



Impact of Collaborative Output-Based Instruction on EFL Learners' Awareness of the Speech Act of Apology

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Abstract

A sizeable body of research into instructed pragmatics roots from the noticing hypothesis: comparing implicit and explicit instruction. It is only recently that other theories, including the output hypothesis, have been researched as possible explanations of interlanguage pragmatic development. Pursuing the same line of research, the present study addressed the impact of collaborative output (CO) on the production of apologies. To this end, 51 EFL learners comprising a CO group (N=26) and a control group (N=25) participated in the study. The CO group underwent six 45-minute sessions of instruction on apologies, in which they received input in the form of written speech-act contained situations, followed by paired discourse completion tasks. The results of the statistical analyses showed the significant improvement of the CO group on a 15-item written discourse completion test serving as both the pretest and the posttest. The findings warrant CO-based instruction as an apt approach to the instruction of pragmatics.

Keywords: Interlanguage pragmatics; Collaborative output; Speech act

INTRODUCTION

Within the broad domain of SLA, “pragmatic competence” was brought into light following the postulation of “communicative competence” by Hymes in the 1970s; however, it explicitly premiered in Bachman (1990) model of communicative competence, underscoring the significance of the relationship between “language users and the context of communication” (p. 89). Since then, a great many studies have addressed three main questions as constituting the essence of interlanguage pragmatic competence research:

Whether and how pragmatic competence can be instructed, whether instruction is more effective than no instruction, and whether different instructional approaches addressing interlanguage pragmatics can be differentially effective (Kasper & Rose, 2002). As Kasper and Rose conclude in their review of previous research findings, the first two questions have been answered in the affirmative, while the third issue still stands in need of more empirical research. Moreover, instructed pragmatics research has mainly addressed speech acts, among which “apologies”

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stand out. This is because research has shown that the performance of apologies is subject to cross-cultural variation (Naoko Taguchi, 2011).

Theoretically, instructed pragmatics research is majorly informed by the noticing hypothesis put forth by Schmidt (1993), leading to a great number of studies into the impact of implicit and explicit instruction on ILP development. An alternative framework within which pragmatic competence can be investigated from an acquisitional perspective is the “comprehensible output hypothesis” (M. Swain, 1985). Swain states that conversational exchanges induced in collaborative output episodes, or collaborative dialogues, can aid L2 acquisition, since they have the potential to push learners to foster the appropriacy, precision, and completeness of their utterances (M. Swain, 1985). Simply put, collaborative output can be defined as “language produced by the learner” in collaboration with peers or significant others (Ellis, 2008, p. 957).

Since M Swain (1985) put forth her theory of comprehensible output, a large number of studies have been conducted to substantiate claims as to the significance of learner output for interlanguage development. However, they have mainly addressed grammar and vocabulary acquisition, and the role of learner output in developing their interlanguage pragmatic competence is an under-researched area (Naoko Taguchi, 2011). Accordingly, the present study investigated the impact of collaborative output-based instruction on the performance of the apology speech act by EFL learners. What follows is a brief literature review related to the study’s main foci.

Interlanguage pragmatics: Theory and research

Pragmatic competence and its subcomponent sociolinguistic competence have been identified as constituents of models of communicative competence since the 1980s, though not always under the rubric “pragmatic competence.” It was Bachman (1990) who first explicitly used the term “pragmatic competence” in his conceptualization of linguistic competence subsuming under

it illocutionary and sociolinguistic competencies. Watts (2003) postulates that pragmatic competence involves the four conversational maxims of quantity, quality, relevance, and manner as constituents of the “Cooperative Principle” postulated by Grice (1975), as well as the rules of politeness however the latter may be defined. Along the same lines, Celce-Murcia and Olshtain (2000) state that “...pragmatic competence relies very heavily on conventional, culturally appropriate, and socially acceptable ways of interacting. These rules of appropriacy result in regular and expected behaviors in language use” (p. 20). Extending the concept to second language acquisition, interlanguage pragmatics can be defined as “the study of nonnative speaker’s use and acquisition of linguistic action patterns in a second language” (Kasper & Blum-Kulka, 1993, p. 3). Interlanguage pragmatic development involves learning “not only how to do things with target language words but also how communicative actions and the “words” that implement them are both responsive to and shape situations, activities, and social relationships” (Kasper & Roever, 2005, p. 317). The former which concerns the interface between pragmatics and social action is referred to as “sociopragmatics,” and the latter which concerns how linguistic forms map onto pragmatic functions is referred to as “pragmalinguistics” (Leech, 1983).

Interlanguage pragmatics turned into a vibrant area of research at the turn of the 21st century. A myriad of studies have addressed the issue of the most effective instructional approach for ILP development, mainly comparing explicit and implicit teaching strategies under different rubrics: “metapragmatic instruction” vs. “input and practice-only” conditions, “rule explanation” vs. “consciousness raising,” “focus on form” vs. “focus on forms,” etc. (see Takahashi, 2010). The general research findings are in favor of explicit pragmatic instruction paired with sufficient practice opportunities. Among practice opportunities, “languageing” or “output” opportunities stand out.

As for the targets of such research, “speech acts” stand out. Levinson (1983) pronounces the

point, stipulating that “of all the issues in the general theory of language usage, ‘speech act theory’ has probably aroused the widest interest” (p. 226). A large number of studies have investigated speech act realization strategies and the effect of various instructional treatments on the production and (fewer on the) comprehension of different speech acts within the domain of second language acquisition. This predisposition can be attributed to the fact that the appropriate performance of a speech act involves not only deciding whether or not to perform it in the first place, given the peculiarities of the speech situation, but also performing it at an acceptable linguistic level and in accordance with the sociocultural norms of the target language (Cohen, 1996). Moreover, among all speech acts, requests, apologies, refusals, complaints, compliments and compliment responses have been most widely researched, perhaps because of the high frequency with which they occur in everyday language use (Naoko Taguchi, 2011).

As the focus of the present study, an “apology” can be defined as a “compensatory action to

an offense in the doing of which S (the speaker) was causally involved and which is costly to H (the hearer)” (Bergman & Kasper; cited in Kondo, 2010, p. 146). The basic strategies used to realize apologies have been sketched by Olshtain and Cohen (cited in Ellis, 2008), and their model was successfully adopted in Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper’s (cited in Kondo, 2010) Cross-cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP). Table 1 displays the apology strategy set, together with examples of its realization semantic formulae. A number of interventionist ILP studies have investigated the teachability of apologies through various instructional approaches. Examples include studies by Z. Eslami-Rasekh, Eslami-Rasekh, and Fatahi (2004), and A. Eslami-Rasekh and Mardani (2010), which evidenced the beneficial effect of explicit instruction for the acquisition of English apology strategies by Iranian EFL learners, and also Tateyama (2001), which found both implicit and explicit instruction of Japanese apology routine formulae to English learners of Japanese effective.

Table 1.

Speech Act Set for Apologies (Olshtain & Cohen; cited in Ellis, 2008, p. 183)

	Strategy	Semantic formula
1	An expression of an apology	
	Expression of regret	<i>I'm sorry.</i>
	An offer of apology	<i>Excuse me.</i>
	A request for forgiveness	<i>Excuse me.</i>
2	An explanation or account of the situation	<i>The bus was late.</i>
3	An acknowledgement of responsibility	
	Accepting the blame	<i>It's my fault.</i>
	Expressing self-deficiency	<i>I wasn't thinking.</i>
	Recognizing the other person as deserving apology	<i>You are right.</i>
	Expressing lack of intent	<i>I didn't mean to.</i>
4	An offer of repair	<i>I'll pay for the broken vase.</i>
5	A promise of forbearance	<i>It won't happen again.</i>

The comprehensible output hypothesis

This hypothesis capitalizes on the significance opportunities for classroom language use and pushing learners to modify their output and make themselves more comprehensible has for L2 learners' interlanguage development (Shehadeh, 2002), rather than

just as fluency practice (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Based on her study of immersion students in Canada, M. Swain (1985) stipulated that in the absence of comprehensible or modified output, even with ample comprehensible input provided, learners are unlikely to build adequate knowledge

of complex grammatical rules, vocabulary, and morphosyntax, and sufficient processing control over their expressive performance and pronunciation.

M. Swain (1995) borrowed notions from cognitive psychology to posit three prime functions for learners' modified or pushed output, namely noticing knowledge gaps (the noticing/triggering function), trialing and testing hypothesis (the hypothesis-testing function), and meta-linguistic problem solving (the metalinguistic function). Likewise, M. Swain and Lapkin (1995) concluded in their study that in producing the target language, L2 learners undergo a mental process whereby they notice gaps in their interlanguage through either external or internal feedback. This, they stated, may generate new linguistic knowledge for the learner, or consolidate their existing knowledge. More specifically, they claimed that "what goes on between the first output and the second is part of the process of second language learning" (p. 386). Later, Swain introduced the concept of "collaborative dialog," as an extension of "output":

It is dialogue that constructs linguistic knowledge. It is what allows performance to outstrip competence. It is where language use and language learning can co-occur. It is language use mediating language learning. It is cognitive activity and it is social activity. (M. Swain, 2000, p. 97)

This definition is based on the sociocultural concept of "microgenesis" of linguistic knowledge, which "disputes distinctions between surface performance and underlying competence" (Mitchell & Myles, 2004, p. 200). It is also allied with the "activity theory," which, as Mitchell and Myles put it, "challenges the compartmentalization of social and psychological aspects of language learning" (p. 200).

Some researchers have investigated whether learner output can promote their IL development, and in some cases investigated it alongside relevant input opportunities. This line of research has

mainly addressed L2 learners' vocabulary learning, production and comprehension abilities, and on a narrower scale certain grammatical structures of the target language (Mitchell & Myles, 2004). However, a wide research gap, either cross-sectional or longitudinal, seems to be whether learner's output, produced in collaboration with peers, has the potential to enhance learning of the target language's pragmatic features. Kasper (1996) states that ILP acquisition requires pertinent input which can be noticed, as well as sufficient practice opportunities so that learners develop a desirable level of control over the learning targets. Given this dearth of research in this area, the present study was designed to investigate the following null hypothesis:

H₀: Collaborative output-based instruction has no significant effect on the performance of the speech act of apology by EFL learners."

METHODS

This section provides an account of the participants, instruments, and data collection procedure.

Participants

For the purpose of the study, data were obtained from 51 male and female participants making up a collaborative output (CO) group (N=26) and a control (C) group (N=25). They were freshmen, majoring in English Language Teaching at the South Tehran Branch of Islamic Azad University. They comprised two intact classes, completing a course in "interaction in English." In addition, they ranged in age from 19 to 28, and none had ever resided in an English speaking country. They were all at the lower intermediate level of grammatical proficiency based on the results of the Quick Placement Test (see Instruments).

Materials

Two instruments were used in the present study: the Quick Placement Test (QPT), and a Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT), which are described in this section.

Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT). The participants' awareness of the

speech act of apology before and after the treatment was measured through a 15-item Written Discourse Completion Test. It comprised 15 situation prompts, reflecting possible situations for university students, and representing various combinations of “power,” “distance,” and “imposition,” following Brown and Levinson (1987). For one, respondents were asked to make an apology imagining they had failed to return a professor’s book on time. Responses were rated by the researcher and an experienced EFL university instructor (as the second rater) based on the 6-point Likert scale developed by N. Taguchi (2006). This scale focuses on grammaticality as well as appropriateness. The test took about 30 minutes to complete. Moreover, pretest scores proved to have acceptable internal consistency, as indicated by a Cronbach’s Alpha co-efficient of .79.

Quick Placement Test (QPT). This instrument was used to obtain a homogeneous sample in terms of grammatical proficiency. It includes 60 multiple-choice vocabulary, grammar, and cloze items, and the results are reported along ALTE’s seven-level scale: (a) Beginner (0-10), (b) Breakthrough (11-17), (c) Elementary (18-29), (d) Lower In-termediate (30-39), (e) Upper Intermediate (40-47), (f) Advanced (48-54), and (g) Very Advanced (55-60). Based on the results and availability of the participant, only lower intermediate learners were included in the study. Moreover, the internal consistency of the scores was acceptable, as indicated by a Cronbach’s Alpha coefficient of .77.

Procedure

At the pre-treatment phase, the participants took QPT and the WDCT. The former was used to homogenize the participants in terms of their grammatical proficiency, and the latter provided an indication of their speech act (apology) awareness. The treatment was provided over six sessions in a three-week time span. The post-treatment phase involved the second administration of the WDCT within three days of the last treatment session.

During the treatment phase, both groups were provided with 30 written speech act-contained situations (5 in each session), extracted from various ELT sources. The excerpts represented a variety of role relationships. Input presentation was followed by theme-based discussion devoid of any pragmatic focus for the control group. On the other hand, the collaborative output condition involved pairing learners up to carry out output production and manipulation tasks. Pairing of the participants was carried out based on an intuitive judgment of their expressiveness and interest in their classmates. More specifically, in the first two sessions, pairs of participants were asked to discuss how they would apologize in the same situations as those in the input. Subsequently, they were provided with the same situations with the apology statements left out, and asked to collaboratively write their strategies. Responses were then checked with the teacher. Input presentation was followed with WDCT completion and manipulation (N=5) in Sessions 3 and 4, and dialog completion and manipulation (N=3) in Sessions 5 and 6. Output production tasks engaged peer-peer dyads in expressing an apology statement based on a situation prompt or dialogue, and output manipulation tasks involved each pair in discussing the viability of their adjacent pair’s produced apology strategy. All tasks were modeled by the instructor at the pre-task phase. In addition, pairs were required to discuss relevant aspects of the situation, or engage in meta-talk, while trying to complete the tasks, with the teacher monitoring their performance to make sure both participants in each pair were contributing to the discussion and discussing the intended pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic features. Overall, 4 hours and 30 minutes of instruction was offered to the CO group.

Design and analysis

The study was designed to determine the impact of collaborative output-based instruction on EFL learners’ performance of the speech act of apology. It involved a pretest-posttest control group design, with a CO group and a control group.

Data obtained from the participants were WDCT scores. The two groups' pretest scores as well as their posttest scores were compared through independent samples t tests. Each group's pattern of performance from the pretest to the posttest was also traced through a separate matched t test.

RESULTS

The present study involved the investigation of the effectiveness of collaborative output-based instruction for the enhancement of EFL learners'

performance of the apology speech act. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the two groups' pretest and posttest WDCT scores. As shown in the table, both groups' WDCT scores enjoyed distributional normality, with the ratios of skewness and kurtosis to their standard error estimates falling within the range of ± 1.96 in all four cases. Moreover, while the two groups' mean scores were almost the same on the pretest, that of the collaborative output group was higher on the posttest.

Table 2.
Descriptive Statistics for CO and Control Groups' WDCT Scores

Group	WDCT	Mean	SD	Skewness		Kurtosis	
				Statistic	SE	Statistic	SE
CO	Pretest	2.48	.80	.10	.45	-.34	.88
	Posttest	3.51	.73	-.63	.45	.33	.88
Control	Pretest	2.52	.75	-.26	.46	.05	.90
	Posttest	2.70	.77	.20	.46	-.47	.90

To compare the two groups' pretest and posttest WDCT scores, two independent samples t tests were run. Table 3 shows the results. With equal variances assumed in both cases, while the two groups didn't significantly differ in terms of their pretest WDCT scores [$t=-.17$, $p>.05$], the collaborative output group showed a significant improvement over the control group on the posttest [$t=3.81$, $p<.05$]. Each group's pretest and

posttest WDCT scores were also compared using two separate paired samples t tests to find out if they had made a significant improvement in their apology awareness from the pretest to the posttest. Table 4 presents the results. The pretest-posttest difference was not statistically significant for the control group [$t=.8$, $p>.05$], but significant for the collaborative output group [$t=-4.5$, $p<.05$].

Table 3.
Independent Samples T Test for the Two Groups' Pretest and Posttest WDCT Scores

Test	Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		T-Test for Equality of Means				
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	SE
Pretest WDCT	.06	.79	-.17	49	.86	-.03	.21
Posttest WDCT	.33	.56	3.81	49	.00	.80	.21

Table 4.
Matched T Test for Each Group's Pretest-Posttest WDCT Mean Difference

Group	Pretest-Posttest Differences			t	df	sig
	Mean	SD	SE			
Control	-.17	1.05	.21	.82	24	.41
Collaborative Output	-1.02	1.13	.22	-4.57	25	.00

In sum, the two sets of t tests (paired and independent) indicated the significant improvement

of the collaborative output group in terms of their performance of the speech act of apology. The

change in performance for the control group, however, was not significant. Accordingly, the collaborative output condition can be said to be an effective instructional approach for enhancing EFL learners' awareness of the speech act of apology.

DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

The present study was designed to address the null hypothesis: "Collaborative output-based instruction has no significant effect on EFL learners' performance of the speech act of apology." The results worked to the rejection of the hypothesis. That pragmatic instruction was found to be effective adds to the existing evidence on (a) the teachability of L2 pragmatic features, and (b) the superiority of instruction over mere exposure to such features (Naoko Taguchi, 2011). Despite the predominant implicit/explicit distinction haunting instructed pragmatics research, the particular instructional approach in the study, i.e. collaborative output-based instruction, was derived from the comprehensible output hypothesis. The findings as to its effectiveness for the enhancement of the awareness of English apologies lend support to the hypothesis, more specifically to the significance it attributes to "collaborative dialoguing." The merit of collaborative dialogues lies in their induced peer feedback in output production tasks, and metalinguistic talk and reflections in output manipulation tasks. This potential was evidenced in Kowal and Swain (1994) and Nabei (1996), which involved learners in text reconstruction. M. Swain and Lapkin (2001) also demonstrated the potential of learner output engendered in text reconstruction and jigsaw tasks for creating language-related episodes.

There are also researchers arguing that peer feedback and metalinguistic talk does not necessarily lead to the learning of the target features. For one, Nassaji and Tian (2010) state that "collaborative pair work may facilitate learners' interaction and attention to the target forms, but it may not necessarily lead to superior learning in comparison to individual work" (p. 400). As far as ILP development, and more specifically

speech act performance, is concerned, Cohen (2009) speculates that peer-peer metalinguistic talk over a pragmatic feature in an EFL context would not enhance its learning. This he rationalizes by stating that peers mostly come from a similar sociocultural background, which makes their output seem right to both in terms of imposition and politeness. Given the findings of the present study, it can be argued that similar language and sociocultural background are not as important in determining collaborative dialoguing's potential for ILP development as the depth of consciousness of relevant pragmatic features it raises in learners. This claim echoes "consciousness raising" as one of the postulated functions of learner output, which is probably better induced in collaborative dialoguing or languaging episodes. The greater consciousness induced probably led the participants in the collaborative output group to attend to relevant aspects of the situations provided as input, and apply the noticed relationships in output production and manipulation tasks. Moreover, task modeling by the instructor might have helped learners to realize aspects of the apology situations to be discussed, and to try to meet the standards of acceptable task performance.

The study's results can also be justified by mapping them onto the general findings of instructed pragmatics research. Such research has evidenced the superiority of explicit instruction of L2 pragmatic features over implicit instruction, attributing its advantage mainly to the teacher's provision of explicit metapragmatic information on the aspects of performance of the targeted feature. By point of comparison, collaborative output-based instruction can be said to have led to peer-peer discussion of pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic implications of performing the apology speech act in output production and manipulation tasks featuring in the treatment condition, as modeled by the instructor. This might have in turn resulted in its greater efficacy over the control condition. Accordingly, it can be hypothesized that discussion of metapragmatic features with peers in output tasks can

be of acquisitional significance as is the provision of metapragmatic information by the teacher; however, this needs to be tested in another comparative study.

The study admittedly involved a number of limitations and delimitations. It only targeted speech act (apology) performance as the instantiation of ILP development. This was assessed in one written discourse completion test as both the pretest and the posttest, which might have led to test wiseness. In addition, the collaborative output condition involved only 6 treatment sessions owing to feasibility concerns. Further research targeting various aspects of ILP development, and involving more treatment sessions would complement the study's findings.

CONCLUSION

Awareness and acceptable performance of L2 pragmatic features is a prerequisite to successful communication. It is, therefore, necessary to unearth theory-laden instructional approaches which would effectively induce ILP development, especially in EFL contexts where interaction with native speakers is limited, and focused pragmatics instruction is often left out of the equation. One theoretical framework to inform ILP development is the comprehensible output hypothesis, which attaches acquisitional significance to learner output, especially when produced in collaboration with peers of the same or different proficiency levels.

The present study evidenced the potential of collaborative output for developing learners' awareness of the speech act of apology. Given this finding, collaborative output can be said to render itself well to the development of L2 pragmatic features, owing to the metalinguistic reflections it engenders, and the consciousness of such aspects of pragmatic performance as imposition, power, distance, and politeness it raises. In light of the findings of the study, the output hypothesis, particularly its postulated concepts of languaging and collaborative output, could be viewed as a viable theoretical framework within which to investigate instructed pragmatics.

Moreover, convergent output production and manipulation tasks could be designed to enhance the learning of L2 pragmatic features. Conclusions and implication statements, however, should be made cautiously as the present study only targeted the apology speech act. Similar studies could investigate the efficacy of collaborative output for the learning of other speech acts, as well as other pragmatic features including pragmatic routines.

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