

Socially Constructed Mechanism in EFL Writing: A Case Study of Scaffold Planning in a Remote Area

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ABSTRACT

Scaffolding is help provided by a teacher to a student to achieve a desired goal. It is viewed as an effective technique that enhances both collaborative skills and writing ability among EFL learners. The present study sought to explore the possible effects of two kinds of scaffolding, that is, teacher and student scaffolding, on EFL students' writing ability. To this end, 45 lower-intermediate and 15 upper-intermediate EFL participants from Gonabad, Iran were selected based on a Quick Placement Test (QPT). The participants formed two experimental groups (peer scaffolding, teacher scaffolding) and one control group. Participants in the experimental groups underwent scaffolding techniques, which required lower-intermediate EFL students to be assisted by more proficient EFL students in one experimental group while in the other experimental group, assistance was provided by the teacher. A series of *t*-tests was run, and the results indicated the effectiveness of the two kinds of treatment implemented in the two experimental groups. Also, no significant difference was found between the two experimental groups in the post-test regarding the effectiveness of teacher scaffolding and peer scaffolding. These findings provide pedagogical implications for employing scaffolding techniques in EFL contexts by both teachers and high-level students.

Keywords: Teacher scaffolding, student scaffolding, writing ability, lower-intermediate EFL learners, upper-intermediate EFL learners

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INTRODUCTION

With the advent of computer-based technology and the development of virtual contexts, people can communicate with each other through writing. Mastery of writing skill appears to be of great significance

for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. Chastain (1988) viewed writing as a fundamental communication skill and a unique asset in the second-language learning process. As argued by Zacharias (2007, cited in Rouhi & Samiei, 2010), writing in second-language learning (L2) is a big challenge for learners. Several attempts have been made to facilitate the writing quality of second-language learners and to raise their motivation to begin and complete writing tasks. EFL students need to be provided with assistance from EFL teachers, classmates who have a higher level of language proficiency as well as relevant books. Along the same lines, Ellis (1994) cited that the process of language learning, especially the productive aspect of language use, is not absolutely an individual-focussed process, but an interactive sociological construct.

FRAMEWORK OF SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding is one type of assistance that learners can receive as they learn to write. Scaffolding is the process of providing assistance from person to person to enable an interlocutor to do something she or he might not have been able to do otherwise (Ohta, 2000). Ellis (1994) defined scaffolding in the field of second-language acquisition as the dialogic process by which one speaker assists another speaker in performing special functions that he or she cannot perform without the help of others. Referring to the original notion of scaffolding, which presupposes a relationship between an expert and a novice, some educators

(Donato, 1994; Swain, 2000) believed that this conceptualisation of scaffolding may not exceed the limits of teacher-orientated instruction (Khodamoradi, Iravani, & Jafarigohar, 2013). According to Al Hussain (2012), scaffolding is a teaching method through which the instructor models the desired learning technique or task, then gradually shifts responsibility towards learners.

As Lantolf (2000) has stated, scaffolding as a strategy stems from the socio-cultural theory that presumes that knowledge is internalised by learners when they learn through socialising with others. Therefore, it allows learners to build new knowledge from their experiences with others (Rafik-Galea & Nair, 2008).

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCAFFOLDING AND THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD)

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to ‘‘the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance’’ (Raymond, 2000, p.176). It is a level of development obtained when learners participate in a social activity. Vygotsky (1978) showed that the emphasis upon potential development among learners seems crucial in the learning process because it allows learners to transfer their knowledge to new contexts and develops critical thinking. This results in the development of new knowledge that sheds new light on the process of meaning making (Rafik-Galea & Nair, 2008).

According to Al Hussain (2012), scaffolding has direct links to the zone of proximal development (ZDP). It comes about through social interaction in the classroom and works through the process of learners helping others figure out language and concepts that may be above their proximity level of competence and proficiency. According to Bruner (1983), scaffolding is defined as “a process of setting up the situation to make the child’s entry easy as well as successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as skilled enough to manage it” (p. 60).

THE PURPOSES OF SCAFFOLDING

Scaffolding has some pedagogical purposes that support EFL learners in the following stages (Walqui, 2003, as cited in Al Hussain, 2012):

Stage 1:

The first stage comprises a planned curriculum over time that is implemented through a series of ritualistic tasks.

Stage 2:

The second stage incorporates the procedures employed in an activity that is set forth in stage 1.

Stage 3:

The third stage is the collaborative process of interacting, which is the actual achievement of stage 2.

Pearson (1985, as cited in Kim, 2010) viewed “gradual release of responsibility” as the key element of scaffolding in a

classroom context (p. 732). Effective teachers, according to Kim (2010), assist English language learners (ELLs) to attain ownership of their language learning. They arrange instructional goals, design instructional activities accordingly and involve ELLs meaningfully in the process of learning. Effective teachers employ classroom discourse strategies in everyday interactions with ELLs with their instructional goals in mind, and assist them to learn the content and develop disposition for language learning (Laura Roehler, personal communications, 1998, as cited in Kim, 2010). As ELLs’ proficiency in English language is improved, effective teachers change discourse strategies in a manner that mirrors their understanding of student’s achievement and promotes the students’ language and cognitive development (Kim, 2010). In pedagogical contexts, scaffolding refers to both dimensions of the construction site: the supportive structure (which is relatively stable, though easy to assemble and reassemble) and the collaborative construction work that is accomplished (Walqui, 2006).

Scaffolding, as argued by Walqui (2006), is helpful in providing academically challenging instruction for ELLs in secondary schools. Some practical strategies and tasks can be employed in order to provide accurate, deep, challenging and responsible education to students who must develop conceptually, academically and linguistically. ELLs engaged by their teachers in high-challenge academic tasks in English may initially complain. As they

realise, however, that their teachers also provide them with high levels of support, and become increasingly aware of their achievement and the instruments required for attaining it, they will become self-confident (Walqui, 2006).

SCAFFOLDING AND OUTPUT

The concepts of ZPD and scaffolding are in line with Swain's output hypothesis (1995). She mentioned three functions of output: 1) producing output helps learners notice that there is something that they cannot say/produce precisely. 2) Learners use output to try out new language forms (hypothesis) and this hypothesis is contingent on feedback. 3) Metalinguistic or "reflective" function of output, which is often noticeable in peer or small group activities in classes, where "a student's talk about language crystallises ideas and makes inconsistencies clear" (Swain, 2005, p.479). Investigating social aspects of language learning in peer and small group activities via scaffold planning seems interesting. As a kind of action research that aims both to develop the quality of students' education and the professional growth of teachers through actually reflecting what happens in the classrooms, the present study sought to explore the effects of scaffolding on Iranian EFL students' writing ability.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To achieve the objectives of the present quasi-experimental study, the following research questions were posed:

1. Does the technique of peer scaffolding have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability?
2. Does the technique of teacher scaffolding have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability?
3. Is there any significant difference between the peer- and teacher-scaffolding techniques in improving Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability?

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

The research questions of the study were transformed into the following null hypotheses:

1. The peer-scaffolding technique does not have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability.
2. The teacher-scaffolding technique does not have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability.
3. There is no significant difference between the peer- and teacher-scaffolding technique in improving Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to the concept of scaffolding a knowledgeable participant can create, through speech, supportive conditions in

which the novice can take part, and extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). As stated by Wood et al. (1976), scaffolding assistance is characterised by the following six characteristics: recruiting interest in the task; simplifying the task; maintaining pursuit of the goal; marking critical features and discrepancies between what has been produced and the ideal solution; controlling frustration during problem solving; and demonstrating an idealised version of the act to be performed.

Rafik-Galea and Nair (2008) scrutinised the types and characteristics of scaffolding strategies used by L2 teacher trainees of different proficiency levels. Three prominent types of scaffolding were identified in the analysis including code switching, retelling and questioning. Code switching was one form of positive scaffolding employed by the pairs to ensure comprehension was occurring. Retelling was used as a form of scaffolding help for low-proficiency pairs in their attempt to understand the story. Finally, questioning was one form of negative scaffolding recognised among the low-proficiency pairs. On the other hand, pairs from the high- and mixed-proficiency groups tried to use higher-order questioning as a form of scaffolding help (Rafik-Galea & Nair, 2008). Findings obtained by Rafik-Galea and Nair (2008) indicated that scaffolding strategies seemed to be advantageous for the learners to understand literary texts. It was found that peers of equal proficiency are also capable of helping each other understand

the texts. However, the types of scaffolding employed by these peers are different, based on their proficiency level. Also, it was found that scaffolding strategies helped learners restructure information in their own way so that they could make sense of the information. Through assistance from peers, learners gradually became independent problem solvers. Therefore, scaffolding involves learners becoming active in the process of building up shared knowledge and comprehension to improve their learning process (Rafik-Galea & Nair, 2008).

According to Bradley and Bradley (2004), there are three types of scaffolding identified as being particularly effective for second-language learners:

1. Simplifying the language: The language can be simplified by the teacher through shortening selections, speaking in the present tense and avoiding idioms.
2. Asking for completion, not generation: The teacher can have students select responses from a list or complete a partially finished outline or paragraph.
3. Using visuals: The teacher can present information and ask for students to respond through utilising graphic organisers, tables, charts, outlines and graphs.

Riazi and Rezaii (2011) found that both the teacher and the students were successful in using different scaffolding behaviours in order to help writers reach higher levels of independence even though such behaviours were not very different. Teachers generally

are more effective in terms of the type and frequency of scaffolding behaviours as well as in helping learners' writing improve. For students, the major issue was to keep the interactions and solve the immediate problem of student writers. It seems that peer scaffolding should be practised when peers encounter difficulties in problem-solving situations given their lack of knowledge and defective skills (Riazi & Rezaii, 2011).

Ahangari et al. (2014) studied the impact of scaffolding on content retention of Iranian post-elementary EFL learners' summary writing. They concluded that the students who received scaffolding performed better than the learners in the control group in their writing as they remembered more details from the story. According to Ahangari et al. (2014), scaffolding writing provides instructors with means of assessing learners' learning of literacy skills and helps students with lower proficiency in writing to develop their language skills. Scaffolding writing allows a shift in students' language development to ZPD when the lower level is calculated by the learners' isolated learning.

The results of a study conducted by Veerappan et al. (2011), which investigated the effect of the scaffolding technique in journal writing among second-language learners, indicated that the scaffolding technique used in the classroom helped students improve solutions to problems other participants encountered by further developing their effectiveness in journal writing. The impact of teacher, class and peer scaffolding on the writing development of EFL learners was studied by Amerian,

Ahmadian and Mehri (2014), who concluded that using scaffolding strategies did not improve their participants' performance in the experimental group in comparison to the performance of the control group, who performed their tasks individually.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants of the present study were 60 Iranian EFL students who came from a language institution in Gonabad, Iran. Both upper- and lower-intermediate EFL students were selected based on a Quick Placement Test developed by Oxford University Press and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (2001). Fifteen upper-intermediate and 15 lower-intermediate EFL learners formed the first experimental group, which was the peer-scaffolding group. Another 15 lower-intermediate EFL learners who received teacher-scaffolding formed the second experimental group. Finally, 15 lower-intermediate EFL students without any scaffolding formed the control group. The participants' age ranged from 18 to 27. None of them had the experience of living or studying in an English-speaking country. Due to gender segregation rules in Gonabad language institutes, only males took part in the study.

Research Instruments

Oxford Quick Placement Test (QPT). To ensure homogeneity among the participants, a Quick Placement Test developed by

Oxford University Press and the University of Cambridge Local Examinations Syndicate (60 multiple-choice items consisting of grammar and vocabulary questions and a cloze test), adapted from Geranpayeh (2003), was administered to the study population of 110 EFL learners. The test was marked out of 60 using a simple overlay that is summarised in Table 1.

Participants who scored 30-39 out of 60 (lower intermediate) as shown in Table 1 were selected (N=45) and randomly assigned to three groups. In addition, 15 higher-intermediate students (scoring 40-47 out of 60) were also selected to help a group of their lower-intermediate counterparts.

Pre-test. In order to assess the participants' writing ability at the start of the study, a writing-based pre-test was administered to the lower-intermediate EFL students in the three groups. They were to write a description about their families within 30 minutes. The rating scale and the writing assessment criteria were employed to assess their writing. A rating scale adopted from Jahin and Idrees (2012) was used by the researcher to assess

the participants' performances in the six categories including mechanics, content, organisation, vocabulary, grammar and cohesion. Also, a four-point scale (1, 2, 3 & 4) was used by the researcher for each of the six categories. To obtain reliable scores, like the pre-test, three trained experienced EFL experts in Gonabad language institutes rated the participants' writing tasks. The authors, by analysing the data, concluded that three raters were fairly consistent in their overall ratings (Cronbach's Alpha, which is a common measure of inter-rater reliability was used; the correlation was 0.78 with a significance level of 0.05).

Post-test. Finally, at the end of the course, the lower-intermediate EFL students sat a post-test. The topic selected for the post-test was 'Description of your summer holiday;'. They were asked to write their descriptions in 30 minutes. The aforementioned rating scale (Jahin & Idrees, 2012) was employed by the researcher to measure the students' written work. Also, three trained experienced EFL experts in Gonabad language institutes scored the participants' writing tasks. These three

Table 1
Look-Up Table for Computer-based and Paper and Pen Scores

Alte level	Paper and pen test Score		Council of Europe Level
	Part 1 score out of 40	Part 1 & 2 score out of 60	
0 Beginner	0-15	0-17	A1
1 Elementary	16-23	18-29	A2
2 Lower intermediate	24-30	30-39	B1
3 Upper intermediate	31-40	40-47	B2
4 Advanced		48-54	C1
5 Very advanced		54-60	C2

experts were the same teachers who had rated the pre-test scripts.

PROCEDURE

After the selection of the participants of the study (lower-intermediate and upper-intermediate EFL learners), a pre-test was administered to the participants. This was to ensure the homogeneity of the lower-intermediate and high-intermediate participants. Then, the participants in both experimental groups underwent a treatment (teacher scaffolding and peer scaffolding) in a course comprising 12 sessions of teaching EFL writing. First, the participants in the three groups were instructed on the strategies and techniques used in descriptive writing. Throughout the course, the participants in the teacher-scaffolding group received their teacher's assistance while writing their descriptions. Teacher assistance in this class took two different forms: individual assistance and support given to the class. In the first kind of assistance, the teacher assisted every individual student when they were faced with problems of various kinds while writing. In the second form of assistance, the teacher provided the class with some key words to use in their descriptive writings, and sometimes, a simple structure was proposed to them to use in their writing.

Participants of the peer-scaffolding group (15 lower- and 15 upper-intermediate EFL students) were divided into 15 dyads in which one upper-intermediate EFL student was responsible for providing a lower-intermediate one with assistance required

for writing. This kind of treatment was more like cooperative and collaborative work in which every pair of students was engaged in the process of writing.

Participants in the control group did not receive any kind of scaffolding. At every session, they were given a topic to write. Their written products were assessed and their errors were explicitly corrected by the teacher. Some comments and additional information were also added to their written texts by the teacher. Finally, the participants sat the post-test to determine if the treatments were effective and to compare the effects of the two treatments (teacher vs. peer scaffolding vs. control).

RESULTS

The data elicited from the participants of the study was analysed using SPSS (19.0) to address the research questions.

Pre-test

To assess the lower-intermediate EFL students' performance at the outset of the study, a one-way ANOVA test was employed. Table 2 shows the results.

Table 2
Results of Homogeneity of Variances

Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
2.654	2	42	0.082

To ensure the homogeneity of the three groups with respect to writing ability, the following procedure was used. As Table 2 shows, the p-value was more than 0.05 (sig=0.082), which means that the null

hypothesis, that is, that the peer-scaffolding technique does not have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability, is accepted.

As Table 3 shows, there was no statistically significant difference ($F=0.204$, $\text{sig} = 0.816 > 0.05$) among the three groups with respect to writing ability at the time of the pre-test.

Post-test

To test the first null hypothesis, an independent sample *t*-test was employed. Table 4 shows the results.

As Table 4 shows, the participants of the experimental group (peer scaffolding) ($N=15$, $M=68.93$, $SD=10.46$) significantly ($df=28$, $t= 2.44$, $p=0.021<.0$) outperformed those in the control group ($N=15$, $M=61.00$, $SD=6.94$). Therefore, the first null hypothesis was rejected. It can be concluded that scaffolding provided by upper-intermediate EFL students for lower-intermediate ones was an effective technique in EFL writing classrooms. The finding supports Riazi

and Rezaii's claim (2011), indicating peer scaffolding is an effective way to help writers reach higher levels of independence. According to Riazi and Rezaii, (2011) peer scaffolding should be used when peers encounter difficulties in problem-solving situations given their lack of knowledge and defective skills. However, it should be mentioned that the effect size is 0.418, which is $0.2 < 0.418 < 0.5$. Thus, it has only a moderate effect.

To test the second null hypothesis that teacher scaffolding technique does not have any significant effect on Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability, an independent sample *t*-test was used (Table 5).

As Table 5 displays, there was a statistically significant difference ($df=28$, $t=2.39$, $p=.024<.05$) between the control ($N=15$, $M=61.00$, $SD=6.94$) and teacher-scaffolding ($N=15$, $M=68.60$, $SD=10.13$) groups. Therefore, the second null hypothesis was rejected. It can be concluded that the assistance provided by the EFL teacher had

Table 3
Results of One-Way ANOVA for Pre-test

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Between Groups	36.044	2	18.022	.204	.816
Within Groups	3708.933	42	88.308		
Total	3744.978	44			

Table 4
Results of Independent Sample t-test for Post-Test Between Peer Scaffolding and Control Groups

Group	N	M	SD	df	t	p
Control	15	61.00	6.94	28	2.44	0.021
Peer scaffolding	15	68.93	10.46			
R= 0.418						

a significant effect on improving lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability. Based on what is observed in Table 5, it can be concluded that the assistance provided by the EFL teacher also had a moderate effect on improving lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability ($0.2 < 0.411 < 0.5$). The finding was in agreement with what Ahangari et al. (2014) found in their study. Ahangari et al. (2014) concluded that an experimental group provided with constant help from the teacher at the beginning that was gradually removed along the course performed better in their writing than those in a control group.

Concerning the third null hypothesis, which claimed that there was no significant difference between the peer- and teacher-scaffolding techniques in improving Iranian lower-intermediate EFL students' writing ability, another independent sample t-test was employed (Table 6).

According to Table 6, there was no statistically significant difference ($df=28$, $t=0.089$, $p=0.93 > 0.05$) between the peer-

scaffolding ($N=15$, $M=68.93$, $SD=10.46$) and teacher-scaffolding ($N=15$, $M=68.60$, $SD=10.13$) groups, supporting the third null hypothesis $0 < 0.033 < 0.2$. The finding is in agreement with the study of Khodamoradi et al. (2013), which indicated that high achievers and the teacher provide equal contribution to low achievers' acquisition of the subskill of grammar, in particular, and writing, in general.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The present study was carried out to explore the effect of two kinds of scaffolding, teacher scaffolding and peer scaffolding, on improving writing ability among lower-intermediate EFL learners. Three research questions were posed and investigated in the study. The data obtained in the study confirmed the effectiveness of these types of scaffolding in improving lower-intermediate EFL learners' writing ability. Also, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference between the two experimental groups in

Table 5
Results of Independent Sample t-test for Post-Test Between Teacher Scaffolding and Control Groups

Group	N	M	SD	df	T	P
Control	15	61.00	6.94	28	2.39	0.024
Teacher scaffolding	15	68.60	10.13			
R=0.411						

Table 6
Results of Independent Samples t-test for Post-Test Between Teacher- and Peer-Scaffolding Groups

Group	N	M	SD	df	T	P
Peer scaffolding	15	68.93	10.46	28	0.089	0.93
Teacher scaffolding	15	68.60	10.13			
R= 0.033						

terms of the effectiveness of scaffolding in writing improvement. Participants in the two experimental groups who received the assistance from the teacher and their higher-level counterparts were allowed to learn in pairs. They could collaborate in discussions with highly proficient sources to improve their writing ability during the study. Moreover, they were provided with feedback from the source.

Regarding heterogeneous dyadic collaboration, the present findings are in partial agreement with those of Pishghadam and Ghadiri (2011), indicating that better results can be achieved if unequal partners instead of equal partners are paired up. In this study, only heterogeneous pairs (upper-intermediate and lower-intermediate ones) were included. Also, providing assistance from higher proficiency students to lower-level ones can enhance EFL students' collaborative skills that appear to be essential in developing their responsibility in social contexts. The present findings offer pedagogical implications for utilising scaffolding as an effective technique in order to enhance EFL learners' writing ability. The results obtained from Schwieter's study (2010) supports a notion that scaffolding writing techniques within the ZPD improves second-language writing skills. The finding is in disagreement with Amerian et al. (2014), who indicated that the control group outperformed the experimental group practising the techniques of teacher, class and peer scaffolding in three consecutive sessions, respectively.

EFL teachers can implement the scaffolding technique in order to enhance their students' cooperation in peer scaffolding as well as to facilitate their learning by providing them with appropriate assistance. Moreover, higher-level students can provide their lower-level counterparts with assistance using methods that are less challenging for them. Sharing their learning experiences with lower-level students, higher-level students can enhance the process of learning.

Since limitations in the study have raised doubts to the external validity of the findings, further research with a qualitative-orientated approach to enhance the quality of the study is strongly suggested. Nevertheless, probing various techniques and alternatives to illuminate how profound language teaching and learning takes place even in an experimental perspective seems necessary.

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