

Scaffolding Reading for Mixed-Ability EFL Classrooms: The American Language Center, Meknes, as a Case Study

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Abstract:

Teaching a mixed-ability class is one of the major challenges teachers experience on a daily basis. While each student is different in terms of their own learning abilities, interests, and learning styles, teachers are expected to employ teaching techniques that ensure all their students benefit from the lesson despite their differences. The present study investigates the effectiveness of differentiating instruction through scaffolding to enhance students' reading comprehension skills. Through qualitative methods such as classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the researcher could gather detailed insights into how teachers implement scaffolding strategies, the nuances of these strategies, and how they adapt them based on students' individual needs. The findings of this study showed that scaffolding reading helps mixed-ability students develop a deeper understanding of texts. The observed teachers managed to create an inclusive classroom environment where students had opportunities to be successful readers regardless of their different abilities and learning styles.

Keywords: differentiation, EFL students, mixed-ability classrooms, Morocco, reading, scaffolding techniques

Introduction

Mixed-ability classes, where students with a wide range of English language proficiency, interests, tendencies, etc. attend the same class, are considered a challenge for educators of English as a foreign language (EFL) (Zakarneh, Al-Ramahi, & Mahmoud, 2020). In fact, as long as a teacher is teaching more than one student, they are teaching a mixed-ability class. Each student is unique and, therefore, no two students are alike. To ensure that all students perform to their maximum potential, teachers need to identify these differences and respond to them accordingly. Implementing differentiated instruction through scaffolding techniques can provide the necessary support and promote inclusion among students with different abilities in a classroom (Vygotsky, 1978, Tomlinson, 2014).

This study is an attempt to discover the extent to which scaffolding in reading helps struggling readers improve their reading comprehension. Reading is one of the four language skills that students need to master if the aim is to learn the English language effectively. Cohen (1999) defines reading as the

interaction between a reader and a printed message and considers it a fundamental learning tool that is practically indispensable both in school and outside school. Therefore, to ensure that all students in a mixed-ability class attain the required reading skills, teachers need to create an environment in which they adapt their teaching methods and strategies in accordance with the differing needs of each student.

Research Problem

Reading comprehension is an essential skill that all students must master for learning to occur. However, students in mixed-ability classrooms rarely achieve equal participation in reading activities. Rather, most of the reading comprehension activities could result in poor performance by lower-level students (Perfetti & Hart, 2001) thereby widening the gap among students in mixed-ability classes.

Objective of the Study

This study aims to investigate the impact of scaffolding reading comprehension in a mixed-ability classroom.

Research Question

How can teachers' use of scaffolding instruction enhance mixed-ability students' reading comprehension?

Literature Review

Over the last few decades, differentiated instruction has become a well-established construct in educational research and practice. Considerable progress has been made in this area, and research publications on differentiated instruction have continued to increase (Swanson & Deshler, 2003; Cunningham & Allington, 2007; Zhou & Brown, 2015). The growing interest in differentiation reflects the recognition that students in the same classroom differ in their knowledge, learning pace, interests, abilities, and ways of engaging with learning tasks. This is particularly relevant to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classrooms, where differences in language proficiency can be considerable. In mixed-ability classrooms, teachers therefore face the challenge of providing instruction that supports struggling learners while remaining sufficiently challenging for more advanced students.

Differentiated instruction seeks to respond to such diversity by adapting teaching practices to learners' readiness, interests, and learning profiles (Tomlinson, 2014). Rather than expecting all students to learn in the same way and at the same pace, teachers can vary the content, learning processes, activities, materials, and forms of support provided to students. In reading instruction, differentiation may involve additional explanations, vocabulary support, guiding questions, visual materials, peer support, or alternative tasks according to students' levels of readiness.

Within differentiated instruction, scaffolding is an important approach for helping learners accomplish tasks that they may initially find difficult to perform independently. The concept of scaffolding is closely associated with sociocultural perspectives on learning and with the idea that learners can achieve higher levels of performance through appropriate assistance from teachers or more capable peers. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) describe scaffolding as temporary support that enables learners to accomplish tasks beyond their current capabilities. Similarly, Vygotsky's (1978) concept of the Zone of Proximal Development emphasizes the importance of guidance and interaction in helping learners move from what they can accomplish independently toward what they can achieve with appropriate support.

Scaffolding is particularly relevant to reading comprehension because reading involves various cognitive and linguistic processes, including identifying main ideas, understanding vocabulary, making inferences, predicting, summarizing, and interpreting information. Students with different levels of reading proficiency may require different forms and amounts of assistance to successfully perform these processes. Struggling readers, for example, may benefit from explicit modeling, vocabulary explanations, sentence starters, guiding questions, and teacher prompts, whereas more proficient readers may require less direct assistance and more challenging questions that encourage deeper interpretation and critical thinking.

An important characteristic of scaffolding is its temporary nature. Support should gradually be reduced as learners develop greater competence and confidence. In reading lessons, a teacher may initially model how to identify the main idea, subsequently guide students through questions and prompts, and finally ask them to apply the strategy independently. This gradual release of responsibility can help learners develop both reading skills and greater autonomy. Scaffolding can also occur through peer interaction, as students discuss texts, clarify meanings, exchange interpretations, and support one another during challenging tasks. Teachers should therefore continuously monitor students' responses and adjust their scaffolding strategies according to individual needs. The amount and type of assistance may vary depending on the difficulty of the text, the nature of the task, and the learner's level of competence. Scaffolding is consequently a flexible instructional process rather than a fixed procedure.

Overall, while differentiation focuses on responding to differences among learners, scaffolding provides temporary support that enables learners to progressively develop greater independence. However, there is a need to examine how scaffolding is implemented in actual EFL classrooms and how teachers adapt their practices to students with different levels of reading proficiency. The present study addresses this issue by exploring teachers' use of scaffolding strategies in mixed-ability EFL reading classrooms and examining how these practices are perceived to support students' reading comprehension and engagement.

Theoretical Framework

Theories such as multiple intelligences theory and sociocultural theory acknowledge that students differ in their aptitude for language acquisition and that every student has the right to learn according to their abilities and learning pace. These theories provide a solid basis for why it is advisable for teachers to tailor their teaching materials to suit every student. Differentiating instruction through scaffolding can create an inclusive environment that celebrates students' diversity, supporting their needs and promoting learning for all students.

1- Differentiation

Differentiating instruction is a mindset that enables teachers to prepare learning goals to suit the needs of the learners in a mixed-ability classroom. For Tomlinson (1995), the diversity in the classroom should not act as a barrier to students meeting their goals, and differentiation helps to adapt instructional methods to meet the different needs of the learners. For her, through differentiated instruction, teachers ensure that all the students, regardless of their learning abilities, cultural heritage, and social background, can achieve their learning goals. In differentiated classrooms, teachers are able to engage students through different and varied approaches to learning along with appealing to students' interests with the intention of reflecting the interests, readiness levels and learning profiles of the students (Tomlinson, 2014). Teachers in differentiated classrooms do not force learners into a standard mold but create a positive learning environment to support learners in achieving their goals (Tomlinson, 2014).

Tomlinson (2014) states that differentiated instruction is designed to meet the individual needs of the students and thus it allows every student, irrespective of their learning abilities, to access the same classroom curriculum. In a differentiated classroom, the teacher makes decisions based on the content that the students are learning, the process by which students are learning, the product of their learning, and the environment of their learning to make instruction more responsive to the individual needs of the learners.

2- *Multiple Intelligences Theory*

The theory of multiple intelligences, developed by the psychologist Howard Gardner in the late 1970s and early 1980s, explains that human beings do not possess a single form of intelligence, but rather a wide variety of different intelligences. This theory clarifies how each person sees the world through their own intelligences and that each person has several distinct intelligences and draws attention to differences in learners' strengths and ways of engaging with learning tasks. Gardner (1983) identified seven intelligences, which are linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. Later, he added naturalistic intelligence to his theory.

Multiple Intelligences Theory can greatly help teachers because it encourages a more personalized and diverse approach to teaching. When teachers understand that learners display a number of differences in the way they learn, they create a more inclusive classroom where students feel their unique ways of thinking and learning are valued and supported. As already stated, students can be visual learners, auditory learners, kinaesthetic learners, quick or slow learners, calm or energetic learners. Being aware of these differences helps teachers tailor their instruction to meet the varied needs of their students. For example, a teacher might offer visual learners diagrams, while auditory learners receive more verbal explanations.

3- *Sociocultural Theory/Scaffolding*

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory highlights how people acquire and develop language through different social interactions. This theory has a holistic approach to learning and emphasizes that knowledge is constructed in collaboration with others and that learners are active meaning-makers and problem solvers in the learning process (Vygotsky, 1978).

Sociocultural theory applies the concept of scaffolding. In construction work, scaffolding is a temporary platform or structure which is used to help in putting together a new building. It supports the building and the workers during the construction project. Similarly, in education, scaffolding refers to temporary instructional supports that teachers provide to assist learners, or that learners provide to each other, such as explanations. This assistance helps learners to accomplish tasks or comprehend concepts that they cannot achieve on their own. As students become able to complete the tasks or understand the concepts on their own, the scaffolding is gradually removed.

In fact, the term scaffolding was first coined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to refer to a teaching method that involves providing temporary support to a learner in order to help them accomplish a task or understand a concept they might not be able to complete independently. The idea is that the teacher or a more knowledgeable person like a peer or a mentor offers guidance, resources, or encouragement in a way that helps the learner perform at a higher level than they could on their own. Scaffolding also means breaking down tasks into steps and building on what students already know. Vygotsky (1978) defines the Zone of Proximal Development as the gap between the actual developmental level, which is 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. The Zone of Proximal Development is based on the student's acquired knowledge and their abilities, also indicating that additional skills can be acquired through outside support. Here teachers provide support to the student in

their Zone of Proximal Development through different activities to develop different skills or knowledge that a learner is on the verge of mastering with the help of guidance or collaboration from a more knowledgeable person. Within this zone, the learner can successfully accomplish tasks with appropriate support, which helps them develop and improve their skills.

Thus, learning stimulates different internal development processes that only operate during a learner's interaction with the people in their environment and the cooperation of their peers. Gradually, the support of the competent peer is reduced as the learner further develops their skills independently (Vygotsky, 1978).

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to explore how scaffolding practices influence reading comprehension in mixed-ability classrooms. Qualitative research focuses on understanding phenomena in-depth and in context, which aligns perfectly with this study's goal of exploring scaffolding techniques used by teachers in a mixed-ability reading comprehension classroom. Through qualitative methods like classroom observations and semi-structured interviews, the researcher can gather detailed insights into how teachers implement scaffolding strategies, the nuances of these strategies, and how they adjust them based on students' individual needs.

Research Participants

The research was conducted at an American language center in Meknes, Morocco. The research subjects were teachers and students. There were three teachers who taught intermediate students at the American language center. The teachers were senior ones with at least 20 years of teaching experience and who were knowledgeable about how to apply scaffolding strategies in reading instruction. There were thirty students (10 students per teacher), aged 16–20 years, from different reading levels (struggling, average, and advanced readers).

Data Collection

1- Classroom Observations: The researcher observed the scaffolding strategies used by the teachers during the reading lessons. There were multiple reading sessions over a span of 4 weeks. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes and focused on group reading activities, shared reading, or interactions between the teacher and students.

The researcher took detailed field notes during each observation, documenting key interactions, strategies, and student behaviors. For example, the types of scaffolding strategies teachers used were mainly prompting, questioning, providing feedback, or modeling reading behaviors. As a result of the scaffolding strategies, students showed a great deal of comprehension and engagement.

Teacher Interviews: Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each teacher after every 2–3 observation sessions. Each interview lasted about 30 minutes. The aim was to understand the teachers' perspectives on the scaffolding strategies they used, their reasons for using them, and their perceptions of their students' learning progress.

The following are some of the interview questions:

- What specific scaffolding strategies do you use during reading instruction?
- How do you decide when and how much scaffolding to provide to individual students?

- What is your perception of your students' responses to scaffolding (e.g., engagement, comprehension)?
- How do you adjust your scaffolding over time as students improve?
- What challenges do you face when scaffolding reading?

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through classroom observations and semi-structured teacher interviews were analyzed thematically. The researcher first reviewed the observation notes and interview responses several times to become familiar with the data. Relevant segments related to scaffolding practices, students' reading comprehension, engagement, confidence, and the challenges encountered by teachers were then identified and coded manually. Similar codes were subsequently grouped into broader categories and recurring patterns were identified across the observation and interview data. The analysis focused particularly on the types of scaffolding used with students at different reading levels and on teachers' perceptions of students' responses to these strategies. The emerging patterns were then organized around the main findings presented in the Results and Discussion section.

To enhance the credibility of the findings, the researcher compared evidence from classroom observations with information obtained through teacher interviews. This process of comparing evidence from different data sources helped identify areas of convergence between what teachers reported and what was observed in the classroom. The researcher also maintained detailed observation notes throughout the data-collection period to document classroom interactions and scaffolding practices. Such systematic documentation is important in qualitative research because it allows the analytical process to remain transparent and traceable (Nowell et al., 2017).

Results and Discussion

This study found that scaffolding plays a crucial role in supporting mixed ability students, particularly when the teaching strategies are tailored to the students' current abilities. The scaffolding strategies were gradually reduced over time as students gained confidence and became more engaged in subsequent reading tasks. Teachers' ability to adjust their scaffolding techniques based on individual needs helped foster a more inclusive and effective reading environment. The study reveals several important findings, such as:

- Teachers tended to use more explicit scaffolding techniques with struggling readers, such as providing sentence starters, prompting them to think aloud about the text or reading aloud with them. The teachers also asked guiding questions, modeling reading strategies (e.g., predicting, summarizing), and providing feedback.
- Advanced readers benefited from more subtle scaffolding, such as encouragement to make inferences, discuss themes, or summarize.
- The most effective scaffolding strategies involved a gradual release of responsibility, where teachers first modeled thinking, then guided the students, and finally allowed them to read independently. In other words, this process involved a gradual release of responsibility. The teachers moved from providing significant support at the beginning of the reading process to more independent reading as students' abilities improved.
- Students' reading comprehension and engagement improved with the use of scaffolding. Students who received higher levels of scaffolding demonstrated greater confidence and engagement in subsequent

reading tasks. Students reported feeling more confident in their reading abilities when given personalized support.

- Teachers reported challenges in finding the right balance of support, especially for students at varying reading levels within the same group.

In general, the findings demonstrated that scaffolding strategies in reading improved students' reading comprehension. The findings indicated that using scaffolding techniques was a successful method to help mixed-ability students improve their reading abilities. It encouraged students to think through the topic or activity, and it smoothly led teachers and students to the Zone of Proximal Development in order to scaffold the students to interact with the reading comprehension tasks socially, collaboratively, and critically (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the researcher built on existing educational theories, such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development or Tomlinson's Differentiation framework, to gain insights into how scaffolding in reading supports students' learning. This study has also provided further application of these theories by showing how they apply in the real-world classroom setting.

Limitations

The study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting its findings. First, the research was conducted at a single American language center in Meknes and involved three teachers and thirty students; therefore, the findings should not be generalized to all mixed-ability EFL classrooms. Second, the data were collected over a four-week period, which limits the extent to which longer-term changes in students' reading comprehension can be established. Finally, the study relied on classroom observations and teacher interviews and did not employ quantitative measures of reading achievement. Accordingly, the findings are interpreted as qualitative evidence of observed classroom practices and perceived changes rather than as statistical evidence of causal effects.

Implications

The study highlights the value of scaffolding as a key component of differentiated instruction. Teachers can use scaffolding to address the diverse needs of students in mixed-ability classrooms, helping them progress toward independent reading. Future research could explore the long-term effects of scaffolding and examine how it can be integrated with other instructional strategies to support students in diverse learning contexts.

Conclusion

This study has highlighted the importance of scaffolding in promoting reading comprehension and suggests that when properly implemented, scaffolding can significantly enhance students' engagement and success in mixed-ability classrooms. It can be concluded that using differentiated reading instruction strategies such as scaffolding can help readers in a mixed-ability classroom develop a deeper understanding of reading comprehension texts. All the observed teachers throughout this study developed an inclusive classroom environment where all their students had opportunities to be successful readers regardless of their different abilities and learning styles. Each teacher's instruction was directly geared toward creating a supportive environment where instruction is designed to meet individual students' needs. This study contributes to the body of research on scaffolded reading and the importance of differentiated instruction for mixed-ability classrooms.

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