

# Scaffolding in English: Teachers' Classroom Practices to Scaffold Learners in Classroom

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## Abstract

*The practice and prospectus in English language teaching has become more challenging than ever before. It is on the shifting sands of ideology and practice. Learners need linguistic support to enhance their current level of proficiency in English. Talking about the context of English Language Teaching (ELT) in Nepal, we have the learners with poor English background. So, it is necessary to provide scaffolding to them to expose for better learning in English. However the practice of scaffolding learners to learn English has not been studied much. I, in this paper, make an attempt to inquire on how English teachers have provided scaffolding to the students aiming at finding out the practices of scaffolding learners in ELT.*

## Introduction

Language teaching requires the use of various linguistic and non- linguistic instruments or tools. Teachers can expose the students by means of providing constructive ideas to build up their current level of proficiency in English language learning. Hence, the linguistic support provided to the learners can be an effective source of knowledge to update them in the challenging world. The current paradigm of teaching and learning has been shifted from the highly content investment to the strategic investment (Kumaravedive, 1994, p. 36).

Many theories of teaching and learning developed as the time put strong demand on the theories such as behaviorism, mentalism, socio-culturalism, social constructivism and so on. There exist a number of approaches in language teaching and learning. Amongst them, the use of scaffolding as a tool for supporting learners is important one.

The term 'Scaffolding' is related to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), a key concept developed by Lev S. Vygotsky as the soul in his theory of social

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constructivism. Literally speaking, Scaffolding refers to a support for something. When learners are other regulated than collaborative talk or supportive dialogue between them and their co-participants then, the teachers may face problems while teaching. At that time, more skilled proficient individual helps him/her to solve the problems. Process of supporting dialogues which directs the attention of the learners towards the key feature of language learning and which promotes them through successive steps of problem, has come to be known as scaffolding (Klood, Barner & Ross, 1976 as cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 195).

In the simplest term, scaffolding can be said as the structured support used in the construction of a work and metaphorically it is a help or academic support given to a novice or child by More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) to develop new and genuine knowledge in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the words of Sharma and Sharma (2011, p.168), “Scaffolding is the collection of steps or procedure for human capacity building”. In scaffolding, the More Knowledgeable Others, i. e. the teachers, guardians, classmates and seniors can help and guide the novices through the problems to overcome them. While clarifying the concept of scaffolding in language teaching, Olson and Platt (2002) say, “Scaffolding is an instructional technique associated with ZPD, in which a teacher provides individualized support by incrementally improving a learners’ ability to build on prior knowledge”(p. 49).

There are many concepts related to scaffolding such as input modification, negotiation of meaning, giving clues to the students, discussion, collaboration, supportive dialogue, interaction, feedback, motivation, co-operative learning, use of adequate materials that supports for the full understanding, and constant guidance (Ellis, 2005). Unless the teachers do not have proper understanding of the ways for providing scaffolding in language teaching and the clear concepts on the use of scaffolding tools in their classroom teaching, the learners’ acquisition/learning of a new language remains in question. The central terminology in social constructivist theory is described below:

### **Zone of proximal development**

Zone of Proximal Development is the key term in socio-culturalism. It is the area of learning where the learners need help from somebody more knowledgeable to master the new knowledge. Mitchell and Myles (2004) state that the domain where learning can most productively take place is christened the Zone of Proximal Development

(ZPD), that is the domain of knowledge or skill where the learner is not yet capable of independent functioning but can achieve the desired outcome given relevant scaffolding. The Zone of Proximal Development is defined by Vygotsky as:

The difference between the child's development at level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 196).

## **Scaffolding**

Learners need support and guidance from others in learning a language and any sort of linguistic support provided to them is scaffolding. "The metaphor of scaffolding has been developed in neo-Vygotskian discussion to capture the quality of the type of the other regulation within the Zone of Proximal Development which is supposedly most helpful for the learning or appropriation of new concepts" (Mitchell and Myles, 2004). It means scaffolding refers to the collaborative dialogue that helps the learners to learn through input modifications, negotiation of meanings, providing hints, giving feedbacks, psychological helps, supportive behaviors and learning through the use of developing good learning strategies in learners. It also includes the steps needed for human capacity development gains knowledge and skill with the co-operation of language and experience through summarizing, questioning, clarifying, predicting by completing the steps of scaffolding.

## **Steps of providing scaffolding**

Scaffolding takes place successively in various steps. According to Wood (1976, as cited in Sharma and Sharma, 2011), scaffolding in the actual classroom can be applied in the following steps:

- i. Build interest and engage the learners.
- ii. Participate the learners actively in learning activities.
- iii. Simplify the tasks into smaller sub-tasks.
- iv. Focus the teaching completely on learners.
- v. To keep the learners from becoming frustrated.
- vi. To immediate the teachers modeling

In the same way, Branford, Brown and Cooking (2000) state that in order to provide young learners with an understanding of how to link world information or familiar situations with the new knowledge, the instructor must guide the learners through verbal and non-verbal communications and model behaviors. The research on the practice of using scaffolding in early childhood development shows that parents and teachers can facilitate this advancement through the Zone of Proximal Development by providing activities and task that:

- Motivate or enlist the child's interest related to the task.
- Simplify the task to make it manageable and achievable for a child.
- Provide some directions in order to help the child to focus on achieving the goal.
- Clearly indicate the differences between the child's work and the standard of desired solution.
- Reduce the frustration or risk.
- Model and clearly define expectations of activities to be performed (Branford, Brown and Cooking, 2000).

The above points justify that scaffolding is not the thing that can be used haphazardly in the classroom rather it should be used systematically following its each and every step in order to produce better results. It helps to have effective teaching in the classroom, so a teacher needs to be careful while using scaffolding in his/her classroom.

### **Scaffolding in the classroom**

While using scaffolding as an instructional technique, the teacher provides the task and enables the learners to build on prior knowledge and internalize the new concepts. According Olson and Platt (2002), teachers must provide assisted activities that are just on level beyond that of what the learners can do in order to assist learners through the Zone of Proximal Development. Once the learners demonstrate the task master, the support is decreased and the learners gain responsibility for their own growth.

Wood (1976, as cited in Sharma and Sharma, 2011, p. 126) presents the characteristics of the class where students get enough scaffolding in following ways:

- i. The teacher mainly uses student focused methods of teaching.
- ii. The teacher's role is that of guide, facilitator, manager, communicator, issue raiser, co-worker, promoter and co-problem solver.
- iii. Students and teachers remain very active.
- iv. Student of learning get enough assistance from their friends and teachers.
- v. The classroom environment is co-operative and collaborative.
- vi. Teacher is friendly and curious to understand the students' problem.
- vii. Students are more engaged in interaction as a result they speak a lot.
- viii. Learners are motivated to learning as they are interested in learning.
- ix. There is the use of enough teaching material.
- x. Learners feel responsibility for their own learning.

The above classroom characteristics of scaffolding exert the many positive effects of it in the class. Teachers feel that they have correctly fulfilled their duty and students have the feeling of gaining very important things easily and without frustration. Learners also become self-motivated and responsible for their own learning. Markenzie (2000) suggests the following eight characteristics as the teachers practice them in the classroom:

- a) Provide clear direction and reduce students' confusion
- b) Clarify purpose
- c) Keep students in task
- d) Offer assessment to clarify expectations.
- e) Point students to worthy source.
- f) Reduce uncertainty, surprise and disappointment.
- g) Deliver efficiency
- h) Create momentum.

The above mentioned characteristics prove that scaffolding brings positive outlets in students learning.

## Scaffolding strategies

Using scaffolding in the classroom is very important thing to ensure the learning outcomes but it should be used with care. One must use it wisely, systematically and appropriately. It is better to be strategic while using scaffolding in the classroom otherwise it may have negative impact to the students. Some of the awesome strategies of scaffolding as given by Alber (2014) are as follows:

- i. Show and tell: It is the fact that we learn something better by seeing rather than hearing about it. Modeling for the students is the cornerstone of scaffolding. The best way to teach students is to show or demonstrate the students exactly what they are expected to do.
- ii. Tap into their prior knowledge: The another best way to scaffold the students is to know their present experiences, hunches and ideas about the content or concept of study and have them relate and connect it to their own lives. The teacher has to offer them the help they need after knowing their present level of knowledge.
- iii. Give them to talk: All the learners need time to process new ideas and information. They also need time to verbally make the sense of the articulate their learning with community of learners who are also engaged in the same experience and journey. Thus, they should be provided enough time to think and talk on any topic.
- iv. Pre-teach vocabulary: It is also known as front loading vocabulary. This strategy helps the students to strive with the challenging text. If we pre-teach the vocabulary, students comprehend the text in hand which eventually prevents the students from possible failure.
- v. Use visual aids: Visual aids are great help for the students to understand the thing taught by the teacher. Graphic organizers, pictures and charts can all serve as scaffolding tools. The same thing can be grasped by the students easily in short period of time in case we use the visual aids.
- vi. Pause, ask questions, pause and review: This is the wonderful way to check for understanding while students read a chunk of difficult task or learn a new concept or content.

## **Tools/activities for teaching through scaffolding**

Tools refer to the equipment or means of performing some task. Here, the tools/activities of scaffolding refer to the devices that can be best employed while scaffolding or assisting to the learners in their language learning runway. Some of the well-known tools/activities for scaffolding that can be utilized in teaching and learning course are as follows:

- i. **Motivation:** Motivation is one of the most important tools of scaffolding. It can be defined as the internal drive to do something. It helps the learners to learn a language because when the learners are motivated, half of the learning is completed. Motivated individual is one who wants to achieve a particular goal, devotes considerable efforts to achieve this goal and experiences satisfaction in activities associated with achieving this goal. (Gardner and MacIntyre, 1993, as cited in Mitchell and Myles, 2004, p. 26).
- ii. **Comprehensible input:** This is another important tool of scaffolding. We can help, support or assist our learners by means of comprehensible input. The learners learn something only in the condition that they get comprehensible input. In the process of language learning, comprehensible input of the language item to teach is a pre-requisite.
- iii. **Interaction:** Interaction is another vital tool through which the learners can be scaffold in the process of language learning. Interaction is mainly carried out to make the input comprehensible and to avoid the learners from confusion regarding subject matter and the language structures.
- iv. **Feedback:** Among the many tools of scaffolding, feedback is of paramount importance. Feedback refers to the process of providing information regarding the students' performance to the student himself. Gass and Selinker (2008, p. 329) say that feedback provides the students with information about the success of their literalness and gives additional opportunities to focus on production or comprehension.
- v. **Negotiation of meaning:** Negotiation of meaning is next important tool of scaffolding that helps the students in their learning. Gass and Selinker (2008) state that the attempt made in conversation to clarify the lack of understanding is known as negotiation of meaning. This leads to substantial interactional efforts by the conversational patterns to secure mutual understanding.

- vi. Translation: Translation can be widely used tool of scaffolding in teaching and learning of language. It helps the learners to avoid from the confusion regarding the use of target language.
- vii. Collaboration/Co-operation: Collaboration/Co-operation refers to the joint work or activities that are performed with each other's support among the learners. Johnson and Johnson (1975) state that co-operation promotes mutual liking, better communication, high acceptance and support, as well as demonstrates an increase in a variety of thinking strategies among individuals in the group.
- viii. Giving hints: This is another important tool of scaffolding which is used to assist the students in language learning process. It refers to the clues or suggestions but deliberately does not include the full suggestion (Pol, 2010).
- ix. Modeling: Modeling can be exploited in the language classroom to scaffold the students in language learning. It is the way of offering behaviors for imitation including demonstration of a particular skill.
- x. Questioning: This is the way of asking students questions that require an active linguistic and cognitive answer. This helps the students to work to find out the answer to the queries (Pol, 2010).
- xi. Use of teaching materials: teaching materials are the things/objects used while teaching. Materials play a vital role for the successful teaching and learning. To scaffold the learners, teachers can use word cards, sentence cards, conversation chart, pocket chart, audio aids, etc.

Besides the above mentioned tools, explanation, elaboration, role play and simulation can also be used as the tools of scaffolding.

### **Objectives of the study**

The problem being addressed in this study is examining on how the teachers scaffold their learners in their act of teaching English to the students or what sorts of scaffolding tools they have been using in their real classroom. The learners alone might not be able to learn themselves. It means, the learners need help or support from someone who has more experiences, knowledge and skills. Only experience, knowledge and skill of an individual is not enough. Thus, he/she must be psychologically competent, practically facilitator and socially co-operative. He



should behave the students in well manner. The learner should feel ease to the help provided. To be specific, this research carries the following objectives:

- a. To explore the ways of providing scaffolding by the teachers of English to the students in their real classroom intervention.
- b. To present the situations to scaffold learners in teaching of English on the basis of classes observed.

### **Research questions**

The present study has addressed the following research questions:

1. How do the English teachers provide scaffolding to their learners in their act of teaching English?
2. What are the situations in which the teachers scaffold learners for better learning in English?

### **Methodology**

#### ***Setting and participants***

This research was carried out among English language teachers teaching at higher secondary level in Kathmandu valley. The participants of the study were the 20 randomly selected higher secondary level English teachers who had the master of Education (M.Ed.) degree. I myself observed one class of each of the selected teachers getting their permission for the study of their practices on providing scaffolding to the learners in their usual classroom instruction.

#### ***Research instruments***

In order to answer the research questions, a classroom observation checklist was developed incorporating the scaffolding tools and the strategies used to scaffold learners in learning English with the insights obtained from the theoretical literature review. Equally, researcher's own diary was also used to keep the record of the situations on which teachers practiced various scaffolding tools to support the students in better learning of English. The data were collected through observation on how the selected participants behave in their natural setting in order to provide linguistic support to their students. Twenty classes of the selected teachers were duly observed with both of the tools in the form of participant observation (Cresswell, 2013, Mackellar, 2013). It is because observing participants' classroom practices

provides insights about how the participants deploy language to accomplish their objectives (Starks, 2007).

## **Data Preparation and analysis**

To prepare the data collected from classroom observation checklist and researcher's own diary keeping, three main steps were taken. First, the data were scrutinized on the basis of research objectives. It means, data analysis started with the coding and minute analysis of the collected data. It can be seen as the process of bringing order, structure and meaning of the mass of collected data. Second, the major scaffolding tools used by the teachers to provide linguistic support to their students were rated. Hence, data analysis involved breaking the data into manageable themes, patterns and relationship to understand the various elements of the raw data collected in course of the research study along with their frequency of use in the classes observed and finally the situations of using those tools/strategies were analyzed in terms of classroom activities. In sum, the collected data were put under different headings and then analyzed and interpreted descriptively.

## **Results and discussion**

There may be many ways in which the information gathered in this research study could have been analyzed. However, for the sake of economy and explicitness, I have presented the findings and discussed them establishing three major themes as: the practice of scaffolding tools by the English teachers in their classroom intervention, the frequency and percentile of the individual strategies used to scaffold learners in classroom and the situations of using scaffolding tools.

### **The practice of scaffolding tools in classroom intervention**

The classroom is a miniature society in which teacher has to do many things for teaching and learning process (Hedge, 2008). Not only this, teachers have to manage everything that makes teaching and learning successful and effective. The way teachers use various scaffolding tools in the classroom. From the observation of 20 classes of selected participants, it is found that the teachers used different strategies or tools to scaffold the learners; however their attempt of using those tools was not sound as per the context of classroom teaching and the level of linguistic proficiency of the students. The major practices of teachers to scaffold learners were using motivation, simplifying the input, involving in interaction, providing feedback, translating the difficult vocabularies and ideas in learners' own language, co-operating them to solve the problems existed and to complete the given

exercises, modeling/ demonstrating a particular behavior, asking comprehensible questions, using different materials as like word cards, sentence cards, conversation chart, audio-tapes, mobile and character maps, explaining the theme of the text in elaborated form and assigning roles to the students for further practice on particular lesson. These strategies were more frequent in the class but meaning negotiation, clarification, input modification, exemplification, contextualization, interpretation and association were least practiced in their classes in order to scaffold the learners.

### **The frequency of using individual scaffolding tools in the classroom intervention**

When teachers make use of various scaffolding tools like motivation, role play, questioning, modified input, pair and group interaction, questioning and so on in order to support the students verbally then, it is supposed that the students learn in an effective and simple way. Based on this assumption, I prepared a classroom observation checklist and observed one class of each sample English teacher. Altogether twenty classes were observed in order to find out their scaffolding tools to support the students linguistically in ELT classroom. The results regarding the frequency of using individual scaffolding tools have been presented in following ways:

- i. Motivating students: Out of 20 observed classes, in 18 (90%) classes, the teachers motivated their students, whereas only in 2 (10%) motivation tool was not used to scaffold.
- ii. Giving comprehensible input: Similarly, out of 20 observed classes, teachers provided comprehensible input in 18 (90%) classes and two of the observed classes were out of the use of this tool.
- iii. Modifying input: Regarding the use of modifying input as a scaffolding tools, teachers used it in 13 (65%) classes whereas they did not make use of it in 7 (35%) classes.
- iv. Involving in interaction: Similarly, out of 20 observed classes, teachers used interaction to scaffold the students in 18 (90%) classes and only two classes were out of use of interaction.
- v. Giving feedback: In almost all the classes (i.e., 100%) observed, teachers provided feedback to support their students linguistically. It was one of the basic scaffolding tools to the teachers of English.

- vi. Asking for negotiating meaning: Regarding the use of meaning negotiation as a tool to scaffold learners in English, in 13 (65%) classes' teachers asked for negotiating meaning, it was unused in 7 (35%) classes in total.
- vii. Translating TL terms: Out of 20 observed classes, teachers provided scaffolding by using translation tool in 14 (70%) classes however, they did not make use of it in rest of the classes observed.
- viii. Giving hints: Teachers can scaffold their learners by providing hints for better acquisition. Out of 20 observed classes, teachers provided hints to the students in 17 (85%) classes and only in three classes (15%) they did not make use of it.
- ix. Modeling: The teachers least used modeling as a scaffolding tool in their classes. On the basis of collected data, it has been found that they used modeling as a tool in 8 (40%) classes, and the rest of other classes were in the state of unused of modeling for scaffolding the learners.
- x. Questioning: Teachers support their learners very often by using questioning technique. Regarding the use of it, the data shows that in out of 20 classes observed, teachers supported learners through questioning in 18 (90%) classes and only two classes were unused of questioning tool.
- xi. Using audio-video materials: The use of materials plays constructive role in learning any subjects and it is not an exception in English. Teachers can use various audio-video materials to support their students in learning. Regarding the use of it in the observed classes, it has been found that teachers used variety of materials only in 4 (20%) classes. The majority of classes observed were not entirely based on the use of audio-visual materials. Explaining: Similarly, out of 20 observed classes, 18 (90%) classes teachers explained while teaching, whereas 2 (10%) did not.
- xii. Asking for co-operation: Teachers' co-operation in the classroom activities and tasks fosters autonomy and creativity in learning. Asking for co-operation is a tool to scaffold the learners in English classes. From the observation of all selected teachers classes, it has been found that all of them used (i.e., 100%) this tool in their classes to support their students in learning.
- xiii. Providing clues: The clues provided by teachers in classroom encourage students to complete the task successfully. So, teachers can use it as a

scaffolding tool. Regarding the use of providing clues as a tool to scaffold the learners in English, the report of observation shows that teachers used it in 13 (65%) classes' and the rest of the classes were out of the use of this tool.

- xiv. Facilitating students to solve problems: Teachers as facilitators (Harmer, 2008) is widely accepted role in language teaching. The facilitation provided by teachers can support the students linguistically. Regarding the use of facilitation to solve the problem as a scaffolding tool, the report of observation depicts that in 12 (60%) classes observed in total, teachers facilitated to solve the problems, whereas they did not make use of this tool in 8 (40%) classes.
- xv. Helping students through supportive dialogue: The dialogue between teacher and students can be an ice breaker of classroom monotony. Teachers can scaffold the learners by means of supportive dialogue. From the observation, it has been found that the selected teachers used supportive dialogue as scaffolding tool only in 8 (40%) classes in total, however, the teachers did not use it in majority of the classes (i.e., in 60%).
- xvi. Simplifying structure: Structure simplification is the classical technique to support the students in learning grammar (Thornbury, 1999). Teachers can provide scaffolding to the learners by means of structure simplification. From the observation of selected teachers' classroom intervention, it has been noted that only in 9 (45%) classes observed in total, teachers simplified structure while teaching, whereas in majority of the classes, i.e., 12 (60%) they did not support learners through structure simplification.

The above report of observation of the teachers classes shows that providing feedback, asking questions, motivating students and asking for co-operation were mostly used scaffolding tools in the classroom intervention and the use of audio-visual materials, negotiating meaning in context, using supportive dialogue and structure simplification were least used scaffolding tools in the classes of higher secondary level English teachers.

### **The analysis of the situations of using scaffolding tools/strategies in the classrooms**

Teachers can use different scaffolding tools/strategies in different situations of the classroom activities so as to actively engage learners in learning process of English. In order to find out and analyse the situations of using scaffolding tools, I used diary keeping (Mackellar, 2013) as a tool for collecting the data during the period

of observation. From the observation of the classes and the record of the situations of use kept in researcher's diary, the following findings have been derived:

- One of the tools used to scaffold was motivating students towards learning. Mostly, the teachers motivated the students to learn English by revising the previous lesson, by asking sign-post questions, by casting a joke and asking IQ tests. They motivated at the beginning of lesson and at the initiation of each transaction.
- Another tool used to scaffold was input simplification. Teachers used this tool at the time of explanation, description and narration of the events and things included in the text.
- Similarly, teachers involved students in interaction throughout the presentation, practice and evaluation of classroom intervention.
- In the same way, they provided feedback after the response of each individual student. It was provided immediately to strengthen the students' learning.
- Teachers provided the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary, idiomatic expressions and abstract ideas in the form of translating into the learners' own languages.
- They asked students for collaboration and co-operation during the practice phase of class and also for the completion of exercises given in the text.
- They provided hints when students felt difficulty to respond the teacher during classroom interaction.
- Questioning was another most frequent tool used by the teachers. They used questioning in all pre, while and post phases of intervention to elicit the information as well as to attract the attention of the students.
- They used audio-visual materials only in the specific cases instruction, i.e. to describe the events through picture, to direct them in listening comprehension, to attract the attention and to clarify the concepts of the text.
- They explained the content through simplification, input modification, exemplification, association, contextualization and illustration necessarily.
- The other tools like modeling, negotiating meaning in context, providing comprehensible input and involving in role playing activities occasionally in their classes.

## Conclusion and implications

The classroom instruction of English is complex in nature. What is to be emphasized today is to encourage and support the learners to process language in better way. In such a situation, providing scaffolding to the students in learning English can have a paramount importance. If the students get academic help from the teachers, they can easily learn new knowledge in a short period of time. After the analysis and interpretation of the data it is concluded that the teachers used sufficient scaffolding tools in their classroom. Questioning, motivation, asking for co-operation and structure simplification were the most used scaffolding tools in the ELT classroom to build interest and engage students in learning English. However, in many contexts teachers do not have clear ideas about scaffolding as a tool for language teaching. Teachers need to change and develop the habit of using scaffolding tools like comprehensive input, modified input, supportive dialogue, audio-visual materials and explanation as most of the teachers were found weak in the use of these tools. Given the paucity of research in this area, it should be stressed that the findings of this study are tentative and that further research is required to expand and deepen the practice of scaffolding tools in teaching English to the non-native English students. In addition, by collecting qualitative data, such as from interview and focus-group discussion with teachers, a richer account of the relative uses of strategies to scaffold the learners in English could be derived.

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