

Scaffolding Technique: An Approach to Zone of Proximal Development for EFL Learners

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Abstract

Learning English as a foreign language (EFL) tends to require explicit learning inevitably to promote the use of language pattern on basis of native speakers' models, i.e., American or British English. Many tasks in forms of drills and exercises are adopted to train the learners repeatedly so that they learn the grammatical structure and contextual use by heart. However, such a method cannot guarantee the success in learning new knowledge through completion of the tasks by the learners alone without sufficient assistance from the more skilled individual. The aim of this paper is to describe the characteristics of scaffolding technique related to zone of proximal development (ZPD) and how it can be applied to promote EFL class.

Keywords: Scaffolding Technique, Zone of Proximal Development, English as a Foreign Language

Introduction

Teaching EFL is widely limited to the model of language use demonstrated to the learners as a referential device to prevent excessive variation which can lead to intelligibility obstacles. Consequently, EFL learners are those who learn modelling standard English in the higher educational system of the country, and might perform language skill inconsistently in the real situation of international communication with people from the different cultural and linguistic background with the ultimate goal of achieving the shared understanding and exchanging of ideas and cultures. To conform the referred concept, formal learning in the artificial class, for example, pointing out the grammatical focus and additional plain explanation together with exercises and quizzes, is employed by teachers.

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According to Krashen (1985), learning consciously under formal circumstances cannot transfer the knowledge gained to implicit learning. Furthermore, Prodrumou (1988) contended that the learned lessons from explicit teaching method do not always become an applicable knowledge for the real-life communication, particularly the neutral contents such as, expression use in standard situations that Prodrumou (1988: 79) metaphorically defines as “Entering the plastic world of EFL textbooks where life is safe and innocent, and does not say or do anything.”. This thought is supported by SLA theory which primarily reflects the factual language learning of human. Acquiring languages refers to subconscious process, or ability of using language naturally whereas learning languages requires awareness to notice how language is used under an artificial context with concentration on language rule and function (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).

Later, Paradis (2004) argues that there should be an interlink between both two types of learning in terms of priority of production processes. The input that learners perceive from controlled environment contribute to using language correctly in the first place before the connection between trained behavior to automatic use in the future, or the implicit replacement. Related to such a principle, Krashen’s Input Hypothesis can be alternatively applied. The teachers need to make sure that input given to the learners stay comprehensible sufficiently so that they can continue to the next step of using language more effectively, the so-called *i+1* hypothesis (Krashen, 1985). Furthermore, learners’ competence is ready to be developed not only by their own determination, but also with scaffolding, or the assistance or guidance of the experienced or more skillful persons, e.g., teachers, peers, and other concerning parties. Hence, the concept of Zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding technique are another component playing an important role in language development system. The former gives a picture of continual learning from the past knowledge to the future or possible performance while the latter is known as an approach to promote ZPD strategically through social interaction with other persons who have higher linguistic potential.

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky (1978) proposed a theory of three domains of learning development known as zone of proximal development (ZPD). It, in fact, is a representation of three overlapped circles representing the different level of children’ learning progression as seen in figure 1. The most inner circle refers to the things the learners can do by themselves. The outer one is where zone of proximal development is located in. It is a boundary of possible ability to accomplish the task with help from the more experienced persons. The most outward one signals the completely difficult things learners cannot still overcome even with others’ assistance. Wing and Putney (2002: 95)

revise the concept of ZPD as the developing learning ability between actual and potential development. It is to say that the learners can achieve success in ZPD after *the past learning* (actual development) before reaching *the future learning* (potential development) where the learners still cannot do something. The learning gained in ZPD is a preparation of the next step to the higher development. Vygotsky (1978: 86) convinces that the role of the more skillful individuals either teachers or peers is very indispensable as he states:

“...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 peers.”

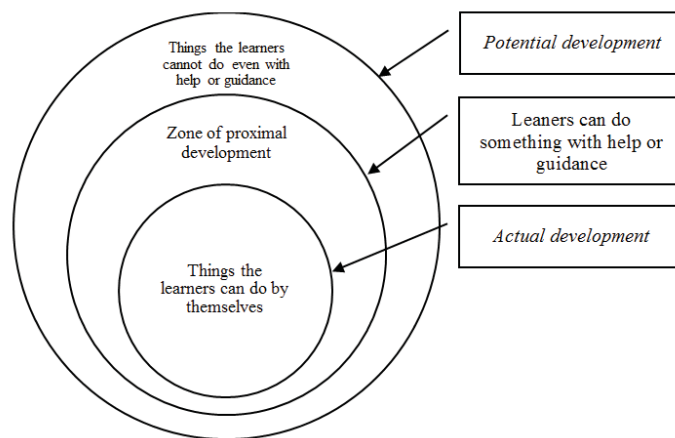


Figure 1 Zone of Proximal Development
(Vygotsky, 1978: 86)

In zone of proximal development, learners are on the verge of understanding something, especially gaining problem-solving skill by themselves. Compared to intellectual repertoire, such a skill is very limited that the learners may not be able to figure out the solution to the problems adequately depending on their own actual competence. Guidance, encouragement, or reinforcement, when properly given to the learners by experienced individuals, such as, teachers, peers or parents, the learners tend to complete the task or solve the confronting problem more successfully.

Vygotsky also realizes that effective learning contributes to the positive development to the higher level of ability or even beyond limitation. There are two types of learning concepts—spontaneous or everyday concept and scientific or schooled concept. Everyday concept is defined as learning through observation of what happens in daily life activities. The learners learn to do things by heart and can perform them again promptly without formal instruction. Scientific concept is knowledge the learners

gain via attending the program offered by educational institutes with fixed objective learning, learning outcomes, activities, and assessment.

Everyday knowledge can be transformed to be scientific concept in order to make it more systematic. For example, a child might learn how to calculate mathematically very fast with his/her own individual method. Later, when he/she attend mathematic class at school, what is learned from the past can be transferred as academic formula of calculation, in particular with processes of obvious mathematic analysis until the outcomes are found. For L2 acquisition, the mediation—the assistance as connector between learners’ actual competence and ZPD, such as, social, historical, cultural mediation, thought and language, social interaction, and guidance or scaffold instruction is necessary inter-related components to promote learners’ achievement as shown in figure 2. The intra-communication occurs repetitively at the beginning stage of learning when the children cannot access the concepts of something. Later on, when they are competent enough to do that thing more effectively, this process is substituted automatically by internalization—use of mental ability to decide what to do for a particular task. Relatedly, Vygotskian theory is a developed version of Piagetian idea to promote active learning on basis of social interaction—social constructivism (McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002). Scaffolding technique is another key point to be discussed in the present study as it is one process of the innovative teaching.

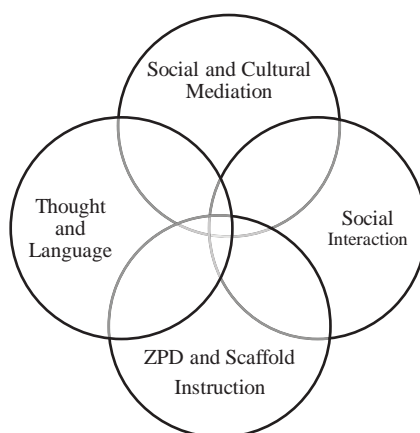


Figure 2 A dynamic process of ZPD for classroom application
(Adapted from McDevitt & Ormrod, 2002)

Scaffolding Technique

As discussed in the previous section, understanding ZPD assists teachers in preparing the learners to be able to solve problems in real life communication. Then, scaffolding is a relevant technique to support such a theory. Wood, Bruner, & Ross (1976: 98) define scaffolding as an interactional role between learners and teachers while providing helps related to the assigned tasks or problems, and learners’ problem-solving

skill is highly expected after the use of this technique. The assistances may come up with guidance, facilitations, or suggestions. The individual support is provided through the aiding strategy (Chang, Chen, & Sung, 2002).

While learning languages, the knowledge to be gained embeds in part of scaffold or social support for the new perception. (Raymond, 2000: 176). Olson and Pratt (2000) suggest that scaffolding instruction should introduce the new tasks beyond the level of learners' actual ability to affirm that they cannot complete them alone by themselves, and this brings them to ZPD. The characteristics of scaffolding activities are studied by some scholars, such as, Bransford, Brown, & Cocking (2000), McKenzie (1999) and Wood et al. (1976). Table 1 shows the comparison of these characteristics.

Table 1 The characteristics of scaffolding activities

Walqui (2006)	Bransford et al. (2000)	McKenzie (1999)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Give model ● Bridge ● Contextualize ● Build schema ● Re-present text ● Develop metacognition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Motivate learners' interest related to the task ● Simplify the task for manageability ● Provide direction so that the learners focus on achieving the goal ● Indicate differences between the learners' work and the expected outcome ● Reduce frustration and risk ● Definite the activities to be implemented 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Provide clear direction and reduces students' confusion ● Clarify purpose ● Keep students on task ● Clarify expectations and incorporates assessment and feedback ● Guide learners to helpful sources ● Maximize learning by reducing uncertainty and eliminating difficulties

Those scaffolding activity characteristics from table 1 are synthesized to be the following activities applied to the present study.

(1) Attracting learners' attention, e.g., use of guiding question or real-life problems.

(2) Defining learning goal, e.g., group discussion as a socialization to share the same goal of learning.

(3) Simplifying directions of activities, e.g., explaining what learners need to do to achieve goal step by step.

(4) Reducing learners' frustration e.g. attempt to observe learners' difficulties and give pieces of advice if necessary or until all forms of frustration are cleared up.

(5) Providing feedback on learners' work e.g. work checking or exchange of ideas between teacher and learners for further improvements.

(6) Supporting learners' learning e.g. demonstration and giving other learning sources.

To picture the way of applying scaffolding technique to EFL class, the followings are demonstration of how this technique is useful to reinforce learners' ZPD.

Holistic learning objective: Students understand the concepts of 'Past Verb Forms' and use them correctly according to the context.

Today's learning objective: Students differentiate regular verb forms from the irregular ones

Actual development:

Learners achieve present verb forms (present simple, present progressive, and present perfect).Learners have just learned past simple 'regular' verb form.

Teacher asks the students to complete the sentence below.

"Yesterday, Peter (to read) some books before going to bed."

In case the students / some students answer as, "Yesterday, Peter readed some books before going to bed.", this reveals their 'ZPD' which refers to needs in learning irregular past verb forms.

ZPD:

There are at least 3 alternative choices of scaffolding-based teaching and learning patterns for the teacher to choose regarding students' different learning competence rather than direct method. They involve:

- (1) Allowing the low-proficiency students to share experiences and knowledge with the higher-ones about the related verb forms.
- (2) Asking the students to search for the correct form of the verb via possible sources, such as, dictionary, the Internet, etc.
- (3) Giving a hint by showing sufficient examples of the particular category of the verb form, e.g., to cut, to put, to let, to cast, to hit, to hurt, etc. (No changes in verb form.)

(4) Providing further exercises on changing of regular and irregular past verb forms.

These methods are recommended to be implemented respectively, in particular method (3) where teacher should wrap up the concept through providing guidelines to build up learners' cognitivism instead of blunt explanation.

Potential development:

To serve the holistic learning objective, teacher might leave an advanced question like completion of the following typical sentence with a bit change of contextual clues as shown below.

"Yesterday, I..... (read) books at the library **for the whole afternoon.**"
(Extra-linguistic knowledge/Context)

The students should realize the influence of word '*Yesterday*', but still lack the connectivity between tense and aspect, namely 'past perfect' in this context. Hence, this problem remains their future lesson to solve next time.

The disadvantages of scaffolding instruction include time-consuming to meet the individual interest of each learner, challenging task when implementing with big-sized class, requiring of teachers' training, ignoring class control and error made by learners, limited application to some specific lessons. However, it is worth to use this strategy to promote active learning since it requires the full engagement of learners in completing the tasks. Besides, the students realize their valuable potentiality once they can complete tasks with teacher's compliment as to reduce the negative attitude towards overcoming the difficult tasks.

Conclusion

SLA-based learning contributed to learners' L2 input comprehensibility by means of both theoretical and practical classroom activities applying scaffolding technique. Such a technique is related to collaborative learning and participation in solving linguistic and communicative problems among teachers, learners, and their peers through group or pair activities. The more skilled persons, e.g., teacher and group members with higher linguistic proficiency guided and exchanged their deeper knowledge to promote the inferior learners' ZPD. According to Brooks & Donato (1995) posited that acquiring L2 arises when shared understandings are socially built up. Also, the findings from ample recent studies were reported in favour of applying this sociocultural approach in L2 class. (Van Compernelle, 2010; Van Compernelle & Kinginger, 2013; and Tajeddin & Tayebipour, 2015). In context of EFL in Thailand where low motivation and negative attitudes towards learning EFL are still detected, scaffolding technique is highly suggested to solve these problems since it enhances learners' partial

self-dependency to achieve success with indirect facilitation from their teachers and peers.

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