

Teacher's and Students' Scaffolding in an EFL Classroom

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Abstract

Scaffolding is a teaching strategy which originates from Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. He proposed the concept of the zone of proximal development, illustrating the distance between what individuals can achieve by themselves and what they can achieve with assistance from others. Scaffolding is a temporary support which individuals receive from more knowledgeable others during their development. In a classroom, the scaffolding can come from the teacher of the classroom as well as students. This study investigated the scaffolding from a teacher and from classmates while students were doing tasks in the classroom setting. As the participants of the research were EFL students with low English proficiency, the research compared the scaffolding strategies used by the teacher to by the classmates. Also, it focused on the task achievement after the students received the social supports and students' attitudes towards the scaffolding providers. The research provided recommendation on using scaffolding as a teaching strategy in an EFL classroom.

Keywords: Sociocultural theory, Scaffolding, Classroom research, Teacher-student interaction

1. Introduction

Scaffolding is an interactional process related to learning, which is highly mentioned in many research studies. Scaffolding was developed by (Vygotsky, 1978) to describe a kind of assistance given by an expert to a novice when he introduced the concept of 'zone of proximal development'. According to Vygotsky (1978), in order to achieve tasks a novice can learn from an expert through scaffolding interaction. In the language classroom, a teacher is generally considered as 'an expert,' who provides scaffolded assistance to his/her students, i.e. novices.

After being proposed, the concept of scaffolding has been investigated and developed by a number of scholars and researchers. Many later research studies show that the role of 'an expert' is not limited to the teacher of the classroom, but students are also capable of providing each other with scaffolding. Students can offer help to their peers (for example in Donato, 1994; De Guerrero and Villamil, 2000; Ohta, 2001).

The concept of scaffolding between the teacher and students has been welcomed in Thailand. Khamwan (2007) studied the effect of interactional strategy training on teacher-student interaction, aiming to increase the effectiveness of the interaction between the teacher and students. Scaffolding is one of interactional strategies she emphasized. Chartrakul (2009) commented that "scaffolding is very important for EFL young learners, particularly in Thai classroom situations where students rarely use L2 or English in their real life" (p.14). In his article, Nomnian (2002) called for more attention to promote teacher-student scaffolding interaction in the language classroom.

According to Khamwan (2007), Thai academics feel familiar with the concept of classroom interaction between the teacher and students. The scaffolding interaction between students has received very little attention. The students are not familiar with the scaffolding from peers, and they are not trained to scaffold their peers because they don't receive many opportunities for interaction among peers. Moreover, there were very few studies mentioned scaffolding in student interaction in Thailand.

In this study, the researcher aimed to investigate the scaffolding interaction between the teacher of the classroom and students, and the scaffolding interaction between students and students when they were in a classroom, doing activities.

2. Literature review

Classroom interaction is a great opportunity for language learning (Widdowson, 1978). There have been many studies reporting that activities stimulating interaction in the classroom are beneficial for student development of learning (Hall &

Verplaetse, 2000). The study of classroom interaction has been in focus since 1980s (Hertz-Lazarowitz, 1989). The trend is influenced by the cognitive development theories, such as Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of learning which focuses on the dynamic social interactive process.

Scaffolding is "the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone" (Ellis, 2003, p. 180). The term 'scaffolding' was firstly defined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). According to them, scaffolding is "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" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 90). As the concept of scaffolding parallels the theory proposed by Vygotsky. Scaffolding was adopted and used with Vygotsky's work (Ellis, 2003). It is a kind of supportive dialogues (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994) It is sometimes referred to as 'assisted performance' (Ohta, 2001).

According to Vygotsky (1978), the cognitive development is the initial stage of social interaction. A child begins to learn about his sociocultural environment since the time after he was born. Then, the internalization process starts. The child internalizes information around him through interaction. Learning occurs in the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) (Lantolf, 2000). Vygotsky (1978) defined the zone 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' (86). This zone is not a physical place, but a metaphor (Lantolf, 2000). ZPD is a gap between what a person can accomplish independently and what the person can do with support from other people (Lantolf, 2000). Scaffolding is used to bridge the gap (Mitchell & Myles, 2004).

The characteristics of scaffolding dialogue include 'recruiting interest in the task, simplifying the task, maintaining pursuit goal, marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produce and the ideal solution, controlling frustration during problem solving, and demonstrating an idealised version of the act to be performed' (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

The scaffolding can be divided into degrees. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) studied the interaction between a tutor and three students. Each student received special one-on-one tutorial about their writing every week. The researchers proposed the regulatory scale, which showed scaffolding behaviours. In their study, there were 12 levels in the scale, from the tutor providing examples of the correct pattern, to students being able to find and correct error by themselves. The tutor went through each scaffolding level. He gradually reduced his help to students, when they showed that they could perform the task individually. The study provided clear evidence of scaffolding behaviours, moving from implicit to explicit assistance.

Children learn through scaffolding interaction with adults. The adult is considered as an expert providing scaffolding to a child (Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly to general learning, in the classroom students learn their second language through 'scaffolding' dialogues with their teachers or peers in language learning (Ellis, 2003). However, some research studies reported that it is not necessary that the scaffolded assistance comes from the expert or from the teacher. The students can also scaffold their peers. For example, Donato (1994) reported evidence that students could provide support to their peers in the same way as experts, such as parents or teachers, gave help to novices, such as children or students. Similarly, De Guerrero and Villamil (2000) found that two ESL college students could assist each other while revising an essay.

Scaffolding is a kind of supportive help which enhances an individual to achieve a task. During scaffolding interaction, assistance is given bid by bid. Therefore, an individual gradually learns from interaction with others. In the classroom, scaffolding can come from both the teacher of the classroom and from classmates. This study analyzed the interaction provided by the two sources.

3. Research methodology

This article is a part of a research study investigating the scaffolding interaction and the learning development resulting from the interaction in a classroom while students were doing pair works. The report presents only the scaffolding provided by the teacher of the classroom and by classmates when the pair asked for help.

The data of the study were from a teacher of the classroom who was also the researcher of the research, and 14 voluntary university students, who enrolled on an English course. They were seven (7) females and five (5) males, who were approximately 18 - 19 years old. This study considered these students as students with low level of proficiency as all of them were repeater students, i.e. they experienced failing either the previous course or the current course.

At the end of each class session, students in the class were given a collaborative task to review and practice what they had learned. Fourteen student participants did the same task. The only difference was that their conversation during

each task was audio recorded. Because the given task required working in pairs, students paired up with their self selected pairs. As the teacher of the classroom, I visited each pair of students to give assistance when they asked for help.

All audio recorded talks of research participants were transcribed and translated into English. Then, the interaction was analyzed for language related episodes. A language related episode (LRE) is a part of a dialogue which the students “talk about the language they are producing, question their language use, or correct themselves or others” (Swain & Lapkin, 1998, p. 326). The interaction which was not about language was excluded from the study. In this paper, the analysis focused especially on the scaffolding interaction which the teacher or classmates gave to the student pairs. The scaffolding interactions were counted and analyzed. In addition to the conversational data, the participants were interviewed to give reflections on their interaction.

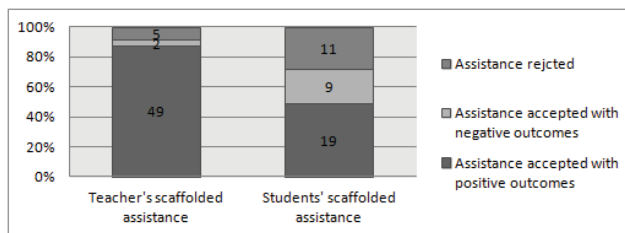
4. Findings

The data in the study was based on audio recordings collected while the participants were pairing up to do eight (8) tasks at the end of each classroom session. According to the analysis, 445 LREs were found in the study. There were 95 (21%) of total LREs showing that the student participants sought help from either the teacher of the classroom or from their classmates (39 LREs; 41%). The details of the 95 LREs are presented in this paper.

4.1 Language related episodes with scaffolding

It was found that the students with low level of proficiency tended to request help from the teacher (56 LREs; 58%) more than from their classmates (39 LREs; 41%). The data further revealed that out of 56 LREs of the teacher’s scaffolded assistance, 49 (87%) LREs led to positive outcomes, 2 (4%) LREs led to negative outcomes and 5 (9%) LREs were rejected. Out of 39 LREs of students’ scaffolded assistance, 19 (49%) LREs led to positive outcomes, 9 (23%) LREs led to negative outcomes and 11 (28%) LREs were rejected.

Table 1: Scaffolded assistance from the teacher and from the students



As all of the 95 LREs showed that the students consulted with their classmates before they turned to their teacher, I did an interview after the analysis asking students to explain about their preference of seeking help. Their responses were interesting. All students agreed that the teacher was a reliable source, and they thought that suggestions from the teacher were always correct. When their classmates could not provide them satisfying information, they could consult with the teacher at the end. Therefore, they wanted to try by themselves before getting the teacher’s support.

4.2 Scaffolding strategies

The teacher and the students provided scaffolding to the student pairs differently. In this section, some extracts of student talks were provided to illustrate the ways which the teacher and the students gave scaffolded assistance.

4.2.1 Teacher's scaffolding

Extract 1 shows how the teacher of the classroom scaffolded her students. In this extract, a pair of student, Gail and Amy, was doing a text editing task. The task required them to rewrite a paragraph with infinitive verbs to a paragraph with appropriate verb tenses. From the extract the students were talking about the past form of the verb ‘catch’. They did not

know anything about the verb, so they decided to ask me, the teacher of the class, for help (Turn 65).

Extract 1: 'Catch- caught'

- 58 GL: I've written this word twice. (3.5) ~~What~~ does it mean?
59 AM: What?
60 (4.0)
61 GL: This one.
62 AM: I can't even pronounce it.
63 GL: catch
64 AM: 'catch' (...) Teacher (.) ~~Teacher~~, (.) ~~Teacher~~, (.) Beautiful Teacher ((laughing))
65 GL: Should we add 'e-d' to 'catch' or what? What is its past form? (2.7) Amy, ask the teacher the past form of 'catch'.
66 AM: Beautiful (.) Beautiful Teacher ((laughing)) She's coming (1.5) How do we pronounce this one?
67 T: 'catch'
68 GL: Should we add an 'ed'?
69 T: No
70 GL: 'catch' (.) What does it mean?
71 T: 'catch' means to take.
72 AM: To take?
73 (3.5) ((T is leaving))
74 GL: What is the past form of 'catch' (...) c-o-t-c-h'?
75 (5.5)
76 AM: I almost reply to the teacher that it meant money ((cash)).
77 GL: Right
((23 turns is omitted))
100 AM: Teacher, can you tell me the past form of 'catch'?
101 T: Can't you have it in your electronic dictionary? 'caught' 'c-a-u-g-h-t' (.) 'c-a-u-g-h-t'
102 GL: No (.) There is no information about past and past participle verb forms.
103 T: Type 'c-a-u (,)g-h-t' in your electronic dictionary
104 (3.7)
105 GL: 'c-a' what?
106 AM: c-a-u
107 GL: 'c-a-u', right?
108 AM: 'g-h-t' (...) Are there (5.5) Past and past participle forms?
109 GL: Past and past participle forms (...) ~~Here~~ it is.
110 AM: catch
111 GL: All right
(Gail & Amy, text-editing, Unit Session 10/1)

I assisted the pairs to do the task four times. I pronounced the word in Turn 67 and told them that the verb 'catch' had an irregular form in Turn 69. In Turn 71, I gave the students the meaning of the verb 'catch' in Thai and then in Turn 101 and 103 I suggested the pair to use their electronic dictionary to find the past form of the verb 'catch'. In this situation, Gail owned an electronic dictionary. However, her dictionary did not clearly show the past form of the verb 'catch'. Instead, it provided the meaning in English, which the pair could not comprehend, and gave only the infinitive form of the verb 'catch'. I realized that Gail could not get the past form of the verb 'catch', therefore I told them the past form of the verb 'catch' and asked them to seek the word 'caught' in the dictionary.

4.2.2 Students' scaffolding

Extract 2 demonstrates assistance classmates provided to their peers. In this extract, Ivy and Jane were doing a picture-story task. They wrote a story to describe a series of pictures. While they were working, the pair could not find an appropriate clause connector. They asked for help in Turn 86. Ryan provided help to Ivy and Jane in Turn 89. He suggested the pair to use the word 'so' and told them to put it in front of a sentence. Ryan's advice was not quite right. It was not appropriate for Ivy and Jan's text as can be seen in Turn 95. Ryan did not explain how and when to use the word 'so'.

Extract 2: 'Then - so'

- 83 IV: I cannot arrange these sentences.
84 JN: That guy. Ask that guy.
85 IV: Shall we?
86 JN: Excuse me
87 RY: What?
88 JN: What is 'then' in English?
89 RY: so
90 IV: so?
91 RY: That's right (.) Put 'so' in front of the sentence.
92 IV: I see (.) 'so' means therefore, doesn't it?
93 RY: Yes. Use 'so' (.) and then follow with a sentence
94 (30.1)
95 IV: Ah (.) They go to the beach (...) so they (.) ride horses (...) at (...) Oh (.) I always forgot ((giggling)) in the (.) Pattaya ((giggling)).
(Ivy & Jane, Picture-story, Unit Session 9/1)

The strategies that the teacher and classmates provided help were quite different. As illustrated in Extract 1 and Extract 2, the teacher of the classroom tended to provide assistance to the pair bid by bid. The helps were gradually given. The teacher increased her help when she realized that the students could not go on without her support. Unlike the scaffolding given by the teacher, students responded differently when they were requested from their peers to help. The students usually provided answers to their peers immediately. Their assistance might support their peer to achieve the tasks. However, they did not estimate how much assistance was needed and how much assistance should be given to their peers. According to the interview, some students reported that they usually gave their peers solutions without any explanation because they might know a correct answer but they could not explain how to reach the answers.

When the teacher of the class scaffolds her students, the aim of the assistance is to encourage students learning. The aim of students' scaffolding seems to help their classmates complete a task. Because of different aims, the assistance appears differently. The teacher carefully and gradually gives scaffolding while students give fast and direct solutions.

In Extract 3, Vicky and Cara were doing a text editing task. The pair was not certain about the past form of the verb 'give'. Vicky asked Hugo, her nearby classmate. Hugo told the pair that the verb did not require any tense in Turn 52 and Turn 54. Vicky asked me the same question in Turn 59 and Turn 61, and I suggested them that 'gave' was the past form of 'give' in Turn 64 and 66. As I did not tell the pair how to spell the word, Vicki and Cara could not complete the task. Hugo could not help them in Turn 74. Finally, they decided to write 'gived' in their work even though they know that it was wrong in Turn 80.

Extract 3: 'Give-given'

- 33 VK: Change 'go' to 'went' (..) 'I went (..) shop'.
34 (27.0)
- 35 CR: Do we need to change any other words?
- 36 VK: Ah (..) Write down these words (1.5) And this one, add an 'ed'. Add an 'ed'.
(14 turns is omitted)
- 50 VK: And this word (..) Should we add a 'd'?
- 51 (2.0)
- 52 HG: Which one? It's not a verb.
- 53 VK: given (..) I given
- 54 HG: I don't think so (..) I didn't add anything. I'm working on this sentence.
- 55 CR: Should we add anything? (...) No?
56 (2.0)
- 57 VK: I think we should. 'give' and then 'given' (..) 'I given'.
58 (55.0)
- 59 VK: Teacher (...) Teacher, is this one 'I give' or 'I given'.
- 60 T: Again, please.
- 61 VK: Do we change the verb 'give' in the simple past? Or, should we add a 'd'?
- 62 T: Where? Can I see it? (..) 'give' comes after the subject, so we need to write its past form. What is the past form of 'give'?
- 63 VK: What should we do? Should we add a 'd'?
- 64 T: What is the past form of 'give'?
- 65 CR: give (..) gave?
- 66 T: That's right.
- 67 VK: You see. I know it.
- 68 HG: Right.
- 69 VK: how to write 'give' (..) 'gave'
70 (9.0)
- 71 VK: give gave given
- 72 HG: Which one? (..) How to write it?
- 73 VK: 'give gave' (..) I don't know. I know only 'give gave given'.
- 74 HG: 'gave gave' Is it g-a (..) m'? (..) 'g-a-m gem'
- 75 VK: give gave
- 76 HG: Is it this one? (..) 'g-e-t'? (..) Is it 'get'? (..) 'g-i' (..) Should we add an '-ed'? (...) Ask Teacher.
77 (2.0)
- 78 VK: I think we should add a 'd'.
- 79 HG: I don't know. (..) I'm done. That's all for this task. (..) Teacher, I've completed the task.
- 80 VK: Add anything here. It's ok to add a 'd'. (..) Let's go and have lunch. I'm hungry.
(Vicky and Cara, Text-editing, Unit Session 10/1)

In this extract, Vicky and Cara received help from the teacher only once. At that time, I was busy with other students because it was near the end of the class. Despite the pair got the teacher's assistance, the pair decided to give up. The teacher's assistance was not effective as it was too slow and not enough to help them complete the task.

5. Conclusion and discussion

In the classroom, not only the teacher can scaffold students, students with low level of English proficiency can also successfully scaffold their peers. It is not necessary that the scaffolding comes from an expert or a teacher. Novices or students who are not fluent in English can also give help. Ohta (2001) explained that students can help their peers because each student has different strengths and weaknesses. Also, students have different interactive roles during interaction. While ones are speaking, the others are listening. Therefore, it is easy for them to notice problems their peers encountering and provide solutions.

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. They tend to tell everything they know to their peers. Their assistance seems to be more knowledge sharing than scaffolding. The students are willing to share what they know. However, their knowledge may not be enough for them to provide deep explanations. The scaffolding from students may help complete tasks, but it may not enhance learning as much as the scaffolding from the teacher.

Teacher's scaffolding comes in a series of assistance. Students may not get direct solution immediately. Students' scaffolding is more straightforward. The scaffolding from the teacher is sometimes ignored. Therefore, the teacher should monitor the students' performance closely and provide assistance continuously until the students are able to work on their own.

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