

Improving ESL Students' Speaking Ability through Instructional Scaffolding

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Abstract

This action research aimed to determine the students' level of speaking skill before and after instructional scaffolding and to ascertain the most helpful scaffolding strategy for the students. Participants in this study were the students from four ESL classes. Four scaffolding strategies were used and an evaluation sheet was given to the students at the end of the four sessions. The results revealed that the students have medium level speaking skill before and after instructional scaffolding. However, an increase in the students' average score after the instructional scaffolding sessions was evident. Making conversation from the question cards is the most helpful scaffolding strategy for the students. This study concluded that instructional scaffolding is an effective way to improve students' speaking skill. It is a recommendation to continue using instructional scaffolding in teaching all language skills. Specifically, the use of questions cards for speaking tests and activities should be maintained and encouraged. Vocabulary learning should also be allocated more time during ESL classes.

Keywords: ESL students, instructional scaffolding, speaking ability, strategy

1. Introduction

The International College of The University of Suwon has recently changed their curriculum. The department feels that if the students will face the TOEIC test in the later part of their bachelor's education, then the ESL curriculum should be at the level that would synthetically mimic the strength of the TOEIC test. This new curriculum is more open to actual conversation and relies less on the rote syntax skills. However, in doing so, the department has opened up many problems that need to have solutions.

The first problem that arises is cultural. This problem is how to get students talking when they have been conditioned by society to only listen. Most language programs in Korea are based on traditional grammar/syntax learning and "fill in the blank" exams. These exams make up a large portion of the class grade as there is concrete evidence of ability. Therefore, the students learn the basic structure of a language, but are reluctant to use this language in real time as they just don't know how. Holding on to this style of teaching is why most Korean university professors can teach the structure of a language, but cannot speak well, if any at all. To make a progressive language course that will truly enhance the student's skills, the ESL department needs to find a way to make the students want to participate in using the English language effectively.

The second problem that faces the new curriculum is more of a university problem. In the ESL classes, students are group in their respective majors. This tends to make a class difficult to teach as the levels of the group can differ greatly. This new curriculum is much more difficult that it has been in the past to reach the level of TOEIC skills. Therefore, those students with less exposure to the target language are destined to fail. There has to be a way to give these lower level students a fighting chance in the ESL class or they will just give up.

The final problem when dealing with the new ESL curriculum is departmental. This problem is how to get the teachers who are used to a "fill in the blank/exams are the only true test of ability" style of teaching to let go and attempt a more holistic approach to language learning. So many of us need to have the structure of rote learning as we need empirical data of our students' progress to show positive advancement inside our classroom at the same time, validate ourselves as a good teacher. In most classroom settings, this thinking would hold true. However, this style of thinking is the antithesis of second language learning as the students have a basic knowledge of grammar from their own language and so are basically being tested on thing they already know.

In learning a language, there are four basic language skills that a student should master namely: reading, listening writing, and speaking. Most Korean university students learned and developed these skills since elementary grades. However, when it comes to speaking, most students would find it difficult. According to them, their foundation English classes only focused on reading and listening. Writing is mostly translating or copying and speaking is just memorizing without even understanding. In fact, English is just seldom used when they speak on their English classes.

This study was conceptualized base on the general concerns of the International College ESL department mentioned above. More specifically, the daily interactions with and observations of students in ESL classes reveal a need to be addressed. Since the students' weakness is on speaking, the researchers came up with the idea of improving their speaking ability through instructional scaffolding.

Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the students' level of speaking skill before and after instructional scaffolding was integrated in class?
2. What scaffolding strategy is the most helpful for the students to develop their speaking skill?

2. Related Literature

This study is anchored in the Sociocultural Theory championed by Lev Vygotsky. According to this theory, "learning occurs when simple innate mental activities are transformed into higher-order, more complex mental functions. This transformation typically involves symbolic mediation, which is a link between a person's current mental state and higher-order functions that is provided primarily by language" (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 119). The theory further claims that "interaction not only facilitates language learning but is a causative force in acquisition", (p. 118).

As stated by Denton (2014) scaffolding is a metaphor for an approach to teaching which refers to the way temporary support is provided by one person to another for purposes of learning. It describes interactions between expert to novice, teacher to student, or knowledgeable peer to less knowledgeable peer.

To further advance his theory, Vygotsky introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in every learner, which is "the distance between learners' existing developmental state and their potential development" (Brown, 2007, p. 13). It describes "tasks that a child cannot yet do alone but could do with the assistance of more competent peers or adults" (Slavin, 2003, p. 44). "This is an area of potential development, where the learner can achieve potential only with assistance. Mental functions that are beyond an individual's current level must be performed in collaboration with other people before they are achieved independently" (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 119). In language learning, Ortega (2009, p. 224) defined ZPD as "the distance between what a learner can do in L2 if assisted by others versus what he or she can accomplish alone."

In addition, one popular way to help language learners achieve their goal within the ZPD is through scaffolding which generally refers to "verbal guidance which an expert provides to help a learner perform any specific task, or the verbal collaboration of peers to perform a task which would be too difficult for any one of them individually. Scaffolding is not something that happens to a learner as a passive recipient, but happens with a learner as an active participant" (Saville-Troike, 2012, p. 120).

In education, scaffolding, instructional scaffolding, or scaffolding instruction refers to a variety of instructional techniques used to move students progressively toward stronger understanding and, ultimately, greater independence in the learning process (The Glossary of Education Reform). Scaffolding basically states that teachers should act as helpers who facilitate the learning of students, evaluating where students are in their learning and providing assistance as needed (Wiesen, 2019). It is consist of the activities provided by the educator, or more competent peer, to support the student as he or she is led through the zone of proximal development. Support is tapered off as it becomes unnecessary. The student will then be able to complete the task on his own (McLeod, 2019).

Moreover, scaffolding instruction refers to specialized teaching strategies geared toward supporting learning when students are first introduced to a new subject. It gives students a context, motivation, or foundation from which to understand the new information that will be introduced (Lewis, 2019). It is a process through which a teacher adds supports for students in order to enhance learning and aid in the mastery of tasks (The IRIS Center, 2005).It is a teaching method that helps students learn more by working with a teacher or a more advanced student to achieve their learning goals (Sarikas, 2018).

To illustrate, there are effective techniques in scaffolding as suggested by Larkin (2002 cited in Pinantoan, 2013). First, boost your students' confidence by introducing them to tasks they can perform with little or no assistance. Provide enough assistance to allow students' success and lower their frustration and remain motivated to achieve their goals. Second, help students "fit in" as they work harder if they feel they resemble their peers. Once the skill is learned don't overwork it and remove the scaffold gradually.

Hence, to implement in the classroom the various strategies mentioned above, Alibali (2006) presented some of the most specific scaffolding instructions.

- **Advance Organizers Tools**
Tools used to introduce new content and tasks to help students learn about the topic: Venn diagrams to compare and contrast information; flow charts to illustrate processes; organizational charts to illustrate hierarchies; outlines that represent content; mnemonics to assist recall; statements to situate the task or content; rubrics that provide task expectations.
- **Cue Cards**
Prepared cards given to individual or groups of students to assist in their discussion about a particular topic or content area: Vocabulary words to prepare for exams; content-specific stem sentences to complete; formulae to associate with a problem; concepts to define.
- **Concept and mind maps**
Maps that show relationships: Partially or completed maps for students to complete; students create their own maps based on their current knowledge of the task or concept.
- **Examples**
Samples, specimens, illustrations, problems: Real objects; illustrative problems used to represent something.
- **Explanations**
More detailed information to move students along on a task or in their thinking of a concept: Written instructions for a task; verbal explanation of how a process works.
- **Handouts**
Prepared handouts that contain task- and content-related information, but with less detail and room for student note taking.
- **Hints**
Suggestions and clues to move students along: “place your foot in front of the other,” “use the escape key,” “find the subject of the verb,” “add the water first and then the acid.”
- **Prompts**
A physical or verbal cue to remind – to aid in recall of prior or assumed knowledge. Physical: Body movements such as pointing, nodding the head, eye blinking, foot tapping. Verbal: Words, statements and questions such as “Go,” “Stop,” “It’s right there,” “Tell me now,” “What toolbar menu item would you press to insert an image
- **Question Cards**
Prepared cards with content- and task-specific questions given to individuals or groups of students to ask each other pertinent questions about a particular topic or content area.
- **Question Stems**
Incomplete sentences which students complete: Encourages deep thinking by using higher order “What if” questions.
- **Stories**
Stories relate complex and abstract material to situations more familiar with students: Recite stories to inspire and motivate learners.
- **Visual Scaffolds**
Pointing (call attention to an object); representational gestures (holding curved hands apart to illustrate roundness; moving rigid hands diagonally upward to illustrate steps or process), diagrams such as charts and graphs; methods of highlighting visual information.

Furthermore, several studies were done using instructional scaffolding. For example, a study done by de Jager (2013) aimed to investigate if scaffold-lecturing methods can improve students’ academic performance. The result revealed that the assessment results of students attending scaffold lectures showed a clear academic progress of their course work and an improvement in active class participation.

Two action research studies were done by Huggins and Edwards (2011) to assess the effectiveness of utilizing instructional scaffolding in reading and writing courses on the college level. In the first action research study, there is evidence to show that graphic organizers, as scaffolding tools in the classroom, can help to improve reading comprehension by helping students to connect to their texts. The second action research study shows that students can benefit in several ways when teachers scaffold the process of writing a research paper. From reading a simple poem to a complex epic, writing a simple narrative to a complex scholarly research paper, scaffolding tools can have positive effects on reading and writing performance.

Kayi-Aydar (2013) investigated how ESL learners in an academic oral skills class sought, responded to, and directed scaffolding across various classroom interactions, and how power relations affected scaffolding.

The findings showed that student and teacher questions scaffolded language learning and use, and positively affected students' participation during teacher-led whole class interactions.

However, scaffolding did not occur or mostly failed in small group work and student-led discussions as power struggles among students were dominant and students were less responsive with their peers.

Another study by Shir mohammadi and Salehi (2017) investigated the effect of scaffolding and self-regulation on the reading comprehension of ESP students. The result revealed that teaching reading comprehension to ESP learners by scaffolding techniques were more effective in this regard than the self-regulated learning and control group. There was a significant improvement in learners' comprehension when they used scaffolding techniques like simplifying the language, asking for completion and using visuals. The researchers concluded that scaffolding instruction is effective in improving the reading comprehension of ESP learners.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Method

The researchers utilized action research as an approach in this study. According to Sagor (2000) action research is a disciplined process of inquiry conducted by and for those taking the action. The primary reason for engaging in action research is to assist the "actor" in improving his or her actions. To conduct this study, the researchers employed O'Brien's (2001) adaptation of the detailed Action Research Model of Susman (1993): *Diagnosing* – identifying or defining a problem; *Action Planning* – considering alternative courses of action; *Taking Action* – selecting a course of action; *Evaluating* – studying the consequence of an action; *Specifying Learning* – identifying general findings.

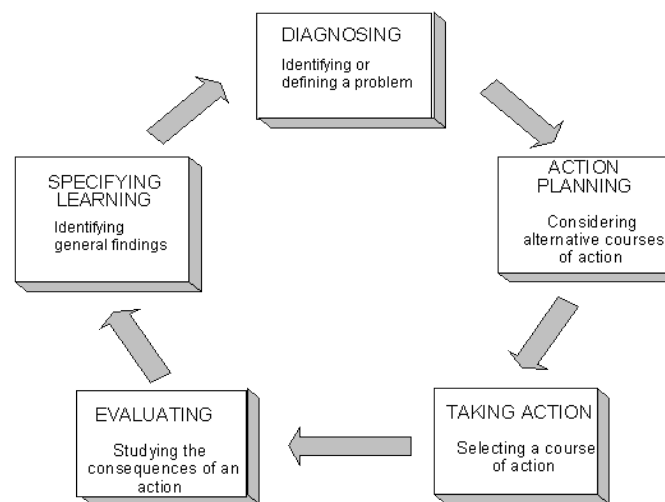


Figure 1. Action Research Model

In this study, *diagnosing* was carried out by giving the students the speaking test and finding out that their scores were mostly medium and low. In *action planning*, the professor in charge of the participants in this study explored different strategies that could help the students improve their speaking skill. To *take action*, the research team brainstormed and decided to use instructional scaffolding and choose specific strategies that will be used in different sessions. After all the sessions were done, *evaluation* was accomplished by giving final speaking test to the students. The same rubric used in ESL classes was utilized to determine the students' speaking scores for both the pre- and post- evaluations. The students were also given an evaluation sheet for the scaffolding strategies. There was also a follow-up short interview for each student about their choice of the most helpful strategy. To *specify learning* of the students, all scores and results were gathered and analyzed by the researchers.

3.2 Participants

The participants in this study were 87 freshmen students enrolled in ESL classes of only one professor for Spring Semester 2019. They were majors in Engineering, Theater, Information Technology, and Piano.

3.3 Instrument

The researchers decided to use four scaffolding strategies, therefore different materials were used. For the first activity, Completing the Dialogue, three activity sheets were given to the students to complete the dialogues from a short and simple to a longer and more complicated one.

For the second activity, Asking Questions from the Reading Passage, the Reading textbook of the students was used and questions were just shown on the screen. For the third activity, Making Conversation Based on the Picture, the students were given a colorful picture per group. For the last activity, Making Conversation Based on the Question Cards, the students were given three chances to pick questions cards.

There was an evaluation sheet given to the students after four sessions to rate the Scaffolding Strategies used. They have to rate each activity with the following: 4=*excellent*; 3=*very good*; 2=*good*; and 1=*poor*. For the interpretation of the student evaluation of scaffolding strategy the following scale was used: 3.25 – 4.00 = excellent; 2.50 – 3.2 = very good; 1.75 – 2.49 = good; 1.00 – 1.74 = poor.

For the Speaking Test, the ESL Speaking Exam Rubric was used. There are four categories namely: *task completion and engagement*; *fluency and appropriacy*; *language and pronunciation*; and *listening and comprehension*. Each category should be rated with 1-4 but in the task completion and engagement category the score should be multiplied by two because it is the most important category. For the interpretation of the speaking level of the students the following scale was used: 3.00 – 4.00 = high; 2.00 – 2.99 = medium; 1.00 – 1.99 = low.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis

This study was conducted right after the Midterm exams in four ESL classes handled by only one professor from the team of researchers. Four sessions were done with four different classes. Every session of instructional scaffolding was done for one hour during ESL classes aside from the regular class sessions. All sessions started with the objective of the activity followed by specific instructions given by the professor. The first and second activities, Completing the Dialogue and Asking Questions from the Reading Passage, were accomplished by pair and the third and fourth activities, Making Conversation Based on the Picture and Making Conversation Based on the Question Cards, were accomplished with three members in each group. While the students were doing the activities, the professor moved around to monitor if they are doing the activity right and give them assistance and further instructions. The last part of every session were presentations carried out by every group with a feedback given by the professor. Average was used to analyze the data in this study.

4. Results and Discussions

4.1 Students' level of speaking skill before and after instructional scaffolding was integrated in class.

Table 1. Students' Level of Speaking Skill Before and After Instructional Scaffolding

Average	Description			
		Before	2.42	medium
		After	2.85	medium
		Total	2.64	medium

The students' average scores in Midterm and Final Speaking Tests are both in the *medium* scale. However, the Final Speaking Test average score is higher than the Midterm. This means that even if the description is the same, medium, there is still an increase on the student's speaking skill after instructional scaffolding was administered in class. The difference between the two scores, although not very big, implies that scaffolding strategies improved the students' speaking skill.

This result is supported by observations during the four sessions. Scaffolding strategies was gradually given to the students starting with the simple to more complicated ones. They were allowed to use their dictionaries and write their conversations and read it. As they were learning the task the professor was there to give the scaffold but on later sessions, scaffold was only given only if the students asked for it. Eventually, before the Final Speaking Test, there was a practice for the students to know if they learned from the given sessions. They were not allowed to use dictionary anymore and there was no writing of conversation and practice. Some groups did it well and others still needed practice and scaffolds while doing the task.

4.2 Scaffolding strategy that is most helpful for the students to develop their speaking skill

The four sessions of instructional scaffolding started with using the simplest and easiest strategy to motivate the students to speak. All activities were accomplished by pair or group of three members to give the opportunity for the students to interact and support each other during the task.

The first activity given was *completing the dialogue*. There were three sets of dialogues, from short and simple to a long and complicated one, given to the students to complete. While the students are working, the professor monitored and gave assistance and further instructions to the students. After each set is finished, the group raised their hands to signal that they are ready to present what they have done.

The professor listened to the conversation and gave feedback until all three sets of dialogue were presented. The last part was the students making of their own dialogue about the situation they chose and present it again to the professor. The second activity was *asking questions from the reading passage* in the textbook. Before reading the passage, the professor discussed the vocabulary words to the students. After reading the passage, the professor asked the wh-questions and the students volunteered to answer. This is followed by further discussion of the details of the answers. After which, the students formulated their own questions with the assistance of the professor. Then, question and answer by pair followed.

The third activity was *making conversation based on the picture*. There was only one picture used in this activity. Each group made a 5-turn conversation about the picture in a creative and imaginative way. As soon as the group was ready, they presented their conversation and the professor gave feedback.

The last activity was *making conversation based on the question cards*. Each group had three chances of picking a question they would like to talk about in the session. They prepared a 5-turn conversation about the question they chose. The professor listened to each group's conversation and gave feedback.

All these activities were tied up with the Speaking lessons focusing on the structure of conversation referred to as prompt, respond, and react. All conversations of the students should have these elements plus giving of follow up questions and using expressions. As the sessions continued, it was observed that the students became more comfortable with the task and asking for assistance became lesser. There was one particular event in one class wherein a student volunteered to help one group to finish the task and they did it while having good interaction with each other.

Table 2. Most Helpful Scaffolding Strategy

<u>Strategy</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Description</u>
Making Conversation Based on the Questions Cards	3.55	excellent
Making Conversation Based on the Picture	3.30	excellent
Completing the Dialogue	3.28	excellent
Asking Questions from the <u>Reading Passage</u>	3.22	very good

The table shows that the most helpful scaffolding strategy for the students is *making conversation based on question cards* with the highest average and within the *excellents* scale. This result was attained through the evaluation sheet given to the students as well as the interview done by the professor. The students also gave notable comments and reasons why it is the most helpful for them.

Making Conversation Based on the Questions Cards

- made me creative and improve my conversation skills
- helped me make sentences and lines for conversation
- gaveme a chance to interact with my group
- developed my speaking ability
- had conversation about arguable topics
- making conversation developed my confidence in speaking
- made me think about impromptu answers
- allowed us to make situations we wanted
- enriched my imagination and enabled me to make new sentences
- helped me not to be afraid of speaking in English
- allowed me to speak my thoughts without prepared script
- it gave me the freedom to speak and it was exciting
- fun to make my story in English

Making Conversation Based on the Picture

- it was fun and interesting
- we helped each other develop conversation
- range of subject was wide
- increased my imagination to make impromptu and interesting conversation
- group work and cooperation was very good

Completing the Dialogue

- helped me made practical dialogue to use in daily life
- can use it when I go to other countries

- enjoyed the dialogues

Asking Questions from the Reading Passage

- the activity was fun and enjoyable
- gave me a chance to interact with my classmates
- increased my speaking ability

To add more details to the results of the study, the bases for evaluation is further discussed.

Table 3. Bases for Evaluation of Scaffolding Strategies

<u>Areas</u>	<u>Average</u>	<u>Description</u>
The professor gave the maximum amount of help I needed.	3.55	excellent
The activity gave me the chance interact with my classmates	3.32	excellent
The activity is a big help to develop my speaking ability	3.26	excellent
I learned better in this activity because we helped each other.	3.25	excellent
I enjoyed the activity so I learned a lot.	3.22	very good
The speaking activity developed my confidence in speaking.	3.16	very good

The table shows that among the six bases for evaluation, the students gave the highest excellent rating to, “*The professor gave the maximum amount of help I needed.*” It means that scaffolding was provided by the professor to the students. Their learning was facilitated well for them to finish the task and eventually they were able to do it on their own. This was apparently observed during the Final Speaking Test where the students performed better compared to their Midterm Speaking Test. Although, as discussed previously, the students are still on the medium level, there is an increase on their average scores. They became more creative with their ideas. Additionally, interacting with their groups was also part of the scaffold because if a member of the group had difficulty, the others were very helpful and supportive.

On the other hand, the lowest rating, even if it was very good, was given to, “*The speaking activity developed my confidence in speaking.*” Although some students said that the activities develop their confidence in speaking, still majority felt they did not achieve the confidence given the different speaking practices. During the Final Speaking Test, some students felt anxious as shown in their non-verbals like shaking of hands, lots of pauses, and sweating. One important factor that affected their confidence was their lack of vocabulary words. They have ideas in mind but they can’t find or they don’t know the English words to express those ideas. They were not allowed to use dictionaries during the Speaking Test but scaffold was given by the professor and group members until they can finally find the right words express their ideas.

5. Conclusions

Instructional scaffolding is an effective way to improve the students’ learning and in this particular study, the ESL students’ speaking skill. Giving proper orientation and clear instructions to the students about the activities helped facilitates the implementation of such activities. Making them understand the benefits of doing the tasks to improve their speaking skill and get high score, motivate them to participate and do their best. Pairing and grouping are also effective ways of facilitating learning because students feel the support of each other. They feel they belong and if they almost fell, their pair or group members are there to catch them. Interactions within the group lessen the fear to speak in a foreign language. Encouraging students to be creative, funny, and not so serious with their topics and style of delivery breaks the monotony of the usual way and pattern of their speaking going back in elementary, middle school, and high school years. It gives them a certain freedom to express more of themselves and their ideas.

Moreover, proximity or sitting with the students while giving the scaffolds made them feel the support they needed and gives a feeling of connection. In short, the presence of someone more knowledgeable but not threatening or intimidating are helpful to the students to do and finish the task. As this was administered during the sessions wherein the professor sat with every group, listened to their conversations, gave feedback and encouraged more discussions. Like in the case of some groups, they further explained why they chose such topic for a conversation or how they came up with such ideas. A friendly and relax atmosphere is also an important factor to make the students feel at ease and lessens the tension of speaking.

Giving feedback to small groups is more effective than giving it to the whole class because half of the students do not pay attention. Discussions become more personal and direct to the students so it is more meaningful for them. Finally, as discussed in the related literature, the purpose of instructional scaffolding is to enable the students to reach their zone of proximal development in accomplishing a given task. In this study, the result showed that almost all students have

increased scores in their speaking tests. The increase in their speaking test scores however is still on the same scale level, *medium*. As observed, most students are always in a hurry to accomplish the task. Maybe they could have increased their performance scores to the next scale level of *medium to high* if they gave more time to reach their zone of proximal development (ZPD).

6. Recommendations

It is highly recommended to use instructional scaffolding in ESL classes not only focusing on speaking but in other skills in language learning –writing, reading, and listening. Pairing and grouping in classes should be done as it is not only the professor who can give scaffold to the students but their peers as well. Continue the use of question cards to practice the students' speaking skills ranging from simple to more complex questions. In short, questions should develop critical thinking skills as well.

This study was carried out in a very short period of two months. If given a longer time, more sessions were done with the students. Since lack of vocabulary words is one of the major hindrances for the students to speak, it would be best to allot a time during class for vocabulary learning. Then students would also practice making sentences using the vocabulary words they learned. Encourage more practical and experiential topics where the students could better relate and allow them to be more creative in their presentations.

It is also recommended to make a follow up study for instructional scaffolding involving more classes. Thorough planning and preparation are essential for a wider scope of implementation. This means more time will be needed to make the next study possible. A more systematized pre- and post-assessments should also be done to the participants of the study. The result of this follow up study could be the bases for a curriculum change in the ESL department.

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