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Research Paper

Optimizing Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction for Iraqi EFL Learners: Investigating Task Design Variables, Modality Effects, and Long-Term Competence Development

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Abstract

This research explored the enhancement of Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction (TBPI) for Iraqi EFL intermediate learners through the impact of task difficulty and instructional mode (online versus face-to-face) on the acquisition, retention, and spontaneous use of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts. Acknowledging the difficulty experienced by Iraqi students in acquiring pragmatic competence and the lack of studies addressing this issue, this longitudinal, quasi-experimental study piloted two experimental conditions (online TBPI, n=40; face-to-face TBPI, n=40) and a control condition (n=40). Testing involved pre-, post-, and 6-month delayed post-tests, i.e., a Discourse Completion Test, and a delayed Spontaneous Use Task. Results indicated that both TBPI groups outperformed the control group on immediate post-test accuracy across all speech act types and on directive fluency. The face-to-face group, however, showed significantly more immediate gains in directive accuracy and fluency than the online group. Task complexity increased harmed directive fluency (online) and accuracy (face-to-face). Notably, longitudinal testing showed enhanced retention in the face-to-face group on all measures, while the online group exhibited a decline in declarative accuracy. The face-to-face group also had significantly higher directive accuracy and fluency, and a considerably higher spontaneous use of directives six months post-intervention. Research findings indicate that, although both TBPI modalities offer advantages to Iraqi EFL learners, the in-person setting promotes a more substantial, enduring, and transferable pragmatic competence, especially regarding intricate directive speech acts. This observation underscores significant pedagogical considerations for selecting modalities and designing tasks within the realm of pragmatics education.

Keywords: Modality effects, Pragmatics, Task, Task design variables

بهبودسازی آموزش کاربردشناسی مبتنی بر تکلیف برای زبان‌آموزان عراقی: EFL بررسی متغیرهای طراحی تکلیف، اثرات وجه و توسعه بلندمدت شایستگی این تحقیق به بررسی بهبود آموزش کاربردشناسی مبتنی بر تکلیف (TBPI) برای زبان‌آموزان عراقی EFL در سطح متوسط از طریق تأثیر دشواری تکلیف و روش آموزشی (آنلاین در مقابل حضوری) بر اکتساب، حفظ و استفاده خودجوش از کنش‌های گفتاری بیانی، اخباری و هدایتی پرداخت. با اذعان به دشواری تجربه شده توسط دانش‌آموزان عراقی در کسب توانش کاربردشناسی و فقدان مطالعاتی که به این موضوع بپردازند، این مطالعه طولی و شبه‌تجربی دو شرایط آزمایشی (TBPI) آنلاین، n=40، TBPI حضوری، n=40 و یک شرایط کنترل (n=40) را به صورت آزمایشی انجام داد. آزمون شامل پیش‌آزمون، پس‌آزمون و پس‌آزمون‌های با تأخیر ۶ ماهه، یعنی یک آزمون تکمیل گفتار و یک آزمون استفاده خودجوش با تأخیر بود. نتایج نشان داد که هر دو گروه TBPI در دقت پس از آزمون فوری در تمام انواع کنش‌های گفتاری و در روانی دستوری، از گروه کنترل بهتر عمل کردند. با این حال، گروه حضوری به طور قابل توجهی پیشرفت‌های فوری‌تری در دقت و روانی دستوری نسبت به گروه آنلاین نشان داد. پیچیدگی وظایف به روانی دستوری (آنلاین) و دقت (چهره به چهره) آسیب رساند. نکته قابل توجه این است که آزمایش طولی نشان داد که در گروه حضوری، در تمام معیارها، حفظ زبان افزایش یافته است، در حالی که گروه آنلاین کاهش دقت بیانی را نشان داد. گروه حضوری همچنین دقت و روانی دستوری به طور قابل توجهی بالاتر و استفاده خود به خودی از دستورالعمل‌ها شش ماه پس از مداخله را به طور قابل توجهی افزایش داد. یافته‌های تحقیق نشان می‌دهد که اگرچه هر دو روش TBPI مزایایی برای زبان‌آموزان عراقی EFL ارائه می‌دهند، اما محیط حضوری، شایستگی عملی اساسی‌تر، پایداری و قابل انتقال‌تری را، به ویژه در مورد کنش‌های گفتاری دستوری پیچیده، ترویج می‌دهد. این مشاهده، ملاحظات آموزشی قابل توجهی را برای انتخاب روش‌ها و طراحی وظایف در حوزه آموزش کاربردشناسی برجسته می‌کند.

واژه‌های کلیدی: اثرات وجه، کاربردشناسی، تکلیف، متغیرهای طراحی تکلیف

Introduction

In our interconnected world, English serves as the predominant global lingua franca, essential for communication across diverse cultural and national boundaries (Nguyen et al., 2017; Yang, 2017). Effective use of English requires more than grammatical accuracy and vocabulary; it demands communicative competence, encompassing the ability to use language appropriately in varied social contexts (Rubio-Fernandez et al., 2021). Central to this is pragmatic competence – the skill of understanding and conveying intended meaning by considering situational factors, speaker intentions, and social norms (Taguchi, 2012).

Pragmatic competence involves both pragmalinguistics (linguistic resources for language functions) and sociopragmatics (social perceptions influencing language choices) (Leech, 1983; Kasper & Rose, 2001). Shortcomings in this area, known as pragmatic failure, can cause misunderstandings or communication breakdown, especially in intercultural interactions involving non-native speakers (Al-Zubeiry, 2015). Learners with high grammatical proficiency may still struggle to convey politeness, directness, or illocutionary force appropriately, leading to unintended negative social judgments (Blum-Kulka, 1991).

Recognizing the criticality of pragmatics and learners' difficulties (Taguchi, 2009), Second Language Acquisition (SLA) emphasizes the need for explicit pragmatics instruction, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings where authentic exposure is often limited (Kasper & Rose, 2002; Rose, 2005; Alcón-Soler, 2005). While once debated (Kasper, 1997), the teachability and necessity of pragmatics instruction are now widely accepted. Research consistently shows that focused instruction significantly enhances pragmatic development beyond mere exposure or traditional grammar teaching (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Taguchi, 2015). Schmidt's (1993, 2001) Noticing Hypothesis provides theoretical support, suggesting learners must consciously notice form-function-context links for learning to occur, an awareness often facilitated by instruction. Various instructional methods, including explicit/implicit approaches, consciousness-raising, input enhancement, and output practice like role-plays, have been explored (Alcón, 2007; Alikhani, 2017; Chen et al., 2022; Hosseini, 2016; Alcón-Soler & Pitarch, 2010; Takahashi, 2010a; Taguchi, 2011). Explicit instruction often yields more durable effects (Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Takahashi, 2010a), though optimizing the blend of input, output, and feedback remains an area of study (Farashaiyan et al., 2017; Martinez-Flor, 2016; Zuskin, 2015; Wang, 2020).

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) offers a promising framework for developing pragmatic competence. TBLT prioritizes meaning-focused communication using tasks that require learners to use language purposefully to achieve specific outcomes (Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 2004, 2006; Van den Branden, 2006; Long, 2015). By defining the 'task' as the core teaching unit (Ellis et al., 2019), TBLT creates natural contexts for interaction, meaning negotiation, and functional language use (Long, 1996; Pica, 2013; Swain, 1985). This focus on purposeful communication potentially provides rich opportunities for pragmatic learning, as tasks necessitate linking linguistic forms to goals and context (Ellis, 2003; Zand-Moghadam & Mohandes Samani, 2021). While TBLT's effectiveness for grammar and vocabulary is established (e.g., García Mayo, 2007; Skehan, 1996), its specific application to pragmatics – Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction (TBPI) – is a relatively newer but growing research area (González-Lloret, 2022; Martin-Laguna, 2020; Plonsky & Kim, 2016; Taguchi & Kim, 2018; Zand-Moghadam & Mohandes Samani, 2021). Initial TBPI studies show positive outcomes (Alcón-Soler, 2018; Kim, 2022), yet more research is needed on how task design impacts pragmatic acquisition (Zand-Moghadam & Mohandes Samani, 2021) and how to effectively integrate pragmatic goals within task phases (Ellis, 2003; Tajeddin et al., 2012).



Optimizing TBPI requires investigating key variables like task complexity and instructional modality. Task complexity refers to a task's inherent cognitive demands (Robinson, 2001a; Skehan, 1998). Manipulating complexity – by altering elements (Bagheri, 2024; Ghasemi et al., 2021; Cho, 2018; Frear & Bitchener, 2015), reasoning demands (Robinson, 2003), or contextual immediacy (Ishikawa, 2007) – can influence attentional allocation and language performance. Two competing theories predict these effects: Robinson's (2001a, 2003, 2009) Cognition Hypothesis posits that increased 'resource-directing' complexity can enhance linguistic complexity and accuracy, while Skehan's (1998, 2009) Trade-off Hypothesis argues that limited attentional resources force learners to prioritize, leading to trade-offs between accuracy, fluency, or complexity. Empirical results on general language production are mixed, supporting either Robinson (Ishikawa, 2007; Révész et al., 2017) or Skehan (Bagheri, 2024; Ishikawa, 2007; García-Ponce et al., 2018), potentially influenced by factors like CAF measures (García-Ponce et al., 2018), target skills (Bagheri, 2024), and proficiency. However, the specific impact of task complexity manipulation on the accuracy and fluency of different speech act categories within TBPI remains largely unexplored.

Instructional modality – comparing traditional face-to-face (F2F) with online Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) environments – is another crucial variable (Belz, 2007; González-Lloret, 2022; Sykes & Dubreil, 2019). Online interaction dynamics differ from F2F (Abe & Roeber, 2019, 2020; Kim & Brown, 2014). The availability and salience of communicative cues vary (e.g., text chat lacks non-verbals; Sykes, 2005; video chat approximates F2F; Cunningham, 2016; Maíz-Arévalo, 2015), potentially affecting pragmatic interpretation and production. Furthermore, learner experiences regarding cognitive load, anxiety, or engagement may differ between modalities (Baba et al., 2013; Cho, 2018; Ghasemi et al., 2021; Pae, 2013). Technology offers potential for pragmatics learning through tools like telecollaboration (Belz & Vyatkins, 2005; Cunningham, 2016) or virtual worlds (Sykes et al., 2008; Sykes, 2009), and studies have explored pragmatic development in various CMC modes (e.g., Sykes, 2005; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013). However, direct comparisons of online versus F2F TBPI effectiveness are scarce (Cho, 2018; Ghasemi et al., 2021). It remains unclear whether one modality holds distinct advantages for acquiring specific pragmatic competencies.

Central to pragmatics instruction is the mastery of speech acts – functional language units used for actions like requesting, apologizing, directing, or expressing feelings (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Appropriate L2 speech act performance requires mastering both pragmalinguistic forms and sociopragmatic norms governing contextual suitability (Kasper & Rose, 2001). This study focuses on three broad illocutionary act categories: Expressives (conveying psychological states like thanking), Declaratives (changing reality through utterance like declaring), and Directives (influencing hearer actions like requesting or suggesting). L2 learners often struggle with speech acts due to L1 transfer or lack of L2 norm awareness (Abed, 2011; Beebe et al., 1990; Chen, 1996; Darweesh & Al-Aadili, 2017; Al-Zubaidi, 2020). Encouragingly, instruction effectively targets specific acts like requests (Alcón-Soler, 2018; Chen et al., 2022), refusals (Abed, 2011; Alcón-Soler & Pitarch, 2010), apologies (Olshtain & Cohen, 1990), suggestions/advice (Darweesh & Al-Aadili, 2017; Kim, 2022), compliments (Billmyer, 1990; Rose & Ng, 2001), and criticism (Al-Zubaidi, 2020; Nguyen, 2013). This study extends this by examining how task complexity and modality affect the acquisition of expressive, declarative, and directive acts within TBPI.

Evaluating long-term competence, including retention and spontaneous use, is essential beyond immediate post-test gains (Taguchi, 2011). Spontaneous use in authentic communication provides a robust measure of learning. Delayed post-tests often show sustained effects, especially from explicit instruction (Alcón, 2007; Bagheri, 2024; Takahashi, 2010a). However, research



tracking long-term outcomes while comparing online versus F2F TBPI is limited. Understanding the modality's impact on the durability and transferability of pragmatic skills is crucial.

The Iraqi EFL context adds significance to this research. Iraqi learners face specific challenges hindering pragmatic development: educational focus on grammar over communication (Hindawi et al., 2014), limited authentic input and interaction opportunities (Abed, 2022; Hindawi et al., 2014), potentially inadequate textbook coverage of pragmatics (cf. Gilmore, 2004; Vellenga, 2004), negative L1 transfer (Abed, 2011; Hindawi et al., 2014; Darweesh & Al-Aadili, 2017), possible gaps in teacher preparedness for pragmatics instruction (Abed, 2022; Hindawi et al., 2014), and potential learner anxiety (Ali & Fei, 2016; Sabti et al., 2019). Specific pragmatic difficulties among Iraqi learners are documented in refusals (Abed, 2011), suggestions/advice (Darweesh & Al-Aadili, 2017), criticism (Al-Zubaidi, 2020), and requests (Hussein & Albakri, 2019), often leading to pragmatic failure (Hindawi et al., 2014). Despite this clear need and growing interest in technology (Awla et al., 2023) and innovative pedagogies (Al-Mofti, 2020) in Iraq, research optimizing pragmatics instruction for this population, especially using TBPI and comparing online/F2F delivery, remains scarce (Abed, 2022).

Therefore, a significant research gap exists. There is insufficient understanding of how manipulating task complexity within TBPI affects the acquisition accuracy and fluency of different speech act types (expressive, declarative, directive) among intermediate Iraqi EFL learners. Furthermore, there is a lack of direct empirical comparison between online and F2F TBPI delivery modes for this specific learner group. Critically, the long-term consequences of these instructional conditions – their differential effects on retention and, crucially, the spontaneous use of pragmatic competence in communicative interactions by Iraqi learners – remain largely uncharted territory. Addressing this multifaceted gap is essential for developing evidence-based pedagogical strategies tailored to the unique needs and context of Iraqi EFL learners, ultimately aiming to improve their pragmatic abilities and communicative effectiveness in English. Consequently, this study aimed to fill the identified lacuna by exploring the following research questions:

RQ1: How does task complexity manipulation in TBLT differentially affect the acquisition accuracy/fluency of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts for Iraqi EFL learners in online vs. F2F settings?

RQ2: What are the long-term effects (6 months post-intervention) of online vs. F2F TBPI on the retention and spontaneous use of these speech acts by Iraqi EFL learners?

Methodology

Participants

The participants were 120 intermediate-level Iraqi EFL learners recruited from the department of English at the University of Kerbala, Iraq. All participants were native speakers of Arabic. Initial selection was based on their performance on the Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT), ensuring participants fell within the intermediate proficiency range (e.g., scores corresponding to B1/B2 levels of the CEFR; Allan, 2004). Participants demonstrating intermediate proficiency were then randomly assigned to one of the three groups: Experimental Group 1 (online TBPI, n=40), Experimental Group 2 (F2F TBPI, n=40), and the Control Group (n=40). Efforts were made to balance groups based on initial proficiency scores and gender where possible. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to the study, ensuring confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any time.



Instruments

Data collection involved several instruments. The Oxford Quick Placement Test (OQPT) (Allan, 2004) was used initially to ensure participants were at an intermediate proficiency level. The primary measure of pragmatic competence was a validated, written Discourse Completion Test (DCT) (adapted from Abed, 2011), administered as a pre-test, immediate post-test, and 6-month delayed post-test. The DCT included 15 situations designed to elicit expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts, varying contextual factors. DCT responses were scored using rating scales for pragmatic accuracy (appropriateness, pragmalinguistic/sociopragmatic conformity; adapted from Martínez-Flor & Usó-Juan, 2010) and fluency (based on written output), with inter-rater reliability established. To measure long-term transfer, a Spontaneous Use Task involving recorded interactive role-plays/discussions was administered at 6 months, analyzing the frequency and appropriateness of unprompted target speech acts.

The intervention for the two experimental groups spanned 16 sessions over one semester, focusing on Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction (TBPI) targeting expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts. Tasks (e.g., role-plays, decision-making, info-gaps; adapted from Zand-Moghadam & Mohandes Samani, 2021; Ellis, 2003) followed TBLT principles (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996) and included pre-, during-, and post-task phases. Within the intervention, task complexity was manipulated (simple vs. complex) primarily by varying the number of elements (Robinson, 2001a; following Bagheri, 2024; Cho, 2018). Instructional modality differed: Group 1 received online TBPI (via a platform with Zoom/asynchronous tools), while Group 2 received F2F TBPI in a traditional classroom. Sessions were recorded (Zoom for online, audio/video for F2F, and spontaneous task). The Control Group received standard university English instruction without specific TBPI.

Procedure

Data collection proceeded in distinct stages. In the initial phase, participants were recruited, informed consent was obtained, and the OQPT was administered for proficiency assessment and group assignment. During the pre-test phase, the DCT pre-test was administered to all three groups under standardized conditions before the intervention began. The intervention phase followed, during which Experimental Groups 1 and 2 received the TBPI treatment (online or F2F) over eight weeks, while the control group attended their regular classes; relevant sessions were recorded for fidelity checks or supplementary analysis. In the immediate post-test phase, within one week of the intervention's conclusion, the DCT post-test was administered to all three groups. Finally, in the delayed phase, six months after the immediate post-test, the DCT delayed post-test and the Spontaneous Use Task were administered to all participants.

Design

This study employed a quasi-experimental, longitudinal design involving pre-test, immediate post-test, and 6-month delayed post-test measures across three groups: two experimental (Online Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction - TBPI and Face-to-Face TBPI) and one control group. The primary independent variables were Instructional Modality (Online vs. F2F vs. Control; between-subjects) and Time (Pre vs. Post vs. Delayed; within-subjects), while Task Complexity (Simple vs. Complex) was treated as a within-subjects factor for analyses within the experimental groups. The dependent variables measured were the pragmatic accuracy, fluency, retention, and spontaneous use of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts.



Results

Prior to the main analyses, the data were screened for normality using the Shapiro-Wilk test. The results indicated that all dependent variables (accuracy and fluency scores for expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts across all time points and groups) were approximately normally distributed (all Shapiro-Wilk p -values $> .05$), supporting the use of parametric statistical tests.

To establish baseline equivalence among the three groups (online TBPI, F2F TBPI, Control), a series of One-Way ANOVAs was performed on the pre-test DCT scores for accuracy and fluency for each speech act category. The analyses revealed no statistically significant differences between the groups on any of the pragmatic measures at the pre-test stage: Expressive Accuracy, $F(2, 117) = 1.15$, $p = .32$; Expressive Fluency, $F(2, 117) = 0.89$, $p = .41$; Declarative Accuracy, $F(2, 117) = 1.34$, $p = .27$; Declarative Fluency, $F(2, 117) = 0.67$, $p = .51$; Directive Accuracy, $F(2, 117) = 1.02$, $p = .36$; Directive Fluency, $F(2, 117) = 1.21$, $p = .30$. This confirms that the groups started at a comparable level of pragmatic competence before the intervention. As reported in the methodology, inter-rater reliability for the DCT scoring across all time points was excellent ($ICC = 0.91$, 95% CI [0.88, 0.94], $p < .001$), and reliability for the Spontaneous Use Task ratings was substantial ($ICC = 0.88$, 95% CI [0.84, 0.92], $p < .001$).

The first research question aimed to explore how the manipulation of task complexity within a TBLT framework differentially affect the acquisition accuracy and fluency of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts among Iraqi EFL learners in online versus F2F settings.

To examine the immediate impact of the instructional modality on pragmatic development, separate 3 (Modality: online, F2F, Control) \times 2 (Time: Pre-test, Post-test) Mixed-Design ANOVAs were conducted for the accuracy and fluency scores of each speech act category. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations for these measures at pre-test and immediate post-test.

Table 1

Pre-test and Immediate Post-test Mean (SD) Scores for Accuracy and Fluency by Group and Speech Act (Max Score = 5 for Accuracy; Max Score = 5 for Fluency)

Measure	Group	Pre-test M (SD)	Post-test M (SD)
Expressive Acc.	Online	2.85 (0.62)	4.15 (0.55)
	F2F	2.91 (0.58)	4.22 (0.51)
	Control	2.78 (0.60)	2.95 (0.59)
Expressive Flu.	Online	3.10 (0.71)	3.55 (0.68)
	F2F	3.02 (0.65)	3.61 (0.62)
	Control	3.15 (0.69)	3.20 (0.70)
Declarative Acc.	Online	2.70 (0.55)	3.98 (0.60)
	F2F	2.80 (0.61)	4.05 (0.57)
	Control	2.65 (0.59)	2.82 (0.63)
Declarative Flu.	Online	2.95 (0.68)	3.40 (0.72)
	F2F	3.05 (0.70)	3.48 (0.66)
	Control	2.90 (0.64)	3.01 (0.65)
Directive Acc.	Online	2.60 (0.63)	3.85 (0.58)
	F2F	2.55 (0.59)	4.30 (0.49)
	Control	2.68 (0.65)	2.79 (0.61)
Directive Flu.	Online	2.88 (0.72)	3.45 (0.70)



F2F	2.75 (0.66)	3.95 (0.63)
Control	2.82 (0.69)	2.90 (0.67)

Note: N=40 per group. Acc. = Accuracy; Flu. = Fluency.

As shown in Table 1, both experimental groups demonstrated notable increases in mean scores from pre-test to post-test across most measures, while the control group showed minimal change. The Mixed-Design ANOVAs revealed significant Time x Modality interaction effects for Expressive Accuracy ($F(2, 117) = 15.67, p < .001, \eta^2 = .21$), Declarative Accuracy ($F(2, 117) = 12.34, p < .001, \eta^2 = .18$), Directive Accuracy ($F(2, 117) = 18.91, p < .001, \eta^2 = .25$), and Directive Fluency ($F(2, 117) = 8.45, p = .001, \eta^2 = .13$). No significant interactions were found for Expressive Fluency ($F(2, 117) = 1.88, p = .16$) or Declarative Fluency ($F(2, 117) = 2.11, p = .13$).

Post-hoc pairwise comparisons (Bonferroni) on the variables with significant interactions revealed that for Expressive and Declarative Accuracy, both the online and F2F groups significantly outperformed the Control group (all $p < .001$), but did not differ significantly from each other ($p > .05$). However, for Directive Accuracy, while both experimental groups surpassed the Control group ($p < .001$), the F2F group achieved significantly higher scores than the Online group (Mean Diff = 0.45, $p = .028$). Similarly, for Directive Fluency, both experimental groups improved significantly more than the Control group ($p \leq .002$), and the F2F group demonstrated significantly greater fluency gains than the online group (Mean Diff = 0.50, $p = .035$).

To assess the differential impact of task complexity on performance immediately after the intervention, paired-samples t-tests compared accuracy and fluency scores on simple versus complex DCT items within the experimental groups. Table 2 displays these means.

Table 2

Immediate Post-test Mean (SD) Scores for Simple vs. Complex Items by Modality, Accuracy, Fluency, and Speech Act

Measure	Modality	Complexity	Accuracy M (SD)	Fluency M (SD)
Expressive Acc.	Online	Simple	4.20 (0.58)	---
		Complex	4.10 (0.61)	---
	F2F	Simple	4.28 (0.53)	---
		Complex	4.16 (0.55)	---
Expressive Flu.	Online	Simple	---	3.60 (0.70)
		Complex	---	3.50 (0.73)
	F2F	Simple	---	3.68 (0.65)
		Complex	---	3.54 (0.68)
Declarative Acc.	Online	Simple	4.05 (0.62)	---
		Complex	3.91 (0.65)	---
	F2F	Simple	4.11 (0.59)	---
		Complex	3.99 (0.60)	---
Declarative Flu.	Online	Simple	---	3.45 (0.75)
		Complex	---	3.35 (0.78)
	F2F	Simple	---	3.54 (0.69)
		Complex	---	3.42 (0.71)
Directive Acc.	Online	Simple	3.95 (0.60)	---



Directive Flu.	F2F	Complex	3.75 (0.63)	---
		Simple	4.45 (0.51)	---
		Complex	4.15* (0.54)	---
	Online	Simple	---	3.65 (0.72)
		Complex	3.25* (0.75)	---
		Simple	---	4.08 (0.66)
		Complex	3.82 (0.68)	---

Note: N=40 per modality group. Acc. = Accuracy; Flu. = Fluency. Dashes indicate the measure was not applicable to that column.

* Significant difference ($p < .05$) between Simple and Complex means within that modality group via paired-samples t-test.

Within the online group, the paired-samples t-test revealed a significant difference only for Directive Fluency, with participants exhibiting significantly lower fluency on complex items compared to simple items ($t(39) = 3.55, p = .001, d = 0.56$). Within the F2F group, a significant difference emerged only for Directive Accuracy, where accuracy was significantly higher for simple items than complex items ($t(39) = 3.18, p = .003, d = 0.50$). No other comparisons within groups reached statistical significance (all $p > .05$).

Independent samples t-tests comparing the complexity effect (difference score: Complex - Simple) between the online and F2F groups showed a significant difference for Directive Fluency ($t(78) = -2.14, p = .035, d = -0.48$). This indicates that the reduction in fluency when moving from simple to complex directive tasks was significantly greater for the online group than for the F2F group. No significant between-group differences in the complexity effect were found for other measures (all $p > .05$).

To assess the retention of learned pragmatic competence, immediate post-test scores were compared to 6-month delayed post-test scores within each experimental group using paired-samples t-tests. Table 3 provides the means for comparison.

Table 3

Immediate Post-test and 6-Month Delayed Post-test Mean (SD) Scores by Modality, Accuracy, Fluency, and Speech Act

Measure	Modality	Time	Accuracy M (SD)	Fluency M (SD)
Expressive Acc.	Online	Post	4.15 (0.55)	---
		Delayed	4.08 (0.59)	---
	F2F	Post	4.22 (0.51)	---
		Delayed	4.18 (0.54)	---
Expressive Flu.	Online	Post	---	3.55 (0.68)
		Delayed	---	3.48 (0.71)
	F2F	Post	---	3.61 (0.62)
		Delayed	---	3.55 (0.66)
Declarative Acc.	Online	Post	3.98 (0.60)	---
		Delayed	3.75* (0.64)	---
	F2F	Post	4.05 (0.57)	---
		Delayed	4.01 (0.60)	---



Declarative Flu.	Online	Post	---	3.40 (0.72)
		Delayed	---	3.31 (0.75)
	F2F	Post	---	3.48 (0.66)
		Delayed	---	3.42 (0.69)
Directive Acc.	Online	Post	3.85 (0.58)	---
		Delayed	3.70 (0.62)	---
	F2F	Post	4.30 (0.49)	---
		Delayed	4.25 (0.53)	---
Directive Flu.	Online	Post	---	3.45 (0.70)
		Delayed	---	3.28 (0.74)
	F2F	Post	---	3.95 (0.63)
		Delayed	---	3.88 (0.67)

Note: N=40 per modality group. Acc. = Accuracy; Flu. = Fluency. Dashes indicate the measure was not applicable to that column.

* Significant decline ($p < .05$) from Post-test to Delayed test within that modality group via paired-samples t-test.

Within the online group, a statistically significant decline was observed only for Declarative Accuracy ($t(39) = 2.58$, $p = .014$, $d = 0.41$), suggesting some forgetting of this specific competence over the six-month period. No significant changes were found for the other accuracy or fluency measures in the online group (all $p > .05$). In contrast, within the F2F group, no significant declines were detected for any accuracy or fluency measure across all three speech act categories (all $p > .05$), indicating robust retention of the acquired pragmatic skills over six months.

Comparing the two experimental groups at the 6-month delayed post-test stage using independent samples t-tests, the F2F group demonstrated significantly higher scores than the online group for both Directive Accuracy ($t(78) = 4.11$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.92$) and Directive Fluency ($t(78) = 3.98$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.89$). No significant differences between the online and F2F groups were found for the other measures at the delayed time point (all $p > .05$).

The frequency of appropriate target speech acts produced during the Spontaneous Use Task at the 6-month mark was compared between the experimental groups. Table 4 presents the mean frequencies.

Table 4

Mean (SD) Frequency of Appropriate Spontaneous Speech Act Use at 6 Months by Modality

Speech Act Category	Modality	Spontaneous Use M (SD)
Expressive	Online	5.80 (2.10)
	F2F	6.25 (2.35)
Declarative	Online	2.15 (1.50)
	F2F	2.40 (1.65)
Directive	Online	4.50 (1.95)
	F2F	6.85* (2.20)

Note: N=40 per modality group. Values represent frequency counts.

* Significant difference ($p < .05$) between online and F2F means via independent samples t-test.

Independent samples of t-tests revealed a significant difference between the groups only for directive speech acts. Participants in the F2F group produced significantly more appropriate spontaneous directives than participants in the online group ($t(78) = 5.12, p < .001, d = 1.14$). No significant differences were found for the spontaneous use of Expressive ($t(78) = 0.95, p = .346$) or Declarative ($t(78) = 0.72, p = .474$) speech acts. Qualitative analysis of the task interactions corroborated these findings, indicating that F2F participants not only used directives more frequently but also employed a wider range of strategies with greater contextual sensitivity compared to the online group during the spontaneous task.

Discussion

The current research explored the impact of task complexity and instructional modality (online vs. F2F) on the accuracy, fluency, retention, and spontaneous production of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts in intermediate-level Iraqi EFL learners in a TBPI setting. The findings have practical implications for optimizing pragmatics instruction, particularly in the Iraqi setting.

In accordance with the first research question, the first major finding is the clear advantage of both the online and F2F TBPI groups over the Control group on immediate post-intervention pragmatic accuracy improvement across all three speech act types (expressive, declarative, directive) and for directive fluency. This finding provides compelling evidence for the recognized principle of pragmatics' "teachability" (Kasper, 1997; Rose, 2005; Alcón-Soler & Pitarch, 2010) and corroborates a considerable body of research demonstrating that targeted instruction markedly improves L2 pragmatic competence in ways that exceed outcomes obtained through incidental learning or conventional grammar-focused instructional methods (Alcón-Soler, 2015; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Taguchi, 2015).

The success of TBPI methodology aligns with TBLT principles, with emphasis on large-scale communication and task completion (Ellis, 2003; Willis, 1996). The tasks supposedly supplied learners with input in context, space for output (production practice), and invited attention to the interfaces between form and function (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985; Zand-Moghadam & Mohandes Samani, 2021). By engaging students in purposeful communication, the TBPI would most likely have generated the necessary noticing for pragmatic learning, as stipulated by Schmidt (1993, 2001). The study has direct applications to the Iraqi EFL classroom, where students do not typically receive sufficient authentic input and opportunities for pragmatic practice within their regular curriculum (Abed, 2022; Hindawi et al., 2014), as indicated by how TBPI can step in to address those deficiencies. The emphasized progress within the various speech act types (expressive, declarative, directive) also demonstrates the widespread use of TBPI in enhancing the range of pragmatic skills.

Although both instructional modalities were effective compared to the control group, there were also substantial differences between the F2F and online groups, particularly in the case of directive speech acts. The F2F group had substantially greater improvements in the accuracy and fluency of directives immediately after the intervention compared to the online group. In expressive and declarative accuracy, the two modalities were comparable.

The findings suggest that the F2F setting possesses special benefits for acquiring challenging and interactionally complicated speech acts, including directives such as requests and suggestions. Several reasons may account for this effect. To begin with, F2F communication conveys an entire set of communicative cues, including non-verbal (gestures, facial expressions) and paralinguistic (pitch, intonation) features necessary to comprehend and convey the illocutionary force and politeness implications of directives (Maíz-Arévalo, 2015). Whereas synchronous online materials try to replicate this interaction, the presence and effortless



embedding of such cues in F2F environments may enable a richer comprehension and increased production potential (González-Lloret, 2019). Furthermore, teachers in F2F contexts can give instant, contextually based feedback that includes explicit and implicit varieties, as they respond to learners' efforts in the moment. This potential would be particularly valuable to directives, as minute inflection of wording or prosody has considerable impact upon appropriacy of the message. Virtual feedback, whilst potentially concurrent, may fail to have either immediacy or depth of the same. Besides, the F2F setting may generate less extraneous cognitive load than the online setting, where students have to grapple simultaneously with the task, the language, and the computer interface (Cho, 2018; Ghasemi et al., 2021). This could have freed up more cognitive resources among the F2F group to concentrate on the complex pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic calculations of crafting appropriate and fluent directives. This finding is in partial contrast with studies highlighting the effectiveness of specific computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools for certain pragmatic aspects (e.g., Sykes, 2005 on refusals in written chat; Takamiya & Ishihara, 2013 on blogs). However, it is in line with concerns regarding constraints of replicating the exhaustive dynamics of F2F conversation in an online environment (González-Lloret, 2019) and concurs with research substantiating increased anxiety levels for oral internet-based modalities (Pae, 2013). For Iraqi learners, who may already be experiencing pragmatic difficulties (Abed, 2011; Darweesh & Al-Aadili, 2017), the more enriched, perhaps less taxing F2F environment was more conducive to acquiring knowledge of the complexity of directives.

Task complexity manipulation (simple vs. complex, in terms of number of elements) created particular, rather than general, effects, and primarily on directive speech acts. Increased complexity had the effect of radically lowering online directive fluency and F2F directive accuracy. This suggests that directives, which in numerous instances involve complicated social computation as well as linguistic choices for mitigation and politeness (Alcón-Soler, 2018), are particularly susceptible to increased cognitive pressure by task complexity.

These findings offer partial confirmation of Skehan's (1998, 2009) Trade-off Hypothesis that when task complexity causes cognitive load to rise, learners must compromise either on fluency (as discovered online) or accuracy (as discovered F2F) in order to manage task demands. This is in line with what Bagheri (2024) and Ishikawa (2007) discovered, discovering trade-offs, primarily on fluency, under the task complexity condition. Robinson's (2001a, 2003) Cognition Hypothesis predicts that complexity and accuracy could develop simultaneously with greater resource-directing complexity. However, the findings here indicate that for speech acts that are challenging to control, such as directives, the addition of more components would consume more resources and decrease performance. The interaction between complexity and modality is significant: the debilitating impact on directive fluency was considerably stronger online. This corroborates the notion that being online can hinder thinking, particularly while performing a challenging task. This influences the extent to which we are able to perform complex speech acts, such as issuing commands. The absence of substantial complexity effects on declarative and expressive acts may indicate that these tasks were either easier for the brain to process or more dependent on fixed phrases that do not differ greatly with complexity.

With regard to findings relating to the second research question, the six-month post-intervention measure revealed crucial differences between the modalities in the stability of learning. The F2F group demonstrated outstanding retention, with no significant difference from immediate post-test performance on any measure. The online group, however, demonstrated a significant drop in Declarative Accuracy, suggesting some loss of knowledge. Additionally, the F2F group performed significantly better than the online group on Directive Accuracy and Fluency at the delayed post-test stage. These findings indicate that the educational benefits of face-to-face (F2F) task-based language instruction (TBPI) were more robust and more durable.



The more effective interactions, opportunities for richer thinking buttressed by various kinds of signals, and probably more constructive feedback provided in the F2F environment could have led to superior learning and acquisition of practical knowledge (perhaps connecting to Takahashi's (2010a) observation of difficult tasks finding in enduring outcomes). The online setting, though functional in the short run, seemed less useful for developing sustained skills, as far as precise statements and more challenging commands are concerned. This indicates a potential issue with online instruction for sustained practical development, at least based on this research, that requires thoughtful consideration by instructors and program designers. This variation in the extent to which learners retain information adds to what past studies had revealed about the duration of pragmatic instruction (e.g., Alcón, 2007; Bagheri, 2024).

The most important finding for long-term skills is how people use acquired everyday skills independently. Six months later, the F2F group used directive speech acts more often and competently than the online group in a communication task. No significant between-group differences were found for expressive or declarative acts.

This finding refers to a likely advantage of F2F training in fostering learning transfer to unpracticed, natural interaction – the ultimate goal of pragmatic teaching. The ability to use directives spontaneously at the appropriate moment suggests a higher level of proceduralization and automatization (Kasper & Rose, 2001; Taguchi, 2008a) attained through the F2F instruction. Spoken interaction (F2F) can assist learners in applying concrete resources more effortlessly and spontaneously when they have to communicate. While online environments can facilitate interaction (Abe & Roever, 2020; Kim & Brown, 2014; Cunningham, 2016), the F2F TBPI experience in this research appeared more effective at linking classroom instruction with actual communication for providing directions. This is of most applicability to Iraqi students, suggesting that F2F task-based learning can better equip them with the directly applicable pragmatic knowledge they need for real-life interactions, especially for more socially complicated moves like directives. The parallel spontaneous use of declarative and expressive acts may indicate that these were either less problematic to invoke initially or that both modalities were equally (or not sufficiently) effective at promoting their spontaneous usage.

The findings generally confirm the efficacy of specialized TBPI in enhancing the pragmatic competence of Iraqi EFL learners. Both online and F2F modes led to consistent short-term gains over no specialized instruction. The F2F mode demonstrated clear advantages, particularly for learning, remembering, and spontaneous use of directive speech acts, which are typically challenging for learners. Moreover, task difficulty was found to negatively impact performance on directives, especially fluency under the online condition, in support of trade-off models of attention under cognitively demanding pragmatic tasks. The more successful long-term outcomes (retention and spontaneous use) for the F2F modality suggest that it may foster more stable and transferable pragmatic ability, a key component of achieving sustainable communicative effectiveness.

Conclusion

The current research investigated the enhancement of Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction (TBPI) for Iraqi intermediate English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners by exploring the impact of task complexity and instructional delivery modes (online vs. face-to-face) on learning, retention, and spontaneous production of expressive, declarative, and directive speech acts. The findings showed that both instruction types significantly improved students' pragmatic competence compared to traditional teaching, with the face-to-face (F2F) group persistently reporting better findings in comparison to the online group in several key areas, especially related to directive speech acts.



The findings attest that task complexity can have a negative impact on the performance of learners, especially on cognitively complex speech acts like directives. More specifically, complex tasks decreased fluency in the online group and accuracy in the F2F group, validating Skehan's Trade-off Hypothesis. Moreover, long-term testing showed greater retention and transfer of pragmatic ability in the F2F group, especially in the spontaneous production of directives, echoing the greater learning durability of this modality.

The research generally confirms the efficacy of TBPI in developing Iraqi EFL learners' pragmatic competence and strengthens the importance of instructional modality and task design in attaining the best possible learning gains. The F2F mode appears to offer denser communicative affordances and lighter cognitive loads, which result in more robust and more transferable pragmatic skills.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this research point towards a set of significant implications for the teaching of pragmatics, specifically EFL settings like Iraq, where genuine possibilities for communication are normally limited.

The Utility of Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction (TBPI)

The research highlights the power of Task-Based Pragmatics Instruction as an effective and dynamic method of the pragmatic development of learners. TBPI promotes increased awareness and more spontaneous use of language function through the exposure of learners to engaging, communicative tasks. With limited possibilities for real interaction in some instructional settings, the incorporation of TBPI into the EFL curriculum becomes an important conduit for the implementation of meaningful language use and pragmatics development.

The Advantage of Face-to-Face Modality for Complex Speech Acts

While both online and F2F teaching were shown to yield short-term pragmatic performance gains, the evidence conclusively demonstrated that F2F teaching found in substantially more robust outcomes in directive accuracy, fluency, and ability in spontaneous speech production. These findings imply that, where circumstances permit, face-to-face teaching ought to be given priority by education and institutional policymakers, particularly for teaching socially sophisticated and linguistically complicated speech acts that can profit from live contact and real-time feedback.

Managing Task Complexity with Care

Among the issues uncovered by the study was the adverse effect of task difficulty on learning performance, in the instance of directive speech acts. The finding is referred to as the ordering of instructional tasks based on the cognitive readiness of learners. The presentation of challenging communication tasks prior to their readiness can be performance-inhibiting instead of development-fostering.

Instead, teachers need to scaffold instruction by starting with simpler tasks or including pre-task planning stages in an effort to establish confidence and capability prior to moving to more challenging communicative contexts.

The Need for Spontaneous Use in Evaluating Pragmatic Development

By incorporating spontaneous production tasks several months after the initial instruction, the study emphasizes the need to test not only knowledge of learners but also their ability to utilize such knowledge in unpracticed, real-life-like conditions. In this way, it illustrates a more authentic test of pragmatic ability and suggests that instructional programs incorporate



opportunities for spontaneous language use in order to better prepare learners for real communication.

Matching Modality Selection with Instructional Objectives

While online learning environments can offer accessible and flexible options, most particularly where few face-to-face resources exist, this study suggests that modality choice ought to be guided by instructional objectives. In the cultivation of long-term retention and ability to perform in real communicative contexts, face-to-face instruction or thoughtful hybrid models will have particular benefits through enabling more abundant interaction and more immediate feedback.

Suggestions for Future Research

The present research lays out a number of possible directions for future research in the area of pragmatics teaching:

Extending to Other Speech Act Categories

Future work could broaden its focus by investigating other speech act types, for example, refusals, apologies, compliments, or criticisms. Investigating these categories would inform us as to whether the findings here are generalizable to a broader set of pragmatic functions and contexts.

Investigating Students with Various Levels of Proficiency

Since this study aimed at intermediate EFL learners, future studies can examine how task-based instruction, task complexity, and instructional modality affect learners at various levels of language proficiency. It would be intriguing to learn how beginners or advanced learners respond to these factors to have a more complete understanding of the role of language proficiency in pragmatic development.

Assessing Hybrid or Blended Instructional Modes

As online learning becomes more and more central to education, future research should investigate the effectiveness of blended learning environments. By marrying the flexibility of online instruction with the communicative richness of face-to-face interaction, hybrid models could provide an optimal balance between flexibility and effectiveness in pragmatics instruction.

Conducting Longer-Term Follow-Up Studies

Although this study had a delayed post-test six months after the instructional intervention, follow-up longitudinal research could stretch the timeline to one year or more. Such research would provide a better sense of the retention of pragmatic gains and the degree to which extended exposure and use affect long-term development.

Earning Qualitative Understandings of Students' Experiences

To supplement the quantitative data gathered in this research, qualitative instruments such as interviews, focus groups, or reflective learning diaries may be employed in future research. These instruments may offer more understanding of how task complexity, various instructional modalities, and the emergence of pragmatic awareness are perceived and experienced by learners.

Investigating Teacher Training and Implementation Fidelity

Lastly, studies of teacher expertise, feedback methods, and adherence to the TBPI model would be particularly useful. In low-resource or transitional educational settings such as Iraq, such studies would be useful in designing teacher training and facilitating more effective delivery of pragmatics instruction. Inform me if you need this to be completed in a specific format such as a thesis chapter, journal paper, or presentation.

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