The Impact of Scaffolding on Content Retention of Iranian Post-elementary EFL Learners’ Summary Writing

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Abstract

Scaffolded Writing is an innovative method of supporting emergent writing based on Vygotsky’s theory of learning and development. In the present study, Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory and scaffolding learning of Gibbons (2002) are used as the theoretical basis to study the impact of scaffolding on EFL learner’s summary writing ability. The focus of the study was on the Content retention of the learners’ writings. 40 female participants within the age range of 12-15, studying in Morad Talkro Language Institute in Tabriz, Iran were randomly assigned as experimental and control groups. The experimental group underwent scaffolding technique in which the learners were provided with constant helps from the teacher at the beginning and this help faded along the course upon the learners’ progress. On the other hand, the control group followed the instruction of the book without being helped in their writings. Comparison of the results obtained from the written posttest showed that the students in the experimental group outperformed the learners in the control group in their writings and remembered more details from the story. The results have some implications for the teaching of second and foreign language writing.

Keywords: writing; scaffolding; content retention

1. Introduction

There is no doubt that writing is the most challenging task for the foreign language learners to master. It is an important productive skill, which can be used in learning other receptive and productive skills (Zhu, 2004). Weigle (2002) has pointed to the importance of writing and has explained that the ability to write proficiently is becoming

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increasingly significant in our global community, and instruction in writing is thus presuming an increasing role in both second- and foreign- language education of communication. In terms of skills Schultz and Fecho (2000) has defined that, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing to do in language. Wolf (2000, cited in Topuz, 2004) alleges that writing in a second language is a more difficult process than writing in one’s native language because some sub-skills necessary for writing may not have developed adequately.

Recently, teaching strategies in language classrooms are shifting from the traditional way of enlightening unknowledgeable learners solely by transmitting knowledge to what students will need to succeed in the real world. The emphasis of current language teaching strategies includes thinking critically, learning to solve problems, and working and communicating with others (Caner, 2002).

2. Literature Review

Sociocultural theory and its application to language teaching and learning which is one of the interests of language educators, was first developed and systematized by Vygotsky and his collaborators in Russia in the 1920s and 1930s. According to the Vygotsky, sociocultural theory maintains that learning and development is the socio-genesis product of meaningful social interactions among the community members in the respective learning context. In Vygotskian’s view, a child’s performance in completing a task with the assistance of others would exceed what he or she could do without assistance. One of the factors that has drawn language educators to sociocultural theory is its emphasis on mediation in the process of learning. Mediation is defined as indirect activity which “is not limited to assistance by other human beings but may come in the form of socially constructed semiotic artifacts, such as books, maps, and diagrams” (Well, 1999 as cited in Villamil & Guerrero, 2003, p. 80). According to the Vygotskian’s view, it is through social mediation that knowledge becomes refined and viable and gains coherence. Mediation is the mechanism through which external, sociocultural activities are transformed into internal, mental functioning (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Ashton (1996) points out that in Vygotsky’s view of mediation, human thought emerges in the context of activities that are embedded in specific social and cultural settings. Written and oral communication will be shaped by the styles of discourse that are preferred in the particular setting where the communication occurs. Applying this idea to a classroom, mediation includes teaching and learning aids; it can be spoken and written language, both of which are important for constructing knowledge and cognitive development. Learners’ thinking will be shaped to the preferred discourse that dominates classroom interaction.

Besides mediation, two other concepts namely scaffolding and ZPD within Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory are of crucial importance to the current study. The metaphor of scaffolding was first introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross in 1976 (Hobsbaum, Peters, & Sylvia, 1996; Holton & Clarke, 2006; Lipscomb, Swanson, & West, 2004; Pea, 2004; Verenikina, 2008), and was defined as “an adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976, p. 9).

In the classroom, scaffolding is a process by which a teacher provides students with a temporary framework for learning. When scaffolding is done correctly, students are encouraged to develop their own creativity, motivation, and resourcefulness. As students gather knowledge and increase their skills on their own, fundamentals of the framework are dismantled. At the completion of the lesson, the scaffolding is removed altogether and students no longer need it (Lawson, 2002).

Many research studies have investigated the impact of scaffolding on the improvement of language skills. Bruch (2007) for example, in her case study, examined scaffolding of ten students in reading and writing. Teachers’ scaffolding techniques included specific prompts, guided reading and writing groups, direct and explicit teaching, mini lessons, small group instruction, and instruction driven by performance based assessment. The study revealed that the use of scaffolding was of great importance and the most effective. Its importance stemmed from being an effective means of moving students from being at risk of failure to
confident, independent, and self-regulated learners. The study revealed consistent progress among students when supported and scaffolded in their literacy acquisition. Their reading and writing performance exceeded the expected level.

In the Iranian context, Baradaran and Sarfarazi’s (2011) study described how a group of university students were guided through the process of scaffolding according to Vygotskian sociocultural theory to produce their first academic essays in English. The researcher tried to teach the students how to generate ideas, structure, draft, and edit their essays within the scaffolding principles such as, contextualizing, modeling, negotiating, contingency, constructing and handover, within the ZPD. The result of the analysis showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group at 0.05 level of significance. So the researchers concluded that the application of scaffolding could greatly improve the writing performance of students at university.

Riazi and Rezaii (2011) reported a study conducted within the sociocultural framework and aimed at investigating the effect of scaffolding on EFL students’ writing ability. The study intended to find out whether teacher- or peer-scaffolding was more successful in helping students improve their English texts. The results of the t-tests showed that teacher scaffolding appeared to be more successful on improving students' writing in that particular EFL context. It was also found that both the teacher and peers used many different scaffolding behaviours; however, the teacher used more such behaviours in mediating students’ writing.

Inspired by the previous studies related to the scaffolding techniques, in the present study, the researcher intended to discover the probable positive impact of scaffolding on the content retention of post-elementary students’ summary writing in order to establish some rules if applicable. To achieve that end, the researcher raised the following research question:

Does scaffolding affect content retention of post elementary EFL learners’ summary writing?

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 40 female EFL learners within the age range of 12-15, learning English at post-elementary level (Chatterbox 5) at Morad Talkro Language Institution in Tabriz, Iran. They were selected from two intact classes of 20 which have been randomly assigned as the experimental group and the control group.

3.2. Instruments

In this study three types of instruments were used to collect the research data. They were as follows: 1) KET test; 2) a writing pretest; 3) a writing posttest. It is worth mentioning that to check the internal consistency and validity of the templates and the writing scale used for rating, four experts being skilful in testing and English teaching, verified them and confirmed their validity.

3.3 Procedure

After analyzing the results of the KET test and finding out the homogeneity of two groups, the researcher selected one of the groups as the experimental, and the other as the control group randomly. At the beginning of the course, both groups were asked to write a summary of the first story of Chatterbox 5, their textbook and it was considered as their pretest performances, so the process of data collection started in January 2012, and ended on June after two successive terms with a one week rest in the middle. The data for the present research were obtained from learners' writings. Writing samples from the experimental group and the control group were collected. The participants in the experimental group were involved in teacher assisted assessment of samples of their written assignments. This functioned as scaffolding because it was based on an assisted process of writing which faded in time to help learners become autonomous. In fact, the teacher, who was the researcher as well, provided some tasks and templates which have been assigned for each summary writing task and were based on tasks developed by Gibbons (2002) and some were introduced by the researcher based on the requirements of the classes under study to meet the learners’ needs. These writing aids were developed to serve a function and help the learners to understand the problems of their writings and improve their retention of contents with indirect and assisted teaching. Each type of exercises or developed frameworks and writing aids is explained in detail below.
3.3.1 Explicit framework
Gibbons (2002) believes that for lower levels students and those who do not have a good mastery of English and still need strong support, providing an explicit framework might be helpful. In this task, a template with incomplete but leading sentences was provided and the learners were asked to fill in the blanks to complete the story. To help the learners write coherent sentences, transitional words and some cues were given.

3.3.2 Picture matching
One of the useful exercises suggested by Gibbons (2002) was sequencing and matching pictures. In the present study, the researcher copied the relevant pictures of the studied stories and scrambled them along with some sentences pertinent to the story but not in order. The students were asked to work in pairs to order the pictures and match the correct sentence which best described the picture. And finally write the summary of the story. This kind of exercise was considered to be useful for remembering the content.

3.3.3 Story map
According to Gibbons (2002), learners can write easily if they are given the idea of what to write. To this end, providing a sequence of events in the form of pictures can be of crucial help. In order to perform this task the pictures related to each story studied in the class were given to the learners after oral summarization in the class, they were asked first to order the pictures according to sequence of events, then to describe them and finally write whatever they could remember from the story. Remembering what they learnt from explicit framework task, they could write without the framework.

3.3.4 Jumbled sentences
In this task which was developed by the researcher, incomplete sentences related to the story were written on a card where the rest of the sentences were provided on another card given to the learner’s partner. The pairs were asked to match the sentences and order them based on the story, then write the whole story and give it to the teacher.

It is worth mentioning that the above explained tasks were given to the learners constantly and as they improved the scaffolds were removed gradually. In other words, the researcher helped the learners more explicitly to write at the beginning but little by little the help was faded till the learners could write independently.

The writings of the participants in the pretest and posttest were corrected based on a writing scale developed by the Scoring Profile of Jacobs et al. (1981) and Wang and Liao (2008), the reliability and validity of which have been confirmed by four experts in testing English.

On the other hand, the control group did not receive such a joint and interactive support and went through the traditional class norms. The teacher taught the story the same way as the experimental group without accompanying tasks and templates. At the end of the class, the students were asked to write a summary of the story in class and no comments were put under their assignments after correcting.

4. Results
To evaluate the amount of content retention in the learners’ summary writings based on the developed scale, scores between 16-20 were given to the texts with thorough retention of relevant content with all details; scores between 11-15 were allocated to some retention of content with limited development of ideas, and limited details; scores between 6-10 were given to limited retention of content, inadequate development of ideas and very few details; texts which did not show any retention of content and did not have enough details got the scores between 1-5. It is noteworthy that the total sum of scores given to content retention of the summary writings was 20 which were considered as the final score of the texts handed to the learners based on which some evaluations like the estimation of inter-rater reliability laid.

It should be mentioned that the rubric was also used to rate students’ essays at the beginning and end of the term (i.e. pretest and posttest). The ratings were made for the second time by another instructor to ensure reliability. The inter-rater reliability coefficient for the pretest and posttest ratings of the experimental group was shown to be 0.928.
and 0.943 respectively and for the control group’s pretest and posttest scores it was 0.89 and .093 respectively.

4.1 The KET Test Analysis

To ascertain the homogeneity of the experimental and control groups the KET test was administered and the result showed that both groups were homogeneous in terms of general proficiency.

Table 4.1
Descriptive Statistics and t-test of the KET Test analysis

| Groups       | mean  | N   | t   | df  | Sig. |
|--------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|------|
| Experimental | 32.33 | 21  | -.082 | 40  | .93  |
| Control      | 32.42 | 21  |      |     |      |

According to the conducted t-test, the overall mean of the experimental group in the KET test was 32.33 (SD=3.75) and the mean of the control group was 32.42 (SD=3.73) and p value was 0.935, which indicates that the difference between the two groups was not significant (0.935>0.05). In other words, the experimental and the control group were almost alike and homogeneous at the beginning of the course.

4.2. Content retention

Having analyzed the preliminary data and ascertained the homogeneity of the experimental and the control group, the researcher examined the impact of scaffolding on content retention of the groups in order to answer the research question. For this purpose the researcher first conducted the descriptive statistics on the data, then run an independent t-test on the post-test scores of the groups. The results are shown in the following table 2.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and t-test analysis for the content retention

| Groups       | mean  | N   | t   | df  | Sig. |
|--------------|-------|-----|-----|-----|------|
| Experimental | 13.45 | 20  | 3.45 | 38  | .001 |
| Control      | 10.55 | 20  |     |     |      |

As it is indicated in Table 2 the mean score of the experimental group in the posttest was 13.45, while the mean score of the control group was 10.55 and based on the Independent Samples t-test shown in Table 2 and considering $t=3.454$ and $P=0.001<0.05$, it was concluded that the difference between the scores of the content retention of the learners’ writing on their posttest was statistically significant and learners in the experimental group who underwent scaffolding treatment, outperformed their peers in the control group considering content retention of their summary writings.
5. Discussion

The findings of the present study are in line with Baradaran and Sarfarazi’s (2011) study which described how a group of university students in Iran were guided through the process of scaffolding according to Vygotskian sociocultural theory, to produce their first academic essays in English. The result of the analysis showed that the experimental group outperformed the control group and the application of scaffolding could greatly improve the writing performance of students at university.

The present study also confirms what Riazi and Rezaii (2011) found in a study conducted within the sociocultural framework and aimed at investigating the effect of scaffolding on EFL university students’ writing ability.

The findings of the present study are also consistent with the findings of Bruch’s (2007) case study, which examined scaffolding of ten students in reading and writing. The study revealed that the use of scaffolding was of great importance and the most effective because of moving students from being at risk of failure to confident, independent, and self-regulated learners.

5. Conclusion

The improvement on the writings of the learners regarding content retention showed the positive effect of scaffolding on the content retention of the learners’ writings. It means that the experimental group outperformed the control group regarding their content retention because of the undergoing scaffolding program. The findings of this study supports that scaffolding technique would help students progress themselves and become autonomous learners. The current research proved that scaffolding technique aids students upgrade their knowledge of English writing and eventually become independent learners. Scaffolding is a guiding light that leads the learner towards independent learning. Highest level of support by the teacher at the beginning is necessary for the learner to eventually become autonomous in the learning path and achieve the ability to complete activities on her/his own without any help from the teacher.

Scaffolding writing offers instructors means to evaluate learner’s learning of literacy skills and is helpful to students with less proficiency in English writing to improve their language skills. Scaffolding writing allows a shift in students’ language development to ZPD when the lower level is calculated by the learners’ isolated learning. The present study has the potential to influence methods of teaching for working teachers and university instructors, among policy makers and designers of syllabuses.

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