

Effect of Developing Pragmatic Competence through Telecollaboration on Improving English as Foreign Language Learners' Writing Proficiency

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Abstract

The very information structure of written communication depends not just on the writer's meaning and purpose but rather on the extent to which writer and reader share knowledge of pragmatic features of the language. To assess the actual effect of developing target language pragmatic competence through telecollaboration on improving English as Foreign Language learners' target language writing proficiency, the current study was conducted on 60 Iranian learners of English at Razi Petrochemical Company in Iran. The study enjoyed a true experimental design by random assignment of participants to two equal groups, one group merely receiving writing instruction while the other being linked to target language speakers besides receiving writing instruction, and by administering three writing tasks immediately before intervention, immediately following intervention, and two months following intervention. The results of between-within subjects analysis of variance indicated that language learners who were linked to target language speakers not only demonstrated a better performance in writing according to the pragmatic features of target language following the intervention but also maintained their obtained knowledge to a greater extent than language learners who did not have contact with target language speakers. The pedagogical implications of the findings suggested providing opportunities for language learners in English as Foreign Language contexts to be virtually linked to target language speakers through telecollaboration.

Keywords: Pragmatic Competence, Telecollaborative Partnership, Writing Proficiency

1. Introduction

The very information structure of written communication depends not just on the writer's meaning and purpose but rather on the extent of match between what the writer has to express and what the reader needs to know, that is, the extent to which writer and reader share knowledge (Nystrand, 1986). People who share a common language and culture have an easier time making sense of each other's expressions and actions. Since the sociolinguistic perspectives of the languages differ considerably from each other (Alptekin, 2002), only very restricted communication is possible without a shared knowledge of the sociocultural norms conditioning language use (Kachru, 1995). In fact, the intended meaning of expressions in a given context might differ remarkably from culture to culture, resulting in various interpretations of the same expression (Murray, 2010). Therefore, effective cross-cultural communication requires not only knowledge of linguistic competence but also knowledge of pragmatic competence (Jung, 2001).

Pragmatic competence of a particular language, defined as the ability to convey one's intention appropriately and to interpret another's intention, explicitly or implicitly stated, in a communicative situation (Thomas, 1995), is best attained through being exposed to the culture from which speakers of the language come and having contact with the speakers of the language (Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012). Language learners in the second language context are exposed to the pragmatic features of the target language community and have contact with target language speakers to a great extent; as a result, they have a lot of opportunities to apply those pragmatic features in their

everyday interactions. However; in a foreign language context, language learners are deprived from contact with target language speakers and exposure to the pragmatic features of the target language community in order to develop their pragmatic knowledge of the target language (Taguchi, 2008; Martinez-Flor, 2008; Neddar, 2012; Khodareza & Lotfi, 2012). This target language contact and exposure can be alternatively provided for them through telecollaboration.

Telecollaboration, defined as “institutionalized, electronically mediated intercultural communication under the guidance of a languacultural expert (that is, a teacher) for the purposes of foreign language learning and the development of intercultural competence” (Belz, 2003, p. 2), involves the application of global computer networks to foreign language learning in institutionalized setting. In telecollaborative partnership, internationally dispersed language learners in parallel language classes are provided with cost-effective access to, and engagement with, peers who are expert speakers of the language under study (Belz, 2005). Telecollaboration has been shown to be especially conducive to the development of target language pragmatic competence as this approach “may expand the variety of discourse options to which learners are exposed as well as create opportunities for the performance and practice of target language pragmatic competence in meaningful interactions” (Belz, 2007, p. 52). Thus, telecollaborative partnership can provide an ideal environment for language learners to be exposed to target language culture and to experience intercultural contact at home.

Given the significant effect of telecollaborative partnership on the development of target language pragmatic competence on one hand and the necessity of obtaining the required target language pragmatic knowledge to be able to produce target language expressions in writing appropriately according to the sociocultural norms of the target language on the other hand, the current study seeks to investigate the effect of developing target language pragmatic competence by creating a virtual reality environment in which foreign language learners of English can be linked to native speakers of English through social networks, the most popular being WhatsApp which is an instant messaging app for smartphones and uses internet to send text messages, images, video, user location and audio media messages, generally referred to as telecollaboration on the improvement of English as Foreign Language learners’ target language writing competence. In this respect, the research question to be addressed in the current study is:

Does developing pragmatic competence through telecollaboration improve language learners’ writing proficiency?

Accordingly, the null hypothesis is:

Developing pragmatic competence through telecollaboration does not improve language learners’ writing proficiency.

2. Literature Review

The significance of having a good command of pragmatic knowledge for writing appropriately in target language according to the sociocultural norms of the target language has been investigated and highlighted by a number of researchers in the field of interlanguage pragmatics. The majority of these researchers (e.g. Al-Khatib, 2001; Upton and Connor, 2001; Vergaro, 2004; Al-Ali, 2006) have investigated the role of pragmatic knowledge in writing different kinds of letters including letters of application, personal letters, and business letters. In these studies, researchers concentrated mostly on the crosscultural differences in using politeness strategies between native writers of a language and nonnative writers of the language as well as the problems faced by nonnative writers of the language to communicate their ideas appropriately according to the sociocultural norms of the target language community.

In one of the studies, Al-Khatib (2001) explored the problems encountered by Jordanian university students of English in communicating in writing with native speakers of the language in terms of the cultural background of both the foreign language writers and the target language readers. The data for the study consisted of 120 personal letters written by 120 students of English at two Jordanian universities. Each student was asked to write a personal letter to a hypothetical British friend inviting her/him to visit Jordan for sightseeing or for attending a wedding party. A close examination of the data showed that most writers tended to emphasize their ideas by repeating and paraphrasing them and sometimes by handling them in an indirect way. The difference between Jordanian society and British society in terms of politeness strategies led to the conclusion that different values are attached to letter-writing as a mode of communication, whether in terms of form or content.

In another study, Upton and Connor (2001) tried to locate in the corpus cross-cultural differences which may ultimately influence the efficacy of the letters of application written by the American and European participants.

The data for the study came from the Indianapolis Business Learner Corpus (IBLC), which is composed of job application letters and resumes of business communication students from the USA, Belgium, and Finland, with a total of 153 application letters analyzed. The study employed the coding scheme for genre move developed by Connor et al. (1997), with some minor modifications. The results of the study showed that none of the three groups used either positive or negative politeness strategies exclusively, or even more frequently than another group. There were differences, however, in the use of specific politeness strategies among the groups.

Vergaro (2004) conducted another study to explore the way persuasion is achieved in different cultures through the medium of a business letter. The study aimed at analyzing contrastively the rhetoric of a corpus of Italian and English sales promotion letters. The corpus used for the research consisted of 43 Italian and 26 English authentic sales promotion letters. At the macro-textual level, the analysis focused on rhetorical structure, mainly drawing on the notion of move. At the micro-textual level, however, the analysis focused on the pragmatic use of mood, modality, reference system, and metadiscourse. The conclusion was that uniformity of expression in the business community is limited to the conventions imposed by the genre used and that cultural values still affect writing at the level of utterance or strings of utterances, that is, within the genre constraints there is still room for creativity.

In the same vein, Al-Ali (2006) investigated the types of pragmatic politeness strategies as well as the types and frequencies of genre component move preferences utilized by Arabic-English bilinguals in their letters of application addressed to an English native setting. A corpus of 90 letters of applications written by 90 Arabic-English bilingual job applicants was created. The letters were obtained from fourth-year undergraduate Jordanian students studying toward a Bachelor of Arts degree in English language at two universities in Jordan. In the light of the results obtained from analyzing the genre components, most of the bilingual participants' cover letters were not considered in an appropriate way to articulate the communicative purpose of this particular genre. The findings also demonstrated that the majority of the bilingual applicants faced some discursal and pragmatic problems in writing this type of genre.

In a different vein to the cross-sectional studies comparing pragmatic differences in letter writing between native and nonnative writers, Faghih and Ansari (2013) conducted an experimental study to examine the effect of teaching target language pragmatics on the improvement of target language writing skill among Iranian English as Foreign Language learners at high schools. The participants were divided into two groups, the experimental group which received the treatment by applying written discourse completion task and discourse self-assessment task and the control group which was taught by the traditional methods and never received the new treatment. The participants in both groups were required to write a composition about one specific topic as the pretest, trained for ten weeks, and at the end of the treatment were required to write about one specific topic as the posttest. The study showed the existence of positive relationship between pragmatics and improving writing ability.

Despite the studies which have been conducted on the role of developing target language pragmatic competence in improving target language writing proficiency in learners of English as a Foreign Language, a number of researchers in the area of interlanguage pragmatics have also investigated the role of involvement with telecollaborative partnership in the development of target language pragmatic competence in learners of English as a Foreign Language. These researchers (e.g. Kinginger and Belz, 2005; Vyatkina and Belz, 2006; Cunningham and Vyatkina, 2012; Rafieyan et al., 2014) have mostly investigated the role of creating a virtual environment to link language learners in foreign language contexts with native speakers of the language to be learned through various forms of social networks on the development of their target language pragmatic competence.

In one of these studies, Kinginger and Belz (2005) concentrated on a particular feature of pragmatic competence namely address form competence in German. The study consisted of an English-speaking learner of German in the United States who participated for 8 weeks in an electronically mediated partnership with expert speakers of German through an Internet-mediated class-to-class pedagogical exchange. In examining the telecollaborative classroom, a corpus-assisted microgenetic approach characterized as "the observation of skill acquisition during a learning event" (Belz & Kinginger, 2003, p. 594) with a longitudinal scope was adopted. The findings of the study suggested the learner's development pathway toward expertise in the use of the address form system.

In another study, Vyatkina and Belz (2006) employed the twin research methodologies of contrastive learner corpus analysis and microgenesis in the context of telecollaborative language and culture learning partnerships to examine the emergence of a critical feature of pragmatic competence namely the comprehension and use of modal particles in German. The participants in the study consisted of 16 American students of German at a university in the United States and their 23 German key-pals enrolled at a college in Germany. Telecollaborative native speaker – nonnative speaker correspondence lasted for 9 weeks through e-mail and synchronous chat. The

findings indicated that the experimental design proved to be conducive to the development of pragmatic competence with respect to performance.

Cunningham and Vyatkina (2012) also conducted a study over the effect of telecollaborative partnership on the development of pragmatic competence. More specifically, they investigated whether interaction with expert users of German combined with a data-driven instructional intervention improve German learners' use of politeness strategies. The participants in their study consisted of 9 American students of German at a university in the United States. The instructional context of the study was a telecollaborative web conferencing exchange between learners of German and German professionals. The study utilized the method of microgenetic analysis. The findings of the study indicated that instruction proved to be conducive to the development of pragmatic competence.

Most recently, Rafieyan et al. (2014) explored the effect of telecollaborative partnership on the development of target language pragmatic comprehension in an English as a Foreign Language context. The participants in the study were two groups of Iranian undergraduate students of English at a university in Iran. One of the groups merely received pragmatic instruction while the other group was linked to a group of American undergraduate students through social networks besides receiving pragmatic instruction. The data for the study were collected through a demographic questionnaire and a pragmatic comprehension test. The findings suggested that contact with target language speakers in the form of telecollaborative partnership has a significant positive effect on the development of target language pragmatic comprehension in English as Foreign Language contexts.

As the review of literature in the scope of interlanguage pragmatics and telecollaborative partnership demonstrates, the studies conducted so far in these areas either have explored the role of developing target language pragmatic competence in the improvement of target language writing proficiency or have investigated the effect of target language pragmatic instruction through telecollaborative partnership on the development of target language pragmatic competence in English as Foreign Language learners. There is, however, a dearth of research on examining the effect of developing target language pragmatic competence through involvement with telecollaborative partnership on the development of target language writing proficiency in English as Foreign Language learners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

Participants in the study consisted of 60 Iranian personnel at Razi Petrochemical Company in Mahshahr, Iran. All of these personnel attended the English language program in the training department of Razi Petrochemical Company. The aim of the English program was to develop English proficiency in petrochemical company personnel in order to equip them with sufficient English knowledge for interactions and correspondence with other multinational corporations. This English program covered all four basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with a specific focus on speaking and writing skills. The participants in the study were all at the advanced level; therefore, they were considered to possess a high level of English proficiency. Proficient language learners were included in the study as the study aimed to explore the pragmatic knowledge of language learners and not their linguistic knowledge. The participants were all adult language learners with an age range of 22 to 55. Among all the participants, 52 were males and the remaining 8 were females.

3.2 Instruments

The instrument for the current study consisted of three job advertisements, each of them describing a situation in which every participant of the study was asked to write a letter of application in response to the advertisement as if she/he was really applying for the job. Before the administration of the writing tasks, the participants were instructed to relate their qualifications and professional experiences to the specifications of the job and to persuade the employer to hire them. However, they were not instructed to pay attention to target language politeness strategies in their letter writings. The job advertisements were used for the writing tasks as pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. The three job advertisements used in the current study were the same in format but not in content.

3.3 Procedure

The first writing task used as pre-test was administered to all 60 language learners participating in the study.

After the completion of the task, language learners were divided into two equal groups of 30 participants each: a control group and an experimental group. Language learners in both groups were instructed on the letter writing strategies. However, language learners in the experimental group were linked to a group of native English speakers through a WhatsApp group created and moderated by the researchers besides receiving pragmatic instruction. In this WhatsApp group, language learners were implicitly exposed to and instructed the target language politeness strategies in letter writing. The intervention for both groups was conducted for eight sessions, each session lasting for 90 minutes. Immediately following the intervention, the second writing task used as post-test was administered to the language learners in both groups. The third writing task used as follow-up test was administered to the language learners two months following the intervention.

3.4 Data Analysis

The writing tasks completed by language learners were collected and rated by two native English speakers who were experts in teaching academic writing. The ratings, which focused on the appropriateness of target language politeness strategies in letter writing, were ranged from 1 to 5, with 1 at the most extreme spectrum of inappropriateness and 5 at the most extreme spectrum of appropriateness. To assess the level of agreement by the two raters, the inter-rater reliability was assessed through Cohen's Kappa. The analysis of Cohen's Kappa would give a value between -1 and +1. The interpretation of the values obtained through Cohen's Kappa, according to Landis and Koch (1977), are presented in table 1. The inter-rater reliability assessed for the writing tasks used as pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test were respectively 0.92, 0.96, and 0.88 which indicate an almost perfect agreement between the two raters for all three writing tasks.

Table 1: Interpretation of Cohen's Kappa Values

Values	Interpretation
Smaller than 0.00	Poor Agreement
0.00 to 0.20	Slight Agreement
0.21 to 0.40	Fair Agreement
0.41 to 0.60	Moderate Agreement
0.61 to 0.80	Substantial Agreement
0.81 to 1.00	Almost Perfect Agreement

To assess the effect and sustainability of intervention conducted for the current experimental study (within subjects effect) as well as the comparison between the two groups of language learners participating in the current study (between subjects effect), mixed between-within subjects analysis of variance was conducted on the ratings obtained from the performance of both groups of language learners on the writing tasks used as pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. The level of the effect of intervention for both within-subjects and between-subjects categories was then assessed through partial eta squared. Finally, the graphical presentation of the performance of language learners in both control and experimental groups on the three writing tasks at pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test was provided.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Findings

The current study investigated the effectiveness of developing target language pragmatic competence through telecollaborative partnership in improving English as Foreign Language learners' target language writing proficiency across three time periods (pre-intervention, post-intervention, and two-month follow-up). In this regard, the data obtained in the study were examined to determine whether there is a change in target language writing proficiency level over the three time periods (main effect for time), to compare the two interventions conducted in the study (control versus experimental) in terms of their effectiveness in developing target language writing proficiency level (main effect for group), and to determine whether the change in target language writing proficiency level over time is different for the two groups of language learners (interaction effect).

The descriptive statistics for the obtained data in the current study has been presented in table 2. Descriptive

statistics presented in the table consists of the overall mean scores and the standard deviation for the performance of language learners in both control and experimental groups on each writing task including pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test. According to the data presented in this table, the performance of language learners in both groups on the writing task used as pre-test does not show a major difference. However, there is an indication of difference for the performance of the two groups on the writing tasks used as post-test and follow-up test. Furthermore, the performance of language learners in both groups on the writing tasks used as post-test and follow-up test shows that they outperformed their results on the writing task used as pre-test immediately and within two months following the intervention. To examine whether this difference is statistically significant or not and to estimate the size of the difference, the results of the between-within subjects analysis of variance needs to be considered.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics

	Group	Mean	Standard Deviation	Number
Pre-test	Control Group	2.30	0.837	30
	Experimental Group	2.33	0.844	30
	Total	2.32	0.833	60
Post-test	Control Group	2.93	1.015	30
	Experimental Group	4.03	0.718	30
	Total	3.48	1.033	60
Follow-up test	Control Group	2.67	0.994	30
	Experimental Group	3.97	0.809	30
	Total	3.32	1.112	60

To check interaction effect to find out whether there is the same change in scores over time for the two different groups of language learners (control versus experimental), the second set of rows in the Multivariate Tests table (time*group) needs to be considered. In this regard, the value which needs to be considered is Wilks' Lambda and the associated probability value given in the column labeled "Sig". All of the multivariate tests yield the same result; however, the most commonly reported statistic is Wilks' Lambda (Pallant, 2013). A probability value of less than or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) indicates a significant change in scores over time for the two groups whereas a probability value of more than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) indicates an insignificant change in scores over time for the two groups (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). In this study, the interaction effect is statistically significant (the significance level for Wilks' Lambda is 0.00, which is less than the alpha level of 0.05). This suggests that the change in scores over time for the two groups is significantly different.

Table 3: Mutivariate Tests^a

Effect		Value	F	Hypothesis df	Error df	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Time	Pillai's Trace	0.823	132.395 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.823
	Wilks' Lambda	0.177	132.395 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.823
	Hotelling's Trace	4.645	132.395 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.823
	Roy's Largest Root	4.645	132.395 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.823
Time*Group	Pillai's Trace	0.605	43.655 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.605
	Wilks' Lambda	0.395	43.655 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.605
	Hotelling's Trace	1.532	43.655 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.605
	Roy's Largest Root	1.532	43.655 ^b	2.000	57.000	0.000	0.605

a. Design: Intercept + Group

Within Subjects Design: Time

b. Exact Statistic

To assess the main effect for time to determine whether there is a change in target language writing proficiency

level over the three time periods, the value of Wilks' Lambda for "Time" and the associated probability value is considered. A probability value of less than or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) indicates a significant change in writing proficiency level over time whereas a probability value of more than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) indicates an insignificant change in writing proficiency level over time (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). The value of Wilks' Lambda for "Time" is 0.177, with a significance value of 0.00 (which really means $p < 0.05$). Because the probability value is less than 0.05, it is concluded that there is a statistically significant effect for "Time". This suggests that there is a change in target language writing proficiency level across the three different time periods. Therefore, the main effect for "Time" is significant. Although a statistically significant difference among the time periods was found, the effect size of this result also needs to be assessed to determine the degree of difference in writing proficiency level among the three time periods. In this respect, the value which needs to be considered is Partial Eta Squared which has been given in the Multivariate Tests output box. The value obtained for "Time" in this study is 0.823. Using the commonly used guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988) to interpret the values of effect size presented in table 4, this result suggests a very large effect size.

Table 4: Interpretation of Effect Size Values

Values	Interpretation
0.01	Small Effect
0.06	Moderate Effect
0.14	Large Effect

Now that the within-subjects effect was explored, the main effect of the between-subjects variable (groups: control versus experimental) needs to be considered to compare the two interventions conducted in the study in terms of their effectiveness in developing target language writing proficiency level. The results that need to be looked at are in the table labeled Tests of Between-Subjects Effects. In this regard, the row labeled "Group" needs to be considered. A probability value of less than or equal to 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$) for "Group" indicates a significant difference between the performance of the two groups of language learners whereas a probability value of more than 0.05 ($p > 0.05$) indicates an insignificant difference between the performance of the two groups of language learners (Gravetter & Wallnau, 2013). The significance value obtained for "Group" in the current study is 0.00 which is less than the alpha level of 0.05 ($p > 0.05$), so it is concluded that the main effect of "Group" is significant, that is, there is significant difference in target language writing proficiency level for the two groups of language learners (those who received writing instruction and those who were linked to native English speakers besides receiving writing instruction). The effect size of between-subject effect is also given in the Tests of Between-Subject Effects table. To determine the degree of difference in target language writing proficiency level for the two groups of language learners, the value of Partial Eta Squared for "Group" needs to be considered. The Partial Eta Squared value for "Group" in this case is 0.203 which according to the guidelines set by Cohen (1988) is considered a large effect size.

Table 5: Tests of Between-Subjects Effects

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Partial Eta Squared
Intercept	1662.272	1	1662.272	827.885	0.000	0.935
Group	29.606	1	29.606	14.745	0.000	0.203
Error	116.456	58	2.008			

The graphical presentation of language learners' performance in both control group and experimental group on the writing tasks used as pre-test, post-test, and follow-up test has been depicted in figure 1. According to this figure, the performance of language learners in both control group and experimental group on writing tasks used as post-test and follow-up test was better than their performance on the writing task used as pre-test; however, language learners in the experimental group outperformed language learners in the control group in the post-test and managed to maintain their obtained knowledge to a greater extent than language learners in the control group.

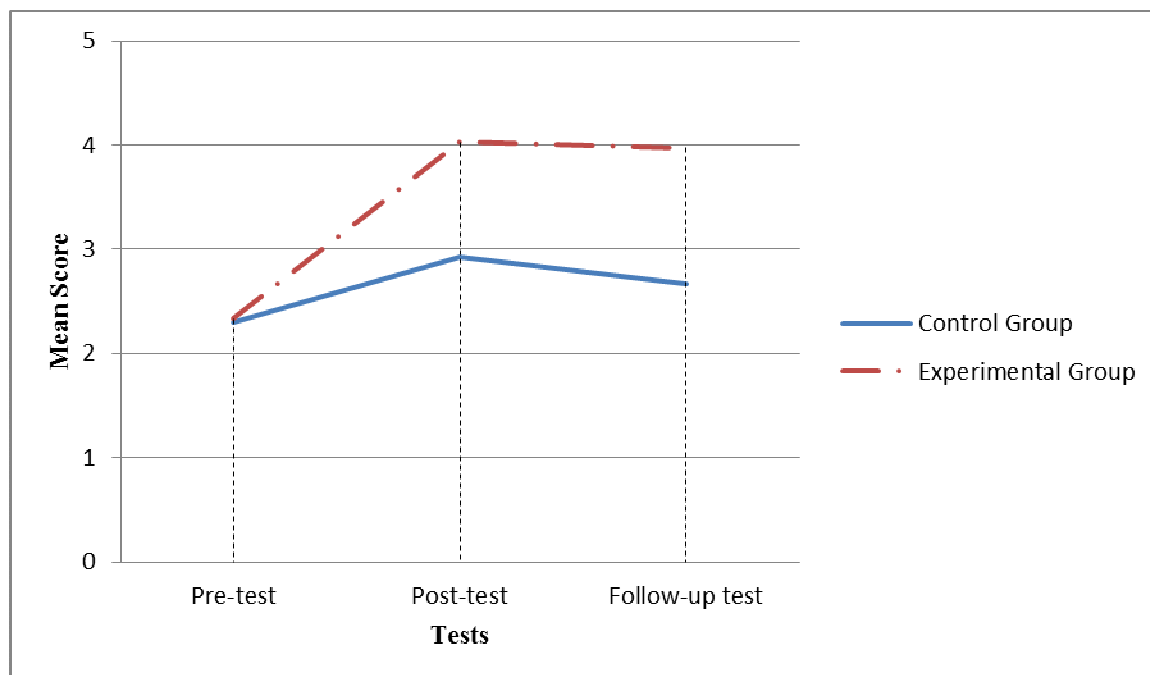


Figure 1: Performance of Language Learners on Pre-test, Post-test, and Follow-up test

4.2 Discussion

The study investigated whether developing pragmatic competence through engaging language learners in computer-mediated intercultural communication with target language speakers using popular social networks through an approach called “telecollaboration” is an ideal method for improving English as Foreign Language learners’ target language writing proficiency or not. The findings obtained from the study suggested that not only developing pragmatic competence through telecollaborative partnership improves English as Foreign Language learners’ target language writing proficiency to a great extent but also helps the obtained knowledge to be maintained for a considerably long period of time. Although both groups of language learners (control group and experimental group) had a better performance on the writing tasks following the intervention, language learners who were linked to the native English speakers through WhatsApp service and their interactions were moderated and supervised besides receiving writing instruction (experimental group) outperformed language learners who merely received writing instruction and did not have the opportunity to interact with target language speakers (control group) both immediately following the intervention and two months following the intervention.

Therefore, with respect to the findings obtained in the current study, the null hypothesis of the study which states that developing pragmatic competence through telecollaboration does not improve language learners’ writing proficiency is rejected. The findings of the study are in line with the findings obtained in the studies by Al-Khatib (2001), Upton and Connor (2001), Vergaro (2004), and Al-Ali (2006) who found that since different values are attached to letter-writing as a mode of communication, the difference between native society and nonnative society in terms of politeness strategies lead English as Foreign Language learners to face pragmatic problems in target language writing. These findings also support those obtained by Kinginger and Belz (2005), Vyatkina and Belz (2006), Cunningham and Vyatkina (2012), and Rafieyan et al. (2014) who found that telecollaborative partnership has a significantly positive effect in developing target language pragmatic competence in English as Foreign Language learners. The findings obtained in the current study are also consistent with the findings obtained in the study conducted by Faghih and Ansari (2013) who found that target language pragmatic instruction improves English as Foreign Language learners’ target language writing ability to a great extent.

These findings can be explained through the fact that although target language pragmatic competence can be ideally acquired through target language contact and exposure (Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012), language learners in English as Foreign Language contexts are deprived from being exposed to target language culture and having contact with target language speakers (Taguchi, 2008; Martinez-Flor, 2008; Neddar, 2012; Khodareza & Lotfi, 2012). Furthermore; despite the crucial role of awareness of target language pragmatic features in effective cross-cultural communication, it continues to take a back seat to grammar in target language classroom practices

(Bella, 2012) and teachers in English as foreign language contexts focus dominantly on the grammatical aspects of the target language and do not pay adequate attention to the pragmatic features of the target language (Al-Falasi, 2007; Farashaiyan & Tan, 2012). Moreover, textbooks, which are the major and maybe even the mere source of providing target language exposure in a foreign language context (Richards, 2005), either do not present the pragmatic features of the target language community or contain conversational models which are not naturally evident in the target language instruction (Vellenga, 2004; Martinez-Flor, 2008; Nguyen, 2011).

Therefore, there are no opportunities for learners of English in foreign language contexts to develop their target language pragmatic competence which is a prerequisite for writing appropriately according to the sociocultural norms of the target language community (Nystrand, 1986). However, the group of language learners in the study who were engaged in computer-mediated intercultural communication with target language speakers using popular social networks such as WhatsApp through an approach referred to as “telecollaboration” (experimental group) had the opportunity to be exposed to target language cultural features and had contact with target language speakers. Consequently, these language learners managed to develop their target language pragmatic competence which certainly boosted their ability to write more appropriate letters of application and to internalize this knowledge to be maintained for a considerably long period of time. However, language learners who were not engaged in such an intercultural communication with target language speakers (control group) did not have the opportunity to develop their target language pragmatic competence. Consequently, they were not equipped with the appropriate way of putting their ideas in their letters of application according to the cultural norms of target language society.

5. Conclusion

The study found that developing target language pragmatic competence through telecollaboration has a significant effect on improving target language writing proficiency and maintaining the obtained knowledge to a great extent. Although the performance of all Iranian English as Foreign Language learners participating in the study on writing letters of application improved considerably following the intervention, language learners who were exposed to the cultural features of target language community and were in contact with target language speakers through telecollaborative partnership were more successful in writing appropriately according to target language sociocultural norms following the intervention and in maintaining the obtained knowledge than language learners who were deprived from such an intercultural communication. These findings suggest providing opportunities for English as Foreign Language learners to be linked to native English speakers through telecollaborative partnership (Rafieyan et al., 2014). The study, however, was limited in the way that it did not include English as Foreign language learners of various cultural backgrounds to compare the strengths and weaknesses as well as the similarities and differences in presenting their writing according to the sociocultural features of the target language. Therefore, it is suggested to include participants with various cultural backgrounds from different parts of the globe in future studies.

Acknowledgements

Earnest gratitude goes to Hasti Rafieyan and Termeh Rafieyan who inspired the research idea and supported the research team with continuous encouragement.

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