

# Scaffolding and the Teaching of Writing Within ZPD: Doing Scaffolded Writing (A Short Case Study)

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## Abstract

This paper aims at explaining the concept of scaffolding within ZPD, providing in-depth analysis, and illustrating how scaffolding, as a tool of assistance, can be used in the teaching of writing. Scaffolding, as a concept, has been originated from Vygotsky's theoretical notion—the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). As it is known, ZPD has been originally constructed to account for the gap between the actual level and the potential level of development of the individual learners. Briefly, the first part of the paper showed how the notions of ZPD, internalization and the concepts of activated learning and collaborative writing within ZPD were briefly presented in the literature review. Likewise, the second part of discussed important concepts in the literature such as scaffolding, principles of scaffolding, scaffolded writing, scaffolding learning. In the third part of this paper, different studies of scaffolding and the teaching of writing in the EFL contexts were briefly discussed and critically presented. The last part of the study briefly presented and discussed the findings of a short one-month case study of my five-year-old son.

**Keywords:** Scaffolding, Scaffolded writing, ZPD, EFL contexts

## 1. Introduction

Writing, as an abstract cognitive activity, has been a challenge for both language teachers and learners in different contexts. It is not a problem that is only encountered by L2 learners. Instead, it impacts unlimited number of learners no matter what language they speak. Moreover, what seems to partially increase the problem is the unprofessional traditional teaching of such an important skill. In the traditional classroom teaching of writing as a product, no matter how difficult and frustrating the task might be, students are deprived from the other important assistances and only restricted to themselves as the only source of

knowledge production. Thus, such a problematic issue has been a fascinating topic for researchers and different studies were conducted on the teaching and learning of writing. Based on the literature review of the teaching and learning of writing in the areas of first and second language teaching and learning, scaffolding, in the lights of ZPD, was used to facilitate and enhance the teaching and learning of different skills including the writing skills. Thus, innovative strategies and approaches have been adopted for the teaching and learning of writing. Briefly, this paper is an attempt to critically and thoughtfully present and discuss how the significant concepts of ZPD and scaffolding were presented in the literature review and how they were incorporated to produce an important methodology for the teaching of writing.

## **2. Literature Review**

### *2.1 Defining ZPD*

In his discussions of ZPD and its impacts on developing and enhancing the different learning processes, Nordlof (2014) cited the statement of Vygotsky that only through the notion of ZPD “what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (p. 66). In other words, it is only through exposing them to an environment during which they are externally guided by the instructions of the other more experienced adults, children become more aware of their experiences before they are internally proceeded in their minds. Clearly, this statement of Vygotsky was the keystone on which ZPD was based. Therefore, in another citation of Nordlof, we find that ZPD is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 66). So, we can clearly understand here that it is only through the dialectical approach different levels of learning are to occur and develop within the different ZPDs of the learners.

### *2.2 ZPD and Internalization*

In a detailed discussion of the significant processes of internalizations within ZPD, Everson (2013) argued that the internal processes that happened during "egocentric speech" is an important part of initiating and developing learning. In other words, through the different stages of ZPD during which the different sorts of knowledge are externally and internally processed, a great opportunity is giving to students to have their own thinking of the topic before writing. Additionally, what improves the individual writing and drafting skills of the learners is to have “a small group discussions before writing ever begins and subsequent sharing drafts aloud with peers or (the teachers) and that will move the learns from “abbreviated inner speech to external social speech” leading to developing the “verbal fluency” and producing a more systematic thought in writing (p. 10).

### *2.3 Activated Learning and Collaborative Writing Within ZPD*

In their study of *ZPD Activated Learning and Collaborative Writing*, Mirzaei and Eslami (2013) asserted that only through ZPD and "collaborative dialogue" the learners move from

their "actual development" level to their "potential development" in which their "microgenetic learning" is more likely to happen (p. 6). In a further discussion of "microgenetic learning," we find that it is defined as the optimal processes of learning through which the use of L2 pedagogical tasks engage students in 'collaborative dialogue' or 'languaging' and problem-solving" (p. 9). Briefly, through conducting a mixed method research for studying how *ZPD Activated Learning and Collaborative Writing* can enhance the writings level through the use of metadiscourse, Iranian EFL university students were randomly sampled into two groups: traditional teacher-based teaching group and the ZPD-activated learning group. The results showed that "the ZPD learners' internal, cognitive control and use of metadiscoursal devices in organizing the content" have led to "the transformation of both self and the activity within the ZPD" (Mirzaei & Eslami, 2013, p. 19), whereas, in traditionally-based teaching class, learners fail to develop such level of experience. In other words, in the collaborative learning class and through the different moments of interactional activities, learners were exposed to different practices "to negotiate for meaning, use language in a meaningful way and establish intersubjectivity" (p. 20). In contrast, the students in the other group were only "performing a limited range of functions with little need to negotiate for meaning, and feedback was primarily directed to enable students to produce correct sentences" (p. 20).

#### 2.4 Defining Scaffolding

Scaffolding, as a concept, was not constructed or introduced by Vygotsky. "He himself did not use the term, scaffolding – it originated in an article by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) and has since been very widely applied to the assistance needed in a ZPD" (Barnard & Campbell, 2005, p. 77). Scaffolding, in general, is defined by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) as an "adult controlling those elements of the task that are essentially beyond the learner's capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (p. 9).

Although scaffolding has been widely used in the teaching of different skills, different results showed that scaffolding, as instrument, has not yet been clearly understood and appropriately incorporated by many teachers in the teaching-learning environments. Therefore, we find that different studies have focused on investigating the theoretical aspects of scaffolding in relation to ZPD and how such an important concept has been implemented by educators in the different fields. For example, Stuyf (2002) have critically discussed how the theory of scaffolding should be applied by instructors and they subsequently cited Van Lier's six significant principles of scaffolding:

1. Contextual support - a safe but challenging environment: errors are expected and accepted as part of the learning process.
2. Continuity - repeated occurrences over time of a complex of actions, keeping a balance between routine and variation.
3. Intersubjectivity - mutual engagement and support: two minds thinking as one.
4. Flow - communication between participants is not forced, but flow in a natural way.
5. Contingency – the scaffolded assistance depends on learners' reactions: elements can be added, changed, deleted, repeated,

etc. 6. Handover – the ZPD closes when learner is ready to undertake similar tasks without helps. (p. 8)

### 2.5 *Scaffolded Writing*

Generally speaking, ZPD has been highly associated with concepts such as "cooperative learning," "scaffolding" and "guided learning" and they have all been used interchangeably in large number of studies. For instance, Bodrova and Leong (1998) have generally described scaffolding as any specific "types of assistance that make it possible for learners to function at higher levels of their zones of proximal development" (p. 2). Through scaffolding, learners are enabled to develop from their "actual "individual levels into the "potential level" during which they can acquire and learn the required abilities that help them to reflect on their experiences of learning and become more independent learners at later stages (p. 3). Thus, the article was mainly investigating how scaffolding can help develop the learning of writing, particularly for children. What was more interesting in this study is the creation and adoption of the so-called "*Scaffolded Writing*;" a methodological approach towards the teaching of writing that was originally based on Vygotsky's method to support emergent writing.

In their detailed discussions of the article, Bodrova and Leong (1998) defined "scaffolded writing" as "a combination of materialization and private speech to support emergent writing" (p. 6) in which "a highlighted line is used to materialize each unit of oral speech" and in a later stage "private speech coincides with the drawing of each line so the link between the spoken word and its materialized line is made clear" (p. 7). Simply, in the first step, teachers start pronouncing words, writing separate blank lines and then having the paper returned to students. Later in the next stage, while the words were repeated by the teachers, the learners then started writing the same words on separate lines made by the teachers. The results of the study proved the effectiveness of such an approach especially in improving the early alphabetical literacy level of children and making them more individually responsible of their writing processes (p. 15).

### 2.6 *Scaffolding and Writing in The EFL Contexts*

Besides, in another important study about *Developing Second Language Writing Through Scaffolding in the ZPD*, Schwieter (2010) defined "scaffolded learning" as "the mediator's adjusting the complexity and maturity of the teaching interaction to facilitate the [learner's] mastery of the task; providing support when necessary; and providing encouragement and prompts to the [learner] to move ahead when ready" (p. 32). Based on this definition we can see that scaffolding is not only limited to the assistance of the learners during their basic initial levels of learning. Moreover, scaffolded learning is a systematic process through which different periods of development of individual learners occur. Therefore, it can be clearly observed that the writers of that study elaborated more on their basic definition of scaffolded learning and described later it as a broad methodology that includes various types of assistances and supports to learners including "conceptual scaffolding (Bell & Davis, 1996), soft and hard scaffolding (Holton & Clarke, 2006; Saye & Brush, 2002; Simons & Klein, 2007), contingent scaffolding (van Lier, 1996), reciprocal scaffolding (Holton & Clarke,

2006), mutual scaffolding (de Guerrero & Villamil, 2000; Donato, 1994), technical scaffolding (Yelland & Masters, 2007), and hybrid learning scaffolding" (p. 32).

Additionally, Schwieter (2010) stated that scaffolding, as a methodology, is based on "six actions: 1) maintaining the novice learner's attention; 2) reducing variability within the task; 3) realizing goals within the task; 4) highlighting critical learning characteristics; 5) minimizing frustration during learning development; 6) providing solutions to problems" (p. 33). Further, scaffolding in writing, as a technique, includes "a variety of student characteristics such as peer-advising, clarification, and reliance on the first language to maintain control of the revision process" (p. 34), and based on this particular description of scaffolding, we can see that learners' progresses in these stages are supported by "a long-term sense of direction and continuity, a local plan of action, and a moment-to-moment interactional decision-making" (p.34).

Hence, in the discussions of scaffolding in writing and within the theoretical frame of ZPD, Schwieter (2010) strongly argued that scaffolding, as a process, happens through different stages of ZPDs "each consisting of assisted scaffolding techniques that lift learners from their individual performance level to a level in which, at one point they could only perform with assistance" (p. 35). Even though I don't agree with the argument here of having ZPD divided into different phases through which developments occurred instead of its being the umbrella under which the whole processes of the learners' development come to exist, still I think the article succeeded to clearly differentiate between scaffolding as tool and ZPD as the essence and the unity of development during which the whole processes of scaffolding occur.

Furthermore, in one academic semester case study of the development of second language writing through scaffolding techniques within ZPD, Schwieter (2010) also investigated how students in a writing course can cooperate to create a professional magazine project and develop their writing skills at the same time. The participants of the study were assigned different rules to handle throughout the semester. The rules of the teachers were to guide the students on the whole processes and to provide them with explicit instructions on the basic structures of the work and how the different tasks in the project should be approached. Through different types of peer-feedback, all participants were involved in the whole circle of creating, editing and finalizing the project. For creating and maintaining a high level of authenticity in the assigned work, the magazine project was restricted to four important stages: "textual, style, fine tuning of peer-review and fine tuning of the teacher" (2010, p. 35). In these four stages, students are supposed to receive three sessions of peer-feedback, whereas, the last feedback before the final submission is given by the instructor. Before moving from one stage to another, students were "expected to internalize and apply what was learned in the debriefing session" (p. 36).

The findings of the previous study supported the early hypothesis of Schwieter (2010) that within ZPD and through scaffolding learners' individual writing significantly developed. Therefore, the researcher strongly argued that their results supported the theoretical claim in which "one ZPD's level of assisted learning is the next ZPD's level of unassisted learning" (p. 40) and this directly means that four ZPD levels are supposed to occur in each deferent

phases of learning. Thus, such a claim cannot be accepted as it is against the original rules on which Vygotsky theoretical framework of ZPD was based. As we know, during ZPD, the external and internal processes of development of learning and the learners' mental functions do not stop at a particular stage and they instead periodically change from a phase to another. Therefore, such claim of having different ZPDs during the learning processes is theoretically and philosophically weak and unacceptable.

As we have seen so far, ZPD, as a concept, has been widely explored in the literature review. However, such significant notion is still largely misunderstood and confused with scaffolding. For instance, in another study on scaffolding and its impacts on EFL writing, Baleghizadeh, Memar A. and Memar H. (2011) asserted that when comparing "low structured" scaffolding to "high structured" and "non-structured" types of scaffolding, a one can conclude that "low structured" scaffolding has more influence on the English writings of students. In that study, an experimental design with 114 EFL students was conducted and the structure of scaffolding, to which the learners were exposed, was limited to the use of different "templates" functioning as "the generic structure and part of the rhetorical content" (p. 45). The participants were divided into three groups and exposed to twenty-one classroom sessions that have the same modified teaching materials. During the first and last sessions, pre- and posttests were administered to the three groups.

In their findings, Baleghizadeh et al. (2011) claimed that students with low-structured scaffolding outperformed the levels of students in the other two groups. Although accounting for such an assertion is not my main purpose here, it should be stated that the problematic design of their study doesn't seem to have reliable valid results. By limiting scaffoldings to a set of modified exercises taken from a writing textbook, the researchers of this article initially failed to understand and investigate the basic function of scaffolding within ZPD in which it used a tool to assist the learners to develop from their actual to their potential level of development. In other words, by restricting scaffolding only to modified teacher-based activities in which students were only exposed to "peer-teaching" instead of learning through peer-feedback, students were only evaluated and tested on their limited actual level and by doing so the writers of this article have ruined the basic structures on which the notion of ZPD was based.

Again, the more we deeply delve into the literature review in which scaffolding has been extensively studied, it becomes obvious that scaffolding is growing into a more "metaphorical" concept rather its being originally created as a tool for assisting and developing the processes of language teaching and learning through the different individual ZPDs of learners. In this regard, it would be more interesting now to present the strong arguments of Shabani, Khatib, and Ebadi (2010) when they clearly pointed out to the limitation of the metaphorical uses of scaffolding and how it should be explicitly distinguished from that of ZPD. Therefore, in their detailed discussions of ZPD and Scaffolding, Shabani et al. described scaffolding, literary, as "only partially reflects the richness of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development" in which it only "captures teaching performance as a one-way communication process" (240).

Moreover, in their argument, Shabani et al. (2010) clearly differentiated between the concept of ZPD and scaffolding and they, for that purpose, interestingly cited Lave and Wenger (1991) when they explicitly stated that “the notion of ZPD which emphasizes teacher-learner collaboration and negotiation as bilateral process contrasts scaffolding that captures teaching performance as a one-way communication process. Accordingly, in scaffolding, the scaffolder constructs the scaffold alone and presents it for the use of the novice” (p. 241). In other words, by limiting ZPD to the practices of scaffolding inside classroom in which the teacher, as the more experienced adult, is the main facilitator of the assessment and knowledge, we are simply advertising the old-fashioned instruction which the researchers of this article fittingly called it as the “pre-Piagetian, traditional way of teaching through direct instruction” (p. 241).

Obviously, we can now see that scaffolding, as a construct, has been operationalized in the various attempts of unlimited number of studies. However, as was indicated earlier, not all attempts succeeded to operationalize such an abroad and vague concept or even to systematically and logically relate it to the basic rules of ZPD on which this notion was originally constructed. On contrary, a comprehensive summary was recently introduced by researchers such as Nordlof (2014) in which the metaphorical scaffolding was practically restricted to the “four concepts: intersubjectivity, ongoing diagnosis, dialogic and interactive, and fading” (p. 56). Through “intersubjectivity,” activities are introduced and collaborations between the learners and the more experienced adults are established. Likewise, through the “the dialogic and interactive” steps in which scaffolding is constructed; “the ongoing diagnosis” of the processes of scaffoldings and different assessments are continually modified to match the various levels of developments for language learners.

### **3. Methodology**

#### *3.1 Participants & Procedures*

The study aims to investigate and find out to which extent the theory of *scaffolding writing*, which was introduced by Bodrova & Leong’s (1998) in their article about *Scaffolding Emergent Writing in The Zone of Proximal Development*, can facilitate the teaching and learning of writing for a child at early stage of literacy. The design of the research was a one-month case study of a five-year-old child. The subject of the study is a native Arabic speaker who has not yet even started school in his Arabic speaking country and learned the alphabetical Arabic system. Further, he has been learning English as a second language for less than six months. The setting of the experiment was the house of the subject.

The procedures of the study were based on the same two ways of providing assistance within a child’s ZPD: “materialization and private speech” which were originally used in the case study of Bodrova & Leong (1998). For the metallization, feasible tools were used such as the drawings of my child, sheets of paper and a pen. Similarly, through private speech, the child was able to connect the different concepts in drawings with alphabetical words and to repeat them later before having them written on separate lines at the later stages of the study.

During this case study of a one-month period, four numbers of drawings were used. These drawings were originally made and chosen by the child himself. A total number of sixteen sessions were devoted to the study. Four sessions were conducted every week and each session lasted for a thirty- minute long. Generally, every week and on a single drawing, we spent the first two sessions in Arabic and the next two sessions in English. Moreover, in every week, one full session was devoted to help the participant first to communicate his drawing into different concepts and later to connect these concepts of the drawing to alphabetical words. After that, also another full session was given to help the child use the words on the lines. During this stage, I started first repeating alphabetical letters of the different words and demonstrating examples of how the same words can be used on the separate lines. The purpose of this stage was to make the participant more aware of the different alphabets and to get him prepared for writing the words on the lines in the next stage. In the last stage, the child started writing words on separate lines, which were earlier prepared by the researcher.

#### **4. Discussions & Findings**

What is interesting about the study is understanding how focusing on the individual ZPD of the learner can facilitate and fasten the learning processes over time. I think that the idea of using the drawings of the participant and giving him the opportunity to choose four of his drawings to work on them during the project was helpful to know the ZPD of the child and to have the assistance tailored to address the individual needs of the learner. This might also explain the important role mediation in internalization process where intersubjectivity is established. This also aligns with what Verenikina (2003) points out that intersubjectivity is a key element in the process of “internalization” when assistance from adult is gradually reduced and responsibility is transferred to the child. Furthermore, through using child’s drawings, I noticed that the participant of the study had meaningful material to study throughout the project and to easily reflect on it in the more advanced level of learning. This also reflects the importance of choosing the appropriate task and activity for learners as they are the key features of scaffolding for education purposes (Wells, 1999).

In the first stage of learning, the child was asked to communicate his drawing into written words. It was expected that during this stage the participant would not be able to write words. Instead, it was easier for him to talk about his drawing particularly in his first language. I think that the strengths of using the drawings of the child, as the material of the project, appeared in the abilities of the child, at the first stage, to clearly describe the message(s) of his drawing and to communicate his drawings into concepts. Later, by assisting the child through translating the concepts of the drawings into words, repeating the same words to the child, offering highlighted lines that match the number of words, he was able to write words on separate lines and to extend the same processes alone with his other drawings.

Accordingly, the study has proven that scaffolded writing is an effective methodology for developing the literacy of the young learners. Even though only four drawings were used in the project, the child was able to apply the same strategies of communicating concepts and writing words on highlighted lines on other samples of his drawings that were not used in the



project. Since the project and the same procedures were conducted in both Arabic and English, it was interestingly observed that the child has two levels of ZPD. In other words, I noticed that through his English and Arabic writings of the same concepts and for the same drawing, the participant produced sentences in Arabic that were more semantically and syntactically structured than that of his writings of the same concepts in English. For example, it was noted in one of his writings in English and Arabic that only in his Arabic sentences the child was able to add the gender specific pronoun to the Arabic words and to have some verbs conjugated for the plural personal pronoun.

## **5. Conclusion**

By and large, through the detailed discussions of the previous studies along with their different findings, it is clear that the Vygotsky theoretical work of ZPD has been wisely incorporated and skillfully deployed by many researchers in the literature review. However, the implementations of ZPD into the various teaching applications and assessments on the teaching and learning of writing are still highly questionable. Since the incorporations of ZPD and scaffolding in the different writing tasks required both the internal and the external interactions of the students in the process of constructing his/her own writing, the individual progresses of the learners throughout the different activities are still not obviously clarified in the literature review. Briefly, scaffolding, somehow, has proven to be an affective methodology for the teaching of writing as a process. Still, because of its limited operational nature through the incomprehensive uses of the different educators and researchers, scaffolding should not be regarded as an equivalence of ZPD. Instead, it should be treated as the practical application during which the individual zone of the learners is internally and externally developed.

## **6. Future Research**

Based on the results of the one-month case study of a five-year-old child, scaffolding, particularly scaffolded writing, has been observed to help the young learners develop their writing literacy of the first and the second language. Also, what is more important than scaffolding and assisting the learners, is to understand the actual zone of the individuals and to have the assistance tailored to address the specific needs of the learners. Through this short case study, it was found out that it is possible that the L2 learners have two different levels of ZPD and using the learners' L1 ZPD would guide and enhance the processes of learning in the second language. Therefore, the findings of this study suggest an important future investigation that focuses on the role of the L1 ZPD in developing the writing literacy of the L2 young learners of English.

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