

**The Effectiveness of Scaffolding in Learning Punctuation for Primary Level EFL Students:
Action Research in Pakistan**

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Abstract

The aim of this action research project is to discover the effectiveness of scaffolding in learning punctuation marks for better writing skills at the primary Grade 5 level in my school. The action research is also being conducted to bring changes in my own teaching practices for better quality teaching. For the purposes of the investigation, I divided Grade 5 into two main groups which were experimental and control. The control group was not provided the scaffolding during class activities, and they were supposed to get assistance from peers only. On the other hand, the experimental group was provided proper scaffolding during different individual or group tasks until they became autonomous. A pre-test and post-test were conducted to investigate the effect of scaffolding. The results showed that scaffolding helped the learners to acquire knowledge of punctuation marks. The research has some implications in providing training to teachers about scaffolding with punctuation to achieve better results in EFL classroom situations.

Introduction

Education System in Pakistan

Education in any country serves as the backbone in its development. It invokes the sense of responsibility among the community. Education brings social and economic strength, and an environment of trust. Pakistan is a developing country. Its economy is not strong. According to a report issued by UNICEF (2005), a lot of challenges like terrorism, sectarianism, poverty, insecurity, corruption, and the instability of democracy are big constraints for the promotion of quality education in Pakistan. The government allocates only 4% of the annual budget for education, which is quite low, to fulfill all requirements of quality education. Some of the problems mentioned by Louis (1987), including a lack of an adequate budget, a lack of policy implementation, a defective examination system, poor physical facilities, and a lack of teacher quality, are still present today.

Another alarming factor in the promotion of quality education is teacher quality. All social and economic factors are responsible for quality education, but the most important agent is the teacher. If the quality of teachers and teacher training is low, no hope for standard education can be expected. According to Rehman and Khan (2011), the government teachers are still using traditional ways of teaching and they never use new techniques and strategies in the classroom. They only rely on the lecture method of teaching where students sit passively and the teacher does his part actively. The main purpose of the examination is to check the recall of students rather than their performance. Students are supposed to cram facts and reproduce this in their exam sheet in order to be promoted to the next level (SPARC, 2005). Although the above mentioned scenario is still in practice, the provincial government of the KP (Khyber Paktoon Khawa) region is taking drastic measures to provide quality education in government institutes.

Motivation for the Action Research Project

Action research based on one's own classroom gives the opportunity for teachers to bring more improvement in classroom practices and refine his or her way of teaching. Richards, Platt, and Platt (2002) define action research as “. . . teacher-initiated classroom research which seeks to increase the teacher's understanding of classroom teaching and learning and to bring about improvements in classroom practices. . .” (p. 4). The factor which motivated me to do action research on scaffolding in my classroom is my recent research based on four domains of Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory: mediation, regulation, scaffolding, and the zone of proximal development (ZPD). In my research I focused on mediation, scaffolding, and ZPD for the purpose of understanding teachers' professionalism, and this was a basic factor which motivated me to do action research on scaffolding in my own classroom.

Research Problem

Teachers who were recruited two to three decades ago are still using the lecture method of teaching where students sit passively for 35 minutes. They have not provided an opportunity to engage in different tasks and activities. This means students do not have the chance to practice with scaffolding, mediation or any other strategy which is helpful in making them an independent learner. On the contrary, I am not used to a lecture method at the primary grade level, which is boring for me as well as for my students. At this stage, they need to be independent learners rather than reproducing facts on exams. So, making my class more motivating and interesting is a goal, and I am always in search of new techniques, methods and strategies which are more interesting and motivating for my students. In keeping with my search for new ways of teaching, I conducted this action research project to investigate the effectiveness of scaffolding in my own class at Grade 5.

Research Question

The purpose of my action research is to find out the effectiveness of scaffolding in learning punctuation marks for better writing. The research question is as follows: *How does scaffolding impact the learning of punctuation marks for better writing at Grade 5 in Pakistan?*

Literature Review

Punctuation Marks

Lauchman (2010, p. 17) defines punctuation marks as “a bunch of impossible-to-figure-out marks, invented by the devil to give writers a foretaste of hell, taught in a hundred confusing and contradictory ways,” which is maybe not the best way to explain the purpose of punctuation marks. Punctuation marks have great importance in conveying a clear message. These marks are multi purpose and necessary for learning foreign or second languages. As Quirk et al. (1985), acknowledge,

The punctuation mark specifies a grammatical, semantic, or pragmatic function, sometimes in addition to the marking of separation. [So] punctuation practice is governed primarily by grammatical considerations and is related to grammatical distinctions. Sometimes it is linked to intonation, stress, rhythm, pause, or any other of the prosodic features which convey distinctions in speech, but the link is neither simple nor systematic, and traditional attempts to relate punctuation directly to (in particular) pause is misguided” (p. 1610–1612).

According to the above definition, punctuation marks cover oral as well as written communication of language. Also, we know that knowledge of punctuation marks guides us to get meaning from the text and helps to avoid reader confusion.

Sociocultural Theory

Society, peers and teachers play an important role in language acquisition/learning. All domains of society are interlinked with learners directly or indirectly. According to Vogotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, society is an important part of learning any aspect of language. He further divides the connection to society into two phases, which are intermental (society based) and intramental (individual based). According to Vogotsky's division of phases, both society and the individual have roles in the learning process. Vogotsky (1978) has four main domains of learning processes which are mediation, scaffolding, regulation, and ZPD. In my study I will focus on one of the domains, which is scaffolding.

Scaffolding

According to Vogotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, scaffolding is the process of support to learners in tasks which are above their level. Scaffolding can be provided by teachers and peers in the classroom to strengthen the learning process. Whenever a student feels any difficulty, scaffolding is provided and students may start to work autonomously (Lawson, 2002). Many researchers have investigated the effect of scaffolding in learning language skills. Bruch (2007) investigated the effectiveness of scaffolding in writing and reading skills through mini lessons, reading and writing assignments, and assessment tasks. The study revealed that scaffolding has a positive impact on students' ability to grasp the concepts. Riazi and Rezaii (2011) conducted a study which aimed to investigate and draw a comparison between teacher and peer scaffolding in writing abilities in EFL. The research revealed that teacher scaffolding is

more effective than peers. Scaffolding is a systematic process and carried out till the learners gain independence. Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) provide six features of scaffolding which are as follows:

- a) Molding students' interest in the task
- b) Restricting the freedom of the student during the task to make it achievable
- c) Maintaining target direction
- d) Marking critical features
- e) Controlling frustration
- f) Modeling a solution for the goal

All these features are important in the process of scaffolding students during teaching. Inspired by studies on the scaffolding in different perspectives, I have conducted an action research project for understanding the effectiveness of scaffolding in learning punctuation marks for better writing in government schools at Grade 5.

Methodology

Participants

In order to conduct this action research project, I worked with 30 students in Grade 5, who were equally divided into two groups of 15. These were the control and experimental groups respectively, which were homogeneous in age. Their level of understanding was determined by a pre-test to be approximately equivalent. I taught both groups the core concept of punctuation in two periods with scaffolding and without scaffolding and conducted the pre-test and post-test. After marking both of the tests, the data was further analyzed.

Here, I would also like to share my brief background as a participant of this action research, as a teacher, trainer, and researcher. I am working as an SPST (Senior Primary School Teacher) at the primary grade in a GPS (Government Primary School) in Pakistan. Along with teaching, I had a great experience as a master trainer at the primary level, where I trained teachers in different teaching skills over the previous several years.

Intervention Procedure

This action research was devised to investigate the effectiveness of scaffolding in learning punctuation marks at the primary grade level. A lesson plan was devised to teach punctuation marks to both the control and experimental groups. The lesson plan was about 80 minutes long, and taught in two class periods. I gave equal time to each group. The control group was taught in the traditional way without providing any scaffolding during tasks and activities. The participants of this group were supposed to get assistance only from peers. In contrast, the experimental group was taught by a task-based method, and I provided them proper scaffolding during the tasks and activities.

In order to scaffold my students' work, I needed to begin with a pre-test to determine their knowledge of punctuation marks. As a pre-test, students were asked to punctuate a letter (see Appendix A). The same letter was assigned to both the control and experimental groups and taken as a pre-test. After getting feedback, I presented the concept of punctuation marks to the experimental group. In the next phase of the lesson plan, a Guided Practice/Interactive Modeling activity was conducted with students. I divided the experimental group into three groups of five students, handed out to them a non-punctuated paragraph and asked the students to punctuate it according to four punctuation marks: full stop, exclamation mark, comma, and apostrophe. I moved around the class and provided assistance if students were not conscious of any

punctuation marks. In the guided activity, each participant of the group provided additional assistance in the activity. In another activity, students got feedback from peers in case of mistakes. I wrote up a few sentences and asked each individual of the experimental group to insert appropriate punctuation in the blanks. Now students in the experimental group were confident in using punctuation marks and answering appropriately. The next activity was an independent working time, which was 20 minutes long; students were asked to write a letter to a friend with proper punctuation.

In the conclusion stage, a post-test (see Appendix A) with non-punctuated sentences was handed out to students, and I asked them to proofread and correct it using correct punctuation marks. I also asked the reason why the changes needed to be made. The control group completed each of the pre and post tests of the punctuation work as well, but no scaffolding was provided to this group during the classroom exercises. I used only a traditional teacher-fronted lecture style for the control group.

Data Collection Procedure

For the purpose of data collection in my action research, I began with both the pre-tests from each group. After teaching the punctuation marks to the control group without scaffolding and the experimental group with scaffolding, I administered and collected the post-test. The pre-tests and post-tests were the same for the both of the groups (see Appendix A for full samples of each).

Data Analysis

For the analysis of collected data, I used SPSS software. I scored the pre- and post-tests for each group and tabulated the number of punctuation errors. This data was entered into SPSS and I calculated a t-test, mean, median and P value.

Results

Findings

*Table 1:
Pre-test Statistics*

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test	Two-tailed P Value
Pre-test Controlled	15	3.80	1.15	0.8268	0.4153
Pre-test Experimental	15	4.13	1.06		

The above table shows that there is no significant difference between the mean and standard deviation of the pre-test of both the control and the experimental group. The mean and standard deviation of the control group on the pre-test is 3.80 and 1.15, while the mean and standard deviation of the experimental group on the pre-test are 4.13 and 1.06 respectively. The value of the P-test shows that the difference between the pre-test of the control and experimental groups is not statistically significant, showing that before teaching punctuation marks, both the groups were homogenous.

*Table 2:
Post-test statistics*

Groups	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	t-test	P two-tailed value
Post-test Controlled	15	4.60	1.06	9.2816	Less than 0.0001
Post-test Experimental	15	8.40	1.18		

On the other hand, the above table shows that there is a significant difference between the mean and standard deviation of the post-tests of the control and the experimental groups. The P-value is much less than 0.05, showing that the difference between the post-test of the control and

the experimental groups is statistically significant. This means that after teaching punctuation marks, there is a clear difference between the control and experimental group.

Discussion

Scaffolding, which is one of the domains of Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory of learning, involves support from peers, teachers and society. It means support and encouragement to learners in achieving their tasks. Scaffolding plays an important role in the learning process. As the results show, learners provided with scaffolding produced better results. The experimental group strengthened their concepts of punctuation marks. The learners who were given support were free and enthusiastic for more activities/tasks.

During my teaching process to both of the groups, I discovered the effectiveness of scaffolding for my students. In my action research, before teaching them punctuation marks, both of the groups, control and experimental, were homogeneous with respect to age and understanding level. While teaching, I noticed that the students in the experimental group were more active, confident and enthusiastic in doing the assigned tasks. The likely reason was that whenever they felt any issue during the task, assistance was being provided to them, which helped them to move smoothly to the next task. They had equal opportunity to discuss the assigned task with peers, but considering the teacher as the authority, the experimental group was more confident. I provided some more examples of punctuation marks to boost their level of understanding. On the other hand, the control group was also engaged in different activities after my presentation, but they were able to get help from peers only. During this session, I noticed that students were doing tasks, but not as confidently as the experimental group. The reason was likely the absence of teacher's scaffolding. They were doing the task, but less actively as compared to others. Due to the absence of teacher help, which is best to make a student an

independent learner, the control group could not get the opportunity to learn more confidently with some extra examples. Furthermore, the control group scored lower marks on the post-test as compared to the experimental group.

Conclusion

In conclusion, action research in my classroom showed that students who received scaffolding from the teacher had better results on a post-test. The lecture method, the way of most of our teachers, is teacher-centered rather than student-centered, where students feel less interested. I recommend that task-based or communicative-based methods are best used where teachers can engage their learners in different activities and scaffold them if needed to make them an independent learner. In our schooling system, teachers admonish their students if they cannot memorize facts properly. This is a discouraging factor in supporting learning. In such a scenario, scaffolding is quite helpful for students in learning and being more interested and engaged in the lessons.

At the end, action research on scaffolding for better learning in punctuation marks has proven beneficial in my teaching process. It opened my eyes to a lot of new aspects of scaffolding, which are quite interesting and motivating for me in my professional career. Needless to say, these in turn opened new ways for me to help my learners improve and grow in the classroom.

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Appendix A

Pre-test

Instructions: Punctuate the following letter.

Dear friends

Hello How are you I am having a great time in Peshawar My dada's mango trees are near our homes Every day I go with my dada/grandfather and cousins to eat mangoes from trees Wow they are very sweet I miss you all here when I climb up the trees How is your summer vacation going I am coming back next week Bye

Post-test

Instructions: Punctuate the following paragraph.

did you see the rabbit go down that hole said the farmer no said sara look over there by that big tree said the farmer oh yes the rabbit has just jumped out again said sara well it might not be the same rabbit exclaimed the farmer there are lots of rabbit in that hole



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