

Application of Scaffolding Instruction to Senior High School English Reading

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the current English curriculum's integration of instrumentality and humanity, this paper explores the application of scaffolding instruction to senior high school English reading instruction. It first outlines the core concept and theoretical foundations of scaffolding instruction, then elaborates on the concrete implementation procedures, and analyzes its pedagogical advantages in real classroom practice. Finally, supported by specific teaching cases, the paper focuses on the practical use of question scaffolds and graphic organizers in senior high school English reading instruction.

Keywords

Scaffolding Instruction; Senior High School English Reading; EFL Teaching

1. Introduction

In the early stages of English language education in China, learning English was primarily viewed as acquiring a communicative tool—that is, the instrumental function of the language was given prominence. Consequently, instruction focused on the mastery of basic knowledge and basic skills. However, as English education has evolved and society has raised higher expectations for English learners, the emphasis on "basic knowledge and basic skills" alone has proved insufficient. English teaching must also foster learners' holistic development and equip them for lifelong learning—in other words, it should attend to the humanistic dimension of the language. The English curriculum, therefore, should achieve an integration of instrumentality and humanity[1]. In the context of senior high school reading instruction, the reading course serves as a crucial vehicle for cultivating students' language ability, thinking capacity, cultural awareness, and learning ability. It requires not only that students acquire fundamental knowledge such as vocabulary and sentence patterns, and complete basic tasks like extracting information and comprehending content, but also that they explore in depth the thematic meaning of texts, appreciate textual logic, and grasp cultural connotations. This fully embodies

the curriculum philosophy that integrates instrumentality and humanity. Nevertheless, compared with the junior secondary stage, senior high school English reading materials present longer texts, more complex syntactic structures, broader topic coverage, and significantly higher demands on critical thinking. Many students struggle with superficial text interpretation, weak logical analysis, and a lack of autonomous reading skills. Constrained by their cognitive development, linguistic foundation, and reading experience, students' reading proficiency inevitably depends on well-designed teacher guidance. In this context, scaffolding instruction—which is grounded in the theory of the Zone of Proximal Development and emphasizes tiered support and dynamic assistance—can precisely address the needs of senior high school English reading instruction. It helps students gradually overcome reading difficulties and master reading strategies, thus demonstrating considerable practical value and instructional effectiveness.

2. Theoretical Foundations of Scaffolding Instruction

The term "scaffold" originates from the construction industry, where it denotes a temporary supporting platform erected to ensure building safety and removed upon project completion. With the development of educational research, scholars began to introduce the scaffold metaphor into pedagogy, suggesting that teachers should act as "scaffolds" in instructional activities—providing support to help students successfully complete learning tasks and then withdrawing that support once it is no longer needed[2]. Wood was among the first to apply the concept of scaffolding to education, arguing that teachers need to offer scaffolds for students during learning activities to assist them in resolving difficulties encountered in the process[3]. Scaffolding instruction is rooted in constructivist learning theory, which emphasizes the active, constructive nature of learning. According to this view, knowledge is not simply transmitted by the teacher but is actively constructed by learners themselves, within a meaningful context, through interaction with others and with the aid of necessary learning resources.

In addition, Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides essential theoretical support for scaffolding instruction. The ZPD theory posits that there are two developmental levels in a student: the actual developmental level (what the learner can do independently) and the potential developmental level (what the learner can achieve with guidance). The gap between these two levels constitutes the zone of proximal development. Scaffolding instruction aims to provide appropriate scaffolds that enable students to cross this zone, thus progressing from their current level to a higher level of potential development.

3. Implementation Procedures of Scaffolding Instruction

3.1. Building Scaffolds

The construction of instructional scaffolds is a core prerequisite step in scaffolding instruction. Before classroom teaching begins, teachers should provide appropriate scaffolds for students based on their knowledge of students' current language foundation and reading proficiency, as well as the specific instructional needs—such as the theme, genre, and key points and difficulties of the reading text. Common types include question scaffolds and graphic organizers. For instance, teachers may design a series of question chains that are purposeful, coherent, graded, and appropriate as scaffolds[6], thereby building a thinking framework for students, guiding them to think actively, and enabling them to gradually deepen their understanding of the reading text.

3.2. Creating Instructional Contexts

In a broad sense, context refers to the everyday, social, and cultural environments in which individuals live. In a narrow sense, context can refer to themes, characters, events, and their spatiotemporal relationships that form the basis of assessment tasks or teaching activities[7]. Instructional context, then, refers to the atmosphere of teaching activities that teachers create during instruction[8]. In scaffolding instruction, the creation of instructional contexts connects teaching content with students' real lives, enabling students to perceive, understand, and apply knowledge in authentic contexts. Moreover, an ideal instructional context should provoke cognitive conflict in students, and the issues raised should lie within their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In the reading classroom, teachers can employ theme-related pictures, videos, background introductions, and thought-provoking questions to create contexts that are relevant to the text's theme, teaching objectives, content, and students' real lives, thereby stimulating their interest and desire for inquiry.

3.3. Independent Exploration

Once teachers have successfully constructed scaffolds and guided students into the learning context, they should provide students with sufficient autonomy to analyze and explore new problems in depth, with the support of the scaffolds and drawing on their existing knowledge and skills. In the reading classroom, this stage marks a significant improvement in students' autonomous reading ability.

3.4. Collaborative Learning

Group cooperative learning is an important component of scaffolding instruction. After the independent exploration stage, students share, discuss, and jointly resolve, through collaborative learning, problems encountered during independent exploration. In addition, they may also seek help from the teacher to address difficult problems. In this process, as students solve problems through collaboration and enhanced self-efficacy, the scaffolds provided by the teacher are gradually

withdrawn. At the same time, during this stage, teachers should also pay attention to grouping students scientifically and reasonably based on their ZPD, personality traits, learning abilities, and other factors, ensuring that group members complement each other's strengths, thus laying a solid foundation for cooperative learning.

3.5. Evaluation of Learning Outcomes

In scaffolding instruction, evaluation of learning outcomes is an essential final stage, as it can comprehensively and objectively reflect students' development in terms of knowledge mastery, ability improvement, learning attitude, classroom participation, and other aspects. This includes teacher evaluation, self-evaluation, and peer evaluation.

4. Advantages of Scaffolding Instruction in Senior High School English Reading Instruction

4.1. Gradual Progression and Fostering Students' Autonomous Reading Ability

In implementing scaffolding instruction, fostering students' autonomous learning ability is a primary objective. The scaffolds teachers provide are dynamic in nature. As instruction progresses, these scaffolds are gradually removed at appropriate times and to an appropriate degree, in response to students' learning pace and developing competence. This enhances their capacity for independent learning.

In a reading classroom underpinned by scaffolding instruction, students move from passively following the teacher's explanations to actively analyzing texts, clarifying text structure, tracking the development of ideas, and exploring thematic meanings. In doing so, they gradually strengthen their ability to analyze and solve problems. This shift reflects the transition from reliance to independence, helps students internalize what they have learned, and promotes deep learning[4].

4.2. Stimulating Interest in Reading and Inquiry While Reducing Reading Difficulty

Interest is a key driver of student motivation. To generate interest, teachers must draw on students' life experiences, which serve as valuable resources for knowledge acquisition and provide essential material and support for deep understanding and deep learning[5].

Senior high school reading texts tend to be challenging. Complex syntax, unfamiliar vocabulary, and abstract topics can easily discourage students. Scaffolding instruction, by constructing contexts closely related to students' real-life experiences, can effectively stimulate their reading interest and lower the barrier to comprehension.

Moreover, scaffolding instruction encourages teachers to guide students step by

step in solving problems, based on their existing cognitive levels and abilities. This approach enables students to build confidence and motivation through experiences of success.

5. Practical Application of Different Types of Scaffolds in English Reading Instruction

This section draws on specific teaching cases to illustrate the design and application of question scaffolds and graphic organizers in the reading classroom. These cases are selected from senior high school English textbooks published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (FLTRP), covering the major genres of reading texts.

5.1. Application of Question Scaffolds

Question chains based on reading texts can guide students to sort out textual content and explore textual meaning. They not only facilitate comprehension of the reading text but also cultivate students' awareness of questioning[9]. For this purpose, this section takes the reading passage *The Monarch's Journey* from the "Understanding Ideas" section of Unit 5, "Into the wild," in the FLTRP senior high school English textbook (Book 1) as an example to demonstrate the application of question chains as scaffolds.

This reading passage revolves around the monarch butterflies' migratory journey and the survival challenges they face. Its thematic context falls within the realm of "Man and Nature" and is closely connected to the unit theme "Into the wild." Through its depiction of the monarch butterflies' behavior and struggles in their natural habitat, the passage draws attention to wildlife conservation.

To enable students to more effectively extract textual information and explore the thematic meaning of the passage, teachers may design question chains from the following four dimensions—ensuring that the questions are purposeful, coherent, graded, and appropriate—so as to provide question scaffolds for students' learning.

(1) Pre-reading: Arousing Interest

At the initial stage of engaging with this passage, teachers may design theme-related questions to prompt students to think of common animals in the wild and to introduce the subject of the text—the monarch butterfly. The questions are as follows:

Q1: When you think about the wild, what kinds of animals come to your mind first?

Q2: Have you ever heard of the monarch butterfly?

These two questions not only generate students' interest in the text but also activate their prior knowledge of wildlife, thus preparing students for the reading that follows. (2) While-reading: Extracting Information Based on the Text

Once students' interest in the topic has been aroused, teachers may use a series of questions to guide them in extracting, organizing, and summarizing the surface-level

information of the text. The questions are as follows:

Q3: How far do the monarch butterflies travel during their journey?

Q4: What tools or abilities do the monarch butterflies use to find their way?

Q3 helps students locate key information in the text and gain a clear understanding of the monarch butterfly's migration distance, which is a crucial detail for comprehending migratory behavior. Q4 directs students' attention to the text's description of the monarch butterflies' navigational abilities, prompting them to read closely and understand how monarchs use the sun's position and time of day to determine their flight direction. This process strengthens students' ability to comprehend details and synthesize information.

(3) While-reading: Delving Deeper into the Text and Exploring Thematic Meaning

After students have acquired factual information about the monarch butterflies through reading, teachers should guide them to go deeper into the text and explore its thematic meaning in connection with the unit theme. The questions are as follows:

Q5: Why is it important for the monarch butterflies to reach California or Mexico?

Q6: What is the relationship between human activities and the decline of the monarch butterfly population?

These two questions help develop students' ability to analyze cause-and-effect relationships, enabling them to recognize the critical role that suitable habitats play in monarch butterflies' survival and reproduction, and thus deepen their understanding of why monarch butterflies migrate. In addition, by guiding students to examine how human activities affect monarch butterflies as presented in the text and to analyze the connections between the two, these questions foster students' logical reasoning and critical thinking. They also help students become aware of the significant influence of human actions on wildlife survival, aligning closely with the unit theme "Into the wild" and its underlying message of harmonious coexistence between humans and nature.

(4) Post-reading: Going Beyond the Text and Transferring Knowledge

Once students have grasped the deeper implications of the text and deepened their understanding of the unit theme, teachers should further guide them to transfer their knowledge and broaden their perspectives on the topic. The following questions may be designed for this purpose:

Q7: Can you think of other animals in the wild that are also facing threats from human activities?

Q8: What are the similarities and differences between their situations and that of the monarch butterflies?

Q9: What can we do to protect the monarch butterflies and other wild animals?

Q7 and Q8 extend the discussion from monarch butterflies to other wildlife species, prompting students to transfer their knowledge and engage in comparative analysis. This broadens their perspectives and deepens their understanding of the common

challenges wildlife faces due to human activities. In doing so, it further reinforces the unit theme. The final question, Q9, encourages students to connect what they have learned with practical action, cultivating their sense of social responsibility and environmental awareness. By prompting students to consider feasible measures they can take to protect wildlife, this question facilitates the internalization and application of knowledge, embodying the educational value of English language teaching.

5.2. Application of Graphic Organizers

Graphic organizers (GOs) are visual and graphical representations that illustrate relationships among textual facts, language, or concepts, thereby facilitating students' comprehension of texts[10]. They are widely employed across various lesson types and at different instructional stages in English language teaching. GOs can be constructed in diverse forms, such as tables, mind maps, flowcharts, timelines, and route maps. In reading instruction, GOs are able to transform complex logical relationships within a text into intuitive visual symbols, effectively reducing students' cognitive load and enhancing both the efficiency and accuracy of information retrieval. This section draws on specific teaching cases to illustrate the application of GOs in both narrative and argumentative texts.

5.2.1. Application of Route Map Scaffolds in Narrative Text Reading

The passage under discussion, "The Sky Railway," is taken from the "Understanding Ideas" section of Unit 6, Nurturing Nature, in the FLTRP senior high school English textbook (Selective Compulsory Book 1). The passage follows the author's journey on the Qinghai-Tibet Railway. It is structured around two intertwined threads: the explicit thread of geographical progression along the route, and the implicit thread of the author's emotional shifts. The narrative recounts what the author—a former railway builder—saw, heard, and felt during his first trip as a passenger on the railway after its completion. Beyond depicting the natural landscapes and engineering marvels along the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, the passage conveys the tremendous efforts made by the builders to protect the fragile ecosystem, evoking a strong sense of national pride and ecological awareness through the author's reflections and recollections.

A distinguishing feature of this passage is the interplay of its dual narrative threads. The spatial thread follows the train's journey from Xining, passing through the Qingshuihe Bridge, the wetland bridge clusters along the Golmud-Lhasa section, the Tanggula Station, and Cuona Lake, before finally arriving at Lhasa. The emotional thread traces the author's feelings, from disbelief at the outset of the journey, to relief and appreciation upon witnessing the harmonious coexistence of wildlife and engineering structures, to reflection upon arriving at the world's highest-altitude railway station, and finally to a sense of pride and accomplishment when facing the

beauty of Cuona Lake. These two threads are interwoven and progressively advanced, jointly serving the thematic meaning of "harmonious coexistence between humans and nature" and "China's infrastructural achievements."

During the while-reading stage, teachers should guide students to use a route map as a graphic organizer to visually and systematically integrate the geographical locations, engineering measures, ecological protection actions, and the author's emotional changes dispersed across different paragraphs. This integration through the route map not only trains students' ability to quickly locate key information and trace the textual thread, but also enables them to use the map as a framework to align each location with its corresponding engineering measures, ecological actions, and the author's emotions. Through this visual representation, students can see clearly that behind each engineering feat there are corresponding ecological protection efforts, and that the author's feelings evolve progressively along the journey. This visualization of the correspondences effectively lowers the cognitive barrier to understanding the abstract theme of how engineering construction and ecological protection can be reconciled.

Furthermore, the instructional value of this route map scaffold extends beyond reading comprehension to writing transfer. The dual narrative structure it presents—spatial progression interwoven with emotional change—offers students a clear structural model for composing similar texts.

5.2.2. Application of Mind Map Scaffolds in Argumentative Text Reading

As an important form of graphic organizers, mind maps can visually present the macrostructure of a text, helping students grasp the overall argumentative framework and logical levels. The reading passage "Little White Lies" from the "Developing Ideas" section of Unit 1, "Knowing Me, Knowing You," in the FLTRP senior high school English textbook (Compulsory Book 3) serves as a case in point. This passage is a typical argumentative text centered on the theme of "white lies." It opens with a poem by Walter Scott, which leads into the central question: "Since we all know that lying is wrong, why do we still tell lies?" The body sets out three reasons for telling white lies, each accompanied by a critical analysis that reveals the possible self-deception underlying these reasons. The conclusion returns to the opening poem, pointing out that even white lies may bring unforeseen consequences.

The textbook provides a graphic organizer task after this passage, requiring students to use a mind map to outline the "introduction-body-conclusion" structure and supplement it with specific examples and analyses that correspond to the three reasons in the body. The process of completing this graphic organizer is, in essence, one in which students actively deconstruct the argumentative logic of the text. They need to extract real-life examples for each reason and match them with the relevant analytical discussion. This process not only trains students' ability to locate details

and categorize information; more importantly, it allows students to "see" the argumentative structure of an essay. Each sub-claim is supported by specific examples, each example is followed by in-depth analysis, and together they form a cohesive argumentative loop.

What is particularly noteworthy is that this graphic organizer not only facilitates comprehension of the current reading text but also, through its explicit structural presentation, provides students with a clear structural blueprint for subsequent writing. Once students have completed the reading task, the graphic organizer naturally transforms from a tool for reading comprehension into a template for writing. This transformation embodies the pedagogical principle of "reading-to-write" and enables the functional transfer of the graphic organizer from reading input to writing output.

5.2.3. The Value of Graphic Organizers in Senior High School English Reading Instruction

In summary, the value of graphic organizers in reading instruction is multidimensional. At the information level, they help students systematically integrate scattered information throughout the text, thus preventing fragmented reading. At the structural level, they make text structure explicit, cultivating students' awareness of discourse organization and enhancing their perception of the text as a whole. At the cognitive level, through visual presentation, they reduce the difficulty of understanding complex text structures and provide students with a visual thinking path for connecting information across paragraphs, making inferences, and synthesizing themes. This effectively facilitates the progression from surface-level comprehension to in-depth interpretation. At the transfer level, they convert the structural knowledge gained from reading into a structural framework for writing, thereby achieving the coordinated development of reading and writing abilities.

6. Conclusion

In terms of the objectives of English teaching, the aim is to cultivate competent English learners. In terms of the teaching process, students are the primary subjects of learning, and teaching exists only to facilitate their learning. Therefore, whether viewed from the perspective of objectives or of the teaching process, teachers should recognize that students are at the center of instruction. What teachers need to do is to make every effort to support students' learning in light of their actual conditions, thereby guiding them to learn how to learn and to move towards lifelong learning.

On this basis, teachers should return the English classroom to students rather than resorting to a teacher-dominated monologue. It is in this context that scaffolding instruction plays a vital role in English language teaching. This pedagogical

approach foregrounds students' central role, emphasizes the cultivation of autonomous learning ability, and effectively stimulates students' interest.

In the process of English language teaching, teachers should explore in depth the theoretical foundations of scaffolding instruction, so as to provide theoretical support for its application in actual classroom practice. At the same time, teachers should also provide diverse and appropriate scaffolds for students' learning in accordance with the instructional context, teaching content, and students' real needs, thereby facilitating their learning.

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