

The Effect of Task-based Instruction and Focus on Forms Instruction on the Development of the Metaphorical Competence of Iranian Upper-Intermediate EFL students

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Abstract

The current study aimed to investigate the effects of task-based and focus-on-forms instruction on metaphorical competence. The initial participants of the present study were 75 upper-intermediate EFL learners who were given an OPT the results of which were used to select 60 learners. The 60 learners were chosen and divided into three groups each consisting of 20 students and given a pretest of metaphorical competence. Next, the first experimental group was exposed to focus-on-forms teaching of metaphors. The second group was taught the target metaphorical expressions through Task-based instruction. The control group was exposed to the conventional method of teaching. The findings of the statistical test of one-way ANOVA indicated that both task-based instruction and focus on forms significantly affected the metaphorical competence of EFL learners. However, no significant difference was found between the Task-based and Focus on Forms instructions in improving L2 learners' metaphorical competence. Based on the findings of the present study, it is suggested that metaphorical language be taught via task-based instruction and/or focus on forms as both of these methods were found effective for teaching metaphorical language.

Keywords: Metaphorical language, Focus-on-forms, Tasks, Task-based Instruction

1. Introduction

No one can deny the importance of metaphors in language, as it has been said, metaphorical language is extremely omnipresent in everyday dimension of first language use of language (Gibbs, 1994; Pollio, Barlow, Fine, & Pollio, 1977) and as some scholars and researchers claimed (e.g., Danesi 1992; Ellis, 1997), second language learners need to provide themselves with sufficient skills, knowledge, and fitting use and comprehension of metaphorical expressions. Therefore, metaphorical use of language is considered as an important indication of second language learners' fluency that help them to incorporate into the social interaction and the cultural dimensions of a second language, because metaphorical expressions can save attempts in processing and perform as discursal time-buyers (Lennon, 1998).

As the researchers and scholars claimed that one of the greatest challenges facing L2 learners is related to mastery of suitable use of metaphorical expressions in a second language learning. Empirical studies of second language

figurative language use have been guided essentially by pedagogical concerns about the appropriate use of humor (Deneire 1995; Schmitz 2002), irony, sarcasm, idioms (Cooper 1999), metaphor (Danesi 1992), and other forms of figurative expressions in a second language context.

Rashtchi (2010) has pointed out that English teachers usually complained about some problems in their classes that slacken the process of language learning. In traditional teacher-fronted classes teachers usually complain about large classes, inattentiveness of students, unsatisfactory output of the class as compared to the given input, and low scores students get despite the effort teachers make for promoting language learning. In such classes, the teacher speaks most of time, leads activities, and passes judgments on student performance while trying to attract their attention to what is being done in the classroom.

One of the most important solutions is reducing student's dependence on teacher through task-based language teaching (TBLT) or communicative activities, which gets all students involved in the process of language learning simultaneously. Since TBLT is an indispensable role in language use, and it is a primary means of second language acquisition, the growth of TBLT as a method should assume critical importance in pedagogy, but it has not received the due attention in practice. In addition, there is a wide literature on communicative and task-based teaching and learning often with adult ESL classes.

One of the problems in EFL teaching and learning is related to learners' expectations and learning style. In a recent study, Burrows (2008) conducted research in EFL contexts and argued that learners were used to learning in a teacher-centered education system which tended not to encourage learner autonomy or high level of active participation. However, most approaches to task-based learning need high levels of learner involvement. The problem in Iran is English education. English is taught as an entity quite divorced from communication and practical use. The reason why Iranian EFL instruction in high schools is teacher-centered without communicative approach is that teaching English still seems to be preparing students for college entrance examinations. Many Iranian English teacher in junior high schools maintained that the current method of instruction of English is well-suited for this purpose. Of course, there are some students who want to improve the practical ability to use English as a tool of communication. Nevertheless, most Iranian English teachers plan to concentrate on the traditional goal of preparing for the college entrance examinations.

In spite of the prevalent use of activities in language teaching, some significant challenges in designing suitable kinds of task-based language teaching and constructing authentic task types, both of which have regarded important factors in specifying the effectiveness of TBLT in communicative classrooms, still remain unanswered.

In response to these challenges, many SLA researchers are currently moving their attention from conceptualizing tasks to implementing task-based on observation of the practical utilities of TBLT methodology in classroom practice. The need for learning English and being able to communicate through it, in situations such as our country, Iran, where there is lack of exposure to the native speakers of English as well as authentic materials, is something that both students and teachers agree on. Therefore, applying effective ways or techniques through which learners can better learn and better communicate seems an important enterprise.

Language proficiency is a multidimensional construct which consists of different levels of abilities and domains (Carrasquillo, 1994). On other word, speaking is an interactive process of constructing meaning that concerns producing, receiving and processing information (Brown, 1994; Burns & Joyce, 1997). Speaking skill is one of the major abilities that is somehow troublesome for EFL and ESL learners. The ability to communicate in a new language target language based on its grammatical, contextual, social, and cultural rules, and variations are always difficult for EFL learners.

On the other word, there are many researchers have examined the role of metaphor and metaphorical language in L2 learning, but little attention has been directed to the way metaphorical language should be instructed, and to what extent the application of formal instruction could affect metaphorical learning.

Since not a deal of attention has been allocated to metaphorical language in L2 curricula, L2 learners face great difficulty in comprehending and producing metaphorical expressions. One of the reasons for such a pitfall is that almost no attention has been related to the way metaphorical expressions are treated in the L2 classroom context. The problem seems to be much worse in relation to the materials developed for the Iranian students, because such materials are particularly designed to support academic reading skills; thus, metaphorical expressions might rarely be of any concern to the developers especially for Iranian students. Although several studies (e.g. Roberts & Kreuz, 1994; van Pattern, 1996; Williams, 1999) have been carried out to explore the efficacy of Focus on Forms and explicit instruction in presenting L2 structures, little has been documented, regarding the efficacy of that in the development of metaphorical competence in L2 learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the possible effects that these two instructions will have on development of metaphorical competence in L2 learners. This study would be valuable for and conducive to L2 teaching to realize which teaching instruction (i.e., Focus on Forms or Task-based) is more practical.

RQ1: Does task-based instruction have significantly effect on Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence?

RQ2: Does focus on forms instruction have significantly effect on Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence?

RQ3: Is there any significant difference between the Task-based and Focus on Forms instructions in improving L2 learners' metaphorical competence?

2. Method

2.1 Participants

The initial participants of the present study were 75 upper- intermediate EFL learners in International Towheed School in Dubai. These 75 learners were given an OPT the results of which were used to select only those learners whose scores fell within the range of ± 1 standard deviation from the mean. To this aim, 60 learners were chosen and divided into three groups each consisting of 20 students.

2.2 Instruments

The following instruments and materials were used in the present study:

The first test was an Oxford Placement Test (OPT) which was a 50-item test to check the proficiency of the students to see all of them were homogeneous in terms of overall language proficiency.

At the second step after assigning student to three different groups (Two experimental groups and one Control group) the learners were given a pretest, this pretest contained 40 multiple-choice items and the metaphorical expressions and idioms were selected from Oxford Idioms and Phrasal Verbs (2011, the upper-intermediate level).

The items were constructed based on correct answer format, not best answer format which means each item had one and only one right answer. The constructing of the tests was based on Writing Good Multiple-Choice Exams by Dawn M. Zimmaro, Ph.D. University of Texas – Austin.

For the instruction phase, 12 reading passages each in one section every week was conducted. The reading passages were selected from the book *English Idioms in Use* (2002, the upper intermediate level). The metaphorical expressions were printed in bold in the original texts.

At the end a posttest which was the same as the pretest was given to the learners. The test items were only different concerning their orders and also the order of the alternatives to nullify the practice effect.

The pretest and posttest were developed from *Oxford Idiom and Phrasal Verbs* (2011, the upper intermediate level), which is a famous and standard book in regard to Idioms and expressions and also the constructed tests and its items were modified, revised and finalized by two university professors so the content validity of the pretest and posttest was assured.

For the reliability of tests as, they were piloted on 30 upper intermediate students in *Pardise Danesh English Institute* in Tehran and characteristics of each item such as Item Facility (IF) and Item Discrimination (ID) were calculated and due revisions were made to the items which did not have appropriate indices. Moreover, the reliability of the tests was also calculated using Cronbach's Alpha and the pretest and posttest had acceptable reliability indices of .78 and .82, respectively.

2.3 Procedure

First the three groups were given a pretest, then one of the experimental groups was exposed to the explicit teaching of metaphors (i.e. FonFs) included in 12 reading passages. For this purpose, participants were provided with metalinguistic explanation, that is, either a piece of etymological information, as imparted from the teacher, was provided to them or an attempt was made to get the participants to find the Persian equivalents of the expressions in question. Also, the participants were initially given some idea of what conceptual metaphors were.

The second group was taught the target metaphorical expressions in the same text but through Task-based instruction as explained below.

For this purpose, the same expressions were taught based on TBLT. In this case the class was divided into three phases: pre- task, task cycle and post-task. In the pre-task phase, there were three objectives, first one was to activate prior knowledge of the students related to the text and expressions, and second objective was to motivate students, so the instructor introduced the topic and then he/she read through the text once without explaining any expression. The last thing in the pre-task phase was explaining the students the tasks which were going to be given to them in the task cycle phase.

During-task phase, the students were engaged in completing three different tasks, Since the instruction phase was reading passages including expressions and metaphors, based on each passage, three different tasks were implied, first task was Road Trip task, in this task the teacher asked the students to be in groups of three and plan a trip using the expressions and metaphors they had learned. When they were done, the teacher had them present their trip to the class.

Then, the class, as a whole, voted on which trip they were going to take, the second task that was used, was that the teacher gave students different cards with the expressions and their meaning written on them, the students tried to match each card with its explanation, again this task took place in groups. The third task was that we put students in different groups, each group was asked to discuss the dictated expression and metaphors and predict and "assemble" a possible story by creating sentences with the taught expressions and metaphors then they shared and discussed their story with other groups and alternatively one student of each group presented the story to the whole class. And finally in post-task phase, they gave a report to the class.

The control group was through the usual classroom instruction. At the end of the treatment, all groups took the posttest.

3. Results

Selection Process and Homogeneity of the Participants in Terms of Metaphorical Competence

In the first step, it was needed to choose participants with homogeneous English language proficiency. As stated earlier, OPT was used for this purpose. Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics for the OPT scores belonging to the initial 75 learners.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics of 75 Students on OPT

Variables	N		Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing				
OPT	75	0	38.6667	2.63210	28.00	45.00

As clearly outlined in the chapter three, those students with scores below and beyond mean score $\pm 1SD$ were removed from the study leading to a homogeneous group of students in terms of language proficiency. Table 2 shows the statistics of 60 students whose scores fell within mean score $\pm 1SD$.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics of the Participants on OPT After Removing the Students with Scores Below and Beyond Mean Score $\pm 1 SD$

Variables	N		Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
	Valid	Missing				
Homogenized OPT	60	15	39.32	1.98	30.00	43.00

After selecting 60 homogenized learners in terms of language proficiency, they were divided into three groups of 20 and given the pretest of metaphorical competence. A One-way ANOVA was run on the pretest scores to make sure that the three groups were also homogenized in terms of metaphorical competence prior to the treatment. Table 3 shows the descriptive statistics of the groups in terms of pretest scores.

Table 3
Descriptive Statistics of the Groups in Terms of Pretest Scores

N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Minimum	Maximum
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Task based	20	16.9000	1.86096	.41612	13.00	20.00
Focus on forms	20	16.8500	2.23120	2.66112	12.00	23.00
Control	20	16.5500	2.16370	.48382	11.00	20.00
Total	60	16.7167	1.98376	.25610	11.00	20.00

Before running ANOVA, it was necessary to make sure that the data sets met the assumption for this test. The main assumption for ANOVA is the normality of the scores. Table 4. displays the results of Levene's test for the pre-test Scores.

Table 4

Results of Levene's test for the Pre-test Scores

Test of Homogeneity of Variances			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.255	2	17	.124

As seen in the table above, the sig equals .124 which is higher than the confidence level of 0.05 indicating that the normality assumption is met. Table 5 demonstrates the results of ANOVA.

Table 5

Results of ANOVA on Pretest Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	1.233	2	.617	.152	.859
Within Groups	230.950	57	4.052		
Total	232.183	59			

Results of ANOVA (Table 5) showed that the groups were not significantly different from each other in terms of pretest scores, $F= 0.152$, $P \leq 0.05$. Accordingly, it was concluded that participants of the study were homogenized in terms of metaphorical competence before receiving treatment. Afterwards, students underwent treatment and at the

end of the treatment, the three groups were given the posttest of metaphorical competence the results of which were used to answer the research questions.

Answering the Research Questions

To investigate the research questions of the current study, a One-way ANOVA was run on the posttest scores of the three groups. Table 6 displays the results of Levene's test for the post-test Scores.

Table 6
Results of Levene's test for the Pre-test Scores

Test of Homogeneity of Variances			
Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
3.442	2	17	.321

As seen in the table above, the sig equals .321 which is higher than the confidence level of 0.05 indicating that the normality assumption is met. Table 7 demonstrates the results of ANOVA.

Table 7
Result of ANOVA On the Posttest Scores

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	332.033	2	166.017	39.404	.000
Within Groups	240.150	57	4.213		
Total	572.183	59			

ANOVA indicated that significant difference existed between the three groups of the study, $F=39.40$, $P \leq 0.05$. Based on this result, it can be concluded somewhere between the groups significant differences existed which means that at least one of the groups outperformed the other two groups or one of them. To determine where exactly the difference between the groups lay, post hoc test of Tukey was run. Table 8 presents the results of multiple contrasts employing the post hoc test of Tukey.

Table 8
Result of Multiple Comparisons by Tukey Test

(I) Method	(J) Method	Mean		Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
		Difference (I- J)	Std. Error		Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Tukey HSD	Control	-4.75000*	.64909	.000	-6.3120	-3.1880
	Focus on forms	.45000	.64909	.768	-1.1120	2.0120
Control based	Task based	4.75000*	.64909	.000	3.1880	6.3120
	Focus on forms	5.20000*	.64909	.000	3.6380	6.7620
Focus on forms	Task based	-.45000	.64909	.768	-2.0120	1.1120
	Control	-5.20000*	.64909	.000	-6.7620	-3.6380

*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

According to the output of multiple contrasts, task-based instruction group outperformed the control group. Thus, it can be inferred that task-based instruction significantly affected Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence. Moreover, focus on forms group also outperformed the control group. Therefore, it can be concluded that the Focus on Forms instruction significantly affected Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence. However, the results showed that there was no significant difference between the Task-based and Focus on Forms instructions in improving L2 learners' metaphorical competence.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The current study aimed to investigate if task-based instruction has a significant effect on Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence. Moreover, the study aimed at finding if focus on forms instruction has a significant effect on Iranian EFL upper-intermediate learners' metaphorical competence. Finally, the study sought to explore any significant difference between the Task-based and Focus on Forms instructions in improving L2 learners' metaphorical competence. The findings of statistical analysis indicated that both task-based instruction and focus on forms significantly affected the metaphorical competence of EFL learners. However, no significant difference was found between the Task-based and Focus on Forms instructions in improving L2 learners' metaphorical competence.

The positive effect of task-based instruction on metaphorical competence of the participants of the study was not far from expectations. Besides, there are empirical studies supporting the efficacy of task-based instruction. The studies by Roknabadi and Sayadian (2014), Fotos, (1994), Ellis (1995), Fotos and Ellis (1991), Fotos (1994), Mohamed (2004), Loumpourdi (2005), Rezaei (2009) have all pointed to the effectiveness of task-based learning in various aspects of language learning.

The positive effect of task-based instruction in the current study can be justified on the grounds that task-based instruction has some theoretical advantages. TBI can be considered as one model of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in terms of its attention to real and meaningful communication as the main feature of language learning (Richards & Rodgers, 2001). The emphasis on task completion and meaningful learning paves the way for more engagement and accordingly more motivation which is considered an important element in learning.

Moreover, task-based instruction includes the element of production and also interaction that are well supported by Output Hypothesis (Swain, 1990) and Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1985).

The priority of task completion and learning by being involved with actions and planning to complete the tasks are also in line with theory of experiential learning by Nunan (2004). He described the experiential learning as a theoretical foundation for TBLT, defining the experiential learning and its association with tasks as an approach that considers the L2 learner's immediate personal experience as the starting point on their path to L2 learning. In experiential learning, learning occurs mainly through "learning by doing". The helpfulness and benefits of task-based instruction were fully discussed by Rezvani and Bigdeli (2012). They argued that through task-based instruction both process and product are equally dealt with, cooperative learning is promoted, the activity looks more real life, and learning becomes more learner centered. All these features have been praised frequently in literature as good contributors to learning.

The positive effect of focus on forms instruction on the metaphorical competence can be justified on the grounds that the explicit teaching of metaphorical competence has certain theoretical advantages for learners. With respect to positive effect of focus on forms, the findings of present study are in line with Coyne, McCoach, and Kapp (2007), Elleman, Lindo, Morphy, and Compton (2009), Maynard, Pullen, and Coyne (2010), and Pollard-Durodola, Gonzalez, et al, (2011). They all believe that language content needs to be taught explicitly in order to be effective. Oxford and Scarcella (1994) take the position that explicit instruction is necessary to guide learners to learn specific strategies for acquiring language. In line with findings of present study that focus on forms instruction was effective in learning metaphorical language, Salemi, Rabiee and Ketabi (2012) also found that explicit instruction via focus on forms had advantage over implicit instruction. Salemi et al. concluded that participants in explicit groups outperformed implicit groups, by saying that it was due to the fact that students' attention was directed to specific features during explicit instruction.

According to the obtained results some pedagogical implications can be suggested for Iranian context of foreign language learning. The very first one is that metaphorical competence and the way it should be taught needs to be further emphasized in language classes. In addition, it is suggested that metaphorical language should be taught via task-based instruction and/or focus on forms as both of these methods were found effective in the current study. The above implications require attention by various people involved in the world of language teaching. For instance, material developers and syllabus designers need to incorporate the metaphorical language activities in a task based format and also focus on forms should be easily encouraged through these tasks. In parallel, foreign language teachers need to be well prepared to handle metaphorical language instruction which puts further responsibilities on the shoulder of teacher trainers and teacher education systems.

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