that TBI has been popularly used in educational settings since it boosts real communication and the learners can perform what they have learned. This gives them a sense of practicality and usefulness of language tasks.

Ellis (2009) suggests three stages of TBI including 'pre-task' that addresses the tasks before the main class activities. These tasks could be introductory to make a kind of brainstorming or making background knowledge in learners' minds. This may trigger learners' cognitive processes and make them ready to participate in problem-

solving activities. In learning oral fluency, the pre-task is essential since the learners are to gain pragmatic competence to talk about the task or discuss relevant issues regarding the given topic. If we believe that the class time could be divided into three phases. Pre-task phase can take one-third of the whole time allocated to a unit or session. The second phase is "task" addressing the main stage in which the learners are required to participate in the main body of the material and do various activities, learn patterns, perform oral activities, and discuss various topics. This stage is very similar to the presentation stage in which the learners are exposed to learning materials and gain knowledge explicitly given by the teacher. Post-task as the final phase involves several follow-up activities like questioning, feedback, checking learners' understanding, and making conclusions. Ellis notes the importance of "task" in TBI since the pre-task and post-task stages could be optional depending on the class situation. If they are needed, the teachers can involve learners in both stages. TBI can be used in teaching all language skills including learning oral fluency and pragmatic competence. The use of TBI in learning oral fluency and pragmatic competence can be effective in learners with intermediate or higher English proficiency levels since they master grammatical patterns and required words to participate in real conversations (Eslami-Rasekh, 2005).

TBI can do both types of instruction, but Eslami-Rasekh (2005) argued that teachers should raise learners' pragmatic awareness to gain fluent communication. Oral fluency needs learners' full understanding of language functions and speech acts in both explicit and implicit instruction provided by TBI. A fluent L2 speaker should know what to say and how to say it to have an effective conversation. Comprehending the inferred meaning and producing the implied meaning could be the ultimate goal of pragmatic competence represented in oral fluency.

Vahid Dastjerdi and Rezvani (2010) explored the instructional paradigms of explicit vs. implicit learning of request in English among EFL learners. There were three groups explicit, implicit, and control who received instruction on the ability to perform requests. They received short audio/video conversation tasks that included various requests. The explicit group received conscious tasks of pragmatic competence of requests while the implicit group was taught request strategies subconsciously. The control group received no request instruction. Findings indicated that both explicit and implicit groups performed better than the control group in the production of requests. The explicit group was better than the implicit; however, the difference was not significant. Implications suggest that pragmatic awareness either explicit or implicit can raise pragmatic awareness of EFL learners.

Omar and Razi (2022) studied the effect of movies on EFL learners' pragmatic competence. There were experimental and control groups who received instructions of requests and suggestion speech acts. The experimental group gained pragmatic awareness of speech acts via exposure to TV series and video clips while the control groups received the same speech acts via text-based instruction. Results

displayed the outperformance of the experimental group over the control one. Therefore, implicit instruction via videos can enhance EFL learners' pragmatic competence in producing requests and digestion speech acts.

Herraiz-Martínez (2018) studied the use of computer-based instruction (CBI). The focus of the paper was to see the challenges of traditional methods in learning pragmatic competence. The second objective of the research was to highlight the effect of using the computer to learn pragmatic activities. The researcher noted that CBI can provide EFL learners with ample pragmatic activities to help them acquire speech act strategies. They were also motivated to engage in conversations and perform their pragmatic activities. This study showed that pragmatic activities and oral fluency of the learners in the performance of apologizing were enjoyable. The learners demonstrated their self-satisfaction in learning new speech acts via CBI. Results revealed teachers need to conduct action research as a valuable tool to gain knowledge of their learners' needs for pragmatic instruction and awareness of oral fluency.

Yan (2022) investigated the role of pragmatic competence in shaping EFL learners' communicative competence. The study makes a distinction between pragmatic competence and communicative competence although both are interwoven. The article reviews the literature on pragmatic competence and communicative competence and defines them as challenging terms. Communicative competence is the learners' knowledge of using language in certain contexts but pragmatic competence deals with the various strategies that boost the communicative competence of language learners. Pragmatic competence could be more challenging than communicative competence for language learners since it deals with appropriate strategies and speech acts in conversations. Therefore, different environments need various pragmatic strategies and speech acts. L2 learners should be aware of pragmatic aspects of their speech that affect vagueness or clarity of meanings. In short, communicative competence needs pragmatic competence and this makes them complementary rather than contradictory. This study concluded the role of pragmatic competence as an integral part of communicative competence. It also indicates the effect of learning pragmatic competence on the L2 learners' communicative competence inside and outside classrooms. While communicative competence is a knowledge of language use, pragmatic competence is the strategies of the appropriate use of speech acts to achieve speech purposes. The current study addresses the research questions (RQs) as follows:

RQ1. Does TBI boost Iranian advanced EFL learners' pragmatic competence of oral fluency?

RQ2. Which TBI modalities are effective in developing EFL learners' pragmatic competence of oral fluency?

METHODOLOGY

Design

The current research adopted a quasi-experimental design

with pre-test post-test, and intervention. The intervention included both TBI in the EG and the conventional approach of presentation, practice, and production (PPP) in the CG. A quantitative approach was used to analyze data. T-tests were used to answer the RQs (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Participants

The participants in the present study were 64 students recruited from among 118 students majoring in teaching EFL. They are males (N=29) and females (N=35) with their ages ranging from 25 to 45 (Mean=28.3, SD=1.25). They were sophomores and had passed several courses of EFL. All filled in consent letters were filled in before the intervention stages. The participants' privacy and anonymity assurance were assured in an introductory session. They were told that they were free to leave the project and their scores were available in case of their need. In an introductory session, the research purposes and requirements of participation, privacy, and time allocation were explained. To select the research sample, the Oxford Placement Test (OPT) was used and 64 learners who achieved a band score between 48 and 54 were divided into EG (N=32) and CG (N=32). EG was instructed through task-based learning while CG was chosen to be exposed to a conventional approach to learning the material.

Instruments

The placement test of OPT included 60 items of vocabulary, reading comprehension, grammar, and writing. The OPT was just used to determine the proficiency level of the participants rather than to measure their pragmatic competence. Since this test is standardized, its reliability and validity have been reported in several sources. However, the internal consistency of the test was measured in a pilot study and the index of ($r=.89$) via KR-21 formula was met as a reliable placement test. Two EFL teachers assessed and confirmed the items regarding the face and content validity of the test.

Pre-test and post-test included several conversations with various topics adopted from the learners' conversation textbook Top Notch 3 A and B developed by Saslow and Ascher (2017). There are oral tasks (i.e., open role play, discussion, interview, etc.). Learners need to participate in conversations on various topics (e.g., tourism, transportation, in a hotel, etc.) to assess the pragmatic development of the participants' pragmatic strategies and oral fluency. The open role plays on specific topics allowed learners to show their oral fluency in a natural conversation (Barron, 2003).

To assess pragmatic oral fluency, the measures taken in the model were employed by researcher-made observation checklist including the range of 1 to 20 points. The criteria were based on using appropriate language functions in definite contexts including greetings, thanking, apologizing, etc. The total score of the observation checklist was 20 and each appropriate speech act got 0 to 1 point. The classroom observation checklist was also used to prepare reports on the learners in both EG and CG. It was designed based on Masuram and NaginiSripada (2020) and then it was validated in a pilot study. The validity and reliability of the

checklist were met at appropriate indices. This checklist focuses on the learners' ability to manage opening and closing speech acts, introduce and change the given topics of conversations, and take turns, using gambits, routines, and patterns. The conversation checklist was recorded and appropriate moves were scored by two raters to arrive at inter-rater reliability, which was met for the pre-test as ($r=.91$) and the post-test as ($r=.87$).

Data Collection Procedure

Initially, a language proficiency test of OPT was administered and 64 students formed EG and CG. The EG was being taught by the TBI and the CG was being exposed to the conventional approach of PPP a text-based approach to learning pragmatic competence.

Administering the pre-test, learners were given detailed information about the role-play procedures, and by introducing and explaining the strategies that can be used, students were informed about their roles. Then useful speech acts were written on the board for their reference. Students were divided into groups of two people and they were given about 10 minutes to have a conversation and introduce themselves to each other. After introducing themselves, students talked about their last vacation the city that they had traveled to, and also the places that the others can visit. In this case, one of the participants had some information about the places, and the other asked for that information.

The learners took an oral pretest with five topics of conversation and they played the role of interlocutors before and after the intervention stage. The topics were randomly selected from their textbook- Top Notch 3 A and B developed by Saslow and Acsher (2017). They should play the roles of conversers in police-driver, tourist-guide, doctor-patient, or other topics that need the learners to discuss or talk in pairs. Meanwhile, the participants' activities were observed and gathered in a test observation checklist. The observation stage included a comprehensive description of the learners' speech acts strategies, spoken errors, mistakes, learners' background, and their problem areas, etc.

In the intervention phase, EG participated in TBI and received meaningful and communicative tasks (i.e., pre-task, task, post-task) within 14 treatment sessions. Each session lasted for 90 minutes and the learners followed the instruction rules and played the open roles concerned with the specific topics in 2 or 3 minutes in pair work. Other learners watched the play and gave feedback or asked questions after the play. Then the teacher wrapped up the session, evaluated it, and gave final remarks. This process was done for each pair's work. 14 units of the textbook were covered in both groups. Students listened to a sample of native speakers doing somehow the same task as they did. They listened to useful expressions in the native speaker sample that they could have used when they did the task. Furthermore, the teacher wrote some expressions on the board. Pragmatic moves and speech acts were focused on by the teachers while learners took notes.

CG received a conventional conversation class of the PPP model by listening to the textbook conversations and doing

the exercises orally. Participants attended conversation class that adhered to the presentation phase, during which the instructor introduced the target conversational structures and expressions, frequently utilizing brief dialogues from the designated textbook. Subsequently, in the practice phase, students took part in structured activities such as repeating phrases, substituting vocabulary, or responding to straightforward comprehension questions derived from those model dialogues. Ultimately, in the production phase, learners endeavored to apply the newly introduced language in brief role-plays or collaborative exercises, albeit still confined within the parameters of the textbook framework. In this methodology, conversational input was predominantly delivered through listening to pre-recorded conversations from the textbook, which were crafted to exemplify correct usage and standard interaction patterns. Consequently, the learning experience prioritized accuracy and controlled practice over spontaneous communication. Furthermore, learners listened to the CD or the teacher and then answered the textbook exercises. If there was a problem, the learners received peers' or teachers' feedback. The is mainly text-based and just the tasks of the book were covered. Pragmatic moves and speech acts were implicitly focused on by the teachers and then learners were asked to take notes.

In the final phase, an oral posttest was utilized the same as the pretest. The time allocated to each test conversation for pairs was two or three minutes for each topic. The post-test was the same as the pretest concerning time allocation, topics, and materials. After the posttest, data were collected and analyzed to compare the learners' mean scores after intervention. Quantitative data analysis of the t-test was computed with SPSS 24 software for statistical analysis.

RESULTS

Test of normality indicates the data are normally distributed and parametric statistics can be used. T-test analysis compared both groups' mean scores of the dependent variable of pragmatic fluency. The significance level of $p=0.05$ was chosen to measure the confidence level of the analysis. To follow the parametric analysis of data, the test of normality should be taken into account as it is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1 displays the one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) test normality of the data. And it makes parametric statistical analysis possible. The two groups' means are compared in Table 2.

Table 2 reveals the mean differences between the pretest and posttest of EG and CG. The descriptive statistics for the EG show a significant difference ($t=9.64$, $p=.001<.05$); however, in the CG ($t=1.76$, $p=.081>.05$). In other words, TBI significantly affected learners' pragmatic oral fluency. This made the researcher claim that the meaningful differences could be attributed to the treatment. To determine the pre and post-test of each group.

Table 3 shows the observed value of the t for EG and CG pretest (Means 8.81 vs. 1.89), with the degrees of freedom (62) and the significance level of ($p<.05$). Therefore, the results indicated that students performed differently on the

Table 1. Normality Test

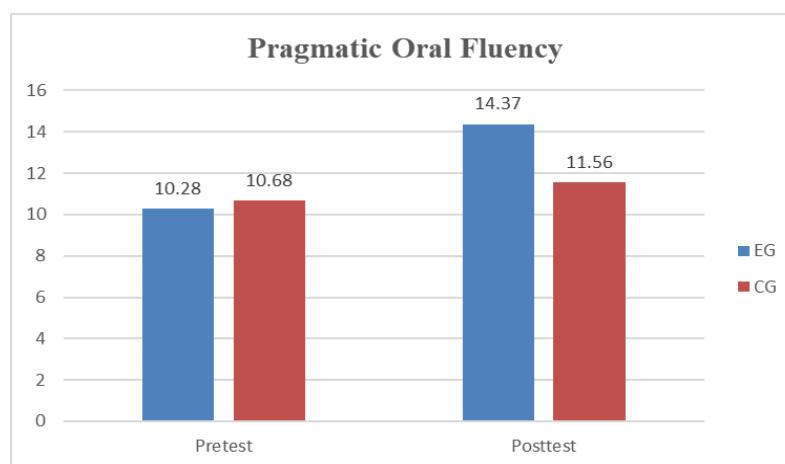
| | Pretest | | Posttest | |
|------------|---------|-------|----------|-------|
| | EG | CG | EG | CG |
| N | 32 | 32 | 32 | 32 |
| Mean | 10.28 | 10.68 | 14.37 | 11.56 |
| SD | 1.95 | 1.89 | 1.75 | 1.84 |
| Statistics | .123 | .137 | .165 | .187 |

Table 2. Pre and Posttest Mean Differences in Each Group

| Groups | Pre-test vs. Post-test | | | Statistics | |
|--------|------------------------|------|------|------------|------|
| | Mean Difference | SD | t | df | p |
| EG | 4.05 | 2.40 | 9.64 | 31 | .001 |
| CG | .94 | 1.31 | 1.76 | 31 | .081 |

Table 3. The Between-group Comparisons

| Groups | t | df | p | d |
|---------------------|------|----|------|------|
| EG and CG Pretest | 8.81 | 61 | .001 | 1.55 |
| EG and CG Post-test | 1.89 | 61 | .062 | 0.20 |

**Figure 1.** Pragmatic Oral Fluency in EG and CG

posttest in EG ($t=8.81$, $p=.001<.05$), and they improved their pragmatic oral fluency better than the CG ($t=1.89$, $p=.062>.05$). Effect size in the EG indicates ($d=1.55$) which means a large effect of the mean difference compared to the small effect size in CG (0.20) of the mean differences in the posttests (Cohen, 2010). Accordingly, less than 0.50 could be a low effect size and greater than 1 could be a high effect size. Moreover, Figure 1 illustrates the group means comparisons in the pretest and posttest.

DISCUSSION

Improving EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge of oral fluency is a complicated challenge for teachers in contexts where natural language exposure is unavailable.

The descriptive statistics showed higher scores for EG. Moreover, the observation checklist revealed EG's low anxiety and self-confidence to have a conversation since they could interact with each other without the help of the teacher. Results maintain that learners' conversations in a natural setting and without anxiety can remove learners' barriers of affective variables and lower the affective filter. In this case, the learners' channel of learning is open, and learning pragmatic competence is facilitated. Observations in both groups' classes indicated that the learners in CG were not able to use speech acts and performed tasks better than EG. This is consistent with Alcón's (2000) findings on the significant role of conversational interaction in a natural situation in developing L2 learners' pragmatic competence. It is also emphasized that the tasks

of teaching pragmatic awareness and speech acts need meaningful and communicative tasks that are carefully designed by the teachers. Therefore, TBI can be an effective teaching approach that directs students towards engaging with meaningful, relevant, and pressing communicative tasks that reflect real-world scenarios. By engaging in these tasks, learners are motivated to interact with each other pragmatically, utilizing language not just for precision but also for fulfilling authentic communicative objectives (Yan, 2022). This approach allows students to practice meaning negotiation, problem-solving, and collaborative learning, all of which are essential for developing communicative competence. Additionally, completing purposeful tasks cultivates a sense of accomplishment and agency, which subsequently enhances students' self-esteem and self-confidence (Fazilatfar & Cgeraghi, 2013). Over time, these emotional advantages can alleviate language anxiety, encourage learner independence, and inspire students to assume more proactive roles in their language learning experiences.

Therefore, Task-Based Instruction (TBI) is considered an effective method for language teaching, as it immerses learners in scenarios that necessitate their participation in authentic, purposeful, and urgent tasks that closely mirror real-world communication. As highlighted by Ellis (2003) and Willis (1996), the tasks within TBI are crafted to direct learners' focus towards meaning rather than isolated forms, thus fostering the development of communicative competence. Through these tasks, students engage pragmatically with their peers, negotiate meaning, and collaboratively construct knowledge, which not only improves their linguistic capabilities but also enhances their strategic and pragmatic skills. Furthermore, engaging in meaningful tasks offers learners the chance to achieve tangible outcomes, which cultivates a sense of accomplishment.

Findings of the study are in line with Nunan (2004) who notes that this feeling of achievement plays a significant role in boosting learners' self-esteem and self-confidence, both of which are vital affective factors in the acquisition of a second language. Additionally, TBI encourages learner autonomy, alleviates language anxiety, and fosters a supportive atmosphere where students can take communication risks without the constant fear of error correction. This agrees with Richards and Rodgers (2014) who emphasize the role of TBI which serves not only as a method for enhancing language proficiency but also as a means to bolster learners' psychological readiness to communicate in a foreign language.

Students can improve their speaking in general and their pragmatic fluency in particular especially through TBI because students are not exposed to natural conversations outside the classroom in Iran; and as soon as they leave the class, all the conversations are taken place in Persian. Thus, creating an authentic context alike the target situation in the classroom is essential. In this study, we observed that students in EG are more motivated to learn pragmatic moves in their conversations. Furthermore, task-based learning concerned with explicit instruction of pragmatic

competence and open role play can activate their language input and their background knowledge about the language (Maliha, 2010).

The observation checklist for pragmatic awareness in TBI indicated that the teachers can manage learners' moves in opening and closing conversations, taking appropriate turns, encoding/decoding messages, and speech acts in the EG better than the CG. The adopted conversations that include several pragmatic moves are illustrated in the following excerpts of TBI taken from EG:

Excerpt 1: Opening and closing

A: hello (formal) Sir! Hi, (informal) Ben [Opening]

B: hello. / hi [Opening]

A: see you later (formal). Bye (informal) [Closing]

B: goodbye (formal). See you (informal) [Closing]

In the present study, the topic introduction and topic change were used by the participants themselves. The results represent that there is a significant difference between EG and CG in changing the topics. The following topic shift tasks illustrate how this measure:

Excerpt 2: Topic shift tasks

A: We went to Mashhad and stayed in a hotel, and saw many places. How was your vacation?

B: oh good we go to Shiraz.

A: what do you plan for this summer? (Topic change)

B: We do not go anyplace.

A: can we travel to Shiraz?

B: yes. We can travel. (Turn-taking)

A: how can we go?

B: by bus or by car we can go. (Turn-taking)

A: what places we can visit?

B: Shahcheragh (i.e., A Holy Shrine) and Takhtjamshid (i.e., Persepolis). (Turn-taking)

Excerpt 3: The use of gambits:

A: oh (gambit) my favorite city is Tabriz.

B: what's your favorite city?

A: Tehran.

B: well (gambit) what Tabriz like?

A: It's beautiful and big.

B: can we go by car?

A: yes (gambit).

The current study investigated whether learners used routines and patterns in their conversations. The results show that there is a difference between group A and group B in the use of routines and patterns and EG performed better than CG. Excerpt 4 illustrates this:

Excerpt 4: Routine

A: hello! How are you? (Routine)

B: I'm fine thank you.

A: fine thanks.

B: how was your vacation?

A: it's good (Routine)

Excerpts show that TBI is deemed authentic as the activities learners participate in are crafted to reflect the types of language usage they would face outside the educational environment. Rather than engaging in isolated grammar exercises or rote memorization of dialogues, students are encouraged to tackle problems, exchange information, organize events, or collaboratively make decisions. These activities necessitate the use of language for a tangible purpose and yield observable results (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). For instance, organizing a class excursion, carrying out a survey, or negotiating a resolution to a community challenge are considered authentic as they replicate genuine communicative requirements.

TBI is communicative since the emphasis is not on accurately reproducing forms but on conveying meaning to accomplish a specific objective (Herraiz-Martínez, 2018). Learners are required to negotiate meaning, seek clarification, rephrase concepts, and adjust their language based on their partner's feedback (Gatbonton & Segalowitz, 2005; González-Lloret, M. (2022)). Thus, communication is authentic: the success of the task hinges on how effectively students comprehend and react to one another, rather than on the flawless repetition of predetermined linguistic structures. The two features of authenticity and communication are noted by Richards and Rodgers (2014), as founded on three primary principles: (1) meaning-focused interaction: language serves to express meaning, rather than merely to showcase grammatical knowledge. (2) Goal orientation – Tasks are designed with clear, non-linguistic objectives (e.g., arriving at a decision, formulating a plan, or resolving an issue). And (3) Real-life relevance: the communicative tasks closely resemble actual language use outside the classroom.

Therefore, TBI is regarded as “authentic” because it emulates real-world tasks, and it is considered “communicative” as it compels learners to utilize language as a means to achieve authentic interactional goals.

CONCLUSION

Creating a situation that increases the interest of the learners is one of the main goals of every teacher. By using task-based learning teachers can provide an authentic context for language learning in which students can communicate with each other with low anxiety and high self-confidence. Since in the EFL context opportunities for interacting with a native speaker are not possible teachers can use TBI in the classroom to encourage learners to talk with other students, and pretend that they are in a target context this enhances the students' confidence in speaking. TBI is a learner-centered method and it reduces the burden on teachers' shoulders and requires students' engagement, students have an active role, and this leads to a more motivating situation for language learning. If the material is designed suited to each age, the classroom can be a situation in which every learner can enjoy the TBI.

Some learners feel uneasy and so anxious to engage in classroom activities because they are afraid of making mistakes. In TBI, students work with their friends in groups, and this helps them to feel comfortable. They learn the language by doing it and through role play. They can be involved in classroom activities freely and with low anxiety. So this can increase students' self-esteem which is the main goal of every language classroom.

With the inefficiency of grammar translation and audio-lingual methods for language learning, syllabus designers should design the textbook in a sequence in which teachers can engage learners in meaningful communication. They should present language items in an order that increases the interest of the learner. TBI is a good method to accomplish this goal.

Limitations of the study included the short time of the research period, conducting only one semester (14 sessions). The future research may implement task-based learning over a longer period, resulting in other findings. Thus, the conclusions of the study concerned with pragmatic competence may develop over time, so a longer study might show different results. The other limitations address the lack of long-term assessment regarding TBI effectiveness on learners' oral fluency and pragmatic competence, since it is not conducted in the study.

The sample size of the learners is small since the available participants within the appropriate band score of homogeneity could not participate in the study. Thus, the findings of the study should be regarded with care and cannot be generalized to other groups with diverse contexts. But other researchers may work with a large number of students. In using this method for advanced learners care should be taken in selecting their roles and creating situations that are appropriate for their age. Some of the students in this research could not communicate by themselves, and implementing task-based learning indeed was difficult in early sessions so we can say that TBI is a somehow demanding, and employing task-based learning in time-limited classes needs energetic teachers.

Further research should be carried out using a bigger sample of students. Since this study was conducted just in a university, more similar studies can be conducted in larger settings to generalize the results of the study at a reliable foundation. Since the study relies heavily on quantitative data (scores, t-tests), future directions could apply interviews or open-ended feedback from learners to provide deeper insights into why TBI worked better.

Moreover, this study assessed the short-term effects of TBI on learners' oral fluency. The future research can be conducted on different types of learners' speech acts and pragmatic competence in long-term studies to assess their retention. This study is carried out just for an advanced learner, future research can be done at various language proficiency levels. Most of the research has investigated the pragmatic competency of oral fluency but future research may use TBI for facilitating learners' listening comprehension and encoding the implied meaning of the utterances in natural or formal contexts. The study was done with Iranian learners. However, the findings might

apply to other EFL learners from other cultural or linguistic backgrounds.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed equally to prepare the paper.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, upon reasonable request.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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