

The Effects of Meaning-Focused Oral Tasks on Adult EFL Learners' Motivation and their Perceptions of the Usefulness of the Tasks for Learning English

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Abstract

Several students join the Department of English Language and Literature at Bahir Dar University every year without their will; therefore, they might have low motivation to learn English. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effects of meaning-focused oral tasks on adult learners' motivation to learn English as a foreign language and their perceptions of the usefulness of the tasks for learning English. The participants were in-service trainees working for a bachelor's degree in the summer program. The study employed a quasi-experimental design in which an experimental group underwent an experimental treatment which was a teaching material containing meaning-focused oral tasks, while a control group continued learning through an existing material which partly focused on English pronunciation. Questionnaires were employed to measure the participants' motivation to learn English, and an evaluation sheet was used to gauge the participants' perceptions of the usefulness of meaning-focused oral tasks for learning English. Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data, and the findings indicated that meaning-focused oral tasks had a statistically significant effect on the overall motivation of the participants in the experimental group, though that was not the case with the control group which was taught with an existing material. Moreover, the results showed that the participants in the experimental group perceived meaning-

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focused oral tasks as useful for improving, among other things, their abilities to communicate in English. Finally, it is recommended that meaning-oriented oral tasks be used with adult Ethiopian EFL learners because the tasks have the potential to increase their motivation to learn English.

Key words: Motivation, perception, meaning-focused tasks, collaboration, adult EFL learners

1. Background to the study

Motivating EFL learners to learn English could be one of the major responsibilities of EFL teachers (Noels, Clément, & Pelletier, 1999). However, most of the studies on L2 motivation focused either on identifying types of motives for learning English or measuring motivational intensity of a particular group of learners instead of investigating strategies that could enhance their motivation (Dörnyei, 1998). However, there has been a shift of focus over the last couple of decades and currently L2 motivation research seems to give priority for identifying factors that motivate L2 learners to learn a second or foreign language (Cheng & Dörnyei, 2007; Dörnyei, 1997, 1998; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010). With this regard, Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) point out that strategies used for motivating language learners should even be seen as an important aspect of the theoretical analysis of L2 motivation.

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MacIntyre, Dörnyei, Clément, and Noels (1998) argue that the major goal of any modern L2 pedagogy should be to help learners develop the willingness to communicate in the target language in the classroom as well as out of the classroom, which is very difficult for most English as a foreign language (EFL) learners (Liu & Jackson, 2008). According to Yashima (2002), students' willingness to communicate in a foreign language is influenced by their motivation to learn the language and their confidence in using the language for communication. Similarly, Cheng and Dörnyei (2007) and Wu and Wu (2008) argue that collaborative or communicative tasks which encourage EFL learners to focus on expressing their own meanings using whatever knowledge of English language they have could be used to improve their motivation and self-confidence. Moreover, Richards and Rodgers

(2001) point out that communicative tasks could increase the motivation of EFL learners because communicative tasks require learners to use authentic language in addition to involving partnership and collaboration. According to Nunan (1989, p.10), the communicative task is “a piece of classroom work that involves learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while their attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form”.

Recent developments in SLA research also seem to indicate that learners’ perceptions about the learning environment might be more vital to effective L2 acquisition than previously thought (Brown, 2009). For example, Williams and Burden (1997) contend that the way EFL learners perceive an instructional approach such as task-based learning might affect how much students learn a foreign language. Nunan (2004) also points out that learners’ perceptions about what constitutes legitimate classroom activity will have an influence on learning outcomes. A study by Liskin-Gasparro (1998) showed that learners perceived that developing oral fluency was something beyond their control, and that this perception of the participants was caused by the complex and intense learning environment in which they were involved. Similarly, Wu and Wu (2008) found that the students participating in their study generally had low motivation, and that the students perceived that the existing learning environment at their university was not conducive to learning English particularly because of low level of social interaction, lack of adequate resources and ineffective instruction. This does not mean, however, that everything that occurs in the learning environment would have the same kind of effect on learners’ motivation or perception. Some studies also revealed that different motivational strategies may have different effects on EFL learners with different proficiency levels (McEown & Takeuchi, 2014; Sugita & Takeuchi, 2010).

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2. Statement of the problem

The motivation of students or in-service trainees joining the Department of English Language and Literature at Bahir Dar University (BDU) may not be high because it is commonplace for many college or university students in Ethiopia to join departments without their will (Tiruwork, 2014). The problem is more serious with regular students who are forced to join the department every year even

though the department is not their first choice. Sometimes this problem occurs with in-service trainees in the summer program. For instance, in the 2012-2013 academic year, the majority of the in-service trainees accepted by the department were not teachers but school principals and educational supervisors. Although the trainees were originally trained as teachers, prior to the 2012-13 academic year, about 70% of them had stopped teaching for at least a couple of years and had been working as school principals or supervisors. The same percentage of the 2012-2013 batch of summer in-service trainees joined the Department of English Language and Literature at BDU not because they wanted to but because they could not join the Department of Educational Planning and Management, which was their first choice.

Most students have poor English language skills (Amanuel, 2015; Chot, 2015; Shumgaze, 2009) and resent the fact that they have joined their departments forcefully (Tiruwork, 2014). Teaching this kind of group of learners might require being innovative to motivate them and creating conditions for encouraging them to use English in the classroom (Vilches, 2003). These innovative ways may involve the use of current technology (Aydin, 2013) or the use of a teaching technique or methodology like task-based language teaching that may affect learners' motivation to learn English (Dörnyei, 2001) and promote effective learning (Kohn, 2000).

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Using existing teaching materials for courses like “Spoken English I and II” repeatedly for many years with regular students and in-service trainees at BDU, the researcher noticed that classes were usually boring and students had very limited opportunity to practice speaking in English. A large body of local research done on the teaching of speaking in English at different levels of education in Ethiopia also echoed a similar problem (Amanuel, 2015; Chot, 2015; Firehun, 2015). If strictly followed, the contents of the materials for the courses “Spoken English I and II” do not allow students to express their ideas and feelings using whatever knowledge of English they have. Instead, students spend most of the class time studying English pronunciation which is elusive for most adult EFL learners in general (Kirkpatrick, 2006).

Throughout the courses, students are made to practice articulating English sounds and words correctly. They also practice marking intonation patterns of sentences having various structures. The considerable attention given to native-like English pronunciation in the existing teaching material may not be a wise thing to do because stress and intonation in particular remain elusive for most Ethiopian adult learners (Anegagregn, 2012). It is not unusual to find Ethiopians who have done their M.A. degrees and PhDs in TEFL but who still speak English with strong local accent that lacks the melody and rhythm of English. Moreover, the existing teaching materials consist of several sample dialogues that contain various expressions to perform different communicative functions. Therefore, students are encouraged to study a list of expressions used to perform communicative functions such as introducing other people and asking for directions before they practice using the expressions in role plays – the only type of activity in the teaching materials for the courses “Spoken English I and II”. Although memorizing formulaic expressions can be helpful in communicating fluently in social communicative situations, which are unfortunately rare in a foreign language-learning context, studying and practicing formulaic speech has a very limited role in being able to speak creatively which is more important in acquiring the underlying grammatical rules of English (Ellis, 1985). What is more important for students is to be given the opportunity to use English freely in the classroom with the purpose of achieving a specific goal provided by a task (Willis, 1996). What would still be more interesting is to investigate the effects of meaning-focused tasks on the emotions and oral productions of EFL learners of different demographic backgrounds.

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3. Research questions

This study set out to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of adult EFL learners about the usefulness of meaning-focused oral tasks for learning English?
2. How motivated are adult EFL learners to learn English?
3. What is the effect of meaning-focused oral tasks on overall motivation of adult EFL learners to learn English?

4. Review of related literature

In view of the difficulty of learning a foreign language, one key ingredient required to help EFL learners learn a foreign language successfully is to sustain their motivation (Noels et al., 1999). Motivation, therefore, has become the focus of mainstream second language acquisition (SLA) research in recognition of its influence on facilitating or hindering second or foreign language learning (Inozu, Tuyan, & Surmeli, 2007). Especially in the context of foreign language learning, what happens in the classroom has a huge impact on the motivation of learners (McEown & Takeuchi, 2014). Therefore, in recent years, the focus in L2 motivation research is not only on finding out how aroused L2 learners are to learn a foreign language but also on identifying the factors that motivate them (Dörnyei, 1997, 1998). Williams and Burden (1997, p.120) define motivation as “... a state of cognitive and emotional arousal, which leads to a conscious decision to act, and which gives rise to a period of sustained intellectual and/or physical effort in order to attain a previously set goal (or goals)”.

Several theories of motivation have been developed in mainstream psychology which were incorporated into L2 motivation research to explain how second language acquisition can be facilitated or constrained by it. These theories or models range from the commonly used Gardner’s (1985) socioeducational model to Deci and Ryan’s (1985) self-determination theory and to Bandura’s (1993) self-efficacy theory. The theoretical model proposed by Williams and Burden (1997, p.122) is adopted for this study to explain what motivates learners and help them achieve their goals. The model is shown diagrammatically in Figure 1. According to Williams and Burden, the model emphasizes that first there are reasons for carrying out a particular activity. The reasons will probably involve a combination of internal and external factors which will be personal to different individuals who will make their own sense of the various events surrounding them. Then, an individual has to decide to embark on a particular task and to invest time and energy in it. Williams and Burden stress that an individual may have strong reasons for doing something, but not actually decide to do it. Next, people need to sustain the effort required to complete the activity to their own satisfaction. This will,

of course, take place within a social context and culture which will influence choices made at each stage.

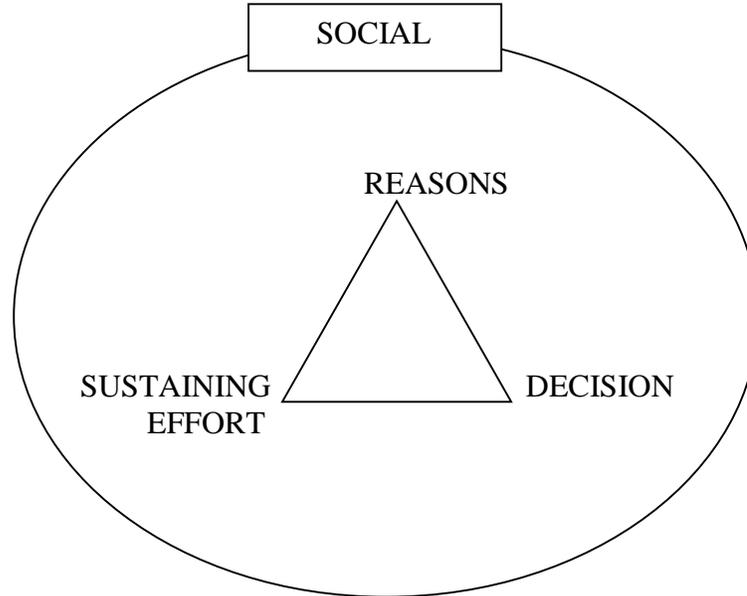


Figure 1: An interactive model of motivation proposed by Williams and Burden (1997)

Williams and Burden note that motivation is more than simply arousing interest. It also involves sustaining that interest and investing time and energy into exerting the necessary effort to achieve certain goals. The writers explain that the first two stages of the model may be seen as more concerned with initiating motivation while the last stage involves sustaining motivation.

If motivation is taken as a combination of efforts and desires to achieve a goal as defined by Williams and Burden (1997), then motivation is enhanced to varying degrees by certain goals or orientations toward learning the L2 (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). Initially, two classes of goals were proposed: (a) the integrative orientation, or a desire to learn the L2 in order to interact and identify with members from the L2 community; and (b) the instrumental orientation, which refers to a desire to learn the L2 to achieve some practical goal (Gardner, 1985; Gardner & Lambert, 1972). According to Masgoret and Gardner (2003), individuals who are willing to identify with the other language group will be more motivated to learn the language than individuals who do not. MacIntyre (2007) echoes

Masgoret and Gardner's (2003) idea and states that the major motivation to learn another language comes from the desire to develop a communicative relationship with people from another cultural group. It is also possible for individuals who have practical reasons for learning a foreign language to be more motivated to learn the language than individuals who are not (Masgoret & Gardner, 2003). In fact, other researchers also examined the existence of other types of orientations and discovered that L2 learners might have *travel, knowledge, prestige, and friendship* orientations (Clement & Kruidenier, 1983).

In discussing ways to motivate L2 learners to learn English, scholars seem to suggest similar strategies. For example, Dörnyei (1997) claims that any instructional approach that is characterized by student collaboration can positively affect L2 motivation and learners' self-confidence in their abilities to use the target language. Clement (1980) also claims that if the amount of contact EFL learners have with the target language increases then their self-confidence in using the language would increase. In other words, EFL learners need frequent occasions for producing language, or comprehensible output (Swain, 1985) as such opportunities might enable them to receive feedback from their interlocutors about the comprehensibility of their output, refine their linguistic knowledge and eventually increase their confidence in their English language ability (Gan, 2013). Conversely, feeling self-confident in one's ability might increase the willingness to communicate in the target language (MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011).

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Dörnyei (1998) argues that although a large body of research on L2 motivation exists, the research investigating what motivational strategies teachers could use to enhance their learners' motivation is meager. However, recently attempts have been made to investigate the effects of diverse motivational strategies on the learning of foreign languages (Jones, Llacer-Arrastia, & Newbill, 2009). For example, in a small-scale study, Waninge, Dörnyei, and de Bot (2014) found that communicative activities such as role-plays, which can be considered as contextual factors in the classroom, could have an effect on the motivation of foreign language learners in the short- or long-run. McEown and Takeuchi (2014) also found that learners with high levels of English proficiency might be motivated by motivational strategies like the provision of individual support, keeping pace with students and

getting them involved in activities. Wu and Wu (2008) recommended that reducing class size and having extracurricular activities should help create a better learning environment which can enhance the students' motivation and achievement. The findings of Cheng and Dörnyei's (2007) study also indicated that teachers employed various motivational strategies among which setting a personal example, recognizing learners' efforts and promoting learners' self-confidence were the most prominent ones. Moreover, Jones et al. (2009) found that tasks which fulfilled learner's psychological needs for autonomy, competence and relatedness were able to increase the learners' intrinsic motivation.

It is generally accepted that how motivated EFL learners are and how much they learn are also affected by the way they perceive the environment in which they learn (Williams & Burden, 1997). Castro, Sercu, and García (2004) highlight the fact that the construct perception may not be always straightforward and it is usually conceived to be similar to other constructs such as beliefs and values. According to Richardson (1996, p. 103), perceptions are "psychologically held understandings, premises, or propositions about the world that are felt to be true". Recent developments in SLA research also seem to indicate that learners' beliefs and perceptions are vital to effective L2 acquisition than previously thought (Brown, 2009).

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The research literature on the perceptions of EFL learners abounds with investigations into how teachers and learners perceive teaching and learning practices in the classroom (Al-Hajri & Al-Mahrooqi, 2013; Solomon, 2010). Brown (2009), for instance, conducted a study to investigate whether students and teachers differ in terms of their perceptions of effective foreign language teaching. Brown's (2009) study revealed that the teachers' perceptions of what should be happening in the classroom reflected the ultimate communicative classroom, where students communicate about meaningful topics, complete real-world tasks, use computer-based technologies, engage with the language outside of class, gain exposure to the culture in class, and work in groups or pairs. Unfortunately, in many cases, the participating teachers' perceptions of this ideal communicative classroom did not parallel their students' perceptions. Moreover, Gan (2013) studied the perceived speaking difficulties of two groups of Chinese students studying in two teacher training universities.

The results of the study showed that the participants perceived that one of the causes of the difficulty in speaking in English was lack of confidence in their own oral skills. Yashima (2002), however, argues that increasing learners' motivation to learn English can have a direct effect on learners' language proficiency which in turn has a direct impact on learners' self-confidence to use the target language. Neff and Rucynskis's (2013) study also indicated that students perceived that doing tasks helped them improve their abilities to communicate in English.

5. Research design and methodology

5.1 Research design

Mixed-methods research design was employed for the study. Since it was not possible to assign the participants of the study randomly into groups for the experiment, the quasi-experimental design with pretest-posttest non-equivalent groups was used to see the effect of the independent variable, which was a new teaching material, on L2 motivation, which was the dependent variable. There were experimental and control groups, and both groups took pretests and posttests. The experimental group went through an intervention for a course entitled "Spoken English I" while the control group continued learning the same course using an existing teaching material. Moreover, a survey was used to investigate the perceptions of the participants about the learning tasks in the new teaching material.

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5.2 Participants

The vast majority of the participants in this study were school principals and supervisors who were receiving in-service training in the summer of the 2013/14 academic year in the Department of English Language and Literature at the Faculty of Humanities, Bahir Dar University. These trainees were working towards a bachelor's degree in English, and the training program would take six summers. The participants were in their second summer of the in-service training when they participated in this experiment. Although all of the participants were trained to be teachers from grades 5-8, during the experiment for this study 68% of the participants in each group were working as either primary school principals or educational supervisors. About 40% of the participants in the control group self-reported that they were trained to teach a cluster of subjects (namely, civic

education, a local language and English) in teacher training colleges, while a higher percentage of participants in the experimental group, i.e. 71%, were trained to teach the same cluster of subjects. Moreover, about 38% of the participants in the control group self-reported that they were trained to teach only English from grades 5-8 while it was only 20% of the participants in the experimental group that were trained to teach only English in the same grades. The remaining percentage of participants in both groups responded that they were trained to teach subjects ranging from mathematics to Amharic, a local language. The average work experience in years for the participants in the experimental group was 7.4, and for the control group it was 8.8.

5.3 Sampling strategy

The current researcher was assigned to teach the course “Spoken English I” to two groups of the trainees in the summer of the 2013/14 academic year. Lots were drawn and one of the groups was designated as the experimental group and the other as the control group. There were 35 and 32 students in the experimental and control groups respectively. However, there are variations in the number of participants who completed the questionnaires and the task evaluation sheets during the pretest and posttest because there were students who started classes late or who were absent when data were collected.

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5.4 Data collecting instruments

A questionnaire and a task evaluation sheet were employed to collect data for the study. The questionnaire was a motivational questionnaire intended to measure the overall motivation of the participants for learning English. The motivational questionnaire was adapted from Murad (2009) and had three components. The first component (Qs.1-14) measured the participants’ integrative orientation with items like “Studying English can be important for me because I would like to meet foreigners with whom I can speak English” and the second component (Qs.15-30) gauged the participants’ instrumental orientation with items such as “Studying English can be important for me because other people will respect me more if I have knowledge of a foreign language”. The third and last component (Qs.31-36) measured the participants’ travel orientation with items like “Studying

English is important to me because it will help me when traveling”. The aggregate mean score of the three components measured the participants’ overall motivation.

The task evaluation sheet was used to collect data on the perception of the participants about how useful they thought meaning-focused oral tasks were for learning English. This instrument had two parts. The first part consisted of one item in the form of Likert scale that was used to measure the extent to which the participants perceived how useful the randomly selected meaning-oriented oral tasks were. The second part of the evaluation sheet, however, required the participants to explain any reason(s) as to why a specific meaning-focused oral task was useful, if they thought it was useful at all.

5.5 The intervention

The experimental treatment of the study was teaching material that was adopted from *Keep Talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching* by Klippel (1984) and *New Headway Plus: Intermediate Student’s Book* by Soars and Soars (2006) for the course “Spoken English I”, which is offered to English major students at BDU. These sources were used because they contain learning tasks or activities which would involve students actively in using their own language and ideas. The material is divided into six units that consist of various tasks. Each unit begins with a speaking activity which is based on a reading article. The article in each unit was given to the participants as a reading assignment that was used as a basis for small group discussions for next class. When the students met for their next classroom session after having read an article, they would be given questions, based on the article, which they discussed in small groups. The participants were not required or encouraged to write their answers; the activity would remain oral. This activity, in most cases, was also followed by another oral activity which related the content of the article to the students’ life experiences. The topics of the articles in their order of appearance in the material are “Wonders of the Modern World,” “How to Behave Abroad,” “The World’s Favorite Food,” “Dream Jobs,” “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?” and “A Father and Daughter”.

The second section of each unit comprised two to three meaning-oriented oral tasks. In Unit 1, three tasks which were intended to get the participants to know each other more were included. In Unit 2, three tasks which were based on interviewing were included. In Unit 3, two guessing games were presented. In Unit 4, three jigsaw tasks were included. In Unit 5, three tasks involving discussions and decisions were provided. Finally, in Unit 6, three problem-solving tasks were included.

The participants in the experimental group took the course “Spoken English I” using the newly prepared material which contained meaning-focused tasks while the participants in the control group took the same course using the existing material which focused on the study of English pronunciation and formulaic expressions for performing different communicative functions.

5.6 Procedure

First, the motivation questionnaire was slightly adapted from Murad (2009). Then the questionnaire was translated into Amharic, a local language, by the researcher and was given to two colleagues to check the appropriacy of the translations. Their comments and suggestions helped to improve and refine the questionnaire. The translation was needed to prevent any misunderstanding that could be caused because some of the participants may have had poor English language skills.

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To ensure the validity and reliability of the data gathering tools, pilot tests were conducted. The Cronbach Alpha coefficient for the motivation questionnaire was 0.83. Though the reliability of the motivational questionnaire was established in other studies (Liu, 2007; Murad, 2009), it was deemed necessary to check its reliability with adult Ethiopian EFL learners. Moreover, inter-rater reliability for categorizing the responses of the participants into themes of usefulness of the selected tasks for learning English was calculated, and it was found to be 0.89.

Having read a participant information sheet and signed a consent form, the participants in both groups filled out the motivation questionnaire as a pretest. Following that, each group began taking the course using different teaching materials. After securing permission from the department, the researcher taught both groups for 6 weeks for a total of 36 hours. At the end of each unit the

participants in the experimental group evaluated one meaning-oriented oral task selected randomly using the task evaluation sheet. The purpose of the evaluation was for the students to decide how useful each of the six selected tasks was and to explain why they were useful.

The meaning-oriented oral tasks performed by the experimental group had different inputs that initiated interaction among the students. For some tasks the input could be a picture, and in others it could be a reading text or a situation that was explained or presented to the students in writing. Each task had a procedure to be followed and was done in pairs or groups. Not a specific language point was the focus of each of the tasks and in doing the tasks the students focused on conveying messages to achieve the goals of the tasks. After completing a task, one member from each pair or group reported the outcome of the task. The reporting could be accompanied by further discussion if the outcome led to disagreements among the various groups.

In the control group, each unit began with a pronunciation section followed by a section for the study of expressions used for performing different communicative functions. In the first few units, the students practiced the correct pronunciation of words, followed by the identification of the number of 14 syllables in words. In later units, the students also practiced stressing the correct syllable in words of more than one syllable and using the right intonation pattern for different types of sentences. The students also had listening exercises in which they listened to native speakers on tape to identify word stress or to contour the intonation pattern of sentences. The pronunciation section in each unit was followed by a section for one or more communicative functions. First the students were provided with the expressions needed to perform a specific communicative function which they were expected to study by heart. This was usually followed by sample dialogues which the students had to study and practice orally in pairs or small groups. Finally, situations were provided in which the students were supposed to use the expressions they had already studied in pairs or small groups.

By the end of the summer program, both groups completed the motivational questionnaire again as a posttest. Finally, the data were organized and were ready for analysis.

5.7 Data analysis

Both quantitative and qualitative data analyses were used to answer the research questions of the study. In fact, most of the data in this study was quantitative which entailed statistical analysis. There was some qualitative data that was obtained from the open-ended part of the task evaluation sheet. Descriptive statistics such as mean, percentage and standard deviation were used to describe the data. Moreover, two types of inferential statistics, i.e. paired samples t-test and analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) were used to test if any changes in mean scores between pretests and posttests were statistically significant. *Effect size* was also calculated for statistically significant results to check how big the magnitude of the difference or change was. The alpha level was set at .05 for any statistically significant result.

The qualitative data that were obtained from the open-ended item of the task evaluation sheets were read repeatedly and were categorized into themes of perceptions that emerged from the data itself.

6. Results

6.1 Perceptions about meaning-focused oral tasks

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According to Table 1, a huge majority of the participants showed their strong agreement that the tasks were useful for learning English. All the tasks were taken from Klippel (1984) and the names of the tasks in Table 1 were given by Klippel himself. On a scale from 1-5, five referring to ‘Strongly Agree’, the least mean score that was observed was 4.55, which is itself very high. The two tasks that had a mean score of 4.55 each were *Lie detector* and *Strip story*. The main difference between this pair of tasks and the other four in Table 1 was that the other four had some form of linguistic input, but the two least scoring tasks had no linguistic input.

Table 1 also shows that the participants awarded the highest score (4.85) to the task known as “Unfinished sentences” found in the first unit of the material used as an intervention. This task was one of the first meaning-focused oral tasks the participants did and its purposes were to get the participants to know each other better, and to set a relaxed atmosphere for the rest of the duration of

the experiment. The task ‘Unfinished sentences’ involved a lot of physical movement, and in this single task the participants had the opportunity to interact with nineteen of their classmates.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics on perception of adult EFL learners about the usefulness of meaning-focused oral tasks to learn English

Task Name	Number of Participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Unfinished sentences	33	4.00	5.00	4.85	.36
Opinion poll	34	3.00	5.00	4.62	.55
Lie detector	31	4.00	5.00	4.55	.51
Strip story	31	2.00	5.00	4.55	.68
Values continuum	34	4.00	5.00	4.68	.47
Problem page	33	4.00	5.00	4.70	.47

The above results clearly indicate that the participants had a very strong perception of the usefulness of the six randomly selected tasks for learning English. When the participants in the experimental group were asked why they thought each selected task was useful for learning English, they responded that the tasks could help them develop their communicative competence as well as linguistic competence. They also thought that the tasks assisted them in developing their cognitive abilities, and in being aware of a new teaching method. After a careful examination of the participants’ responses, their responses were categorized and analyzed under five themes.

6.1.1 Improvements in oral communicative competence

The fourteen comments in Table 2 summarize all the comments given by the participants in their evaluation of the six tasks and the comments emerged from the coding of every response into types of comments, which was carried out by a colleague and the present researcher. It was observed that a comment made by a participant on the usefulness of a specific task was usually in line with the goal of the task.

The comments presented in Table 2 clearly indicate that the participants in the experimental group thought that the six meaning-focused oral tasks they evaluated were useful to develop their overall as well as more specific verbal skills. The participants in the experimental group generated 259 comments about the usefulness of the six randomly selected tasks in terms of developing their communicative competence. Most of the comments given by the participants about the development of their communicative competence were blanket statements like developing speaking skills in English or communicating messages in English. According to Table 2, the participants primarily believed that all six tasks helped them to develop their speaking skills because the majority of their comments, i.e. 38% (98), were related to the development of the speaking skill.

Table 2: Comments about the perceived usefulness of various meaning-focused oral tasks to improve abilities to communicate in English

Comments made by participants	Frequency of comments by task type						Total
	US*	OP	LD	SS	VC	PP	
To develop speaking skills	20	18	14	12	18	16	98(38%)
To improve interviewing skills	1	0	1	0	0	0	2(0.7%)
To communicate messages in English	10	19	11	7	17	10	74(29%)
To generate ideas	2	2	0	2	4	4	14(5.4%)
To get to know each other	4	1	2	1	0	0	8(3%)
To describe objects	0	0	0	9	0	0	9(3.4%)
To discuss in English	0	0	1	0	2	1	4(1.5%)
To solve a problem by discussing in English	0	0	0	0	0	12	12(4.6%)
To make decisions	0	0	0	1	1	0	2(0.7%)

To suggest solutions to problems	0	0	0	0	0	2	2(0.7%)
To develop skills in debating	0	0	0	1	4	0	5(1.9%)
To offer advice	0	0	0	0	0	10	10 (3.8%)
To explain problems in English	0	0	0	0	0	1	1(0.3%)
To ask and answer questions	1	7	9	0	1	0	18(6.9%)
Total	38(15%)	47(18%)	38(15%)	33(13%)	47(18%)	56 (22%)	259 (100%)

Note: *US= Unfinished Sentence; OP= Opinion Poll; LD= Lie Detector; SS= Strip Story; VC= Values Continuum; PP= Problem Page.

Moreover, 74 (29%) comments were made about the usefulness of the tasks for helping them to develop their abilities to communicate messages in English. On the other hand, some of the comments demonstrate that the participants thought that the tasks helped them to develop their abilities to achieve more specific communicative purposes such as to solve a problem by discussing in English, to offer advice, to get to know each other and so on. For example, the participants generated 18 (6.9%) comments with regard to the usefulness of the tasks in terms of helping them to develop their abilities to ask and answer questions. Ten (3.8%) of their comments also refer to their beliefs that the tasks assisted them in practicing advising people. It is also interesting to note that only the task *Problem page* attracted all the comments about getting practice in offering advice. This could be because of the purpose of the task which was to offer advice to people who had problems of personal relationships.

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With regard to tasks believed by the participants to be more useful for developing communicative competence, the task *Problem page* stands out as the most useful because it triggered 56 (22%) comments. On the other hand, *Strip story* looks to be the least favored by the participants in terms of its usefulness to develop communicative competence because it elicited 33 (13%) comments. Doing *Problem page* involves reading a relatively longer text that students have to understand before they

suggest solutions to problems of personal relationships people in the reading text have. However, the task *Strip story* contains only a set of eleven pictures which tell a story when they are put in the right order. Moreover, the participants perceived that some of the tasks were more useful to help them achieve most of the communicative purposes listed in Table 2. For example, *Problem page* was believed by the participants to be useful to help them achieve eight (57%) out of the 14 communicative purposes the participants themselves suggested and which are listed in Table 2. On the other hand, Table 2 shows that the participants seem to have downgraded the usefulness of the tasks for developing their ability to achieve communicative purposes like suggesting solutions to problems in English and interviewing in English because the tasks altogether triggered only two comments from the participants for each of the aforementioned communicative purposes or situations.

6.1.2 Gains in linguistic competence

As shown in Table 3, the participants perceived the tasks as useful for developing their knowledge of the linguistic system of the target language. The task *Unfinished sentences* generated 18 (62%) of the comments. Surprisingly, the participants thought that the task *Problem page* contributed the least in helping them develop their linguistic competence. Not a single comment was made by the participants about the usefulness of the task *Problem page* for improving their linguistic competence. However, the participants thought that the other randomly selected meaning-focused oral tasks helped them to practice making questions for which there were 6 (20.6%) comments, 4 (13.7%) comments were also made for using correct word order and discourse markers, and 3 (10.3%) comments for learning new vocabulary items and so on. Although no task had a planned lesson on pronunciation, the tasks *Opinion poll* and *Values continuum* initiated one comment each about their usefulness in improving pronunciation.

Table 3: Comments about the perceived usefulness of various meaning-focused oral tasks to improve linguistic competence

Comments made by participants	Frequency of comments by task type						Total
	US	OP	LD	SS	VC	PP	
Having practice using correct word order and discourse markers	2	0	0	2	0	0	4 (13.7%)
Understanding different sentence patterns	1	0	0	0	0	0	1(3.4%)
Learning new words	1	0	0	1	1	0	3(10.3%)
Practicing making sentences	2	0	0	0	0	0	2(6.8)
Improving pronunciation	0	1	0	0	1	0	2(6.8)
Practicing making questions	1	3	2	0	0	0	6(20.6%)
Practicing completing sentences	10	0	0	0	0	0	10(34.4%)
Improving grammar	1	0	0	0	0	0	1(3.4%)
Total	18(62%)	4(14%)	2(7%)	3(10%)	2(7%)	0(0%)	29(100%)

6.1.3 Changes in affective traits

It is interesting to note that, as indicated in Table 4, the participants in the experimental group perceived that the randomly selected meaning-focused oral tasks assisted them emotionally besides developing their linguistic and communicative competence. For example, 8 (12.6%) comments reveal that the participants thought that the tasks helped them to have more self-confidence in communicating in English. Moreover, the majority of the comments (65%) suggest that the participants believed that all six tasks assisted them to overcome primarily their shyness and stage fright and to express their ideas in a more relaxed manner (7.9%). Table 4 further shows that 70% (44) of the comments about the way the tasks affected the participants emotionally were generated in aggregate by the tasks *Opinion poll*, *Lie detector* and *Values continuum*. On the other hand, the task

Problem page seems to have the least impact on the participants' affective traits because it triggered only 4 (6.3%) comments.

Table 4: Comments about the perceived usefulness of various meaning-oriented oral tasks to improve affective traits

Comments made by participants	Frequency of comments by task type						Total
	US	OP	LD	SS	VC	PP	
Be more confident in using English	2	1	2	1	2	0	8(12.6%)
Overcome shyness and stage fright	6	13	7	2	10	3	41(65%)
Be more willing to speak in English	0	1	1	1	0	0	3(4.7%)
Have an interest in speaking	0	1	0	0	0	1	2(3.1%)
Have courage to speak in English	0	0	0	1	0	0	1(1.5%)
Express ideas in a relaxed manner	0	0	3	1	1	0	5(7.9%)
Realize that learning English is good	0	0	0	0	1	0	1(1.5%)
Have hope that they will speak in English in the future	0	0	1	1	0	0	2(3.1%)
Total	8(12.6%)	16(25.3%)	14(22.2%)	7(11.1%)	14(22.2%)	4(6.3%)	63(100%)

6.2 Overall motivation of adult EFL learners

According to Table 5, the average overall motivation for the participants in the experimental group during the pretest was 3.56, and for the control group it was 3.46. The results show that the participants in both groups seem to be generally motivated to learn English before the intervention because their mean scores are higher than the mid-point on the motivation scale.

The changes in overall motivation witnessed at the end of the experiment are also displayed in Table 5. As depicted in Table 5, the motivational mean score of the participants in the experimental group increased from a pretest mean score of 3.56 to a posttest mean score of 3.82. Likewise, the motivational mean score of the participants in the control group increased from a pretest mean score of 3.46 to a posttest mean score of 3.63. Moreover, Table 5 indicates that the participants in each group had more varied scores on the posttests than on the pretests because they had higher standard deviations in the posttests.

Table 5: Descriptive statistics on overall motivation of adult EFL learners to learn English before and after the intervention

Group	Test	Number of participants	Minimum	Maximum	Mean score	Std. deviation
Experimental	Posttest	32	2.81	4.53	3.82	.70
	Pretest	32	2.08	4.61	3.56	.54
Control	Posttest	25	2.42	4.50	3.63	.81
	Pretest	25	1.81	4.47	3.46	.58

6.3 Effects of meaning-focused oral tasks on motivation

To see if these gains in mean scores on overall motivation by the participants in each group were statistically significant, paired-samples t-tests were performed. The data in Table 6 show that the increase in overall motivation for the experimental group was statistically significant ($t = 2.19$, $df = 31$, $p < .05$) whereas the rise in the level of overall motivation for the control group was not

statistically significant ($t = 1.01$, $df = 24$, $p > .05$). The effect size for the experimental group (Eta squared= 0.14) is found to be very large.

Table 6: Separate effects of meaning-oriented oral tasks and an existing material on the overall motivation of adult EFL learners to learn English

Group	Mean Difference	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Experimental					
Posttest -					
Pretest	.26	.68	2.19	31	.04
Control					
Posttest -					
Pretest	.17	.80	1.01	24	.32

Furthermore, ANCOVA was computed to test if the difference in mean gain scores between the two groups was statistically significant. The results of analysis of covariance reveal that the difference was not statistically significant ($F= 2.13, df = 1, p > .05$).

7. Discussion

The findings indicated that the mean scores on motivation in both groups before and after the intervention were above the mid-point on the motivation scale indicating that the participants' overall motivation to learn English was relatively high. Moreover, the results indicated that the increase in the overall motivation of the participants in the experimental group during the posttest reached statistical significance, though that was not the case with the control group which was taught using an existing material which partly focused on English pronunciation. This finding seems to confirm the claim by McEown & Takeuchi (2014) who pointed out that especially in the context of foreign language learning, what happens in the classroom has a huge impact on the motivation of learners. The qualitative difference in the learning environment between the experimental and control groups in the present study was the higher amount of interaction and collaboration created in the

experimental group as a result of the use of the meaning-oriented oral tasks in the classroom. The statistically significant result observed in the experimental group in terms of enhanced motivation might be used as evidence to Dörnyei's (1997) claim that collaboration and interaction, which can be initiated by meaning-focused oral tasks, might be useful to improve motivation. This finding might also substantiate Richards and Rodgers's (2001) claim that communicative tasks increase the motivation of EFL learners because communicative tasks require learners to use authentic language and are varied in format and procedure. The results of the present study are also in line with Murad's (2009) findings in which he found that the motivation of the participants in his study improved after learning English through task-based language teaching.

The results of the present study also imply that the problem of ineffective instruction that can affect motivation could be overcome by the use of, for example, meaning-oriented oral tasks. In a study conducted to investigate the perceived reasons for low motivation of Taiwanese university students to learn English, Wu and Wu (2008) found that the learners believed that the learning environment was one of the reasons for their being not motivated to learn English. Lack of social interaction and ineffective instruction were some of the reasons mentioned by the participants in Wu and Wu's (2008) study.

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The participants in the experimental group were also asked to disclose what their perceptions of randomly selected meaning-oriented oral task were in terms of the usefulness of the tasks to learn English. The results indicated that the participants regarded the tasks as useful for learning English. This result appears consistent with the findings of Brown's (2009) study in which he reported that teachers highly valued communicative approaches. The strong perception of the participants in this study about the meaning-oriented oral tasks is also in line with Jones et al.'s (2009) findings in that the participants in their studies enjoyed the meaning-focused activities that they did.

When the participants in the experimental group were asked why they thought each randomly selected task was useful for learning English, they responded that the meaning-oriented oral tasks aided them to develop their oral communicative skills. This finding is very similar to what Neff and

Rucynski (2013) found in their study in which the participants commented that the tasks they performed helped them improve their abilities to communicate. Moreover, the participants perceived the tasks as useful for positively changing their emotions which is in line with Vilches's (2003) study in which he reported that the participants in his study perceived that their confidence in using English increased at the end of an English program which was based on task-based language learning.

8. Conclusions and recommendations

The results showed that the participants in both groups were generally motivated to learn English before and after the intervention because their mean scores were higher than the mid-point on the motivation scale. The results also indicated that the effect of meaning-oriented oral tasks on the motivation of adult EFL learners to learn English was strong. This reveals that meaning-focused oral tasks have great potential for creating the desire for learning English as a foreign language which is lacking in many students who major in English at BDU because every year new students are forced to join the Department of English and Literature without their will. Motivated by meaning-focused oral tasks, the students or in-service trainees will put more efforts into learning English, which will have an impact on their achievement for the lack of which they are usually blamed.

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The other purpose of this study was to investigate adult EFL learners' perceptions of the usefulness of meaning-focused oral tasks for learning English. The perceptions of the participants in the experimental group demonstrated that meaning-focused oral tasks were perceived as a means of developing various skills and knowledge. The participants perceived them not only as a means of developing their communicative competence in English, but also as a means of acquiring the linguistic system of the target language and developing some of their affective traits. The perceptions of the participants about meaning-focused oral tasks show that this type of tasks may fulfill the various needs of trainee English teachers. It is concluded that the frequent use of meaning-focused oral tasks by English language teachers will be effective in assisting adult EFL learners to learn English because the strong perceptions that adult EFL learners have about meaning-focused oral tasks means that they enjoy learning English through meaning-focused oral tasks.

Based on the findings of the study and the conclusions drawn above, it is recommended that meaning-oriented oral tasks be used with adult Ethiopian EFL learners because the tasks have the potential to increase their motivation to learn English. The other reason why meaning-oriented oral tasks are recommended for adult Ethiopian EFL learners is that they perceive the tasks as useful for developing not only their oral skills but also their linguistic knowledge and their self-confidence in using English. Finally, since task-based research is an area of research that is not well explored in the context of learning English in Ethiopia, it is suggested that local researchers use various tasks with Ethiopian students of different proficiency levels and investigate the impacts of the tasks on students' learning of specific grammatical forms or structural patterns. Moreover, a predominantly quantitative research such as this one may not reveal some of the true changes and developments the participants in the present study made in terms of improving their interlanguage. Therefore, future research which will focus on the impacts of meaning-focused tasks should also employ other research approaches like discourse analysis.

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