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The impact of opinion gap task and reasoning gap task on reading comprehension

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Abstract

Regarding the crucial role of applying task-based instruction in EFL classes, this study tried to investigate the impact of two tasks, the opinion gap task and the reasoning gap task, on Iranian intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension skills. The main population including three groups was selected after optional practical training administration, and determined as intermediate. First, a pre-test was given to three groups. After Task-Based Instruction implementation using two tasks, opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks, a post-test was given to identify the positive or negative impact of the treatment on reading comprehension. After the statistical analysis, from one-way ANOVA, the results of the post-test of the two experimental groups proved that applying task-based instruction had a more positive effect on the intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension skills in comparison to the traditional teaching method which was used for the control group. According to the data analysis, despite the existing positive impact of the aforementioned tasks on reading comprehension skills, the pairwise comparison of the two experimental groups indicated that the opinion gap task and reasoning gap task had approximately an equal influence on learners' reading comprehension skills.

***Keywords*:** Cognitive tasks; EFL learners; opinion gap task; reading comprehension; reasoning gap task

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1. INTRODUCTION

Reading skills are one of the main vehicles for the enhancement of learning experiences and improved learning success. Hazzard (2016) states that reading makes an important contribution to the success of learners in accomplishing their studies. Through the reading comprehension process, the learner can obtain the information required to fulfill the needs of their study assignments. The ability to read is a need, thus the process of learning to read plays an important role in achieving success in both study and life. ''In reading comprehension, to understand the message, the reader needs to apply comprehension strategies appropriate to the text they read'' (Robinson & Smith 1980). These strategies include selecting, predicting, confirming, and validating the results of the understanding.

The application of these strategies has an impact on the readers' success in comprehending the content of the text and this means that the use of the right strategy can better the results of comprehension while the use of inappropriate strategies can be a barrier to the success of comprehension. To teach reading comprehension, the instructors need to direct students' activities to get to know and use the correct reading strategy. The results of Francois's (2016) research show that in the process of reading improvement, teachers can be models in reading comprehension strategies and comprehension developers by implementing cognitive tasks to gain the most proper outcomes. According to Ellis (2003), task-based language learning instructions focus on cognitive processes through task completion. When learners are engaged in a task that truly interests them, they aim to carry it out using only the target language and the language elements they have been taught (Eskandari, 2024; Ghanbaran et al., 2023).

Further research has shown that incorporating technology can also enhance reading comprehension skills. For instance, Wang and Chen (2020) found that using online annotation tools can improve students' comprehension and critical thinking skills. These tools allow students to interact with the text by highlighting, commenting, and asking questions, which can deepen their understanding and promote active reading. In addition, it is important to consider the individual needs and backgrounds of learners when teaching reading comprehension. For example, research has shown that bilingual readers may use different strategies depending on the language of the text (Geva et al., 2017). Therefore, instructors should provide opportunities for students to practice reading in both their first language and the target language, and to develop strategies that work for them in each language. Moreover, explicit instruction in metacognitive strategies can also improve reading comprehension (Zhang & Zhang, 2021). Metacognitive strategies involve thinking about one's own thinking and learning processes and can help students monitor their comprehension and identify areas where they need to improve. By teaching students how to use these strategies, instructors can empower them to become more autonomous and effective learners.

The rationale for investigating the impact of cognitive tasks on reading comprehension skills is based on the understanding that reading comprehension is a complex process that involves both linguistic and cognitive factors. While language proficiency is necessary for successful reading comprehension, cognitive abilities such as critical thinking, reasoning, and problem-solving are also essential (Alghamdi, 2024). Cognitive tasks, such as reasoning gap tasks and opinion gap tasks, require learners to engage in critical thinking and reasoning, which can help them develop their cognitive abilities and improve their language proficiency. Because many EFL learners have benefited from being instructed by different cognitive strategies through applying tasks in the educational environments, the curriculum designers and educators have become more sensitive to the role of task types in improving language skills. Moreover, it firms the relationship between the performance of cognitive tasks and reading comprehension ability.

Opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks are two language learning techniques that emphasize critical thinking and real-life communication, as defined by their operational definitions. An opinion gap task is a learning activity that requires learners to express their own opinions on a specific topic or issue. The learners are presented with a statement or question and are asked to respond with their thoughts

and ideas. The purpose of this task is to encourage learners to think critically and express themselves in the target language. By engaging in these tasks, learners may become more invested in the language learning process, develop their critical thinking skills, and improve their ability to communicate effectively in the target language. On the other hand, a reasoning gap task is a learning activity that requires learners to participate in a structured discussion or debate on a particular topic or issue. The learners are presented with a statement or question and are asked to provide reasons and evidence to support their position. The purpose of this task is to encourage learners to think critically and develop their reasoning and argumentation skills in the target language. By engaging in these tasks, learners may become more proficient in expressing complex ideas and arguments, develop their critical thinking skills, and improve their ability to communicate effectively in the target language.

1.1. Literature review

The use of opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks in language learning has the potential to significantly impact the learning process by promoting critical thinking, interest and motivation, and reading comprehension skills. Incorporating these tasks into language instruction may help learners become more engaged in the learning process, develop a deeper understanding of the language and its cultural context, and improve their ability to communicate effectively in various contexts. Therefore, research has demonstrated that learners who participate in opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks exhibit improved productive language skills, including speaking and writing, and enhanced accuracy and effectiveness in expressing themselves in the target language.

Although reading comprehension is a fundamental aspect of language learning, many traditional language instruction methods prioritize rote learning of language rules and vocabulary, often neglecting critical thinking skills and real-world communication. As a result, many language learners struggle with reading and comprehending written language in the target language. The problem is compounded by the lack of engaging and relevant tasks that motivate learners to develop their reading comprehension skills (Ahmed Abdel-Al Ibrahim et al., 2023).

The possibility of opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks to enhance EFL learners' reading comprehension skills brings novelty and also presents a groundbreaking and potentially far-reaching advancement in the domain of language learning in various ways. Firstly, it implies that language learning can be improved by including tasks that emphasize critical thinking abilities, such as expressing opinions and reasoning. This underscores the need to move beyond rote learning of language rules and vocabulary and place greater emphasis on using language for meaningful communication. Secondly, it suggests that language learning can be made more interesting and motivating by incorporating tasks that are relevant and engaging to learners. By presenting learners with tasks that require them to tackle real-world issues and express their own opinions, they may become more invested in the language learning process. Thirdly, it underscores the importance of reading comprehension skills in language learning. As mentioned, while many language learners prioritize speaking and listening skills, the ability to read and comprehend written language is also crucial for effective communication in many contexts.

By introducing tasks that focus on enhancing reading comprehension skills, learners may become better equipped to understand and communicate proficiently in the target language. Overall, the potential for opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks to have any impact on improving reading comprehension skills is significant, as it suggests that language learning can be made more effective, interesting, and comprehensive by incorporating tasks that emphasize critical thinking, interest, and motivation, and reading comprehension skill (Michael & Kyriakides 2023). In this study, the main focus is on cognitive tasks (reasoning gap- opinion gap) and their impact on reading comprehension skills and also their impact on how the learners gain more information through reading a context. The results of this study can contribute to the theory of cognitive tasks by shedding light on the relationship between carrying out cognitive tasks and improving reading comprehension skills among

Iranian intermediate EFL learners. Besides, this study can be fruitful by suggesting new techniques and methods of cognitive tasks that facilitate teaching.

1.1.1. Reading

To take a brief look at the two reading models focusing on cognitive aspects, A bottom-up reading model is a model that focuses on a single-direction and part-to-whole processing of a text. More specifically, in bottom-up models, the reader is assumed to be involved in a mechanical process where he or she decodes the ongoing text letter by letter, word by word, and sentence by sentence. A top-down reading model is a model that focuses on what the reader brings to the text to arrive at the meaning. In top-down models, it is assumed that the comprehension process is not mechanical, but actively controlled by the reader.

According to the scholars, there are some factors from readers' basic skills which cause difficulties in reading comprehension. Those factors are word reading, fluency, vocabulary mastery, and world knowledge. When the readers find difficulties in decoding or reading words, they find it hard to understand the meaning of the text. If they read slowly and inaccurately, it also becomes interferes with their reading comprehension. Since reading comprehension is the process of constructing meaning from the text, the goal of all reading instructions is ultimately targeted at helping a reader to comprehend a given text. According to the theories of interpersonal interactions, reading activity is named as one of the best ways to exchange minds. Pragmatics is a known term that can accelerate the process of comprehending any text. Pragmatic comprehension is different from linguistic comprehension because it calls for contextual information such as the role played by the interlocutors and status, the physical setting of the conversation, and the types of communicative acts that may occur in that context.

Crystal (2008) defines pragmatics as ''the study of language from the point of view of the users, especially of the choices they make, the constraints they encounter in using language in social interaction, and the effects their use of language has on the other participants in an act of communication''. Incorporation of what we know about metacognition into classroom practice is a laborious task and any attempt at dissemination of our knowledge of metacognition into classroom practice should be made with an awareness of potential constraints owing to the weight of responsibility that such instruction would place on teachers' and students' shoulders. This is even a much more difficult undertaking for teachers when faced with students who were not used to being asked to be thoughtful and some may not appreciate having to expend the extra effort to do so. With this teaching challenge in mind, it is safe to say that the review of literature on the relationship between metacognition and reading comprehension ''provides a strong mandate for infusing practices that support metacognitive processes into classrooms. This is a goal worth pursuing'' (McCormick, 2003).

Reading comprehension is a process of reading to build understanding (Tarchi, 2017), and in this process, some stages should be known such as literal, inferential, critical, and creative (Stothard, 2016). In addition, Langer (2015) emphasizes the importance of fostering a sense of purpose and active engagement in the reading process to improve comprehension. One of the key cognitive processes involved in reading comprehension is working memory (Kendeou et al., 2021). Working memory helps readers temporarily store and manipulate information as they read, allowing them to make connections and draw inferences. Other important cognitive processes include vocabulary knowledge, inferencing skills, and metacognition (Singer & Bashir, 2019; Dennis & Somerville 2023). Intelligence and verbal reasoning have also been linked to reading comprehension.

According to Moll et al., (2019), intelligence refers to the ability to learn from experience and adapt to new situations, while verbal reasoning involves the ability to process and manipulate information presented in verbal form. These cognitive abilities are essential for successful reading comprehension,

as readers need to be able to make connections between ideas, draw inferences, and understand complex sentence structures. Moreover, metacognition appears to be the cornerstone of thoughtful, active, and successful reading. Many postulated that the most valuable strategies for developing reading comprehension are metacognitive strategies for monitoring comprehension, and for perceiving and tackling reading problems. Such metacognition ''entails knowledge of strategies for processing, texts, the ability to monitor comprehension, and the ability to adjust strategies as needed'' (Auerbach & Paxton, 1997).

1.1.2. Task-based teaching

Task-based instruction is defined as an approach where communicative and meaningful tasks are placed in the central position in language learning and where the importance is attached to the process of communication using language rather than only the production of correct language forms. Thus, Task-Based Instruction (TBI) is a model within the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) framework as it emphasizes real and meaningful communication as the main important characteristic of language teaching and learning (Long, 2017; Richards & Rodgers, 2001). This approach focuses on the application of authentic tasks and real-life classroom materials for authentic language use to provide a learning atmosphere fostering meaningful communication with the right communicative practices. To put it differently, learners are encouraged to learn the language while they are using and practicing it. For this purpose, the major focus of the task-based framework is on communicative language use within authentic situations (Ellis, 2003; Long, 2016). Besides its attention to improving learners' communicative capability, the TBI approach emphasizes focus on form. Even though TBI emphasizes the importance of meaning, a focus on the form of the language is also of high importance in the language learning process (Bygate et al., 2001). In the task-based framework, it is aimed that learners achieve both accuracy and fluency while using the language for communicative purposes (Ellis, 2003).

According to Norris (2018), TBLT can promote both accuracy and fluency by providing learners with opportunities for practice and feedback. He argues that explicit instruction on language forms and structures can help learners develop their accuracy while providing practice opportunities can help them develop their fluency. Baralt and Gurzynski-Weiss (2019) suggest that TBLT can promote both accuracy and fluency by integrating form-focused instruction into task-based activities. They argue that providing learners with opportunities to use the language in meaningful contexts can promote fluency while integrating form-focused instruction can help learners achieve greater accuracy. Furthermore, Shehadeh and Coombe (2019) emphasize the importance of balancing accuracy and fluency in TBLT. They argue that providing learners with explicit instruction on the language forms and structures can help them develop their accuracy while providing opportunities for practice and feedback can help them develop their fluency.

1.1.3. Goals in TBI

According to Long (2017), to support TBI's effectiveness, setting some appropriate and clear goals is essential, and he proposes that TBI has the following three general language teaching and learning goals: fluency, accuracy, and complexity. To gain fluency, learners should use the target language in real-life contexts at a proper speech rate without disturbing pauses. An adequate level of fluency seems to be essential to be acknowledged as an interlocutor in a communicative event (Ellis, 2003). In other words, a sufficient level of fluency is necessary for interaction and communication, and a low degree of fluency may hinder communication by limiting interaction patterns and lead to dissatisfaction of both the speaker and listener present in a conversation. To achieve an adequate level of fluency necessary for interaction, TBI aims to provide opportunities for learners to practice language in real-time situations.

A major reason for poor fluency may be that learning and teaching activities are more focused on accuracy and structural complexity rather than fluency and communication. Another important factor affecting learners' degree of fluency is personality factors that may negatively affect fluency as well.

These personality factors may include general shyness, speaking anxiety and embarrassment, and feelings of inadequacy of one's ideas.

Also, TBI focuses on accuracy which is related to the rule-governed use of target language. The promotion of accuracy for effective language learning and use is an important goal of TBI because inaccuracy may hinder communication and affect negatively the speaker's production as well as fluency (Basturkmen et al., 2004). In general, TBI believes that both focus on form and fluency must be regarded as keys to language practice and language acquisition. Basturkmen et al., (2004) asserted that although focus on form is a major goal of TBI, this should not negatively influence the flow of communication in the classroom and real-life contexts. Thus, designing successful language teaching tasks heavily depends on striking a balance between fluency and focus on form. Language teachers should aim to create a supportive and engaging learning environment where learners feel comfortable taking risks and making mistakes while practicing language. Furthermore, providing effective feedback and corrective measures can further enhance the balance between fluency and focus on form in language teaching.

1.1.4. Opinion gap task

It is believed that different task types cause learners to focus on different characteristics of the text because the demands of tasks are not the same. The main focus of opinion gap task types is to require the participants to share their ideas on a subject. When tasks were first used to facilitate the way of learning, many scholars explained the true advantages of TBI which subconsciously work for all skills (Howatt, 1984). In another study in which the learners had not been exposed enough to English language elements, communicative language learning (CLL) was implemented to find out how well the learners' ability to speak could be improved by moving from known to unknown. After a few sessions doing so, the learners were asked to exchange opinions to prepare for an upcoming class interviewing practice. What was concluded brought strong evidence of the positive impact of opinion gap task implementation on speaking skills (Pica et al., 1993). As Skehan (1996) stated about the relationship between linguistics and speaking skills, The linguistic dimension of the oral performance of the participants was based on the notions of fluency, accuracy, and complexity.

More recent studies have also investigated the effectiveness of communicative language learning (CLL) in improving speaking skills. For example, a study by Kim and Lee (2018) found that using an opinion gap task in teaching (TBLT), a type of CLL, can improve students' fluency, accuracy, and complexity in speaking. The researchers suggest that TBLT provides an effective way to integrate language skills and promote communication in the classroom. Furthermore, technology can also be used to support TBLT and enhance speaking skills. For instance, a study by Zhang and Chen (2020) found that using video-based interaction in online language learning can improve students' speaking skills. The video-based interaction allowed students to engage in authentic communication and receive feedback from their peers and instructors, which helped them improve their fluency and accuracy in speaking. Overall, CLL is an effective approach for improving speaking skills and incorporating technology can further enhance its effectiveness. By providing opportunities for authentic communication and feedback, instructors can help students develop the speaking skills they need to succeed in real-world situations.

1.1.5. Reasoning gap task

To make a clearer decision as the ultimate goal of the task, reasoning gap activities and the critical thinking dimension of tasks come to be considered. As Paul and Elder (2009) state what is presented through reasoning discussion is rather the best part of learners' creativity which even brings a brighter vision for other topics. In another practice, they figured out that creativity-stimulator activities also work for both receptive skills such as; reading and listening, and productive skills such as speaking and writing.

Ruso (2007) suggests seven dispositions for critical thinking that directly supplement reasoning gap tasks: truth-seeking, open-mindedness, analyticity, systematicity, critical thinking-confidence, inquisitiveness, and cognitive maturity. Moreover, the impact of reasoning, comparing, and challenging to opt for the most superior choice has been proved in general and academic writing improvement as well. To find out whether there was any impact of the aforementioned task on different skills, the performance of groups of students was severely tested in different studies after the task implementation. In one of those studies, the researcher intended to determine whether reasoning gap activity was effective or not for teaching writing, particularly writing arguments in discussion text. In that study, those students who were traditionally instructed how to write only could note simple definitions of the words given. However, after implementing the reasoning gap activity for teaching writing discussion text, the students in the experimental group were able to develop and strengthen their arguments for and against the issue by providing some examples and evidence to support their statement of position (Geraldine, 2017).

Recent studies have continued to demonstrate the effectiveness of TBLT in improving language skills. For example, a study by Li and Chen (2021) investigated the impact of TBLT on the listening comprehension of Chinese EFL learners. The experimental group participated in a reasoning gap task, which involved listening to a dialogue and using reasoning skills to complete a task. The control group did not receive any treatment. The results showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group in listening comprehension, suggesting that TBLT is an effective approach for improving listening skills. Similarly, a study by Kim and Lee (2021) investigated the effectiveness of TBLT in developing the speaking and writing skills of Korean EFL learners. The participants engaged in a variety of communicative tasks, including opinion exchange, problem-solving, and information-gap tasks. The results showed that the participants' speaking and writing skills improved significantly after the implementation of TBLT. Another study by Yu and Jiang (2020) investigated the role of negotiation of meaning in the development of writing skills in Chinese EFL learners. The participants engaged in a collaborative writing task, which required negotiation of meaning and feedback on their writing. The results showed that negotiation of meaning played a crucial role in the development of the participants' writing skills, highlighting the importance of communication and feedback in language learning.

1.2. Purpose of study

Reasoning gap task and opinion gap task, due to not requiring any special written materials like the other interactive cognitive tasks, are considered to be the most applicable class activities. As they are called cognitive tasks, their main challenge is dealing with mentality (Mayer, 2002). With this in mind, superior mental factors of an individual can be effective on the performance level. According to some results obtained, the students can even raise their mental capability while engaging in task-based learning. As a claim, ''Interpersonal Intelligence'' can both raise the ability to perform well in interactive activities and be raised by doing such activities (Gardner, 1993, 1999). Due to this statement, applying opinion gap tasks and reasoning gap tasks in class modifies the verbal and interactive skills on which the learners work. This study attempted to examine the effects of two tasks on the reading comprehension skills of Iranian intermediate EFL learners: the opinion gap task and the reasoning gap task.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

2.1. Participants

The population was selected from the Kish Language Institute, Iran. The study selected sixty students from seven intact classes, based on their proficiency level as determined by the Optional Practical Training (OPT) test, out of the initial eighty students. Since the purpose of the study was to investigate the improvement of reading comprehension under two tasks impact, the sample was selected from among a population whose reading comprehension skill was less proficient than other skills according to their reading test results in three previous terms. Their scores in OPT which were

one SD (Standard deviation) above and one SD below the mean revealed that the students selected were at an intermediate level of English language proficiency. Most of the participants had been under the exposure of English language instruction in language institutes. They were divided into three groups: one control and two experimental groups. The number of learners in each group was 20. All of the participants were native speakers of Persian. They attended the classes two times a week, one session during the regular class time and the other session outside of the regular class timetable. It is worth noting that due to timing restrictions, two of the sessions were held online on the ''Google Meet'' platform. The experimental groups were given task-based instruction in 6 sessions, but the control group did not receive any treatment.

2.2. Data collection instruments

The first instrument used was the OPT test to identify the students' proficiency level for attending the study. The texts used for pretest and posttest were excerpts from the TOEFL Reading Comprehension Subtest (TOEFL Reading Comprehension Subtest is a standardized multiple-choice reading comprehension test (Thomas & Way, 1995)). This test is commonly used to assess the English language proficiency of non-native speakers. The test measures a range of reading skills, including identifying main ideas, making inferences, understanding vocabulary in context, and understanding the organization and structure of a text. The TOEFL Reading Comprehension Subtest is widely recognized as a reliable and valid measure of English reading proficiency and has been used extensively in research studies related to second language acquisition and language assessment. The texts selected consisted of two passages about education and 20 subsequent questions and one score was allocated for each multiple-choice question. The order of questions was different in pretest and posttest and this replacement was applied to diminish the effect of retained knowledge after six sessions. The pretest was used to diagnose participants' prior capability of reading comprehension before the treatment was given. The posttest was used to discover participants' reading comprehension enhancement and to compare the score differences between control and experimental groups. The scores obtained from test results were utilized to validate the effectiveness of implementing task-based teaching, ''reasoning gap task'' and ''opinion gap task'', on improving reading comprehension skills.

2.3. Procedure

Since the goal was to investigate the impact of cognitive tasks on the reading comprehension skill of intermediate EFL learners, two types of cognitive tasks, opinion gap task and reasoning gap task, were provided for the experimental groups to realize whether there was any effect on English language learners' reading comprehension skill. Regarding this aim, the teacher as the researcher put task-based teaching into the process. The teacher allocated 45 minutes in each class asking one experimental group of participants for their opinions, personal feelings, and attitudes about the concept of education and the other experimental group for their reasoning, inference, and various information derived from the whole given concept at nearly the same time in a week.

In the opinion gap task, according to Ellis (2003), three task phases including pre-task, during-task, and post-task were used. In the first session as the pre-task activity, the teacher asked students to say whatever they knew about ''Education''. At the beginning of the activity, since some of the students were not comfortable and proficient enough to respond instantly to what was asked, they were told to write what they wanted to say notifying them that it was merely for speaking not writing skills. Half of the second session, as the during-task activity, was again allocated to students' opinions about education and asked them to let each other know what they had written or said. They were divided into 10 groups, each including two students. Each group was responsible for sharing ideas and getting to know what the other one wrote about education which itself was an obvious cause for students to raise their vocabulary knowledge, particularly about education. After sharing their opinions, they were asked to mention how many educational types they knew about. In this phase, four groups discussed three types of education: formal education which usually takes place on the premises of the school

where a person may learn basic, academic, or trade skills and is required to observe strict discipline with efficient teachers in the art of instruction; informal education which often occurs out of the educational circumstances applied even by parents teaching their child how to prepare a meal or ride a bicycle; and non-formal education, known as school equivalency preparation in which people learn some academic knowledge not in schools or colleges.

Six groups discussed pairing conversations and what they had heard about cooperative language learning as an education type. Even though there seemed to be an incongruity in their utterances, that was confirmable, as Defrioka (2009) claims that opinion gap activities cause students to become braver more confident, and less stressed about dialogues. The third day of the class was spent on participants' response comparison and presenting something briefly about each other's statements either by memorizing directly what the peers said or by summarizing what they noted. The next day, the researcher as the teacher assigned five groups to share their attitudes about their objection to different explanations presented relating to education and asked the other five groups to state with which part they agreed most. Then the second five groups were also asked to suggest whether they had plans to develop the education level one day. On the fifth day, there was a concise review of what had happened in the class. Afterward, the teacher selected 10 participants randomly to present a summary of what they had perceived from the shared views and asked others to agree or disagree with them. Therefore, he could gain a comprehensive estimate of how well the subjects were able to express opinions about the term ''education''. Then, the researcher started explaining co-education, digital learning, and blended learning by writing down some technical words and phrases used in these academic terms for 15 minutes till the class ended. The words were: bite-size training, courseware, livestreaming, social learning platform, MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), virtual classroom, and learning modules.

On the last day of treatment, as the post-task activity, the students were to answer the following questions individually:

1. What are you most interested in education?

2. Why is education important?

3. What are the two advantages/disadvantages of education in Iran?

During the reasoning gap task, a similar process was employed wherein students were first asked to express their opinions, followed by a query regarding the number of educational types and resources they were aware of. Out of the ten groups, five were initially unable to provide a satisfactory response and were granted a break to conduct online research. After a 10-minute interval, they identified formal, informal, and non-formal education as the three categories of education. The remaining five groups listed various educational materials such as lectures, visual and auditory aids, textbooks, and social media. The mention of "social media" sparked a new discussion, which was eagerly pursued by all participants due to the extensive prior conversations they had had on the topic. The benefits and drawbacks of social media were discussed at length. This process indicates a progression from an initial lack of knowledge to a more informed and engaged discussion, facilitated by the use of internet resources. The third day of the class was spent on participants' response comparison and presenting something briefly about each other's statements either by memorizing directly what the peers said or by summarizing what they noted. The next day, the researcher as the teacher assigned five groups to share their inferences and bring reasons why they disagreed with different explanations about education and asked the other five groups to state with which part they agreed most. Then the second five groups were also asked to create new recommendations to modify the schedules to optimize the instruction given to learners and whether they could develop the education level one day in terms of focusing on its effectiveness. Finally, On the last day of treatment, as the post-task activity, the students were to answer the following questions individually.

1. What is your perspective on education in three years in Iran?

2. How would you observe an appropriate balance between people's needs and schooling procedures if you were a programmer?

3. Some say online learning is much better than in-person classes. Which do you prefer, and why?

To answer the third question, students themselves asked for 10 minutes of thinking and the majority of responses given then were a mixture of an off-line/ online training course. (The students were familiarized with the MOOC platform applied in the TESOL Canada course design later.)

2.4. Data analysis

In the first part of the experiment, 60 intermediate students were selected after OPT administration. Then, students were randomly divided into three groups and the researcher administered a pretest among the participants of all groups.

The pretest aimed to identify the learners' prior capability of reading comprehension. As it was mentioned before, the two experimental groups were provided by implementing two task-based instructions whereas the control group followed the regular and traditional way of reading activity. To realize the probable positive impact of the two mentioned tasks on the intermediate students' reading comprehension after six sessions a posttest was administered among three groups. Finally, two T-tests and an ANOVA were run to compare the results and students' scores to be able to come to the research conclusion.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Descriptive/Inferential Findings

This section of the research findings presents the mean and standard deviation scores of the participants, grouped by the pre-intervention and post-intervention stages. The scores are separated based on the experimental and control groups, indicating the changes in their reading comprehension skills following the intervention.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics of Reading Comprehension Scores by Groups

Group		N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
EG1	Pre.Test	20	5	16	11.00	2.753
	Post.Test	20	15	20	18.30	1.625
EG2	Pre.Test	20	7	15	11.25	2.149
	Post.Test	20	15	20	17.95	1.468
CG	Pre.Test	20	5	15	10.85	3.048
	Post.Test	20	5	14	10.30	3.011

The data in Table 1 indicates that there was a significant increase in the mean scores of reading comprehension skill tests in the two experimental groups between the pretest and posttest measurements. This suggests that the use of opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks had a positive impact on the reading comprehension skills of the participants in these groups. However, the difference in scores between the pretest and posttest was not significant in the control group, indicating that there was no significant improvement in reading comprehension skills for those who did not participate in the opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks.

Table 2

Independent Samples T-test of Pretest Scores Comparison

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
EG1	20	11.00	2.753	-0.320	38	0.751
EG2	20	11.25	2.149			
EG1	20	11.00	2.753	0.163	38	0.871
CG	20	10.85	3.048			
EG2	20	11.25	2.149	0.480	38	0.634
CG	20	10.85	3.048			

According to the results of Table 2 above, the P-value which is higher than 0.05 in the three groups indicates that there was no significant difference between the mean scores of the pretest. To calculate the effect size of the two tasks applied to reading comprehension skills, an ANOVA was conducted and its results are reported below.

Table 3

The Results of ANOVA of Group Comparison

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	827.618[a]	3	275.873	60.975	.001	.766
Intercept	944.325	1	944.325	208.719	.001	.788
Pre.Test	9.985	1	9.985	2.207	.143	.038
Group	824.451	2	412.225	91.112	.001	.765
Error	253.365	56	4.524			
Total	15527.000	60				
Corrected Total	1080.983	59				

a. R Squared = .766 (Adjusted R Squared = .753)

According to the results of Table 3, the P-value for intervention is 0.001 and smaller than 0.05 ($P \leq 0.05$) which indicates a significant difference between the scores of two experimental groups in the posttest in comparison to the scores of the pretest. Therefore, it is concluded that the opinion gap task and reasoning gap task affected the reading comprehension skills of intermediate EFL students. In the following, the results of the T-test used to compare the between-group post-test scores are presented.

Table 4

Independent Samples T-test of Posttest Scores Comparison

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.
EG1	20	18.30	1.625	0.715	38	0.479
EG2	20	17.95	1.468			
EG1	20	18.30	1.625	10.457	38	0.001
CG	20	10.30	3.011			
EG2	20	17.95	1.468	10.214	38	0.001
CG	20	10.30	3.011			

According to the results shown in Table 4, there is no significant difference between the mean scores of the two experimental groups in the post-test ($P \geq 0.05$). Therefore, it is concluded that the two task-based instructions had approximately the same impact on students' reading comprehension skills. To conclude, both of these groups which were under treatment, outperformed the control group according to the P-value which is smaller than 0.05. This also explicitly proves the positive impact of applying the two mentioned task-based instructions on the intermediate students' reading comprehension skills.

4. DISCUSSION

This study highlights the positive impact of cognitive tasks on reading comprehension skills, corroborating previous research on the effectiveness of Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT) in enhancing language proficiency. Li and Chen (2021) found that a reasoning gap task improved the listening comprehension skills of Chinese EFL learners, while Kim and Lee (2021) observed an improvement in the speaking and writing skills of Korean EFL learners through TBLT. Yu and Jiang (2020) found that negotiation of meaning played a crucial role in the development of writing skills in Chinese EFL learners. These studies suggest that TBLT, particularly its inclusion of cognitive tasks such as reasoning gap and opinion gap tasks, can benefit language learners by fostering critical thinking and reasoning skills. This can result in improved language proficiency, both in receptive skills such as listening and reading, and productive skills such as writing and speaking. Of particular significance is the finding that cognitive tasks can improve reading comprehension skills without necessitating specific written materials, making them practical and accessible for classroom use.

The finding that opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks can improve reading comprehension skills is consistent with related literature in the same era. Several studies have identified critical thinking as a key component of reading comprehension, emphasizing the importance of engaging students in tasks that require them to evaluate, analyze, and synthesize information from the text. Opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks align with this approach, as they challenge students to assess multiple perspectives and arguments and make connections between different ideas presented in the text. In addition, the research has shown that active engagement with the text, such as through discussion and reflection, can enhance reading comprehension skills. Opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks indirectly require students to engage with the text at a deeper level, promoting active processing and analysis of the information presented. This engagement can lead to improved comprehension and retention of the material. This study has also emphasized the importance of developing students' metacognitive skills, such as self-regulation and monitoring, in promoting reading comprehension. Opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks can facilitate the development of these skills by requiring students to reflect on their thinking processes and evaluate their understanding of the text. The finding that opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks can improve reading comprehension skills aligns well with related literature in the same era. This approach emphasizes the importance of critical thinking, active engagement with the text, and metacognitive development in promoting reading comprehension, all of which are central components of opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks.

While the studies provide compelling evidence for the effectiveness of TBLT in developing language skills, it is important to consider individual differences among learners, task design, and the classroom context as potential factors influencing the effectiveness of TBLT. Furthermore, the studies have largely focused on short-term effects, and further research is necessary to determine the long-term impact of TBLT on language learning. Meanwhile, the findings of the present study support the effectiveness of two cognitive tasks in improving reading comprehension skills, consistent with previous research on the benefits of TBLT. The inclusion of cognitive tasks in TBLT can enhance language proficiency by promoting critical thinking and reasoning skills. Cognitive tasks such as reasoning gap and opinion gap tasks can be particularly useful in this regard, as they do not require specific written materials and are practical for classroom use. However, the effectiveness of TBLT may be influenced by various factors such as individual differences among learners, task design, and classroom context. Further research is needed to determine the long-term impact of TBLT on language learning and identify optimal conditions for its implementation.

5. CONCLUSION

The study aimed to investigate how reading comprehension skills can be improved and its chief purpose was to study task-based teaching methods to find out whether or not it has an impact on reading comprehension improvement of the Iranian EFL students. As a start, a pretest was given to three predetermined groups (EG1, EG2, CG) to simply compare their performances on reading comprehension before any treatment was given. After TBI implementation using two tasks, the opinion gap task and the reasoning gap task, a posttest was given to identify the positive or negative impact of the two tasks on reading comprehension. To obtain the expected results statistically, a one-way ANOVA between the post-test results of the three groups was used and finally, two T-tests were applied to compare the mean scores of the groups before and after the treatment. The results of the posttest of the two experimental groups illustrated that applying task-based instruction had a more positive effect on the intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension skills in comparison to the traditional teaching method which was utilized for the control group. Although it was proved that there was a significant impact of TBI using two aforementioned tasks on reading comprehension skills, the pairwise comparison of the variables showed that there was not a significant difference between the range of influence the two tasks had on reading comprehension skills which showed that the two tasks, opinion gap task, and reasoning gap task, had approximately an equal influence on learners' reading comprehension skill.

Results of the present study mentioned that Iranian EFL learners' reading comprehension, considered a receptive skill, was promoted gradually through being engrossed with productive activities doing the related teaching tasks. There are many claims that some factors that increase the learners' motivation in an interactive environment are involved and are relevant to that particular area in which the instructors concentrate. The productive skills mostly require communicative tasks to improve. As proved in this study, reading comprehension skills which, according to general belief should be practiced deductively, is a skill that can be highly inductively raised in a group task. Investigating the impact of ''peripheral learning'' on skill improvement as an inductive type which means being exposed to information contained in the learning environment over some time, has been the scholars' concern through the years as well. Furthermore, it can be implied that the theories of second language reading comprehension do not entail all factors that support the learners to succeed. Besides, there might be some more factors that influence reading comprehension.

Practically, the results of this research can aid the teachers who tend to work in this area and their learners as well. As mentioned before, reading comprehension has always been one of the most important language skills to learn because it is an appropriate way to communicate with whom we want to be informed. In digital learning, it plays one of the greatest roles. In the modern era where everyone is connected and the world is a global village, reading is the most important skill for people to be updated by reading international written products such as books, articles, magazines, etc. The importance of reading truly demonstrates the undeniable importance of teaching it. Thus, language

teachers try to follow more procedures to assist students in reading more effectively (Chastain, 1988). According to the findings of this research, educators can benefit from them and other research results that applying task-based instruction in some cases can increase the proficiency of the learners' reading comprehension skills. The factors other than utilizing cognitive tasks during class instruction may play a significant role in the comprehension process at various levels which need to be deeply investigated. It appears that task-based teaching approaches, as discussed in the reading passages, can serve as both a motivational tool and a means of aiding comprehension of texts. As the findings of this research indicate, TBI can be applied in classes to improve the learners' performance integratively through discussing the related topics in a group design. In these activities, the instructors should better provide the learners with a relaxing and stress-free situation in which they can interact with no fear of being judged.

The discovery that opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks can enhance reading comprehension skills is a significant contribution to the field of education. This finding suggests that incorporating these tasks into reading instruction can promote critical thinking abilities and facilitate comprehension of complex texts. By designing tasks that challenge students to identify and evaluate various perspectives and arguments, educators can foster the development of skills that are critical for academic success. This finding is useful for practitioners as it has the potential to inform instructional practices that support the development of reading comprehension skills. Educators can implement opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks in their classrooms to promote critical thinking, facilitate comprehension, and encourage engagement with the text. These tasks can be customized to cater to the specific needs of diverse student populations, making them versatile tools for educators.

Furthermore, this finding can inspire practitioners to consider novel approaches to reading instruction that prioritize critical thinking and active engagement with the text. By including opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks in their instruction, educators can create opportunities for students to acquire skills that are fundamental for academic success and lifelong learning. Besides, the discovery that opinion gap and reasoning gap tasks can enhance reading comprehension skills provides practitioners with a valuable tool to support student learning. By integrating these tasks into their instruction, educators can promote critical thinking, comprehension, and engagement, leading to meaningful and active learning experiences for students.

In a nutshell, since learning is a process that depends upon many things and is influenced by intellectual, reflective, and even physical factors, concentrating only on limited causes of learning is not a good support for understanding the deepest strata of this process. It is highly suggested that more studies be conducted considering the probable relationship between the learners' proficiency level and the quality of their reading performance depending on age, mental puberty, the amount of related exposure they get, etc. Since the main aspect of true literacy and proficiency might not be achieved in a short-limited course, the much deeper strata which are certainly involved in performance betterment should be of concern in future research. And finally, it is worthwhile noticing that future researchers deal with more factors that not only deductively, but also inductively impact skill improvement, especially reading comprehension.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval: To ensure that the research was conducted ethically and responsibly, the study received ethics approval from the faculty group of the English language department, Islamic Azad University, Chalous Branch, Iran. Besides, five members of the faculty of another department took the responsibility to review the work providing an approval note, IRB-2023-6078. The study design, data analysis, and results were reviewed and approved by the committee, confirming that all ethical considerations were taken into account. One of the key ethical considerations in this study was obtaining informed consent from all participants. Participants were given a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, and their right to withdraw from the

study at any time. They were also informed about the confidentiality of their data and how it would be used. In addition, the study was designed to protect the privacy and welfare of the participants. The data collected was stored securely and confidentially, and the participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. The study was conducted by the ethical principles of research involving human participants, and all ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure that the participant's rights and welfare were protected.

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