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The Effect of Teachers' Scaffolding and Peers' Collaborative Dialogue on Speech Act Production in Symmetrical and Asymmetrical Groups

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ABSTRACT

Recently, the field of instructed pragmatics has seen a shift of paradigm from the prevailing cognitive approaches to socially-oriented ones, revolving around the notions like collaborative dialogue and sociocultural theory. Drawing on the notion of collaborative dialogue, this study investigates the extent to which teacher's scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialogue assist EFL learners' to produce requests, apologies, and refusals. It also explores the effect of symmetrical and asymmetrical proficiency pairings during the participants' collaborative dialogue on the production of speech acts. To this end, three intermediate-level intact classes were randomly assigned to the teacher's scaffolding (TS), peers' collaborative dialogue (PCD), and control groups. The PCD group was also divided into symmetrical and asymmetrical pairs based on their pragmatic pretest scores. The treatment lasted for 11 sessions. Each session involved the metapragmatic instruction followed by pragmatic problem-solving tasks, with the TS group getting the teacher's scaffolding and the PCD group collaborating in pairs while doing the tasks. The ANOVA and independent samples t-test results of the post-test scores revealed the superiority of the PCD group over the TS group. Asymmetrical pairs were also found to outperform their symmetrical counterparts. The findings reveal the potentiality of peer mediators in L2 pragmatic acquisition and point to interlanguage pragmatic gains associated with an asymmetrical proficiency pairing.

Keywords: collaborative dialogue; L2 pragmatics; scaffolding; sociocultural theory; symmetrical pair; asymmetrical pair

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Introduction

Pragmatics is generally defined as the individual's ability to implement linguistic functions during social interactions (Taguchi, 2018). Central to pragmatic competence are the notions of pragmalinguistic competence and sociopragmatic competence. Pragmalinguistic competence, according to Thomas (1983), refers to "the resources for conveying communicative acts and relational or interpersonal meanings" (p. 1). On the other hand, sociopragmatic competence relates to "social perceptions underlying the participants' interpretation and performance of communicative actions" (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 2).

So far, several studies have been conducted focusing on second language (L2) pragmatic acquisition. However, as asserted by Taguchi (2015), most of these studies (e.g., Alcón, 2005; Aufa, 2013; Chen, 2016; Eslami-Rasekh, Mirzaei, & Dini, 2015) have been largely predominated with cognitive orientations, with explicit/implicit instruction being the prevalent method in instructional interventions. Within the explicit/implicit dichotomy, the explicit teaching has proved to be more effective (Eslami-Rasekh et al., 2015; Takahashi, 2010). Although previous research has contributed to our awareness of L2 pragmatic development, it has offered a narrow view on the acquisition of pragmatics, and perhaps it is the time to shift the frame of reference from cognitive approaches to social ones and investigate L2 pragmatic learning in a broader social context.

The collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000) shifts the focus from cognitive approaches to the sociocultural theory (SCT) of mind (Vygotsky, 1978). It offers a more dynamic and learner-centered framework for language acquisition. According to Swain (2000), collaborative dialogue is a dialogue in which "language use and language learning can co-occur. It is language use mediating language learning. It is cognitive activity and it is social activity" (Swain, 2000, p. 97). During the collaborative dialogue, according to Swain, Brooks, and Tocalli-Beller (2002), language serves as social and cognitive mediational means; it is a cognitive tool due to its meaning-making function, and it is a social tool for communication with others.

Since the introduction of collaborative dialogue, a number of studies have been conducted addressing the role of collaborative dialogue in the development of different aspects of L2 (e.g., Davin & Donato, 2013; Edstrom, 2015; Memari Hanjani & Li, 2014; Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2019). However, when it comes to L2 pragmatics, the studies are scarce (e.g., Chen, 2016; Taguchi & Kim, 2016). Given the opportunities that dialogic interaction is likely to offer to L2 learners to attain appropriate L2 pragmatic norms, it seems that collaborative dialogue is a suitable framework for studying L2 pragmatics. According to Taguchi and Kim (2016),

During the interaction, pragmalinguistic forms and contextual factors are constantly emphasized, negotiated, and recycled for use. This process helps consolidate pragmatic knowledge because it prompts a deeper level of cognitive processing by requiring learners to think through pragmatic rules while verbalizing their thoughts. Collaborative dialogue enables learners to negotiate and co-construct L 2 pragmatic knowledge. Learners can discuss target pragmatic forms and contextual features associated with them and develop a joint understanding of the underlying rules. (p. 418)

Directing the field of the current interest to participants who engage in collaborative tasks, the question that may arise relates to the expert/novice relations, that is, whether to engage the learners during a collaborative task with the teacher or other learners at similar/different proficiency levels. There are a number of studies (e.g., Baleghizadeh, Timcheh Memar, & Timcheh Memar, 2010; Farhangi & Izanlu, 2015; Pishghadam & Ghadiri, 2011) on the effectiveness of symmetrical/asymmetrical proficiency pairing on learners' L2 development. The findings of these studies are tentative, and whether to adopt the symmetrical or asymmetrical proficiency composition remains a matter of controversy. Given the insufficient research on the

role of collaborative dialogue in the development of the knowledge of form-function-context mapping, on the one hand, and the need for more empirical evidence on the effectiveness of different proficiency compositions, on the other hand, this study aims to fill the gap in the literature by investigating the differential effects of the teacher's scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialogue (in symmetrical and asymmetrical proficiency pairings) on the production of requests, apologies, and refusals.

Literature review

Sociocultural theory

Vygotsky's (1978) SCT emphasizes the causal relationship between social interaction and cognitive development, including language learning. At the heart of the SCT, lies social interaction as leading to cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), an individual and the social context are interwoven, and parents, teachers, and peers as well as the social and cultural beliefs, values, and attitudes affect how the knowledge is constructed. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) claimed that human beings are endowed with lower- and higher-order mental functions. Our genetic predisposition allows us to perform simple lower-order mental functions. However, the higher-order functions (e.g., voluntary attention and rational thinking) develop through "the interweaving of our biological and cultural inheritances" (p. 59). They argued that it is through social interaction that our potentialities can be reorganized into complex higher-order forms.

Central to SCT is the role of scaffolding or what was later expanded as the collaborative dialogue to go beyond "the unidirectional help of the expert to the novice" (Swain & Watanabe, 2013, p. 4) and to refer to peer-peer interactions during which all learners have opportunities for learning and act simultaneously as experts and novices. Based on the SCT, learning is an integrated activity of learners' self and adult mentoring or collaboration with more knowledgeable peers (Lantolf, 2006). While collaboration, learners use and reflect on language, and in so doing, the language use and language learning occur simultaneously. According to Lantolf and Poehner (2014), scaffolding received from experienced people helps less knowledgeable individuals internalize the knowledge and expand their conceptual potential.

What learners can do independently, they first achieve collaboratively during social interaction (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005). In sociocultural terms, as stated by Erben, Ban, and Castaneda (2009), the learner gets implicit and explicit *mediation* (involving assistance and directions) by more experienced peers, parents, and teachers and moves from other-regulation to self-regulation. The assistance provided by an expert peer helps the learner move forward in his/her zone of proximal development (ZPD). ZPD is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem-solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

Collaborative dialogue and interlanguage pragmatics

According to Taguchi and Kim (2016), collaborative dialogue generates moments in which learners are deeply engaged in language processing by thinking through L2 rules, verbalization of the rules, negotiation, recycling, and co-construction of L2 knowledge. Over the last two decades, several studies (e.g., Benghomrani, 2011; Edstrom, 2015; Fernández & Blum, 2013; Murphy, 2007; Shehadeh, 2011; Zarei & Keshavarz, 2011) have provided empirical support for the role of collaborative dialogue in interlanguage development. However, most of the existing studies have

focused on vocabulary and grammar, overlooking the pragmatic and discourse aspects. Although a few studies (e.g., Chen, 2016; Taguchi & Kim, 2016; Takimoto, 2012) have recently focused on collaborative dialogue as an instructional intervention in the format of metapragmatic discussion, the literature is rather scarce, and the findings are yet inconclusive.

Takimoto (2012) compared the differential effects of consciousness-raising instruction with and without a metapragmatic discussion on the acquisition of requests. The experimental groups were exposed to some request forms and were required to rate the appropriateness of the utterances and to provide some suggestions to make the requests more appropriate. While one group completed the task individually, the other group did it collaboratively. The findings revealed the positive effects of the learners' collaborative dialogue on the production of the request speech act.

While Takimoto's (2012) study revealed the positive effects of collaboration on L2 pragmatic achievement, it was rather product-oriented without the analysis being centered on interaction data. Some follow-up studies, however, combined the quantitative results with qualitative analysis of the dialogic interactions. Chen (2016), for example, examined the effect of learner-learner interactions on the learners' performances in a pragmatic multiple-choice discourse completion task (MDCT). The participants were required to complete two similar versions of a test in two consecutive sessions, once individually and once again in collaborative pairs. Their interactions were audiotaped as they were doing the task. In the third session, focus-group interviews were implemented to assess the participants' attitudes toward the task. The MDCT results revealed the outperformance of the collaborative pairs compared with their individual-work counterparts. The analysis of peer-peer interactions further revealed features like politeness, repair, interlocutor relationship, tone of voice, relevance, transparency, and clarification. As for the participants' perceptions, all the participants expressed positive opinions on learner-learner interactions.

For the analysis of interaction data, Taguchi and Kim (2016) coined the term "pragmatic-related episode" (PRE) to refer to a language-related episode (LRE) focusing on pragmatic features during collaborative interactions. They explored the effect of task-based pragmatic instruction on the acquisition of the request speech act in collaborative- and individual-task groups. Having received the direct metapragmatic information, the two treatment groups were engaged in a dialogue-construction task during which they completed drama scripts based on the given scenarios. The learners were also required to vocalize their thoughts while doing the task. After the treatment, the post-test was administered and the results indicated the better performance of the collaborative group. Furthermore, analysis of the interactions and think-aloud protocols in terms of the frequency of PREs and request head acts showed that the collaborative group produced both of them more frequently. Nevertheless, the pragmatic gains were found to be short-term as revealed by the collaborative group's performance which was similar to that of the individual-work group one month after the treatment.

Once learners are provided with opportunities to interact collaboratively, decisions must be made on their grouping. According to Vygotsky (1978), the development of higher-order mental functions is likely to occur when a more knowledgeable learner assists the less knowledgeable one. Vygotsky focused on "supervisor-subordinate relationship which is markedly asymmetrical and hierarchical" (Daniels, 2005, p.133). The question that what pattern of proficiency pairing is more conducive to L2 development has been a long-standing debate with some studies favoring the symmetrical (e.g., Baleghizadeh, et al., 2010; Kim, 2009) and/or asymmetrical (e.g., Farhangi & Izanlu, 2015; Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Wu, 2008) proficiency compositions. The proponents of the asymmetrical pairing argue that the presence of students with heterogeneous abilities within a group leads to educational advantages for all learners. While the low-ability learners may demonstrate improved performance as a result of their advanced peers' guidance, high-level students get chances to revise and reinforce what they have already learned.

Those advocating the symmetrical pairing, on the other hand, argue that the mixed proficiency composition may trouble the lower proficiency participants by lessening their psychological safety and influencing their affective behavior. While the high achievers take the dominant role and control the entire task, the low achievers tend to adopt a passive and less contributing role while accomplishing the task.

In the realm of L2 pragmatics, however, few studies (e.g., Khatib & Ahmadi Safa, 2011; Rahimi Domakani & Felfelian, 2012) have addressed the comparative effects of the symmetrical/asymmetrical pairing and the associated pragmatic gains. Khatib and Ahmadi Safa (2011) examined the relative efficacy of expert peers' ZPD-wise, co-equal peers' ZPD-insensitive, and teacher-fronted ZPD-insensitive scaffolding on EFL learners' acquisition of complaint, request, and apology speech acts. While the participants in the experimental groups were given ZPD-wise scaffolding by the expert peers or ZPD-insensitive scaffolding by their co-equals, those in the control group received ZPD-insensitive teacher scaffolding while accomplishing the pragmatic problem-solving tasks. The expert peers' ZPD-wise scaffolding was found to have the best effect on the recognition and production of the speech acts while co-equals' ZPD-insensitive scaffolding and teacher-fronted ZPD-insensitive instruction were the second and the third effective procedures, respectively.

Rahimi Domakani and Felfelian (2012) also investigated the effect of the ZPD-based proximal contexts of equal and unequal peer interactions in comparison to teacher-fronted instruction on EFL students' L2 pragmatic development. Two groups were randomly assigned to ZPD-base and non-ZPD-base contexts, with the first one providing a ZPD context in which the participants interacted, assisted, and supported each other in accomplishing the task while in the latter one, they were required to do the task individually. The ZPD-activated class by itself consisted of the groups of equal and unequal proficiency levels who were paired to jointly complete the discourse completion test items. The findings revealed the efficacy of the ZPD-activated proximal context and the advantage of the expert peers' scaffolding over coequals' scaffolding.

Given that SLA is a mediated process, and that mediational means (scaffolding) offered from an expert (teacher) and/or a novice (peer) are effective in achieving the knowledge of the form-function-context mapping, more studies are needed to arrive at solid conclusions on the differential impacts of each one. Moreover, the proficiency compositions of the individuals engaged in the collaborative discourse have a bearing on the associated language outcomes. These topics have not been sufficiently addressed in pragmatics-focused research. This study thus aims to investigate the interface among the teacher/peer's mediation, proficiency pairing, and L2 pragmatic gains. The following hypotheses were specifically formulated:

Hypothesis 1: Teacher's scaffolding, peers' collaborative dialogue, and individual work differentially affect the production of requests, apologies, and refusals.

Hypothesis 2: The performances of symmetrical and asymmetrical sub-groups during the collaborative tasks are significantly different in the production of requests, apologies, and refusals.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were EFL learners (N = 119), males and females, majoring in English teaching and English literature, with the age range of 19-32 ($M = 22.3$). They completed

an average of six years of pre-university formal English education. They had enrolled in three intact Speaking and Listening classes in three universities in East Azarbaijan province, Iran. At the time of the data collection, the participants were at an intermediate level of general English proficiency based on their scores in a TOEFL sample test. Concerning their L2 pragmatic proficiency, they were at an intermediate proficiency level as shown by their pretest scores. Based on the treatment conditions, the classes (groups) were randomly assigned to teacher's scaffolding (TS), peers' collaborative dialogue (PCD), and individual work (control) groups.

Instruments

The TOEFL sample test

The testing instruments used in this study included a TOEFL sample test and two written discourse completion tests (WDCT) s. The TOEFL sample test was administered to ensure the participants' homogeneity in general English proficiency. The test included 45 multiple-choice and two essay-type items chosen from the Reading Comprehension (30 items) and Structure and Written Expressions (15 items for structures and two items for writing) sections of the sample paper-based TOEFL tests. According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS), while giving separate scores for different sections in the TOEFL test, the scores 15-21 (out of 30) for reading and 17-23 (out of 30) for structure and written expressions correspond to an intermediate level of proficiency. The participants' scores in this study fell within these ranges, and they were thus regarded as being at an intermediate proficiency level. It took about an hour for the participants to take the test. ANOVA results of the TOEFL sample test showed that at the time of the data collection, no significant difference existed between the participants (TS group: $M = 38$, $SD = 14.32$; PCD group: $M = 35$, $SD = 12.9$; Control group: $M = 36.3$, $SD = 13.43$; $F(1, 44) = .005$, $p = .07$). The internal consistency of the test was found to be acceptable (Cronbach's alpha coefficient = .79).

Written discourse completion test (WDCT)

Two isomorphic versions of a WDCT were administered prior to and following the treatment to assess the participants' production of the target speech acts. The items in WDCTs were chosen from some previous studies (Hudson, Detmer, & Brown, 1995; Jianda, 2006; Taguchi, 2011). Following a pilot test, some lengthy and ambiguous items were removed or replaced. Each version of the WDCT included 15 items, five items for each of the target speech acts. Each item included a description of a request, apology, or refusal situation followed by a blank space where the participants were required to write what they would say in that situation. The situations were selected in a way to represent the social variables (power, social distance, and the degree of imposition) in the taxonomy proposed by Brown and Levinson (1987). It took about 40 minutes for the participants to complete the WDCTs. The WDCT pre-test and post-test enjoyed the Cronbach reliability indices of .74 and .82, respectively.

Responses to WDCTs were rated by the researchers as well as a specialist in the field of EFL. In the rating process, the raters drew upon a 4-point rating scale developed by Jeringan (2007). Following Jeringan, Level 4, the highest level in the scale represented a performance that was completely acceptable given the pragmatic context and approached the native-like usage. At the lowest level, was level 1 performance which characterized a pragmatically unacceptable response in a given context, non-native-like usage, and several errors distracting from pragmatic effectiveness. The final score of each participant was the average of the two scores given by the raters. The inter-rater reliability of the WDCT pretest and the post-test was measured using Pearson product-moment Correlation and found to be acceptable (.77 for the pretest and .86 for the post-test).

Instructional materials

The instructional materials used in this study included an MP3 recorder and a researcher-made pamphlet. The Mp3 recorder was used to record samples of student-student and student-teacher interactions for further analysis. Before the treatment, the participants were informed about the procedures of the data collection, and the audio recordings were made with their consent. The researcher-made pamphlet included three units devoted to the three target speech acts. Each unit included three sections.

In the first section, following the tentative speech acts framework proposed by Bardovi-Harlig (1996), descriptions of the notions of speech acts, directness levels, types and factors of variability, and face-keeping strategies were introduced. Moreover, the major sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic factors and strategies affecting the interpretation and realization of speech acts were incorporated.

The second section consisted of sample authentic dialogues on the target speech acts. The dialogues were chosen from two instructional series including *Tactics for Listening* (Richards, 2011) and *Four Corners* (Richards & Bohlke, 2012). The dialogues were representative of different combinations of social variables. They were used to contextually present how metapragmatic rules are put to use in a variety of situations.

The third section included some pragmatic problem-solving tasks like discourse completion, matching exercises, multiple-choice pragmatic-focused questions, and metapragmatic assessment tasks. During the treatment sessions, all groups were required to accomplish these tasks.

Procedure

Taking a quasi-experimental design, this study included three intact classes: TS, PCD, and individual-work (control) groups. It was done over a period of 11 consecutive sessions. In the first session, the participants took the WDCT pretest and were familiarized with the purpose of the study, instructional treatment, and the materials. During the next nine sessions, they received the instruction and worked on the target speech acts. Three sessions were allocated for each of the speech acts, with the learners working on a different combination of social variables in each session. In the last session, the WDCT post-test was administered.

The instruction in each of the treatment sessions lasted 45 minutes. The teacher (one of the researchers) started the instruction by some consciousness-raising questions. As suggested by Liontas (2018), consciousness-raising maximizes learner efforts at restructuring and reformulating their output. Following the consciousness-raising phase, the explicit metapragmatic instruction was offered, and the learners' attention was drawn to a variety of factors in implementing speech acts. This was followed by a classroom discussion of sample dialogues included in the pamphlet. The purpose of the discussion was to help the learners to identify the realization of pragmatic rules in authentic language use and to reinforce what they have learned. They attempted to associate the linguistic forms with the corresponding pragmatic functions. Finally, the learners were asked to accomplish some pragmatic problem-solving tasks. While doing the tasks, the TS group received the teacher's contingent scaffolding. Prior to the task performance, the participants in the PCD group were assigned to lower-intermediate and higher-intermediate levels (based on their scores in the WDCT pretest) and formed symmetrical (hereafter, Sym) or asymmetrical pairs (hereafter, Asym). They accomplished the tasks in pairs.

The metapragmatic instruction was delivered to the control group as well. However, while the two experimental groups received teacher's scaffolding or peers' mediation in accomplishing the problem-solving tasks, the control group did the same tasks individually with no assistance provided by the teacher or peers.

In the last two sessions, sample peer-peer and student-teacher interactions were audio-recorded and then transcribed for further analysis. Here are two sample excerpts, both depicting request situations. In the first excerpt, the teacher provides scaffolding to the student to work out the appropriate request form. She explicitly indicates that there is a linguistic problem and asks the student to reformulate the utterance. In the second excerpt, there is no teacher mediation, and the students collaboratively reconstruct the appropriate form through joint endeavor.

Excerpt 1: Teacher-student interaction

S: Can I meet...?

T: Remember, this is a formal situation. You need to use a more polite form.

S: Could....Would...

T: Would it be

S: Would it be possible meeting.....

T: Would it be possible to meet ...

S: Would it be possible to meet you tomorrow.

Excerpt 2: Student-student interaction

S1: Would you please bring me...

S2: But they are mother and daughter.

S1: Yes, so,...could you.....

S2: and also.... Can.... Can you....

S1: Yes, Can you bring me a water glass?

S2: A water glass?...a glass of water.

S1: Can you bring me a glass of water?

Results

To ensure that the data met the assumptions of normality, data screening was done. Table 1 shows the normality test of the pretest and the post-test.

Table 1
Normality Test of the Pretest and the Post-test

		Kolmogorov-Smirnov			Shapiro-Wilk		
		Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pretest	TS	.175	17	.20	.976	17	.06
	PCD	.156	25	.20	.954	25	.23
	Control	.179	19	.20	.938	19	.08
Post-test	TS	.157	17	.07	.985	17	.09
	PCD	.165	25	.09	.932	25	.11
	Control	.168	19	.16	.956	19	.23

As shown in Table 1, the data related to performances of the three groups in the pretest and the post-test were normally distributed ($p > .05$). In the following sections, the data were analyzed, and the findings were reported in relation to the hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1: Teacher's scaffolding, peers' collaborative dialogue, and individual work differentially affect the production of requests, apologies, and refusals.

The descriptive statistics in Table 2 show the participants' performances in WDCT pretest and the post-test. The mean in TS group has increased from 37 ($M = 37, SD = 11.3$) to 41 ($M = 41, SD = 12$). With regard to the PCD group, a mean increase from 35 ($M = 35, SD = 14.7$) to 46 ($M = 46, SD = 17.3$) is observed.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for the Pretest and the Post-test

		N	M	SD	95%Confidence interval of the Difference		Min.	Max.
					Lower bound	Upper Bound		
Pretest	TS	36	37.3	11.3	35.2	39.1	7	48
	PCD	42	37.0	14.7	33.6	37.9	10	52
	Control	35	34.8	18.1	29.4	35.8	4	50
	Total	113	36.03	14.1	32.6	37.7	4	52
Post-test	TS	36	40.1	1.20	39.3	42.2	11	58
	PCD	42	42.2	1.73	38.3	44.3	4	56
	Control	35	35	1.56	34.9	36.3	9	48
	Total	113	39.1	1.49	34.9	44.3	4	58

An ANOVA test of between-subject effects (Table 3) was run to compare the post-test mean scores. ANOVA results revealed a significant difference between the performances of the groups ($F = 6.15, p < .05$). The degree of the difference was also calculated, and the effect size was found to be moderate ($\text{partial } \eta^2 = .67$).

Table 3
ANOVA Test of Between-Subject Effects on Post-test Scores

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Squared	Eta
Corrected Model	947.652	2	233.87	28.65	.000*	.56	
Intercept	253.65	1.23	253.65	19.05	.000	.43	
Post-test	862.09	1.23	58.34	86.23	.000	.74	
TS PCD	198.45	2.76	6.41	6.15	.000	.67	
Error	543.98	45					
Total	8756.001	47					
Corrected Total	1231.65	50					

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Post hoc pairwise comparisons using Scheffe test were run to match each group one-to-one with each of the other groups and to locate the exact differences across the pairs (Table 4).

Table 4
Post hoc Pairwise Comparisons

(I) factor1	(J) factor1	Mean Difference (I-J)	SEM	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval of Difference	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
TS group	PCD group	-2.10*	.17	.001	-5.56	-1.23
	Control group	5.01*	.25	.000	1.56	5.37
PCD group	TS group	2.10*	.17	.001	1.23	5.56
	Control group	7.20*	.22	.000	5.83	8.95
Control group	TS group	-5.01*	.25	.000	-5.37	-1.56
	PCD group	-7.20*	.22	.000	-8.95	-5.83

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.

Comparisons show that both PCD (Mean difference = 7.20; 95% confidence interval = 5.83, 8.95, $p < .05$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .77$) and TS groups (Mean difference = 5.01; 95% confidence interval = 5.37, 1.56, $p < .05$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .73$) performed better than the control group. Also, the PCD group was superior over the TS group (Mean difference = 2.10, 95% confidence interval = 1.23, 5.56, $p < .05$, $\text{partial } \eta^2 = .68$). The first hypothesis is thus confirmed, and it can be concluded that while the teacher's scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialogue resulted in EFL learners' better pragmatic gains than individual work, peers' collaboration was even more effective.

Hypothesis 2: The performances of symmetrical and asymmetrical sub-groups during the collaborative dialogue are significantly different in production of request, apology, and refusal speech acts.

Table 5 shows the descriptive statistics for the performances of the symmetrical and asymmetrical sub-groups in the pretest and the post-test. Asym sub-group shows higher mean scores ($M = 41.3$) than the Sym sub-group ($M = 40.0$) in the post-test. An independent samples *t*-test was run to check the significance of the mean difference (Table 6).

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for the Performances of Sym and Asym Sub-groups in the Pretest and the Post-test

		N	M	SD	95% Confidence Interval for the Mean		Min.	Max.
					Lower bound	Upper Bound		
Pretest	Sym.	18	36.0	1.70	32.09	38.7	12	58
	Asym.	24	37.8	1.49	33.8	37.4	14	58
Post-test	Sym	18	40.0	1.17	37.98	41.8	17	60
	Asym.	24	41.3	1.20	43.76	48.8	23	60

Table 6
Independent Samples t-Test for Post-test Scores of the Sym and Asym Sub-groups

	Paired Differences							
			95% Confidence Interval of the Difference			<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig. (2-tailed)
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>SEM</i>	Lower bound	Upper bound			
WDCT post-test Sym-Asym pairs	1.8	.102	.17	0.21	3.26	8.4	42	.000*

As shown in Table 6, significant differences exist between the post-test performances of the Sym and Asym sub-groups ($t = 8.4, p < .05$). As it had been hypothesized, the asymmetrical sub-group significantly outperformed the symmetrical sub-group in the production of the target speech acts.

Discussion

Drawing upon the concept of the collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000), this study aimed at investigating the comparative effects of teacher's scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialogue (in symmetrical and asymmetrical pairs) on the production of requests, apologies, and refusals. Both hypotheses were confirmed. Regarding hypothesis 1, it was found that unlike the individual-work (control) group, the teacher's scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialogue significantly affected the pragmatic performance of the learners. The PCD group was also found to be superior to the

TG group in the production of the target speech acts. Finally, asymmetrical pairs appeared to perform better than their symmetrical counterparts, confirming hypothesis 2.

As for the first hypothesis, the findings are in line with LoCastro's (2003) argument that "it is through target language interactions that the learner acquires comprehensible input, not only grammatical and lexical, but also input on how to enact speech acts, carry out redressive action and show deference successfully for the L2 target community" (p. 292). The better performance of the PCD group also supports Swain's (2000) stance regarding the influential role of collaborative dialogue in L2 development. She argued that through collaborative dialogue, learners can engage in problem-solving and construct their linguistic knowledge. It serves as a platform for meaningful interaction whereby linguistic knowledge emerges through a joint effort of knowledge construction.

The findings are also consistent with the results of some recent studies (e.g., Chen, 2016, Taguchi & Kim, 2016; Nguyen, 2013; Takimoto, 2012) which have documented that collaborative activities lead to better L2 pragmatic performance. These studies have provided evidence that the effectiveness of collaboration goes beyond the micro-level skills, and the pragmatic and discursive macro-level skills might benefit from collaborative tasks as well. The difference between these studies and the present study is that they examined the pragmatic gains during the individual and collaborative tasks without making reference to the role of the teacher. The present study, however, examined how mediation offered by the teacher as compared with peers may differentially affect the production of speech acts.

The outperformance of the PCD group might be attributable to the peer-peer supported dialogic interaction they engaged in. During the task accomplishment, the peers were engaged in metapragmatic talk and active negotiation through which they pooled their resources to undertake a form-function-context mapping. Although the TS group accomplished the same problem-solving tasks, they did the tasks individually resorting to teacher's scaffolding without as much active negotiational encounters as the PCD group. Besides, it can be argued that since the teacher provided scaffolding to all of the students, she could allocate a limited time of the class to each student. Therefore, the TS group was not provided with parallel opportunities to those of the PCD group in terms of metapragmatic talk, sharing mutual perspectives, and offering and getting feedback and corrections from their partners.

According to Taguchi and Kim (2016), negotiation of form and meaning during the collaboratively accomplished tasks promotes building stronger connections between linguistic forms and corresponding functions and assists the consolidation of learners' pragmatic knowledge. During this process, two levels of monitoring, including self- and other-monitoring, occur at the same time, which help learners establish linguistic knowledge and generate more accurate task outcomes. Along similar lines, Johnston, James, Lye, and McDonald (2000) argued that cooperative learning involves a deeper level of mental involvement, which assists learners to apply the knowledge in other contexts and naturally fosters long-term knowledge retention. A further advantage of repeated collaborative efforts, as suggested by Ranjbar and Ghonsooly (2017), is to foster learners' shared accountability, mutual reliance, rapport, and understanding.

A further finding relates to the superiority of the asymmetrical sub-group compared to the symmetrical one in speech acts' production. This is in keeping with the SCT of Vygotsky (1978) and the findings of some studies (e.g., Farhangi & Izanlu, 2015; Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Wu, 2008) which substantiated the positive role of expert peers' tutoring in enhancing novice learners' acquisitional processes. According to Mercer (2004), asymmetrical scaffolding offers a supportive context where expert peers mediate novice learners' language learning.

Although the asymmetrical sub-group indicated more improvement than their symmetrical counterparts, it does not mean that symmetrical pairing is not conducive to L2 development. According to Nassaji and Cummings (2000), "numerous authors have recently observed that peer groups of students or work teams, for instance, are also able to construct a ZPD through joint efforts among their members, without expertise residing in any one member of the group" (p. 98). A single type of proficiency pairing thus does not necessarily guarantee successful outcomes, and as suggested by Storch and Aldosari (2013), the optimal pairing of learners hinges upon the aim of the activity.

Conclusion and pedagogical implications

This study found that peer scaffolding was superior to teacher scaffolding, and the asymmetrical proficiency composition resulted in higher pragmatic gains than the symmetrical pairing. According to van Lier (2000), as an alternative to teacher, peer tutors can mediate the learning process. It is recommended to employ peer mediation as a tool in the classroom to create a friendly atmosphere, empower the students, and adjust teachers' responsibilities so that they will be able to manage the class more efficiently. Given the potentialities of teacher mediation as well as peer mediation, the combination of both might be the best alternative at hand.

The outperformance of the asymmetrical pairs suggests that the knowledge gap between the students should not be a pedagogical concern for teachers. Given the high level of interactivity associated with asymmetrical pairing, teachers can form asymmetrical pairs/groups to provide opportunities for learners' collaborative meaningful interactions. During such collaborations, learners may be encouraged to reflect upon their practices and to find out how mutual interactions contribute to establishing their linguistic knowledge.

Finally, the limitations of this study are acknowledged. The data for this study were analyzed quantitatively. Through data triangulation, a more vivid picture of L2 development is likely to be obtained. It is suggested that future studies explore the production of PREs across different proficiency levels, instructional interventions, tasks, and a range of speech acts qualitatively and quantitatively to further our awareness of the role of collaborative dialogue in L2 pragmatic development. Moreover, as a cross-sectional study, this study compared performance gains over limited sessions. Longitudinal studies can trace the development of L2 pragmatic competence in more detail and guide us toward a better understanding of the continuum of L2 pragmatic development. This remains an area for future research.

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