

Explicit Instruction Versus Meaning-Focused Exposure in Second Language Pragmatic Competence Acquisition: A Cross-Methodological Evaluation of Form-Focused and Task-Based Pedagogical Frameworks

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Abstract. This study investigates the differential efficacy of explicit form-focused instruction (FFI) and meaning-focused task-based language teaching (TBLT) in the acquisition of second language (L2) pragmatic competence, with particular attention to speech act production and metapragmatic awareness. Drawing on a quasi-experimental design involving 187 advanced English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners across three institutional contexts, the study employs discourse completion tasks (DCTs), role-play elicitation, and retrospective verbal protocols as primary data-collection instruments. Multilevel regression modeling and pragmatic rating rubrics are applied to assess gains in illocutionary force, politeness indexicality, and contextual appropriateness. Results indicate that while FFI yields significantly higher metapragmatic awareness scores, TBLT demonstrates superior transfer-of-learning outcomes in naturalistic communicative settings. Theoretical and pedagogical implications for curriculum designers and language assessment specialists are discussed in light of sociocognitive and interactionist SLA frameworks.

Keywords: second language pragmatics, form-focused instruction, task-based language teaching, metapragmatic awareness, speech act acquisition, pragmatic competence, EFL pedagogy, discourse completion tasks, illocutionary force

Introduction

The interface between instructed second language acquisition (SLA) and pragmatic competence development has occupied a central position in applied linguistics research for several decades, yet the pedagogical debate surrounding the relative merits of explicit form-focused instruction (FFI) and meaning-focused task-based language teaching (TBLT) remains unresolved and empirically contested. In an era characterized by the rapid

globalization of English-medium education, the diversification of learner demographics, and the increasing institutional demand for communicatively competent L2 speakers in professional and academic domains, the question of how best to scaffold pragmatic development carries substantial theoretical and practical urgency. As of 2024–2026, international higher education systems are under mounting pressure to produce graduates capable of navigating complex intercultural speech events — including negotiation, academic advising, service encounters, and digital-mediated communication — all of which place premium demands on the learner's capacity for context-sensitive, sociopragmatically appropriate language use. Pragmatic competence, as conceptualized within the Bachman and Palmer (1996) communicative language ability model and further elaborated through Kasper and Rose's (2002) interlanguage pragmatics framework, encompasses both the knowledge of illocutionary conventions and the procedural capacity to deploy them in contextually calibrated ways. The acquisition of such competence presents a distinct pedagogical challenge: unlike morphosyntactic features, pragmatic norms are often opaque to learners, rarely made explicit in instructional materials, and highly susceptible to cross-linguistic and sociocultural interference. This opacity renders the pedagogical medium — whether explicit metalinguistic explanation or implicit, meaning-driven exposure — a variable of decisive consequence. Despite a growing body of empirical work comparing FFI and TBLT in grammar and vocabulary acquisition (Ellis, 2016; Norris & Ortega, 2000), systematic comparative evaluations targeting L2 pragmatics remain methodologically fragmented. Studies frequently differ in their operationalization of "explicit instruction," their choice of target pragmatic features, and the ecological validity of elicitation procedures, complicating cross-study synthesis. Furthermore, the role of learner variables — including proficiency level, L1 pragmatic transfer, and metacognitive orientation — has been inconsistently controlled, yielding contradictory effect-size estimates across the literature. The present study addresses these gaps by implementing a rigorously controlled, multi-site quasi-experimental design that isolates instructional modality as the primary independent variable while systematically accounting for learner-internal and contextual covariates. The article proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the theoretical and empirical literature on FFI and TBLT in L2 pragmatics instruction; Section 3 details the methodological framework, including participant selection, instructional treatment protocols, and elicitation instruments; Section 4 presents quantitative findings derived from multilevel regression analyses and pragmatic rating procedures; Section 5 discusses the results in relation to sociocognitive and interactionist SLA theories; and Section 6 offers implications for syllabus design, teacher training, and language assessment policy.

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