Effect of (Un)Focused Tasks on L2 Learners' Meaning Negotiation and Negotiation Strategy

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Abstract

This study probed EFL learners' negotiation of meaning and negotiation strategy in two unfocused and two focused tasks using a counterbalanced design. Each of the focused/unfocused tasks included one opinion-exchange and decision-making task type, which resulted in four particular task conditions. To this end, 36 Iranian intermediate EFL learners majoring in English translation with an age range of 20–24 were invited to work together in groups to carry out tasks, with their voices recorded while performing the tasks. The analysis of the quantitative and qualitative data from the participants' performances indicated that the unfocused tasks elicited significantly more instances of meaning negotiation than the focused tasks, promoting more interaction-driven opportunities. Also, they evoked more confirmation check and clarification request strategies. Moreover, the decision-making tasks demanded more

cooperation and engaged the participants in interaction more than the opinion-exchange tasks. The findings have provided insight into designing classroom tasks to increase negotiation of meaning. They have also highlighted the positive effects of unfocused task engagement on L2 learning and encourage L2 teachers to implement task-based language instruction.

Keywords: focused tasks; unfocused tasks; decision-making tasks; meaning negotiation; negotiation strategy

Introduction

In the past two decades, research in the field of second language (L2) learning has observed a growing interest in the use of tasks as a way to promote L2 learning (Hawkes, 2015; Révész, 2014). A task is "an activity in which a person engages in order to attain an objective (Van den Branden, 2006, p. 4). In fact, the task-based approach to teaching is a trend in methodology which includes the use of tasks to engage language learners in meaningful negotiation and interaction (Richards, 2001; Willis & Willis, 2007). Task-based language instruction (TBLI) or task-based language teaching (TBLT) relies on the idea that if language learners want to study the target language successfully, they should involve themselves in tasks that offer opportunities for naturalistic language use instead of activities that focus only on language forms (Ellis, 2003). TBLI/TBLT is so important in L2 learning (Nunan, 2005) and can improve learners' L2 ability (Kanoksilapatham & Suranakkharin, 2019). However, TBLI is inadequate in developing acceptable levels of accuracy in L2 learning (Widdowson, 2003). Also, a purely meaning-focused approach to task-based instruction is problematic in the foreign language (FL) situation, where real life needs for the target language occur very occasionally and language learners study the target language primarily to pass written examinations (Nassaji & Fotos, 2004).

Taking these issues into consideration, Ellis (2003) has made a distinction between focused and unfocused communicative/ communication tasks. He describes the focused type of communicative tasks as the tasks which are constructed in a way that entail language learners' use of a particular form of grammar. Language learners focus on meaningful issues while they are encouraged to use specific linguistic features (García Mayo, 2018). By contrast, unfocused communication tasks are the tasks in which L2 learners utilize the target language without any requirement to use a specific grammar structure/form for completing the task. That is, this type of task is not designed to elicit particular grammatical structures in the L2 learners' output (García Mayo, 2018). However, both focused and unfocused tasks present opportunities for L2 learners to use the target language in a meaningful situation and foster communicative language use.

Furthermore, learners' negotiation of meaning is a focus of research on tasks in the field of L2 education and plays a pivotal role in TBLT (Van der Zwaard & Bannink, 2019). Negotiating meaning enriches the understanding of L2 input and provides reasonable conditions for L2 development (Foster & Ohta, 2005). In fact, meaning negotiation is "the process by which two or more interlocutors identify and then attempt to resolve a communication breakdown" (Ellis, 2003, p. 346). It is an attempt by learners to overcome various communication difficulties and continue being involved in communication as they make sense of others' speech (Azkarai & Agirre, 2016; Nurazizah et al., 2018). The key element in meaning negotiation is the use of negotiation strategies, such as clarification requests and comprehension checks, which are regarded as responses to a communication breakdown. That is to say, negotiation strategies are the primary discourse moves that ensure the occurrence of negotiation (Loewen & Sato, 2018).

So far, research has investigated the effects of tasks on language learners' meaning negotiation. Studies have shown that different factors, such as the type of the task (e.g., Gagne & Parks, 2013), the cognitive complexity of the task (e.g., Gilabert et al., 2009), and task familiarity (e.g., Mackey et al., 2007) can affect meaning negotiation.

In spite of the large body of research in this area, there is no clear picture of how focused and unfocused communication tasks affect negotiation of meaning and facilitate learning of L2, particularly in English as a foreign language (EFL) settings. The role of negotiation strategies as a means of facilitating meaning negotiation has not been adequately investigated in research studies (Gass et al., 2005). In order to address this gap, the present study mainly looked into L2 learners' meaning negotiation and the use of negotiation strategies in two focused and two unfocused communication tasks in an EFL context. Besides this, it examined the role of task type in the L2 learners' meaning negotiation and negotiation strategy use. It was hoped that the results of this study may contribute to better understanding of L2 learning process. Moreover, as Yi and Sun (2013) state, meaning negotiation does not take place in a vacuum and automatically. Classroom communicative tasks in which learners work together have the potential for meaning negotiation (Jafar et al., 2017). Therefore, research on communicative tasks can contribute to better understanding of how meaning negotiation occur in classrooms.

Literature Review

Focused and unfocused tasks

There are various definitions and descriptions of tasks presented by L2 researchers. Skehan (1996) defines tasks as activities which require meaning as their principal focus and somehow resemble real-life language use. Pica et al. (1993) consider communicative tasks as a means to help language learning and to examine the processes of L2 learning. Ellis (2003) considers tasks as a work plan that demands language learners to process language pragmatically to obtain an outcome. Willis and Willis (2007) refer to tasks as those activities where the target language is utilized by language learners for a communicative goal to obtain an outcome. Among these various views, the general consensus, however, is that tasks primarily concentrate on learners' language use in a meaningful way, and they are mostly connected to communicative challenges learners face in their real life (Nassaji & Fotos, 2011).

Over the past decades, TBLT has been implemented by many language instructors, teacher trainers, and researchers as the most attractive alternative to traditional approaches (Butler et al., 2018; Ellis, 2017). TBLT views meaning making as the main function of language and incorporates structural, functional, and interactional models of language (Richards & Rodgers, 2007). The aim is to engage learners to use an authentic language and develop their fluency and accuracy in the target language. In TBLT, tasks are used as the main component of planning and instruction in teaching of the target language (Richards, 2001). However, a basic concern in TBLT is whether the target tasks need to be focused or unfocused. Focused tasks are those tasks that offer chances for potential communication by applying some particular linguistic elements (Ellis, 2009). In focused communication tasks, the prominence is given to some linguistic features, but not in the manner that makes the learners focus more on form than meaning (Nobuyoshi & Ellis, 1993).

In focused tasks, when learners are aware of a grammar rule, they would have a tendency to perceive it in succeeding communicative input. That is, when learners notice a language point frequently, they unconsciously compare the new input with their existing L2 system, build new hypotheses, and test them by confronting themselves with more input and receiving feedback on their own output using the new form (Ellis, 2009). In contrast, unfocused tasks are tasks that give learners the opportunity to use language communicatively (Ellis, 2009). In general, the difference between focused and unfocused tasks is in their design; unfocused tasks are developed in a way to produce general samples of language use, whereas focused tasks are developed with a particular language form in mind (Ellis et al., 2018). However, both should meet such criteria as a principled focus on meaning and have a communicative outcome.

Several studies have investigated the relative impact of various kinds of unfocused and focused tasks on L2 learning. For instance, Gurzynski-Weiss and Révész (2012) explored the impacts of various kinds of unfocused and focused tasks on the patterns of feedback. They transcribed 23 videotaped lessons of nine Spanish FL

classrooms. The overall results showed that the classroom teachers were more inclined to point to errors with feedback throughout unfocused tasks than focused tasks. That is, the type of tasks influenced the amount, but not the type of teacher feedback during task performance. Also, in the context of Iran, Farahani and Taki (2017) examined the effects of unfocused and focused task instructions on 60 intermediate-level teenagers' acquisition of grammar. The results showed that the focused tasks, particularly consciousness-raising task tended to improve the participants' grammar. They pointed to the importance of focused TBLI in grammar learning and concluded that focused tasks could offer a better way of teaching particular linguistic forms communicatively. Along the same lines, Ahour and Ghorbani (2015) conducted a study on the impact of unfocused and focused tasks on the grammatical achievement of 60 Iranian freshmen and showed that both focused and unfocused TBLI would have major effects on learning grammar. Furthermore, Alavinia et al. (2018) examined the impact of unfocused and focused audio-appended reading tasks on the written accuracy of Iranain EFL learners at the intermediate level. Their results revealed that those learners who received focused audio-appended reading tasks performed better than those who were exposed to unfocused audio-appended reading tasks due to the deeper processing involved in form-focused instruction. In sum, previous studies have contributed to an understanding of the effects of various kinds of unfocused/focused tasks. However, they have not looked into how focused and unfocused tasks affect the amount of EFL learners' meaning negotiation, which is the main focus of the present research.

Negotiation of Meaning in L2 Learning

Meaning negotiation has gained great popularity in the field of L2 education over the past few years (Flora et al., 2021). Pica (1994) defines negotiation of meaning as an activity "in which learners seek clarification, confirmation, and repetition of L2 utterances they do not understand" (p. 56). In a similar way, Gass and Varonis (1985) describe meaning negotiation as "non-understanding routines" that

occurs when input from one participant is regarded as "unaccepted input," making others' understanding incomplete (p. 151). Most often, negotiation exchanges are being used between interlocutors in order to make the conversation easily understood (Wang, 2019). Therefore, the process of meaning negotiation acts as a means for preventing conversational trouble as well as a repair mechanism for overcoming communication breakdown (Oliver, 2002).

Initially, Long (1983) and Pica and Doughty (1985) classified the negotiation of meaning strategies into different categories: confirmation checks, clarification requests, comprehension checks, use of approximation, word coinage, correction, self-repetition, other repetition, and non-verbal expression of non-understanding. Among them, the most commonly used strategies are confirmation checks, clarification requests, and comprehension checks (Hartono & Ihsan, 2017), which provide opportunities for learners to negotiate meaning and prevent communication breakdown (Flora et al., 2021). As Flora et al. (2021) explain, comprehension check is a strategy which is used by the speaker when he or she wants to be sure whether he or she is understood by the interlocutor (e.g., *Do you understand?*). Clarification request takes place when the listener tries to understand the speaker's utterances (e.g., *Pardon me). C*onfirmation check is for confirming a message or an idea, which is done by repetition, modification, correction, completion, or elaboration (e.g., *Do you mean …?*). According to Loewen and Sato (2018), these three strategy types are the basic elements of negotiation for meaning, namely, at the heart of the interaction, and are viewed as the driving force in improving L2 development (Loewen & Sato, 2018).

Prior research has demonstrated that L2 learners' tendency to meaning negotiation is influenced by different factors, such as the age and context of learning (Mayo & Ibarrola, 2015) or their level of proficiency (Lazaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2015). Besides, several studies (e.g., Bao, 2019; Mackey et al., 2007) have indicated that different task factors, such as task type, can affect learners' negotiation of meaning in the domain of L2 learning. L2 research (e.g., Bygate, 1999; Gagne & Parks, 2013; Nakahama et al., 2001) has also

confirmed the effect of task types on the oral language production of learners and their interaction in groups. Bygate (1999), for instance, investigated the Hungarian secondary school students' performance in narrative and argument tasks and reported that the two types of tasks pushed the Hungarian students in different ways. The narrative kind of tasks led the learners toward complexity of lexical and syntactic processing, while the argumentation tasks involved the learners more in less complex syntactic processing. Likewise, Nakahama et al. (2001) studied the way meaning was negotiated in two different kinds of interactions: an information-gap task and an unstructured conversation. Three intermediate-level English as a second language (ESL) Japanese students were recorded as they carried out the aforementioned tasks and concluded that conversational tasks were superior to information-gap tasks in promoting negotiation. Moreover, Mackey et al. (2007) examined the influence of task familiarity on the interaction of 40 ESL children and reported that the ESL students produced more confirmation checks and clarification requests while doing unfamiliar tasks; by contrast, the ESL children made more comprehension checks while performing the tasks with familiar content.

Later, Gagne and Parks (2013) examined how young ESL learners in an intensive class at elementary level provided each other with linguistic scaffolding while performing different tasks in their classroom. They demonstrated that the request for help and peer correction were the two frequently-used strategies by the young ESL learners, while the use of those strategies which were basically related to meaning negotiation based on an interactionist perspective were rare. They concluded that the young learners' success in collaboration might be due to task type. More recently, Wang (2019) examined the impact of controlled and creative L2 tasks on interaction patterns among 36 students who were studying English in two different Taiwanese universities. Those tasks that involved the students in creative thinking evoked more negotiation of meaning among L2 adult learners.

In sum, in spite of the bulk of studies about the task effects on L2 learners' meaning negotiation, further research is required on how focused and unfocused tasks affect the amount of meaning negotiation and negotiation strategies. Moreover, based on the related literature, the choice of appropriate task type may influence the quality and quantity of learners' output and the amount of negotiation. However, there is little research delving into the potential impact of decision-making and opinion-exchange tasks on meaning negotiation and use of negotiation strategies. These tasks allow a number of possible outcomes. A decision-making tasks requires L2 learners to reach an agreed solution, whereas an opinion-exchange task does not (Ellis, 2003). Besides, decision-making tasks require L2 learners to cooperate with others to achieve a general goal, whereas opinion-exchange tasks just rely on L2 learners' expression of their personal thoughts. Taking these issues into consideration, the current study sought to investigate if there would be any significant difference between focused and unfocused tasks regarding L2 (English) learners' frequency/amount of meaning negotiation and their negotiation strategy use. It also investigated if the kind of tasks, i.e., opinion-exchange vs. decision-making, could affect such possible differences. In attaining the above objectives, this study can provide L2 instructors and learners with context-sensitive pedagogical implications which may guide them in promoting the use of tasks and meaning negotiation strategies in L2 development. Thus, the present study attempted to answer the following two research questions:

1. Is there any significant difference in L2 (English) learners' frequency of meaning negotiation between focused and unfocused communicative tasks? If that is the case, does the task type (opinion-exchange vs. decision-making) act as a moderating variable in such a difference?

2. Is there any significant difference in L2 (English) learners' use of negotiation strategies between focused and unfocused communicative tasks? If that is the case, does the task type (opinion-exchange vs. decision-making) act as a moderating variable in creating such a difference?

Methodology

Participants

Thirty-six Iranian EFL freshman students at Payam Nour University, Fasa Branch, in Iran participated in this research. The participants were 30 females and six males, majoring in English translation, and their ages ranged from 20 to 24. They were selected based on the scores on an English placement test, Outcomes Placement Test, released by National Geographic Learning (2016). It was decided to exclude those students who scored below the required level on grammar, vocabulary, and writing skill because the participants of the study needed to express their ideas in written or oral language. The participants were at the intermediate level, and their oral/writing proficiency was acceptable for the purpose of the current study.

Materials and Instruments

The Outcomes Placement Test

The Outcomes Placement Test was used to select the intermediate-level participants and make sure that they were homogeneous. It consisted of grammar and vocabulary items, an interview, and a writing task. The reliability indices of the placement test, estimated by Cronbach's alpha coefficient ($\alpha = .89$) and interrater reliability coefficient ($r = .94$), showed an acceptable internal consistency for grammar and vocabulary items as well as consistency between two raters in assigning writing and speaking scores.

Oral Communication Tasks

For the purpose of the present study, four oral communication tasks were designed: two focused communicative tasks and two unfocused communicative tasks. Focused tasks were designed to have a particular linguistic focus. Following Ellis (2003), the focused tasks had the goal of making the target grammar form (comparative form) salient to the EFL participants by drawing the participants' attention to their use in context (consciousness raising).

Pica et al. (1993) classified tasks as information-gap, jigsaw, decision-making, opinion-exchange, and problem-solving types. This study used decision-making as well as opinion-exchange/opinion-gap tasks to create opportunities for meaning negotiation. In this way, the focused and unfocused tasks could be opinion-exchange (OE) and decision-making (DM). Accordingly, the present study included the following task conditions: focused decision making (F/DM), unfocused decision making (UF/DM), focused opinion exchange (F/OE), and unfocused opinion exchange (UF/OE). As Ortiz-Neira (2019) has pointed out, because learners try to share some information with each other to complete such tasks, they are called two-way activities.

Both opinion-exchange (i.e., F/OE and UF/OE) and decision-making (i.e., F/DM and UF/DM) tasks had the same topic. DM tasks are those activities that demand an agreement/consensus as its end product (Brown, 2001). In the current study, the UF/DM and F/DM tasks were called "a True Friend," and their development was based on the task procedure in Maggs and Hird (2002). That is, the participants in both focused and unfocused tasks were required to imagine the following scenario: "If you find out that your friend has cheated in an exam, what will you do?" In the F/DM tasks, the participants were given several options (e.g., tell the teacher immediately, have a good laugh and congratulate your friend, explain that your friend can get into a lot of trouble for cheating), and they had to choose one option, decide what to do, and compare their final decisions with each other. The participants had to talk about their reasons using comparative forms of adjectives. On the other hand, in the UF/DM tasks, the participants were asked to brainstorm what to do without having any options to choose from and without focusing on any specific linguistic form.

As Brown (2001) explains, OE tasks, also named opinion-gap tasks, are those tasks in which the learners are asked to detect, specify, and convey their own ideas on a specific topic. In the current study, the participants were required to discuss the topic of "How to improve motorcycling safety in Iran." In the F/OE, three specific methods of (1) enacting restriction helmet laws, (2) improving the

design of a helmet, and (3) ordering all motorcyclists to have a certification test, were presented to the participants. They discussed their ideas and their choice using English comparative adjectives. In contrast, in the UF/OE tasks, the participants were required to brainstorm the topic without any predetermined choices and without focusing on a specific target form. Table 1 presents some information for the oral communicative tasks in a comparative way.

Table 1

Comparative Information about the Oral Communicative Tasks

Tasks	Task 1	Task 2	Task 3	Task 4
Topic	Cheating	Cheating	Motorcycling Safety	Motorcycling Safety
Task type (1)	Focused	Unfocused	Focused	Unfocused
Task type (2)	Decision-making	Decision-making	Opinion-exchange	Opinion-exchange
Information exchange	Required	Required	Required	Required
Information gap	Two-way Closed	Two-way Open	Two-way Closed	Two-way Open
Expected Outcome				

Data collection procedure

The placement test was administered to select the EFL participants who were at the same level of English proficiency. These particpants were then asked to carry out all the four communicative tasks. In order to prevent an order effect on the interaction, the study used a counterbalancing design, which included four different task types: two focused and two unfocused tasks. The focused/unfocused task type encompassed one DM and one OE task, resulting in four different task conditions. The focused and unfocused tasks were presented at two points of time. The F/DM and UF/DM tasks were implemented at one point, and, after three weeks, the F/OE and UF/OE were implemented at another point of time. Also, to ensure consistency in their implemention, a procedure which had three stages

of topic activation, group discussion, and group presentation was used (see Table 2). In the first stage, the participants became familiar with the task instructions and their purpose. Then, to activate the participants' prior content and make them ready for the subsequent discussion, they watched two five-minute video clips, downloaded from YouTube. They initially brainstormed the topics by writing key words and placing them in a box on a piece of paper given to them, coming up with their initial ideas and writing them down in another box, and then improving them or selecting good ones. Next, they discussed the topics about ten minutes in the second stage (group discussion) while their voices and reactions were being recorded by a voice recorder and a camera. After completing the group work, they were invited to summarize their views about the topic of the task for about five minutes and presented their views.

Table 2

The Procedure for the Oral Communicative Tasks

Task types	DM Tasks	OE Tasks	Time
Topic Activation	Viewing episodes of cheating on YouTube & brainstorming	Viewing episodes of motorcycle accidents on YouTube & brainstorming	5 mins 5 mins
Group Discussion	Group discussion	Group discussion	10 mins
Group Presentation	Summary of their discussion	Summary of their discussion	5 mins

Two levels of analysis, transcription and decoding, were implemented. At the level of transcription, a ten-minute segment on every task condition were transcribed and prepared for the decoding phase. To transcribe the group interactions, Storch's (2002) transcription conventions were used. Storch's framework examines the participants' interaction by analyzing the degree to which they share ideas with each other and control the direction of the tasks

(Roberson, 2014). All the transcriptions were done by one of the researchers and were later checked by another researcher of the current study. At the second level, i.e., the decoding level, two raters determined and reported the occurrences of negotiation of meaning and categorized the participants' negotiation prompts. Interrater agreement was high, but when disagreement took place, they were asked to meet again, discuss it, and resolve the disagreement.

Moreover, Long (1980) has classified negotiation strategies as confirmation checks, clarification requests, and comprehension checks with regard to their function in the discourse. To explore how the participants negotiated during group interaction in the tasks, the current study relied on Long's classification, employed by many other studies (e.g., Gilabert et al., 2009; Lazaro-Ibarrola & Azpilicueta-Martínez, 2015). Table 3 presents the classification of negotiation strategies with examples from the data collected in the current study.

Table 3

Classification of Negotiation Strategies with Examples from the Data

Negotiation Strategies	Examples
1. Confirmation check	St1: I will denounce that person? Or…… St2: **Renounce?** St1: Denounce.
2. Clarification request	St1: and I admonish her, Yee… admonish her, I think it would be more effective. St2: **What do you mean?** St1: I mean, I am saying that that she has done something wrong.
3. Comprehension check	St1: Perhaps the exam was more difficult …, and he couldn't answer it.(laugh) St2: Yes, I think the same… but it isn't a logic behind her job. St1: Okay. St2: **You know what I mean?**

Results

First Research Question: Comparison of Meaning Negotiation in the Tasks

The participants' negotiation of meaning was identified in the focused and unfocused tasks. They were all considered as prompts leading the interlocutors to employ some negotiation strategies to prevent communication breakdown. Following are two examples taken from the focused/unfocused tasks. Excerpt 1 shows how the meaning negotiation occurred in the focused task (The contraction St stands for "Student").

Excerpt 1 (Focused Task)
St3: If you do not catch them cheating and report the students' cheating, they may sail through the whole term and make the same mistake!
St4: **What do you mean?** [clarification request]
St1: If they get caught, they probably won't try to do it again. (Others laughed.)
St2: I think, telling the teacher in private after class is better.
St3: It's better not to **ruin** her reputation.
St2: ruin? [confirmation check]
St1: Yeah...ruin... she means keeping her reputation!
St3: **You know what I mean?** [comprehension check]
St4: Yes, so...we all believe that talking to the teacher is a more effective solution.

In the exchange in Excerpt 1, the students talked about a situation in which they should decide what to do if they found out that their classmates cheated on a test/an exam. They gave their opinions and tried to come to an agreement while using comparative adjectives. During their discussions, they resorted to the strategies of clarification request, confirmation check, and comprehension check to negotiate meaning. Student 4 used a clarification request "What do you mean?" since she did not get the point in the first statement made by Student 3. Later, Student 2 used a confirmation check strategy by repeating the word "ruin?" to be sure about the meaning of the word, and finally Student 3 employed a comprehension check strategy "You know what I mean?" to check the other interlocutors' understanding of his point.

Excerpt 2 shows how meaning negotiation occurred in the unfocused task. In the exchange, the students were invited to give their opinions on various ways to improve motorcycling safety in Iran. The students were not required to use any specific grammatical structures in their interaction. They employed several negotiation strategies to prevent communication breakdown. As shown in Except 2, Student 3 utilized a comprehension check strategy "You know what I mean?" to check the others' understanding of his proposed view that a restriction rule was not enough. Also, Student 2 employed a confirmation check strategy by repeating the word "in force?" because she was not certain about the meaning of the term "enforce;" she also misunderstood it.

Excerpt 2 (Unfocused Task)
St1: In my opinion, there must be a restriction rule for wearing a helmet.
St2: er… the design of the helmet here should also be improved.
St3: But a restriction rule is not enough.
St4: Of course, ….it is not.
St3: **You know what I mean?** [comprehension check]
St1: So what?
St3: I mean the government should enforce all motorcyclists in Iran to pass a certification test.
St2: er…{**in force**}? [confirmation check]
St3: e-n-f-o-r-c-e.

To answer the first research question and compare the participants' meaning negotiation through the focused and unfocused tasks, the frequencies of meaning negotiation were obtained. The summary of the frequency data is reported in Table 4.

Table 4

Frequencies of Meaning Negotiation for the Unfocused and Focused Tasks

Type of Tasks	*F*	%
F	30	26
UF	87	74
Total	117	100

Note: f = frequency

As Table 4 shows, the unfocused tasks (74%) achieved higher rates of negotiation than the focused ones (26%). The UF/DM task elicited the most cases (48 cases), and the F/OE task elicited the least cases (12 cases). In other words, these results indicated that more cases of meaning negotiation occurred in the unfocused tasks. Also, the Chi-square results revealed that the differences in the amount of meaning negotiation between focused and unfocused communicative tasks were statistically significant ($x2 = 27.77$, $p = .001$).

This study employed two task types of decision-making vs. opinion-exchange. Excerpt 3 shows how meaning negotiation occurred in the unfocused decision-making task, and Excerpt 4 demonstrates how meaning negotiation occurred in the focused opinion-exchange task. In the interaction in Excerpt 3, the students were asked to decide on a more effective way to improve motorcycling safety in Iran and find an appropriate solution. Student 1 had introduced the use of helmet laws as a suggestion. Student 2 seemed to be confused and had doubt about the meaning of the word "enacting." Thus, she employed a confirmation check strategy by repeating the word "Enacting?" to confirm the use of the term "enacting." Also, Student 3 made use of a clarification request "What do you mean?" to better understand the intention of Student 2 about "promoting this law" and wearing helmets for improving motorcycling safety.

Excerpt 3 (Decision-making)
St1: I think enacting restriction helmet laws is a good solution.
St2. **Enacting?** [confirmation check]
St1: Yes, enacting.
St3. She means making a law.
St4: Yeah, I think wearing a helmet can enhance motorcycling safety.
St1: er…one must obey the law.
St2: I think promoting this law by government is important!
St3. **What do you mean?** [clarification request]
St2: I mean by encouraging people or by other ways to publicize this rule.
St4: So, we all believe that an appropriate solution is enacting helmet laws.

In the exchange in Except 4, the participants discussed the topic of cheating. They talked about the ways to deal with a person who would cheat. While talking about this issue, they gave their own opinions about how to report cheating to the teacher using comparative adjectives, such as "better" or "more appropriate." Student 2 used a confirmation check strategy by repeating the phrase "singling out?" to be more on the safe ground about its meaning. Later, Student 1 used a clarification request "What do you mean?" when he did not understand the meaning of the statement made by Student 4. Therefore, he asked for clarification about the meaning of "appreciates a tattle tale."

Excerpt 4 (Opinion-exchange)
St1: I think informing the teacher of what happened is the best solution.
St2: Solving such a problem is not always possible by teachers!
St3: It's my idea, reporting the cheating without singling out that person is more appropriate.
St2. **Singling out?** [confirmation check]
St3. Singling out... I mean announcing the name of the student who was cheating is better.
St4: But….nobody in the class appreciates a tattle tale. (others laugh)
St1: **What do you mean?** [clarification request]
St4: …eh..
St2: You said {tatter tale}?

Furthermore, the study was conducted to see whether the differences in the frequency of meaning negotiation between focused and unfocused tasks were affected by the two task type conditions (opinion-exchange vs. decision-making). Table 5 displays the frequencies of meaning negotiation for these two types of conditions.

Table 5

Frequencies of Meaning Negotiation for the Decision-making and Opinion-exchange Tasks

Type of Tasks	*f*	*%*
DM/UF	48	41
DM/F	18	15.4
Total DM	66	56.4
OE/UF	39	33.3
OE/F	12	10.3
Total OE	51	43.6

Table 5 shows that there were more examples of negotiation of meaning in the DM tasks (56.4%) than the OE tasks (43.4%). There were about 13% more cases of meaning negotiation in the DM tasks. The Chi-square results also showed that the observed frequency differences between the DM and OE tasks were statistically significant ($x2 = 0.06$, *p* = .805). Therefore, the differences were not affected significantly by the task condition of decision-making vs. opinion-exchange and these task conditions did not act as a moderating variable.

Second Research Question: Comparison of Negotiation Strategies in the Tasks

To address the second research question, investigating EFL learners' use of negotiation strategies between the focused and unfocused tasks, the frequencies of confirmation checks, clarification requests, and comprehension checks were obtained (see Table 6).

Table 6

Frequencies of Negotiation Strategies in the Unfocused and Focused Tasks

Task Type Negotiation Strategies	UF		F	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*
Confirmation Check	47 42.86	63		12
Clarification Request	23 32.14	31		9
Comprehension Check	5	6	7	25
Total	74 100	100		24

As displayed in Table 6, confirmation check strategies received the highest percentage and the comprehension check strategies received the lowest percentage of the strategies regarding both types of unfocused and focused tasks. The percentages of confirmation checks (63%) and clarification requests (31%) were higher in the focused tasks. Therefore, more confirmation checks and fewer comprehension checks were utilized.

To probe whether differences in the participants' use of negotiation strategies between the two task types were statistically significant, the Chi-square test was run. The statistical analysis revealed that the relationship between the type of negotiation strategies and task type (focused vs. unfocused) was statistically significant, ($x2 = 7.293$, *p* = .0260). In order to see whether the task condition (decision-making vs. opinion-exchange) acted as a moderating variable in such a difference, the participants' frequencies of negotiation strategy use in these two task conditions were obtained (see Table 7), and the Chi-square test was subsequently run again.

Table 7

Frequencies of Negotiation Strategies in Decision-making and Opinion-exchange Tasks

Negotiation Strategies	DM				OE			
	UF		F		UF		F	
	f	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*	*f*	*%*
Confirmation Check	28	63.63	7	38.9	19	61.30	5	50
Clarification Request	13	29.55	6	33.3	10	32.25	3	30
Comprehension Check	3	6.82	5	27.8	2	6.45	2	20

Table 7 indicates that the UF/DM task elicited more instances of confirmation check strategies (63.63%) than the F/DM task (38.9%). Also, the participants employed more confirmation check in the UF/OE (61.30%) than in the F/OE tasks (50.0%). Regarding the use of clarification request, there was an increase in the use of this strategy from the UF/DM task (29.55%) to the F/DM task (33.3%). Considering comprehension checks, small differences were observed between the DM and OE tasks. The participants employed almost the same instances of comprehension check strategies in both the DM (6.82%) and OE (6.45%) tasks. All in all, more confirmation checks were produced by the participants in the UF/DM task than in the F/DM task. In contrast, more clarification requests were observed in the UF/OE task than in the F/OE task. However, the Chi-square results indicated that the task condition (decision-making vs. opinion-exchange) did not act as a moderating variable and the above differences between the unfocused and focused tasks in the use of negotiation strategies were not significantly affected by the task conditions of decision-making and information-exchange, x^2 (2, 44) = 0.237, *p* = .888.

Discussion

Concerning the first research question, the results revealed that the unfocused tasks generally elicited more interaction among the EFL

partners than the focused tasks. There are several reasons why there were more cases of meaning negotiations in the unfocused tasks, which resulted in a significance difference in percentages of meaning negotiations between focused and unfocused tasks. First, it can be argued that the unfocused tasks were more challenging and more cognitively demanding, and they also promoted more interaction-driven learning opportunities for the participants to negotiate their meanings. According to Robinson (2001), language learners have more opportunities to produce meaning negotiation through more cognitively complex tasks than simple ones. The complex tasks provoke the use of developmentally advanced constructions and adjustment in the interaction and promote interaction-driven language learning opportunities (Ziegler & Bryfonski, 2018). According to Foster and Ohta (2005), meaning negotiation and the use of different task types to reach interactional adjustments help language learners gain more access to the target language. Since the unfocused tasks trigger the learners' engagement with language, they lead to interaction and meaning negotiation during which learners understand the mismatch between their production and the target language (García Mayo, 2018). Along the same line, Kim (2012) and Révész (2011) studied the relation between task complexity and learning opportunities and concluded that more complex tasks acted as means of encouraging learners' collaboration and linguistic knowledge construction. They could make language learners attempt to negotiate meaning more. Philp and Duchesne (2016) also recognize the importance of engagement with regard to task-based interaction among L2 language learners and indicate that learners have more interaction with each other and pay focused attention to their own knowledge.

Second, the unfocused tasks caused more misunderstanding (e.g., "the design of the helmet here should also be improved"), communication breakdowns (e.g., "What do you mean?"), and errors (e.g., "in force?"). This could result in the greater amount of language use and meaning negotiation. As Becker and Roos (2016) assert, tasks which require language learners to think creatively and challenge them

to utilize the available linguistic repertoire while talking about their ideas can result in more common errors and greater negotiations of meaning. This finding is in line with the results of research carried out by Gurzynski-Weiss and Révész (2012) indicating that the type of tasks (unfocused vs. focused tasks) would greatly influence the amount of language produced in interaction and that more information or statements of opinion can be produced in unfocused tasks, resulting in more negotiation of meanings.

Third, the unfamiliarity and unpredictability of the content is important. The contents of the unfocused tasks (UF/DM and UF/OE) were less familiar than that of the focused tasks (F/DM and F/OE) because they were more general and less focused and, therefore, the learners' views and uses of language were less predictable. Mackey et al. (2007) have discussed the impact of content familiarity on negotiation of meaning. They argue that learners' unfamiliarity with the content of a task can lead to their willingness to generate more language and negotiation strategies. The focused tasks, on the other hand, may be more familiar and allow EFL learners to focus more on their speech in order to justify their choices. As noted by Nassaji and Fotos (2011), these tasks limit the choices available to learners and lead to the predictability of their language production. In fact, the focused tasks induce learners to process certain linguistic features productively and perform activities that satisfy specific criteria of a task (Ahour & Ghorbani, 2015), limiting their choices for more production and negotiation.

As for the second part of the first research question, the results showed that the decision-making tasks led to more negotiation of meaning than the opinion-exchange tasks in this study, although the association between task condition of decision-making vs. opinion-exchange and the amount of meaning negotiation was not statistically significant. In other words, task condition of decision-making vs. opinion-exchange did not act as a strong moderating variable, and the differences in frequencies of the meaning negotiation should not be greatly attributed to the task condition of decision-making vs. opinion-exchange. Also, any wild generalization about the significant

effect of task type condition (decision-making vs. opinion-exchange) on meaning negotiation should be avoided. Nonetheless, the higher frequency of negotiation of meaning in decision-making tasks could be explained by the idea that such tasks are convergent and cooperative (Kaufman et al., 2008). The participants in the current study relied more on cooperation and negotiation to avoid communication breakdown in the decision-making tasks. However, opinion-exchange tasks are divergent and less cooperative (Kaufman et al., 2008). The participants produced longer and more elaborated utterances in the opinion-exchange tasks, and fewer cases of meaning negotiation occurred in such tasks. Also, as Pica et al. (1993) explain, in a decision-making task, each of the interactants keeps different parts of the information needed for completing the task, and they share and demand information while they are working on a convergent single objective. However, in an opinion-exchange task, the interactants have the same type of information, and it is not necessary to move toward a single objective to accomplish the task.

As for the second question of the study, the difference in the EFL participants' application of negotiation strategies between the focused and unfocused tasks was statistically significant. The participants used more clarification requests and confirmation checks in their conversation in the unfocused tasks. This finding seems to be logical because the participants involved in such a task type were free to talk about the topic and were not constrained to use specific comparative forms; they were not provided with any language support such as the use of "more or -er" by the teacher. Therefore, they attempted to avoid frequent communication breakdowns and errors with the use of confirmation checks (e.g., "in force?") because they were not sure about the proper use of the target word. They used clarification requests frequently (e.g., "What do you mean?") because they failed to get the meaning of some statements (e.g., "nobody in the class appreciates a tattle tale"). Additionally, the unfocused tasks were more challenging and demanding for the learners. The interlocutors tended to interrupt the speaker and ask questions to be assured of unclear lexical terms or statements, Thus, more clarification requests

and confirmation checks were expected. Along the same line, Gilabert et al. (2009) studied the effect of task type on the interactional features in the production tasks among 60 students in the University of Barcelona. They showed that more clarification request and confirmation checks were used by the students of English in complex tasks.

Furthermore, the statistical data analysis indicated that the effect of focused vs. unfocused task type was greater than that of the decision-making vs. opinion-exchange task condition. On the one hand, more cases of confirmation checks were produced by the participants in the UF/DM task, compared with the F/DM task. In contrast, more cases of clarification requests were used in the UF/OE task, compared with the F/OE task. That is to say, the role of focused/unfocused task type appeared to be more noticeable. Thus, the greater use of negotiation strategies such as confirmation check and clarification request in the decision-making tasks should be accounted for with reference to the (un)focused task type. In fact, as the qualitative data analysis showed, more intensive turns and shorter utterances were used in decision-making condition in the unfocused task types, showing the complex nature of such task types. These findings find support from the related literature. Wang (2019), for instance, reported that decision-making tasks, strong group interaction, intensive turns, and shorter utterances were used in the utterances by the English L2 adult learners from two Taiwanese universities. In his study, the speakers used more confirmation check strategies, perhaps because they wanted to be sure about their partners' understanding of their points and maintain their speech. Furthermore, the participants tended to produce longer and more elaborated utterances in the OE tasks. When communication breakdown took place, the listeners tended to wait for the speakers to end their utterances and then asked for clarification. In general, his overall results showed that the DM tasks elicited more intense interaction, compared with the OE tasks. Therefore, it seems that DM tasks can stimulate more interaction among language learners and make them use more confirmation check and clarification request

strategies to have successful interaction as a way to improve oral L2 skills.

Conclusion and Implications

Our findings indicated that the unfocused tasks elicited more meaning negotiation among the EFL participants perhaps due to the fact that such tasks, whether they were used in the form of decision-making or opinion-exchange, were less predictable, less familiar, and cognitively more demanding for EFL learners. The participants who were involved in the unfocused tasks had to interact more and explore new insights without being restricted to a specific language structure, while those who were involved in the focused tasks had to analyze and compare the given options more and concentrate on supporting their choices using English comparative adjectives. In addition, misunderstanding, errors, and communication breakdowns were more frequent in the unfocused tasks, resulting in greater use of confirmation checks and clarification requests, particularly in decision-making task condition. The findings, in general, have accentuated the importance of task-based instruction and the role of different types of communicative tasks in meaning negotiation and strategy use in L2 classrooms.

The findings also indicated that unfocused task types were highly important for L2 learners in meaning negotiation. They could provide them with natural communicative opportunities and experiences in negotiating meaning, thus facilitating their L2 learning. By implication, L2 teachers should employ such communicative tasks in their L2 classrooms to trigger their students' engagement with the target language. Moreover, based on our findings, DM tasks, compared to OE tasks, were better in stimulating L2 learners' interaction, resulting in more negotiation strategies. As Crawford (2021) asserts, learners' interaction can facilitate the L2 learning process because learners try to understand each other and propose their own meaning. It is thus suggested that L2 teachers employ such tasks as UF/DM and DM tasks flexibly in their L2 classes in line with their teaching objectives and adopt the tasks carried out in the classroom to build up

negotiation of meaning and negotiation strategies with the aim of enhancing L2 development.

There were several limitations which should be addressed in future investigations. First, the current research was limited to the students at the intermediate level, aged 20 to 24, in a state university in Iran. The findings may not widely be generalized to students in different age groups and with other proficiency levels. Future studies can take into account the effects of L2 learners' individual factors and examine differential effects of focused/unfocused task types in the L2 context. Second, the present research was carried out with a relatively small sample of EFL learners. Future research can be undertaken with a larger sample and other types of sampling to be more representative of the population. Third, this research focused on the role of negotiation in the classroom. Research indicates that language learners' tendency towards meaning negotiation can be influenced by the learning context (Mayo & Ibarrola, 2015). Thus, future research can replicate the study in various contexts, using more types of communicative tasks.

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