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Scaffolding Techniques: Investigating the Status of Foreign Language Teacher's Familiarity*

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Abstract

In the present study, the researchers have investigated foreign language teachers' familiarity with scaffolding techniques and where Iranian instructors have learnt such scaffolding techniques. This study follows a descriptive-survey method. For this purpose the researchers used a questionnaire of scaffolding techniques. The questionnaires were distributed among 41 instructors in three university language centers. A binomial Test was carried out to investigate the rate of Iranian instructors' acquaintance with scaffolding. As the result of the first question showed, the majority of Iranian instructors were familiar with the scaffolding techniques and used them while teaching. Furthermore, according to the results of the second question more than half of the Iranian instructors have learnt most of scaffolding techniques in MA level. The results also clearly showed that there are weaknesses in the educational system (here MA courses) for foreign language teaching skills.

Keywords: Scaffolding in education, Foreign language Teachers, Foreign language learning

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Introduction

Scaffolding is defined as the support provided during the learning process which is personalized to the needs of the students to help them achieve their learning goals (Sawyer 2006). Learning a second language, especially for learners who want to study a second language has always been challenging. On the other hand, it is often heard that non-native learners who start learning another language have problems in the classes and it is difficult for them to understand the materials and/or the teaching style. This can reduce their motivation and interest to learn (Jalili, 2017 and Rabari, Ameri, Monshizadeh, & Golfam, 2018). Therefore, Iranian language instructors should make the materials easy for learners or help their students themselves or by engaging other students in the language environment; for this purpose, Iranian instructors should be familiar with scaffolding techniques and they should use them while teaching. This is also emphasized by Pourjamshidi (2014), where she found that scaffolding in education has direct relation with learning Persian language for foreigner learners.

According to Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976), with scaffolding techniques “a child or adult learner can solve a problem, carry out a task or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts”. This kind of scaffolding including the adult “controlling” those items of the task that are beyond the learner’s ability, so allowing him to focus upon and complete only those items that are within his range of competence (Wood et al., 1976).

One of the important uses of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is its application in scaffolding. This metaphor has been defined by Schumm (2006, p. 530) as “providing support for students in their learning, and then gradually diminishing the support as students become more independent”. For Field (2004, p. 54) the relation between scaffolding and ZPD is,

An adult provides assistance to a developing child by way of prompting his attention in a task, guiding him toward proper goals, marking salient features of a task and showing related strategies.

Scaffolding has a significant role in supporting a child to progress into his ZPD.

Verity (2005) believes that scaffolding is an important form of strategic mediation, which should be offered to a learner contingent upon his needs. Xu, Gelfer and Perkins (2005) argue that peer tutoring, roughly synonymous with scaffolding, is also beneficial not only for non-native learners of English but also for native English speakers.

Scaffolding, as an instructional strategy, is a significant tool to contribute to the learning process because it provides opportunities for students to solve their learning problems (Poorahmadi, 2009). Celce-Muria (2001, p.195) explained the term “scaffolding” as the way in which “a teacher or adult structures a learning task and provides directives and clues using dialogue to guide the learner’s participation in the learning task.” Peregoy and Boyle (1997), on the other hand, clarified that scaffolding entails the arranging “temporary supports, provided by capable people, which permit learners to participate in the complex process before they are able to do so unassisted”.

Care should be taken that the procedure for the implementing scaffolding should be done systematically considering the students’ needs and their level of development; it should be gradually decreased as the teacher ensures that students have become independent in their learning (Berk, 2002). Reading comprehension ability, for example, can be accelerated gradually providing enough assistance – scaffolding – to EFL learners, and finally they can act alone in similar situations (Poorahmadi, 2009). On the other hand, Pata, Lehtinen, and Sarapuu (2006) believe that the support offered by an instructor during joint problem-solving activities is often referred to as scaffolding, while students’ regulative processes in teams are seldom characterized by the scaffolding metaphor but rather it is called as self-regulation (Lipponen, 2001), team-level metacognition (Jermann, 2002) or socially shared metacognition (Iskala et al., 2004).

In fact, scaffolding has come to symbolize some of unique strategies or mechanisms wherein learning can be supported.

Rosenshine and Meister (1992) recommended that a scaffold may be both a tool, while scaffolding devices including a cue card is supplied for the learner, or a technique that the instructor implements with a view to assist a learner. As suggested by Tabak's (2004) distributed scaffolding theory, no single tool can provide effective scaffolding for all purposes; different kinds of scaffolding should be applied in different situations. Studies should integrate multiple sources of scaffolding from teachers, peers, and technology, and ensure the maximized learning effectiveness of each tool in a complementary way. Considering different tools, Hui-Ling (2010) focuses on the effectiveness of scaffolding in technology-enhanced science learning environments, and specifically the relative merits of computer- and teacher-based scaffolding in science inquiry. The findings indicated that students receiving continuous computer-based procedural and early teacher-based metacognitive scaffolding performed statistically better at learning scientific inquiry skills than other treatment groups. While students using faded computer-based procedural and early teacher-based metacognitive scaffolding showed the worst performance.

The primary objective of this research is the study of the status of language teacher training program and courses in terms of scaffolding techniques in Iran by measuring the Teachers' familiarity with such techniques. Furthermore, the researchers aimed at understanding where Iranian instructors had learned scaffolding techniques. Moreover, this study seeks to investigate if courses or practical workshops have been held for the language instructors. The reviewed literature suggested the scarcity of Persian studies in this regard. Inasmuch as, to date, there appears to be no comprehensive investigation of the status of teachers' knowledge of scaffolding techniques. Understanding more about what second language teachers currently know, believe, and practice could lead us in how to provide support for further learning. As this is the first study to investigate the area in the context of Iran, the data would have the potential to contribute to better understanding of the teaching environment and needs. This could also then contribute to an

international discussion on potential cross-linguistic differences or similarities between the pedagogical implications of the technique in Persian and other languages speakers. However, previous research mostly covers the field of TEFL, which limits the application of the results to teachers of other languages, such as Persian. Therefore, the present study tries to expand the existing literature using the following questions. The main research question in this study was,

1. How much do Iranian instructors teaching to foreigners know about scaffolding techniques?

During the implementation of the pilot study, the researchers decided to add two more questions to the questionnaire to analyze the data also in a qualitative method along with its quantification. So, the following two questions raised afterward; first, as a semi-quantitative close-ended question:

2. Where did the instructors learn the scaffolding techniques?

And then, as an open-ended question which was a supplementary to the first question:

3. Have courses or practical workshops been held for you in practicing scaffolding techniques? How and where?

The most important limitation in this study was the number of subjects who accepted to answer the designed questionnaire and the teachers were delimited to only three language teaching centers due to time limitation. Another limitation of the current study was that the researchers had to select the participants in a convenient sampling manner while institutions were chosen randomly and entirely by chance such that each institution in Iran had the same probability of being chosen.

Methods

PARTICIPANTS

The sample of this work included 41 foreign language Teachers (25 female and 16 male) with the age range of 26-51 (mean= 33.3±0.72). Three institutions were chosen randomly and entirely by chance among

all Iranian language teaching centers: Dekhoda Institute, Tehran; Sa'adi Foundation, Tehran; Language Training Center at Imam Khomeini International University, Qazvin. Table 1 shows the education range of volunteers who were selected based on convenient sampling. As can be seen (in Table 1), %65.85 of participants were holding MA and %34.15 were holding Ph.D.

Table 1
Frequency/percentage of participants' education

education	Frequency	Percent
master degree	27	65.85
Ph.D.	14	34.15
Total	41	100

Instrument

The survey instrument was a researcher-made questionnaire of scaffolding technique subskills drawing on literature in two steps. The questionnaire which each had two parts included 22 questions focused on what teachers should know; the first part was familiarity status which had two options, 'Yes' and 'No'; if the participants chose 'yes' they also had to complete the second column about the place where they had learned those scaffolding techniques. Comment boxes allowed instructors to explain their further unspecified responses. It also had an open-ended question which was a supplementary to the first question to know whether there had been any courses or practical workshops for the instructors in practicing scaffolding techniques and to know more about the nature of these courses. To see the questionnaire you can refer to the appendix.

The questionnaire did not have a specific time to answer. The theoretical framework underpinning this questionnaire was ZPD theory of Vygotsky, and also educational scaffolding of Hui-Ling (2010). Furthermore, most of the items of the present questionnaire had been derived from Pourjamshidi's questionnaire (2014), with major changes

in presenting the questions, and we added and deleted some more items to cover the research questions adequately and to omit redundancies. Then, the researchers worked through a series of drafts and incorporated revisions into a version for piloting of the questionnaire (Dörnyei, 2003). The researchers distributed the questionnaire to 15 male and female teachers in order to examine its reliability. Cronbach's alpha test was used to determine the internal consistency. In the questionnaire, for all of the questions $\alpha = 0.762$ which is bigger than 0.7 (Table 2): therefore, the questionnaire was reliable. The final questionnaire, a 22-item survey instrument administered individually by the researchers.

Table 2

Reliability of the questionnaire

Questionnaire	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha
Cronbach's Alpha reliability for questionnaire	22	0.762

Two experts who knew the subject in particular determined content validity of the designed questionnaire; therefore, the validity of the questionnaire in this study was also achieved.

Procedure and data collection

After discussing the aim of the research with the teachers they agreed to fill out the questionnaire. They were chosen in a nonrandom, convenient way. After participants answered the questions, researchers described the responses given. The design of the present study was both quantitative and qualitative; therefore, mixed method is applied. Since a questionnaire was given to the respondents directly, survey-descriptive research design is applied. Content analysis was used to analyze the comments. The comment data were coded by hand when the researchers began reading the transcripts for the first time to reveal the themes and concepts. Afterwards, we used the research questions to guide the coding process and referred mainly to teachers' knowledge about the questionnaire items.

Data analysis

Statistical analysis was performed by using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software 23.0. Descriptive statistics was used in order to give general information regarding the questionnaire that helped describing and understanding the features of the data set by giving short summaries about the sample and measures of the data.

Results

Familiarity status of Iranian instructors with scaffolding (RQ1) was investigated through 22 items of the questionnaire. To analyze them, a Binomial Test was carried out to investigate the rate of instructors' acquaintance with these techniques. The results regarding this test are shown in Table 3.

Table 3 *Binomial Test*

Items	yes / no	Freq	Percent	Sig.
1. Using power point and pics when explaining	No	14	34.15	.060
	yes	27	65.85	
2. Showing concepts by drawing and using related tools	No	13	31.71	.028
	yes	28	68.29	
3. Help students to be motivated in learning the subjects	No	11	26.83	.004
	yes	30	73.17	
4. explaining concept by showing videos	No	18	43.90	.533
	yes	23	56.10	
5. Helping students to target their study procedure	No	18	43.90	.533
	yes	23	56.10	
6. using proper methods for Teaching reading texts	No	14	34.15	.060
	yes	27	65.85	
7. Creating opportunities for asking about texts and course contents	No	9	21.95	.000
	yes	32	78.05	

8. Preparing text background and asking students predict what comes next	No	7	17.07	.000
	yes	34	82.93	
9. Creating opportunity for students to assess their learning	No	11	26.83	.004
	yes	30	73.17	
10. Giving different examples to facilitate understanding concepts	No	10	24.39	.001
	yes	31	75.61	
11. Having conversations with students and motivating them to share their experiences	No	8	19.51	.000
	yes	33	80.49	
12. Helping students to connect new words with their background knowledge	No	13	31.71	.028
	yes	28	68.29	
13. Giving introduction about the passages before starting to read	no	3	7.32	.000
	yes	38	92.68	
14. Giving corrective feedbacks while students read texts	no	15	36.59	.117
	yes	26	63.41	
15. Stating similarities and differences of the given concepts where needed	no	13	31.71	.028
	yes	28	68.29	
16. Providing extra information for a better comprehension while reading texts	no	7	17.07	.000
	yes	34	82.93	
17. Providing solutions for reading and comprehending complicated texts	no	18	43.90	.533
	yes	23	56.10	
18. Dividing complicated words and expressions into more comprehensive chunks	no	12	29.27	.012
	yes	29	70.73	
19. narrating stories and interesting occurrences for motivating students	no	17	41.46	.349
	yes	24	58.54	

20. Constant encouragement to increase students' motivation	no	13	31.71	.028
	yes	28	68.29	
21. Ensuring students that they have enough abilities to learn concepts and to understand texts	no	17	41.46	.349
	yes	24	58.54	
22. Active participation in class and paying attention to students while doing their assignments	no	11	26.83	.004
	yes	30	73.17	

As indicated in Table 4, the test significance was less than 0.05 for all items except for items 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 14, 17, 19, and 21. Therefore, there is a significance difference between the participants who selected 'no' and the participants who selected 'yes' with 95% reliability in all items except the items mentioned above. Based on the frequency, the ratio of participants who selected 'No' were less than those who chose 'yes'. Also, the test significance for items 1, 4, 5, 6, 9, 14, 17, 19, and 21 were more than 0.05. So, there is no significant difference between the participants who selected 'no' and those who selected 'yes'.

The place where Iranian instructors learned scaffolding (RQ2) was also inquired by the questionnaire. This item in the questionnaire had four parts: 'MA', 'BA', 'Institute', and 'others'. If the participants choose 'yes' in the first column they should also complete the second column. The frequency of results for 22 items is indicated in Table 4.

Table 4 Frequency/percentage of questions related to place of learning scaffolding

Items	Frequency / Percent	BA	MA	Institute	Other codes
1. Using power point and pics when explaining	Frequency	2	16	4	5
	Percent	7.41	59.26	14.81	18.52
	Frequency	3	14	4	7

2. Showing concepts by drawing and using related tools	Percent	10.71	50	14.29	25
	Frequency	0	18	4	8
3. Help students to be motivated in learning the subjects	Percent	--	60	13.33	26.67
	Frequency	2	10	4	7
4. explaining concept by showing videos	Percent	8.70	43.48	17.39	30.43
	Frequency	3	16	1	3
5. Helping students to target their study procedure	Percent	13.04	69.57	4.35	13.04
	Frequency	1	18	0	7
6. using proper methods for Teaching reading texts	Percent	3.85	69.23	--	26.92
	Frequency	2	20	2	8
7. Creating opportunities for asking about texts and course contents	Percent	6.25	62.50	6.25	25
	Frequency	4	18	2	10
8. Preparing text background and asking students predict what comes next	Percent	11.76	52.94	5.88	29.41
	Frequency	4	17	1	8
9. Creating opportunity for students to assess their learning	Percent	13.33	56.67	3.33	26.67
	Frequency	1	18	3	9
10. Giving different examples to facilitate understanding concepts	Percent	3.23	58.06	9.68	29.03
	Frequency	3	14	5	10
11. Having conversations with students and motivating them to	Percent	9.38	43.75	15.63	31.25

share their experiences					
12. Helping students to connect new words with their background knowledge	Frequency	1	20	3	4
	Percent	3.57	71.43	10.71	14.29
13. Giving introduction about the passages before starting to read	Frequency	2	25	5	6
	Percent	5.26	65.79	13.16	15.79
14. Giving corrective feedbacks while students read texts	Frequency	0	16	4	6
	Percent	--	61.54	15.38	23.08
15. Stating similarities and differences of the given concepts where needed	Frequency	1	15	4	8
	Percent	3.57	53.57	14.29	28.57
16. Providing extra information for a better comprehension while reading texts	Frequency	1	19	7	7
	Percent	2.94	55.88	20.59	20.59
17. Providing solutions for reading and comprehending complicated texts	Frequency	0	10	6	7
	Percent	--	43.48	26.09	30.43
18. Dividing complicated words and expressions into more comprehensive chunks	Frequency	2	16	2	8
	Percent	7.14	57.14	7.14	28.57
19. narrating stories and interesting occurrences for motivating students	Frequency	1	10	4	8
	Percent	4.35	43.48	17.39	34.78
	Frequency	2	12	6	8

20. Constant encouragement to increase students' motivation	Percent	7.14	42.86	21.43	28.57
	Frequency	1	12	4	7
21. Ensuring students that they have enough abilities to learn concepts and to texts	Percent	4.17	50.00	16.67	29.17
	Frequency	0	17	4	8
22. Active participation in class and paying attention to students while doing their assignments	Percent	--	58.62	13.79	27.59
	Frequency	36	351	79	159
Total	Percent	5.76	56.16	12.64	25.44

Based on the data in table 4 and the rate of the frequency and percentage, it is revealed that the majority of Iranian instructors (56.16%) have learned the scaffolding items during their MA courses. Also, by considering the results, it is clarified that %5.76 of the participants had learned scaffolding techniques in BA, %12.64 in institutes, and %22.44 mentioned other places. If the respondents' choice was the last item 'others', the questionnaire asks them to notify where exactly they have learnt about it, as an semi-open-ended item. After reading all the mentioned responses, the authors made a content analysis and extracted five different codes namely, workshops, personal experience, reading related books and articles and online resources. For example for subskill 1, two teachers learned it in workshops, three instructors learned it with their personal experience, and one by reading related books; the details of this part of analysis could be found in the Table 5.

Table 5 Details about where the instructors learnt the related subskills

Subskill No.	Workshop	Personal Experience	Books	Related Articles	Online Resources	Miscellaneous (not mentioned)	Total
1	2	3	1	0	0	3	9
2	0	2	1	0	0	1	4
3	2	5	2	1	1	2	13
4	1	3	1	0	0	2	7
5	1	1	1	2	1	2	8
6	1	1	2	1	0	2	7
7	3	2	1	1	0	1	8
8	3	2	3	2	1	2	13
9	2	2	0	0	0	2	6
10	1	3	1	1	0	2	8
11	2	3	1	1	1	3	11
12	1	1	3	2	0	2	9
13	2	2	3	2	1	2	12
14	3	1	1	0	0	1	6
15	1	3	2	1	0	2	9
16	2	3	2	1	0	2	10
17	1	1	1	0	0	2	5
18	1	2	1	0	0	3	7
19	1	3	2	1	0	3	10

20	1	1	3	0	1	3	9
21	1	2	2	0	0	4	9
22	2	4	2	1	0	1	10
Total	34	50	36	17	6	47	190
Percent	17.89	26.31	18.94	8.94	3.15	24.73	100

As the data in the above table shows, a quarter of responses (26.3 %, personal experience) suggest that learning about these needs of learners has happened during the time that the teachers were dealing with their students and the materials they had in hand; this is while only 17.8 % of the respondents learned them in the workshops where they participated. The other extracted codes (reading related books, articles and other online resources) are, to some extent, in the same fields; all deal with reading materials related to their practicum.

There was a descriptive (open-ended) question (RQ3) after the last item of the questionnaire in order to clearly investigate whether Iranian instructors have had courses or practical workshops for practicing scaffolding techniques during their studies and also to know more about the nature of their personal ideas and experiences on learning these techniques in the most effective way.

According to the findings of the current study, workshops of educational scaffolding techniques has been held during BA and MA levels, and in the studied language centers for the teachers. And according to the instructors, the workshops were very useful and effective. This shows that the managers of these institutions had recognized instructors' needs and weaknesses.

Discussion and Conclusion

Scaffolding techniques can open up a path for learners to connect their background knowledge with language skills. Therefore, instructors can use clues, relevant sources and proper instruments and correction to assist learners to have an influential learning. Thus, language

instructors are able to facilitate the process of learning through scaffolding techniques and by using real experiences. This scaffolding is important from many aspects; for instance, Pourjamshidi's (2014) results show that there is a significant relationship between application of scaffolding and learning a foreign language which states that if instructors apply scaffolding techniques in their teaching, foreign language learner feel that their learning can be enhanced. Hui-Ling (2010) findings also indicated that students receiving continuous computer-based procedural and early teacher-based metacognitive scaffolding performed statistically better at learning scientific inquiry skills.

According to the first question, As it can be seen in Table 4.5, Iranian instructors know more than 60% of the scaffolding techniques; when this is compared with question 3, as it can be seen in Table 4.7, it can be concluded that about 50 to 60 % of the participants had learned scaffolding techniques during their MA levels while the rest of the participants had learned these techniques in BA, English institutes, training workshops, etc. This comparison clearly shows that there are weaknesses in the educational system (here MA courses) for foreign language teaching skills, especially scaffolding techniques. Therefore, material developers should pay more attention to insert the practical training components, which are required for Persian instructors, in the course plans and related textbooks. This seems more important when we observe that 25% of the participants' major were not foreign language in their BA levels where they normally have some courses related to teaching practical techniques such as scaffolding. Therefore, these participants did not have any opportunity to learn teaching, especially scaffolding, techniques in their previous courses. This is why university professors (especially during MA courses) should pay more attention to technical training skills while teaching. But this need has not been satisfied completely in university language teaching courses either

Consequently, the results of this study suggests that to resolve weaknesses in the country's educational system and to facilitate

learning the language for non-native students, it is better to hold workshops on educational and applied techniques (e.g. scaffolding) which are useful in language classes and could be handy for teachers while teaching to foreign language learners.

The findings of the present study are concurred with the investigations from researchers like Hogan and Pressley (1997) and Wood et al., (1976). Scaffolding reduces frustration and raises motivation in learners through focusing on performing more effective tasks. Teachers can communicate with learners through communication means and create a friendly status and a better opportunity for students to think about language learning skills. It is essential to motivate learners to share their experiences with one another to expand their language concepts since they gather specific information to grasp the subjects.

The results for research questions showed that Iranian instructors know a little more than half of the targeted scaffolding techniques. This is not an ideal picture for a training system since it is taken for granted that instructors must normally learn the techniques in the courses they have passed at least during their MA's.

According to the responses to the descriptive question in the questionnaire, the researchers found that most of the participants had learned the related subskills by attending workshops, their own experiences, or through exposure to the literature. This gives us, at least, the impression that they are well-motivated to learn the needed skills more independently by accessing various types of informal learning while the findings suggest that more practical courses or workshops should be held for the current and future teachers.

The findings of the present study and its implications can be enriched in future studies by analyzing other teaching skills and techniques.

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