SCAFFOLDING FROM STUDENTS IN UNIVERSITY ESL CLASSROOM

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Abstract

The paper is devoted to studying scaffolding strategies in English as a Second Language or English as a foreign language (ESL/EFL) classroom with University students. First the theoretical aspect of the notions “the zone of proximal development” and “scaffolding” are considered in general based on the works of such scholars as L. Vygotsky, H. Coffey, L.D. McKenzie, H. Widodo, S. Adi, L. Yang, K. Wilson and others. Then the problem of scaffolding from students, which has not yet been the subject of many works, is studied, as it is described in the works of contemporary methodologists. Since the purpose of the research is to scrutinize the role of scaffolding from students in University ESL/EFL classroom we give a detailed description of our experiment conducted with undergraduate students—would be English-Russian interpreters.

In the experimental group consisting of 12 students pair work was applied as one of the peer scaffolding methods. For this paper, recordings of students’ discussions when doing the pre-reading exercises and discussions of answers to the questions in reading exercises (prepared beforehand) during one term were taken. After thorough analysis of the recordings the conclusion is drawn about the necessity of peer scaffolding in University EFL classroom as an important complement to scaffolding from the teacher. Despite all its disadvantages, we emphasize the usefulness of scaffolding from students for both students: the ones who get this assistance acquire additional knowledge alongside with that provided by the teacher; the ones who give this scaffolding have an opportunity to try themselves in the role of a teacher, which is one of their career opportunities in the future.

Keywords: scaffolding, the zone of proximal development, peer scaffolding, pair work, pre-reading exercises, experimental group.

1 INTRODUCTION

For many years already English as a foreign language (EFL) is taught all over the world. Therefore the methodology of its teaching is a topic that attracts much attention of scholars working in the field of methodology and EFL teachers. So many aspects of English teaching methodology have already been studied thoroughly and solution to many problems has been found. One should mention the contribution of such scholars as L.S. Vygotsky, who invented the scaffolding as an instructional technique, enabling the learner when acquiring new knowledge to base on the prior one; S.D. Krashen, who suggests that second language learning should be studied as “acquisition” and “learning”; L.D. McKenzie, H. Widodo, S. Adi, L. Yang, and K. Wilson etc., who study scaffolding strategies in reading, listening, speaking and writing performance; James Lantolf and Steven Thorne etc., who consider second language acquisition as sociocultural phenomenon; Youb Kim and others, who offer applying various types of questions as a scaffolding strategy.

The purpose of the current research is to study the role of peer scaffolding in EFL classroom with Kazan Federal University students—would be English-Russian interpreters.

2 SCAFFOLDING IN EFL TEACHING

2.1 Scaffolding from a teacher

Scaffolding, which “refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process” [1], is a widely acclaimed technique in teaching not only EFL, but also many other subjects. The term is defined by Heather Coffey as “an instructional technique, associated with the zone of proximal development, in which a teacher provides individualized support by incrementally improving a learner’s ability to build on prior knowledge” [2].
As it was already mentioned in Coffey’s definition scaffolding is closely related to the zone of proximal development (ZPD), the notion which was invented by L. Vygotsky and defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” [3, 86].

The teacher should be well aware of the necessary level of assistance, according to Judy Olson and Jennifer Platt, it must be only one level beyond that of what the learner is capable of doing. Only in this case the assistance will lead the learner through the zone of proximal development, and as soon as the learner shows his ability to cope with the task the support should decrease [4]. Sometimes scaffolding from the teacher can be ignored. Therefore, the teacher should monitor the students’ performance closely and provide assistance continuously until the students are able to work on their own [5]. Therefore, if the research deals with the EFL classroom with University students, the teacher’s knowledge of each student’s level is vital.

Scaffolding from the teacher is natural and this assistance has been much discussed. But there is one teacher in the classroom with the number of students sometimes as many as 19 (depending on circumstances), so she may not be able to provide necessary support to each student. That is why; many scholars suggest that scaffolding from more successful students should be also considered.

So S. Warithorn delving into the efficacy of aforementioned assistance comes to the conclusion that “the teacher of the classroom and students provide help differently. The teacher increases help to her students when she considers necessarily and withdraws when it is not needed. In contrast, students are not able to control the degree of assistance” [5,343]. Also the research evidences that peers’ help may be not enough to complete the task.

2.2 Scaffolding from students

Teacher’s scaffolding comes in a series of assistance. Students may not get direct solution immediately. Students’ scaffolding is more straightforward.

The number of students in an EFL classroom in Kazan federal University cannot be less than 10, sometimes being not less than 19. That’s why, very often it is impossible to provide each student with necessary personal attention and teachers have to think about various strategies for compensating this deficiency. One of them is scaffolding from more successful students, for which the process of work should be organized in an appropriate way.

Taking TEFL courses in Boston Academy of English (Stafford House) I witnessed an effective method of solving this problem. Teachers urge students to work in pairs, by which, to my opinion, they provide not only student scaffolding, but also make the process of work in the class more lively and keep all students task involved and interested. Successful teachers demonstrate different variations of working in pairs: firstly, asking students to prepare their answers together; secondly, asking students to compare and discuss their answers with each other before articulating them for the whole group, which results in boosting students’ confidence. It's obvious, that the latter plays an important role in a student’s “inner determination and his ability to control the learning process” [6] – inherent parts of a learner’s intrinsic motivation.

2.3 Experiment

In our research we study both of these methods experimentally. For this experiment we took one of the two groups of the 4th year students approximately with the same level of the English language. In one of the groups, we call it an experimental group, we organized the work applying the aforementioned two methods of work in pairs and observed scaffolding process by recording it during the whole term. In the other one – control group – we did not apply these methods. At the end of the term we compared the successes of the two groups.

The current paper describes the part of the experiment held in reading activities. Prereading exercises presuppose referring to some personal experience, which is definitely different of every student, therefore it’s useful to give learners opportunity to talk to each other and practice the language while exchanging this experience. Here we present some extracts from the students’ talk doing this type of exercises:
### Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Exercise</th>
<th>Students’ level difference</th>
<th>Recording of the discussion</th>
<th>Scaffolding</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Health matters</td>
<td>What do you think is the best form of physical exercises? What is minimum and maximum amount of exercises you think you should do each week? How much do you do (Gude &amp; Stephans 2012, 58).</td>
<td>S1 – advanced, S2 – advanced, But S1 performs a bit better and she is more diligent.</td>
<td>See Discussion 1 below the table.</td>
<td>1) Words “squat”, “aerobic”, “anaerobic”, 2) General knowledge about physical exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traces of the Past</td>
<td>Look at the pictures and discuss the following.</td>
<td>S1 – advanced, S2 – High Intermediate, S1 performs much better than S2.</td>
<td>See Discussion 2 below the table.</td>
<td>1) Words: “portraiture” 2) Some knowledge about ancient Greek and Roman sculpture.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Which periods of history are presented here (Gude &amp; Stephans 2012, 81)? (there are 6 pictures and here we give recording where S1 and S2 are discussing two of the given pictures. In the first picture one can see a sculpture obviously representing ancient Rome. In the second one – Egyptian Pyramids in the process of building).</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Discussion 1.

S1. I think the form of exercises chosen depends on the purposes for which they are done.
S2. Do you think “form of exercises” here presupposes calling exercises like “pull-up”, “push-up”, “running”, “jumping” or ... I don’t even know any others?
S1. Look, I think it means different groups of them, such as aerobic/anaerobic or moderate/vigorous or something like this.
S2. Mmm... Have never heard about these kinds of exercises.
S1. OK, I am not an expert, of course... But aerobic exercises are those uhm... aerobic/anaerobic is related to different use of oxygen because of the energy demands during them.
S2. I see, erm... then they should be combined, do you mean this?
S1. I suppose so...
S2. Wait, moderate and rigorous is about the intensity of exercises. Am I right?
S1. Yes. But I am not sure that I know many names of exercises.
S2. ...Mmmm... I know pull-up, push-up...
S1. Squatting, stretches,...
S2. Wait, wait... what is squatting?
S1. OK, it’s when you bend your hips and knees and your heels touch your buttocks.
S2. Thank you, uhm...
S1. Look, there are 4 types of physical exercises: endurance, strength, balance and flexibility.
S2. Oh! ... You know so much about them.
S1. You know, I always do some sport.
S2. Uhm... as I understand, maximum amount of exercises is individual for each person depending on his health.
S1. Yes, and it should be determined consulting a doctor.
S2. Moreover, it’s better to have a personal instructor, ...who ... will be able to offer you appropriate amount of moderate and vigorous exercises.
Discussion 2.

S1. Oh it’s not an easy task, ...though ... this piece might be Roman or Greece origin.
S2. How do you know it?
S1. I remember from the history,...uhm there were pictures with different ancient sculptures. And it is the portraiture... that is very much characteristic of them.
S2. May be... Er... I know the portrait, but you said portraiture.
S1. Well... it is an art, way or process of making portraits.
S2. Mmm... Ok. And what about this portraiture here.
S1. To my opinion, it is the hairdo and the regular features of the personage here that make me think it is a sample of Ancient Rome or Greece.
S1. What about the second picture?
S2. We see a pyramid, do you think it is Egypt?
S1. I think so. As we see construction of pyramids is in process here. So again it is Ancient Egypt.

Reading exercises proper require concentration and full attention, that is why students are instructed to work independently; and this kind of work is usually given as a home assignment. When they are ready with their answers students are asked to compare and discuss them before reading to the class. The exercises the discussion of which in pairs is described below were also done at home.

Table 2.

<table>
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</table>
| Health matters     | Read the text opposite and choose the right answer from A-D answering the questions 1-6 (Gude & Stephens 2012, 58). | S1 – advanced  
S2 – advanced,  
But S1 performs a bit better and she is more diligent. | See Discussion 3 below the table. | 1. The word “exertion”;  
2. Showing that to determine the right answer one should read more attentively. |
| Traces of the Past | Read the extract and choose the best answer (A,B,C,D) for questions 1-6. | S1 – advanced,  
S2 – High Intermediate,  
S1 performs much better than S2. | See Discussion 4 below the table. | 1. The word “Neanderthals”;  
2. The word “to appreciate”;  
3. The word “plunging”;  
4. Explaining the technique of working with multiple choice questions. |

Discussion 3.

S1. Since the necessary prompt for choosing the right answer to the first question is given, we choose D.
S2. Yes, and let's start with the second question. And here I think the right answer is B, because the text says “Genetics and family history also have a crucial role”, further we read: “some people never have a trace of a disease even though their family history would seem to make them prime targets.”
S1. I agree with you. And what about the third question? My answer is D (reduces heart exertion).
S2. In which lines could you read it?
S1. Uhm... “exercise... it reduces both the pulse rate and blood pressure so minimizing strain on the heart...”
S2. And what of it?
S1. Er... “so minimizing strain on the heart”; doesn’t it mean reducing exertion?
S2. Oh… I see…, “minimizing strain” and “reducing exertion” denote the same, I knew it…, but I forgot the meaning of the word “exertion”. Now I see.

S1. Question 4.
S2. The answer is C! I think it’s the most obvious, because it says “We haven’t done enough research in this area”.

S1. I agree with you. And now Question 5. The right answer is C.
S2. No… I think D.
S1. Look… They found this enzyme in cyclists and in competitors in Hawaii Ironman Triathlon.
S2. Er… it is not enzyme, it is some chemical.
S1. No, …be more attentive, first they call it enzyme, then – chemical. Uhm… look at lines 100-106, 109-112.
S2. Oh, you are right.

Discussion 4.

S1. Which do you think is the correct answer to Question 1?
S2. Of course, A.
S1. Why do you think so?
S2. Because here I read “You will speak Latin wherever possible”, so…
S1. But, look… before, it says: “You will demonstrate the tactics, training, armour and equipment of the Roman Army in the public eyes”. Only then goes “You will speak Latin wherever possible”. So I think we should choose the answer which unites all these activities. For doing all the things mentioned including speaking Latin one should have willingness to deal with the public.
S2. But “…wherever possible…” I understand as must.
S1. No, possible implies that it not possible everywhere. Then, working with multiple choice we should remember that sometimes the same wording of one of the possible answers as in some part of the text very often is used for misleading a student.
S2. Uhm… Ok.
S1. Question 2 – A.
S2. Isn’t it the same thing as you were telling now about the same word or ….
S1. But here it’s a different thing. It exactly answers “As a member of our display team (males only). Can there be any doubt?
S2. Er… no.
S1. Question 3 … and here the correct answer is A.
S2. This extract is very difficult. Er… I didn’t understand it at all. I did not get what is Nean… Neanderthals…?
S1. OK, Find Line 35. At the end you can read “Over time these early humans further evolved into distinctive types, into Java Man and Homo neanderthalensis in Europe”. It means the Neanderthals were one of the two types of early humans.
S2. Uhm… thank you.
S1. Which answer did you choose for Question 4?
S2. Er… what is appreciation?
S1. Oh, it’s finding something good, to appreciate is to think that something is good.
S2. Thank you …er… Is the correct answer here B?
S1. It is D - disbelief. Because he says “…the Cro-Magnons’ arrival… at a time when Europe was plunging into yet another long spell of punishing cold. Whatever it was that drew them to Europe, it wasn’t the glorious weather”.
S2. Sorry, what is plunging?
S1. Plunging is getting covered with something or being surrounded with something. So the 
author does not quite believe that Cro-Magnons could come to Europe with such severe 
weather. 
S2. Question 5 is … what is descent? 
S1. Whatever… the correct answer is B. 
S2. Hm… 
S1. To Question 6 the correct answer is C. 

2.4 Results

The discussions in pairs while preparing the answers to questions in pre-reading exercises and 
discussions of the answers each student gave to questions in reading exercises were recorded and 
alysed. As it was already mentioned, the experiment lasted during the term consisting of 18 weeks 
and this kind of exercises were done once a week. At the end of the experiment we analysed 54 
recordings of each pair of students of 18 pre-reading and 36 reading exercises. It should be noted that 
in the same group different methods of scaffolding were applied also in listening activities. Above we 
give 2 extracts from discussion of questions in pre-reading exercises and 2 extracts from discussion of 
answers to questions in reading exercises each student prepared beforehand.

As the analysis of recordings, total number of which is 324 (108 in pre-reading and 216 in reading 
exercises), shows, in most of the discussions there is at least one scaffolding either in the form of 
explaining the meaning of some word; or sharing some knowledge from specific field of activity or 
general life. Most discussions (188 recordings) contain both of them; in 84 recordings explaining 
meanings of some words were observed; in 22 some knowledge was shared. 30 recordings do not 
show any scaffolding for the following reasons: 12 recordings demonstrate equal level of interlocutors 
one of them needing any prompt; in 14 discussions the partner failed to give assistance; in 4 
recordings the request of the interlocutor was ignored.

What concerns the quantity of the linguistic scaffolds when meanings of different words are 
explained, taking place in 272 recordings all in all: in 122 recordings the meaning of 1 word is 
explained, in 111 this number is 2, in 32 – 3, in 7 – 4. Total number of words, whose meanings were 
explained by students to each other during the term only when discussing pre-reading and reading 
exercises, is 468.

The quality analysis of scaffolding in our recordings demonstrate the following:
1. 26 words were given wrong interpretation; 
2. 88 words were interpreted rather vaguely; 
3. 92 words were given correct but only one synonym; 
4. 216 word meanings were explained quite correctly, but without any demonstration of examples; 
5. In interpretation of meanings of 46 words included not only full explanation, but they also were 
   provided with synonyms, antonym and examples.

3 CONCLUSION

Thus the results of the experiment witness to undoubted usefulness of scaffolding from students in 
EFL classes, because:
− it is more available for each student; 
− it is a real possibility to learn more words during the class; 
− it also gives chance to successful students to enhance their explaining skills.

Some conclusion should be made about applying pair work as a scaffolding method in EFL classes. 
First of all, discussing the answers in pairs before reading them aloud for the whole group boosts 
students’ self-confidence. Then, it is favourable for both parties, since the less successful student 
acquires some knowledge of pure linguistic or extralinguistic character from his peer and the 
successful student gets the opportunity to try himself as a teacher, which is also very important, 
because after getting their Bachelor’s degree most of the students continue their education to get their 
Master’s degree in teaching English.
REFERENCES


