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The Effect of Mixed and Matched Level Dyadic
Interaction on Iranian EFL Learners' Comprehension
and Production of Requests and Apologies

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Abstract

Drawing upon sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, the current study aims to investigate the effect of dyadic interaction in mixed and matched level proficiency pairings on comprehension and production of request and apology speech acts. The participants were 125 EFL learners who were randomly assigned to control and experimental (interaction) groups. Based on their scores in the pretest including a pragmatic listening test and an Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT), those in the experimental groups were assigned to the mixed (H-L) and matched level (H-H and L-L) dyads. Both the control and experimental groups received metapragmatic instruction on speech acts; however, the experimental groups were engaged in collaborative problem-solving tasks on speech acts for nine sessions. Following the treatment, the posttest was administered, the results of which revealed the outperformance of the interaction groups compared with the control group. Moreover, mixed level dyads were found to outperform their matched level counterparts in both measures of comprehension and production of speech acts. The findings have pedagogical implications for L2 teachers and practitioners on how to best pair learners in collaborative activities.

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One of the assumptions underlying L2 pragmatic development is that L2 pragmatic acquisition is largely analogous to general models of L2 acquisition accepted by many experts in the field of applied linguistics and SLA research (Gass, 1988). This assumption implies that different approaches to L2 learning contribute to our understanding of L2 pragmatic development. Kasper and Rose (2002) categorized these approaches into two groups. The first group enjoys an intra-psychological orientation like cognitive processing models. The second group, with an inter-personal perspective, considers L2 learning as a social practice. Within the second framework lies the *Sociocultural Theory* (SCT).

The focus of the present study is on SCT, as an under-explored aspect of developmental pragmatics. Based on SCT, language learning is the result of individual's collaborative interaction with more capable peers. Central to SCT is the notion of "scaffolding" or the preferred term "collaborative dialogue". Collaborative dialogue is "the knowledge of building dialogue in which language use and language learning can co-occur. It is language use mediating language learning. It is a cognitive activity and it is a social activity" (Swain, 2000, p. 97). Scaffolding is also defined as the process through which the assistance is provided to the novice on the part of the expert ones (Hawkins, 2015). Scaffolding assists the learner to move forward in the *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD). According to Lantolf and Poehner (2014), it is through the inter-psychological mechanisms of scaffolding that learners are in the position of internalizing the knowledge they co-construct through a collaborative activity.

Although the effect of collaborative interactional activities has been acknowledged by theoretical assumptions like SCT and Long's *Interaction Hypothesis* (IH), a concern that still remains for language teachers and practitioners is how to best pair learners engaged in interactional activities. Undoubtedly, learners in an individual class vary in terms of their proficiency level and decisions have to be made on their proficiency pairing. There is substantial number of studies focusing on how the type of proficiency pairing

affects L2 acquisition; however, they failed to reach a consensus on the patterns of pairing more conducive to L2 development. Some studies claimed that matched ability pairs worked more effectively (e.g., Baleghizadeh, TimchehMemar, & TimchehMemar, 2010; Kim, 2009; Kowal & Swain, 1994) while some other studies lend support to the outperformance of mixed ability pairs (e.g., Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Storch, 2002; Wu 2008). Besides, the effect of proficiency pairing on different aspects of L2 has been explored in previous studies (e.g., Leeser, 2004; Murphy, 2007; Storch & Aldosari, 2013). However, when it comes to L2 pragmatics, one is faced with paucity of research. Although literature exists more or less on the effect of interaction on L2 speech acts (e.g., Alcon, 2002; Tajeddin & Tayebipour, 2012), to date very few studies attempted how proficiency pairing within interactional tasks affects the development of L2 speech acts. An exception is the study by Rahimi Domakani and Felfelian (2012) who did not find a statistically significant difference in L2 pragmatic performance of equal and unequal pairs as a result of interaction in ZPD-sensitive contexts.

Given the paucity of research on the effect of proficiency pairing on development of L2 pragmatics, further empirical research in the field seems necessary. Drawing upon SCT of Vygotsky (Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995), the current study attempts to fill the gap in the literature and further our understanding of interlanguage pragmatic development by bringing together the three stimulating areas of L2 proficiency, dyadic interaction and L2 pragmatic performance all of which are of outstanding status in the state of the art. More specifically, it fills the gap by demonstrating how engaging in peer interactional tasks across different proficiency pairings brings about variations in learners' comprehension and production of request and apology speech acts. The following research questions were specifically addressed.

1. Do matched ability pairs indicate improvement from pretest to posttest of comprehension and production of requests and apologies as a result of being engaged in dyadic interaction?
2. Do mixed ability pairs indicate improvement from pretest to posttest of comprehension and production of requests and apologies as a result of being engaged in dyadic interaction?

Review of Literature

Studies of Interaction and SLA Based on SCT

So far, SCT has triggered a number of studies which investigated how expert-novice and novice-novice interactions introduced variations in learners' development of different L2 aspects (Baradaran & Sarfarazi, 2011; MemariHanjani & Li, 2014; Poorahmadi, 2009; Shehadeh, 2011). Among others, nonetheless, the realm of L2 pragmatics does not have a robust literature in the research carried out within sociocultural framework, even though this type of research can help L2 practitioners design and implement interactional activities that give rise to pragmatic development.

Poorahmadi (2009) examined the impact of teacher scaffolding on development of EFL learners' reading comprehension. While the control group simply was engaged in extensive reading activities, the experimental (scaffolding) group was provided with supplementary reading comprehension tasks along with an integration of various scaffolding strategies provided for each task, emphasizing reading ability and featuring the target output. The amount and the type of scaffolding offered for each task was tried to be fine-tuned to the students' needs and their developmental level and it was gradually reduced as the students revealed signs of progress. The results revealed the outperformance of scaffolding group and provided supportive evidence for the positive role of scaffolding in development of reading comprehension. In a similar vein, Baradaran and Sarfarazi (2011) described how a group of university students were guided through the process of teacher scaffolding to produce their first academic essays in English. The teachers tried to teach the students how to generate ideas, structure, draft, and edit their essays within the scaffolding principles such as, contextualizing, modeling, negotiating, contingency, constructing and handover, within the ZPD. The results of the analysis showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group. The researchers concluded that teacher's scaffolding could greatly improve the writing performance of students at university level.

Although Vygotsky's work is mainly focused on asymmetrical scaffolding (i.e., expert-novice), there is ample evidence that symmetrical scaffolding (novice-novice) may be effective as well. Indeed, there is a body of studies suggesting that scaffolding can also occur effectively in peer

interaction; however, the nature of scaffolding may be different in peer interactional tasks (van Lier, 1996). A study by Shehadeh (2011) compared EFL learners' development of writing ability in individual and collaborative writing situations. In the latter condition, the learners acted interchangeably as both the experts and novices. It was found that collaborative writing had a statistically significant effect on improving students' L2 writing in terms of content, organization, and vocabulary. The study also revealed that the peer's scaffolding enhanced not only students' writing competence, but also their speaking ability and self-confidence. Similar findings were reported by Memari Hanjani and Li (2014) who investigated the impact of collaborative revision activity on Iranian EFL learners' writing performance and found different levels of mutual scaffolding which was evident in all pairs regardless of their level of L2 writing proficiency.

Among others, the realm of pragmatics has received scant attention in the research carried out within a sociocultural approach. Alcon (2002) compared the effect of teacher-student versus student-student interaction on development of speech act of request. Two groups of learners were randomly assigned to learners' collaborative language learning condition and teacher-led interaction. Both groups outperformed in the posttest compared with the pretest. The nature of collaborative dialogue was analyzed in both groups and it was found that pragmatic knowledge might emerge from assisted performance.

The mediating role of interaction is well represented in Lantolf and Poehner's (2005) account of "dynamic assessment" which refers to an interactive and ZPD-sensitive assessment that has "the expressed goal of modifying the learner's performance during the assessment itself" (p. 235). Tajeddin and Tayebipour (2012) examined the pragmatic performance of two dynamic assessment (DA) and non-dynamic assessment (N-DA) groups, with each group including the sub-groups of low and high proficiency levels. Following metapragmatic instruction on request and apology speech acts, DA group received ZPD-sensitive feedback while N-DA group was assessed based on their independent performance. The findings revealed that DA groups outperformed their N-DA counterparts and that the sub-groups of high and low proficiency in DA groups indicated improvement from pretest to

posttest to delayed posttest. However, such an improvement was not observable in relation to N-DA group. The researchers attributed the outperformance of DA groups to their ZPD-sensitive interactions which provided them with two types of opportunities to learn; one, when the learner was addressed directly and once when s/he was not addressed directly but through listening to others.

van Compernelle and Kinginger (2013) also presented the data collected from a case study of an intermediate learner whose metapragmatic knowledge was assessed and promoted in the ZPD. Based on Vygotsky's concept of ZPD, they argued that cooperative interaction- in which the assessor (mediator) not only observes, but also intervenes in the learner's response processes can lead to the learner's continued growth within the assessment task. They illustrated how the metapragmatic knowledge of social distance and power hierarchies as illustrated by the second-person pronouns "tu" and "vous" was emerged as the case attempted to choose between these pronouns in cooperation with the tutor.

Interaction and Proficiency Differences

Although peer-peer interaction across groups of different L2 proficiency levels is commonly observed in L2 classrooms, whether such groupings are useful and which patterns of grouping lead to higher level of performance remains a matter of controversy.

Homogeneous grouping has been favored by some studies (e.g, Ansalone, 2000; Baleghizadeh et al., 2010) on the grounds that the teachers are able to focus the instruction at the level of all students within a specific group. In their study, Kowal and Swain (1994) used a dictogloss task with the teacher reading a short text and the students working in homogeneous and heterogeneous pairs to reconstruct it as similar to the original version. They found that heterogeneous dyads worked less effectively possibly because neither student's needs were within the ZPDs of the others and because they failed to respect each other's perspectives. Kowal and Swain (1994) concluded that pairing learners of different proficiency levels may fall short of achieving instructional objectives particularly when the proficiency gap is too large.

Some later studies, however, found evidence to support the outperformance of heterogeneous dyads (Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Storch, 2002; Wu 2008). A longitudinal study by Storch (2002) came up with the patterns of interaction more conducive to language learning. She noted that when learners worked in collaboration pattern (working together to solve the problem or expert/novice interaction when one assists the other), more instances of knowledge transfer took place and more assistance was provided and received by the participants. The assistance was in the form of providing positive feedback, correcting each other and explanation of grammatical points and word meanings. However, dominant/dominant pattern (where each member of the pair sought to dominate the interaction) and dominant/passive pattern (where more knowledgeable participant took an authoritarian stance and the other one was passive) indicated either no transfer of knowledge or missed opportunities. The study revealed that the pairs with the higher proficiency difference (low and upper-intermediate) were more collaborative while the pairs with some degree of homogeneity (low and intermediate) had non-collaborative orientation.

Wu (2008) examined the impact of English proficiency on learner-learner's meaning negotiation in a Chinese EFL context. The participants were assigned to high (H-H), low (L-L) and mixed groups (H-L) and engaged in picture-description tasks while their interactions were audio recorded. The analysis of transcripts revealed that H-L dyads produced more meaning negotiation than H-H and L-L dyads.

Although literature is rich on the effect of proficiency pairing on development of different L2 aspects, when it comes to L2 pragmatics, very few studies have been conducted so far with the exception of Rahimi Domakani and Felfelian (2012) who investigated the effect of the ZPD-based proximal contexts of equal and unequal peer interactions in comparison to the traditional modes of teaching on students' L2 pragmatic development. Two groups were randomly assigned to the ZPD-base context and non-ZPD-base context with the former one providing a ZPD context in which interaction, cooperation, scaffolding and mediation existed among learners while in the latter one no interaction and assistance among peers occurred. ZPD-activated class by itself consisted of groups of equal and unequal peer interaction who

were paired to collaboratively complete the discourse completion test items. The results demonstrated that ZPD-activated proximal context had a positive effect on EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development, however, no significant difference between EFL learners' interlanguage pragmatic development of equal and unequal groups was found.

Method

Participants

The participants of this study were 125 English-major freshmen (54 males and 71 females) comprising three intact "Listening and Speaking" classes in some branches of Islamic Azad University in East Azarbaijan province, Iran. Their age range was between 18 and 32 with the average age being 23.5. They represented three language backgrounds, Azari, Kurdish and Persian. They had, on average, 6.5 years of prior formal English learning. The participants were homogeneous in terms of their general proficiency, as indicated by Quick Placement Test (QPT); however, they were heterogeneous in terms of their L2 pragmatic knowledge as revealed by their pretest scores. For the purpose of the current study, they were assigned to high-intermediate (henceforth, H) and low-intermediate (henceforth, L) proficiency levels based on their scores in the pretest.

Instruments

Three types of tests were used in this study: Quick Placement Test (QPT); pragmatic listening test and Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT). While the QPT was administered to measure the participants' general proficiency level, pragmatic listening test and ODCT measured their L2 pragmatic knowledge. Both the pretest and posttest included a pragmatic listening test and an ODCT, each one including 10 items with the items varying in terms of sociopragmatic elements of power, social distance and degree of imposition (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Details of each measure are presented below.

Quick Placement Test (QPT). QPT was used to ensure the homogeneity of all participants' general English proficiency. It is a standardized measurement developed by Oxford University Press and University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate, including 30 parts;

vocabulary, grammar and cloze items (ten items for each part). It took about 45 minutes for the participants to take the test. Furthermore, the internal consistency of the test was measured and found to be acceptable as indicated by a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.79.

The pragmatic listening test. The pragmatic listening test was adapted from the ones previously validated and used in the literature including Liu (2007) and Birjandi and Rezaei (2010). It included ten situations, five situations for each of the intended speech acts. The listening prompts used for the pragmatic listening test were in the form of tape-recorded dialogues. Each item included three options, a correct answer and two distractors. Prior to test administration, the participants were given some instructions on how to fill out the answer sheet. Before hearing each dialogue, the participants studied a set of options. They had enough time to choose the correct answer following listening. The measures of internal consistency reliability for the pragmatic listening pretest and posttest were estimated using Cronbach's alpha, yielding 0.81 and 0.79 respectively, both of which representing roughly acceptable values.

Oral Discourse Completion Test (ODCT). ODCT items were also chosen from the previous studies (Liu, 2006; Song & Liu, 2002; Taguchi, 2011). Those items detected by researchers as ambiguous or lengthy were replaced following pilot testing. Prior to taking ODCTs, each participant was given a role card including a description of the situation as well as the participant's role. They had approximately 1-2 minutes to focus on the situations and take notes if necessary. Following this, the teacher read each situation and the participants responded orally while their voices were recorded. To enhance the reliability or "scoring validity" (Weir, 2005, p. 23), the final scores of ODCTs were the mean scores of the researchers as well as an external rater employing global or holistic approach and drawing upon a four-point rating scale previously validated by Jernigan (2007). The correlation between all ratings was estimated using Pearson Product-moment Correlation yielding .82 for the pretest and .87 for the posttest, both of which representing an acceptable inter-rater reliability.

Materials

Worksheet: A number of scenarios representing speech acts of request and apology were presented in the worksheet. The situations selected were the ones more likely to be encountered by L2 speakers, like daily interactions and educational affairs. The scenarios enjoyed variability with respect to sociopragmatic elements of power, social distance and degree of imposition.

The pairs in experimental groups were required to decide on the acceptability of contextualized utterances and correct the pragmatically problematic parts included in each situation. While all the items were pragmalinguistically correct, some items included sociopragmatic deviations. According to Kasper and Rose (2002), pragmalinguistics involves resources for conveying communicative acts, such as forms or strategies used to intensify or soften communicative acts. Sociopragmatics, on the other hand, refers to the social perceptions underlying the performance of these forms and strategies in a particular sociocultural context.

Video vignettes: To compensate for the effect of over-practice in the experimental groups and make a balance between all groups' amount of exposure to language, the control group watched short video clips containing the target speech acts while the experimental groups were engaged in dyadic interaction. Twelve video vignettes, six apologies and six requests were extracted from Annie Hall and Flash Forward films. The major focus of these vignettes was to draw the control group's attention to the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic aspects involved in making requests and apologies.

Mp3 recorder: The participants' performances on ODCTs in the pretest and posttest were recorded for the researchers and an additional rater's scoring.

Target Structure

The rationale behind choosing pragmatic features of requests and apologies in this study was that among a number of speech acts, they are observed recurrently in daily interactions of any speaker. They are face-threatening and thus demand a full understanding of their interpretation and production in order to avoid miscommunication (Ellis, 2008). Besides, the results obtained in some previous studies (Rahimi Domakani, Hashemian, &

Mansoori, 2013; Razavi, & Tabatabaei, 2014) suggested that Iranian EFL learners had problems in identifying and producing appropriate requests and apologies in different sociocultural contexts.

Procedures

Three intact classes assigned to group 1, 2 and 3 constituted the participants of this study. Group 1 and 2 were randomly assigned to the experimental groups (matched and mixed level groups) and group 3 to the control group. Following the pretest, the participants in the experimental groups were assigned to H-H, L-L (matched level group) and H-L (mixed level group) dyads. H-H dyads included two participants of higher proficiency level. H-L dyads consisted of a higher proficiency learner as well as a lower proficiency one. L-L dyads included two partners of lower proficiency level. Both the control and experimental groups received metapragmatic instruction on the target speech acts. The experimental groups were engaged in dyadic interaction as well.

Explicit metapragmatic instruction for the request speech act was commenced by the teacher (one of the researchers) raising the participants' awareness through some questions focusing on the situations demanding the request speech act. Two possible strategies for requesting, including direct strategy (e.g., Give me some water) and conventionally indirect strategy (e.g., Could you give me some water?) were proposed. Listener-oriented (e.g., Could you give me some water) and speaker-oriented (e.g., Can I have some water?) perspectives were also discussed. Downgraders like "I'm sorry" or "please" which minimize the request imposition were also illustrated. The instruction followed by presenting a detailed description of semantic formulas, politeness techniques as well as types and factors of variability in realization of requests. The roles of sociopragmatic variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition which lead to realization of various pragmalinguistic forms in different contexts were also discussed.

Metapragmatic instruction for the speech act of apology followed similar steps as those taken for requests. Once again, the teacher raised some awareness raising questions and then modeled examples of semantic formulas realizing the speech act of apology in L2. Direct (e.g., I'm sorry) and indirect

strategies (I didn't mean to) along with apology schemes and intensifiers (e.g., really, very), realization and interpretation patterns as well as downgraders were discussed. Besides, the students' attention was drawn to social and contextual factors affecting the language users' preference for a certain appropriate apology form.

Following metapragmatic instruction, each pair in the experimental groups was engaged in dyadic interaction. Dyadic interaction in the current study implies a mutual interaction between the pairs in the experimental groups resulting in scaffolded performance. Each pair received a worksheet including the situations with sociopragmatically problematic items adapted from among the ones used in several earlier studies including Bardovi-Harlig & Dörnyei (1998) and Bardovi-Harlig & Griffin (2005). While all the items were pragmalinguistically correct (i.e., correct forms or resources were employed for realization of speech acts), they included some sociopragmatic deviations (i.e., the interlocutors did not adhere to the social conventions underlying the performance of speech acts). In the case of requests, e.g., the situation included an over-polite request where a moderate level of politeness was needed (e.g., in supermarket) or a bare request was made while pragmatically more polite request was demanded by the situation (e.g., the student requesting his teacher). In the case of apologies, the speaker avoided apologizing where apology was needed. Through collaborative problem solving work, the dyads were required to draw upon their shared resources and make judgments about whether the intended speech act was used appropriately or not and justify their answers in the cases with an appropriate use of speech act. In cases with a sociopragmatic deviation, they needed to underline the unacceptable part and provide the appropriate form in order to role play the modified form in front of the class. In the process of collaborative activities, the participants engaged in different social roles and speech events where they could practice and gain familiarity with pragmatic or sociopragmatic aspects of speech acts. In the course of action, the performance of the dyads was being monitored by the teacher. Finally, each dyad acted out in front of the class.

The treatment lasted five weeks, nine sessions including two sessions for the pretest and posttest administration and three sessions for each of the

intended speech acts as well as two sessions for reviewing what they've learned in previous sessions. In each session, the focus was on different social variables. In one session, the participants worked on the social variables of equal power, high/low distance and low degree of imposition. They practiced requesting and apologizing their classmates and friends. The next session, the emphasis was on unequal power, high distance and high/low degree of imposition; hence, the pairs requested and apologized their teachers. During the third (review) session, the focus was chiefly on a combination of these variables. One week following the treatment, the posttest was administered to gauge the effect of dyadic interaction on comprehension and production of speech acts. Table 1 presents the framework of the study. P stands for Power (the relative dominance of the interlocutors in relation to each other); D stands for Distance (familiarity between the interlocutors); R stands for Degree of imposition (the burden placed on the hearer by the speaker's request); = stands for equal; # stands for unequal; - stands for Low and + stands for High.

Table 1

Framework of the Study

Session 1	Pretest administration	Pretest administration	Pretest administration
Session 2	Metapragmatic instruction on request; Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (=p, ±D, -R)	Metapragmatic instruction on request; Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (=p, ±D, -R)	Metapragmatic instruction on request; Watching video clips on request situations
Session 3	Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (#P,+D,+R)	Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (#P,+D,+R)	Watching video clips on request and discussing the situations
Session 4	Review sessions 2 & 3; Working on combinations of social variables	Review sessions 2&3; Working on combinations of social variables	Review sessions 2&3

Session 5	Metapragmatic instruction on apology; Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (+P, -D, ±R)	Metapragmatic instruction on apology; Working in pairs on worksheet including request situations of (+P, -D, ±R)	Metapragmatic instruction on apology; Watching video clips on apology situations
Session 6	Working in pairs on worksheet including apology situations of (#P,+D,+R)	Working in pairs on worksheet including apology situations of (#P,+D,+R)	Watching video clips on apology and discussing the situations
Session 7	Review sessions 5 & 6; Working on combinations of social variables	Review sessions 5&6; Working on combinations of social variables	Review sessions 5 & 6
Session 8	Review session 2 to 7	Review session 2 to 7	Review session 2 to 7
Session 9	Posttest administration	Posttest administration	Posttest administration

The following examples come from the interactions of the dyads. In example 1, the situation includes a student and his teacher with the teacher requesting the student to check the bus times for a class trip; however, the student gives a bare reply, deviating the politeness techniques. Example 2 depicts a situation in which the customer makes an over-polite request in addressing the salesperson.

Example 1.

S1: Peter, could you check the bus times for us on the way home tonight?

No, I can't tonight. Sorry.

S2: I think Peter....here is talking to somebody who is lower than him.....in a lower situation than him....or....

S1: Yes, he thinks that teacheris....a kind of...close friend. He have...has a close relationship with him. Peter thinks that he has a close relationship with him and.....eh....asks him like that.....that language.

S2: As you said it's too informal, because when you talk to your teacher,....the teacher is in a higher position than you....and you should use more formal sentences.

S1: Yeah.....more appropriate and more polite language.....well.....would you mind giving me.....?

S2: or...can I have your book if you.....ah.....can I have your book if you don't need it this weekend?

Example 2.

S1: Would you be so kind as to give me a sandwich?

S2: Peter's answer is very....eh..... official and ...it isn't appropriate between ...eh.....customer and salesperson.

S1:...Hm....I think so. I think.....could you....

S2: Also... would you...

S1: Well.....Would you....could you give a sandwich and yogurt please.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study were collected using three tests: QPT which was administered to ensure that the participants were homogeneous in terms of their general English proficiency levels before the treatment. Pragmatic listening test and ODCT were also employed as the pretest and posttest to gauge the participants' L2 pragmatic knowledge prior to and following the treatment. QPT comprised of 30 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar and cloze items while pragmatic listening test included 10 multiple-choice items (five items for each of the request and apology speech acts). The participants' final scores in QPT and pragmatic listening pretest and posttest were the total number of correct answers. ODCT, however, required the test takers to listen to each situation and provide their responses for similar situations regarding the social variables of power, social distance and degree of imposition. It also included 10 items (five items for each of the intended speech acts). The final scores of ODCT pretest and posttest were the mean scores of all researchers and an external rater employing global or holistic approach to scoring and drawing upon a four-point rating scale previously validated and used by Jernigan (2007). In holistic approach, candidates are placed at a single level on the scale based on the impression of their production. According to Weir (2005) each grade on a scale is usually equated with a distinct level of performance which is closely described in terms of a number of criteria. In order to obtain more consistent data, six participants with extreme scores were paired with each other and were excluded from the final analysis.

The data collected through the above-mentioned tests were analyzed using the statistical software SPSS, version 16. Prior to administration, Cronbach's alpha coefficients for QPT and pragmatic listening test were calculated and the indices were found to be acceptable. Inter-rater reliability of ODCT pretest and posttest were also calculated using Pearson Product-moment Correlation and the measures appeared to be acceptable. Subsequently, four Paired samples t-tests were run to provide an account of the improvement of mixed and matched groups from pretest to posttest in measures of comprehension and production of request and apologies. The results of Paired samples t-tests were used to answer the first and second research questions. Besides, to provide a measure of the overall development of the experimental groups from pretest to posttest, ANOVA test of within subject effects was conducted. Finally, post-hoc pairwise comparisons test was run to match each group one-to-one with each of the other groups and locate the significance of the differences. The results of post-hoc pairwise comparisons were drawn on to compare the groups and answer the third research question.

Results

Matched Group

The descriptive statistics of the scores in pragmatic listening test and ODCT for the matched level group in pretest and posttest has been presented in Table 2. The mean (M) and standard deviation (SD) for listening pragmatic pretest were 5.18 and 2.07 which indicate an increase from pretest to posttest (posttest M = 6.28; SD = 2.02). Similarly ODCT scores' mean in pretest (M = 4.87) increased from pretest to posttest (posttest M = 5.38). Descriptive statistics, thus, supports the assertion that the comprehension and production of speech acts in the matched group increased from pretest to posttest as a result of engagement in interactional tasks.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Matched Group

		Pragmatic Listening, pretest	ODCT, pretest	Pragmatic Listening, posttest	ODCT posttest
N	Valid	39	39	39	39
M		5.18	4.87	6.28	5.38
Md		5.00	4.00	6.00	6.00
Mode		5.00	3.00 ^a	7.00	6.00
SD		2.07	1.86	2.02	1.82
Variance		4.30	3.48	4.10	3.34
Minimum		2.00	3.00	2.00	2.00

In addition to descriptive statistics, to answer the research questions, two paired samples t-test were run to investigate the significance of the difference between the mean scores in the comprehension and production pretest and posttest (Table 3 and 4). The results obtained by these tests were used to answer the first research question. Table 3 shows the results of paired samples t-test for pragmatic listening pretest and posttest of matched group.

Table 3
Paired Samples t-test for Pragmatic Listening Pretest and Posttest of Matched Group

		Paired Differences							Sig. (2-tailed)
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
		M	SD	SEM	Lower	Upper	t	df	
Pair 1	Matched, pragmatic listening	1.09	1.95	.34	.34	.013	2.18	38	.015

As Table 3 displays, the amount of t -value with its 38 degree of freedom is 2.18 which is larger than t -critical at 0.05 level of significance ($p < .015$). It can be concluded that the comprehension scores of matched group significantly increased from the pretest to posttest.

Table 4 shows the results of paired samples t -test which was run to examine the significance of difference between ODCT scores in the pretest and posttest of matched group.

Table 4
Paired Samples t -test for ODCT in the Pretest and Posttest of Matched Group

		Paired Differences							Sig. (2-tailed)
		M	SD	SEM	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Matched, ODCT pretest- posttest	.51	1.38	.30	-1.12	.095	2.31	38	.011

As Table 4 shows, t -observed in its 38 degree of freedom is 2.31 which exceeds the t -critical needed at 0.05 level of significance ($p < .011$). This confirms a significant difference between ODCT scores of matched group in the pretest and posttest. By reference to the results yielded by Table 3 and 4, we can claim that the comprehension and production scores of matched group increased from pretest to posttest as a result of engaging in dyadic interaction.

Mixed Group

Descriptive statistics for the mixed group is shown in Table 5. The mean and SD in pragmatic listening test were 5.13 and 1.98 respectively. These indices are 6.43 and 1.7 for pragmatic listening posttest. So, there is an increase from pretest to posttest scores of pragmatic listening test in mixed group. Regarding ODCT, the table shows the mean increase from 5.60 in the pretest to 6.36 in the posttest.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Mixed Group

	Listening, pretest	ODCT, pretest	Listening , posttest	ODCT posttest
N	46	46	46	46
M	5.13	5.60	6.43	6.36
Md	5.00	4.00	7.00	6.00
Mode	5.00	3.00	7.00	6.00
SD	1.98	2.00	1.70	1.65
Variance	3.95	4.01	2.91	2.72
Minimum	2.00	3.00	3.00	3.00

As for the matched group, two paired samples t-test were run to investigate the significance of the difference between the mean scores of mixed group in the comprehension and production pretest and posttest (Table 6 and 7). The results obtained by these tests were employed to answer the second research question. Table 6 shows the results of paired samples t-test for pragmatic listening pretest and posttest of mixed group.

Table 6
Paired Samples t-test for Pragmatic Listening Pretest and Posttest of Mixed Group

		Paired Differences							
		M	SD	SEM	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
					Lower	Upper			
Pair 1	Mixed, listening	1.30	.71	.23	-.77	.16	-2.87	45	.007

The t -value is 2.87, exceeding the t -critical needed in 45 degree of freedom ($p < 0.07$). Thus, the difference between the pragmatic listening pretest and posttest is statistically significant. We can claim that the mixed group's scores in pragmatic comprehension increased from pretest to posttest as a result of engaging in dyadic interaction.

Regarding the production scores, descriptive statistics (Table 5) revealed an increase from pretest to posttest of mixed group. To find out the significance of difference in means, paired samples t -test was run for ODCT scores of pretest and posttest of mixed group (Table 7).

Table 7

Paired Samples t-test for ODCT Pretest and Posttest Scores of Mixed Group

		Paired Differences								
		M	SD	SEM	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	
					Lower	Upper				
Pair 1	Mixed, ODCT pretest-posttest	-76	1.28	.18	-1.14	-.37	-4.01	45	0.00	

Table 7 shows that t -value with 45 degree of freedom is 4.01, exceeding the t -critical needed at 0.05 level of significance ($p < 0.00$). This supports a significant increase in ODCT scores of mixed level dyads due to interactional tasks.

By reference to the results of Table 6 and 7, we can answer the second research question and conclude that mixed ability group indicated an increase from pretest to posttest scores of comprehension and production of speech acts as a result of being engaged in dyadic interaction.

For the next level of analysis, the data were submitted to an ANOVA test of within subject effects. While paired samples t -tests conducted so far provide a measure of the improvement of each of the experimental groups in isolation, ANOVA test of within subject effects can provide a measure of the

overall development of the experimental groups from pretest to posttest of comprehension and production of speech acts, hence consolidate the findings. Table 8 shows the results of this test.

Table 8
ANOVA Test of within Subject Effects Comparing the Improvement from Pretest to Posttest in the Experimental Groups

		Type III		Mean			Partial Eta
Source		Sum of	df	Square	F	Sig.	Squared
factor1	Sphericity Assumed	342.95	2	171.47	49.97	.000	.64
	Greenhouse-Geisser	342.95	1.81	188.55	49.97	.000	.64
	Huynh-Feldt	342.95	1.83	186.46	49.97	.000	.64
	Lower-bound	342.95	1.00	342.95	49.97	.000	.64
Error(factor 1)	Sphericity Assumed	1063.71	310	3.43			
	Greenhouse-Geisser	1063.71	281.91	3.77			
	Huynh-Feldt	1063.71	285.08	3.73			
	Lower-bound	1063.71	155.00	6.86			

As Table 8 shows, F -observed value for comparing the means on the pretest and posttest scores is 49.97 which is significance at $p=0.00$. This confirms the significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental groups in measures of comprehension and production of requests and apologies. The magnitude of the difference was also estimated and the effect size was observed to be moderate (Eta squared = .64)

So far, we have made within-group comparisons. To compare the magnitude of development from pretest to posttest across three groups, post-hoc pairwise comparisons test was run to match each group one-to-one with

each of the other groups and locate the significance of the differences. Table 9 displays the result of post-hoc pairwise comparisons.

Table 9
Post-hoc Pairwise Comparisons

(I) factor1	(J) factor1	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval for	
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound
mixed group	matched group	.67*	.18	.001	.23	1.12
	control group	2.05*	.20	.000	1.56	2.54
matched group	mixed group	-.67*	.18	.001	-1.12	-.23
	control group	1.37*	.23	.000	.79	1.95
control group	mixed group	-2.05*	.20	.000	-2.54	-1.56
	matched group	-1.37*	.23	.000	-1.95	-.79

The answer to the third research question of this study can be found in the above table. Comparisons revealed a significant difference between matched and mixed group (mean difference = .67, $p < 0.05$). The difference between the mixed and control group was also found to be significant (mean difference = 2.058, $p < 0.05$). Similarly, matched group and control group revealed significant differences in means (mean difference = 1.37, $p < 0.05$). The results of pairwise comparisons confirm that there is a significant difference between interaction groups and the control group in terms of pretest-posttest differences, that is, the three groups didn't reveal the same degrees of improvement from pretest to posttest. Furthermore, as suggested by the above table, from two experimental groups, mixed group was found to reveal more improvement from pretest to posttest than matched group (mean difference = .67, $p < 0.05$). This suggests that dyadic interaction was more effective on development of comprehension and production of speech acts of request and apology in mixed group compared with matched group.

Discussion

Drawing on the SCT of Vygotsky, the purpose of the current study was to investigate the acquisition of speech acts of request and within interactional discourse in dyads of matched and mixed level proficiency. Overall, the findings demonstrated the outperformance of interaction groups (experimental) compared with non-interaction (control) group in measures of comprehension and production of request and apology speech acts. The results also revealed that pairing the learners in mixed proficiency dyads resulted in better performance than pairing them with partners of similar proficiency. The findings of this study, thus, can be discussed under two subheadings; (a) the effect of interaction on pragmatic gains and (b) the effect of proficiency pairing on pragmatic gains.

The Effect of Interaction on Pragmatic Gains

The findings of this study in terms of the outperformance of the interaction groups compared with the control group generally support the application of Long's (1996) interaction hypothesis based on which L2 acquisition benefits from interaction and especially negotiation of meaning which occurs when interlocutors attempt to overcome problems in conveying their meanings. This is also supported by a number of studies which have documented a positive role of interaction in development of different aspects of L2 (Alcon, 2002; Edstrom, 2015; MemariHanjani & Li 2014; Shehadeh, 2011). These studies mainly focused on the negotiation of meaning and interactional feedback as the main features of interactional discourse. Significant effects for dyadic interaction were observed in this study for pragmatic comprehension and production for speech acts of request and apology. This confirms 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 regressive action, and show deference successfully for the L2 target community" (p. 292).

According to Donato (1994, p.46), opportunities for "collective scaffolding" can be obtained through learners' engagement in interactional tasks. Through a collaborative meaning-focused task, learners are provided

with opportunities to “verbalize” their problems. This verbalization assists learners to pull their knowledge in a joint attempt to successfully resolve the problem at hand and in so doing deepen their linguistic knowledge and co-construct the new knowledge. Analysis of interactions from both experimental groups in this study revealed that a high proportion of pairs readily participated in the problem-solving activities during which they used language for authentic purposes and tested their hypotheses on language. They shared their strengths through scaffolding in order to accomplish the task and reach higher levels of accuracy and complexity.

The outperformance of interaction groups compared with the control group may be attributable to the “affordances” provided to the interaction groups which were not available for the control group. During the treatment sessions, the interaction groups had opportunities for interaction and hence learning which was not offered to the control group. Although the control group had exposure to pragmatic video vignettes, the mere exposure was inadequate in assisting them to arrive at parallel pragmatic gains. An additional point worthy of mentioning is the nature of affordances across two interaction groups. Whereas in mixed group the affordance was provided on the part of more capable peers, in matched group it was not offered necessarily from the peers, but rather it was co-constructed in collaboration and resided in interaction (Maftoon & Ghafoori, 2009).

The Effect of Proficiency Pairing on Pragmatic Gains

In terms of the outperformance of the mixed group, the findings of this study support those of some earlier studies (Karimi & Jalilvand, 2014; Storch, 2002; Wu 2008). These studies argue that negotiation of meaning is more likely to occur in heterogeneous ability settings. Such ability diversity within the same group offers opportunities for all learners’ cognitive development. While the low level learners can overcome their cognitive obstacles by their high level peer’s assistance, advanced learners can put into practice their knowledge, revise and consolidate what they have already acquired.

This study, however, reveals counterevidence to the study of Kowal and Swain (1994) who argued that mixed proficiency pairing may trouble the lower proficiency participants. In their study which included both mixed and

similar proficiency levels, the more proficient learners tended to dominate the interaction and do the task while the weaker students were passive and willingly or not abdicated the whole burden of the task to their partners in an asymmetrical interaction. The researchers attributed the underperformance of mixed proficiency pairs to the participants' affective aspects. They argued that peer-peer learning involves emotional aspects that might influence the learner's performance. The novice participants might have been under pressure or frustrated to work with their expert partners and hence adopted the passive or novice roles. A point in need of consideration is that the study of Kowal and Swain (1994) included highly heterogeneous pairs, e.g., upper intermediate and low. In the current study, however, the level of heterogeneity was not high (including high-intermediate and low-intermediate) and the pairs didn't suffer due to affective aspects and felt at ease to interact with their fellow participants. This is consistent with Webb and Palincsar's (1996) argument that for the low-achiever to benefit from the high-achiever's scaffolding in a heterogeneous group, it is imperative that the cognitive distance is not that wide as low-achievers may not understand high-achievers' explanations.

The outperformance of mixed group suggests that the learners enjoyed asymmetrical scaffolding which is the interaction of a more knowledgeable peer with a less knowledgeable one. With an optimal cognitive gap, they were able to contribute different levels of scaffolding to each other and help their partners move forward in their ZPDs. This is in keeping with Vygotsky's SCT regarding heterogeneous or expert-novice interaction as an essential part of arriving at higher mental development. According to Ohta (1995), collaborative pair work in mixed level pairs is beneficial for both high and low proficient participants. While the less proficient learners can benefit from the solutions offered by their more proficient partners and tend to develop their knowledge through assisted performance, the high level participants are able to move forward in producing a language with higher levels of complexity and fluency.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore whether peers' interaction makes any significant improvement in the comprehension and production of request and apology speech acts and whether the improvement differed across dyads of mixed and matched proficiency levels. Two groups of mixed and matched level were engaged in collaborative interactional tasks to provide their appropriate alternatives to the items with sociopragmatic deviations. Following treatment, their improvement from pretest to posttest was measured and it was found that peer-peer interaction had an impact on comprehension and production of request and apology speech acts. Furthermore, although both mixed and matched level dyads were found to outperform their control counterparts, mixed group appeared to perform better than matched group in both measures of comprehension and production of speech acts. Based on the results of this study, it seems that L2 pragmatic knowledge can be achieved through students' interaction with more or less knowledgeable peers in mixed proficiency settings; however, even if the students be at roughly similar proficiency levels, they can still benefit from interactional activities in pairs or groups.

Given the findings, some pedagogical implications may be drawn from this study. First, the results revealed that L2 pragmatic knowledge is likely to emerge from peer's collaborative interaction, that is, mediation comes not only from the teacher but also from the peers. As stated by van Lier (1996), students can learn by the act of teaching the other students. Peer-peer interaction might be a possible alternative for teacher-fronted instruction especially in large size classes with a limited exposure to L2 where teachers do not have opportunities to interact with individual students. Secondly, in keeping with Vygotskian stance, mixed level dyads were found to outperform their matched level counterparts. The heterogeneity of the proficiency levels in a single classroom, therefore, may not be a pedagogical concern for teachers, but rather they can get advantage of this possibility by guiding learners towards assisted performance.

Finally, the limitations of this study are to be acknowledged. First, as mentioned earlier, the participants were from various L1 backgrounds. Bearing the assumption in mind about the general consensus on the

transference of some pragmatic aspects of L1 into L2 (Liu, 2007), it may be implied that the L1 background of the participants might have affected their L2 pragmatic choices. Second, the analysis made a comparison between matched and mixed level groups in general without considering the learning outcomes associated with each of the subgroups. This is an area in need of further exploration if one wishes to get a profound picture of developmental outcomes once learners are paired up with partners of more or less proficiency levels. Finally, in the current study, the learners worked only with a learner of the same or different proficiency level. The outcomes might have been different if each learner accomplished the same task two times, once in a mixed level dyad and once in a matched level one. This remains an area for future studies.

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