

SCAFFOLDING IN EFL SPEAKING DEVELOPMENT IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY PERSPECTIVE.

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Abstract: Scaffolding is an essential instructional strategy in language education, particularly in the development of speaking skills among higher education students. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, scaffolding provides temporary, structured support that enables learners to perform beyond their independent level. This study explores the theoretical foundations of scaffolding, its types, and its effects on learners' fluency, accuracy, and confidence in oral communication. Research indicates that guided interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), combined with intentional discourse scaffolding, significantly enhances speaking performance. The findings highlight the importance of structured support in fostering autonomous, confident, and fluent speakers.

Keywords: Scaffolding, Sociocultural Theory, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Speaking skill development, Oral proficiency, Higher education, Discourse scaffolding, EFL learners.

Introduction.

Speaking is a complex language skill that requires not only linguistic knowledge but also confidence and the ability to interact meaningfully. Many higher education students, particularly in EFL contexts, struggle to communicate effectively due to lack of practice and confidence. Scaffolding, as an instructional strategy, provides temporary support that helps learners progress from initial guidance to independent performance. This paper examines the theoretical foundation of scaffolding, its implementation in speaking instruction, and its impact on learners' oral proficiency. Understanding these elements is essential for designing effective language learning environments that promote learner autonomy and confidence.

Theoretical Foundation – Sociocultural Theory and the Origin of Scaffolding

Lev Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory provides a foundational framework for understanding scaffolding in language education, particularly in speaking development. According to Vygotsky (1978), higher psychological functions such as reasoning and verbal communication originate from social interaction before becoming internalized by the learner. He proposed that all human learning is first inter-psychological (between people) and only then becomes intra-psychological (within the person). In his view, language learning occurs first through dialogue with others, then becomes part of the individual's thinking process. This aligns with the idea that learning happens most effectively in meaningful social contexts, particularly

when learners are guided by more knowledgeable individuals such as teachers or peers.

Central to Vygotsky's theory is the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which he defined as the gap between what a learner can do independently and what they can do with support. Instruction that targets this zone — rather than what the learner already knows or cannot yet understand — is considered most effective. Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that interaction with more capable peers or instructors allows students to accomplish tasks within their ZPD, which leads to language development. In the context of speaking instruction, this means providing support during early oral activities, such as modeling or guided conversations, and gradually withdrawing that support as learners become more competent.

Bruner (1966) extended Vygotsky's ideas through the term “scaffolding.” Bruner believed that learners can perform beyond their independent level when provided with structured, temporary assistance. As the learner becomes more confident and skilled, the scaffold is gradually removed, allowing for autonomous performance. This gradual release of responsibility is especially important in speaking development, where learners initially depend on structured models or sentence frames but eventually construct independent, fluent responses.

The structured support scaffolding offers is particularly significant in higher education language learning environments, where students often struggle with confidence and fluency in speaking. These theoretical insights guide the pedagogical use of scaffolding in oral communication tasks. As supported by Boonmoh and Jumpakate (2019), and aligned with Vygotsky's theory, learners' oral proficiency improves when they are scaffolded from initial demonstration to independent production. Ellis and Larkin's four-step model (as cited in Wong, 2004) also reflects Vygotskian principles, moving learners from teacher modeling to autonomous participation.

From the perspective of this thesis, which investigates scaffolding strategies in speaking development among higher education students, Vygotsky's theory serves as the psychological basis for understanding why guided interaction supports oral communication. Many university students, particularly in EFL contexts, lack the confidence to speak unless scaffolded through structured support. Recognizing students' ZPD allows educators to provide the right amount of help at the right time. In this way, Sociocultural Theory not only explains how speaking develops but also validates why scaffolding is necessary in instructional practice.

Definitions and Types of Scaffolding in Speaking Skill Development

Scaffolding is broadly defined as temporary and adjustable instructional support provided by a teacher or peer that enables learners to accomplish tasks they cannot perform independently (Maybin, Mercer, & Stierer, 1992). This support is gradually reduced as learners internalize the skill and develop autonomy. The concept of scaffolding has evolved into an essential strategy in communicative language teaching, particularly in the development of speaking skills. Flores (2022) described scaffolding as planned, temporary assistance designed to strengthen learner confidence, promote comprehension, and foster speaking fluency. In her study, scaffolding was shown to help students gradually achieve communicative tasks by providing continuous guidance, modeling, and error correction. This aligns with Bruner's (1966) concept of reducing

assistance as learners progress, and with Vygotsky's notion that cognitive functions are developed through guided interactions within the Zone of Proximal Development.

Mahan (2022) emphasized that scaffolding in speaking instruction requires intentional design, particularly when integrating content with language learning. She introduced the term "discourse scaffolding", which refers to the linguistic support provided during oral communication, including teacher revoicing, paraphrasing, and guided questioning. Mahan argued that scaffolding in oral tasks should include academic vocabulary development, modeling of how to express complex ideas, and opportunities for interaction that push learners beyond their comfort zone. From her findings, modeling and structured oral practice were identified as key components of effective speaking scaffolds, especially in higher education where students must engage in academic discourse.

Effects of Scaffolding on Speaking Fluency, Accuracy, and Confidence.

Numerous studies have confirmed that scaffolding strategies significantly enhance learners' fluency, accuracy, and confidence in oral communication. Nguyen and AlSaqqaf (2023), in their study with Vietnamese ESP students, implemented the DMGA scaffolding model — Diagnosing, Modelling and Sharing, Guiding, and Applying. Their results showed that students in the experimental group experienced substantial improvements in speaking performance compared to the control group. These learners expressed increased fluency, expanded vocabulary use, improved pronunciation, and greater confidence when engaging in speaking tasks. Notably, the modelling and sharing stage was particularly helpful for vocabulary building, while the applying stage contributed to improved pronunciation and fluency. Nguyen and AlSaqqaf (2023) emphasized that scaffolding helped students feel safe and supported, which encouraged them to participate more actively in oral communication.

Similarly, Boonmoh and Jumpakate (2019) demonstrated that scaffolded instruction, based on Vygotsky's theory and Bruner's extension of scaffolding, allowed students to transition from teacher-led demonstrations to independent oral production. Their instructional sequence followed Ellis and Larkin's (1998, as cited in Wong, 2004) four-step scaffolding model: demonstration, joint construction, guided practice, and independent performance. Students in their study reported greater speaking confidence and willingness to participate when scaffolded gradually through these steps. In addition, many participants indicated that having structured support helped reduce anxiety and allowed them to focus more on pronunciation and fluency.

Discussion.

The findings from previous studies and theoretical perspectives highlight the critical role of scaffolding in developing speaking skills among higher education students. Both Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Bruner's concept of scaffolding emphasize that learning is most effective when support is provided within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The studies by Nguyen and AlSaqqaf (2023) and Boonmoh and Jumpakate (2019) provide empirical evidence supporting this claim, showing that scaffolded instruction improves learners' fluency, accuracy, vocabulary use, pronunciation, and overall confidence in speaking tasks.

These results suggest that scaffolding not only facilitates immediate language performance but also promotes the internalization of speaking skills, enabling learners to transition from guided to independent use of language. The concept of discourse scaffolding, as emphasized by Mahan (2022), further illustrates the importance of targeted linguistic support, including teacher modeling, revoicing, and guided questioning, which encourages learners to express complex ideas and participate actively in academic discourse.

However, the effectiveness of scaffolding depends on its careful design and implementation. Over-scaffolding can lead to dependency, while insufficient support may result in learner frustration or anxiety. Therefore, educators must assess students' ZPD accurately and provide support that gradually decreases as learners gain competence.

In addition, cultural and contextual factors may influence how scaffolding is perceived and utilized by learners, particularly in EFL settings. Future research could explore variations in scaffolding strategies across different educational and cultural contexts to optimize their effectiveness. Overall, these findings reinforce the theoretical and practical significance of scaffolding as a dynamic instructional strategy that bridges the gap between learners' current abilities and their potential performance in speaking tasks.

Conclusion.

Scaffolding, grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and extended by Bruner, is a vital strategy in developing speaking skills among higher education students. By targeting the Zone of Proximal Development and providing structured support, educators can foster learners' fluency, accuracy, and confidence.

Implementing scaffolding strategies, such as discourse scaffolding and gradual release of responsibility, ensures that students gain both linguistic competence and autonomy. Future research should explore scaffolding applications across diverse EFL contexts to further optimize speaking instruction.

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