

Pedagogical Efficiency of Teacher-led Whole-class Scaffolding as a Pre-writing Task

Nafiseh Hosseinpour

Department of English Language, Falavarjan Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

Mansour Koosha

Department of English Language, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Islamic Azad University, Isfahan, Iran

Abstract—Task-based language teaching (TBLT) can provide learners with more authentic communicative activities, particularly in foreign language context, where learners may experience few such opportunities. From the perspective of sociocultural theory (SCT), scaffolding is a process of supportive interaction that occurs when learners are communicating with each other. There are situations in which the mediation of the teacher as an expert is necessary in the scaffolding process to advance the learners' zone of proximal development. The present study sought to extend the scope of TBLT through SCT. More specifically, it was an attempt to investigate the effects of teacher-led whole-class scaffolding as pre-task on the writing proficiency of EFL learners. To this end, fifty Iranian female learners of English at intermediate level of general English proficiency took part in the study which was based on post-test only equivalent groups design. The participants were asked to evaluate some ELT textbooks based on a checklist and write a report respectively. The control group did not receive any pre-task activities; however, the experimental group participated in scaffolding as a pre-task. The results revealed that the trial of pre-task improved the writing performance in such areas as content, organization, grammar, and vocabulary.

Index Terms—sociocultural theory, task-based language teaching, pre-task, scaffolding, writing

I. INTRODUCTION

Tasks have been employed to make language teaching more communicative. Nevertheless, in contexts where few opportunities exist for experiencing authentic communication, like foreign language situations, tasks can be used to plan a communicative curriculum (Ellis, 2003, p.30). However, a basic practical concern is how to fit the tasks into the teaching cycle. Numerous approaches have been proposed in this regard; this variety may be partly due to the different definitions of a task. According to Widdowson (1998), the distinction between an exercise and a task is not 'form' versus 'meaning', but the 'type of meaning' is important. In other words, whereas a task deals with 'pragmatic meaning', an exercise is concerned with 'semantic meaning'. Another important point is the components of a task. As Wright (1987) claims, tasks are comprised of two principal elements: 'input data' and 'instructional questions'; however, Nunan (1989, p. 48) identifies three components including 'input', 'activities', and 'goals'. Ellis (2003) adds another element that is 'procedures'. Procedures concern the methodological options available to researchers and teachers for implementing tasks. Such procedures are independent of both the input and the conditions of the tasks. According to him (ibid), one of the current task-based research is to investigate the effects of various procedures on task performance. Thus, a framework for describing a task is necessary to both researchers and teachers since without which neither research nor teaching can be carried out efficiently.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A number of recent studies have focused on sociocultural theory (SCT) of mind, according to which all learning, including language learning, is socially constructed. Based on the Vygotskian account of language learning, when second or foreign language learners interact with other language users such as teachers, native speakers or other learners, they can perform such language functions which they are not able to do by themselves. They can internalize these functions by practicing and learning to perform them independently. This process involves "a progression from the inter-mental to intra-mental, as the learners shift from object and other regulation to self-regulation" (Ellis, 2003, p.24). Recently, this theoretical perspective has led to task-based studies that investigate 'scaffolding' and 'collaborative dialogue', that is the supportive interactions that arise when learners communicate with others (Aljafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Baleghizadeh, Memar & Memar, 2011; Barnard & Campbell, 2005; Donato, 1994; Hosseinpour & Biria, 2014; Nassaji & Cumming, 2000; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Swain & Lapkin, 1998).

A primary means of mediation is verbal interaction which can be monologic or dialogic. Whereas both can serve to mediate learning, dialogic interaction is seen as central. "Dialogic interaction enables an expert, such as a teacher to create a context in which novices can participate actively in their own learning; meanwhile the expert can fine-tune the support that the novices are given" (Anton, 1999as cited in Panahi et.al, 2013). As Vygotsky (1987) puts it, new

elaborate psychological processes become available as a result of initial production of these processes in social interaction. Applied to language learning, this means that learners first manifest new linguistic forms and functions in interactions with others and subsequently internalize and use them independently.

Scaffolding is the “dialogic process by which one speaker assists another in performing a function that he or she cannot perform alone” (Ellis, 2003, p.180 as cited in Samana, 2013). Swain (2000, p. 102) uses the term ‘collaborative dialogue’ defined as dialogue in which speakers are engaged in problem solving and knowledge building. Another frequently used term ‘instructional conversation’ (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) refers to pedagogic interaction that is teacher-led and directed toward a curricular goal, for example, enabling students to perform a structure that they have not yet internalized but is conversational in nature (Donato, 2000). According to Ellis (2000), where tasks result in scaffolding, collaboration, and instructional conversation, learners are expected to extend their knowledge of second or foreign language.

There are contradictory ideas about scaffolding. Some scholars believe that scaffolding is not dependent on the presence of an expert. It can also arise in interactions between learners. Dicamilla and Anton (1997) showed how learners make use of repetition to provide scaffolded help for each other. Ohta (1995) illustrated how learners scaffold each other’s contributions in a role-playing task. She also notes that in learner-learner interactions, the notions of novice and expert are ‘fluid conceptions’ that is the same learner can function as both expert and novice at different times in a conversation. In this regard, Dobao (2012), Hosseinpour and Biria (2014), and Shehadeh (2011) showed the efficiency of collaboration and scaffolded help in improving the writing quality of foreign language learners. However, as Swain and Lapkin (1998) have shown, peer mediation is not always effective; occasions can arise when ‘expert’ mediation is required. Lantolf (2000a) refers to a study by Platt and Troudi (1997) which showed how a teacher’s belief that peers rather than expert mediation was more effective in promoting learning had a negative effect when it came to certain content areas. Lantolf (2000a) goes on to comment that “while peer assistance is effective for learning every day functional language, it may not be as effective for development of academic language”. Definitely, there will be situations where the mediation provided by an ‘expert’ language user is required to negotiate a learner’s zone of proximal development (Ellis, 2003). On the other hand, teachers who are interested in SCT favor whole-class scaffolding since ‘the practical circumstances force most teachers to plan activities on the scale of class or groups’ (Mercer & Fisher, 1997, p.209). To overcome this problem, several techniques have been proposed including peer teaching (Guk & Kellog, 2007), collaborative learning (Donato, 1994; Hosseinpour & Biria, 2014; Shehadeh, 2012), simplifying a task through a template (Verity, 2005), and low-structured scaffolding (Balegizadeh et al., 2011).

In order to design a task-based lesson, one should consider the stages or components of a lesson including a task as its main part. Different designs have been recommended (Estaire & Zanon, 1994; Lee, 2000; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996). However, as Skehan (1996) states, they all have three common stages: pre-task, during task, and post-task. These phases reflect the chronology of a task-based lesson. Only ‘during task’ phase is obligatory in task-based lesson (Ellis, 2003). Although options of pre-task and post-task are non-obligatory, they can ensure the effectiveness of task performance.

III. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The function of pre-task is to make students ready to perform the task in ways that will enhance acquisition. Lee (2000) emphasizes the importance of “framing the task to be performed” and proposes that “one way of doing this is through providing an advanced organizer of what the students will be required to do and the nature of the outcomes to arrive at” (as cited in Ellis, 2009). Dornyei (2001) emphasizes the motivational aspect of presenting a task. Skehan (1996, p.25) proposes two options for the pre-task stage: “1) an emphasis on the general cognitive demands of the task, and 2) an emphasis on linguistic factors”. According to Ellis (2003, p. 245), these alternatives can be performed in any of the following ways: “1) supporting learners in performing a similar task to the one they will perform in ‘during task’ stage, 2) providing learners with a model of how to perform the task, 3) engaging learners in non-task activities designed to prepare them to perform the task, and 4) strategic planning of the main task performance”.

The present study aimed at increasing our understanding of the effects of pre-writing task on the writing performance of foreign language learners. In this way, it focused on goal-oriented academic writing which is one of the course requirements of most university programs not just the writing courses. Academic writing seems to be one of the challenges faced by Iranian learners of English as a foreign language. Therefore, inspired by SCT, this study made an attempt to find out whether teacher-led scaffolding as a pre-writing task would improve the writing performance of learners in terms of content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing. The following research questions guided the study: 1) does teacher-led scaffolding as a pre-writing task help Iranian EFL learners to improve their writing performance? and 2) which components of the writing are improved through the performance of teacher-led scaffolding as a pre-writing task?

Based on the findings of previous research, it was hypothesized that mediation provided by the teacher as an expert would be effective in promoting the writing quality of the learners. It was expected that teacher-led scaffolding would decrease the content load of the task and increase the writing ability respectively.

IV. METHOD

This experimental classroom research was based on the pos-test only equivalent-groups design.

A. *Participants*

Fifty senior (i.e. fourth year) female students of TEFL took part in this study. Their age ranged from 22-28 years old. Persian was the language they spoke as their first language. Based on the results of oxford placement test, their level of general English proficiency was intermediate. They attended 'Textbook Evaluation' class which was one of the required courses to get their Bachelor degree in TEFL. They were randomly assigned to two groups, namely, the control and the experimental group.

B. *Materials*

The implemented materials consisted of five parts: 1) the OPT, 2) a textbook evaluation checklist, 3) two sets of ELT materials including the Interchange and the Headway series, 4) textbook evaluation reports, and 5) an analytic writing rubric. First, the OPT was applied to find out the general English proficiency of the students. Then, students in both groups were provided with the checklist for course book evaluation which was proposed by Ur (2012, p.200). Next, they were asked to evaluate and write a report based on a set of ELT textbook: the Headway was assigned to the control group and the Interchange to the experimental one. After that, a collection of fifty reports was collected through the post-test. Finally, the analytical writing scale prepared by Hedgcock and Leftkowitz (1992) was applied by two raters to score the reports. The scale was comprised of five components including 1) content, 2) organization, 3) grammar, 4) vocabulary, and 5) mechanics of writing. Four proficiency levels were described for each component: poor, fair, good, and excellent.

C. *Procedures*

The fifty TEFL students who had enrolled for the 'Textbook Evaluation' course were randomly assigned to the control and experimental groups that is there were twenty five people in each group. Participants in both groups were supposed to write an evaluative report (i.e. the main writing task) analyzing a set of ELT materials based on the evaluation checklist during the class time in one session. The control group received no pre-task activities; where, the students were supposed to evaluate the books and write their reports individually. The cycle of activity lasted for three hours in the control group. However, a teacher-led whole-class scaffolding activity was carried out as a pre-writing task in the experimental group that is the students were supposed to have a whole-class discussion of their findings which were the results of textbook evaluation. The discussion was led by the teacher as an expert, but it was mainly student-centered. In other words, the teacher took part in the discussion whenever the students failed to express their ideas or anytime they didn't do the activity correctly. More importantly, the focus was on the content not form. After the pre-task which lasted two hours, they were allowed to write down their reports based on what they had discussed. Regarding the extra time needed for the pre-task, the whole cycle of the activity took five hours. Finally, the reports collected through the main writing task were rated blindly by two raters based on the writing scale by Hedgcock and Leftkowitz (1992). The raters discussed and resolved disagreements and reached a high level of congruity after rating 10 reports; so that, the inter-rater reliability of .81 was obtained. Finally, a series of independent sample t-tests were applied to compare the two groups statistically.

V. RESULTS

In order to answer the research questions, a series of independent sample t-tests were carried out to compare the writing performance of the control and experimental groups based on the writing rubric which consisted of 5 components including content, organization, grammar, vocabulary, and mechanics of writing. Table I shows descriptive statistics for both groups. Referring back to the writing scale, it became clear that considering the total score, the writing proficiency of the control group was generally at the 'fair' level ($M = 63.44$); however, the experimental group's performance was generally at 'good' level ($M = 76.88$). Taking a look at the mean scores of the components of writing, the results are as follows: the content of reports written by the control group was at 'fair' level ($M = 19.56$) which was lower than the experimental group ($M = 24.20$). This was also the case with the organization of writing that was at the 'fair' level for the control group ($M = 12.64$), but at the 'good' level for the experimental group ($M = 15.80$). However, it was a little different for grammar: the control group again was at 'fair' level ($M = 15.00$), but the experimental group was at 'average' level ($M = 17.64$). The range of vocabulary applied by the control group was at 'fair' level ($M = 12.72$), but the experimental group at 'good' level ($M = 15.48$).

TABLE I.
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS OF BOTH GROUPS

	group	N	Mean	SD	SE
Content	CG	25	19.56	2.647	.529
	EG	25	24.20	4.010	.802
Organization	CG	25	12.64	2.307	.461
	EG	25	15.80	2.872	.574
Grammar	CG	25	15.00	4.282	.856
	EG	25	17.64	4.212	.842
Vocabulary	CG	25	12.72	2.638	.528
	EG	25	15.48	2.740	.548
Mechanics	CG	25	3.52	.510	.102
	EG	25	3.76	.597	.119
Total Score	CG	25	63.44	11.529	2.306
	EG	25	76.88	13.869	2.774

*CG: Control Group, EG: Experimental Group

On the contrary, the two groups were rather similar in their performance of mechanics of writing that is both the control group ($M = 3.52$) and the experimental one ($M = 3.76$) were at the 'average' level. In order to investigate the differences between the two groups, a series of independent t-tests were carried out, the results of which are represented in Table II.

TABLE II
INDEPENDENT SAMPLES T-TESTS

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
								Lower	Upper	
Content	Equal variances assumed	.980	.313	-4.828	48	.000	-4.640	.961	-6.572	-2.708
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.828	41.575	.000	-4.640	.961	-6.580	-2.700
Organization	Equal variances assumed	.950	.335	-4.289	48	.000	-3.160	.737	-4.642	-1.678
	Equal variances not assumed			-4.289	45.868	.000	-3.160	.737	-4.643	-1.677
Grammar	Equal variances assumed	1.245	.270	-2.198	48	.033	-2.640	1.201	-5.055	-.225
	Equal variances not assumed			-2.198	47.987	.033	-2.640	1.201	-5.055	-.225
Vocabulary	Equal variances assumed	.064	.801	-3.628	48	.001	-2.760	.761	-4.290	-1.230
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.628	47.931	.001	-2.760	.761	-4.290	-1.230
Mechanics	Equal variances assumed	.037	.848	-1.528	48	.133	-.240	.157	-.556	.076
	Equal variances not assumed			-1.528	46.849	.133	-.240	.157	-.556	.076
Total Score	Equal variances assumed	.216	.644	-3.726	48	.001	-13.440	3.607	-20.693	-6.187
	Equal variances not assumed			-3.726	46.449	.001	-13.440	3.607	-20.699	-6.181

The Levene's test indicated that the variances of scores for the two groups are assumed to be equal since the sig. value is larger than .05 for all components including content ($p = .313$), organization ($p = .335$), grammar ($p = .270$), vocabulary ($p = .801$), mechanics ($p = .848$), and the total score ($p = .644$); therefore equal variances are assumed in the interpretation of the findings. The results of independent t-tests revealed statistically significant differences between the two groups at .05 level of significance as follows: content ($p = .000$), organization ($p = .000$), grammar ($p = .033$), vocabulary ($p = .001$), and the total score ($p = .001$). However, the experimental group did not differ significantly regarding the mechanics of writing ($p = .13$). Based on the guidelines proposed by Cohen (1988, p. 284-7), the magnitude of the differences (i.e. Eta squared) was calculated to estimate the effect size. As Cohen (ibid) claims, if Eta squared equals or gets larger than .14, it will be considered as a large effect. The results indicated that the effect size considered to be large with regard to such aspects of writing as content (.32), organization (.27), vocabulary (.21), and the total score (.22), but not grammar (.09) which was regarded as a moderate effect size based on the Cohen's criteria (ibid).

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Results showed that teacher-led whole-class scaffolding as pre-writing task had a significant effect on improving the writing quality of Iranian foreign language learners. More specifically, this activity had a larger effect on such aspects of writing as content, organization, and vocabulary in comparison with grammar. However, it does not seem to have any significant effects on mechanics of writing. In other words, the writing performance of the students in the experimental group was better than the control group because the former experienced scaffolding as a pre-writing task. That is the option of pre-task improved the effectiveness of task performance. Therefore, the findings approves Ellis (2003), Lee (2000), and Skehan (1996) who emphasize the importance of pre-task as a framing activity and propose that providing an advanced organizer of what the students will be required to do and familiarizing them with the nature of the outcomes to attain will improve the task performance.

The findings are therefore in line with the sociocultural theory of learning, which views language learning as socially constructed. More specifically, the results support the claims of Anton (1999), Ellis (2003), and Mercer and Fisher (1997) that dialogic interaction, in this case teacher-led whole-class scaffolding, assists the teacher to create a context in which learners can participate actively in their own learning, and the teacher as an expert can modify the support that learners contribute to. On the other hand, this study goes in for the suggestions proposed by Van Lier (1988) and Verrity (2005) that emphasized the importance of the students' centrality in scaffolding. In this regard, Baleghizadeh et al. (2011), and also Bernard and Campbell (2005) claimed that students should not be spoon-fed with too much hints. In other words, they should not be deprived of free exploration while performing a task; so that, the teacher do not need to provide the students with too many guides during writing activities. As it was explained before, in this research the participants were not provide with any hints during the writing task; so, the better writing performance of the participants in the experimental group can be attributed to the pre-task which was a whole-class teacher led scaffolding in which the students played the central role in the oral discussion of the content of their findings regarding textbook evaluation.

In conclusion, this study indicated the pedagogical efficiency of teacher-led whole-class scaffolding as a pre-writing task. Teachers can benefit from this technique in that they don't need to put a lot of energy and efforts to guide the students during the writing task by preparing the students with an advanced organizer of what they will be required to do. Definitely, this study was not without its limitations. The results were limited to the female students at the intermediate level of general language proficiency, and it just investigated a special form of scaffolding. Further studies in this regard may focus on other forms of scaffolding and compare them to find out the most effective activity. It is also possible to investigate how different components of writing are influenced by different forms of scaffolding as a pre-task. Another option is to test the efficiency of this technique in other contexts with students at lower or upper levels of general English proficiency. Finally, it is suggested to carry out a gender study to see if males are different from females in performing scaffolding or compare them with mixed gender groups.

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Nafiseh Hosseinpour was born in Isfahan, Iran. She got her BA in TEFL from Kashan University, Kashan, Iran in 2000. She got her MA in TEFL from Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch, Isfahan, Iran in 2003. She is currently a PhD student in Islamic Azad University, Khorasgan Branch. She has been a faculty member of Islamic Azad University, Falavarjan Branch since 2005. Her research interests are diacourse analysis, sociolinguistics, teacher education, teaching and learning strategies, and teaching English as a foreign language.

Mansour Koosha is an associate professor of TEFL at the English Department of Islamic Azad University, Isfahan (Khorasgan) Branch, Isfahan, Iran. He has published several articles both nationally and internationally. His research interests include teaching methodology, testing, translation studies, second language acquisition, and curriculum design.