



## Enhancing Pragmatic Competence through Task-Based Language Teaching: Evidence from Iranian ESP Learners

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### Abstract

This study aims to investigate the concept of pragmatic competence as an important feature of communicative ability and its relative neglect in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) courses. Moreover, it aims to explore the efficacy of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) for developing the pragmatic competence of Iranian ESP learners. Sixty Iranian learners of ESP, consisting of 30 males and 30 females at intermediate and upper-intermediate levels, were selected from two language institutes in Zahedan, Iran, using the Oxford Quick Placement Test. They were randomly assigned into an experimental group and a control group, each consisting of 30 learners. A quasi-experimental pretest-posttest control group design was used. The experimental group was subjected to task-based teaching, which was based on the three stages of task-based methodology, namely, pre-task, during-task, and post-task stages, whereas the control group was subjected to traditional teaching. A pragmatic competence test was used as both pre-test and post-test. Results showed that the experimental group showed significant improvement in pragmatic competence, whereas the control group showed little improvement, using paired-samples t-tests. In addition, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in pragmatic competence development,  $t(28) = -.315, p = .755$ . The findings revealed that task-based teaching is an effective approach for developing learners' pragmatic competence. Implications and recommendations are presented.

**Keywords:** task-based language teaching, pragmatic competence, English for Specific Purposes, speech acts

### 1 Introduction

In the last few decades, there has been a gradual shift from the grammar-based approach to the communicative approach in second and foreign languages teaching. Among the communicative language teaching approaches, TBLT has received considerable attention. This approach focuses on communicative tasks in the language learning process. It allows learners to use the language to accomplish a meaningful outcome (Long, 1985; Nunan, 1989; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1998; Willis,

1996). The basic idea of this approach is to consider the task the central unit of the language syllabus. This approach facilitates learners to communicate while they develop their linguistic skills.

A task is generally considered an activity in which learners have to use the target language to accomplish a communicative outcome (Willis, 1996). Similarly, Richards and Rodgers (2014) described a task as an activity in which learners have to process or understand the language to perform a particular function. Ellis (2003) emphasized the importance of the pedagogic task, which requires learners to process the language pragmatically to accomplish an outcome. The outcome of the task may involve cognitive or communicative processes. Tasks have been found to create a conducive environment for the acquisition of second language.

The concept of pragmatic competence involves the ability of the learners to use the language in an appropriate social or cultural context. This concept has been described as the study of language from the user's perspective. It involves the study of the choices made by the speakers while using the language. The choices made by the speakers have a considerable effect on the interpretation of the messages (Crystal, 1997). The pragmatic competence of the learners helps them to perform speech acts such as requests, apologies, compliments, refusals and suggestions.

In fact, it is not enough for learners to have good grammatical skills in order for them to communicate effectively. A learner can have good grammatical skills but still be unable to convey their intended message or understand what someone else is trying to convey in an actual face-to-face conversation (Ellis, 2008; Wolfson, 1989). Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) demonstrated that it is possible for learners to have advanced grammatical skills but still lack advanced pragmatics skills. Niezgodna and Rover (2001) and Matsumura (2003) also demonstrated that learners can have good linguistic skills but still have very poor pragmatics skills.

The significance of pragmatics is also demonstrated in ESP learning contexts. ESP is a program that is aimed at equipping learners with appropriate English skills for their academic or professional needs (Hutchinson & Waters, 1987). In ESP learning contexts, learners must have appropriate communicative skills for their particular learning needs. Basturkmen (2006) demonstrated that learners in ESP learning contexts must be aware of appropriate communicative practices for their particular learning needs, for example, in business communication, learners must be aware of cultural differences in politeness (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998).

Despite the fact that pragmatics is widely accepted as an important aspect of second and foreign language learning, many studies have demonstrated that learners still fail pragmatically when they try to communicate in their second language (Bouton, 1994; House & Kasper, 1981). Bardovi-Harlig (2001) noted that much of pragmatics is not acquired automatically; therefore, it must be explicitly taught. A study by Rose (2005) found that learners who have been explicitly exposed to pragmatics have consistently outperformed those who have not been exposed to pragmatics instruction.

Although considerable research has been conducted to examine the role of instruction in the development of pragmatic competence, previous studies (Rose & Ng, 2001; Takimoto, 2008) have primarily focused on various instructional methods, such as explicit/implicit and deductive/inductive. Thus, little attention has been devoted to examining the contribution of language teaching methodology to the development of pragmatic competence. In addition, little research has been conducted to examine

whether communicative language teaching, including TBLT, can promote learners' pragmatic competence in ESP.

This lack of research indicates that an investigation of the relationship between task-based language instruction and language students' pragmatic competence, especially in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings, should be conducted. Since task-based language instruction focuses on meaningful interaction and communication, it may play a crucial role in promoting language students' pragmatic competence. However, little research has been conducted to examine the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting language students' pragmatic competence in ESP settings.

It is within this background that this study aims to examine the effectiveness of TBLT in promoting language students' pragmatic competence. Specifically, this study aims to examine whether TBLT can promote language students' ability to perform various speech acts, including requests, refusals, apologies, suggestions, and compliments. In addition, this study aims to examine whether any gender difference exists in language students' pragmatic competence within a TBLT framework.

The findings of the present study may contribute to the growing body of research on interlanguage pragmatics and communicative language teaching. Moreover, the findings may have certain implications for ESP teachers, syllabus designers, and teacher trainers by emphasizing the possibility of task-based approaches for developing pragmatics in EFL and ESP contexts.

## 2 Literature Review

### 2.1 Task-Based Language Teaching

TBLT can be seen as relatively a new form of communicative language teaching, with communicative tasks as its main feature. Unlike traditional language teaching, which emphasized grammar, TBLT focuses more on communicative language use through tasks that mimic real-life communication. A task can be defined as an activity that involves students using their target language to accomplish a communicative task. Ellis (2003) defined a pedagogical task as a plan of work that involves learners processing language pragmatically to accomplish a particular outcome. Thus, tasks involve language use for meaning, as opposed to language use for form.

Some researchers have identified essential features of tasks. Skehan (1998) argued that tasks should prioritize meaning, involve real-life communication, and involve students using their own linguistic resources to accomplish an outcome. Nunan (2004), on the other hand, mentioned that tasks should involve students in understanding, producing, and interacting in the target language, with a primary emphasis on meaning over form. TBLT also relies on experiential learning theory, which involves a process of learning that occurs as a result of experience. Thus, language acquisition occurs as a result of students' engagement in communicative activities. As such, students develop their linguistic competence by engaging in communicative activities. According to Kohonen (1992), experiential learning promotes autonomy and allows students to assume more responsibility for their learning process.

### 2.2 Pragmatic Competence in Second Language Learning

Pragmatic competence is recognized as one of the most important features of communicative competence. It is the ability to use language appropriately in various social and cultural settings (Crystal, 1997). This includes knowledge of speech acts, politeness, and discourse features. The concept of

communicative competence was first proposed by Hymes (1972). He argued that linguistic competence is more than just knowledge of grammar. This is supported by later models of communicative competence. Pragmatic competence is recognized as one of the important features of communicative competence (Canale & Swain, 1980; Bachman, 1990). In Bachman's (1990) model, pragmatic competence is recognized as one of the subcomponents of communicative competence. Pragmatic competence includes knowledge of sociolinguistics and illocutionary acts.

Studies have shown that even though learners are highly competent in grammar, they still have difficulties in using language appropriately in social settings. Bardovi-Harlig and Dörnyei (1998) demonstrated that grammatical competence does not necessarily lead to pragmatic competence. Similarly, Niezgoda and Rover (2001) and Matsumura (2003) highlighted that advanced learners are often characterized by low pragmatic awareness. Studies in interlanguage pragmatics have demonstrated that learners have difficulties in using various speech acts such as requesting, refusals, and apologies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Rose, 2000; Schauer, 2004). This is because learners are exposed neither to sufficient input in the target language nor are they able to transfer pragmatic knowledge from their first language (Takahashi & Beebe, 1987).

Since pragmatic competence is not necessarily acquired in the target language, many researchers have emphasized the importance of pragmatic teaching. According to Bardovi-Harlig (2001), many features of L2 pragmatics are not necessarily acquired without teaching. Similarly, Rose (2005) found that learners who are exposed to pragmatic teaching have scored significantly higher than learners who are not exposed to pragmatic teaching.

### **2.3 Task-Based Instruction and Pragmatic Development**

While much research has focused on the role of instruction in pragmatics, most of the research has centered on methods such as explicit and implicit instruction (Rose & Ng, 2001; Takimoto, 2008). Conversely, few studies have examined the influence of certain methods of teaching on pragmatics development. TBLT may be an effective approach for teaching pragmatics since it involves learners in authentic interactions and enables learners to carry out speech acts within contexts. Through such interactions and negotiation of meaning, learners may be able to develop an awareness of appropriate language use within different social contexts. Tasks may also involve learners in authentic interactions, which may help learners practice pragmatics within contexts that are similar to real-life situations. This interaction-based approach may be effective for developing learners' pragmatic competence since it may provide learners with an opportunity for interaction and receiving feedback.

However, little research has examined the effectiveness of TBLT for developing learners' pragmatic competence, particularly within ESP and EFL contexts. It is, therefore, necessary for further research to be carried out to establish whether TBLT may be effective for developing learners' pragmatic competence.

### **2.4 Empirical studies**

Some investigations have been carried out on the effectiveness of TBLT in developing learners' pragmatic competence and communicative language abilities. A consensus among many studies is that this approach offers learners an opportunity for interaction, contextualized language use, and communicative language abilities. These conditions are critical for developing pragmatic competence.

Some studies have demonstrated the effectiveness of TBLT on learners' pragmatic competence. For example, Levkina (2018) found that task-based language instruction had a positive effect on learners' speech acts, including apologies and justifications, in an EFL context. Additionally, Kim and Taguchi (2015) found that learners who received TBLT outperformed those in the control group in expressions of request-making. More recent research by Gorjian and Mir (2025) revealed that Iranian EFL learners who received TBLT outperformed their counterparts who received traditional presentation-practice-production instruction in pragmatic oral fluency.

Other studies have examined the effectiveness of TBLT in ESP and EFL contexts. For example, Khatib and Dehghankar (2018) found that ESP learners who received task-based language instruction demonstrated significant improvements in productive skills, including positive attitudes toward task-based language instruction. Additionally, Fujita and Shintani (2025) found that learners who received TBLT in an ESP program demonstrated improvements in writing complexity and fluency, as well as positive attitudes toward this approach. TBLT has also been found to be effective in developing learners' pragmatic competence in an EFL setting, especially when tasks were mediated by technology, as demonstrated by Kim et al. (2023) in an advice-giving situation.

In general, it is clear that task-based language instruction can facilitate learners' development of pragmatic competence through communicative language abilities. However, few studies have examined the effectiveness of TBLT in developing learners' pragmatic competence in ESP contexts in EFL contexts. As such, more research is needed to establish the effectiveness of task-based language instruction in developing learners' pragmatic competence in ESP contexts.

### 3 Research Questions

Based on these objectives, the study addressed the following research questions:

1. Does Task-Based Language Teaching significantly improve the pragmatic competence of Iranian ESP learners?
2. Is there a significant difference between male and female ESP learners in the development of pragmatic competence through a TBLT syllabus?

### 4 Method

#### 4.1 Research Design

This study followed a quasi-experimental research design with a pretest–posttest control group format. The independent variable was the type of instruction (task-based language teaching vs. traditional instruction), and the dependent variable was learners' pragmatic competence. The study aimed at exploring the effectiveness of a TBLT syllabus in developing the pragmatic ability of Iranian ESP students.

#### 4.2 Participants

Participants were selected from a population of 67 Iranian ESP students studying at Shokooh Language Institute and Oxford Language Institute in Zahedan, Iran. Specifically, the intermediate-level class was selected from Shokooh Language Institute, while the upper-intermediate class was selected from Oxford Language Institute. As the study followed a quasi-experimental design, intact classes were

used rather than randomly assigning individual participants to groups. To ensure homogeneity in language proficiency, the Oxford Quick Placement Test (Version 2) was administered. Based on the test results, seven students whose proficiency levels did not fall within the intermediate or upper-intermediate range were excluded from the study. Consequently, 60 students were retained as the final sample.

Participants in the experimental group received instruction through TBLT, whereas those in the control group received traditional instruction. Both groups received instruction for the same duration and were taught by the same instructor in order to minimize potential teacher-related variables. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Demographic Characteristics of the Participants*

Variable	Category	N	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	30	50
	Female	30	50
Proficiency Level	Intermediate	32	53.3
	Upper-intermediate	28	46.7
Institution	Shokooh Language Institute	30	50
	Oxford Language Institute	30	50
Total Participants	—	60	100

### 4.3 Instruments

Two main instruments were used for data collection.

#### 4.3.1 Oxford Quick Placement Test

The Oxford Quick Placement Test (Version 2) is a widely accepted English language proficiency assessment tool. This study used Oxford Quick Placement Test (Version 2) as a means of establishing homogeneity in English language proficiency. This test is a standardized English language proficiency assessment tool used for evaluating learners' grammatical knowledge, vocabulary, and reading ability (Geranpayeh, 2003). Its reliability has been supported through large-scale piloting and consistent placement outcomes, while its validity has been established through strong alignment with other standardized proficiency measures and the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) levels (Geranpayeh, 2003; Allan, 2004; Council of Europe, 2001).

#### 4.3.2 Pragmatic Competence Test

This study used a 25-item multiple-choice discourse completion test as a means of evaluating participants' pragmatic ability in a wide range of communicative situations. The test was adapted from established discourse completion test (DCT) instrument by Kasper and Dahl (1991) widely used in interlanguage pragmatics research. Each item in the discourse completion test had a contextualized dialogue followed by a number of choices. Participants were asked to choose the most appropriate

pragmatic answer. Five speech acts were targeted in the discourse completion test: Requests, Refusals, Apologies, Suggestions, and Compliments.

**Table 2**

*Distribution of Speech Acts in the Pragmatic Competence Test*

Speech Act	Number of Items
Requests	5
Refusals	5
Apologies	5
Suggestions	5
Compliments	5
Total	25

The assessment was based on one point for each correct response and zero points for incorrect responses. Thus, the range of possible scores was from 0 to 25, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of pragmatic competence. To test the reliability of this instrument, a pilot study was conducted with a group of students who shared similar characteristics with the targeted students. Internal reliability was also tested by using Cronbach's alpha, which yielded a reliability coefficient of  $\alpha = .84$ . To test content validity, expert opinions were sought. Two experts in EFL teaching and one expert in applied linguistics analyzed the test to ensure that each item was an accurate reflection of the targeted speech acts. Some of the items were revised based on their feedback to improve clarity and contextual appropriateness. A pre-test and post-test design was also incorporated to assess changes in students' pragmatic competence after receiving the treatment.

#### 4.4 Procedure

The study was carried out in various stages, including selecting participants, pre-testing, instructional intervention, and post-testing. Initially, the Oxford Quick Placement Test was administered to a group of students to assess their level of proficiency in English. Participants with homogeneous characteristics, based on their results, were selected for the study. A group of 60 students with varying proficiency levels from intermediate to upper intermediate was selected. The classes were randomly assigned to either an experimental group or a control group, with each group consisting of 30 students.

Before the instructional intervention, a pragmatic competence test was administered as a pre-test. The pre-test was intended to assess the students' level of pragmatic competence before any instructional intervention. Also, it was meant to ascertain whether both groups were comparable before any treatment. Thereafter, the instructional intervention was administered. It was implemented over a period of eight weeks, with two sessions per week, each lasting about 90 minutes. To reduce teacher-related variance, one teacher was used for both groups.

The experimental group was exposed to instruction based on TBLT. The instructional procedure was based on Willis's (1996) three-stage procedure, including pre-task, task cycle, and post-task. In the pre-task, the teacher presented the topic of the task and provided the learner with background information relevant to the communicative context. The learner was given a brief review of the essential

vocabulary and expressions needed for the task completion. In the task cycle, learner completed communicative tasks as individuals or in small groups. The tasks were based on the performance of speech acts such as requests, refusals, apologies, suggestions, and compliments. The tasks were structured to mimic a natural communicative context, thereby facilitating learner interaction and the use of appropriate pragmatic strategies. regarding post-task, the learner reported the task completion and discussed the task with the class. The teacher gave the learner feedback based on the appropriateness of the language, pragmatic strategies, and alternative forms of the performed speech act. The stage included reflection activities for the learner to increase awareness of pragmatic features of the language.

On the other hand, the control group was given conventional instruction, focusing on the explanation and practice of linguistic forms. During these lessons, the teacher introduced the learner to linguistic forms and examples relevant to the performed speech acts, and the learner was asked to complete the exercises in the instructional material. At the end of the teaching period, both sets of learners were given the same test for pragmatic competence, called the post-test, using the same setup as the pre-test, so that any change in the learners' pragmatic competence after the treatment could be observed and measured.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

The analysis of the data was done using SPSS, version 26. For the study, both descriptive and inferential analysis were done to answer the research questions. To begin with, the simple statistics such as means and standard deviations were computed and presented, which showed the performance of the participants on the test for pragmatic competence both for the pre-test and the post-test. This gave an initial idea of the performance of the learners from both the experimental and control groups.

Before going for more complicated analysis, it was necessary to test if the data was normally distributed using the Shapiro–Wilk test. The results showed that the data was normally distributed since the probability was greater than .05.

To test if the instructional treatment was effective, the paired-samples t-test was used, which compared the pre-test and post-test scores for each group, showing if there was improvement in the learners' pragmatic competence after the treatment. To test for gender differences, independent-samples t-tests were done, answering the second research question.

For all tests, the level of significance was set at .05. To show the practical significance of the findings, the results were interpreted using effect sizes, specifically Cohen's *d*. According to Cohen (1988),  $d = .20$  was for small effect size,  $d = .50$  was for medium, and  $d = .80$  was for large effect size.

### **5 Results**

This section presents the statistical findings corresponding to the research questions of the study. Descriptive statistics were first calculated to provide an overview of participants' performance on the pragmatic competence test in both the pre-test and post-test phases. Subsequently, inferential statistical analyses including paired-samples t-tests and independent-samples t-tests were conducted. Effect size, measured by Cohen's *d*, was reported to measure the differences observed and compare them according to Cohen's (1988) standards. Prior to the inferential analysis, the normality assumptions were checked. The results of the Shapiro–Wilk test indicated that the assumption of normality was not violated ( $p > .05$ ).

### 5.1 Descriptive Statistics

Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for the pragmatic competence test scores of the experimental and control groups in both the pre-test and post-test phases.

**Table 3**

*Descriptive Statistics for Pragmatic Competence Test Scores*

Group	Test	N	M	SD
Experimental	Pre-test	30	12.03	3.61
Experimental	Post-test	30	13.90	3.34
Control	Pre-test	30	12.00	3.84
Control	Post-test	30	11.36	3.83

As can be seen in Table 3, the pre-test means scores of the experimental group ( $M = 12.03$ ,  $SD = 3.61$ ) and the control group ( $M = 12.00$ ,  $SD = 3.84$ ) were nearly similar. This similarity shows that the two groups were comparable in terms of their initial level of pragmatic competence before the instructional treatment.

However, after the intervention, the experimental group showed an increase in their post-test mean score compared with the pre-test ( $M = 13.90$ ,  $SD = 3.34$ ). The control group showed only a slight change in performance ( $M = 11.36$ ,  $SD = 3.83$ ). These descriptive results indicate a possible improvement in the pragmatic competence of learners in the experimental group.

### 5.2 Effect of TBLT on Pragmatic Competence

To examine whether task-based instruction significantly improved learners’ pragmatic competence, a paired-samples t-test was conducted comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. Before conducting the paired-samples t-test, the assumption of normality was checked and confirmed that the assumption was met.

**Table 4**

*Paired-Samples t-Test for Experimental Group*

Comparison	Mean Diff	SD	t	df	p	Cohen’s d
Pre-Post	-1.87	2.37	-4.31	29	< .001	0.79

According to the results manifested in Table 4, the results revealed a statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group,  $t(29) = -4.31$ ,  $p < .001$ . This finding indicates that learners who received instruction through TBLT showed a significant improvement in their pragmatic competence following the instructional treatment. Moreover, the effect size calculated for the experimental results revealed a large effect size (i.e., Cohen’s  $d = .79$ ). This reveals that the instructional method significantly impacted the development of the learners’ pragmatic competence.

In order to determine whether the traditional instruction significantly improved the learners’ pragmatic competence, a paired-samples t-test was carried out for the control group (Table 5).

**Table 5***Paired-Samples t-Test for Control Group*

Comparison	Mean Diff	SD	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Pre-Post	0.63	1.56	2.22	29	.035	0.40

As displayed in Table 5, there was a small but statistically significant difference between the pre-test and post-test scores of the control group,  $t(29) = 2.22$ ,  $p = .035$ . Although the difference was statistically significant, the degree to which the control group improved can be considered to be relatively small. The effect size calculated for the control group was  $d = .40$ , which can be considered to represent a small to moderate effect. This effect size was substantially smaller than that calculated for the experimental group. This difference may imply that task-based instruction was more effective than traditional instruction in helping to develop pragmatic competence among ESP students.

The second research question examined whether gender influenced learners' pragmatic competence development within the task-based instructional context. Descriptive statistics for male and female learners are presented in Table 6.

**Table 6***Descriptive Statistics for Male and Female Learners*

Gender	Test	N	M	SD
Male	Pre-test	15	12.06	3.78
Female	Pre-test	15	11.80	3.52
Male	Post-test	15	13.80	3.63
Female	Post-test	15	14.20	3.32

As shown in Table 6, both male and female learners showed improvement in their post-test scores compared with the pre-test scores. To determine whether these differences were statistically significant, an independent-samples t-test was conducted.

**Table 7***Independent-Samples t-Test for Gender Differences*

Comparison	t	df	p
Pre-test (Male vs Female)	0.199	28	.843
Post-test (Male vs Female)	-0.315	28	.755

As represented in Table 7 the results revealed that there were no significant differences between the male and female learners with regard to the pre-test scores,  $t(28) = .199$ ,  $p = .843$ , and the post-test scores,  $t(28) = -.315$ ,  $p = .755$ . This revealed that gender has had little impact on the development of pragmatic competence.

Overall, the statistical analyses revealed two main findings. First, learners who received task-based instruction demonstrated a significant improvement in pragmatic competence, with a large effect size. Second, no statistically significant gender differences were observed in pragmatic competence

development. These results indicate that TBLT can effectively enhance learners' pragmatic competence regardless of gender.

## 6 Discussion

This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of TBLT in facilitating the development of the pragmatic competence of Iranian learners of ESP. It also aimed to examine the effect of gender on the development of the pragmatic competence of learners. The statistical tests used in the study revealed two main findings. First, learners who experienced TBLT showed statistically significant development in their pragmatic competence compared to learners in the traditional teaching group. Second, no statistically significant difference in the development of the pragmatic competence of male and female learners was found.

### 6.1 Effect of Task-Based Language Teaching on Pragmatic Competence

In fact, the results of the research indicate that the experimental group showed a significant improvement in the development of pragmatic competence after the instructional treatment. The participants who were exposed to TBLT showed a statistically significant improvement in the scores of the post-test with a large effect size ( $d = .79$ ). Conversely, the control group showed a minor change in the scores. These findings support the potential of TBLT to contribute to the development of pragmatic competence among ESP learners.

One of the reasons for the improvement shown by the experimental group could be the opportunities for communicative interaction provided by TBLT. As part of the task-based instructional treatment, the learners were exposed to activities that allowed them to interact with each other to negotiate meaning and make appropriate responses to diverse communicative situations. These processes of interaction are seen as crucial for the acquisition of a second language. Following the tenets of the interaction hypothesis (Long, 1996), the interaction between the learners facilitated the identification of the gaps in their linguistic knowledge through the negotiation of meaning.

The findings of the research can also be explained from the perspective of Schmidt's Noticing Hypothesis (1990, 1993). According to this hypothesis, learners need to notice the linguistic features to acquire them. The learners were exposed to communicative tasks that allowed them to interact with each other to negotiate meaning. These tasks subjected the learners to communicative situations where they were forced to notice the appropriate speech acts to be used with the interlocutors. These speech acts included requests, refusals, apologies, suggestions and compliments. As the learners interacted with the other participants and reflected on the appropriateness of the speech acts they used during the post-task treatment, they were exposed to the appropriate speech acts to be used with the interlocutors.

Another theoretical basis for the effectiveness of task-based instruction can be seen in Swain's Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1985, 2005). Swain's Output Hypothesis suggests that the production of language helps learners to test hypotheses about language usage and to create a heightened awareness of linguistic forms. In the task-based activities used for the current research, the learners were asked to actively produce language to complete the communicative tasks. This language production process most probably helped the learners to enhance their pragmatic competence.

The results of the current research support previous studies on the effectiveness of task-based instruction for the development of pragmatics. Levkina (2018) showed that task-based instruction

significantly improved the ability of the learners to complete speech acts such as apology and justification in an EFL context. Moreover, another research by Kim and Taguchi (2015) showed that the learners who were exposed to task-based instruction demonstrated greater improvement in the usage of request-making expressions compared to the learners who were not exposed to task-based instruction. Gorjian and Mir (2025) found that the Iranian EFL learners who were exposed to TBLT significantly outperformed the learners who were exposed to traditional Presentation-Practice-Production instruction methods with respect to the development of their pragmatic oral fluency.

Other studies have emphasized the general pedagogical potential of TBLT in ESP and EFL contexts. Khatib and Dehghankar (2018) showed that ESP learners who were given task-based instruction showed considerable improvement in productive language skills such as speaking and writing, and positive attitudes towards task-based instruction. Similarly, Fujita and Shintani (2025) showed that learners who were given task-based instruction in ESP showed improvement in the complexity and fluency of writing and positive attitudes towards task-based instruction. Tasks have also been demonstrated to enhance learners' pragmatic abilities through the use of technology. A study by Kim et al. (2023) found that learners who were offered task-based instruction on blog posting showed greater improvement in advice-giving strategies and linguistic complexity than learners who underwent textbook instruction.

Furthermore, the results highlight the potential value of task-based instruction in ESP contexts. ESP learners often need to use English in specific academic or professional settings where appropriate pragmatic behaviour is essential for successful communication. As Basturkmen (2006) noted, ESP learners must develop not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of the pragmatic conventions of professional discourse communities. By engaging learners in realistic communicative tasks that simulate real-world situations, TBLT can help learners develop the pragmatic awareness necessary for effective communication in such contexts. In addition, Yeshanov (2025) emphasized that integrating task-based pedagogy with explicit pragmatic instruction and authentic communicative contexts can enhance learners' metapragmatic awareness and ability to navigate diverse global communication settings.

## **6.2 Gender Differences in Pragmatic Development**

The second research question examined the impact of gender on the development of the learners' pragmatic competence. The results showed that there were no significant differences between the male and female learners in the pre-test or post-test scores. This suggests that gender does not significantly impact the development of the learners' pragmatic competence within the task-based instructional conditions. This finding is consistent with the results of several studies reported in the field of interlanguage pragmatics that reported limited evidence of gender effects on pragmatic performance. Kasper and Rose (2002) indicated that the development of pragmatic competence can be attributed to a complex interplay of contextual factors, sociocultural factors, and instructional factors rather than gender. Similarly, Kasper and Schmidt (1996) indicated that the development of pragmatic competence can be attributed to exposure to communicative contexts and social interaction rather than gender.

While previous studies have reported that female learners may demonstrate higher levels of pragmatic awareness or the use of politeness strategies (e.g., Rintell, 1984; Tannen, 1991), the results of the current study did not support this finding. This suggests that instructional conditions may be a

more powerful factor in the development of the learners' pragmatic competence than gender. One possible explanation for the lack of gender effects in the current study may be that the instructional conditions for both the male and female learners were the same. This would mean that the female learners would have benefited equally from the instructional conditions as the male learners. This would have enabled both the male and female learners to attain the same level of pragmatic competence.

## 7 Conclusion and Implications

The current study aimed to explore the effectiveness of TBLT in the development of the pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners in ESP contexts. Furthermore, the research aimed to investigate the potential impact of gender on the development of the participants' pragmatic competence. The results indicated that the participants who were exposed to the TBLT approach showed significant improvement in their pragmatic competence compared to the participants who were exposed to the traditional approach. This indicates that TBLT can be a powerful approach to the teaching of English as a second or foreign language in ESP contexts. The improvement in the participants' pragmatic competence can be attributed to the communicative nature of the TBLT approach. The participants were exposed to various speech acts such as requests, apologies, suggestions, refusals and compliments, while engaging in the performance of the tasks. This exposure to authentic situations can be an influential approach to the development of second language acquisition. This approach can improve the learners' awareness of the importance of the social contexts in which language is used.

Furthermore, the results indicated that the participants' gender did not have a potential impact on the development of their pragmatic competence. The results showed that both the male and female participants showed the same level of improvement in their pragmatic competence after the instructional intervention. This indicates that the TBLT approach can provide the same level of opportunities to both the male and female participants to develop their pragmatic competence.

The implications of the study's findings can be seen in several aspects that are important in language teaching. First, the study's findings offer implications for the value of incorporating task-based activities in an ESP classroom to promote learners' pragmatic competence. Language teachers are advised to incorporate more communicative tasks that mimic real-life situations and encourage learners to perform different speech acts in real contexts. Second, language teachers should explicitly pay attention to the pragmatic features of language during task-based instruction. In the pre-task or post-task stages, teachers may encourage learners to pay attention to the pragmatic features of language. Third, the study's findings imply that pragmatic competence should be incorporated into language instruction as an integral part of communicative competence. As such, language curricula and learning materials should include activities that allow learners to practice their pragmatic competence in real contexts.

Finally, the study's findings imply some implications for ESP teachers and course designers or materials developers. Since learners in an ESP classroom often need to function in real contexts in their professional or academic lives, their ability to communicate appropriately in specific contexts is important. Task-based activities that mimic real situations may encourage learners to become more pragmatic and communicatively competent. Moreover, learning materials in an ESP classroom may benefit from incorporating more tasks that promote learners' pragmatic competence in specific contexts or disciplines. This may help learners practice their language ability in real contexts that resemble real-life professional communication situations.

Despite the importance of the present study, it has a few limitations that need to be mentioned. First of all, the sample size of the present study was limited to only 60 ESP learners. The participants were selected from two language institutes in the city of Zahedan. The sample size was sufficient for the analysis carried out in the present study. However, the results of the present study are not generalizable to all EFL or ESP learners. Therefore, the results of the present study need to be replicated with a larger sample size in the future.

Second, the present study was carried out within a particular educational setting. The participants of the present study were at different proficiency levels. The effectiveness of task-based instruction may vary depending on the proficiency level of the participants. Therefore, the effectiveness of the task-based instruction approach needs to be investigated with participants at different proficiency levels in the future. Third, the present study relied on a quantitative research approach. The effectiveness of the task-based instruction approach was investigated through a multiple-choice pragmatic competence test. The results of the present study showed that the participants could score well in the test. However, the results of the present study may not be sufficient to understand the effectiveness of the task-based instruction approach. Therefore, the effectiveness of the task-based instruction approach needs to be investigated through a qualitative research approach in the future. Finally, the instructional session was carried out for a limited time. The effectiveness of the task-based instruction approach may be investigated if the instructional session is carried out for a longer time.

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### **Authors' Contributions**

All authors have conducted the study, collected data, analyzed and interpreted the data, and written up the manuscript.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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