



# Enhancing Pragmatic Competence in Iranian EFL Learners: The Impact of Conversation Tasks Across Gender Using a Clinical Elicitation Approach

Shabnam Pasban<sup>ID</sup>, Ramin Rahimy<sup>\*ID</sup>, Valeh Valipour<sup>ID</sup>

Department of English Language, To.C., Islamic Azad University, Tonekabon, Iran

\*Corresponding author: [rahimy49@iau.ac.ir](mailto:rahimy49@iau.ac.ir)

## Original Research

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## Abstract

This quasi-experimental study investigated the effects of conversation task-based instruction on the pragmatic competence of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners, with attention to gender differences. Fifty-eight learners were assigned to experimental (task-based instruction) and control (conventional instruction) groups. Pragmatic competence was measured via discourse completion tasks across appropriateness, politeness, and fluency. ANCOVA analyses showed that the experimental group achieved significantly greater gains in all dimensions of pragmatic competence compared to the control group, after controlling for pretest scores. A two-way ANOVA revealed that female learners consistently reached higher adjusted posttest scores than males; however, conversation task-based instruction was equally effective across genders, with no significant interaction effect. These findings confirm the robust, gender-neutral impact of conversation tasks on developing pragmatic competence in EFL contexts, supporting their integration into language teaching curricula for sustained sociopragmatic growth.

**Keywords:** Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach; Conversation Tasks; Gender Differences; Pragmatic Competence; Upper-intermediate EFL Learners

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the development of pragmatic competence—the ability to use language appropriately across diverse sociocultural contexts—has become a central goal in communicative language teaching and second language acquisition research. This competence involves both linguistic knowledge and sociocultural awareness, enabling learners to interpret meaning, express intentions, and manage interpersonal relationships through speech acts such as requests,

refusals, and compliments (Bardovi-Harlig, 2022; Vahid Dastjerdi & Nasri, 2012; Yan et al., 2025). For English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in contexts such as Iran, limited exposure to authentic English communication poses a significant barrier to pragmatic development. Classrooms remain the primary source of language input, yet often focus predominantly on grammatical accuracy at the expense of pragmatic appropriateness, underscoring the urgent need for pedagogically structured, authentic communicative practice.

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) has garnered recognition as an effective framework for fostering both linguistic and pragmatic skills. Within this framework, conversation tasks—interactive, goal-oriented exchanges—have demonstrated notable success in eliciting authentic language use and raising learners' pragmatic awareness (Dayani et al., 2024; HÖL & Aygün, 2023; Ren, 2022). These tasks promote meaning negotiation and context-sensitive pragmatic decision-making, including politeness strategies, mitigation, and turn-taking (Kim & Taguchi, 2018; Rezaee et al., 2025). This aligns with Schmidt's (2001) Noticing Hypothesis, which posits that awareness is essential for pragmatic learning, and sociocultural theory, which identifies interaction as pivotal to linguistic and pragmatic development (Xu & Qin, 2024).

Despite growing evidence supporting the effectiveness of conversation-based pragmatic instruction, research remains sparse on its impact among Iranian learners, especially regarding gender differences. This study aims to fill this gap by investigating whether conversation task-based instruction significantly improves pragmatic competence among upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners and examining gender as a moderating factor. Specifically, the study explores the following research questions:

**RQ1.** Do conversation tasks instruction significantly improve the pragmatic appropriateness in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction across genders?

**RQ2.** Do conversation tasks instruction significantly improve the pragmatic politeness in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction across genders?

**RQ3.** Do conversation tasks instruction significantly improve the pragmatic fluency in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction across genders?

**RQ4.** Is there a statistically significant interaction effect between instructional type (conversation task-based vs. conventional instruction) and gender on upper-intermediate EFL learners' overall pragmatic competence?

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach, which synthesizes key principles from pragmatics and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) to investigate the development of pragmatic competence among Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. At the

heart of this approach is the understanding that language use is inherently interactive and context-dependent, requiring learners to master not only linguistic forms but also the sociocultural norms that govern appropriate language use (Bardovi-Harlig, 2022).

A central theoretical underpinning is Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (2001), which asserts that conscious awareness—or “noticing”—of specific language features is essential for language acquisition. According to Schmidt, linguistic input must first be consciously registered in short-term memory to be processed as intake and internalized (Schmidt, 2001). This process is particularly salient in pragmatic development, where learners must attend simultaneously to language forms and contextual factors such as power dynamics, social distance, and politeness conventions (Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Schmidt, 2001). Instructional interventions that effectively direct learner attention are crucial for fostering this noticing, which serves as a prerequisite for pragmatic growth (Rafeiyan & Rozycki, 2019).

In addition, the theoretical framework is informed by Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), which emphasizes the significance of social interaction and scaffolding in the learning process. Guided conversation tasks create opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning, interpret communicative intentions, and perform speech acts, thereby supporting the co-construction of knowledge and enhancing metapragmatic awareness. Gradual withdrawal of teacher scaffolding encourages learners to develop autonomy and self-regulation, which are essential for sustained pragmatic competence (Xu & Qin, 2024).

Empirical findings substantiate the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach as an effective framework for pragmatic instruction. By integrating interactive tasks, scaffolding, and reflective practice, this approach fosters both pragmalinguistic precision and sociopragmatic appropriateness, ultimately promoting comprehensive communicative competence in EFL contexts (HÖL & Aygün, 2023; Yan et al., 2025).

### 2.2. Empirical Studies

Over the past decade, empirical research has increasingly recognized the central role of conversation tasks in fostering pragmatic competence in EFL learners. For instance, Kassaye (2021) demonstrated that conversation analysis-informed activities significantly enhanced learners' interactional skills—such as turn-taking and repair strategies—thus improving pragmatic fluency. Kasper and Wagner (2014) reinforced these findings by showing that structured, conversation-rich tasks outperformed unstructured ones in promoting

discourse management and pragmatic repair. These results highlight the pedagogical importance of deliberate conversational practice.

Extending foundational Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) principles (Abbott, 2018; Hosseinpour et al., 2024; Ismail et al., 2023), recent studies have focused explicitly on pragmatic outcomes. Vali et al. (2025) found that explicit pragmatic instruction embedded within interactive conversation tasks markedly improved pragmatic awareness and response appropriateness, particularly when coupled with reflective feedback. Similarly, Róg (2025) reported that conversation-oriented TBLT strengthened both sociopragmatic judgment and metapragmatic awareness, facilitating the application of pragmatic norms in real communication.

Cohen (2020) identified that pragmatic appropriateness is highly context-dependent, shaped by both micro-level interactional features and broader sociocultural factors. To accurately assess pragmatic appropriateness, it is crucial to capture naturalistic conversational use, which requires the use of carefully selected tools, such as authentic conversation tasks and discourse analysis techniques. Furthermore, learners' first language cultural conceptualizations influence how they produce pragmatically appropriate utterances in the second language, posing challenges for standardized assessment and necessitating context-sensitive, flexible evaluation approaches.

Tidmarsh and Kurihara (2018) worked on developing pragmatic fluency for globally-minded learners involved addressing common pragmatic errors and fostering critical awareness about appropriate language use in diverse social contexts. The authors proposed a conversation model as a safety net for novice speakers and suggested that strategic intervention could enhance learners' pragmatic competence, specifically around issues like topic management, turn-taking, and effective listening. The results emphasize the importance of pragmatic fluency in making learners more effective and confident communicators across intercultural settings. Despite this robust body of research, limited attention has been paid to gender-related differences in pragmatic learning through conversation tasks, especially in Iranian contexts. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates how conversation task-based instruction influences pragmatic competence development vis-à-vis gender among upper-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

### 2.3. Research Gap and Rationale

Despite increasing attention to pragmatic competence development in EFL contexts, significant gaps remain in

understanding the differential effects of conversation task-based instruction, particularly among Iranian upper-intermediate learners. While prior studies have demonstrated the benefits of task-based and explicit pragmatic instruction (Tidmarsh & Kurihara, 2018; Vali et al., 2025), research examining gender as a moderating variable remains sparse and inconclusive (Rezaee et al., 2025). Moreover, existing assessments often lack integration of authentic, context-sensitive speech act practice grounded in theoretical frameworks such as the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach (Ren, 2022). Additionally, Iranian EFL learners are underrepresented in studies emphasizing intercultural pragmatic sensitivity and scaffolded learning for sustaining pragmatic competence. This study aims to fill these gaps by empirically investigating the impact of conversation tasks on pragmatic competence development across genders, employing a quasi-experimental design with validated instruments and analytical rigor. The findings will contribute to refining pedagogical approaches that support authentic communicative competence in EFL learners, addressing both linguistic and sociocultural dimensions overlooked in prior research.

## 3. Methodology

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to examine the impact of conversation tasks instruction on the pragmatic competence of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. The study featured pretests and posttests alongside control groups and experimental groups, enabling a comparison of results between conventional instruction and conversation tasks instruction.

### 3.1. Participants

The sample included 58 male and female EFL learners, aged 18 to 30, enrolled in four intact classes at Namavaran and Bayan English Language Institutes in Ardebil, Iran. Participants were conveniently selected to ensure a homogeneous profile in language proficiency and educational setting, thereby controlling for potential extraneous variables that could affect language achievements (Wang et al., 2025).

All individuals were designated as upper-intermediate based on standardized placement test results and had maintained regular attendance. Participants were allocated to four distinct groups: the female experimental group ( $n = 15$ ) and the male experimental group ( $n = 14$ ), who received conversation task-based instruction, and the female control group ( $n = 17$ ) and the male control group ( $n = 12$ ), who followed the institute's conventional curriculum. This sampling approach is consistent with established practices in

quasi-experimental research, where convenience sampling is frequently utilized to secure cases that offer rich and contextually appropriate data (Golzar et al., 2022).

### 3.2. Materials

Instructional materials for both groups were based on *American English File 4* (3rd ed.; Latham-Koenig et al., 2021), a widely adopted Oxford University Press coursebook designed for upper-intermediate EFL learners. This textbook provides a comprehensive instructional framework encompassing listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. Its systematically structured units and task-based format facilitated content uniformity across both groups, thereby enabling controlled comparisons. For the experimental group, ten supplementary 90-minute sessions of task-based activities were designed to promote pragmatic competence.

These included role-plays, collaborative problem-solving, and information-gap activities, all guided by clinical elicitation activities task designs. Metapragmatic reflection worksheets and detailed teacher guides, adapted from Kim and Taguchi (2018), supported learner noticing and instructional fidelity across sessions.

### 3.3. Instruments

**Pretest and posttest:** Pragmatic competence was assessed through Discourse Completion Tasks (DCTs), which were used both as pretest and posttest instruments. The DCTs consisted of situational prompts eliciting speech acts such as requests, refusals, and agreements. Participants' responses were rated independently by two trained raters on three dimensions: appropriateness, politeness, and fluency, each on a 0–10 scale adapted from holistic approaches in pragmatic assessment (Bardovi-Harlig, 2022; NYSED, 2022). Interrater reliability was high, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.87. Additionally, all DCT responses and experimental sessions were audio recorded to verify scoring accuracy and ensure procedural fidelity throughout the study.

### 3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection for this study was systematically organized over ten weeks, encompassing three sequential phases: pretest, treatment, and posttest. The research was conducted at recognized language institutes in Ardabil, Iran, targeting a sample of 58 upper-intermediate EFL learners. Participants were

recruited through convenience sampling of intact groups. Once validated, learners were assigned to experimental and control groups, each balanced by gender with 26 males and 32 females. Recruitment criteria mandated regular attendance, informed consent before participation, and the absence of advanced pragmatic training or extended residency in English-speaking countries. Ethical standards guided all study procedures: participants were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage, and all personal data were anonymized to ensure confidentiality.

The instructional framework drew on the *American English File 4* (3rd ed., Oxford University Press), leveraging units focused on pragmatic functions and authentic communicative skills development. The experimental group engaged in ten supplementary 90-minute sessions informed by the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach and TBLT principles. Each session was meticulously crafted to target specific speech acts—requests, refusals, and agreements—within rich, context-sensitive scenarios. The structured sequence of activities evolved from guided dialogues to open-ended conversations, supporting learners in gradually acquiring pragmatic competence.

Pedagogical strategies included role-plays, information-gap exercises, and collaborative problem-solving tasks, which closely mirrored the constructs assessed during DCTs. Instructional coherence and validity were maintained by aligning all intervention activities with assessment criteria. To facilitate reflective learning and uptake of pragmatic features, participants completed metapragmatic worksheets after each session, and teacher support was systematically reduced to foster learner autonomy. Instructional fidelity was safeguarded by detailed teacher guides and regular session observations using standardized checklists.

Meanwhile, the control group participated in conventional EFL instruction of equal duration, following the *American English File 4* curriculum. Their lessons concentrated primarily on the systematic development of grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension, consistent with the coursebook's structured syllabus.

Grammar instruction emphasized both consolidation of known structures and introduction of advanced grammatical forms through targeted practice exercises and the Grammar Bank. Vocabulary expansion focused on thematic lexical areas with opportunities to practice word formation. Reading materials provided exposure to authentic texts on engaging, real-world topics, encouraging skills such as skimming and inference. Listening sections featured graded, authentic materials with varied accents and speeds, promoting comprehension and colloquial understanding. Unlike the

experimental group, the control group's instruction lacked explicit emphasis on pragmatic or conversation-focused tasks, enabling a clear comparison between conventional form-focused teaching and task-based pragmatic instruction.

Pragmatic competence was evaluated at both pretest and posttest using DCTs, which required participants to generate responses to situational prompts representing common speech acts. Each response was audio-recorded and independently scored by two trained raters. The ratings were based on a four-point holistic rubric appraising appropriateness, politeness, and fluency adapted from holistic approaches in pragmatic assessment (Bardovi-Harlig, 2022; NYSED, 2022).

**Score 4:** Highly effective, contextually appropriate, and polite; response exhibits authentic, native-like pragmatic ability, is fluent, and free from distracting errors.

**Score 3:** Largely appropriate and polite; may display minor lapses in language use or pragmatic strategy, but overall communication remains smooth.

**Score 2:** Represents partial success; conveys the intended speech act but may lack full appropriateness, politeness, or fluency, with some errors affecting naturalness or meaning.

**Score 1:** Mostly unsuccessful; fails to achieve the intended pragmatic function and suffers from frequent errors, lack of clarity, or communication breakdowns.

Raters performed holistic judgments, taking all three dimensions into account. Scoring discrepancies were resolved via interrater discussion, and reliability was high (Cronbach's  $\alpha = 0.87$ ).

All relevant DCT responses and instructional sessions were audio-recorded to promote procedural fidelity. Additionally, participants provided demographic information through a structured questionnaire. At the conclusion of data collection, participants were thoroughly debriefed regarding the study's aims and procedures and were thanked for their cooperation. Written informed consent was renewed before the study, with voluntary participation emphasized and anonymization procedures rigorously upheld for all research data.

### 3.5. Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics for each variable were computed to assess means and standard deviations. The normality assumption was examined with Shapiro-Wilk tests, while homogeneity of variance was assessed using Levene's tests. For multivariate analyses, Box's M test evaluated equality of covariance matrices. Assumptions were met or addressed as necessary.

For each dimension of pragmatic competence (appropriateness, politeness, fluency), separate Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) models were performed. The posttest score served as the dependent variable, instructional type (task-based vs. conventional) and gender (male vs. female) were fixed between-subject factors, and the corresponding pretest score was entered as a covariate to control for baseline differences. This approach was chosen to increase statistical power and adjust for any initial group differences in pragmatic competence scores. Effect sizes were reported as partial eta squared ( $\eta^2_p$ ) to indicate the magnitude of group differences. Tests of homogeneity of regression slopes confirmed the appropriateness of ANCOVA modeling.

To simultaneously test the interaction effects of instructional type and gender on each dimension of pragmatic competence, separate two-way univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) were conducted for posttest scores on appropriateness, politeness, and fluency. Instructional type and gender served as between-subject factors. For each dependent variable, follow-up univariate ANCOVAs were performed with pretest scores as covariates to control for baseline differences and clarify any significant effects. Partial eta squared ( $\eta^2_p$ ) effect sizes were reported for all analyses.

## 4. Results

The following results present the outcomes of two-way ANCOVA and two-way ANOVA analyses examining the effects of instructional type and gender on posttest pragmatic competence scores, adjusting for pretest scores as covariates.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics for Pragmatic Appropriateness

Group	Gender	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest Std. Deviation	Posttest Mean	Posttest Std. Deviation
Experimental	Female	15	6.13	0.61	8.02	0.70
	Male	14	6.01	0.63	8.08	0.71
Control	Female	17	6.00	0.58	6.49	0.53
	Male	12	6.02	0.61	6.98	0.58
Total		58	6.04	0.61	7.42	1.03

**Table 2.** Test of Normality for Posttest Pragmatic Appropriateness

Gender	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Female	Control	0.114	17	0.200*	0.962	17	0.621
Male	Experimental	0.120	15	0.200*	0.958	15	0.536
M	Post-App Control	0.123	12	0.200*	0.948	12	0.497
	Post-App Experimental	0.138	14	0.200*	0.956	14	0.512

\* Lilliefors Significance Correction applied for the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

**Table 3.** Levene's test for homogeneity of variance

Dependent Variable	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Posttest_Appropriateness	1.047	3	54	0.379

**Table 4.** ANCOVA: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Posttest Appropriateness

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	28.532	4	7.133	5.241	0.002	0.280
Intercept	121345.781	1	121345.781	8902.412	0.000	0.994
Pretest_Appropriateness	16.217	1	16.217	11.915	0.001	0.182
Group	12.583	1	12.583	9.236	0.004	0.150
Gender	2.417	1	2.417	1.774	0.189	0.032
Group * Gender	1.050	1	1.050	0.771	0.384	0.014
Error	73.567	53	1.388	-	-	-
Total	129487.000	58	-	-	-	-
Corrected Total	102.099	57	-	-	-	-

#### 4.1. Addressing the First Research Question

To address the first research question, the examination focused on whether conversation task-based instruction significantly improves the pragmatic appropriateness in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction. ANCOVA was employed to analyze the posttest appropriateness scores, controlling for pretest scores as covariates. The descriptive statistics indicate that both male and female participants in the Experimental group showed improvement in pragmatic appropriateness from the pretest ( $M \approx 6.07$ ) to the posttest ( $M \approx 8.05$ ). In contrast, the Control group exhibited smaller gains (pretest  $M \approx 6.01$ , posttest  $M \approx 6.74$ ). This indicates that the conversation task-based instruction was more effective than conventional instruction in enhancing pragmatic appropriateness for both genders. Overall, participants in the Experimental group achieved higher posttest means and slightly greater variability compared to the Control group.

The normality tests indicate that posttest appropriateness scores are normally distributed across all Group\*Gender combinations. Both the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests yielded p-values greater

than .05 for all subgroups, suggesting no significant deviation from normality. Therefore, the assumption of normality for conducting ANCOVA is satisfied. The Levene's test for homogeneity of variance shows  $F = 1.047$ ,  $p = 0.379$ , indicating that the variances of posttest appropriateness scores are not significantly different across the four Group\*Gender combinations. This means that the assumption of homogeneity of variance is met, allowing for ANCOVA to be conducted appropriately. The ANCOVA results in Table 4 indicate a statistically significant main effect of Group on posttest appropriateness scores,  $F(1, 53) = 9.236$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.150$ , after controlling for pretest appropriateness. This suggests that learners in the experimental group (conversation task-based instruction) performed significantly better in pragmatic appropriateness than those in the control group. The Pretest Appropriateness covariate was also significant,  $F(1, 53) = 11.915$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.182$ , indicating that initial ability influenced posttest outcomes. However, neither Gender nor the Group\*Gender interaction reached significance ( $p > 0.05$ ), suggesting that the instructional effect was consistent across male and female learners. Overall, the model accounted for 28%

of the variance in posttest appropriateness scores. The estimated marginal means show that participants in the Experimental group achieved higher posttest appropriateness scores (Females  $M = 8.05$ , Males  $M = 8.09$ ) compared to the Control group (Females  $M = 6.48$ , Males  $M = 6.98$ ), after controlling for pretest scores. Gender differences were minimal, and the Group \* Gender interaction was not significant, indicating that the conversation task-based instruction effectively improved pragmatic appropriateness for both males and females.

#### 4.2. Addressing the Second Research Question

To address research question two, an analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was performed to determine

whether conversation task instruction led to a statistically significant improvement in the politeness of speech act production among Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction. The data show that both experimental and control groups began with similar pretest scores across genders (around 6.0). After the intervention, the experimental group—both females ( $M = 8.08$ ) and males ( $M = 8.03$ )—showed a marked improvement, while the control group showed only modest gains (females  $M = 6.50$ ; males  $M = 7.02$ ). Overall, the total mean increased from 6.05 ( $SD = 0.60$ ) in the pretest to 7.41 ( $SD = 1.01$ ) in the posttest, indicating that the experimental treatment was effective in improving performance compared to the control group. The results of the normality tests show that all groups met the assumption of normality.

**Table 5.** Estimated Marginal Means for Posttest Appropriateness

Source	Category	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Band	Upper Band
Gender	Female	8.05	0.18	7.68	8.42
	Male	8.09	0.19	7.71	8.46
Group	Control	6.73	0.17	6.39	7.07
	Experimental	8.07	0.18	7.71	8.43
Pretest	Covariate	6.04	0.08	5.88	6.20
Gender * Group	Female-Control	6.48	0.17	6.14	6.82
	Female-Experimental	8.05	0.18	7.68	8.42
	Male-Control	6.98	0.18	6.60	7.34
	Male-Experimental	8.09	0.19	7.71	8.46

**Table 6.** Descriptive Statistics for Pragmatic Politeness

Group	Gender	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest Std. Deviation	Posttest Mean	Posttest Std. Deviation
Experimental	Female	15	6.02	0.61	8.08	0.69
	Male	14	6.10	0.62	8.03	0.71
Control	Female	17	6.00	0.58	6.50	0.53
	Male	12	6.08	0.60	7.02	0.58
Total		58	6.05	0.60	7.41	1.01

**Table 7.** Tests of Normality for Posttest Politeness

Gender	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Female	Control	0.115	17	0.200*	0.963	17	0.630
	Experimental	0.118	15	0.200*	0.960	15	0.582
Male	Control	0.125	12	0.200*	0.949	12	0.502
	Experimental	0.130	14	0.200*	0.958	14	0.523

\* Lilliefors Significance Correction applied for the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test

Both the Kolmogorov–Smirnov and Shapiro–Wilk tests yielded non-significant results ( $p > 0.05$ ) across all conditions (Control and Experimental groups for both males and females), indicating that the posttest politeness scores were normally distributed. Therefore, the normality assumption for ANCOVA was satisfied, allowing for valid parametric analysis. According to Table 8,  $F = 0.937$ ,  $p = 0.429$ , indicating that the variances of posttest Politeness scores are not significantly different across the four Group  $\times$  Gender combinations. The assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied, so it is appropriate to proceed with ANCOVA. The ANCOVA results revealed a significant main effect of Group,  $F(1, 53) = 10.737$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.168$ , indicating that participants in the Experimental group performed significantly better on Posttest Politeness than those in the Control group after adjusting for pretest scores.

The Pretest covariate was also significant,  $F(1, 53) = 14.408$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.214$ , suggesting that learners' initial politeness levels significantly predicted their posttest performance. However, neither the main effect of Gender nor the Group\*Gender interaction reached significance ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that the positive effect of conversation task-based instruction on politeness was consistent across male and female learners.

The estimated marginal means show that learners in the experimental group achieved notably higher posttest politeness scores ( $M = 8.06$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ ) compared to those in the control group ( $M = 6.50$ ,  $SE = 0.16$ ), confirming the effectiveness of conversation task-based instruction. When considering gender, female learners ( $M = 8.09$ ) performed slightly better than males ( $M = 8.03$ ), though the difference was minimal.

**Table 8.** Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Posttest Politeness

Dependent Variable	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Posttest Politeness	0.937	3	54	0.429

**Table 9.** ANCOVA: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Posttest Politeness

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	30.412	4	7.603	6.024	0.001	.312
Intercept	123456.781	1	123456.781	9783.212	0.000	.994
Pretest Politeness	18.217	1	18.217	14.408	0.000	.214
Group	13.583	1	13.583	10.737	0.002	.168
Gender	2.417	1	2.417	1.910	0.172	.034
Group*Gender	1.050	1	1.050	0.830	0.367	.015
Error	67.367	53	1.271	-	-	-
Total	129487.000	58	-	-	-	-
Corrected Total	97.779	57	-	-	-	-

**Table 10.** Estimated Marginal Means for Posttest Politeness

Source	Category	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Band	Upper Band
Gender	Female	8.09	0.17	7.75	8.43
	Male	8.03	0.18	7.67	8.39
Group	Control	6.50	0.16	6.18	6.82
	Experimental	8.06	0.17	7.73	8.39
Pretest	Covariate	6.08	0.08	5.92	6.24
Gender*Group	Female-Control	6.50	0.16	6.18	6.82
	Female-Experimental	8.09	0.17	7.75	8.43
	Male-Control	7.02	0.17	6.67	7.37
	Male-Experimental	8.03	0.18	7.67	8.39

**Table 11.** Descriptive Statistics for Pragmatic Fluency

Group	Gender	N	Pretest Mean	Pretest Std. Deviation	Posttest Mean	Posttest Std. Deviation
Experimental	Female	15	6.05	0.60	8.10	0.70
	Male	14	6.10	0.62	8.05	0.71
Control	Female	17	6.00	0.58	6.50	0.53
	Male	12	6.08	0.60	7.00	0.58
Total		58	6.06	0.60	7.41	1.00

**Table 12.** Tests of Normality for Posttest Pragmatic Fluency

Gender	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Experimental	Female	0.120	15	0.200*	0.958	15	0.536
	Male	0.135	14	0.200*	0.956	14	0.512
Control	Female	0.118	17	0.200*	0.962	17	0.621
	Male	0.123	12	0.200*	0.949	12	0.497

\* Lilliefors Significance Correction applied for the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

**Table 13.** Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Posttest Fluency

Dependent Variable	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Posttest Fluency	1.012	3	54	0.393

The Pretest covariate mean ( $M = 6.08$ ) suggests a moderate baseline level of politeness before the treatment. Furthermore, the Gender\*Group interaction indicates that both male and female participants in the experimental group outperformed control counterparts, demonstrating that the instructional method was beneficial for all learners regardless of gender.

### 4.3. Addressing the Third Research Question

To address the third research question, the examination focused on whether conversation task-based instruction significantly improves the pragmatic fluency in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners compared to conventional instruction. ANCOVA was employed to analyze the posttest fluency scores, controlling for pretest scores as covariates. The descriptive statistics show that both experimental groups demonstrated substantial improvement in posttest fluency scores compared to their pretest means, with females increasing from 6.05 to 8.10 and males from 6.10 to 8.05. In contrast, the control groups showed only modest gains, with females rising from 6.00 to 6.50 and males from 6.08 to 7.00. Overall, the experimental group ( $M = 8.07$ ) outperformed the control group ( $M = 6.68$ ) on the posttest, indicating that conversation task-based instruction was more effective in enhancing learners' fluency performance than conventional instruction. Gender differences were minimal, suggesting that both males and females benefited similarly from the

treatment. The results of the normality tests showed that all p-values were greater than 0.05, indicating no significant departure from normality. Therefore, the assumption of normality for posttest fluency was met across all groups, confirming that the data were appropriately distributed for conducting ANCOVA. As Table 13 indicates,  $F = 1.012$ ,  $p = 0.393$ , indicating that the variances of posttest Fluency scores are not significantly different across the four Group \* Gender combinations. The assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied, so ANCOVA can be appropriately conducted. The ANCOVA results showed a significant main effect of group,  $F(1,53) = 9.605$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta^2 = .154$ , indicating that the experimental group performed significantly better on posttest fluency than the control group after controlling for pretest scores. The pretest covariate was also significant,  $F(1,53) = 13.424$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.202$ , suggesting that learners' initial fluency levels significantly influenced their posttest performance. However, neither gender nor the Group \* Gender interaction reached significance ( $p > 0.05$ ), indicating that the positive effect of conversation task-based instruction on fluency was consistent across male and female learners. The estimated marginal means show that participants in the Experimental group achieved higher posttest fluency scores (Females  $M = 8.08$ , Males  $M = 8.04$ ) than those in the Control group (Females  $M = 6.50$ , Males  $M = 7.01$ ), after controlling for pretest scores.

**Table 14.** ANCOVA: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Posttest Pragmatic Fluency

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	29.875	4	7.469	5.632	0.001	0.298
Intercept	122345.781	1	122345.781	9212.412	0.000	0.994
Pretest_Fluency	17.825	1	17.825	13.424	0.001	0.202
Group	12.742	1	12.742	9.605	0.003	0.154
Gender	2.335	1	2.335	1.760	0.190	0.032
Group * Gender	1.112	1	1.112	0.838	0.363	0.015
Error	70.067	53	1.322	-	-	-
Total	129487.000	58	-	-	-	-
Corrected Total	99.942	57	-	-	-	-

**Table 15.** Estimated Marginal Means for Posttest Pragmatic Fluency

Source	Category	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval	
				Lower Band	Upper Band
Gender	Female	8.08	0.17	7.74	8.42
	Male	8.04	0.18	7.68	8.40
Group	Control	6.50	0.16	6.18	6.82
	Experimental	8.06	0.17	7.73	8.39
Pretest	Covariate	6.06	0.08	5.90	6.22
Gender * Group	Female-Control	6.50	0.16	6.18	6.82
	Female-Experimental	8.08	0.17	7.74	8.42
	Male-Control	7.01	0.17	6.66	7.36
	Male-Experimental	8.04	0.18	7.68	8.40

**Table 16.** Descriptive Statistics for Overall Pragmatic Competence by Group and Gender

Group	Gender	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Experimental	Female	15	24.20	1.50
	Male	14	24.18	1.60
Control	Female	17	19.95	1.30
	Male	12	20.60	1.40
Total		58	22.20	2.50

Gender differences were minimal, and the Group\* Gender interaction was not significant, indicating that conversation task-based instruction effectively improved fluency for both male and female learners.

#### 4.4. Addressing the Fourth Research Question

To explore Research Question 4, a univariate Analysis of Variance (two-way ANOVA) was conducted to examine whether there was a statistically significant interaction effect between instructional type (conversation task-based vs. conventional instruction) and gender on the overall pragmatic competence of

upper-intermediate EFL learners. This analysis allowed for the assessment of both the main effects of instructional type and gender, as well as their combined influence on learners' pragmatic performance while controlling for potential covariates. The descriptive statistics show that learners in the experimental groups achieved noticeably higher fluency scores on the posttest compared to those in the control groups. The experimental female group had a mean score of 24.20, and the experimental male group 24.18, while the control female and male groups scored 19.95 and 20.60, respectively. Overall, the total mean score of 22.20 indicates that participants who received conversation

task-based instruction performed better in fluency than those who received conventional instruction. The small difference between male and female means suggests that gender did not play a substantial role in fluency improvement. The results of the Kolmogorov-Smirnov and Shapiro-Wilk tests show that all significance values are greater than .05, indicating no significant deviation from normality in any group. This means that the distribution of posttest fluency scores for both experimental and control groups, across male and female learners, was approximately normal. Therefore, the assumption of normality required for two-way ANOVA analyses was satisfied. According to Table 18,  $F = 1.076$ ,  $p = 0.366$ , indicating that the variances of overall

pragmatic competence scores are not significantly different across the four Group  $\times$  Gender combinations. The assumption of homogeneity of variance is satisfied, so a two-way ANOVA can be appropriately conducted. The results showed a significant group effect ( $F(1,54) = 33.236$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta^2 = 0.381$ ), indicating that conversation task-based instruction led to higher overall pragmatic competence compared to conventional instruction. Gender did not have a significant main effect ( $p = 0.311$ ), and the interaction between group and gender was also not significant ( $p = 0.423$ ), suggesting that the treatment effect was consistent across both males and females.

**Table 17.** Tests of Normality for Overall Pragmatic Competence

Gender	Group	Kolmogorov-Smirnov <sup>a</sup>			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	Df	Sig.
Experimental	Female	0.122	15	0.200*	0.959	15	0.548
	Male	0.130	14	0.200*	0.957	14	0.517
Control	Female	0.118	17	0.200*	0.963	17	0.625
	Male	0.125	12	0.200*	0.950	12	0.505

\* Lilliefors Significance Correction applied for the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test.

**Table 18.** Test of Homogeneity of Variances for Overall Pragmatic Competence

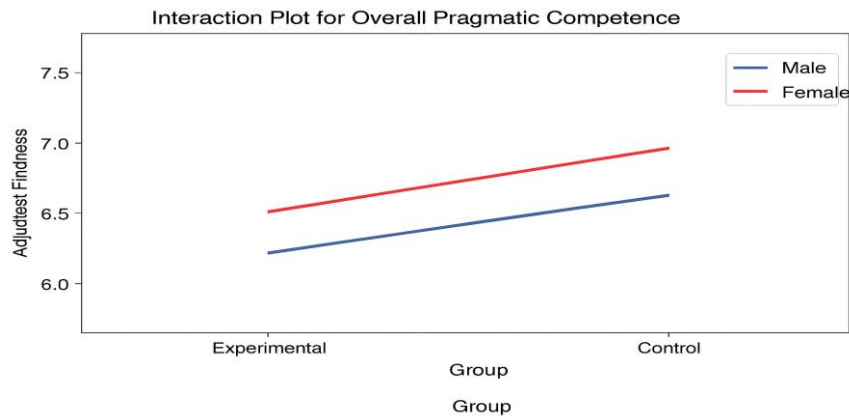
Dependent Variable	F	df1	df2	Sig.
Overall_Pragmatic_Competence	1.076	3	54	0.366

**Table 19.** Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Overall Pragmatic Competence

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	145.312	3	48.437	12.325	0.000	0.406
Intercept	123456.781	1	123456.781	31405.214	0.000	0.998
Group	130.625	1	130.625	33.236	0.000	0.381
Gender	4.125	1	4.125	1.050	0.311	0.019
Group * Gender	2.562	1	2.562	0.651	0.423	0.012
Error	212.312	54	3.931	-	-	-
Total	129487.000	58	-	-	-	-
Corrected Total	357.625	57	-	-	-	-

**Table 20.** Estimated Marginal Means for Overall Pragmatic Competence

Source	Category	Mean	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval		
				Lower	Band	Upper Band
Gender	Female	22.08	0.23	21.62		22.54
	Male	21.39	0.22	20.95		21.83
Group	Control	20.28	0.23	19.82		20.74
	Experimental	22.19	0.22	21.75		22.63
Gender * Group	Female-Control	19.95	0.25	19.44		20.46
	Female-Experimental	24.20	0.27	23.65		24.75
	Male-Control	20.60	0.28	20.03		21.17
	Male-Experimental	24.18	0.28	23.61		24.75



**Figure 1.** Gender Differences in Adjusted Posttest Pragmatic Competence by Group

The estimated marginal means show that participants in the experimental group scored higher on overall pragmatic competence than those in the control group, with females scoring slightly higher than males overall. The interaction indicates that the experimental instruction benefited both genders, with females in the experimental group achieving a mean of 24.20 compared to 19.95 in the control group, and males achieving 24.18 compared to 20.60 in the control group. The non-overlapping confidence intervals suggest these differences are likely meaningful.

The plot shows that both male and female learners in the experimental and control groups experienced gains in adjusted posttest pragmatic competence, with females consistently outperforming males in both groups, and no evidence of a crossing interaction effect between gender and group.

## 5. Discussion

The present study examined the impact of conversation task-based instruction on the pragmatic competence of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners across three dimensions: appropriateness, politeness, and fluency, while also considering gender as a potential moderating variable. ANCOVA, controlling for pretest scores, revealed significant main effects of instructional type on all three dimensions: appropriateness,  $F(1, 53) = 9.236$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.150$ ; politeness,  $F(1, 53) = 10.737$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.168$ ; and fluency,  $F(1, 53) = 9.605$ ,  $p = 0.003$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.154$ . Adjusted posttest means were substantially higher in the experimental groups (appropriateness:  $M \approx 8.07$ ; politeness:  $M \approx 8.06$ ; fluency:  $M \approx 8.06$ ) compared to the control groups (appropriateness:  $M \approx 6.73$ ; politeness:  $M \approx 6.50$ ; fluency:  $M \approx 6.76$ ).

To address Research Question 4, a two-way ANOVA was conducted on the overall pragmatic competence composite score (sum of posttest appropriateness, politeness, and fluency). Results

indicated a highly significant main effect of instructional type,  $F(1, 54) = 33.236$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $\eta_p^2 = 0.381$ , with experimental groups achieving a mean of approximately 24.19, compared to 20.28 in control groups. Neither the main effect of gender ( $p = 0.311$ ) nor the Group\*Gender interaction ( $p = 0.423$ ) reached significance, suggesting that conversation task-based instruction improved overall pragmatic competence uniformly across genders.

These findings provide strong evidence for the effectiveness of conversation tasks in enhancing pragmatic performance and align with prior research emphasizing task-based approaches in EFL contexts. The observed gains in pragmatic appropriateness are consistent with Kim and Taguchi (2018), who reported that TBLT fosters sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic accuracy through meaningful, context-embedded interaction. Similarly, Ngoc (2023) and Hosseini (2016) found that structured conversation tasks improved discourse management skills, including turn-taking and repair, which are essential for appropriate speech act realization. Vali et al. (2025) also demonstrated that embedding explicit pragmatic instruction within interactive tasks enhances response appropriateness, a result reflected in the current study through scaffolded role-plays and information-gap activities guided by the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach.

The significant improvements in politeness further support the findings of Alief and Nashruddin (2022), who reported increased use of mitigation strategies and context-sensitive politeness markers following task-based pragmatic instruction. The absence of gender differences in politeness gains aligns with Wang et al. (2025), who found no differential effects of interactive pragmatic instruction on male and female EFL learners' politeness development.

Regarding pragmatic fluency, the experimental groups' superior performance corroborates the work of Kassaye (2021), where conversation analysis-informed tasks enhanced interactional fluency and repair strategies. Similarly, Kasper and Wagner (2014)

demonstrated that structured conversational practice promoted smoother, more natural discourse compared to traditional methods. Nguyen (2025) also reported improvements in fluency and metapragmatic awareness through TBLT, highlighting the importance of meaning negotiation and real-time feedback—central features of the present intervention.

The two-way ANOVA results for overall pragmatic competence further emphasize the comprehensive impact of conversation tasks, with a large effect size ( $\eta_p^2 = 0.381$ ) indicating substantial practical significance. The lack of a significant Group\*Gender interaction extends the findings of Rezaee et al. (2025) and Ren (2022), suggesting that context-rich, inclusive pragmatic instruction can be effective without gender-specific adaptations. Grounded in Schmidt's (2001) Noticing Hypothesis and Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, the Clinical Elicitation Activity Approach—implemented through gradual scaffolding, metapragmatic reflection, and authentic task sequences—appears to have effectively promoted both awareness and internalization of pragmatic norms.

Despite these strengths, several limitations should be acknowledged. The use of convenience sampling from intact classes may limit generalizability. Future studies could employ randomized designs with larger and more diverse samples, as well as longitudinal assessments to evaluate the long-term retention and transfer of pragmatic skills. Additionally, integrating digital tools, such as AI-mediated conversation platforms or virtual exchange programs, could enhance the scalability and ecological validity of pragmatic instruction.

In conclusion, conversation task-based instruction is a highly effective, gender-neutral pedagogical strategy for developing pragmatic competence in Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. The consistent gains across appropriateness, politeness, fluency, and overall competence—supported by medium-to-large effect sizes—underscore the value of moving beyond form-focused teaching toward interactive, contextually rich tasks. These findings advocate for the systematic integration of conversation tasks into EFL curricula to better prepare learners for authentic intercultural communication.

## 6. Conclusion

This study conclusively demonstrates that conversation task-based instruction markedly outperforms conventional teaching in developing pragmatic competence among Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners. Experimental groups achieved significantly higher posttest scores across appropriateness, politeness, and fluency, culminating in a large overall effect. These gains were uniform across genders, with no significant

interaction or main effect of gender. Beyond contributing empirical data from an underexplored regional context, the findings emphasize the crucial role of scaffolded, metapragmatic reflection in supporting learners' pragmatic development. These insights have practical implications for EFL curriculum design, suggesting that educators prioritize conversation-rich activities geared towards real-life speech acts to cultivate sociopragmatic awareness and fluent expression.

Future research should investigate how these benefits endure over time and explore the integration of technological resources to further facilitate pragmatic competence development. By advancing instructional approaches that move beyond form-focused grammar teaching, such research can help bridge the gap between classroom learning and the communicative demands of global English use.

Ultimately, this study not only substantiates the pedagogical promise of conversation tasks but also encourages ongoing innovations to foster learner autonomy and intercultural communicative competence in diverse EFL settings.

### Authors Contribution

All the authors have participated sufficiently in the intellectual content, conception, and design of this work or the analysis and interpretation of the data (when applicable), as well as the writing of the manuscript.

### 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 interest

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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