

RESEARCH ARTICLE



THE EFFECT OF INPUT-BASED AND TASK-BASED LANGUAGE TEACHING ON LEARNING ENGLISH REQUEST BY PRE-INTERMEDIATE IRANIAN EFL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study is an attempt to explore the effect of task-based and input-based language teaching on learning English request on Iranian EFL learners. Eighty one pre-intermediate students who registered in ILI (Iran Language Institute) in Tehran with an age range of 18 to 22 years old participated in the study. They were randomly divided into two homogenous groups, one of which received task-based approach for teaching English requests and the other one took advantage of input-based language teaching for the same requests. Both groups received nine sessions of instruction by the researcher. Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test (MCDCT) of request speech act was used for the both pre- and posttests. Data analysis indicated that there was a significant difference between the task-based and input-based language teaching in learning English requests from pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. In other words, task-based approach led to better learning of the English requests than input-based one.

Keywords: pragmatics, interlanguage pragmatics, task-based approach, input-based approach

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INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, it is widely believed that for having a successful communication in any language, it is necessary to have sociocultural knowledge about that language community. Research into the pragmatic competence of adult foreign and second language (L2) learners has demonstrated that grammatical development does not guarantee a

corresponding level of pragmatic development (Bardovi-Harlig & Dornyei, 1998). Several scholars (e.g., Canale & Swain, 1980; Hymes, 1972) believe that learning an L2 is learning a two-in-one package, which includes a new linguistic system (form) and a new pragmatic one (function). They claim that both pragmatic and grammatical competences are essential for successful L2 communication.

Therefore, one of the aims of second language acquisition (SLA) studies is to describe not only the learners' linguistic competence, but also their pragmatic competence (Ellis, 2003).

Recently, the study of pragmatic competence in an L2 has received remarkable attention by SLA researchers. Pragmatic competence can be defined as the ability to convey and understand the communicative intent by performing and interpreting speech acts and language functions (Celce-Murcia, Dorney & Thurrell, 1995). Bachman (1990) states pragmatic competence is the relationship between linguistic signs and referents, and the relationship between language users and the context of communication. As a domain within L2 studies, pragmatics are usually referred to as interlanguage pragmatics (ILP), as an analogy with interlanguage grammar, interlanguage phonology, and interlanguage lexicon (Kasper & Rose, 2002). Currently, ILP is a hot topic in SLA studies. ILP is, as the name suggests, a subfield of both interlanguage studies, which belong to the domain of SLA research, and pragmatics (Schauer, 2009). As a subset of pragmatics, ILP figures as a sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic, or simply linguistic enterprise, depending on how one defines the scope of pragmatics (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3).

Much recent research in the area of L2 pragmatic development has focused on input (e.g., Kasper & Rose, 2002; Takahashi, 2005). Some researchers (e.g., Krashen, 1989; Schwartz, 1993) believed that input alone can directly affect the developing linguistic system. Krashen (1994) asserted that we can develop extremely high levels of language and literacy competence without any language production at all.

In the history of language teaching and learning, lots of methods and approaches have been devised, each of which paid attention to some aspects of learning and teaching. One of these approaches is task-based language teaching (TBLT), which is based on using tasks as the core of language teaching and learning (Ellis, 2003). TBLT puts tasks at the center of the methodological focus. It views the learning process as a set of communicative tasks that are directly linked to the curricular goals they serve (Brown, 2001). In TBLT approach, learners are presented with a task or

problem to solve and do not concentrate on language features during performance. These tasks are meaning-focused and have a non-linguistic outcome (Ellis, 2003).

In ILP studies, many scholars have attempted to find out information about cross-cultural distinctions in speech acts' perception and production by English as Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Even though various speech acts (e.g., apologies, complaints, and compliments) have been examined in ILP research in the past three decades, requests remain one of the most frequently investigated speech acts according to Kasper (1997) and Hendriks (2008) (as cited in Schauer, 2009). Appropriate requests are among the most important speech acts. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), requesting is considered as a face-threatening act. Inappropriate use of the request by non-native speakers can serve to make them look impolite.

The present study attempts to examine the impact, if there is any, of task-based and input-based language teaching on the Iranian ILP development of requests.

The present study attempts to answer to the following question:

Is there any significant difference between task-based and input-based language teaching in learning English requests from pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners?

The following null hypothesis have been proposed for the proposed research question:

H₀: There is no significant difference between task-based and input-based language teaching in learning English requests from pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners.

2. Review of Literature

All researchers seem to be unanimous that there can be no second language (SL) learning or acquisition without language input. It has been stated that we acquire language when we understand what we hear and what we read (Krashen, 1982). At the pre-intermediate level, learners in classes that are provided with more comprehensible input consistently outperform learners in classes that are provided with less comprehensible input when tests are

“communicative” and do at least as well, or better, when tests are grammar-based (ibid.).

According to Krashen (1998), comprehensible input has not been given a real chance yet. We have to see how learners will act if they are in classes full of comprehensible input, if they have access to a large amount of very interesting reading and listening materials (films, tapes), and if the acquisition situation is genuinely free from anxiety (ibid.).

He came to a conclusion that given the consistent evidence for comprehensible input (Krashen, 1994) and failure of other means of developing language competence, providing more comprehensible input appears to be a more reasonable strategy than increasing output (Krashen, 1998).

Ellis (2003) asserts that input-based tasks which are designed “to obligate learners to process a specific feature in the oral or written input” (p. 157) assume that acquisition is a result of input processing. Consciousness raising tasks are not like input enrichment tasks that are usually organized around the content of a general nature, rather they require learners to talk about a language point making use of their own linguistic resources (Ellis, 2003). Although Ellis put consciousness raising tasks in a separate category, it is still considered as an input-based task. Takimoto (2009) state that whereas the aim of both consciousness raising and structured input tasks is to improve form-meaning connections, consciousness raising tasks lead to more overt instructions than structured input tasks.

The task-based approach to language teaching, based on the constructivist theory of learning and communicative language teaching methodology, has developed in response to some restrictions of the traditional PPP approach, represented by the procedure of presentation, practice, and performance (Ellis, 2003). Therefore, it has the considerable implication that language learning is a developmental process which promotes communication and social interaction; not a product that is acquired by practicing language items, and that learners learn the target language more effectively when they are naturally exposed to meaningful task-based activities (ibid.). Such a perspective led to the development of several task-

based approaches in the eighties (Prabhu, 1987), and during the nineties, has developed into a detailed application framework for the communicative class in which learners perform task-based activities through cycles of pre-task preparation, task performance, and post-task feedback through language focus (Willis, 1996).

Prabhu (1987) asserts that a task is an activity that made learners to reach to an outcome from given information through some process of thought, and that allowed teachers to control and regulate that process. Nunan (2004) believes that the concept of task has become a significant factor in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner evaluation, it has affected educational policy-making in both English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. From a pedagogical point of view, TBLT has strengthened the following principles:

A need –based approach to content selection.

An emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language.

- The introduction of authentic texts into the learning situation. (Nunan, 2004)

Task-based instruction can be defined as an approach in which communicative and meaningful tasks play the vital role in language learning and in which the process of using language in communication is considered more important than the mere production of correct language forms (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). Thus, task-based instruction is considered as one model of Communicative Language Teaching in relation to real and meaningful communication as the initial characteristic of language learning (Willis, 1996).

The TBLT is a classroom technique whose goal is to make the language learners active on a type of purposeful problem solving activity. Akbarnetaj (2000) asserts that when learners deal with the tasks as problem-solving activities, they find themselves under a situation in which they are highly motivated, have less stress, anxiety and apprehension, and are finally ready to take part in classroom interactions with the highest self-esteem and self-confidence. This active engagement in class will lead to a good result-learning English better.

Prabhu (1987) states that in task-based syllabus, learning is facilitated as students pay more

attention to meaning and task rather than the language itself. In other words, the promoters of TBLT believe that the engagement of learners in classroom in 'real language use' is an essential and crucial factor in teaching a language (ibid.).

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study were eighty one pre-intermediate students who registered in ILI in Tehran with an age range of 18 to 22 years old. They were randomly divided into two groups.

3.2 Instruments

The instruments employed in this study are as follows: (a) English Test- Beginner (proficiency test), (b) MCDCT (Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test).

3.2.1 English Test - Beginner (proficiency test)

In order to feel certain that all the learners are at the same level of language proficiency, "–English Test – Beginner" Proficiency Test developed by William Bertrand was administered at the very beginning. The test contains 100 multiple choice items. The participants were given enough time to answer the questions.

In order to estimate how reliable the use of the proficiency test is, the researcher administered the test to the pilot group of forty students in ILI who were at the same level with the participants of the present study. KR-21 formula was used for the computation of the internal consistency of the test. The reliability index for the "–English Test – Beginner" Proficiency Test in this study was found to be 0.87, which is considered a high reliability.

To ensure the content validity of the test, the comments of some experts were sought. Each strongly confirmed the appropriateness of the test in regard to the general objective of measuring beginners' English proficiency.

3.2.2 Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Task (MCDCT)

Over the last two decades, empirical studies measuring L2 learners' pragmatic competence have frequently used Discourse Completion Tests (DCT) to elicit speech act production (Billmyer & Varghese, 2000). As Kasper and Rose (2001) point out, DCTs are by far the most popular data gathering instrument. Kasper and Rose list over fifty DCT studies in L2 pragmatics research

since 1982, which cover twelve different speech acts. As Blum-Kulka (1982) states, the DCT is a questionnaire containing a set of briefly described situations designed to elicit a particular speech act. Subjects read the situations and respond in writing to a prompt. An example of a typical DCT prompt is seen below.

You are about to leave the house for an important appointment when your housemate Jack asks you if you could help him paint his room.

You say: _____ (Rose, 1992)

DCTs enjoy their popularity probably due to their practicality. In their typical written format, they allow relatively rapid data collection from many individuals and, unlike oral elicitation techniques, do not require cumbersome and error-prone transcription (Kasper & Dahl, 1991).

MCDCTs are less popular in ILP research than DCTs but they are by far the most popular instrument in language testing (Kasper & Rose, 2001). The analysis of MCDCT is generally less complicated and time consuming than the analysis of DCTs, but their design is highly complex, and very much depends on the research question to be investigated, a multiple-choice questionnaire intended to survey respondents' preferred responses or interpretations differs fundamentally from one assessing whether test takers have some pre-defined knowledge. (Bouton, 1994)

In MCDCT, the testees are required to select the best response among three, four or five options. In fact in a MCDCT, there is a key which is the appropriate response and there are two, three or four other distracters which are inappropriate. (Birjandi & Rezaei, 2010)

The instrument chosen for data collection in the present study was an MCDCT (see Appendix), used to collect responses from learners. The test consisted of seventeen situations designed to elicit the speech act of request. Below each situation appeared three or four alternatives one of which is the appropriate response for the speech act response and others are distracters .

The MCDCT used in the study is a combination of two MCDCTs developed by Birjandi and Rezaei (2010) and Jie (2005). The reason behind using two tests for the MCDCT was that the number of items in each MCDCT mentioned above was not enough for

this study. The researcher estimated its post-test reliability to make certain that the combination of MCDCTs used in this situation is also reliable. KR-21 formula was used for the computation of the internal consistency of the test. The reliability index for the MCDCT in this study was found to be 0.82, which is considered high reliability.

3.3 Procedure

Two intact groups were used to compare the effectiveness of task-based and input-based language teaching. In the first session, the researcher administered "English Test – Beginner" Proficiency Test to make sure that all the participants are homogeneous in terms of language proficiency. One session later, the participants were given the MCDCT of English requests as a pre-test.

One session after administering the pre-test, the process of teaching to the both groups was started. The researcher himself taught to the both groups. One of these groups was taught based on task-based language teaching and the other one based on input-based teaching approach. The requests taught in both groups were exactly the same.

Nine requests were chosen to be taught based on the well-known classification in request speech act realization based on CCSARP scheme (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989, as cited in taghvaei, 2013). Just one request was taught per session to each group. The learners of both groups made use of nine forty five- minute sessions of instruction.

In both groups, one request was taught each session. The structure and function of the request were explained to the participants of the two groups.

In task-based group, the researcher gave each learner a situation as a task. The learners were asked to work on the situation in order to make an appropriate request. All the situations used for practice were different from the ones in the pre- and post-test.

In the input-based group, following Takimoto (2009), the consciousness raising task was carried out in four stages:

Firstly, in a pragmalinguistic activity, the researcher asked the learners to read two conversations, and compare the requests and say the differences between them. Secondly, a

sociopragmatic-focused activity aimed to beware learners of the relationship between the interlocutors in the conversation and the amount of imposition of the requests. In this activity, the learners had to rate the interlocutor's relationship and the amount of imposition of the requests on a five point scale. Thirdly, in a pragmalinguistic-sociopragmatic connection activity, the researcher asked the learners how the interlocutors in each conversation attempted to be polite and what social factors controlled the selection of particular forms in making their requests. Finally, the learners and the researcher discussed the characteristics of target structures.

At the end of the course, in tenth session, a post-test, which was exactly the same as the pretest, was administered to the both groups. After collecting the data, appropriate statistical tests were used to find out the significance of the results.

3.4 Data Analysis

In order to examine the effectiveness of the two approaches, task-based and input-based, first of all descriptive statistics including means and standard deviations were computed to summarize the students' responses to the pretest and the posttest. In order to test the hypothesis, an independent-samples *t*-test was conducted to compare the means of the two groups' gain scores. The alpha level was set at 0.05. It must be noted that all the statistical analyses were conducted by using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS 19.0) program.

4. RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

In order to test the proposed null hypothesis, first of all, all participants' gain scores were calculated. To do so, pre-test scores gathered from the participants of both task-based and input-based groups were subtracted from their post-test scores.

In the following lines, the data analyses and results are presented. The descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) of the gain scores of both groups are shown in Table 1

Table 1: Descriptive statistics for the task-based and input-based groups' gain scores

	Methodology	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Gain score	input-based	42	5.17	2.36	.36
	task-based	39	7.03	1.31	.21

As indicated in Table 1, for the task-based group, the mean score was 7.03 and the SD was 1.31 and for the input-based group, the mean score was 5.17 and the SD was 2.36. Apparently, the task-based group outperformed the input-based one in learning English requests.

To make sure if the difference between the mean scores of the task-based and input-based language teaching groups is significant, the researcher ran an independent-samples *t*-test. Table 2 shows the result of the independent-samples *t*-test.

Table 2 : Independent-samples *t*-test: the task-based group's gain scores vs. the input-based group's gain scores

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
Gain score	Equal variances assumed	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
	Equal variances assumed	15.77	.00	-4.34	79	.00	-1.86	.43	-2.71	-1.01
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.43	64.98	.00	-1.86	.42	-2.70	-1.02

As it is shown in the Table 4.2, there was a significant difference between the two groups, $t(64.98) = -4.43, p = 0.00$. It can be claimed that the first null hypothesis is rejected. It was concluded that there is a significant difference between the input-based ($M = 5.17, SD = 2.36$) and task-based ($M = 7.03, SD = 1.31$) language teaching in learning English requests by pre-intermediate Iranian EFL learners. In other words, task-based instruction does lead to greater learning of English requests than input-based instruction.

5. DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The related research question is answered on the basis of the students' performance on MCDCT of the speech act of request. As it is indicated in Table 4.1 and 4.2, participants' performance in the task-based and input-based language teaching groups showed a significant ILP development of the participants. In other words, task-based instruction led to greater learning of English requests than input-based instruction.

As far as the researcher knows, no studies regarding the effect of input-based and task-based approaches to EFL learners' ILP development have been carried out; therefore, the findings of the present study could not be compared with the relevant previous studies.

There might be some reasons to explain the findings of this study. One reason might probably be related to the students' involvement in tasks which made them learn the requests better. Since most courses are carried out mainly based on input-based approach and students do not get involved in the process of learning, task-based approach appeared much more interesting for them. Another reason might be due to the fact that conducting a task successfully gave students a sense of achievement. Such a sense motivated students for learning, and therefore, acting better in the posttest.

6. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the researcher does not suggest that task-based work should replace input-based work

but that both approaches can complete each other. Pedagogically, it is also significant to consider which methodological approaches may best assist language learners in various instructional settings and which can lessen levels of stress or frustration when learners deal with unfamiliar situations.

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APPENDIX

MCDCT of request speech act

Imagine that you were one of overseas students. What would you say if you faced the following situations in which you were speaking to native speakers of English? Please read the following 17 situations and choose the best requests.

Situation 1

Your teacher is giving a lecture on an important topic. You have a related question to that part of his lecture. How do you interrupt your teacher?

The Teacher: ...constructivist views are very important for..... (interruption)

You.....

- I don't understand what you are talking about.
- Sorry but I really don't understand what are you saying!
- I'm sorry to ask but could you explain a little more?

Situation 2

Suppose you have not understood what the teacher has just explained about “simple past tense”. How do you ask for explanations about the structure of this tense?

You.....

- a. Should I ask you a question?
- b. How can I ask you a question?
- c. Excuse me sir, may I ask you a question?

Situation 3

Suppose you have a listening class and you cannot hear what is played on T.V. How would you ask your teacher to turn it up?

You.....

- a. I’m sorry, but I cannot hear.
- b. I’ll ask you to turn it up.
- c. What? Turn it up please.

Situation 4

Suppose the teacher is writing with a red marker on the board, and the color really disturbs your eyes. How would you request the teacher to use a different color?

You.....

- a. Why are you writing with red! It’s a pain in the neck.
- b. I think you must use another color or I won’t see anything on the board.
- c. Excuse me; I can’t read that color of pen, do you think that you could use another color when writing on the board?

Situation 5

Suppose you have been absent the previous session, and you have not understood a specific part on your own. How would you ask your teacher to give a brief explanation about that part?

You.....

- a. Could you tell me what I missed last class?
- b. Could you please review the grammar very quickly...
- c. I don’t understand the material from the previous class meeting.

Situation 6

The teacher has announced the date of midterm exam but you have another exam on that same day. How would you ask your teacher to change the date of the exam?

You.....

- a. You need to change the date of the exam. We already have an exam on that day.
- b. Could you please possibly take the exam some other day?
- c. Couldn’t we just not have the exam? We have one exam already on that day.

Situation 7

Suppose the teacher is using power point for teaching writing in the class. How would you ask your teacher for the power point file?

You.....

- a. Is there any way that I could get a copy of the power point you used today to study with?
- b. Professor, would it be possible for me to get a digital copy of those slides? You should e-mail those slides to the students.
- c. Is it ok if I get a copy of your PowerPoint?

Situation 8

Suppose you have got 14 on your reading test and you are sure that your score must have been higher. How would you ask your teacher to check your paper again?

You.....

- a. I know that I did better than 14. You must have made a mistake when you were grading.
- b. I studied really hard for this test and I thought that I would do better than 14. Is there any way that you could review my test and double check my grade?
- c. You need to recheck my test. I don't think that I got a 14 on this test.

Situation 9

Suppose you need a recommendation letter for teaching at an English language institute very urgently for tomorrow. How would you ask your teacher to do that?

You.....

- a. Can you write me a recommendation letter? And I need it by tomorrow.
- b. I wonder if you could possibly give me a recommendation letter for my workplace.
- c. Could you please write me a letter of recommendation really quickly? The deadline is tomorrow and it's really important!

Situation 10

Suppose that you need to have your teacher's phone number in case you might have some questions while studying. How would you ask for his/her phone number?

You.....

- a. Could you possibly provide me with a telephone number where I could contact you with questions I might have during the class?
- b. I am going to need your telephone number so that I can call you with any problems I might have when I am studying.
- c. Is it Ok if I ask for your phone number in case I face any problems while studying?

Situation 11

Suppose you want to have an appointment with the teacher this week for asking some questions about your term project. How do you ask him for an appointment?

You.....

- a. Excuse me; are you available this week for me to ask a few questions about my term project?
- b. Would you like to keep your appointment with me?
- c. Do you mind if I arrange an appointment with you for this week?

Situation 12

You are studying in your room when you hear loud music coming from another student's room down the hall. You don't know the student, but you decide to go and ask her to turn the music down. What would you say?

You.....

- A: Hey, could you please turn down the music?
- B: Hey, I wonder if you could turn down the music.
- C: Turn down the music.
- D: Excuse me. Your music is so beautiful, but it's midnight now. Could you please turn down the music?

Situation 13

You missed yesterday's class and need to borrow a friend's notes. What would you say?

You.....

- A: Buddy, give me your notes.
- B: Hey, Tom. You know, I was ill yesterday and missed the English class. Would you please lend me your notes?
- C: Tom, can I borrow your notes?
- D: Tom, I wonder if I can borrow your notes.

Situation 14

You need a ride home from school. You notice a professor who lives in the same apartment building with you is starting his private car to return home. You want him to do you a favor, but you haven't spoken to this person before. What would you say?

You.....

A: Would you please give me a ride?

B: Excuse me. Can you ride me home?

C: Wow, what a coincidence! We're neighbors. My bicycle is broken. Would you mind giving me a ride?

D: I'm wondering if you can give me a ride.

Situation 15

Two students are discussing something loudly in the library. You are the librarian and decide to ask the students to quiet down. What would you say?

You.....

A: Would you please keeping quiet?

B: Keep quiet!

C: Excuse me. We're in the library. If you talk so loudly, you'll disturb others.

D: Please discuss your questions outside this library.

Situation 16

Your term paper is due, but you haven't finished it yet. You want to ask your professor for an extension. What would you say?

You.....

A: Professor, would you please give me a few more days so that I can finish my term paper?

B: Professor, I wonder if I can get a few more days to finish my term paper.

C: Professor, I have been ill these days. Could you please give me two more days to finish my term paper?

D: Professor, give me a few more days to write my paper.

Situation 17

You are a professor and want Tom, your student, to present a paper in class a week earlier than scheduled. What would you say?

You.....

A: Tom, can you present your paper in class next week, but not the week after?

B: Tom, could you do me a favor? Would you to present your paper next week, not the week after?

C: Tom, the schedule has been changed and you will have to present your paper next week, not the week after.

D: Tom, you must present your paper next week, not the week after.