Promoting Creativity in EFL/ESL Writing through Scaffolding Strategy

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed at investigating scaffolding strategies and techniques utilized by EFL teachers in their instructions. The study also was to find out how EFL teachers employ scaffolding strategies and techniques in writing classes. The present study was carried out in one hundred branches of Discovery Schools (DSs) located in Amman, Jordan during the academic year 2012/2013. A convenience sampling included ten EFL teachers. The study employed two data collection instruments, namely, interviews and observations. The results revealed that eight interviewees gave feedback about the use of scaffolding to enhance students' creativity in writing. Moreover, the results revealed that four of the participating teachers employed scaffolding as a teaching strategy in the class through observations. An investigation into non-DSs schools in which the MoE policy on creativity in writing is applied is recommended for future studies to determine if similar instruction is being followed and if the instruction is successful.

Keywords: *Scaffolding, Discovery schools, Creativity, EFL/ESL writing.*

Introduction

Scaffolding offers an invaluable strategy for supporting problem solving that is argument-related. According to Cho and Jonassen (2002), scaffolding in pre-writing positively impacts writing and related tasks of problem- solving. McLoughlin and Marshall (2000) defined scaffolding as ―a form of assistance provided to a learner by a more capable teacher or peer that helps the learners perform a task that would normally not be possible to accomplish by working independently (p, 165). Teachers using the Theory of Constructivism in class facilitate their students in an environment in which student learning is scaffolded (Vygotsky, 1978), and technology may be integrated for smooth learning and teaching process (McLoughlin & Marshall, 2000; Roblyer &

Doering, 2013). From a theoretical perspective, the social constructivist perspective of learning supports the use of pair and group work in the L2 classroom. There is a consensus that Vygotskian socio-cultural psychology and the notion of the Zone of Proximal Development **(**ZPD are at the heart of the concept of scaffolding (Anderson et al., 2013; Vygotsky, 1978).

However, despite the best efforts expended by the MoE in developing and encouraging new strategies in Discovery Schools (DSs) and despite several studies conducted internationally to find out the impact of scaffolding strategy on writing (Jdaitawi, Ishak, Taamneh, Gharaibeh, & Rababah, 2011; Rababah & Rababah, 2017; Rababah, Halim, Jdaitawi, & Melhem, 2013; Rababah & Melhem, 2015; Rababah, Alshehab, & Melhem, 2017), research on scaffolding strategies in an Arab context is scarce compared with that done in Western countries (Al-Gomoul, 2011; Rababah & Melhem, 2015; Shorofat, 2007). Even those previous studies conducted in the Arab context were not in an English language context. Thus, researchers in the region including Jordan including (Al-Gomoul, 2011; Rababah et al., 2013; Rababah & Melhem, 2015) have requested that additional studies should address the issue. In short, most of these studies were not carried out in either the English Language field or in writing. In other words, studies dedicated to brainstorming in writing are lacking generally.

Thus, this justifies the present study's investigation of the usage of scaffolding strategy through interviews and observations, the present study attempts to explore scaffolding strategies and techniques to enhance EFL students' writing. The present study investigates EFL teacher's use of scaffolding strategies in writing in Jordan and calls for the answers to the following research questions:

1. What scaffolding strategies and techniques are utilized in the classrooms to improve the students' EFL writing?
2. How do EFL teachers employ scaffolding strategies and techniques in writing classes?

Literature Review
The Constructivist Theory

The Constructivist Theory considers the individual as developing his/her knowledge through the processing of experience-gathered information (Saracho & Spodek, 2006). According to Saracho

& Spodek (2006), the theory has made significant contributions to the education field while, in this regard, Piaget (1979) stressed that learners do not acquire knowledge in a passive manner. Instead, they discover and develop knowledge via the activities in which they take part. Piaget explained that learners primarily know and develop their knowledge of the world by acting on objects, and such an action provides knowledge of the corresponding objects. In this context, the learner needs to be active and not merely a vessel to be filled with facts. Piaget (1979) stressed active action and self-directed problem solving reinforcement coupled with activities entailing practical and first-hand experiences (Beetlestone, 1998).

Another constructivist advocate is Bruner, albeit he is not a structuralist. The fundamental difference between Bruner and Piaget is that the former includes social values whereas the latter only addresses the individual. In particular, Bruner's (1975) core premise posits that learning is an active social process in which students develop new ideas/concepts on the basis of present or passed-along knowledge. The learner chooses and transforms information, develops hypotheses, and reaches decisions depending on the cognitive structure while doing so. Cognitive structure makes experiences meaningful and organizes them and enables the individual to look beyond the provided information (Bruner, 1975). Thus, the instructor and the student must interact via an active communication and, as Piaget advocates, instruction must motivate students to determine principles on their own. The instructor's role is to transform information into a format that is easily understood and learned.

The difference in the two theories lies in the role of social cultural context (Bettlestone, 1998). Piaget considers his study of human behavior as a biological process in which man is considered to be a member of the animal species while Bruner considers that the process of learning occurs in a cultural context and that the interaction between an individual and his environment accommodates various knowledge and understanding (Bruner, 1990). According to Bruner (1990), varying processes are necessary in an innovative problem-solving activity, and he stresses three factors, namely, language, communication and instruction. He also addresses the nature of creative thinking and originality and the manner in which the individual is capable of going beyond the information provided to develop codes and rules. Learning entails the determination of patterns, regularity and predictability. When information and ideas are linked in

the mind, they can be easily accessed and even used subconsciously. Both creativity and capability contribute in developing creative ways via the development of networks and connections in the mind along with other minds in a learning group (Hennessey & Amabile, 2010).

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky generally focused on relaying human culture and the manner through which images are projected. Similar to Bruner, Vygotsky's emphasis is on the manner in which language impacts learning and in which learning is improved through social interaction. Vygotsky's (1978) notion of the ―Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) posits that the learner is brought towards a higher degree of performance via his peer's and his instructor's support – a premise similar to that of Bruner's scaffolding learning. Vygotsky provided a conceptualization of the learning-development relationship in his ZPD in which he posits that development is a continuum of the behavioural development (Vygotsky, 1978). Behavioural development has two stages, namely, independent performance of the learner and learner achievement with the assistance of a knowledgeable teacher in a continuum between assisted performance and independent performance. The teacher facilitates the learner's independent acquisition by direct assistance and, as the learner progresses in his achievement of the independent level, the ZPD also attains a higher degree. In this regard, the teacher's behaviour assists a learner in learning and development in a process known as scaffolding, whereby the teacher provides instruction, and the materials in the learning environment, along with other experiences to reinforce the learner and allows him to acquire competencies and progress towards new competencies (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Vygotsky's ZPD has been expanded to include performance in other competence areas along with problem solving. The objective behind teaching is to help the learner in this zone and to provide motivation and encouragement to the learner for successful performance in areas beyond their current capabilities. With regards to writing creativity, learners require strategies and methods that provide them something to think and write about. When learners are encouraged to think and write, their writing and interactions add to their intellectual development, particularly

their literacy development (Dyson, 1995). This is the reason behind the importance of establishing a classroom environment motivating cooperation among learners. The teacher's role is to facilitate a learner's interaction concerning a project and the way in which that learner derives an improvisation idea and what he decides on using.

Moreover, Vygotsky's theory and his understanding of the way in which social interaction is linked with learner development provide evidence for stopping to give learners static activities. Static activities do nothing to challenge the intellectual development of learners. Specifically, the ZPD lays down the fundamental basis for several current pedagogical practices in education. ZPD is a socio-cultural theory that is not new in its application to cognitive and linguistic development but is relatively new in its application to the second language acquisition analysis (Schinke-Llano, 1995). In relationship to this, Schinke-Llano (1995) indicated that peer teaching has a key role in facilitating collaborative learning in a way that transforms the classroom into a place in which a teacher is a source of both knowledge and assistance while the learner is valued for his inputs. Vygotsky's ZPD largely contributed to explaining the social origins of higher mental functions indicating the difference between the capability of the learner without assistance, and his capability with the assistance of others (peers or teachers). This scaffolding comprises structuring tasks provided through instruction, discussion in small groups, modelling, reflection and feedback until the learner is capable of learning on his own (Duchesne & McMaugh, 2013). In other words, the base of effective instruction is not grounded on developed functions but instead on the developing ones that include teachers offering of learning contexts wherein instruction direct development (Shayer, 2003). Hence, education should be focused on learning to learn, developing skills and strategies for continuous learning, building meaningful experiences of learning that are pertinent to the life of the learner and learner development and growth as an individual.

Empirical Studies

Many studies have been conducted to examine the impact of such a strategy on Writing ability (Ahangari, Hejazi, & Razmjou, 2014; Riazi, Rezaii, & others, 2011; Wong & Hew, 2010). To start with, Ahangari, Hejazi, and Razmjou (2014) examined the impact of scaffolding on EFL

learners' writing ability. Forty female participants in age ranging from 12 to 15, studying in the Morad-Talkro Language Institute in Tabriz, Iran, were randomly assigned in equal numbers to either the experimental or control group. The experimental group used the scaffolding technique. The learners were provided with constant help from the teacher at the beginning of the course, but this help faded as the course progressed depending upon the learners' progress. The control group followed instructions from the textbook verbatim without being helped in their writings. A comparison of the results obtained from the written post-test showed that the students in the experimental group outperformed students in the control group in their writing abilities and idea generation and remembered more details from the story as well. Riazi and Rezeai (2011) conducted a study drawing upon Socio-cultural Theory aimed at investigating the effect of scaffolding on EFL students' writing abilities. The study was conducted among all native Persian speakers at a university in northern Iran. The study intended to determine whether teacher- or peer-scaffolding was more successful in helping students improve their written English. The results of the t-tests showed that teacher scaffolding appeared to be more successful in improving students' writing abilities in that particular EFL context. Wong and Hew (2010) investigated whether the use of scaffolding could improve writing abilities of students in Singapore. The participants were 36 grade five students via pre-and post writing tests, interviews and reflection sheets. The results showed a statistically significant medium effect size between the pre- and post-test scores.

Methods

The present study used a qualitative approach to obtain data from DSs teachers and to determine the answers to research questions. The qualitative approach is useful to help the researcher to explore social or human problems and then build a complex picture, analyze words, report detailed information and conduct the study in a natural setting (Creswell, 2013; Denscombe, 2014). The present study was carried out in one hundred branches of DSs located in Amman, Jordan during the academic year 2012/2013. DSs are characterized by a long history of past development projects and initiatives. The schools have had a long history characterized by reform projects and initiatives.

A convenience sampling is utilized in research in case the researcher is desirous of obtaining a reasonable approximation of the truth, and it provides useful information particularly in a pilot study (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, in the current study, the researcher selected participants because they were willing and available to be studied. For the present study, the researcher chose 10% of EFL teachers and students of the whole population based on Creswell's (2013) recommendations. The sample comprised ten EFL teachers.

This study employed two data collection instruments, namely, interviews and observations. The present study employed the semi-structured interview because they have several advantages, including enhancing the accuracy of the individual's responses, enabling the informant's free responses, and enabling the researcher to follow up upon ideas, to investigate, develop and clarify answers while the interview is going on. Moreover, the researcher used the non-participant observation to generate qualitative data for research questions.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher interviewed the participants at their convenience based on their availability. All EFL teachers who participated in the study were interviewed to answer the research questions. The researcher conducted interviews with ten EFL teachers. Every teacher was requested to respond to five questions revolving around the techniques and strategies they adopted in the classroom. The tape-recorded responses were transcribed word for word and then qualitatively analyzed. The transcripts were read many times for relevant responses that might answer the questions or that might contribute to an emerging theme. The responses of the interviewees were translated into English with each coded in the following way; teacher X – for instance (TA) refers to _Teacher A'.

Observations were initiated after the interviews. Observations were organized and discussed with the participants beforehand. In other words, EFL teachers were aware of the times and dates of observation. Availability for a particular day's observations was verified the day before to ensure that the participants did not have prior engagements such as meetings, short-term seminars, an in-service course or absence for medical leave. The participating teachers were observed for one

month to determine the use of strategies and techniques, which promoted student creativity in EFL writing. Each teacher was observed three times. The observational data were then analyzed. Field notes were taken regarding classroom strategies in a time log, supplemented by audio recordings of the teacher's way of teaching and the realities of their classroom practices including implementation of teaching strategies and techniques.

Qualitative data analysis requires providing meaning to text and images in order to answer the research questions. Creswell (2013) recommended six steps that a researcher should use as guidelines for collecting, analyzing and interpreting qualitative data. This study has followed Creswell's recommended steps using the bottom-up approach to analysis.

Results

In order to achieve the aims of the study, interviews, and observations were utilized on a convenient sample consisting of ten EFL teachers in DSs. The present section presents the findings based on the tools used in an attempt to answer the following research questions;

1. What scaffolding strategies and techniques are utilized in the classrooms to improve the students' EFL writing?
2. How do EFL teachers employ scaffolding strategies and techniques in writing classes?

Question One: What scaffolding strategies and techniques are utilized in the classrooms to improve the   students' EFL writing?

Eight interviewees gave feedback about the use of scaffolding to enhance students' creativity in writing. Their feedback is discussed in this sub-section. According to TA, scaffolding could help students to progress in their writing tasks under supervision in class as well as at home. He stated, ―this strategy could allow students to progress from completing the given tasks in the class under the teacher's supervision towards home assignments" (TA, Interview, November1, 2012).Similarly, TE stressed the importance of scaffolding in writing by saying that this strategy is required to ensure strong writing structure, and after the building is strong to stand on its own, scaffolding could be taken off one by one; this is akin to the situation of when a student becomes

confident enough in his/her understanding of the subject (writing), the props could be taken off one by one (TE, Interview, November 19, 2012). Furthermore, TJ talked about scaffolding strategy, and what he does preceding the process of scaffolding. He stated that: I usually start my classes with tutorial sessions, which aim at stimulating, encouraging, guiding cooperative learning, and getting the students ready for subsequent out-of-class assignments (TJ, Interview, November 27, 2012). TF suggested that a teacher should prepare a schedule and routine for submitting of assignments with a set time and day with clear guidelines. TF stated, Once the students are suitable for a routine, students are encouraged to construct a similar type of work he/she has just provided feedback on…Students were notified about the timetable for submitting and they were encouraged to submit their work on a fixed time (TF, Interview, November 13, 2012). Most interviewed teachers believed that scaffolding was important to encourage students' learning independence. Two teachers were unfamiliar with the scaffolding strategy. One of them, TB, stated, ―I have heard about scaffolding before but honestly I don't know how to implement such kind of strategies into instruction…. I always implement the strategies I am familiar with (TB, Interview, November 4, 2012).

Question Two: How do EFL teachers employ scaffolding strategies and techniques in writing classes?

Through observations, the results revealed that four of the participating teachers employed scaffolding as a teaching strategy in the class. Specifically, TF used the group activity to explain descriptive writing. He proceeded to explain in class how they could use reading descriptive sentences to the class in making their writing more descriptive. TF distributed handouts among the students containing spatial words and plain sentences and instructed them to first construct descriptive sentences and then descriptive paragraphs (TF, Observation 2, December13, 2012) TF used two sentences taken from his hand out to ensure that students were clear about the task. The students cooperated by turning these plain sentences into descriptive ones and sharing their answers with the class. The sentences were then discussed and alternative sentences followed. The students proceeded to do individual work on more sentences, which were submitted to the teacher for feedback. The completed sentences were handed back to the students with comments and suggestions. The students proceeded to write a descriptive paragraph, which was also

submitted to the teacher for feedback. Following their successful attempts at descriptive writing of sentences and paragraphs, students were asked to write a longer piece of descriptive writing. Another teacher participant, TE, also employed the scaffolding strategy in class during an essay writing lesson by dividing the essay into different parts and assigning those parts to different groups of students. After the class chose a topic, the task was divided into five groups. The first group worked on the introduction, three groups worked on the body and the last group worked on the conclusion. The parts were formed together, and everybody got a copy of the final draft. The different parts were examined for topic sentences, details, specific examples, missing details and that the proper steps were taken in constructing the essay (TE, Observation1, December10, 2012).

TJ started a class by giving the students instructions about the time to be taken and the procedures to be followed. The classes were active, tasks were focused on student interests, and students were encouraged and guided by the teacher, who was moving among groups to see the progress. He gave encouragement to all groups and prepared the students for the subsequent homework assignments (TJ, Observation 2, December, 16, 2012). TA, after the groups finished their work, gave the students some short assignments following the process of inquiry but not for cognitively thinking deeply. He asked them to describe anyone they chose in a paragraph. The teacher discussed the principles of this type of work and informed them about the time allotted and the deadline for submitting the drafts (TA, Observation1, December 6, 2012).

Discussion and Conclusion

Most of the interviewed teachers believed that scaffolding was important to encourage students' learning independence. Observations revealed that four of the participating teachers employed this teaching strategy in the class, which is based on Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Vygotsky (1978) posited that human learning cannot be understood independently from the social and cultural forces that influence individuals and those socio-cultural interactions are critical to learning. Conceptual and cultural learning occurs through dialogue in what Vygotsky called a ZPD. He defined this zone as —The distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as

determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers‖ (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Learning in a ZPD may be effectively scaffolded by either teachers or fellow learners, and the constructs of the ZPD, scaffolding and appropriation can be applied to the teaching of writing as a process. Importantly, when inducting students into writing as a process, the teacher must create a supportive but challenging environment, set the overall goal and direction, and clearly explain the rationale for such writing, demonstrating, by appropriate micro-tasks, some of the procedures used for collaborative work.

In this study, the observations revealed that many of the teachers followed several principles of the scaffolding strategy. First, these teachers provided contextual support in a safe but challenging environment, and errors were expected and accepted as part of the learning process. For example, teacher TJ provided students with his support when needed, and teacher TA provided students with his supervision and tried to enhance their independence. Moreover, the principle of flow was used to improve scaffolding leaning in this study. Teachers stimulated student interest in the tasks, encouraged and guided collaboration, and prepared them for the subsequent out-of-class activities. For example, teacher TJ was observed beginning his class by giving students specific instructions for the time allotted and procedures. The sessions were aimed at stimulating student interest in the tasks in hand, encouraging and guiding collaboration, and preparing for the subsequent out-of-class assignments.

Furthermore, the principle of handover has also appeared in this study, as did the principle of contingency. In this, co-constructed drafts are edited and proofread by group members. Once this has been done to their general satisfaction, students make final adjustments to the draft and a final version is submitted to the teacher. In this case the ZPD closes when learner is ready to undertake similar tasks without help. For example, TF requested that his students write a longer piece of descriptive writing after finishing their first assignment and then to submit a fresh copy of the work. Teachers in this study used many scaffolding techniques and principles to enhance the students' creativity in writing. The impact of such strategy on creativity in writing has been demonstrated in many previous studies (Ahangari et al., 2014; Riazi & Rezaii, 2011; Wong & Hew, 2010).

The findings of this study have helped to either clarify or explain the realities of what actually happens in the selected DSs classrooms in examining the quality of the learning and teaching process and the promotion of creativity in the Jordanian EFL context in real practice. Using triangulation helped prove the trustworthiness and credibility of the findings. The study contributed filling in the gaps in previous literature concerning creativity in EFL writing in the context of Jordan and in the Arab region. An investigation into non-DSs schools in which the MoE policy on creativity in writing is applied is recommended for future studies to determine if similar instruction is being followed and if the instruction is successful. A comparison between DSs schools and non-DSs schools would highlight the differences in instruction and yield significant information concerning the enhancement of students' creativity in writing.

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