

Teachers' Strategies in Providing Scaffolding in English for Young Learners Classroom

Hanifia Arlinda

Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia

Bandung, Indonesia

hanifia.arlinda@gmail.com

Abstract—The high demand for English to be taught at the primary level in Indonesia fosters the needs of EYL teachers who are qualified in terms of teaching and mastering content knowledge. Language proficiency is considered as one of the factors which determine the quality of English teacher (Richards, 2015). This study, therefore, aims at scrutinizing the extent to which English for young learners' teachers provide scaffolding as well as exploring their language proficiency and its influence in providing scaffolding in the classroom. Employing a descriptive qualitative study, two English teachers with a high level of proficiency were invited to become the participants. Through classroom observation followed by teacher interviews, it is found that teachers employed several types of scaffolding such as modeling, bridging, and contextualizing. Furthermore, language proficiency can help the teachers in providing scaffolding to young learners in terms of providing good language models, maintaining the use of English in the classroom, giving explanations and instructions in English, and providing examples of words and grammatical structures.

Keywords: *classroom interaction, EYL, scaffolding, teachers' language proficiency*

I. INTRODUCTION

In the classroom context, the teacher is seen as a significant factor who determines the success of their learners in achieving the learning goals. For the students to achieve their goals, the teacher needs to provide materials as well as for instructions effectively. To become effective, the teachers need to meet the competencies required to teach English, one of which is having a high level of English proficiency (Richards, 2015). This belief is supported by many kinds of research that have been employed to find out how significant teachers' target language proficiency (TTLP) for the teacher in giving instructions in the language classrooms (Canh and Renandya, 2017; Khaliliaqdam, 2014; Richards, 2017; Tsang, 2017). TTLP has widely been recognized as one of the significant aspects of teacher expertise as this factor has an impact on learners' learning (Butler, 2004; Richards, 2015) as well as on their mastery of the target language. From that perspective, it can be assumed that teacher with such quality, a good level of proficiency, would signify their role as a learning mediator.

In terms of language learning, various strategies can be applied by the teachers to assist their students in developing language and the knowledge of subject matter from the interactive and sociocultural perspective (Walqui, 2006). One such way, *scaffolding*, is in line with a sociocultural theory

which becomes the main focus of this study. The term *scaffolding* was firstly employed by Bruner (1983) to capture the nature of guidance and support in the process of learning. Besides, Suherdi (2008) delineated *scaffolding* as an instructional help to provide the learners to master certain knowledge or competencies. Considering the advantages of applying *scaffolding* in language learning, this paper aims at delving into the phenomena of *scaffolding* used by the teachers to assist their students to achieve their potential development. The area in which *scaffolding* is given by the teachers is called a zone of proximal development (ZPD) of which the term first introduced by Vygotsky in 1978.

Although the issue of language proficiency has already been spread in literature, the research on teachers' proficiency and its relation to the way of providing *scaffolding* young learners is still scarcely found. In Indonesia, the status of English as an international language has placed greater demand for high-quality English teachers who are considered effective in teaching their learners to achieve the objective that is mastering English. English is taught at different levels of learners including at the primary level. Although English is not included in the Indonesian curriculum for elementary school students, the high demand of English for young learners is still considered significant. This demand is likely due to the result of English teaching in a secondary school which is still shown its failure (Sadtono, 2007). Therefore, many parents expect their children to obtain early instruction in English to prepare them before entering secondary school. To cater to this issue, many primary schools in Indonesia offer English subjects as an extracurricular subject. Additionally, it is seen the mushrooming private institutions which offer English program for young learners. In regards to this issue and my personal experience as an English teacher for the young learner, I conduct this study to scrutinize the phenomena of how the teachers cater to the needs of their learners considering their competence in instructing English.

The following research questions were addressed to scrutinize the influence of teachers' language proficiency in providing scaffolding in EYL classroom, as follow:

1. To what extent do EYL teachers provide scaffolding in their classrooms?
2. How do teachers' language proficiency influence EYL teachers in providing scaffolding in the classroom?

A. Teachers' Target Language Proficiency

The problem that I encountered in researching teachers' target language proficiency is to find out an exact definition of teachers' target language proficiency. The term becomes more complicated since it is hard to measure what minimum level of proficiency that a teacher should possess to teach in the classroom. If we take a look at the general definition of language proficiency, Bachman and Palmer (1996) define the term language proficiency as 'knowledge competence or the ability in the use of a language'. However, this conception becomes more complex when language proficiency is placed in the pedagogical context. To delve into the definition of teachers' language proficiency, I collected several works from scholars whose teachers' language proficiency is their interest. The majority of scholars found it challenging to conduct a study on teacher' language proficiency due to abroad definitions and the measurement of the required level of proficiency should be possessed by the teachers is difficult to stipulate. In 1996, Bachman and Palmer identified six areas of proficiency that a language teacher needs to possess, such as organizational knowledge, textual knowledge, pragmatic knowledge, functional knowledge, and socio-linguistic knowledge. Those interrelated areas, however, could not determine an objective measure of teachers' proficiency in the target language. In line with the statement, Lantolf and Frawley (1988) stated that it is difficult to construe proficiency as it is an open system, for that reason proficiency is also difficult to measure. Therefore, to decide whether or not one teacher is proficient relies upon the way this multifaceted construct is construed (Pasternak and Bailey, 2004). In the context of teachers' target language proficiency, Freeman, Katz, Gomez, and Burns (2015) separated the concept of general proficiency: 'teacher language proficiency, not as general English proficiency but as a specialized subset of language skills required to prepare and teach lessons. In a similar vein, Richards (2015) characterizes language proficiency as one aspect of subject knowledge along with knowledge of second language acquisition, pedagogical, curricular and syllabus as well as cultural knowledge.

More specifically, Richards (2015) defined teachers' language proficiency as a capability of one language teacher in providing good language model, maintaining use of English in the classroom, giving explanations and instructions in English, providing examples of words and grammatical structures, giving accurate explanations of meanings of English words and grammatical items, using and adapting authentic English-language resources in teaching, monitoring one's speech and writing for accuracy, giving correct feedback on learner's language use, providing input at an appropriate level of difficulty and engaging in improvisational teaching.

As for this present study, teachers' general language proficiency realized teachers' scores on a standardized test used for examining the influence of their target language proficiency in providing *scaffolding* in their classroom. This study does not aim at comparing, yet to find out any uniqueness of two teachers with a high level of English proficiency in providing classroom instructions to scaffold young learners.

B. Scaffolding

Many researchers have constructed a definition of *scaffolding*, yet many of the concepts share the same idea that *scaffolding* refers to the steps or stages provided to help the learners to achieve their potential development and the area within which scaffolding *occurs* is called ZPD. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to be put in a definition is the following:

"It is 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." (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86)

The aforementioned theories suggested that teachers have the main responsibility to assist their learners to complete their tasks independently. In a similar vein, Bruner (1983) highlighted that in providing *scaffolding*, teachers do not mean to create the task easier, but rather to make it possible for the learners to complete the task with assistance. Suherdi (2008) also suggests several points to characterize the kinds of help that teachers can provide through *scaffolding*: 1) the classroom activities provided by the teachers should be beyond the learners' actual level of development, 2) the activities should be relevant to the concept and the learners' competences. Suherdi (2008) added if the choices of activities do not handle with care, it leads to the learners' confusion in taking any parts of the teaching and learning process.

In the pedagogical context, there are three scales of *scaffolding*: contingent, collaborative and interactive (Walqui, 2006). Contingent means that it depends on existed behavior that will determine any type of help that is needed to support the learners. It is collaborative when achievement is a result of joint achievement. Finally, it is interactive, when the activities are open for interaction in which negotiation occurs between teacher and learners (Schwieter, 2010). Within those three scales, Van Lier (2004) coined six central features of *scaffolding*, such as continuity, contextual support, inter-subjectivity, contingency, handover, and flow.

C. Scaffolding Instruction for Young English Language Learners

The types of scaffolding provided below are synthesized from literature. Walqui (2006) suggested these strategies to be used by teachers in assisting their learners to achieve the learning goals. For the data analysis, I use the following six strategies as a framework to examine the extent to which teachers scaffold their learners.

1. Modeling. In this state, learners are provided with clear examples of what is expected for them to imitate. Learners, during this activity, see or hear what a developing product looks like. The purpose of modeling is to develop content understanding and later learners could modify the tasks into their personal use (Walqui, 2006).
2. Bridging. This is the ability of teachers to connect learners' prior knowledge before delivering the new concept to the learners. The goal of this type of

scaffolding is to establish a personal connection between the learners and the subject being learned. By doing so, the materials given will be relevant to the learners' life as an individual.

3. Contextualizing. Contextualizing means that teachers need to bring context which is closer to learners' world experience. This strategy aims at making the language learning more comprehensible for the learners and reducing the cognitive demands of learners. In this stage, the teacher might embed the language in a sensory context by using manipulatives, pictures, films, and/or authentic materials to make the language accessible and engaging for learners.
4. Schema building. It refers to 'a process of organizing learners' knowledge and understanding' (Walqui, 2006). This strategy allows learners to process information from top-down or having general knowledge before studying the details. In the case of young learners, a teacher giving a broad knowledge before introducing any kind of vocabulary or expressions used in the given situation.
5. Re-presenting text. In this case, learners transform the knowledge that they have received into different kinds of text.
6. Developing metacognition. Metacognition has been construed as 'the ability to monitor one's current level of understanding and decide when it is not adequate' (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000). This strategy is used by the teacher to develop learners' thinking abilities in solving the problem.

II. METHOD

This study employed a descriptive qualitative case study. The case study design is considered appropriate for this study since it is primarily concerned with meaning rather than generalization (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, this study involved a small number of respondents. In this study, I invited two English teachers with a high level of proficiency who teach English for Young Learners program in one of the English courses in Bandung to join as participants.

There are several considerations for choosing the participants. First, to answer the research question related to target language proficiency, the two teachers were chosen due to their high score of standardizing test of English. Second, they are considered experienced proven by their teaching periods that are more than five years. Lastly, they teach the same level of young learners English that is at the pre-intermediate level.

To collect the data, I employed a classroom observation followed by an interview with the teacher. Each teacher was observed for a 100-minute lesson. To analyzed the data, the classroom activities were audio-recorded and transcribed. To answer the first RQ, the data was analyzed following six types of scaffolding proposed by Walqui (2006). Meanwhile, the second research question will be descriptively analyzed following competencies that Richards (2015) pointed out related to teachers' language proficiency.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Below are the findings and discussions of the observed lessons as well as the relevant teachers' interviews to answer proposed research questions.

A. Teacher 1 (Donna)

In the observed lesson, the topic that was being introduced was about the holiday. Learners were expected to identify activities doing on holiday and to use an expression to tell about plans for the holiday. During my observation, I could see that the teacher provided several strategies to scaffold the learners in completing their tasks.

The teacher also employed one of the *scaffolding* strategies that is *contextualizing* to introduce the term holiday to the learners (Walqui, 2006). The use of authentic material in teaching young learners was considered important since they are introduced with hands-on activity (Mustafa, 2010). However, in terms of language use, the teacher tended to use Bahasa Indonesia in giving instructions.

Apart from the difficulty, the teacher employed other strategies in giving instruction such as using gestures, pictures, and other media when she thinks that the learners will understand what she means. She would rather switch the language when the instruction is too complicated. To scaffold the learners, Donna could provide a good language model. The teacher provided the language model by giving an example of using accurate pronunciation as well as grammatical structures. It is in line with Richards (2015) who believed that teachers' target language proficiency is useful for the teacher particularly in transferring the linguistic features appropriately to the learners. Furthermore, it can be seen from the extract that she did not teach grammar explicitly to young learners. She rather asked the learners to repeat the expression. Therefore, in the end, the learner could independently use the expression and the teacher could remove the scaffold (Van Lier, 1996).

Above all, the scaffolding used by the teacher is considered effective in assisting students to achieve the learning goal. Through *contextualizing*, the students were seen as more engaged in the learning process as they can connect their prior knowledge with what they are going to learn. However, the students did not get much exposure when the teacher instructed Bahasa Indonesia rather than giving more exposure to English.

To summarize, the teacher has provided appropriate activities to scaffold the learners within their Zone of Proximal Development. This supports the study conducted by Li (2012) which suggests that language learning is more supportive if the teacher gives appropriate strategy in mediating the learners to learn the language. She performed various types of scaffolding mentioned by Walqui (2006), such as bridging, modelling, contextualizing, and developing learners' metacognition. Her high level of proficiency is considered effective in providing language models, providing examples of words and grammatical structures and monitoring the accuracy of the learners in using the language. However, her language proficiency, on the other hand, hinders her to maintain the use of English in the classroom due to the complex language which she believes hard to be understood by the learners. This result

supports the result of Cahn and Renandya's (2017) work which mentioned that language proficiency created limited opportunities for the learners to gain more exposure to the target language.

B. Teacher 2 (Adam)

The topic introduced in Adam's lesson was about animals. Through his lesson, the learners are expected to be able to identify types of animals and to recognize parts of animals' bodies. Compare to Donna, Adam used English more frequently in giving instructions. When he encountered difficulty in using the language, he facilitated their learners through gestures and drawing some pictures on the board to provide meanings. Yet again, although he used mostly English in the classroom, he did not offer many opportunities for the learners to use the language. Besides, the teacher neglects the use of *scaffolding* to develop learners' metacognition. As stated by Walqui (2006), in teaching target language, the teacher has to be able to develop learners' thinking skills, thus they could become more independent language users.

In scaffolding the language, the teacher uses mostly *bridging* strategy in which he created an opportunity for the learners to connect the lesson being learned with their prior knowledge.

Language breakdown might happen when learners could not find the correct word. To avoid this situation, the teacher feed in the missing language with *scaffolding*. When a learner has performed an understanding of the task and considered ready to 'take over', 'the scaffold can be removed and the learner internalizes the task and reflects on it' (Van Lier, 1996). In extract 4, the teacher was trying to introduce different types of parts of an animal's body which functions to cover their body. In the beginning, he tried to draw a picture of feathers and let the learners guess the word for a feather. The learner then gave a correct answer but in Bahasa Indonesia. To stimulate the learner, the teacher used a *hangman* game that is kind of guessing game in which learners could guess the word if only they mention the letters needed to form an expected word. This strategy is considered effective to engage the learners in the activity.

In conclusion, Adam has shown several *scaffolding* strategies such as *bridging* and *modeling*. Meanwhile, the influence of his language proficiency is considered effective for employing his *scaffolding* strategies. His language proficiency helps him in maintaining the use of English in the classroom, giving accurate explanations of meanings of English words and grammatical items, giving correct feedback on learner language use (Richards, 2015).

IV. CONCLUSION

Generally, teachers' language proficiency is considered significant in providing *scaffolding* to language learners. This study shows that language proficiency helps the teachers to give good models of language use, raise their confidence, and enhance learners' participation. However, the lessons employed by two teachers are shown to have limited opportunities for the learners' participation in the classroom. The observed lesson from Donna seems to suggest that she did not feel necessary to

give most of the instructions in English since the young learners might get confused with her explanation. Meanwhile, Adam's unnecessarily lengthy explanations also suggest that his high proficiency does not always indicate an effective classroom teaching.

To sum up, the teacher's role is a mediator, who employs language as a 'psychological tool to scaffold student learning through social interaction' (Vygotsky, 1978). It can be assumed that learners could obtain optimal learning when they are well scaffolded by the teacher who uses language appropriately in the classroom. To become an effective teacher, English for Young Learners' English teachers is expected to possess an advanced level of proficiency in English. Nevertheless, classroom English proficiency is also important. In other words, English teacher not only has to be highly proficient in the language but also has to be equipped by pedagogical knowledge in using the language to scaffold the learners by engaging them in contextual and meaningful interactions. This study, thus, provides a recommendation for teacher education programs to design a balanced approach to addressing the language proficiency. The approach that is needed to improve not only teachers' language proficiency but also their skills in making use of the target language to scaffold their learners in achieving optimal learning.

REFERENCES

- Butler, Y. G. (2004). What level of English proficiency do elementary school teachers need to attain to teach EFL? Case studies from Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. *TESOL Quarterly*, 38(2), 245-78. doi: 10.2307/3588380
- Bachman, L. F., & Palmer, A. S. (1996). *Language testing in practice: Designing and developing useful language tests* (Vol. 1). Oxford University Press.
- Bransford, J. D., Brown, A. L., & Cocking, R. R. (2000). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, and school*. Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.
- Bruner, J. (1983). *Child's talk*. New York: Norton.
- Canh, L. V., & Renandya, W. A. (2017). Teachers' English proficiency and classroom language use: A conversation analysis study. *RELC Journal*, 48(1), 1-15. doi: 10.1177/0033688217690935
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4th Edn.). Boston, MA: Pearson.
- Freeman, D., Katz, A., Gomez, G., & Burns, A. (2015). English for teaching: Rethinking teacher proficiency in the classroom. *ELT Journal*, 69(2), 129-39. doi: 10.1093/elt/ccu074
- Khaliliaqdam, S., (2014). ZPD, scaffolding, and basic speech development in EFL classroom. *Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences*. 98, 891-897. doi: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.497
- Lantolf, J. P., & Frawley, W. (1988). Proficiency: Understanding the construct. *Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, 10(2), 181-195. doi: 10.1017/S0272263100007300
- Li, X. (2012). The role of teachers' beliefs in the language teaching-learning process. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(7), 1397-1402.
- Pasternak, M., & Bailey, K. M. (2004). Preparing nonnative English-speaking teachers: issues of professionalism and proficiency. In L. D. Kamhi-Stein (Ed.) *Learning and teaching from experience: Perspectives on Nonnative English-speaking professionals* (pp. 155-175). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2015). *Key issues in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Richards, J. C. (2017). Teaching English through English: Proficiency, pedagogy, and performance. *RELC Journal*, 48(1), 7-30. doi: 10.1177/0033688217690059

- Sadtono, E. (2007). *A concise history of TEFL in Indonesia*. Busan: Asia TEFL.
- Schwieter, J. (2010). Developing second language writing through scaffolding in the ZPD: A magazine project for an authentic audience. *Journal of College, Teaching, & Learning*, 7 (10), 31-46. doi: 10.19030/tlc.v7i10.154
- Suherdi, D. (2008). *Scaffolding in Junior High School (SMP) English teaching learning processes*. Paper presented at the 1st International Conference on Applied Linguistics. Bandung: Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia.
- Tsang, A. (2017). EFL/ESL teachers' general language proficiency and learners' engagement. *RELC Journal*, 48(1), 99-113. doi: 10.1177/0033688217690060
- Van Lier, L., (1996). *Interaction in the language classroom*. Essex: Longman Group.
- Van Lier, L. (2004). The semiotics and ecology of language learning. *Utbildning & Demokrati*, 13(3), 79-103.
- Walqui, A. (2006). Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9, 159-180. doi: 10.1080/13670050608668639
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.