



College English Writing on Scaffolding Theory

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Abstract

Based on theories of zones of proximal development and scaffolding instruction, the author manages to combine the two theories and attempts to put it to the practice of college English writing in class on peer composition tutoring. Divided into different groups, students are required to give instructions and suggestion after reviewing their peer's composition.

Key words: Scaffolding; Zone of Proximal Development; Peer review

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1. SCAFFOLDING THEORY

The teaching of writing in English as a second language(ESL) in China has been overstressed for many years. More and more university students are asked and supposed to pass all kinds of tests, including College English Test (CET) band four and band six, post graduate entrance examination, which required the specialized writing skills. Students had to practice more than ever before. All those are part of the reasons why writing is paid too much attention to. Whereas, their writing skills are not so satisfactory as expected and could not score high. English writing stands in the way of their language acquisition. Undoubtedly writing is all obstacle

for the students to get a relatively high mark in English test. Many serious problems exist in the current college English teaching.

A quantity of experts have been devoted themselves fully to the research on writing teaching and they have gained much achievement. The theory and evidence of scaffolding was warmly discussed at 2004 Annual Meeting in American Educational Research Association. Scaffolding instruction is defined as the "role of teachers and others in supporting the learner's development and providing support structures to get to that next stage or level" (Raymond, 2000).

The term "Scaffolding" was first used by Wood, Bruner, and Ross(1976) in their examination of parent-child talk in the early years. "Scaffolding"-in its more usual sense-is a temporary structure that is often put up in the process of constructing a building. As each bit of the new building is finished, the scaffold is taken down.

The original idea of "Scaffolding" comes from the work of Jerome Bruner, who defines "Scaffolding" as follows: a process of 'setting up' the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it. (Bruner, 1983, p.60). Bruner's notion of "Scaffolding" was developed in the 1970s in the context of an intensive investigation of six infants(ages 7-18 months)over a period of 10 months, as they and their mothers played games. These 'non-rule bound' parts of the game are an instance of the mother providing a "scaffold" for the child (Bruner & Sherwood, 1975, p.280).

Scaffold is temporary, but essential for the successful construction of the building. Bruner(1978) describes "Scaffolding" in the metaphorical sense in which we are using it here, as "the steps taken to reduce the degrees of freedom in carrying out some tasks so that the child can concentrate on the difficult skill she is in the process of acquiring"(1978). In the classroom

it portrays the “temporary, but essential, nature of the mentor’s assistance” in supporting learners to carry out tasks successfully (Maybin, Mercer, and Stierer, 1992, p.186). “Scaffolding”, however, is not simply another word for help. It is a special kind of help that assists learners to move toward new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding. “Scaffolding” is thus the temporary assistance by which a teacher helps a learner know how to do something so that the learner will later be able to complete a similar task alone (Vygotsky, 1978). It is future-oriented: as Vygotsky has said, what a child can do with support today, she or he can do alone tomorrow.

2. ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

As a teaching strategy, “Scaffolding” originates from Lev Vygotsky’s socio-cultural psychology and his concept of ZPD (zone of proximal development). Zone of Proximal Development is a term put forward by the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky to describe the next stage in a student’s learning. It is 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.” ZPD is understood as the difference between what an individual is able to accomplish functioning alone (i.e. actual level of development) and what that person is capable of in collaboration with other, more expert, individuals (i.e. potential level of development) (Vygotsky, 1978, P.86).

Vygotsky (1978) puts forward his Zone of Proximal Development theory, and draws our attention again to the students’ current learning proficiency level. Vygotsky maintains that the child follows the adult’s example and gradually develops the ability to do certain tasks without help or assistance. He calls the difference between what a child can do with help and what he or she can do without guidance.

In simple words: Zone of Proximal Development is the term used to refer to the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that with which the learner is currently capable of coping.

3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCAFFOLDING AND ZPD

Scaffolding as a teaching strategy is amply supported by research and theory. These two theories are related closely. All those beliefs focused on how students build upon prior knowledge might also be considered.

Vygotsky believes that scaffolding plays a critical part in the learning process. Scaffolding refers to the support given to the child early on in the learning process. This support becomes diminished in the later stages of

learning by having the child take on more responsibility for learning as she is able (Parsons, Hinson, Sardo-Brown, 2001). The adults provide a scaffold to help the child move from assisted to unassisted SUCCESS at the task (Spector, 1992).

Success in the zone of the proximal development requires support for learning, and the support is called scaffolding. The support is progressively withdrawn and, as students take over more and more responsibility in a problem-solving situation. They become self-regulated and independent.

Effective teachers know that they cannot leave learning to discovery but must structure activities at the just-right level and support learning through conversations, modeling, and active participation in tasks (Pressley, 2002). So during the process of instruction, only when the scaffolding is put up in time and rightly can the children arrive at their zones of proximal development. In other words, timely and appropriate scaffolding is the base of the zone of proximal development. The students’ potential abilities can’t be developed without effective supports or with ineffective supports.

From a Vygotskian perspective, it is essential to consider children’s problem-solving abilities in contexts rather than the traditional testing format.

4. PRACTICE ON COLLEGE ENGLISH WRITING

Teachers are confronting a situation about how to improve students’ writing ability. One of their concerns is about the study of composition revision, which is mentioned as a teaching strategy including teacher’s revision, self-revision and peer revision (review). The author wants to focus on studying the problem about how to manage the different level students in the future study integrated with the Zone of Proximal Development.

To improve students’ writing level and interest, teachers may manage to combine these theories together and apply it to the practice usage of revising students’ composition work. To put it more clearly, after teachers divide the students into different groups, students in certain group come to revise and tutor other’s compositions from another group. Given same time and instruction, the student pays greater attention to other’s work, gives suggestions and instructions, and is more likely to have interest in other’s feedback on his own composition. Then, after taking responsibility for revising others’ compositions, they have to revise their own compositions following their peer’s suggestions.

Teacher’s goal is to stimulate all the students’ interest and get them to review their peer’s work after finishing their own compositions in order to avoid the fact that part of the students tend to put the revised composition aside without even looking at it again when the essay is returned

by teachers.

If this could be smoothly employed in composition revision in class and after class, all the students will benefit from this program.

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