IMPROVING STUDENTS' COMMUNICATIVE SKILLS THROUGH SCAFFOLDING FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN THE 21ST CENTURY

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Abstract
This paper assesses the significance of scaffolding towards improving students' communicative skills namely: speaking and writing. It provides background on how scaffolding can aid in teaching and learning contexts and ultimately improves students' communicative skills. The study adopts ZPD theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978). The methodology is qualitative descriptive approach. Method of data collection is desk-based; it looks in-depth at most relevant materials in regard to the study. Evidences from previous studies indicate that scaffolding brings about substantial benefit to students in their attempt to improve their communication skills. The facts also depict that teaching communication skills require various techniques, tools and resources. These in turn, need to be modified depending on the experience of students and the teachers. The study concludes that communication skills should be modelled and taught through different mediums especially work integrated learning.

Keywords: Communicative skills, Scaffolding, Students, Development

Introduction

English is recognized as the dominant language of communication in the age of globalisation and technology. Therefore, teaching English as a foreign or second language has become vital in order to help the new generation cope with the vast changes and challenges of this age (Al Yami, 2008). Responding to this international trend, numerous researchers have substantiated that the earlier a learner is exposed to a second language the easier he learns (Zughlool, 1988; Elmuttawa,

1996). In Nigeria, English Language is introduced at the primary stage (NPE, 2004). As such, it is hoped that pupils can learn English more effectively and use it for different communication purposes. However, in a foreign language (FL) context, where English is not commonly spoken in the society, pupils are not sufficiently exposed to this foreign language for instance Saudi Arabia (Al Yami, 2008). This has made it an urgent concern that English should be taught effectively in schools. In other words, the quality of teaching English must be strengthen and more attention should be paid to different language skills in order to achieve the objectives of teaching English, particularly with regard to developing the learners' ability to communicate.

According to Iksan, Zakaria, Meerah, Osman, Lian, Mahmud, and Krish (2012) Communication has traditionally been seen as verbal or non-verbal. However, our understandings of communication are based on a rapidly evolving field that incorporates many different domains. These domains are not necessarily mutually exclusive and can surpass a traditional perception. These domains include face-to-face interactions, digital literacy including, email and texting, social media and virtual environments, for instance, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The protocols of communicating within each domain are different in regard to the length of message, the texts used for specific communicative purposes, intended audience, acceptable norms, nomenclature, spelling/grammar conventions, etc. Hence, effective communication skills are essential for learners to gain entry to and be successful in, their future professions. Learning and developing effective written, oral and interpersonal communication skills will develop students' emotional intelligence and empathy through an understanding of their audience; these skills contribute significantly toward positioning graduates as global citizens **(**Koehler & Hains-Wesson, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Numerous scholars viewed that scaffolding is one of the current trends used in teaching and learning environments to aid students' learning. In Nigerian context for example, scaffolding is applied in different fields of study but some teachers are unaware of the notion of scaffolding. This study therefore looks at the used of scaffolding towards improving

students' communication skills through exploring recent literature in the field of English language teaching and learning.

The research question that guides the study is posed at this juncture. To what extent scaffolding improve students' communication skills?

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a theory proposed by Vygotsky (1978) and a conceptual model, the zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) developed by Lantolf, Thorne and Poehner (2015). The theory concisely suggests that human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them. Vygostsky was particularly captivated with the complex effects that schooling had on cognitive development. Educators and psychologists were enthralled by ZPD for a number of reasons. First, it is the notion of assisted performance, which though not equivalent to the ZPD, has been a driving force behind much of the interest in Vygotsky's research. Another convincing idea attributed to ZPD is that, in contrast to traditional tests and measures that only indicate the level of development already attained, the ZPD is forward looking through its assertion that one can do today with mediation is indicative of what one will able to do independently in the future. In this sense, it will be summed that ZPD is geared towards assisting learner to realise his present and future educative goals (Van Patten & Williams, 2015).

Review of Related Literature

The importance of teacher and student communication in learner's achievements is strongly emphasised in the socio-cultural educational theory, originated by Lev Vygotsky (1978) and further developed in modern research (Daniels 2001). This theory describes the process of teaching and learning as "much more than face-to-face interaction or the simple transmission of prescribed knowledge and skills" (Daniels 2001) but rather places stress on dialogue and co-construction of knowledge (Wells 1999). It describes teaching as strongly influenced by, and embedded in its social and cultural context and points to the meaning of teaching as the transformation of socially constructed knowledge into that which is individually owned by the learner. This type of teaching assumes a specific paradigm of teacher-student

interaction where the role of the adult is that of collaborator and co-constructor. A strong emphasis is on the active position of the learner, which is essential for the development of the life-long learning skills. There are various approaches from different governments that focus their attention on Quality Teaching and Productive Pedagogies. They are largely inspired and influenced by socio-cultural theories of teaching and learning. The approaches emphasise the important "role of student direction in learning, where students influence the nature of the activities they undertake and assume responsibility for the activities with which they engage" (Productive Pedagogies, 2001). Self-directed learning is a significant part of the development of students' positive attitudes towards life-long learning, which the Commonwealth Government Quality Teacher Initiative (2000) views as a key element in the recognition of quality teaching. More recently, achieving high standards of primary and secondary education has been associated with "promoting education for further education and training, work and lifelong learning". Thus, self-directed and life-long learning has been perceived as an important aim of quality teaching. To achieve this goal teachers have to engage in effective communication with their students which includes "a repertoire of inquiry techniques and teaching strategies as well as the ability to use a range of tools, activities, and resources to engage their students in learning" this has also signal the fact that scaffolding does not only aids students comprehension but also teachers themselves (NSWIT, 2006).

A well-known practical inference of Vygotsky's theory, the metaphor of scaffolding, which is used to capture the nature of support and guidance in learning, can assist teachers' understanding and developing of such techniques. Over the past two decades, a large number of educators and researchers have used the concept of scaffolding as a metaphor to describe and explain the role of adults or more knowledgeable peers in guiding children's learning and development (Stone 1998; Krause, Bochner & Duchesne 2003; Hammond 2002; Daniels 2001). Teachers find the metaphor interesting as it resonates with their own intuitive conceptions of what it means to intervene successfully in students learning and offers what is lacking in much literature on education - an effective conceptual metaphor for the quality of teacher intervention in learning" (Mercer, 1995).

The above views were however, contested by Stone (1998) who explains that narrowness of the term scaffolding is due to the connation of the metaphor itself. He provides a critical analysis of the metaphor of scaffolding in its application to the field of learning disability. Stone pointed out the twofold role of metaphor in scholarly understanding of a phenomenon. On the one hand, "a good metaphor… is more than a novel label or a graphic description of a phenomenon. If it has been aptly chosen, a metaphor can help us to appreciate as yet unanticipated connections or consequences. In this latter sense, a metaphor is not so much descriptive as it is generative of new ideas" (Stone, 1998). On the other hand, a metaphor can hinder further understanding of the phenomenon, as the metaphor can be misleading in finding its essential characteristics and connections (Stone, 1998). Stone (1998) analysed a number of limitations of the scaffolding metaphor. He suggested that even though the metaphor captures the key feature of Vygotskian view of teaching as guided by others, it doesn't assist an understanding of the nature of such guidance. In fact, it rather hinders an understanding of Vygotskian interpretation of the relationship between teacher and learner as co-construction of knowledge. Stone referred to a study of (Searle 1984, in Stone 1998) who expressed the concern that too literal adherence to a scaffolding metaphor, especially in the hands of insensitive teachers, could result in "the imposition of a structure on the student" (Stone 1998). In other words, the metaphor of scaffolding can lead to viewing the teacher-learner interaction in the classroom as predominantly adult-driven and one-sided in nature. This view of scaffolding, if applied to classroom teaching, might take educators back to a pre-Piagetian, traditional way of teaching through direct instruction. Stone (1998) emphasises the importance of finely tuned communication between the learner and teacher in order to construct new understanding.

Scaffolding is a recent view of teaching new skills, concepts and higher levels of understanding. It is a more mature educational and psychological view of the teachers' support and intervention in the learners' learning. Many efforts have been made to explore this view, its concepts, characteristics, types and techniques, and to develop guidelines and cautions for using scaffolding in classrooms.

Scaffolding, in its usual sense, is defined as "a temporary structure that is often put up in the process of constructing a building. As each bit of the new building is finished, the scaffolding is taken down. The scaffolding is temporary, but essential for the construction of the building*"* (Gibbons, 2002). This point is important in the 21st century where second language learners are heavily becoming passive in their effort to develop their communicative skills. It was observed with dismay that learners of second language are becoming lax in their effort to develop their learning style. In a situation where scaffolding is employed both learners and teachers will immensely benefit from the approach which will eventually lead to positive result. The next section highlights the methodology of the study.

Methodology

The methodology of this study is Qualitative descriptive approach. Method of data collection is desk-based. Although the desk-based review is not completely a systematic review, it looked in depth at most relevant materials in regard to the study and but it cannot claim to obtain all-relevant research published in this area, it is nonetheless broad. To capture the latest thinking and most rigorous empirical evidence, the study applied a multi-pronged search strategy, involving: searching a wide range of citation and journal indexes, online research and evaluation repositories, resource centres, and other search engines.

The following methodological limitations of the review are presented and need to be observed:

1. The review is limited by the level of details given by authors in the studies revised. Moreover, only studies that were captured under the key search terms were included in the literature.
2. Due to the huge volume of available materials beyond the scope of the time for the review, the evidence reviewed was narrowed down to primary keywords.

Scaffolding Advances Communicative Skills

This section answers the question posed and progresses the theory adopted at the beginning of the study. It exposes the critical contexts where scaffolding usually occupies. To begin with, Wood, Bruner and

Ross (1976) were the first to use the term "scaffolding" in its educational sense. They defined it as an "adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learners capacity, thus allowing him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence". Equally, the teaching process can be seen as comparable to the process of constructing a building. From this perspective, the term scaffolding is used to describe the assistance given to a learner while he is trying to acquire a new skill. This assistance increases or decreases according to the learner's ability to accomplish the task alone. Scaffolding, then, can be seen as a special kind of temporary help that assists and motivates the leaner to move to a higher level of understanding or success in accomplishing the targeted task. It is what a teacher does when working with a learner to solve a problem, carry out a task, achieve a goal or acquire a skill which would be beyond his unassisted efforts (Hogan & Pressley, 1997; & Larkin, 2002).

Informal learning within experiential placements is very important. Vygotsky's notion of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) emphasizes that learning can be accelerated through a structured and scaffolded program (Vygotsky, 1978). Although scaffolding is a term which may refer to a number of different supports, this study has adopted a definition of scaffolding which goes beyond merely providing supports which help students to carry out a task (Verenikina, 2008). Scaffolding necessitates students being enabled to carry out a task which they would not have been able to carry out on their own, with the guided steps eventually enabling them to complete the task as evidenced by learner achievement (Verenikina, 2008). In the context of experiential placements in professional programs other than pharmacy, scaffolding can be identified. For example, in law education, student reflective writing skills were improved through undertaking weekly writing tasks and provision of detailed written feedback within tutorial groups. Tutor sessions also examined models of reflective writing, included problem solving tasks and discussed assessment criteria (Owen & Davis, 2009).

To cite another interesting example, as a pharmacist in Australia to be specific, graduation from an accredited university program requires a

specified profession-determined competency standards. This evidence includes assessment of skills, knowledge and attitudes within the workplace. Key aspects of the eight functional areas of competence outlined in the Competency Standards for Pharmacists in Australia (2003) include being professional and ethical, dispensing and counselling, preparation of pharmaceutical products, provision of primary health care, and organization and management. Patient counselling is the term employed by the pharmacy profession to describe verbal client interactional communication. The goals of counselling are to achieve the safe and appropriate use of medicines and therapeutic devices and adherence to the prescribed or recommended treatment regimen, thus optimizing therapeutic outcomes. The goals of counselling are, therefore, pivotal for competency. Practice Standards, produced by the Pharmaceutical Society of Australia, include the following definition for counselling ,refers to the dissemination or exchange of information by the pharmacist to the consumer. The goal of the information exchange is to achieve the safe and appropriate use of medicines and therapeutic devices to optimise therapeutic outcomes" (Australia, 2006). This definition is therefore consistent with the view that patient counselling may range from, simply stating the dosage of a drug as it is handed over to the client, through counter prescribing for common ailments, to giving advice with regard to lifestyle and health promotion issues. Clients will be equipped with the resources to use any medications more safely and effectively" (Pilnick, 2003). Key client interactional communication skills in the counselling process include building rapport, explaining, questioning and listening (Hargie, Morrow, & Woodman, 2000). Counselling, real patients' or clients for students essentially only occurs during experiential placements. Scaffolding students around this activity is critical in ensuring placement outcome success.

Similarly, Scaffolding is a term that engineers can readily understand as scaffolds are temporary, physical structures used in tall construction sites to allow workers to reach their work places as well as complete their work around the structures easily. Instructional scaffolding on the other hand is a pedagogical technique that helps students receive incremental support in learning activities that may be too difficult to

complete initially on their own. As physical scaffolds are not needed after a building has been constructed, instructional scaffolds should also be removed after students have developed the necessary skills. Instructional scaffolding is not a new technique, and it has been in use for a long time. Scaffolding is a problem-based learning technique, which is often used to teach students to solve ill-structured problems in a cooperative learning manner. According to McKenzie (1999) instructional scaffolding involves eight characteristics:

1. Provides clear directions to students on what they should do and reduces their confusion.
2. Clarify the purpose of what students are asked to do and why it is important.
3. Provides structure and keeps students on task so that they do not wander off from the task.
4. Clarifies expectations by providing quality examples of work as references.
5. Directs students to available resources which they can choose to use in their tasks.
6. Reduces uncertainty, surprise, and frustration so that students maximize their learning.
7. Delivers efficiency in the learning process by helping students to focus on their work.
8. Creates momentum in the learning process by allowing new ideas and experiences to flow.

(Stupans, Owen, Ryan, Woulfe, Mckauge, 2010).

From the aforementioned characteristics of scaffolding, it is easy to infer that instructional scaffolding involves developing instructional plans that build on students' existing knowledge to result in a deeper understanding of new information. The instructional plans must be implemented and the participating students must be supported during the learning process for the scaffolding to benefit students. The types of instructional and support plans that have to be developed and implemented will depend on the types of students, nature of skills to be gained, and the background knowledge of students (Stupans, Owen, Ryan, Woulfe, Mckauge, 2010).

In addition to the above points, Scaffolding has also been used as an effective technique for improving students' writing skills in American Schools namely, K-12 courses, ESL classes, and higher education settings (Krishnamurthi, 2009). According to Krishnamurthi (2009), scaffolding instructional plans generally involve the following steps:

- Modelling the task and the desired behaviour so that students see how the instructor completes the task.
- Offering explanations that can range from detailed explanations at the initial stages on how the instructor accomplished the task to simple clarifications at the later stages.
- Inviting students to participate in the task through activities that can range from inviting a student to explain on the board what he or she had learned to inviting groups of students to do the same task.
- Verifying students' work and clarifying their understanding as this feedback is critical to reinforce what students have learned as well as resolve any difficulties they may have.
- Inviting students to contribute ideas about the topic, which can guide instructor's discussion based on their ideas and lead students to a deeper understanding of the topic.

The five steps clearly illustrate the constructivist approach of the scaffolding technique and its cooperative learning strategy. The technique requires active involvement of the instructor as well as the students, and it calls for a detailed instructional plan and support system for students. Due to the problem-based learning nature of the scaffolding technique, it is most suited for teaching difficult concepts to engineering students as they are usually receptive to solving problems. Therefore, scaffolding is an effective technique for teaching engineering students good writing skills (Krishnamurthi, 2009). Scaffolding to Improve Engineering Students' Writing Skills In the past, the author of this paper had integrated writing assignments in engineering courses by assigning a term paper or project report that was due at the end of the semester. As a basic prerequisite, the first step in applying scaffolding techniques is to analyse students' background knowledge and skills on the chosen topic so that appropriate

instructional scaffolds can be developed to build on the background knowledge and skills.

Conclusion

In Conclusion, the paper in large measure, presents the fundamental role scaffolding plays towards improving students' communication in the 21st century. Using Vygostkian theory, scaffolding techniques are praised to have been improving students' communication skills which often comes in form of speaking and writing. The evidences provided above have proven that scaffolding immensely enhances students' education performances. Legitimate reasons were provided through previous studies. It is important to note that communicative skills are related to critical thinking, good writing skills for instance, improve students' academic performances. It is therefore necessary for teachers particularly of language teaching and learning to be prepared to spend time to develop a workable framework that will include scaffolding technique. There are a range of inclusive teaching strategies that can assist all students to develop good communication skills and manage their study independently. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) strategies scaffold learning for students by offering more than one choice or way for expressing themselves. For example, there are a variety of opportunities and models for building fluency in oral communication. First year students may commence with an audio recording, then move onto a video recording of an oral presentation to demonstrate the same learning outcome. Performing in pairs can also build self-confidence. Students can then graduate to presenting their own oral tasks with assurance and self-determination.

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