Peer-peer Dialog during Collaborative Writing: A Comparison of Iranian EFL and Malaysian-Chinese ESL Learners

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A B S T R A C T

The present study aimed to compare the nature of peer-peer dialog among two Iranian (EFL) and two Malaysian-Chinese (ESL) dyads during eleven collaborative writing sessions. Pair talks were video-recorded, transcribed verbatim and subsequently were analyzed at three levels: type of talk, type of activity and type of episode. The types of talk were sub-segmented into three kinds of talk: on-task talk, about-task talk and off-task talk. The analysis revealed that on-task talk was the most frequent, while off-task talk was the least common across all dyads. As for the type of activities, the process of collaborative writing was found segmentable into three stages of planning, writing, and revising, although there were instances when this linear three-stage process was flouted and also the time that dyads spent on each activity varied. In terms of taxonomy of episodes, about-task talk and on-task talk episodes were the same among all the dyads. As for the Language Related Episodes (LREs) generated in the course of peer-peer dialogs, despite being identical in terms of the typology, there was a notable difference in frequency between Malaysian-Chinese and Iranian dyads. In contrast to their Malaysian-Chinese counterparts, Iranians exhibited a stronger tendency to engage in discussions about the meta-linguistic aspects of language. The findings hold pedagogical significance and implications for language teachers, researchers and practitioners, highlighting Vygotskyan frameworks and culture-specific collaboration patterns, requiring tailored L2 pedagogies.

Keywords: peer-peer dialog, EFL/ESL learners; Iranian; Malaysian-Chinese

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1. Background

The examination of verbal interactions and collaborative discourse generated during collaborative learning activities has witnessed an upsurge of interest among scholars in recent years. Much of the interest is shared by Vygotsky-inspired advocates of dialogic view of writing, who consider writing a socio-contextual phenomenon and perceive collaborative mode of writing as encouraging "learners to language, that is, to reflect on language use in the process of producing language" (Storch, 2011, p. 277). Swain (2000) supports collaborative writing on the grounds that during collaborative engagements to do a writing task or to produce written outputs (texts), in addition to peers' 'noticing the gap' in their linguistic knowledge, which is pedagogically very significant, the dialog itself takes on an externalized manifestation and becomes materially available for analysis and exploration by researchers. Examination of these dialogs could shed light on *languaging* (i.e., the ongoing language learning processes) (e.g, Swain, 2000, 2006, 2010). Drawing upon Swain's proposal, numerous scholarly investigations have been undertaken to examine and document the pedagogic effect and nature of peer-peer dialog.

Collaborative interactions in writing have been investigated within the fields of applied linguistics and educational research from diverse perspectives. A review of the relevant literature indicates that the majority of the existing studies has mainly addressed the relationship between collaborative dialog and development of L2 writing (e.g., Ajideh, et al., 2016; Aldossary, 2025; Davison, 2024; Elabdali, 2021; Fernandez Dobao, 2012; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Li & Zhang, 2022; Storch, 2001, 2005; Villarreal & Gil-Sarratea, 2019; Wiggleworth, & Storch, 2009) whereas a smaller number of the studies have mainly focused on examining and describing the nature and inner dynamics of collaboration among peers while doing group writing. A considerable body of the existing research has examined the discourse of the peers during peer feedback interactions (i.e., post-writing revisions) (e.g., Lockhart & Ng, 1995; Mendonça & Johnson, 1994; Nelson & Murphy, 1992; Storch, 2002; Suzuki, 2008; Tajabadi et al., 2020; Xu, 2016). In comparison, significantly fewer studies have looked into peer dialog during collaborative planning activities (e.g., Fernandez Dobao, 2012; Li, Zhang & Parr, 2020; Neumann & McDonough, 2014, 2015) or throughout the entire collaborative writing process (e.g., Jiang & Eslami, 2021; Soleimani et al., 2017; Storch, 2001, 2005).

For instance, studies by Nelson and Murphy (1992), Mendonça and Johnson (1994), and Lockhart and Ng (1995) on the peer dialogs of ESL learners at revision stage showed that L2 learners actively reflected on and discussed a variety of text-related issues. Research conducted by Nelson and Murphy (1992) demonstrated that the peers' verbal exchanges were primarily task-centric. Approximately, three-quarters of all verbal exchanges between the peers pertained to "the analysis of word order, rhetorical organization, lexical ties, cohesive devices, style, and usage" (p. 187). In a similar study conducted with six ESL dyads, Mendonca and Johnson (1994) observed that during peer-response activities the learners' attention was predominantly given to lexico-grammatical issues as well as broader discourse issues (e.g., text organization). In a related study, Lockhart and Ng (1995) observed that much of the verbal exchanges between peers during performing peer response activities was focused on 'ideational aspects'—essentially, discussions about content and ideas. In contrast, Storch's (1997) study demonstrated that in the course of peer-editing exercises, ESL learners' verbal interactions were predominantly centered on language-related issues, particularly grammatical accuracy, rather than ideational issues. Comparing self-revision and peer-revision processes, Suzuki (2008) found that the frequency of negotiation episodes and metalinguistic instances was greater in peer revisions than in self-revisions, indicating interactive and linguistically focused verbal interactions among peers. Li, et al.'s (2020) study set out to investigate the nature of student discussions during small-group interactions focused on planning individual writing tasks. Specifically, their research explored peer dialogs occurring at the "planning" stage of argumentative writing within Chinese tertiary EFL (English as a Foreign Language) classrooms. The researchers identified and categorized various types of student talk, each occurring in differing frequencies. These categories included content talk, language talk, task-management talk, organization talk,

affective talk, and phatic talk, each reflecting distinct aspects of collaborative dialog during the writing planning process.

As for investigating peer dialog during the entire writing process, Storch's study (2005) with nine dyads, who collaboratively performed the graphic prompts of IELTS Academic Module Task 1, indicated that learners spent a substantial portion of task completion time on idea generation (i.e., 53%), followed by language-related issues (i.e., 25%). In a comparative study of the group dynamics of students working in pairs and threes in an ESL classroom, Peacock (1998) had already showed that "learners worked significantly harder (that is, spent significantly more time on-task) in pairs than in groups of three" (p. 37). Williams (1999) analyzed the collaborative negotiation processes of eight learners, each representing one of the four English proficiency levels (beginning, intermediate, high-intermediate and advanced). The study showed a clear tendency among learners to discuss lexical items more often than grammatical structures. Similar findings have been reported by a number of subsequent studies investigating the influence of peers' proficiency level on the frequency and nature of the LREs (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Watanabe, 2014; Watanabe & Swain, 2007;). Among these, Leeser's study (2004) which inspired the subsequent studies identified a significant direct relationship between a pair's overall language proficiency and both the frequency and the accuracy of the LREs they produced. There was also more focus and discussion on form-related aspects of language than on lexical items. Sato and Viveros's (2016) study also found that proficiency did have an impact on learners' interactional behaviors.

As evidenced by the reviewed body of literature, the nature of collaborative negotiations is prone to the influence of different variables (e.g., task type, group size, proficiency level) or "aspects of context" (Watanabe, 2014). In addition, in the majority of the prior studies, examining the peer-peer dialog has been carried out in a compartmentalized fashion: either examining the collaborative dialogs during revision (peer feedback) stage or planning stage (oral brainstorming). This study seeks to explore the peer-peer dialog during the entire writing process. Another overlooked gap in the literature is the nature of collaborative talk of the learners with different "cultural backgrounds and pedagogic socializations", which according to Grabe and Kaplan (1996) can influence the nature of collaboration and accordingly the qualitative and quantitative features of collaborative dialog. According to Hofstede (1991), most cultures which rate high in collectivism also rate high in power distance. It is interesting to know that Malaysia ranks first with the power distance index of 104 and Iran ranks twenty-ninth with the power distance index of 58 among fifty countries and three regions. Based on the findings of the study, it was claimed that there is often a correlation between the rate of power distance and rate of collectivism. In other words, the degree of individualism-collectivism influences the willingness of the member to cooperate in group projects. Other cross-cultural studies have specifically investigated and highlighted similarities and differences between Iranian and Malaysian learners and their collaborative behaviors (e.g., Abdollahimohammad et al., 2014; Yazdi-amirkhiz et al., 2013). Li and Zhang (2023) in their proposal for future research of collaborative writing in L2 classes mention 'cultural background' as an important factor of influence on collaborative dynamics and a significant avenue of investigation in L2 writing and language learning. By addressing these gaps, this research aims to achieve a comprehensive understanding of collaborative writing and its inner dynamics when it takes place among learners with varying cultural backgrounds and educational experiences. To this end, the participants were asked to share an overall history of their education and English learning. For an overview of their English learning histories, see Appendices A and B.

Based on the foregoing, the following research question was posed to guide the study:

How does the nature of the peer-peer dialog among female Iranian and Malaysian-Chinese dyads compare in performing collaborative writing tasks?

2. Methodology

2.1 Participants

The criterion-based sampling technique was employed to select eight female undergraduate students (four Malaysian-Chinese and four Iranian) from a private university in Kuala Lumpur. It is worth mentioning that Malaysian-Chinese are Malaysian citizens of Chinese ethnicity, being the second largest ethnic group in multiethnic Malaysia. The three largest cultural groups in the country are the Malays with 67%, the Malaysian-Chinese with 25% and the Malaysian-Indians with 7% of the entire population (Department of Statistics, as cited in Buttny et al., 2013).

The participants were selected based on four key criteria: age range (19-20 years), gender (all female), language proficiency (IELTS band-score of 6) and academic discipline (all medical sciences students). They were divided into two Iranian dyads (A & B) and two Malaysian-Chinese dyads (C & D). The pseudonyms used for the participants were: Azadeh and Sadaf (Dyad A), Negar and Niloufar (Dyad B), Mei and Tang (Dyad C), and Gin and Wai (Dyad D).

The point to be made here is that our study's exclusive focus on female dyads does, in fact, preclude conclusions about gender effects; hence, it is explicitly noted as a limitation in the "Conclusion". However, the homogeneity of our sample (all female, same age/proficiency) was intentional to control for gender as a variable, allowing clearer isolation of cultural-educational influences on collaboration. The participants' gender was considered as one of the selection criteria because according to Chavez (2000) and Gass and Varonis (1986), sex of interactants could affect the interaction and group dynamics. There were, in fact, two major reasons for the selection of female students for the study. 1. The researchers failed to find male participants (both Malaysians and Iranians) who could meet the required criteria of the study. 2. According to Triandis (1993), "…men are more individualistic than women" (p.160). Besides this, based on Hofstede's (1991) Power Distance Index, Iranians are more individualistic than Malaysians. Therefore, if male participants had been selected for the study, it would have made the cultural participants far too much different from each other. Had it been the case, along with the role of their cultural affiliation, another intervening variable (i.e., their masculine qualities) would have come to the picture, which in turn could have made the results of the study more susceptible to skepticism.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

At the commencement of the study, the general objectives of the study were explained to the participants, and informed consent forms were obtained with assurances given about the confidentiality of the participants' identities. The data collection process spanned approximately 6 weeks; each dyad and the researchers agreed on mutually convenient times for data collection; therefore, they would meet on different occasions and data were gathered at varying intervals. In order to minimize the potential influence of exposure to academic English during the academic year, data collection was intentionally carried out during summer vacations.

The data collection process for each dyad was structured in a cyclical pattern, encompassing five distinct cycles. Each cycle comprised three consecutive collaborative writing sessions, followed by an individual writing session. During each collaborative session, the four dyads were presented with identical graphic prompts, specifically drawn from the IELTS Academic Module Task 1. Each dyad collaboratively completed the given tasks within a specified time limit of not exceeding thirty minutes, ensuring that their written outputs contained at least one hundred and fifty words.

In order to investigate the nature of verbal interactions (peer-peer dialog) occurring in each dyad, it was essential to record verbal exchanges of the participants while they were engaged in completing collaborative writing tasks. Accordingly, the peer-peer dialog of each dyad over fifteen collaborative writing sessions was video-recorded. Due to participant attrition and technical issues with recordings, only eleven sessions were selected for transcription and analysis.

The eleven recorded sessions were transcribed verbatim. To ensure the accuracy and reliability of the transcription, a second transcriber (a PhD candidate of TESL) was hired to cross-check the transcripts against the videotapes. The discrepancies between the initial transcription and cross-check of the second transcriber were discussed and resolved. Adopting an analytical approach proposed by Storch (2001), the transcribed data were systematically segmented at three hierarchical levels: *types of talk, types of activities,* and *types of episodes.* Initially, the entire corpus of transcribed data was categorized according to *types of talk.* Subsequently, the *types of talk* were sub-categorized into *types of activities* and *types of episodes.*

Drawing upon Storch's (2001) approach, the entire corpus of transcribed data was segmented into three distinct categories of talk: *about-task* talk, *on-task* talk, and *off-task* talk. According to Brooks and Donato (1994, as cited in Storch 2001), *about-task* talk or "orientational talk" is a type of talk and discussions by the peers to better understand the task and to improve coordination among the peers to do the task together more effectively. In the present study, any verbal exchange to clarify the directions and requirements of a writing task, any discussion about who should do which part and aspect of a task, or generally conferring with each other about strategies to approach a task were all classified as *about-task* talk. *On-task* talk, on the other hand, refers to those interactions and verbal exchanges that occur between the peers while they are jointly engaged in completing a task. Dialogs related to generating ideas, discussing lexico-grammatical issues and text organization fall under the *on-task* talk category. *Off-task* talk, as the name suggests, refers to those parts of peer-peer dialog that are unrelated to the completion of the task at hand. For instance, the peers' conversations about their personal matters were classified as *off-task* talk. Given the extremely low occurrence of off-task talk in the present study, it was excluded from data analysis. Only the duration of *off-task* talk during the collaborative writing sessions was calculated (in minutes) for reference.

In *types of activities*, the writing process was examined with a focus on the presence or absence of writing phases, namely, *planning, writing,* and *revising.* Additionally, the length of time spent by each dyad on task completion was calculated (in minutes).

The designated transcribed data (*on-task* & *about-task* talk) were further segmented into *episodes.* This segmentation process was guided by the definitions of *episodes* by Guerrero and Villamil (1994) and Nelson and Carson (1998), who described episodes as any utterance semantically connected by topic or purpose. The coding of these episodes was carried out based on the analysis of the participants' points of focus as well as the manner in which they oriented themselves toward completing the task.

The findings for each category of segmentation are presented through these headings in the next section.

4. Findings

4.1 Type of Talk

As mentioned earlier, the entire data set was segmented into: *on-task* talk, *about-task* talk and *off-task* talk. Tables 1 and 2 illustrate quantified values (in minutes/percentage) of total task completion time, and total o*n-task/about-task/off-task* time for the four dyads of the study (A, B, C & D) in the course of the eleven collaborative writing sessions.

Table 1
Total Task Completion Time, On-task, About-task and Off-task talk (in minutes) for Each Dyad during Eleven Collaborative Writing Sessions

	Total time	On-task talk	About-task talk	Off-task talk
Dyad A	291 Min	252 Min	33 Min	6 Min
Dyad B	318 Min	241 Min	64 Min	13 Min
Dyad C	272 Min	246 Min	24 Min	2 Min
Dyad D	285 Min	250 Min	32 Min	3 Min

Table2
Proportion of On-task, About-task and Off-task Talk (in percentage) for Each Dyad during Eleven Collaborative Writing Sessions

	On-task	About-task	Off-task
Dyad A	87%	11%	2%
Dyad B	76%	20%	4%
Dyad C	90%	9%	1%
Dyad D	88%	11%	1%

As shown by the above Tables, the total time that each dyad spent on doing the collaborative writing tasks varied. For example, whereas dyad C spent 272 minutes to do the eleven writing tasks collaboratively, dyad B did the same tasks in 318 minutes. Similarly, the amount of *on-task* talk, a*bout-task* talk and *off-task* talk was discrepant for the dyads. For instance, whereas dyad C spent 246, 24 and 2 minutes on *on-task* talk, *about-task* talk and *off-task* talk, respectively, dyad B spent 241, 64 and 13 minutes, respectively, on *on-task, about-task* and *off-task* talk.

According to Tables 1 and 2, the common thread running through all the dyads was that the *on-task* talk accounted for a major proportion of total task completion time, followed by *about-task* talk with much smaller proportions and *off-task* talk with only minuscule quantities. For three of the dyads (i.e., A, C & D), the proportions of *on-task* talk were rather similar: dyad A (87%), dyad C (90%) and dyad D (89%). Compared to these three dyads, dyad B had a smaller proportion of on-task talk, that is, 76%.

4.2 Type of Activities

Examination of the transcribed data also indicated that the dyads' process of collaborative writing was segmentable into three stages of: *planning, writing,* and *revising.* The total task completion time as well as time divisions for the three stages were computed in minutes for both Malaysian-Chinese and Iranian dyads. Three sample collaborative writing sessions representing the beginning, middle and ending sessions are presented below (see Tables 3, 4, 5, & 6).

Table 3
Time spent on the Stages of Writing (in minutes) by Dyad A in Three Sample Collaborative Writing Tasks

	Total time on task completion	Planning	Writing	Revising
Task 2	29 Min	8	21	0
Task 8	26 Min	4	21	1
Task 14	24 Min	2	21	1

Table 4
Time Spent on the Stages of Writing (in minutes) by Dyad B in Three Sample Collaborative Writing Tasks

	Total time on task	Planning	Writing	Revising
Task 2	33 Min	13	20	0
Task 8	29 Min	9	17	3
Task 14	26 Min	6	16	4

Table 5
Time spent on the Stages of Writing (in minutes) by Dyad C in Three Sample Collaborative Writing Tasks

	Total time on task	Planning	Writing	Revising
Task 2	30 Min	2 min	25	3
Task 8	25 Min	2 min	20	3
Task 14	18 Min	1 min	15	2

Table 6
Time spent on the Stages of Writing (in minutes) by Dyad D in Three Sample Collaborative Writing Tasks

	Total time on task	Planning	Writing	Revising
Task 2	30 Min	5 min	22	3
Task 8	26 Min	4 min	21	3
Task 14	24 Min	2 min	19	3

It is important to note that sometimes the participants' approaches to the tasks varied. Examination of the transcripts revealed that there were some instances when the three-stage linear process in writing was flouted by some dyads. For example, whereas dyad D seemed to have had a regular time slot for revising their joint text at the end of each task, the revision stage was not present in the transcript of dyad A for the second session at all. Dyad A appeared to have been doing revision concurrent with their composing (stage). Dyad C had a different approach to revision. For the revision of the text the peers did not read through the text and did not heed the lexico-grammar, but rather they just reviewed through the steps they had been taking during the task completion process and attempted to pinpoint the location of those steps on their text. Mei was doing the revision; the revision stage in her own words is presented here: "So now revising the graph…Ok! Our first line is the title, and then followed by the countries we studied and then we compared the employment rate between male and female in six countries in ten years, and then we compared the…" [Dyad C, Task A, L176].

As far as planning stage was concerned, it was present in all the transcripts. However, the amount of time that each dyad spent on this stage considerably varied for some dyads. As Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 show, whereas dyads C and D spent a very small proportion of the total task completion time on the planning stage, and generated and planned their ideas during the composition phase, dyads A and B spent a bigger share of their time at the planning stage. They generated, classified and noted down the key words and ideas to be used during composition stage. Furthermore, as shown by the Tables (3 through 6), although task completion time varied between the dyads, they all had one thing in common: task completion time and more noticeably "planning" time were

progressively on decline for all the dyads. For example, whereas even some dyads (e.g., dyad B) could barely finish the tasks in the allotted 30 minutes in the beginning sessions of collaborative writing, towards the ending sessions they all could complete the tasks in less than thirty minutes.

4.3 Type of Episodes (About-task and On-task Talk Episodes)

The taxonomy of the established codes distinguished between *about-task* talk and *on-task* talk for both Malaysian and Iranian dyads are presented below. Malaysian and Iranian participants' pair talk interestingly produced similar episodes. The body of *about-task* and *on-task* talk could be subcategorized into six and five episodes, respectively. For the purpose of further clarification, the above-mentioned *about-task* talk and *on-task* talk episodes are accompanied with further explanation as well as actual samples from Malaysian and Iranian dyads' interactive discourse.

4.3.1 The Taxonomy of About-task Talk Episodes for Iranian and Malaysian Dyads

(i) Reading the topic and task directions;

(ii) Clarifying and highlighting task requirements;

(iii) Sharing responsibilities (Dividing labor);

(iv) Announcing the writing stage;

(v) Seeking the peer's contribution and ideas;

(vi) Heeding the time limit and word limit.

In the following paragraphs, *about-task* talk episodes are explained in detail and actual examples are provided from the participants' pair conversations.

(i) Reading the Topic and Task Directions

Those stretches of collaborative discourse in which the learners read aloud the topic of the writing task as well as the directions of the task were coded as 'reading the topic and task directions.' These episodes naturally and predictably occurred at the very beginning of task completion process.

Excerpt 1:		Reading the topic and task directions
2	Negar:	"The graph below shows information of employment rates across six courtiers in 1995 and 2005."
	[Dyad B, TASK A, L 2]	
Excerpt 2:		Reading the topic and task directions
1	Teng:	all-right…let's look at the title of the graph
2	Mei:	"The graph below shows information of employment rates across six countries."
	[Dyad C, Task A, L1-2]	

(ii) Clarifying and Highlighting Task Requirements

These are the episodes by which the peers tried to make a given task clearer to understand and to follow. They underlined or circled the key words and discussed the task instructions to better understand what the task required them to do. Some of the participants also took a task apart through paraphrasing task details and features.

Excerpt 3:		Clarifying and highlighting task requirements
18	Niloofar:	The graph asks us to explain the number of passengers who use underground system.
	[Dyad B, Task B, L 18]	

Excerpt 4:		Clarifying and highlighting task requirements
2	Teng:	I think we need to find for the features and compare…
3	Mei:	station passengers
	[Dyad C, Task B, L 2-3]	

(iii) Sharing Responsibilities (Dividing Labor)

Those parts of the collaborative discourse by which the peers are talking together about "who should do what" falls in this category. The participants, in fact, by these episodes of language were negotiating to assume a role or to assign a responsibility.

Excerpt 5:		Sharing responsibilities
21	Niloofar:	Ok. Now write!
	[Dyad B, Task C, L 21]	

Excerpt 6:		Sharing responsibilities
46	Niloofar:	Start writing now!
47	Negar:	Oh my God! My hand is very tired
48	Niloofar:	Ok! I will write it.

(iv) Announcing the Writing Stage

The talk by which the participants stated the stage of the writing task was coded as Announcing the Writing Stage. It was actually a common practice among some of the participants to announce the writing stage they were about to go through. Some of the participants announced the introduction and editing stage of their composition.

Excerpt 7:   Announcing the writing stage

28   Wai: Now the introduction…

[Dyad D, Task E, L 28]

Excerpt 8:   Announcing the writing stage

68   Mei: It's time for conclusion part…

(v) Seeking the Peer's Contribution and Ideas

During their collaborative activities, the peers sometimes overtly sought assistance and contribution from the peer. The episodes of this type were categorized as "seeking the peer's contribution and ideas."

Excerpt 9:   Seeking the Peer's Contribution and Ideas

15   Mei: We should write for the reason or not?

16   Teng: …so the reason will be that people go for the walk

17   Mei: So how should we write it?

(vi) Monitoring Time and Word Limit

As the dyads were supposed to produce texts of not less than one-hundred and fifty words in not more than thirty minutes, almost all the dyads had some episodes of their pair talk on the number of words written and the time limit. They would count the number of words and heeded the amount of time left on a regular basis.

Excerpt 10:   Monitoring the time and word limit

239   Gin: We need to write a conclusion …not enough time…

240   Gin: already have around 150 words…

241   Wai: so we go in conclusion...

[Dyad D, Task B, L 239- 241]

Excerpt 11:   Monitoring the time and word limit

298   Niloofar: …right now we don't have time…that's enough…

[Dyad B, Task C, L 298]

4.3.2   The Taxonomy of On-task Talk Episodes for Iranian and Malaysian Dyads

(i) Idea Generation;

(ii) Language Related Episodes (LREs);

(iii) Clarification of Content;

(iv) Organization of Ideas;

(v) Re-reading the Text.

In the following paragraphs, *on-task* talk episodes are explained in detail and actual examples are provided from the participants' pair conversations.

(i) Idea Generation

Following Swain and Lapkin's (1998) procedure, the 'idea unit' was used as a unit of analysis in coding of pair talk in the present study. Idea unit refers to any stretch of discourse dealing with generation of one idea. Some criteria have been proposed for identifying the idea units: intonation, pausing and syntax. According to Chafe (1985), idea units normally have the following three features: 1. are uttered with a single coherent intonation contour, and have a tendency to end with a clause final intonation; 2. are followed by a pause; 3. consist of one single clause. It should be noted that the three factors might not always be present and presence of any of them does not necessarily mean the presence of an idea unit. In this study, in addition to considering the above-mentioned intonational features and pauses, the phatic expressions used by the interlocutors during the pair talks were noted as well. Many of the idea units were followed by phatic utterances like 'yes, yeah, ok".

Excerpt 12:   Idea Generation

13   Mei: Start from 10 there is an increasing in number of people

14   Teng: Yeah, but they don't peak like during the working time.

15   Teng: I mean when they depart to work.

16   Mei: Yes, I guess we can see the lowest number of people is
                                  at 6am and also at the 10pm

[Dyad C, Task B, L 13-16]

(ii) Metatalk or Language Related Episodes (LRE)

Following Swain and Lapkin's (2001) framework, those stretches and instances of the pair talk where the peers discussed or reflected on the meta-linguistic features of the language they were producing or had produced, or any correction and modification they made to their own language or to the language of their partner were counted as LREs. Analysis of data (i.e., reiterative process of reading and re-reading the transcribed data) indicated emergence of three types of LREs in the participants' metatalk: Form-oriented LRE (FO-LRE), Lexis-oriented LRE (LO-LRE), and mechanics-oriented LRE (MO-LRE).

a) Form-oriented LREs (FO-LRE)

Any part of the peers' pair talk dealing with grammatical accuracy such as reflecting on tense of the verbs, the prepositions, articles, linking devices and word order was categorized as Form-oriented LRE. The following LRE exemplifies Form-oriented LREs.

Excerpt 16:		An FO-LRE dealing with the tense of a verb
143	Negar:	Start from 10! There is an increasing in number of people, actually, the numbe passengers who use underground station…
144	Niloofar:	Who use?!
145	Negar:	Yes, number of passengers who use…yes…
146	Negar:	'Who use' is correct or 'who is using?' What do you think?
147	Niloofar:	'Who use' is correct…I think

b) Lexis-Oriented LREs (LO-LREs)

The peers' discussions and reflections about choosing of words, meaning of words, or expressing an idea in alternative ways were counted as Lexis-Oriented LREs. An example from the Lexis-oriented LREs is presented below:

Excerpt 14:		An LO-LRE dealing with the choice of a word
176	Niloofar:	It means the chance of…
177	Negar:	having job….
178	Niloofar:	finding job…
179	Negar:	Why finding?...having job is better
180	Niloofar:	having is not chance…finding is chance
		[Dyad B, Task A, L 176-180]

c) Mechanics-Oriented LREs (MO-LREs)

Mechanics-oriented LREs were defined as those segments of the collaborative meta-linguistic talk which focused on the spelling, pronunciation, and punctuation. Below is an example from the Mechanics-oriented LREs:

Excerpt 23:   An MO-LRE dealing with punctuation

199   Mei: So, we just put a full stop there?

200   Teng: Ok. Yup.

[Dyad C, Task B, L 199-200]

The quantified values representing the nature of metatalk (LREs) for grammar, lexis and mechanics are provided for each dyad as follows:

Table 7
Type and Frequency of LREs (produced by the dyads)

Type / Frequency	FO-LRE	LO-LREs	MO-LREs	Total
Dyad A	71	91	14	176
Dyad B	93	96	23	212
Dyad C	45	62	16	123
Dyad D	39	51	12	102

As shown by Table 7, the LREs generated by all the dyads were typologically comparable; however, their frequency of occurrence was notably different between the Iranian and Malaysian-Chinese dyads. The numerical representations of the LREs demonstrated that compared to their Malaysian-Chinese counterparts, Iranians had a more predominant inclination towards deliberating about the meta-linguistic features of language.

Furthermore, all dyads exhibited a similar quantitative distribution of the LREs: lexis-oriented LREs had the highest and mechanics-oriented LREs had the lowest rate of frequency, and the grammar-oriented LREs fell between the two.

(iii) Clarification of Content

During their collaborative discussions, participants often engaged in interpreting and clarifying the content and details of the given tasks. As the following sample episode indicates, the peers were interpreting the graphic (pictorial) information provided by the task.

Excerpt 16:   Clarifying content

48   Mei: The lowest one is about sixty-two percent and the total is eight hundred.

49   Teng: the majority of the Vietnamese have a low English

50   Teng: fluency which around 60% came to Australia…no increase at all

51   Mei: intermediate in the low…

52   Teng: 10% for the advanced …and…

[Dyad C, Task C, L 48-52]

(iv) Organization of Ideas

The participants' pair talks included some discursive episodes concerning the organization and arrangement of their ideas in their text. In excerpt 17 below, Niloofar wants to deal with the number of passengers who use underground station in London, but Negar proposes that they first look at the factor of time on the graph.

Excerpt 17:   Organization of ideas

11   Niloofar: Now the first paragraph…what can we write?

12   Negar: the number of …

13   Niloofar: no no no, I think we can start by the time….

[Dyad B, Task E, L 11-13]

In addition, some of the participants explicitly articulated their approach to paragraphing of their text. As shown by the following excerpts, it seems that the participants had apparently a partitioned structure of English texts in their minds.

Excerpt 18:   Organization of ideas

197   Gin: It's time for conclusion part

198   Wai: Ok. So the conclusion will be…

(vi) Re-reading the Text

The segments of collaborative discourse in which the participants read their jointly-written text were coded as 'Re-reading the text' episodes. Re-reading the texts took place in the forms of reading the whole text or reading only some parts of the text.

5. Discussion

The present study sought to explore the nature of peer-peer dialog during collaborative writing tasks among Iranian EFL and Malaysian-Chinese ESL learners, with a specific concentration on the types of talk, writing stages, and the nature of the learners' collaborative discourse. The results offer valuable insights into how the writing process is mediated by dyadic interactions, revealing similarities and variations in peer collaboration.

One of the most salient findings of the study is the predominance of *on-task* talk across all dyads. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Storch, 2002; Watanabe & Swain, 2007), the data suggest that learners predominantly stayed focused on the task, with *on-task* talk occupying between 76% and 90% of the total time. This strong engagement points to the efficacy of collaborative writing as a context that encourages sustained academic discourse, goal-oriented interaction, and negotiation of meaning—all underlying principles of sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The high proportion of *on-task* talk and a much smaller percentage of a*bout-task* talk and negligible amount of *off-task* talk in this study (see Tables 1 & 2) are consistent with the findings of other similar studies (Guerrero & Villamil, 1994; Storch, 2001).

As for *type of activity*, the dyads' process of collaborative writing was found to be segmentable into three stages of *planning, writing,* and *revising.* This, however, did not mean that the three stages were omnipresent in all the transcripts. There were instances where the three stages were not followed in a linear fashion. For instance, the peers in dyad A did not engage in a distinct revision stage, and appeared to be doing revision concurrent with their composing (stage). Other scholars have reported a similar non-linearity of composing process by the participants in their studies (Storch, 2001, 2005; Zamel, 1983). Unlike the revision stage, the planning stage was present in all of the transcripts, although the amount of time that each dyad spent on this stage sometimes considerably varied between the dyads. Similar scenarios of variations between the dyads in terms of their approaches to task completion are documented in the related literature (Storch, 2001, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). What is noteworthy is that although the duration of task completion time varied between the dyads, they all had one thing in common: task completion time and more noticeably 'planning' time were progressively on decline for all the dyads. Besides the plausibly expected 'practice effect', this could possibly be attributed to the task typology and task requirements: it could be hypothesized that the repeated attempts with similar tasks, which required composing a short description of graphic prompts, may have enhanced the students' dexterity in dealing with the tasks. In other words, the set of isomorphic tasks used was naturally not conceptually challenging or new to them; therefore, they did not need serious reflection and contemplation. It can be speculated that the outcome could have been otherwise had the tasks been of argumentative type, requiring novelty and extended reasoning and argumentation.

As far as the *type of episodes* is concerned, the segmentation of transcribed data into *about-task* and *on-task* episodes produced identical taxonomies for both Malaysian-Chinese and Iranian dyads (see sub-headings 4.3.1 & 4.3.2 above). The similarity between these taxonomies could be an indication that the way Iranian and Malaysian-Chinese students orientated themselves to the tasks was qualitatively similar. For example, all the participants approached the tasks by "reading the topic and task instructions" (*about-task* talk episode) or they all happened to produce LREs (*on-task* talk episode) in their pair talk. However, the 'qualitative similarity' in task completion was not necessarily concomitant with 'quantitative similarity'. For instance, the numerical analysis of LREs revealed distinct tendencies towards metatalk among the participants. Compared to Malaysian-Chinese students, Iranians were evidently further inclined to contemplate meta-linguistic features, particularly lexis-oriented LREs. A similar finding has been reported by Saadat and Zahed Alavi (2020) with the two purposively selected Iranian pairs of their study, i.e., more proficient vs. less proficient: "…episodes having to do with lexis were prevalent in almost all of the performances of

both pairs" (p.115). However, Shakarami (2011) has reported that Malaysian learners "paid more attention to the communicative aspect of language and cared less about the language forms" (pp. 124-125). One possible explanation for such an orientational divergence between Malaysians and Iranians could be the overall dissimilarity in the socio-contextual status and pervasiveness of the English language in the two countries. In the Kachruvian model of world Englishes, Iran is in the 'Expanding Circle' with English having the status of 'foreign language', whereas Malaysia lies in the 'Outer Circle' with English as a 'second language' (Kachru, 1986 as cited in Bolton, 2019; Monfared et al., 2016) and English serves the role of "an institutionalized additional language" (Baker, 2008, p. 132). These structural differences manifest in what Widdowson terms the 'local foreignness' of English –how learners' sociocultural contexts shape their very conception of the language's purpose (Widdowson & Yazdi-Amirkhiz, 2023, p. 398).

In the Iranian sociolinguistic context, the Farsi language (Persian) has an undisputed status as the national language and most English learners encounter limited real-life opportunities to engage in authentic communicative interactions with native or international speakers beyond their local environment. As such, the principal avenue for learning the English language in Iran has traditionally been confined to formal education settings, where instruction is largely structure-based and lexico-grammar oriented. It is worth pointing out that despite the efforts in the recent years to revise and reform the materials in line with the principles of communicative language teaching, substantive changes have yet to appear. According to Leather and Motallebzadeh (2015), despite claims made by the developers of Iran's new junior high school English textbooks that their program represents "a revolutionary process"—purportedly transitioning from traditional to communicative pedagogical approaches— the actual instructional emphasis still persists predominantly on reading, grammar and vocabulary. The issue is further compounded by the lexico-grammar-centered format of the English test section of the Iranian National University Entrance Exam (INUEE) called Konkoor, as the most consequential high-stakes test in the country. The test format has been found to create a negative washback effect, influencing both the instructional practices and learning priorities. Consequently, teachers and students alike show form-focused orientations towards form-focused instruction (Ajideh & Mahmoudi, 2017; Mahmoudi, 2014).

In the Malaysian context, however, English functions as a firmly established lingua franca, serving primarily as a functional communication tool among diverse linguistic communities and language users who prioritize the practical utility of English for everyday interaction over formal linguistic features. This perspective is supported by Shakarami's (2011) findings that Malaysian students prioritized communicative effectiveness, where "neither accuracy nor fluency seemed important...the language's crucial function was enabling effortless connection with others" (p. 125). Graddol's observation (2001, as cited in Faber, 2010) further explains this phenomenon, noting that English as a lingua franca becomes "more dynamic and flexible and much less standardized, with a greater focus on transmitting messages rather than strict grammatical correction" (p. 21).

Thus, the participants' varied English learning histories and previous educational experiences (see Appendix A & B) could be viewed as other likely factors amplifying divergent tendencies between Malaysian-Chinese and Iranian participants of the study. These differences could be due to the distinct pedagogical systems and broader sociocultural contexts in which the participants were immersed over the years in the macro-context of their home countries. As Watson-Gegeo (1992) asserts, "[p]articipants in an interaction always bring with them previous experiences and learning shaped by a variety of institutional practices in the family, school, community and nation" (p. 53). Supporting this, Gillette's (1994) study highlights how the strategic choices made by the language learners could be attributed to and explained by their individual learning histories and lived experiences.

Conclusions

This study offers a comparative look at the nature of peer-peer dialog among two Iranian (EFL) and two Malaysian-Chinese (ESL) dyads during eleven collaborative writing sessions. It examines how collaborative engagements unfolded within each dyad. While the overall approaches adopted by both groups for task completion were found to be qualitatively similar (i.e., their way of orientating themselves to completing the tasks was similar), the quantity and distribution of certain features varied, e.g. frequency of LREs. Compared to their Malaysian-Chinese counterparts, the Iranian participants showed a stronger tendency to focus on metalinguistic aspects of language. Given that the dyads were comparable in terms of gender, age, grouping, language proficiency, academic discipline, and the type of task completed, the variations observed could perhaps suggest that cultural background, educational experiences, and learning histories may influence how learners engage with language on a metalinguistic level. The study underscores the complexity of peer interactions in collaborative writing and challenges the assumption that learners of similar proficiency levels will interact identically when faced with the same tasks. On the other hand, by analyzing and exploring the peer-peer dialogs and the nature and inner dynamics of interaction among the learners, educators and researchers could gain valuable insights that inform more judicious and effective pedagogic decisions and interventions in their settings.

Implications, Limitations and Future Studies

The findings of this study may have a number of theoretical and pedagogical implications. Theoretically, the findings primarily align with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, demonstrating how peer dialog mediates language learning processes. The predominance of "on-task" talk across all dyads during collaborative writing tasks supports Vygotskyan notions of learning through socially situated interaction. The study also supports Swain's concept of "languaging", as learners externalized their thought processes through dialog, particularly in metalinguistic discussions. The differential frequency of LREs between Iranian and Malaysian-Chinese dyads could be indicative of the influence of learners' sociocultural and educational backgrounds on collaborative behavior. The higher frequency of LREs among Iranian learners could be construed as suggesting that metalinguistic awareness may be more pronounced in contexts where language learning is form-focused. From the perspective of cultural and contextual influences, the differences in metalinguistic manifestations between the two groups highlight the need to consider cultural and educational backgrounds in collaborative learning research. This aligns with Grabe and Kaplan's (1996) assertion that cultural socialization impacts collaborative dynamics. Iranian learners' heightened focus on metalinguistic features reflects a more form-oriented instructional tradition, while Malaysian-Chinese participants exhibited more communicative engagement. These findings challenge assumptions of uniform interactional patterns among similarly proficient learners and call for more context-sensitive models of collaborative L2 writing. The segmentation of writing into planning, composing, and revising—though not always linear—highlights the recursive nature of L2 writing and affirms prior research on the dynamic structure of collaborative composition (Storch, 2005; Swain, 2006).

Pedagogically, educators can utilize collaborative writing tasks to foster learner engagement and metalinguistic awareness. In EFL contexts with grammar-translation traditions, such tasks may serve as effective interventions to promote interactional competence and linguistic reflection. For ESL learners, tasks could be designed to balance communicative fluency with attention to linguistic accuracy. The observed reduction in planning and task completion time indicates that repeated exposure to isomorphic (structurally similar) tasks enhances fluency and efficiency. This supports the use of task repetition or sequencing in curricula to scaffold learner development and build procedural fluency. The greater frequency of LREs among Iranian dyads signals the need for

pedagogical balance. Whereas form-focused discussions can support accuracy, instructors should incorporate prompts that encourage content negotiation and idea generation. Finally, educators should be attentive to learners' educational histories when forming groups or designing tasks. Mixed-background pairings may produce synergistic benefits by balancing form-oriented precision with communicative focus. Awareness of such dynamics can inform more equitable and effective classroom practices.

However, several limitations constrain the generalizability of these findings. First, the small sample size limits the extent to which the results can be generalized to broader populations or contexts. Future research involving a larger and more diverse group of dyads is recommended to strengthen these insights. Second, the study only included learners with an IELTS band score of 6, meaning the findings may not apply to students at other proficiency levels. Third, all participants were female and of similar age, factors that could have influenced the nature of their collaboration. Research suggests that gender and age can influence individualistic versus collectivist tendencies. According to Triandis (1993), "…men are more individualistic than women. Age is slightly related to collectivism" (p. 160). Additionally, previous studies (e.g., Villamil & Guerrero, 1998) have highlighted that the type of task can affect learner performance in collaborative settings. On the other hand, task type could also be discussed in connection with practice effect. As evidenced by the content analysis of the peer-peer dialog, there was a declining trend of peer-peer dialog (negotiated interactions) over time: the early sessions captured richer meta-linguistic discussions as the dyads engaged more profoundly with unfamiliar tasks, but later sessions' efficiency was downgraded as the full scope of collaborative potential was barely used, being attributable to *task type*. It could be hypothesized that the outcome could have been otherwise had the tasks been selected of less structured type (e.g., argumentative) where novelty could have sustained negotiations. Therefore, future studies could explore interactions across diverse age groups, genders, and task types.

Finally, since this study was not conducted within a genuine classroom context and Malaysian-Chinese participants were paid to participate in the study, it can be hardly claimed that the collected data would reflect natural classroom dynamics. The artificiality of the setting, i.e., the lab-like setting (e.g., scheduled sessions, recording equipment) and absence of classroom dynamics likely enhanced focus but reduced ecological validity. Future research should aim to investigate these collaborative processes within authentic classroom environments to better capture real-world learner behavior.

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Appendix A

Queries about Participants' Language Learning History

1. How many languages do you know? Where and how did you learn English?

2. How was English taught at school? Please describe typical classes.

3. Please tell me briefly about the skills (listening, reading, writing speaking), the language elements (vocabulary and grammar) and activities you usually did in your classes.

4. What methods did your English teachers usually use to teach English? Please describe in detail.

5. How often did you have group work in your classes?

Thank you very much for your time.

Appendix B

The four Malaysian-Chinese participants of the present study had fairly similar background of English learning: they had all learnt English for eleven years under Malaysia's educational system, except for one of them (i.e., Wai) who had attended private language schools as well. The Iranian students said they had all learnt English for 7 years under Iranian educational system and had all attended private English institutes. In terms of the areas of focus in their English classes, Malaysian participants referred to the four skills of language (reading, writing, listening, and speaking) plus grammar and vocabulary. However, Iranian participants unanimously stated that the focus of instruction in their English classes at schools was on grammar exercises, vocabulary and translation from English into Persian. They particularly referred to the lexico-grammar-focused English section of the Iranian National University Entrance Exam, prompting teachers and students to strive in the direction of the demands of the test. They basically argued that since the focus of the high-stakes test was exclusively on vocabulary, grammar and reading, most of the English teachers were teaching to the test and the students were likewise excessively obsessed with grammar and vocabulary.

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