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Cultivating interlanguage pragmatic comprehension through concurrent and cumulative group dynamic assessment: a mixed-methods study

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Abstract

This study explored the effects of concurrent group dynamic assessment (G-DA) and cumulative G-DA on Iranian pre-intermediate English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' interlanguage pragmatic comprehension (ILPC). To this end, a total of 97 pre-intermediate learners took the key English test (KET) test and 45 learners whose scores fell between -1 and $+1$ SD were selected and randomly assigned to experimental groups, namely concurrent G-DA ($n = 15$), cumulative G-DA ($n = 15$), and a control group, namely immediate feedback (IF) group ($n = 15$). Then, they went through pre-test, interventions (lasting fifteen 1-h sessions held three times a week), and post-test procedures, as well as the interactions among the teachers and learners were recorded. The data were analyzed through a one-way analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) and a microgenetic development approach. Results revealed that the concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA outperformed the IP group concerning the gains in the ILPC on the post-test. Additionally, the complementary microgenetic findings demonstrated the ways through which the concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA could lead to improving the learners' ILPC.

Keywords: Sociocultural theory, Concurrent group dynamic assessment, Cumulative group dynamic assessment, Interlanguage pragmatic comprehension

Introduction

Pragmatic competence (PC) has gained noticeable attention as an integral component of communicative competence (CC) (Bachman, 1990). According to Senowar-sito (2013), PC is defined as a second language learner's (L2) ability to communicate effectively. To achieve successful communication, as Wilson (2017) notes, L2 learners should be equipped with knowledge beyond grammar and lexicon levels. Kasper (1997) considers PC as "not being extra or ornamental, like the icing on the cake" (p. 3). Instead, Kasper perceives it as the most fundamental component of CC. However, acquiring PC has been claimed to be very challenging for L2 learners, which makes them many pragmatic errors during communication with others (Taguchi, 2011,

2019). Such errors could be attributed to two major sources: first, pragmatic errors may not be perceived as salient as lexical, grammatical, and pronunciation errors, so they may go unnoticed by L2 teachers and L2 learners; second, pragmatic errors may be associated with the lack of a strong consensus on the best approach to teaching PC (Rose & Kasper, 2001). Although different components of CC are learned in different ways (Ellis, 2008, 2014; Lightbown & Spada, 2012), EFL/ESL practitioners have failed to achieve a conclusive decision on the optimum approach to teaching PC (González-Lloret, 2020; Ohta, 2005; Pourmousavi & Mohamadi Zenouzagh, 2020; Taguchi, 2019; van Compernelle, 2014).

Despite this lack of an agreed-upon approach, some scholars have assumed that dynamic assessment (DA) could be of some help since it can assist teachers to fuse teaching and assessment (van Compernelle & Kinginger, 2013). Also, the previous studies have evidenced that DA could create some space within which learners could be provided with both explicit and implicit assistance depending on their current level of need and the responses they show (Ohta, 2005; Taguchi, 2011, 2019; van Compernelle, 2013). As its proponents (e.g., Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Poehner, 2010, 2014; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; McNeil, 2016; van Compernelle et al., 2014) note, opposed to the traditional or non-Dynamic Assessment (N-DA) approaches, in DA, the primary aim is to gather information about the abilities that have not been fully internalized. In actual fact, as Haywood and Lidz (2007) stress, DA pushes forward gradually L2 learners from their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (present knowledge situation) to their Zone of Actual Development (ZAD) (the specified desired learning destination). Despite these robust theoretical underpinnings, EFL/ESL practitioners have complained that DA is not applicable in large classes (Dörfler et al., 2009; Malmir & Mazloom, 2021; Miri et al., 2016; Poehner, 2009). They pinpointed that DA is only productive in tutorial sessions and it is not able to engage a whole class' ZPD. To mitigate this limitation, Poehner (2009) referred to Vygotsky's original conceptualization of ZPD and introduced G-DA. Of particular note is that DA and G-DA approaches are built on one principle: L2 learners should be provided with appropriate mediations to co-build a ZPD. However, they are different as G-DA takes a whole group's ZPD into account and DA considers only one individual's ZPD.

Given that interlanguage pragmatic comprehension (ILPC) is of paramount importance for EFL learners and there is a long-lasting call for an effective approach to teaching and assessing it concurrently (Ohta, 2005; Shauer, 2019, Taguchi, 2019), it seems that G-DA has the potential to substantially foster it among EFL learners. Furthermore, the review of the related literature also evidences that to date, no study has compared the efficiency of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA in developing EFL learners' ILPC. Hence, this study aimed to explore the effects of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA on the development of Iranian EFL learners' ILPC. Additionally, through micro-analysis of the dialogues exchanged among the teachers and the learners, another attempt was made to document the processes through which the learners were supported to substantially develop their ILPC. It is hoped that the results of the present study can further the understanding of pertinent stakeholders concerning the processes involved in LIPC and, accordingly, pave the ground for more promising learning achievement.

Literature review

Interlanguage pragmatic comprehension

ILP is not a new discipline but it is considered an underdeveloped one (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). ILP is defined as “the study of non-native speakers’ acquisition, comprehension and production of pragmatics” (Kasper & Rose, 2002, p. 27). As Taghuchi (2008) notes, ILP is “the ability to perform language functions in a context” (p. 34). For Taguchi (2011), PC falls into two categories: ‘pragmalinguistic’ competence and ‘sociopragmatic’ competence. Pragmalinguistic competence includes the linguistic resources a language offers for assigning communicative acts and interpersonal meaning, such as pragmatic strategies (González-Lloret, 2020; Taguchi, 2011; Taguchi et al., 2017). Sociopragmatic competence, however, is the social perception and consists of the set of rules underlying the language users’ interpretations and performance of communicative acts (Taguchi, 2011, 2019; van Compernelle, 2013).

ILP competence includes comprehension and production abilities. Garcia (2004) defines ILPC as L2 learners’ abilities to comprehend an utterance with the help of contextual clues. In other words, ILPC is using contextual clues to make correct interpretations about an interlocutor’s utterance. To achieve correct interpretations, L2 learners need to use external factors (e.g., the context) and internal factors (e.g., background knowledge). In this way, ILPC is L2 learners’ ability to extract the intended meanings by decoding both pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic clues (Taguchi, 2013; Taguchi & Kim, 2016). From another perspective, ILPC entails cognitive, psycholinguistic, and sociolinguistic aspects. It occurs when the connections between contextual macro-level factors and sociocultural macro-level factors are made successfully in L2 learners’ brains (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013). As Taguchi (2015) notes, ILPC is the integral binary part of ILP production which develops concurrently. However, according to Perez (2017), vis-à-vis ILP production, the development of ILPC seems to be easier for L2 learners. As Taguchi (2013) confirms, the literature has not reached a strong conclusion if explicit or implicit instruction is more fruitful to cultivate L2 learners’ ILPC. The underlying reason for this lack of consensus is that the new instructional approaches such as G-DA have not been used to boost L2 learners’ ILPC. Therefore, as Taguchi (2017) stresses, ILP research and teaching are in an urgent need of novel approaches to improve L2 learners’ ILPC. This is the point where G-DA, as a new approach, may serve to fill in the gap.

Group-dynamic assessment

One of the unique features of DA is offering mediations during assessment practices. These mediations help L2 learners perform better on tests and go beyond their current abilities (Lantolf & Peohner, 2014; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Poehner, 2008; van Compernelle, 2014). As Lantolf (2009) notes, DA is built on the assumption that to get a more realistic picture of L2 learners’ abilities, they should be provided with gradual, congruent mediations than leaving them alone with tests. In Poehner’s (2009) exact words, “the more familiar assessment model in which teachers observe student performance is replaced by one in which teachers and students jointly carry out activities, with teachers intervening as necessary to help learners stretch beyond their current capabilities” (p. 471). In this respect, DA is considered a subset of interactive assessment where L2

learners receive gradual, congruent mediations to go beyond their current abilities (Haywood & Tzuriel, 2002; Lantolf & Poehner, 2004). Under this premise, it is argued that if an instruction is going to be effective, it must entail assessment, and, simultaneously, fair assessment practices are not attainable without considering instruction (Lantolf, 2009; Poehner & Lantolf, 2005; van Compernelle, 2018).

However, one of the often-cited criticisms levelled at DA is its applicability in large classes (Dörfler et al., 2009; Mauludin, 2018; Miri et al., 2016; Rezai et al., 2022). In particular, DA procedures are just applicable and helpful in tutorial sessions or “what is dubbed ‘rickshaw model’” (Poehner, 2009, p. 478) wherein the teacher/mediator is just able to scaffold one learner at a time. Poehner (2009) tried to mitigate this limitation by introducing G-DA. For him, DA and G-DA procedures are not too much different, as they both stick to the same general principle: Offering students appropriate mediations to assist them to co-construct a ZPD. Poehner (2009) stresses that G-DA entails “understanding the group to be not merely as a context for individual performance, but a social system in its own right that might be supported to function in ways that are beyond the present capabilities of any individual member” (p. 477–478). Thus, G-DA can engage group member in a task that no individual member can complete independently, but for which all group members need mediation, though at different levels and quantities. Two key concepts in G-DA paradigm are ‘primary’ and ‘secondary interactants’ (Poehner, 2009). In the classroom context, when a teacher offers mediation to a student to negotiate a point, as Poehner (2009) notes, the teacher and the student are regarded as primary interactants. However, the other students who are present in the classroom and may benefit from the exchange between the primary interactants are called secondary interactants. As such, the classroom setting allows all class attendants to benefit from the interactions. Considering this critical distinction between primary and secondary interactants, concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA are detailed below.

In concurrent G-DA, when an L2 learner fails to respond to the teacher’s feedback, the teacher directs the following prompt of a leading question to another student. That is, as an L2 learners’ comment, question, and struggle set the stage for another L2 learner’s contribution, interactions shift rapidly between primary and secondary interactants (Poehner, 2009). In contrast, in cumulative G-DA, when an L2 learner faces up a problem, the teacher runs through the full range of pre-determined mediating prompts with them before addressing another individual (Poehner, 2009). The teacher affords the first addressed students with the most implicit to most explicit prompts to let them find the problematic part and rectify it. This approach is called cumulative because it seeks to move the entire group forward in its ZPD through negotiations with individual learners in their respective ZPD. According to Poehner (2009), cumulative G-DA aims to move all members of a group forward through co-constructing ZPDs with individuals, but concurrent G-DA supports the development of each individual by working within the group’s ZPD.

A range of studies have investigated the effects of one-on-one DA, computerized DA, and G-DA on L2 learners’ ILP competence (e.g., Alavi et al., 2020; Farrokh & Rahmani, 2017; Malmir, 2020; Malmir & Mazloom, 2021; Moradian et al., 2019; Ohta, 2005; Qin, 2018; Tajedin & Tayyipour, 2012; van Compernelle, 2011; Zangoei et al., 2019). Here, we review some of them critically to lay the groundwork for the

present study. In an early attempt, Ohta (2005) examined how the notions of ZPD and mediation can be used to teach and learn ILP competence. He reviewed critically three studies done by Takahashi (2001), Samuda (2001), and Yoshimi (2001). Ohta concludes that the ZPD-sensitive mediations could lead to a significant improvement in L2 learners' ILP competence. Additionally, more recently, Moradian et al. (2019) explored the effects of concurrent G-DA on EFL learners' pragmatic knowledge for the cases of request and refusal speech acts. Their results documented that the G-DA group outperformed the control group on the immediate post-test. Similarly, Malmir (2020) investigated the impacts of interactionist DA and interventionist DA on the development of Iranian advanced EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension in terms of accuracy and speed. His findings disclosed that the experimental groups receiving instructions based on the interactionist DA and interventionist DA procedures performed better than the control group. Moreover, Alavi et al. (2020) designed a computerized DA tool to foster Iranian EFL learners' knowledge of apology and request speech acts. Their findings documented a significant improvement in the participants' knowledge of requests and apologies at the end of the instruction. Finally, Malmir and Mazloom (2021) examined the effects of conventional G-DA and computerized DA on the cultivation of upper-intermediate EFL learners' pragmatic comprehension. Their findings evidenced that the pragmatic comprehension of both groups outweighed the non-DA group on the post-test.

There were some limitations with the above-alluded studies which were staple impetus to conduct the present study. First, they have failed to compare concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA approaches to boosting ILPC in a single study. Second, their research designs were mostly quantitative; thus, they could not capture how ZPD-sensitive exchanges of feedback help learners develop their ILPC. To eliminate these limitations, the present study purported to explore the following questions:

1. Do concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-D improve Iranian EFL learners' ILPC?
2. How does concurrent G-DA improve Iranian EFL learners' ILPC?
3. How does cumulative G-D improve Iranian EFL learners' ILPC?

Method of the study

Research design

The present study used an explanatory mixed-methods design to meet the intended objectives. That is, along with a quantitative method, including a quasi-experimental design, a qualitative method, including a microgenetic development approach was used. The underlying reason for using the mixed-methods design was to reach triangulation. It assisted the researchers to further the breadth and depths of their perceptions of the topic under research (Mackey & Gass, 2016). In sum, this explanatory mixed-methods design was adapted to disclose the potential of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-D procedures in cultivating pre-intermediate ELF learners' ILPC in the Iranian context.

Setting and participants

Iran Language Institute (ILI) in Khorram Abad was selected as the setting in Summer, 2019. ILI is a non-profit L2 instruction center with lots of branches across the country. A total of 97 students took the key English test (KET) and 45 students whose scores were one standard deviation (SD) ($=5.86$) above the mean ($=24.35$) and one SD below the mean were selected. Then, they were randomly assigned into three groups, namely IF group ($n=15$), concurrent G-DA group ($n=15$), and cumulative G-DA group ($n=15$). The participants aged from 14 to 20, were all females, and pre-intermediate EFL learners. As the education system in Iran is single-gender, the participants included just females. Though the participants' textbooks gave scattered attention to ILPC, the researchers intentionally selected pre-intermediate EFL learners to ascertain that they did not have a good command of ILP proficiency before the study and, thus, the findings of the study could be attributed to the effects of given instructions. Of particular note is that the participants were willingly attending their ILI classes to develop a command of English as a communicative tool. The learners' use of English was mainly restricted to their classrooms since they rarely had the opportunities to talk to native English speakers in person. The classes were held twice a week over a nine-week course; each session lasted 75 min, during which all four language skills were practiced. It is worth noting that the researcher well-informed about the principles and procedures of G-DA ran the interventions for the G-DA groups.

Instruments

The instruments used to collect the data entailed key English test (KET), two ILP comprehension tests, and a conversation pamphlet. While the education officials of the ILI approved that the participants were at pre-intermediate proficiency level, the homogeneity of the participants was verified using the reading and writing parts of KET. It should be noted that the listening and speaking parts were not administered due to logistical limitations. The KET's reading part encompasses five parts with 40 multiple-choice items providing diverse written materials, such as signs, brochures, newspapers, and magazines. Its writing section gets test-takers to write a composition in 100 words in length about a number of daily life topics. The reliability and validity of the KET test were measured by piloting it on 20 students who had the same characteristics as the main study' participants. The KET test's reliability was calculated using Cronbach's alpha (0.70). The experts' judgment strategy was used to measure the validity of the instrument. In doing so, the researchers invited two well-experienced EFL teachers to examine its face validity and content validity. The EFL teachers confirmed that the instrument enjoyed an acceptable level of face validity and content validity.

The other instrument included two ILPC tests developed and validated by Tajedin and Malmir (2014). The original ILPC tests included 35 items divided into two tests, namely pre-test ($n=17$) and post-test ($n=18$) by the researchers. The ILPC tests embedding the five most frequent speech acts of apologies, refusals, requests, compliments, and complaints. They covered situations ranging from very informal situations to extremely formal ones. Each test item encompassed a particular speech act situation followed by three choices. The participants were required to select the most appropriate choice in

light of the sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic/lexico-grammatical contextual factors. To construct the ILPC test, Tajedin and Malmir (2014) meticulously searched a couple of conversation textbooks (e.g., Top Notch (Books 1, 2, 3, 4), New Interchange (Books 1, 2, 3, & 4), Passages (Books 1 & 2), and American Cutting Edge (Books 1, 2, 3, & 4)) and authentic websites. Then, they piled up 50 items. Next, after running two pilot studies to measure their reliability ($\alpha=0.75$) and validity, they reached 35 items. The final version of the ILPC test included seven requests, nine apologies, eight refusals, seven compliment/compliment responses, and four complaint speech acts. Table 1 reports the speech acts, their sequence order, and the number of items for each part of the final version of the tests.

The final instrument was a conversation pamphlet. It was used as the materials to instruct the participants during the treatments. The reason to compile the conversion pamphlet was the lack of a textbook that solely deals with ILP competence in the market. It included a couple of conversations with one or more particular speech acts. For this purpose, the researchers went through meticulously some conversation books (e.g., *American Cutting Edge* (Books 1, 2, 3, & 4), *New Interchange* (Books 1, 2, 3, & 4), *Top Notch* (Books 1, 2, 3, 4), and *Passages* (Books 1 & 2)) and selected the conversations which included a special speech act. Then, they piled up them in a pamphlet, copied the pamphlet, and gave it out to all the participants in the three groups. Overall, 54 conversations were packed in the final version of the conversation pamphlet.

Data collection procedures

The researchers took some steps to run the present study. Prior to starting the main study, as pointed out above, the reliability and validity of the KET test were measured in a pilot study. Then, the study continued with the administration of the KET test to a total of 97 learners. Based on the KET test’s results, the learners whose score fell between 1 SD above and 1 SD below the mean were screened out and randomly assigned into three groups, namely concurrent G-DA (n = 15), cumulative G-DA (n = 15), and IF (n = 15). At the next stage, to measure the prior ILP competence of the participants, the ILPC pre-test was administered. Then, depending on the group name, three different interventions were offered by the first researcher. For the concurrent G-DA class, first, the teacher explained the primary purposes of the lesson to the students. Then, he went through the conversations and provided the required information about the key words and chunks. Next, he directed the students’ attention to the speech acts embedded in the conversation. To follow the principles of the concurrent G-DA, he wrote a particular speech act

Table 1 Number and sequence of speech acts in the ILPC tests

Speech act	Pre-test (n = 17)	Post-test (n = 18)
Request	3	4
Apology	4	5
Refusal	4	4
Compliment/compliment response	4	3
Complaint	2	2
Total	17	18

on the whiteboard. Next, he continued asking one of the learners to tell the particular function of that speech act. If the students could not provide the required answer or use the speech act appropriately, the teacher offered mediations on a scale from implicit to explicit. The teacher, put it precisely, used Davin and Donato’s (2013) framework in an interactionist way (See Table 2); that is, “by providing contingent and graduated support, called mediation, in the form of questions, hints, or prompts” (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, as cited in Davin & Donato, 2013, p. 6) to assist the students. The teacher tried to “explore and promote the group’s ZPD while also supporting the development of individual learners” (Poehner, 2009, p. 471). In practice, whenever the addressed learner (primary interactant) was unable to respond to the feedback, the teacher directed the next prompt to another learner (secondary interactant). If the feedback failed to elicit the intended response, his mediation was attuned to the groups’ ZPD, and the teacher provided another learner with more explicit feedback. In other words, “the teacher’s interaction shifts rapidly between primary and secondary interactants as one learner’s question, struggle, or comment sets the stage for another’s contribution” (Poehner, 2009, p. 478). In this way, when one of the learners responded incorrectly, the interaction between the teacher and that student and other students shifted gradually so that the provided prompts could remove the problem. In the end, the teacher assured if the speech act has been entirely handled by asking the students to offer more similar examples.

For the cumulative G-DA group, during the intervention, after teaching the conversations, the teacher tried to draw the learners’ attention to a particular speech act by choosing and writing it on the whiteboard. He then asked one of the learners to read it out and tell the class its appropriate use based on the context. When the students’ response was not correct, or the students’ production was not pragmatically-accepted, the teacher run through the full range of pre-determined mediating prompts before addressing another secondary interactant (Poehner, 2009). The teacher afforded the first addressed student with the implicit to explicit prompts to let her find the problematic part and rectify it. In line with the procedures of cumulative G-DA, the teacher conducted a series of one-on-one DA interactions as the class worked toward mastery of the pragmatic features. That is, “individuals take turns engaging directly as primary interactants with the teacher, with the understanding that each subsequent one-on-one exchange will have the advantage of building on earlier interactions that the class witnessed” (Poehner, 2009, p. 478). The teacher aimed at pushing the entire class forward in its ZPD through detailed negotiations with individual students in their respective ZPDs.

The intervention for the IF group was offered through a conventional approach. That is, corrective feedback was not attuned to the learners’ ZPDs. When one of the students

Table 2 Mediations/prompts provided by the teachers adopted from Davin and Donato (2013, p. 6)

Level of explicitness	Mediation/prompt
Prompt 1	Pause with skeptical look
Prompt 2	Repetition of entire phrase by teacher
Prompt 3	Repetition of the specific site of error
Prompt 4	Forced choice option (i.e., when or where?)
Prompt 5	Correct response and explanation provided

produced an incorrect speech act, the teacher immediately provided the correct form accompanied by a short explicit explanation. More specifically, upon making a pragmatic error, the teacher offered immediate corrective feedback without considering the students' ZPD. It should be noted that the interventions for the three groups lasted fifteen 1-h sessions that held three times a week. Having completed the treatments, the participants' gains of the different interventions were measured through the ILPC post-test.

Data analysis procedures

To analyze the quantitative data, the researcher used SPSS version 22 and calculated both descriptive and inferential statistics. In addition to measuring the central tendency and the variability, a one-way ANCOVA was run to identify the differences between the three groups concerning the gains in ILPC across the three test administrations. Additionally, he adopted a microgenetic development approach to analyze the qualitative data. The primary advantage of the microgenetic development approach is that it allows to track "the moment-to-moment co-construction of language and language learning" (Ellis & Barkhuizen, 2005, p. 2). Due to this outstanding advantage, the researcher employed it to track the moment-to-moment changes in the learners' ILPC as they were interacting together to co-construct the intended knowledge (Lantolf & Poehner, 2000). For this aim, the interactions between the instructor and the learners were meticulously recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Afterward, he went through them so much so that he could understand them fully. Then, he reviewed the transcriptions to verify the interactions leading to changes and development in the learners' ILPC. Next, he invited a university professor at Lorestan University to examine the interactions, transcriptions, and the gained episodes. Overall, she confirmed that the data analysis procedures had been done properly.

Results

Quantitative results

The first question investigated if current G-DA and cumulative G-D procedures improved the EFL learners' ILPC. To this aim, along with controlling the effects of the pre-test (Covariate), a one-way ANCOVA was run. Prior to running it, the assumptions of normality (Kolmogorov–Smirnov test), equality of variances (Leven's test), and independence of observations were examined. Concerning the normality assumption, Kolmogorov–Smirnov test's results showed that the sig values (0.200) of the post-test scores were larger than the critical value (0.05) (See Appendix). Therefore, the normality assumption was met. Second, the assumption of the equality of variances was examined through Levenes' test. The findings indicated that this assumption was also met ($F(2, 42) = 2.76, p = 0.07 > 0.05$). Finally, as no learner attended more than one class during the study, the assumption of the independence of the observations (or scores) was verified too.

Having met the basic assumptions, a one-way ANCOVA was run. As presented in Table 3, there were differences among the three groups' means (concurrent G-DA: $M = 13.00, SD = 3.04$; cumulative G-DA: $M = 12.60, SD = 3.06$; IF: $M = 7.67, SD = 3.39$) on the post-test. Thus, to test if these differences were statistically significant and how

Table 3 Results of descriptive statistics for concurrent G-DA, cumulative G-DA, and IF groups on the ILPC post-test

Groups	Mean	S.D.	N
IF group	7.67	3.395	15
Concurrent group	13.00	3.047	15
Cumulative group	12.60	3.066	15
Overall	11.09	3.953	45

Table 4 Results of inferential statistics for comparing concurrent G-DA, cumulative G-DA, and IF groups on the ILPC post-test

Tests of between-subjects effects						
Dependent variable: post-test						
Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Partial eta squared
Corrected model	596.111 ^a	3	198.704	89.004	0.000	0.867
Intercept	360.595	1	360.595	161.519	0.000	0.798
Pre-test	331.400	1	331.400	14.442	0.000	0.284
Instruction	231.101	2	115.550	51.758	0.000	0.716
Error	91.534	41	2.233			
Total	6221.000	45				
Corrected total	687.644	44				

^a The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Table 5 Results of estimated marginal means

Groups	Mean	Std. error	95% Confidence interval	
			Lower bound	Upper bound
IP group	7.903	0.386	7.122	8.683
Concurrent G-DA group	13.018	0.386	12.239	13.797
Cumulative G-DA group	12.346	0.386	11.566	13.126

much of these differences were due to the effects of the different instructions, a one-way ANCOVA was run.

As depicted in Table 4, concerning the Sig. values, there was a statistically significant difference between the post-test scores due to the effects of the different instructions, $F(2, 44) = 51.75, P < 0.05$, partial eta squared = 0.71. It means, around 71% of the differences between the groups was attributed to the effects of the interventions. However, the effects of difference in the pre-test scores on the post-test performance was also significant, $F(2, 44) = 14.42, P < 0.05$, partial eta squared = 0.28. That is, around 28% of the differences could be explained by the differences in the pre-test scores. Hence, Estimated Marginal Means were used to remove the effects of the covariate in the post-test scores (Table 5).

After adjusting for the pre-test scores, a significant difference between concurrent G-DA, cumulative G-DA, and IF groups, 0.51, in terms of gains in ILPC was revealed, $F(2, 44) = 51.75, P = 0.00$, partial eta squared = 0.71. Thus, the conclusion was that due to

Table 6 Results of pairwise comparisons of concurrent G-DA, cumulative G-DA, and IF groups on the ILPC post-test

(I) Groups	(J) Groups	Mean difference (I – J)	Std. error	Sig	95% Confidence interval for difference Lower bound
IF group	Concurrent G-DA group	– 5.116*	0.546	0.000	– 6.478
	Cumulative G-DA group	– 4.443*	0.547	0.000	– 5.809
Concurrent group	IF group	5.116*	0.546	0.000	3.753
	G-DA cumulative group	0.672	0.546	0.676	– 0.691
Cumulative group	IF group	4.443*	0.547	0.000	3.078
	G-DA concurrent group	– 0.672	0.546	0.676	– 2.035

*The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

the different instructions, the three groups performed differently on the post-test. After indicating the point that there existed a statistically significant difference among the adjusted means, the succeeding step was to verify where the differences lie. The results of this question are reported in Table 6.

By consulting the significance values, it is clear that there was not a statistically significant difference between the concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA groups in terms of their gains on the post-test. However, there was a statistically significant difference between cumulative G-DA and IF groups, as well as between concurrent G-DA and IF groups in terms of their performance on the post-test.

Qualitative results

In light of the collaborative conversations among the teachers and students, the second and third research questions aimed at tracking changes in the learners’ ILPC. Here four episodes are microgenetically analyzed to offer concrete evidence of how concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA lead to the improvement of the learners’ ILPC. Four transcribed episodes of the interactions between the teachers (T) and students (S1, S2, S3, ...) serve as the data for analysis. The first two episodes were taken from the concurrent G-DA group and the last two episodes were taken from the cumulative G-DA group. Episode 1 presents an example of a conversation in which a student made a pragmatic error to use a compliment.

Episode 1

1. T: Your new shirt is really nice, Maryam.
2. S1: It’s your eyes which see them nice.
3. T: (Pause with a questioning look). (Prompt 1)
4. S1: (Silence and thinking about the utterance).
5. T: * Is it correct to answer my compliment in such a way in English? (Prompt 2)
6. S2: Oh! I got it. We should say ‘Thank you. I like it too’ in English.
7. T: That’s it. Well done.
8. S3: So, instead of saying ‘It’s your eyes which see them nice’, we must say ‘I like it too. Thanks.’

9. T: Sure.

In the exchanges above, T compliments the new shirt of S1. In response to the compliment, S1 provides a sentence which, though appropriate in Persian, is not a proper answer in English. Thus, T offers the first prompt by pausing to indicate that S1's utterance is not pragmatically correct to which S1 remains silent, looks, and thinks about the utterance. Next, T moves on to the second prompt by asking if it is correct to answer his compliment by using such an utterance. Upon receiving this more explicit prompt, S2 can produce the proper utterance. Next, the teacher confirms the correct utterance and appraises her attempt to solve the problem. In the succeeding turn, S3 can provide a much more explicit explanation about the pragmatic structure to show that they have internalized it. It is worth noting that the exchanges can clearly show that within an interaction, not only can primary interactants benefit from receiving mediations, but they also can be beneficial for secondary interactants (Poehner, 2009).

In the next episode, the conversation centers on the speech act of requesting in which a student asked for the teacher's pen. The episode 2 is a tangible example of how the offered prompts were helpful for the student to present her request in a pragmatically well-formed way.

Episode 2

1. S1: 'Teacher, lend me your pen.'
2. T: (Pause with a questioning look). (Prompt1)
3. S1: (Silence). Is it incorrect? Well, what should I say?
4. T: Looks at another student. 'Lend me your pen?' (Prompt2)
5. S2: We need to be more polite, I think. For example, 'I wonder if I can borrow your pen.'
6. T: That's right. But we can put it more politely and correctly. Who knows??? (Prompt 3)
7. S3: Aha. Understood. We should say 'I wonder if it might be at all possible for you to lend me your pen for a couple of minutes.'
8. T: Bravo. That's it. So? (Prompt 4)
9. S1: If we want to present our requests in a polite way, we need to use such well-formed structures in our utterances.
10. T: Yea, right.

In the episode 2, four prompts are offered to help the students present their requests more politely. In Turn 1, S1 offers her request inappropriately. To let S1 know that her utterance was not pragmatically appropriate, T offers the first prompt through a short pause with a questioning look. S1, then, remains silent and gives the signal to T that she is yet unaware of the error. She requires a more explicit mediation by asking whether her statement is incorrect. The teacher, then, turns to S2 and offers the second prompt by iterating the entire statement of S1 with a rising intonation. S2 replies that the utterance should have been expressed with more polite structures. She continues that the more appropriate request is something like 'I

wonder if I can borrow your pen.' Next, along with the approval and applause of S2's attempt, T calls for a more appropriate utterance. Upon receiving prompt 3, S3 can generate the intended utterance by saying 'I wonder if it might be at all possible for you to lend me your pen for a couple of minutes.' Then, T approves and appraises S3's attempt. In the succeeding turn, S1 shows that she has fully understood the point by giving an explicit explanation about the structure. It is worthy to note that to construct a collective ZPD, T offers graduated and contingent mediations and changes them appropriately among the three students.

In the third episode taken from the cumulative G-DA group, the teacher and a student make a joint endeavor to master how to present the apology speech act. Having explained in detail how English native-speakers apologize for a problem, the teacher is talking to the class when S1 interrupts him suddenly and makes the following conversation occur:

Episode 3

1. S1. I have something to say.
2. T. (Pause with a questioning look). (Prompt 1)
3. S1. (Silence and thinking about the problem). I cut your words???
4. T. So, when you interrupt a person's talk, you should say what? (Prompt 2)
5. S2. Uhm. I should say 'excuse me?'
6. T. You can just say 'excuse me'? Nothing else?? (Prompt 3)
7. S1. Aha. Got it. I need to say 'I'm sorry to stop you?'
8. T. That's right. Bravo. Or for example, you can say 'I do apologize to interrupt you.'(Prompt 4)
9. S1. Understood. Thank you. When we are to apologize in English, we should use structures like 'I'm sorry' and 'I do apologize...'
10. T. True. Perfect.

In the episode 3, to help S1 learn how to do the apology speech act, T provides four prompts. In Turn 1, when T is talking to the class, he is stopped by S1. With a pause and a questioning look, T sends this signal to S1 that there is a problem with her act. However, since the first prompt cannot help S1 generate the intended utterance, T offers the second prompt by asking for the appropriate structure. Upon receiving the second prompt, S1 generates a better utterance. As the utterance is not yet pragmatically acceptable, T gives the third prompt by asking if there are any more ways to convey such a meaning in English. In the next turn, S1 is capable of producing the required utterance. With the confirmation and appraisal of S1's attempt, T presents the following prompt by giving an alternative utterance to do the same speech act. Then, in an explicit illustration, S1 demonstrates that she has fully internalized the intended pragmatic feature.

In the final episode, the teacher tries to help a student learn how to do the speech act of complaining correctly. The dialog is concerned with a student's complaint about one of her classmates who has been too distracting and noisy in the classroom.

Episode 4

1. S1: (Turns to her classmate and says to her) I got a headache because of your loud noise.
2. T: (Pause with a questioning look). (Prompt 1)
3. S1: (Silence and looking at the statement). So, is it not correct?
4. T: Do you think that it is correct to express our complaints in this way? (Prompt 2).
5. S1: Well, I should say 'My complaint is about your loud noise?'
6. T: It's not wrong. But we can say
7. S1: Aha. Got it. I need to say 'I want to complain about ...' or 'I have a complain about ...'
8. T: Well done. So, to express our complaints, we have to use particular structures. (Prompt 3)
9. S1: Well, now I know that expressing complaints in English is different from Persian.
10. T: (Smile) Way to go.

As can be observed in the exchanges between T and S1, a joint attempt was made to solve the problem. Since the sentence constructed by S1 is not pragmatically appropriate, T looks at S1 questionably to provide the first implicit prompt to indicate that the sentence should be modified. Owing to being silent and looking at T, S1 demonstrates that she requires more prompts and the problem is not within her ZPD yet. Consequently, T questions the correctness of the utterance to encourage S1 to change her original statement. In the succeeding turn, S1 generates a much more pragmatically acceptable sentence. Then, T gives the next prompt, making S1 produce the intended utterance. Accompanied by approval and applause of S1's correct output, T offers the last prompt to shed light on the point. In this series of interactions, the teacher is to provide proper and sufficient mediation to S1 while simultaneously assessing the quality and quantity of the needed mediation. The above episodes are indicative of communicative contexts wherein a pragmatic challenge is offered while the required scaffolds are available to move up the students to higher grounds. As Ohta (2005) notes, the teachers' hand was available to lead them upward as the students were not competent enough to reach.

Discussion

The findings of the study evidenced that both concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA were useful to improve Iranian EFL learners' ILPC. The qualitative analysis of the ZPD-sensitive feedback also evidenced that both types of G-DA could open up valued learning opportunities for both primary and secondary interactants. The results indicated that even the secondary interactants could co-construct a proper group's ZPD and could benefit from the dialogic feedback exchanged among the teacher and the directly addressed students. The findings of the study are in line with the previous studies used one-on-one DA (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nassaji & Swain, 2000), as well as the previous studies adopted G-DA (Alavi et al., 2020; Malmir, 2020; Malmir & Mazloom, 2021; Miri et al., 2016; Moradian et al., 2019). In line with the results of

the study, it may be argued that G-DA-based instruction might create a rich learning environment in which the instructor could detect the fully-developed abilities and the under-developed abilities by offering mediations attuned to their ZPDs.

The findings of the study might be explained through the concept of primary and secondary interactants and how they might have benefited from the knowledge which was co-shaped on the social level (Pohner, 2009). That is, it could be argued that the EFL learners might have been granted the chance to gain gradual and contingent feedback from the teachers which was attuned to their ZPDs. In this way, within this optimal space, the EFL learners might have been scaffolded to put their resources together to move beyond their solo abilities. More specifically, the EFL learners who were directly addressed and received graduated feedback and those who were exposed indirectly in the classroom might have benefited from the dialogic interactions to take control of the learning tasks at hand.

The results of the study may also be partly explained by what van Compernelle and Williams (2013) called 'active non-verbal participation.' That is, the secondary interactants may have benefited from the dialogic interactions that occurred on the social level since they actively, yet non-verbally, might have participated in the dialogic interactions through their looks and gazes. This might have permitted them to take in what the primary interactants were co-building, and hence, might have been enabled to move beyond their current level of ILPC. In a similar vein, along with Lantolf and Poehner (2000), it may be argued that the unaddressed EFL learners might benefit from the social interactions in their milieu as far as they might have engaged themselves in the processes of communication. In contrast, the participants of the IF group were not exposed to graduated and dialogic feedback which could fit their ZPDs, so they were not given a strong impetus to realign their objectives and actively follow the language exchanges between the teacher and their peers. In this way, they might have been deprived of learning from their social environment.

To further discuss the findings of the study, the potential of the concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA in helping the EFL learners handle the pragmatic features may be attributed to the dynamic nature of dialogic mediations compared to the feedback presented in a static way in the IF group. To be more specific, the participants in the G-DA groups might been given the opportunity to play a more active role so as to repair the pragmatic problems while the non-G-DA mode of error correction opened up a window of opportunity for only one student at a time, which might have pushed other participants to tune out or get disengaged (Miri et al., 2016; Poehner, 2009). Consequently, it may be argued that further engagement which was provoked as a result of attuning the feedback according to the addressed learners' responses might have enhanced the level of engagement whilst the EFL learners in the IF group's responsiveness to the feedback was not taken into account which might have taken its toll on the students' level of engagement, and hence learning. Additionally, the outperformance of the concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA groups may also be ascribed to the diagnostic function of G-DA instructions. As they might have provided the opportunities for the teachers to identify the underlying sources of the problems that their students had with the target pragmatic structures. With this noticeable advantage, the teachers might have offered appropriate feedback to repair the students' ILPC errors (Poehner, 2009). In contrast, as

the non-G-DA might not have the teacher to first diagnose the root causes of the errors, he might not have offered the most useful feedback to amend the lacks in the students' ILPC. As, the learners in the IF group might have been deprived of opportunities to receive mediations tailored with their needs and lacks (Nassaji & Swain, 2000).

Moreover, to explain the findings of the study, we can refer to Vygotsky's (1978) position about the collaborative nature of learning. As Poehner (2009) notes, a shift from a one-on-one model of pedagogy to a group-focused one demands "an understanding of the relation between the development of individuals and development of the group" (p. 472), which both occur in a collaborative environment. This, in Vygotsky's mindset, is a matter of how the individual's ZPD is closely related to the group's ZPD (Poehner, 2009). The optimal condition for having an optimal relationship between the individual's ZPD and the groups' ZPD can be decided upon in light of Petrovsky's (1985) conceptualization of group. He lists three ways in which the notion of group has been implemented in psychology: group-as-context, group-as-cooperation, and group-as-collective, among which only the last two are concerned with establishing a link between an individual's and group's ZPDs. According to Poehner (2009), the main difference between the last two is the extent to which individuals identify themselves with the group. That is, Poehner adds, "in a group-as-cooperation model, each individual retains their goals while understanding their interrelation with the goals of other group members. In a group-as-collective model, all are united in working toward a common goal" (2009, p. 474). In alignment with this view toward collaborative learning, it may be argued while the learners might have been oriented toward overcoming their own problems, they may have started appreciating cooperating with others. Therefore, the role of others in the classroom might have played a facilitative function in the learners' learning (Poehner, 2009) and might have been crucial to involve them in "joint intellectual activity, and the pooling of mental efforts to overcome difficulties" (Petrovsky, 1985, p. 183). Therefore, it may be argued that the enhanced depth of ILPC of the G-DA groups might be explained with the help of collaborative learning.

To close, along with the findings of the study, it may be argued that G-DA approaches were promising in the large classes to cultivate the EFL learners' ILPC. The results of the study confirmed Ohta (2005) and van Compernelle (2018) who recommended conducting more interventional studies from socially-oriented perspectives. Along with the results of the study, it may be argued that if EFL/ESL practitioners are to further their understanding of cognitive processes involved in classroom activities, as well as to get a clear picture of the link between teaching and assessment practices, the findings of interventional studies like the present one can be very revealing.

Conclusion and implications

The present study probed the potential of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA in cultivating Iranian pre-intermediate EFL learners' ILPC. The findings evidenced that concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA were effective to significantly improve the EFL learners' ILPC. Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that if concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA be implemented properly, they are useful alternative approaches to teaching ILPC in large classes.

In light of the findings of the study, some implications are suggested. The first implication is that G-DA approach cannot and should not replace static assessment in the classroom. Instead, G-DA and static assessment should be perceived complementary to facilitate L2 learning. The next implication is that in the cases when a student cannot handle a particular task independently, they should not be frowned up by teachers in the sense that the student is not cognitively qualified. Instead, by offering tailored mediations for the student lacking the required competence, teaching turns out to be more conducive and promising (Ohta, 2005). The next implication is for the teachers running large classes including students with different ZPDs. In that case, according to the findings of the study, teachers can group learners with different ZPDs together to cooperate to co-build a joint ZPD. By doing so, students receive more fair feedback from their teachers and peers and, in turn, this leads to fairness in teaching and assessment practices (Murillo & Hidalgo, 2017). The succeeding implication is for teacher education programs where the attention of teacher educators can be drawn upon the increasing amount of empirical evidence supporting the effectiveness of G-DA. They can incorporate G-DA principles and procedures into pre-service and in-service teacher training courses to improve the professional competence of their attendees. Given that L2 learners have to use the utterances pragmatically appropriate, another implication is for materials developers. They have to assign a particular space to teach the ILP features in the textbooks. Finally, the results of the study may enrich the existing literature on teaching and assessment of ILP competence, as they revealed how ILPC can be taught and tested concurrently in large classes.

Some limitations were imposed on this study that can be considered as point of departure for further research in the future. As this study was limited to one language institute, more studies can be conducted in other parts of the country to increase the generalizability of the findings. Plus, because the researcher gathered the qualitative findings through microgenetic development approach, interested researchers can benefit from other qualitative design, such as interviews and observation to gain a deeper understanding of the topic under research. Moreover, whereas this study could somehow provide support to the potential of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA in promoting Iranian EFL learners' ILPC, further qualitative studies are needed to probe into their effectiveness in developing other CC components. For example, future studies are needed to investigate how G-DA can foster EFL learners' strategic competence. Additionally, as the present study included female EFL learners, further research is needed to explore the impact of concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA on EFL learners' achievement with different proficiency levels and ages in other learning contexts (e.g., public and private schools and universities). Likewise, future studies may examine if concurrent G-DA and cumulative G-DA can be implemented in pre-service and in-service teacher training courses to raise EFL teachers' assessment literacy. Finally, ethnographies studies are needed to give a comprehensive conceptualization of DA approaches (e.g., one-to-one DA, G-DA, and computerized DA) and their effectiveness in improving L2 learning.

Appendix

Tests of normality via Kolmogorov–Smirnov

	Kolmogorov–Smirnov		
	Statistic	df	Sig
Post-test	0.155	15	0.200*

* The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level

Levene’s test of equality of error variances

F	df1	df2	Sig
2.765	2	42	0.074

Abbreviations

ILPC Interlanguage pragmatic comprehension
 G-DA Group-dynamic assessment

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Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Consent for publication

Not applicable.

Human and animal rights

Not applicable.

Competing interests

On behalf of the author, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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