

Scaffolding in Business English Correspondence Classes at College Level

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Language teaching and education have been so long influenced by developmental psychology, namely constructivism. This idea enlightens the world of language teaching. Constructivism has received both praises and critics. Communicative approach followers claim that the principles in constructivism support their thoughts while the followers of a more traditional approach, namely, Grammar Translation Method, claim that the constructivism is just another experiment in language teaching, just like other methods. This article is based on a classroom action research investigation of how scaffolding instruction, the operational 'terms' of constructivism, based on its 'ZPD' (Zone of Proximal Development), play roles in language teaching, specifically in Business English Writing. The investigation has perceived several important aspects in scaffolding instruction for teaching Business English Correspondence, such as the importance of modeling or giving examples, as well as corrective and immediate feedback, together with positive reinforcement, to improve the learners' performance. It showed that modeling or giving examples, peer reviewing, together with immediate feedback, brought significant influence on the learners' perspective, about their learning performance.

Keywords: constructivism, Scaffolding, ZPD, Business English Writing

Introduction

In the realm of language teaching, there has been time when language teachers and educators were searching for the best method and approach of language teaching. Ranging from Grammar Translation, Audio Lingual, to Communicative Approach, each method and approach has its own advent-ages and drawbacks. Now, some teachers and educators have realized that actually there is no such thing as the best teaching method although the rest are still struggling to seek for the best one. Teaching relies a lot on some influential factors such as learners' background, classroom constraint, and learning objectives [for a specific context] (Liu, 2009, p.6). Scaffolding instruction has been widely used in many areas of English Language Teaching using several alternatives teaching methods inside the instruction (Dare & Polias in Hammond, 2001).

In scaffolding instruction, methods of teaching are complementary to the existing learning variables such as learning objectives, learners' background, classrooms and time constraint. The methods of teaching, as the metaphor of scaffolding implies, are only temporary support that will help the learners to develop new understandings, new concepts, and new abilities (Hammond & Gibbons in Hammond, 2001). They could not permanently be regarded as being fixed in their impact to the learning situation in every setting and

context. Scaffolding has to adapt the learning situation. Therefore, it has no favorite methods in its application. However, one crucial principle in scaffolding is that it works in social-cultural context and in collaborative learning atmosphere, due to its nature and the nature of knowledge which is collaboratively constructed (Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976 in Hammond & Gibbons, 2001, p.14-15)

This study aims to investigate how Scaffolding Instruction in teaching Business English Writing assists students having problems in business English writing; during their learning activity, the students did a set of instruction which eventually led them perform the skill independently. The components of Scaffolding instruction which impact the most to the learning are discussed in this article.

Scaffolding Instruction

Scaffolding Instruction is a set of teaching instruction showing how to use particular learning media according to principles of constructing knowledge independently and collaboratively in a particular social cultural environment (e.g. a classroom) during the process of learning. As other approaches derived from Constructivism and are based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), scaffolding instruction perceives learning from Social and cultural context which consequently puts language learning focus on communication, cognition, and meaning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006) in Naeni & Duvall, 2012). The instruction follows a set of principle, which is described by McKenzie (1999). He recognizes eight characteristics of scaffolding as follows:

1. Scaffolding provides clear directions, step-by-step instructions to explain how to meet the expectations for the learning activity
2. Scaffolding directs learners to worthy sources
3. Scaffolding keeps learners on task
4. Scaffolding reduces uncertainty, surprise and disappointment
5. Scaffolding clarifies purpose
6. Scaffolding offers assignment to clarify expectations
7. Scaffolding delivers efficiency
8. Scaffolding creates momentum

Based on these characteristics, there are four basic principles of scaffolding instruction:

1. The instruction gives direction and goals of the learning activities.
2. The instruction involves list of assignment and rubrics.
3. The instruction opens opportunities for learners to develop their independency in working on the tasks.
4. The instruction is task-specific-oriented (meaning that the instruction differs in terms of working procedure from task to task).

No matter what the learners' background, how much time constraint is given in the curriculum, and what the learning objectives are, these principles apply. Linking back to the earlier issue regarding teaching methods, teachers who use the scaffolding instruction may employ any suitable teaching methods in applying the principles. These principles keep the activities on track to achieve the fulfillment of the principles. However, how the teacher works on each principle, what method is being used, depends heavily on the teacher's judgment about the suitable teaching method. Each teaching method has a potential to bring learner through their current level of skill or understanding. Experienced teachers will know which method works the best in a particular learning environment, context, setting, and background.

Scaffolding instruction lay its foundation on this concept of **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. ZPD is a **mental state of ability or an area of learning** in which a learner has potential ability to perform a task, an assignment, a duty, by assistance of more capable peers, tutors, or a set of instruction or guidance. When a learner does a task within their current ability, it means he or she is performing a task within his or her actual development zone. On the other extreme, when a learner is given a task which is too difficult for him or her to do, even with assistance, it means he or she is in a zone beyond his or her actual development. When a learner is given a task above his or her actual development with some assistance from more capable persons and supporting environment and able to finish the task, it means the learner is within his or her Zone of Proximal Development. This zone is a zone where a learner is potentially able to finish a task above his or her actual level with some assistance. A learner will pass this ZPD to the next level, where he or she can do the task independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

In teaching Business English Writing, the learners have the prior knowledge on general English writing, English grammar, vocabulary storage, and any of learners' background knowledge on the particular types of Business English Writing being taught. Starting from the current ability (anywhere it is) which is different from one learner to another, a teacher can utilize Scaffolding instruction to begin assisting the learners to reach the learning objectives. The learners' ZPD is their potential ability or their potential mental area where they can develop and improve further their skill and knowledge in Business English Writing with the assistance of more capable learners or instructor/teacher/ lecturer, in a social and cultural interaction (their peer or their instructor). In reaching the objectives, these teaching principles are based on scaffolding principle and ZPD suggested by Mercer (1994) in Hammond (2001):

1. Providing learners with any learning support, to help them move from initial acquisition of a concept/skill toward independent performance of the concept/skill (Also referred to as "**guided practice.**")
2. Giving the task/ assignment after frequently describing and modeling a particular concept/skill.
3. Increasing the number of learning items and difficulty level of testing questions for students to demonstrate increasing level of comprehension and mastery.
4. Giving direct and prompt feedback (**by teachers and peers**), both corrective and constructive feedback. The feedback may be followed by positive reinforcement

- such as praises or positive comment. At some circumstances, it is also suggested to provide rewards for achieving a particular level of learning.
5. Continuing the process until students indicate sufficient comprehension and mastery of concept/skill and perform increasing independency in doing the assignment.

Methods

Classroom Action Research was used in the investigation; this method involves several cycles of Learning Activities which is then evaluated (Baumfield et al, 2008). The process in each cycle is as the following (Farrell, 2007):

1. Planning (the learning activity)
2. Acting Out (the learning activity)
3. Observing (the result of the learning activity)
4. Reflecting and Re-Planning (the next cycle of learning activity)

The Data Collection was done in September 2014 to December 2014, by the following method: interviewing the students and colleagues, analyzing Weekly Students Learning Activity Log and Students Weekly Assignment. Triangulation of the three data collection methods were applied to ensure the validity of the qualitative research findings in Classroom Action Research, as suggested by Burns (1995:8) in Farrell (2007), as commonly used by second language education research.

The cycles of action research were three cycles. Each cycle takes four meeting (around a month). Practically, the first cycle began in the first week of September 2014 and the last cycle ended in the second week of December 2014.

There were two classes of Business Correspondence subject investigated in this study, namely the class of Business Correspondence IIA and IIB. The first class contained sixteen (16) students and the second one contains fifteen (15) students. Both classes are in the same academic year and having averagely the same background of previous English language exposure in the institution. Every teaching learning activity in one semester (12 meetings) was recorded in a field note, in three different classes of English Business Correspondence. Each class employed a significant amount of Business English Writing in different setting of business context for every unit of learning activity. There were three unit of learning activity covered during the study, as the following list:

1. Composing Direct Request Letter (covered in four (4) meetings)
2. Composing Acknowledgement of Direct Request Letter (covered in four (4) meetings)
3. Composing Direct Request and its acknowledgement in a time (covered in four (4) meetings)

Each unit of learning activity was equal to one cycle in the classroom action research implemented in this study. To see the progress of each class (and each cycle), three sets of assignment for each learning activity (which is, each cycle) were given.

In the classroom, the following list of activities in every teaching setting was applied:

1. **Describing** the background information of a particular type of Business English Writing (as written in the lesson plan), giving the writing composition examples from authentic context/ real life business setting as a **model** for the students. (The description and the composition model are **to scaffold** the students' comprehension towards a particular type of Business English Writing)
2. **Analyzing the model** to find the specific **features/ patterns/ special key terms** or a particular type of Business English Writing. To scaffold this activity, the teacher may provide the students with a set of target (what to find during the activity) or a list of guiding questions as the scaffolding)
3. **Allow students to check their friends' work** following a given guidance previously prepared by the teacher, applying peer reviewing. The teacher provides a specific 'rubric' for the activity.
4. Giving specific **feedback and positive reinforcement** to each student's response. (feedback and positive reinforcement are other types of scaffolding).
5. When students answer incorrectly, **praising the student** for his/her attempt while also describing and modeling the correct response. When students answer correctly, **giving positive reinforcement** by specifically stating what they have done correctly.
6. When students perform improved competence, **prompting students** to begin writing by drafting, revising and completing the composition.
7. When the teachers are confident their students **understand the features/ patterns/ special key terms of a particular type of Business English Writing**, inviting them **to actively write and develop the patterns**.

The above activities were applied in all the classes taught using the scaffolding instruction. Data are collected from sources of data such as the learning log activity as well as the students' work (assignment, exercises). Some interviews to the students were conducted after they experienced the teaching using scaffolding instruction for several times.

Data Analysis and Findings

Then, the summary of the Students Learning Activity Log and Interview also expressed some important features of scaffolding instruction which improved and assisted the students' learning. Furthermore, from the summary of the learning activity log and interview to the students, it is obvious that all the scaffolding involved in the instruction were giving positive influence and helping students on their assignment and learning. It is worth noted that out of the four types of scaffolding, there were two scaffoldings which impacted directly to the material aspect of the learning, namely grammar, sentence pattern, message structure, common vocabulary and expressions used as well as a template of a particular type of business letter. The two scaffoldings were modeling/giving authentic examples and peer reviewing (confirmed later by the teacher's/instructor's reviewing).

Table 1.

A Set of Scores in Each Cycle for Business Correspondence Class IIA

No	Student Number	Score		
		Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
1	4105013001	75	78	80
2	4105013002	71	73	74
3	4105013004	80	76	81
4	4105013005	77	79	82
5	4105013007	79	80	80
6	4105013010	80	78	81
7	4105013014	77	79	80
8	4105013030	75	79	82
9	4105013043	74	75	77
10	4105013046	78	78	80
11	4105013048	71	72	75
12	4105013051	71	72	76
13	4105013052	77	75	79
14	4105013055	81	80	80
15	4105013056	76	79	80
16	4105013058	67	69	71

Table 2.

A Set of Scores in Each Cycle for Business Correspondence Class IIB

No	Student Number	Score		
		Cycle 1	Cycle 2	Cycle 3
1	4105012029	69	66	71
2	4105012038	81	83	82
3	4105013006	68	69	71
4	4105013011	64	66	69
5	4105013022	71	73	74
6	4105013025	71	76	75
7	4105013026	78	77	76
8	4105013028	81	80	80
9	4105013037	76	78	79
10	4105013038	71	77	75
11	4105013044	81	83	84
12	4105013045	69	72	73
13	4105013047	81	82	81
14	4105013054	76	77	78
15	4105013059	69	71	72
16	4105012029	71	73	74

Table 3.
Summary of the Students Learning Activity Log and Interview

No	Types of Scaffolding	Students' Perception towards the scaffolding given	Lecturer's Observation
1	Modeling/ Giving Examples	All the interviewed students agreed that giving examples or providing models of a particular business letter helps them write similar type of letter. They felt that authentic model gave them a kind of template for writing a similar type of letter.	Students seemed to understand more when teaching involves authentic examples or model, especially regarding the common expressions, common pattern (message structure of a letter), and common vocabulary used.
2	Peer Reviewing	All the interviewed students liked the opportunity to check their friend's work; however, all of them felt a little doubt when checking some aspects in the assignment such as grammar and sentence patterns; they felt confidence enough to check the message structure	Students could be trusted to check their peers' work up to certain points such as message structure of a letter, appropriate expressions or common vocabulary used; they still needed some help in checking grammar and sentence structure.
3	Immediate and Corrective Lecturer/Teacher's Feedback	Almost all interviewed students felt that teacher's remark or feedback towards their work were beneficial for giving them the 'official' and trustable information. Only two said that correction from the lecturers could reduce their confidence in working on the next assignment.	Immediate and corrective feedback seemed to give students a 'pathway' or 'track' in working on the next assignment. They served as 'signboards' in their road of getting to the right direction.
4	Praises or Positive Reinforcement	All interviewed students agreed that praises and positive reinforcement gave a positive mental induction and influence them to achieve higher.	The lecturers felt that both the lecturer and the students were given a positive mental influence when praises or positive reinforcement given to the students.

The finding about the impact of modeling is in line with a curriculum model in language teaching suggested by Hammond and Gibbons in Hammond (2001, p. 54). They propose a scaffolding curriculum model as the following order:

1. Building the field
2. Modeling
3. Joint construction
4. Independent construction

Referring to this model, giving an authentic example of a type of business letter creates a context, or 'building the field', then give the learners a clear 'model' from the real world. These two activities mean creating a learning foundation for the learners then to collaborate with the instructor (joint construction) and eventually lead to an independent problem solving activity (independent construction).

More notes on the authentic examples describe that authentic examples supply.

1. Context
2. Common features
3. Common used vocabularies
4. Common patterns and expressions
5. Message Structure and Grammatical Structure
6. Knowledge of Template and Format

The above six points are the necessary components of English Business writing as also needed by other form of second language writing (Kim, 2012). Clearly the authentic examples provided a sort of 'self guidance checklist' for notifying which to include and which not to include during the process of writing. Learners saw the common patterns happening in the authentic examples and they began to draw conclusions, made summary, and eventually formulated the six components of English Business Writing by themselves. As Business Letter Writing is one genre in English Language Writing Skill, learning grammar and vocabulary only is less than sufficient to achieve its mastery. Tabatabaei & Farnia (2015), in line with Jacobs (2015) argues that successful communication, including written communication, in second language, requires the knowledge and understanding of the language's pragmatic and socio cultural norms. Authentic written example of a particular writing genre serves this purpose the best, as mentioned by Lin (2006). Authentic written examples are also the best modeling in scaffolding instruction which introduces learners to a specific genre of writing with all its aspects and socio cultural context (Hammond, 2001, p. 40).

Regarding peer reviewing and instructor's reviewing, the finding is fundamentally confirmed by Vygotsky (1978 as quoted by Naeni & Duval, 2012) arguing that learning engages with the social interaction and requires external form of assistance. Peer reviewing in fact has been previously known as a powerful tool to exercise the learners' cognitive concept on a new knowledge and apply their skills in the newly learned skill area (Barnard, 2002). When the learners of Business Correspondence Writing learn a new type or genre of Business Writing, they will have an opportunity to exercise what they just learned and apply the new skill that they just mastered a moment ago in their learning process. The 'exercises' would lead the learners to a 'higher form of consciousness' (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, the learner's current level of ability will have more opportunity to reach the potential level of ability (ZPD) because they are affected by what other people (peers and teachers) are thinking (Jacobs, 2015).

Discussion

After applying the scaffolding instruction, at least three important points impacting the learning activities of Business English Writing were discovered:

Scaffolding provides the necessary learning support. Support such as necessary expressions relevant to the specific context, authentic examples of a particular business writing type, teacher's and peer's feedback to students having learning problems, these students dared to take the risks of initially learning a new type of a particular Business Writing skill. The availability of the learning support gave students a kind of confidence in their learning. Their feeling of security increased, empowered them to explore new area of

knowledge and skills, which at the end, brought them to cross over their ZPD. As having been mentioned on the ZPD concept earlier, each learner has a potential to reach beyond their actual or seen ability. If the learner's confidence improves, so will their ability be. However, it is important to remember that when going through this inductive reasoning process, the learners might several times end up in a set of conclusion different from what has been expected by the teacher. If this happens, the teachers should use the scaffolding instruction principle of giving constructive feedback to help the learners fulfill the expected results.

Scaffolding provides effective pathway. Scaffolding Instruction provides an effective pathway for students to step by step but thoroughly (from the knowledge/ skills they already knew and mastered to the new knowledge and skills) learn a new Business English Writing skill, rather than expecting students to automatically transfer what they see from what the teacher do to doing it by themselves. Students need a 'working model' or a 'scheme' to give them a picture of how to create the piece of writing.

Scaffolding provides analytical thinking and feedback. By providing the opportunity to the student to analyze common features and patterns of a particular type of letter, giving corrective feedback, focuses on particular parts of the concept/skill, students are expected to do all the tasks more independently from time to time. The opportunity to analyze a same type of work which they were also assigned to will sharpen their analytical thinking; this sharpening analytical skill, from time to time, will give them confidence in the field and later 'train' them to be more independent. Students improve more their confidence in understanding and mastering the concept, lessons or skills taught and are more successful during independent exercises because they more thoroughly understand the concept/skill due to the scaffolding process.

Conclusion and Suggestion

Scaffolding and ZPD have been quoted and used to describe the principle of assisting learners to reach their potential ability, including in language learning. Many successful reports have been told, as well as some unsuccessful stories. No matter how the result of the application of scaffolding is, it has been undoubtedly acknowledged as one of the most powerful 'tools' in teaching many skills and knowledge in various fields.

The most significant thing to do as the continuation of research in the area of scaffolding is to keep working on finding out how scaffolding may be at help in many more specific teaching context. Almost none give negative reports on the effect of the approach (if it cannot be called as a 'method'). However, still many teachers and educators who claimed to apply the scaffolding instruction do not really understand the proper mechanism of its application. With improper ways of acting it out, less effective result would be attained. There are at least three things that teachers and educators can do to improve the effectiveness of using scaffolding instruction:

1. Keep practicing using scaffolding instruction in any possible teaching opportunity and context.
2. Keeping evidence or record of how scaffolding has given impact in teaching. Teachers can write any positive things appearing when scaffolding is used, or any doubting evidence when scaffolding is applied. A later careful research upon these evidences will bring more evaluation on how to properly use the 'approach'.

3. Keep improving and experimenting any effective alternatives in using scaffolding for teaching and learning language.

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