

Comparing the Effects of Metacognitive-based Teaching and Task-based Teaching on Pragmatic Competence of Iranian EFL Learners

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ABSTRACT

In the current study the researchers endeavored to investigate the effects of two instructional strategies; i.e. task-based teaching and metacognitive-based teaching on developing Iranian English as a Foreign Language (EFL) intermediate level learners' pragmatic knowledge of two speech acts of apology and request. To fulfil this objective, 60 intermediate students – in two groups of 30- of an Iranian English language institute- named Respina Talk Novin- participated in this study. To homogenize the learners, Nelson test was administered. Then a second language pragmatic test consisting of 25 items on the speech acts of apology and request was administered to both groups as the pretest. After an eight-session instruction, the participants were given the same test as the posttest to explore any probable improvements on their pragmatic knowledge. The results of the study were analyzed using descriptive statistics; pretests and posttests of pragmatic competence. In order to prove the effectiveness of metacognitive-based teaching as opposed to task-based teaching, an independent samples test was run which proved that metacognitive-based teaching had superiority over the other one regarding the two speech acts which means all three null hypotheses were rejected.

Key terms: Task-based instruction, Metacognitive-based instruction, Pragmatic competence

1. INTRODUCTION

Sociolinguistic and ethnographic studies have focused on incorporation of pragmatic awareness in TESOL planning as well, being reinforced by the move from grammatical to communicative competence in language learning. However, there is not a gear deal of research on the specific components constituting such awareness.

The development of speech-act theory has provided interlocutors with a better understanding of speakers' intention in the act of communication. It also has inspired research concentrating on the effects of diverse strategies and approaches on speech events and speech acts the outcomes of which will make the instructors more cognizant of the interaction of situational, sociolinguistic, and linguistic competence.

Task-based instruction as one of its offshoots is a new approach within umbrella of communicative language teaching (CLT) focusing on communication of meaning rather than study grammatical forms to begin learning. Such an approach provides exposure to authentic language, helps learners produce meaningful language, and presents opportunities to attend to the grammatical forms involved.

Metacognitive strategies are higher order executive skills that may entail planning for, monitoring or evaluating the success of a learning activity (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p. 44).

Problem identification, social strategies, and affective strategies are metacognitive strategies that have also been considered for teaching, some of which will be employed in this study in order to investigate their effects on pragmatic competence of EFL learners.

Following the above mentioned strategies, in addition to the main focus of the study which is to explore and compare the effects of task-based and metacognitive-based teaching on pragmatic competence (with the focus on two speech acts of request and apology) of Iranian EFL learners, the current study is also an attempt to allow EFL students to become aware of the sociolinguistic conventions of language use and cultural differences. Having this purpose in mind, the researchers formulated the following research questions:

- Q1. What is the effect of task-based teaching on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners?
- Q2. What is the effect of metacognitive-based teaching on competence of Iranian EFL learners?
- Q3. Which method - task-based teaching or metacognitive-based teaching - has more effects on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners?

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2. REVIEW OF THE RELATED LITERATURE

2.1. Grammatical Competence vs. Communicative Competence

The term communicative competence was coined in reaction to the dichotomy proposed by Chomsky. In 1970s, research on communicative competence distinguished between linguistic and communicative competence (Hymes, 1972) to highlight the difference between knowledge "about" language forms and knowledge that enables a person to communicate functionally and interactively (cited in Brown, 2007).

According to Hymes (1972) the notion of communicative competence is defined as the knowledge of rules of grammar along with the knowledge of rules of language use appropriate to a communicative situation. Based on their definition, various models of communicative competence have been suggested by Bachman (e.g. 1990).

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Canale & Swain (1980) believed four different components made up the construct of communicative competence: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociolinguistic competence and strategic competence. In their model, grammatical competence is that aspect of communicative competence that encompasses knowledge of elements of language. (cited in Brown, 2007), which closely resembles Neizgoda and Rover's code component.

Neizgoda and Rover (2001) suggest at least two components in the definitions of communicative competence: a code component, and a use component; The former describes a language user's knowledge of syntax, morphology, semantics, lexis, and phonology and the latter elaborates on a language user's ability to use language appropriately for a purpose within a given context.

The term "grammatical competence" in Canale & Swain's model is also the equivalent of the term suggested by Chomsky, namely, "linguistic competence". Discourse competence is associated with the formal features of language as well. However, what differentiates these two components, i.e. Grammatical and Discourse, is the level of knowledge of grammar; the former refers to intrasentential knowledge of grammar, while the latter deals with discourse level, e.g. achieving coherence and cohesion in spoken or written communication (Neizgoda and Rover, 2001). Two other components of communicative competence, i.e. sociolinguistic and strategic competence refer to the use of language in communication. Sociolinguistic competence is the knowledge of contextually appropriate language use and strategic competence is the knowledge of applying different strategies to make an effective communication (Neizgoda and Rover, 2001). In this model there is no explicit reference to pragmatics, but pragmatics has been implicitly represented as sociolinguistic competence. In the second influential model by Bachman (1990) language competence is subdivided into organizational and pragmatic competence.

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2.2. Teaching Pragmatics

Throughout the literature teachability of pragmatic knowledge has been demonstrated; a case in point is Rose and Kasper (2001). However the first impediment in this area is instructors' knowledge. More precisely, Thomas (1983) notes the language teachers lack enough theoretical knowledge of pragmatics. Matsuda (1999) named two reasons for this problem in pragmatics teaching. First, teaching pragmatics is a daunting and sensitive issue due to the high degree of „face threat“ it often involves and, second, the number of available pedagogical resources is limited. But the observed reluctance should also be partly attributed to the lack of some valid methods for testing interlanguage pragmatic knowledge (see Salehi, 2013).

Furthermore, Ishihara (2011) mentions pragmatics as one of the most complex and thus challenging areas for instructors to teach in a language classroom. Rose and Kasper (2001) argue for overall advantages of an instructed group over an uninstructed one.

2.3. Speech Acts

2.3.1. Speech Act of Apology

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines apology as "an acknowledgment intended as an atonement for some improper or injurious remark or act: an admission to another of a wrong or discourtesy done him accompanied by an expression of regret" (as cited in Cohen, 1999, p. 1014).

Apologies are basically "post-event acts", i.e. apologies suggest that a certain event has already happened or is about to happen. They are face-threatening for the speaker and face-saving for the hearer. As far as the speech act of apologizing is concerned, a speaker is cognizant of the fact that a social norm has been violated and assumes responsibility for that (Blum- Kulka & Olshtain, 1984).

Olshtain and Cohen's (1990) study on apologies was designed to displace the more conventionalized apology forms with a wider range of semantic formulas used in apologies, such as explanation, acknowledgement of responsibility, offer of repair and promise of forbearance.

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2.3.2. Speech Act of Request

Blum-Kulka & Olshtain (1984) define requests as "pre-event acts", i.e. they are made to cause or change an event, exposing both speaker and hearer to a loss of face (p. 206).

2.4. Metacognitive-based Language Teaching

Students are actually empowered by metacognitive strategies and this does affect the way cognitive strategies are maintained and employed (Carr, Kurtz, Schneider, Turner & Borkowski, 1989).

Alternative forms of assessment coupled with teacher assessment can give students tangible information about their work .

2.5. Task-based Language Teaching

Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) was developed from communicative approaches. In TBLT, a task is seen as central to learning cycle. A task-based syllabus is organized around tasks (Nunan, 1988). Of course what is noteworthy about tasks is the issue of gradation. In other words, there are no clear-cut criteria for sequencing tasks (see Prabhu 1987). Still, it is worth conducting a study on task-based instruction. Task-based instruction and for that matter, task-based assessment is so important that an entire issue of the prestigious journal of Language Testing has been dedicated to it.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Participants

The sample of this study consists of 60 participants. They were both female and male intermediate students of an Iranian English language institute- named Respina Talk Novin. They were homogenized and classified into two groups of 30 subjects with the age range from 20 to 30. Eight sessions of thirty minutes of instruction were held. From that sample, one group was exposed to task-based instruction of apology and request speech acts and the other group of participants received metacognitive-based instruction of apology and request speech acts as a treatment.

3.2. Instrumentation

The instruments employed to accomplish the purpose of this study were as follows:

3.2.1. The questionnaire

The questionnaire for the pre-test and post-test composed of a set of apology and request situations based on the multiple-choice discourse completion test from Salehi and Isavi (2013) was given to learners in which there were 5 main categories.

3.2.2. Nelson Test

A version of Nelson standardized general proficiency test was administered to examine participants' general proficiency. No attempts were made to validate it as the test is an internationally recognized one.

3.2.3. Task-based Activities and Materials

A series of task-based activities and materials based on Ellis (2003) was employed. According to Ellis (2003) tasks involve a plan for learner activity; they have a primary focus on making meaning; they engage with real-world authentic language use; they focus on any or all of the four language skills; they engage learners in cognitive skills in order to accomplish them; and they have a defined communication-based learning outcome.

The tasks included here were apology and request situations - like forgetting a meeting with your boss and asking your boss for some days off- taught in the forms of diverse mentioned task-based activities.

3.2.4. Metacognitive-based Activities and Materials

A series of metacognitive-based materials and activities based on Harwood (2010) were employed by which various request and apology situations were presented to the participants.

3.3. Procedure

In the first step of data collection, 60 EFL learners at the language school of Respina-Talk Novin were asked to sit for the test of Nelson Standardized General Proficiency Test.

After having the results analyzed, in the next step, a questionnaire composed of a set of apology and request situations based on the multiple-choice discourse completion test from Salehi and Isavi (2013) was given to learners to examine their competence homogeneity.

In the third step, the researchers embarked on the treatment. As it was mentioned before, one General English class at a language school enjoyed the task-based instruction of pragmatics and the other class was taught metacognitive-based i.e. One group was exposed to different task-based activities such as listing, brainstorming, ordering and sorting, matching, comparing the similarities and differences, problem-solving, sharing personal experiences, storytelling, and the like to learn about apology and request speech acts. Simultaneously, a series of metacognitive-based activities for planning, checking, monitoring, selecting, revising, evaluating, etc. were presented to engage students of another group in strategies in order to complete an assignment or solve a problem. The instruction for both groups took eight sessions of about 15 minutes. Videos selected from famous talk shows in America were employed for the instruction. Those parts including two speech acts of request and apology were cut and played in both classes and the researchers noticed any speech acts used in the dialogues to students. Furthermore, in the first two sessions of instruction, a power point and various videos containing metapragmatics of request and apology were shown and explicated.

After the implementation of the above- mentioned activities, the post-test was administered.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Testing Assumptions

Four assumptions of interval data, independence of subjects, normality and homogeneity of variances should be met before one decides to run parametric tests (Field, 2009). Nelson Test was run to ensure the homogeneity of participants, regarding their pragmatic knowledge, prior to the study.

4.1.1. Nelson Test Results

According to the Nelson Test results shown below there is a slight difference between standard deviation of metacognitive-based group and task-based group, therefore, the two groups are homogeneous in terms of pragmatic competence prior to the study.

Table 4. Descriptive Statistics for Proficiency Test (N=30)

	Group 1	Group 2
Maxi	46-48	46-48
Mini	26-29	26-29
Standard Deviation	5.78	6.42
Note: Group1, Metacognitive-based, Group2, Task-based.		

The first assumption is met because the present data are measured on an interval scale. Bachman (2005, P. 236) believes that the assumption of independence of subjects is met when “the performance of any given individual is independent of the performance of other individuals”. The administration of peer assessment, cooperative learning, pair-work and groups-work violates this assumption. Since none of these methods were administered in this study, the second assumption was also met.

The third assumption concerns the normality of the data which is tested through the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors. As displayed in Table 4.1 the ratios of skewness and kurtosis over their respective standard errors are within the ranges of +/- 1.96 (Field, 2009).

Table 4.1. Normality Tests

Group		N	Skewness			Kurtosis		
			Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Ratio	Statistic	Std. Error
Metacognitive-Based	Pretest	30	.025	.427	0.06	-1.328	.833	-1.59
	Posttest	30	.547	.427	1.28	-.220	.833	-0.26
Task-Based	Pretest	30	-.151	.427	-0.35	-.918	.833	-1.10
	Posttest	30	-.127	.427	-0.30	-.789	.833	-0.95

The last assumption – homogeneity of variances – will be discussed when reporting the results of the independent t-tests.

4.2. Pretest of Pragmatic Competence

An independent t-test was run to compare the metacognitive-based and task-based groups’ mean scores on pretest of pragmatic competence in order to prove that the two groups enjoyed the same level of pragmatic competence prior to the main study. As displayed in Table 4.2 the mean scores for metacognitive-based and task-based groups on pretest of pragmatic competence were 18.07 and 17.73 respectively.

Table 4.2. Descriptive Statistics; Pretest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pretest	Metacognitive-Based	30	18.07	1.437	.262
	Task-Based	30	17.73	1.574	.287

The results of the independent t-test ($t(58) = .85, P > .05, R = .11$ it represented a weak effect size) indicate that there was not any significant difference between metacognitive-based and task-based groups' mean scores on the pretest of pragmatic competence. Thus it can be concluded that the two groups enjoyed the same level of pragmatic competence prior to the main study.

Table 4.3. Independent Samples Test; Pretest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	.187	.667	.857	58	.395	.333	.389	-.446	1.112
Equal variances not assumed			.857	57.523	.395	.333	.389	-.446	1.112

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene's $F = .187, P > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 4.3, i.e. "Equal variances assumed" was reported.

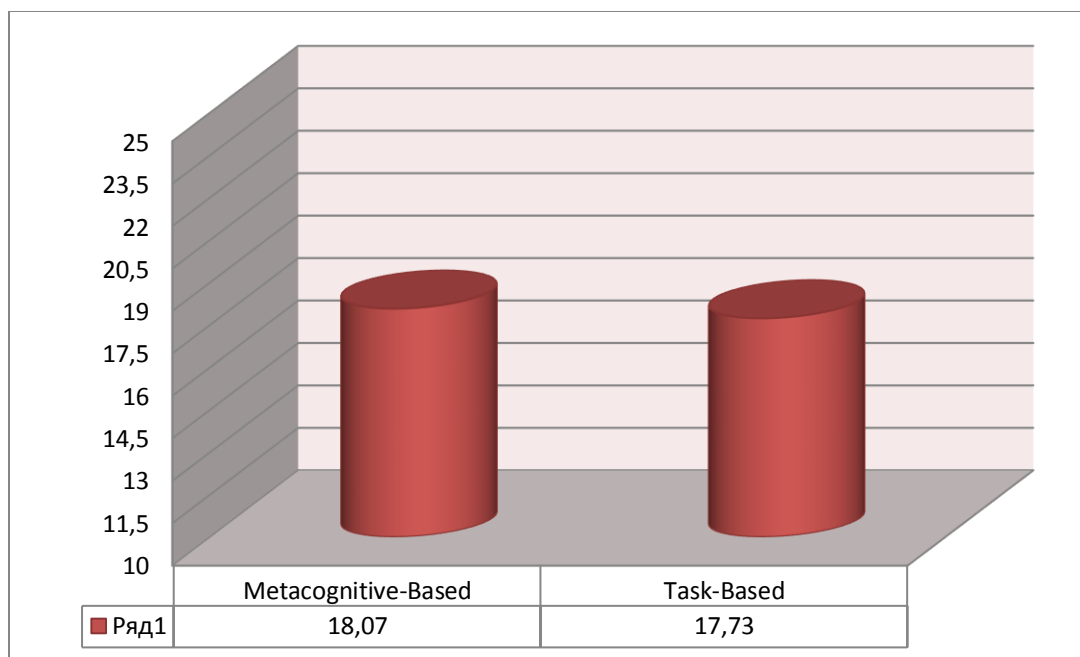


Figure 1. Pretest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

4.3. Research Question 1

What is the effect of task-based teaching on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners? A paired-samples t-test was run to compare the task-based group’s mean scores on pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence in order to probe the first research question. As displayed in Table 4.4 the mean scores for and task-based groups on pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence were 19 and 17.73 respectively.

Table 4.4. Descriptive Statistics; Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Task-Based Group)

Group		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Task-Based	Posttest	19.00	30	1.203	.220
	Pretest	17.73	30	1.574	.287

The results of the paired-samples t-test ($t(29) = 9.37, P < .05, R = .86$ it represented a large effect size) indicate that there was a significant difference between task-based group’s mean scores on the pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence. Thus it can be concluded that the first null-hypothesis **was rejected**. The task-based subjects showed a significantly higher mean on the posttest of pragmatic competence ($M = 19$) than pretest ($M = 17.73$).

Table 4.5. Paired-Samples Test; Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Task-Based Group)

Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower	Upper			
1.267	.740	.135	.990	1.543	9.379	29	.000

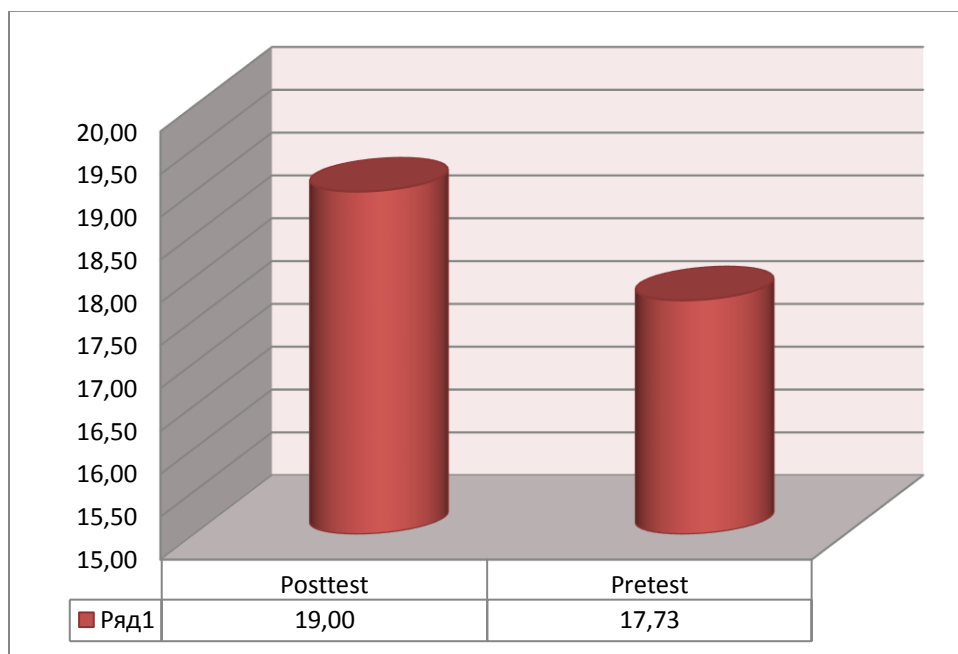


Figure 2. Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Task-Based Group)

4.4. Research Question 2

What is the effect of metacognitive-based teaching on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners? A paired-samples t-test was run to compare the metacognitive-based group’s mean scores on pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence in order to probe the second research question. As displayed in Table 4.6 the

mean scores for and metacognitive-based groups on pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence were 23.33 and 18.07 respectively.

Table 4.6. Descriptive Statistics; Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Metacognitive-Based Group)

Group		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Metacognitive-Based	Posttest	23.33	30	.884	.161
	Pretest	18.07	30	1.437	.262

The results of the paired-samples t-test ($t(29) = 25.24, P < .05, R = .97$ it represented a large effect size) indicate that there was a significant difference between metacognitive-based group's mean scores on the pretest and posttest of pragmatic competence. Thus it can be concluded that the second null-hypothesis **was rejected**. The metacognitive-based subjects showed a significantly higher mean on the posttest of pragmatic competence ($M = 23.33$) than pretest ($M = 18.07$).

Table 4.7. Paired-Samples Test; Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Metacognitive-Based Group)

Paired Differences				t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference				
			Lower				Upper
5.267	1.143	.209	4.840	5.693	25.245	29	.000

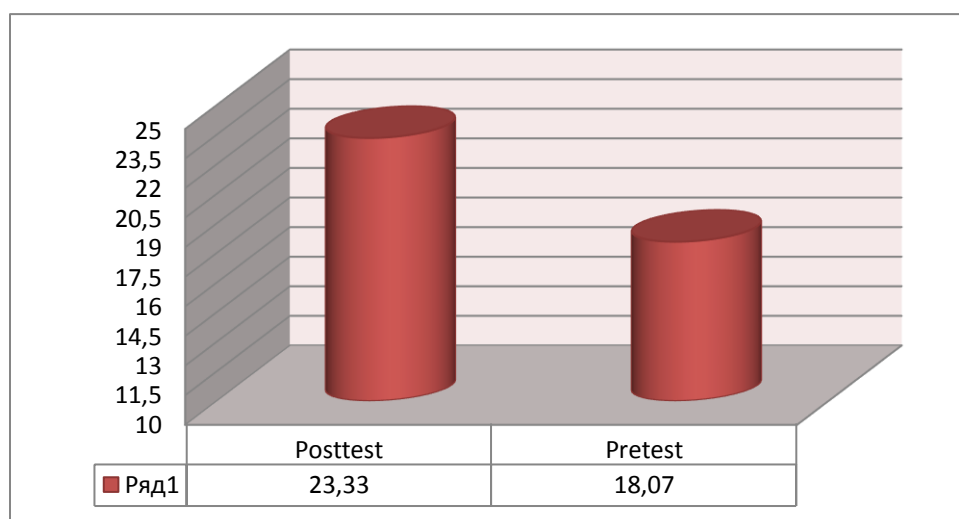


Figure 3. Pretest and Posttest of Pragmatic Competence (Metacognitive-Based Group)

4.5. Research Question 3

Which method - task-based teaching or metacognitive-based teaching - has more effect on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners?

An independent t-test is run to compare the metacognitive-based and task-based groups' mean scores on posttest of pragmatic competence in order to probe the third research question. As displayed in Table 4.7, the mean scores for metacognitive-based and task-based groups on posttest of pragmatic competence are 23.33 and 19 respectively.

Table 4.7. Descriptive Statistics; Posttest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

	Group	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Posttest	Metacognitive-Based	30	23.33	.884	.161
	Task-Based	30	19.00	1.203	.220

The results of the independent t-test ($t(58) = 15.89, P < .05, R = .90$ it represented a large effect size) indicate that there was a significant difference between metacognitive-based and task-based groups' mean scores on the posttest of pragmatic competence. Thus it can be concluded that the third null-hypothesis **was rejected**.

Table 4.9. Independent Samples Test; Posttest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
	F	Sig.	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper
Equal variances assumed	1.839	.180	15.894	58	.000	4.333	.273	3.788	4.879
Equal variances not assumed			15.894	53.241	.000	4.333	.273	3.787	4.880

It should be noted that the assumption of homogeneity of variances was met (Levene’s $F = 1.83$, $P > .05$). That is why the first row of Table 4.9, i.e. “Equal variances assumed” was reported.

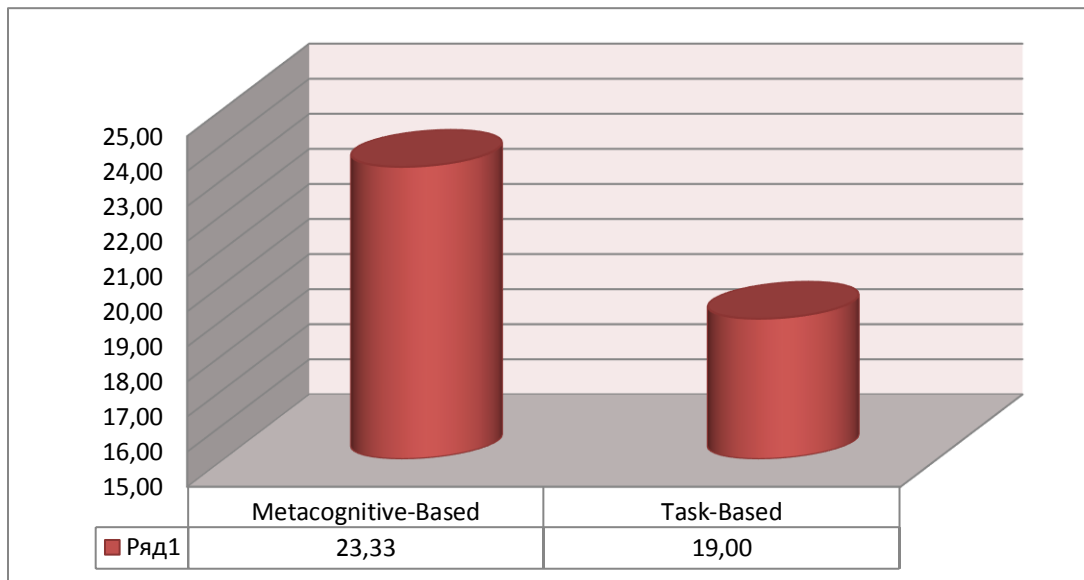


Figure 4. Posttest of Pragmatic Competence by Groups

5. Discussion

It can be said that the tasks paved the way for the processing of pragmatic input. This finding is in line with Ellis’s (2003) view in that making the target point frequent and salient gives rise to input enhancement in task design. The result was that appropriate pragmatic output could be ensured. It can be claimed that the present study falls under the category of studies supporting the intervention in terms of input enhancement (see Rose and Ng, 2001). The results are also in concordance with Salehi (2011) and Kia and Salehi (2013) in that instruction is generally useful regardless of teaching orientation.

Shoushinasab (2013) investigated the relationship between task -based instruction and the development of pragmatic competence. She furthermore investigated whether the effect of task-based instruction on different aspects of pragmatic competence namely, implicatures, situational routines, and speech acts is similar or not. She came to the conclusion that task-based instruction has positive effects on EFL learners. These are in accordance with the findings of this study.

With respect to the second research question, the findings of this study are in concordance with the studies of Tare, Gelman (2010) in that even metacognitive awareness seems to be connected to pragmatic knowledge. Another justification for this result could be Xiao (2007) who advocates applying metacognition in EFL writing instruction in China.

Furthermore, with regard to the third research question, the findings lend support to Takallou (2011), who investigated the effect of metacognitive strategy instruction on EFL learners' reading comprehension performance and metacognitive awareness. In this study it was found that the experimental groups did better than the control group.

Finally, Coşkun (2010) investigated the effect of metacognitive strategy training on the listening performance of beginner students and came to the conclusion that the group that was instructed on metacognitive training did better in a test of listening comprehension. These findings of the current study are aligned with the findings of Coşkun's study regarding the fact that metacognitive-based instruction has priority over task-based instruction.

6. Conclusions

The present research lends itself to the following conclusions:

1. Metacognitive-based teaching has an effect on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners.
2. Task-based teaching has an effect on pragmatic competence of Iranian EFL learners.
3. Metacognitive-based teaching is superior to task-based teaching with regard to speech acts of apology and request.
4. All in all, it can be concluded both types of instructions are effective in terms of improving the pragmatic knowledge of Iranian learners; therefore, they are necessary to be included in language learning curriculum.

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