

Scaffolding Process in the International Business Correspondence Course in Vocational Colleges

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ABSTRACT

Based on the Scaffolding Process proposed by Wood et al., this paper attempts to study how effective scaffolding can help business English majors achieve study objectives in the International Business Correspondence Course in a Chinese vocational college. Six functions of the scaffolding process are elaborated and then used as guidelines in the design and practice of a teaching unit of this course. Finally, students' comments and assessments of this course are collected as an indication of the effectiveness of the scaffolding process in teaching design, which suggests that the scaffolding process works in a positive way to raise the students' overall satisfaction, acquisition of knowledge, skills, motivation, and examination scores in this course.

Keywords: ZPD, scaffolding; scaffolding process; International Business Correspondence Course

1. INTRODUCTION

As a compulsory course in the Business English Major Cultivation Programme in Guangzhou City Polytechnic, International Business Correspondence is a specialized course which focuses on business communication skills, aiming to cultivate the students' competence to deal with foreign customers in business and trade using modern communication tools (emails, instant message platforms etc.) in English. To elaborate on the objectives, it requires the students to master the process of international trade, and to write appropriately in form, structure, style, and content according to different international business situations based on the writing principles and skills. It also attempts to foster the students' comprehensive competence to cope with various issues in international business and trade, communication skills, interpersonal skills, and business practice.

There are many theories that have studied the process of language teaching and learning from a specific perspective. In this paper, we mainly adopt the perspective of social constructivism, because we are firmly convinced that every human being, from the very early stage of his life, learns through social interaction with his caregivers. He constructs the meaning of every object and every concept from communicating from people surrounding him. Students improve their critical thinking and problem-solving skills when they construct new knowledge based upon background experiences and multiple resources (Maypole & Davies: 2001). An opposite example comes from children with autism, with social interaction disorders as the main characteristics. A very large part of these children (72%) (Wang Hui: 2007) have a comparatively low IQ, indicating cognitive impairment, which no interest in social interaction and a lack of the

ability to imitate should definitely account for. Previous studies on scaffolding have reported on its applications to writing (Wei Liqiu: 2011; Bick-har Lam: 2011; Dorn & Soffos: 2001), but no research on the application to the teaching and learning of International Business Correspondence has been found so far. Therefore, in this study, we will mainly design and assess the teaching practice of a trading step ---- counter offer in this course based on the social constructivist theory, especially the scaffolding process.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW: ZPD, SCAFFOLDING AND RELATED RESEARCH

Social constructivism holds that knowledge is individually constructed via one's experience (Schreiber & Valle: 2013) and learning occurs through social interaction. Originally developed by Lev Vygotsky in Russia in the 1930s (Vygotsky and Kozulin, 1989), social constructivism emphasizes the impact of social and cultural influences on students, the ways their varied backgrounds and experiences shape students' learning and the ways students understand and interpret concept. Thus, teachers should do their utmost to foster an environment where students can actively participate in creating their own knowledge and shouldering their own responsibility in learning.

He went on to propose the concept of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) – the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (Vygotsky, 1978) Ideally, with the help of a teacher, a mentor, or a more capable peer, the learners can master skills or knowledge they are not able to achieve on their own. The teacher's role of education is to provide

experience within the learner's ZPD with scaffolding strategies, and the activity should challenge the learner's existing ability, achieved under the sensitive adults' guidance (Berk & Winsler, 2007:45).

To obtain ZPD, the teacher offers assistance to the learner in completing the task they are not able to at the moment, called scaffolding metaphorically. Scaffolding is a measured and appropriate intervention which has the purpose of enabling a learner (Pritchard, A. and Woollard, J. :2010) to move forward, and it is adopted by teachers as they monitor, coach, guide, advise, facilitate learning while encouraging them to take ownership of the learning process (Schreiber & Valle: 2013). Teaching and learning in the classroom must be contextualized by presenting authentic tasks that are meaningful, relevant and parallel to problem in the real world (Jonassen, 1994). Studies on the application of scaffolding strategies suggest students have more involvement in activities, gain a deeper level of understanding and more transfer of responsibility from the teacher in different classrooms (Pressley, Harris & Marks, 1992; Anton, 1999; Sarıçoban, 2014; Lam: 2011; Reynolds & Goodwin: 2016).

3. SCAFFOLDING PROCESS AND ITS SIX FUNCTIONS

Proposed by Wood et al. (1976), the "scaffolding" process is elaborated about the function of the tutor. Although the students' active participation and active learning in the classroom should be encouraged and guaranteed, we mainly focus on the teacher's scaffolding in order to achieve learner-centered teaching in this paper, for it is the teacher's design and practice mindful of students' leadership that will bring about knowledge and skill acquirement eventually. We want to show how the six functions of scaffolding process are used as guidelines and developed into teaching procedures and activities for teachers to consider and deploy in teaching. In International Business Correspondence, we will take the counter-offer step as an example to showcase how the teacher, adhering to the six functions, leads the students towards to goal of mastering the concept of counter-offer as a step in international trade, acquiring flexibility in usage of typical expressions, special vocabulary and sentence patterns while implementing the writing principles.

1). Recruitment: to get the students interested in and adherence to the requirements of the task. In the counter-offer step, in the warm-up session, we achieve it by reviewing a quiz they have done before class, drawing their attention to the mistakes and identifying the key points to be covered in this class. The students will have a general idea of what they've already known and what they don't know and thus can anticipate the objectives, and take an active attitude towards learning.

2). Reduction in degrees of freedom: to simplify the task by reducing the number of constituent acts required to reach solution. In the teaching of counter-offer writing, this mainly involves making use of previous knowledge to

tackle a comparatively simple task that is part of a more complex task requirements. After watching a video about a real trade situation, the students will generalize the key points covered in a counter-offer letter by discussing with their group members and then drawing a mind-map. Then the teacher, as a scaffolder, guides students to construct the structure of a counter-offer letter that covers necessary content points. This task-based activity is not high in difficult level, but it is a prerequisite step towards the objective of writing letters appropriate in form, structure, style, and content, which is out of students' grasp at present.

3). Direction maintenance: to keep the students in pursuit of a particular objective with motivation. In this part, the teacher initiates a vote for a more suitable letter between two counter-offer letters. Afterwards, the students have to explain why they vote for this letter from three perspectives: structure, language, and etiquette. The result of the vote illustrated in a graph shows how well the students distinguish the right from the wrong in a vivid way, which offers them an opportunity to argue with each other and interpret the new concept. Another task requiring the students to generalize the typical expressions and sentence patterns in a counter-offer letter is an attempt to arouse and maintain the students' interest in exploring the typical structure and language usages to write counter-offer letters appropriately. The design of these two activities aims to deepen the students' understanding of counter offer letters before they are able to write on their own. The teacher may go around the classroom and remind those who are not fully engaged in the activity and draw them back in track, or assist wherever help is needed.

4). Marking critical features: to mark or accentuate certain features of the relevant task. Oriented by another task—a simultaneous text message exchanges simulating the negotiation process of counter-offer, the students are asked to take roles of the buyer and the seller according to a certain situation in international trade. Critical features—etiquette, you-attitude and negotiation tactics especially, are to be emphasized by the teacher while going around the classroom to scaffold the students' practice. The teacher may also add relevant content to the present task, give more examples and indicate major mistakes and discrepancies.

5). Frustration control: to make students feel safe even when errors occur. The degree of difficulty has to be moderate and spirals up gradually, for college students will perform better when they feel more confident and safer. In order to facilitate a friendly environment, scaffolders will avoid harsh words to criticize students or any abrupt interruption to students' performance. Planned and opportunistic interventions are given to enable the students to move forward. Planned interventions include a reminder of the key points or the right approach to solve a certain problem, and so on, which are conveyed to students while they are conducting a task. Opportunistic interventions are omnipresent when the teacher recognizes such a necessity, like a little help in private, a supply of correct answer without mentioning their mistake, or even a joke will make the best impact on the progress of the learner. The teacher

can take on different roles: teacher as support, prompt, critical listener and provider of feedback, simplifier, motivator, highlighter, model (Pritchard & Woollard: 2010).

6). Demonstration: an “idealization” of the act to be performed, the completion or even explication of a solution in the expectation that “imitation” can be followed by learners. Students are required to perform in front of their fellows the text message exchanges after contemplating the process in their seats, which has allowed them sufficient time for practice. The demonstration of their text messages according to each individual’s role should be accompanied by the teachers’ explanation on critical steps, repetition of good points, calling their attention to subtle details of importance, asking about reasons and giving assessments.

The scaffolding process highlights the 6 functions which align with the usual steps in the teaching of International Business Correspondence and the way students learn. The six functions applied in the design of classroom activities that start from the maximum help and responsibility from the teacher, proceed to transfer the responsibility of learning and doing to the students themselves, and eventually the students can demonstrate an ideal modelling of the writing process, which can be referred to by their peers. Though this demonstration of writing process does not equal a satisfactory writing work of correspondence, the students have accumulated the

knowledge and skills regarding the structure, style, format, useful expressions, functional sentence patterns, etiquette, negotiation tactics and so on –all the necessities of an effective counter-offer letter.

The following part is an embodiment of the six functions of scaffolding process in the teaching design and practice of counter offer letter writing –a key step in international trade.

4. TEACHING DESIGN AND PRACTICE

Teaching design is an essential reference for teachers’ plan of how to conduct classroom activities in order to accomplish the requirements stipulated in the curriculum and also enable the students to achieve the learning objectives consequently. Our students are supposed to flexibly use the structure, style, format, useful expressions, functional sentence patterns, etiquette and negotiation tactics to write an effective counter-offer letter in the activities designed for the length of 4 periods of class. These activities are task-based, with a view to highlighting the students’ leadership and responsibility, therefore the scaffolding process accompanies every actual step of teaching and facilitates students’ active participation and learning tremendously, see Table 1.

Table 1. Teaching design of 4 periods of class on counter offer writing

Steps	Content	Teaching method	tool	Student activity	Scaffolding Process
Preparation	Students search the job website for different jobs and responsibilities, and give one’s ideal job and explain reasons.	Show & tell	Cyber resources	Oral presentation	Recruitment (Arouse students’ interest)
Warm-up	Vocabulary study: match job titles with department names	Inspirational questions	PPT	Matching game and memorization	Recruitment (Useful vocabulary to support further talk)
Introduction of core sentence patterns	talk about each other’s job by and answering questions in referring to the sentence patterns guage Focus A and B.	Pair work show & tell	Textbook	Dialogue simulation	Reduction of degrees of freedom (a simple task, as the preparation for a major task)
Practice	Listen to short conversations and note down different people’s jobs and responsibilities	Inspirational questions	PPT audio	Listening and Filling in the blanks with the help of note-taking	Direction maintenance (go around the classroom to assist students)
	Choose one of the conversations to repeat in pairs.	Pair work show & tell	PPT audio	Find where they have difficulty in repeating.	Marking critical features (Pause, explain where difficulties appear, and stress important language points)
Enhancement	Watch the video and finish the structure of a certain company	Inspirational questions	PPT video	Discussion, viewing and note-taking	Marking critical features (Ask students to generalize the structure of a company and its ranks)
	Simulate the Dialogue in the video	Pair work and act-out	PPT video	Imitation of the dialogue with the help of note-taking	Frustration control (Repeat difficult parts, and show part of the script)
Further Improvement	Simulate an alumni reunion, where students talk about each other’s job and responsibilities, likes and dislikes.	Group discussion, and act-out	PPT	Role play	Demonstration (A brief assessment of each group work, stress the strength of each group)
Assessment	Inter-group assessment	Show and tell	Vote	Discussion and explanation	

There are two approaches to scaffolding: planned intervention and opportunistic intervention in this teaching design, which are applied throughout the 6 functions of the scaffolding process. Obviously, planned intervention is mainly seen in the first two functions: recruitment and reduction in degrees of freedom, because the teacher has to provide a framework within which the students will familiarize themselves with the concept, structure and all the essentials regarding counter-offer letters. Here, the teacher takes more responsibility and has to plan ahead so as to effectively lead the students to the right topic. Later on, however, opportunistic intervention is used with a very high frequency in the later four functions. The students have to shoulder more responsibility and they have to practice by themselves so as to sharpen their skills. During this process, the teacher has to observe and discover situational factors indicating their learning status and provides help in various forms.

After adopting this approach to organize classroom activities with the teachers' functions in the scaffolding process blended in the teaching design, the students have achieved the teaching goals set in the teaching plan. They gave their comments and assessments of this course by rating the teacher's performance and overall satisfaction of the course on a level from 1 to 5, which are then transformed into scores of 100 points in the following aspects: good preparation and familiarity with the content, clear expression and organization, key and difficult point explanation, competence to relate to reality and appropriate exemplification, effective homework and help, sufficient visual aid, catering to diversified needs, classroom rules, punctuality and deportment, and overall satisfaction. Students were only required to give marks on a level from 1 to 5, though a few students gave positive comments voluntarily and out of appreciation to the teacher's job. Some students praised the teachers' commitment to the teaching and the great efforts offered to help them grasp the writing skills, while others spoke highly of such a "relaxing" and "interactive" atmosphere in the classroom, see table 2:

5. CONCLUSION

Table 2. Students' assessment on the course and teacher's performance

Index	Average score	Satisfaction	Weight Value	Excellent 95	Good 85	Medium 75	Pass 65	Fail 50
good preparation and familiarity with the content	9.4048	93.59155%	0.10	62	8	1		
clear expression and organization	9.3413	93.02817%	0.10	58	12	1		
key and difficult point explanation	9.3571	93.02817%	0.10	58	12	1		
competence to relate to reality and appropriate exemplification	9.3889	93.59155%	0.10	61	10			
effective homework and help	9.3889	93.4507%	0.10	60	11			
sufficient visual aid	9.3413	93.02817%	0.10	58	12	1		
catering to diversified needs	9.3730	93.16901%	0.10	59	11	1		
classroom rules	9.3730	93.30986%	0.10	60	10	1		
punctuality and deportment	9.3571	93.16901%	0.10	58	13			
overall satisfaction	9.3889	93.4507%	0.10	60	11			

Weighted arithmetic mean: 93.8730

学生评语汇总:

1:课堂气氛有趣
2:工作态度认真 对学生负责
3:good

Figure 1. Students' comments: (In Chinese)

- 1: lively atmosphere in the classroom
2: (the teacher is) hard-working and responsible for students.
3: good

Figure 2. Students' comments on the course

This survey makes use of both the quantitative and the qualitative research methods, and the students were required to conduct the questionnaires anonymously and independently, so the teacher has no way to influence their decision and no student is worried about any consequence resulting from a low rating. Therefore, the survey's credibility is relatively high. The result of the students' assessment shows an average of 93.8 points out of 100, showcasing their overall satisfaction towards to course and the teacher.

Therefore, the application of the scaffolding process and its six functions to the teaching design is effective in enhancing students' motivation and assisting them to master the writing skills in international business correspondence. The students have learned to take responsibility to explore and acquire knowledge and skills by themselves with the teacher's planned and opportunistic scaffolding approaches. This study has only tried to apply scaffolding process to the teaching and learning of the course International Business Correspondence and the satisfactory results make us expect to see if there are more courses which can take advantage of this scaffolding process to optimize the teaching plan and teaching design of a certain topic or a certain unit, so as to help students to improve their engagement, collaboration, and critical thinking.

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