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The effect of task role on Vietnamese EFL learners' collaboration in mixed proficiency dyads

Abstract

Previous peer interaction research has shown that proficiency not only plays a role in how second language (L2) learners talk about language form, but also influences their pair dynamics (Leeser, 2004; Williams, 1999). The current study focuses on peer interaction involving mixed-proficiency dyads, specifically whether task role affects the nature of L2 learners' discussions or their pair dynamics. Sixty English L2 learners at a Vietnamese university were assigned to mixed-proficiency dyads to carry out a story retell task. Task role was manipulated by assigning either information holder or information receiver status to the lower-proficiency learner. After retelling the story, the learners worked together to create a story ending and then collaboratively wrote the entire story. Audio-recordings of their interactions were transcribed and analyzed in terms of the amount, type, and resolution of language-related episodes (LREs) and pair dynamics. The results indicated that the learners produced more LREs and engaged in interactions with greater mutuality when the lower-proficiency learner had the task role as information holder. The findings shed light on ways to promote attention to language form and collaborative interactions when L2 learners from different proficiency levels carry out communicative tasks.

Key words: Peer interaction, proficiency pairing, task role, LREs, pair dynamics

The effect of task role on Vietnamese EFL learners' collaboration in mixed-proficiency dyads

Peer interaction during pair and small group communicative activities is believed to provide L2 learners with learning opportunities in the form of interactional feedback and discussions about language form (Adams, 2007; Mackey, 2007; Philp, Adams, & Iwashita, 2014). However, the extent to which these learning opportunities occur is mediated by a host of internal and external factors, including age (Oliver, 2009), task characteristics (McDonough & Mackey, 2000; Loschky & Bley-Vroman, 1993), pair versus small group work (Lasito & Storch, 2013), and computer-mediated versus face-to-face communication (Ziegler, 2015). Among these factors, proficiency has received considerable attention because it has been shown to influence the amount and type of learning opportunities that learners create during peer interaction (Choi & Iwashita, 2016; Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Williams, 1999), thereby creating challenges for instructors whose students have varied proficiency levels. Some prior research indicated that lower-proficiency learners were at a disadvantage in mixed-proficiency dyads because their more proficient partners dominated the conversation and ignored their contributions (Kowal & Swain, 1994, 1997). However, other studies provided evidence that lower-proficiency learners were more likely to engage in discussions about language form and to resolve those discussions accurately when interacting with more proficient peers (Leeser, 2004). In an effort to identify effective strategies for maximizing learning opportunities when L2 learners collaborate in mixed-proficiency dyads, the current study explores whether manipulating the lower-proficiency learner's task role positively impacts their discussions of language form or pair dynamics.

Previous studies that examined the interaction between L2 learners in mixed-proficiency dyads have operationalized their discussions about language form as language-related episodes (LREs), which Swain and Lapkin (1998) defined as segments of dialogue

"in which learners talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others" (p. 104). LREs are believed to help learners gain greater awareness about how the target language works and encourage the development of form-meaning relationships (Swain, 1998). Subsequent studies have found that interaction between learners in mixed-proficiency dyads contains more discussion of language form and greater ability to reach accurate consensus than interaction between learners in same proficiency dyads (Choi & Iwashita, 2016; Kim & McDonough, 2008).

Besides impacting learners' discussions about language form, proficiency may also play a role in learners' pair dynamics. Storch's (2001, 2002) framework categorizes pair dynamics into collaborative, expert/novice, dominant/passive, and dominant/dominant patterns of interaction. The categories are based on two main attributes of interaction: the extent to which learners have equal control over the task (equality) and their engagement with each other's contributions (mutuality). Both collaborative and expert/novice pair dynamics, which are characterized as having high mutuality, have been associated with learners' discussion about language form and their ability to reach correct resolutions to their queries, even when working in mixed-proficiency dyads (Watanabe & Swain, 2008). It is possible that any potential disadvantages of mixed-proficiency interaction can be reduced if learners mutually engage with each other's contributions.

An interesting question then is what instructors can do to increase the likelihood that their learners will benefit from mixed-proficiency pairings, in terms of both their discussions about language form and their pair dynamics. One possibility is to manipulate the task role of the learners, as previous research has shown that it plays a role in peer interaction. For example, early task research reported that assigning the dominant task role to a higher proficiency partner resulted in little negotiation of meaning (Yule & MacDonald, 1990). More recent research found that task role influenced how L2 learners manage the speaking

floor and allocate turns (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2003; Jenks, 2007, 2009). Whereas learners who held greater task information gained speaking time, the learners who received task information initiated more confirmation and clarification requests.

Although previous studies examined the effect of task role (Gonzalez-Lloret, 2003; Jenks, 2007, 2009; Yule & MacDonald, 1990) and proficiency (Leeser, 2004; Watanabe & Swain, 2007; Williams, 1999) on peer interaction, studies to date have not examined the combined impact of these factors. Manipulating the task role of the lower proficiency partner in mixed-proficiency dyads may positively impact learners' discussion of language form and pair dynamics by increasing the likelihood that both learners will participate in the conversation (equality) and engage with each other's contribution (mutuality). Allocating novel information to the lower-proficiency learners may help them gain the speaking floor and take a primary role in task completion (Jenks, 2007; Yule & Macdonald, 1990) and discuss more language form (Swain & Watanabe, 2007). Therefore, the current study explored the effect of manipulating the task role of lower-proficiency learners (either information holder or receiver) in mixed-proficiency dyads in terms of their discussion of language form and pair dynamics. Two research questions were formulated.

(1) How does task role influence L2 learners' discussions of language form (amount, type, and resolution of LREs) in mixed-proficiency dyads?

(2) How does task role impact L2 learners' pair dynamics in mixed-proficiency dyads?

Method

Participants

The participants were 60 EFL learners (48 women) at a Vietnamese university enrolled in English classes whose instructors agreed to participate in a research project. They ranged in age from 18 to 23, with a mean of 19.5 years (*SD* = 1.3). Their English proficiency was assessed using a paper-based TOEFL test, with their scores ranging from 343 to 527 (*M*

= 421, *SD* = 46). Using a 50-point difference in TOEFL scores, the learners were assigned to mixed-proficiency dyads. A 50-point score differential was selected to avoid extreme proficiency differences which could lead to difficulty in task accomplishment (Kowal & Swain, 1994, 1997). Whereas the lower-proficiency learners had a mean TOEFL score of 390 (*SD* = 22), the higher-proficiency learners had a mean score of 449 (*SD* = 44). Since the learners were classmates, they may have had pre-existing perceptions about their partners' proficiency. In order to reduce the likelihood that the criteria for pairing the learners (i.e., proficiency) could bias the learners or lead to negative perceptions about their partners, they were not given any information about their TOEFL scores prior to undertaking the task.

Design

A between-groups design was used to explore whether task role influenced EFL learners' interaction during mixed-proficiency dyads. The independent variable was task role, which was operationalized in terms of information holder status. Information holder status was manipulated by assigning only one learner per dyad to watch the video clip and retell the story. For 17 dyads, the lower-proficiency learner had the task role of information holder (i.e., they watched the video), but for 13 dyads the lower-proficiency learners were information receivers (i.e., the higher-proficiency learner watched the video). Inequality in the number of dyads per condition was caused by technical problems that led to lost data. The dependent variable was the learners' interaction, which was operationalized in terms of their discussion of language form and pair dynamics. Following Swain and Lapkin (1998), discussion of language form was operationalized as LREs, which was further categorized as being about grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, or mechanics. To gain further insight into their discussions, the LREs were also coded in terms of how accurately the learners resolved their queries: correctly, incorrectly, or unresolved. Pair dynamics were operationalized

following Storch's (2001, 2002) and Galaczi's (2008) frameworks which classify interaction in terms of the equality and mutuality demonstrated by the learners in each dyad.

Material and Procedure

The material consisted of a story retell task based on a ten-minute segment from a Mr. Bean episode entitled *Mr. Bean's home haircut*. The segment shows Mr. Bean accidentally shaving his head before a photo shoot with a famous actress. The clip was taken from supplementary teaching materials used in the participants' English program, but none of the participants had seen the video before. Information holder status was manipulated by assigning only one learner per dyad to watch the video clip and retell the story. The story retell task was administered during 55 minutes of a regularly-scheduled EFL class. The researcher introduced and explained the purpose of the research project, and answered questions (7 minutes). After completing the consent form and a questionnaire used to obtain the background information reported in the Participants section (7 minutes), the learners were paired into mixed-proficiency dyads based on their TOEFL scores and given task instructions (5 minutes). Learners with the information holder task role watched the video (6 minutes), while the other learners turned away from the video screen and did an unrelated task. After the video, dyads were reformed and spaced throughout the room to minimize distractions across pairs. After forming the dyads, the learners who watched the video retold the story to their partners (10 minutes), after which both learners worked together to create an ending (10 minutes). Finally, they collaboratively wrote the entire story, both the story depicted in the video clip and their ending (10 minutes). While the learners were carrying out the story retell task, the teacher circulated among the dyads to provide assistance when requested. Each dyad was audio-recorded using individual digital audio-recorders and their written texts were collected at the end of the activity.

Data coding and Analysis

The audio-recordings were transcribed by the first researcher. The transcripts were first analysed to identify LREs, which were operationalized following Swain and Lapkin's definition (1998) as explained previously. In order to focus narrowly on peer interaction, only LREs that were initiated and completed by the learners without assistance from the instructor were included in the dataset. Once identified, the LREs were classified into the form categories used in previous research: grammatical, lexical, phonological or mechanical (Philp, Walter, & Basturkmen, 2010; Storch, 2008). Discussion about the pronunciation of specific words was coded as phonological rather than lexical category because they reflected issues with comprehensibility rather than word meaning.

Grammatical LREs were defined as episodes in which learners talked about a grammatical feature (including prepositions), corrected their own grammar, or corrected their partner's grammar. Example 1 illustrates a grammatical LRE in which the higher proficiency (HP15) learner recast her lower proficiency (LP 15) partner's non-targetlike form (*was take*).

Example 1. Grammatical LRE[1]

1. LP 15: He was take a photo
2. HP15: He took a photo?
3. LP 15: Uhm he took a photo

Lexical LREs were episodes in which learners discussed the meaning of specific words or debated which word was appropriate in a specific context. Example 2 shows a lexical LRE in which the lower-proficiency learner (LP5) asked which word was appropriate, *go* or *turn*.

Example 2. Lexical LRE

1. LP 5: And Mr. Bean uh go to --turn to his house. Use the word go to or turn to? Which one?
2. HP 5: I think go to… uh go to his house Mr Bean

Phonological LREs were classified separately and concerned the pronunciation of specific words. Example 3 shows a phonological LRE where the lower-proficiency learner (LP16) learner mispronounced the verb *give.* In response to her partner's clarification request, she wrote down the verb because she could not pronounce it correctly.

Example 3. Phonological LRE

1. LP 16: The man *grive *grive … the woman
2. HP 16: The man what?
3. LP 16: *grive… *grive the woman
4. HP 16: What is that word? What it means? pronounce?
5. LP 16: [*long pause*] …the man give [*writes it down*] …
6. HP 16: Ah the man give ok?
7. LP 16: Yes give

Finally, mechanical LREs were episodes where learners discussed spelling or punctuation during the writing phase of the task. In Example 4, the higher-proficiency learner (HP5) spelled the word *pet* and corrected her partner's spelling mistake.

Example 4. Mechanical LRE

1. HP 5: Cat is pet…pet spell is … letter P E T
2. LP 5: B E T?
3. HP 5: No P E T yeah…
4. LP 5: Ya

The learners' accuracy at resolving their LREs was coded in terms of the three outcomes identified in prior research: correctly resolved, incorrectly resolved, and unresolved (Kim & McDonough, 2008; Leeser, 2004; Swain, 1998). Correctly resolved LREs were those in which the learners provided each other with accurate linguistic information, as illustrated in Examples 1–3. In contrast, incorrectly resolved LREs were those in which learners

provided each other with incorrect information. For example, in Example 5, the lower-proficiency learner (LP11) produced a non-targetlike verb form (*washing*) but her partner provided an equally non-targetlike form (*wash*). Unfortunately, the incorrect form was subsequently used.

Example 5. Incorrectly resolved LRE

1. LP 11: He washing his face
2. HP 11: He wash his face
3. LP 11: Yes he wash his face...tomorrow she she…take a interview

Finally, unresolved LREs were episodes where learners were unable to provide an answer, did not know the requested information, or chose to move on without answering. Example 6 illustrates an unresolved LRE as neither learner knew which form of the verb *wake* should be used.

Example 6. An unresolved LRE

1. LP 8: The strong wind flow uh–flew… made him wake–woke up... wake or woke?
2. HP 8: I don't know…so the strong wind?

The interaction between the learners in each dyad was also coded in terms of four interaction patterns that reflect varying levels of equality and mutuality: collaborative, parallel, dominant-passive, and expert-novice interactions (Galaczi, 2008; Storch, 2001, 2002). Whereas equality refers to the learner's control over the task, as reflected in the amount of language output or task contribution, mutuality reflects the extent that learners engage with each other's contribution and the reciprocity between them. Collaborative interactions (+equality, +mutuality) are characterized by both equality and mutuality, in that both learners contribute equally to the task, show willingness to engage with other's ideas by listening carefully and building upon each other's ideas, provide help (e.g., feedback and help

with language), jointly solve problems with high agreement (e.g., solving language problems), and encourage each other to talk, exchange and discuss ideas.

In contrast, parallel interactions (+equality, –mutuality) involve both learners trying to establish control over the task and failing to engage with each other's ideas. Each learner initiates new ideas but the partner does not follow up, build on, or develop those ideas. In addition, parallel interactions are characterized by a high degree of disagreement. The main characteristic of parallel interactions is low mutuality despite relative equality. Although Storch's (2001) referred to this type of interaction as dominant-dominant, Galaczi (2008) described it as parallel because learners may not be dominating the conversation, but simply failing to engage with each other's ideas or follow up with each other's contributions. Therefore, the more neutral term parallel was used instead of dominant-dominant to characterize interactions with low mutuality.

For expert-novice interactions (–equality, +mutuality), even though task control is not balanced, the higher-proficiency learners function as experts who encourage their partners to participate and contribute to the task. In addition, the 'expert' learner often attempts to provide the 'novice' learner with language help. Finally, dominant-passive interactions (–equality, –mutuality) involve unequal task contribution between the two learners. While one learner takes control of the task and produces more language, the other learner participates minimally with few turns or words. Because of low mutuality, the dominant learner does not engage the passive learner, which is reflected by the little exchange or discussion of ideas. The dominant learner remains unchallenged, which leads to little negotiation.

A subset of the transcripts (25%) was coded by an independent rater for both LREs and pair dynamics. Following training from the first author, the independent rater then worked independently to code the data. Interrater reliability for the occurrence of LREs was calculated using a Pearson correlation, which was = .93. Cohen's kappa was used to assess

the reliability of classifying LREs by type (κ = .93), resolution of LREs (κ = .87), and pair dynamics (κ = .91). To examine how manipulating learners' task role in mixed-proficiency dyads affected learners' discussion of form, the number of LREs and their resolution were summed and compared using independent-samples *t*-tests. To investigate the impact of task role on pair dynamics, the four categories of pair dynamics were collapsed into two categories based on mutuality. Storch (2001, 2002) and Watanabe and Swain (2007) suggested that both collaborative and expert-novice interactions, despite difference in equality, benefit L2 learning due to their higher degree of mutuality as compared to parallel and dominant-passive patterns. In addition, previous studies of pair dynamics have used mutuality as the basis for classifying learners into only two categories (Kim & McDonough, 2011). Therefore, collaborative and expert-novice interactions were categorized as having higher mutuality, whereas parallel and dominant-passive interactions were classified as lower mutuality. The use of two categories, rather than four, was also motivated by the need to meet the assumptions of the chi-square test used to investigate the relationship between task role and pair dynamics. Alpha was set at .05 for all statistical tests. Excerpts from the data are used to illustrate the findings revealed by the statistical tests.

Results

The first research question asked how task role influenced L2 learners' discussions of language form (amount, type, and resolution of LREs) in mixed-proficiency dyads. First, the amount and type of LREs discussed by the learners under the contrasting task role conditions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1

LREs based on Task Role of the Lower-proficiency Learner

	Information holder	Information receiver

LREs	M	SD	M	SD
Grammatical	7.76	5.90	.85	1.52
Lexical	7.64	6.81	3.46	5.85
Phonological	1.59	3.74	0.15	0.38
Mechanical	0.18	0.53	0.08	0.28
Total	17.18	10.51	4.54	7.01

When the lower-proficiency learner had the role of information holder, there were more LREs across all four categories, with a mean total of 17.18 LREs per dyad. In contrast, very few grammatical, phonological or mechanical LREs occurred when the lower-proficiency learner held the role of information receiver, averaging less than one episode. However, lexical LREs occurred more frequently, with over three episodes per dyad. Nevertheless, the mean number of all LREs was only 4.54 when the lower-proficiency learner was the information receiver. An independent samples *t*-test indicated that the total number of LREs was significantly higher when the lower-proficiency learner was the information holder, $t(28) = 3.74$, $p = .01$, $d = 1.41$.

To illustrate the finding that learners generated more LREs when the lower-proficiency learner had the task role of information holder, Examples 7 and 8 show interaction involving similar content by dyads from the different conditions. In both examples, the learners are retelling the video segment in which Mr. Bean helps retrieve a woman's cat from a roof. In Example 7, the lower-proficiency learner has the information holder status and the conversation contains several LREs. The learners focused on grammar (word order) when the higher-proficiency learner clarified who had the cat (lines 1-4) and discussed article usage in lines 13-17. They also discussed phonology when the higher-

proficiency learner provided a recast of the word *engineer* (lines 5-7*)* and lexis when confirming word choice between the verbs *take* and *touch* (lines 9-12).

Example 7. Lower-proficiency learner as information holder

1. LP 2: Mr. Bean a cat uh have a cat a woman and a woman
2. HP 2: Again?… Mr. Bean have a cat?
3. LP 2: No a woman have a cat
4. HP 2: A woman
5. LP 2: An engineer [*wrong pronunciation*]
6. HP 2: An engineer? [*correct pronunciation*]
7. LP 2: Engineer kỹ sư [*Vietnamese translation*] And have an engineer a cat climb a tree
8. HP 2: Climb a tree
9. LP 2: Next Mr. Bean house… and a woman try to catch try to touch a cat but
10. HP 2: Touch cat similar uh take the cat
11. LP 2: Take the cat…so but Mr Bean…touch
12. HP 2: Touch ok
13. LP 2: And open door to give
14. HP 2: Touch a cat and open a door
15. LP 2: Open a door and give a cat for a woman.
16. HP 2: Open a door
17. LP 2: And give a cat
18. HP 2: Turn back?
19. LP 2: So a woman hug Mr. Bean no no…
20. HP 2: Ah
21. LP 2: And kiss Mr. Bean

22. HP 2: Yes

In contrast, when the higher-proficiency learner had the task role as information holder in Example 8, the learners did not produce any LREs. The higher-proficiency learner generated many long turns (lines 1, 3, 5, 7) while the lower-proficiency learner kept silent, produced backchannels, or gave one-word responses (lines 2, 4, 6).

Example 8. Lower-proficiency learner as information receiver

1. HP 7: On rainy day… on rainy day have a…a woman she look like…fat … and she have and she have a…red lips
2. LP 7: Ah
3. HP 7: Red lips ...uh and she--she wear… a hat she wear her…her cat her cat climb on the tree--climb on the tree and and she want to catch to catch it but she can't--she can't climb on the tree uh inside the house--inside the house…next to the tree uh which the cat on the tree on outside--inside the house the man … his name is a Mr. Bean
4. LP 7: Uh
5. HP 7: Uh he just wakes up and he open he open the window he uh he seen the cat on the tree next to his house and a cat and a cat jump on his hand and then he uh he hug it…
6. LP 7: Ok
7. HP 7: Next to uh he give a cat for the woman and the woman and very happy and she give Mr. Bean big hug and kiss kiss

Also to address the first research question, the proportion of LREs that were correctly resolved, incorrectly resolved, or unresolved is provided in Table 2. Because there was a significant difference in the number of LREs between the groups, proportion scores were obtained by dividing the sum in each resolution category by the total number of LREs. Overall, the majority of LREs were correctly resolved regardless of whether the lower-

proficiency learner was the information holder (.84) or receiver (.63), and an independent samples *t*-test indicated that there was no significant difference in the proportion of correctly resolved LREs: $t(28) = .32$, $p = .69$. In sum, the findings for the first research question indicated that assigning the information holder task role to the lower-proficiency learner was associated with a greater number of LREs, but no difference in correct resolution rates.

Table 2

Proportion Scores for the Resolution of LREs by Task Role of Lower-proficiency learner

Resolution	Information holder		Information receiver	
	M	SD	M	SD
Correctly resolved	.84	.17	.63	.40
Incorrectly resolved	.10	.13	.28	.42
Unresolved	.06	.08	.09	.16

The second research questions asked how task role influenced L2 learners' pair dynamics in mixed-proficiency dyads. The number of dyads with collaborative, expert-novice, parallel, and dominant-passive pair dynamics is shown in Table 3. When the lower-proficiency learner was the information holder, there were more interactions characterized by higher mutuality, which includes both collaborative and expert-novice patterns. Only one parallel interaction occurred when the lower-proficiency learners had the role of information holder. In contrast, when the lower-proficiency learner was the information receiver, 12 dyads had low mutuality patterns, either parallel or dominant-passive.

Table 3

Interactional Patterns based on Task Role of Lower-proficiency learner

Category	Interactional pattern	Information holder	Information receiver

Higher mutuality	Collaborative	9	1
	Expert-novice	7	-
Lower mutuality	Dominant-passive	-	2
	Parallel	1	10

A Pearson chi-square test was carried out to test the relationship between collaborative pair dynamics and information holder task role. As described previously, both (+mutuality) patterns were combined into the higher mutuality category, and the two (–mutuality) patterns were combined into the lower mutuality category. The result indicated that there was a significant relationship between information holder status and pair dynamics: χ^2 (3, N = 30) = 22.41, p = .01.

To illustrate the effect of task role on pair dynamics, Examples 9 and 10 show interaction in which dyads from the different task role conditions were talking about the same segment of the video. In Example 9, the lower-proficiency learner attempted to retell the part of the video despite many pauses (line 1). She then made continuous efforts to retell the video after being encouraged and helped by her higher-proficiency partner (lines 3, 9, 11, 15, 17, 26, 30). The higher-proficiency learner showed mutuality through her careful listening as reflected in confirmation and elicitation of information (lines 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18), provision of language help (e.g., completing utterances, correcting grammar and pronunciation in lines 2, 4, 6), and constant encouragement, e.g., *Ok keep going* (line 21), *Ok look at me* (line 23), *try to remember* (line 25), and *what information about?* (line 29).

Example 9. Higher mutuality with lower-proficiency learner as an information holder

1. LP 16: The man is sleeping…uh…the man are…go to the movie…uh ...[*long pause*]
2. HP 16: He go to the cinema and what?
3. LP 16: Open door

4. HP 16: he open the door…open the door
5. LP 16: the police [*wrong pronunciation*]
6. HP 16: The police [*corrected pronunciation*]
7. LP 16: The police [*correct pronunciation*]…uh…had
8. HP 16: Catch him?
9. LP 16: No, the woman kiss …cat…
10. HP 16: The owner of the cat kiss her cat?
11. LP 16: Uh…[*long pause*] …will take photograph
12. HP 16: Who take photograph?
13. LP 16: Uh
14. HP 16: You mean…the main person Mr. Bean take the photograph
15. LP 16: Right…the man washing face
16. HP 16: Watching what?
17. LP 16: Wash
18. HP 16: Ok wash his face ok?
19. LP 16: Ok…
20. LP 16: …[*long pause*]
21. HP 16: Ok keep going
22. LP 16: …uh…[*laugh*]
23. HP 16: Ok look at me…
24. LP 16: không nhớ [*can't remember*]
25. HP 16: Try to remember
26. LP 16: Newspaper …information the woman
27. HP 16: Ok the information about the woman is on the paper…newspaper
28. LP 16: Yes

29. HP 16: What information about?
30. LP 16: uh the end
31. HP 16: The whole story…and the ending…the end… put it into happy ending wait wait… it stop when they on newspaper right?
32. LP 16: Yes yes
33. HP 16: The ending will be Mr. Bean happy when he read the newspaper he will laugh and happy.
34. LP 16: Yes yes yes…it something like …ok the ending … the happiness of Mr. Bean.
35. HP 16: Ok…how to it uh the end of the story is happiness the happiness of Mr. Bean.
36. LP 16: the ending … information … newspaper … the man…on wonderful the woman happy
37. HP 16: [*laugh*] yes yes beside that… he was going…to have beautiful girl love him…you can imagine anything
38. LP 16: yes yes he and he a lot of money …uh girl love him
39. HP 16: uh uh … So many girl love him and a lot of money
40. LP 16: like dream dream
41. HL 16: uh uh think the ending was like it is a dream dream comes true…
42. LP 16: come true dream come true [*laugh*]

However, when the higher-proficiency learner was the information holder, as in Example 10, their interaction followed a lower mutuality pattern in which the learners failed to engage with each other's ideas and both attempted to establish control over the task.

Example 10. Lower mutuality with lower-proficiency learner as an information receiver

1. HP 11: ok I watched the movie my teacher and I would like to talk you about that film Ok I can--I see about Mr. Bean…it very happy Mr. Bean is sleeping and suddenly he wake up uh and he listen something outside… and he open the door

sorry he open window and see around his house… and he can see a cat which is ... which is in the tree and that cat may be death it uh ok and someone try to…try to keep a cat to don't lie and… I know uh he cannot uh

2. LP 11: Huh?
3. HP 11: Uh …and there are a woman standing behind sorry beside the tree of a cat and she wish uh sorry and she wish uh the cat my cat…her cat
4. LP 11: Cat
5. HP 11: uh can uh go to near her safely suddenly…a cat go to far the uh policeman and it go to near Mr. Bean and certainly Mr. Bean uh …suddenly Mr. Bean uh keep that cat safely and she very happy when that happen and she kiss uh … thank Mr. Bean because Mr. Bean can do that it happen very certainly … uh and she want to uh someone to take photograph with Mr. Bean and… ok Mr. Bean uh don't think about that but it happen uh Mr. Bean suddenly uh … and after that Mr. Bean want uh me to afraid in the uh news and after that the end…

   [*long pause*]

   …
6. LP 11: …About ending of Mr. Bean uh …I think Mr. Bean is dreaming uh about happy ending …maybe uh …I think Mr. Bean--ok yes Mr. Bean is dreaming about happy ending… about all of her talking uh… her cat uh she two people Mr. Bean hug Mr. Bean …this is cat they appear story they appear in news.
7. HP 11: I don't think so about that but I want to end of my teacher movie uh and what will we do …

   …. [*long pause*]
8. LP 11: I know she…Mr. Bean a popular film. I think that Mr. Bean want make famous.

9. HP 11: He like her sure because she keep Mr. Bean after
10. LP 11: Maybe he will kiss her.
11. HP 11: No I don't think so she kiss Mr. Bean because…he want to help her cat safely I…suddenly quick him that happen very suddenly…Mr. Bean is surprise…

The higher-proficiency learner retold the story segment continuously without checking his partner's understanding (lines 1, 3, 5) or responding to the lower-proficiency learner's request for clarification (line 2). The lower-proficiency learner had few opportunities to check comprehension and spoke few words (lines 2, 4). Their low mutuality also continued when they were creating and ending for the story. When the lower-proficiency learner took the floor, she provided complete ending to the story (line 6). However, her partner rejected the ending without explanation (line 7) and also ignored the lower-proficiency learner's attempt to expand her idea and add new information (line 9). To summarize the findings for the second research question, assigning information holder status to the lower-proficiency learner resulted in interactions with higher mutuality.

Discussion

The current study investigated how task role influenced L2 learners' discussions about language form and pair dynamics in mixed-proficiency dyads. In terms of their discussions about language form, assigning information holder status to the lower-proficiency learners facilitated the occurrence of LREs, but did not impact the correct resolution of those LREs. As discussed previously, in mixed proficiency pairs the higher-proficiency learners might not consider their lower proficiency peers as legitimate partners and may dominate the interaction (Kowal & Swain, 1994; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). The findings of this study indicated that assigning the lower-proficiency learners the task role of information holder reduced the likelihood that the higher-proficiency learners could dominate the interaction and increased the lower-proficiency learners' contributions to the interaction. The positive effect

of manipulating the lower-proficiency learners' task role on the occurrence of LREs was reflected in Examples 7 and 9 in which the lower-proficiency learners' status as information holders may have 'pushed' them to contribute more to the task as reflected by their attempts to retell the story when encouraged and helped.

Previous studies have shown that more LREs were generated during collaborative writing tasks than oral tasks (see Fernández Dobao, 2012; Philp et al., 2010; Storch & Wigglesworth, 2007; Watanabe & Swain, 2007). The story retell task used here included both an initial oral component (retell the story and create an ending) and subsequent written activity (rewrite the entire story). It is possible that the LREs occurred exclusively during the writing stage, in which case the effect of task role on learners' interaction may be limited to written tasks. However, this is unlikely. Unlike learners in previous collaborative writing studies, who discussed content and co-constructed the written text simultaneously, these learners retold the story and created an ending orally before beginning to write. During the writing phase, the learners were instructed to simply write down their complete stories. As a result, there was little discussion during the writing phase and learners were often silent, regardless of the task role assigned to the lower-proficiency partner.

In terms of LRE types, the learners rarely attended to grammatical form when the lower-proficiency learner was the information receiver; however, they discussed grammatical form frequently when the lower-proficiency learner had the role of information holder. Similarly, discussion of lexical form was greater when they had the role of information holder rather than information receiver. The grammatical and lexical LREs may have been triggered by the lower-proficiency learners' need to retell the story, as in Example 6. When the lower-proficiency learner had difficulty choosing between the phrases *made him wake up* and *made him woke up*, she asked her higher proficiency partner. Although the higher proficiency partner could not provide the answer, this excerpt illustrates that when the lower-

proficiency learners encountered a language problem during story retell, they attempted to solve it by seeking help. In addition, the higher-proficiency learners were also likely to have more opportunities to notice their lower proficiency peers' language problems when listening to the story retells, and then assisted or corrected them, as shown in Example 1 where the higher-proficiency learner provided a recast.

With regard to resolution of LREs, more correctly resolved LREs occurred in the information holder than receiver groups although the difference failed to reach statistical significance. In addition, when the lower-proficiency learner was the information receiver, the descriptive statistics indicated that there were more incorrectly resolved LREs. It is possible that when the higher-proficiency learners encountered language problems while retelling the story, the lower-proficiency learners were not able to help resolve those problems. In contrast, when the lower-proficiency learners had the information holder status and had a language problem when retelling the stories, their higher-proficiency partner could help resolve the problems. This tendency was shown in Examples 1, 2, and 3 when the language problems encountered by the lower-proficiency learners during the story retell phase were recognized and correctly resolved by their higher-proficiency partners.

For pair dynamics, assigning information holder status to the lower-proficiency learner resulted in interactions with higher mutuality, as demonstrated through more frequent expert-novice and collaborative patterns. This result suggests that manipulating task role might have influenced the learners' interactional behavior. When assigned the role of information receiver, the higher-proficiency learners showed greater mutuality. As illustrated in Examples 7 and 9, since they did not possess the task information, the higher-proficiency learners had to elicit the information from their lower proficiency peers, thus they did not appear to take over the conversation. Instead, they encouraged their lower proficiency peer to talk in order to get information to complete the task. This enabled the lower-proficiency

learners to gain more speaking floor (Jenks, 2007), engage in the negotiation for meaning during communication breakdowns, and seek language help from their higher-proficiency peers.

Conversely, when given the role of information holder, the higher-proficiency learners showed lower mutuality, as evidenced by the greater number of parallel patterns. This tendency for the higher-proficiency learners was illustrated in Examples 8 and 10, especially during the story retell phase. Although the parallel pattern was the most frequent, it was not the case that learners necessarily tried to dominate the conversation. Instead, the qualitative data suggested that both the lower- and higher-proficiency learners failed to follow, reflect or develop each other's ideas. As shown in Example 10 (lines 6 – 11), when discussing the ending of the story, both learners appeared to contribute to the task by suggesting different ideas. They did not develop or reflect on the previous ideas, but simply focused on their own ideas. This example clearly showed their lack of mutuality and engagement with each other's ideas, thus representing a lower mutuality pattern. This finding corroborates Yule and Macdonald's (1990) finding that little negotiation occurred when the higher-proficiency learner had the controlling role in the task. In sum, the current findings suggest that manipulating task role in mixed-proficiency interaction can elicit the interactional patterns which are positively associated with L2 learning (Storch, 2001, Watanabe & Swain, 2007).

Overall, the study suggests some implications for pedagogy, specifically when assigning task roles to learners. First, the findings highlight the importance of taking task role into consideration when implementing peer interaction, particularly when pairing learners from diverse proficiency levels. Second, even if lower-proficiency learners are given task information in a mixed-proficiency dyad, they may experience language difficulties when carrying out this role. As a result, successful task accomplishment may require a degree of

mutuality from the higher proficiency partner, such as by providing language support and giving encouragement. However, the higher-proficiency learner may not automatically assume that role, as was evidenced by the one case of parallel interaction (Table 3). Consequently, it may be helpful to encourage and model interactions in which the higher-proficiency learners take a collaborative or expert role when interacting with their lower proficiency peers (Kim & McDonough, 2011).

Although the findings indicated that manipulating task role impacted the occurrence of LREs and enhanced the mutuality of mixed-proficiency dyads, the study has some limitations. Due to the overall low proficiency level of participants in this study, the impact of task role on peer interaction may not be generalized to learners of more advanced proficiency levels. Moreover, the study examined just one type of mixed-proficiency grouping, so it is unclear how task role affects peer interaction generated by same proficiency dyads or those where the proficiency difference is greater. Furthermore, the study used only one task type, so future research may employ different task types which allow the manipulation of information status in order to compare how task role affects peer interaction across tasks. Finally, because the study excluded teacher-involved LREs, little is known about whether manipulating learner's task role affects the teacher's interventions into peer interaction as well as their roles in implementing these activities.

Conclusion

The current study examined the impact of task role on learners' discussion of language form and pair dynamics during mixed-proficiency dyads. The findings showed that the learners engaged more in LREs and had pair dynamics with higher mutuality when the lower-proficiency learners held task information. Therefore, it is important to take task role into account as a potentially mediating variable when pairing learners from different proficiency levels. Furthermore, to help create constructive peer interaction it may be helpful

to enhance learners' awareness about the need for mutuality and its benefits for both learners. To conclude, the results of this study provide further insight into the interaction that occurs between learners in mixed-proficiency dyads, with the manipulation of task role as a potential way to help learners co-construct more L2 learning opportunities and work more mutually.

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Note

[1] The following transcription conventions were used for all Examples.

*	Utterance with error in pronunciation, grammar, or vocabulary
…	Unfilled pause (one second or longer)
uh	Filled pause
--	Self-repair
[*italics*]	Transcriber comments
mhm	Agreement or affirmative reply
?	Rising intonation
ah	Comprehension signal

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