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Teachers' Means of Scaffolding L2 Learners' Pragmatic Production in Online Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Scaffolding is a contributing factor to the effectiveness of pragmatic instruction. Although there is a large body of research on the means of scaffolding in second language teaching, research on scaffolding in L2 pragmatic instruction, especially in online teaching, is still in its infancy. To bridge the gap, this study investigated the means of scaffolding (feedback, giving hints, instructing, explaining, modeling, and questioning) utilized by teachers to aid learners in producing pragmatically appropriate speech acts of request and refusal. The data from 18 hours of online pragmatic instruction to 21 intermediate EFL learners via the Skyroom platform showed that the most frequent means of scaffolding used by three teachers participating in this study were questioning and explaining. Employing questioning, teachers used display questions to guide learners toward the appropriate production of request and refusal. Moreover, explaining, as a means of scaffolding, helped learners establish connections between new pragmatic knowledge and their prior knowledge of the speech act. The other three means of scaffolding, including feedback, giving hints, and modeling, were characterized by almost the same rate of frequency. The least frequent means of scaffolding was found to be instructing. It can be concluded that teachers tend to use questioning as a means of scaffolding more frequently because pragmatic knowledge needs to be improved through interaction. The findings can help teacher educators heighten the teachers' knowledge of various means of scaffolding to enable them to employ different means of scaffolding instead of overusing questioning and explaining.

Keywords: pragmatics; scaffolding; means of scaffolding; speech acts; request; refusal; online instruction

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Introduction

Pragmatics is defined as an individual's ability to effectively use language to communicate and interact with other people in different contexts (Taguchi, 2018). According to Taguchi (2019), this ability requires the learning of sociocultural conventions as they are an indispensable element for becoming a competent speaker in a second language (L2). To mitigate pragmatic failures and communication breakdowns, some key factors that include pragmatic competence and conventions of the target language should be given attention. The necessity for pragmatic instruction in the acquisition of pragmatic knowledge in English as a foreign language (EFL) has been emphasized in many studies (Alemi & Khanlarzadeh, 2017; Bardovi-Harlig, 2018; Bardovi-Harlig et al., 2015; Matsumura, 2022; Nguyen & Pham, 2022; Shakki et al., 2020). The effectiveness of the instruction of speech acts has been documented in many studies (for a meta-analysis, see Derakhshan & Shakki, 2021, 2023; Shakki et al., 2021). One factor in instructional effectiveness is the teacher. In highlighting the role of the teacher in pragmatic instruction, Bardovi-Harlig (2018) claimed that achieving pragmatic competence is not possible without teacher instruction. Yanling and Haratyan (2023) suggested that, to make pragmatic instruction more efficient, teachers can apply effective scaffolding means. This is because the mediation offered by teachers has a direct effect on the production of speech acts by learners (Fakher & Panahifar, 2020). From the perspective of sociocultural theory, scaffolding or collaborative dialog (Swain, 2000) is considered central to the learning process. It involves the interaction between an expert and a novice, where the expert provides guidance, support, and hints to the novice, allowing them to learn at a more independent and self-directed pace (Swain & Watanabe, 2013).

So far, a lot of research has been conducted on the topic of L2 pragmatic instruction and acquisition (e.g., Alemi & Khanlarzadeh, 2017; Bardovi-Harlig, 2018; Matsumura, 2022; Nguyen & Pham, 2022). Although previous research has furnished insights into L2 pragmatic development, it is now crucial to shift to the sociocultural theory of L2 pragmatic instruction. This theory has the potential to yield new insights into both the acquisition of pragmatics and the use of scaffolding in the teaching process. Although the importance of scaffolding is highlighted in many studies in the literature (e.g., Li & Zhang, 2022; Mahan, 2020; Reynolds, 2017; Smagorinsky, 2018; Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020), the notion of scaffolding in pragmatics remains under-explored. Considering the lack of research on the use of scaffolding in the instruction of speech acts of request and refusal and the need for more empirical evidence on the preferred and most commonly employed means of scaffolding by teachers in online teaching, this study aimed to address this gap in the literature by investigating teachers' means of scaffolding in online pragmatic instruction.

Literature Review

Hymes (1972) posits that simply possessing linguistic competence does not suffice to comprehend a language because a sentence linguistically correct in one situation might be inappropriate in another. Therefore, not only linguistic competence but also pragmatic competence is necessary for an L2 learner to communicate effectively (Taguchi, 2019). Perceiving pragmatics as a main constituent of language competence (Bachman, 1990), researchers have begun investigating L2 pragmatics in numerous contexts (e.g., Cohen, 2008; Malmir & Dearkhshan, 2020; Sonnenburg-Winkler et al., 2020; Tajeddin & Bagherkazemi, 2021; Tajeddin et al., 2018). One of the most widely explored aspects of research on L2 pragmatics pertains to the study of its instruction. Providing pragmatic input and instruction can help improve the learners' pragmatic comprehension and production. As such, pragmatics has gained prominence, notably concerning its place in instructed second language acquisition (Cohen, 2020; Culpeper et al., 2018; Taguchi & Kim, 2018).

Regarding aspects of pragmatic instruction, a few studies have examined the role of scaffolding in pragmatic instruction and its impact on the development of learners' pragmatic competence. Drawing on the notion of collaborative dialog, Fakher and Panahifar (2020) investigated how

teachers' scaffolding and peers' collaborative dialog assist EFL learners in producing requests, apologies, and refusals. They concluded that peer mediation can efficiently contribute to acquiring L2 pragmatic knowledge. Chen and Lin's (2021) study explored the impacts of collaborations among peers on EFL learners' comprehension of implicatures in conversation. They compared and contrasted the learners' verbalization and performance via individual and collaborative tasks and concluded that scaffolding substantially benefits learners' pragmatic knowledge. Taguchi and Kim (2018) reviewed the impact of collaborative dialog on the acquisition of the request speech act. In their study, pragmatic gains were detected. In addition, van Compernolle and Kinginger (2013) reported on the data obtained from a case study of a mid-level student whose metapragmatic knowledge was tested and advanced by scaffolding. Tajeddin and Tayebipour (2015) also examined the connection between an individual's zone of proximal development and that of the group as a whole in the learning of the request and apology speech acts. They found that scaffolding had a positive impact on learners' pragmatic knowledge.

Scaffolding is an efficient teaching and learning strategy that enables learners to learn more in a supportive learning environment. Morton (2020) highlights the fact that the use of interactional scaffolding is a crucial factor in the knowledge base of teachers who work in bilingual and multilingual education programs. In alignment with the previous statement, at the level of pedagogy, the utilization of instructional and interactional techniques and activities, such as scaffolding, facilitates the creation of a dialogic learning environment in mainstream education settings through the teaching and learning cycle (Morton, 2020; Troyan, 2021). Considering the presence of a wide range of competing definitions, characteristics, and classifications of scaffolding, scholars have been spurred to study this aspect in various contexts (e.g., Doo, Bonk, & Heo, 2020; Mahan, 2020; Shin et al., 2020; van Kampen et al., 2018). Therefore, the review of the literature shows that scaffolding has gained widespread popularity in educational contexts (Doo et al., 2020; House & Kádár, 2023; Mahan, 2020; Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020; Tajeddin et al., 2020).

The concept of scaffolding has triggered some studies into how teachers support their students with different means and intentions of scaffolding (e.g., Mahan, 2020; Roll, Holmes, Day, & Bonn, 2012; Shin et al., 2017). Means of scaffolding, which is the focus of this study, are the ways scaffolding takes place, while intentions of scaffolding indicate underlying reasons for scaffolding the items (Van de Pol et al., 2010). Means of scaffolding have been classified into six categories by Van de Pol et al. (2010), namely feedback, giving hints, instructing, explaining, modeling, and questioning. Studies relevant to these means of scaffolding are outlined below.

Shin et al. (2020) and Alharbi (2017) found that the most frequent type of scaffolding was giving feedback. As noted by Abdollahzadeh and Behroozizad (2015), feedback was used more frequently among all means of scaffolding. On the other hand, Shin et al. stated that hinting is an indirect and subtle manner of clues or suggestions provided by teachers or peers to support the learner to proceed. It was found in their study that teachers provided hints when learner gets off track to enable them to produce an appropriate output. A study by Safadi and Rababah (2012) found that instructing as a means of scaffolding was observed frequently in the teaching process to enhance learners' proficiency. Instructing is mostly used to help learners realize underlying concepts including when and where an appropriate output should be used (Pressley & McCormick, 1995; Roehler & Cantlon, 1997). Modeling, on the other hand, has been found as a frequent and effective strategy for guiding language use and providing learners with an example of correct language production to facilitate learning and reinforce appropriate communication in some other studies (e.g., Silliman et al., 2000; Yelland & Masters, 2007).

As the preceding review shows, there is still a paucity of research on scaffolding in pragmatic instruction, including the online one. Therefore, this study examines the means of scaffolding used in online instruction of speech acts of request and refusal. Accordingly, the current research aims to answer the following research question:

RQ. What are the means of EFL teachers' scaffolding in online pragmatic instruction of request and refusal?

Method

Participants

Three Iranian female Ph.D. candidates in TEFL aged 30-40 formed the participants. They were non-native English language teachers. The number of teachers was limited to three to make the qualitative study manageable and rich as the data of the study were gathered from moment-to-moment observation of classroom instruction to inspect pragmatic corrective feedback related to the speech acts of request and refusal. The teachers had been teaching advanced levels in private institutes and university courses of TEFL for more than five years. The teachers who chose to participate had passed courses in the field of pragmatics in their Ph.D. program and had received training in this field for a whole semester. Moreover, they published papers on scaffolding, and their Ph.D. dissertation topics were directly related to the field of scaffolding. This served as the motivation and reasoning behind their taking part in this study. Purposive sampling, typical of qualitative research (Creswell, 2012), was employed to select experienced and academically qualified teachers. Additionally, twenty-one male and female intermediate-level Iranian English language learners aged 25-35 attended this study. These participants were selected based on convenience sampling from a private language institute and placed in new classes designed for online pragmatic instruction. The learners participating had enrolled in the general English course offered at the private language institute. The course utilized the "Top Notch 3" teaching textbook, which aligns with the B1 level of the Common European Framework of References (CEFR) and lasted for one semester, encompassing 16 sessions in total. Based on the placement test of the institute, the learners were placed at the intermediate level. It is important to highlight the distinction between the general English course teachers at the institute and those teaching the speech acts in this study. The focus of the institute's English classes was primarily on the teaching of general English, rather than on the instruction of pragmatic competence. While the course book included some occasional attention to pragmatics, it was not the main purpose of the course. Therefore, the learners had not received comprehensive or consistent instruction on speech acts, meaning that they were not explicitly taught to effectively use speech acts to communicate and interact with others in the institute's English classes.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

When teaching speech acts, the teachers used different sources for their pragmatic instruction. Beebe et al.'s (1990) classification of refusal and Shoshana et al.'s (1989) different categories of request were focused on in these sessions. Moreover, Brown and Levinson's (1987) model of power, social distance, and size of imposition were taught to the learners. This pragmatic course was held in the Skyroom, which is an application for online events like classrooms, meetings, and webinars. Throughout the observed sessions, teachers used their webcams and shared files required for that lesson. In addition, the learners had the chance to turn on their webcams and write in the chat box. Another important feature of the application was that more than one learner could use their microphones simultaneously to have conversations and role-plays.

In instructional sessions, including six sessions for each speech act, different scenarios of request and refusal were discussed in the class (Appendix A). This helped them familiarize the learners with the nuances of how the appropriate speech acts of request and refusal can be produced. In addition, the learners were assigned to do role-plays to practice different situations for the appropriate use of request and refusal. Also, in all the sessions, the learners were invited to complete discourse completion tasks (DCTs) and perform online tasks to practice the speech acts. To ensure the learners' understanding, videos related to different situations of request and refusal were shown to them.

The teacher-learner online interactions were the main source for extracting different means of scaffolding in learners' speech act production. The three teachers were informed that all their online interactions were both recorded and carefully scrutinized for details for more information. Eighteen hours of recording were stored, including all teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions. There were three classes, each consisting of 7 learners (21 in total) at the intermediate level. In this stage, means of scaffolding in the support of learners' speech act productions were only under investigation. The data of this study consisted of a corpus of interactions totaling 18 sessions, each lasting for one hour. As each session involved a different teacher, the number of hours taught by each teacher was 6 hours. The classes taught by each teacher were held twice per week for nine weeks. All teacher-learner and learner-learner interactions were recorded. Later, all the conversations and recorded interactions were transcribed in detail.

Data Analysis

Before content analysis, the data were transcribed using Jenks's (2011) transcription conventions (Appendix B). For the instruction corpus collected from 18 hours of teacher-learner online interactions, the researchers employed qualitative content analysis to find the dominant means of scaffolding applied to the learners' requests and refusals. The content analysis of the corpus was framed employing means of scaffolding consisting of six categories proposed in Van de Pol et al.'s (2010) taxonomy: feedback, giving hints, instructing, explaining, modeling, and questioning. Means of scaffolding were also quantitatively calculated to extract and report on their frequency of use in the online courses. As the focus of the research questions was on means of scaffolding in online pragmatic instruction, analysis was directed toward those relevant episodes of instruction in which teacher scaffolding took place.

The data analysis was primarily premised upon deductive content analysis, which entailed matching the codes with Van de Pol et al.'s (2010) taxonomy. Subsequently, another independent and separate coder was asked to review 20% of the data by selecting it at random. This was done to double-check the accuracy and enhance the reliability of the content analysis. The second coder was knowledgeable in pragmatic instruction, including means of scaffolding. When there was disagreement with the inter-coders, an in-depth discussion took place to refine coding. The codes were finalized with the agreement of the two coders. In addition, Cohen's Kappa related to intercoding was .82.

Results

This study sought to explore the dominant means of scaffolding in the online instruction of speech acts of request and refusal. Having analyzed the corpus of online pragmatic instruction, the researchers observed different means of scaffolding introduced by Van de Pol et al. (2010). Among the means of scaffolding employed by the three teachers, two means were more frequently observed: (1) *questioning*, and (2) *explaining*. Table 1 and Figure 1 present the frequencies of all six means of scaffolding.

Table 1

Means of Scaffolding in Online Pragmatic Instruction

Means of Scaffolding	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Total
Feedback	11	20	17	48
Giving hints	19	15	21	55
Instructing	6	1	3	10
Explaining	58	56	60	174
Modeling	13	25	11	49
Questioning	85	90	92	267

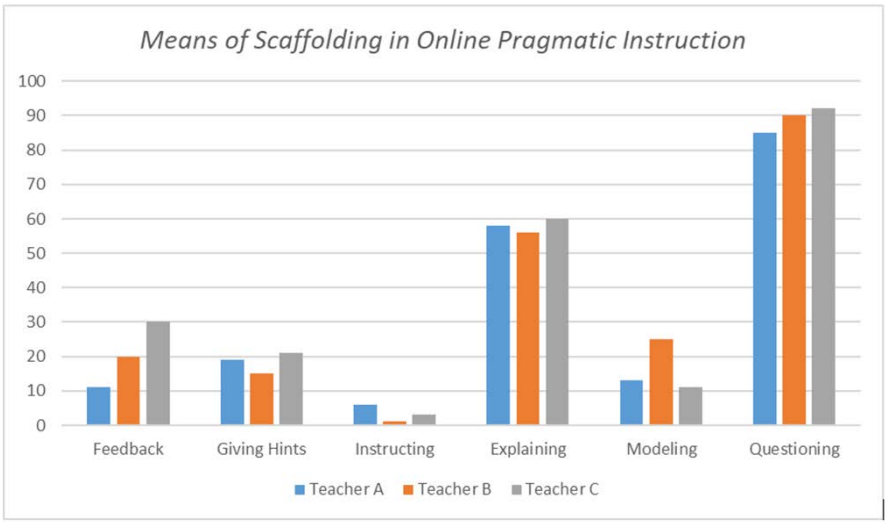

Figure 1. Means of Scaffolding in Online Pragmatic Instruction

Questioning

Based on the results of observation, *questioning* had the highest frequency in teachers' means of scaffolding (n = 267). This means of scaffolding involves asking learners questions that require an appropriate output production. In this means of scaffolding, teachers asked learners questions to guide them to produce a more proficient speech act of request or refusal. In the excerpt below, the learner does not make an appropriate request and the teacher tries to elicit the correct form by asking questions and guiding the learner to provide a more appropriate speech act.

Excerpt 1

Learner:	*I want↑ her to: give her(.) pamphlet(.) ok? (.) can I ↑ say (.) can I ↑ have your pamphlet(.) for two days?=*
Teacher B:	*=mmm (0.3) wouldn't it be better↑(.) to add some explanations request (.) to be more↑ acceptable↓?=*
Learner:	*= (inaudible) (0.5) Can I ↑ have your pamphlet(.)↓ I want to study for the exam (.)↓ I was(.) absent previous session]*
Teacher B:	*[gets better*

By employing questions, the teacher allowed the learner to think critically and thoughtfully about his speech act production. In addition, the question provided a means to evaluate **learners'** understanding and comprehension level of the subject matter, allowing the opportunity to adjust and refine their responses accordingly.

Explaining

As Table 1 indicates, *explaining* ranked second, after *questioning*, with a total frequency of 174. In this means of scaffolding, teachers provided information that was more detailed or clarified. Excerpt 2 shows the interaction between Teacher A and her learner. In this excerpt, the teacher helps the learner with some explanation and clarification about the speech act of refusal. The

learner does not understand how to use vague excuses while refusing something. Therefore, contingent explanations are given to enable the learner to produce the speech act appropriately.

Excerpt 2

Learner:	*By↑ refusing the request(.) with vague excuses↓ I don't know(.) if:should explain the reason or not↑*
Teacher A:	*For refusing↑ a request↓ by(.) providing vague excuses(.) we don't provide(.) concrete ↑excuses or any detailed↑ explanations↓ your↑excuse↓ is not ↑clear↓*
Learner:	*(silence)(0.8)*
Teacher A:	*Your↑ excuse↓(.) is not obvious↓ Ok↑=*
Learner:	*=No↓*
Teacher A:	Look (0.3) you↑ want to say↓ NO↑(.) but you don't↑say the exact rea:son↑(.) why you are↑ saying no↓]]
Learner:	[like(.) I ↑have some work to do(.) so I↑ can't come(.) to the party↑
Teacher A:	Aha: ↑right↓ (nodding her head as a confirmation sign)

As is seen in the above excerpt, the teacher's explanation allows the **learner** to gain a deeper understanding of the refusal strategy known as the vague excuses. The teacher's explanation provides clarification and helps the **learner** connect the new information with their existing knowledge base or experiences.

Giving Hints

Followed by *questioning* and *explaining*, the third most frequently used means of scaffolding was *giving hints* (*n = 55*). In this means of scaffolding, giving hints entails the provision of clues or suggestions to help the **learner** go forward. In excerpt 3, which shows part of a role-play, Teacher C tries to improve the learner's speech act production by giving some hints or signals instead of fully helping or supporting her. By receiving a brief hint in this excerpt, the learner becomes more aware of how to improve her refusal production.

Excerpt 3

Teacher C:	*Your friend (.) asks you↑ for some help↓ (.) Refuse↑ her request ↑by giving a promise↑ for some (.) other time↓*
Learner:	*I↑ don't have time ↓ (.) I'm busy ↑right now↓]*
Teacher C:	*[Aha: ↑ (showing hesitation by her facial expression and tone of her voice). And: about promising:↑*
Learner:	*So: ↑ (0.3) may be (.) I can help you tomorrow ↓ (.) correct↑*
Teacher C:	*(nodding her head for the sign of confirmation) yeah↓*

In the excerpt provided, providing hints encourages learners to reflect on their speech act production. By not providing full support, the teacher prevents the possibility of the learner becoming reliant on the teacher's provision of all the answers and encourages the development of independent thinking. The use of hints allows learners to reach the correct responses through their own thinking and analysis skills. This type of scaffolding not only helps to enhance the learning process but also helps to prepare learners to become more independent learners.

Modeling

The findings presented in Table 1 revealed that *modeling* showed a frequency of 49. *Modeling* assists learners in correcting their inappropriate utterances based on the examples that the teachers model for them. In effect, *modeling* refers to the process of offering behavior for imitation. In this means of scaffolding, imitation has the main role and the teachers act like role models for learners to follow their steps. Excerpt 4 shows the interaction between Teacher B and the learner in the process of performing a DCT.

Excerpt 4

Teacher B:	*In this example↑ (.) you↑ are asked (.) to lend your: pamphlet (.) to a friend↓ refuse ↑ the request by: giving↑ a reason ↓*
	for example: (0.3) sorry↓ (.) I↑ can't (.) I↑ have already↑ given it to: another friend (.03) ↓ aha↑: =] (Asking for confirmation by her tone of voice)
Learner:	*[Sorry (.)I have a test (.) I should : study↑ for it↓=*
Teacher B:	*= yeah↓*

Excerpt 4 shows that the teacher provides a correct example of speech act production, allowing the learner to learn and engage in the process of scaffolding. The learner follows the teacher's model by replicating the speech with a more appropriate one. This process helps learners gain insights into the construction of speech acts and allows them to practice and develop their own communication skills.

Feedback

The fifth observable means of scaffolding in the online corpus of teacher-learner interactions was *feedback* (n = 48). Feedback refers to information provided to learners regarding their performance. In this means of scaffolding, teachers provide information related to the learner's use of speech acts. Excerpt 5 shows the interaction between the teacher and the learner. In this excerpt, the learner makes a formal request by using the word 'wanna', and Teacher A provides *feedback* to scaffold the learner's use of a more polite form of request.

Excerpt 5

Learner:	*I wanna ↑ ask for: (.) your cellphone in order to: (.) make a phone call↓]]*
Teacher A:	*[[Using wanna ↑ is not ↑ formal (.) and polite(.)↓ so: ↑ better to use(.) I would like ↓*
Learner:	*I would like↑ to ask for: (.) your cellphone ↑ in order to: make a phone call ↓*

By providing *feedback* on the learner's problematic speech act, the teacher helps the learner improve and refine her utterance to make it more formal and polite. The *feedback* helps the learner understand what formality is expected and make necessary corrections to fit within this parameter.

Instructing

The least frequent means of scaffolding was *instructing* (n = 10), which ranked at the bottom of six scaffolding means (see Table 1). *Instructing* involves the teacher teaching the learners what to do or teaching how and why something must be done. By this means of scaffolding, teachers provide instruction to learners enabling them to decrease the distance between the actual developmental

level, known as independent problem solving, and the level of potential development. Excerpt 6 exemplifies this means of scaffolding.

Excerpt 6

Teacher C: *In a conversation ↑ (.) between a teacher↑(.) and a learner ↓ (0.3) the learner ↑ asks her teacher↓ (.) to↑ check his assignment↓ (.) In this example ↑ (.) how is the power ↑=*

Learner 1: *=high to low↓]*

Learner 2: *[Low to high↓*

Teacher C: *Regarding power↑(.) social status is important ↑(.) when a person with higher ↑ status asks for a request ↓ (.) from a person↑(.) with lower status ↓(0,3) the power↑ is from high: to low↓ For example↑ (.) a teacher: asks his/her learner (.) a favor ↓ (.) on the other↑ hand ↓(.) if a person↑ with a lower status↑ asks for a request↓ the power ↑ is from low↑ to high ↓For example(.) a learner↑ asks his/her teacher(.) a favor↓]*

learner1: [so, low to high↑

As can be seen in this excerpt, the learners provide two different answers, one of which is inappropriate. Afterward, Teacher C starts to instruct the points related to the power relation of interlocutors in this conversation deductively. In this excerpt, the teacher tends to help the learner solve the problem by providing direct instruction.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate the utilization of scaffolding means by teachers in online pragmatic instruction based on the guiding principle of collaborative dialogue. Certainly, in the present study, the most prevalent means of scaffolding observed were questioning and explaining, which are, by far, the two most frequent means of scaffolding deployed by the teachers.

The findings of this study accord with those reported in some other studies (e.g., Fakher & Panahifar, 2020; Rachmawaty & Ariani, 2019) which revealed that teachers can get learners engaged in problem-solving and develop their pragmatic knowledge through the use of collaboration, particularly by utilizing interactional means of scaffolding such as questioning. As pragmatic knowledge is mostly bound to encoding and decoding contexts and strategies in each conversation, questioning is the dominant means of scaffolding as the teachers try to direct the learners to analyze the context and amend the use of speech act production strategies in a specific conversational and interactional situation. In this study, the teachers posed questions to elicit, guide, and receive feedback from learners, which corresponds to an earlier study by Singh et al. (2020). Singh et al. showed that teacher questioning is utilized to verify learners' prior knowledge and create prospects for them to go from familiar to unfamiliar information to assist them in acquiring new understanding. It was found that the teachers offer prompt questions based on learners' progress to direct their attention to avoid any breakdown in their conversation. This finding is in agreement with earlier research, such as Reynolds and Daniel (2017), who likewise emphasized the value of interactional scaffolding, particularly concerning its ability to provide swift modifications based on learners' progress to reinforce accuracy.

The second most frequent means of scaffolding was explaining. As previous studies show, explaining is one of the most frequent means of scaffolding (e.g., Anderson & Macleroy, 2017; Kim & Song, 2019; Pressley & McCormick, 1995; Roehler & Cantlon, 1997; Smith, 2018), which is in alignment with the findings of the present study. The previous studies found that explanations are used to clarify the underlying contents that learners should know. As posited by

Schutt (2003) and Dantes et al. (2019), it is easier for instructors to thoroughly recognize learners' problems in a face-to-face classroom context in comparison with online classes. Therefore, online learning requires specific means of scaffolding to be thoroughly understood by the learners and to attain the lesson objectives (Hung & Nguyen, 2022). Instructing learners who are not physically present in the class requires teachers to constantly adjust to the virtual environment and adapt their scaffolding means accordingly. Therefore, as is seen in this study, providing explicit scaffolding (explaining) makes a learning environment more supportive, which is very important in online instruction (Hung & Nguyen, 2022). In this study, it was observed that teachers preferred to use direct scaffolding as they were physically absent and did not sit in front of the class as in face-to-face classes. They wanted to avoid any misunderstandings while they tried to provide contingent support to the learners. Therefore, the teachers tend to use explaining as the explicit form of scaffolding to boost the awareness of learners so that they can get support from the teacher directly.

Another frequent means of scaffolding was modeling, which is one of the general components of explicit scaffolding. The teachers verbally provided the learners with examples related to the speech acts. The data indicated that modeling was employed in two situations more frequently. The first situation indicated that modeling came after a less explicit intervention that did not successfully motivate learners' engagement. A similar finding was documented by Maloch (2002), who reported that instructors preferred to encourage their learners through modeling more regularly after less direct instruction of speech acts. In the second situation, the teachers utilized modeling as input data or as a warm-up activity. The finding corresponds to former research by Grossman (2015), Mahan (2020), Tajeddin and Kamali (2020), and Tajeddin et al. (2020), which propose that modeling is an aid in the initial phase of the teaching process and plays various roles in instructing.

The fourth most frequent means of scaffolding was giving hints, which showed the same frequencies as feedback did. Consistent with Shin et al.'s (2020) study, the teachers in this study gave subtle suggestions that served as indirect guides for the less capable learners to progress. The aim was to support them without overtly helping them or intruding on their thinking and to encourage them to make efforts to reach the desired speech act production themselves. In addition, the data revealed that the teachers used hints as a little push toward the points that were already known to learners. Moreover, this means of scaffolding is employed by the teachers for a gradual relegation of responsibility which supports the move from greater assistance (modeling, explaining) to lower levels of assistance (giving hints). This aligns with the study by Meyer (1993), which suggested that teachers, by supplying hints, moderate the levels of scaffolding for the known aspects to elicit rich responses.

The next frequent means of scaffolding was giving feedback. In line with the study by Abdollahzadeh and Behroozizad (2015), the findings showed that feedback was used in this study as well. The scarcity of feedback can be justified by the nature of online education, which entails the physical absence of the teachers and the restrictive nature of most available online learning platforms (Hung & Nguyen, 2022), which can cause a barrier to giving appropriate feedback to learners. This finding further supports the study by Alharbi (2017), who asserted that providing learners with effective feedback is challenging in online settings as opposed to face-to-face classes.

The least frequent means of scaffolding was instructing. Although it was not frequent, it is found to be used by the teachers as a support for their learners. It was observed that when learners did not succeed in their speech act production after the teachers had provided other means of scaffolding, teachers started to provide instruction to lead learners to understand request and refusal speech acts deeply. This means of scaffolding is regarded as the final attempt to help and support learners. The findings of the present study resonate with those from some previous research (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Ko, Schallert, & Walltters, 2003), which reported

that instructing showed low frequency as a means of scaffolding. On the other hand, Takahashi's (2001) report is inconsistent with the findings of the present study as it found instructing as a frequent means of scaffolding. Similar to the study by Pressley et al. (2001), the present study, revealed that instructing as a means of scaffolding is tailored to assist learners when it is needed to ensure the understanding of the material. Indeed, providing direct instructions as support to learners is more salient in the language learning classroom. The nature of pragmatic knowledge is not so much bound to direct instructions; however, the interactions between teachers and learners can be more helpful in this regard.

This study substantiates existing research, showing that scaffolding behaviors and means change as development in learning is achieved. It demonstrates that, before learners become competent in a particular learning goal, enough lengthier scaffolding periods and more interruptions during the process are needed. As Cole (2006) posited, scaffolding moves back and forth between micro and macro contexts. Therefore, different means of scaffolding are observed in this study based on the learners' needs.

Conclusion and Implications

The current study was conducted through observation of online pragmatic instruction to afford insights into the means of scaffolding applied by teachers in online classes. Analyzing the teachers' means of scaffolding evidenced that the prominent means used in this study were questioning and explaining. It can be concluded that because of the influential barriers to interaction and collaboration among learners in online learning, the teachers engage the learners by posing questions to avoid any misunderstanding of the appropriate use of speech acts of request and refusal. The teachers adjusted the nature of questions continuously as a means of scaffolding based on learners' progress and decided to increase or decrease scaffolding. In addition, by explaining, the teachers provided information that was more detailed or given directly but subsequently reduced the level of support to transfer the responsibility to the learners to produce an appropriate speech act. This implies that teachers tend to use the means of scaffolding contingently to adjust it to learners' ability for pragmatic production.

The result obtained from means of scaffolding in instruction to support learners' pragmatics learning has pedagogical implications. This study shed light on the employment of different means of scaffolding, especially, for online modes of pragmatic instruction. The findings of the study help teacher educators heighten the pre-service and in-service teachers' knowledge of various means of scaffolding to enable them to employ all different means of scaffolding instead of overusing questioning and explaining. The findings revealed that the teachers tended to use questioning as an interactional scaffolding and direct explanation to explicitly assist learners in online classes as they were susceptible to misunderstanding in online classes. Therefore, this study provides insight to teachers to consider and employ all means of scaffolding to avoid the dominant use of some specific means of scaffolding because of present barriers existing in online classes.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

This study had its limitations, which could be considered in further research. It was carried out during the Coronavirus pandemic, so online pragmatic instruction was the only mode of instruction under investigation. Rather than being restricted to online instruction due to the Coronavirus pandemic, future studies can investigate differences between means of scaffolding in online and face-to-face pragmatic instruction. The present research could be replicated by

employing a larger number of EFL teachers and learners for the sake of generalization. The data in the present study were derived from experienced EFL teachers who were proficient in teaching pragmatics; therefore, a similar study could be done to find different means of scaffolding between experienced and novice teachers' online instruction. In addition, it is suggested that future studies be done on teachers with different genders, educational backgrounds, and teaching experience. A better view of teachers' means of scaffolding could be gained if interviews and stimulated recalls are used to enrich data to gain deeper insights into teachers' pedagogical reasoning for using each means of scaffolding.

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Appendix A

Request Scenarios

1. Speaker A: You are at a telephone booth while waiting to make a call home. You realize that you do not have enough change for the call. You decide to ask another girl who is standing nearby for change. What would you say?

   Speaker B: You are at a telephone booth while waiting to make a phone call. A girl standing nearby asks you for change.

2. Speaker A: You are new in your college and you hardly know your classmates. You missed a class the day before and would like to borrow your classmate's notes for a few hours. What would you say?

   Speaker B: One of your classmates who is new in your class missed a class the day before and she asks you to borrow your notes.

3. Speaker A: The meeting is over. Your bus has just left and the next one is due for an hour. You know that the cleaner in your office, who you know by sight only, has a car. Although you know he lives in the street far away from yours, you want to ask him to give you a ride. What would you say to him?

   Speaker B: The meeting is over. You have a car and you want to go home. A person who you know by sight only and lives in the same street as you do approaches and asks you for a ride.

4. Speaker A: Suppose that you need to ask your teacher to add 5 points to your score and change it from 14 to 19, which you know that he rarely changes even one point. What would you say?

   Speaker B: You are a teacher and your student ask you to improve his score as he needs to pass with the best score.

5. Speaker A: You had a party the night before and you left the kitchen in a mess. Two of your friends are coming to dinner tonight and you will have to get on with the cooking soon. What would you say to your flat mate to clean the stove while you know he has an exam tomorrow?

   Speaker B: You had a party last night and you did not clean the stove. Your flat mate asks you to clean it.

6. Speaker A: You are at a restaurant waiting to be served. Your table needs to be cleaned. How would you ask the waiter to clean your table?

   Speaker B: You are a waiter in a restaurant. One of your customers asks you to clean his table.

Refyuusal Scenarios

1. Speaker A: You have been sharing a flat with a new classmate who you hardly know, as he is new in your college. He is working on an assignment. He wants to borrow your laptop charger for a few hours while you think you may need it for your own assignment. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: While you are working on your assignment, your computer suddenly stops working. The other person is your flat mate. You want to borrow his laptop charger for a few hours.

2. Speaker A: You are the owner of a bookstore. One of your best employees asks to speak to you in private. He has been working for you over a year, and now he asks you for a pay raise. Fulfilling his request is not possible for you now. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: You have been working in a bookstore over a year. You are one of the best employees and you think that you deserve a pay raise. Therefore, you ask him to talk in private and request for the raise.

3. Speaker A: You are a top student in the university. You are known among your classmates for taking very good notes during teachers' lectures. Yesterday the professor just announced that there would be an exam next week. One of your classmates wants to borrow your lecture notes for an hour to copy them. This time you just feel that you cannot give him your notes. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: You are a university student and you have to work part-time for your living. Therefore, you miss the classes frequently and come late to classes. Yesterday, the professor just announced that there would be an exam next week. Therefore, you want the best student in the class to give you his lecture notes for an hour so that you can copy them.

4. Speaker A: You have been working for a tourism agency for almost three years now. The other person is your boss, whom you have met recently as he is new in your office. He asks you to relocate to another office, which is two hours far from your current workplace. Although you like the offer, you cannot accept it. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: You are a manager at a tourism agency. The other person is your employee who you have just met, as you are new in the office. You have decided to offer him a pay raise. However, this promotion involves relocating to another office, which is two hours far from his current workplace.

5. Speaker A: You are the manager of a toy store. One particular cleaner working for your company requested to take a toy for his son without payment during his office-cleaning task. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: You are a cleaner working for a toy store. While you are cleaning the manager's office, you ask him whether you could take a toy for my son, presumably without payment.

6. Speaker A: You are a student and you are visiting a book fair with your teacher and a group of other students. You are about to pay for a rather expensive book, when you realize that you have forgotten to take your wallet. One of the students who you do not know offers you to pay for it then you can pay him back later. However, you would not like to accept his offer. How would you refuse?

   Speaker B: You are visiting a book fair with your teacher and other students. One student wants to pay for a rather expensive book, but he realizes that he has forgotten to take his wallet. You offer to pay for the book

Appendix B

Transcription Conventions (Jenks, 2011)

[[ ]]	Simultaneous utterances – (beginning [[) and (end]])
[ ]	Overlapping utterances – (beginning [) and (end])
=	Contiguous utterances (or continuation of the same turn)
(0.4)	Represent the tenths of a second between utterances
(.)	Represents a micro-pause (1 tenth of a second or less)
:	Elongation (more colons demonstrate longer stretches of sound)
.	Fall in pitch at the end of an utterance
,	Slight rise in pitch at the end of an utterance
-	An abrupt stop in articulation
?	Rising in pitch at utterance end (not necessarily a question)
CAPTIAL	Loud/forte speech
__	Underline letters/words indicate accentuation
↑ ↓	Marked upstep/downstep in intonation
° °	Surrounds talk that is quieter
Hhh	Exhalations
.hhh	Inhalations
he or ha	Laugh particle
(hhh)	Laughter within a word (can also represent audible aspirations)
> >	Surrounds talk that is spoken faster
< <	Surrounds talk that is spoken slower
(( ))	Analyst notes
( )	Approximations of what is heard
$ $	Surrounds 'smile' voice
*per syllable	Unintelligible syllable

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