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Reappraisal of the Pivotal Role of Social Interactionist Perspectives in Furthering Learners' Reading, Attitudinal Dexteries

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Abstract

Constructivist and social interactionist psychologies have indisputably opened up novel, unprecedented horizons for current pedagogical research which is centered on diversification of education and learner empowerment. Amid the myriad axioms, argumentations and theories configured under the auspices of social interactionist views toward instruction lies the vast body of techniques and principles falling under the flag of Vygotsky's groundbreaking theory widely known as 'sociocultural theory'. An overriding component of Vygotskian line of argumentation, scaffolding is what mainly constitutes the pivotal cornerstone of the current scrutiny. Thus, seeking to probe the feasible impact of providing teacher intervention and peer assistance, in tandem with the underlying tenets of scaffolding theory, on learners' possible reading gains and test attitude modifications, the researchers in the current study opted for a sample of 94 academic EFL freshmen. Data required for the study were amassed through two separate administrations of a standardized reading comprehension test, along with a questionnaire entitled 'Student Opinion Survey' (composed of two subscales of Task Importance and Task Effort), prior and successive to running treatment. In line with the final upshots gained through the study, it was found that no significant difference existed between the reading comprehension performance of experimental and control groups on the posttest. However, experimental group participants were characterized by undergoing more attitudinal changes, compared to control group learners, (in terms of both task importance and task effort components of the questionnaire) at the culmination of the research.

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1. Introduction

Among the myriad approaches and schools of psychology, including behavioristic, cognitive, constructivist, and humanistic perspectives, it was social interactionist view that made a more long-lasting effect on the processes of language learning and acquisition. Taking a social interactionist or, as some theoreticians in the field tend to call it, social constructivist stance allows language teachers and researchers to view language learning as a co-construction “through interactions with others, which takes place within a social-cultural context” (Kao, 2010, p. 114).

According to Wu (1998), sociocultural theory (SCT) is a theory of the development of higher functions that emphasizes close association of culture, cognition, and development. "Unlike the psychological theories that view thinking and speaking as related but independent processes, sociocultural theory views speaking and thinking as tightly interwoven" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 47). Furthermore, as Azabdaftari (2013, p. 107) contends, within SCT model "knowledge is use, and use creates knowledge" and hence "the distinction between 'use' of the L2 and 'knowledge' of the L2 becomes blurred." Vygotsky's concept of SCT is, indeed, based on mental development through mediation which means that "human mind is always and everywhere mediated primarily by linguistically based communication" (Lantolf, 2002, p. 104). Furthermore, as Lantolf (2004) maintains, SCT "is not a theory of the social or of the cultural aspects of human existence …it is, rather,…a theory of mind…that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking" (cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 1).

One of the fundamental axioms within Vygotsky's SCT, scaffolding, was originally introduced by Bruner (1966) and Wood, Burner and Ross (1976). Scaffolding, as Schweisfurth (2013, p. 23) holds, entails the "process of building from a lower starting level towards the learner's potential through the intervention of another." Also, as she continues to aver, "Sustained dialogue is central to the process of scaffolding, as is careful and understanding modelling by the teacher." Berk defines scaffolding as "A changing quality of support over a teaching session in which adults adjust the assistance they provide to fit the child's current level of performance. Direct instruction is offered when a task is new; less help is provided as competence increases" (Berk, 2002, p. 261). For Foley scaffolding is regarded "as assistance that helps to facilitate learning that is provided to the child by a caregiver, who is usually one step ahead of the child" (Foley, 1994, p. 101). Ellis (2008, p.235) further explains scaffolding as an ‘inter-psychological process’ that internalizes dialogically what students learn.

In the scaffolding process students are not passive receiver of information rather "they are the active learners and therefore, their zone of proximal development should be maximized through the help of their peers and teacher in an integrated activity which is in line with the concept of Gradual Release of Responsibility or GRR" (Ellery, 2005, p.18). Clark and Grave considered scaffolding as an effective strategy and stated that scaffolding is so effective because "it enables teacher to keep a task whole, while students learn to understand and manage the parts, and presents the learner with just the right challenge" (Clark & Grave, 2005, p.571).

Vygotsky (1978) also underscored the role of interaction in the processes of language development. "He concluded that language develops primarily from social interaction. He argued that in a supportive interactive environment, children are able to advance to higher level of knowledge and performance" (cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 20). Within this model, learning is said to take place "when an individual interacts with an interlocutor within his or her zone of proximal development (ZPD) – that is, in a situation in which the learner is capable of performing at a higher level because there is support from an interlocutor" (Lightbown & Spada, 2006, p. 47). In simpler words, ZPD refers to "the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that with which the learner is currently capable of coping" (Williams & Burden, 1997, p. 40).

In addition to scaffolding and ZPD, there are a number of other significant concepts that underlie Vygotsky's SCT model. Two of the most paramount notions in this regard are the Vygotskian principles of mediation and self-regulation. Lying at the heart of Vygotsky's SCT is the concept of mediation which is defined by Huong (2003) as "the mechanism through which external, socio-cultural activities are transformed into internal, mental functioning. Mediation is the instrument of cognitive change" (p. 33). Moreover, as Williams and Burden
(1997, p. 40) declare, the notion of mediation underscores "the part played by other significant people in the learners' lives, who enhance their learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them."

The term self-regulation (SR) is another fundamental component of sociocultural theory. It involves several aspects which lead students to appropriately respond to their environment (Bronson, 2000). Zimmerman believes that "SR refers to learning that occurs when individuals are metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process" (Zimmerman, 1994, p. 3). Teachers may be interested in training the students who can ultimately become independent, active and self-regulated learners. Students’ active involvement and awareness develop their self-regulation.

Studies abound in literature concerning diverse gains resulting from the implementation of different aspects of Vygotsky's SCT and particularly notions of mediation and scaffolding. In this brief overview of the previous work conducted on various aspects of SCT, however, the researchers will go over only a few rather recent investigations with a focus on the role of scaffolding in educational enhancement.

Sullivan (2000), in her observation of some Vietnamese classes recognized that wordplay and playful oral interaction which are, according to her, part of the cultural historical tradition and heritage in Vietnam, are good prerequisites for mediation which can augment the amount of negotiation between students and the teacher.

Walqui (2006), on the other hand, explored the use of different types of scaffolding strategy and strived to gauge their differential effects on learners' academic and linguistic development. At the end of this analysis, the researcher came to the conclusion that the utilization of scaffolding techniques can bring about a more challenging environment for learning.

Another study by Rafik-Galea and Premalatha (2008) focused on the use of different types of scaffolding strategies by teacher trainees enjoying varied proficiency levels and deduced that teacher trainees' proficiency level is a determining factor in selecting the type of scaffolding strategy that best suits the class.

In a probe into the impact of scaffolding on kid's reading anxiety, speed and proficiency, Magno (2010) launched an investigation with sixty first-graders ranging between 6 and 7 years of age, and concluded that scaffolding technique utilized as a treatment tool was found to be efficacious in lowering learners' reading anxiety and augmenting their reading proficiency and reading speed.

Finally, Feizollahi (2013) explored the effectiveness of scaffolding technique, as opposed to peer correction, in increasing learners' oral fluency and accuracy. Choosing a sample of 45 adult female EFL institute learners and arranging the participants in three separate cells (one control and two experimental groups), the researcher came to the conclusion that the use of teacher scaffolding can bring about more improvement in learners' oral fluency and accuracy in comparison to the provision of peer feedback.

Though various researchers, to date, have strived to launch probes into different kinds of gain resulting from the implementation of SCT, in general, and scaffolding techniques, in particular, none have concerned themselves with the potential effects of scaffolding on both reading and attitudinal/motivational gains in a single study. Thus, to help bridge this ostensible gap in the literature, the current study delved into a scrutiny to come up with cogent answers to the following research questions:

RQ1: Does the implementation of scaffolding strategy enhance Iranian academic EFL learners’ reading comprehension?

RQ2: Does the implementation of scaffolding strategy enhance Iranian academic EFL learners’ motivation to read?
2. Method

2.1 Participants

The purpose of the current research was to evaluate the effect of scaffolding strategy on students’ motivation and reading comprehension. The participants consisted of ninety four college students, fifty four males and forty females, enrolled in second semester at Elmi-Karbordi College in Urmia, West Azerbaijan. Approximately 43% of the participants were female and 57% of them were male. The participants’ mother tongue was Azari and their age ranged from 21 to 46. The participants were randomly assigned to either experimental or control groups and as intact groups were employed for the study, an uneven number of learners existed in each of the two groups (41 in experimental and 53 in control group).

2.2 Instrumentation

The current research implemented standardized proficiency tests (taken from konkur test designed by Sanjesh Organization for the year 1382) to investigate the participants’ level of reading comprehension prior and successive to treatment. Furthermore, the Student Opinion Survey (SOS) was implemented to gauge learners’ motivation level. In contrast to the single factor structure originally reported by Wolf and Smith (1995), the scale has been refined to measure two factors, namely Importance and Effort (Sundre, 1999).

2.3 Procedure

To undertake the study, the researchers administered the instruments to students in their second semester English reading comprehension classes. At the first stage (pre-test), all the 94 students in 2 classes were given two intermediate reading comprehension tests to measure their initial reading comprehension ability. Next, the ten-item Students’ Opinion Scale was given to the participants in both classes in order to measure their motivation to read. Afterwards, the students in both classes participated in eight reading sessions; each session was about sixty minutes long. In the control group, the focus was on reading comprehension based on structuralist perspective and mainly grammar translation method, whereas in the experimental class the focus was on scaffolding strategy.

For the treatment to take effect, the students in the experimental group were divided into different small groups; the groups consisted of four or five male and female participants. Eight reading comprehension texts were selected to be taught during treatment sessions. While reading, various kinds of scaffolding activities such as intergroup scaffolding, intragroup scaffolding and teacher scaffolding were implemented as language tools for developing students’ understanding of texts. At the final stage (post-test), again two reading comprehension tests and Students’ Opinion Scale were given to students to measure their reading comprehension ability and degree of motivation to complete the given task. The data obtained from test results and students’ opinions survey constituted the major basis for statistical analyses.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were subjected to a number of basic statistical analyses, including both descriptive and inferential statistics. Mainly t-test analysis (independent samples t-test, to be more specific) was run on the data to evaluate the relationship between variables.

3. Results and Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore the effect of scaffolding strategy on reading comprehension skill and motivation of Iranian academic EFL learners. The research questions addressed in the study were:
RQ1: Does the implementation of scaffolding strategy enhance Iranian academic EFL learners’ reading comprehension?

RQ2: Does the implementation of scaffolding strategy enhance Iranian academic EFL learners’ motivation to read?

As the initial step for data analysis and to ensure the equality of the groups on the pretest, an independent samples t-test was run on the pretest scores of reading comprehension, the results of which are reported in Table 1.

Table 1 Independent Samples t-test Run on Pretest Reading Comprehension Scores

| Reading Comprehension | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T   | Sig |
|------------------------|----|------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Experimental (Pretest) | 53 | 10.45| 3.62           | -0.69 | .48 |
| Control (Pretest)      | 41 | 10.97| 3.58           |      |     |

As Table 1 indicates, the obtained $p$ value (.48) is higher than the cut-off point of .05, and hence no significant difference is found between the two groups at the outset of the study.

Also, to pinpoint the potential effect of treatment on participants' reading comprehension performance, another independent samples t-test was run on the posttest scores (see Table 2).

Table 2 Independent Samples t-test Run on Posttest Reading Comprehension Scores

| Reading Comprehension | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T   | Sig |
|------------------------|----|------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Experimental (Posttest)| 53 | 12.94| 4.06           | 1.47 | .14 |
| Control (Posttest)     | 41 | 11.76| 3.58           |      |     |

Although comparison between the mean scores reported in Tables 1 and 2 reveals that both experimental and control group means have improved from pretest to posttest, and that experimental group is characterized by more improvement in terms of mean scores (10.45 to 12.94), the difference between the posttest reading comprehension performance of two groups is not statistically significant ($p = .14 > .05$).

Furthermore, as stated earlier, the motivation scale used in the current study was composed of two elements of 'task importance' and 'task effort'. Thus, to analyze the possible improvement in learners' motivational orientation successive to the treatment, these two elements are going to be analyzed in isolation. Table 3 represents the results of independent samples t-test run on the pretest scores of motivation with regard to the element of 'task importance'.

Table 3 Independent Samples t-test Run on Pretest 'Task Importance' Element of Motivation Scale

| Task Importance | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T   | Sig |
|-----------------|----|------|----------------|-----|-----|
| Experimental (Pretest) | 53 | 2.34 | .49            | -1.81 | .07 |
| Control (Pretest)     | 41 | 2.56 | .65            |      |     |
As Table 3 reveals, the performance of two groups on the pretest motivation scale in terms of 'task importance' does not indicate any significant difference ($p = .07 > .05$).

To see whether treatment has brought about significant differences in terms of 'task importance' element of motivation, another independent samples t-test was run on the posttest results (see Table 4).

### Table 4 Independent Samples t-test Run on Posttest 'Task Importance' Element of Motivation Scale

| Task Importance | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T    | Sig |
|-----------------|----|------|----------------|------|-----|
| Experimental (Posttest) | 53 | 3.40 | .67            | 3.05 | .00 |
| Control (Posttest)        | 41 | 2.98 | .67            |      |     |

As can be inferred from Table 4, the difference between the two groups is significant ($p = .00 < .05$), and hence it can be claimed that the treatment applied in the experimental group has led to significant gains within this group in terms of 'task importance' element of motivational scale.

Furthermore, concerning 'task effort' component of motivation again use was made of independent samples t-test to check the differences between the two groups both prior and subsequent to treatment. Table 5 deals with the results obtained regarding participants' pretest scores.

### Table 5 Independent Samples t-test Run on Pretest 'Task Effort' Element of Motivation Scale

| Task Effort | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T    | Sig |
|-------------|----|------|----------------|------|-----|
| Experimental (Pretest) | 53 | 2.35 | .65            | -0.26| .79 |
| Control (Pretest)        | 41 | 2.38 | .60            |      |     |

In line with what is reported in Table 5, no significant difference is observed between the two groups' scores on the pretest of motivation with regard to the component of 'task effort'. The last instance of independent samples t-test was utilized to check the possible differences between the groups on the posttest (see Table 6).

### Table 6 Independent Samples t-test Run on Posttest 'Task Effort' Element of Motivation Scale

| Task Effort | N  | Mean | Std. deviation | T    | Sig |
|-------------|----|------|----------------|------|-----|
| Experimental (Posttest) | 53 | 3.40 | .64            | 3.76 | .00 |
| Control (Posttest)        | 41 | 2.89 | .67            |      |     |

Drawing on the data in Table 6, it can be claimed that the researchers' applied scaffolding treatment has led to significant difference between the two groups concerning the 'task effort' component of motivation scale ($p = .00 < .05$).
Although the comparison of experimental and control groups with regard to reading comprehension did not reveal a significant difference, according to the results demonstrated through examination of the data in the preceding section, it was found that the participants in experimental group achieved more than the members of the control group. Additionally, the results showed considerable enhancement concerning students’ motivation scale both in terms of 'task importance' and 'task effort' dimensions.

The findings of the current study with regard to the effect of scaffolding on reading comprehension are in partial keeping with the results gained in Rafik-Galea and Premalatha’s (2008) study, which showed the practicality of scaffolding strategy in enhancing learning and comprehension. The results are also partly compatible with the upshots gained in Magno’s (2010) research. He stated that scaffolding is effective in improving reading speed, reading comprehension and the reduction of anxiety.

Based on the obtained findings for the second research question, it can be concluded that scaffolding technique applied as the treatment in the experimental group has led to significant differences between the two groups in terms of both 'task importance' and 'task effort' constituents of motivation scale. These results somewhat affirm the claim of Vacca (2008), who believes that the proper implementation of scaffolding might result in improved learner creativity, motivation, and resourcefulness. The findings are also consistent with the results gained by Kim, et al. (2006), where the researchers showed that scaffolding in classroom positively influences learner motivation.

4. Conclusion

The findings of the current study point to interesting verities regarding the effect of scaffolding on students' reading comprehension as well as motivation. It is concluded that scaffolding plays an important role in improving learners' motivation and to a lesser degree their reading comprehension. The reason underlying such an enhancement might be that when students work with each other and receive an ongoing support, they have more chance to arrive at the correct answer, and have sufficient time to think, rehearse, and receive feedback. Such a process develops interaction among students and makes them participate in the process of co-constructing meaning. Besides, scaffolding is a kind of flexible and adoptable way of instruction which allows students themselves to learn how to learn.

The findings of this study may have implications for teachers who are seeking information about scaffolding strategies and the quality of teacher intervention and students' cooperation in pedagogical arenas. The results gained in this research and other similar studies might also help sensitize the educationalists toward the key role of scaffolding in bringing about more student involvement and interest. After all, it is hoped that the outcomes of this research will pave the way for revitalizing attention toward the pivotal part played by sociocultural theory, mediation and scaffolding in the process of second language learning.

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