

## Scaffolding Effects on Writing Acquisition Skills in EFL Context

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### Abstract

This paper is aimed to examine the effects of scaffolding on the development of higher-order thinking skills as evidenced in the academic writing of undergraduates at tertiary levels in the university education system. A lot of empirical research so far has examined the applicability of scaffolding in acquiring writing skills; however, few of them have studied the motivational aspect of scaffolding and its impact on the acquisition of writing skills of English as foreign language (EFL) learners. This study argues both motivational and demotivational factors with respect to scaffolding. During this study, the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in accordance with Vygotsky's principles shall also be studied to determine whether the learners in the process of writing are following teacher's implicit instructions and teachers are dealing appropriately with the deployment of scaffolding techniques. References shall be drawn from the findings of Nunan (1991) who felt a positive feedback functions as an incentive to students and fairly motivates them and those of Ellis (2008; 2010; 2012; 2013) who apprehended that a negative feedback may be "potentially dangerous" to students and can damage their receptivity to learning. The findings of the study bear evidence of how the teachers, as well as the learners, follow similar patterns in understanding the scaffolding technique in the acquisition of writing skills.

*Keywords:* EFL, Motivation, Scaffolding, Writing Skills, ZPD

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## Introduction

Teachers of English language strive regularly to find out the means in which students learn and acquire skills. The pedagogical principles require the instructors to understand the cognitive abilities of a learner or in other words, know how their brains develop. The teachers of the English language also must understand what knowledge and skills learners are expected to acquire. Thinkers and cognitive scientists have investigated the way students learn and hence developed theories and strategies to enable a student to learn. Soviet psychologist Vygotsky (1978; 1986), for instance, has contributed greatly in the area of cognitive development through the zone of proximal development (ZPD), a theory that has helped teachers customize their teaching methodology in the classroom. According to Vygotsky, anything that a learner needs to learn, say, writing skills, for instance, must be within his cognitive capacity or the ability to acquire that particular skill. Vygotsky called this cognitive ability as a student's 'zone of proximal development.' The teacher uses the scaffolding techniques to reach this ZPD for the desired learning outcomes.

In the second language (L2) acquisition studies, scaffolding has gained growing attention (Haghparast & Behdokht, 2015; Miller, et al, 2015; Lantolf, 2000a, 2000b) particularly after the introduction of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD), a theoretical perspective has developed which postulates that scaffolding facilitates and enhances language skills of a L2 learner (Cotteral & Cohen, 2003; Hammond et al, 2012). However, there are differences of opinion on the definition and measurement of scaffolding. Bickhard (1992), for instance, argues that scaffolding exists only in controlled situations with preferably formal instructions. Pea (2004) regards it as a "cultural tool" happening naturally with informal interactions. Rogoff (1990) called scaffolding a "guided participation" highlighting the analogy of parent-child learning interactions. Likewise, Wood et al. (1976) defines scaffolding as "an adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (p. 9). One thing common to all these perspectives is that scaffolding is understood as an expert's supportive behavior for the novice learner to become independent, to be able to solve a learning problem and carry out a task.

In this study, an attempt has been made to study three perspectives of scaffolding to understand its role in developing writing skills, namely instructional, cognitive, and motivational scaffolding perspectives (Cromley & Azevedo, 2006). It has been observed consistently that instructional perspective helps scaffold learners to understand concepts and provide answers, to summarize and plan their learning tasks. The second perspective, cognitive, helps learners to correct their own errors when the instructor scaffolds through hints and prompts and thus draw their attention to the solution. The third perspective, motivational, includes teachers' positive or negative feedback for learners' responses, which work as a motivation to them. In addition, there are a few other perspectives. For instance, Ellis (2013) propagated the pedagogic view about corrective feedback and recommended scaffolding techniques to be used by the teacher. In another study, Kim and Cho (2017) recommend the teacher to improvise writing oriented gestures to scaffold L2 learners to develop writing skills.

This study was motivated by the fact that a few instructors of writing often develop a tendency about the usage of patterned practices to teach writing skills by adopting a kind of structural-behaviorist approach. A few ESL writing textbooks also expect the writing instructors

to choose a fixed pattern to help students acquire writing skills. Ironically, such a process approach frustrates both instructors and learners as it does not contribute to the reduction or elimination of students' errors. At this stage, the scaffolding method is being adopted by a few teachers to develop writing abilities in the students. The scaffolding method enables the teacher to devise or invent several techniques such as gesture scaffolding. Writing gestures when combined with speech or handwritten paper or pen, might collaborate in developing the writing skills of a L2 learner. However, not much is known about the use of the specific scaffold gesture used by the teacher as an aid to L2 learners' writing. A need was therefore felt to conduct an empirical study to examine how a writing tutor can utilize the scaffolding techniques to assist the L2 learners of deficient proficiency levels.

### **Statement of the Problem**

A study on scaffolding can be carried out on two propositions: the first deals with scaffolding or providing support to students to acquire a skill with a supportive mentor who acts as a scaffold until students are comfortable to do it on their own. At this point, the teacher may remove scaffolding if the students are deemed to have acquired expertise in a particular concept or skill. The second presupposition involves Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, which observes that often acquisition of a skill is beyond students' learning even if support or scaffold is provided. A pertinent example could be asking a novice student, who has just learned how to write a sentence, to write an argumentative essay with distinct thesis statements, body paragraphs and conclusion. Since the student has learned only how to write elementary sentences, the in-depth essay writing would definitely be outside his zone of proximal development.

The current study is an attempt to identify and bring to light such scaffolding techniques deployed by writing tutors in their classroom teaching. An attempt will be made to find out how scaffolding tools such as gestures, in combination with speech, or pen and paper, can facilitate L2 learner in developing writing skills. Moreover, keeping in mind the subject of the current study, an attempt shall also be made to study the motivational aspects of scaffolding techniques during the process of acquisition of L2 writing skills.

### **Significance of the Study**

The following considerations reveal the significance of the present study:

- 1- The study attempts to investigate a recent innovative teaching practice, the scaffolding that promises to provide external support to learners, in developing writing skills. It is one of the few empirical studies that will ever be conducted in the acquisition of L2 writing skills.
- 2- This study promotes the concept of learners' autonomy as a fundamental concern of new trends in education that foster student-centered learning. Hence, techniques to be adopted must also be student-centered.
- 3- The results of this study on scaffolding as a technique to develop writing skills may highlight the need to reformulate the widely-used teaching techniques in those educational institutions that wish the promotion of learner autonomy in the acquisition of skills.

### **Literature Review**

Throughout history, language teaching has been characterized by changes and alterations in its trends. This has occurred to improve its effectiveness. The audio-lingual approach was in full

swing in the 1950s through the 60s (Hendrickson, 1978) However, the period from the 1970s through the 1980s witnessed a significant paradigm shift in language teaching. Eventually the quest for alternatives to old methods led mainstream language teaching to embrace the growing interest in communicative approaches to language teaching. (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Gradually, the use of mother tongue (L1) was denounced and discontinued in foreign language education. However, with the emergence of the socio-cultural perspective, L1 use has been reconsidered as a key mediating tool for second language learning. Moreover, this instrument can be used to scaffold the understanding of tutees (Cho & Kim, 2017). Simultaneously, research suggests that interactional motivational scaffolding benefits low performing readers: It helped them to build a positive and engaging motivational environment for reading challenging texts (Reynolds & Goodwin, 2016). In accordance with the above views, moderate use of L1 in language classes might motivate learners, reduce cognitive load, and scaffold learning.

Research has illustrated that scaffolding makes an impact on student's motivation and learning performance (Chen, & Law, 2016). It also has shown that feedback facilitates learners to observe and anchor their errors and enable them to become aware of how to progress their writing with their peer's scaffolding assistance. (Zhang, et al. 2014). Scaffolding, one of the key constructs of SCT, had a considerable effect on the complexity and accuracy of EFL learners' narrative writing. (Ali, 2015). Mackiewicz, & Thompson, (2014) quantitatively investigated tutors' instruction, cognitive scaffolding and motivational scaffolding and revealed that tutors' use of the motivational scaffolding strategy of showing concern was most frequent (Haghparast & Behdokht, 2015). Miller, et al (2015) conducted a study on the efficacy and writing competence and found competence in writing correlates with the ability to think clearly. They recommended scaffolded writing tasks to improve nursing students writing skills. Based on these findings, it can be argued whether these contemporary theoretical trends are in line with current pedagogical practices.

Wells (1999) referred to scaffolding as "a way of operationalizing Vygotsky's (1987) concept of working in the zone of proximal development" (p. 127). Meyer and Turner (2002) and Miller (2005) entrust the responsibility of scaffolding upon the students and Daniels (2001) emphasizes collaboration between the teacher and the learner to co-construct the acquisition process. However, Pea (2004) and Pawan (2008) consider scaffolding as a one-way communication process between the scaffolder (teacher) and the scaffolded (learner). Stone (1998) had earlier explained a similar notion highlighting the narrowness of the term scaffolding. In this critical analysis of scaffolding, he called scaffolding as a metaphor to describe a learning disability to write a good essay. He analyzed several limitations of the scaffolding technique in acquiring good writing skills. He suggested that even though the metaphor resonates with Vygotskian view of teaching as guided by others, it doesn't assist an understanding of the nature of such guidance. Liang (2007) emphasizes the need of providing flexible, systematic language guidance, particularly grammar instructions to learners throughout the writing process until they gain confidence and competence in the writing process.

There is a critical debate on the manner and the extent to which scaffolding techniques are helpful in developing writing skills. However, a fear has also been expressed that too much support can make it a teacher-driven or adult-driven technique; a point of view that has been included in the scope of this study. It is possible that scaffolding can convert learning into one-sided or teacher-

centered process through classroom teaching. Stone (1998) finds a solution to the probability of scaffolding to become one-sided and emphasizes the importance of introducing Piaget's concept of a learner becoming an active creator of his own knowledge. Piaget had proposed a new vision of learning or acquiring skills through traditional instructional methods, but had also put the pre-requisite that the curriculum must be learner-centered, placing the emphasis on student's ability to take the initiative. Such a version of independent learning relates to a student's natural interest and motivation to acquire a skill and eventually become self-motivated lifelong learners.

### **Theoretical Basis of the Study**

Scaffolding had its origin from a few theoretical studies (Wood and Middleton, 1975; Wood et al., 1976) that described it as a process between mature and proficient tutors such as parents and instructors particularly for preschool-aged children. In the context of L2 instructions, scaffolding resonates with the socio-cultural perspectives, a theory that draws parallels from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD; 1978). Theoretically, scaffolding has now been understood as a special force offered to the learners up to the possible level of assistance until their cognitive potential is exposed to new learning or acquisition of new skills. Vygotsky's theory of ZPD too believes in this phenomenon and therefore it is widely accepted and successfully implemented in many learning and teaching areas such as languages, mathematics, sciences, and information communications and technology (ICT). This paper will, therefore, derive theoretical ramifications to understand scaffolding from the Vygotskian concept of ZPD and discuss some similarities and characteristics of learning and acquiring the writing skills, the focus on the current study.

### **Research Methodology**

For the purpose of this study, two teaching groups were identified: one group used traditional, direct method of teaching to acquire the writing skills and the other group was aided by the scaffolding technique. The purpose was to make a constant comparison of different methods of teaching writing skills. The researcher videotaped and transcribed the writing sessions of both the groups to detect how the second group that was taught the writing skills with verbal and gesture scaffolding techniques was different from the first group that adhered to the traditional method of teaching writing skills. The purpose of video-taping the teaching session was also to identify codes and categories of various techniques used in both the groups, particularly to capture the gestures, verbal and nonverbal in the second group and in order to understand the usefulness of scaffolding techniques in acquiring the writing skills. Subsequent to identifying the gestures and other verbal methods used to scaffold the students, the researcher also carried out an investigation of the writing scripts of the students. Writing specimens were collected from both the groups to ascertain how the learners handled communication obstacles caused in acquiring writing skills.

The variables of the study included the teacher's oral gestures and motivational aspects of scaffolding techniques during the process of acquisition of L2 writing skills. The sample was divided into two teaching groups- the first group used the traditional, direct method of teaching and the second group was aided by the scaffolding technique. Results reveal that the second group taught through scaffolding techniques performed much better than the first group. This study would be very helpful for educators, teachers and researchers who wish to find out the impact of scaffolding in learning situations.

### Sampling

Each writing group comprised of 10 students of level 4 who were studying Academic Essay writing. Four teachers were also sampled from the Department of English for the interviews, out of which two were asked to use scaffolding technique in their classroom for teaching writing skills and the remaining two were asked to adhere to their traditional, direct instruction method. All twenty students and four teachers formed the sample of this study. All the teachers in the sample held university degrees; two of them masters' degrees and two held Ph.D. degrees. All four teachers had between five and ten years of teaching experience.

### Procedures

After the sampling process was complete, the researcher formed two groups of students. The first group (Group A) that had been taught writing skills through direct instructions was videotaped when they were following instruction from the teacher in the writing classroom. The researcher also took notes during the session in order to supplement the transcripts of the session. Similar videotaping was carried out in the second group (Group B) where the focus was more on the teacher using scaffolding techniques through verbal and nonverbal gestures. A special attention was also given to the learners' responses in both groups. This process was repeated in all the four sessions until the researcher was convinced that the design of the study could be validated by the data collected and also that data saturation had reached.

Students of both groups involved in the experiment were oriented to the objectives and procedures of the study. Therefore, the writing specimens were immediately made available to the researcher after each session. The researcher made a constant comparison of the transcripts of both the sessions as well as the notes that supplemented the videotaped transcripts. A few codes and categories were identified in the data collected from both the groups, using a manual coding method. These codes later helped the researcher to formulate themes as well as opinions and justifications of the scaffolding techniques far more useful than the traditional one.

As the next step, the researcher matched the codes with the writing specimens intending to find the impact of scaffolding on the writing skills of the students. The findings of this constant comparison and searching evidence of scaffolding in writing specimens were done mainly to validate the scaffolding technique as useful and effective in acquiring writing skills.

After the conduct of this experiment, interviews with four teachers were scheduled with open-ended questions (*See Appendix*). The focus was on finding why they preferred a traditional or scaffolding technique in their respective classrooms.

### Results/ Findings and Discussions

In order to facilitate the data collection, the researcher videotaped, transcribed, and coded all the writing sessions carried out during the experiment. There were interesting findings revealed in this experiment. For instance, it was found that the teacher in Group A presented instructions with the help of blackboard and created model sentences expecting students to replicate the teacher's model in their own writing. The teacher in Group B would employ gestures primarily as instructional scaffolding either to explain L2 vocabulary and grammar to the learners or help the learners repair the sentence through self-editing attempts. The teacher would also use gestures

involving pen and paper to scaffold the L2 learners writing performance to elicit greater involvement and establish inter-subjectivity in the classroom.

Another finding was that while in Group A the teacher dominated the classroom and projected writing as a one-sided, teacher-centered activity, in Group B the teacher and the students worked together to create a writing composition. In group A, the students could learn how a text is written through the modeling of the teacher. But in Group B, the students practice with what they had learned previously through sharing their awareness and discussing the process of writing a text, along with its content, organization, and language. For instance, in Group A, the teacher provided a topic sentence on the blackboard and provided a few supporting ideas to develop them into a paragraph. In Group B, the teacher did provide a topic sentence but he performed the brainstorming together with students to identify supporting ideas to support the topic sentence.

In both situations, the teacher acted as a facilitator. But in Group B, she/he was also more as a partner in the writing process. In group A, the students were passive recipients of the ideas; in group B, they were the active participants, playing the role of critique and supporting each other in completing the writing task. In Group B there were open negotiation, discussion, and immediate teacher feedback, to serve as a motivation and to enhance the students' understanding of writing strategies, which was not evident in Group A. Last but not the least, in Group B, students were also prompted to edit their own writing or edit each other's writing under the guidance of the teacher, where the teacher would only remain as a judge and not a prosecutor. This developed self-editing techniques that promoted editing autonomy among the students and motivated them to take up more writing sessions. In Group A, however, the teacher prompted the students whenever they made a mistake, thus acting as the editing guide himself or in a few cases asked students to refer to the editing guide prepared by the teacher for the use in the classroom.

The teachers prompting an error correction in Group A while the teachers providing corrective feedback in Group B was another interesting evidence to differentiate between the two teaching techniques. The researcher also witnessed that through self-editing techniques, Group B students were able to correct their most common errors themselves without being distracted by a more generic editing guide developed by the teacher. Students may not be able to correct all of their errors, but they were able to develop an awareness of their problematic structures and could make conscious, active and self-corrective attempts to initiate an appropriate and correct linguistic choice in creating a writing specimen.

Interviews with the teachers of both groups were conducted immediately after the teaching sessions and transcribed for the ease of analysis. These transcripts were content analyzed on a question-by-question basis. Based on the constant evaluation of the transcripts, a number of themes were established. E.g. positive attitudes to grammar and vocabulary during the writing process or a special like or dislike for a particular subject like science or sports. Two techniques were used to analyze the interviews: One, analysis of words from the respondents and two, counting frequencies of occurrence of ideas and themes in the form of words (Cohen et al., 2007: 368). Using the latter technique, ideas which occurred frequently from the respondents were sought. The assumption behind this technique is that the repetition of words and ideas indicates that these ideas are important for the respondents. Generating meanings and classifying utterances were also used

(Cohen et al., 2007). This technique helped establish themes based on teachers' perceptions of their respective teaching techniques.

The findings reveal that the teachers in Group A believed in the conventional methods of developing writing skills mainly for two reasons: it allowed a quick and time bound replication of the writing specimen from the students without any effort by the student to check its correctness. Second, the writing process, according to respondents, must be structured and follow a step-by-step method to develop writing skills. The researcher while analyzing the interview transcripts of Group A, however, encountered a feeling of regression or backsliding among the students whenever the teacher gave negative feedback. While in Group B, the researcher found students motivated even when there was an instance of the negative feedback by the teacher as they took the feedback as a mistake which they were capable of correcting by self-editing skills. These findings are consistent with those of Nunan (1991) who felt positive feedback functions as an incentive to students and fairly motivated them and those of Ellis (2013) who apprehended that negative feedback may be "potentially dangerous" to students and can damage their receptivity to learning.

Over the amount of time and technique to be spent, the respondents of both groups had differing opinions. While the respondents of Group A recommended a fixed and rigid level of instructional technique to be used within the given time, the respondents of Group B expressed the fear that inappropriate amount and timing of scaffolding in writing classes would lead to poor performance by students. So both the technique and timing must be decided by the contextual factors or the current comprehension level of the students.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The aim of this study was to examine the impact of motivational scaffolding on the acquisition of writing skills in the L2 situation. This study unfolds and demystifies a few facts about the effects of scaffolding on the development of higher-order productive skills such as writing. This study was carried out with a view to resolving the issues of poor and ineffective written communication skills of the students at the tertiary level as without effective writing skills they would not be able to rise in their career nor become eligible to courses requiring a good amount of writing skills. This study recommends that, in order to solve this problem, there is a need to make changes in strategies of teaching writing skills and the use of effective scaffolding techniques in the teaching of writing skills is the most appropriate in the current L2 situations.

In order to implement new study plans that insist on learning outcomes through key performance indicators, it is explicitly required of teachers to employ scaffolding strategies to differentiate their instructional strategies. The results of the current study also suggest that the use of scaffolding strategies is beneficial for students' development of language skills. Findings of this study also suggest that teachers could benefit in the form of professional development opportunities by focusing on the use of scaffolding strategies as a linguistic intervention in the teaching process.

In the absence of trained teachers or infrastructural constraints, online resources are a good substitute to practice scaffolding. Hsieh (2016) finds a positive impact of online resources on the learners writing abilities except that in learning situation online scaffolding is time-constrained,

that is, the learner must respond immediately in order to rectify his errors and present the correct model lest the learner might lose both interest and motivation. However, rectifying the error is probably not possible all the time in online scaffolding unless both the expert scaffolder and novice learner are highly motivated and are not restricted by geographic time zones.

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## Appendix

### Teachers' Interview: Evaluation Questionnaire

#### I – Preliminary Information:

Name (Optional):

1. Last academic degree:
2. Years of experience in education:
3. What teaching methodology do you use in your writing lectures and why?
4. How do you introduce a new topic in your classroom?
5. How do you explain the new concept?

#### II. Motivational Scaffolding:

6. How do you motivate your students before starting a new topic?
7. How do you motivate your students during the lecture?
8. How do you motivate your students when you finish your lecture?

#### III. Scaffolding Students' Writing

9. How do you scaffold your instructions?
8. How do you monitor your students?
9. How do you give feedback to students?
10. How do you divide the classroom while doing activities? Please explain your choice.
11. Do you model the text for your students, or you work with them to create a writing-composition. Please explain your choice.

#### IV- Future Implications:

12. What are the advantages of scaffolding students' writing?
13. What were the challenges that you faced during your lessons?
14. How can this scaffolding technique be improved?