

The Application of Scaffolding Instruction in English Writing Class in Senior High School

Lixuan Wu *, Yuqing Wang

College of Foreign Studies, Minnan Normal University, CO 363000, China

* Corresponding author: Lixuan Wu (Email: 1175022840@qq.com)

Abstract: English writing teaching in senior high school is an irreplaceable way to improve students' language literacy and expressive ability. The traditional English writing teaching model neglects students' cognitive activities in the writing process, and the application of scaffolding instruction in actual contexts of English writing teaching in senior high school makes up for this deficiency. Scaffolding instruction is based on constructivism and the zone of proximal development theory, which advocates that teachers or adults with solid professional ability should participate in learning activities with students and provide external support to help them complete tasks. The application of scaffolding instruction in English writing teaching in senior high school emphasizes students' initiative in mastering writing knowledge and skills, significantly improving students' ability to construct knowledge and write independently. This paper analyzes the practical problems and reasons for implementing scaffolding instruction in English writing teaching in senior high schools and puts forward relevant solution strategies to provide valuable references for the current practice of English writing teaching in senior high schools in China.

Keywords: Scaffolding Instruction; English in Senior High School; Writing Teaching.

1. Introduction

As an essential skill for senior high school students, English writing is considered as a significant approach to measure students' linguistic competence and facilitate the expression of ideas and the communication of thoughts. However, many senior high school teachers often have difficulty in teaching English writing when it comes to teaching writing effectively, and students complain about their inability to write well. The one-size-fits-all templates of composition have become a life-saver for indoctrinating teaching. The emergence of scaffolding instruction has injected new vitality into teaching English writing in senior high school. Scaffolding instruction is based on constructivism and zone of proximal development theory and focuses on students' cognitive activities in the learning process. Scaffolding instruction also emphasizes the connection between the old and new knowledge in students' minds and their abilities to explore and solve problems independently by building appropriate scaffoldings. The combination of the scaffolding instruction model and the teaching of English writing in senior high school can help achieve the training objectives of the new curriculum reform and improve the teaching of English writing. At the same time, the introduction of scaffolding instruction is vital for updating the teaching philosophy and teaching methods of senior high school English teachers and for developing students' awareness of independent learning.

Since 1976, when American educators such as Wood, Bruner, and Ross first applied "scaffolding" to the field of education, there has been a boom in research on scaffolding instruction abroad [1]. After years of research and exploration, the theoretical study of scaffolding instruction has become increasingly mature. In 1996, Zhang Jianwei and Chen Qi, introduced scaffolding instruction to China for the first time, and since then, some scholars in China have begun to pay attention to the study of scaffolding instruction and its

application to various subjects. Throughout their exploration, several scholars' research perspectives on scaffolding instruction have been directed toward English. Lv Jing and Yang Min [2] concluded that scaffolding instruction is conducive to optimizing the teaching of English reading. Yan Xianfeng [3] also states that scaffolding instruction improve the quality of English reading teaching. However, the author found from the literature that although research on scaffolding instruction has become more mature and has penetrated different fields and disciplines in China and abroad, relatively little research has been conducted on applying scaffolding instruction in English writing classes in senior high school. Against the background of an in-depth study of scaffolding instruction, this paper analyses the application of scaffolding instruction in English writing classes in senior high school.

2. Scaffolding Instruction

Scaffolding instruction originates from the concept of "scaffolding" in architecture, which refers to the teaching mode in which teachers provide learners with appropriate learning scaffoldings around the theme, and when learners can explore and solve problems independently, teachers remove the scaffoldings at the right time, and the task of managing their learning is gradually transferred from teachers to learners themselves. In scaffolding instruction, teachers provide learners with targeted support and guidance, which can help learners understand and master new knowledge, improve their self-learning ability, and become active constructors of meaning. Scaffolding instruction is based on constructivist theory and Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development. Constructivism advocates a student-centered approach and emphasizes learners' active refinement of the knowledge construction system. Vygotsky pointed out that the "zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual level of development determined by (a child's) independent problem solving and the potential level of development for problem-solving under an adult's

guidance, or in cooperation with more capable peers”[4]. The statement above suggests that teachers should grasp the learner’s competence level and guide them to a higher level.

3. Problems of the Application of Scaffolding Instruction in English Writing Class in Senior High School

Teachers’ ignorance of students’ subject status is a common issue in educational settings, especially in larger classes or when teachers have limited time to devote to each student. To achieve the objectives of the senior high English curriculum, teachers, as organizers and instructors of learning activities, must fully understand students’ levels of development and learning situations, select appropriate content writing, carefully design the activities of writing teaching, and apply effective strategies to teach writing. However, many teachers who teach writing are used to seeing things from their perspective, believing that what they teach is what their students need, which means that teachers ignore and understand the actual learning of each student, which may lead to a lack of relevance in writing lessons and reduce the effectiveness of the writing class.

Some teachers should have prioritized or encouraged collaboration among students. Collaborative learning is integral to scaffolding instruction, promoting students’ writing and improving their communication skills. Students work together to control and communicate about their writing topic, share their knowledge and experience with their peers, and generate new ideas and insights. According to Vygotsky, “education is achieved through students’ own experience, and theirs depends on the environment, where the teacher’s role is to organize and co-ordinate the environment”[5]. Under the influence of the theories related to scaffolding instruction, most English teachers attach importance to communication among students and organize group discussions in writing class. However, several teachers still give out the topic of composition directly, and then students start to write independently, and there needs to be more student-student communication in the writing class.

More guidance in the writing process is essential for supporting students’ development. Writing is a complex skill that involves multiple cognitive processes, including generating ideas, organizing thoughts, structuring content, revising for clarity and coherence, and editing for grammar and mechanics. Numerous students may need more guidance and support to navigate these processes. “In teaching, teachers and students form a learning community”[6]. However, in many cases, the teacher was no longer a participant in the students’ writing process but a spectator. Some students responded that teachers only occasionally provided writing Guidance; others responded that teachers never provided writing Guidance. These suggest that in teaching English writing, teachers often give students a topic, and writing instruction becomes entirely independent for writing students, with teachers failing to notice the direction and perspective of students’ writing.

Teacher-given writing assessments could be more effective. Assessment scaffolding is essential in the teaching of writing. Initially, students write down their ideas emotionally. Still, they cannot write smoothly and naturally, so teachers should use assessment scaffolding to guide students in meditating, reading, and revising their compositions rationally. With additional support or

scaffolding, teacher-given writing assessments may fully address students’ diverse needs in developing their writing abilities. Simply evaluating students’ written work without guiding improvement may not result in substantial growth in their writing skills.

4. Causes of the Application of Scaffolding Instruction in English Writing Class in Senior High School

The traditional concept of education places great importance on the “dignity of teachers”; that is, students are passive recipients of all the knowledge imparted by the teacher, i.e., they become “people who enter the classroom with empty heads”. Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, if “one side” in any case objectively exploits “the other” or prevents “the other” from pursuing self-affirmation as a responsible human being, the one is in the oppressor’s position [7]. In the class, the teacher is the one who is in control; the choice of content and the design of activities are all decided by the teacher alone, and the students are only passive subscribers who have no right to intervene in the depth and breadth of knowledge they are about to learn. “The teaching of writing values the process of students discovering and solving problems independently, rather than the process of teachers making students find and solve something”[8]. Although the advent of scaffolding instruction has enabled teachers to teach writing more democratically, such as brainstorming and group work, “the discourse in many writing classes is still in the hands of the teacher”[9]. Teachers only provide scaffoldings and create situations based on their judgment and will only provide Guidance at times they deem appropriate; the help students receive is determined by the subjective will of teachers, which helps create an unequal status of teachers and students, which is not conducive to the development of teacher-student relationships and the quality of education. However, the teacher-student relationship in teaching activities should be equal in the ideal class. Teachers are supposed to carry out teaching practices based on a thorough understanding of students’ levels and interact with students cooperatively. The problem of teachers’ absolute authority and the need for students’ subjectivity in the Guidance of writing teaching activities is thus a negative factor that hinders the smooth development of writing teaching activities.

A superficial understanding of the theory of scaffolding instruction involves only grasping its basic concept without fully comprehending its underlying principles and applications. Educational theoretical literacy is vital to a teacher’s professionalism[10]. The design of a teacher’s teaching style and the problem-solving strategies adopted in the classroom reflect the teacher’s theoretical reserves. Educational theoretical literacy directly influences the effectiveness of teaching practice and, in turn, the teacher’s awareness of problem identification and resolution. “As one of the core elements of educational theoretical literacy, professional knowledge is an essential condition for teachers to engage in academic and teaching activities and a critical source of teachers’ educational ideas”[11]. A thorough and deep understanding of theories related to scaffolding instruction, such as constructivist theory and zone of proximal development, is a vital prerequisite for teachers to design writing activities, and a solid theoretical foundation guides their design. In scaffolding instruction, only a deep

understanding of the relevant theories will enable teachers to provide students with appropriate scaffoldings to address their writing difficulties, thus guiding them to solve their writing difficulties independently and improving their blindness and inefficiency in the writing process. Although many teachers consciously enhance their professionalism through competitions and observations in addition to their work, the speed at which knowledge is updated should not be underestimated. Suppose teachers only have a superficial understanding of scaffolding instruction and do not conduct in-depth research into related theories. In that case, they will be in a situation where Guidance is not targeted and collaborative learning is formalized, which is not conducive to improving teaching efficiency, thus limiting their ability and effectiveness in designing practical writing teaching activities.

Students' lack of proper understanding of writing assessment leads them to disregard it. Assessment, a measure of teaching effectiveness, is a session in which teachers and students receive feedback. For teachers, "assessment is a significant way to improve teaching quality and promote professional development"[12]. At the end of the writing lesson, teachers can reflect on their students' class performance and compositions. On this basis, teachers may adjust their writing teaching strategies and revise their planning to ensure that the next lesson will run more smoothly. Through self-assessment, peer assessment, and feedback from the teacher, students can reflect on their compositions, identify their strengths and weaknesses, and, therefore, continue to improve their writing. Scaffolding instruction thus advocates that teachers pay attention to students' attitudes towards revising their compositions, guiding them to assess their effectiveness, continuously improve their compositions, and improve their writing through repeated rewriting and creativity. "Assessment of essays is not just 'assessment of learning' but 'evaluation for learning'" [13]. In other words, once students receive feedback on their compositions, the writing still needs to be finished. Students should continue to revise and improve their compositions based on the feedback, thinking about their ideas, line structure, and rhetorical techniques from multiple angles to make their compositions masterpieces. However, the author found that some of the students' compositions stopped at "first creation", and the students' revision marks were rare. In addition to reviewing the compositions, teachers also use various assessment methods, such as peer assessment and self-assessment, and try to write effective comments on the students' compositions. However, most students need to pay more attention to the feedback they receive from others and leave their compositions behind after reading the comments. In this case, even if teachers' or peers' comments are pertinent, it will only be a drop in the bucket for improving students' writing skills. At the same time, it is not a good habit for students not to pay attention to writing assessments, which is not conducive to consolidating knowledge and lifelong learning.

5. Strategies on the Application of Scaffolding Instruction in English Writing Class in Senior High School

Teachers need to understand and capture students' zone of proximal development fully. "On the one hand, teaching influences the content, speed, and level of students' development, and on the other hand, it creates the zone of

proximal development.[14]" As mentioned, students have two levels of development, and the gap between these two levels is dynamic, depending on how the teaching facilitates acquiring and internalizing knowledge. Therefore, to ensure a match between the scaffoldings provided by the teacher and the student's actual needs in the writing teaching practices, teachers need to consider the student's zone of proximal development and make higher demands on the students based on their current level of writing. The author believes that it is crucial in writing class for teachers to grasp the relationship between students' zone of proximal development and the content they are about to learn, which coincides with Krashen's input hypothesis[15]. The "i" is the level of students' existing language knowledge, and the "i+1" is the practical language input at the level of existing language knowledge. The input provided by the teacher must be appropriate for the students. The content and resources teachers choose for students must be currently understandable and challenging for them so that their desire to solve problems is stimulated. In the author's opinion, there are two main ways to grasp students' zone of proximal development. Firstly, teachers can use questionnaires or direct observation to understand students' writing levels and adjust their teaching strategies to make scaffolding instructions effective within students' zones of proximal development. According to Wallace's Reflective Model[16], learning is an essential prerequisite for teachers' professional development. Learning from excellent teachers about their experience in observing and anticipating learning is a good way to do this.

Rather than just passively receiving information from the teacher, within collaborative learning, students interact with each other to explore ideas, solve problems, and construct their understanding of the subject matter. Collaborative learning is an integral part of scaffolding instruction, which is suitable for developing students' creativity and helping them internalize their writing knowledge and create a sound personality. "The teacher is not a bystander in the collaborative learning process but a careful observer"[17]. Before writing begins, teachers can use brainstorming methods to organize students to discuss and expand their thinking in groups according to the writing topic to open up students' writing ideas. After the writing is finished, teachers can also organize group members to check their peers' work, suggest new ideas and revisions, and continuously improve the structure and phrasing of the essay. It is important to note that the teacher should control the direction and timing of the discussion to ensure that it is effective. The teacher should provide targeted Guidance to facilitate group discussions when unexpected situations arise or students need help with the basics. In cooperative learning, "students are equal individuals contributing their efforts out of common interests and goals"[18]. Each group member should respect their peers' speeches, listen attentively to the opinions and ideas of their peers, and constantly receive new information to enrich his/her cognitive structure. At the same time, the group leader should keep a record of the discussion and share the group's discussion with the class after the debate.

A harmonious teacher-student relationship is indeed crucial, and it can make the teaching of writing twice as effective with half the effort. Emphasizing teachers as supporters or students as subjects could be more conducive to developing students' critical thinking and independent inquiry. In the field of teaching, teachers build trust and closeness by caring for and respecting their students, making the students more

willing to be guided and taught by them. Scaffolding instruction often involves collaborative problem-solving activities where teachers and students work together to tackle challenging tasks. Teachers need to provide guidance when students encounter problems they cannot solve independently, provide appropriate scaffoldings at the right time, and help students write independently, thus improving their problem-solving skills through the gradual withdrawal of scaffoldings. Scaffolding instruction embodies a harmonious teacher-student relationship because it emphasizes students' needs to learn in writing practice and independent exploration in the process of writing and affirms the teacher's role in guiding and helping students. A harmonious teacher-student relationship can only be possible if the role of the teacher in teaching is clarified. Firstly, teachers take on the role of organizer and designer in writing education. They choose appropriate writing objectives and content according to students' zone of proximal development, organize realistic and exciting activities, and encourage students to participate in them. Secondly, teachers are also supporters and guides. They guide students in their independent writing and provide the necessary scaffolding to assist students in completing their writing tasks and achieving higher levels of development.

A competent teacher adheres to the principle of non-interference but also discerns when intervention becomes essential and the appropriate extent of such intervention. Therefore, the desired effect can only be achieved if how instruction is directed during the writing process is well designed. In terms of how instruction is given, teachers should first consider the lesson's content when choosing how to provide guidance. Secondly, the way in which the teaching guidance is given should vary from person to person. Each student's knowledge, experience and learning style are unique, and teachers need to design approaches to instruction that are appropriate for students based on individual differences. For example, some students do not like it when the teacher tells them directly how to continue, so the teacher should pay attention to their own instructions. Thirdly, changes in the external environment are an essential consideration for teachers when designing instructional approaches. One of the new roles of the teacher is that of a researcher, who must anticipate unexpected situations that may arise in writing instruction and then adjust instruction flexibly. Regarding the timing of guidance, teachers need to time their guidance appropriately. While independent and collaborative learning are important features of scaffolding instruction, it is also essential to avoid blindness and ineffectiveness when students write independently. During independent learning, the teacher can assist if students cannot continue with the writing task because they need more appropriate materials or have no ideas. When students clash over differences of opinion or the discussion may veer off-topic, the teacher must intervene and provide timely guidance.

Assessing a composition does not mean the end of an activity of writing teaching. As already mentioned, some students do not value feedback from others on their compositions, so in this case, do the students understand how compositions on this type of subject should be written? Kiraly states that "learning is a process of interactive construction rather than a process of transmitting knowledge"[19]. A writing lesson is only considered successful if students fully grasp how to write compositions in such a category. In terms of scaffolding instruction, the way assessment is required, the teacher should make the meaning of assessment clear to the

students and guide them to create a secondary composition after receiving feedback until they have a deep understanding of how to write the type of composition they are writing in this lesson. Firstly, teachers should correct students' original compositions promptly and keep a record of their corrections. After fixing the students' original compositions, the teacher has a general idea of the problems that have arisen in the students' compositions. The teacher should first guide the problems common to the whole class and then make a specific analysis of the problems of some of the weaker students. Secondly, in guiding students in the process of secondary composition, teachers should follow up promptly and encourage students' slight progress. Finally, teachers should ask students to summarize the characteristics of the original and the secondary composition, especially the writing ideas and the structure of the essay. In comparing the two essays, students will gradually find the doorway to writing good essays, constantly improve their writing structure, develop good revision habits on their own, and thus increase their interest in writing.

6. Conclusion

This paper analyses the current situation of the application of scaffolding instruction in high school English writing classes, finds the problems that occur when combining scaffolding instruction with high school English writing class, analyses their causes and proposes corresponding solution strategies. To better apply scaffolding instruction in high school English writing classes, English teachers should grasp students' zone of proximal development, promote cooperative learning, cultivate harmonious teacher-student relationships, provide appropriate writing instruction and guide students to pay attention to writing assessment.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge the financial support provided by Minnan Normal University's Undergraduate Teaching and Research Project "Talent-cultivation model of 'Integration of Enrollment, Cultivation and Employment' for Foreign Language Discipline" (JG202304).

References

- [1] D. J. Wood, J. S. Bruner & G. Rose, "The Role of Tutoring in Problem-Solving", *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 1976, 17 (2): 89-100.
- [2] Jing Lv, Min Yang. "Research on the effectiveness of scaffolding teaching method in college English reading teaching", *China Higher Education*, 2020(19): 45-46.
- [3] Xianfeng Yan. "The value of Scaffolding Instruction of English Reading Teaching and Its Realisation", *Teaching and Management*, 2018 (9):87-89.
- [4] L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Boston: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [5] L. Vygotsky, *The Complete Works of Vygotsky (Volume 6): Educational Psychology*. Translated by Gong Haoran et al, Hefei: Anhui Education Press, 2016: 56-57.
- [6] Lan Ye. "The Re-exploration of Classroom Instruction Process: Efforts beyond Opinion", *Curriculum-Teaching Materials-Teaching Methods*, 2013 (9): 3 - 13.

- [7] P. Freire. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Translated by Gu Jianxin, Zhao Youhua, He Shurong. Shanghai: East China Normal University Press, 2001.
- [8] Yumei Chang. "Intelligent Exploration of English Writing Teaching in High School", *Educational Theory and Practice*, 2019, 39 (20): 51-53.
- [9] Xinghua Liu. "A Study of the Current Status of Evidence-based Practice in Teaching English Writing in Secondary Schools", *Theory and Practice of Foreign Language Teaching*, 2020 (4): 58-64.
- [10] Lihua Lu. "Cultivation of Educational Theory Literacy of Primary and Secondary School Teachers: Theoretical Basis and Strategic Innovation", *Modern Education Management*, 2020 (6): 62-68.
- [11] K. Carter, W. R. Houston, M. H. J. Sikula, "Teachers' Knowledge and Learning to Teach", *Handbook of Research on Teacher Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1990: 291-310.
- [12] Yilong Ji, Xing Lu, Jiahua Zhang, et al. "Intelligent Technology-enabled Teacher Teaching Evaluation: A Theoretical Framework and a Practical Way Forward", *Contemporary Education Science*, 2024 (2): 71-80.
- [13] Leizhen Xia. "Talking about the use of evaluation in writing teaching", *Secondary school language teaching*, 2012 (9): 29-31.
- [14] L. Vygotsky. *Selected Essays on Education by Vygotsky*. Translated by Yu Zhenqiu. Beijing: People's Education Press, 2004.
- [15] Weidong Dai, Zhaoxiong He, *New Concise English Linguistics Course*. Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 2002: 163
- [16] M. J. Wallace. *Training Foreign Languages Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge university Press, 1991.
- [17] Lu Liu, Yuanman Liu. "A Study of Teacher Roles in Cooperative Learning in International Chinese Classes", *Journal of Tianjin Normal University (Social Science Edition)*, 2022 (3): 40-48.
- [18] Honglan Liu. "The Practice of Cooperative Learning in English Writing Teaching", *Educational Exploration*, 2009 (7): 54-55.
- [19] D. Kiraly, *A Social Constructivist Approach to Translator Education*, Manchester & New York: St. Jerome Publishing, 2000.