

An Initial Exploration of College English Collaborative Writing Teaching Model Based on Scaffold Theory

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Abstract: Current college English writing instruction faces problems such as outdated teaching models and limited feedback mechanisms, which hinder the development of students' writing skills. This paper, reflecting on the current state of writing instruction, integrates scaffolding theory with collaborative writing, and then proposes a teaching model consisting of five key stages: context setting, scaffolding, collaborative writing, feedback and evaluation, and independent writing. By adopting scientific grouping and constructing linguistic scaffolds as well as cognitive framework scaffolds, instructors aim to effectively enhance students' writing proficiency, critical thinking abilities, and collaborative abilities.

Keywords: Scaffolding Theory; Collaborative Writing; English Writing Instruction.

1. Introduction

Writing is a crucial demonstration of English learners' language proficiency. However, the writing skills of most Chinese college students are generally weak, highlighting the importance of exploring effective English writing instructional models. Currently, English writing instruction faces challenges such as large class sizes and limited instructional hours, leaving students with insufficient practice and delayed feedback. This situation has led to significant difficulties in implementing teaching approaches focused on writing skill development.

In recent years, scaffolding teaching methods, cooperative learning, and dynamic assessment theories have gradually been incorporated into the field of foreign language writing instruction. Increasing attention has been paid to the positive roles of teacher-student collaboration, peer interaction, and peer feedback during the writing process. In this context, this paper aims to explore the effectiveness of a collaborative English writing teaching model based on scaffolding theory, with the goal of constructing a concrete, effective, and highly operable instructional framework.

2. Current Situation of College English Writing Instruction

Enhancing students' English writing proficiency and critical thinking skills is a fundamental goal of college English writing instruction. However, various challenges persist in teaching practices.

(1) Outdated teaching approaches and instructional models

Due to the features of writing courses and the constraints of large-class teaching settings, writing classes predominantly rely on teacher-directed lectures focusing on theoretical knowledge, such as writing techniques and paragraph structures, as well as sample analysis. Opportunities for student discussions and in-class writing practice are relatively limited, which hampers students' motivation and active participation. In addition, because of limited weekly instructional hours, writing exercises are often assigned as homework, posing significant challenges to students' autonomy and language proficiency. The heavy workload of

assignments further diminishes their interest in learning.

(2) Limited Teaching Evaluation and Feedback Methods

Currently, the feedback methods in English writing instruction are relatively monotonous. In writing classes, teacher feedback is the primary form of evaluation. However, teachers are often required to assess compositions from a large number of students across multiple classes, which creates a significant workload for teachers. While some automated grading platforms (such as Grammar Check or Iwrite) can be used, they mainly focus on grammar errors and still necessitate teachers' involvement in providing feedback on writing content and structure, which ultimately leading to a decline in the quality of teacher feedback over time. Furthermore, the reliance on teacher-only feedback may have a limited impact on students' writing improvement.

(3) Low Utilization of Online Learning Resources

In the context of digital education, the integration of information technology with curriculum content remains insufficient, resulting in low utilization of online resources. Although mobile devices such as smartphones have become widespread among university students, few students use online resources efficiently for English learning. This is primarily due to a lack of overall planning for their learning activities. Therefore, it is essential for teachers to design specific instructional activities that guide students to use online resources for self-directed learning.

3. Scaffolding Teaching Method

The term "scaffolding" can be traced back to the 13th century, originally referring to the temporary structure used in the construction industry. In the 1930s, Russian psychologist and philosopher Vygotsky introduced the concept of "socialist theory" and the theory of "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). Later, American educational psychologist Bruner, building upon Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD, introduced the idea of "scaffolding" into the field of education. He defined scaffolding as an instructional method where support is provided by teachers, parents, or peers to help learners accomplish tasks that they are unable to complete independently.

In recent years, with the application of scaffolding theory into foreign language teaching, scholars from various

countries have conducted a series of theoretical explorations and empirical studies based on scaffolding theory, focusing mainly on its theoretical foundation, and instructional model design (He, 1997; Van Lier, 2014; Li, 2017; Mersty, 2019). Among them, He (1997) summarized the five key stages of the scaffolding teaching model, widely used by scholars, which are “scaffolding construction, context setting, independent exploration, collaborative learning, effect evaluation”. Li (2017) and Mersty (2019) pointed out that applying scaffolding theory to English writing instruction can optimize writing classrooms, enabling students to improve their writing skills. Less proficient students, with guidance from teachers or collaboration with more capable peers, can also enhance their ability to solve problems independently and their knowledge level. Thus, in the process of writing learning, both teacher guidance and assistance from more competent peers can be regarded as the “scaffolds” for students.

4. Collaborative Writing

In the 1980s, cooperative learning concepts was introduced into foreign language writing instruction, with increasing emphasis on collaborative interaction and peer feedback during the writing process. As researchers delved deeper into the field, they found that when group members “actively engage in collaborative decision-making, scaffold each other, and jointly take responsibility for producing the same text”—a process defined as “**collaborative writing**”, participants’ English writing abilities be improved effectively (Storch, 2013). In the past two decades, numerous second language acquisition scholars have focused on the validity of collaborative tasks, with most studies affirming the positive effects of this teaching method (Ni, 2016; Li, 2018; Nie, 2019; Perkel, 2020). Among them, Ni (2016) conducted collaborative writing research from the perspective of sociocultural theory and argued that collaborative writing offers learners the possibility of “collective scaffolding”, which contributes to an improvement in language proficiency. Zhu and Xu (2019), through empirical research, examined the effectiveness of collaborative writing on second language acquisition and found significant improvements in learners’ language accuracy, fluency, and lexical complexity.

Thus, based on careful design and effective monitoring, collaborative writing activities can serve as an effective method for both writing instruction and second language acquisition. However, in the process of collaborative writing, how to optimize the “collaboration” effect remains a challenge. Teachers need to consider how to implement “collaborative writing”, how to provide the necessary “scaffolding”, and how to organize effective groups. Guided by scaffolding theory, this study will conduct an in-depth investigation into the issue “how to effectively implement the collaborative writing teaching model”, with the goal of developing an effective and practical English collaborative writing teaching plan.

5. Teaching Plan of Scaffolding Teaching Method in College English Writing Class

This plan aims to improve the writing abilities of first-year English major students in Chinese regional universities by teaching essay writing. Based on Van Lier’s (2014) principles of scaffolding teaching, this plan adapts He’s (1997) five-

stage scaffolding teaching model into the following steps: setting the context, building scaffolds, collaborative writing, evaluation and feedback, and independent writing.

5.1. Setting the Context

From a constructivist viewpoint, the key point is to create relevant learning contexts that help students link new language knowledge with their prior experiences, knowledge, and real-life situations. This facilitates a deeper understanding and mastery of the given material. In this plan, the students’ primary goal is to develop their academic writing skills. However, before receiving structured English writing training, writing specific genres of English essays can be a challenging task. Therefore, teachers can use the first few minutes of class for warm-up activities, helping students familiarize themselves with the task at hand. For example, when teaching students how to write a comparison and /or contrast essay, the teacher might encourage them to compare and contrast Chinese and Western holidays. This engages students in a real-world context, activates their prior knowledge, and allows them to discuss the similarities and differences between the two cultures in English. Based on this, students can then write a comparative or contrastive essay on the topic.

5.2. Building the Scaffolding

Building scaffolding is a crucial step in the scaffolding teaching method. In this phase, the teacher should design a learning environment centered around the teaching topic, creating a ZPD that supports students’ development. Scaffolding can be constructed through various strategies such as organizing students into hierarchical groups, providing relevant writing materials, and offering cognitive frameworks that guide their thinking. These scaffolding techniques could lay the foundation for students to effectively improve their writing skills.

5.2.1. Peer Scaffolding

In this phase, students are grouped based on their overall English performance from the previous two semesters, using a scientifically structured approach to ensure cognitive diversity within each group. The groups are organized into 3-4 members, encouraging effective and meaningful discussions and facilitating peer scaffolding.

5.2.2. Material and Language Scaffolding

In this phase, teachers assign pre-writing tasks, asking students to compile a collection of writing materials. Students are required to gather relevant materials from online resources and academic databases before writing, enabling them to gain additional background knowledge and get some inspirations from writing perspectives. Furthermore, students are encouraged to take notes on key vocabulary and cohesive devices related to the topic in the materials, allowing them to learn academic expressions. This task aims to expand students’ thinking while simultaneously providing them with both material and language scaffolding.

5.2.3. Cognitive Scaffolding

This phase involves the deconstruction of the essay writing and the construction of a cognitive framework. For the **deconstruction of the essay**, students should first understand the basic theoretical knowledge of writing comparison and contrast essays. The teacher then uses examples to deconstruct and analyze the introduction, body, and conclusion paragraphs, helping students understand how to generate thesis statement, provide evidence, and organize

comparisons and contrasts. In terms of **constructing the cognitive framework**, the teacher sets relevant tasks to guide students in organizing their writing materials and producing a scratch outline.

5.3. Collaborative Writing

After the second step “scaffolding”, students have developed a preliminary writing approach for comparison and /or contrast essay writing. In this phase, students will collaborate in small groups to finish the essay writing task collectively. To ensure that students can successfully complete the writing task, the teacher sets three collaborative writing tasks, focusing on the introduction (thesis statement), supporting arguments, and conclusion. After providing clear explanations and instructions, the teacher will guide the students through each task step by step. At the end of the course, students will refine and complete the essay as a group.

5.4. Evaluation and Feedback

This stage focuses on evaluation and feedback, which is divided into peer evaluation and teacher feedback. First, the teacher provides a detailed evaluation rubric and guides students to perform a comprehensive analysis of the peers’ essays, pointing out strengths and offering specific suggestions for improvement where necessary. After peer evaluation, the teacher conducts a secondary evaluation to ensure that students have a clear direction for making revisions.

5.5. Independent Writing

The final stage requires students to write independently. After the scaffolding and collaborative writing phases, students’ writing abilities are expected to approach their ZPD, allowing them to write independently. In this phase, students are required to revise their essays based on the feedback provided by peers and the teacher, and submit the final version within the given time frame.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the collaborative writing teaching model based on scaffolding theory provides an innovative approach and method for college English writing instruction. By incorporating scaffolding supports in teaching, this model not only enhances students’ writing abilities but also fosters the development of their collaborative learning and critical thinking skills. In practical teaching, effective guidance from the teacher and interaction and collaboration among peers play crucial roles. Although the teaching plan proposed in this

paper is only an initial exploration within the Chinese EFL context and has certain limitations, this study provides practical guidance for improving college English writing instruction.

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