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Research Article

The impact of task-based and task-supported instruction on the acquisition of L2 hedge phrases

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Abstract: Despite a growing interest in task-based teaching in second language acquisition research and L2 instruction, classroom-based studies investigating its applicability to L2 pragmatics instruction remain scarce. The current study aimed to compare the effects of task-based versus task-supported language teaching on EFL learners' acquisition of L2 hedge phrases. 72 homogenous upper-intermediate EFL learners were randomly assigned to one control and two experimental groups. Experimental group 1 (TSLT-EG1; n = 25) followed a task-supported framework, whereas the second experimental group (TBLT-EG2; n = 23) followed the so-called "weak" task-based framework. The control group (CG; n = 24) took part in regular classes that were not intended to teach hedge phrases. The groups' pragmatic production was measured using a written test and a focused communication task. The results suggest that both experimental conditions yielded positive outcomes, as evidenced by the acquisition of hedge phrases, with the TBLT group showing more lasting effects than the task-supported group in the written test.

Keywords: second language acquisition, hedges, L2 pragmatics, TBLT, TSLT

1 Introduction

Second language acquisition (SLA) research places L2 pragmatics among other traditionally researched language subsystems (i.e., lexis, grammar, and phonology). A scientific inquiry into L2 pragmatics has grown considerably in the last four decades. L2 pragmatics has also become a focus of L2 pedagogy, with new instructional options slowly trickling down to language classrooms (Cutting & Fordyce, 2021; Félix-Brasdefer & Shively, 2022; Nguyen & Le, 2019; O'Keeffe et al., 2020; Ren, 2022; Roever, 2022; Taguchi, 2015; Taguchi & Roever, 2017) although L2 pragmatics instruction remains an underexplored research area and a rare topic in teacher training courses. An example of pragmatic forms are hedges, i.e., words or phrases used to show that a speaker is not entirely sure or sufficiently knowledgeable about what they are saying (Carter & McCarthy, 2006), e.g. "sort of" or "kind of". These forms are the target phrases in the study reported below, which compares the effectiveness of task-based (TBLT) and task-supported language teaching (TSLT) in their acquisition.

In the last two decades, instructed SLA has witnessed remarkable growth in research into TBLT (East, 2021; Ellis, 2003; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015; Nunan, 2004; Van den Branden, 2022), which is a language teaching approach based on a symbiotic combination of explicit and implicit learning through performing various tasks in the target language. TBLT is an

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educational framework that has so far been supported by most SLA theories (East, 2021; Ellis et al., 2020; Long, 2015) and research (see Bryfonski & McKay, 2019, for a meta-analysis). It is an approach to language teaching which uses a task as an organisational unit of a lesson, a teaching resource, a source of input, and/or a drive for output and interaction.

As for TSLT, another concept important to the present study, it can be described as any instructional approach that uses tasks to support L2 acquisition but does not follow the central tenets of the task-based approach. In other words, TSLT employs tasks to practice the use of specific target structures (Ellis, 2018). One of the most classic examples of TSLT may be a version of the presentation-practice-production (PPP) framework in which tasks are used in the production phase of the lesson (or a series of lessons). Tasks may also support other L2 teaching methodologies, such as the communicative approach or the natural method (see Róg, 2024a, b).

Tasks and L2 pragmatics are both concerned with the social use of language. The two areas deal with facilitating communication in situated interactions and stress the importance of learners' real-world communicative needs and communicative goals. It, therefore, seems viable to employ tasks in L2 pragmatics instruction. Despite the growing body of research on task-based and task-supported language teaching, studies investigating their effects on L2 pragmatics, particularly the acquisition of hedge phrases, remain limited. Given the crucial role of hedging in effective communication and the scarcity of instructional focus on pragmatic features, this study aims to compare the efficacy of TBLT and TSLT in fostering learners' ability to use hedge phrases. By examining both short-term gains and long-term retention, the study seeks to provide empirical insights into the impact of task-based and task-supported instruction on L2 pragmatics and inform pedagogical practices in EFL contexts.

2 Literature review

2.1 Task-based language teaching

The roots of TBLT can be traced back to the strong version of the communicative approach (Howatt, 1984). The methodology has received growing attention since the publication of guides on TBLT instruction in the classroom context by Ellis (2003), Nunan (2004) and Willis (1996). In a nutshell, TBLT uses tasks as a source of L2 knowledge, a teaching material, and a driving force of L2 acquisition. Following a cognitive-interactionist stance on SLA (Long, 2015; Long & Ahmadian, 2022), TBLT's central claim is that the best way to learn a language is through using it. Tasks may provide meaning-oriented comprehensible input, stimulate output and interaction, or increase the noticing of linguistic targets. They accommodate attention to fluency and accuracy as they allow for the negotiation of meaning and form. Literature of the field distinguishes between the "weak" and "strong" versions of TBLT. The weak version includes more explicit instruction to allow for noticing language patterns. This is usually achieved through an explicit focus on form in the post-task phase (Ellis, 2019). The "strong" version focuses on incidental and implicit learning through fluency work and accommodates a reactive focus on form (Long, 2015). In the present study, the weak version of TBLT has been chosen as the more teacher-friendly option.

Numerous definitions of tasks have been offered in L2 pedagogy (see East, 2021 or Ellis, 2003), which differ in detail. The general idea is that tasks replicate how language is used in real life. A learner should use their own linguistic resources to perform the task, there is some form of a communication gap (either information or opinion gap) to complete, and the goal of the task is not the use of language per se but something beyond the use of language (Ellis &

Shintani, 2014). By way of illustration, learners may be asked to listen to a voicemail and respond to it, decide on the placement of animals in the zoo based on the information provided by the teacher, create a social media post, book cinema tickets, choose clothes according to the weather forecast, fill out a job application and so forth.

TBLT differs from other approaches in two ways. First, the syllabus is analytic, i.e. it does not impose any specific linguistic targets to be taught in a course. Learners learn the language by performing the tasks rather than focusing on a given lexicogrammatical structure. Secondly, the course is based on a needs analysis that shows which tasks the learners should be able to perform in real life. Therefore, a TBLT syllabus does not consist of specific lists of grammatical structures or vocabulary but of a list of tasks. Since there is no specification of what language learners will learn, Ellis (2019, p. 6) observes that it may turn out that they will end up learning different structures as a result of performing the same task.

However, a point should be made that it is possible to design tasks in such a way that they will elicit specific linguistic structures. Such tasks, known as focused tasks, provide opportunities for learners to process specific structures either receptively or productively. For instance, the study reported below first uses input-based tasks to model hedge phrases, then consciousness-raising tasks to increase the opportunities for noticing these targets, and finally, focused tasks to elicit the use of hedges by the learners.

2.2 Task-supported language teaching

When tasks are used in synthetic syllabi (i.e., syllabi comprising a list of pre-selected grammar and vocabulary structures to be taught), we speak of task-supported language teaching (Ellis, 2003). One primary example is the PPP framework in which the teacher chooses a specific linguistic element, presents it to their learners, and gives examples of its use. The learners are then asked to practice using this structure in isolated sentences devoid of context. The final step in the process may be the use of tasks so that learners have opportunities for L2 output. This framework is popular in teacher training courses and underlies most commercial course books.

The primary difference between TBLT and TSLT lies not in how tasks are designed since they should always satisfy the earlier criteria but in understanding how languages are learned. TBLT rests on the premise that language learning is, by default, implicit but can be accelerated by explicit instruction. Since the developmental order studies (see Róg, 2020 for discussion) confirmed that learners follow their own internal order to acquire linguistic structures, which is largely impervious to instruction, TBLT moves away from prescribing language to be taught toward real-life use of language. TSLT, on the other hand, follows the skill acquisition theory (DeKeyser, 1998), which suggests that learners should be given declarative knowledge and ample opportunities to practice it so that it can become automatic. This is a belief shared by most practitioners, mainly since it seems commonsensical that “practice makes perfect”.

2.3 Acquisition of L2 hedghe phrases

The focus of instruction in the study reported below are hedge phrases which are expressions used to indicate that the speaker is not entirely sure whether what they are saying is sufficiently correct or complete, or they indicate the speaker’s decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition (Hyland, 1998, 2005). For instance, expressions such as “I’m not absolutely sure” or “As far as I know” count as hedges. Research thus far has shown that hedges are almost

non-existent in L2 textbooks (Hyland, 1998) and that L2 speakers rarely use them because they are unfamiliar with these forms (Wigglesworth & Yates, 2007).

Hedge phrases (or hedges) are found both in spoken and written discourse. As described by Zuck and Zuck (1986) using hedge phrases mitigates the force of an assertion. Although hedging is generally preferred in academic writing (Hyland, 1998, 2005), in everyday speech, it is often employed to signal uncertainty about the speaker's level of knowledge or understanding and when the speaker wishes to avoid coming straight to the point (Carter & McCarthy, 2006). In the case of scientific writing, hedging is used when the writer wishes to acknowledge the caution with which they approach data and research results (Crismore & Farnsworth,1990).

Despite increasing studies on hedge phrases in L2 writing, most focus on their use in academic contexts. For instance, it has been argued that L2 learners may need help in academic writing due to their lack of pragmatic competence in using hedge phrases (Alqurashi, 2019). Therefore, researchers have suggested that L2 learners should be aware of the role and significance of hedging strategies in academic contexts (e.g. Laghari et al., 2022; Weisi & Asakereh, 2021; Wishnoff, 2000). Yagiz and Demir (2014, p. 267) found that Turkish L2 writers often do not use hedge structures appropriately in Anglo-sphere academic discourse. Additionally, Chen and Zhang (2017) observed that Anglophone academic English writers employed more hedge phrases than their Chinese counterparts. Similarly, Laghari et al. (2022) noted a similar trend among Pakistani L2 English writers.

Previous research on hedging in L2 writing demonstrates that explicit, classroom-based instruction can significantly enhance learners' ability to both produce and comprehend hedging devices. For instance, Fukuya and Martínez-Flor (2008) found that explicit instruction in L2 hedges increased their use in oral but not in written tasks which, according to authors, can be explained by different degrees of attention required under different modalities. Other researchers confirmed that explicit teaching of L2 hedge phrases is feasible in particular with respect to academic writing (e.g., Laghari et al., 2022; Wishnoff, 2000). Studies have shown that targeted pedagogical interventions lead to measurable improvements in the frequency, variety, and appropriateness of hedge usage in academic texts and computer-mediated communication (Wishnoff, 2000; Sarani & Talati-Baghsiahi, 2017; Jalilifar et al., 2011; Jafary et al., 2024; Al-Quraishy, 2011). While such instruction often brings learners' performance closer to that of expert writers, descriptive analyses reveal that L2 users still tend to rely on a narrower, more conversational set of hedging forms compared to native speakers. Data-driven and corpus-based approaches, such as those described by Sun and Hu (2020), have also been positively received by learners, although the quantitative impact of these methods remains limited. Observational research further indicates that even advanced L2 writers, despite achieving relatively high levels of hedging accuracy, often produce hedging that is less formal and more constrained than native-speaker norms (Hinkel, 2005; Šeškauskienė, 2008).

In the case of Polish learners of L2 English, Hryniuk (2018) observes that cultural differences play a key role in shaping academic writing conventions. Earlier studies (Duszak, 1994; Golebiowski, 1998) highlight that cultural conventions significantly influence EFL writers. Polish writing tends to be more reader-responsible, whereas Anglo-American traditions emphasize audience engagement, which affects how writers use stance markers like hedges and boosters. Hryniuk (2018) shows that Polish writers use more hedges overall than native English writers yet deploy a smaller variety, resulting in tentative and less assertive texts. In academic essays and research articles, hedges typical of informal registers appear inappropriately, and Dronia (2019) notes differences in politeness and hedging patterns in email communication. Polish students often fail to use hedging appropriately in English academic or professional

contexts, potentially due to L1 transfer. Unlike English, where hedging signals politeness and avoids sounding too direct or authoritative (Wierzbicka, 2003), Polish communication norms tend to favor emotionality and directness, making such devices feel unnecessary. As a result, students may unintentionally violate politeness expectations in English discourse (Dronia, 2019).

These findings suggest that explicit instruction helps and that L2 learners struggle with appropriate hedging. Polish studies uniquely emphasize cultural transfer and pragmatic mismatches especially in how politeness, directness, and stance are conceptualized. The main challenge for Polish learners lies not in producing hedges per se, but in selecting the right type of hedge for the right context.

3 Study

The quasi-experimental study reported in the present article concerns teaching L2 pragmatics in a foreign language classroom. It specifically aims to explore the short- and long-term benefits of task-based pragmatic instruction on acquiring hedge phrases. The two experimental groups described below followed different instructional options so that conclusions about their pedagogical effectiveness could be drawn. The first group, TSLT-EG1, followed a task-supported framework, whereas the second experimental group, TBLT-EG2, followed the so-called "weak" task-based framework. The control group (CG) used in the study took part in regular classes that were not intended to teach hedge phrases. As observed, the main difference between TSLT and weak TBLT lies in the timing and role of explicit instruction. In TSLT, explicit teaching of language forms typically precedes the task and is central to the lesson, while in weak TBLT, learners first attempt the task, and metapragmatic or form-focused instruction follows, supporting learning based on task performance and the "noticing-the-gap" principle.

The following research questions were addressed in the study reported below:

RQ1: What is the effect of TSLT versus TBLT on learners' knowledge of hedge phrases as measured by a written test?

RQ2: What is the effect of TSLT versus TBLT on learners' use of hedge phrases as measured by a focused oral task?

RQ3: Are instructional effects lasting?

3.1 Target phrases

In the present study, hedges are understood as linguistic expressions that indicate uncertainty or attempt to soften the speaker's assertion. During the study, participants were presented with a set of hedges, which included:

1) As far as I know…
2) (At first glance) he appears…
3) Going purely on appearance…
4) I can't be certain, but…
5) I could be wrong but…
6) I'd say…
7) I'm not absolutely sure.
8) It looks to me as if…
9) It's hard to say.

10) My gut feeling is that…
11) My initial impression was…
12) She may be…

The phrases were chosen to represent a range of syntactic and lexical realizations of epistemic stance (e.g., verb-based *I'd say*, clause-initial *As far as I know*, and adverbial *At first glance*), while remaining accessible to upper-intermediate learners in terms of structure and meaning. The selected phrases were relatively simple regarding lexical or grammatical structure for the participants. Even with this, the difficulty lay in the fact that they were fixed chunks of language infrequently used by the learners, as hedging is not a common linguistic strategy employed by them. Pilot classroom observations confirmed that these expressions were rarely used spontaneously by the participant group. For these reasons, the selected items offered a balance between pedagogical relevance, teachability, and empirical measurability.

3.2 Methodology

In the study, 72 homogenous EFL learners were randomly assigned to three groups, two experimental (TSLT-EG1, $n = 25$, and TBLT-EG2, $n = 23$) and a control one (CG, $n = 24$). The 48 participants in the control groups received instruction focused on hedge phrases (e.g., It's hard to say, but…, Going purely on appearances, I'd say…, I could be wrong but…, My gut feeling is that…, I can't be certain but… etc.). The hedge phrases chosen for the study cannot be said to have been difficult lexically or grammatically for those learners. The difficulty lies in that they are fixed chunks of language rarely used by the learners since hedging is not a linguistic option often used by them.

The instructional treatment took place during the learners' regular class hours. The instruction took one lesson as the target phrases constituted a small sample. In the study, hedge phrases used for expressing uncertainty were targeted through two different types of instruction. TSLT-EG1 followed a TSLT framework, while TBLT-EG2 followed a weak TBLT methodology (based on Ellis, 2003). At the same time, learners in CG took a lesson on unreal conditionals (see Table 1). The aim was to keep the two instruction types in the experimental groups as similar as possible in order to minimise interference from other covariates.

Table 1

Treatment procedure in the studied groups

TSLT-EG1 (n = 25)	**TBLT-EG2 (n = 23)**	**CG (n = 24)**
task-supported language teaching	weak TBLT methodology	control group
1) input-based task (a listening activity), a receptive processing activity, and explicit instruction on the target hedge phrases (15 minutes) 2) six language-focused activities (15 minutes) 3) task performance and its repetition; reactive corrective feedback provided by the teacher (10 minutes)	1) pre-task: input-based task (a listening activity) and a receptive processing activity (10 minutes) 2) task cycle: task performance with reactive corrective feedback provided by the teacher (5 minutes) 3) post-task: six language-focused activities and task repetition (25 minutes)	1) explicit instruction on unreal conditionals, time for learners' questions and discussion of the concept (10 minutes) 2) a matching exercise in which learners match sentences with the correct form of unreal conditional (10 minutes) 3) an exercise in which learners have a list of situations that require the use of unreal conditionals and write their own sentences (10 minutes) 4) a writing activity – a short story or dialogue incorporating a few unreal conditionals (15 minutes)

3.2.1 The task-supported experimental group (TSLT-EG1)

The first part of the lesson in TSLT-EG1 included implicit and explicit teaching of L2 hedge phrases. The learners were asked to look at photos of strangers and listen to a conversation between a man and a woman who speculated about the people in the photos. The twelve target hedge phrases were all used in the listening activity. The learners then answered comprehension questions (a form of a gap-fill based on the text of the recording). Next, the learners were involved in receptive processing of the target phrases as they had to answer several true/false statements and open questions (e.g., "Is your gut feeling the same as the woman's?", "Going purely on appearances, would you say…?"). It is important to observe that the learners were not obliged to produce any output in this phase. The teacher answered some of the learners' questions regarding meanings and forms and then the teacher provided explicit metalinguistic explanations of hedge phrases and their use.

In the second part of the lesson, the learners had opportunities to perform six language-focused activities: two gap-fill exercises, error correction, paraphrasing, grammaticality judgments, and a two-answer alternatives exercise in which the learners had to choose a proper word or phrase from two alternatives to complete a sentence.

Finally, the production phase of the lesson followed the same procedure as the while-task phase of TBLT-EG2. The learners were presented with photos of three individuals and were asked to speculate on their personalities and behaviors. The task was performed twice with different interlocutors chosen randomly. The teacher monitored, circled around the groups, listened to them, and offered corrective feedback, mainly in the form of recasts.

3.2.2 The task-based experimental group (TBLT-EG2)

The instructional treatment in TBLT-EG2 took the form of a task cycle. The treatment started with a pre-task phase, which was identical to the first part in TSLT-EG1 safe the explicit instruction in hedge phrases. The aim of the pre-task was to expose the learners to the target hedge phrases through a listening task, the comprehension questions and receptive

The while-task phase was entirely devoted to the productive practice of the hedges. The learners performed a task similar to the one presented in the pre-task phase. The learners formed pairs or groups of three of their own will. They were given photos of strangers and asked to speculate on their personality traits and behaviours. The teacher circulated among the groups, listened in on their conversations and offered corrective feedback (mostly using recasts).

In the post-task phase of the lesson, the teacher drew learners' attention explicitly to the hedge phrases and any grave linguistic errors that occurred during task performance. The learners had opportunities to practice using hedges in isolated contexts, i.e. in gap-fill, error correction, grammaticality judgment, and paraphrasing exercises which were the same as the ones used in the second stage in TSLT-EG1. This was a point at which the teacher offered both implicit and explicit feedback if there was such a need. The task was then repeated with a different interlocutor.

Such procedure ensured that both TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 completed the same language-focused activities (about 15 minutes for the whole set of activities), performed the communicative task twice (about 10 minutes spent on task performance), and received corrective feedback from the teacher. The main difference between the groups was that TSLT-EG1 was explicitly taught the target L2 hedge phrases and followed a different sequence of activities. While TBLT-EG2 had the opportunity to "try out" the target task before any

metapragmatic explanations were offered, TSLT-EG1 were first explicitly taught the target structures and completed restricted, language-focused exercises before they were allowed to perform the task.

3.3 Participants

The participants in the study were 72 Polish learners of English as a foreign language in a secondary/ high school in a town in the north of (country). They were aged 16 to 17 at the time of the study, with at least eight years of EFL instruction experience. Their language proficiency oscillated around CEFR B2+, which is a higher intermediate, although the coursebook they all followed ("Focus 5" published by Pearson) is aimed at learners at advanced (C1) learners. The teacher-researcher consciously decided to opt for a higher-level coursebook since, knowing the learners and their motivation, he expected them to put more effort into their learning. The school which the learners attended was private, with relatively small groups of learners. The school offers five hours of foreign language instruction a week, and the study took place when the learners were in their second grade. At the time of the study, the teacher-researcher had already conducted around 200 classes with each group. The 72 learners in the study come from three groups taught by the same teacher-researcher. The division into the two experimental and a control group was purely random, as the learners were all of a comparable level of English. Their EFL course followed no particular method or approach before the study took place, being eclectic in its design and a strong focus on communicative tasks.

3.4 Instruments and analysis

An attempt was made to collect information about the participants' knowledge of hedge phrases at different points of the study. The necessary research data were collected three times: two weeks before the lesson (pre-test), two days after the lesson (post-test), and three weeks later (a delayed post-test). The study used two instruments to tap into learners' explicit and implicit knowledge: a written test to measure explicit knowledge and a focused communicative task to access learners' implicit knowledge of hedge phrases. Three different versions of these instruments were created to avoid the phenomenon of the practice effect.

To distinguish between learners' explicit and implicit knowledge of L2 hedge phrases, this study adopted two different assessment modes: written and oral. This decision was grounded in the distinction between explicit knowledge, which is conscious, declarative, and verbalizable, and implicit knowledge, which is unconscious, procedural, and typically demonstrated through spontaneous performance (Andringa & Rebuschat, 2015; Ellis, 2005). Written tasks, which afford learners more time for planning and monitoring their output, are considered more likely to elicit explicit knowledge (Ellis, 2009), while oral production tasks carried out under time pressure are believed to draw more heavily on learners' implicit knowledge (Suzuki & DeKeyser, 2017).

The written test included language-focused activities such as completing the text with a missing word, putting words in the correct order, or completing a photo description (see example in Appendix 1). Correct answers were awarded 1 point so the learners could score 25 points on the test. Each test took about 15 minutes to complete.

The focused communication task could potentially access learners' implicit knowledge of the target hedge phrases. In the pre-, the post-, and the delayed post-test, the instruction remained the same: "Look at the photos of these people. Speculate about how you think they

might be feeling. What makes you think so? Avoid definite judgments. Justify your speculations with details from the photo.". Each time, the learners were presented with different photos. The same set of photos was administered to both groups in one test to avoid different performance results. Pairs of learners performed the tasks during regular class hours. The learners were given three minutes for individual preparation and two minutes to perform each task. They were instructed to record themselves performing the task on a mobile device. An online voice recorder Vocaroo was used to record the conversations and the teacher-researcher received the links to the recordings. The teacher-researcher received 11 recordings from TSLT-EG1, 10 recordings from TBLT-EG2, and 12 recordings from CG at each measurement time (the pre-, post-, and delayed post-test). Each time, the 33 recordings were analysed for hedge phrases used by the learners. The analysis of each recording involved identifying all the instances and calculating the number of hedge phrases used by each learner. The hedge phrases were considered correctly used only in instances where they were intelligible. Points were only awarded for hedge phrases which were used correctly, i.e., following standard English grammatical or lexical rules.

4 Results

To ensure research validity, descriptive statistics for the three experimental groups were analysed for normality of distribution in both the written and the oral test. Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that the collected data were all normally distributed. The *p*-value greater than .05, except for the results for the written pre-test in TBLT-EG2, where the *p*-value was proven to be lower than the significance level ($p = .005$), so the data may not have represented are a normal distribution. However, the skewness and kurtosis below 1 confirmed that the assumption of normality was reasonably satisfied. All the data also satisfied the homogeneity of variance ($p > .05$ in Levene's test).

4.1 Written test results

A mixed ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of the three types of intervention on the written test scores for the pre-, the post-, and the delayed post-test. The group (i.e., the type of intervention) served as between-subjects factor, while the results of the written tests were a within-subjects factor. With regards to between-subjects effects, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of the group, $F(2, 69) = 257$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .882$, meaning that there were significant differences between the groups

A pairwise comparison revealed significant differences between TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 ($p = .005$) and a significant difference between these two groups and CG ($p < .001$), indicating that the intervention had a different effect on the written test results in the three groups. The mean results of TSLT-EG1 ($M = 15.77$; $SD = 2.37$) and of TBLT-EG2 ($M = 17.12$; $SD = 1.79$) were higher than those of CG ($M = 8.42$; $SD = 1.48$).

The within-subjects effect revealed a significant main effect of the written test $F(2, 138) = 569$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .892$, denoting that the participants achieved significantly different results at different test times, i.e., successive measurements were significantly different. Also, a significant interaction effect was reported $F(4, 138) = 142$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .804$, suggesting statistically significant differences between the test results and the groups.

A pairwise comparison revealed statistically significant differences between the results of the pre-, post-, and delayed post-test ($p < .001$). The mean results of the pre-test ($M = 8.48$; *SD*

= 1.63) were lower than those of the post-test (*M* = 16.77; *SD* = 1.90) and the delayed post-test (*M* = 16.06; *SD* = 2.11), however, the results of the delayed post-test were lower than those of the post-test.

Concerning the interaction effect, the analysis showed no differences between the three groups on the pre-test ($p = 1.00$), meaning the three groups were at a comparable level before the intervention commenced. Also, no significant differences were reported for the post-test between TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 ($p = .832$), but a significant difference between these groups in the delayed post-test ($p = .021$). These results suggest that the two groups made similar gains after the intervention, but three weeks later, TBLT-EG2 (M = 21.00, SD = 2.17) retained a higher score than TSLT-EG1 (*M* = 18.17, *SD* = 2.75) (see Table 2 for each group's results). The analysis also revealed no significant changes between the consecutive tests in CG ($p = 1.00$).

Table 2

Written test results

group	written test	M	SD	95% CI	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
TSLT-EG1	pre-test	8.32	1.82	7.66	8.98
	post-test	20.3	2.54	19.49	21.07
	delayed post-test	18.7	2.75	17.85	19.59
TBLT-EG2	pre-test	8.74	1.42	8.05	9.42
	post-test	21.6	1.8	20.79	22.43
	delayed post-test	21.0	2.17	20.09	21.91
CG	pre-test	8.38	1.66	7.70	9.05
	post-test	8.42	1.38	7.61	9.22
	delayed post-test	8.46	1.41	7.57	9.35

4.2 Oral test results

A mixed ANOVA was performed to compare the effect of the three types of intervention on oral exam scores for the pre-, the post-, and the delayed post-test. The group (i.e. the type of intervention) served as a between-subjects factor, while the results of the oral tests were a within-subjects factor. As for between-subjects effects, the analysis revealed a significant main effect of the group, $F(2, 69) = 73.19$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .680$, meaning that there were significant differences between the groups.

A pairwise comparison revealed no differences between TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 ($p = .350$) and a significant difference between these two groups and CG ($p < .001$). This indicates that the intervention had a similar effect on the oral test results in TBLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2. The mean results of TSLT-EG1 (*M* = 1.19; *SD* = .06) and of TBLT-EG2 (*M* = 1.04; *SD* = .06) were higher than those of CG (*M* = .18; *SD* = .04).

Regarding the within-subjects effects, a significant main effect of the oral test $F(2, 138) = 113.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .622$ denotes that the participants achieved significantly different results at different test times, i.e., successive measurements were significantly different. Also, a significant interaction effect was reported $F(4, 138) = 28.77$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2_{partial} = .455$, suggesting there were statistically significant differences between the test results and the groups.

A pairwise comparison revealed statistically significant differences between the results of the pre-, post-, and delayed post-test ($p < .001$). The mean results of the pre-test ($M = .17$; $SD = .05$) were lower than those of the post-test ($M = 1.30$; $SD = .06$) and the delayed post-test ($M = .94$; $SD = .06$); however, the results of the delayed post-test were lower than those of the post-test.

Concerning the interaction effect, the analysis showed no differences between the three groups on the pre-test ($p = 1.00$), denoting that the three groups were at a comparable level before the intervention commenced. Also, no significant differences between TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 were reported for the post- ($p = .781$) and the delayed post-test ($p = .213$), which suggests that the two groups made similar gains after the intervention and retained them three weeks later (see Table 3 for each group's results). The analysis also revealed no significant changes between the consecutive tests in CG ($p = 1.00$).

Table 3

Oral test results

group	oral test	M	SE	95% CI	
				Lower Bound	Upper Bound
TSLT-EG1	pre-test	.160	.083	-.006	.326
	post-test	1.960	.108	1.744	2.176
	delayed post-test	1.440	.100	1.240	1.640
TBLT-EG2	pre-test	.174	.087	.000	.347
	post-test	1.783	.113	1.558	2.008
	delayed post-test	1.174	.105	.965	1.383
CG	pre-test	.167	.085	-.003	.336
	post-test	.167	.110	-.054	.387
	delayed post-test	.208	.103	.004	.413

Overall, the data accrued in both written and oral tests show that both TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 significantly improved directly after the intervention. In the case of the oral exam, both groups retained this improvement in a delayed post-test three weeks after the intervention; however, the results of TBLT-EG2 were statistically higher on the written delayed post-test. Also, both groups outperformed CG in the post- and delayed post-tests.

5 Discussion

The present study addressed three research questions. The first two regarded the effectiveness of two types of pedagogic intervention (i.e., TSLT and TBLT) on the acquisition of L2 hedge phrases, and the third question concerned the durability of this effectiveness. The answers to these questions were achieved by assessing learners' pragmatic production of hedge phrases following the different instructional settings and comparing the results from a written and an oral test.

In order to find the answer to the first two questions, the study was designed so that the input-based task, the awareness-raising activities, and the language-focused exercises were the same for both TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2. The main difference in the intervention between both groups was that TSLT-EG1 was provided with explicit metapragmatic explanations and that the learners were given opportunities to practice the target hedge phrases before task performance. The TBLT-EG2 was provided with explicit information and practice opportunities in the post-task phase, i.e., after the first task performance. The TBLT-EG2 learners first came across the target structures in a receptive listening task and in awareness-raising questions. They then performed the task using their own linguistic resources without being prompted to use any specific language structures, which is in line with the central tenets of TBLT (Ellis, 2003, 2018, 2019).

Results show that while both TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 significantly improved following the intervention, the results of the written test suggest more significant improvements for TBLT-EG2 in the delayed post-test. This finding seems counterintuitive since the written test aimed at investigating the gains in learners' explicit knowledge, and it was TSLT-EG1 which was involved mostly in explicit instruction. However, it cannot be simply assumed that learners who are taught explicitly will gain explicit knowledge (Ionin & Montrul, 2023). In fact, several studies showed that implicit instruction could result in some explicit knowledge (DeKeyser, 1998; Lichtman, 2016; Morgan-Short, 2007). There is also still a lot of debate about which tasks tap into which type of knowledge (Ellis & Roever, 2021; Suzuki, 2017) and evidence is beginning to emerge suggesting that both types of L2 knowledge influence each other reciprocally over time (Kim & Godfroid, 2023).

This finding can be explained by the fact that TBLT-EG2 learners had the opportunity to perform the task before their attention was explicitly drawn to the target structures. This might have helped them notice the gaps in their knowledge and, potentially, to notice the necessary linguistic data in subsequent input. These findings align with the theoretical constructs of noticing the gap (Swain, 1985, 1995) and noticing (Schmidt, 1990, 2010). First, when learners try to verbalise intended meanings, they may notice they need more linguistic resources to encode them. Secondly, such noticing may trigger the learners to pay more attention to subsequent input in order to fill the gaps in their L2 knowledge. This subsequent input can become intake only when the learners detect it.

When comparing the effects of different types of task modalities, previous studies found either no effect (Reagan & Payant, 2018) or an advantage for oral tasks (Fukuya & Martínez-Flor, 2008). The latter study found greater effects of instruction on the acquisition of hedges in oral tasks. To reiterate, in the case of the experiment reported above, TBLT-EG2 learners performed the oral task first. Their attention was explicitly drawn to the target L2 hedge phrases after this initial task performance, and they were given ample opportunities to practice using these targets in subsequent language-focused exercises. The initial task performance might have created the need to fill the gaps in learners' communicative competencies, leading to a greater investment to memorise the targets for future use. A task repetition phase of the lesson created

a further practice opportunity, this time with the learners' conscious use of the targets. Within the framework of Skill Acquisition Theory (DeKeyser, 2020), such practise is the driving force behind the development of procedural knowledge.

Although aligned with the theoretical concepts discussed above, these results differ to some extent from the findings of earlier empirical investigations. Previous studies pointed to the benefits of explicit pragmatic instruction (Bu, 2012; Ishihara, 2010; Nguyen, 2013; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Ren, 2022; Ren et al., 2022; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015), which lead to better performance than the implicit one. In the current study, the explicit TSLT-EG1 did make progress, but the implicit-explicit TBLT-EG2 outperformed it on the delayed written test. This difference could be due to the fact that TBLT-EG2 combined elements of implicit and explicit instruction in that implicit teaching had been supported with explicit language-focused activities in the post-task phase of the lesson. Following the cognitive-interactionist view of second language acquisition (Long, 2015, 2023), this explanation is supported by the central tenets of task-based language teaching; namely, the synergy of implicit and (reactive) explicit instruction is most beneficial from the perspective of a learner.

A few limitations of the study should be acknowledged before conclusions can be reached. Most importantly, it should be observed that the linguistic forms targeted in the instruction were chosen before the lesson. They did not arise from the use of language, as proposed in some versions of TBLT (Ellis, 2019; Long, 2015). Secondly, the experiment involved a very short treatment duration. Future studies should use longer treatments as such a short experiment time may not be reflective of longer interventions. Finally, it should be recognised that the findings of recent meta-analyses (Jeon & Kaya, 2006; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Ren et al., 2022) show that learners with higher proficiency benefit more from pragmatic instruction. Perhaps a similar study with lower-level participants could bring different results.

6 Conclusion

The current study aimed to compare the effects of task-based versus task-supported language teaching on EFL learners' acquisition of L2 hedge phrases. The main finding indicates that both TSLT and "weak" TBLT helped the learners acquire the target items as measured by a written and oral test. The results showed that both experimental groups significantly improved on the oral and written tests directly after the intervention and retained this improvement in a delayed oral post-test three weeks after the intervention.

The findings of the written test also suggest that the task-based experimental group scored higher in the delayed post-test than the task-supported group. This difference proved statistically significant. Unlike previous studies (e.g., Nguyen, 2013; Plonsky & Zhuang, 2019; Ren, 2022; Ren et al., 2022; Rose, 2005; Taguchi, 2015) which pointed to the superiority of explicit over implicit instruction in teaching L2 pragmatics, the current study found that the effects of a combination of implicit and explicit instruction were more lasting than the purely explicit treatment on learners' explicit knowledge.

As for the oral test results, which aimed at tapping into learners' implicit knowledge, the difference between TSLT-EG1 and TBLT-EG2 proved insignificant to indicate unequivocally which of the two groups achieved a better result. Both, however, outperformed CG in the post- and delayed post-test. More evidence from future studies is needed to evaluate whether either type of instruction yields more progress.

The present study adds to the literature on the effects of task-based and L2 pragmatic instruction. It seems that the weak TBLT, which offers a combination of implicit and explicit

instruction, yields more substantial and lasting effects than a treatment which relies solely on explicit intervention (such as TSLT).

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