

Scaffolding: deconstructing what it is and isn't

T E A C H

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The word “scaffolding” can be heard and read a great deal in our profession — so much so that it is easy to lose sight of what it actually means. In this article, Andy Sampson takes another look at scaffolding in ELT — what it is, what it isn’t and how it can help learners.

Within the ELT profession, the term “scaffolding” can be read and heard a great deal: in methodology books, in teachers’ guides, on teacher training courses, at conferences, and in feedback from mentors to teachers... at times, it feels as if the word “scaffolding” has all but replaced the word “support” in teachers’ day-to-day parlance. But are scaffolding and support one and the same thing? The aim of this article is to take a closer look at the term “scaffolding”, its origins and uses, and attempt to construct a working definition of what scaffolding is — and what it isn’t. To that end, it is probably most helpful if we first begin with what scaffolding isn’t.

Scaffolding is not just any kind of support

The words “scaffolding” and “support” often seem to be used interchangeably. Scaffolding is, of course, a kind of support, provided to learners in order to help them achieve what they might not be able to achieve alone. But two key characteristics differentiate scaffolding from support in more general terms: contingency, and fading (van de Pol, Volman & Beishuizen 2010). Firstly, scaffolding is contingent on the teacher’s ongoing assessment of the learner’s current level — the teacher continuously assesses what the learner is able to do at any given time, and only provides enough support in order to help the learner achieve what he or she could not achieve alone. Secondly, scaffolding should fade over time as it is gradually withdrawn by the teacher, with responsibility for task completion moving from the teacher to the learner until the learner can complete the task unassisted.

Scaffolding is not a Vygotskian term

A common misconception is that the term “scaffolding” was coined by psychologist Lev Vygotsky as he developed his Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of language development. The term “scaffolding” was in fact first used by Wood, Bruner & Ross (1976) to refer to finely-tuned support provided by teachers to learners in order to aid learners’ development from their current to potential level. That development takes place within what Vygotsky (1978: 86) termed the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), 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”. So, while the ZPD is a Vygotskian term, scaffolding is not (although the two concepts are, of course, closely related).

Scaffolding comes in different types

A distinction can be drawn between scaffolding that is cooperative (Bickhard 2005) — also referred to by Holton and Clarke (2006) as heuristic scaffolding — where the expert models or simplifies a task to help the novice complete it, and scaffolding that is informational (Bickhard 2005) — referred to by Holton and Clarke (2006) as conceptual scaffolding — where the expert imparts new information.

Scaffolding is not just provided by teachers

While scaffolding has traditionally referred to support provided by teachers since the mid-1990s the concept has been extended beyond teacher-learner interaction to interaction between learners in pairs or groups. Since language learners have different levels of expertise in different areas of language and language skills, peers can provide scaffolding (Storch 2005). A number of classroom studies have provided to mediate each other’s development within the ZPD (Donato 1994; Ohta 2001); insights into how peer scaffolding can occur. Donato (1994), for example,

observed a small group of university French learners preparing a presentation, and identified instances of peer-scaffolding that included collectively managing aspects of linguistic problems, identifying discrepancies between the language produced and what learners perceived to be the ideal solution, and reducing frustration by drawing on the group's collective resources. Similarly, Ohta (2001) identified peer scaffolding in Japanese university learners as they collaboratively resolved language issues during a task. When we see stronger learners helping less able learners by prompting them to start speaking, finishing their utterances when they struggle, or taking the initiative in more complex tasks, these may be considered examples of peer scaffolding.

A more recent development is the idea of self-scaffolding (Knouzi et al 2009), where the learner supports him- or herself in order to complete a cognitively complex task. While a learner clearly cannot impart to him or herself knowledge that he or she does not know — that is, he or she cannot provide informational scaffolding — a learner can still self-scaffold by breaking down a task into smaller, manageable parts, beginning with simpler problems before moving onto more challenging problems, or drawing on knowledge of analogous contexts in order to figure out solutions to the problem at hand.

Conclusion

To sum up, while scaffolding can be considered to come under the umbrella of support provided to language learners, it is a very specific type of support: it enables learners to achieve within the ZPD what they cannot do unaided; it is contingent on the learners' current needs as perceived by the teacher or more capable peer, or even by him- or herself; and it fades with time as learners become more autonomous. Furthermore, it does not necessarily require a teacher, with more capable peers able to scaffold less capable learners, and individual learners able to

scaffold themselves when faced with cognitively complex tasks. If we can encourage our learners to peer- and self-scaffold in the ways described here, then we can help them become more autonomous in their future learning.

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