



Scaffolding for English as Foreign Language Writers: Writing a Scholastic Essay

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Abstract

This article describes how a group of Iranian upper-intermediate EFL learners were guided through the practice of writing their first academic essays in English. The method applied the principle of scaffolding to the essay writing process by providing flexible support for the learners during the writing their first essays. Scaffolding included a number of aspects, each of which is explained in this paper. The researcher discusses that the approach he adopted promotes learners autonomy by focusing on an authentic task, making the requirements of the task explicit, and providing flexible support for the students as they approach the target performance.

Keywords: Academic essay; Authentic task, Scaffolding

INTRODUCTION

Most of the students of EFL face a number of problems in their writing skills, especially those students who are seeking to enter the universities in English speaking countries. They need to adjust themselves to cultural differences, acquire academic proficiency in the target language, and familiarize themselves with the type of texts and tasks associated with academic study in the new country. This study focuses on the third aspect and in particular, on learners' experience of attempting to produce an argumentative essay within the context of an EAP writing programs. Here, let's indicate the adopted a "scaffolded" approach which assisted the learners as they produced their first academic essays in English.

According to Donato (1994, p. 40) the scaffolding concept in social interaction is:

A knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence.

The scaffolding in the writing program here incorporate the following features:

1. Topics linked to concurrent study themes
 2. A predetermined essay structure
 3. Assistance with finding tests a data
 4. Staged instruction, focusing on one section of the essay each week
 5. Extensive modeling of the composition process
 6. Focus on language
 7. Regular feedback from peers and tutors
- each of the above features is discussed as follows:

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firstly the research in learner autonomy is discussed. Secondly scaffolded guidance in L2 contexts, and the writing instruction which supports the approach adopted. Then background information is provided for the learners. Next, the key features of scaffolding are outlined. Finally, the paper will state a very brief discussion of implications for the teaching of academic writing in the same contexts.

Literature Review

To support this study, three aspects taken from previous researches can be helpful. First, explorations of curriculum-based approaches to fostering autonomy in language learning. Second, research into scaffolding in L2 instructional contexts. Finally, research on writing instruction, which emphasizes the significance of the rhetorical context. Teachers who wish to promote learner autonomy are essentially concerned with fostering the 'ability to take charge of one's own learning' (Holce, 1981, p. 3).

Crabbe (1993, p. 448) claims that.....there are two aspects of the curriculum we need to focus on in order to foster autonomy. One is what the teacher says about classroom tasks as learning activity. The other is the actual design of tasks and whether they have any element that models learning activity. According to Crabbe, classroom discourse which can assist learners in transferring classroom learning to their independent learning is likely to focus on the purposes of tasks, problems experienced while completing the tasks, and possible strategies for solving those problems. The key feature of task design he identifies is the extent to which the task, models independent learning procedures' (ibid, p. 450). Therefore, curricula, which aim to foster learner autonomy, need to integrate discourse about learning, and model the kind of learning activity, which the learners will attempt independently in the future. One procedure which incorporates opportunities for talk about learning and models effective learning activity is scaffolding. According to Benson (2001, p. 170): the more successful curriculum-based approaches to autonomy do not

simply leave the students to 'sink or swim'. Invariably their effectiveness depends upon implicit or explicit scaffolding structures that support learners in decision-making processes. A study which explored the role of scaffolding in L2 reading instruction (Cotteral, 1990) found that four aspects of the procedure assisted novice academic readers. Firstly, learners were exposed to extensive, contextualized modeling of 'expert' reading comprehension strategies. Secondly, they received 'cues' to adopt new strategies; thirdly, they had plentiful opportunities to practice and discuss the new strategies, and finally, they received immediate feedback on their performance. According to Coe (1994) the recent research on writing instruction has emphasized the importance of establishing the rhetorical context for writing. In establishing a rhetorical context, learners are urged to respond to questions about the purpose, audience, and occasion for their writing (ibid, p. 162), and, as a result, assume responsibility for deciding the structure, language, and tone of their text. Thus learners are "not only assuming a perspective but situating it in the context of others'(Greene, and Ackerman, 1995, p. 390). This encourages them to internalize reasons for writing, and to develop an autonomous stance in relation to the writing task.

Unfolding the rhetorical context for writing also helps learners manage information. For example, when learners use more than one source of knowledge to complete a writing task, they must synthesize a range of ideas. Their appreciations of the rhetorical context prompt them as they select, organize, and connect information for their essay (Spivey, 1984). Learners' prior knowledge, built up by experience and talk, is integral to this process, of synthesis, showing them how to link selections from sources to fit the new rhetorical context.

In summary, three central concerns contributed to the design of our writing program, firstly, an appreciation of importance of talk about learning, as well as the need to work on 'real world' asks; secondly, the value of providing on-line support during learning, 6.as a way of

controlling selected aspects of the complex writing tasks; and thirdly, the need for learners to engage with the writing task in such a way that they appropriate it to their own purposes. Those ideas featured prominently in the design and delivery of the writing program reported here.

METHODS

Participants

the 16 participants who took part in this study were the students at Islamic Azad University-South Tehran Branch, Faculty of Persian Literature and Foreign Languages. They were enrolled in essay writing course which was one of their credit units of seventh semester in B.A of translation studies. The course lasts 16 weeks (one session each week, two hours). They were all Iranians but from different provinces, 10 females and 6 males with ages ranging 18 to 30.

The students' placement test (pre-test) results revealed that their level of proficiency in writing skill was quiet low. The pre-test for their measurement was the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the learners' proficiency ranged between 3.5 to 4.0 at the beginning of the course.

The participants had been placed (on the basis of their placement test results) in a class taught by the researcher (the writer of this paper) in an integrated program addressing all their language needs. This paper focuses exclusively, however, on the writing component of the class program. The researcher designed the program which consisted of one two-hour session per week in each 16 week period 7. (i.e. a total of 32 hours). By the end of which 8 weeks session, the students were expected to have produced a 1000 word "argument essay". In what follows the key characteristics of the approach adopted in guiding the learners through the essay writing process are discussed.

Writing Language

Considering that the task of producing a 1000_word argumentative essay in English would be demanding for the learners, we were

committed to exposing them to the authentic experience of producing an academic essay. The fact that learners were supposed to produce an argumentative essay under examination conditions in the proficiency test at the end of the treatment (course) provided additional motivation. In planning discussions, researcher focused on the different kinds of support he could provide during the process. The plan was supported by a number of important objectives. Firstly and the most importantly, the plan began to give learners the experience of completing an authentic, extended, writing task of the type encountered at university. It also aimed to indicate learners how to use an essay structure to integrate information and ideas which conducting research and writing descriptions, explanations, discussions, and opinions. Based on the language goals, the plan was designed to give learners the chance to recycle vocabulary and structure encountered in the input texts.

The plan also provided experience in writing logical introductions and conclusions, as well as making use of signals, keywords, collocates, links and transitions, and synonyms. In the second essay, an additional goal was introduced requiring the learners to include text from published sources in their essay. The session also included standard process writing goals of pre-writing, drafting, feedback, and revision.

Topic for the first essay was Endangered Animals. This topic allowed learners to make use of their general knowledge of endangered animals in their own areas where they have been grown up, as well as their personal notions of conservations. These aspects of prior knowledge were supplemented by teacher prepared information packs on different animals, from which learners selected the animals they wished to profile in their essay. Every two weeks, i.e. each of the eight four-hour sessions focused on one section of the essay, with the final session focusing on editing and revision. In each cycle of the writing program, a text structure was adopted. As shown below:

1. Introduction
2. Description an animal
3. Explanation of threat it faces
4. Discussion of efforts to protect it
5. Conclusion (including arguments for and against its protection)
6. References

The typical sequences of each session involved prewriting discussion, group drafting of text, individual speaking and writing activity, and feedback. Initial discussion usually focused on what kind of information might be expected in the current section of the essay. The class then collaborated in drafting a model text for that section on the whiteboard. Subsequently, time was devoted to learners discussing, composing, and responding to each other's draft text.

In discussing writing instruction, which involves modeling followed by collaborative text construction, followed by independent text construction. Badger and White (2000) state:

In theory, the cycle can be replaced as and when necessary, but it would seem that often each phase appears only once. (p. 156)

one of the advantages of the approach adopted in the program was that the learners were exposed to this cycle every two weeks. At the conclusion of each four-hour session, learners were asked to seek peer feedback on their first draft, revise their draft, and submit it to the teacher for feedback by the start of the following week. This sequence clearly placed responsibility for producing successive drafts on the learners, while allowing some flexibility in the speed with which individuals produced their drafts every other week.

Applying Scaffolding Rules (Features)

A series of scaffolding rules in writing program supposed the gradual acquisition of writing competence by the learners. These rules or features are discussed below, supplemented by evaluative comments made by the learners at the end of the course (program).

Connecting the Topic to the Subject of the Study

Joining the essay topic to subject being explored was an optimal condition for the recycling of ideas and language. Input texts matched in terms of information and vocabulary, so that learners gained experience of dealing with multiple texts on a topic.

Learners became more confident at using topic - specific vocabulary, and mastered the grammar of different structures. The researcher also incorporated a more explicit oral element into delivery of his sessions that the learners' oral presentations provided extra natural opportunities for rehearsal and repetition of similar information.

Deciding the Essay Structure Previously

Pre-decision of essay structure created the learners enough opportunity to focus their efforts on one section of the essay at a time, while introducing them to important patterns. Although some may argue that this approach is overly prescriptive, I maintain that when many aspects of the process are unfamiliar, ensuring the predictability of structure enhances learners' sense of security. When the researcher asked at the end of the course to express their ideas on what they had learned from the experience of writing the essay in this manner, six of the learners commented 'essay structure', and eight mentioned 'linking and organizing ideas', two of the learners wrote together their comments as follows:

We obtained many important things by writing this essay. First, we learned how to organize the article. Usually we have some confused opinions about one topic, and now we can separate them in correct paragraph. Second, we know how to write the structure. Such as we wrote Introduction, Description, Explanation, etc. We think it is very clear to reader what you will talk about and how many ideas you want to express.

Contributing to Locate Suitable Texts and Data

An important aspect of planning the writing task involved realizing suitable texts for the learners to work with, given that many of the standard university texts were beyond their level of comprehension. The individualized information packs prepared for the essay provided all the essential information learners required but did not prevent them from seeking additional information. Week four of the second cycle of the plan included a session spent in the library locating and working with the materials needed. One of the students explicitly identified this aspect of the program one which he valued:

I learn something from this instruction. First, I learn how to structure an essay, how many aspects which include. Second, I learn how to find data which are appropriate to support an essay.

Dividing the Instruction into Stages

The final way (phase) in which the instruction was "scaffolded" by restricting the focus of each session to one section of the essay. Critics may object that expert writers do not begin writing at the start of an essay and proceed sequentially to the end. However, given the low proficiency and relative lack of writing experience of the learners, I believe that this staged approach organized the instruction into manageable elements, while usefully focusing attention on the unit of organization itself (i.e. Description, Explanation, etc.).

Results and Discussion

Collectively composing one section of the text every other week or sometimes within three weeks produced a number of positive results. First, the learners gained access to the inherently private process of composing. For example, this allowed them to observe the way in which brainstorming different ideas results in the need to prioritize and select from those ideas, and the adoption of alternative word choices demands modifications to sentence syntax. Second, it allowed them to associate particular functions in the or

ganization of the essay with particular language forms. In the second half of the course, the group-brainstormed model was typed out by the teacher after each session and displayed in the classroom as an ongoing record of the group process. The "model" proved so popular that it "disappeared" mysteriously from the classroom on more than one session.

The group discussion and composition phase of each session on the way in which language is used to signal the relationship between ideas. All references to specific linguistic signals were therefore naturally embedded in highly elaborated contexts, in contrast to approaches which present phrases ' as a list of exponents which students could mistakenly regard as interchangeable' (Flowerdew, Zoo). The learners appeared keen to incorporate the language modeled during the group composition stage in their own texts.

Researchers' and Students' Feedback

The researcher's feedback aimed to reinforce the uptake of ideas relating to content and structure which had been discussed in the class session each week. While attention was paid to accuracy, this was secondary to the researcher's concern that learners should incorporate ideas appropriate to the respective section of the essay, link ideas adequately, and see signposting language highlighted in the class discussion. It was pleasing to find evidence in the program evaluations that the learners valued giving and receiving feedback, as well as receiving feedback from the researcher (as teacher). One learner wrote in the end of course evaluation session/

After finished writing our essay in this course, I find my writing skill improved to higher level than before. First of all , I think it is very important to get feedback from teacher(researcher) and classmates. Because they can give you good suggestions and correct your mistakes. When you read other people's essay, you can give the same comments to others. So it is a good way to study each others by giving feedback with your classmates.

Conclusion

I believe this experience of teaching and at the same time helping the participants in their writing program had two major strengths. First, by providing appropriate scaffolding throughout the essay writing cycle, I was able to focus attention on the language and structure needed to produce an argumentative essay. This successfully reduced the learning load for class members as they engaged in what was mostly an unfamiliar and challenging task. The second main factor related to the attention paid to establishing an ideal context. Instead of focusing on the decontextualized mechanics of writing, this program helped the participants establish links between their beliefs, attitudes, and prior knowledge on the one hand, and the topic they were writing about, on the other. Out of the sense of ownership developed a clear sense of why they were writing, who they were writing for, and what information they needed to include in their essays. But, my most lasting impression of this writing activity is of the excitement with which the participants engaged in the process of collective inquiry. The remarkable point of these classes was the learners' efforts at discovering and sharing information, exchanging feedback, and developing confidence in their role as experts. Their sense of active engagement is best conveyed by a participant who summed up his experience of the writing activity in the following words:

Writing this essay caused me become such as a discoverer. Because when the essay topic was assigned, I started collecting different kind of information from my friends, library, internet, and etc. But only the information was not enough. Most of time I must thought about whether these information are correct, useful, true or not. And I must remained myself 'keep neutral attitude' and avoid misleading any information. Another student expressed her comment as follows:

Writing essay based on the way we were guided not only improved my writing. I also practiced my speaking, listening and reading. When I met my friends, all of them always asked me 'how is your essay going on ' so, I must answer and describe my essay's context. This was a best way to learn language.

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