

An Application of Scaffolding Instruction in the Reading Course for Elementary CFL Learners

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Abstract: Scaffolding instruction based on constructivism has been widely accepted and implemented by educators both at home and abroad. However, there has been little discussion about its application in teaching Chinese as a foreign language. This study aims to explore an effective way to develop elementary Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners' reading ability through the use of scaffolding instruction. The results demonstrate that scaffolding instruction in the reading class leads to a more engaging and interactive learning environment, offering students the necessary support and guidance to gradually enhance their reading skills.

Keywords: Elementary Chinese learners; Internalization; Reading ability; Scaffold.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the Scaffolding instruction has received significant attention in foreign language teaching, including among Chinese scholars and experts in English language teaching. However, little has been discussed about scaffolding instruction in Chinese language teaching. With an increasing number of foreign students showing interest in studying Chinese for various reasons, learning Chinese has become a tough and challenging experience for them, especially for elementary Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners. This has urged researchers to conduct more studies on Chinese language teaching from various perspectives to achieve better teaching results. This paper aims to explore the use of scaffolding instruction in the reading course. The study will be carried out from the perspective of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to enhance students' ability to read Chinese more effectively and improve their language competence.

2. Basic theories

2.1. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a concept in educational psychology proposed by Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky in the 1920s. Vygotsky defined the ZPD as the "distance between a learner's actual development level, as determined by independent problem-solving, and their level of potential development, as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or collaboration with more capable peers" [1]. In essence, the ZPD refers to the difference between what a learner can achieve independently and what they can achieve with support and guidance from a more knowledgeable person, such as a teacher or peer.

Roosevelt suggests that the main goal of education, from Vygotsky's perspective, is to keep learners in their ZPD as much as possible by providing them with interesting and culturally meaningful learning and problem-solving tasks that are slightly more challenging than what they can accomplish alone [2]. This approach encourages collaboration with a more competent peer or teacher to complete the task. The ZPD is an essential area for learning and cognitive development, representing a learner's potential to move to a

higher level of understanding and skill acquisition. As the ZPD is not fixed and can be extended with appropriate instruction and scaffolding, skilled teachers and mentors can use it to guide learners towards more complex tasks and support them as they work towards mastery. Consequently, the ZPD is applicable to recent studies in various fields, including education, cognitive development, and language acquisition. In the context of reading courses, the ZPD can be applied to help students develop their reading skills by providing them with appropriate support and guidance.

2.2. Scaffolding

Scaffolding is a tool commonly used in construction to provide workers with support to complete their tasks efficiently. The term "scaffolding" was first introduced in the works of Wood, Brunner and Ross [3]. Scholars have borrowed this concept and developed it into a metaphor to describe the assistance provided by teachers or peers in learning. Scaffolding, as a teaching approach, involves supporting learners as they engage in tasks or activities that are just beyond their current level of ability. Ashman and Conway describe scaffolding as "temporary" and "adjustable" instruction provided by teachers to facilitate learners in developing and extending their skills [4]. The goal of scaffolding is to help learners build on their existing knowledge, acquire new skills, and develop their problem-solving abilities. Teachers must withdraw their support as learners develop new understanding. Scaffolding occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), where learners can perform tasks independently beyond their development level with guidance from a teacher or peer. In fact, scaffolding can only take place within the ZPD. Safadi and Rababah describe the relationship between scaffolding and the ZPD, stating that scaffolding plays a vital role in supporting novice learners to establish themselves within their ZPD when more advanced learners or instructors provide guidance for goals [5]. This paper focuses on the application of scaffolding instruction in the reading course for elementary Chinese as a Foreign Language (CFL) learners from the perspective of the ZPD, with the aim of enhancing their reading abilities.

3. Reading course for elementary CFL learners

Reading is a crucial skill for foreign language learners, as it helps them better understand written materials, develop their vocabulary, improve their understanding of grammar and syntax, and gain insights into the culture associated with the language. In the (CFL) curriculum, reading is considered one of the most important language skills, and a reading course is an indispensable component for elementary CFL learners. Such a course can help them consolidate their grammar knowledge, expand and accumulate vocabulary, train their reading skills and habits, and gradually acquire independent reading ability.

However, the current reading teaching in CFL courses faces two main problems. Firstly, the traditional reading class has a dull and boring atmosphere. The teaching process usually involves reading and doing exercises after reading, which does not stimulate students' interest in learning Chinese. Secondly, students can easily develop anxiety in reading class due to the slow effectiveness of the teaching. Although reading classes mainly cultivate students' reading ability, improve reading speed, and help them master some reading skills, these achievements cannot be accomplished overnight, causing frustration and resistance, and even leading to reading anxiety.

To solve these problems, some studies have proposed innovative teaching methods, such as scaffolding instruction, to achieve a student-centered and teacher-led approach in the reading class. This approach aims to create a more engaging and interactive learning environment, providing students with support and guidance to gradually develop their reading ability. Implementing this teaching concept could have a positive impact on the reading class for elementary CFL learners.

4. Application of scaffolding instruction in the reading courses

Scaffolding instruction is intended to support students in learning tasks that exceed their current level of understanding or ability. To achieve this, teachers should provide students with various necessary and meaningful scaffolds that enable them to comprehend what they have learned and internalize it. When implemented correctly, scaffolds act as enablers rather than disablers. The various scaffolds offered to students can help them cross the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) with the combination of teacher instruction and peer cooperation and achieve their goals. Therefore, throughout the teaching process of reading class, the teacher must make full preparations and be willing to shift their role from initiator to guide, facilitator, assistant, etc., as scaffolds, including design-in scaffolding and contingent scaffolding, are presented in different forms based mainly on the tasks. Generally, the scaffolding instruction involves five steps: building the scaffolds, entering the situation, thinking for themselves, collaborative learning, and evaluation. The study analyzes how to make full use of scaffolds in the reading class for elementary CFL students to attain the teaching goal. To solve the problems that hinder learning, some studies have been conducted and found that the new teaching method, scaffolding instruction, introduced in the reading class achieves student-centered and teacher-led teaching requirements. The innovative teaching concepts have a

positive impact on the Chinese reading class for elementary CFL students.

4.1. Building Scaffolds

Before implementing scaffolding instruction, teachers need to analyze the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of their students. They should comprehend their students' strengths, weaknesses, current language proficiency, and skills to identify the areas where they require the most support. Based on this information, teachers can determine the most effective type of scaffolding, which should be just beyond their current level of competence but achievable with guidance and support, for each student to facilitate their language development progress.

At this stage, teachers need to provide clear directions and clarify the learning objectives, which requires them to anticipate the difficulties students may encounter and help them understand the importance of the task. Since students have diverse learning styles and preferences, teachers must use a variety of scaffolds, such as questioning, modeling, graphic organizers, visual aids, and other tools to ensure that students comprehend the new task comprehensively. During the teaching process, the tasks can be appropriately modified according to the students' learning performance, thereby gradually promoting the teaching process with the ultimate goal of completing the teaching task. The specific scaffolding used will depend on the task or skill being taught, as well as the students' needs and abilities.

4.2. Creating a Problem Context

Entering the problem context is like building a bridge that connects students from what they already know to what they don't know yet. Effective activities should be carefully planned and designed to spark students' curiosity and help them engage with the context naturally. In order to do this, teachers should guide their students into the teaching context by creating a situational framework that is based on real-life teaching situations. The context should be as realistic and relevant as possible, and examples should be chosen that are familiar and meaningful to the students.

The created context should not only align with students' current knowledge and experiences, but also consider their potential for creativity and their ability to learn and grow. By presenting information in a realistic context, students can see the practical applications of what they are learning and become more invested in the material. This can help them use their prior knowledge and personal experiences to acquire new knowledge and skills.

To effectively lead students into the problem context, teachers can employ instructional supports such as warm-up questions, brainstorming, modeling, and cueing. These tools can help students better understand the new task and solve problems in a real-world environment.

All in all, creating a relevant and engaging problem context is an important step in effective teaching. By connecting students to what they already know and helping them see the relevance of what they are learning, teachers can support their students' growth and development.

4.3. Independent Exploration and Autonomous Learning by Students

While the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) highlights the importance of guidance and support, it also acknowledges the need to encourage learner autonomy.

Scaffold instruction, which is grounded in constructivist theory, emphasizes that teaching activities should be student-centered and should guide them to solve problems gradually through scaffolding, thus inspiring them to explore and discover learning autonomously. Scaffold instruction replaces the traditional teaching method of directly imparting knowledge to students. However, this does not mean that teachers relinquish their role entirely in designing instruction. On the contrary, the guidance of teachers plays a critical role in supporting students' independent exploration.

During the exploration process, teachers should be patient and ready to offer appropriate assistance to individuals if necessary to stimulate students' deeper thinking and guide them towards higher levels of understanding. In some cases, teachers may need to provide individualized instruction for students who struggle with reading by identifying their specific needs and providing targeted support. In such situations, the teacher models their thinking process to help the student understand the steps involved in completing the task. Moreover, if the task is complex, the teacher tends to break it down into smaller, more manageable parts, allowing students to focus on one part at a time and eventually complete the entire task.

As students' abilities to solve problems in reading improve, old scaffolds are gradually removed, and new ones are put in place to provide support. This process creates an environment that promotes autonomous learning and allows students to explore and discover knowledge on their own.

4.4. Collaborative Learning and Cooperative Discussion

In the process of independent exploration and construction of meaning, students may encounter problems that cannot be solved on their own. In such cases, collaborative and mutual learning among peers can help them complete the construction of knowledge. Through communication with their peers, students strive to present their best work and take the task seriously. This approach allows learners with different levels of language proficiency to work together, with more proficient learners offering guidance and support to less proficient ones. This creates a supportive learning environment where students can learn from each other and make progress in their language development. Therefore, teachers can employ group discussion or group interaction to facilitate this step.

In reading classes, teachers can assign students to work in pairs or small groups, providing opportunities for peer teaching and support. This allows students to work together more effectively to solve problems related to difficult words, sentences, and paragraphs in the text. Small group collaboration and discussion can also enhance students' interest and engagement in the learning process. As students' ability to solve reading problems improves, old scaffolds are gradually removed and new ones are introduced in a real-world environment.

4.5. Evaluation

Teacher evaluation is a critical aspect of the learning process, which has a profound impact on Chinese beginners, and cannot be overlooked. Firstly, teachers should establish clear expectations for students regarding assignments, tests, and other assessments. This will help students understand what they need to do to meet the expectations and give them an idea of what type of feedback they can expect from the

teacher. Secondly, teachers should provide feedback as soon as possible after the completion of the task or assignment. This enables students to reflect on their work while it is still fresh in their minds and make any necessary adjustments before moving on to the next task. It also provides them with an opportunity to improve on their next attempt. Thirdly, the feedback provided by the teacher should be specific about what the student did well and what they need to work on. Teachers should avoid general statements such as "good job" or "needs improvement" and instead provide specific examples to support their feedback. This type of specific feedback helps students reflect on their work and think about how they can use the feedback to improve. It also contributes to their understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, providing them with an opportunity to take ownership of their learning. Finally, teachers should use positive reinforcement to acknowledge the effort and progress that students make, not just the final result. Positive reinforcement can motivate students to continue working hard, build their confidence and improve their Chinese language learning performance.

In summary, providing timely and specific feedback during the evaluation process requires a focus on clear expectations, specific language, and opportunities for reflection. By following these tips, teachers can help their students improve their ability to read, reach their full potential, and achieve their academic goals.

5. Conclusions

From the perspective of Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory, scaffold instruction can effectively enhance CFL learners' language competence in the reading class. Before implementing scaffolding instruction, teachers need to assess their students' current knowledge level and identify specific areas where they require support. Throughout the teaching process, teachers play various roles, such as organizer, instructor, facilitator, and guide, providing a range of scaffolds to engage students in learning and challenging them at each step to facilitate the internalization of knowledge and active construction of what they have learned. Through joint efforts, students can mobilize their initiative and enthusiasm for Chinese reading, gradually approaching their potential development level, and eventually achieve the highest level of Chinese reading ability. To encourage and motivate students to continue working hard, it is crucial to recognize their effort and progress, not just the final results. Positive reinforcement can build up their confidence and improve their performance in learning the Chinese language. In summary, during the evaluation phase, providing timely and specific feedback should focus on clear expectations, specific language, and opportunities for reflection. By following these guidelines, teachers can assist their students in improving their reading ability, reaching their full potential, and achieving their academic goals.

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