

A Research on Scaffolding Instruction of College English Writing Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Writing ability is viewed as an important competence of language output. With the college English teaching reform, writing in some English examinations takes a greater part compared with other abilities; however, students' writing skills are not satisfactory. As far as writing teaching is concerned, students and teachers feel that the arrangement of college English class is tight-scheduled, and teaching content in classroom is much heavier, so writing has been a great concern for both students and teachers. Nowadays, scaffolding instruction on the basis of constructivism is accepted and implemented widely by home-and-abroad educationalists. In this paper, setting this research on 42 nursing majors, the author constructs scaffolding for students in writing in the light of writing process, changes teaching plan and procedure, and completes this research with scaffolding instruction in English writing in order to explore an effective way to develop learners' writing skills.

Keywords: *scaffolding instruction, methodology, college English writing teaching, teaching strategy*

writing teaching to improve the students' writing abilities by the effective intervention.

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing of international communication and cooperation in China, Writing skill, in China, is considered as one of the key skills in English learning. In recent years, an increasing number of students and teachers have attached great importance to learning and teaching writing. *The New College English Curriculum Requirements* revised in 2007 by the Chinese Ministry of Education sets higher demands on writing "for non-English majors, students should be able to write brief reports and papers in their areas of specialty, to express their opinions freely, and to write within 30 minutes expository or argumentative essays of no less than 200 words on a given topic. Text should be characterized by clear expression of ideas, rich content, neat structure, and good topic"[1]. Nevertheless, there is no specific writing course as a part of college English due to the set-up of college English curriculum. Most English teachers in university help students write a composition on rare occasions so much so that the students have to write a composition with what little they have learned; consequently, for a great number of students writing a composition is still a challenge and even a difficult thing because of lack of motivation on writing. How to give students a hand for improving their writing ability have become an urgent task that college teachers have to face.

Scaffolding instruction proposed by Vygotsky is one of the models based on constructivism, emphasizing that social context is critical to the development of mental process and the acquisition of knowledge [2]. Practically, scaffolding instruction is applied to many academic fields such as math, physics and so on; furthermore, some researchers devote themselves to doing research on English writing. But, very little action research based on scaffolding instruction is applied to college English writing. In the paper, the author, as a college English teacher, applies scaffolding theory into

2. THEORIES APPLIED IN THE RESEARCH

2.1. Definition of Scaffolding

In pedagogy, scaffolding is a metaphor, which plays the same role. Bruner, a psychologist who had made great contribution to psychology and education, is the first person who proposed the term scaffolding. He defines that scaffolding is 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 [3]. According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross [4], the term scaffolding is tutoring or other assistance provided in a learning setting to assist students with attaining levels of understanding impossible for them to achieve without assistance. In classroom, scaffolding is to serve as a strategy, with which teacher is able to provide students with temporary assistance for learning. When students are encouraged to develop their own motivation, cognition and knowledge, the scaffolding of teacher should fade away. Students are encouraged to internalize knowledge and understand meaning in learning. Mary Lou McCloskey argues that scaffolding is for teachers (or other learners) to support learners to enable them to do what they cannot yet do unsupported [5]. When they achieve independence, the scaffolding is removed, and a higher goal is set. That is to say, scaffolding is a teaching process which can help students cultivate their independence and team-work spirit and reach higher level in learning; when they construct their own knowledge, the importance of scaffolding will

be weakened. According to Ashman and Conway, they use "temporary" and "adjustable" to describe scaffolding instruction that is provided by teacher to facilitate students in developing and extending their skills in the early phases of instruction [6]. Scaffolding instruction in teaching is not permanent, teachers need to withdraw their supports as students develop new understanding. In the view of scaffolding, teachers' roles are transformed from a conductor to a facilitator. When teachers provide students with help or assistance, the interaction is accrued during the process. Students are expected to reach a higher level independently through interaction. According to Vygotsky [2], the development of child is the result of interaction between children and social environment. The students' construction of knowledge, skills and attitudes are by virtue of interaction with peers, not imitating the world around the world.

2.2. Scaffolding as a Teaching Strategy

Scaffolding as a teaching strategy can be widely implemented in language teaching to engage students in learning. McKenzie, in 2000, illustrates six steps to conduct scaffolding instruction in teaching:

1. Provides clear direction and reduces students' confusion;
2. Clarifies purpose;
3. Keeps students on task;
4. Clarifies expectations and incorporates assessment and feedback
5. Points students to worthy source;
6. Reduces uncertainty, surprise, and disappointment. [7]

Before scaffolding construction, teachers must have the ability of anticipating any problems that might occur in scaffolding and guide learners with a clear direction for helping them to complete tasks. Students' confusion and hesitation will decrease with a clear goal. Designing purpose depends on the characteristic of task, so every aspect of purpose should be taken into account in the scaffolding instruction. Besides, teachers provide students with supports continually when they can not achieve independence, keeping students on tasks with explicit and precise direction. Teachers should monitor the class closely and clarify expectations for different students, once students meet with problems in class, and peer and teacher will be quick to give a feedback and assessment for a better solution. Pointing students to a worthy source is the key to reduce their confusion and save time.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research Questions and Subjects

In this research, the question of research is to focus on:

- 1) Can scaffolding instruction help students improve their writing skills?
- 2) Does scaffolding instruction influence learners' attitudes towards English writing?

3) Does scaffolding instruction motivate learners' interests in English writing

The research is going to be implemented in Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine. English is a second language to most of students in Chengdu University of Traditional Chinese Medicine, and English sometimes even is a third language to some specific majors. Likewise, all those students are expected to pass CET-4. The schedule of English class is four periods of one week for non-English majors. The representative subjects of action research consist of 42 students, 4 males and 38 females, who are freshmen.

3.2. The Stages of Research

3.2.1. Pre-writing

During the pre-writing, a clear direction is very crucial for scaffolding instruction. Therefore, the author designed a supportive context for students, choosing a popular topic that students might be familiar with. In the stage of pre-writing, the author prepared some academic papers or newspapers written in English for students after class, asking them to read materials with questions. Afterwards, students in groups discussed what they have read and analyzed the technique used in paper in class, presenting the structure and topic by PowerPoint. Then the selected group members were encouraged to list new vocabulary, some key words and ideas on the blackboard. After that, the teacher gave a comment on their work and advice for students' further reading. Then, what students need to do is to read and analyze those materials in groups; they can distribute tasks to every group member. Afterwards, students in groups discussed what they have read and analyzed the technique used in paper in class, presenting the structure and topic by PowerPoint. Then the selected group members were encouraged to list new vocabulary, some key words and ideas on the blackboard. After that, the teacher gave a comment on their work and advice for students' further reading. During group work, if students had something that confused them, at first, they would think it over on their own; this is one way to cultivate their ability of thinking independently. Thereby, if a student himself could not overcome difficulties, one group can have a discussion concerned with that together, which would enable students to develop a good habit of collaborative learning. This collaborative activity is for easing students' fear and confusion. If a group had any questions, teacher would adopt a way of inspiring them rather than telling them the answer directly.

3.2.2. *While-writing*

Writing an essay is even more difficult than drawing up an outline for students in a limited time. Writing smoothly and effectively is a result of practice. I intended to give students enough time, about 30 minutes, to write an essay about 120 words regarding toxic haze, and instruct them to write this essay with a typical 3-paragraph pattern that they had already known in the pre-writing. Purpose of this stage is to improve their creative thinking and let them have information to convey. The purpose of writing with a familiar topic is for reducing students' frustration in writing.

Scaffolding as a teaching strategy needs to provide a clear direction and reduce students' disappointment. Accordingly, in this stage, as a teacher, I need to support them by providing assistance and help in order to finish the task as soon as possible. In that case, it does not allow me to provide direct help to them, or to tell them how this sentence is organized or what is appropriate word here. Conversely, I attempted to enlighten them and make them ask themselves questions and find an answer individually. This activity was done by a group that consisted of proficient person and lower-level person, and they could interact with each other. The goals of such an arrangement are that students' compositions will become better than before with mutual assistance, and the low-level person can complete task with assistance.

3.2.3 *Post-writing*

Post-writing includes two sections, revising and editing. Scaffolding should clarify expectations and incorporate assessment and feedback (McKenzie 1). In my viewpoint, revising is the work of writer himself, but, editing is the work of peer. In the stage of post-writing, when students had written their essays, they were allowed to revise their own essays and to find out some inappropriate words, incorrect sentences and grammar mistakes. After finishing that, the teacher asked students to exchange their essays with each other in one group. The author gave students evaluating criteria, asking them that when students evaluated partner's

thesis, they needed to write down detailed information. By mutual correction, every group should sum up the type of mistakes when correcting, and give comments on students' papers in terms of structure and contents, and come up with suggestion on how writings could become better, then present their summary in class. The purpose of this activity is to remind students of avoiding making some mistakes again and again. This activity was carried out in every writing class, and I found that students paid more attention to some same mistakes in writing. Grammatical error is a hardship to handle for students, and students do not make sure of its accurate usage in writing too. Thus, teacher must provide active help for students to finish essay together. After class, teacher asked students to hand in all corrected papers and observed students' mistakes, making sure whether or not their papers were corrected exactly and drawing a conclusion of their mistakes and selecting some representative papers in the next class. When I have marked all the papers, I would like to read the selected papers and give comments on the advantages and disadvantages.

4. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

4.1. *Analysis of Pre-questionnaire*

In order to have a basic understanding of students' past experience, writing habits and attitudes regarding writing, the researcher went out of her way to design pre-questionnaire used before scaffolding instruction. This table (Table 4.1) indicates the results of pre-questionnaire. The author handed out 42 questionnaires and 42 are returned. The pre-questionnaire is to find out students' attitudes on writing and writing habits in existence. 10 statements are mentioned in pre-questionnaire, which can be classified into two types. The first two questions refers to learners' attitudes towards writing, and the rest belongs to investigation of on students' writing habits.

Table 1 Statistics of Pre-questionnaire

Statements	Yes	Sometimes	No
Do you enjoy writing?	9	6	27
In general do you trust yourself as a person who can find good words and ideas and perceptions	3	6	33
Do you have awareness of using writing strategies	3	9	30
Are you used to discuss topic with peers during writing?	14	10	18
On a topic of interest to you, can you generate lots of ideas and words fairly quickly and freely—not be stuck?	4	3	35
On a topic that doesn't much interest you(perhaps an assigned topic),can you generate lots of ideas and words fairly quickly and freely—not be stuck?	0	2	40
Can you find problems in your reasoning or logic and straighten them out?	6	5	31
Can you adjust something you've written to fit the needs of particular readers?	5	8	29
Can you get rid of most mistakes in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and soon, so readers would not be put off?	9	3	30
Do you have a habit of exchanging compositions with your partner for further evaluating?	4	2	36

As we can see from the table above, the first question is about students' real opinions in relation to writing, almost 64% students do not like writing, while 14% consider that they are likely to write something if time permits. Only 9 students enjoy writing very much. The second question is to undertake an investigation regarding to students' confidence of writing. As to students' self-confidence in writing, 78% students do not think that they are excellent writers, and only 14% students consider them confident in writing. From the results discussed above, the majority of students think that writing is a tough task in language learning, and most of them dislike writing. What's more, the minority of students are found of writing, and more than 78% students think that they are not good writers who are able to express whatever ideas and perceptions. It can be concluded from the analysis

of pre-questionnaire that the majority of students dislike writing, and that many of them lack self-confidence in writing.

Simultaneously, these students hardly adopt writing strategy to enhance their writing ability, such as self-assessment, peer-evaluation. But, the most important thing is that their vocabulary is not enough for expressing their ideas and opinions freely and quickly.

4.2. Analysis of Post-questionnaire

After employment of scaffolding instruction in English writing teaching, a post-questionnaire is used to investigate students' attitudes towards scaffolding instruction.

Table 2 Statistics of Questionnaire

Items	Strongly agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly disagree
Q1	24	15	3	0	0
Q2	19	20	3	0	0
Q3	17	19	4	2	0
Q4	18	21	2	1	0
Q5	14	25	1	2	0
Q6	20	18	2	2	0
Q7	30	12	0	0	0
Q8	28	14	0	0	0
Q9	13	23	4	2	0
Q10	26	13	2	1	0
Q11	28	12	1	1	0
Q12	20	19	3	0	0

The questionnaire is made of 12 items, all questions were of five-scale Likert-type, with response ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. As is shown over 57% subjects strongly agree that scaffolding instruction has a positive impact on English writing in this experiment. 45% strongly agree and 48% agree that scaffolding instruction indeed has effect on summarizing their points in thesis. 40% strongly agree and 45% agree the effectiveness of scaffolding instruction on integrity of essay, but 9% have no idea about that, and 5% disagree about this effectiveness in this research. More than 60% participators affirm that their topic sentence writing becomes better than before. With scaffolding applied by peers and teacher, 48% strongly agree and 43% agree that scaffolding instruction aids students to choose vocabulary and correct grammatical patterns. It can be concluded that after interaction, students' abilities of using appropriate form of vocabulary are improved. Thus, we may reasonably come to the conclusion that scaffolding instruction is useful for student' English writing. Meanwhile, scaffolding instruction is an efficient way to develop students' writing abilities

5. SUMMARY

According to the data of students' questionnaire and interview, it reveals that the students' writing competences are developing with application of scaffolding instruction. Namely, scaffolding instruction also has a positive effect on prompting learner's writing ability. As far as students' interests and attitudes are concerned, students are interested in scaffolding instruction; they think that writing is not an individual task since scaffolding instruction was applied. During the time, these students are enjoyable, stressing that scaffolding instruction is not boring in writing class, which reduces their nervousness and anxiety in writing and builds their confidence. In conclusion, most of students think that scaffolding instruction motivates their interest in English writing; in addition, their attitudes towards English writing are changing. Scaffolding instruction promotes learning through dialogue, feedback and shared responsibility. Through the supportive and challenging learning experiences gained from carefully planned scaffold learning, instructors can help students become lifelong, independent learners.

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