Scaffolding Technique
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Framing the Issue

Over the past few decades, scaffolding has been a promising technique used in teaching and learning. Indeed, the metaphor of scaffolding has been used as the name of a theoretical construct in the field of education in general and language teaching in particular. However, this metaphor has also been used, more loosely, for any supportive teaching. The term scaffolding is originally a construction-related concept. The scaffolding in the building profession refers to the temporary structures used to help workers construct or renovate buildings.

The introduction of the term in the domain of education goes back to the 1970s. Scaffolding is usually associated with the Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky, and his work was an impetus for the development of this method. However, the English term was used in Bruner and Sherwood’s (1976) study in which the authors investigated mother–child interaction during the game of peekaboo. They used the term scaffold to describe the interventions of the mother during the game. The second study that is generally credited with having introduced the term scaffolding in education is Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). Wood et al. used this word to describe the role of parents during problem-solving tasks carried out with their children. In its original usage, scaffolding referred to a form of just-in-time adult assistance “that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts” (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). Wood et al. also identified several features of scaffolded adult help: recruitment of the child’s interest in the task, reduction in degrees of freedom, maintaining goal orientation, marking critical task features, controlling frustration, and modeling solutions to the task. Since its inception in 1976, either by Bruner and Sherwood or by Wood et al., scaffolding has gained widespread popularity in a variety of education-related fields.
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Making the Case

Drawing upon pioneering research conducted by Bruner and Sherwood (1976), Wood et al. (1976), and other scholars, scaffolding was closely associated with the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky, and particularly with his concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD). In fact the ZPD is at the heart of scaffolding. According to Vygotsky, there are two developmental levels: the actual level and the potential level. The ZPD represents “the distance between the actual development 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” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). From this perspective, scaffolding refers to the temporary and dynamic support within the ZPD. That is, contrary to the notion of scaffolding in the field of construction, where the same structures can be used in constructing similar buildings, scaffolding in education and other related fields, with its link to sociocultural theory, is not a rigid structure but a fluid support finely tuned to the child’s progress, with the purpose of helping the child become self-regulated.

In the late 1970s and in the 1980s, the use of the scaffolding metaphor was extended from parent–child interactions to teacher–student interactions. The scaffolding used in classroom contexts refers to the interventions that tutors or teachers make within the students’ ZPD to facilitate their learning and improve their current knowledge and skills. However, the scaffolding metaphor has been applied so broadly in educational research that it came to describe any form of support given by teachers to students.

Shortly after the introduction of scaffolding in the literature, the scaffolding technique drew a rapidly increasing scholarly adherence in second language (L2) research, just as it did in other fields. The potential of scaffolded help in the ZPD within L2 contexts has been extensively investigated. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), for instance, investigated how the provision of corrective feedback during tutor–learner interactions promotes learning. Their findings indicated that different ZPDs might be needed for different learners. Further, L2 teacher-education research has focused on the ways in which scaffolding can be integrated into approaches to language teaching (e.g., Walqui, 2006). Scholarly work on the application of scaffolding to L2 contexts has experienced a slight shift. Until the early 1990s, L2 researchers focused mostly on the scaffolding from the perspective of a competent speaker (the teacher) interacting with a less competent speaker (the learner). However, scaffolding can occur not only in asymmetrical dyads, such as the pair expert–novice, but also in symmetrical (i.e., equal-level) dyads, such as a pair of students working on a joint problem-solving task. However, the nature of symmetrical scaffolding is slightly different: the role of the expert is bilateral in such scaffolding. Donato (1994) coined the term collective scaffolding for collaborative situations of this type. Consequently, collective scaffolding expanded the scaffolding technique by including the element of collaboration between learners. This new type of scaffolding triggered a number of studies in the late 1990s. Several researchers (e.g., De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Storch, 2002) have shown that scaffolding can occur in peer (e.g., novice–novice) interactions during
pair or group activities. In collective scaffolding, learners can create ZPDs for each other and can produce better results together than they would have been able to do alone. More recently, peer scaffolding in L2 writing has received attention in L2 research. For example, Storch (2002) investigated the interactional dynamics of 10 pairs of adult ESL students during three different language tasks: a short composition task, a text editing task, and a text reconstruction task. Storch’s (2002, p. 147) findings showed that students working in pairs can combine their mental capacities and thus “scaffold each other’s performance.” Another example of the application of peer scaffolding to the L2 context is Ohta’s (2000) study, which noted that, when students worked together to complete a task, their strengths and weaknesses were pooled, thereby creating a greater ZPD for the group than for any one student in the group.

In addition to expert and peer scaffolding, van Lier (1996) introduced the concept of self-scaffolding, in which learners working alone internalize learning practices, experiment with different strategies, and try new angles. That is, learners draw mostly on their inner sources to compensate for shortcomings in their own skills and knowledge.

**Pedagogical Implications**

Scaffolding is one of the several aspects of effective instruction that can be applied in the context of language learning. Although teachers might be enthusiastic about the idea of scaffolding, it must be borne in mind that scaffolding is not simply synonymous with teacher support. Scaffolding is specific just-in-time support that gives students the pedagogical push that enables them to work at a higher level of activity. Indeed, several scholars with sociocultural orientation (e.g., Donato, 1994; De Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Walqui, 2006) have demonstrated that learners are more likely to succeed in learning a language when their teachers, as well as their peers, provide targeted support when necessary.

Scaffolding can be applied in several ways with English language learners. Some of the most salient instructional scaffolding techniques are modeling, bridging, contextualizing, schema building, re-presenting text, and developing metacognition (Walqui, 2006). In modeling, learners are provided with representative examples of what is expected of them, which give them concrete guidelines. Apart from tasks and activities, teachers can model proper language patterns and the vocabulary that learners may need to use as they complete tasks and activities. In bridging techniques, teachers build up skills by activating learners’ prior knowledge. A further benefit of bridging is that it establishes a personal link with learners by forging a connection between their lives and the subject matter. Unlike everyday language, academic language that English learners face in class is usually decontextualized and situation-independent. Nevertheless, teachers can contextualize the language learning process through multiple verbal and nonverbal aids such as pictures, videos, and analogies. In schema building, which is a scaffolding technique, teachers help learners connect new information to already existing structures. In preparation for a reading task, for instance, students might be asked to first preview the
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text by focusing on the title, the illustrations, the charts, and so on. Thus students’ schemata can be activated and ready to weave new information into existing knowledge. Another scaffolding technique is to re-present texts to learners. In this technique, students are involved in transforming linguistic structures found in one genre into another genre (e.g., converting a poem into a narrative). A final type of scaffolding is developing metacognition, in which learner autonomy and metacognition development are fostered through the teacher’s modeling strategies, for instance think-aloud and self-assessment activities. It is possible to provide English learners with work at a higher level of competence through such scaffolding techniques. However, the application of scaffolding techniques in language learning contexts can be challenging, because being able to provide students with the specific help they need requires a lot of skill and preparation from the teachers.

The use of such techniques, however, does not automatically imply that scaffolding has been successfully provided. In fact, there are some key characteristics of scaffolding that teachers need to keep in mind when using a scaffolding technique. The most salient features of scaffolding are collaborative openness, contingency, fading, and the transfer of responsibility. The first and most important feature is that the interaction must be collaborative. However, not all types of collaborative support are considered scaffolding. Scaffolding should be provided only when needed and should be adjusted to the student’s level of understanding. Instead of giving support right away, teachers should act contingently. That is, scaffolding should operate within the student’s ZPD; in other words teachers or scaffolders should access the student’s level of comprehension and work at the same or at a slightly higher level. Consequently, it is important for teachers to collect information about their students’ level of competence. This information is needed in order for teachers to be able to determine whether to increase or decrease the amount of support provided. In addition, good knowledge of the subject matter is as important as diagnosing students’ understanding. An effective scaffolding intervention requires a deep understanding of the subject matter or the task in question. Further, teachers might use a variety of techniques to tap different learning styles and strategies, because not all students respond to scaffolded help in the same way. Another important characteristic of scaffolding is that the scaffold should “fade,” that is, be gradually withdrawn over time as the student becomes more competent. The pace of fading depends on the student’s level of performance. Closely related to fading is the transfer of responsibility. The student’s responsibility for the performance of a task increases as the student’s skills and confidence increase. That is, students should be able to gain ownership in their learning process.

From an assessment perspective, the concept of scaffolding has been associated with dynamic assessment and formative assessment (Shepard, 2005). In both these types, as in the scaffolding process, teachers are responsive to their students’ current understanding and the support is individualized and based on assessing what students know and understand.

Although scaffolding is a complex process and thus can take more time than typical support, it is still an effective instructional technique in that the students
receive tailored support while their potential is fully acknowledged. The students are empowered but never left to their own devices. Scaffolding reflects the components of good teaching—being responsive to a student and assisting him or her within the ZPD. An awareness of the fundamental elements of scaffolding (e.g., contingency, fading over time, transfer of responsibility) can lead to better scaffolding interventions in English classrooms.

SEE ALSO: Communicative Language Teaching (CLT); Effective Classroom Strategies; Sheltered Instruction

References


Suggested Readings
