

Scaffolding Reading Strategies of EFL Learners

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Abstract – The present study set out to investigate the effect of scaffolding in promoting EFL Learners' reading strategies in three areas of finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences. To this end, an intact class with five learners majoring in English at a private language institute in Sanandaj, Iran were selected as the participants of the study. For data collection purposes, three pre-tests each determining the present knowledge of the participants in the three reading strategies, and three post-tests each determining the knowledge of the participants in the three reading strategies after the mediation processes were conducted. Paired-Samples t-test analyses were run to investigate the differences between each pre-test with its post-test counterpart on the one hand, and to find a better way to promote EFL learners' reading strategies on the other hand. The results of the Paired-Samples t-test analyses revealed that by applying scaffolding in the process of learning, EFL learners' reading strategies in these three areas can be promoted. It was concluded that EFL learners who are scaffolded and mediated while reading a text can easily promote their reading strategies. The results, as well as the implications, of the study are discussed in more details in the article.

Keywords: scaffolding, reading strategies, mediation

I. INTRODUCTION

“Scaffolding refers to providing contextual supports for meaning through the use of simplified language, teacher modelling, visuals and graphics, cooperative learning and hands-on learning” (Ovando, Collier, & Combs, 2003, p. 345). Scaffolding argues that while learners are assessed, some interventions should be embedded in order to interpret individuals' abilities and lead them to higher levels of functioning. Vygotsky (1984) in a research into the development of cognitive functions revealed cognitive abilities were not innate. He considered this process as the new ways of thinking, and acting that an individual was supported by interactions with others. In an approach named Sociocultural Theory of Mind developed by Vygotsky in 1984, the development of higher forms of consciousness occurs through a process of internalisation. He further suggests that this process of internalisation initially occurs as the interaction between human beings. Poehner (2005) suggests learners cannot improve their abilities from independent performance. He claims learners' abilities are attainable if scaffolding techniques be applied. Furthermore, he proposes that scaffolding is an effective means of understanding learners' abilities and it can help them overcome linguistic problems.

The findings of a number of studies suggest that learners who are mediated in the process of learning and assessment learn better and faster. Royanto (2012) conducted a study in order to investigate an intervention programme based on scaffolding to improve metacognitive strategies in reading. He used three activities named reciprocal teaching, tutoring with peers, and reading as a homework in order to improve learners' metacognitive strategies. He revealed that the intervention was effective for helping novice learners to use metacognitive strategies. Furthermore, he proposed that the intervention programmes activated the strategies that the learners knew but they had not been able to use them.

Teo (2012) conducted a study to investigate the effects of dynamic assessment on promoting Taiwanese EFL learners' reading strategies. He wanted to promote and assess the learners' reading strategies in three different areas of finding main ideas, using contextual clues, and making inferences. The design of the study was pre-test, mediation treatment, and post-test. He used both implicit and explicit mediation processes to enhance these three strategies in learners. He indicated that appropriately designed mediation processes played a significant role in promoting learners' reading strategies.

Shabani (2012) examined the role of computerized dynamic assessment in delivering computerised texts on L₂ readers' reading comprehension. For assessment procedure he used short reading texts along with their manipulated versions and visual prompts. These prompts were presented when the learners were confronted with failure to provide the correct answers. He found that computerized dynamic assessment could discriminate among low-achieving learners with reference to their responsiveness to electronic mediation and diagnose quite vividly their underlying abilities.

Navarro and Mora (2012) in a study entitled "dynamic assessment of reading difficulties" investigated the changes occurred in a group of learners with reading difficulties in response to the application of a dynamic assessment processes involved in reading. There were 133 participants in this study. They were divided to two groups, one assigned as experimental group and the other one as the control group. The design of the study was pre-test, treatment, post-test (i.e. sandwich format of DA). He found that significant improvements in reading comprehension would occur if reading difficulties be accompanied with the dynamic assessment processes.

Mardani and Tavakoli (2011) conducted a study to investigate an interactionist model of DA to assess reading comprehension of 30 Iranian male learners. Data were collected before and after implementation of DA through administrations of multiple-choice reading comprehension tests. The findings of the study provided significant improvement in student performance after implementation. They concluded that incorporation of DA as a supplement procedure to standard testing had positive effects on both test performance and learning of learners.

Price et al. (2009) examined beginners' automated assessments in reading. They selected a set of speech recognition and verification experiments. Then they compared teacher scores with automatic scores in order to decide when a novel pronunciation was best viewed as a reading error or as dialect variation. They revealed that teachers were not familiar with all the dialect systems and automated assessments could improve the consistency and

fairness of reading assessment. They also found that automatic methods performed best when the acoustic models were trained. They suggested that the training condition was necessary for automatic reading assessment because a child's reading ability was not directly observable in one utterance.

Pritchard and Nasr (2004) investigated some ways to improve reading skills among third level engineering students at an Egyptian College of Technology. Most of the participants had some negative attitudes towards English. They carried out a needs analysis in order to establish what the students and their teachers deemed most important. They used this taxonomy of skills as the basis for developing a reading improvement programme in the experimental group. The control group was taught by the reading materials currently used in the institution. The mean scores of the students in the experimental group increased significantly. They concluded that teachers should understand and begin to use the subject concepts from their learners. They should carry out a needs analysis and negotiate with them in order to develop learners' reading. They further claimed that teachers should not present themselves as the only authority and the primary information providers in the class.

Ajideh, Farrokhi and Nourdad (2012) investigated the reading ability of 9 EFL learners at three proficiency levels of advanced, intermediate, and beginners. These participants were assessed dynamically during five weeks. They indicated that there were five major data types that could only be obtained by conducting dynamic assessment. The data included an exact determination of examinees' capabilities, recognising the source of problem, recognising and determining the stage of the problem, predicting the potential of the examinees' development within their ZPDs, and the extent to go far beyond the limits for a later independency. They further discovered some differences in the data types for the readers at different levels.

Lee Swanson and Orosco (2011) conducted a study to see whether or not dynamic assessment predicts reading growth of the learners. They investigated the validity of dynamic assessment on reading abilities. The study was conducted over a three-year period. The participants of the study were 78 children. Some of the participants had some reading disabilities and some were without reading disabilities. Some working memory tasks were conducted under some testing conditions namely initial, gain, and maintenance. They revealed that maintenance testing conditions could significantly predict comprehension and vocabulary growth. They further proposed that gain testing conditions significantly predicted non-word fluency growth. The results of the study further suggested that the dynamic assessment of working memory tasks significantly predicted later reading performance.

Alavi, Kaivanpanah and Shabani (2011) investigated the effect of group dynamic assessment (G-DA) on identifying the mediational strategies. The purpose of the study was also to investigate whether or not G-DA-based instruction had an effect on the co-construction of knowledge among L₂ listeners. The construction of the assessment procedures were made of microgenetic, longitudinal and interactionist methodologies. The participants of the study were a group of second language learners whom their age ranged from 20 to 25. For the assessment sessions they used some authentic texts selected from VOA broadcasts. The results of their study showed that collective scaffolding could help learners to co-construct the pieces of knowledge. They also revealed that secondary and primary interactants mutually

benefited from each other's contributions. Furthermore, the mediational strategies helped the learners' microgenetic and developmental trajectories.

The findings suggest that scaffolding is a crucial technique in promoting EFL learners reading strategies and reading comprehension. However, it remains unclear whether scaffolding has a significant effect on EFL learners' reading strategies in the three areas of finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of words, and making inferences. Thus, the following research question was addressed: *Does scaffolding promote EFL Learners' reading strategies in the three areas of finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of words, and making inferences?*

II. METHOD

A. Participants

The study was carried out in a private language institute in Sanandaj, Iran between June 2013 and August 2013. There were five seventeen to nineteen year-old participants. The participants were all male, as a result sex was not considered as the moderator variable. They were EFL learners in one of the courses taught by the researcher. The participants were all at the same proficiency level.

B. Procedure

There was one intact class which was assigned as experimental group. For the pre-test, the researcher gave the learners three short passages selected from *New Insight into IELTS* developed by Jakeman and McDowell (2009). The passages were selected to assess the participants' reading strategies in three areas: finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences. For the treatment, the researcher mediated the learners in the reading strategies. For doing this the researcher used two successive activities, the preparation and the intervention. The preparation activities included preparation of the assessment, pilot study, preparation of the sample, and preparation of the intervention. The intervention activities included assessment of the general ability, reading comprehension test, pre-test to know these three strategies in novice readers, intervention, and post-test to know the three strategies in novice readers. Each session the ZPD of the learners were compared with the previous session by counting the number of hints or prompts offered to help the learners arrive at the answer. The assumption was that the more the learners asked for help, the lower their ZPD level would be. For the post-test, the researcher gave the learners three other short passages from *New Insight into IELTS*. They were similar to the pre- test passages. The same strategies were assessed again.

C. Materials and Instruments

The reading texts were selected from the participants' course book namely *New Insight into IELTS* by Jakeman and McDowell (2009). It contained the materials to promote

the four skills of reading, speaking, writing, and listening in learners, and prepare them for IELTS. The course book included the materials to gradually build up the skills, language and test techniques in learners, so they could approach IELTS with confidence. In this institute the course book was intended for learners who had finished the course book of Interchange and were about to get their diploma. This study focused mainly on the parts which were pertinent to reading skill and strategies.

D. Data analysis

In this study the researcher wanted to find the effect of scaffolding on EFL Learners' reading strategies. So the independent variable was scaffolding, and the dependent variables were EFL Learners' reading strategies (i.e. finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences). The researcher compared the performance of the participants in the pre-tests and post-tests. As a result, three Paired-Samples t-test analyses were used.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The researcher determined the baseline by collecting the data through the three pre-tests, each one assessing one of the strategies of finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences. By collecting the data through the three post-tests, each one assessing the same strategies, the researcher tried to analyse the data while using a statistical technique.

To investigate whether or not scaffolding promote the three reading strategies of EFL Learners, three Paired-Samples t-tests were run. The results are summarised in the table below:

Paired Samples t-tests, investigating the differences between the pre-tests and post-tests of reading strategies (i.e. finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words and making inferences)

| | | Paired Differences | | | | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
|--------|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|-----------------|---|---------|--------|----|-----------------|
| | | Mean | Std. Deviation | Std. Error Mean | 95% Confidence Interval of the Difference | | | | |
| | | | | | Lower | Upper | | | |
| Pair 1 | Pretest1 - Posttest1 | -2.50000 | 1.56125 | .69821 | -4.43855 | -.56145 | -3.581 | 4 | .023 |
| Pair 2 | Pretest2 - Posttest2 | -1.90000 | 1.16726 | .52202 | -3.34935 | -.45065 | -3.640 | 4 | .022 |
| Pair 3 | Pretest3 - Posttest3 | -2.45000 | 1.87417 | .83815 | -4.77709 | -.12291 | -2.923 | 4 | .043 |

As the results show, there is a significant difference between pre-test 1 and post-test 1. Pre-test 1 and post-test 1 assessed the strategy of finding main ideas. Therefore, it could be suggested that using scaffolding and mediation processes can promote the reading strategy of finding main ideas in the EFL learners.

The results also indicate that there is a significant difference between pre-test 2 and post-test 2. Pre-test 2 and post-test 2 assessed the reading strategy namely, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words. As a result, it could be proposed that using scaffolding and mediation processes can promote another reading strategy of the learners, namely, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words.

The results further show that there is a significant difference between pre-test 3 and post-test 3. Pre-test 3 and post-test 3 investigated the third reading strategy included in this study namely, making inferences. Hence, it could be proposed that using scaffolding and mediation processes can promote the third reading strategy of the learners, namely, making inferences.

The findings of the study imply that the strategies of finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences can be learned and promoted in the classroom, as long as the teacher put the pace of learning of the EFL learners into consideration. The teacher and the peers can cooperate and help other less capable learners to get to the zone of proximal development area. The less capable learners also develop these three strategies by modeling the behaviour of the teachers and also the expert peers. These three strategies can be better taught and promoted if teachers accommodate learners' current abilities. If the teachers understand the learners' pace of learning they can facilitate the learning process by scaffolding. As Poehner (2005) pointed out, learners' learning abilities could be promoted if their abilities be scaffolded.

IV. IMPLICATIONS

The findings of the study could benefit EFL teachers and learners. EFL teachers can scaffold the three reading strategies (i.e. finding main ideas, using contextual clues to predict the meanings of vocabulary words, and making inferences) to contribute and promote EFL learners' reading skills and to further facilitate the process of English language learning. Additionally, the more capable EFL learners can scaffold and improve the three reading strategies of the less capable EFL learners.

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