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Learners in The Comprehension of Literary Texts

THE USE OF SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES AMONG ESL LEARNERS IN THE COMPREHENSION OF LITERARY TEXTS

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Abstract

Research involving comprehension among adult learners has been tremendously influential in the field of learning. This has led researchers across various disciplines to study the strategies adult learners use in an attempt to gain understanding of materials read. For example studies conducted by O'Malley and Chamot (1985) involving beginning and intermediate ESL students resulted in identification of 26 language learning strategies. On the other hand, Kalmbach (1986) identifies retelling as a form of strategy that could enhance comprehension among learners. One interesting aspect highlighted by the sociocultural theory is the use of scaffolding as a form of strategy to make sense of information. Various researches carried out in this field have shown the importance and effectiveness of scaffolding strategy. For example, studies by Donato & McCormick (1994) and Anton & DiCamilla (1998) on second language users of English have identified several scaffolding strategies that assist learners in gaining knowledge. Bearing this view in mind, this paper discusses how a group of teacher trainees of differing proficiency levels attempt to create meaning of two selected short stories. The study mainly focuses on the types of scaffolding utilized by teacher trainees from three different levels of proficiency; dyads of high proficiency, dyads of low proficiency and dyads of mixed proficiency. Based on the transcripts of the recorded discussions, the findings indicate that

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the types of scaffolding utilized by the respondents differ based on their proficiency levels. (234 words).

Keywords: Scaffolding strategies; Comprehension processes, Literary texts

INTRODUCTION

How language learning evolves among adult learners is an interesting issue among many academics. This includes the types of learning strategies they employ. It is interesting to note that scaffolding strategies used in constructing children's learning can be easily transferred to adult learning environments. Scaffolding is considered to be a useful strategy for helping students to learn. Numerous studies have suggested that scaffolding plays an important role in facilitating learners' comprehension processes. Scaffolding as a strategy is rooted in the socio-cultural theory which postulates that knowledge is internalized by learners when they learn through socializing with others. It therefore allows learners to construct new knowledge from their experiences with others. Vygotsky's (1978) zone of the proximal development elaborates the capability of learners to move from what they already have understood (actual development) to possible new knowledge (potential development). The emphasis on potential development among learners is deemed crucial in the learning process since it allows learners to transfer their knowledge to new context and enhances the development of critical thinking. This leads to the development of new knowledge that gives a new insight into the meaning making process.

Since knowledge is the product of humans and is socially and culturally constructed, there is a need to allow learners to arrive at their own meaning and understanding of what they have read. This aspect is necessary since it encourages learners to think critically and to link their understanding based on their surroundings and experiences. This is crucial in the study of literary works that requires learners to respond to a variety of texts.

Today, a great deal of information is available on the ways learners attempt comprehension and the processes that they adopt to facilitate learning. However, few studies have investigated the role of scaffolding in the context of literary competence. A lot more needs to be learned about the way L2 learners learn to use scaffolding, in particular L2 speakers of English training to become English language teachers. This is because different cultures and background lead to the adoption of different learning strategies to suit the needs of the learners. This paper will outline the differences or similarities in the learning strategies adopted by the teacher trainees of different proficiency levels based on a study. The study investigated the use

of scaffolding as a learning strategy among Malaysian teacher trainees of different levels of English language proficiency. The focus was on the comprehension of literary texts. The paper will discuss the influence of socio-cultural theory on scaffolding as an important support in the learning process and its role in facilitating literary competence. In addition, the paper will discuss and highlight the different forms of scaffolding used by L2 teacher trainees in their attempt to comprehend literary texts in English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scaffolding Strategy

Learning is one of the fundamental principles that are crucial in gaining acquisition of knowledge. Various researchers have postulated the importance of building knowledge through the process of creating meaning. Hence various meaningful learning skills and strategies have been identified and employed by learners. One such strategy is that of scaffolding. Research has shown that scaffolding as a strategy enable learners to interact with each other and provides the basis for comprehension to take place. This theory is based on the socio-cultural theory popularized by Vygotsky (1978). The theory emphasizes the social side of skill learning. Vygotsky believes that success in gaining knowledge can only be achieved through scaffolding from a knowledgeable person to a novice. This view is shared by other researchers such as Franklin (1996), Mayer (2003) and Mercer (2000). For example, Mercer (2000) emphasizes the shared resources available to a community or society as knowledge while Franklin (1996) sees knowledge as acquired through joint activity between people in a collaborative meaning making.

Thus scaffolding can be defined as a metaphor which is derived from the work of Wood *et al* (1976) and it is based on Vygotsy's concept of the zone of proximal difference (ZPD) to capture the nature of support and guidance in learning. It is considered as a strategy to assess learners ZPD to facilitate learning. Three important elements must exist for scaffolding to take place successfully. The three elements are interaction, zone of proximal development (ZPD) and mediation. These three elements are crucial in the development of the learning process. Verbal interaction is important in helping learners to acquire understanding and skills (Wertsch,1991). According to the socio-cultural theory, meaning is created through social interaction which occurs first on an interpersonal level and later is internalized by the learner at the intrapersonal level (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky stresses that good learning occurs when it precedes development

on the interpersonal plane. In other words, meaningful learning can only be achieved if it 'challenges learners to think and act in advance of their actual level of development' (p. 89). Learners are active risk takers who accept challenges and understand how and why they learn. Learners have the opportunity to restructure information in their own way so that they can make sense of information. Through assistance from more knowledgeable adults or peers, learners gradually become independent problem solvers. Learning thus involves learners becoming active in the process of building up shared knowledge and understanding to enhance their learning process through scaffolding.

Secondly, mediation is a process whereby learners discuss and come to a consensus on a task or solve a problem by working with a knowledgeable peer or adult with a novice. Mediation is very much related to the term intersubjectivity. This term was introduced by Wertsch and colleagues who stress on the importance of internalization of concepts through the process of negotiation of meaning (as cited in Wink & Putney, 2002, p. 129). Intersubjectivity refers to shared understanding among individuals whose interactions are based on common interests and assumptions that form the ground for their communication (Rogoff, 1990). Therefore, intersubjectivity can only be achieved when partners are equally committed in the conversation (Lantolf & Ahmed, 1989). Furthermore, not only do the novice learners learn from the knowledgeable peers but it can also be vice versa the master learns from the novice.

Thirdly, the actual development level refers to learners' past independent capabilities or understanding, while potential development level refers to learners' capability with the support and guidance of other capable adults or peers. The distance between these two levels is known as the 'zone of proximal development' (ZPD) or the learning continuum (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 84). The notion of ZPD is not only confined to young children as shown in Vygotsky's study. It is also evident at every stage of human development that is from not knowing to a learning phase with support (Foley & Thompson, 2003). The concept of ZPD is applied to situations where there is explicit instruction between an older more skilled adult and a younger, less knowledgeable learner. This is similar to Rogoff's 'guided participation' which refers to adult-child interaction during more routine activities and communication in everyday life (1990, p. 191). Rogoff views it as a process and system of involvement of individuals with others as they communicate and engage in shared activities.

The ultimate goal for learning is to gain knowledge. Knowledge is gained when meanings or attributes are attached to information and the learner has clearly defined and stored that information (Tokoro & Steels, 2003). In general, there are many ways and means for a learner to construct

new knowledge. However, different learners learn at different paces, hence there are different types of learners who perform differently from one another. Similarly, the types of scaffolding strategies used by the learners will differ based on their proficiency, ability and knowledge levels.

Text Comprehension

How learners achieve text comprehension is a universal concern. Such concerns have resulted in a number of studies focusing on ways learners attempt to create meaning from a text read. In general comprehension is defined as 'making sense' of what is read (Smith, 1982, p. 15). Smith believes that uncertainty exists while reading a text. This leads to questioning by the readers to reduce the uncertainty. When answers are gained from the questions, comprehension is said to occur. On the other hand, Goodman (1982, p. 68) sees 'cognitive structure' as the source for comprehension.

In general, students who are able to identify the relationships among main ideas in a text generally comprehend the text better than those who failed to identify them (Carrell, 1985, Taylor, 1980). A fluent reader who at first failed to comprehend would find other ways to deal with the text such as self-check and self-correct. Therefore, fluent readers have good over-all comprehension (Steward & Tei, 1983). However, for weak readers who come across this kind of problem they will tend to attribute their failure to their lack of ability. Therefore, literary text comprehension is a cognitively demanding process where it requires learners to engage in the process of meaning making rather than finding meaning in the text (Noden & Vacca, 1994).

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This paper reports part of the findings of a larger study. The purpose of the study was to investigate the types and characteristics of scaffolding strategies employed by L2 teacher trainees of different proficiency levels. This paper focuses on two objectives of the study. The objectives are to:

- (1). determine forms of scaffolding used among L2 teacher trainees in comprehending literary texts, and to
- (2). identify scaffolding strategies used among L2 teacher trainees in comprehending literary texts.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

The subjects for this study consisted of 48 male and female B. Ed. (TESL) teacher trainees from a teacher training college in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The 48 subjects consisted of 24 subjects of high proficiency and 24 subjects of low proficiency and were selected based on the proficiency test set by the researcher. They were between 19 and 20 years old. These subjects were paired at random to form three different groups. The first group comprised 16 subjects of high proficiency to form 8 dyads while the second group consisted 16 subjects of low proficiency to form 8 dyads. The third group consisted of 8 subjects of high proficiency and 8 subjects of low proficiency to form the mixed proficiency dyads. The purpose of forming the dyads was to enable the trainees to discuss the short stories for recording purposes and to see to what extent scaffolding took place. All the subjects were provided with training in using the scaffolding technique.

Data Collection

Data was collected using several recorded discussions, interviews and diary entries. Each dyad from the three groups of proficiency levels were asked to discuss 2 short stories with their respective partners. The two Malaysian short stories selected were 'Just a Girl' by Lee Kok Liang and 'Journey' by Shirley Lim. The recording was carried out in two phases. In the first phase each dyad's discussion was recorded based on the first short story 'Just a Girl'. In the second phase, recording was carried out on dyads' discussion of the second short story 'Journey'. Respondents were asked to discuss each story based on four literary elements; characters, setting, plot and theme of the story. The recording of the dyads interaction were transcribed verbatim and analyzed qualitatively for recurring patterns of types of scaffolding based on constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1984).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the recorded conversation, a total of 24 transcripts were obtained for analysis. The analysis revealed that the trainees used different types of scaffolding and these varied according to the respondent's proficiency level. This paper discusses three prominent types of scaffolding identified in the analysis. They are code switching, retelling and questioning

The discussion will also highlight how the trainees were able to create meaning from the short stories.

Code Switching

The analysis revealed that one of the ways the dyads achieved comprehension is by applying code switching in their discussions. However, the level of the lexical items used in L1 differed across the different proficiency levels. The low proficiency dyads seem to face language difficulties in expressing their ideas. Hence the use of L1 is evident as a substitute for several linguistic items they find difficult to execute in the target language. For example, in excerpt 1 dyad A uses the lexical item 'gatal' (pervert) to describe the medicine man.

Excerpt 1

1A: Because the girl was afraid of the medicine man because he is very very **gatal** (*pervert*).

Another example is shown in excerpt 2. Dyad B is finding difficulty in describing the protagonist. Instead of using the correct lexical item 'innocent', dyad B resorts to use L1 when she uses 'daif' in line 1.

Excerpt 2

1B: How about the girl? The girl I think she is veryah **daif** (*naive*). She is very **daif** because she is she is easily persuaded by Cik Hasnah to go to her.

Low proficiency dyads appear to substitute several difficult lexical items in L1 as a way to avoid disruption in the conversation. This is one way for the dyads to maintain the flow of the conversation and at the same time attempt to comprehend the text. This is expressed by one respondent who states the importance of using L1 since 'it is difficult to search for the English word immediately'.

The low proficiency dyads were also found to be mixing both the L1 and the target language when expressing their understanding of the text. For example, dyad B in line 2, excerpt 3 shows her understanding of the text by switching between the two languages.

Excerpt 3

- 1.A: Is it like she feels like a stranger in the neighbourhood that she is she is in right now?
- 2.B: Yes, **macam** (*like*) she **rasa tak senanglah** (*feels uncomfortable*). She is poor, rumah **ni besar, tak?** (*this house is big, right?*) **sama macam rumah dia** (*the same as his house*). **Kalau I, I rasa senanglah** (*if it was me, I would feel embarrassed*)

This is not seen as negative since dyad B is able to express her opinion towards the main character and at the same time expresses how she would feel if she was in the protagonist's shoes. This is one form of reader response that is required when learners are dealing with literary texts.

On the other hand, the findings showed that the high proficiency dyads use code switching mainly to convey certain expressions which they believe are suitable to be executed in L1. For example, excerpt 4 shows how dyad B uses a Malay proverb to indicate her understanding of the text in line 3.

Excerpt 4

- 1.B: So now the girl got sick and her parents wants to send her away.
- 2.A: Ya, because I think they are poor and cannot afford to look after her anymore.
- 3.B: Yalah, the father is like **kais pagi makan pagi** (*what you earn in the morning you eat in the morning*).

The use of proverbs by high proficiency dyads are seen as something positive where they are able to relate to the issues highlighted in the text. One respondent highlighted the fact that it was easier to use the proverbs in L1 since these terms are 'normally used in daily conversation'. Furthermore, it would not be practical to translate proverbs from one language to another for fear of losing its' aesthetical values.

Mixed proficiency dyads' use of code switching mainly acts as a reinforcement for their partners. For example, dyad B in excerpt 5 switches from 'dongeng' to 'myth' in line 3. The reason for this switch is mainly to reassure her partner's understanding on the meaning of the lexical item. Most high proficiency respondents from the mixed proficiency dyads claim

that they do switch certain lexical items from the target language to L1 or vice versa to make sure that their partners (of low proficiency) have understood what has been said. This is one form of positive scaffolding used by the dyads to ensure comprehension is taking place.

Excerpt 5

1B: ...So the tiger man later on will change into an old man and show the treasure to the girl. So, its like ah something like a fairy not fairy tale. Something you can see erh you know **dongeng?** (*myth?*) **Cerita dongeng** (*Mythical stories*) like that, ah myth right? So then it's like she's gonna meet something and that kind of thing.

Retelling

Another form of scaffolding utilized by the respondents is retelling. Retelling is mainly used by low proficiency dyads as a form of understanding the short story. For example, in excerpt 6, dyad A is uncertain as to whether the protagonist drowns herself at the end of the story. Dyad B who is not sure herself resorts to go back to the story by retelling when she indicates 'Lets start from the dream part...' (line 2).

Excerpt 6

1A: Okay but... but when the she died right? Because she's still been affected by the curse. She killed herself. I don't know. She drowned herself **kan?** (*right?*)

2B: I don't know.... drown? Let's start from the dream part.....

The example above shows how retelling is used as a form of scaffolded assistance for low proficiency dyads in their attempt to comprehend the story. When dyads fail to understand certain parts of the story, they resort to retell the story. This is indicated by one respondent who believes that retelling can sometimes 'enable me to understand the story better.'

However, dyads from the high proficiency and mixed proficiency groups did not use retelling in their discussions. Most of these dyads begin their discussions by highlighting pertinent issues found in the story. One example is shown in excerpt 7 where dyad A begins her discussion by asking her partner's opinion in line 1.

Excerpt 7

- 1A: So, do you agree she kills herself? Because see she did not want to go to the big house in the town.
- 2B: I don't think she killed herself. Why do you say that? She just wanted to search for the moon you know. The moon, they say it is kind. May be she is desperate to find the moon because no one is kind to her right?....

This form of questioning allows partners to view their opinion as indicated by dyad B in line 2. Dyad B disagrees with her partner's view and gives her version of what might have happened to the protagonist. She further justifies her answer when she argues the protagonist is in fact searching for the moon since no one is kind to her.

Questioning

The level of questioning across the three groups of subjects differ greatly. Low proficiency dyads appear to use lower order questioning in their discussions. For example, dyad A in excerpt 8 executed a lower order questioning in line 1. The form of question used does not lead her partner to view her opinion. This is evident when dyad B merely answers 'Ah' in line 2.

Excerpt 8

- 1A: Quite insane. She is going to marry the **keramat** (*saint*) man. And then a long rope was over her neck and she began to grow smaller and smaller like she hung herself, right?
- 2B: Ah.

Most subjects from the low proficiency group were unable to execute higher order questioning that allow their partners to voice their opinion. This is one form of negative scaffolding identified among the low proficiency dyads. On the other hand, dyads from the high and mixed proficiency groups attempted to use higher order questioning as a form of scaffolding assistance. This is illustrated in excerpt 9.

Excerpt 9

- 1B: What do you think is the theme of the story?
- 2A: I think the theme of the story is the hardship of life.
- 3B: Why you said that?
- 4A: On the page 146, on th fourteenth line, erh *she tried to cry out but only her mouth twisted soundlessly*. It seems she is very sad. Can picture the sadness of the story of her life and it also picture the hardship of her life and it go through the whole story where she is very sad with her family and her sick mother, her irresponsible father.
- 5B: And then, do you think there are other themes that can be brought from this story?
- 6A: 6A:I think basically it's more on hardship and poverty lah. Because at the time right, people were very poor, before independence?

Dyad B in line 1 questions her partner on the possible theme of the short story. This form of questions requires her partner to provide the possible answer based on her understanding of the story. Dyad B further asked her partner to give the reason for her answer (line 3). This form of questioning provides room for her partner to justify her answers as shown in line 4. These examples indicate that higher order questioning allows the dyads to express their understanding by using intertextuality (as shown in line 4, excerpt 9) and by linking prior knowledge as well (line 6).

The examples in the excerpts reveal that scaffolding strategies appear to be beneficial for the learners to comprehend the literary texts. As postulated by the sociocultural theory, scaffolding plays an important role in learning in that it allows a novice to gain some form of understanding from a knowledgeable learner. Vygotsky's (1978) claims that scaffolding can only occur when a knowledgeable learner assists a novice to learn. The findings illustrate the fact that peers of equal proficiency are also capable of assisting each other in comprehending texts. However, the types of scaffolding utilized by these peers differ based on their proficiency level. For example, low proficiency dyads tend to use retelling as a form of scaffolding strategy to gain understanding of the texts. On the other hand, high proficiency dyads' use of proverbs in L1 helps in scaffolding their understanding of the literary work. This study has shown that scaffolding strategies allow

learners to have the opportunity to restructure information in their own way so that they can make sense of the information. Through assistance from peers, learners gradually become independent problem solvers. Scaffolding thus involves learners becoming active in the process of building up shared knowledge and understanding to enhance their learning process. Thus the findings of this study are consistent with that of the socio-cultural theory which claims that meaning is created through social interaction which occurs first on an interpersonal level and later is internalized within the learner at the intrapersonal level (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, this theory stresses that, meaningful learning can only be achieved if it 'challenges learners to think and act in advance of their actual level of development' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 89). Based on the findings of this study, learners appear to be able to achieve comprehension of the literary texts through mutual discussions with their peers with the use of scaffolding strategies.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study give some insights on the ways dyads of different proficiency levels attempt to comprehend literary texts. The findings presented in this paper indicates that the types of scaffolding strategy used by the dyads differ across the three levels of proficiency. Low proficiency dyads mainly resort to using code switching and retelling in their attempt to comprehend the text. These forms of scaffolding are considered as low level scaffolding since they do not carry the discussion beyond the text. The discussions merely focus on the surface level of the students understanding that seek factual information hence ignoring the aesthetic stance which is crucial for comprehension to take place (Rosenblatt, 1982). On the other hand, dyads from the high proficiency and mixed proficiency groups attempted to use higher level questioning to probe further on the issues highlighted in the texts. This form of scaffolding allows dyads to argue and voice their opinions into the discussions. Questioning also allows for personal reaction to occur when dyads are able to rationalize their stand besides making their stand on certain issues. These are seen as healthy discussions which are very much needed in the study of literature. The use of code switching among the high proficiency and mixed proficiency dyads also indicate their capability to link certain expressions in L1 to the text

The findings highlights the important role scaffolding plays as an important learning strategy in improving the comprehension of literary text. Since comprehension of literary texts is a mediated activity, it is essential for learners to engage with their peers for the success of knowledge construction. Peer scaffolding has a strong influence on teacher trainees'

learning process whereby it enable learners to assist each other in supporting their thinking towards meaning making. Appropriate scaffolding can maximize learning that achieves a higher level of understanding. Therefore, scaffolding strategy has the potential for enhancing language learning and comprehension.

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